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QATAR STARS LEAGUE

# Gharafa title hopes hit as Ahli storm to comeback win

The result denied Al Gharafa the chance to cut the gap on leaders Al Sadd to just one point

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**A**l Gharafa suffered a major setback to their title hopes after slumping to a heavy 1-4 defeat against Al Ahli at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in the Qatar Stars League yesterday, as the visitors produced a dominant second-half display to turn the match on its head.

The result denied Al Gharafa the chance to cut the gap to leaders Al Sadd to just one point, leaving them on 34 points in third place, behind Al Shamal on goal difference. Al Ahli, meanwhile, climbed from second-bottom to tenth place with 19 points following a crucial victory.

Al Gharafa looked in control for much of the first half and took the lead in the 28th minute when Algerian playmaker Yacine Brahimi calmly converted a penalty. However, Al Ahli struck immediately after the break, with Younes Hussein finding the equaliser in the 46th minute to shift the momentum.

The match turned decisively in the second half as Al Ahli capitalised on Al Gharafa's defensive lapses. Nigerian defender William Ekong put them ahead in the 59th minute, before Dutch midfielder Michel Vlap extended the lead late on with a goal in the 87th minute. Hussein then sealed an emphatic win deep into stoppage time, scoring his second of the night in the 90+6 minute.

Meanwhile, Al Sailiya registered a spirited 3-2 win over Al Shahania at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium to boost their survival hopes. The victory lifted Al Sailiya to 18 points and eleventh place, while Al Shahania slipped into the relegation spot with 17 points. Al Sailiya made a flying start, with Diogo Amaro opening the scoring in the 2nd minute with a header from a Younes Belhanda free-kick. Matias Nani doubled the lead just five minutes later, again with a header, this time from a corner.



Al Gharafa and Al Ahli players duel for the ball during the Qatar Stars League match at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday. **PICTURE:** Noushad Thekkayil

Al Shahania responded after the break, as Alvaro Sanz pulled one back in the 59th minute. But their hopes were quickly dented when Belhanda restored Al Sailiya's two-goal cushion with a powerful strike from the edge of the box in the 61st minute. Abdoulaye Traore reduced the deficit again in the 71st minute, but Al Shahania were unable to find an equaliser despite late pressure. Al Sailiya finished the match with ten men after Omar Yahya

was sent off for a second booking in stoppage time.

In another match, Umm Salal and Qatar SC played out a goalless draw at Al Thumama in a contest that lacked cutting edge from both sides. Despite efforts from both teams, neither could break the deadlock.

An added point from the game meant that Qatar SC moved to 28 points to remain in fifth place in the standings while Umm Salal stayed in ninth place with 20 points.



Al Sailiya registered a spirited 3-2 win over Al Shahania at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium.



Umm Salal and Qatar SC played out a goalless draw at Al Thumama Stadium.

FOCUS

# Senegal demands 'corruption' probe over AFCON decision

AFF  
Paris

**S**enegal's government said yesterday it wanted an "independent international investigation" into corruption after its national team were sensationally stripped of the Africa Cup of Nations title with the Confederation of African Football (CAF) declaring Morocco champions, two months after their chaotic final.

Several Senegalese players controversially walked off the pitch in Rabat during the final on January 18 in protest when the hosts were awarded a penalty late in second-half stoppage time.

After Senegal's players eventually returned having been coaxed back onto the pitch by captain Sadio Mane, Morocco missed the penalty and Pape Gueye went on to score the goal in extra time that gave his team a 1-0 victory.

After a Morocco appeal asked the governing body to study competition rules, CAF recorded a 3-0 victory in favour of the tournament hosts on Tuesday, sparking uproar in Dakar. "By calling into question a result achieved at the end of a match that was properly played and won in accordance with the rules of the game, the CAF seriously undermines its own credibility", Senegalese government spokeswoman Marie Rose Khady Fatou Faye said in a statement. "Senegal unequivocally rejects this unjustified attempt at dispossession" she added, while calling for "an independent international investigation into suspected corruption within the CAF's governing bodies".

The CAF Appeals Committee justified its decision by applying Articles 82 and 84 of the AFCON Regulations, which state



CAF's appeals board ruled that Senegal had "forfeited" the final by walking off the pitch in protest during stoppage time, converting a 1-0 extra-time win into a 3-0 default defeat in favour of hosts Morocco.

that if a team "refuses to play or leaves the ground before the regular end of the match without the authorisation of the referee, it shall be considered (loser) and shall be eliminated for good from the current competition".

The articles add the team contravening the regulations "will lose its match by 3-0". The Royal Moroccan Football Federation (FRMF) said late Tuesday that its appeal "was never intended to contest the

sporting performance of the teams participating in this competition, but solely to request the application of the competition regulations".

In a further statement it added: "This decision helps clarify the rules applicable in similar situations and contributes to the coherence and credibility of international competitions, in particular when it comes to African football."

