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**CRICKET | Page 2**

David six-hitting spree powers Bengaluru to IPL win



**FOOTBALL | Page 4**

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# GULF TIMES SPORT



**CYCLING**

World champion Pogacar wins joint-record third Tour of Flanders

Page 3

**SPOTLIGHT**

## Sheikh Joaan chairs QOC's 39th General Assembly Meeting

The Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) convened its 39th General Assembly meeting for 2026 yesterday, under the chairmanship of HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the QOC.

The meeting was attended by HE Mohamed bin Yousef al-Mana, First Vice President; HE Dr. Thani bin Abdulrahman al-Kuwari, Second Vice President; HE Jassim bin Rashid al-Buenain, Secretary General; as well as presidents and representatives of the sports federations and committees affiliated with the QOC.

During the session, HE Sheikh Joaan praised the efforts of the federations and committees, highlighting the notable achievements of Qatari national teams across various sports in 2025. He called for continued dedication and increased efforts in the coming phase, particularly in preparation for major upcoming events - most notably the 20th Asian Games, set to be held in Aichi and Nagoya, Japan, from 19 September to 4 October 2026.

The General Assembly proceedings commenced with the approval

of the minutes of the previous meeting (No. 38), held on December 5, 2024. This was followed by a presentation highlighting the QOC's sporting achievements in 2025, as well as upcoming major events to be hosted by Qatar, including the 4th GCC Games - Doha 2026, the FIBA Basketball World Cup Qatar 2027, the West Asian Youth Games 2027, and the FIVB Volleyball World Championship Qatar 2029.

The meeting also reviewed upcoming multi-sport events, including the Asian Beach Games in Sanya, China, in April 2026; the Asian Games in Aichi and Nagoya, Japan, in September 2026; the Youth Olympic Games in Dakar, Senegal, in November 2026; and the Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in December 2026.

During the meeting, the General Assembly also approved the admission of the Qatar Police Sports Federation and the Qatar Military Sports Association as members of the Qatar Olympic Committee. The Assembly also reviewed the QOC's budget for the fiscal years 2025-2026 and approved the fi-



nal accounts for the fiscal years 2024-2025.

Speaking on the occasion, al-Buenain highlighted the importance of advancing Qatar's sports sector, noting that recent achieve-

ments and ongoing efforts by the QOC are strengthening the country's global sporting presence. He emphasized that upcoming milestones - especially the 2036 Olympic bid and major events like

the Asian Games - require unified national efforts to elevate performance and secure further success. He also described expanding QOC membership to the Qatar Police Sports Federation and the

Qatar Military Sports Association as a strategic step toward enhancing collaboration and expertise, and concluded by thanking all contributors to Qatar's sporting progress.

**SHOWJUMPING**

# Vanderveen claims CSI5\* Grand Prix of QEF Cup

Brash tops Doha Equestrian Tour 2026 Four- and Five-Star categories; al-Saad wins DET 2026 One-Star category

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Kristen Vanderveen made it a memorable first in Doha for herself and her horses yesterday as she topped the CSI5\* Grand Prix - Jump-Off - 1.60m concluding class of the Qatar Equestrian Federation Cup as the Doha Equestrian Tour 2026 came to a spectacular conclusion at Al Shaqab.

Vanderveen displayed sizzling form as the American rider claimed wins in three top classes on the final day of the four-day event.

Vanderveen topped a five-rider jump-off astride darkbay gelding Bull Run's Jireh with a clear round in 44.07secs to finish ahead of Qatari Bassem Mohammed, who was second on chestnut gelding Wathnan Issem in 44.13secs.

The third podium spot was claimed by Saudi Arabia's Abdullah Alsharbatly, who rode bay stallion Skorphults Baloutendro and finished in 43.52secs picking four faults.

Vanderveen received €97,500 besides the trophy for her win. Bassem Mohammed won €65,000 and Alsharbatly €48,750.

Vanderveen said she felt lucky today. "I got a bit lucky in the first round today. I am very happy with my results and to have finished as a champion in the concluding event. It is very special for me."

"It was my first Tour here in Doha and I have been delighted to be here. It was an amazing opportunity for the horses to ride on the vast expanse. Outside the event, I also got a chance to the beautiful culture here. It has been quite special and I would surely love coming back here," she said.

Britain's Scott Brash topped the overall standings for the Doha Finals in the four- and five-star classes with a total of 199 points. He was followed by Abdullah Al Sharbatly (197 points), and Brit Harry Charles (144 points).



Podium winners of the CSI5\* Grand Prix - Jump-Off - 1.60m class, the finale of Qatar Equestrian Federation Cup, Kristen Vanderveen, Bassem Mohammed and Abdullah Alsharbatly with their trophies.

In overall standings for the Star category, Qatari rider Saad Ahmed al-Saad topped the table with 90 points, followed by his compatriot Khalid Jassim al-Suwaidi with 89 points, and Qatari rider Hussein Saeed Haidan in third place with 69 points.

The top finishers were crowned by Rashid Nasser Saree al-Kaabi, a member of the Doha Equestrian Tour 2026 Organizing Committee and a member of the Al Shaqab Board of Directors, and Bader bin Mohammed al-Darwish, President of the Qatar Equestrian Federation and a member of the Doha Equestrian Tour Organizing Committee.

