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**CRICKET | Page 2**

Shanto extends  
Bangladesh  
lead in first Test  
against Pakistan



**TENNIS | Page 3**

Sinner crushes  
Popyrin to stroll  
into Italian  
Open last 16

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**FOOTBALL**

Afif named Best  
Player at QFA  
Awards, eyes strong  
World Cup show

**Page 4**

**SPOTLIGHT**

# GCC Games Doha open with focus on Gulf unity and youth

Games bring together 1,400 athletes and officials, with competitors taking part across 17 sports



The 30-minute opening ceremony at Al Shaqab combined sport, art and culture in a visually striking production, while symbolic performances reflected the shared identity and unity of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. **PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil**



**By Sports Reporter**  
Doha

The 4th GCC Games Doha 2026 opened in spectacular fashion at Al Shaqab Indoor Arena yesterday, with a vibrant ceremony celebrating Gulf unity and highlighting the multi-event's role as a platform for the region's young athletes to showcase their talent.

The Games will bring together 1400 athletes and officials where athletes will compete across 17 sports over 11 days of competition, which aim to strengthen sporting ties and inspire the next generation across the Gulf.

HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Olympic Council of Asia and Qatar Olympic Committee and Chairman of the Organising Committee for the GCC Games Doha 2026, officially declared the Games open and wished success to all participating athletes.

Sheikh Joaan said: "Doha is proud to host this fourth edition of the GCC Games, bringing together athletes and friends from across our region. At a time when the world faces many challenges and uncertainties, these Games reaffirm the important role sport can play in strengthening dialogue, cooperation and understanding between peoples. Sport continues to be one of the strongest platforms for unity and optimism across the Gulf region. We witnessed this clearly during the Asian Beach Games Sanya 2026, where all 45 National Olympic Committees of Asia came together in a remarkable celebration of sport and friendship."

He added: "In Qatar, we strongly believe in the power of sport to build healthier, more connected and more united societies. Over the past two decades, Qatar has wel-



comed athletes, fans and delegations from around the world and hosted more than 20 World Championships. This legacy, which dates back to the Doha 2006 Asian Games, has provided us with world-class venues and expertise that today serve the ambitions of athletes from across the Gulf. We extend our appreciation to the GCC Federations, partners and organisers for their support of this event, and to every athlete competing in Doha 2026 – we wish them success in showcasing the true spirit of Gulf sport."

The 30-minute opening ceremony combined sport, art and culture in a visually striking production that departed from traditional formats through its youthful and modern presentation. Symbolic performances reflected the shared identity and unity of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

A highlight of the evening was the operetta "One Gulf, One Heart", which celebrated the solidarity and common heritage of the GCC nations. Conceived, written

and composed by Faisal Ibrahim al-Tamimi, the production blended music, theatre and choreography in an emotional tribute to Gulf brotherhood.

The show impressed with its seamless mix of melodies, coordinated movements and visual storytelling, creating an engaging atmosphere for spectators inside the arena and viewers watching elsewhere.

Advanced lighting, giant screens and visual effects enhanced the spectacle while complementing the heritage-inspired performances, underlining Qatar's expertise in staging major international sporting events. Children and young girls from Qatar also featured prominently in the performances, adding an emotional and human touch through displays that highlighted values of identity and belonging.

Large group performances involving participants of different age groups showcased remarkable precision and harmony, reinforcing the themes of teamwork and unity that defined the ceremony.

The Games feature competitions in

handball, table tennis, athletics, padel, fencing, boxing, taekwondo, karate, swimming, billiards, snooker, 3x3 basketball, shooting, archery, volleyball, equestrian and bowling. Hosts Qatar are represented by a delegation of around 300 athletes.

The opening ceremony was attended by a number of Ministers, Presidents of the GCC Olympic committees, and senior sports officials, including Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki al-Faisal, President of the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee; Sheikh Mansoor bin Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, President of the UAE National Olympic Committee; Sheikh Fahad Nasser Sabah Al Ahmad al-Sabah, President of the Kuwait Olympic Committee; Sayyid Azzan bin Qais al-Said, President of the Oman Olympic Committee; and Sheikh Isa bin Ali al-Khalifa, Vice President of the Bahrain Olympic Committee, alongside a number of GCC sports leaders.

Jassim bin Rashid al-Buainain, Secretary-General of the Qatar Olympic Committee and Vice-Chairman of the Organising Committee, said Doha's hosting of the Games reflected Qatar's continued commitment to supporting Gulf sport and strengthening cooperation among GCC nations.

He described the Games as an important

gathering that combines competition with fraternity, while also strengthening bonds between Gulf peoples and promoting the values of solidarity and unity.