Senegal's football authorities said they

will appeal "as soon as possible" to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS). CAF president Patrice Motsepe stressed his support for the right of African countries to make appeals to CAS, saying African football's governing body would "respect the decision which is taken at the highest level".

"Not a single country in Africa will be treated in a manner which is more preferential or more advantageous or more favourable than any other," Motsepe said in a

video message posted on social media.

Minutes before the end of the match, some Senegalese supporters attempted a pitch invasion, while Senegal's players halted the game for nearly 20 minutes to protest the penalty awarded to Morocco. The controversial spot-kick was given by Congolese referee Jean-Jacques Ndala right at the end of the allotted eight added minutes in normal time following a VAR check for a challenge on Brahim Diaz by El Hadji Malick Diouf.

The game was goalless at the time and Diaz could have won the trophy for Morocco with the spot-kick, eventually taken in the 24th minute of added time at the end of normal time. But Senegal goalkeeper Edouard Mendy easily saved the weak attempted 'Panenka' chip by the Real Madrid winger.

The game went to extra time before Gueye's brilliant 94th-minute winner. Motsepe added: "It is important for us that ordinary supporters in every one of the 54 countries in Africa... regard the decisions of our judicial bodies as fair and they regard our referees, VAR operators and commissioners as people who are fair and just."

Several Senegal players posted on social media after Tuesday's announcement. Lyon defender Moussa Niakhate posted a picture of himself lifting the Africa Cup of Nations trophy with a message saying "they're mad" apparently in reference to CAF.

In the immediate aftermath of the final, FIFA president Gianni Infantino, who attended the match, had condemned "some Senegal players" for the "unacceptable scenes". The appeal trial of 18 Senegalese supporters, imprisoned since the final and sentenced to prison terms ranging from three months to one year has been postponed until March 30.

CRICKET

# Struggling Buttler ready to continue England career

Buttler, 35, is ready to play for Gujarat Titans in the upcoming IPL

AFP  
London

**J**os Buttler is refusing to accept his England career is over despite admitting he had a "poor tournament" at the recent T20 World Cup.

Widely regarded as one of the outstanding white-ball batsmen of his generation, Buttler managed just 87 runs in eight innings at the tournament as England reached the semi-finals before losing to co-hosts and eventual champions India.

"Obviously I had a poor tournament, which is disappointing," Buttler, who remains on an England and Wales central contract, said on his For the Love of Cricket podcast with former England fast bowler Stuart Broad.

"But I have been playing some of the best cricket of my (career) in recent years, so hopefully I can get back to playing my best."

"I certainly have ambitions (to play for England again), but no longer being a captain, I am not a selector and whatever, so what will be, will be."

Buttler, 35, is set to play for Gujarat Titans in the upcoming Indian Premier League and hopes time away after the World Cup "up the mountains" in France with his family will leave him feeling reinvigorated.

"I couldn't have been further away from cricket, which for me at the time was just perfect," said Buttler. "It is exactly what I needed."

"Obviously the tournament



didn't go personally how I would have liked it to go, and I just felt like I needed some space from cricket and not to think about the game, and I could not have been further away from cricket where I was in that week."

Buttler, a member of England's 2019 one-day international World Cup-winning team and also the skipper for their

T20 triumph in Australia three years later, added: "It was really refreshing - I really enjoyed it, a complete sort of release, and slowly but surely, I would say at the start of this week, (I am) just starting to reflect a bit and have a few thoughts about what is important to me and my cricket, and why it probably didn't go quite as I would've liked."

"There's elements that I actually don't really know exactly," he said.

"For all your best intentions and hard work and efforts to perform, it just didn't work, and sometimes that is OK as well."

"That is something I have had to realise. It wasn't for a lack of effort, it just didn't quite happen."

ATHLETICS

# Record setters Duplantis, Hodgkinson headline Torun world indoors



AFP  
Torun, Poland

**O**lympic gold medallists Armand Duplantis and Keely Hodgkinson headline a stellar cast of athletes for the world indoor championships which kick off in Torun, Poland, tomorrow.

Both Sweden's Duplantis and Briton Hodgkinson arrive in the north central Polish city fresh from new world records.

Duplantis sailed over 6.31 metres on home soil last week, his 15th world record in the pole vault.

Hodgkinson meanwhile smashed the 24-year-old record for the indoor 800m last month.

"I've had my healthiest winter for years," Hodgkinson said.

"It was so frustrating being on the sidelines for such a long time. I'm just happy to be able to do an indoor season and have nothing holding me back."

For Duplantis, it is a veritable trip down memory lane, the US-born Swede having set his first world record, of 6.17m, in Torun back in February 2020.

"I've been fortunate enough to break a few since then, but the first one's always a very life-changing moment," said Duplantis, who will be seeking a fourth world indoor title.

'BIG STEPPING STONE'

In the men's 60m, defending champion Jeremiah Azu of Britain will face stiff competition from world and Olympic 100m silver medallist Kishane Thompson.