Assistant Tournament Director, Sheikh Talal bin Khaled al-Thani, congratulated the winners. "We had some very impressive competitions in all classes of showjumping, dressage and para dressage. Congratulations to all the winners," he said. And added: "Special thanks to Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, Qatar Olympic Committee, for his unwavering sup-

port in the success of the tour. The next edition of the Doha Tour will start on December 30."

The final day of the championship featured five rounds, beginning with the three-star 135cm class which was also bagged by Vanderveen with a time of 58.67 seconds on Bull Run's Lioness. Qatari rider Saeed Hamad Jumaa was second in 63.86 seconds astride Wathnan Diesel, while his compatriot, Mohammed Yousef al-Jaber, finished third in 64.56 seconds riding Christa 27.

The winners were crowned by Mohammed al-Suwaidi, the stable manager for the championship.

The CSI3\* - Table C - 1.40m class was clinched by Egyptian Zayed Ali claimed first place finishing in 64.97 seconds on Quirani van de Maltahoeve. Saudi rider Khalid al-Hadi was second in 65 seconds on Capoen, while Qatari rider Sultan Salem al-Nuaimi finished third with a time of 68.3 seconds on his horse Gannan de La Luce.

The winners were honored by

Engineer Lahdan al-Buainain, the tournament's venue manager. Qatari's Mohammed Khalifa al-Baker won the CSI3\* Grand Prix - Jump Off - 1.50m class clocking 44.86 seconds astride Dukhan 3 Abdullah Alsharbatly was second in 45.73 seconds on Quisandro, while Qatari Hussein Saeed Haidan finished third in 48.62 seconds on Icatarina.]

The winners were honored by Bader bin Mohammed al-Darwish, President of the Qatar Equestrian Federation and member of the Doha Equestrian Tour Organizing Committee.

The CSI5\* - Faults & Time - 1.50m was also claimed by Vanderveen who clocked the best 73.89 seconds on Starbucks. Egyptian Zein Shady Samir was second with a time of 81.27 seconds on Le Boss, and Qatari Bassem Mohammed ended in third in 73.48 seconds on Wathnan Zodiak.

The winners were crowned by Mohammed al-Suwaidi, the tournament's stable manager.

Khalifa al-Attayah, Executive



Kristen Vanderveen rides Bull Run's Jireh during the CSI5\* Grand Prix - Jump-Off - 1.60m class in the Qatar Equestrian Federation Cup at the Longines Outdoor Arena of Al Shaqab.



Overall winners in various categories of Doha Equestrian Tour 2026 after being honoured by Rashid Nasser Saree al-Kaabi, a member of Doha Equestrian Tour 2026 Organizing Committee at Al Shaqab.

Director of the Doha Equestrian Tour, stated: "With the conclusion of the Doha Equestrian Tour 2026, Qatar has successfully translated its strategic vision into tangible reality through a comprehensive season that constituted one of the most prominent events on the international equestrian calendar, in terms of the level of organization, the scale of participation, and the diversity of the competitions."

Mohammed Jaber al-Khay-

arin, Deputy Director of the Doha Equestrian Tour, said the exceptional season was a significant step in establishing Qatar's position as a leading global center for equestrian sports.

"Doha successfully delivered a comprehensive season spanning several months, attracting the world's elite riders to a professional organizational environment and world-class infrastructure at Al Shaqab," he said.

IPL

# David leads RCB's batting blitz in win over Chennai

The Australian smashes 8 sixes in his blistering knock of 70 runs

AFP  
Bengaluru, India

**T**im David belted eight sixes in a blistering 70 not out to fire Royal Challengers Bengaluru to their second win of the IPL season, hammering Chennai Super Kings by 43 runs yesterday.

David's 25-ball blitz steered defending champions Bengaluru to 250-3, the highest total in this season's tournament, after the hosts were put in to bat first at M Chinnaswamy Stadium.

Bengaluru bowled Chennai out for 207 in 19.4 overs to condemn the five-time IPL winners to a third defeat in as many matches.

Seam bowler Bhuvneshwar Kumar took three wickets for Bengaluru. Jacob Duffy, Abhinandan Singh and Krunal Pandya claimed two each.

Bengaluru top the 10-team IPL table with a better run-rate than Rajasthan Royals, Delhi Capitals and Punjab Kings.

All four sides have won their opening two matches.

Bengaluru, who won their first IPL title in 18 attempts last year, started strong after Virat Kohli hit an 18-ball 28, and the rest of the batting kept up the pace and then accelerated.

Kohli's fellow opener Phil Salt made 46 and Devdutt Padikkal reached 50 before skipper Rajat



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Tim David in action during the IPL match against Chennai Super Kings in Bengaluru yesterday. (Reuters)

Patidar, who finished unbeaten on 48, and David tore into the Chennai attack.

Australia's David launched a brutal assault at the back end of the Bengaluru innings and whacked England's Jamie Overton for four sixes and a four in a 30-run 19th over.

David and Patidar put on 99

runs in 36 balls as Bengaluru plundered 97 runs from the final five overs. Chennai lost three early wickets, including skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad for seven, to immediately fall behind in the chase.

Sarfraz Khan's 25-ball 50 and good knocks from Prashant Veer (43) and Overton (37) added some spark to an otherwise disappoint-

ing Chennai show.

