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FOOTBALL

Al Gharafa beat Al Sadd, defend Amir Cup title



Al Gharafa players and team officials celebrate winning the Amir Cup title at the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha yesterday. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil

By Rizwan Rehmat
Doha

Captain Yacine Brahimi produced a performance of a lifetime yesterday as defending champions Al Gharafa beat Al Sadd 4-1 to win the Amir Cup.

Algerian winger Brahimi scored a hat-trick (27, 63 and 90 +1) as Al Gharafa delivered a commanding show to win Qatar's most popular football tournament.

It was Al Gharafa's ninth Amir Cup title, sealed in front of 37,823 fans at the iconic Khalifa International Stadium.

"It is an amazing feeling. Winning two times in a row is really amazing. This group of players was the main thing for us. We had a strong mentality for this game. We knew nothing less than a win will do for our fans," Brahimi, the Man of the Match, said after the final yesterday.

"We came to the stadium to win the Amir Cup final. It was a tough game. I thought we did amazingly against a very powerful team. We wanted to give something to our fans because we couldn't win the league (title) but we had to do something today and we did," the popular Algerian added.

Al Sadd - coached by Roberto Mancini of Italy - had the services of feared Qatar striker Akram Afif, Spanish forward Rafa Mujica, Brazilian striker Giovanni, two-time AFC Asian Cup winning skipper Hasan al-Haydos and Brazilian attacking midfielder Claudinho.

But Al Gharafa had solid plans to tackle the Doha giants in front of a partisan huge crowd rooting for Al Sadd.

Arriving for the final as defending champions, Al Gharafa - popularly known as the 'leopards' - hit the ground running yesterday as Brahimi found his goal-scoring touch just when his side needed it most.

Paris-born Brahimi set up Sassi for the first goal of the final with a slick cross near the halfway line.

After deflecting a pass to teammate Ahmed Al-Ganehi, Sassi charged into the Al Sadd box. Al Ganehi slipped a low ball back to Sassi who fired a bullet past Al Sadd goalkeeper Meshaal Barsham for Al Gharafa's first goal.

Three minutes from the half-hour mark, Sassi found an unmarked Brahimi in the Al Sadd box. Brahimi calmly slotted the ball past Barsham in the 27th minute for his first goal of the night.

In the next half, Brahimi scored his team's second goal with a slick finish after a solo run from the halfline in the 63rd minute. But Barhimi's hat-trick



Yacine Brahimi (centre) and Ferjani Sassi (right) after they combined to score a goal against Al Sadd in the Amir Cup final.



Al Sadd coach Roberto Mancini commiserates with goalkeeper Meshaal Barsham after the final.



Al Gharafa fans cheer for their team during the final.

goal was the best effort.

After receiving a long ball from Amro Surag, Brahimi tapped the ball down inside the Al Sadd box. The Algerian hoodwinked marker al-Haydos and then slipped a low ball past Barsham for his side's fourth goal in injury time.

Earlier Al Sadd had reduced the deficit when Dutch winger Javairo Dilrosun - after coming on as a substitute - found the net in the 89th minute

"We definitely deserved this win," Al Gharafa's Icelandic midfielder Aron Gunnarsson said yesterday. "We fought

hard for each other. We knew it would be a tough game. We minimised the threat posed by their great players," he added.

"Nobody expected us to win this final. We were leading in the league for a long time. We knew that if we played together, we could do anything. I lost one final with Al Arabi and last year I won with Al Gharafa. I was not going to lose this one," he said with a huge grin on his face.

When asked about his future plans, the 37-year-old added: "Well, I want to stay here. I love it here. I want to stay in Qatar. I want to say with Al Gharafa. This place feels like home."

Al Gharafa's Spanish striker Joselu said yesterday: "It is a great win. It was a tough match and I am glad we did so

well." Saoud Sabah, the Al Gharafa assistant coach, said: "We congratulate our fans, and today we crowned the efforts of a great season with the Amir Cup win and compensated for the league's failures. It was a great match."

Al Gharafa's Surag said yesterday: "My feeling is indescribable as Al Sadd is a big club. We played with team spirit and achieved this memorable victory with a lot of guts."

This was the last football fixture of the 2025-26 season. The teams will disperse before reconvening for a series of pre-season activities after the summer break following the end of the FIFA World Cup 2026 to be held from June 11 to July 19 in the US, Canada and Mexico.

QFA president congratulates Al Gharafa on winning Amir Cup

Following Al Gharafa's victory in the 54th Amir Cup final, **Jassim bin Rashid al-Buainain**, President of the Qatar Football Association (QFA), yesterday congratulated the club for their impressive performance.



"I congratulate Al Gharafa on winning the Amir Cup," said al-Buainain. The final, played under the gracious patronage of His Highness the Amir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, saw Al Gharafa defeat Al Sadd at Khalifa International Stadium.