Jamaica's men are yet to win a world indoor 60m title, but Thompson will have able allies in teammates Akeem Blake, the 2024 world indoor 60m bronze medallist, and world 200m bronze medallist Bryan Levell.

"People try and make out like it's pressure going in defending it," said Azu, who clocked 6.47sec in Berlin this season to go third in the all-time British list.

"But I think I've got the advan-

tage over most of the competitors there that I've actually gone and done it."

US champion Jordan Anthony boasts a season-leading 6.43, while Thompson has run 6.46.

American Trayvon Bromell, the 2016 world 60m champion and twice a world 100m bronze medallist has clocked a season's best to match Azu, along with Levell.

Seeking a second 3000m world indoor title will be Britain's Josh Kerr, the 2023 world outdoor 1500m champion and Olympic silver medallist bouncing back from a calf tear sustained in last year's 1500m final at the world outdoor champs in Tokyo.

Kerr insisted that triumphing in Torun would be a "really big stepping stone" into the season. "I believe I am the best athlete in the world at these distances. There's no one in the world who can convince me otherwise," he said.

His rivals might argue differently, however, and the Scotsman will line up against the two other 1500m medallists from the Paris Games, Americans Cole Hocker and Yared Nuguse, in what is expected to be one of the stand-out races of the March 20-22 meet.

Aside from Duplantis and Azu, there are 10 other reigning champions from Nanjing last year who will defend their titles.

They are Woo Sanghyeok (high jump), Mattia Furlani (long jump), Andy Diaz Hernandez (triple jump) and Tom Walsh (shot put) in the men's events, and Frewynni Hailu (3000m), Devynne Charlton (60m hurdles), Nicola Olyslagers (high jump), Marie-Julie Bonnini (pole vault), Leyanis Perez Hernandez (triple jump) and Sarah Mitton (shot put) in the women's.

In total, 11 individual gold medallists from last year's world outdoors in Tokyo are set to compete.

The entries also include nine individual gold medallists from the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, including Duplantis, Hocker, Hodgkinson and fellow world record-holder Yaroslava Mahuchikh, the Ukrainian high jumper.

MOTORSPORT

# Godzilla to roar across F1 with high-flying Haas

Reuters  
London

**F**ormula One's smallest team Haas are ready to go on the rampage with Godzilla as they take the fight to bigger rivals this season.

The US-owned team, who have Toyota's motorsport division as title sponsors and are led by Japanese principal Ayao Komatsu, announced yesterday a season-long collaboration with Japan's Toho Co.

The studio's reptilian anti-hero, the 'King of the Monsters' who has been causing havoc across cinema screens since 1954, is the star of a new 'Godzilla Minus Zero' movie scheduled for North American release in November.

Haas said the collaboration will debut at the March 27-29 Japanese Grand Prix, with a special livery to be unveiled in Tokyo on March 24, and feature prominently at the team's home US Grand Prix in Austin in October.

"Through this collaboration, get ready for Godzilla to rampage on the world's fastest stage," said Keiji Ota, Toho's 'Chief Godzilla Officer'. The team are currently



punching above their weight in fourth place in the constructors' standings after two Grands Prix and a sprint race, with Britain's Oliver Bearman fifth in the drivers' championship after scoring in all three.

Eighth last season, Ferrari-

powered Haas are now ahead of former champions Red Bull and only one point behind current champions McLaren.

Bearman is two points clear of McLaren's world champion Lando Norris.

Both McLaren drivers failed to

start the Chinese Grand Prix last weekend while Bearman lined up 10th and finished fifth.

Red Bull had four-times world champion Max Verstappen retire from the race on Sunday while teammate Isack Hadjar was eighth.

"We beat Red Bull on merit today, so we were the fourth fastest team... which is incredible," said Komatsu after the race in Shanghai ended in a Mercedes one-two with Ferrari's Lewis Hamilton and Charles Leclerc third and fourth.

"The unfortunate thing for McLaren was that they couldn't take the race."

"We were there to take the benefit, so we just maximised everything."

"Coming out of the Bahrain test, I didn't think we could fight Red Bull at all, and also Alpine looked really quick," added the Japanese. "(Pierre) Gasly proved that they are quick, but we've beaten them on merit."

Alpine's Gasly finished sixth, more than two seconds behind Bearman.

Formula One has 11 teams now but General Motors-backed newcomers Cadillac already boast a bigger headcount than Haas.

FOCUS

# Retired Australian Test wicketkeeper Haddin named New South Wales coach

AFP  
Sydney

**F**ormer Australian Test wicketkeeper Brad Haddin was appointed head coach of New South Wales yesterday, vowing to bring "an aura" back to the struggling team.

Haddin replaces Greg Shipperd who was sacked midway through the season with NSW failing to fire in the domestic Sheffield Shield.

He got the nod after reportedly

receiving high-level endorsements from former Test captains Mark Taylor and Steve Waugh.

