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CRICKET | Page 2

Bangladesh and Pakistan renew Test rivalry in Dhaka



TENNIS | Page 3

Sinner demands 'respect' from Grand Slams in prize money row

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FOOTBALL

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Page 4

DOHA 2026

GCC Games set for grand start as schedule declared

Action to start with swimming at Hamad Aquatic Centre on May 12

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Organising Committee of the 4th GCC Games – Doha 2026 has officially approved the competition schedule for the regional multi-sport event, which will begin on May 11 with the participation of national teams from all six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

The fourth edition of the Games will feature competitions in 17 sports, including handball, table tennis, athletics, padel, fencing, boxing, taekwondo, karate, swimming, billiards, snooker, 3x3 basketball, shooting, archery, volleyball, equestrian and bowling.

Events will be staged across 10 venues in Qatar, among them Aspire Dome, Hamad Aquatic Centre, Qatar Sports Club, Al Gharafa Sports Club, Lusail Shooting Range, Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club, Duhail Sports Hall and the Women's Sports Hall.

Competition action will begin on May 12 with swimming events at Hamad Aquatic Centre, scheduled over four days, alongside the launch of 3x3 basketball competitions at Al Gharafa Sports Club. Taekwondo events will also get underway at Aspire Dome, where table tennis competitions will continue until May 17.

Billiards events will run through May 15 at the Qatar Billiards and Snooker Federation Hall, while bowling competitions at the Qatar Bowling Centre are set to conclude on May 17.



'Washeq' is the official GCC Games mascot.

Equestrian competitions will commence on May 13 at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club and continue until May 15. Aspire Dome will additionally host fencing events over three days and boxing competitions over two days.

Shooting competitions at Lusail Shooting Range are scheduled to continue until May 20.

Athletics events will begin on May 14 at Suhaim bin Hamad Stadium at Qatar Sports Club and will be held over four days. Handball

competitions at Duhail Sports Hall will run until the final day of the Games on May 22.

Snooker competitions are scheduled from May 15 to 19, while volleyball matches at the Women's Sports Hall will take place from May 16 to 19. Padel events at Aspire Dome will continue through May 20. Archery competitions will begin on May 17 at Lusail Shooting Range and run until May 21, while karate competitions are scheduled for May 21 at Aspire Dome.

The GCC Games were first held in Manama, Bahrain, from October 11 to 22, 2011, featuring around 1,500 athletes from six nations competing in 11 sports. Qatar finished third overall with 20 medals, including seven gold medals.

The second edition was staged in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, from October 12 to 26, 2015, with nearly 1,500 athletes competing in 15 sports. Qatar again secured third place, collecting 59 medals, including 21 gold.

DECISION

IOC lifts Olympic ban on Belarus but Russia 'still suspended'

AFP
Lausanne

The IOC yesterday lifted its ban on Belarusian athletes competing in the Olympics, although restrictions on Russian athletes remain in place.

Competitors from Russia and their allies Belarus had been banned from international competition following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, although some were permitted to compete as neutrals.

Russians will still only be able to compete in Olympic competition under the neutral banner, on an individual basis, and only if they have not actively supported the conflict.

The IOC executive board released a statement saying that it "no longer recommends any restrictions on the participation of Belarusian athletes, including teams".

"The IOC reaffirms that athletes' participation in international competition should not be limited by the actions of their governments, including involvement in a war or conflict," it said. This new policy should allow for a Belarusian delegation to compete at the Los Angeles Summer Olympics in 2028, when they will be present at the opening ceremony and included in the medals table.

The IOC said that the timing of the statement recognised that the qualification period for the 2028 Games begins this (northern hemisphere) summer.

"On behalf of the entire Belarusian sporting public, we express our gratitude to IOC President Kirsty Coventry for her balanced and principled stance," said the Belarusian Olympic Committee.

"We are firmly convinced that sport is called to serve as a unifying force and must remain an arena free from political influence," said the statement adding that Belarus hoped the decision

"will become a defining benchmark for international sports federations, which will, in the shortest possible time, lift all restrictions on Belarusian athletes in all sports."

Some Olympic sports, such as judo and swimming, have already lifted restrictions but Belarus are still unlikely to be able to compete as a team in track and field after World Athletics said in response to the IOC announcement that it was keeping its ban in place.

"As a consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, World Athletics sanctions implemented in March 2022 excluding Belarusian and Russian athletes, officials and supporting personnel from competition remain in place," said a World Athletics spokesperson.

"Our council has made a clear decision that when there is tangible movement towards peace negotiations it can begin to review its decisions. We all hope this will be soon."

At the last two Olympics in Paris 2024 and the Milan-Cortina Winter Games in February, Belarusians competed alongside Russians as "Individual Neutral Athletes", stripped of their national colours and in small numbers - there were 17 in Paris and seven in Italy.

And for the moment that will remain the case for Russian athletes wanting to take part in Los Angeles. "The situation relating to the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) is different from that relating to the National Olympic Committee (NOC) of Belarus," said the IOC in their statement.

