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# GULF TIMES SPORT



TENNIS

Sinner stops Jodar to book spot in Madrid Open semis

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ASIAN BEACH GAMES

# Qatar ends campaign with two gold and one silver

Qatar beach volleyball and 3x3 basketball teams claim gold medal, while handball team gets silver



President of the Olympic Council of Asia HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani poses with the beach volleyball podium winners at the Asian Beach Games - Sanya 2026 yesterday.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Qatari teams wrapped up their campaign at the Asian Beach Games - Sanya 2026 in style, finishing with an impressive haul of two gold medals in 3x3 basketball and beach volleyball, along with a silver in beach handball, further cementing their status as a dominant force on the continental stage.

Tokyo Olympic bronze medalist Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan delivered a standout performance, clinching beach volleyball gold with a commanding straight-sets victory over Iran in the final 2-0 (21-15, 21-12).

The duo showcased remarkable consistency throughout the tournament, topping Group B unbeaten before powering past the Maldives, Uzbekistan, and China in the knockout rounds, and defeating Thailand in the semi-finals on their way to the title. Thailand went on to secure bronze after a

2-0 win against Oman. This triumph adds another chapter to Qatar's strong legacy in regional beach volleyball, building on their success at the Asian Beach Games 2014 and the Asian Beach Games 2016, where they claimed gold and silver respectively.

Qatar Volleyball Federation President Ali Ghanem al-Kuwari dedicated the achievement to the nation's leadership, stating: "We dedicate this gold medal to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and His Excellency Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, in recognition of their unwavering support and patronage of sport. We also dedicate this success to the Qatari people, who consistently stand behind their national teams. This accomplishment is the result of a long-term vision built on sustained effort and careful planning."

He added: "The leadership of Sheikh Joaan has played a pivotal role in elevating Qatar's sporting presence across Asia, positively influencing volleyball and other

disciplines. It has strengthened the country's reputation as a key contributor to the development of sport on the continent, while instilling greater confidence in our national teams as they compete on the international stage."

Qatar's men's 3x3 basketball team were also crowned champions after a commanding 21-10 victory over Thailand in the final, capping an outstanding run at the tournament.

Qatar opened the knockout stage with a hard-fought 18-16 win against China in a fast-paced, high-intensity semi-final, before carrying that momentum into a one-sided final where they controlled proceedings from start to finish.

Thailand had booked their place in the final with a narrow 20-18 victory over the Philippines, while China secured the bronze medal after defeating the Philippines 21-13 in the third-place play-off.

Despite the physical and mental demands of playing multiple matches in a single day, the Qatari side displayed remarkable composure.



3x3 basketball winners celebrate with HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani yesterday.



Qatar handball players celebrate after they finished second.

sure. Their trademark fast tempo, sharp execution, and ability to capitalise on scoring opportunities proved decisive as they sealed a well-deserved gold medal.

Qatar's path to the title was built on a flawless group-stage performance, where they topped Group C with victories over Bahrain, Kazakhstan, and India. They then maintained their strong form with a convincing win over Iran in the quarter-finals, setting the stage for their golden finish. In the women's competition, Qatar exited in the second round after a loss to Singapore, having advanced from the group stage with a third-place finish.

Following the victory, Mohammed Saad al-Meghaiseeb, President of the Federation, dedicated

the achievement to Qatar's leadership, noting that the team fully deserved the title based on their performances throughout the tournament. He highlighted that this marks Qatar's third consecutive gold medal in 3x3 basketball at the Asian Beach Games, following earlier triumphs in 2014 and 2016.

He said the victory reflects the players' high level of preparation and professionalism, particularly in handling the demanding format of multiple decisive matches in a single day. Their discipline, focus, and consistency, he said, were key factors behind the team's success.

Meanwhile, Qatar's handball team won the silver medal after losing 2-1 to Iran in the final yesterday. The achievement capped a strong tournament campaign. Qatar

opened their run with victories over Pakistan, Oman, Bangladesh, Mongolia, and Jordan, before topping their group with a win over Thailand. They then defeated Bahrain in the semi-finals to reach the final. Thailand secured bronze after defeating Bahrain 2-0 in the third-place match.

The Qatari beach handball team remains one of the strongest sides on the continental and international stage, with a decorated record that includes Asian Beach Games titles in 2012 (China), 2014 (Thailand), and 2016 (Vietnam). They also won silver at the 2022 World Games and bronze medals at the World Championship in 2014 and 2016, underlining their sustained competitiveness across major tournaments.

FOCUS

# Qatar to host FIFA U-17 World Cup in November-December

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Qatar will host the FIFA Under-17 World Cup in November and December, the sport's global governing body and local organisers have announced.

The tournament will take place from 19 November to 13 December in the FIFA World Cup 2022 host nation and will be contested by 48 teams, a statement by the local organising committee in Qatar said yesterday.

The prestigious youth tournament returns to Qatar, marking the second of five consecutive editions that the country will host annually through 2029.

Following a landmark 2025 tournament that saw Qatar hosting the first-ever FIFA competition to feature 48 teams, this year's edition will continue the expanded format, welcoming tomorrow's stars to compete for the coveted trophy.