Al-Buainain added that the organising committee had worked closely with all stakeholders to ensure the best technical and organisational standards for the event, while confirming that Qatari athletes were fully prepared to compete for medals across all sports.

Mohammed Issa al-Fadala, Chairman of the Sports Committee of the Games, praised the technical and organisational quality of the opening ceremony, saying it successfully projected Gulf identity through a world-class production befitting Doha's standing as a regional sporting capital. "We witnessed an exceptional ceremony that conveyed the message of unity and shared destiny among the peoples of the Gulf, while reflecting Qatar's outstanding organisational capabilities in hosting major sporting events," al-Fadala said.

He added that the organising committee had reached full readiness across all operational and competition venues ahead of the start of events.

Competitions officially begin today, with swimming at the Hamad Aquatic Centre and 3x3 basketball at Al Gharafa Club Hall.



## FIRST TEST

# Shanto extends Bangladesh lead against Pakistan

'If they give us 70 overs and 260, we will definitely go for the chase'



Bangladesh's captain Najmul Hossain Shanto in action during the fourth day of the first Test against Pakistan at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Dhaka

**S**kipper Najmul Hossain Shanto hit an unbeaten half-century as Bangladesh extended their lead by 179 runs on the rainy fourth day of the first Test against Pakistan yesterday.

The hosts were 152-3 in their second innings, with Shanto on 58 not out alongside Mushfiqur Rahim on 16, when stumps were drawn for the day at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Dhaka.

Bangladesh lost their openers early after resuming on their overnight score 7-0, with Mahmudul Hasan Joy trapped leg before off Mohammad Abbas for five.

Shadman Islam was then caught at gully by Saud Shakeel off Hasan Ali for 10, leaving the hosts reeling at 23-2. Shanto came to the rescue, joining hands with Mominul Haque (56) to steady the innings.

The left-handed pair, who had tormented Pakistan with a record 170-run third wicket stand in the first innings, added 70 runs off 122 balls to take Bangladesh to lunch at 92-2.

Pakistan had chances to make further inroads but Mohammad Rizwan failed to hold on to Mominul's catch. The afternoon session was washed out as heavy rain continued for nearly three hours.

When play resumed, Shanto and Mominul extended their stand to 105 off 193 balls - Bangladesh's third century partnership between the pair in Tests and only the third

time any Bangladesh pair posted century stands in both innings of the same match.

Mominul reached his half-century off 102 balls, the milestone also taking him past 5,000 Test runs. He was dismissed for 56, caught behind off Shaheen Shah Afridi one ball after Shanto had brought up his own fifty.

Bangladesh scored 413 in their first innings, thanks to Shanto (101), Mominul (91) and Mushfiqur (71). Abbas was the most successful Pakistan bowler, taking 5-92.

Pakistan, who had elected to field, replied with 386 after Azan hit a century on debut. Bangladesh batting coach Mohammad Ashraf was upbeat about his side's prospects on the final day.

"We are playing to win. I think if we can bowl 70-75 overs tomorrow,

and if there is no rain, there will be the opportunity to play 98 overs. I think we will have a chance to win," Ashraf said.

Pakistan's Salman Ali Agha said he was confident of his side chasing any target.

"Definitely we'll go for the win," he said after the day's play. "If they are brave enough to give us 70 overs and 260, we will definitely go for the chase," Salman said.

"Tomorrow is going to be an exciting day of Test cricket and we just want to get them out as quickly as we can."

**BRIEF SCORES: Bangladesh 413 and 152 for 3 (Shanto 58\*, Mominul 56, Hasan 1-23) lead Pakistan 386 (Awas 103, Fazal 60, Mehidy 5-102, Tajul 2-46) by 179 runs.**

## ANNOUNCEMENT

## Teenager Peake named in Australia squad as Maxwell dropped

AFP  
Sydney

**U**p-and-coming 19-year-old batsman Oliver Peake and all-rounder Liam Scott were yesterday given their first call-ups to Australia's white-ball squads, but veteran T20 all-rounder Glenn Maxwell was left out.

Australia will play three one-day internationals against Pakistan in Rawalpindi and Lahore from May 30 before travelling to Bangladesh in June for three ODIs in Dhaka and three T20s in Chattogram.

ODI captain Pat Cummins and fellow fast bowlers Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc will miss the tours to rest after playing in the IPL.

Twenty20 skipper Mitchell Marsh will captain the ODI team in Cummins' absence.

Maxwell and Marcus Stoinis, who were both part of the Australia squad that failed to make it out of the group stage at the T20 World Cup earlier this year, have been dropped. Peake, who has captained Australia Under-19s, will be blooded at senior level for the first time on the Pakistan leg of the tour.