The ROC has been suspended since autumn 2023 for having placed the sports organisations of four occupied Ukrainian regions under its authority.

However, the IOC also said that fresh concerns were recently arisen regarding the Russian anti-doping system which was first exposed in late 2015 following the Sochi Winter Games the year before.

SPOTLIGHT

Lusail celebrate QSL promotion, set to develop strong side

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Sheikh Saud bin Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani yesterday was the guest of honour as Lusail Club hosted a special ceremony to celebrate the team's historic promotion to the Qatar Stars League (QSL) for next season.

The event brought together the club's management, technical and administrative staff, players, supporters, fans, and a host of prominent sports figures and officials, all of whom gathered to congratulate the club and share in the joy of this landmark achievement.

"Promotion to the Qatar Stars League represents an important step forward in implementing the club's 2026-2030 strategy, which is focused on building a professional and sustainable sports institution built on talent development and long-term growth," said Lusail Club president Nawaf Mohammed al-Mudahka.

Al-Mudahka said the next phase will focus on strengthening the first team's readiness and raising its competitive level ahead of the new Stars League campaign.

"The club remains committed to continuing the development of youth programs and talent pathways aimed at producing players capable of supporting both the first team and the national teams,"



Sheikh Saud bin Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani was the guest of honour as Lusail Club hosted a ceremony to celebrate the team's promotion to the QSL for next season. Lusail Club president Nawaf Mohammed al-Mudahka was also present as were the players and team's Portuguese coach Emanuel Alfante.

al-Mudahka said. In conclusion, the club president expressed his appreciation to all club members, supporters, and partner organisations for their continued backing, emphasizing that promotion is only the beginning of a new chapter dedicated to establishing Lusail Club among the elite of Qatari football and achieving its future ambitions. Lusail secured the promotion after defeating Al Markhiya 2-0 on April 25 at Ha-

mad Bin Khalifa Stadium in Round 13 of Second Division League. Lusail were crowned 2025-2026 season Second Division champions with one round remaining, having collected 29 points. The result of their final match in the league will officially confirm their triumph. Lusail's goals were scored by Amin Alireza and Amir Roustaei in the 19th and 48th minute respectively. Speaking on the occasion, club's Portuguese coach Emanuel

Alfante expressed 'immense happiness' over the team's promotion. "We are immensely happy to secure qualification to the Qatar Stars League. This achievement represents a historic milestone in Lusail Club's journey and marks the club's first-ever promotion since its establishment," said Alfante. Alfante said the success was the result of continuous hard work and collective efforts from everyone at the club. He praised the



players' discipline, commitment, and fighting spirit throughout the season, while also highlighting the important role played by the technical and administrative staff, as well as the unwavering support of the club's management. "The team maintained confidence in its ability to secure promotion despite the intense competition and numerous challenges throughout the campaign. The players' strong mentality and

determination proved decisive in the season's most important matches," said Alfante. Alfante further stressed that competing in the top flight will require even greater preparation and commitment. He confirmed that work will continue to ensure performances worthy of Lusail Club's ambitions, while efforts will also be made to strengthen the squad in line with the demands of the upcoming season.

TEST SERIES

Bangladesh and Pakistan renew rivalry in Dhaka

BANGLADESH CAPTAIN WANTS A BIG TOTAL IN FIRST INNINGS

AFP
Dhaka

Bangladesh and Pakistan open their two-match Test series in Mirpur today, with the hosts aiming to complete a remarkable double after their historic away whitewash in 2024.

Bangladesh captain Najmul Hossain Shanto has made no secret of his ambitions, insisting his side must post big first-innings totals to give their potent pace attack the platform to take 20 wickets.

"The important thing is scoring runs. If we score 400 in 80 overs, no problem. If someone takes 120 overs, I also have no problem," Shanto told a pre-match news conference yesterday. "So the runs are important."

The pitch at Mirpur, which carries a grassy tinge ahead of the first day, has set the tone for what promises to be a pace-dominated contest.

Shanto believes his fast bowlers hold a slight edge over Pakistan's attack.

"In the pace bowling department, I would say both teams have good pace attacks," he said.

"But if you ask me, I would say our pace bowling attack is maybe slightly ahead, if I look at the last few years and how they have been bowling."

Pakistan skipper Shan Masood politely pushed back.

"We're not going to dwell on comparisons. They've got their qualities, we've got our qualities," Masood said, while also acknowledging the quality of the



Bangladesh's captain Najmul Hossain Shanto (right) and his Pakistani counterpart Shan Masood pose with the series trophy at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Dhaka on the eve of the first Test between the two countries. (AFP)

Bangladesh attack. "We're relishing the occasion of facing a good attack and hopefully getting some runs against them." Bangladesh have bolstered their batting with the inclusion of attacking opener Tanzid Hasan Tamim, while Taskin Ahmed returns from injury to strengthen an already experienced pace unit alongside the exciting Nahid Rana. Shanto wants Tamim to play his natural game. "The way he plays ODI and T20 cricket, I want him to play the same way," Shanto said.

