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FOCUS

Sheikh Joaan hails unity as Asian Beach Games conclude



Qatar contingent during the closing ceremony of the 6th Asian Beach Games in Sanya, China, yesterday.



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the OCA, with the OCA flag at the closing ceremony of the 6th Asian Beach Games in Sanya, China.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Olympic Council of Asia and the Qatar Olympic Committee, officially declared the conclusion of the 6th Asian Beach Games during the closing ceremony held at Yasha Park in Sanya, China.

In his closing remarks, Sheikh

Joaan described the Sanya edition as exceptional, emphasising that Asia's unity had created a historic moment.

"Together, as one Asia, we made history. Through our love of sport and our shared dream, we have showcased the very best of our continent," he said.

Sheikh Joaan praised the host city's success in rising to the occasion and establishing itself on the global stage. He commended the efforts of the organising committee,

the Chinese Olympic Committee, and the government of China.

"I have no doubt this will be the first of many major sporting events that Sanya will host. As this edition concludes, the spirit of Sanya will remain with us - reminding us that when Asia unites, anything is possible," he added.

The ceremony also featured the traditional handover of the Olympic Council of Asia flag. The Mayor of Sanya presented the flag

to the President of the Chinese Olympic Committee, who then handed it to Sheikh Joaan. His Excellency subsequently passed it to Abraham Tolentino, symbolising the transfer to Cebu City, host of the next edition in March 2028.

Meanwhile, under the patronage of Sheikh Joaan, Dr Thani bin Abdulrahman al-Kuwari, Second Vice-President of the Qatar Olympic Committee, hosted a banquet honouring the Qatari

delegation's participation and achievements. The event was attended by Ali Ghanem al-Kuwari, President of the Qatar Volleyball Federation, and Mohammed Saad al-Mughaiseeb, President of the Qatar Basketball Federation, along with administrative staff and national team athletes. During the banquet, the delegation celebrated gold medal victories in beach volleyball, 3x3 basketball, and handball, as well as a silver medal

achievement. The evening reflected a strong sense of pride and appreciation for the teams' outstanding performances throughout the Games.

China topped the Games medal standings with 55 medals - 24 gold, 18 silver and 13 bronze - underlining its dominance at the event. Thailand finished second with 28 medals (10 gold, 9 silver, 9 bronze), while Iran placed third with 10 medals (9 gold, 1 silver).

AMIR CUP

Heavyweights gear up for quarter-final showdowns

Prestigious tournament features 20 team - 12 QSL sides combined with eight from the second division

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Defending champions Al Gharafa will begin their Amir Cup title defence today with a quarter-final clash against the recently relegated Qatar Stars League (QSL) side Umm Salal at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium at 8pm.

Despite a promising start to the season, Al Gharafa endured a dip in form in the recently concluded QSL campaign, eventually finishing fourth under coach Pedro Martinez.

Speaking at pre-match press conference yesterday, Martins admitted the challenge ahead would not be easy, but voiced confidence in his squad's ability to rise to the occasion despite recent struggles.

"Match against Umm Salal will be difficult and a great challenge for us based on our previous meetings in different tournaments, and we must be in a very high technical condition to compete for the title again," said Martins.

Al Gharafa booked their place in the quarter-finals with a solid 2-0 victory over Al Kharaitiyat, while Umm Salal advanced after an impressive 4-2 win against Al Ahli.

Umm Salal coach Ruben Albis, meanwhile, struck an optimistic tone ahead of the encounter after being relegated from the top flight.

"We did not perform well in the league and now face the defending champions, so it will be a tough task," he said.

"However, I believe in my players and their ability to step up in crucial moments. Amir Cup matches have a different nature



Al Gharafa (left) and Umm Salal players during their training sessions yesterday, on the eve of the Amir Cup quarter-final.

compared to league competitions, and that motivates the team to fight harder and give everything to achieve our goal."

In the other quarter-final ties today, QSL champions Al Sadd will take on Al Shamal yet again after the QSL final round tie on Monday at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium, Al Rayyan will meet Al Wakrah at Al Thumama Stadium while Al Duhail will lock horns with Al Arabi at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

Al Sadd coach Roberto Mancini, said: "Facing Al Shamal will be very important as they are an or-

ganised team, and we faced them a few days ago in the decisive match for the league title."

"We must focus on the match. Cup tournaments are different, and the Amir Cup itself is different. Everyone knows its importance for the club, the fans, and the players."

"From my point of view, all the teams in the Amir Cup have a chance to win, and it is not just Al Sadd that are favourites."

"Almost all the teams are of a similar level, and we must always remember that the Amir Cup is a



different competition with its own special challenges."

Al Shamal coach David Prats said his team was ready for another Al Sadd challenge.