But he will not feature in the Bangladesh matches, when a number of senior players return after stints in the IPL, including Travis Head, Cooper Connolly and Ben Dwarshuis.

The 25-year-old Scott was named in the ODI squads.

Left-arm spinning all-round-

er Joel Davies, 22, was named in the T20 squad for the first time.

"It's always exciting to see new players get an opportunity to play international cricket and be a part of the national team," national selection chair George Bailey said.

"The blend of experienced players coupled with new or returning players will provide a nice mix for these subcontinent tours."

**Australia squad for Pakistan ODIs (May 30 to June 4):** Mitchell Marsh (capt), Alex Carey, Nathan Ellis, Cameron Green, Josh Inglis, Matthew Kuhnemann, Marnus Labuschagne, Riley Meredith, Oliver Peake, Matthew Renshaw, Tanveer Sangha, Liam Scott, Matt Short, Billy Stanlake, Adam Zampa

**Australia squad for Bangladesh ODIs (June 9-14):** Mitchell Marsh (capt), Xavier Bartlett, Alex Carey, Cooper Connolly, Ben Dwarshuis, Nathan Ellis, Cameron Green, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Matthew Kuhnemann, Marnus Labuschagne, Matthew Renshaw, Tanveer Sangha, Liam Scott, Adam Zampa

**Australia squad for Bangladesh T20s (June 17-21):** Mitchell Marsh (capt), Xavier Bartlett, Cooper Connolly, Tim David, Joel Davies, Nathan Ellis, Cameron Green, Aaron Hardie, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Spencer Johnson, Matthew Kuhnemann, Riley Meredith, Josh Philippe, Matthew Renshaw, Adam Zampa.

### NZ delay launch of new T20 competition

New Zealand's proposed T20 league will be pushed back a year to the home summer of 2027-28 to allow more time to establish the competition, the nation's cricket board said yesterday. NZ20 organisers initially planned to launch a six-team league of privately owned franchises for the coming summer but had agreed to hold off in part due to the international schedule, New Zealand Cricket (NZC) said. "As talks with NZC and prospective investors have continued, it has become clear that additional time is required to complete the work necessary to establish the competition," NZC said in a statement. "A key consideration has been the international cricket calendar, with locked-in test series against Australia and Sri Lanka in January and February significantly reducing the available window."

NZC in March confirmed NZ20 as its preferred option to replace the 21-year-old Super Smash competition, which will now continue for another season. "Our focus is on ensuring the future of domestic T20 cricket in New Zealand is sustainable, competitive and aligned with the global game," NZC Board Chair Diana Puketapu-Lyndon said. "We've been working closely with NZ20 and are encouraged by the progress made to date."

Australia's privatisation plans for the Big Bash League have also stalled due to a lack of support from key member states.

## COMMENT

## Jayawardene rues run of injuries as Mumbai miss the playoffs

Reuters  
New Delhi

**M**umbai Indians head coach Mahela Jayawardene said a run of injuries to key players had derailed their Indian Premier League campaign after the five-times champions were eliminated from the playoff race.

Royal Challengers Bengaluru delivered the final blow to their season with a two-wicket victory in Raipur, Mumbai's eighth defeat in 11 matches. Mumbai spare no expense when putting together their teams and this year was no exception with India's Hardik Pandya serving as captain of a squad that also includes T20 World Cup winning India captains Rohit Sharma and Suryakumar Yadav.

However, Rohit missed six matches with a hamstring strain, Pandya sat out three with a back spasm, while spin-bowling all-rounder Mitchell Santner went

down with a shoulder injury, forcing Mumbai to frequently change their line-ups. "I don't think it was chopping and changing," Jayawardene said.

"We had a lot of injuries, a lot of niggles, players getting injured, and some players were not available. So, those were mostly forced changes. Tactically, we would have made very few changes during the season. I would have loved to have our main core guys consistently being out there. But there's no excuse. I think we had a quality squad."

It has been a lean season for all-rounder Pandya and batter Suryakumar but Jayawardene backed the decision to keep playing them. "The core group is quite valuable for us. You can't just keep changing," he added.

"We went with the trust, the confidence that we had with them. And then it is what it is ... They had a really good World Cup, winning it and all that. So I think it's just that as a unit, we haven't been good enough."

## INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

## Delhi hand Punjab fourth successive defeat

AFP  
Dharamsala

**D**elhi Capitals rode on blistering half-centuries from skipper Axar Patel and David Miller to mount a record chase and keep their qualification hopes alive following a stirring three-wicket victory over Punjab Kings yesterday.