The final draw scheduled for 21 May in Zurich, Switzerland.



The Khalifa International Stadium will host the final of the FIFA Under-17 World Cup on December 13, 2026.

Matches will be held at the state-of-the-art Competition Complex in Aspire Zone, which will once again transform into a vibrant football hub for fans and players.

The tournament's centralised

hosting concept formed the cornerstone of the fan experience in 2025, with more than 197,460 spectators in attendance across 104 matches over 15 match days.

A total of 130 football scouts

from leading football clubs around the world also benefitted from the venue's compact nature, allowing them to observe talents from a single venue.

With the 2025 edition serving as



Group matches and semi-finals will be held at the state-of-the-art Competition Complex in Aspire Zone.

a launch pad for rising stars, such as Egypt's Hamza Abdelkarim, Mali's Seydou Dembelé, Belgium's Jesse Bisiwu and Nathan De Cat, and Italy's Samuele Inacio among many others, all eyes will now be on the next generation of talents at the 2026 edition.

The final will be held at the renowned Khalifa International Stadium, where Portugal was

crowned champions last year in front of 38,901 spectators.

This year, Khalifa International Stadium marks 50 years since its inauguration in 1976. As part of its illustrious legacy, the venue has hosted several premier sporting events, including matches of the historic FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. The stadium is set to host the Amir Cup Final 2026 on May 9.

PSL

# Sadaqat, Usman lift Kingsmen past Sultans

Agencies  
Lahore

The Hyderabad Kingsmen delivered a clinical performance at the Gaddafi Stadium yesterday, crushing the Multan Sultans by eight wickets in Eliminator 1 to keep their PSL 2026 title hopes alive. A dominant batting display led by Maaz Sadaqat and Usman Khan saw the Kingsmen chase down a target of 160 with 28 balls to spare, effectively knocking the Sultans out of the tournament. Opting to bowl first, the Kingsmen's pace attack immediately made inroads. Mohammad Ali and Akif Javed removed openers Steven Smith and Sahibzada Farhan with-

in the powerplay, leaving the Sultans reeling. When Hunain Shah trapped Josh Philippe LBW, Multan were in desperate trouble at 3-36. It took a resilient, lone-wolf effort from Shan Masood to give the Sultans a fighting chance. Masood played a solid knock, finishing unbeaten on 69 off 46 deliveries. His late-inning flourish, which included four sixes, propelled his side to a respectable 159/9. Ali, Akif, and Hunain each finished with two wickets for Hyderabad.

**Kingsmen's Clinical Chase**  
The chase was never in doubt once Sadaqat and Usman found their rhythm. Despite the early loss of captain Marnus Labuschagne for 11, the Kingsmen's middle order

operated with surgical precision. Usman was particularly aggressive, reaching his half-century in just 29 balls and dismantling the Sultans' spin attack. Not to be outdone, Sadaqat played the finisher's role to perfection, smashing 64 off 33 balls. The duo's 100-plus run partnership ensured that the required rate never became a factor. The victory was sealed in the 16th over when a boundary from Faisal Akram took the Kingsmen to 162/2. Sadaqat was named Player of the Match for his unbeaten fifty and disciplined strike rotation. While the Multan Sultans head home, the Hyderabad Kingsmen now shift their focus to Eliminator 2, where they are scheduled to face

Islamabad United for a spot in the Grand Final. Labuschagne, captain of Kingsmen, said yesterday: "It is really hard to put into words what it means for the franchise, the owners, the team, and the sport staff for us to be here: it is really special. We put a lot of work and time into making sure we came prepared today. We played really well especially with the bat and tried to come a few new ideas and a little bit of prep. It is nice that it came off today."

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**Hyderabad Kingsmen 162 for 2** (Sadaqat 64\*, Usman 64, Smith 1-14) **beat Multan Sultans 159 for 9** (Masood 69\*, Akif 2-30, Hunain 2-31) **by 8 wickets**



Maaz Sadaqat (left) and his Hyderabad Kingsmen teammate Usman Khan during their innings of 64 not out each against Multan Sultans in Lahore yesterday.

CRICKET

# Head and Klaasen shine as Sunrisers post 6-wicket win

Rickelton's ton for Mumbai in vain as SRH chase down 244

AFP  
Mumbai, India

Ryan Rickelton's maiden IPL century came in vain as Sunrisers Hyderabad chased down 244 to beat Mumbai Indians by six wickets in the Indian Premier League yesterday. South Africa's Rickelton hit an unbeaten 123 off 55 balls to power five-time champions Mumbai to 243-5 after the hosts elected to bat first at Wankhede Stadium. The left-handed Rickelton, a wicketkeeper-batter chosen in place of fellow South African Quinton de Kock, struck the fastest ton by a Mumbai batter, reaching three figures in 44 balls. But Hyderabad relied on their South African star Heinrich Klaasen, who hit an unbeaten 65 to steer the team home with eight balls to spare. It was the fourth highest successful run chase in the IPL as Hyderabad registered their fifth successive win to move to third in the table. Klaasen 30-ball blitz came after openers Travis Head and Abhishek Sharma put on 129 to get Mumbai off to a flying start in response. Head blasted 76 off 30 deliveries, while Abhishek added 45 off 24 balls. Hyderabad stuttered after they lost two wickets in two balls to Afghanistan spinner AM Ghazanfar, with Head departing the next over. But Klaasen's masterful knock



