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FOOTBALL

AL SADD RETAIN QSL TITLE



Captain Akram Afif lifts the Qatar Stars League shield after Al Sadd beat Al Shamal yesterday. Al Sadd were crowned QSL champions for the 19th time. **PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil**

AL SADD BEAT A FIGHTING AL SHAMAL SIDE 3-2 TO WIN THE LAST MATCH OF THE SEASON

BY Rizwan Rehmat
Doha

Defending champions Al Sadd beat a dogged Al Shamal 3-2 yesterday to retain the Qatar Stars League (QSL) crown.

Playing in front of a partisan crowd of 12,324 fans, captain Akram Afif and his powerful side dominated proceedings in both halves to clinch the QSL crown on home soil at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium. It is Al Sadd's 19th QSL title win and third in a row.

Even a draw would have sealed the fate in favour of points leaders Al Sadd but they looked for goals from the get-go.

A plucky effort from Afif opened the scoring in the 20th minute. Al Sadd's first goal was followed by a slick strike from Brazilian Roberto Firmino two minutes later.

Algerian striker Baghdad Bounedjah scored the first goal for Al Shamal in the 65th minute.

Brazilian left-back Paulo Otavio added Al Sadd's third goal two minutes later.

Colombian Jeison Murillo Ceron scored off a penalty for Al Shamal in the 85th minute.

Al Sadd, who signed Italian coach Roberto Mancini last November, clearly looked like a much stronger side against Al Shamal in the final match of the 2025-26 season.

Former AFC Champions League winners, Al Sadd - backed by a vociferous crowd yesterday - ended a satisfying season with 45 points from 22 games. Al Shamal, who were seeking their first QSL title, finished the league in second spot with impressive 40 points.

Al Rayyan (38 points) finished third followed by Al Gharafa (36) in fourth.

Speaking after the title triumph, Mancini, 61, said yesterday: "First of all, I would like to congratulate the players, the technical and administrative staff, and Al Sadd fans on this important title. Winning the league for the third consecutive time is not easy; it is the result of daily hard work and great commitment from everyone within the team. From the beginning of the season, we knew the challenge would be difficult, but the players



Al Sadd's Akram Afif runs with the ball during the QSL match against Al Shamal.

showed strong character and a winning mentality that helped us overcome every obstacle."

A TENSE START FOR BOTH TEAMS

The match got off to a tense start for both sides. Qatar national team player Tarek Salem of Al Sadd made a poor clearance in the third minute, allowing the ball to go for the game's first corner. As the battle gathered steam, Bounedjah got elbowed by his former Al Sadd teammate Boualem Khoukhi in the third minute.

Qatar national team skipper Afif seconds later found Brazilian teammate Firmino with a long ball from the left flank but Al Sadd's Brazilian import failed to connect from close range. In the eighth minute, keeper Meshal Barsham easily collected a weak header from Algerian star and Al Shamal skipper Bounedjah inside the Al Sadd box after an assist by Waad.

Both teams looked a little rough in the first 10 minutes even as Al Sadd skipper Afif gestured to his players to calm down.

In the 15th minute, Al Shamal's Spanish midfielder Alex Collado controlled the ball for about 20 yards, then unfurled a powerful shot from the edge of the Al Sadd box but the ball missed the target.

A minute later, Al Sadd's Otavio drilled a low shot from close range, but Al Shamal keeper Babacar blocked his effort. Shortly afterwards, the script changed for Al Sadd.

Al Sadd coach Roberto Mancini reacts during the match.



Al Sadd fans cheer on their team at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

Al Sadd's Afif opened the scoring in the 20th minute. After a short dribble past Musaab Khidir, Afif aimed at the goal with a low shot from inside the box but Al Shamal defender Omid Ebrahimi deflected the ball into his own net.

With celebrations barely dying down in the stands after the first goal, Al Sadd doubled the lead through Firmino in the 22nd minute. Firmino latched on to a short pass from Claudinho and slipped a low ball to the right of Al Shamal keeper.

Shortly after the half-hour mark, Al Shamal's Mohamed Naceur Manai produced a slick bicycle kick from the edge of the box but Al Sadd keeper Barsham smartly collected the ball.

In the 38th minute, Al Sadd could have scored their third goal but Claudinho's powerful shot from inside the box hit the Al Shamal goalpost and ricocheted away. In injury time, Bounedjah was a fraction of

QFA president congratulates champs Al Sadd, praises Al Shamal



Qatar Football Association President Jassim al-Buainain hands over the QSL Shield to Akram Afif of Al Sadd. Hani Taleb Ballan, CEO of QSL, was also present.

HE Jassim bin Rashid al-Buainain, President of the Qatar Football Association (QFA), congratulated Al Sadd, its Board of Directors, technical and administrative staff, players, and fans on winning the Qatar Stars League crown for the 2025-2026 season, after delivering the best performance with high technical levels, culminating in their well-deserved league title. "We also highly value the outstanding technical level presented by Al Shamal Club, the league's runner-up, and their excellent performance throughout the matches they played, demonstrating the great dedication of the players. In this regard, I can only commend the efforts of the club's Board of Directors, technical

staff, and players for what they presented during the league competitions, wishing them success in the upcoming tournaments.