Beyond the result, the QFA President was keen to highlight the collective effort behind the event. "I truly appreciate the work of all our partners in making this final, our most precious trophy, a success," he stated. "It caps off a successful and truly special season for Qatari football."

The QFA President also praised the technical and organizational standards on display, noting that the final coincided with a landmark anniversary.

"This was a fitting celebration as Khalifa International Stadium marks 50 years since its opening. I extend my appreciation to every government, sports, security, and media entity that collaborated with the QFA to deliver a memorable experience for the fans in attendance."

Al-Buainain went on to acknowledge the tournament's sponsors as essential partners.

"We value the vital role played by the Amir Cup sponsors. They are fundamental to the competition's continued success through their unwavering support. We wish them continued progress and prosperity."

Taking a broader view of the season, the President added: "I also congratulate every club that has won silverware during the 2025-2026 season. We've seen outstanding performances from clubs throughout the year. By any measure, it has been a successful season, and we wish them all the best in their future competitions, both domestically and internationally."

Finally he offered a special word of thanks to the local media. "I am pleased to express my gratitude and appreciation to Qatar's media outlets. Your role as a core partner in supporting Qatari football, and in covering every event and competition throughout the season, is invaluable," he added.

CRICKET

Debutant Awais leads Pakistan's strong reply after Abbas 5-for

'I think if we could have scored another 50-60 runs it would have been much better for us'

AFP
Dhaka

Mohammad Abbas claimed five wickets to restrict Bangladesh to 413 before two debutant batsmen combined to put Pakistan in a strong position in the first Test yesterday.

Opener Azan Awais hit an unbeaten 85 and Abdullah Fazal, also playing in his first Test, was 37 not out as Pakistan reached 179-1 at stumps on the second day in Dhaka.

The visitors trail Bangladesh by 234 runs but veteran Pakistan seamer Abbas was the stand-out performer, claiming three wickets in the morning session after the home side resumed at 301-4.

Abbas took two more wickets after lunch and finished with figures of 5-92 from 34 overs, the sixth five-wicket haul of his career.

Bangladesh captain Najmul Hossain Shanto laid a strong platform on the first day with 101. Mushfiqur Rahim, who was 48 not out overnight, then went on to make a gritty 71 off 179 balls.

Mushfiqur celebrated his 39th birthday by equalling Tamim Iqbal's record of 42 innings of 50 or more for Bangladesh in Test cricket.

Bangladesh began day two well before 36-year-old Abbas dismantled their innings with disciplined bowling.

Liton Das fell for 33 while attempting a pull shot, and Mehidy Hasan Miraz was out for 10 one ball after hitting a six.

Tajjul Islam edged a bouncer from Abbas for 17 before Shaheen



Pakistan's Azan Awais plays a shot during the second day of the first Test against Bangladesh at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. (AFP)

Shah Afridi bowled Mushfiqur in the first over after lunch.

Taskin Ahmed made a late cameo of 28 before falling to Afridi, who finished with 3-113.

Senior assistant coach Mohammad Salahuddin lamented that Bangladesh was unable to post a bigger score and pinpointed slips catching as an area of concern after two chances were dropped.

"I think if we could have scored another 50-60 runs it would have

been much better for us," he said.

"Our slip catching needs a lot of improvement. It is a specialised area and we will talk about how to improve further."

Pakistan began their innings strongly, with Imam-ul-Haq and Azan adding 106 for the opening wicket before Mehidy trapped Imam lbw for 45.

Imam praised Abbas and the two new batsmen.

"Abbas bowled very well, everybody knows how good he is,"



Pakistan's Mohammad Abbas acknowledges fans after taking a five-wicket haul in Mirpur yesterday. (AFP)

Imam said. "The way Azan batted, taking and absorbing all the pressure, the kid really held his composure. I am very happy to see both of them playing so well," he said.

BRIEF SCORES: Pakistan 179 for 1 (Awais 85*, Imam 45, Mehidy 1-37) **trail Bangladesh 413** (Shanto 101, Mominul 91, Mushfiqur 71, Abbas 5-92) **by 234 runs.**

Australia's Starc eyes 2027 WC

Australia fast bowler **Mitchell Starc** remains driven by the competitive nature of cricket and hopes to extend his 16-year international career for a few more years, he said yesterday, keeping the door open for a potential appearance at the 2027 World Cup.

The 36-year-old left-arm, Australia's third-highest wicket-taker with 759 across formats - behind only Shane Warne and Glenn McGrath - retired from Twenty20 internationals in September to prolong his career in tests and 50-over cricket.

The next ODI World Cup is scheduled to be held in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia in October-November 2027. "I'm pretty competitive, so I just enjoy that aspect of cricket," Starc told reporters. "For Australia, I get to play with some of my best mates. I enjoy the hard work, but I also enjoy competing, and it's still fun."