Sunrisers Hyderabad's Heinrich Klaasen (centre) is congratulated by Mumbai Indians captain Hardik Pandya (left) after his team's win in the IPL match at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday. (AFP)

ensured Hyderabad stayed on track as Nitish Kumar Reddy chipped in with 21, before Salil Arora struck the winning six to finish on 30 not out. Klaasen, Player of the Match, said yesterday: "Wicket was good. They had a quality bowling attack, so had to take a chance and see if we could make light work of it." He added: "It is always fun, you can feel them (Abhishek and Head) putting the bowlers under pressure. If they are going (at a brisk rate), it makes your job easier."

Rickelton registered the highest individual score for a Mumbai player in the IPL, surpassing Sanath Jayasuriya's unbeaten 114 in the inaugural edition in 2008. Rickelton put on 93 runs for the opening wicket with Will Jacks (46) and struck 10 fours and eight sixes in his explosive innings.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**Sunrisers Hyderabad 249 for 4** (Head 76, Klaasen 65\*, Abhishek 45, Ghazanfar 2-51) **beat Mumbai Indians 243 for 5** (Rickelton 123\*, Jacks 46, Hinge 2-54) **by six wickets**



Sunrisers Hyderabad's Travis Head plays a shot. (AFP)

CYCLING

# Pogacar wins opening full stage to take Tour de Romandie lead



UAE Team Emirates-XRG's Slovenian rider Tadej Pogacar celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the first stage of the Tour de Romandie UCI cycling World tour, a 171.2 km loop from Martigny-Ville to Martigny-Ville, in Martigny, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Martigny, Switzerland

World champion Tadej Pogacar stamped his authority on the Tour de Romandie by sprinting to victory yesterday's opening full stage. The 27-year-old, who is competing at Romandie for the first time, started the day in sixth place after Tuesday's short 3.2km prologue won by Frenchman Dorian Godon. But he moved into the lead in the overall standings after beating German Florian Lipowitz into second, with France's Lenny Martinez third at the end of the 171.2km ride through Switzerland's French-speaking region. Incredibly, it was Pogacar's fifth victory in just seven days of racing this year, having won four of five one-day classics before heading to Romandie - including three of the four Monuments so far this season. This victory came just three days after Pogacar triumphed for the fourth time at Liege-Bastogne-Liege, winning the 13th Monument of his glory-laden career. This is one of two week-long stage races the Slovenian is competing in as he build up to a bid for a record-equalling fifth Tour de

France title in July. In June he will race at the Tour de Suisse. He made his move halfway up the one major climb of the day, the 8.9km-long ascent to the village of Ovronnaz, with a tough average gradient of 9.8 percent. Only Bahrain Victorious rider Martinez was able to stay with Pogacar when he attacked, with still 38km to ride to the finish. Red Bull-Bora Hansgrohe's Lipowitz and Colombian Jefferson Cepeda climbed their way back up to the leading duo about two kilometres from the summit. Cepeda, though, then fell away and Norway's Jorgen Nordhagen caught the trio at the front on the descent to the finish in the valley of Martigny. The four riders came to the line together, with UAE Team Emirates leader Pogacar easily distancing his rivals to win the sprint. Cepeda came home in a group of 13 riders 21 seconds back which included former Giro d'Italia and Vuelta a Espana winner Primoz Roglic. Lipowitz moved into second overall at seven seconds, with Martinez third at 16sec and Nordhagen at 23sec. Today's second stage is a lumpy 173.1km run from Rue to Vuchereins which should suit breakaway specialists.

## Rain washes out second T20 between Bangladesh and New Zealand

**Chattogram, Bangladesh:** Rain washed out the second T20 international between Bangladesh and New Zealand in Chattogram yesterday, leaving the hosts 1-0 ahead in the three-match series. Persistent showers throughout the day made play impossible, with the match abandoned without a ball being bowled. Even the toss could not be held. The Bangladesh Cricket Board said fans who purchased tickets online would be refunded in line with its policy. Bangladesh, who won the opening T20, will now take on the Kiwis in the third and final game on May 2 in Dhaka.