The QFA president said: "The main and most prominent feature of this season's league is the continuation of the competition until the last round, which was reflected in the close technical levels between all teams. Also, the positions from first to twelfth were not guaranteed at all, and were not decided until the last round of the competition, which confirms the high level of competition between the teams and the technical quality of performance in general. I wish all clubs success in the upcoming tournaments."

a second late on a close-range shot, but Al Sadd's Otavio blocked the move.

In the last move of the first half, Bounedjah's header from very close range - following a set piece situation - went above the Al Sadd crossbar.

Four minutes into the second half, disaster struck Al Shamal when Algerian defender Abdessamed Bounacer received a red card from 2026 FIFA World Cup-bound referee Mohammed al-Jassim for a tackle on Afif.

In the 56th minute, Firmino rifled in a powerful shot that narrowly missed the Al Shamal crossbar. Seconds later, Brazilian forward Giovanni also took a long-range shot that keeper Babacar smartly parried away.

At the one-hour mark, Al Shamal's Omar Mohammed aimed with a left-footed drive from an acute angle inside the box but his shot slipped past the Al Sadd goal-

post from close range. Bounedjah, the untiring Algerian, reduced the deficit for Al Shamal with a solo run of about 30 yards into the Al Sadd box. With Agustin Silveira shadowing Bounedjah, the Algerian quickly took aim and slipped the ball past a charging Barsham in the 65th minute.

Two minutes later, Otavio delivered a low left-footed drive that went past Al Shamal keeper Babacar much to the delight of coach Mancini and the Al Sadd dugout. Al Shamal scored their second goal when Jeison Murillo converted an 85th-minute penalty.

In other results yesterday, Al Rayyan cruised to a 4-0 victory over Al Arabi while Al Duhail narrowly edged out Qatar SC with a 2-1 win. Al Wakrah defeated Al Saliya 3-1 and Al Ahli also won 3-1 on the road against Umm Salal.

Meanwhile, the clash between Al Gharafa and Al Shahaniya ended in a 1-1 draw.

CRICKET

Bangladesh surge past Kiwis with record home chase

Hridoy anchors the innings with an unbeaten 51 off 27 balls



Bangladesh's Tawhid Hridoy plays a pull shot during the first T20 match against New Zealand in Chittagong. (AFP)

AFP
Chattogram, Bangladesh

Tawhid Hridoy and Shamim Hossain steered Bangladesh to their highest successful chase at home, overhauling New Zealand's 182-6 to win the first T20 international by six wickets.

Bangladesh reached their target of 183 at the Chattogram stadium with two overs to spare to take a 1-0 lead in the three-match series. The win surpassed their previous best home chase of 171 against Ireland in November last year.

Hridoy anchored the innings with an unbeaten 51 off 27 balls, his sixth T20 fifty. Shamim provided a fitting finish with 31 not out off just 13 balls, including three fours and two sixes.

The left-handed Shamim took New Zealand seamer Matthew Fisher apart in the 17th over, plundering 25 runs to enthral the home crowd.

"You might get the occasional half-century batting at No. 5 or 6. If you see someone getting a fifty from that position, you will figure out that the team is on the back foot, as we must have lost three or four early wickets," Hridoy said. "Having said that, I thought Shamim and Emon played the type of innings that was as good as scoring fifties.

"It is important to understand the importance of such impactful innings. We are also guilty of thinking about fifties and hundreds, but sometimes even an

innings of ten runs can have an impact in a T20 match. The way Shamim and Emon batted, it made us win with a lot of ease."

Captain Litton Das scored a brisk 21 off 15 balls before Parvez Hossain Emon smashed 28 off 14 to set the platform for the chase. For New Zealand, leg-spinner Ish Sodhi took two wickets, while Josh Clarkson and Nathan Smith claimed one each.

Batting first, Katene Clarke and Dane Cleaver gave New Zealand a flying start, despite an early mix-up that saw Tim Robinson run out in the second over after a direct throw from Hridoy. Clarke and Cleaver responded emphatically, using their fine footwork to take New Zealand to 61 at the end of the powerplay. They added 88 runs off 50 balls before both fell to leg-spinner Rishad Hossain.

Clarke, who was dropped by Saif Hassan on 44, made 51 off 37 balls, with seven fours and one six, for his first T20 fifty. Cleaver was the more aggressive of the two, scoring 51 off just 28 balls, with seven fours and a six. Stand-in captain Nick Kelly contributed 39 off 27, while Clarkson struck an unbeaten 27 off 14. Rishad was the pick of the Bangladesh bowlers with 2-32.

BRIEF SCORES

New Zealand 182/6 in 20 overs (Katene Clarke 51, Dane Cleaver 51; Rishad Hossain 2-32) **lost to Bangladesh 183/4 in 18 overs** (Tawhid Hridoy 51, Shamim Hossain 31; Ish Sodhi 2-40) by 6 wickets

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar face Serbia in Table Tennis Worlds opener



Qatar's table tennis squad for World Championships Mohammed Abdulwahab, Fahad al-Mughni, Abdullah Abdulwahab, Sultan al-Kuwari and Rawad al-Nasser pose before their departure to London.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's national team is set to compete at the World Team Table Tennis Championships, which get underway today in London. The global event brings together 64 men's and 64 women's teams, divided into 16 groups of four, promising a high level of competition across the board.

