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# GULF TIMES SPORT



**SPOTLIGHT**

**Vanderveen wins as Doha Equestrian Tour resumes with Al Shaqab Cup**

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## Arabi and Muaither book QSL Cup semi-final spots



Al Arabi and Muaither secured their places in the semi-finals of the QSL Cup with hard-fought wins yesterday. Arabi defeated Al Waab 3-1 at Al Khor Stadium, with Pablo Sarabia scoring twice late in the game to seal the victory. Ousseynou Cesar had given Al Waab an early lead in the 13th minute, but Al Arabi levelled through an own goal by Ahmed Issa before Sarabia converted a penalty in the 89th minute and added another deep into stoppage time to send last year's finalists into the last four. Meanwhile, Muaither staged a thrilling comeback to beat Al Markhiya 3-2 at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium. Al Markhiya led 2-0 through Sahil Bashir (23rd minute) and Lucas Firmo (55th), but Marc Saez scored twice to bring Muaither level before captain Albert Luque netted the winner in stoppage time to complete the comeback.

## Iran train in Turkey ahead of World Cup warm-ups

**Belek, Turkey:** Iran's men's team trained in southern Turkey yesterday as they prepare for two upcoming friendlies ahead of the World Cup, where the squad are likely to attract heightened attention against the backdrop of the US-Israeli war on Iran.

The team held a training session in Belek, a resort area near the Mediterranean city of Antalya, with tightly restricted media access as officials said they wanted to avoid distractions ahead of the matches described as critical to their World Cup preparations.

Iran's football federation is in discussions with world governing body FIFA about moving its World Cup matches to Mexico from the United States due to concerns over player safety, federation President Mehdi Taj said last week.

Iran's camp has largely sought to keep a low public profile as the team build towards the World Cup where they are expected to face intense political and media scrutiny.

In Belek, no interviews with players or coaches were made available, and a team media

representative said the squad were focused entirely on their immediate competitive programme. Iran will play two matches in Antalya, against Nigeria tomorrow and Costa Rica on Tuesday.

The friendlies were originally scheduled to take place in Jordan but were moved to Turkey following the outbreak of the Iran war.

The players appeared relaxed during the session in sunny conditions, with staff and players at times chatting and joking. Among those present was forward Mehdi Taremi, who has been in the spotlight in recent days after swapping shirts with an Israeli opponent while playing for his club Olympiacos in Greece.

Former Roma striker Sardar Azmoun was omitted from the squad after posting a picture on his Instagram feed of a meeting with Dubai's ruler Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum.

Iranian media reported that Azmoun, who has scored 57 goals in 91 internationals, had been expelled from the national team for a perceived act of disloyalty to the government.

**FOOTBALL**

# Underdogs chase FIFA World Cup berths in Mexico

Two berths on offer for this year's expanded 48-team tournament



Iraq are bidding to reach the World Cup for the second time, having qualified for the 1986 finals in Mexico where they lost all three group games.

**AFP**  
Mexico City

Two of the final remaining tickets to the World Cup will be up for grabs when a high-stakes playoff tournament kicks off in Mexico today, bringing together six teams from across the globe.

New Caledonia, Suriname, Jamaica, Bolivia, Iraq and the Democratic Republic of Congo form the diverse cast of hopefuls each chasing one of the two berths on offer for this year's expanded 48-team finals in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

The mini-tournament in Guadalajara and Monterrey also serves as a test run for two cities set to host World Cup matches in June, giving Mexico a chance to showcase its readiness after recent security concerns.

The straight-knockout playoffs begin today, with the tiny French Pacific territory of New Caledonia facing the "Reggae Boyz" of Jamaica in Guadalajara.

The winner will advance to meet the Democratic Republic of Congo at the same venue on March 31, with a World Cup ticket on the line. Whoever emerges will join Group K alongside

Colombia, Portugal and Uzbekistan.

In Monterrey, Bolivia - seeking their first World Cup appearance since the 1994 finals in the United States - take on Suriname, the former Dutch colony on the northeastern coast. The victor will move on to a winner-take-all clash with Iraq next week for the second berth on offer. The team that survives the Monterrey pathway will land in a daunting Group I, where France, Norway and Senegal await.

### IRAQ, DR CONGO FAVOURITES

On paper, and according to the latest FIFA rankings, Iraq and the DR Congo will start as the heavy favourites to advance out of the playoffs. Iraq's preparations however have been hampered by the outbreak of war in the Middle East triggered by US-Israeli strikes on Iran on February 28. Iraq coach Graham Arnold initially appealed to FIFA to postpone his team's playoff, stating that many players and backroom staff had been left stranded due to the war. Players and staff based in Baghdad however made it out of the country after reportedly traveling overland to Jordan before flying out of Amman to reach Mexico.

Iraq are bidding to reach the World Cup for only the second time, having qualified for the

1986 finals in Mexico where they lost all three group games against Paraguay, Belgium, and Mexico.

For DR Congo, meanwhile, the wait to secure their second World Cup finals appearance has been even longer. The country, formerly Zaire, last played at the 1974 World Cup finals in Germany, where they were eliminated in the group stage after defeats to Scotland, Yugoslavia and Brazil without scoring a goal.