### Sri Lanka gov't 'temporarily' takes over cricket board

Sri Lanka's government took control of the island's cricket board yesterday and appointed a nine-member interim administration to carry out "structural reforms". Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) is the country's wealthiest sporting body, but it has been plagued by allegations of corruption and mismanagement. World governing body the International Cricket Council suspended Sri Lanka for two months in 2023-2024, citing political interference in the running of the national board. "All administrative functions of Sri Lanka Cricket will be temporarily brought under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, effective today," the ministry said. Shortly afterwards, the ministry appointed former investment banker and opposition politician Eran



New Zealand's players sit outside their dressing room after the second T20I against Bangladesh was washed out owing to rain in Chittagong yesterday. (AFP)

Wickramaratne to lead the board. Among the other members appointed by the government are former skipper Kumar Sangakkara and former Test players Sidath Wettimuny and Roshan Mahanama. The ministry said the interim committee will "address the current issues in cricket and implement structural reforms". Four-time SLC president Shammi Silva resigned on Tuesday, along with his entire committee, after the government intervened. AFP has contacted the ICC for comment. Sri Lanka made an early exit from the T20 World Cup, which it co-hosted with India in February-March.

FOCUS

# TT worlds in London hoping to ride 'Marty Supreme' momentum

Reuters  
London

Hit movie "Marty Supreme" put table tennis in the spotlight this year and organisers of the World Team Championships that started in London this week will hope the sport's new audience can make it one of the best-supported editions ever. One hundred years after the first Table Tennis World Championships were staged in London, the biggest names descend on the capital for an event that will culminate at Wembley Arena on May 10. Actor Timothee Chalamet's chaotic portrayal of fictional ping pong hustler Marty Mauser will be a world away from the high-class action that begins at London's Copper Box Arena on the Olympic Park for the early stages. The tournament is on a completely different scale to the orig-

inal, with 64 men's and women's teams playing 262 matches across 13 days. A so-called "extended snake" format will feature Stage One in which 56 lower-ranked nations are split into four groups with the winners and best runners-up moving to Stage Two where they will join the eight seeded nations in a traditional knockout format. The business end of the championships will be at Wembley where defending men's and women's champions China's domination will be challenged by the likes of Japan, Korea Republic, Germany, France and Sweden. England, among the top seeds, will be hoping that home support can fuel their medal ambitions. Vastly experienced Paul Drinkhall, a three-times Olympian and bronze medalist at the 2016 ITTF World Team Championships in Kuala Lumpur, said it would be special. "I remember playing at home at London 2012 and didn't think

anything could beat that, but hopefully this comes close," Drinkhall told Reuters. "This is an amazing chance to showcase the sport and use it as a platform to grow table tennis. "I've never been to Wembley so to play an event in there will be extra special." China will be the team to beat on the men's side with a powerful squad including world number one Wang Chuqin but Sweden, with second-ranked Truls Moregardh, and France, led by Paris Olympics hero Felix Lebrun, will provide tough opposition. On the women's side, China's Sun Yingsha, Wang Manyu and Chen Xingtong are the top three in the rankings and will be tough to beat. The World Table Tennis Championships alternates between a team and an individual event. "There's always excitement in a team event, and it's the more fun format to play," Drinkhall said.

MADRID OPEN

# Sinner stops Jodar to book spot in semis

Lucky loser Potapova beats Pliskova to reach her first WTA 1000 semi-final

AFP  
Madrid

Jannik Sinner ended the inspired run of teen home favourite Rafael Jodar with a 6-2, 7-6 (7/0) victory at the Madrid Open to complete his set of semi-finals reached at all nine Masters 1000 tournaments.

The 19-year-old Jodar has taken the tour by storm this clay season, winning a maiden ATP title in Marrakesh, and making the semi-finals in Barcelona and the quarter-finals in Madrid before he was stopped by the world number one at the Caja Magica.

This time last year, Jodar was playing college tennis for the University of Virginia and was ranked 687 in the world. He will crack the top 35 when the new rankings are released on Monday.

Sinner was seriously tested before he extended his current winning streak to 21 consecutive matches. The world number one will face Jiri Lehecka or Arthur Fils in semi-final. "He pushed me to the limit. He's an incredible player. I tried to be ready as much as I could. First time playing against him," said Sinner.

"I'm incredibly happy. It has been a very high-quality match. Got lucky a bit in the second set, but also a little bit of experience. And so I'm very happy about today's match and obviously very happy to be the first time here in semis. It means a lot to me."

The first-set scoreline may have read 6-2 but it was far from a routine affair for Sinner, who found himself facing a young

opponent who could match his firepower, particularly on the forehand wing. The Italian was tested in multiple service games, including a marathon one at 2-2, and had to save a pair of break points before he took a one-set lead in 44 minutes.

Leaning on the rowdy home support that included several Real Madrid stars, past and present, Jodar skirted danger at the start of the second set and put pressure on the Sinner serve. But despite his best efforts, Jodar couldn't convert any of the five break points he created as Sinner levelled for 4-4. The set fittingly went to a tiebreak, which was dominated by Sinner, who won the last 11 points of the match to advance to his first Madrid semi-final.

Lucky loser Anastasia Potapova reached the first WTA 1000 semi-final of her career with a hard-fought 6-1, 6-7 (4/7), 6-3 performance against former world number one Karolina Pliskova.

The world number 56, who knocked out Grand Slam champions Elena Rybakina and Jelena Ostapenko in the previous two rounds, awaits Marta Kostyuk or Linda Noskova in the final four.