A furious early onslaught by opener Priyansh Arya was the bedrock around which Punjab, coming off a hat-trick of losses, posted a commanding 210-5 at the HPCA Stadium in Dharamsala, where no total in excess of 200 had been chased down successfully previously.

Punjab seemed to have things under control when Arshdeep Singh and Yash Thakur reduced Delhi to 33 for three inside the first five overs.

Axar and Miller reignited their hopes with a 64-run stand for the fifth wicket, after which impact player Ashutosh Sharma and Madhav Tiwari, playing his first game of the season, tore into the Punjab bowling to secure victory with six deliveries to spare.

Axar came into this game with just 44 runs from eight previous innings but found form when it mattered most, unleashing a flurry of boundaries that unsettled the pace-heavy Punjab attack.

With the ball becoming greasy, thanks to a damp outfield, the bowlers had trouble gripping it and Axar and Miller made merry, picking off fours and sixes at will to keep their team in the hunt.

Both fell not long after bringing up their respective fifties but Delhi weren't done yet.

Ashutosh and Tiwari embarked on a six-hitting spree against the Australian duo of Ben Dwarshuis and Marcus Stoinis, and Aaquib



Delhi Capitals captain Axar Patel plays a shot during the IPL match against Punjab Kings at the Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association Stadium in Dharamsala yesterday. (AFP)

Nabi brought up a much-needed victory by slamming Thakur for a straight six. Punjab had earlier shown no signs of the pressure they must have felt after three successive losses as Arya got the match off to a stunning start by driving the first ball, from Mitchell Starc, over point for six.

The Australian paceman conceded 22 in the first over, a sign of things to come with the Delhi bowlers going too full in looking

for non-existent swing. Once they pulled their lengths back a little, the quick bowlers were harder to hit and the Punjab innings wobbled briefly before skipper Shreyas Iyer and Cooper Connolly rode to their rescue with a stand of 83 for the third wicket.

Suryansh Shedge then weighed in with 21 off only eight deliveries, but Delhi's resolve proved stronger as they staved off elimination with their fifth win of the season. "The

pressure moments, we have been losing. Have been saying our team is good. Very happy with how the team played, and hopefully we can do the same in the next two games," DC captain Axar Patel said.

**BRIEF SCORES Delhi Capitals 216 for 7 (Axar 56, Miller 51, Arshdeep 2-21) beat Punjab Kings 210 for 5 (Iyer 59\*, Arya 56, Tiwari 2-40) by three wickets**

### England pacer Atkinson fails concussion test after being hit by bouncers

England fast bowler Gus Atkinson was substituted out of a County Championship match on Sunday and later failed a concussion test after being hit on the helmet twice while batting, raising concerns about his fitness ahead of next month's test series against New Zealand. The seamer was struck twice on the head by international teammate Josh Tongue in Surrey's match against Nottinghamshire but initially continued batting after on-field assessments. The 28-year-old later called for further treatment before retiring hurt on 27. "Obviously, he failed a concussion test, that's why he is out of this game," Surrey head coach Gareth Batty said in a video posted on the team's Instagram page. "He felt like he was OK, but duty of care comes into it."

TENNIS

# Sinner demolishes Popyrin to stroll into Italian Open last 16

Gauff survived a scare against Jovic, Swiatek crushes 4-time Grand Slam champ Osaka in straight sets

AFP  
Rome

**J**annik Sinner breezed into the last 16 of the Italian Open yesterday after swatting aside Alexei Popyrin in straight sets 6-2, 6-0 and continuing his bid for a first title in Rome.

The world number one easily won his 25th straight match, taking just over an hour to see off Australia's Popyrin and set up an Italian derby with Andrea Pellegrino in the next round.

Pellegrino, 29, who beat 20th seed Frances Tiafoe 7-6 (10/8), 6-1, is a qualifier ranked 155 in the world who before this week had never played in the main draw of a Masters 1000 tournament.

Sinner meanwhile is trying to extend his own record-breaking run of overall victories in the ATP's top-ranked events after having won his last five.

The 24-year-old joins Novak Djokovic as the only player to win a year's first 25 Master 1000 matches, with the Serbian tennis icon's record run stretching to 31 matches in 2011.

Popyrin was suffocated by Sinner and made 23 unforced errors on his way to a comprehensive defeat.

The world number 60 only got 48 percent of first serves into play and that allowed Sinner to break five times and close out a match which was barely a contest.

"It has been a very good performance from my side," said Sinner.

"He's a big server so his percentage was not very high, which



Italy's Jannik Sinner hits a return to Australia's Alexei Popyrin during the Italian Open match at Foro Italico in Rome yesterday. (AFP)

helped me for sure a little bit, but I've been returning very well the second serves."