DR Congo though have grounds for believing that the long wait to return to the finals could finally be over after battling through African qualifying, eliminating Cameroon and Nigeria to reach these playoffs.

This week's tournament is taking place just weeks after an explosion of violence in Guadalajara and other parts of Mexico triggered by the death of a notorious cartel druglord. More than 70 people were killed in the violence, but Mexico President Claudia Sheinbaum and world governing body FIFA have insisted the unrest will have no bearing on the World Cup.

Mexico, which is hosting 13 matches at the World Cup shared between Guadalajara, Monterrey and Mexico City, has said more than 100,000 security personnel will be deployed to protect fans at the tournament.

**SPOTLIGHT**

## Coach Gattuso says Italy's World Cup play-off 'biggest match' of career

**AFP**  
Bergamo

Giennaro Gattuso yesterday called Italy's World Cup play-off semi-final against Northern Ireland the most important match of his coaching career.

The Azzurri host the Northern Irish in Bergamo today trying to end a 12-year absence from the World Cup finals after failing to qualify for the last two editions in Russia and Qatar. "Tomorrow is definitely the most important match of my career," Gattuso told reporters. "But I'm prepared... I'm not thinking about it things go badly, I want to think positively, think big, and tomorrow we'll give it our best."

Gattuso admitted that for him Thursday's match is in a way even bigger than the 2006 World Cup final, which he won as a player for Italy following a penalty shootout against France. Italy haven't even played a knockout match at a World Cup since then, and eliminations in the qualifying play-offs in 2018 and 2022 have given Thursday's match huge significance.

Gattuso joked that he needed pills to help him sleep, otherwise he stays up through the night "like a bat" due to the pressure. "That's another world, I stopped playing years ago and I can't even remember the matches I played," said Gattuso. "There's no comparison really, not so much for the tension but for the responsibility that I've put on myself."

Gattuso added that most of his players were fit, and that Inter Milan defender Alessandro Bastoni and Atalanta striker Gianluca Scamacca were the only doubts for the semi-final.

Striker Mateo Retegui has come back to Bergamo where he became Serie A top scorer with Atalanta in the 2024/25 season, and where he netted twice in a 5-0 thumping of Estonia in September last year.

"We've spoken a lot about keeping calm, keeping things light and not thinking about it too much," said Retegui, who now plays for Al-Qadsiah in Saudi Arabia.

"We know that there's only one result for us, and that's to win."

If Italy get past Northern Ireland, who haven't been at a World Cup since being knocked out at the group stage 40 years ago, they will face one of Wales or Bosnia and Herzegovina away from home on Tuesday. Northern Ireland held Italy to a goalless draw at Windsor Park in 2021, a result which stopped the reigning European champions from topping their qualifying group and led to their play-off defeat to North Macedonia.

"The important thing for us is to play the game and not think about what's at stake. The expectation clearly lies... with the big nation, that's Italy," said Northern Ireland coach Michael O'Neill. "I think we have to not be intimidated by the reputation of the players that they have."

O'Neill, who took Northern Ireland to their first ever European Championship in 2016, is aware of the pressure on Italy and said he wanted a "tight" match.

"Italy have their own situation to deal with which is their own history. They only have that history because they're a top football nation. We fully respect that," added O'Neill. "It's not something that we can use to our advantage, it's something that they have to deal with, and we have to make the game difficult."



Italy take on Northern Ireland today in Florence.

CRICKET

# Esterhuizen the batting hero as SA clinch series

The visitors prevail by 33 runs in the final T20 in Christchurch

Reuters  
Christchurch

Connor Esterhuizen's knock of 75 off just 33 balls helped South Africa secure a 33-run win over New Zealand yesterday, clinching a comeback 3-2 victory in their five-match Twenty20 series after New Zealand had taken a 2-1 lead last week.

Esterhuizen, who made his international debut earlier in the series, rekindled South Africa's innings after a muted start to help them post 187-4 in Christchurch, before two-wicket hauls from Gerald Coetzee, Wiaan Mulder and Ottmiel Baartman restricted New Zealand to 154-8.

"Means everything and pinch-me moment to play for your country. Special feeling and humbling," said player of the series Esterhuizen, who had also scored a fifty in the previous game to help South Africa level the series.

New Zealand chose to bowl first and despite Benjamin Sears and Josh Clarkson dropping catches early on, South Africa were struggling at 76-2 in the 11th over before Esterhuizen came on.

The 24-year-old smashed four sixes and three boundaries to reach fifty in 24 balls, and by the time he was caught by the hosts' stand-in captain James Neesham,



South Africa's Connor Esterhuizen plays a shot during the fifth Twenty20 international against New Zealand at Hagley Oval in Christchurch yesterday. (AFP)

Esterhuizen had partnered with Dian Forrester to add 61 runs in 27 balls for the fourth wicket.

New Zealand, seeking their first win over South Africa in a multi-game bilateral T20 series, lost opener Katene Clarke early to Mulder, before Dane Cleaver (22), Tim Robinson (25) and Nick Kelly (14) fell in quick succession to leave them at 69-4 in the 11th over.