Starc, who has been managing elbow and shoulder niggles, said his body was holding up well despite the demands of international cricket. "There's always something going on. I've had a bit of a niggle with my elbow and shoulder, which is still being managed, but there's probably a little less impact in T20 cricket," he said. "I'm still going okay after 16 years and hopefully there are a couple more left."

Starc, who made his Australia debut in 2010, is currently playing for Delhi Capitals in the Indian Premier League, in which they sit eighth in the 10-team table. He was named player of the series in Australia's recent 4-1 Ashes victory over England.

"It's (2027 World Cup) a long way down the road, but I'll hopefully be there. The World Cup is always a goal for every cricketer," he added. "I've stepped away from T20 internationals, but I'm still enjoying my cricket. I don't set timelines - I just see where the body is and where the cricket is."



IPL

Rashid shines in big GT win

AFP
Jaipur, India

Rashid Khan took four wickets for 33 runs as Gujarat Titans bowled out Rajasthan Royals for a 77-run win in the IPL yesterday.

Kagiso Rabada also took two wickets and Jason Holder polished off the tail with three as Gujarat dismissed Rajasthan for 152 runs, after wonder-kid Vaibhav Sooryavanshi scored 36 off 16 balls.

Earlier, skipper Shubman Gill hit 84 and Sai Sudharsan made 55 as Gujarat notched up 229-4 batting first.

Rajasthan's reply started in a quickfire manner as Sooryavanshi hit three fours and three sixes. After his dismissal, the hosts folded against Khan's guile.

Gujarat climbed to second in the points' table with their sixth win in 11 games. Rajasthan slipped to fifth after their fifth loss and their net run-rate took a huge hit.

Gill's fourth half-century of the season came off 30 balls, and he put on 118 runs with Sudharsan for the first wicket.

That opening stand laid the base for a tall total. Gujarat scored 82-0 in the powerplay, with Gill and Sudharsan hitting five sixes between them.

It was a fourth half-century of the season for Sudharsan. He had also made a century against Royal Challengers Bengaluru.

Gujarat's 19-year-old wrist



Gujarat Titans' Rashid Khan tries to catch the ball during their IPL match against Rajasthan Royals in Jaipur, India, yesterday. (Reuters)

spinner Yash Raj Punja got the breakthrough as Sudharsan was caught in the 11th over.

Gill added 32 with Jos Buttler (13) and another 35 off 18 balls with Washington Sundar, before he was caught in the 17th over.

Sundar's cameo - 37 not out off 20 balls - including three sixes, pushed Gujarat past 200. Rahul Tewatia (14 not out) applied the finishing touches with two sixes in four balls.

In reply, Sooryavanshi put Ra-

asthan on course initially with 38 runs off only 17 balls.

The turning point came in the third over when the 15-year-old holed out off Mohammed Siraj.

Rabada then struck twice in successive overs. He had stand-in skipper Yashasvi Jaiswal caught for three, and then removed Shimron Hetmyer for six.

Dhruv Jurel responded with 24 off 10 balls, hitting three sixes in Siraj's third over. But Khan bowled him in the eighth over to start Ra-

asthan's collapse. Two balls later, Khan bowled Donovan Ferreira for four. The Afghanistan veteran spinner was nearly unplayable, running through the middle order, as Rajasthan slipped to 136-7 in 13.5 overs.

BRIEF SCORES Gujarat Titans 229 for 4 (Gill 84, Sai Sudharsan 55, Brijesh 2-47) **beat Rajasthan Royals 152** (Jadeja, 38, Rashid 4-33, Holder 3-12) **by 77 runs**

CYCLING

Vingegaard shows intent on Giro climb as Silva takes pink

AFP
Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria

Race favourite Jonas Vingegaard made his rivals sweat yesterday on stage 2 of the Giro d'Italia, a hilly 221km course won by Guillermo Silva of Astana, who also took over the race lead.

Vingegaard crossed the line in the same time as Silva of 5 hours 39 minutes 25 seconds after an eventful run from the Black Sea at Burgas westward into a remote hilly interior region where this Giro ended for a clutch of riders in a mass fall.

A crack in the road on a sharp corner provoked a twisted mess of bodies and bikes with around 30 riders either piled atop each other or strewn over a barrier.

Santiago Buitrago and Derek Gee-West both staggered away in pain while Adam Yates re-embarked covered in mud and blood as Remi Cavagna waited for assistance feebly clutching his wrist.

Four riders pulled out, including both Jay Vine and Marc Soler of Team UAE while Yates

finished over 13 minutes down.

"This is sad so early in the race," said UAE team chief Mauro Gianetti.

After the race was briefly neutralised, the two-time Tour de France winner Vingegaard broke on the last big climb but he, Giulio Pellizzari and Lenner Van Eetvelt were caught on a narrow, cobbled village road 1 kilometre from the finish at Veliko Tarnovo.

Uruguayan Silva was fastest at the line taking the race lead from French rookie Paul Magnier of Quick Step, who won Friday's bunch sprint after the 22-year-old avoided another nasty late pile up.