Qatar's squad features Mohammed Abdulwahab, Fahad al-Mughni, Abdullah Abdulwahab, Sultan al-Kuwari, and Rawad al-Nasser, under the guidance of coach Vitaly.

The delegation departed for London yesterday ahead of the tournament's opening.

Drawn in Group H, Qatar will face tough opposition in Croatia, Serbia, and Luxembourg. The team

opens its campaign against Serbia today, before taking on Luxembourg tomorrow and Croatia on Thursday.

Qatar secured qualification for the World Championships following a strong showing at last year's Asian Championships.

Hamad Ahmed al-Hammadi, President of the Qatar Table Tennis Federation, said the team has prepared thoroughly through a domestic training camp and participation in local competitions.

He acknowledged the challenge posed by Group H, describing it as highly competitive with higher-ranked teams, but expressed confidence in the players' ability to rise to the occasion and represent Qatar with pride.

Al-Hammadi added that the World Championships will serve as valuable preparation ahead of the 4th Gulf Games, which Doha is set to host next month.

IPL

Bengaluru crush Delhi as Hazlewood, Kumar shine

AFP
New Delhi

Josh Hazlewood and Bhuvneshwar Kumar wreaked havoc as defending champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru skittled out Delhi Capitals for 75 before romping to a nine-wicket victory in the IPL.

Kumar and Hazlewood took three wickets each in the first four overs to reduce Delhi to 8-6 and effectively end the game as a contest almost immediately. Delhi avoided the tournament's lowest-ever total of 49 and also scraped past their own low of 66 before being bowled out in 16.3 overs.

"Even I don't know what happened," said Delhi skipper Axar Patel. "That's why they say you have to be on your toes in cricket. We have to move on from this match."

Bengaluru veteran and Delhi's favourite son Virat Kohli, who was the star attraction in his home city, made an unbeaten 23 to guide the

team home in just 6.3 overs. Kohli, who passed 9,000 IPL runs during his innings, hit two sixes to wrap up the game, with Devdutt Padikkal at the other end on 34.

Bengaluru, who won their first-ever IPL title last year, consolidated second place in the table behind leaders Punjab Kings. Kumar bowled opener Sahil Parakh for a duck with the second ball of the match after Bengaluru elected to field first.

Hazlewood struck with successive balls in the next over as he took down previous-match centurion KL Rahul, for one, and Sameer Rizvi before Tristan Stubbs avoided the hat-trick ball.

"I just followed Bhuvni," said Hazlewood, who finished with figures of 4-12. "There was a little bit there in the first six overs. It was a little bit up and down."

Kumar dismissed Stubbs, for five, and Axar (0) in the next over to leave the Delhi dugout stunned by a disastrous batting performance on the same pitch they posted 264-2 in their previous match,

albeit in a losing cause. Abhishek Porel and David Miller attempted to stop the rot in a stand of 35. South Africa's Miller made 19 before he fell to Rasikh Salam. A dust storm then halted play for around 10 minutes.

The storm settled and Delhi debutant Kyle Jamieson hit a six to send his team past Bengaluru's record low of 49 against Kolkata Knight Riders in 2017. Jamieson's hit over the deep square-leg fence met with loud cheers from the home crowd but their joy was short-lived.

Hazlewood bowled Porel for 30 to wrap up Delhi's innings. Delhi's South African quick Lungi Ngidi missed the game after he suffered a concussion on Saturday.

BRIEF SCORES

Delhi Capitals 75 in 16.3 overs (Abhishek Porel 30; Josh Hazlewood 4-12, Bhuvneshwar Kumar 3-5) **lost to Royal Challengers Bengaluru 77/1 in 6.3 overs** (Devidutt Padikkal 34, Virat Kohli 23*) by 9 wickets.



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Bhuvneshwar Kumar (second left) celebrates with Josh Hazlewood after taking the wicket of Delhi Capitals' Tristan Stubbs during the Indian Premier League match in Delhi. (AFP)

BOXING

Joshua signs deal to face Fury in all-British grudge match

AFP
London

Former heavyweight champions Anthony Joshua and Tyson Fury are finally set to lock horns later this year in a long-awaited all-British grudge match.

Joshua, who has not fought since a car crash that killed two close friends at the end of last year, will first face Albania's Kristian Prenga in Saudi Arabia in July. The 36-year-old's promoter, Eddie Hearn, said a deal to fight Fury – a fellow two-time world champion – had been agreed after years of speculation and false starts.

"Signed, sealed, delivered! AJ v Fury is on!" Hearn said on Instagram. "The biggest piece of business we've ever done but more importantly the one we've always wanted. Biggest year of AJ's career coming up, the comeback is on."

No date or venue has been announced but the bout is expected to take place in November and be shown on Netflix. Joshua escaped relatively unscathed after a collision that killed Sina Ghami and Latif Ayodele in Nigeria, shortly after his most recent fight in December, a sixth-round knockout of YouTube star Jake Paul.