Neesham, captaining New

Zealand after regular skipper Mitchell Santner was rested and back-up captain Tom Latham got injured, batted till the last over but could do little as their innings fizzled out after Bevon Jacobs' (36 off 19 balls) brief stand.

"Unfortunately a couple of sub-par performances at the end of the series... South Africa have a quality bowling attack and (our) batters got a taste of what the next level is like," said Neesham.

New Zealand, who lost to hosts India in the T20 World Cup final earlier this month, will visit Bangladesh for a white-ball tour in April.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**South Africa 187 for 4** (Esterhuizen 75, Hermann 39, Sears 2-37) **beat New Zealand 154 for 8** (Jacobs 26, Coetzee 2-21, Mulder 2-28, Baartman 2-33) **by 33 runs**

SWIMMING

# McEvoy sees room to improve after setting 50m freestyle record

Reuters  
Brisbane



Reuters  
Brisbane

Cameron McEvoy believes his best is yet to come after breaking Cesar Cielo's long-standing men's 50 metres freestyle world record, with the Australian saying yesterday he intends to keep competing until the 2032 Brisbane Olympics. The 31-year-old clocked 20.88 seconds at the China Swimming Open in Shenzhen last week to eclipse the 20.91 set by Cielo in 2009 - during the era of the now-banned "supersuits".

Olympic and world champion McEvoy said he viewed the 50m freestyle as a strength-based event and that his strength could continue to improve in his 30s.

"I think I've got a little bit of time left... Hopefully the result in China proves that people in their 30s can definitely sprint and continue to sprint. I've still got my eyes on LA," McEvoy told reporters in Brisbane.

"I definitely have my eyes on the home Games here in Brisbane. I'll just keep at it every year and just take it one step at a time. I definitely think I can get faster.

"Whether that happens on an execution point of view, I can't be so certain. But on paper, there's definitely room to improve. Even on the training side of things, I'm

constantly refining it and developing it."

McEvoy did not receive a financial reward after setting his record, with swimming's governing body World Aquatics only paying out bonuses for records set in competitions organised by them. By contrast, the Enhanced Games, which allows athletes to use pharmacological or technological assistance, said last year it had paid Greek swimmer Kristian Gkolomeev \$1mn for bettering Cielo's time - then the 50m official world record.

Gkolomeev reportedly swam 20.89 seconds while wearing an inline full-body open water suit that falls outside World Aquatics standards.

Asked about Gkolomeev's payout, McEvoy said: "It's crazy to think that to get a world record without a suit, and without any performance-enhancing drugs, as a clean athlete, the bonus is zero dollars.

"(At the Enhanced Games) You get not only a \$1 million bonus, but there's also a \$250,000 prize money for first place, which you'd get on top of the world record... And the zero-dollar pathway is the much harder pathway to do something like this.

"So it's pretty ludicrous... I'm dumbfounded in terms of the stark contrast that exists currently in the landscape of sport and swimming."

COMMENT

# 100-Test veteran Bairstow joins Livingstone in criticising level of care in England set-up



Reuters  
London

An out-of-favour Jonny Bairstow has joined former teammate Liam Livingstone in criticising the level of care shown by the England hierarchy to some of the players and is looking forward to the English board rebuilding bridges with county cricket.

All-rounder Livingstone recently said he was left out in the cold after being dropped by England last year, adding the current regime did not care about players outside the core group.

Bairstow, who was part of England's early success under head coach Brendon McCullum and Test captain Ben Stokes but has not played a Test since his 100th

two years ago, echoed the same view.

"You need the care back in the game," Bairstow, 36, told the British media. "It is OK saying people care about things - no they don't.

"If you are in the system, you are in the system. As soon as you are out of the system, you are out of the system."

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) conducted a review of the team's 4-1 Ashes humbling earlier this year before deciding to stick with McCullum and Stokes, while Rob Key will also continue as managing director of England's men's cricket.

England were criticised for persisting with out-of-form players such as Zak Crawley and Ollie Pope in the Ashes series.

Former England players including Geoffrey Boycott and

Michael Vaughan have expressed surprise at what they called a lack of accountability in English cricket.

Like them, Bairstow also felt certain players had grown complacent under the current set-up.

"When you become comfortable you become complacent, and when someone questions you directly you are not used to it because you are in an environment that is potentially not questioning you in a different way."

Key has announced the formation of a "county insight group" to establish a stronger link with domestic cricket.

"The question you would ask is why have they disconnected in the first place?" Bairstow said. "We will see if the proof is in the pudding. I look forward to hearing a bit more about the review."

FOCUS

# Al Arabi retain Qatar Handball League title



Al Arabi players celebrate winning the league title.

QNA  
Doha

Al Arabi retained the Qatar Handball League title for the 2025-2026 season, marking their second consecutive title and fourth overall.

Al Arabi secured the title despite a 26-25 loss to Al Rayyan yesterday in the penultimate round (17th) of the competition.

Al Arabi benefited from Al Duhail's 29-26 defeat to Al Ahli in the same round.

Al Arabi maintained their lead in the standings with 49 points, four points ahead of second-placed Al Duhail, before the final round (18th), where Al Arabi will be officially crowned champions and receive the league shield.

Al Rayyan, meanwhile, increased their points tally to 41, remaining in third place, behind Al Duhail, who stayed in second place with 45 points.