"Wearing the baggy blue was incredibly special and gave me some of the greatest memories of my career," said Haddin of his playing time with NSW.

"I am looking forward to working with our current crop of talented players to bring back an aura to NSW cricket and to have a team with a formidable, distinctive style of play we can all be proud of."

The appointment continues

Haddin's rise through coaching ranks, having previously served as an assistant in the Australian teams under Darren Lehmann and Justin Langer.

He also worked under Trevor Bayliss at Indian Premier League sides Sunrisers Hyderabad and Punjab Kings.

Haddin played 66 Tests and 126 ODIs before his retirement in 2015.

Molineux fit for WI tour ahead of T20 World Cup

Australia received a boost in their

build-up to this year's women's Twenty20 World Cup after captain Sophie Molineux said she was fit and ready to return for the upcoming white-ball series against West Indies.

The 28-year-old was ruled out of the remainder of Australia's multi-format series against India after suffering lower back issues following the opening one-day international in Brisbane last month.

The white-ball tour of West Indies begins tomorrow.

"(I will be) playing in the T20s, (I

am) available and looking forward to playing a role and getting back out there," Molineux said.

The bowling all-rounder, who captained Australia in three T20 internationals against India before Alyssa Healy returned to lead the one-day and test sides, is set to officially take over the captaincy for the Caribbean tour. However, her role remains under assessment, with uncertainty over whether she will feature as an all-rounder.

"Probably just to see how we go, especially towards that back end

with the one-day games," she said. "We'll just keep assessing but I'm looking forward to getting back out there again with the girls."

Australia have played only nine T20 internationals since the last World Cup edition in 2024 and Molineux said every match would be crucial as they target a seventh title.

"I don't think we're far off at all... It is very hard in T20 cricket to play the perfect game," she said.

The women's T20 World Cup begins on June 12 in England and Wales.

RCB prep up for new IPL season



Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB) players Virat Kohli and Krunal Pandya arrive for a net session yesterday, ahead of the start of Indian Premier League (IPL), the world's richest T20 franchise-based league. The 2026 IPL starts on March 28 with a match between defending champions RCB and Sunrisers Hyderabad.

HORSE RACING

# Wathnan Racing's Anika claims Al Jumail Cup

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**W**athnan Racing's Anika continued her remarkable rise with a dominant victory in the 1400m Local Purebred Arabian Graduation for Fillies & Mares, capturing the Al Jumail Cup in style at Al Rayyan Racecourse on Tuesday night.

The four-year-old grey, trained by Alban de Mieulle and ridden by Megane Peslier, made it three wins in succession from just five career starts, underlining an outstanding strike rate. She powered clear in the closing stages to score by an authoritative three lengths, also securing a double on the night for her rider.

In a field of nine, Anika was positioned prominently throughout, settling in second behind RM Wadha, who set the early tempo. Bariq Almass and Ghada tracked closely, while Noorah Al Hadi moved up approaching the home turn to join the leading pack.

Turning for home, RM Wadha still held the advantage, with



Connections of Anika celebrate after the four-year-old grey horse won the Al Jumail Cup. PICTURES: Juhaim

Anika poised to challenge and the chasing group tightly bunched behind. But inside the final 200m, Anika surged to the front with a decisive turn of foot, quickly asserting her superiority and drawing clear to seal an emphatic success. With the win, Peslier also completed a double on the card. Peslier guided Al Hajaj Farm's Mamoun De Bozouls to victory in the Purebred Arabian Handicap (45-65) for four-year-old+ race.

RM Wadha, representing Mohammed Rashid Abdullah al-Naimi and trained by Hadi al-Ramzani, stayed on under Soufiane Saadi to finish second. Stablemate Noorah Al Hadi, partnered by Marco Casamento, came home third, a further seven and a half lengths adrift -emphasising the commanding margin of the winner's performance.

The rescheduled Al Jumail Cup meeting featured eight races in



Jockey Megane Peslier guided Anika to the Al Jumail Cup win.

total. Other winners on the card included Fuwairit, who finished strongly shedding her maiden tag in the Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate, and Hardan, who struck late to land the Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (0-65). Mamoun De Bozouls produced a staying effort to open his account in the Purebred Arabian Handicap.

Meanwhile, Waajidd returned to winning form with a decisive run in the Thoroughbred Handicap

(55-75), and Liable made all in emphatic fashion in the Thoroughbred Handicap (0-70). Victories were also recorded by Albatar in the Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85), and Aljalta in the Thoroughbred Handicap (75-95).