Having recently switched allegiance from Russia to Austria, Potapova is the first player representing Austria to reach a WTA 1000 semi-final, and the first lucky loser to make it this far at a tournament of this level.

"It feels great, I wouldn't lie," said the 25-year-old. "I've been given a second chance, and I've been using it very good. It actually can happen in tennis, so that's why I think it's one of the most beautiful sports we have. If I was given it, maybe I deserve it, so, yeah, I'm very happy."



Italy's Jannik Sinner jumps to play doublehanded backhand during his match against Spain's Rafael Jodar at the Madrid Open. (AFP)

## Draper out of French Open in fresh injury blow

London: Jack Draper announced he had been ruled out of the French Open with a knee injury. It was a further setback for the 24-year-old British tennis player, a former world number four, following a longstanding arm injury that sidelined him for close to eight months.

Draper has managed just nine matches across five events since returning to competitive action in February and retired during his first-round clash with Tomas Etcheverry at the Barcelona Open earlier this month.

He was subsequently diagnosed with an aggravated knee tendon injury but had hoped to feature in the second Grand Slam of the year next month. Draper has now decided against risking further injury on the clay at Roland Garros and will now try to regain full fitness ahead of the grass-court season, with Wimbledon starting on June 29.

"My knee is on the mend and I've started back hitting balls but unfortunately I have been advised not to play Roland Garros," Draper wrote on Instagram. "As gutting as it is to miss another slam, the advice is not to rush straight back into playing five set tennis on clay."

"Off the back of the arm injury I sustained last year, I've been restricted with my training and by giving myself the time to heal and build, I can be the player I want to be out there once again."

Under a year ago, Draper was ranked in the world's top four after winning the title at Indian Wells and finishing runner-up at another Masters 1000 event in Madrid. But he now joins the injured Carlos Alcaraz in missing the French Open, with Draper likely to be outside the top 100 in the rankings when he does return.

PREVIEW

## F1 back on track in Miami with rule tweaks in focus after forced break



There has yet to be a winner from a front row start in Miami, after four editions to date, and it is also a rare circuit where Mercedes have yet to triumph.

Reuters  
Miami

Formula One gets back on track in Miami this weekend, after a forced April break, with rule tweaks and car upgrades adding a fresh twist while teenage championship leader Kimi Antonelli chases his third win in a row for Mercedes.

The first US race of the sport's new era is the fourth round of the 2026 season after Grands Prix in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia had to be shelved due to the Iran war and fallout in the Gulf region.

In the absence of cars on track, the development race has continued at full speed with teams seeking to close the gap to early leaders Mercedes and end their run of three wins in three. Champions McLaren, last year's winners in Miami in both the Saturday 100km sprint and Sunday race with Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri respectively, have said they will bring a "completely new car" while Ferrari and Red Bull have also been pushing hard to bring performance.

"Last year (Miami) was one of our best tracks of the season in

terms of pace compared to others," said Norris of the circuit around the Hard Rock Stadium. "It's a different track and it might still just suit the car a little bit more than some other places."

There has yet to be a winner from a front row start in Miami, after four editions to date, and it is also a rare circuit where Mercedes have yet to triumph.

Reigning champion Norris took his first career win there in 2024 and also won last year's sprint before having to settle for second in the main race behind Piastri. Before them, Red Bull's four-times world champion Max Verstappen won in 2022 and 2023. Antonelli made headlines last year when the Italian, then 18, became the youngest pole-sitter in any F1 format after sprint qualifying and he returns with the hype ramping up back home.

The sprint format, with added points to be won on Saturday, could also see the pendulum swing back in favour of Antonelli's teammate George Russell, who won the opening race in Australia but is now nine points behind and in need of better luck.

"Now we're all equally recharged," said Russell of the break.

"I've just used (put) this time to good use, spent a lot of time with the team... the (car's) performance looks very strong. So, hoping to continue where we left off. I think the field will slowly bunch up, but I don't think you're going to suddenly see any drastic changes."

The rules tweak, agreed by all after a series of meetings, are intended to improve both the racing and safety as a result of the new engines and the wide differences in speed as some drivers slow to harvest energy while others boost the power at their disposal to get ahead.

"The two main things we wanted addressing was reinstating that (flat-out) challenge in qualifying and making things more natural in the way it should be in qualifying and being able to reduce the closing speeds and the speed differences in the race in unexpected places," said Piastri.

"We'll have to wait and see if we need further changes. I think we probably had ideas of other things that you could change. But they're not things you can change from one weekend to the next."

The race at the Hard Rock Stadium will be a home debut for newcomers Cadillac.

BADMINTON

## Players divided as BWF ratifies 15-point scoring system

Reuters  
Bengaluru

The badminton world remains divided over a new 15-point scoring system which comes into force in January and will be used at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, with some welcoming quicker matches while others warning it could be a disadvantage to younger players.

The new system, ratified by the Badminton World Federation (BWF) at its annual general meeting on Saturday, means players will need 15 points to win a game instead of 21, with matches played under a best-of-three format.

The BWF has said the change is aimed at producing shorter and more interesting matches, benefiting players through reduced physical load while offering broadcasters and organisers scheduling flexibility.