In the other matches played today, Al Sadd defeated Qatar SC 24-22, bringing their total to 35 points and securing fourth place. Qatar SC remained in ninth place with 25 points.

Al Wakrah defeated Al Khor 34-31, raising their total to 32 points and placing them fifth, level on points with Al Ahli in sixth place



but ahead on goal difference. Al Khor remained in seventh place with 29 points.

Al Gharafa also defeated Al Shamal 30-24, bringing their total to 28 points and placing them eighth. Al Shamal remained in tenth place with 24 points.

It is worth noting that Al Rayyan hold the record for the most wins in the handball league with 15 titles.

They are followed by Al Sadd with 9 titles, while Al Duhail won the championship 5 times, then Al Ahli and Al Jaish with 4 titles each, while Al Arabi won the title 4 times, including this season's title, Qatar SC won the title twice, and Al Gharafa and Al Wakrah won the title once each.

CYCLING

# Godon claims Tour of Catalonia stage three

AFP  
Vila-seca, Spain

Dorian Godon won stage three of the Tour of Catalonia in a bunch sprint finish as Remco Evenepoel fell in a chaotic race finale yesterday.

Double Olympic champion Evenepoel was left bloodied after crashing at the final round-about while leading a late break on the 159.5 kilometre run from Mont-roig del Camp to Vila-seca.

Two-time Tour de France champion Jonas Vingegaard had followed Evenepoel when he broke with 20km to go, but slowed off as soon as Evenepoel fell.

Lurking a few hundred metres behind, Ineos's French rider Godon powered into action to claim a second stage here and retain the overall lead.

Evenepoel took his time getting up but lost no time in the overall as his fall happened inside the final kilometre.

British duo Ethan Vernon and Noah Hobbs were second and third respectively.

Visma-Lease a Bike's Vingegaard is favourite to win the race and should feature strongly in the next three stages in the mountains.

After Evenepoel fell Danish rider Vingegaard eased off and said he did not want to capitalise on his rival's misfortune.

"He just went over the handlebar and I hope he's okay, it looked really crazy," said Vingegaard.

"I hope he's okay and obviously I didn't want to take advantage of a situation like that



Dorian Godon celebrates after winning stage three of the Tour of Catalonia in a bunch sprint yesterday. (@VoltaCatalunya)

so I decided at that moment to just wait for the bunch. "I hope he's okay and he can continue tomorrow."

Evenepoel, who fell with around 300 metres remaining, without an obvious reason, did not appear to be seriously injured.

"I was concentrating for the sprint," said

Godon, who said he was unaware that Evenepoel crashed.

Australian Jay Vine of UAE Team Emirates abandoned the race after crashing earlier on.

Evenepoel trails Godon by 11 seconds overall, with Briton Tom Pidcock 16 behind the leader and Vingegaard at 18 seconds.

FORMULA 1

# Mercedes can make it three out of three in Suzuka

FERRARI LOOK LIKE THE CLOSEST CHALLENGERS AT SUZUKA

Reuters  
Suzuka, Japan

Formula One leaders Mercedes go into Sunday's Japanese Grand Prix chasing a season-opening hat-trick of one-two wins, with Kimi Antonelli fired up after a maiden victory and George Russell seeking to cement his status as title favourite.

The pair have won one Sunday race each but Russell, winner of the season-opener in Australia and the Saturday sprint in China, leads his Chinese Grand Prix-winning teammate by four points. Mercedes last kicked off with a hat-trick of wins in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic-hit season in which Austria's Red Bull Ring hosted the first two races. The last time they started with three one-two finishes was in 2019.

Having made a similarly dominant start to the sport's new era this season, including locking out the front row in every qualifying session, they could tick off both milestones on Sunday. "We have made a positive start to the season but it is only that," said Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff. "We know that the moment you think you've got this sport figured out, you are usually proven wrong."

**FERRARI CHASING FIRST WIN AT SUZUKA SINCE 2004**

Despite Wolff's caution, either Russell or Antonelli should be celebrating a first win at Suzuka, a 5.8-km figure-of-eight layout widely hailed as a drivers' track that hosts the 40th running of the Japanese round.

Ferrari, who last won at Suzuka in 2004 and have been second-best to Mercedes in the opening two races, will hope to rise to the challenge.



Mercedes' British driver George Russell poses in his car in Shanghai. (AFP)

Charles Leclerc and Lewis Hamilton, thanks to their fast starts and intra-team duels, have served up plenty of wheel-to-wheel entertainment.

Seven-time world champion Hamilton, in particular, has shown plenty of fight and ended his podium drought in China with a third-place finish.

A four-time Suzuka winner, the Briton will be hoping that run continues.

Circuit owners Honda will be hoping for a happier homecoming as power unit suppliers to Aston Martin after a dismal start to their year. Neither Fernando Alonso nor Lance Stroll have finished the opening two races, with vibrations from the Japanese manufacturer's power unit severely limiting running. Just getting to the chequered flag would be big progress for the

Japanese manufacturer that powered Max Verstappen to four successive wins on the circuit from 2022 to 2025 when they were partners to Red Bull.