**RESULTS**  
**59th Al Uqda Race Meeting in Al Rayyan - Al Jumail Cup**  
**WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)**

- 1 - Al Jumail Cup, Local Purebred Arabian Graduation Plate**  
Anika, Alban de Mieulle, Megane Peslier
- 2 - Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate**  
Fuwairit, Hamad al-Jehani, Mohammed Moussa
- 3 - Local Purebred Arabian Handicap (0-65)**  
Hardan, Hadi al-Ramzani, Soufiane Saadi
- 4 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (45-65)**  
Mamoun De Bozouls, Hamad al-Jehani, Megane Peslier
- 5 - Thoroughbred Handicap (55-75)**  
Waajidd, Zuhair Mohsen, Soufiane Saadi
- 6 - Thoroughbred Handicap (0-70)**  
Liable, Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, Faleh Bughenaim
- 7 - Purebred Arabian Handicap (65-85)**  
Albatar, Ibrahim Saeed al-Malki, Saleh Salem al-Marri
- 8 - Thoroughbred Handicap (75-95)**  
Aljalta, Rashid al-Jehani, Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik

TENNIS

# Sabalenka hits back at Dubai chief in withdrawal row

'I'M NOT SURE IF I EVER WANT TO GO THERE AFTER HIS COMMENT'

Reuters  
Miami

**W**orld number one Aryna Sabalenka said she is unsure about her return to the Dubai Championships after its tournament director criticised her withdrawal this year, labelling the demand for tougher penalties on late pullouts a "ridiculous" idea.

Sabalenka and Iga Swiatek were among several players ruled out due to injury, illness or scheduling changes, leaving lucky losers to fill the depleted main draw in Dubai and taking gloss off the WTA 1000 event only below the Grand Slams in stature.

Sabalenka cited a minor hip injury when she pulled out of the tournament last month, before the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran sparked chaos in the region.

At the time, Dubai tournament director Salah Tahlak told The National that Sabalenka and Swiatek pulling out had been an "unfortunate surprise" for the organisers and sought strict action for late withdrawals with ranking points being docked.

"I think it's ridiculous," Belarusian Sabalenka told reporters at the Miami Open.

"I don't think he showed himself in the best way possible. For me it's actually so sad to see that the tournament directors and the tournaments not protecting us as players. They just care about their (sales), about their tournament and that's it."

"His comment was ridiculous. I'm not sure if I ever want to go



Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus speaks to the media during the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami. (AFP)

there after his comment. For me it's too much."

Reuters has contacted the Dubai tournament for comment. Top players are obliged to compete in all four Grand Slams, 10 WTA 1000 tournaments and six WTA 500 events under WTA rules, with punishments for missing them ranging from ranking points penalties to fines.

World number four Coco Gauff urged a more understanding view of Swiatek and Sabalenka pulling out of Dubai.

"I just feel Iga and Aryna have played that tournament so many

times and it wasn't anything personal to it," Gauff said. "It's tough. We're trying our best to play the calendar. I completely understand why she (Sabalenka) would feel like that because the comments were unnecessary."

The men's and women's tours have faced criticism due to their 11-month seasons, and both came under scrutiny towards the end of last year with several matches in the Asian swing unable to be completed due to injuries.

Sabalenka, who won the Indian Wells title on Sunday and will defend her Miami trophy, said she

had opted to be more selective this season to negotiate the demands of a relentless circuit.

"Going into this season, we decided ... to prioritise my health and make sure we have these little gaps in the schedule where I can reset, recharge, work and be better prepared for bigger tournaments," said Sabalenka, who also skipped Doha.

"I feel like the scheduling is going crazy and that's why you see so many players injured, always taped and not delivering the best quality matches because it's almost impossible."

FOCUS

# Woods still healing, remains mum on Masters return

Reuters  
Los Angeles

**A**s his health continues to fluctuate, Tiger Woods remains non-committal about his playing status for next month's Masters.

"I said I've been working on it," Woods, 50, told reporters after Tuesday's TGL semifinals in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. "Sometimes I have good days, sometimes I have bad days. Disk replacement is not a lot of fun."

"... So as I said, I've had a lot of procedures prior to that, so the body doesn't quite heal like it was when I was 24. Doesn't quite bounce back. So I have good days when I can pretty much do anything, and other days where it's hard to just to move around."

Woods, a five-time Masters winner and 15-time major champion, has not played in an official event since the 2024

Open Championship. He ruptured his left Achilles tendon last spring and underwent lumbar disk replacement surgery in October.

Woods was on the sidelines Tuesday as his Jupiter Links squad defeated Boston Common and advanced to next week's finals against Los Angeles GC. He said team members Akshay Bhatia, Max Homa and Tom Kim will continue to play without him.

"Well, I think that I have been trying to play each and every one of these matches," he said. "I've been trying to come back. But it just hasn't worked out that way. ... But the guys here, this team, we have so much fun, I really don't want to screw up the lineup, I just want these guys to keep playing."

Woods is an 82-time winner on the PGA Tour, tied for the all-time lead with Sam Snead. The World Golf Hall of Famer's most recent victory was at the 2019 Zozo Championship.