China's world champion Shi Yuqi said he would need some time to adjust to the system. "Shorter matches mean less demand on physical conditioning, but at the same time, the pressure from opponents, especially younger ones, will be stronger," he added. "I will need to be more mentally focused and fully engaged from the start."

China's Zheng Siwei, who won mixed doubles gold at Paris 2024, said the switch would not be welcomed by everyone. "The current top players, especially the younger ones, I don't think they want this kind of reform," Zheng said. "For them, shorter games will make the advantage much more obvious. For older players, it may actually extend their careers. With 15-point games, we're going to see new styles and tactics, and perhaps unexpected champions emerge."

Former world number one Lee Chong Wei, who retired in 2019, was sceptical about the change. "If this 15-point system is really going ahead, I wouldn't be surprised if 36-year-old Chou Tien-chen keeps playing or even if I end up coming back to the court



China's world champion Shi Yuqi said he would need some time to adjust to the system.

myself," the 43-year-old said.

Hong Kong mixed doubles player Tse Ying Suet had previously indicated she might retire after this year's Asian Games but said she may reconsider that decision. "It gives our coach another reason to persuade me to keep playing," the 34-year-old said. "Given my age and fitness, 15 points is tempting, but I'm still a bit hesitant and torn."

### CHINA'S ANTI-CORRUPTION BODY PROBES BADMINTON ASSOCIATION CHIEF

China's top anti-corruption body said it was investigating the head of the country's badminton association for "serious violations of discipline and law". Olympic gold medalist Zhang Jun, chairman of the Chinese Badminton Association (CBA) and vice president of the Nanjing Sport Institute, has been placed "under disciplinary review", it said on its website.

Jun is also being investigated by the Nantong Municipal Supervisory Commission in eastern Jiangsu province, the statement added.

The statement by the Central Commission for Discipline In-

spection and the National Supervisory Commission did not give details on why Zhang was being probed but said he was "suspected of serious violations of discipline and law" -- a phrase commonly used in China when referring to corruption.

Since coming to power, President Xi Jinping has pushed to root out graft -- an effort that has intensified in recent months. Zhang Youxia, a vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) -- China's top military body headed by Xi 2 and a member of the Politburo, was placed under investigation in January. Another Politburo official, Ma Xingrui, was probed too, Chinese state media reported in April. Badminton chief Zhang Jun won two Olympic badminton mixed doubles gold medals at the 2000 Sydney and 2004 Athens Games.

He joined the national team's coaching staff after he retired in 2007, before becoming the CBA's president in 2019. Rumours had swirled when Zhang was not seen recently, with the hashtag "Badminton Association Chairman Zhang Jun Missing" garnering more than 55mn views on Weibo.

## LIV Golf touts 'strong momentum' despite New Orleans postponement

New York: LIV Golf said the league looks forward to continuing its "strong momentum" despite postponing its New Orleans event scheduled for June amid questions about its future beyond 2026.

In a statement, LIV said it intends to "explore" a potential fall event in Louisi-

ana while citing summer heat, a crowded sports calendar and course conditions among the reasons for the postponement.

However, the postponement comes in the wake of reports that Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund is preparing to pull its funding for the league. LIV Golf CEO

Scott O'Neil had promised employees in an email that the current season would go "exactly as planned, uninterrupted and at full throttle."

However, the postponement of the New Orleans event scheduled for June 25-28 leaves a gap between LIV Golf Andalucia

in Spain (June 4-7) and LIV Golf United Kingdom (July 23-26). The league is set to return to action with LIV Golf Virginia next weekend.

Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry's statement on Tuesday confirmed reports that Louisiana has so far paid \$3.2mn of a \$7mn

agreement. LIV "is expected to return all state incentive funds" totaling \$1.2mn; the other \$2mn was spent on improvements to the golf course, Bayou Oaks at City Park.

A report said that LIV was exploring a smaller, "exposition-style" event in New Orleans in the fall.

## CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# Atletico hit back to hold Arsenal in cagey semi-final

Alvarez equalises with penalty after Gyokeres scored first-half spot-kick

AFP  
Madrid

Julian Alvarez's penalty secured Atletico Madrid a 1-1 draw against Arsenal in a nervy Champions League semi-final first leg clash. Viktor Gyokeres sent the Premier League leaders ahead from the spot just before the interval after he was fouled, but Alvarez followed suit 10 minutes into the second half after Ben White's handball.

Arsenal were upset at a late penalty decision being overturned following a VAR review when David Hanco made contact with Eberechi Eze in the area. Atletico had the better for long periods but Arsenal's solid defending helped them leave the Spanish capital in a good position to return to the Champions League final 20 years after their last appearance.

"We were the team we have to be, if we play at this level we can win," said Atletico captain Koke of his team's second-half display. "From my point of view they didn't create much danger against us... the team defended well and they just had that penalty?"