"I'll never forget this day, I was feeling good but never imagined this. I'm over the moon," he said.

Sunday's third stage, the last one in Bulgaria, runs from Plovdiv to Sofia where the sprinters should provide a late shake-down. Monday is a rest and travel day.

Vingegaard has to wait until stage seven for a first real mountain with a near 14km climb at over 8 percent up Mount Blockhaus in the Apennines.



XDS Astana Team's Guillermo Thomas Silva crosses the line to win the Giro d'Italia Stage 2 in Veliko Tarnovo Bulgaria, yesterday. (Reuters)

HOME HERO BLASI WINS WOMEN'S VUELTA A ESPANA

Spanish rider Paula Blasi won the women's Vuelta a Espana yesterday at the summit of L'Angliru, finishing second on the seventh and final stage behind Switzerland's Petra Stiasny. Second overall at the start of the stage, UAE ADQ rider Blasi clinched victory ahead of Dutchwoman Anna van der Breggen, who was dropped on the brutal slopes of the final climb in Asturias.

Blasi, 23, secured a first-ever Grand Tour tri-

umph, with SD Worx-Prottime's Van der Breggen second and young French rider Marion Bunel, who was fourth yesterday, in third overall.

The race's longest stage at 132 kilometres, was decided on the Angliru finish, one of the toughest climbs in cycling, as Blasi confirmed her status as an international cycling star. With around four kilometres remaining Brunel attacked and Blasi followed, with Van de Breggen

unable to keep up, finishing 24 seconds behind the Spaniard overall.

This was the first time the women's Vuelta has incorporated the notorious Angliru climb, with slopes of up to 23 percent.

Blasi has enjoyed a superb season, winning the Amstel Gold Race and impressing at La Fleche Wallonne and Liege-Bastogne-Liege before her impressive Vuelta triumph.

(AFP)

MOTORSPORT

Martin surges to sprint victory at Le Mans

AFP
Le Mans, France

Jorge Martin surged to victory in the MotoGP sprint race at the French Grand Prix at Le Mans yesterday as Marc Marquez broke a foot in a spectacular crash.

Martin started eighth on the grid but raced through the pack heading into the first corner and then pulled away to win.

"I love this track," said Martin, who won both the sprint and the main race at Le Mans on his way to the 2024 world title.

Behind him, reigning world champion Marquez endured a nightmare day that ended in a violent crash on his factory Ducati. It left him with a broken right foot that will require surgery.

Marquez started on the front row but had slipped to seventh before losing control with less than two laps of the 13-lap race to go.

He put his left foot on the ground to try to regain his balance

but was flipped over the handlebars in the opposite direction, sliding along the ground as his disintegrating Ducati cartwheeled just past him.

Ducati issued a statement after the race saying that an X-ray showed "a fracture of the fifth metatarsal in his right foot" and that Marquez, who is a distant fifth in the standings, would miss Sunday's main race and at least one more.

"He will fly to Madrid this evening to undergo surgery in the coming days. He will not participate in the Catalan Grand Prix next week," said the Ducati statement.

Martin started from eighth on the grid but jumped to first early on his Aprilia.

"I struggled a bit in qualifying but I knew my potential," he said.

"I put all my determination into the start. I found myself ahead at the second corner and I pushed like I'm used to alone, and boom! boom! boom!" he added, punching the air three times.

In balmy, sunny conditions, Martin finished a comfortable 1.107 seconds ahead of Francesco Bagnaia on the second factory Ducati.

"I'm happy," said the Italian. "We are stilling missing something compared to Aprilia. I hope tomorrow we will have good weather because we can make a good result."

The other Aprilia, ridden by Marco Bezzecchi, was third 2.786sec back.

The Italian remained at the top of the riders' standings, with his lead cut to six points over teammate Martin.

Pedro Acosta, on a KTM, is third, 36 points off the pace.

"I'm very happy," said Bezzecchi. "I wasn't feeling very good. Happy to get this result. Always fighting."

Spaniard Acosta was fourth with Frenchman Fabio Quartararo fifth for Yamaha.

The weekend's racing continues with Sunday's main race when rain is forecast.



Aprilia Racing's Jorge Martin celebrates on the podium after winning the Sprint race of the Grand Prix of France at Le Mans, France yesterday. (AFP)

TENNIS

Sinner advances at Italian Open, Sabalenka upset

The world No.1 delights fans at centre court with a dominant display

AFP
Rome

Jannik Sinner got his Italian Open campaign underway yesterday by swatting aside Sebastian Ofner 6-3, 6-4 to start his bid to extend a record-breaking run of five straight Masters 1000 tournament victories.

The world number one delighted fans in the packed centre court stands with a predictably dominant display which left Austria's Ofner little room to breathe, even in the breezy atmosphere of Rome.