**BRIEF SCORES**

**Royal Challengers Bengaluru 250 for 3** (David 70\*, Paddikal 50, Patidar 48\*, Dube 1-30) **beat Chennai Super Kings 207** (Sarfraz 50, Veer 43, Bhuvneshwar 3-41, Abhinandan 2-30) **by 43 runs**

CRICKET

# Fixing length does the trick for Rajasthan leg-spinner Bishnoi



Reuters  
New Delhi

**R**ajasthan Royals leg-spinner Ravi Bishnoi believes he has turned a major weakness into his strength after putting on a match-winning display in Saturday's Indian Premier League (IPL) match against Gujarat Titans.

Bishnoi endured his worst IPL season last year, when he managed only nine wickets in 11 games, prompting Lucknow Super Giants to release him.

The 25-year-old went through a hard grind to fix his length and claimed 4-41 to set up Rajasthan's six-wicket victory against Gujarat.

"Last season was difficult," Bishnoi said after collecting the award for player of the match at Ahmedabad's Narendra Modi Stadium. "I had one weakness, if my length was wrong, then I was getting hit for fours and sixes."

"I played a whole season of domestic and worked on perfecting my lengths. Hitting my lengths

made it difficult for batters, when I was too full I got hit today too."

That method showed up in his impressive display.

Bishnoi deceived Sai Sudharsan and Glenn Phillips with googlies and also dismissed Washington Sundar before landing the key strike of Rahul Tewatia late in the chase.

"All four are my favourite wickets, but Rahul's wicket towards the end was important, since it came at that particular time," he said.

"He is known to be a finisher. If he hadn't gone out then the game could've gone any direction."

It was a nervy win for Rajasthan with Gujarat threatening to pull off a 211-run chase.

Gujarat needed 15 runs from the last two overs with three wickets in hand, but Jofra Archer conceded only four in an excellent penultimate over and Tushar Deshpande gave away as many to thwart them.

IPL leaders Rajasthan are level with Delhi Capitals and Punjab Kings on four points from two matches but ahead of them on a superior net run rate.

## Nawaz shines as Sultans beat Gladiators in PSL



Multan Sultans yesterday posted a 6-wicket victory over the Quetta Gladiators, further solidifying their position in the PSL 2026 standings. Sultans' bowling attack, led by Mohammad Nawaz, restricted the Gladiators to a modest 166/7 in their 20 overs. Nawaz (above) was the standout performer, claiming 3 wickets for 30 runs, a performance that earned him the Player of the Match award. For Quetta, captain Saud Shakeel provided a fighting 56 off 41 balls. The chase was clinical. Multan reached the target with 15 balls to spare, finishing at 167/4. Legendary Australian batsman Steve Smith anchored the innings with a composed 53 off 35 balls, while captain Shan Masood remained unbeaten on 46 to guide his team home and bounce back from their previous loss.

SPOTLIGHT

# Shami, Pant produce slick efforts in Lucknow victory

AFP  
Hyderabad, India

**M**ohammed Shami's figures of 2-9 and an unbeaten 68 by skipper Rishabh Pant led Lucknow Super Giants to a tense five-wicket win over Sunrisers Hyderabad in the IPL yesterday.

Pace bowler Shami's inspirational opening spell had Hyderabad tottering at 26-4 before the home team reached 156-9 at the Uppal stadium.

Lucknow started strongly but wobbled in the middle phase before the left-handed Pant kept calm to steer the team home with one ball to spare for their first win of the season in two matches.

Aiden Markram's 45 off 27 balls set up the chase but Lucknow lost quick wickets including impact substitute Ayush Badoni, stumped for 12, and Nicholas Pooran, run out for one.

Needing nine off the final over, Pant, a wicketkeeper-batter, hit three fours including the winning boundary off Jaydev Unadkat.

Shami stood out after he took down Hyderabad's dangerous openers Abhishek Sharma, for a duck, and Travis Head, for seven, on successive balls in his first two overs. He had Sharma caught at



Lucknow Super Giants' Mohammed Shami (right) speaks with his captain Rishabh Pant during the IPL match against Sunrisers Hyderabad yesterday. (AFP)

short third off the last delivery of his opener and Head then taken at mid-off from the first ball of his second over. India's veteran quick Shami has 462 international wickets across three formats but has fallen off the radar of national selectors despite consistent domestic performances.

The 35-year-old Shami last played for India in the final of the 2025 ODI Champions Trophy in

Dubai. England's Liam Livingstone avoided the hat-trick but soon fell for 14 after skipper Ishan Kishan was bowled for one before Heinrich Klaasen and Nitish Kumar Reddy hit back.

Klaasen top-scored with 62 and Reddy hit 56 off 33 balls as the two put on 116 runs in a counter-attacking stand that gave Hyderabad a fighting chance.

But once the two departed, Hy-

derabad's batting fell apart as fast bowlers Prince Yadav and Avesh Khan finished with two wickets each to provide able support to Shami.