"Yes, we will also participate for the first time in the AFC Champions League, but all of that should make us focus more on what is more important, which is the Amir Cup and facing Al Sadd again in the quarter-finals," said Prats.

He added: "When you play against Al Sadd, it is a very difficult match and we expect it to be similar to the last one. We know

their capabilities and players, and we are ready for the match, the competition, and the enjoyment."

"We will try to attack strongly and defend strongly. What is important is that the players deal with the pressure and face it because we want to enjoy the game while competing strongly."

"It is a cup tournament, and there is only one chance. We are ready to perform strongly."

Al Rayyan coach Vicente Moreno confirmed his team's readiness to face Al Wakrah. "Our team's goal is bigger than just get-

ting past the current stage, as we aim to win the most prestigious title in Qatari football."

He added that he knows Al Wakrah well, as he had been in charge of the team's technical management since the beginning of the current season, before moving a short time ago to coach Al Rayyan, stressing that the task will not be easy in light of the outstanding levels possessed by the players.

Moreno pointed out that his team enters the Amir Cup competition with a lot of motivation after winning the Qatar Stars Cup and the Gulf Champions League titles. Al Wakrah's Chilean coach Jose Luis Sierra said that his players will do their best to win. The coach explained that he took over the technical management of his team a short time ago, but the team is ready to defend their chances of going ahead in the tournament.

Al Duhail coach Djamel Belmadi said his team faces a tough challenge against Al Arabi. "We have a tough opponent and all teams in Amir Cup are now aiming to reach the final, so there are no easy matches. Every game is evenly balanced and requires a high level of concentration," he said.

Cosmin Contra, coach of Al Arabi said, "The defeat we suffered in the last league match has been painful and the recovery time has been short. On paper, Al Duhail are stronger but we will look to deliver a strong performance and aim to qualify for the semi-finals."

Qatar's most prestigious tournament features 20 team - 12 sides from the QSL combined with eight from the second division.

SPOTLIGHT

Saudi to cut LIV Golf funding after 2026 season

LIV Golf was founded in 2021 as a rival to the PGA Tour

AFP
Riyadh

Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) is cutting funding for the breakaway LIV Golf league after the 2026 season, a spokesperson from the fund said. The announcement came hours after LIV Golf, founded in 2021 as a rival to the PGA Tour, said it was seeking to secure "long-term financial partners".

It has reportedly cost PIF over \$5bn so far to operate the series after signing many of the world's top players including Major winners Bryson DeChambeau and Spaniard Jon Rahm. Saudi's powerful wealth fund, however, said funding for the project would be axed as PIF looked to pare back a string of projects in the kingdom with the war in the Middle East raising fresh speculation about investment priorities moving forward.

"PIF has made the decision to fund LIV Golf only for the remainder of the 2026 season," a spokesperson for the fund said in a statement. "The substantial investment required by LIV Golf over a longer term is no longer consistent with the current phase of PIF's investment strategy."

The spokesman went on to say the decision had been made in light of "PIF's investment priorities and current macro dynamics".

LIV said earlier it was searching for new financial backers. The golf league said it was looking to secure "long-term financial partners to support its transition from a foundational launch phase to a diversified, multi-partner investment model."

There was also no mention in the LIV statement of PIF governor Yasir al-Rumayyan, who co-founded the dissident league. The statement simply mentioned two new board members, Gene Davis and Jon Zinman, had joined. LIV Golf described the duo as "seasoned experts with proven track records of navigating complex situations and unlocking value for global organizations, to guide the league through its next phase."

The PIF statement confirmed rumours, which had circulated for several weeks, that the breakaway tour was on the verge of collapse due to the possible withdrawal of the Saudi financing.

LIV's deep-pocketed backers in Riyadh were



LIV Golf has reportedly cost Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund over \$5bn so far to operate the series after signing many of the world's top. (AFP)

rumored to have cooled on the extravagantly expensive project. LIV Golf CEO Scott O'Neil vowed prior to the announcement to continue the season "full throttle," though he conceded the league would "probably" have to raise money going forward.

A collapse of LIV Golf could jeopardise the careers and earnings of its star players. The likes of DeChambeau defected from the PGA Tour in acrimonious circumstances, and may face severe penalties if they try to return. "There were rules, and they were broken," PGA Tour chief executive Brian Rolapp told the Journal this week. "With rules comes accountability."

Brooks Koepka became the first LIV player to return to the PGA fold when the five-time major winner jumped ship last December. The 35-year-old American's return was made possible as the PGA created a Returning Member Program, described as offering "a route back to elite performers who no longer have contractual limitations preventing them from com-

plying with PGA Tour rules and regulations".

LIV Golf postponed its planned June tournament in New Orleans on Tuesday, with officials saying they hope to reschedule an event for later this year. LIV's next tournament is set for May 7-10 at Trump National in suburban Washington. Its final scheduled tournament this season is set to take place in Indianapolis from August 20-23.