## MCILROY UNVEILS MASTERS CHAMPIONS DINNER MENU

Rory McIlroy announced the menu for the traditional Champions Dinner during Masters week, and it does sound appetizing. The Northern Irishman completed the career grand slam at Augusta National last April, earning the green jacket in dramatic fashion by defeating Ryder Cup teammate Justin Rose in a playoff. One of the privileges of winning the Masters is setting the menu for past champions and Augusta chairman Fred Ridley prior to next year's tournament. That feast will be held on April 7, preceding the Masters from April 9-12. McIlroy unveiled his menu during a Zoom call with members of the media yesterday morning. Let's start with the main course, with those in attendance having the choice between Wagyu filet mignon or seared salmon. The traditional Irish champ (creamy mashed potatoes with scallions, butter and milk), brussel sprouts, glazed carrots and Vidalia onion rings will be served as well. That will come after the first course of yellowfin tuna carpaccio, with appetizers featuring peach and ricotta flatbread, bacon-wrapped dates, rock shrimp tempura, and grilled elk sliders. Sticky toffee pudding will be served as a dessert. The Champions Dinner dates to 1952 at the Masters, with defending champion Ben Hogan providing the honors.

(Reuters)

GOLF

# In 10th season, Schauffele feeling like 'old guy' on the tour

AFP  
Los Angeles

**X**ander Schauffele is the betting favorite at the Valspar Championship this week, thanks in large part to being the highest-ranked player in the field at No. 7 in the world.

It's not often he's playing in a tournament where the likes of Scottie Scheffler, Rory McIlroy and Tommy Fleetwood are absent, but Schauffele said Tuesday that he hardly feels the weight of being a favorite on tour anymore.

Instead, it's the years themselves that are starting to pile up for the 32-year-old father.

"It's my 209th (career) start so

I'm starting to feel like an old guy out here, to be honest," Schauffele told reporters at Innisbrook Resort in Palm Harbor, Fla. "I feel that more than the actual rank in a field, you know what I mean. I think once the gun goes off and everyone tees off it's sort of anyone's game out here."

That became something of a theme for the remainder of Schauffele's interview. Now in his 10th full season on the PGA Tour, Schauffele has become one of the more familiar faces and in 2024 coupled his consistency with his first two major titles at the PGA and Open Championships.

The tour itself has also changed greatly since Schauffele won the Tour Championship and Rookie of the Year in 2017. New CEO Brian

Rolapp is tasked with reimagining the tour's schedule, and he made it clear in a press conference last week that he wants to move away from limited-field, no-cut formats that currently comprise the "signature events."

A younger Schauffele may have opined on what that will do for the future of the tour, or for the pockets of the sport's elite players like himself. On Tuesday, he deferred.

"As I said, this is my 209th event, as I get older I'm starting to realize there's a lot more that goes into a tournament than I thought 200 events ago," Schauffele said. "I'm starting to realize that there's a lot that goes into it. When you want to change things and make everyone happy and sort of create a structure that's supposed to be

there for 50-plus years, I wouldn't want to have that job. He's asked us to be patient and I think we're appreciative that he's communicating well and kind of keeping things in front of us. Other than that, no, I'm not going to sit and speculate. I did that for too many years."

Schauffele shared that when he was in the physio room at TPC Sawgrass last week, the 2004 Players Championship was being shown on TV. There was Adam Scott of Australia, winning the title over guys who now ply their wares on the 50-and-older PGA Tour Champions.

"I was like, holy smokes, you know, he's been at it for a while," Schauffele said. "And it's impressive that he's sitting out here at 45 with 190 ball speed just doing his

thing. So there's a lot less of those guys out here is what I've realized. When I first came on tour there was more, a few more of those sort of older 30-year-olds and younger 40-year-olds. And the tour's getting younger, which is great for golf, but I'm realizing I'm starting to be in that sort of weird spot, so I need to stay healthy and stay strong and keep competing."

Schauffele is off to a promising start this year, after he tied for seventh at the Genesis Invitational and placed third on Sunday at The Players. He'll take that over the slow start to the 2025 season, when he missed two months due to an intercostal/rib injury, finished 72nd of 72 who made the cut at The Players and did not win until October.



## CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# Barcelona thrash Newcastle 7-2 to reach quarters

Lewandowski and Raphinha struck twice each for the Catalans

AFP

Barcelona

Barcelona stormed to a 7-2 victory over Newcastle yesterday to reach the Champions League quarter-finals, winning 8-3 on aggregate. Robert Lewandowski and Raphinha struck twice each for the Catalan giants as Eddie Howe's side crumbled under a scintillating attacking display from the hosts at Camp Nou.

Lamine Yamal, Marc Bernal and Fermin Lopez were also on target as Hansi Flick's side ran riot and recorded a landslide last 16, second leg victory. The five-time champions are dreaming of lifting the trophy again, 11 years after they last won it, and showcased the attacking firepower which could make their ambition a reality.

By contrast Newcastle were hoping to reach the quarter-finals for the first time in their history but the Premier League side departed bruised and battered.

Barcelona were outplayed in the 1-1 first-leg draw but pledged to improve back on home soil and claimed an early lead through Raphinha, starting as they meant to go on.