BABAR AZAM RULED OUT OF FIRST TEST

Pakistan will miss the services of star batsman Babar Azam because of a knee injury, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) confirmed yesterday.

There was uncertainty in Pakistan's camp after Babar underwent a scan following the team's practice session yesterday.

"Pakistan batter Babar Azam will not be available for the first Test match against Bangladesh due to an injury in left knee. The

team's medical panel is currently assessing his condition. Further updates will be shared in due course," the PCB said in a statement on the official website.

Pakistan is eager to avenge their 2024 series loss, although Masood rejected the notion of revenge.

"We must give credit to the Bangladesh team, the way they came out, they prepared in 2024," Masood said.

"So we're not going to take any opposition lightly."

SPOTLIGHT

Marsh ton sets up LSG win in rain-hit IPL clash

AFP
Lucknow, India

Australia's Mitchell Marsh hit 111 to set up a tense nine-run win for Lucknow Super Giants in a rain-hit IPL clash against defending champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru yesterday.

Opener Marsh's 56-ball knock laced with nine fours and nine sixes fired Lucknow to a mammoth 209-3 in a reduced 19-overs-a-side contest at Lucknow's Ekana Stadium.

Chasing a revised target of 213, Bengaluru faltered as Virat Kohli fell for a second-ball duck off Prince Yadav after fellow quick Mohammed Shami dismissed Jacob Bethell for four.

Prince produced a delivery that nipped back in to rattle the off stump of "King Kohli" who looked puzzled as the bowler jumped in delight and punched the air.

Prince returned impressive bowling figures of 3-33 in his four overs.

Skipper Rajat Patidar hit 61 off 31 balls and impact substitute Tim David hit a 17-ball 40 to raise Bengaluru's hopes.

Krunal Pandya (28) and Romario Shepherd (23) put together an unbeaten partnership of 45 but leg-spinner Digvesh Rathi held his nerve to defend 20 runs in the final over.

Bengaluru finished on 203-6 for their fourth defeat in 10 matches but stay third in the 10-team table and in the hunt for the playoffs.

Lucknow registered their first win after six losses with their chances of advancing to the playoffs hanging by a thread.

Top four teams after the league stage will qualify for the playoffs. Marsh came out roaring as he hit the bowlers to all parts of the ground and on his way to his sec-



Lucknow Super Giants' Mitchell Marsh of Australia plays a shot during the IPL match against Royal Challengers Bengaluru at the Ekana Cricket Stadium in Lucknow yesterday. (AFP)

ond hundred of the T20 competition in 49 balls with a four off Shepherd after a second rain interval.

He put on 95 runs with opening partner Arshin Kulkarni, who made 17, and then another strong partnership of 70 with Nicholas Pooran, who hit 38.

Marsh finally fell to fellow Australian Josh Hazlewood, who took one wicket but gave away 49 runs from his four overs.

BRIEF SCORES

Lucknow Super Giants 209 for 3 (Marsh 111, Pooran 38, Pant 32*) **beat Royal Challengers Bengaluru 203 for 6** (Patidar 61, David 40, Prince 3-33, Shahbaz 2-33) **by nine runs**



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Virat Kohli is bowled out by Lucknow Super Giants' Prince Yadav. (Reuters)

COMMENT

England captain Stokes '100 percent to bowl' on return to cricket

AFP
London

Ben Stokes is expected to bat and bowl for county side Durham as he returns to action for the first time since England's disastrous Ashes campaign.

The England captain is set to face Worcestershire in a second division County Championship match starting today.

The all-rounder suffered a freak injury when he was hit in the face by a ball during a net session while coaching academy players in February.

Stokes, 34, who suffered a groin strain during England's recent 4-1 Ashes humbling in Australia, had to undergo reconstructive surgery. Durham coach Ryan Campbell said Stokes could open the bowling at New Road in the absence of West Indies fast bowler Kemar Roach.

"He'll be bowling for us, 100 percent," Campbell told Britain's Press Association news agency.

"In one of the innings he might even go with the new ball, that's in our thinking."

"We won't expect him to bowl a million overs, it will be probably be around 20 to 25 overs for the game, but once he gets into the battle it's hard to get him out of it."



England's international season starts with a three-Test series against New Zealand at Lord's commencing on June 4.

Stokes enjoyed a revival as a Test-match bowler last year, taking 33 wickets at just over 23 apiece.

England have struggled to fill the position of opening bowler since the retirements of James Anderson, Stuart Broad and Chris Woakes but Stokes' recent injury record counts against using him in that slot.

Campbell underlined his plan was designed to benefit Durham rather than England.

"We've made it very clear, Stokesy is here as a member of our team to help win a game of cricket for Durham, not to get ready for England," he said.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Pakistan to host Australia in three-match ODI series

AFP
Karachi

Australia will tour Pakistan for a three-match ODI series, the Pakistan Cricket Board said Thursday, as the countries build up to next year's World Cup.