Earlier this month, PIF announced its 2026-2030 strategy would reorganise the fund's investments. The announcement came as the kingdom and wider Middle East has been upended by the ongoing war in the region.

The Gulf was hit hard by Iranian barrages on infrastructure, including airports, energy installations and ports following the US and Israeli attack on Iran in late February. But even before the war, Saudi Arabia's economic reforms were coming under pressure, with persistently low oil prices in recent years shrinking government revenues and triggering deficit spending.

EQUESTRIAN

Alqaqaa, Alkhamees shine at Hathab



Alqaqaa bin Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani aboard Bon Suela, delivered a flawless performance to win the 100cm class at Qatar Equestrian Federation's main arena yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Alqaqaa bin Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani claimed top honours in the Amateur class as the 12th round of the Longines Hathab Qatar Equestrian Tour began at the main arena of the Qatar Equestrian Federation yesterday.

Riding Bon Suela, Alqaqaa delivered a flawless performance to win the Table A, special two-phase 100cm class in a time of 29.78 seconds. Poland's Milena Werla aboard Nevada de Beauty finished second in 30.11, while Nasser Hamad al-Thani secured third with Equinoxe de l'Aulne in 30.17. Mo-

ammed Saleh al-Marri, Head of the Facilities and Logistics Committee, presented the awards to the top three riders.

In the Silver Tour accumulator with joker (130cm), Kuwait's Madhy Alkhamees took victory in 52.18 seconds riding Caheelah de Beaufour. Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Alasaker on Cassiano II finished second in 53.56 secs, while Qatar's Abdulaziz Khalid al-Bukhari placed third aboard Ganges Loca with 65/58.34. The winners were crowned by Saeed Hamad al-Rashdi, Deputy Director of the tournament.

The Hathab series, organised by the Qatar Equestrian Federation in partnership with Al Shaqab, comprises 14 rounds.



In the Silver Tour accumulator with joker (130cm), Kuwait's Madhy Alkhamees took victory in 52.18 seconds riding Caheelah de Beaufour.

TOUR DE ROMANDIE

Pogacar increases hold on lead with sprint win

AFP
Vucherens, Switzerland

Tadej Pogacar continued to dominate the Tour de Romandie, winning a sprint finish to take the second full stage the day after winning the mountainous opener.

Pogacar cracked a smile and held two fingers in the air to signal a second victory as he finished almost a bike length ahead of Frenchman Dorian Godon.

After the last survivor of a four-man breakaway was caught, Florian Lipowitz launched the sprint but was chased down by Godon, but the Ineos rider had UAE team leader Pogacar on his wheel.

The Slovenian world champion

surged up the inside in the final 100 metres of a rolling 173.1 kilometre stage through Switzerland from Rue to Vucherens.

New Zealander Finn Fisher-Black was third. "Some guys went too early and it was an advantage for me," said Pogacar at the finish. "For me it was all under control and a super sprint for me."

Pogacar, who is competing in the Romandie for the first time, picked up 10 bonus seconds to increase his overall lead to 17 seconds over Lipowitz, a German who rides for Red Bull, with Frenchman Leny Martinez of Bahrain Victorious third at 26 seconds.

Today's third stage, a 176.6km circuit starting and ending in Orbe, includes one second-category climb.



UAE Team Emirates-XRG's Tadej Pogacar (left) sprints to win ahead of INEOS Grenadiers' Dorian Godon (R), in Vucherens, Switzerland, (AFP)

IPL

Gill, Buttler guide Gujarat to easy victory

AFP
Ahmedabad, India

Sparkling cameos by skipper Shubman Gill and Jos Buttler complemented a stellar display with the ball and in the field, carrying Gujarat Titans to a four-wicket victory over defending champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru.

All seven previous matches in the IPL between the sides had been won by the chasing team and Gill therefore had little hesitation in asking Bengaluru to bat first at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad. Virat Kohli smashed Kagiso Rabada for five fours in the second over of the match before succumbing to the same bowler not long thereafter as Bengaluru went from 79 for two to 155 all out.

Devdutt Padikkal top-scored with a fluent 40, while left-arm pacer Arshad Khan (3/22), Gujarat's most successful bowler, received excellent support from Afghan Rashid Khan. West Indian Jason Holder had headlined a flawless first half for Gujarat with three catches to go with the wickets of Jitesh Sharma and Romario Shepherd, triggering a middle-order collapse which compelled Bengaluru to summon Venkatesh Iyer as the impact substitute.

"It was one of those nights (when the ball kept following me)," player-of-the-match Holder said. "The energy was quite high. I am just happy to hold on to the chances and happy to help the team win."