Teenage star Lamine Yamal turned brilliantly away from Malick Thiaw in midfield, leaving the German defender on the turf and released the Brazilian winger. Raphinha let the ball run to Fermin Lopez and then collected it back, showing poise to hold his shot for a second before slotting into the bottom corner.

Barcelona are notoriously fragile defensively though and Newcastle quickly forced their way back into the game. The Catalan giants were carved open with just a couple of passes between Lewis Hall and Harvey Barnes, and Anthony Elanga timed his run right to stay onside and sweep past Joan Garcia.

Three minutes later Barca were back in front with 18-year-old midfielder Bernal turning home from close range after Gerard Martin nodded down Raphinha's diagonal free-kick for him to finish. Yamal was so often Barca's hero on their run to the semi-finals last season but was guilty of a mistake which led to Newcastle's second equaliser.

The teenager attempted a backheel in his own



Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski celebrates after scoring against Newcastle during the Champions League last 16 second leg match at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona. (AFP)

final third and gave the ball away, with Elanga profiting at the back post as he turned home Barnes's cross. Veteran Polish striker Lewandowski has had a tough season for Barca, looking shorn of confidence, and he spurned two fine chances for the hosts in the first half.

Lewandowski seemed certain to score but Dan Burn made a brilliant block to deny him, and then after visiting goalkeeper Aaron Ramsdale saved from Raphinha, the striker lacked the agility to turn the rebound home from close range. With Lewandowski floundering Yamal ran in and hammered high over the bar when he too should have scored.

The Spain international made amends from the spot to give Barca the lead at half-time when veteran defender Trippier pulled back Raphinha. The former England international was booked after the penalty was given following a VAR review, with Barca angry he was not shown red.

Ramsdale got his fingertips to Yamal's penalty, low to his left, but could not claw it out. Raphinha sent Lopez through on goal to bag the fourth early in the second half and it broke Toon spirits.

From that point on Newcastle gave up the ghost and Barcelona scored to their heart's content. Lewandowski nodded home from a corner and celebrated joyously, taking off the mask he has been playing with due to an eye-socket fracture.

The goal was liberation for him and the next chance he got he put away too, producing a lethal finish after a superb Yamal assist. Jacob Ramsey put Barcelona's seventh on a plate for the swaggering hosts, with a poor pass across the face of his box, which Raphinha intercepted and dispatched clinically.

Fans sent a Mexican wave around the stadium, celebrating the biggest win they have had at Camp Nou since it reopened.

## Coach Enrique hails firepower of Paris Saint Germain

**London:** Paris Saint Germain coach Luis Enrique hailed his players' ruthlessness in front of goal in their 3-0 defeat of Chelsea in the Champions League on Tuesday which gave the reigning European champions an 8-2 aggregate win over the Londoners.

"We were very precise," the Spaniard told reporters. "We scored the first two goals very quickly and that was the key to the game."

PSG raced into a 2-0 lead within 14 minutes thanks to goals from Khvicha Kvaratskhelia

and Bradley Barcola. Substitute Senny Mayulu made it 3-0 in the 62nd minute.

"I think today we showed once again that we truly are a team that can play in different ways and which is always unpredictable for our opponents," Enrique said. "Of course I am proud because you don't expect that kind of result," the Spaniard said.

PSG winger Bradley Barcola has been ruled out for "the next few weeks" with an ankle injury, the club said. The France international

hobbled off just before the hour mark of PSG's match Chelsea. PSG said he had "suffered a severe ligament sprain in his right ankle".

Barcola scored in both legs against Chelsea, his first goals in the competition since February last year.

Paris are back in action this weekend at Nice, hoping to extend their one-point lead over Lens at the top of Ligue 1. Barcola has been in fine form in recent weeks, netting five times in his last six appearances.

## FOCUS

## 'Incomplete' Man City not what they once were, says Guardiola

AFP

Manchester

Pep Guardiola believes a new-look Manchester City need time to match the feats of his earlier years in charge after bowing out of the Champions League to Real Madrid for the third consecutive season.

Vinicius Junior's double inflicted a 2-1 defeat on 10-man City on Tuesday, who lost captain Bernardo Silva to a red card after just 20 minutes at the Etihad Stadium. Most of the damage was already done in the first leg at the Santiago Bernabeu thanks to Federico Valverde's hat-trick.

Guardiola bemoaned the chance to truly test the 15-time European champions due to Silva's dismissal for handling Vinicius' shot on the goal-line. Despite the scoreline, the tie was far more evenly contested than Madrid's 6-3 aggregate victory when the sides met last season.

City have embarked on a major rebuild over the past three transfer windows with Silva one of the few remaining key figures from a squad that won four consecutive Premier League titles under Guardiola between 2021 and 2024. Guardiola's men have an immediate chance to bounce back when they face Arsenal in the League Cup final on Sun-

day. But they trail the Gunners by nine points in the Premier League title race and face Liverpool in the FA Cup quarter-finals next month.