"It's no secret I've taken some time to consolidate and rebuild to be ready for stepping back into the ring and this is the next step



No date or venue has been announced but the bout between Anthony Joshua and Tyson Fury is expected to take place in November.

on that journey," Joshua said, referring to the bout against Prenga in Riyadh on July 25.

Joshua was ringside earlier this month as Fury, 37, marked his comeback after 16 months spent in his latest spell of retirement with a unanimous points win over Russia's Arslanbek Makhmudov.

It was supposed to be the moment that ignited the build-up to a contest between the two British fighters, but instead Joshua remained in his seat despite being beckoned into the ring to face off with his rival.

Now negotiations have been finalised and after a decade of circling each other and aborted

attempts to agree a showdown while still in their prime, they will collide in a contest Fury has called "The Battle of Britain".

Albania's Prenga has 20 wins – all by knockout – in his 21 fights as a professional, but has yet to face an opponent anywhere near the class of the 2012 Olympic champion.

Both Joshua and Fury have lost twice to the current king of the heavyweight division, Ukrainian Oleksandr Usyk. Joshua has a record of 29 wins, including 26 by knockout, and four defeats, including two KOs, in his 33 fights. Fury's record is 35 wins, including 24 KOs, one draw and two defeats in 38 bouts.

Asian Games years could be moved in shake-up: reports

Hong Kong: The Asian Games could be moved to odd-numbered years starting in 2031 so the event takes place in the 12 months leading into the Olympics, reports say, reshaping the sporting calendar.

The reported proposal would mean Asia's biggest sporting spectacle doubling up as qualifying and preparation for the Olympics, giving it added significance.

The Asian Games in Japan this September-October will be unchanged but the 2030 edition

in Doha would be pushed back a year, after which the Games will be held every four years as normal but in odd years instead of even ones.

The executive board of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) has approved the idea and there will now be more talks with international sports federations, China's state *Xinhua* news agency said.

Specialist website Inside The Games said the proposal was discussed by the OCA in Sanya, the Chinese resort city currently hosting the Asian Beach Games.

Song Luzeng, vice president of the OCA, told *Xinhua*: "It would allow the Asian Games to serve as a qualifying event for the Olympics, giving more elite athletes valuable competition opportunities and raising the overall standard of the Games."

The OCA did not immediately reply to an AFP request for comment. The Asian Games is the continent's biggest sporting event and typically involves more competitors than the Olympics.

MADRID OPEN

Sabalenka in quarters, Noskova ousts Gauff

Medvedev beats Kjaer while Ruud gets past Fokina to reach the round of 16

AFP
Madrid

World number one Aryna Sabalenka overcame Naomi Osaka 6-7 (1/7), 6-3, 6-2 in a gripping battle to reach the Madrid Open quarter-finals.

Third seed Coco Gauff was eliminated in a three-set battle with Linda Noskova decided on a final set tie-break. Sabalenka, who has claimed titles at Miami, Indian Wells and Brisbane this year, was tested by her Japanese opponent in the fourth-round clash but came back from a set and a break down to triumph.

"I was just trying to take one ball at a time and my team was there for me, they really (pushed) me to keep fighting, and I'm really happy that I didn't give up and I was pushing until the very last point," said Sabalenka on court. She later told reporters: "When (she) put me under pressure, I was able to pull out really incredible shots and incredible tennis. So I'm happy."

The first set between the two four-time Grand Slam winners was tight, with only one break point forced, by Sabalenka, which Osaka saved to hold for 2-1. Osaka dominated in the tie-break, ripping into a 5-0 lead and then triumphing when Sabalenka lashed a return wide.

Sabalenka stepped up a gear in the second frame, although world number 15 Osaka dug deep to survive three break points and then managed to engineer a break for herself to take a 2-1 lead. However, the Belarusian immediately broke to love and then again in the eighth game, serving out to take the second set.

Only Elena Rybakina has beaten Sabalenka this year, in the Australian Open final, and the 27-year-old dominated in the third set, securing breaks in the fifth and seventh games while Osaka could not put pressure on her opponent's serve.

Sabalenka sealed her victory serving to love with an ace to reach the last eight, where she will face American Hailey Bap-



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka plays a backhand during her round of 16 match against Japan's Naomi Osaka at Madrid Open. (Reuters)

tiste, who beat Belinda Bencic in three sets, including losing a tie break 16-14 in the second. "She's an incredible player, we had a really tight match in Miami, and especially here in Madrid I think this surface suits her game," added Sabalenka.

Osaka said she was happy with pushing Sabalenka to the wire after going down in straight sets when they met at Indian Wells. "I feel like every game was super close. I think... I could potentially match her in power," said Osaka. "I feel like in In-

dian Wells I was a little overwhelmed. Here I did a little bit better. Obviously she's the number one player in the world, so it was a really cool match for me to know that I'm kind of there."

World number three Gauff, who had been dealing with a stomach bug this week, fell to a 6-4, 1-6, 7-6 (7/5) defeat by Noskova. The Czech earned a decisive break in the fifth game of the first set, but American Gauff secured two of her own to claim the second. Gauff moved two breaks up in the third

but let the match slip away from her as Noskova pulled back to level 4-4. The American led 3-0 in the tie break before again could not hold on.