The four-time world champion, who now has a Ford-badged Red Bull power unit in his car, will also be looking to bounce back after retiring in China.

"Heading into Suzuka, this is one of my favourite tracks to race at with lots of high-speed corners," said Verstappen.

"There is a lot of history at this circuit for the team and it is one I always look forward to coming back to."

McLaren will be hoping for a strong showing after reigning champion Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri were unable to start in China. Australian Piastri will be especially keen to get a full race

ATHLETICS

## World Athletics gives misdirected US runners extra spots at WRRC

Reuters  
London

World Athletics will allow the United States to field three extra runners in the women's half-marathon at this year's World Road Running Championships after three leaders were led off course during their national championships earlier this month.

Jess McClain, Emma Grace Hurley and Ednah Kurgat were leading the race with two miles left when they were led astray, missing out on the podium and a qualification for the WRRC, which is reserved for the top four finishers.

McClain, Hurley and Kurgat were later compensated as organisers said police assigned to mark out the route had to leave their positions to respond to an emergency call.

World Athletics said it had made an "exceptional decision" to allow the U.S. to field seven female half-marathon runners

at the WRRC, scheduled for Copenhagen in September, on a "strictly one-off basis".

The three extra runners will be "non-scoring athletes" who cannot receive medals, prize money or count towards team results, but will receive world ranking points based on their performance, World Athletics said in a statement.

"USATF will select their four fastest athletes to be their scoring athletes, while non-scoring athletes... will take the three additional places. The three non-scoring athletes will wear USA national kit but of a different style to the four scoring athletes," the statement added.

The USATF said McClain, Hurley and Kurgat will be a part of the team, along with the official top-three finishers Molly Born, Carrie Ellwood and Annie Rodenfels, with a final spot still to be decided based on world rankings.

"Should any non-scoring athletes finish in a prize-eligible position, USATF will also provide the corresponding prize money," the national body said.

## London plans two-day mega 100,000-runner marathon

The London marathon could be split across two days next year to reportedly allow up to 100,000 runners to participate and raise millions more for charity.

A world record 1.1 million people applied via a ballot to take part in the 2026 London marathon, taking place on April 26, nearly doubling the number of applications from two years ago.

The 2025 event set a world record for number of finishers in a single marathon at 56,640 and raised £87.3 million (\$117 million) for a diverse range of charities.

"The TCS London Marathon is the world's most popular marathon, and we are continually exploring innovative ways to enable more people to take part, while delivering positive benefits for London," organisers said in a statement to AFP.

"Together with our partners and stakeholders, we are looking at the intention for the 2027 TCS London Marathon to take place across two days.

"No approval has been given at this stage." The Guardian reported that the elite men's and women's races would also be staged on separate days if that plan came to fruition with hopes an expanded event could raise £130 million for good causes.

A spokesperson for the Mayor of London, Sadiq Kahn, said: "London is the sporting capital of the world and the Mayor looks forward to working with London Marathon partners to consider if it might be possible to host an event that will run across two days next year." (AFP)

FOOTBALL

## Havertz eyes successful World Cup despite long injury absence

Reuters  
Frankfurt

Germany forward Kai Havertz is close to his best form again after several injuries in the past 12 months, and a successful Arsenal run across three competitions in the coming months will be the best preparation for the World Cup, he said yesterday.

Havertz, who has been away from the national team for more than a year after missing last year's internationals through injury, is part of the Germany squad to face Switzerland on Friday and Ghana three days later. "I had a tough time. It was not easy for me," Havertz told a press conference ahead of Germany's friendly against hosts Switzerland.

"I had my first injury in February last year, three and a half months out then comeback and then a setback with the knee injury," he added. Havertz returned to action for the Premier League leaders Arsenal in January after being sidelined since August last year, but the 26-year-old said he was ready for his club's busy match schedule in the league, the FA Cup and the Champions League.

"I now feel completely fit. I need

the one or other game from the start to reach 100 percent but I feel fit to start lasting over 90 minutes," he said. Havertz added that Arsenal's busy schedule came just at the right time.

"We have many matches in three competitions. I missed the first six months of the season and I will give it all for the club, and to be able to go with a lot of confidence to the World Cup. I want to be successful at this World Cup and lead the way," he said.

Germany have set their sights on winning the World Cup following shock group-stage exits in 2018 and 2022, determined to restore their reputation as a global football powerhouse. The tournament starts in June and is co-hosted by Mexico, the United States and Canada.

The Germans, who have not reached a final in any major international tournament since winning their fourth World Cup in 2014 in Brazil, have been drawn in Group E with Ecuador, Curacao and Ivory Coast for the June 11-July 19 tournament. They play their opening World Cup match in Houston, Texas on June 14 against Curacao. Germany then travel to Toronto on June 20 to take on Ivory Coast before their last group game against Ecuador in New York on June 25.



Germany's Kai Havertz attends a press conference yesterday, ahead of the friendly against Switzerland in Herzogenaurach. (AFP)

TENNIS

## Rybakina outlasts Pegula to reach semis

AFP  
Miami

World number two Elena Rybakina rallied to overcome fifth-ranked Jessica Pegula 2-6, 6-3, 6-4 yesterday to reach the WTA and ATP Miami Open semi-finals.