Having deployed Venkatesh, Bengaluru found themselves a specialist seamer short



Gujarat Titans' Shubman Gill (left) dives as Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Virat Kohli attempts a run-out during the Indian Premier League match. (AFP)

and Gujarat made them pay despite a wobble during the middle stages of the modest chase. Bengaluru were heavily reliant on the seasoned new-ball duo of Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Josh Hazlewood to strike early, but Gill had other ideas. The opener tore into Hazlewood, hammering the Australian for three fours and two sixes in the second over to give his team a strong start. Bengaluru fought back through Bhuvneshwar, who accounted for Sudharsan and Gill after a sparkling 43, but Buttler kept up the momentum with a hat-trick of sixes in his knock of 39.

Bhuvneshwar returned for a one-over final

spell during which he yorked Buttler for his 17th wicket of the season. With their prolific top three back in the hut, Gujarat made heavy weather of the chase.

Shepherd, getting an extended bowl largely because Bengaluru didn't have a specialist third seamer, dismissed Shahrukh Khan and Washington Sundar in the space of three deliveries to spark some excitement, but Gill and Buttler had scored so rapidly that Gujarat didn't have to contend with run-rate pressure. Rahul Tewatia held the second half of the chase together and Rashid struck the winning boundary with 25 deliveries to spare.

Sangakkara, Mahanama named in interim committee to run Sri Lanka Cricket

Colombo: Former Sri Lanka internationals Kumar Sangakkara, Roshan Mahanama and Sidath Wettimuny were named in the nine-member transformation committee that will run Sri Lanka Cricket, a day after the previous leadership resigned from their posts. Local media reports said the former board members had resigned after a meeting with the country's president Anura Kumara Dissanayake.

Former state minister and businessman Eran Wickramaratne has been named as the chairman of the new interim committee, which aims to implement a new

constitution for SLC to ensure better management and transparency.

"Our immediate priority is a total overhaul of the governance framework at SLC," Wickramaratne said in a statement.

Former Sri Lanka captain Sangakkara, who served as the president of Marylebone Cricket Club in 2019-20, is currently the director of cricket for the Indian Premier League franchise Rajasthan Royals.

Mahanama has also been involved in cricket administration since his international retirement in 1999, having served as an ICC match referee for more than a decade.

DU PLESSIS, RHODES AND KLAASEN BUY ROTTERDAM FRANCHISE IN EUROPEAN T20 LEAGUE

South African trio Faf du Plessis, Jonty Rhodes and Heinrich Klaassen have formed a consortium to acquire the Rotterdam franchise in a new European Twenty20 league, organisers said.

Former Proteas skipper Du Plessis will also lead the side in the inaugural season of the six-team European T20 Premier League (ETPL), which is set to run from August 26 to September 20 across six European cities. Former Australia captain

Steve Waugh, compatriot Glenn Maxwell, New Zealanders Kyle Mills and Nathan McCullum, and West Indies stalwart Chris Gayle are among the other co-owners in the T20 league.

The competition will also feature city-based franchises in Glasgow, Amsterdam, Edinburgh, Dublin and Belfast. The success of the Indian Premier League has inspired similar competitions around the world. The money on offer at franchise-based leagues has led some players to prioritise the format over tests and one-day internationals.

IPL SANCTIONS RAJASTHAN CAPTAIN PARAG OVER VAPING

Rajasthan Royals captain Riyan Parag has been fined 25% of his match fee and handed one demerit point for a vaping incident in the dressing room during an Indian Premier League match.

Parag, 24, was seen using an e-cigarette in the dressing room during Rajasthan's six-wicket win over Punjab Kings on Tuesday.

Vaping is banned in India, including the sale, production, import and advertising of e-cigarettes.

TENNIS

Blockx ends Ruud's Madrid title defence

Andreeva overcomes Baptiste in straight sets to book her spot in the women's final

AFP
Madrid

Up-and-coming Belgian Alexander Blockx ended the title defence of Casper Ruud by defeating the former world number two 6-4, 6-4 to reach the Madrid Open semi-finals, while Mirra Andreeva booked her spot in the women's final.

Blockx, 21, who broke into the top 100 for the first time last month and is at a career-high 69 in the world, has knocked out four consecutive seeds, including third-seeded Felix Auger-Aliassime, en route to the final four. Blockx is through to his first tour-level semi-final and is the first Belgian man in tournament history to make it this far at the Madrid Open.

Prior to this month, he had never won a tour-level match on clay. He now enters the semi-finals with a 10-2 mark on the red dirt through qualifying and main draw matches at ATP level. "To be honest, I don't know, I'm just happy being here. Even winning my first match here, I barely escaped in the first round," said Blockx in his on-court interview. "I was happy about that already, but semi-finals is something I wouldn't have even dreamed of to begin with. I'm proud with how I'm playing the last couple of matches."