Australia, who played a T20 series in Pakistan earlier this year, will defend their 50-over title at the World Cup co-hosted by South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia in October 2027.

"Australia will arrive in Islamabad on May 23 and take on Pakistan in the first ODI at the Rawalpindi stadium on May 30," said a PCB

release. The second and third ODIs will be played at the refurbished Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore on June 2 and 4.

The matches will start at 4:30 pm local time because of the hot weather.

It will be Australia's first bilateral ODI series in Pakistan since March-April 2022.

They were thrashed 3-0 by the hosts in T20s in January-February this year.

Meanwhile Cricinfo.com reported that Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood, and Mitchell Starc are among a host of Australians who look set to miss a three-match ODI tour of Pakistan as the dates clash with the end of IPL 2026.

FOCUS

Australia great Warner to 'accept' drink-drive charge, says lawyer

AFP
Sydney

Australian cricket star David Warner will "accept responsibility" for drink-driving, his lawyer told reporters yesterday after a Sydney court hearing.

The 39-year-old faces a "middle-range" drink-driving charge, court documents showed, after allegedly being more than twice the legal limit in Sydney in April.

Warner - one of Australia's best-known sportsmen - is accused of being at the wheel of a van and stopping short of a random testing site, before being breath-tested, arrested and taken to a police station.

"I can indicate that David will be accepting responsibility for drink-driving," defence lawyer Bobby

Hill told reporters outside court, according to public broadcaster ABC.

"So many of us make those poor decisions. I think what's important is accepting and being accountable for those poor decisions," he said yesterday.

Warner's lawyer argued that the case showed the risk people take when trying to assess whether they have drunk too much.

"It doesn't matter if you're a tradesman, a doctor or one of the best opening batsmen in the world, that danger exists for every one of us."

Former international opener Warner, who captained Sydney Thunder in the domestic Big Bash League, did not appear in court and has not entered a plea, local media said.

Court documents showed the next hearing was set for June 24.

BCB CHARGES PLAYER, OFFICIALS IN ANTI-CORRUPTION PROBE INTO BPL

DHAKA: The Bangladesh Cricket Board has charged multiple team officials and a domestic cricketer over betting violations and obstruction in an anti-corruption probe into the Bangladesh Premier League, the country's major franchise-based Twenty20 competition. Player Amit Mojumder and team manager Rezwana Kabir Siddique have been charged with "placing, accepting, laying or otherwise entering into bets" in relation to matches, the BCB said yesterday, after an investigation conducted by its integrity unit. Towhidul Haque Towhid, former chairman of the Noakhali Express

franchise, and Chattogram Royals team manager Labur Rahman have been charged with obstructing the investigation into the BPL's 2025-26 season which concluded in January. "The charged Participants have been provisionally suspended and have 14 days from receipt of the notices of charge to respond to the allegations," the BCB said. Saminur Rahman, who was associated with the Chattogram Royals franchise, has also been issued an exclusion order following an investigation into the previous three editions of the BPL, the BCB said, adding that Rahman had accepted the exclusion order.

TENNIS

World No 1 Sinner demands 'respect' from Grand Slams

Djokovic also pledges his support to the players in their battle with the sport's major events

AFP
Rome

Jannik Sinner called yesterday for Grand Slam tournaments to show tennis players respect in a row over prize money, as Novak Djokovic pledged his support to the players in their battle with the sport's major events.

Last year almost all the leading players signed two letters to the four Grand Slam bosses demanding an increase in prize money, payments into a player welfare fund to improve retirement and maternity benefits, as well as involvement in decisions that affected them.

The letters set a target of a 22-percent share in tournament revenue, which would bring the majors in line with the nine combined 1000-level events run by the ATP men's tour and the women's WTA tour.

But Sinner said at the Italian Open in Rome that the players were no nearer an agreement with the organisers of Wimbledon and the French, US and Australian Opens.

"It's more about respect. Because I think we give much more than we are getting back. It's not only for the top players; it's for all of us players," Sinner said. "It's not nice that after one year we are not even close to conclusion of what we would like to have."

On Tuesday women's world number one Aryna Sabalenka said that she was ready to boycott the Grand Slams in order for the players to force organisers' hands.

Those comments came after players said in a statement that last month's announcement by the French Open of a 9.5-percent prize money rise was not good enough.

It said that a 14-percent increase in revenue last year only led to the total prize purse going up by 5.4 percent, reducing the players' share to 14.3 percent. Sinner coyly suggested he may back players pulling out of Grand Slam tournaments in the future.

"Of course, we talk about money, but the most important is respect, and we just



Italy's Jannik Sinner trains in front of packed crowd on the eve of the Italian Open in Rome. (Reuters)

don't feel it. I think we players, we are a bit disappointed also of the outcome of Roland Garros, for example. So let's see what's coming," added Sinner. "So I do understand players talking about a boycott because it's somewhere we also need to start... Then we see in the future."

