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Taijul takes six to lead Bangladesh to Pakistan Test series sweep



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# GULF TIMES SPORT

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How many nations have participated in every edition of the World Cup?  
Just one – Brazil.

## AL ARABI SC WINS SPORTS AND YOUTH EXCELLENCE AWARD

**DOHA:** Al Arabi SC yesterday won the Sports and Youth Excellence Award for the 2025/2026 season at a special ceremony attended by leaders of sports clubs, youth centers, and prominent institutions active in sports and youth development. Held under the patronage of HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, Minister of Sports and Youth, the Ministry of Sports and Youth celebrated the winners of the fifth edition of the Sports and Youth Excellence Award for the 2025/2026 season. Al Sadd SC were second best while Al Rayyan SC won the third place. During the event, Engineer Yasser bin Abdullah al-Jamal, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Sports and Youth, honoured the winners across the award's various categories, including Youth Committees, Youth Centers (Girls and General), Specialized Centers, and Sports Clubs. In his address, HE the Minister of Sports and Youth congratulated

the award recipients, commending their exceptional efforts and remarkable achievements, which embodied determination, commitment, and excellence. The Minister said the fifth edition of the Sports and Youth Excellence Award marks a significant milestone in strengthening a culture of institutional excellence in Qatar. He noted that the award has evolved beyond an annual recognition program into a comprehensive national framework that motivates institutions and individuals to adopt best practices and elevate performance standards based on quality, sustainability, and innovation. The Minister further stated that the award's continuous development reflects the dedicated efforts of sports and youth institutions to enhance their programs and initiatives in alignment with Qatar's vision of investing in people and building national capabilities. Through its successive editions,



The winners at the Sports and Youth Excellence Award ceremony for the 2026-26 season held yesterday.

the award has contributed to creating a positive and competitive environment that encourages excellence while reinforcing the principles of leadership, strategic planning, performance measure-

ment, and continuous evaluation. Since its launch five years ago, the Sports and Youth Excellence Award has become one of the State's most prominent national initiatives aimed at advancing

institutional performance and enhancing the quality of programs and services provided to young people. The award aligns with national development priorities and supports

the preparation of a conscious, active generation capable of contributing effectively to the nation's progress. It also reflects the Ministry of Sports and Youth's vision of building an integrated culture of excellence founded on professionalism, innovation, and youth empowerment.

- The winners:**  
**Youth Committees Category:**  
**First Place:** Al Khor Sports Club Youth Committee  
**Second Place:** Al Wakrah Sports Club Youth Team  
**Youth Centers Category (Girls and General):**  
**First Place:** Doha Girls Center  
**Second Place:** Leadership Center for Girls  
**Specialized Centers Category:**  
**First Place:** Qatar Youth Hostels  
**Second Place:** Qatar Science Club  
**Sports Clubs Category:**  
**First Place:** Al Arabi SC  
**Second Place:** Al Sadd SC  
**Third Place:** Al Rayyan SC

### GCC GAMES

# Qatar shooters continue to shine with another gold

'I dedicate this achievement to our wise leadership, and to HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani'

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**T**eam Qatar shooters continued their remarkable dominance on the podiums after delivering another commanding performance in the mixed team events at the conclusion of the shooting competitions at the 4th GCC Games - Doha 2026.

The Qatar shooters secured two additional medals - one gold and a silver - following thrilling and highly competitive contests at the Lusail International Shooting Complex.

Hosts Qatar now have an overall tally of 122 (44 gold, 46 silver, 32 bronze) to lead the Games medals table.

Saudi Arabia are in second place with 66 medals (26 gold, 21 silver, 19 bronze).

Bahrain occupy the third place with 62 medals (24 gold, 22 silver, 16 bronze).

The standout achievement came in the Trap Mixed Team event, where the Qatari duo of Saeed Abu Sharib and Maytha al-Binali claimed the gold medal after a superb display of precision and consistency.

The pair topped the qualification round with a total of 139 targets before continuing their impressive performance in the final to secure first place with 31 targets.

They finished ahead of the UAE team, which claimed silver with 29 targets, while Bahrain secured bronze with 22 targets.

In the 10m Air Pistol Mixed Team event, Team Qatar shooters claimed the silver medal following a dramatic contest that went down to the final moments.

The Qatari duo of gold medalist Duaa Habib, who scored 233.7 points, and Khalid al-Shaiba, who recorded 226.0 points, achieved a combined total of 459.7 points, narrowly behind the UAE team, which won gold with 461.0 points. Oman secured bronze with a total of 397.7 points.

Following the conclusion of the competitions, HE Dr Mishaal Ibrahim al-Nasr, President of the Qatar Shooting and Archery Association, alongside Abdul-



Qatar's Saeed Abu Sharib and Maytha al-Binali after winning the gold in the mixed team trap competition at the GCC Games.



Qatar's Khalid al-Shaiba and Duaa Habib celebrate winning the silver in the 10-meter air pistol mixed team competition.

lah bin Mohammed Bamkhalaf, Secretary-General of the Oman Olympic Committee, crowned the winners amid celebratory scenes that earned widespread praise from GCC delegations for the outstanding organisation of the tournament.

**We had done quality preparations, Maytha al-Binali** Team Qatar star Maytha al-Binali, who won gold in the Trap Mixed Team event, expressed her delight at Qatar's impressive medal haul at the GCC Games, describing the achievement as the natural outcome of intensive preparations and training camps ahead of the tournament.

Al-Binali said after the medal ceremony: "Praise be to God for helping me win three medals in this edition. I dedicate this achievement to our wise leadership, and to HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee, and to all the people of Qatar."