Should Sinner prevail at the Foro Italico he will be the first

Italian to win there since Adriano Panatta 50 years ago, and would complete his collection of Master 1000 tournaments.

With great rival Carlos Alcaraz

out injured and Novak Djokovic eliminated early, Sinner will be red-hot favourite as he builds towards completing the career Grand Slam at the French Open

which starts next week.

Former Rome champion Daniil Medvedev gets his tournament underway against Pablo Llamas Ruiz after a second-round walko-

ver gave the Russian seventh seed automatic passage into the third.

Coco Gauff survived a scare against Iva Jovic coming back from a match point to win 5-7, 7-5, 6-2 and reach the women's quarter-finals.

American star Gauff, who is reigning French Open champion and reached the final in Rome last year, won a draining match on windy centre court which took the best part of three hours.

The 22-year-old has struggled on clay this season, with a last-16 exit in the Madrid Open coming after a disappointing run to the quarter-finals in Stuttgart.

Gauff was so annoyed with herself shortly after saving a match point against the serve at 5-4 down in the second set that she smacked herself in the head.

**Swiatek back to best?**

Iga Swiatek will face Jessica Pegula on the quarter-finals of the women's tournament after making short work of Naomi Osaka, beating the Japan star 6-2, 6-1 and looking more like the player that won four French Open titles.

Pole Swiatek hasn't won a clay court tournament since claiming her most recent title at Roland Garros two years ago. But she looked back to her old self yesterday, giving Osaka nowhere to turn as she scurried around the court and finished off the match in just one hour and 22 minutes.

Osaka, a four-time Grand Slam winner, is yet to get beyond the last 16 of any tournament this year after also being knocked out of Indian Wells and the Madrid Open at the same stage by Aryna Sabalenka.

BOXING

## Dubois climbs off the canvas to become two-time world heavyweight champ

AFP  
London

**D**aniel Dubois recovered from two early knockdowns to win a second world heavyweight boxing title with an 11th-round stoppage of Fabio Wardley in a brutal all-British battle in Manchester on Saturday.

Victory meant the 28-year-old deprived World Boxing Organisation champion Wardley of his belt, with Dubois having lost the International Boxing Federation version of the title to unified champion Oleksandr Usyk at Wembley in July last year. Wardley dropped Dubois to the canvas within barely 10 seconds of the opening bell at the Co-Op Live arena.

And in the third round Wardley, making his maiden title defence, landed a huge overhand right on Dubois, who took a knee before beating the count again. But from then on Dubois connected with a series of crushing blows to leave Wardley's face a bloody mess and referee Howard Foster could easily have stopped the fight long before the 11th round of a scheduled 12.

Dubois, who now has a professional record of 23 wins and three defeats, with 21 knockouts, had been angered by an apparently casual comment made by Wardley in a pre-fight interview.

Wardley (21-0-1, 19 KOs) said Dubois would be a "bin man" if the London heavyweight was not a boxer. That led Dubois to respond by saying: "Well, I am going to take out the trash. I am the dustman, he is the trash, mate. I'll take out the trash."

Yet he was full of respect for Wardley following Saturday's gruelling bout, with Dubois telling broadcaster DAZN: "It was a war, we went through the sticky moments. Thank you Fabio for that, thank you. I know I've got heart, bundles of heart. I'm a warrior in there. I had to pull it out the bag and rely on it and use all of my skills. What a great fight, what a great battle. But, I'm number one again."

"He (Wardley) is a durable guy, durable warrior, great warrior. Thank you for a great fight, man. It was an honour to be in the ring with you," he said before veteran promoter Frank Warren confirmed there was a rematch clause in the contract. Dubois desper-

ately needed a victory following a crushing defeat by Usyk - a loss made worse after a video surfaced showing a reported "gathering" at his house just hours before the bout.

Yet it was Wardley who started the stronger. It was far from one-way traffic, however, with Dubois drawing audible gasps from the crowd when he rocked Wardley with a colossal right in the fourth round only for the champion to demonstrate a granite chin.

But such was the onslaught from Dubois that by the sixth round Wardley's face was covered in blood from a cut to his nose, which caused the referee's shirt to turn red as well.

But the gutsy Wardley, 31, somehow made it to the end of the round and in the seventh he took more punishment from Dubois.

By the ninth round, Wardley could barely see out of his right eye and his head was swollen, yet still the fight continued. It seemed only a matter of time before the bout was stopped, with Wardley's face a grotesque sight, yet his corner still refused to pull him out and Foster let him box on before belatedly calling a halt to the contest.