Sinner will begin his bid for a record-extending sixth consecutive Masters 1000 title against one of Sebastian Ofner or Alex Michelsen tomorrow. The Italian, a four-time Grand Slam winner, is on a 23-match winning streak and is red-hot favourite for singles victory in front of his home fans, with rival Carlos Alcaraz injured.

Djokovic, who returns to action in Rome today against Dino Prizmic after a shoulder injury kept him out of the Miami, Monte Carlo and Madrid events, backed the players in their battle.

The 24-time Grand Slam winner founded the breakaway Professional Tennis Players Association (PTPA) in 2021 in a bid to wrest more power for the players after a disillusioning spell as president of the ATP's player council.

Djokovic, 38, has argued for more player power in the sport and again yesterday insisted that the current set-up is stacked against the lower-ranked and grassroots

players, who he says "are leaving tennis because of no funding".

"I'm glad that there's willingness from the leaders of our sport, like Sabalenka, to really step up and really understand the dynamics of how tennis politics works, understand the nuances and really what needs to be done, not only for her benefit and well-being, but for everyone," said Djokovic.

"That's true leadership for me and I think that she needs to maintain that... my position is very clear, I support the players and always will support the stronger player position in the ecosystem."

Italy's tennis chief wants to break Grand Slam 'monopoly' with new major

Rome: Angelo Binaghi has dragged Italian tennis from the doldrums to a golden age since taking charge of the country's federation (FITP) a quarter of a century ago, with Jannik Sinner just the very best of some of the world's top players.

But the organiser of the Italian Open, which runs in Rome until May 17, has an even bigger goal - breaking what he calls the Grand Slam monopoly and hosting a fifth major tournament in his home nation.

"The monopoly is scandalous and is a big handicap for tennis," Binaghi said. "It's a scandal that there is no meritocratic system, instead the system protects those who don't do as much as they could for tennis. There are four countries in the world that have a mountain of money to invest in tennis that other nations don't have. I'm trying to break that monopoly."

Binaghi insists that Italy is the place to host a fifth Slam given the explosion in popularity of the sport in recent years, pushed by the likes of Sinner and Jasmine Paolini, reigning women's champion here in Rome. The 65-year-old said he was willing to organise the eventual tournament "anywhere in Italy and on any surface", but he was vague on the practicalities of creating a new Slam.

Binaghi suggested that his proposed tournament wouldn't be held at the Foro Italico where the Italian Open has blossomed into one of the tennis calendar's most prestigious events. The centre court in the Italian capital is set to have a retractable roof and an increased capacity of 12,500 by 2028.

But Binaghi said that the area around the grounds, which also houses the Stadio Olimpico where football clubs Roma and Lazio play their home matches, presents challenges for a Grand Slam.

SPOTLIGHT

Paolini begins Italian Open title defence by battling past Jeanjean



Italy's Jasmine Paolini reacts during her second round match against France's Leolia Jeanjean at the Italian Open in Rome. (Reuters)

AFP
Rome

Jasmine Paolini launched her Italian Open title defence by battling back from a set down to beat France's Leolia Jeanjean 6-7 (4/7), 6-2, 6-4.

Home hope Paolini is bidding to become the first Italian woman to retain the title in Rome, but started slowly at the Foro Italico.

The world number eight turned on the afterburners after going behind following an error-strewn first set, comfortably turning around the match to secure a spot in the third round, where she will meet Elise Mertens.

"This match was a bit of up and downs, for sure. But I remember last year, I mean, also a lot of up and downs during the tournament," said Paolini.

Coco Gauff, who lost to Paolini in last year's final, made short work of Tereza Valentova in the reigning French Open champions' opening match of the tournament. American star Gauff beat Valentova 6-3, 6-4 in one hour and 34 minutes in front of a sparsely-populated centre court, and will play one of Solana Sierra or Anhelina Kalinina in the next round.

World number one and favourite for the women's title in the Italian capital, Aryna Sabalenka will face Barbora Krejckikova in the final match of the day on centre court.

Sabalenka, who lost last year's Roland Garros final to Gauff, has never won the Italian Open, with her run to the final two years ago, when she was lost to Iga Swiatek, her best result.

Paolini's compatriot Matteo Berrettini fell at the first hurdle, 6-2, 6-3, to Alexei Popyrin, a defeat which will see the former Wimbledon finalist drop out of the top 100 in the men's rankings.

The Rome native has had a hideous time with abdominal injuries in recent years, and since the start of the season -- when he had to pull out of the Australian Open -- he has won just nine matches and lost 10. "It was a pretty bad day, I had no energy and I wasn't able to use the energy of the crowd," said Berrettini. "This year started in a particular way, and the only way I can move forward is to accept that there will be days like this."

Another Italian in Lorenzo Sonego was dumped out at the first time of asking, the 30-year-old seen off in straight sets 6-3, 6-3 by Peru's Ignacio Buse on centre court.