Blockx drew first blood, breaking in game three en route to a 3-1 lead. Norwegian Ruud began dictating with his forehand and closed the gap to level for 4-4 but Blockx was unfazed and struck again to regain his advantage and he secured the set on his fourth opportunity after 51 minutes of play.

Blockx made his move in the seventh game of set number two to carve a 5-3 opening and after squandering two match points on Ruud's serve, he closed it out on his own serve to secure the win in 96 minutes. Ruud committed 17 unforced forehand errors during the match and will drop out of the top 20 for the first time since May 2021 when the new rankings are released next week.

"I found it depressing this game, because he didn't have really any weaknesses," Ruud said after the match. The three-time Grand



Belgium's Alexander Blockx plays a forehand against Norway's Casper Ruud in the Madrid Open quarter-finals. (AFP)

Slam finalist revealed he had been dealing with a calf issue since Monte Carlo and is happy with how his leg held up this fortnight in the Spanish capital.

Meanwhile, Andreeva's remarkable clay-court campaign continued with a strong 6-4, 7-6 (10/8) performance against Aryna Sabalenka's conqueror Hailey Baptiste, which sent the Russian into her first Madrid final. The ninth-seeded Andreeva is 12-1 on clay so far this season, with a title run in Linz, a semi-final showing in Stuttgart and now a final appearance in Madrid, where

she awaits Anastasia Potapova or Marta Kostyuk.

Andreeva was broken while serving for the match at 5-4 as Baptiste forced a tie-break and saved three set points before the Russian wrapped up the win in one hour and 39 minutes. "Honestly, I feel so much adrenaline inside. I feel like I'm still nervous. I'm just so happy that I won and that I was able to save all those set points," said Andreeva, who won 81 percent of her first-serve points. "The serve helped me a lot. I'm so, so happy, I cannot really find ways to

describe what I'm feeling right now."

Baptiste had a stellar run in Madrid with two top-10 victories over Jasmine Paolini and top-ranked Sabalenka, which will earn the 24-year-old American a top-30 debut next week.

Andreeva, who turned 19 on Wednesday, is the second-youngest finalist in tournament history, behind only Caroline Wozniacki. She is the first teenager to reach three WTA 1000 finals and will be targeting a third trophy at this level on Saturday, having won Dubai and Indian Wells last year.

Russian doping probe passes 300 sanctions: WADA

Bengaluru: The probe into Russia's state-backed doping programme passed a milestone of over 300 sanctions against athletes in what the World Anti-Doping Agency president described as the "most successful investigation in anti-doping history".

WADA announced that its 'Operation LIMS' probe has resulted in 302 sanctions against 291 Russian athletes, with 11 athletes receiving two sanctions each for separate violations.

The investigation was based on data and samples retrieved from the Laboratory Information Management System (LIMS) of the Moscow Anti-Doping Laboratory in 2019. "Put simply, 'Operation LIMS' is the most successful investigation in anti-doping history," WADA president Witold Banka said. "An incredible 302 sanctions have now been imposed in the wake of Russia's institutionalised doping scheme."

WADA said sanctions have been imposed by 23 different anti-doping organisations, with four additional cases still awaiting final judgment. While weightlifting (107 cases) and athletics (93) had the most violations, a total of 22 sports were implicated.

Russia's anti-doping agency (RUSADA) was declared non-compliant in 2015 after WADA uncovered widespread, institutionalised doping in Russian sport. WADA said its conditional reinstatement in 2018 later allowed investigators to recover 24 terabytes of Moscow laboratory data in 2019, laying the groundwork for hundreds of cases.

Banka defended WADA's decision to reinstate RUSADA under strict conditions, despite fierce criticism at the time. "Importantly, the decision taken in 2018 to reinstate RUSADA under strict conditions - despite opposition from a vocal minority of critics - was made precisely in order to get to the truth and formed part of a sophisticated investigative strategy," he added.

WADA confirmed that all Operation LIMS cases have now been investigated, marking the end of a probe that reshaped the anti-doping landscape.

FORMULA 1

Antonelli bids for hat-trick in Miami

AFP
Miami

Italian teenager Kimi Antonelli, the youngest championship leader in F1 history, will seek to complete a hat-trick of early season victories this weekend as Formula One returns after a month's enforced absence due to the Middle East war.

The 19-year-old Mercedes driver, triumphant in China and Japan, leads team-mate George Russell, who won the season-opening Australian race, by nine points ahead of what is effectively the start of another season, complete with revised rules and widespread car upgrades, at the Miami Grand Prix.