In the men's third round, Daniil Medvedev, who has reached the quarter-finals in each of the last two years despite not being a fan of clay, beat Nicolai Budkov Kjaer 6-3, 6-2. Casper Ruud eased to a 6-3, 6-1 win over Alejandro Davidovich Fokina to reach the last 16, while Stefanos Tsitsipas defeated Daniel Merida 6-4, 6-2.

British Open to be staged at Royal Lytham and St Annes in 2028

London: The British Open will return to Royal Lytham and St Annes in 2028, tournament organisers the R&A announced, with Donald Trump's Turnberry course again overlooked.

It is the first time the major will have been played at the links course, near Blackpool in England's north-west, since 2012. "Royal Lytham and St Annes is widely renowned as one of the world's finest links courses and has witnessed many great championship moments since the Open was first played there in 1926 when the legendary Bobby Jones won," said Mark Darbon, chief executive of the R&A.

"This is one of golf's most cherished and historic venues and the Open's return to these famous links will spark huge interest among fans to be part of one of the world's great sporting events."

The 156th British Open will take place slightly later than normal, between August 3 and August 6, to accommodate the 2028 Olympics, being held in Los Angeles. Royal Birkdale will host this year's event, with attendance set to surpass 300,000 for the first time, before returning to St Andrews in 2027. Darbon said the R&A was still open to hosting their landmark event at Turnberry, but off-course logistical challenges remain to be resolved. The Scottish course, which was bought by Trump in 2014, has not hosted the Open, the only major outside the United States, since 2009.

"Turnberry is still in our thinking - we really like the golf course and we know that there are some logistical challenges primarily off the course (in terms of) road, rail and accommodation infrastructure," said Darbon.

"As you know, in the same way that there are with many of our venues, there are some things that we need to overcome to facilitate a modern Open Championship."

GOLF

Korda wins LPGA Chevron Championship

AFP
Houston

Nelly Korda rolled to a five-stroke victory in the LPGA Chevron Championship on Sunday, capturing her third major title to assure her return to the world number one ranking.

The 27-year-old American took a five-shot lead into the final round and carded a two-under par 70 to win the first women's major of the year with China's Yin Ruoning and Thailand's Patty Tavatanakit sharing second.

Korda completed an impressive wire-to-wire victory at Memorial Park in Houston, becoming the third player in the last 50 years to win a major championship after leading by multiple strokes after each round.

"Honestly, having that big of a lead, it's not easy," Korda said. "It was definitely one of the hardest things I've had to do mentally. I'm, like, having to play defensive at some point but also not wanting to get too defensive because I want to play my own game. That's where I struggled this weekend."

Korda, whose 2024 Chevron triumph was her second major after a victory in the 2021 Women's PGA, had matched the tournament's 54-hole scoring record with a 16-under total and opened the final round with an up and down birdie at the par-five first.

She nabbed another birdie at the par-five third, where her long eagle attempt just missed. Playing partners Patty and Yin tried to keep some pressure on, both posting three birdies on the front nine, but the American

Nelly Korda of the United States poses with trophy after winning the Chevron Championship in Houston, Texas. (AFP)



was still up by five at the turn.

A three-putt bogey at the 12th saw Korda's lead cut to four, but she answered with birdies at the 13th and 14th -- bombing a drive at 13 and sticking her approach within three feet of the pin. "Obviously having the two back-to-back birdies helped," she said. "The par-fives are easier for me to play like myself."

A bogey at 17 didn't even dent her lead as Yin made bogey as well. Both of Korda's bogeys were three-putts, and she missed a couple of birdie chances as well.

"What I kept telling myself was I really want to hoist this trophy because I want to show the kids at home that it's OK to miss short putts

and still win a major championship," she said. "You're going to make mistakes, but you have to mentally still be in it 100 percent."

There may have been some miscues on the green, but Korda hit 12 of 13 fairways in regulation and 16 of 18 greens. Yin finished with four birdies in her three-under 69 and Patty had three birdies and a bogey in her 70 - coming home with 10 straight pars.

Korda's win continued a strong 2026 campaign that has seen her win the season-opening Tournament of Champions and finish second in her three other starts. After those runner-up finishes, Korda said, victory felt like something of a vindication.

Pogacar vows to keep going until Seixas 'destroys' him

Liege, Belgium: Tadej Pogacar won a fourth Liege-Bastogne-Liege Monument race after fending off a spirited challenge from teenage French sensation Paul Seixas.

But he fully expects the 19-year-old to keep improving and one day blitz everyone in the field in much the same way as Pogacar has in recent years. Seixas was the only rider able to stay with world champion Pogacar when he launched his customary attack on the Cote de la Redoute some 35km from the finish of the grueling 260km race through the Ardennes.

That was the ninth of 11 punchy climbs and while the rest of the field -- including Olympic champion Remco Evenepoel -- fell by the wayside, Seixas stayed with Pogacar until the final climb.

But halfway up the steep Cote de Roche-aux-Faucons, with 14km left, Seixas cracked and victory was Pogacar's. "Having Paul entering such a big field at such a good level already at 19, it brings motivation to everybody else now to keep trying to improve," said Pogacar.