Badminton looks to future with 'evolution and innovation'

Hong Kong: Synthetic shuttlecocks, shorter games and a new generation of stars are all part of the "evolution" of badminton, a top official said, saying the sport can't afford to sit still. Traditionalists hit out after the Badminton World Federation said that from January 2027 it will adjust the scoring system, partly with an eye on the next generation of fans. Currently matches are the best of three games, with the winner of each the first to 21 points. That will change to the first to 15.

Also last month, the BWF said it will trial synthetic shuttlecocks at lower-grade tournaments with a view to potentially using them at elite level. Days later - in an unrelated move - double Olympic champion Viktor Axelsen retired aged 32, leaving a hole at the top of the men's game.

BWF secretary general Thomas Lund said that badminton was well placed to thrive as it attempts to build on the immense popularity it already enjoys in Asia. Members overwhelmingly approved 15-point games, but Lund conceded: "Of course there are some who have doubted about what that will mean for the game."

"I would say most of the traditionalists or sceptical voices in our community are - as I

see it - the ones who are afraid that the sport will change. I would say this is rather seen as a tweak to the sporting aspects to the scoring system and the game... this is very much in line with how we see the game being played today, the DNA, how the game will evolve," Lund added.

It was also about "the welfare of players in terms of recovery" and making it more appealing to fans and broadcasters, he said.

Part of any sport's allure is having big stars and badminton lost one in Lund's fellow Dane Axelsen. Spain's 2016 Olympic champion Carolina Marin also left the sport in March at the same age after a long struggle with a knee injury.

Before them, the rivalry between China's Lin Dan and Lee Chong Wei of Malaysia captivated and even transcended the sport until 2018. Lund dismissed concerns that Axelsen's retirement and the lack of a rivalry akin to the Lin-Lee storyline hurts badminton.

"I've heard this for 40 years," he said. "The sport that we sometimes compare ourselves with is tennis, and everybody was afraid of what will happen when (Roger) Federer and (Rafael) Nadal disappeared. I'm not sure people think about that now because others

come up and play fantastic tennis, and now the same will happen with badminton," he said, pointing to how France last weekend reached the final of the Thomas Cup men's team event for the first time, losing to superpower China.

Another recent announcement which raised eyebrows among traditionalists concerns trying out synthetic shuttlecocks, amid concerns about costs and a shortage of duck and goose feathers. "We believe that should be pushed and pursued," Lund said, adding it was "coming step-by-step".

The BWF said in April it will try synthetic shuttlecocks at selected events including junior international tournaments. Asked if he saw a day when all of badminton uses synthetic shuttlecocks, Lund said: "I do hope at the highest level that we will be able to have a quality (synthetic) shuttle we can then use more and more across the tours and the major championships over the years."

Lund said that using synthetic shuttlecocks is also to do with making badminton more affordable at grassroots - the BWF says more than 300 million people play globally. "It's important that these evolutions and innovations are done," he said.

EQUESTRIAN

Al-Khamis, Nasser al-Thani shine at Hathab

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Madi al-Khamis claimed the Silver Tour title during the 13th round of the Qatar Equestrian Tour - Longines Hathab at the main arena of the Qatar Equestrian Federation.

Al-Khamis won in a time of 26.64 seconds on Bevor. Hussain Saeed Haidan finished second in 26.92 seconds on Saucedo, while Bader al-Fard secured third place in 27.36 seconds on Murdock. The winners were crowned by Hassan Al-Nasr, Director of the Qatar Dressage Team.

In the Amateur Tour, Nasser Hamad al-Thani clinched first place with a time of 23.55 seconds on Equinoxe de l'Aulne. Al Qaqa'a bin Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani finished second in 24.05 seconds on Bon Suela, while Moza Hamza al-Kuwari took third place in 26.61 seconds on Haneen. Mohammed Saleh al-Marri, Head of the Facilities and Logistics Committee for the tournament, presented the awards to the top three riders.



In the Amateur Tour, Nasser Hamad al-Thani clinched first place on Equinoxe de l'Aulne during the 13th round of Hathab.



In dressage introductory levels, Najla Abdullah al-Khalifi, Sheikha Shaikha Ahmed al-Thani and Hemyan al-Kuwari secured victories in their respective categories.

The first day of the round also featured dressage competitions across introductory levels, where Najla Abdullah al-Khalifi, Sheikha Shaikha Ahmed al-Thani and Hemyan al-Kuwari secured victories in their respective categories. The winners were crowned

by Hassan Al-Nasr along with dressage judges Irina Makanami and Mariam al-Jaidah.

The Longines Hathab remains one of Qatar's leading equestrian championships, aimed at developing the sport through high-level competition, refining riders'

skills, and supporting national talent to represent Qatar internationally with the backing of the Qatar Equestrian Federation and its strategic partners.

PREVIEW

PSG all set to wrap up league crown after reaching CL final

'IT IS A REAL PLEASURE TO HAVE A TEAM OF THIS QUALITY'

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain are on course to fulfil their main objective for the season of retaining the Champions League title, but before turning their attention fully to the final in Budapest they look set to clinch another Ligue 1 crown.