"Still we are not complete. Still there are things in certain moments (where) we need to be more clinical, but my feeling is it will be a question of time," said Guardiola, who has won 15 major trophies during his decade in charge. "We are not a complete team, that is a reality. I've been in a team in Manchester City where we were a team in all aspects. Still we are not, but we have a final on Sunday, FA Cup against Liverpool and the Premier League is still tight. We need to finish the Premier League strong, prepare good decisions for the summer and next season we will be back in the Champions League."

Guardiola did lead City to Champions League glory in 2022/23, but just one European crown in 10 years is the one slight blemish on his record since arriving in Manchester. However, he said he wants City to aspire to the demands of Madrid, where anything other than winning the competition is deemed a failure.

"I would love this club to be like Madrid where if you don't win the Champions League, it is a failure. That is pressure. (At) City it is not the expectation. In time maybe we will get that."



Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior shakes hands with Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola after the Champions League match in Manchester on Tuesday. (Reuters)

## SPOTLIGHT

## 'Frightening' Eze delivers magic moment for Arsenal

Reuters

London

Until Tuesday, Eberechi Eze's short Arsenal career had been most notable for him scoring five goals in two games against north London rivals Tottenham Hotspur, the club he almost joined last summer.

Often consigned to the bench, the £60mn (\$80mn) signing from Crystal Palace has given fleeting glimpses of his talent but as spring arrives, he is blossoming. The England attacking midfielder demonstrated why Arsenal signed him on Tuesday, scoring a sublime opening goal in a 2-0 Champions League victory over Bayer Leverkusen that sent Mikel Arteta's side into the quarter-finals.

Receiving a pass from Leandro Trossard outside the penalty area, Eze's first touch set the ball up and after turning sweetly he lashed a right-footed shot into the roof of the net that visiting keeper Janis Blaswich barely saw. Each replay was met with oohs and aahs from the Emirates Stadium crowd and even his teammates looked stunned at the ferocity of Eze's thunderbolt.

"He's got one of the best shots I've seen left foot and right foot," Arsenal's other goalscorer Declan



Arsenal's Eberechi Eze (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Bayer Leverkusen in London. (Reuters)

Rice said. "We need to keep getting him in those areas, because honestly, he's frightening. There's not many players I've seen that hit the ball better than him."

Apart from his five against Tottenham and one against his former club Crystal Palace, Eze's only other goals so far this season were against lower-league Port Vale and Mansfield Town in the League Cup and FA Cup respectively. But the 27-year-old is now becoming an integral part of Arsenal's attacking unit at just the right time as they close in on silverware in four competitions.

"We needed a magical moment from Ebs, a wonderful strike to give us the lead," Arteta said. "He is playing every three days, he has rhythm, has an understanding with the players and this (goal) is why he is here."

"I think he's building a better chemistry, a better understanding with all of them. We start to understand him as well much better. When you start to make a good game, a good action, an action like that when you're in the game, that lifts your confidence as well. That's what every player needs."

## COMMENT

## Real 'change' under Champions League spotlight, says Vinicius

AFP

Manchester

Vinicius Junior said "everything changes" for Real Madrid in the Champions League after his double dumped out Manchester City on Tuesday to take the 15-time winners into the quarter-finals 5-1 on aggregate.

Most of the damage for Pep Guardiola's men was inflicted last week in a 3-0 first leg defeat at the Santiago Bernabeu. A 2-1 home defeat confirmed City's fourth Champions League exit to Madrid in the last five seasons, including each of the past three years.

But the Spanish giants began the tie as underdogs due to their unconvincing form, that led to Xabi Alonso replacing Alvaro Arbeloa as coach in January. "All of us players know that the good games are coming and when Madrid play in this competition, everything changes," said Vinicius, who has twice scored in Champions League finals for Los Blancos in 2022 and 2024. "The fans change, the players change and we're prepared for more. That is coming soon."

Any doubt over the outcome of the tie was killed just 20 minutes in when City captain Bernardo Silva was sent off for deflecting a Vinicius shot off the line with his



Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior argues with Manchester City's Gianluigi Donnarumma after his goal was disallowed during the Champions League round of 16 match in Manchester. (Reuters)

arm. The Brazilian converted from the spot and should have added many more before he rounded off the scoring deep into stoppage time after Erling Haaland levelled for City.

"It was a very important game for our confidence," added Vinicius on their latest victory against Pep Guardiola's City.

"Since the start of the season we've had a lot of good games, but we haven't controlled them as much as we controlled this tie. It

was a very difficult match against a great team, a great coach, where they had a lot of time on the ball but we knew what to do, how to work, and take advantage of our chances."

Madrid face a tough route to this year's final in Budapest. They will almost certainly renew their rivalry with Bayern Munich in the quarter-finals, with defending champions Paris Saint-Germain possibly lying in wait in the last four.