Daniel Dubois celebrates after winning his fight against Fabio Wardley by way of technical knockout at Co-Op Live Arena, Manchester, Britain, on Saturday. (Reuters)

FOOTBALL

## Leaders Arsenal know job is not yet done, says Lewis-Skelly

AFP  
London

**M**yles Lewis-Skelly is adamant Arsenal know better than anyone what they must do to secure the club's first Premier League title in more than 20 years.

The Gunners moved closer to being crowned champions of England for the first time since 2004 following a 1-0 win at West Ham on Sunday but only after the hosts had a stoppage-time equaliser ruled out following a lengthy VAR review.

Victory left leaders Arsenal five points clear of second-placed Manchester City, with two games to play - at home to already-relegated Burnley and away to Crystal Palace before the Gunners face Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League final on May 30.

"We have to stay humble," said teenage rising star Lewis-Skelly, now back in Arsenal's starting line-up after spending much of the season on the sidelines.

"(The dressing room is) just joy, excitement, fulfilment - everything you can describe," he explained. "We are buzzing, but we know that the job is not done."

"We have got two more (domestic) 'finals' (against Burnley and Palace) left now, and we have to take each game as it comes. The next one is Burnley - and then we go on from there. As players, as a fan myself, it's easy to think about what could be. But, it is important that we stay in the moment. We have to stay on it."

Lewis-Skelly enjoyed a breakthrough campaign last season but struggled to secure a place in Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta's side until he was given a chance against Fulham earlier this month and he has started every game since. "It was tough initially," he said.

"But, for me, I pride myself on having mental strength. Sport is not one pathway, because there are ups and downs. And it's how you bounce back from that, and how you are in those moments when you face adversity. That is what defines you."

"I spoke with my family and friends. I just told them, 'I don't



West Ham United's Tomas Soucek is tackled by Arsenal's Myles Lewis-Skelly during the Premier League match in London. (AFP)

### Every goalie 'illegally blocked', says West Ham's Hermansen after Arsenal agony

West Ham goalkeeper Mads Hermansen believes pushing and shoving at corners in Premier League has become a major problem after VAR denied his side a late equaliser against Arsenal for a foul on Gunners counterpart David Raya. Relegation-threatened West Ham thought they had rescued a precious point against the league leaders when Callum Wilson equalised in stoppage-time at the London Stadium on Sunday after Raya had dropped the ball. But the goal was disallowed by referee Chris Kavanagh, following a lengthy review that saw him advised to consult the pitch-side monitor, for a foul by Pablo on Reya.

The decision meant Leandro Trossard's 82nd-minute strike eventually proved enough for Arsenal to secure a 1-0 win that took them five points clear at the top of the table and left London rivals West Ham in the bottom three with just two games left to play. West Ham were furious with the decision and now reportedly plan to raise their concerns with referees' body Professional Game Match Officials. "If you ask any goalkeeper in the league, if he's been illegally blocked, pulled, pushed on corners this season I think you will not find anyone who has not experienced this," Hermansen said. "So to give this (decision against West Ham), I'm not sure I understand why. Of course, we watched it afterwards and we can see there's shirt pulls on (Konstantinos) Mavropanos, shirt pulls on (Tomas) Soucek, even shirt pulls on Pablo before the goal. So to pick this situation..."

The 25-year-old Denmark international made it clear he accepted Raya had been impeded but questioned why other similar incidents had not been penalised in the same way. "You know, I agree it's a foul," he said. "You can give the foul on the goalkeeper, definitely. "But (with) what has been given during this season of goals with illegal blocks and illegal pulls and pushing and stuff on goalkeepers, I don't understand why that's been given. That's all. I spoke with David after the game and I think we have the same experience on this matter during this season. Because, of course, he has every right to ask for a free-kick or a foul on him. But I think you can find a lot of situations during this season where it's been different."

want to hear all the noise that is coming from social media. Let me stay in this moment, let me continue to face this adversity and let me come out the other side of it?"

"He (Arteta) told me, 'You are going to play in midfield, so go for it'. So, that is what I did. And I had to be bold and play with courage, because that is what this league demands," he added.

## QFA AWARDS

# Afif adjudged Best Player, eyes strong World Cup show

AL SHAMAL'S DAVID PRATS NAMED THE BEST COACH, ROGER GUEDES GETS TOP SCORER AWARD

By Rizwan Rehmat  
Doha

**Q**atar football star Akram Afif yesterday won the Best Player award for a record sixth time at a glittering QFA Awards ceremony.

The Al Sadd striker garnered more votes than Baghdad Bounedjah of Al Shamal and Roger Guedes of Al Rayyan to clinch the award, which he has won the most number of times since the Qatar Football Association (QFA) first presented the trophy at the end of the 2005-06 season.