What the game lacked in the dizzying goal rush of Paris Saint-Germain's 5-4 win over Bayern Munich in the other semi-final the night before, it replaced with tension and a desperation not to fall behind. Toilet paper rained down from the stands of the Metropolitan stadium minutes before kick-off, in a striking - if wasteful - display, which invited cynical jokes from some quarters about the calibre of the spectacle ahead. In a tussle between arguably the continent's two biggest teams never to lay a finger on the trophy neither wanted to blink first.

Atletico still have an outdated defensive reputation but pinned Mikel Arteta's miserly Arsenal back in the early stages, with David Raya tipping Alvarez's shot around the post. The Gunners, a long way from Arteta's eve-of-the-game demand they dominate proceedings, looked to smash and grab, with Marc Pubill blocking from Martin Odegaard on a quick breakaway. Noni Madueke, starting on Arsenal's right flank with



Atletico Madrid's Marc Pubill (right) and Arsenal's Piero Hincapie battle for the ball during the Champions League first leg semi-final in Madrid. (Reuters)

Bukayo Saka only fit for the bench, hammered just wide from distance as last year's beaten semi-finalists sporadically emerged from their half. The next time they did, Gyokeres won a penalty. The Swedish striker, who might not have started if Kai Havertz was fit, exchanged passes with Martin Zubimendi and Hanco clumsily shoved him in the back from behind.

Diego Simeone and Atletico veteran Antoine Griezmann begged for the decision to be reviewed but VAR saw no reason to intervene.

Gyokeres took the spot-kick himself, walling it past Jan Oblak, who dived the right way but stood no chance of keeping it out.

Three-time runners-up Atletico, back in the semi-finals for the first time in nine years, came out guns blazing in the second half. Raya saved Ademola Lookman's drive with Gabriel blocking Griezmann's follow-up. The hosts pulled level from the penalty spot after White handled Marcos Llorente's shot, the ball bouncing up and hitting his arm, which was

away from his body. Alvarez took it, and having missed in Atletico's Copa del Rey final shoot-out defeat earlier in April, this time made no mistake with an unforgiving blast rivaling Gyokeres's first-half effort. MLS-bound Griezmann looped a shot off the crossbar and then sent the rebound off target as Atletico turned the screw in pursuit of an advantage to take into next Tuesday's second leg. Nigeria international Lookman twice came close and could end up ruing his missed chances.

## FOCUS

## FIFA boosts cash payments for WC

AFP  
Vancouver

FIFA announced a sharp increase in overall financial distributions for this year's World Cup, boosting cash payments to nearly \$900mn following concerns over the spiraling costs for teams taking part in the tournament.

FIFA said in a statement that money shared from the tournament - being staged in Mexico, Canada and the United States - would now total \$871mn, up from an initial figure of \$727mn announced in December.

Tuesday's announcement followed a meeting of FIFA's ruling council ahead of the body's Congress in Vancouver taking place today.

The hefty increase comes after several FIFA members reportedly raised concerns that the high cost of travel, tax and overall operations could result in them losing money from taking part in the tournament.

FIFA has now moved to alleviate those concerns, increasing an award of \$1.5mn for preparation costs to \$2.5mn for each of the 48 qualified teams.

A payment of \$9mn for qualifying for the tournament has also been increased to \$10mn.

Further contributions for team delegation costs and increased team ticketing allocations are also part of the overall increase.

"FIFA is proud to be in its most solid financial position ever, enabling us to help all our member associations in an unprecedented way," FIFA President Gianni Infantino said in a statement.

"This is one more example of how FIFA's resources are reinvested back into the game."

FIFA is projected to earn around \$13bn from the current four-year World Cup cycle, which concludes with this year's tournament, the largest World Cup in history.

FIFA's prize money for the 2026 tournament announced last year had already shattered the cash handed out at the 2022 World Cup, increasing by 50 percent. According to figures announced last year, the winning team of the World Cup will receive \$50mn, with the runners-up \$33mn.

The third-placed team will receive \$29mn and fourth-placed side \$27mn.



FIFA president Gianni Infantino gives a speech during the 36th AFC Annual Congress in Vancouver on Tuesday. (Reuters)

### Liverpool 'expect Salah to be available' before Anfield exit

Liverpool said yesterday that they expected Mohamed Salah to be "available to play again before the end of this season" after injury threatened to disrupt the star striker's farewell to Anfield. Salah, who will leave the reigning Premier League champions after nine years at the end of the season, was forced off with a suspected hamstring injury in Saturday's 3-1 win at home to Crystal Palace. Liverpool are awaiting the results of a scan to determine the extent of the problem, but with just four games of the campaign remaining, there were fears that the 33-year-old Egyptian international may not feature again this season. But a club statement issued on Wednesday said: "Liverpool FC can confirm Mohamed Salah is expected to be available to play again before the end of this season."

The statement added: "The issue that caused his withdrawal has now been confirmed as a minor muscle injury. It is, however, anticipated Salah will return to action ahead of 2025-26's conclusion and his departure from the Reds this summer." Salah arrived from Roma in 2017 and has made more than 400 appearances for Liverpool to date, with his 257 goals for the Merseysiders leaving him third in the club's all-time goalscorers chart behind Ian Rush (346 goals) and Roger Hunt (285). Salah has won four Premier League Golden Boots and starred for Liverpool in both their 2019-20 and 2024-25 title triumphs as well as lifting the 2019 Champions League trophy.