Sinner won his 24th consecutive match in one hour and 40 minutes, the 24-year-old barely breaking a sweat to set up a clash with Alexei Popyrin or Jakub Mensik in the third round.

No Italian man has won at the Foro Italico since Adriano Panatta 50 years ago, and with Carlos Alcaraz out of action, Sinner is expected to go one better than last year when he lost the final to his great rival.

Such was Sinner's dominance that he had time to break into a smile when the match was stopped twice in the second set for spectator illnesses.

It was the third win for an Italian man at the Italian Open yesterday, with Flavio Cobolli, who helped his country win last year's Davis Cup in Sinner's absence, beating France's Terence Atmane 7-6 (7/1), 6-3.

Mattia Bellucci, ranked 64 in the world, is in the fourth round after a 5-7, 6-2, 6-3 win over 24th seed Tomas Martin Etcheverry.

Former winner Daniil Medvedev will begin his campaign in the third round after his match, which was scheduled to be the first on centre court, was shelved when his opponent Tomas Machac pulled out of the tournament with an unspecified illness.

Fourth seed Felix Auger-Aliassime suffered a shock second-round defeat at the hands



Italy's Jannik Sinner signs autographs for the spectators after winning his round of 64 match against Austria's Sebastian Ofner at the Italian Open in Rome, Italy, yesterday. (Reuters)



Romania's Sorana Cirstea shakes hands with Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka after winning their round of 32 match. (Reuters)

of Argentina's Mariano Navone, the Canadian losing to his 44th-ranked opponent in straight sets 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (7/5).

SABALENKA, PAOLINI OUT

Women's world number one and favourite for overall victory, Aryna Sabalenka followed men's tennis icon Novak Djokovic in going out early following a 2-6, 6-3, 7-5 loss to Sorana Cirstea.

Sabalenka was visibly frustrated with her performance on centre court, muttering to herself with her shoulders slumped during an uncharacteristically sloppy display.

"I feel like I didn't play well from the beginning till the end. I started really well, but then I kind of dropped the level," said Sabalenka. "Felt like my body was limiting me from performing on the highest level."

The 28-year-old had not been knocked out of a tournament in the round of 32 since the Qatar Open in February last year, and

she looked set for a quick and clean victory after racing to the first set. But she failed in her bid for a first tournament victory in the Italian capital, with Romania's Cirstea facing Linda Noskova in the next round after beating a woman at the top of the world rankings for the first time in her career.

Sabalenka also had to have a time out for a problem with her lower back and left hip, casting doubt on her fitness ahead of Roland Garros later this month.

Jasmine Paolini's defence of her Italian Open title came to an early end after the home favourite was knocked out by Elise Mertens, 4-6, 7-6 (7/5), 6-3.

French Open champion Coco Gauff of the US is still in the hunt after taking over two hours to beat Argentina's Solana Sierra 5-7, 6-0, 6-4.

GOLF

Im leads Fleetwood by one at Quail Hollow

AFP
Washington

South Korea's Im Sung-jae fired a two-under par 69 to seize a one-stroke lead over England's Tommy Fleetwood after Friday's second round of the PGA Tour Truist Championship.

Im birdied the par-five 10th and 15th holes and answered a bogey at the 12th hole with a birdie at 14 to stand on nine-under 133 after 36 holes at Quail Hollow in Charlotte, North Carolina.

"I'm very happy I'm leading," Im said. "I didn't putt very well, but I'm happy with where I'm at. I'm driving the ball very well. I'm keeping it in the fairways, so it makes it easier for me to hit my second shots on the green. I know this course very well, so I'm taking advantage of that."

Fleetwood fired a 67 to finish one adrift with England's Alex Fitzpatrick and American Justin Thomas sharing third on 135 after each fired 68.

Rory McIlroy, coming off a triumph in last month's Masters, shot 67 despite a bogey at 18 to join a pack in eighth on 137 that included Americans Rickie Fowler, who fired a 63, and Matt McCarty, the first-round leader.

"Would have been nice not to make that bogey at the last," McIlroy said. "But overall it was a good day's work and puts me right into the thick of things going into the weekend."

Im, a 2020 Masters runner-up, seeks his third PGA Tour title after the 2000 Honda Classic and 2021 Shriners Children's Open. The 28-year-old Asian star had struggled with a wrist injury but said he was "100%" this week.

Fleetwood sank a 13-foot

birdie putt at 14 and made a five-footer for birdie at the par-three 17th to grab second. "Definitely didn't have my rhythm, got ahead of a few shots, but I didn't hit it in any terrible spots and I scored very well," Fleetwood said.

"I've definitely hit enough good shots. Today I didn't quite have it, but still managed to get a good score out of it. I holed out well and did a lot of other things well." McCarty, who fired a 63 on Thursday, shot 74 with three bogeys and a double bogey.