"I am extremely happy to have won this award again," Afif, 29, said yesterday. "I have worked hard for this but I want to continue helping my team win," Afif, a two-time AFC Asian Player of the Year winner, said.

"I would like to thank my family members and my teammates for their support," Afif said.

"This would not be possible without the support of my club," he added quickly.

"We could have possibly won another title, may be the Asian championship or the Amir Cup final, but it was still a great season for Al Sadd," Afif said.

Last October Afif played an influential role in helping Qatar secure qualification for the 2026 FIFA World Cup to be held across the US, Canada and Mexico from June 11 to July 19.

**AIMING FOR BETTER FIFA WORLD CUP SHOW**

"Right now we are preparing for the (FIFA) World Cup. We have much work

ahead. I have to say I wasn't happy with my performance at the 2022 World Cup. I promise you all it will be a better show this time," the Al Sadd stalwart said during his brief speech after receiving the trophy.

Afif has been Qatar's rock since 2019 when he helped the team win the AFC Asian Cup title in the UAE.

The Al Sadd star struck a hat-trick of goals in the final against Jordan as Qatar defended their



The winners with their trophies at the QFA Awards held in Doha yesterday. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil

AFC Asian Cup title on home soil in February 2024.

Also yesterday, Al Shamal's David Prats was named the Best Coach from the last QSL season.

Al Shamal finished second behind Al Sadd, the Qatar Stars League champions. Al Shamal have qualified for next year's AFC Champions League. Al Sadd coach Roberto

Al Sadd's Akram Afif with the Best Player trophy at the QFA Awards ceremony held in Doha yesterday.

**BEST FANS AWARD:** Al Sadd  
**BEST REFEREES AWARD:** Mohammed Al Mazeed (Best Referee) Saoud Ahmed (Best Assistant Referee) Yousef Aref (Best Assistant Referee) Meshari Al Shamari (Best Video Assistant Referee - VAR)  
**MANSOUR MUFTAH AWARD (TOP SCORER):** Al Rayyan's Roger Guedes (21 goals)  
**BEST UNDER-23 PLAYER AWARD:** Al Gharafa's Ayoub Al Oui  
**BEST GOALKEEPER AWARD:** Al Rayyan's Mahmoud Abunada  
**BEST COACH AWARD:** Al Shamal's David Prats  
**BEST PLAYER AWARD:** Al Sadd's Akram Afif

Mancini and Vicente Moreno of Al Rayyan were also in the running for the award.

"This has been a memorable season for me and my team. We enjoyed our hard work and the good results we got," Prats, 47, said after receiving his award. "We will continue to work hard and make better results," he added.

Al Rayyan's Mahmoud Abunada beat Jassim al-Hail of Al Arabi and Meshaal Barsham of Al Sadd to win the Best Goalkeeper award. Al Gharafa's Ayoub Al Oui lifted

the trophy in the Best Under-23 Player category after competing with Mohamed Manai of Al Shamal and Mubarak Shanah of Al Duhail.

Al Rayyan's Guedes, who scored 21 goals in the 2025-2026 QSL season, won the Mansour Muftah Award as the top scorer.

The Best Fans award went to the Al Sadd faithful.

The QFA Awards ceremony yesterday was also attended by a number of VIPs, guests, club presidents and players.



David Prats of Al Shamal poses after receiving the Best Coach trophy.

## REVIEW

## 'I'll never forget this day': Flick after Liga triumph

AFP  
Barcelona

**H**ours after the death of his father, Barcelona coach Hansi Flick led the Catalan giants to a second straight La Liga title with a Clasico win over rivals Real Madrid and said it was a day he would "never" forget.

Flick's Barca side earned a 2-0 win over Los Blancos and the coach said he was grateful to his team for their support and commitment.

"I'm proud. I'll never forget this day. Never. I'm happy about this (triumph) and the atmosphere in this stadium is unbelievable," Flick told reporters.

The German coach said his mother called him in the morning to tell him that his father had died.

"This morning, my mum called me and she said that my father passed away. And so I thought about (whether) I should hide it, or should I speak with my team? Because for me it's like a family," explained Flick.

"And I said, okay, I want to get the information to the players. And what they did (then) was unbelievable. I will never forget this moment."

"I'm really happy and really proud about everyone. Every player in the team. My staff around as well, and the club."

Flick, who was tossed into the air by his players in celebration at full-time, said he had "never" felt so much love in a stadium as on this day.

The coach said his team were still hoping to match the record of 100 points in a La Liga season in



Barcelona's Polish forward Robert Lewandowski (left) waves next to his teammates while parading aboard a bus to celebrate winning their 29th Spanish league title in Barcelona yesterday. Barcelona secured their 29th Spanish league title after beating Real Madrid 2-0 in the Clasico on Sunday. (AFP)

their final three league matches, and their big goal for next season was to end their 11-year wait for the Champions League.