## PREVIEW

## Emery aims to write 'new chapter' in Europe with Villa

AFP  
London

Unai Emery said he wanted to write a "new chapter" with Aston Villa as he prepares for a Europa League semi-final against fellow former European champions Nottingham Forest.

The two Premier League clubs, who will meet in today's first leg at the City Ground, are one step away from a first continental final in decades. Forest won the Champions League, then called the European Cup, in 1979 and 1980, and Villa were champions in 1982 during a golden spell for English clubs.

Emery has revived the Birmingham team since he was appointed as manager in 2022 but they have still not won a major trophy for 30 years.

Villa lost in the semi-finals of the UEFA Conference League in the 2023/24 season, to Olympiakos, and again in last year's FA Cup semi-final against eventual winners Crystal Palace. Villa go into today's match against Forest knowing they are firmly on course to qualify for next season's Champions League, with the top five Premier League teams guaranteed entry into Europe's premier club competition.

Emery said he wanted to write a "new chapter" with Villa.

"We are going to try to use our experiences to try to get better in this one," the Spaniard said at his pre-match press conference yesterday.

"But of course I know how difficult it is to win a semi-final, because it is 50/50 between both teams, and they have as well, good players, a good coach, experienced coach in Europe. They have as well, I think their momentum, feeling confidence in the moment they are (in)."

Emery has a proud record in the Europa League, masterminding four triumphs in total with Sevilla and Villarreal.

"Of course I have my own experiences before, and in this competition, and different momentum as well, but it's completely different," he said. "In football, everything you were doing before - maybe it's fantastic, maybe not - but it's done, and now is a new chapter, and I want to write a new chapter here."

Emery expects a tough test from Forest, who are unbeaten in their past eight matches in all competitions - a run that has helped ease their fears of relegation. "They have their history, Nottingham Forest in Europe, winning the Champions League," he said. "And we have our history as well, but not recently, and recently, we want to try, both teams, to keep doing something important in Europe."

## SPOTLIGHT

## Enrique predicts more thrills in return leg

AFP  
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain coach Luis Enrique admitted his team will likely need to score several more goals away to Bayern Munich next week to be sure of reaching another Champions League final after a remarkable 5-4 victory in the first leg of their semi-final on Tuesday.

"I just asked my staff how many goals they thought we would need next week and we all think we will need to score at least three," said the Spaniard, who masterminded PSG's 5-0 triumph over Inter Milan in last season's final.

That allowed them to win the Champions League for the first time in their history and next Wednesday's semi-final second leg will be their first visit to the Allianz Arena since then.

"Bayern will of course be in their stadium and will be even stronger with their fans behind them but going back there will bring back beautiful memories for us. We want to have the same mentality and will go out to try to win the game."

Tuesday's thriller was the highest scoring semi-final match in the modern Champions League era - you have to go back to 1960 to find the last game as prolific at this stage of the European Cup.

That was a 6-3 win for Eintracht Frankfurt away to Rangers, before the Germans lost 7-3 in the final to Alfredo di Stefano's Real Madrid. "The intensity of the game throughout was exceptional," said Luis Enrique. "We won it and we



PSG's head coach Luis Enrique reacts during the Champions League semi-final first leg match against Bayern Munich in Paris on Tuesday. (AFP)

are very pleased, but at 5-2 we thought we could have had a better result. "We deserved to win, but we also deserved to draw and lose!"

A crazy first-half at the Parc des Princes saw Harry Kane give Bayern the lead with an early penalty, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia and Joao Neves strike for the hosts and Michael Olise then make it 2-2, only for an Ousmane Dembele penalty to put PSG back ahead at the interval. Kvaratskhelia and Dembele then both scored for PSG before the hour mark, leaving them seemingly out of sight at 5-2, but Dayot Upamecano and Luis Diaz pulled goals back for Bayern.

That ensures it will be game on next week in Munich, and there is a strong chance this tie could become the most prolific ever in the Champions League. The record for most goals in a two-legged tie in Europe's elite club competition is 13, including in last season's semi-final in which Inter beat Barcelona 7-6 on aggregate.

"I was proud of how we reacted at 5-2. It was incredible how the players fought back," said Bayern coach Vincent Kompany, who had to watch from the stands due to suspension, an experience he described as a "catastrophe".

Asked about the attacking approach of the two teams, he added: "Football is a bit like religion - people believe what they believe, and there is not one style of play

that is superior to another. "What happened today was a clash of two similar ideas - normally in these situations you have one team that starts to sit back a bit but neither team wanted to do that and that is why the match was how it was," he said.

Bayern will hope to overturn their one-goal deficit next week as they look to reach a first Champions League final since 2020.

"It can't come quick enough," Kompany said of the return leg. "There is not much in it and we just need to win the game. The weight of our stadium can make a difference. It is a legendary venue where Bayern have had so many great successes."