Reigning Australian Open champion Rybakina, a 26-year-old from Kazakhstan, fired 12 aces in beating the American, last year's Miami runner-up, for their fifth consecutive meeting.

Rybakina next will play the winner of a later quarter-final between world number one Aryna Sabalenka, the defending champion from Belarus, and 45th-ranked American Hailey Baptiste, trying to reach her second WTA semi-final.

Rybakina improved to 6-3 all-time against Pegula, including an Indian Wells quarter-final and semi-finals of the Australian Open and last year's WTA Finals on the way to titles. Pegula, who won last month's WTA title in Dubai, broke twice to begin the match with a 4-0 lead when Rybakina netted a forehand in the opening game and sent a forehand long in the third.

Pegula held twice more to take the first set in 35 minutes when Rybakina netted a backhand, the American making only two unforced errors in the opening set. Rybakina missed three overhead smashes in the fifth game of the second set but held serve then broke when Pegula swatted a forehand long for a 4-2 edge on the way to forcing a third set.

Rybakina broke Pegula to open the third set and stayed in command to advance after two hours and 15 minutes.

Sabalenka, who will face Baptiste for the first time, has not lost to an unseeded opponent since she fell to Czech Marketa Vondrousova in last June's Berlin semi-finals. Sabalenka won titles



Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan celebrates after defeating Jessica Pegula of the United States in their Miami Open quarter-final at Hard Rock Stadium yesterday. (AFP)

this year at Brisbane and Indian Wells.

Her only 2026 loss was to Rybakina in the Australian Open final. It will be the 32nd career WTA quarter-final for Sabalenka. Baptiste, who lost to Rybakina in the second round at Indian Wells, has captured four straight matches, the longest win streak of her WTA career. Her best WTA finish was a run to the Abu Dhabi semi-finals.

Earlie, Coco Gauff battled past Belinda Bencic to reach the semi-finals for the first time on Tuesday with a gruelling 6-3, 1-6, 6-3 victory. Fourth seed Gauff had considered skipping Miami after being forced to pull out during the fourth round at Indian Wells with a left-arm injury.

But the 22-year-old from Florida, who lives in nearby Delray Beach, was determined to play in what she considers to be her hometown tournament

where she had never previously gone further than the last 16.

Gauff's sense of determination was on full display at the Hard Rock Stadium's main court on Tuesday as she weathered fluctuating form against the 12th-seeded Bencic to grind out victory. "I honestly didn't think I would be in the semis so I'm really happy and proud of myself," Gauff said.

"I think I proved a lot to myself this week, and I feel like with each match I'm getting better. Even though I'm still playing three sets, I feel like the level is getting better and better."

Gauff, the French Open champion, will now face the Czech 13th seed Karolina Muchova in the last four as she chases her first Miami final appearance.

Gauff has won all five of her previous matches against Muchova. "You don't think about the head-to-head," Gauff said.

"There's so many matches that we play that could go either way. I don't really think about it -- especially when I play here, because I know how good she is."

Muchova advanced to the last four earlier with a 7-5, 7-6 (7/5) defeat of Canadian 10th seed Victoria Mboko.

The 29-year-old Muchova admitted she had everything to prove against Gauff.

"I don't have the best record against Coco, but I feel good," Muchova said. "And you never know."

Despite giving away 10 years to the teenaged Mboko, Muchova said she did not feel any sense of disadvantage against her younger opponent.

"I keep getting these questions this week like I'm really old or something," Muchova said.

"I don't feel that old - I feel like I'm still pretty young. In my head, I could be 20."

## AL SHAQAB CUP

## Vanderveen triumphs as Doha Equestrian Tour resumes

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The Doha Equestrian Tour resumed yesterday with Al Shaqab Cup, while the Qatar Equestrian Federation Cup will be held from April 2 to 4. The competitions, which is being held at Al Shaqab Arena, feature elite international riders alongside competitors from across the region and Qatar, contesting multiple categories at varying heights.

On the opening day of the Al Shaqab Cup yesterday, American rider Kristen Vanderveen claimed victory in the CSI5\* Faults and Time 150cm class, guiding Bull Run's Jireh to a clear round in 66.77 seconds. Saudi Arabia's Abdullah Alsharbatly finished second aboard Frenchy Vds with a time of 69.38 seconds, while Austria's Gerfried Puck secured third place on Equitron Naxcel V in 73.48 seconds.

Earlier, Qatar's Bassem Mohammed delivered a strong performance to win the CSI5\* Two Phases 140cm class on Wathnan Chacball, completing the course with two clear rounds in 35.79 seconds. Qatar's Rashid Towaim Ali al-Marri also impressed to take second place riding Navaronne in 36.70 seconds, while his compatriot Faleh Suwead al-Ajami finished third aboard Wathnan Quality Street in 40.52 seconds.

The Al Shaqab Cup, which features one-star, three-star and five-star classes, has attracted more than 150 riders and offers a total prize purse of €784,000. The Qatar Equestrian Federation Cup is expected to host more than 200 riders competing



American rider Kristen Vanderveen claimed victory in the CSI5\* Faults and Time 150cm class, guiding Bull Run's Jireh to a clear round in 66.77 seconds.

across one-star to five-star categories, with an identical prize purse of €784,000.