Spanish media have reported Flick will extend his contract, which expires in 2027, by a year.

"I'm feeling in the right place, at the right time, and I think we all want to continue, and we want to give more for this club," added Flick. "I know everyone here and also in Barcelona wants to win the Champions League. We try next season again, and hopefully we can achieve this goal."

**Real Madrid must put team 'before' individuals: coach Arbeloa**  
Real Madrid coach Alvaro Arbeloa said his club needs to work together better as a unit rather

than as a collection of individuals, after Barcelona beat them on Sunday to retain La Liga.

"We need to collectively take a step forward, to have a much clearer idea of what it is we want to do," Arbeloa told reporters.

"To put the collective before the individual, because, beyond talent, we always need to have a clear idea, and for me this is the start."

"Above all, we have to learn that we dropped a lot of points against teams and in games where we shouldn't have."

After signing French superstar Kylian Mbappe in the summer of 2024, Madrid have lacked balance when playing the forward alongside Vinicius Junior and Jude Bellingham. Madrid's top

goalscorer Mbappe was unable to play against Barcelona because of a thigh injury. The France captain drew criticism after going on holiday to Sardinia during his recovery process.

The coach said he could understand supporters being upset with the team this season, after they finished without a major trophy for a second year running.

"We can't say a lot (to the fans), because we understand the frustration, their upset, how unsatisfied they have to be with this season," the Spanish coach told reporters.

"All we can do is work, looking towards the future, learning from everything we did badly this year, knowing that Real Madrid always come back."

## Dzeko, 40, leads the youngsters in Bosnia World Cup squad

**SARAJEVO:** Evergreen forward Edin Dzeko, 40, leads a Bosnia-Herzegovina squad for the World Cup announced yesterday that also contains a raft of younger players.

Coach Sergej Barbarez said he was setting his team, who reached the finals by beating Italy in a penalty shootout at the end of a tense playoff in March, the goal of getting through the group phase.

"I am still carried by this feeling that I had on the pitch at the end of the match against Italy, and I have been holding onto it ever since," Barbarez said at a press conference in Sarajevo.

Barbarez, the former captain of the national team who took over the management reins in April 2024, said the victory against Italy was the result of "a lot of work and great cohesion".

"This cohesion is the foundation of everything. We have been aware from the start that this is the only way it can work," he added. "My wish is to get into July (when the knockout stage begins), and then we will see," said Barbarez, who has brought in a number of new young players alongside veterans like former Manchester City, Roma and Inter Milan striker Dzeko.

The latest recruit, 21-year-old attacking midfielder Ermin Mahmic, made international appearances at lower age groups for the country of his birth, Austria, before switching to Bosnia.

"He's the type of player that we didn't have, a very attacking player who can strike high up the pitch," Barbarez said.

Bosnia will be playing in their second World Cup finals. They were eliminated in the group stage in 2014 in Brazil.

They will play joint hosts Canada in their first Group B match on June 12 in Toronto and will then face Switzerland and Asian champions Qatar.

Barbarez said they will only move



into their training base in Salt Lake City after their first match.

**SQUAD:**

**Goalkeepers:** Nikola Vasilj (St Pauli/GER), Martin Zlomislic (Rijeka/CRO), Osman Hadzicic (Slaven Belupo Koprivnica/CRO) Defenders: Sead Kolacinac (Atlantia/ITA), Amar Dedic (Benfica/POR), Nihad Mujacic (Gaziantep/TUR), Nikola Katic (Schalke 04/GER), Tarik Muharemovic (Sassuolo/ITA), Stjepan Radeljic (Rijeka/CRO), Dennis Hadzikuadic (Sampdoria/ITA), Nidal Celik (Lens, FRA)

**Midfielders:** Amir Hadziahmetovic (Hull City/ENG), Ivan Sunjic (Pafos/CYP), Ivan Basic (Astana/KAZ), Dzenis Burnic (Karlsruhe/GER), Ermin Mahmic (Slovan Liberec/CZE), Benjamin Tahirovic (Brondby/DEN), Amar Memic (Viktoria Plzen/CZE), Armin Gigovic (Young Boys/SUI), Kerim Alajbegovic Salzburg/AUT), Esmir Bajraktarevic (PSV Eindhoven/NED)

**Forwards:** Ermedin Demirovic (VfB Stuttgart/GER), Jovo Lukic (Universitatea Cluj/ROM), Samed Bazzdar (Jagiellonia/POL), Haris Tabakovic (Borussia Moenchengladbach/GER), Edin Dzeko (Schalke 04/GER)