**BRIEF SCORES**

**Lucknow Super Giants 160 for 5** (Pant 68\*, Markram 45, Dubey 2-18) **beat Sunrisers Hyderabad 156 for 9** (Klaasen 62, Reddy 56, Shami 2-9) **by five wickets**

FOCUS

# QSL CEO attends closing ceremony of 49th Saleh Saqr Ramadan Tournament



**H**ani Taleb Ballan, CEO of Qatar Stars League (QSL), attended the closing ceremony of 49th Saleh Saqr Ramadan Football Tournament, organized by Qatar Football Association and QSL.

The final match, played at Doha Stadium, pitted Doha Club against Al Riffa Club.

Al Riffa emerged as victorious defeating Doha Club 7-6 in a penalty shoot-out in the final of prestigious tournament, considered as one of the most prominent Ramadan tournaments which attracts widespread participation.

Hani presented the winners with their medals and trophies. On the occasion, Hani expressed his delight at the high level of game displayed by both finalists, congratulating Al Riffa on their victory and commending the performance of Doha FC and all competing teams.

He stressed that the Saleh Saqr Tournament represents a significant sporting legacy, being one of the oldest Ramadan tournaments in the Arab world and Gulf region, having been held for 49 years. This reflects its prominent place in the history of Qatar football.

He also noted that holding the

matches at Doha Stadium gave the tournament a special character, given the venue's considerable historical value.

This tournament has witnessed significant milestones and turning points over the decades, ensuring its enduring prestige and remarkable continuity, especially as it bears the name of one of Qatar football's icons.

He praised the ongoing support the tournament receives from QFA and QSL, and expressed his hope for an exceptional edition in next year's Golden Jubilee, marking 50 years since its inception.

CYCLING

# A cut above the rest: Pogacar wins Tour of Flanders

The world champion from Slovenia has won three races this year

AFP  
Oudenaarde, Belgium

**W**orld champion Tadej Pogacar won a record-equaling third Tour of Flanders yesterday after dropping his main rival Mathieu van der Poel with 18km to ride.

Van der Poel was himself aiming for a new record fourth victory in the second Monument of the season, but instead, Pogacar made it two from two in the prestigious one-day classics having won Milan-San Remo last month.

Four-time Tour de France winner Pogacar, 27, now has 12 Monument victories, putting him clear in second on the all-time list behind only the great Eddy Merckx with 19.

He has raced three times this year, winning all three and if he wins Paris-Roubaix next weekend, he will join an elite band as just the fourth man to win all five Monuments after Merckx and fellow Belgians Rik Van Looy and Roger De Vlaeminck.

"It was a really crazy race today, I don't know what to say: super-hard from I don't know which kilometre," Pogacar told *Belgian TV*.

"I don't race too much, so when I race there is pressure to win.

"So far everything went perfect for me, so I can be more than happy.

"Coming next week to Roubaix, I can go motivated, but I try to enjoy the cobbles."

On his Roubaix debut last year, he finished second to Van der Poel, who won for the third year in a row.

Double Olympic champion Remco Evenepoel, on his Flanders debut, held on for an impressive third place ahead of fellow Belgian Wout van Aert after 278km and more than six hours riding around Flanders, over punchy climbs and numerous cobble sections.

In what was billed as a battle



UAE Team Emirates' Slovenian rider Tadej Pogacar cycles in the men's race of the 'Ronde van Vlaanderen/ Tour des Flandres/ Tour of Flanders' UCI WorldTour one day cycling race, 278 km from Antwerp to Oudenaarde, in Haaltert, yesterday. (AFP)

between four of the biggest stars in cycling, Pogacar once again proved he is a cut above the others, although Van der Poel - one of the greatest cobbled classics specialists of all time - pushed him all the way.

Pogacar had dropped all his rivals bar Van der Poel and Evenepoel with an acceleration on the second of three ascents up the Oude Kwaremont climb with 57km to race.

Evenepoel was left behind on the very next climb, the Paterberg, and although he kept within a handful of seconds at first, he would gradually drift backwards, finishing more than a minute after Pogacar.

Pogacar and Van der Poel rode together for the better part of 40km, before the Slovenian put in his race-winning move on the final ride up the Oude Kwaremont. He crested that with a six-

second advantage, but Dutchman Van der Poel's resistance was broken and he would only lose more time before the finish.

A 13-man break, including Mongolian Sainbayarn Jambaljamts, escaped in the first 40km and built up a maximum lead of about five-and-a-half minutes, thanks in part to the peloton being held up at a level crossing.

That lead stayed fairly stable for more than 100km before the peloton upped its pace.

With just over 100km left, Pogacar's teammates put the hammer down on the Molenberg climb and caused a split that saw a group of about 15 riders containing the favourites form a chase group.

The favourites caught the breakaway group with just under 80km left to ride, by which time their lead over the peloton had risen over one minute.

From then on, it was a question of whether anyone would be able to stay with Pogacar over the remaining climbs to the finish - and no one could.

In the women's race, European champion Demi Vollerling yesterday made an identical move to Pogacar, dropping her rivals and cresting the Oude Kwaremont with a 19-second lead over Pauline Ferrand-Prevot and Puck Pieterse.

The Dutch rider would not be caught, coming home at the end of the 164km race with a 45-second gap to Ferrand-Prevot, who easily pipped Pieterse in the sprint for second.

It was the 2023 Tour de France Femmes winner's third Monument victory having won Liege-Bastogne-Liege twice.