World number two McIlroy, who had played only the Masters over a seven-week span, found his form as he charged into the hunt for his fifth victory at Quail Hollow. The Northern Ireland star sank a 17-foot birdie putt at par-five 11th, made an 13-foot birdie putt at 11 and dropped his approach inside three feet then tapped in for birdie at the par-three 13th.

McIlroy reached the green in two and tapped in for birdie at the par-five 15th then made an 11-foot birdie putt at 16 to pull within three of the lead before finding fairway and greenside bunkers at 18 to set up a bogey.

A day earlier he sank a 15-foot birdie putt at 18 after 17 pars.

"I still feel like I left a couple out there," McIlroy said. "It was an improvement and if I can keep seeing improvements as the week goes on, that's a good thing. There's maybe a little rust, but it's more like getting a (scorecard) in your hand and getting comfortable hitting certain shots. Definitely felt a little more comfortable today, drove it in the fairway a little bit more and was able to take advantage of that and make some more birdies."

American Chandler Blanchet aced the 188-yard, par-three 17th hole.



Im Sung-jae of South Korea hits a chip shot on the 15th hole during the second round of the Truist Championship 2026 at Quail Hollow Country Club in Charlotte, North Carolina. (AFP)

FOOTBALL

Sevilla strike late to boost survival hopes in La Liga as Celta edge Atletico

AFP
Seville

Akor Adams snatched Sevilla a late 2-1 victory over Espanyol in La Liga yesterday to increase their chances of avoiding relegation.

Celta Vigo earned a 1-0 win at Atletico Madrid to keep their ambitions of qualifying for the Champions League alive.

Nigeria forward Adams's 91st minute strike propelled record seven-time Europa League winners Sevilla provisionally up to 12th, three points clear of the relegation

zone. Espanyol, now without a win in 18 league matches - all of 2026 to date - sit 15th, two points above the drop zone, after a bad-tempered match with 10 yellow cards.

Tyrhys Dolan slammed home for Espanyol early in the second half at Sevilla's Ramon Sanchez-Pizjuan stadium, before the hosts hit back.

Sevilla defender Andres Castrin scored to level in the 82nd minute with the help of some poor handling by Espanyol goalkeeper Marko Dmitrovic.

In stoppage time Adams pounced on a loose ball and produced a clinical finish

to secure a crucial victory for Luis Garcia Plaza's team.

"This comeback, I think it brings us closer, closer to what we've been looking for," Castrin told Movistar.

"It was essential to win here today, to get the three points with these wonderful people (the fans).

"Thanks to them - they have lifted us, have carried us, and you could really feel the atmosphere, how it influenced those final minutes when the goal comes at the end."

Earlier Alaves, 18th and one point from safety, drew 1-1 against Elche, 13th, who

are not yet safe from the spectre of relegation either.

IGLESIAS SCORES A FINE GOAL FOR CELTA

At Atletico's Metropolitan stadium Borja Iglesias scored a fine goal for Celta, sixth, to help them put pressure on Real Betis, fifth.

The hosts, with nothing left to play for this season after Champions League semi-final elimination by Arsenal this week, are fourth and already assured of playing in that competition again next season.

It was confirmed earlier this week that

seven Spanish sides will qualify for the Champions League from La Liga, guaranteeing Atletico a spot.

Spain international Iglesias's neat chip helped Celta move within three points of Real Betis, who face Real Sociedad later on. "Even in the toughest moments this team has kept on dreaming," Iglesias told DAZN.

"Obviously it's not easy to compete at this level, we're happy to be in this fight right now.

"If we keep on looking upwards, just imagine... I think we deserve it, and we'll try to get it."

FOCUS

Champions Qatar and Japan drawn together in Asian Cup finals

AFP
Riyadh

Record winners Japan were drawn in the same group as champions Qatar for next year's AFC Asian Cup, while hosts Saudi Arabia will meet Kuwait, Oman and Palestine.

The draw for the 2027 edition of the continent's showpiece event, which runs from January 7 to February 5, took place on Saturday in Diriyah on the outskirts of Riyadh.

Saudi Arabia is staging the Asian Cup for the first time as the kingdom views the tournament as a precursor to hosting the 2034 World Cup.

For the third time running, the Asian Cup will feature 24 national teams, with 23 already confirmed. The sole remaining spot will go to either Lebanon or Yemen, who contest a play-off in Doha on June 4. A tie would be enough

for Lebanon to qualify. At the draw, Japan were placed in Group F alongside Qatar, Thailand and Indonesia.

Japan have lifted the trophy a record four times, although they have not won the tournament since 2011.

Saudi Arabia and Iran each have three wins, with Qatar crowned champions for the past two tournaments, in 2019 and 2023.

Last time out, the 2022 FIFA World Cup hosts defeated Jordan 3-1 in the final. Both countries have qualified for this summer's global finals, with Jordan competing for the first time.

On Saturday, teams were divided into four pots of six in accordance with the latest FIFA ranking as of April 1.