"Because, again, he's 19

now and normally your body physically is the best at 26 to 30 years old. So, we'll see. We keep working hard to still try to fight for the next years to win as much as we can until he destroys everybody!"

Seixas's rise over the last 12 months has been remarkable. Although still competing as a junior last year, he achieved some impressive results in his debut senior season.

He was eighth in the Critereium du Dauphine stage race, 13th at the World Championships, seventh at the Tour of Lombardy Monument race, and won bronze behind Pogacar and Evenepoel at the European Championships.

This year he has been one of the star performers, winning the Tour of the Basque Country stage race and the Fleche Wallonne and Ardeche Classic one-day races.

He was also a narrow second to talented Spaniard Juan Ayuso at the Tour of the Algarve and has now twice finished second to Pogacar in one-day races, Strade Bianche and in Liege. He has, in many ways, proved himself to be the second best rider in hilly one-day classics behind Pogacar.

SPOTLIGHT

How remarkable Sawe made marathon history in London

AFP
London

Sabastian Sawe became the first man to run under two hours for a marathon in race conditions thanks to extraordinary talent, a punishing training regime, and the lightest shoes in history.

In London on Sunday, the 31-year-old Kenyan achieved one of sport's milestones, ranking alongside Roger Bannister's first sub-four minute mile in 1954. His time of 1hr 59min 30 sec was an astonishing 65 seconds inside the previous best of 2:00:35 set in Chicago in 2023 by Kelvin Kiptum, whose death in a car crash in 2024 plunged Kenya into mourning.

Sawe's statistics were dizzying. He went through the first half in 60:29 and then got faster, clocking a remarkable 59:01 for the second. Sawe undoubtedly benefited from the technological arms race launched by

the shoe companies a decade ago, when they began developing carbon fibre shoes for elite runners.

The newly developed Adidas shoes he was wearing to navigate the streets of London were the first to weigh under 100 grammes. They clearly made a difference - second-placed Yomif Kejelcha was wearing them too and the Ethiopian also broke the two-hour barrier, finishing in 1:59:41.

"I have made history today in London," Sawe said. "It's something that will remain in my mind for ever. I had courage to push even when the pace was so fast. I was not bothered because I was ready for it. The crowd helped me a lot because they were cheering and calling my name... The world record today is also because of them."

Sawe's Italian coach Claudio Berardelli told reporters he was honoured to be guiding such a unique talent. "All of the pieces came together perfectly because of his attitude, because of his character. I am still in the process of discovering who Sabas-



Kenya's Sabastian Sawe crosses the finish line to win the men's race in a new world record time at the 2026 London Marathon on Sunday. (AFP)

tian is," he said.

Berardelli said his athlete had been even fitter than in Berlin in September when the late-summer heat had spoiled his previous

assault on the world record. "In the last six weeks he was averaging 200km (125 miles) and above a week, while the peak was 241km," he said.

"I knew he was super-good for Berlin, but he couldn't express himself because of the conditions. But when I started to see him running the way he ran before London, I was like, hey, something special might come out."

Sawe's achievement will inevitably be viewed against the backdrop of an appalling series of doping cases among Kenyan athletes in the last few years.

Two former Kenyan winners of the men's race at the London Marathon - Wilson Kipsang, the victor in 2012 and 2014, and 2017 winner Daniel Wanjiru - are among those to have been subsequently banned.

In a bid to allay such suspicions about his own performances, Sawe has voluntarily subjected himself to extra drug testing, even paying \$50,000 to be tested 25 times in the year by the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) before last year's Berlin race. "Sabastian is not just a good one, he is a special one," Berardelli said.

FOOTBALL

Nobody is better than PSG, says Enrique ahead of Bayern semi

'You need to be ambitious to get to this stage and I think we are. We still want to go that bit further'

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique insisted yesterday that no team in Europe could claim to be better than his right now as the French giants prepare for their Champions League semi-final showdown against Bayern Munich.

"These are the two best teams in Europe, even if Arsenal have also had a great season," the Spanish coach told reporters on the eve of the semi-final first leg at the Parc des Princes.

"In terms of consistency, maybe Bayern are a little bit above us. But we have shown that no team is better than us."

PSG are in the semi-finals for a third straight season since Luis Enrique became coach in 2023 and are hoping to claim back-to-back Champions League titles after winning the trophy for the first time last season. They have reached this stage by defeating Chelsea and Liverpool in the last two rounds.

"It is a real pleasure and it is deserved. You need to be ambitious to get to this stage and I think we are. We still want to go that bit further," Luis Enrique said.

PSG and Bayern have already met three times since the start of last season: the Germans won 1-0 at home in the league phase in November 2024 and the Parisians triumphed 2-0 in a Club World Cup quarter-final last July in the United States, but Bayern won 2-1 in Paris in the league phase in November.

There have been concerns in the PSG camp about the fitness of Vitinha after the Portuguese playmaker sat out his team's last two games due to injury.

However, he was back in training on Monday in a big boost to the defending champions.

"Everyone is ready," said the coach, who

also saw Spanish midfielder Fabian Ruiz make his first start in three months after injury last weekend as PSG beat Angers 3-0 in Ligue 1.