Record three-time winner Lotte Kopecky had to settle for fourth.

BOXING

# Wilder calls out Joshua after win over Chisora

Reuters  
London

**D**eontay Wilder called out Anthony Joshua for a long-awaited match-up between the former heavyweight champions, after Wilder edged Derek Chisora to clinch a split-decision victory in London yesterday.

Wilder came face to face with Joshua as he walked past the Briton after the fight.

The two fist-bumped, and the American said, "Let's do it."

"It wasn't a few words, I dapped it up with him and I said, now let's get it on," Wilder told reporters when asked about the exchange.

"I'm ready for whoever, long as these guys are in the heavyweight division, I am here. You can call me Mr Clean, because I want to clean up the whole division. The division is nothing without Deontay Wilder."

American Wilder was the WBC champion when Joshua held the WBA, IBF and WBO belts, but a unified heavyweight championship bout between them never materialised, as Wilder went on to lose to Tyson Fury and Joshua lost his belts to Oleksandr Usyk.

Undefeated Usyk went on to become the unified champion when he beat Fury in May 2024.

Joshua was last in action in December, when he knocked out Jake Paul.

Joshua's promoter Eddie Hearn, who was with him during the exchange with Wilder, said the fight would not be a problem for the Briton. "He said, let's do it. AJ sort of stared at him ice cold, but he would fight him no problem," Hearn told *Fight Hub TV*.

## Joshua's first public appearance since fatal car crash

Former world heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua has made his first public appearance since he survived a car crash in Nigeria that killed his close friends Sina Ghami and Latif Ayodele.

Joshua had kept a low profile since the accident on December 29, but he was seen at London's O2 Arena on Saturday watching a Derek Chisora bout.

The British fighter was ringside as Chisora made the 50th and final fight of his career against Deontay Wilder.

Boxing promoter Eddie Hearn has said Joshua needs time to heal before considering stepping back into the ring himself.

Dressed in a white tracksuit, Joshua emerged with Hearn from a black people carrier as he walked into the arena past a number of camera crews.

There was no friendly welcome from his old rival Wilder, who was repeatedly linked with a world title bout with Joshua during the peak of their powers.

The American went straight past Joshua without any acknowledgement in a tight corridor inside the arena.

Joshua last fought before Christmas when he faced YouTube-turned-boxer Jake Paul in Miami, but speculation continues over a potential bout with British rival Tyson Fury. Paul KOed by Joshua with ease.

During a ringside interview with DAZN, Joshua told reporters at the fight: "It's amazing to be here. Boxing, especially British boxing, is booming."

"I'm obviously biased, I'm rocking with Derek regardless, so I'm Team Chisora."



Deontay Wilder celebrates winning his fight against Derek Chisora at O2 Arena, London, Britain, yesterday. (Reuters)

TENNIS

# Alcaraz feels ready to play full clay-court season

AFP  
Monte Carlo, Principality of Monaco

**C**arlos Alcaraz said yesterday it "feels amazing" to be back on clay and that he is aiming to play in Monte Carlo, Barcelona, Madrid and Rome before his Roland Garros title defence.

The world number one, who gets his bid for a second straight Monte Carlo Masters title under way next week, has never played a complete European clay-court season.

He also won the Italian Open last year, with his only defeat on clay in 2025 coming against Holger Rune in the Barcelona Open final.

"I miss clay every time that the clay season is over. I just miss it," Alcaraz told reporters in Monaco.

"It's been (a) long (time) since Roland Garros that I just haven't touched clay.

"The first practices that I got, I just said to my team, 'It's time to get to the dirty socks again!' It



feels amazing to be back on clay."

Alcaraz won the Monte Carlo title on only his second appearance at the tournament 12 months ago, but skipped the Madrid Open.

Last year was also only the sec-

ond time he had played in Rome, but this campaign he is hoping to play a full schedule.

"That's my idea," said the Spaniard. "Obviously the clay season is really - it's too demanding, physically, mentally.

"But obviously I would say the week of Barcelona should be the week that I have to take off.

"But Barcelona is a really important tournament for me.

"A special feeling that I just used to play (there) when I was under 14. A lot of friends there, playing at home, it's always great.

"So let's see how it's going to be, the body and mentally."

Alcaraz will face either Stan Wawrinka or Sebastian Baez in his opening match in the second round in the principality, having received a first-round bye as the top seed.

He practised with three-time Grand Slam champion Wawrinka on Saturday and hopes to face him for the first time before the Swiss retires at the end of the year.

"It's incredible to see him around, still having him around.

"I will try to enjoy as much as I can his matches, the matches he plays until the end of the year.

"But hopefully (I) play against him at least once and say that I just played a match against a legend like Stan."

SPOTLIGHT

# Pegula romps to WTA Charleston Open victory

AFP  
Miami

**D**efending champion Jessica Pegula clinched back-to-back victories at the WTA Charleston Open clay court tournament yesterday, routing Ukraine's Yulia Starodubtseva in straight sets to claim her second title of the year.

Top seed Pegula, who had gone to three sets in every round on her way to yesterday's final, was in no mood to take the scenic route again as she sprinted to a 6-2, 6-2 victory in 1hr 22min against her 89th-ranked opponent.

The Charleston victory follows Pegula's win

at Dubai in February and is the 11th title of the 32-year-old New Yorker's career.