Both events are of particular importance as they serve as qualifying rounds for Group VII of the International Equestrian Federation (FEI) individual competitions.

Deputy Director of the Doha Equestrian Tour Mohammed Jaber al-Khayarin said preparations to conduct the events were carried out with meticulous planning and strict adherence to the highest safety standards due to the current regional ten-

sions. He noted that competitions are being held without spectators in a controlled environment, in line with official guidelines and in coordination with partners and relevant bodies, including the FEI.

He stressed that the safety of all participants, including horses, remains a top priority, adding that the championship holds special significance within the season as it provides riders with an opportunity to qualify for the FEI Group VII finals. He also highlighted the continued presence of elite



Qatar's Bassem Mohammed delivered a strong performance to win the CSI5\* Two Phases 140cm class on Wathnan Chacball at Al Shaqab yesterday.

international riders competing for titles until the closing stages.

Al-Khayarin added that the substantial prize money has been a key motivator for riders, contributing to the high level of competition seen throughout the tour so far, while also attracting top-ranked riders from around the world to a series that is growing in importance on the international equestrian calendar.

In the overall standings for the four-star and five-star categories, Great Britain's world number one Scott Brash leads with 199 points, followed by compatriot Harry Charles with 144 points. Saudi Arabia's Alsharbatly sits third with 125 points, ahead of France's Megan Moissonnier (113 points) and American rider Eve Jobs (109 points).

In the one-star standings, Qatar's Saad Ahmed al-Saad leads with 75 points, followed by Khalid Jassim al-Suwaidi with 49 points and Hussein Saeed Haidan with 43 points. Egypt's Fatima Mohand El Kashawi is fourth with 34 points, while Ali Omar al-Ansari and Ghanem Nasser al-Qadi are tied with 32 points each.

Launched in 2025, the Doha Equestrian Tour is a prestigious international show-jumping and dressage series comprising 10 championships held at the Longines Arena at Al Shaqab, one of the world's leading equestrian venues. The tour brings together elite riders and showcases top-level competition, further strengthening Doha's status as a global equestrian hub.

## FOOTBALL

## France, Brazil weigh up World Cup prospects in glamour friendly

With less than three months until the big kick-off, France and Brazil face off in Boston

AFP  
Foxborough, United States

Brazil and France will be among the leading contenders for World Cup glory later this year and the two heavyweight nations continue their preparations for the tournament by facing off in a glamour friendly in the United States this week.

With less than three months until the big kick-off, the countries ranked fifth and third respectively in the world rankings are in the US familiarising themselves with what lies in store in June and July and they go head to head today at the Gillette Stadium near Boston.

The home of NFL side New England Patriots is the venue for the first meeting of these teams in exactly 11 years, since Brazil came from behind to win 3-1 in a friendly at the Stade de France in March 2015 with goals from Oscar, Neymar and Luiz Gustavo. Brazil laboured their way through South American World Cup qualifying with six defeats in 18 games as they finished fifth - now they are hoping the appointment of Carlo Ancelotti as coach will give them a genuine chance of winning a record-extending sixth World Cup, and first since 2002.

After this match they will head to Orlando, Florida, for a friendly on March 31 against Croatia, the team who ousted them from the 2022 World Cup in the quarter-finals. Neymar is now 34 and has not played for his country since October 2023, but his absence from the squad has still been one of the main talking points coming into these matches. "It is a physical issue, not technical. With the ball he is great, but he



France's forward Kylian Mbappe signs autographs upon arriving at a hotel in Boston. France will play a friendly against Brazil today in Boston and then against Colombia on March 29 in Landover. (AFP)

needs to improve physically," Ancelotti said after being asked about the absence of the former Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain superstar, now at Santos. "Because in my eyes and those of my staff, he is not at 100 percent. So he needs to keep working to get back to 100 percent."

In the meantime Brazil's main man is Real Madrid forward Vinicius Junior, while

others likely to have key roles at the World Cup such as goalkeeper Alisson Becker, centre-back Gabriel Magalhaes and midfielder Bruno Guimaraes are missing here. Among those who do feature is Rayan, the uncapped 19-year-old who earned his place after impressing in the Premier League for Bournemouth since arriving from Vasco da Gama in January.

The main focus for France, as ever, is Kylian Mbappe, and the national team captain was eager to feature on this trip after overcoming a knee injury to return for Real Madrid just last week. There had been mounting fears in France that the 27-year-old's fitness could become a real issue but he said missing the World Cup or the end of the club season was never a concern.

"It is behind me. I was following a protocol and I wanted to start playing again gradually. I hope to be able to play during this international break and to start being decisive again," he said on Monday, just before the squad headed to the US.

France, who have seen Arsenal defender William Saliba withdraw due to injury and called up Maxence Lacroix of Crystal Palace in his place, are staying in the same Boston hotel where they will be based during the World Cup. The tournament will be coach Didier Deschamps' swansong after 14 years at the helm, with Zinedine Zidane fully expected to succeed him.

"I know his name," French Football Federation president Philippe Diallo said this week when asked about his search for the successor to Deschamps. He refuses to explicitly say Zidane will take over, but it is hard to imagine Diallo means anyone else.