Meanwhile, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia cutting inside and dribbling towards the opposition goal is one of the most thrilling sights in football and the Georgian superstar is hoping his wing wizardry can inspire PSG in the showdown against Bayern.

"I play football because I love it and I am always so pleased to be on the pitch," the 25-year-old former Napoli man said yesterday.

If the English Premier League has placed a greater emphasis this season on physicality and set-pieces, the likes of PSG and Bayern have shown with their performances in Europe that football at the very highest level can still be a genuine joy to watch.

"Football has changed and is not the same sport that it was, but of course it is important to do beautiful things and I am proud to be able to," added Kvaratskhelia, who has been arguably the main driving force in PSG's run to the brink of another Champions League final.

Signed from Napoli in January last year, Kvaratskhelia played a leading role for Luis Enrique's side as they made it to the final and demolished Inter Milan 5-0, allowing PSG to become champions of Europe for the first time.

This season, he has been the most prolific of his career, as he now has 15 goals between Ligue 1 and the Champions League, eclipsing the 14 he scored on Napoli's run to the Serie A title in 2023.

Eight of his goals in this campaign have come in Europe, from a breathtaking strike against Atalanta in September to brilliant finishes in commanding knockout victories against Chelsea and Liverpool.

That finishing ability allied with his tremendous workrate make the player nicknamed "Kvaradona" by Napoli fans an absolute night-

mare for opposition defences.

"I think technically I was just as good at Napoli, but I have really improved defensively with Luis Enrique. He has really pushed me," said Kvaratskhelia, who admits that the Diego Maradona comparisons bring some pressure.

"Sometimes it is also difficult to be compared to Maradona because every time you take to the pitch, you need to live up to that billing."

Kvaratskhelia has, however, come into peak form at just the right time for the run-in, with seven goals in his last eight appearances.

He was rested by Luis Enrique for PSG's routine 3-0 win at Angers on Saturday, which saw them take a big step towards retaining the Ligue 1 title -- they are now six points clear of Lens with four games left.

But the Champions League is the main objective and he will be back at kick-off against Bayern along with Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembele as PSG look to seize an advantage to take to Munich for next week's second leg.

"We played a lot last season so we were a bit tired at the start of this season, but now I think we are in really good shape physically," said Kvaratskhelia.

With the World Cup approaching, it is a great shame that, even with the expansion of the tournament to 48 teams, there will be no place for a player whose quality was not enough for Georgia to qualify.

That, therefore, places even greater importance for him on the Champions League, although Luis Enrique is adamant that the World Cup is not distracting any of his players from the prospect of more European glory.

"It is the magic of the Champions League - it gives a special energy to the players and everyone wants to be there and make the most of this tie," said the Spanish coach.



PSG's head coach Luis Enrique reacts during a training session yesterday, on the eve of their Champions League semi-final against Bayern Munich in Paris. (AFP)

ASIAN BEACH GAMES - SANYA 2026

Qatar's Younousse-Tijan advance to semi-finals

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar's Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan powered into today's beach volleyball semi-finals of the Asian Beach Games - Sanya 2026 with a commanding straight-sets victory against China, setting up a high-stakes clash with Thailand.

Qatar's top beach volleyball duo defeated China 2-0 (21-10, 21-19) in yesterday's quarter-final, delivering a performance that combined control, composure, and timely resilience. After cruising through the opening set, Younousse and Tijan faced a tougher challenge in the second, briefly falling behind before rallying with poise to seal the match in straight sets.

Their ability to absorb pressure and respond with precision once again underlined the chemistry and experience that have made them one of Asia's most formidable pairings.

The Qatari pair will now take on Thailand in today's semi-final, after the Southeast Asian side advanced with a win over Indonesia. The matchup promises intensity, with Sharif and Tijan aiming to extend their winning run and book a place in the final. In the other semi-final, Iran will face Oman.

Meanwhile, Qatar's handball team wrapped up the group stage of the games with a flawless record, sealing top spot in Group B and booking a semi-final showdown with Bahrain.

The Qatari side closed out the first round in style yesterday, defeating the Maldives 2-0 (26-12, 18-16). The match highlighted their consistency and control, as they dominated the opening set before holding firm in a tighter second to preserve their perfect run. It marks an unbroken streak of victories for Qatar, who have been in commanding form throughout the tournament. Their campaign began with wins over Pakistan and Oman, followed by victories against Bangladesh and Mongolia, and then Jordan.

A decisive result against Thailand confirmed their position at the top of the group and reinforced their credentials as title contenders. In the other semi-final, Group A winners Iran will face Thailand. Qatar's men's 3x3 basketball



Qatar's Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan defeated China in the beach volleyball quarter-finals of the Asian Beach Games in Sanya yesterday.



Qatar 3x3 basketball team registered a hard-fought 15-12 victory over India in the final group-stage game to enter the quarter-finals yesterday.

team yesterday secured a hard-fought 15-12 victory over India in their final group-stage game to advance to the quarter-finals in emphatic fashion, finishing top of Group C with a perfect record. Qatar set the tone early in the competition with back-to-back wins over Bahrain and Kazakhstan, showcasing sharp execution and an ability to dictate the tempo with their trademark fast-paced style.