After an even start, Pegula seized control in the fifth game of the first set, grabbing the first break point of the match when Starodubtseva pulled a forehand wide.

The Ukrainian saved that point but was quickly in trouble again, giving Pegula another break point with a rushed return which the American converted for a 3-2 lead.

After holding to go 4-2 up, Pegula then went a double-break ahead as more unforced errors from Starodubtseva proved costly. After comfortably serving out for the set, Pegula was soon on the offensive in the second, breaking Starodubtseva for a third time to 1-0 up.

## SPANISH TEEN JODAR WINS FIRST ATP TITLE IN MARRAKESH

Rafael Jodar scooped up his first ATP title yesterday as the 19-year-old Spaniard beat surprise Argentine finalist Marco Trungelliti 6-3, 6-2 in just over an hour.

Jodar was ranked outside the top 900 a year ago but will climb to 57th in the world today, having only turned professional in December after two seasons of US college tennis.

"It's incredible. I have no words, honestly, to describe this feeling right now," said Jodar. "I'm super happy that I could get the title here in Marrakesh. The first time for me in Marrakesh and Morocco. I loved the crowd, everyone who came to support me and watch the final."

## LIBERATED MCILROY EYES MORE MASTERS MAGIC AFTER CAREER SLAM

**Augusta, United States:** Rory McIlroy still remembers the surge of emotion that followed his victory at last year's Masters, a moment that ended a decade-long wait and completed golf's career Grand Slam.

The Northern Irishman captured his fifth major title at Augusta National, dropping to his knees after holing a short birdie putt in a playoff to secure the green jacket.

"It was my best-ever chance to win the grand slam," McIlroy said. "I don't think there was any round of golf I had played before that can compare to the feelings and emotions I went through that Sunday."

A year later, the memories remain vivid, but McIlroy's attention has turned back to the challenge ahead as he prepares to return to Augusta as the defending champion next week. His breakthrough came after years of close calls and constant questions about whether he could finally win the Masters. The victory ended a 10-year major drought and lifted the weight of expectation that had followed him each April.

After starting with a double bogey then recovering with four birdies in the next nine holes, McIlroy battled England's Justin Rose down the stretch and made bogey at 18 to force a playoff. Back at 18, McIlroy dropped a wedge shot three feet from the hole and sank the birdie putt for an emotional triumph that brought a green jacket and a night of joyful celebration. "It was a wonderful night," said McIlroy. "It carried on for a couple days."

That next morning, McIlroy awoke feeling "a little foggy," he admitted. "I think I woke up and

I just had to make sure that it wasn't a dream. People talk about those pinch-me moments and it really was like, did that really happen?"

It did. The proof was the green jacket in his luggage when he packed and flew home.

"It was so much fun to get home and have dinner at home and wear this jacket and just put the coverage on, watch the highlights," McIlroy said. "It's the best. You have that immense, like, satisfaction and you reflect on the journey."

Golf fans that had watched McIlroy grow up celebrated right along with him.

"The reception I got after I won, and just how happy everyone was for me," McIlroy said. "Everyone in some way felt invested in it."

"I'm doing this for myself. I've had these goals since I was a little boy but the fact other people are invested in that journey of mine obviously makes me incredibly grateful, just makes me take a step back and appreciate everything that I've done in my career." McIlroy said aggressive play has been crucial at Augusta, right down to his winning putt after a par miss on the same hole minutes earlier.

"The only difference with the three-footer in the playoff rather than the five-footer in regulation is I was sure of the line in the playoff."

"I was a little bit indecisive with my line or my read in regulation," McIlroy said. "When I look back at the round, when I was aggressive and when I played aggressively, I was rewarded and I played well. "There's probably a lesson in there somewhere of not taking your foot off the gas."

## FA CUP

# Van Dijk claims Liverpool 'gave up' in Man City defeat

Slot under pressure before Champions League tie against PSG

AFP  
London

**V**irgil Van Dijk apologised to Liverpool fans after admitting his side gave up during their FA Cup quarter-final defeat against Manchester City.

Arne Slot's team slumped to a dismal 4-0 loss at the Etihad Stadium on Saturday, leaving Van Dijk furious with their second-half display.

Already trailing 2-0 at half-time after Erling Haaland's brace, Liverpool conceded again immediately following the restart as Antoine Semenyo netted before Haaland completed his hat-trick.

Liverpool's limp surrender sparked a mass exodus of their 8,000 fans well before the final whistle. Van Dijk acknowledged he was culpable after conceding a penalty that Haaland converted in the first half and the Reds captain said his team-mates must also accept the blame.

"I can only apologise to the fans for what we have shown, especially the second half," he said.

"Obviously you come out with the right intentions from the dressing room, to hopefully score for 2-1 as soon as possible to change the game.

"The opposite happens and to come back from 3-0 is obviously very difficult here - but also you shouldn't give up and that's maybe, at a certain point, what happened.

"We let our fans down, we let ourselves down, and the manager. The way we played in the second half, especially, must hurt for everyone. It definitely hurts me."