Luis Enrique's side will face Arsenal in the Champions League final on May 30 after a 1-1 second-leg draw away to Bayern Munich on Wednesday saw them beat the Germans 6-5 on aggregate in their semi-final.

A year after hammering Inter Milan 5-0 in the final to win Europe's elite club competition for the first time in their history, they can now become just the second side in the Champions League era to go back-to-back, after the Real Madrid of 2016 to 2018.

"It is a real pleasure to have a team of this quality," said Luis Enrique after Wednesday's match.

Dominating domestically just does not carry the same significance as their European exploits, and indeed winning Ligue 1 is the minimum expected of PSG these days given their financial advantage over the rest of France since the transformative Qatari takeover of 2011.

PSG had the fourth-biggest revenue in world football last year according to analysts Deloitte, with estimates suggesting that their budget is more than France's next five wealthiest clubs put together.

Lens, whose budget is not even a 10th of PSG's, are the only team who can still pip them to the title with three games remaining.



Paris Saint-Germain's Ousmane Dembele (second left) celebrates with team-mates after scoring against Bayern Munich during the Champions League second-leg, semi-final in Munich on Wednesday. (AFP)

However, PSG are six points ahead with a significantly better goal difference.

Lens therefore have to win at home to relegation candidates Nantes today to prevent PSG from being able to officially retain their French crown at home to Brest on Sunday.

Even if Lens win, a victory for giants PSG would effectively end the race, and if not, coach Luis Enrique's team would have the opportunity to win the league away to their nearest rivals next Wednesday.

Lens, meanwhile, see finishing

second as the best they can realistically aim for before their season ends with the French Cup final against Nice on May 22.

"Given the season we have been having, it is out of the question for us to consider anything other than second place, even if we are still of a mind to look a little higher," said Lens coach Pierre Sage.

Lyon are in a position to claim France's third automatic Champions League place, with Lille in fourth, which brings with it a place in next season's third qualifying round.

Monaco have to beat Lille to

keep their own Champions League hopes alive, while Rennes can still qualify too, but Marseille's season has collapsed and they might yet fail to get into Europe at all.

FIXTURES (times GMT)

Today

Lens v Nantes (1845)

Tomorrow

Angers v Strasbourg, Auxerre v

Nice, Le Havre v Marseille, Metz

v Lorient, Monaco v Lille, Paris

Saint-Germain v Brest, Rennes

v Paris FC, Toulouse v Lyon (all

1900)

President al-Khelaifi, coach Enrique praise PSG squad unity and supporters

Paris St Germain have learned how to endure sustained pressure to win, according to midfielder Joao Neves after the holders held off a relentless Bayern Munich on Wednesday to reach the Champions League final again.

A 1-1 draw in Germany in the semi-final second leg secured a 6-5 aggregate victory for the French team, who relied on defensive discipline to neutralise the German side despite facing sustained pressure for much of the game. PSG will face Arsenal in the final in Budapest on May 30, framing the victory not just as a tactical win, but as a gift to their supporters and a milestone in their quest to build a lasting European legacy.

"We know how to suffer. We're ready for what's coming. Even with injuries, all the players are ready to play; that's how you build a great team," Neves said. Desire Doue echoed the sentiments of his teammate.

"It was an exceptional match, another magical night in Munich

against a great team. We have to congratulate them. These are the kinds of matches we've dreamt of playing since we were little," Doue said.

Club President Nasser al-Khelaifi welcomed the victory as a continuation of PSG's development after winning the European Cup for the first time last season.

"We made history here last year, and we want to keep writing the history of PSG. It's our dream to win it a second time. The star is the team. Everyone wants to fight. That's football, that's PSG," al-Khelaifi said.

"It's magnificent. We have the best coach in the world, the best supporters. Tonight, we only heard our supporters. They are the best."

PSG Manager Luis Enrique praised his players.

"In two days I'm going to celebrate my (56th) birthday. I'm very happy. We're in the next phase of the competition, the final of the Champions League. We want to give our supporters that kind of gift."



PSG supporters celebrate their team's progression to the final of the Champions League near the Champs-Elysees after their second-leg semi-final against Bayern Munich. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Brazil must channel World Cup pressure into motivation: Henrique

AFP
Sao Paulo

It has been 24 years since football powerhouse Brazil - the most successful nation in World Cup history - lifted the trophy, and forward Luiz Henrique told AFP the team must use that pressure as motivation when the tournament kicks off in June.

The winger, who plays for Russia's Zenit, was a baby when five-time winner Brazil last won the World Cup in 2002.

He is one of head coach Carlo Ancelotti's key attacking options for the World Cup in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, as Brazil grapples multiple injuries.

"Pressure is always a good thing. In football - and especially with the national team - pressure is ever-present. We have to channel that pressure into motivation," Henrique, 25, told AFP in an interview from Saint Petersburg.

He said he "feels deeply" for defender Eder Militao and forward Estevao - who are both out with hamstring injuries - and Rodrigo who has suffered a severe knee injury.