The last competitive meeting of the teams came at the 2006 World Cup, when France beat Brazil 1-0 in the quarter-finals, thanks to a Thierry Henry goal and a masterful performance by Zidane.

If both win their groups at the upcoming World Cup as expected, then they would not be able to meet each other until the final. Getting that far is the aim for these sides, and Thursday's game will be a good gauge of where both stand as the competition approaches.

## Final World Cup ticketing phase is first-come, first-served

**New York:** Fans looking for one last opportunity to get tickets to this summer's FIFA World Cup in North America will get their chance on April 1. And that's no joke.

FIFA announced that a fourth and final phase of ticket sales will take place starting at 11 am ET on April 1 and will remain open through the end of the tournament. Tickets in the "Last-Minute Sales Phase" will be available to the general public on a first-come, first-served basis through FIFA's official ticketing website, where fans will be able to select specific seats for various available matches or use a "book the best seat" feature.

Availability of seats could change frequently as tickets will be released on a rolling basis, including some same-day tickets for matches, according to FIFA.

FIFA's official resale and exchange platform will reopen on April 2. Initially open from October 2025 through Feb. 22, this marketplace is intended to prevent unauthorized or invalid ticket sales as demand for tickets continues to be high, with FIFA reporting that the all-time attendance record of 3.5mn - set during the 1994 World Cup - is expected to be surpassed this summer.

The announcement comes just a day after European football fans lodged a formal complaint over the high cost of the tickets, arguing that ticket prices are significantly higher than at any previous World Cup. Tickets for the final at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey on July 19 start at \$4,185 - seven times the cost of the cheapest ticket at the 2022 World Cup final in Qatar. The 48-team World Cup opens on June 11, with matches taking place across the United States, Mexico and Canada.

## INJURY THREATENS JAPAN DEFENDER TOMIYASU'S WORLD CUP DREAM

Former Arsenal defender Takehiro Tomiyasu on Tuesday pulled out of Japan's squad for friendlies against Scotland and England because of injury, putting his World Cup hopes at further risk. The 27-year-old was last week called up for the first time in almost two years, but he will now have no chance to play for his country before coach Hajime Moriyasu names his World Cup squad.

Tomiyasu started for his club Ajax against Feyenoord on Sunday, but he signalled to the bench in discomfort after going down and was substituted in the 73rd minute. Japan play Scotland in Glasgow on Saturday before taking on England at Wembley three days later. They have been drawn in Group F with the Netherlands, Tunisia and a European qualifier at the World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

## Senegal lodge appeal to Court of Arbitration for Sport over AFCON final decision

**Paris:** Senegal have lodged an appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport over the decision to strip them of the Africa Cup of Nations title and hand the trophy to Morocco, the Swiss-based tribunal confirmed Wednesday.

"The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) confirms receipt of an appeal by the Senegalese Football Federation (FSF) against the Confederation of African Football (CAF) and the Royal Moroccan Football Federation," the CAS said in a statement.

Senegal are hoping to overturn the decision by African football's governing body to strip them of the title after several of their players walked off the pitch in protest at a penalty awarded to Morocco during the Cup of Nations final on January 18, which the Senegalese side went on to win 1-0 in extra-time.

CAF announced on March 17 that it had upheld an appeal by the Moroccan

Football Federation, saying that Senegal had infringed tournament regulations by walking off. As a result, it declared Senegal to have forfeited the match, turning its 1-0 victory into a 3-0 defeat, making hosts Morocco the champions.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport said Senegal's appeal "seeks to set aside the CAF decision and declare the FSF winners of AFCON".

CAS Director General Matthieu Reeb added: "We understand that teams and fans are eager to know the final decision, and we will ensure that arbitration proceedings are conducted as swiftly as possible, while respecting the right of all parties to a fair hearing."

The final flashpoint came when Morocco were awarded a hotly contested spot-kick in injury time with the game goalless. The penalty 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.

Some Senegalese supporters attempted a pitch invasion out of anger, while Senegal's players halted the game for nearly 20 minutes to protest the penalty award. After Senegal's players eventually returned having been coaxed back onto the pitch by Sadio Mane, Morocco's Diaz took the kick but his penalty was saved. Pape Gueye then went on to score the goal in extra-time that gave Senegal a 1-0 victory, and their second continental title after their maiden triumph in 2022.

The Moroccan Federation reacted to CAF's decision to overturn the result by saying it had "never intended to contest the sporting performance of the teams participating in this competition, but solely to request the application of the competi-

tion regulations".

CAF president Patrice Motsepe has said he supports the right of African countries to make appeals to CAS, saying the continent's football governing body would "respect the decision which is taken at the highest level".

In the immediate aftermath of the final, FIFA president Gianni Infantino, who attended the match, had condemned "some Senegal players" for the "unacceptable scenes".

Both Senegal and Morocco are in action this week playing friendly matches as they prepare for the upcoming World Cup. Senegal play Peru at the Stade de France in Paris on Saturday, while Morocco - who have a new coach following the recent appointment of Mohamed Ouahbi to replace Walid Regragui - face Ecuador in Madrid on Friday and then take on Paraguay in Lens, France, on March 31.