The dismal result intensified the



Liverpool manager Arne Slot brings on Cody Gakpo (Centre), Rio Ndommoh (Second from right) and Alexis Mac Allister during the FA Cup quarter-final against Manchester City at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester. (AFP)

pressure on Slot ahead of a daunting Champions League quarter-final first leg against Paris Saint-Germain in France on Wednesday.

With their hopes of domestic silverware dashed by City, Liverpool have to focus on winning the Champions League and qualifying for next season's tournament.

Urging his squad to stay united as the pressure mounts, Van Dijk said: "It's a together thing, isn't it? Obviously he's responsible as the manager but we are the ones on the pitch that have to do it.

"The matter of fact is now, PSG are waiting for us. I watched them Friday a little bit. It will be so tough again. So we have to be ready mentally as soon as possible.

"I've been lucky enough to play for Liverpool for so many years. The main thing we always had was togetherness. Now obviously we are in a little bit of a transition but we have to find it."

Liverpool face a crucial Premier League clash with Fulham between their two games against PSG and Van Dijk wants an im-

proved effort from his team over the next three matches.

"We have a responsibility to ourselves and, especially, to the fans. If we want to make something out of this season, then we have to try and produce something special the next three games," he said.

"I'm trying to think how we can turn this round. We've been going through this almost 75 percent of the season. "It's a difficult one to take and everyone has to look at themselves."

## FOCUS

## Leeds beat West Ham in shoot-out to reach semi-finals

AFP  
London

**L**eeds reached the FA Cup semi-finals for the first time in 39 years as they survived a dramatic penalty shoot-out after squandering a two-goal lead in a thrilling clash with West Ham yesterday.

Daniel Farke's side were moments away from victory at the London Stadium after Ao Tanaka's first-half goal and Dominic Calvert-Lewin's second-half penalty put them in control.

But West Ham staged a stoppage-time rally as Mateus Fernandes reduced the deficit before Axel Disasi's equaliser forced extra time. With the score still level at 2-2 after the additional period, Leeds keeper Lucas Perri emerged as their shoot-out hero. Joel Piroe missed Leeds' first penalty but Calvert-Lewin, Brenden Aaronson, Wilfried Gnonto and Pascal Struijk all converted their kicks.

Perri saved Jarrod Bowen's opening effort for West Ham and also denied Pablo as Leeds won 4-2 on penalties.

It was their second shoot-out victory in the competition this season following their fourth-round success at Birmingham.

Leeds will face Chelsea in the semi-finals at Wembley later in April. The Yorkshire club are in the semi-finals for the first time since 1987, when they lost to eventual winners Coventry at Hillsborough. Leeds have lost on their past three trips to

Wembley, in the 2024 Championship play-off final, the 2008 League One play-off final and the 1996 League Cup final. FA Cup winners for the only time in 1972, Leeds' last victory at Wembley was a 4-3 success against Liverpool in the 1992 Charity Shield. Their win over West Ham was a welcome lift in the midst of a Premier League relegation battle for both clubs.

Third-bottom West Ham are one point behind fourth-bottom Tottenham with seven games left. Leeds, four points above the Hammers, face a return trip to West Ham for a potentially decisive clash on the last day of the season.

West Ham boss Nuno Espirito Santo made five changes as he prioritised Friday's vital showdown with bottom-of-the-table Wolves. Leeds grabbed the opener in the 26th minute thanks to an eye-catching effort from Japan midfielder Tanaka, who cleverly twisted to find space inside the penalty area for a shot that deflected off Disasi and bounced in off the crossbar.

Leeds struck again in the 75th minute after Max Kilman chopped down Aaronson in the area, with referee Craig Pawson changing his decision to a penalty after consulting the pitch-side monitor. Calvert-Lewin confidently stroked his spot-kick past Alphonse Areola before sprinting to celebrate with 9,000 raucous Leeds supporters crammed behind the goal. Leeds lost focus in the closing stages, allowing West Ham to stage their remarkable comeback.

### Union Berlin draw leaves St Pauli stranded in Bundesliga drop zone

St Pauli's hopes of moving out of the Bundesliga relegation zone took a hit after they were held to a 1-1 draw at Union Berlin yesterday. Mathias Pereira Lage's first-half stunner put St Pauli in front but it was cancelled out when Andrej Ilic scored from a corner just after the break. The draw helped Union climb two spots up to 10th but left St Pauli still third from the bottom in the relegation playoff spot. St Pauli are two points behind 15th-placed Cologne, who fought back from two goals down to draw 2-2 at Frankfurt later. Jonathan Burkardt and Arnaud Kalimuendo both scored for Frankfurt midway through the second half, but Cologne's Jakob Kaminski quickly pulled one back and Alessio Castro-Montes levelled with seven minutes left.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Arteta demands Arsenal response after shocker at Southampton

AFP  
Southampton

**M**ikel Arteta urged Arsenal to "show what we are made of" after their shock 2-1 defeat against second tier Southampton in the FA Cup quarter-finals on Saturday.

Arteta's side fell behind to Ross Stewart's first-half goal at a raucous St Mary's before Viktor Gyokeres came off the bench to net the second-half equaliser.

Arsenal were well below their best in the absence of injured England stars Declan Rice and Bukayo Saka, while Brazil defender Gabriel Magalhaes limped off with a knee injury.

They were punished in the 85th minute when Shea Charles steered in Southampton's winner from the edge of the area.