"After a month without any racing, we are ready to get back on track," said Mercedes team chief Toto Wolff. "We've used this break to analyse the opening races, address our weaknesses and raise our level. We've started the season well, but that counts for very little if you stand still. We know our competitors will have used this time to improve and build a deeper understanding of their cars so we expect the field to be closer in Miami. That's the reality of F1 - it's a challenge we must rise to."

Antonelli's early triumphs made him the first Italian driver since Alberto Ascari in 1953 to win two consecutive races. Ascari completed his treble that season. Wolff also addressed the tweaks to the regulations to be introduced in Miami, aimed at making the cars and the spectacle more natural with reduced battery re-charging in qualifying and increased super-clipping power to reduce dangerous speed differentials.

He said the revised rules would "respect the DNA of our sport" and deliver an improved spectacle without any significant reduction to Mercedes' early-season performance advantage. For Mercedes, this Sunday's race is an opportunity for a first win in Florida since the event was launched five years ago. It has been won twice by four-time champion Max Verstappen for Red Bull and twice by McLaren with a win apiece for world champion Lando Norris



Mercedes driver Andrea Kimi Antonelli drives a mini kart in the paddock yesterday, ahead of the Formula 1 Grand Prix of Miami. (AFP)

and team-mate Oscar Piastri.

They will harbour hopes of claiming points too with success in Saturday's sprint race, won last year by Norris, but Ferrari are widely expected to be strong contenders too as they arrive in Miami, like McLaren, who are bringing an almost "completely new car", with a heavily revised package. "It was one of our best tracks for pure pace, compared to others, last year," said Norris. "It's a different track and it may still suit us a little more than others."

After winning in 2022 and 2023, Verstappen will be aiming to stop Mercedes' winning run and revive Red Bull's challenge this year after a discouraging start. He is ninth, on 12 points, 60 adrift of Antonelli, with team-mate Isack Hadjar 12th on four.

Ferrari's duo of Charles Leclerc and seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton are third and

fourth respectively on 49 and 41 points with many paddock observers suggesting they are poised to fight for a first win since Carlos Sainz's success in Mexico in October 2024.

Leclerc's eighth and last win came at Austin, Texas, shortly before Sainz's triumph while Hamilton is chasing his 106th win and first since the 2024 Belgian race before he joined Ferrari. After a desultory first year, the Briton said he is relishing the challenge of a new formula that has seen him rediscover his racing mojo.

"We're all re-charged after the break," said Russell, expressing the feelings of most drivers. "I'm hoping we can continue where we left off."

It will mark newcomers Cadillac's first racing appearance on home soil in the United States when Sergio Perez and Valtteri Bottas venture out at the Hard Rock Stadium in a new American livery.

BOTTAS OPENS UP ON DANGEROUS WEIGHT-LOSS DIET

Miami: Valtteri Bottas on Wednesday revealed he deliberately endured a dangerous near-starvation diet to control his weight during his second season as a Formula One driver with Williams 12 years ago.

The 36-year-old Finn, who has returned to F1 with the new American Cadillac team after a season on the sidelines, admitted he was "delusional" and felt "like a drug addict" as he aimed to lose 10 kilos.

In a letter published by The Players' Tribune,

he said he began the diet after his Williams team forecast they would have an overweight car in 2014 and suggested he should lose five kilos. "This was back when there was no seat-plus-driver weight minimum," explained Bottas, who will line up on the grid for Cadillac for the fourth race of the 2026 season, his 13th in Formula One, in Sunday's Miami Grand Prix.

"If you put a clear goal like that in front of me, I am going to obsess over it ... When you tell me five kilos in two months, my brain

thinks, 'five? Why not 10? We can make the car even quicker.' So, I started eating steamed broccoli and a bit of steamed cauliflower for almost every meal. I can still smell the broccoli. Wet. Green. Plain. My god. It was like a game to me. I would wake up and weigh myself every morning, and when I'd see the number go down, I'd feel a deep satisfaction. I would come back from a 90-minute run and eat my little bowl of steamed broccoli, just to have enough energy so I could go for another 90-minute run."

ATHLETICS

Hero's welcome in Kenya for marathon record-breaker Sawe

AFP
Nairobi

There was a hero's welcome for marathon world record-breaker Sebastian Sawe as he returned to Kenya and was lauded by President William Ruto.

Sawe made history in London on Sunday by becoming the first athlete to run a sub-two hour marathon in race conditions. Receiving Sawe at State House in Nairobi, Ruto said it was "a defining moment in the story of human endurance".

He compared it to milestones in human history including the first four-minute mile by Roger Bannister in 1954 and even the moon landing. "Future generations will look back on 26 April, 2026, as the day a man broke through a physical and psychological barrier long thought insurmountable; and the name forever attached to that moment will be Sebastian Sawe," Ruto said in a speech.