At 18th in the official standings, Japan are the lead country in Asia, with Iran second (No. 21), South Korea third (No. 25) and Australia fourth (No. 27).

Allocated first position in Pot 1, Saudi Ara-

bia are looking to add to the three titles they won in 1984, 1988 and 1996.

The opening match will be played on June 7 between Saudi Arabia and Palestine at the refurbished King Fahd Sports City Stadium, its 72,000 capacity making it the largest of the venues used.

THE DRAW

Group A

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Palestine

Group B

Uzbekistan, Bahrain, DPR Korea, Jordan

Group C

Islamic Republic of Iran, Syria, Kyrgyz Republic, China

Group D

Australia, Tajikistan, Iraq, Singapore

Group E

South Korea, UAE, Vietnam, Lebanon/Yemen

Group F

Japan, Qatar, Thailand, Indonesia



Japan player Hidetoshi Nakata draws Qatar in Group 'F' at the AFC Asian Cup 2027 draw ceremony held in Riyadh yesterday. (Reuters)

PREMIER LEAGUE

City keep title race alive as Chelsea hold Liverpool 1-1

Man United held to 0-0 draw at Sunderland, Bournemouth beat Fulham

AFP
Manchester

Manchester City kept the pressure on Arsenal at the top of the Premier League with a 3-0 win over Brentford, while Liverpool were booed off after a 1-1 draw against struggling Chelsea yesterday.

With three games of the season left for both title contenders, City closed to within two points of the Gunners, who face a tricky trip to relegation-threatened West Ham today.

After a dramatic 3-3 draw at Everton on Monday, Pep Guardiola's men could not afford another slip up if they were to retain hope of a seventh title in nine years.

A resolute Brentford, still in the running for European football themselves next season, held out until the hour mark when the in-form Jeremy Doku curled into the top corner.

Erling Haaland backheeled in a second to move four goals clear of Brentford's Igor Thiago in the battle for the Golden Boot.

Haaland then turned provider for Omar Marmoush to score what could be a vital third in stoppage time. City cut the goal difference gap on Arsenal to one and now must hope the Hammers cause an upset in a huge clash at both ends of the table at the London Stadium. Arsenal face already-relegated Burnley and Crystal Palace, days before the play in the Conference League final, in their final two games.

City host Palace on Wednesday before a tough trip to in-form Bournemouth and host Aston Villa on the final day of the campaign.

Slot promises 'completely different' Liverpool

Liverpool inched towards Champions League qualification but



Manchester City's Jeremy Doku (right) celebrates with Omar Marmoush after scoring the opening goal during the Premier League match against Brentford at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester yesterday. (AFP)

failed to inflict a seventh consecutive league defeat on Chelsea.

Ryan Gravenberch's sweet strike gave the Reds the perfect start in the sixth minute at Anfield.

Chelsea hit back when Enzo Fernandez's 35th-minute free-kick evaded everyone to find the bottom corner.

Boos at full-time reflected the mood around Anfield but Arne Slot said he is convinced he can win back the faith of the Liverpool support next season.

"If we can have the summer that we are planning to have, then I'm 100 percent convinced that we will be a different team next season than we are now."

Bournemouth's 1-0 win over

Fulham cut Liverpool's lead over the sixth-placed Cherries to four points with two games remaining.

Chelsea can no longer mathematically finish in the top five and remain in ninth.

Manchester United are already assured of Champions League football and a lack of jeopardy showed in the Red Devils' uneventful 0-0 draw at Sunderland.

Bournemouth's charge towards a first ever season in Europe continued as both sides were reduced to 10 men at Craven Cottage.

Both dismissals came late in the first half as first Bournemouth's Ryan Christie and then Fulham defender Joachim Andersen saw red

after VAR reviews for rash challenges. Brazilian teenager Rayan won the game for the visitors in the 53rd minute with a fine finish from just outside the penalty area. Brighton climbed to seventh, just two points behind Bournemouth, with a 3-0 win over Wolves.

Jack Hinshelwood nodded the Seagulls in front after 37 seconds and Lewis Dunk's header doubled their advantage in the fifth minute.

Yankuba Minteh's 86th-minute rocket completed the rout of already-relegated Wolves.

Sixth-place could still secure a place in the Champions League if Villa finish fifth and win the Europa League final against Freiburg later this month.

BUNDESLIGA

Kane misses penalty as Olise rescues Bayern

AFP
Berlin

Harry Kane missed a penalty but Bayern Munich beat Wolfsburg 1-0 yesterday as RB Leipzig sealed Champions League qualification on a dramatic day in the Bundesliga's race for Europe.

Suffering from the hangover of their Champions League exit to Paris Saint-Germain in midweek, Bayern needed a second-half wonder-goal from Michael Olise to get past relegation-threatened Wolfsburg. The hosts recorded 15 shots before the break but were repeatedly denied by the heroics of Bayern goalkeeper Jonas Urbig.