"I'm going to wait for Ancelotti's decision and see if he selects me. I want to play - to be in the starting eleven - and if he chooses me, I'll do exactly what I've always done: give it my absolute best."

The veteran Italian coach, appointed in May last year, has vowed to take Brazil back to the top. Henrique said it was an honor working with "someone who has been a winner for so long."



"He helps a footballer evolve and instills a sense of calm in the players, allowing us to showcase our best football."

Ancelotti is expected to name his final World Cup squad on May

18. Henrique said he would "love to play with Neymar", who has not played for Brazil since 2023 due to a serious knee injury but still hopes to be called up this year.

COMMENT

De Zerbi shrugs off criticism of Spurs win over weakened Villa

AFP
London

Tottenham manager Roberto De Zerbi said he had no qualms about profiting from Aston Villa's weakened team after criticism of a vital win in his club's fight to avoid relegation.

De Zerbi's side won 2-1 at much-changed Villa last weekend after Unai Emery rested his key players to prioritise their Europa League semi-final against Nottingham Forest.

Villa's lacklustre performance sparked debate about their influence on the relegation dogfight, with Tottenham moving out of the Premier League relegation zone after West Ham's defeat at Brentford 24 hours earlier.

But De Zerbi said Tottenham's injury crisis, which has robbed the Italian of several key players, made Villa's switches irrelevant.

"I can say one thing, we played without (Cristian) Romero, (Dejan) Kulusevski, (Mohammed) Kudus, (Dominic) Solanke, Xavi Simons, (James) Maddison and maybe more players than Villa," he told reporters yesterday.

"It is better if the people speak about us than we speak about them."

"In Italy we are used to thinking in the bad way about this situation but it is not true. It is not true."

Fourth-bottom Tottenham are one point above third-bottom West Ham with three games left in the survival battle.



With Tottenham not in action until Monday's visit from Leeds, they would drop back into the relegation zone if West Ham beat league leaders Arsenal on Sunday.

But a defeat for West Ham would present Tottenham with a chance to open a potentially decisive four-point lead over Nuno Espirito Santo's men.

After hosting Leeds, De Zerbi's team travel to London rivals Chelsea on May 19 before finishing their season at home to Everton on May 24.

"First of all we are playing against one of the best teams in the league, in this moment," said De Zerbi, who has led Tottenham to victories in their last

two matches. "In the last five or six games, Leeds won against Manchester United, they drew in Bournemouth playing well. For that we have a big respect."

"We can't think in a different way. We have to keep this mentality."

"We must remain humble. Nothing has changed. We have to prepare for an important game."

"We have to focus on this type of game, with this type of attitude, spirit and showing the qualities of the players."

De Zerbi confirmed goalkeeper Guglielmo Vicario remains sidelined after hernia surgery, with striker Dominic Solanke unlikely to recover from a hamstring injury in time to face Leeds.

CARRICK SAYS STRONG FINISH MATTERS MORE THAN HIS MAN UTD FUTURE

Michael Carrick said yesterday he is more worried about Manchester United finishing the season in style than his own future at Old Trafford.

The 44-year-old former United midfielder returned to the English football giants as interim manager until the end of the campaign shortly after the end of Ruben Amorim's ill-fated reign in January. Carrick has overseen a huge upturn in the Red Devils' fortunes and Sunday's 3-2 win over arch-rivals Liverpool meant United qualified for the Champions League with

three games to spare. Nevertheless, Carrick's long-term position remains uncertain, a situation that threatens to have implications for United's transfer policy following the conclusion of the current campaign. "Clarity is important," said Carrick ahead of Saturday's trip to Sunderland.

"I think moving forward, it's come at the time, right at the end of the season, where I think we've finished strong, put ourselves in a good position. "And obviously the situation of my role and what it looks like

moving forward, I think it's just the natural time. It was always spoke about towards the end of the season, if not the end of the season, so nothing has really changed, to be honest."

Carrick, asked why his position had seemingly not been strengthened by securing a return to the Champions League, replied: "It's a matter of days ago and we've got eyes on finishing the season strongly as well. "I understand the question, I understand the timing of it, but from my point of view right at this stage it's just putting

the boys in a place to finish the season strongly. "Then, as I've said all along, and I'm calm about it, it'll get sorted out when it's going to get sorted out. Some of it's out of my hands, so we'll see what happens."

While Carrick has been coy over his future, several United players have backed him to continue as manager with Kobbie Mainoo, fresh from scoring the winner against Liverpool, saying the team are willing to die for him. Carrick, asked if he would do anything differently if he became the full-time, as opposed to caretaker boss, said:

"It's a good question. I've said from the start I've never approached a day here in terms of any short-term decisions."

"Whether that's different to the outlook of others, I don't know. "But from myself and the staff we've made decisions for the longer-term for the group and individually, players, how we treat them and try to help develop them." He added: "Maybe we'll get to see, I don't know. But certainly, from my point of view, I've gone about it in a way that I feel is the right way to do it."