Sawe clocked 1hr 59min 30sec in a tight battle with Ethiopia's Yomif Kejelcha, who also came

in under two hours. Sawe was mobbed at Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport when he landed late Wednesday.

"It is such a beautiful day. I'm glad you have joined me in celebrating, and that you have shown a spirit I never expected could be like this. I'm very grateful," he told the crowd. "I didn't do it just for myself, I did it for all of us. And I would like us all to enjoy it and for it to stand as a record for all of us," he added.

Kenya has dominated long-distance running, and its runners are superstars in the country. The pressure to break into the elite means doping is a major problem in Kenya. 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 2 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.



Kenya's Sebastian Sawe poses next to a picture of him while crossing the finish line to win the London Marathon after breaking a historic world record, during a congratulatory ceremony in Nairobi (AFP)

FOOTBALL

Arsenal's Arteta livid over Eze penalty review

'This changes the course of the game. I'm sorry but this cannot happen'

AFP
Madrid

Arsenal coach Mikel Arteta was left raging at the decision to overturn a penalty his team had been awarded in their 1-1 Champions League semi-final first leg draw at Atletico Madrid on Wednesday.

With the score tied in the final stages Eberechi Eze went down in the box under a challenge from Atletico defender David Hancko, who made contact with his foot.

Dutch referee Danny Makkelie pointed to the penalty spot but changed his mind after a VAR review to the delight of the Metropolitan stadium.

"What I'm incredibly fuming with is how the hell the penalty on (Eze) gets overturned in the manner that it happened," Arteta told reporters.

"This changes the course of the game at this level. I'm sorry but this cannot happen."

Arsenal took the lead after Hancko fouled Viktor Gyokeres, who scored the resulting penalty, before Julian Alvarez levelled with another spot kick early in the second half after a Ben White handball.

Arteta said he could accept that decision, after a similar penalty was given against Bayern Munich on Tuesday in the other semi-final, but he could not stomach the reversal of the Eze call.

"We are all fuming about it," continued Arteta.

"When you have fought so hard for nine months to be in this position, that's another goal that



Arsenal's Eberechi Eze went down in the box under a challenge from Atletico Madrid defender David Hancko during their Champions League semi-final first leg match in Madrid on Wednesday.

changed completely the course of the tie.

"This cannot happen. We put so much (into) it, it cannot happen."

By contrast his opposite number Diego Simeone was grateful for VAR's interventions, after the White handball was also only given following a review.

The Atletico coach also disagreed with the decision to award Arsenal a spot kick for Hancko's challenge on Gyokeres, shoving

the striker's back.

"The first penalty, in my humble opinion, there is some contact behind and the player throws himself down, in the semi-final of the Champions League, I think a penalty really needs to be a penalty," said Simeone.

"The handball was not given as handball, thanks to VAR it was a penalty, and the second penalty thanks to VAR was not a penalty. Sometimes VAR gives and sometimes it takes away."

The draw leaves everything to play for in the second leg in London on Tuesday, with both sides desperate to win the trophy for the first time.

"What do we have ahead of us? An extraordinary challenge," said Simeone.

"London, Arsenal's ground, a team that has not lost at all in the Champions League.

"We have huge hope and we will go there to play with everything we have."

Hassiba triumphs at Qatar Karting Championship



Tameem Hassiba clinched the Qatar Karting Championship Round 1 Grand Final after a dramatic 12-lap battle at Lusail's 1.124km circuit, clocking 13:03.377 to edge Victor Litaudon (13:03.388) by just 0.011 seconds. Karim Rizkallah finished third in 13:04.045, while Arkadiusz Barski (13:04.249) and Owen Morris (13:06.600) completed the top five in a race where the leading pack stayed within striking distance throughout.



Mainoo signs new 5-year Man Utd deal

Kobbie Mainoo has signed a new contract at Manchester United that will keep him at Old Trafford until 2031, bringing an end to months of uncertainty over his future. The 21-year-old, who joined United's academy in 2014, has already made 98 appearances for the club, scoring seven goals, including in the FA Cup final win against Manchester City in 2024. Mainoo fell out of favour under former boss Ruben Amorim and had a request to leave on loan in August rejected.

He started just one game all season - the League Cup loss to Grimsby on penalties - under the Portuguese, who was sacked in January. That led to growing speculation that the future of the boyhood United fan could lie away from Old Trafford. But Mainoo has been rejuvenated under Michael Carrick, who was appointed as head coach until the end of the season after Amorim was fired. The midfielder has started all but one game since then, playing a key role as United have climbed to third in the Premier League, all but securing a return to the Champions League. "Manchester United has always been my home - this special club means everything to my family," said Mainoo. "I have grown up seeing the impact that our club has on our city, and I relish the responsibility that comes with wearing this shirt." He added: "We can all feel the momentum building inside the club. I am determined to step up and play my role in helping Manchester United to regularly fight for major trophies in the years ahead."