Bayern's best chance in the first half came from the penalty spot after Olise was fouled in the box, but Kane sent his spotkick high and wide after appearing to slip

in his final stride. It was the third time Kane has missed a penalty for Bayern this season, having previously scored 22 in a row between 2022 and 2025. "With Harry you are normally pretty sure he is going to score, but I guess he is also allowed to miss one sometimes," Bayern midfielder Tom Bischof told Sky. Video footage showed a Wolfsburg player had deliberately churned up the turf around the penalty spot in advance, but Bayern coach Vincent Kompany said it was "normal".

"What do you expect the Wolfsburg players to do? Just congratulate us when we score goals and get relegated without giving everything?" said Kompany.

Olise spared Bayern's blushes early in the second half when he curled a stunning finish into the top corner from the edge of the area. Mattias Svandberg had a golden chance to equalise for Wolfs-



Bayern Munich's Harry Kane reacts after missing a penalty during the Bundesliga match against Wolfsburg in Wolfsburg yesterday. (AFP)

burg late on, but hit the post from point-blank range.

The defeat leaves Wolfsburg third from bottom in the relegation play-off place, which they will hope to defend in a winner-takes-all clash with fellow strugglers St. Pauli on the final day.

St. Pauli are second from bottom after they lost 2-1 away to RB Leipzig earlier yesterday.

The Hamburg side had scored just four goals in their previous eight games, and they were left to rue missed chances yet again in Leipzig.

SERIE A

Inter thump Lazio 3-0 in Italian Cup final warm up

AFP
Rome

Inter Milan celebrated the Serie A title by winning 3-0 at Lazio yesterday, in a match which was also a warm up for next week's Italian Cup final.

Lautaro Martinez, Petar Susic and Henrikh Mkhitaryan netted for the champions who have a chance to complete a league and cup double at the same stadium on Wednesday night.

Saturday's win was played out in a bizarre atmosphere as the vast majority of Lazio supporters continued a months-long boycott of home matches in protest at owner Claudio Lotito's stewardship of the club.

Hardcore Lazio and Inter fans, who have a long standing relationship also due to shared

hard-right politics, gathered together in the nearby Ponte Milvio neighbourhood during the match.

The seats at the Stadio Olimpico that were taken were populated by Inter supporters who cheered on their team to a simple victory in the Italian capital.

Inter are 15 points clear of Napoli who host Bologna tomorrow night still unsure of a spot in next season's Champions League with three matches remaining in their season.

Also battling for a place in the top four are Juventus, Luciano Spalletti's team at Lecce in late match and just one point ahead of fifth-placed Roma. Resurgent Roma are at Parma on Sunday evening before AC Milan, who are only three points ahead of the capital club in third, host Atalanta.



Inter Milan's Lautaro Martinez (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring his team's first goal during the Serie A match against Lazio at the Olympic stadium in Rome yesterday. (AFP)

LIGUE 1

Lens beats Nantes to secure Champions League spot

AFP
Paris

Teenage substitute Mezzian Meslouh gave Lens a 1-0 win over Nantes in Ligue 1 to clinch his side qualification for next season's Champions League, while relegating Nantes to the second tier.

The result also keeps the Ligue 1 title race alive with second-placed Lens the only team that can still pip Paris Saint-Germain to the trophy.

The 16-year-old substitute Meslouh picked up a loose ball in the box with his first touch in the 79th minute and fired home with his second to break the deadlock on his Ligue 1 debut.

Lens are now guaranteed a top-three finish in Ligue 1 after moving nine points clear of fourth-placed Lille, with both teams having two matches remaining. The top three teams in Ligue 1 qualify automatically for the Champions League league phase, while the fourth-placed side heads into the qualifying rounds.

Lens, whose budget is not even a 10th of Champions League finalists PSG, are still to play the Parisians who lead them by three points and have a game in hand.

Following the win, the sell-

out 38,000 crowd at Lens' Stade Bollaert stayed behind for extravagant celebrations, with the players heralded one at a time on a spotlight centre-circle with fireworks flaring.

Stopping PSG remains an outside chance, but Lens are also eyeing silverware in the French Cup, with the final against Nice on May 22.

Lens, the 1998 French champions, were the surprise package earlier in the season as they reached the winter break top of the table.

Lens had three goals ruled out for offside or handball Friday as Nantes held them at bay largely thanks to goalkeeper Anthony Lopes.

Nantes are now guaranteed to finish in the bottom two and will be relegated from Ligue 1.

Club great Vahid Halilhodzic took over as the third coach of their season in March but could not save the Canaries.

PSG play Brest at home on Sunday but the Lens win has prevented them from mathematically wrapping up a fifth straight title this weekend.

However, their far superior goal difference means victory would all but wrap up top spot.

Luis Enrique's men will face Arsenal in the Champions League final on May 30 after beating Bayern Munich 6-5 on aggregate in the semi-finals.