Across all three games, the team demonstrated strong chemistry and technical discipline, under-

lining their credentials as serious contenders. In the quarter-finals, Qatar will meet the winner of the match between Iran and Hong Kong.

In the women's event, Qatar progressed to the second round after finishing third in Group A and will take on Singapore next.

China leads the medal standings with 30 medals (14 gold, 11 silver, 5 bronze), ahead of Thailand with 15 (7 gold, 5 silver, 3 bronze) and the Philippines with 7 (3 gold, 2 silver, 2 bronze), as competition intensifies across multiple disciplines.

FOCUS

Kane getting better with age, says Bayern coach Kompany

AFP
Paris

Bayern Munich coach Vincent Kompany yesterday hailed Harry Kane, saying the England captain was only getting better with age as the German giants get ready to face Paris Saint-Germain in their heavyweight Champions League semi-final.

Kane has scored 12 goals in 11 Champions League appearances this season, including strikes in both legs of the remarkable quarter-final victory against Real Madrid.

He has 53 goals in total, across 45 appearances in all competitions for Bayern since the campaign began. Those are incredible numbers for any player, especially one who will turn 33 in July and spends large parts of games dropping deep to participate in the build-up rather than simply conserving his energy for the penalty area.

"He was an incredible goalscorer, a striker who could find a way to score goals from any position, whether it be headers, left foot, right foot, distance shots," Kompany said of how his perception of Kane has changed since the forward left England in 2023.

"I think his finishing was never underestimated, and I think his leadership was never under-



Bayern Munich's Harry Kane warms up during a training session in Munich yesterday.

estimated either because he has had that role for his team and for his country.

"Obviously what we see a lot more is just his distribution and his workrate for the team, and his game intelligence in general. To combine that side of his game with the numbers he has, you have to do the job to help the team progress and then still arrive in the box, so it is not an easy thing."

"That is something we have seen and been able to enjoy, and that was maybe underestimated at the time in England, but he is getting better with age, so I am just enjoying seeing that side of his game for us as well."

Kane and Bayern are back in Paris, where they won 2-1 during the league phase in November - the former Tottenham Hotspur star was eclipsed that night by Luis Diaz, who scored both goals for his team but was then sent

off. The sides also met twice last season, with Bayern winning 1-0 in Munich in the league phase of the Champions League in November 2024 before PSG gained revenge with victory in the Club World Cup quarter-finals in the United States.

"You go through each game against them and it has always been very tight - we won a couple, they won one, but the games were so tight that they could have been different," admitted Kompany. "Luis Enrique (the PSG coach) said it would be about details and that has never been more true."

Bayern have already wrapped up the Bundesliga title and are through to the German Cup final. "The only thing we have is the advantage of having played against Paris quite a lot now, but it is the same for them," said Kompany when asked how to stop the French side.

"They are dangerous on the counter and from positional play but if you look at our team we have the same qualities."

Kompany is suspended from the touchline for the game after being cautioned against Real in the quarter-finals, and Bayern are also without Raphael Guerreiro and Serge Gnabry. The absence of the latter means Jamal Musiala is set to start as he faces the team against whom he broke his leg during the Club World Cup clash last July.

Mbappe doubt for Clasico after Real confirm thigh injury

Real Madrid striker Kylian Mbappe is a doubt for the Clasico on May 10 after his club confirmed yesterday he has sustained a thigh injury. "He has been diagnosed with an injury to the semitendinosus muscle in his left leg," said Los Blancos in a statement, after the France captain went off hurt during Madrid's 1-1 draw against Real Betis in La Liga last Friday. Madrid, second in the Spanish top flight by 11 points from leaders Barcelona, face Espanyol on Sunday before taking on the Catalan giants the following weekend. Real Madrid initially indicated Mbappe had suffered a muscular overload, but further tests showed their top goalscorer was injured. If Madrid drop points against Espanyol without him and Barcelona defeat Osasuna on Saturday, Hansi Flick's side will be crowned champions for a second successive season. Mbappe has been troubled by injury this season, generating concern in France with the World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico starting on June 11. The 27-year-old, a world champion in 2018, was dogged by a knee issue which lasted for two months, the longest absence of his career, and admitted it caused him "frustration, anger and anxiety".

Modric's season over after 'successful' surgery
Luka Modric will not play again for AC Milan this season after undergoing surgery on a cheekbone fracture suffered in his team's goalless draw with Juventus, a source with knowledge of the matter told AFP yesterday. Croatia captain Modric is expected to be out of action for between six to eight weeks but should be free to play in the upcoming World Cup, potentially with a face mask, the source said. The 40-year-old will, however, have to sit out Milan's final four games of the Serie A season after clashing heads with Juve midfielder Manuel Locatelli at the San Siro on Sunday. Modric subsequently left the field with an ice pack to his face, with Milan revealing earlier that he had fractured his left cheekbone and would need to go under the knife. "Surgery was needed on a complex, multi-fragment fracture of the left cheekbone. The operation... was perfectly successful," said Milan in a short statement. Milan did not say for how long Modric would be out of action, but the latest club statement added that Milan "hoped for a quick recovery in view of the World Cup" for Modric, hinting that his club season was over.