FOCUS

Parker leaves Burnley after relegation

AFP
London

Scott Parker has left his position as head coach of Burnley by mutual consent following the club's relegation from the Premier League, it was announced yesterday.

Burnley said in a statement that Parker and the board had "mutually agreed that his time at Turf Moor would conclude" following one season back in the English top division.

Parker led the Clarets to promotion last year but this season has been a struggle, with just four league wins in total.

Burnley's fate was confirmed on April 22 after a 1-0 home defeat by Manchester City, two days after Wolves were relegated. Parker, who has previously managed Fulham, Bournemouth and Belgian side Club Brugge, signed a three-year contract in July 2024, succeeding Vincent Kompany.

He oversaw a remarkable 2024/25 season in the Championship, which included a 31-match unbeaten run and 30 clean sheets, taking them back into the Premier League at the first time of asking.

But Burnley have conceded 68 goals in 34 league matches in the

current campaign, the most of any side, and were knocked out of the FA Cup and League Cup by third-tier teams.

"The club would like to place on record its sincere thanks to Scott for his professionalism, dedication and contribution," Burnley said in a statement.

"He leaves with the respect and gratitude of everyone connected with Burnley Football Club."

Former England midfielder Parker, 45, said in a statement on the club's website that it had been an "immense privilege" to lead Burnley. "I have enjoyed every moment of our journey together, but feel that now is the right time for both parties to move in a different direction," he said.

"I reflect back with great pride on what we achieved during my time at the club, especially our unforgettable promotion season in 2024/25, and it was a true honour to lead this team into the Premier League."

The club said Parker's assistant, Mike Jackson, would take charge for the club's four remaining Premier League fixtures, beginning with Friday's match at Leeds United. It said the process of appointing a new permanent head coach ahead of the 2026/27 season had begun.

SPOTLIGHT

FIFA confirms Iran playing in US at World Cup

AFP
Vancouver

FIFA President Gianni Infantino reiterated that Iran will play their World Cup games in the United States as scheduled yesterday as he kicked off the global football body's summit in Vancouver.

Iran's participation at this year's tournament in Canada, Mexico and the United States has been shrouded in uncertainty since the eruption of war in the Middle East in February following strikes by the United States and Israel. Infantino, who has repeatedly stated that Iran will be at the World Cup, underscored that stance at the start of his address to delegates in Vancouver.



FIFA President Gianni Infantino speaks during the 76th FIFA Congress in Vancouver yesterday. (Reuters)

ver. "Let me start by the outset, confirming straightaway that of course Iran will be participating at the FIFA World Cup 2026," In-

fantino said. "And of course, Iran will play (in) the United States of America."

Iranian officials had floated

the idea of shifting their group games from the United States to Mexico, but that proposal had already been nixed by Infantino.

In a further twist last week, Italy-born US special envoy Paolo Zampolli was reported to have floated the idea of Italy taking Iran's World Cup place.

The US government later distanced themselves from that proposal, with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio saying Iran's footballers would be welcome.

But the tension surrounding Iran's World Cup participation rumbled into the build-up to yesterday's FIFA Congress.

Iran was the only absentee from the 211-member congress as yesterday's meeting got under way after a clash with Canadian border officials earlier this week.

Italian footballer and coaching bodies join Serie A in backing Malago as new FA chief

Italy's player and coaching associations yesterday joined Serie A in endorsing Giovanni Malago, who headed the Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics, for the presidency of Italy's football federation (FIGC). "Players and coaches have a shared vision, identifying Giovanni Malago as the person capable of meeting the numerous challenges facing us now and above all in the future," said a statement released by the player (AIC) and coaching (AIAC) associations. Malago, 67, is firm favourite to succeed Gabriele Gravina, who stepped down earlier in April after the men's national team failed to qualify for a third straight World Cup by losing to Bosnia-Herzegovina in the qualification play-offs. Coach Genaro Gattuso and team general manager Gianluigi Buffon also resigned. The only other candidate is former FIGC president Giancarlo Abete, with May 13 the deadline for nominations. With the support of Serie A, the AIC and the AIAC, Malago commands 48 percent of the votes ahead of the election which is scheduled for June 22.

14TH QATAR NATIONAL ARABIAN HORSE SHOW FOR INDIVIDUAL OWNERS 2026



Hayman Al Bahya, Owned by Hamad Khalaf al-Mannai, topped the Colts 2 Years Old (Class 5B) competition while Alia Al Khor of Al Khor Stud stood out in Fillies 2 Years Old (Class 3A) on the second day of the 14th Qatar National Arabian Horse Show for Individual Owners 2026 at Al Shaqab yesterday. The four-day show will conclude on May 2. PICTURE: Juhaime