Arteta admitted he was disappointed with Arsenal's lacklustre performance, with their sloppy defending especially frustrating.

"We conceded the first goal in a very unusual way for us, the second one was from direct play as well," he said. "We didn't manage the long balls well enough. We just let the ball through us. Difficult to explain but credit to them.

"We had so much dominance in and around the box. We had two massive chances and needed to capitalise on that. But if you make defending errors we made today it's very difficult to be in the semi-final."

Arsenal's hopes of a first FA Cup triumph since 2020 - their last major trophy - were blown away on the blustery south-coast.

The Premier League leaders have seen their quadruple and treble bids shattered by a 2-0 defeat against Manchester City in the League Cup final and now the limp loss to Southampton.

"You have to adapt to the wind, the injuries. You have to adapt to difficult situations in the season.



Arsenal's manager Mikel Arteta looks on during the FA Cup quarter-final against Southampton at St Mary's Stadium in Southampton. (AFP)

Now we have to show what we are made of," Arteta said.

Arteta had described the pain of losing the League Cup final as like "a ball of poison" in his stomach and Arsenal's woeful FA Cup exit will surely leave the Spaniard reaching for the antacids.

Arsenal's fifth defeat this term marked the first time they have lost successive games in all competitions in the current campaign.

They have little time to lick their wounds as they prepare for a Champions League quarter-final first-leg at Sporting Lisbon on Tuesday before resuming their charge towards a first Premier League title in 22 years.

The north Londoners are nine points clear of second-placed City in the title race.

"In the season you have to go through periods. Some of them are difficult for whatever reason. Now we have two very disappointing results and we have to pick ourselves up," Arteta said.

"It's always been like this from the beginning of the season when the expectations on your team are so high.

"Nobody is going to set the demands and standards higher than us that's for sure."

Southampton's memorable victory came 50 years after they stunned Manchester United in the FA Cup final, a triumph they commemorated by wearing a yellow and blue kit against Arsenal in their latest giant-killing as a second-tier side.

"That's more a story for the media," boss Tonda Eckert said of similarities with Bobby Stokes and the rest of Southampton's 1976 heroes.

"We put on a good shift today. It was a challenge, we knew it was going to be a tough game. The second half always has the chance to shift and we reacted quite well."

The Saints, who beat Fulham in the fifth round in March, are back in the semi-finals at Wembley for the first time since 2021.

But Eckert's side have another Wembley date in their sights as they chase a place in the Championship play-offs, with a crucial clash looming at Wrexham on Tuesday.

"Belief is always there, it's not been a problem. The reality is that the game is close. It's going to be nice to celebrate today but we open up Wrexham and Championship football tomorrow," Eckert said.

## LA LIGA

## Lewandowski scores late as Barca post win over Atletico

AFP  
Madrid

**R**obert Lewandowski shouldered home a dramatic late winner for Barcelona as they edged Atletico Madrid 2-1 on Saturday to move seven points clear at the top of La Liga after Real Madrid slipped up.

Second-placed Real were beaten 2-1 at Mallorca earlier on and Barca capitalised at the Metropolitan stadium to take a big step towards defending the league title.

Marcus Rashford pulled Barca level after Giuliano Simeone opened the scoring for the hosts in the first half. Atletico midfielder Nico Gonzalez was sent off just before the break and his team dug deep with 10 men to try and avoid defeat, which they almost managed.

Veteran Polish striker Lewandowski had other ideas and used his shoulder to deflect home a rebound from point-blank range after 87 minutes. "We all knew what happened in the afternoon," Barca defender Eric Garcia told DAZN. "We knew that if we won today we would be taking a big step (towards the title), so we're very happy..."

"They are a hard team to score against when they close up at the back, they defend very well, so the team did well."

This was the first of a trilogy of matches between the sides, clashing in the Champions League quarter-finals over the next fortnight. With little left to play for in La Liga, Atletico coach Diego Simeone rotated heavily with Wednesday's visit to Camp Nou in mind.

His Barca counterpart Hansi Flick opted for Dani Olmo as a false nine to rest Lewandowski, while starting Rashford in place of the injured Raphinha on the



Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski celebrates scoring his team's second goal during the La Liga match against Atletico Madrid at Metropolitan Stadium in Madrid. (AFP)

left wing. The England international, on loan from Manchester United, tested Juan Musso early on with a free-kick which the goalkeeper fielded comfortably.

At the other end Antoine Griezmann, playing for Atletico for the first time since announcing his departure at the end of the season to MLS side Orlando City, was profligate.

The forward skipped into the box and cleverly nutmegged Gerard Martin but his shot was too close to Barca stopper Joan Garcia to trouble the new Spain international. Fermin Lopez was similarly wasteful at the other end, unable to find Rashford

who had a clear sight of goal, and prodding wide himself when Lamine Yamal sent him scuttling through with a sensational pass.

Barca's 18-year-old star Yamal hit the post with a dinked effort after Lopez laid the ball off to him as the game flowed from end to end. Atletico took the lead in the 39th minute through Giuliano Simeone, the coach's son bursting in behind Barca's high defensive line onto Clement Lenglet's pass and slamming past Garcia.

The visitors pulled level just three minutes later, Rashford exchanging passes with Olmo and drilling past Musso on only his third league start since January.