She also thanked the organising committee and the Qatar Shooting and Archery Association for their continuous support, particularly HE Dr Mishaal Ibrahim al-Nasr, Secretary-General Jassem Shaheen al-Sulaiti, and Saud al-Athba, Head of the Trap Committee.

Al Binali said these achievements will serve as strong motivation ahead of upcoming international events.

## QATAR SECURE SILVER MEDAL IN PADEL



Qatar's padel squad after receiving their silver medals from HE Mohammed bin Yousuf al-Mana, First Vice President of the Qatar Olympic Committee. Tareq Zainal, President of the Asian Padel Federation, was also present on the occasion.

The Qatar padel team yesterday claimed the silver medal at the 4th GCC Games Doha 2026 after delivering impressive performances throughout the tournament before facing one of their toughest moments in the final against the UAE, when player Rashid Nawaf suffered an injury and was unable to complete the decisive match. The UAE eventually secured victory 2-1 to win the gold medal. The Qatari duo of Issa Shanan and Rayan al-Jefairi lost the opening match in straight sets (0-6, 2-6). However, the duo of Mohammed Saadoun

al-Kuwari and Hassan Wali brought Team Qatar back into the contest after winning the second match in straight sets (6-2, 6-4). The decisive third match saw Team Qatar duo Rashid Nawaf and Mishari Nawaf level at one set apiece after scores of 6-7 and 7-5. The final set was tied at 3-3 before Rashid Nawaf suffered an injury and was unable to continue, handing the UAE the overall victory and the gold medal, while Kuwait secured bronze. The silver medal capped another strong campaign for Team Qatar, who had opened the tournament with a 3-0 victory over Saudi Arabia before defeating Kuwait 2-1 in the second

round and Bahrain 3-0 in the third round. In the women's competition, Kuwait won the gold medal, Saudi Arabia claimed silver, and the UAE secured bronze. The medal ceremony took place immediately after the final at the specially constructed padel venue under Aspire Dome. The winners were crowned by HE Mohammed bin Yousuf al-Mana, First Vice President of the Qatar Olympic Committee, HE Dr Thani al-Kuwari, Second Vice President of QOC, and Tareq Zainal, President of the Asian Padel Federation and Secretary-General of the Qatar Tennis, Squash, Padel and Badminton Federation.

CRICKET

# Bangladesh sweep Test series despite Rizwan defiance

'WE CONTROLLED OUR EMOTIONS BETTER AND AVOIDED PANIC'

AFP  
Sylhet, Bangladesh

Spinner Taijul Islam took six wickets to lead Bangladesh to a 78-run win over Pakistan in the second Test and clinch a famous 2-0 series win yesterday.

Pakistan, who started the fifth day on 316-7 chasing a record 437, were bowled out for 328 in the first session in Sylhet after Mohammad Rizwan hit a valiant 94.

It was Bangladesh's first Test series win at home against Pakistan and a second successive sweep after their 2-0 triumph on Pakistani soil in 2024.

The win marked another major milestone for Bangladesh, who secured four successive Test series victories for the first time in their history.

"It's difficult to explain the emotions of that final hour because Pakistan were batting really well and we were under pressure," Bangladesh captain Najmul Hossain Shanto said.

"But compared to previous matches, we controlled our emotions better and avoided panic.

"Every player and member of the support staff contributed, and as captain I feel very proud of the team's work ethic."

Wicketkeeper Rizwan kept Pakistan in the hunt for an unlikely win with a 166-ball stay after the visitors had slumped to 162-5 on day four. Rizwan put on an eighth-wicket partnership of 54 with overnight partner Sajid Khan, who made 28.

Taijul broke through to dismiss



Bangladesh's players pose with the tournament trophy after winning the second Test against Pakistan at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium in Sylhet yesterday. (AFP)

Sajid for his 18th Test five-wicket haul and pace bowler Shoriful Islam had Rizwan caught in the next over to end Pakistan's resistance.

"It's never good to lose games," said Pakistan skipper Shan Masood. "In both matches we had significant chances, but we need to reflect on where we lost the game in batting, bowling and fielding if we want to move forward as a side."

Taijul took the final wicket of Khurram Shahzad to return second-innings figures of 6-120 and trigger the Bangladesh celebrations. Taijul's four wickets on

Tuesday had left Pakistan in deep trouble. Former captain Babar Azam counter-attacked with 47 before wicketkeeper Litton Das produced a stunning catch off Taijul.

Captain Masood made 71, while Salman Ali Agha added 71 in a crucial 134-run sixth-wicket stand with Rizwan before Taijul broke through. Taijul, a left-arm spinner also took 3-67 during Pakistan's first innings 232.

Litton, who was named player of the match, scored 126 in Bangladesh's first-innings 278.

Veteran batsman Mushfiq

Rahim scored 137 in the second to guide Bangladesh to 390, with contributions from Mahmudul Hasan Joy (52) and Litton (69).

The 39-year-old Mushfiq was named player of the series for his 253 runs in two matches. Bangladesh won the opening Test by 104 runs.

**BRIEF SCORES: Bangladesh 278** (Litton 126, Shahzad 4-81) **and 390** (Mushfiq 137, Litton 69, Shahzad 4-86) **beat Pakistan 232** (Babar 68, Rana 3-60, Taijul 3-67) **and 358** (Rizwan 94, Masood 71, Agha 71, Taijul 6-120) **by 78 runs**

FOCUS

## McCullum 'very lucky' to keep England job after Ashes debacle: Gough

AFP  
London

Former England fast bowler Darren Gough believes England coach Brendon McCullum was "very lucky" to remain in post after England's Ashes flop as he expressed his "hurt" at being overlooked for the role of national selector.

Gough, who took 467 international wickets, previously worked as Yorkshire's managing director of cricket but lost out to Marcus North in the race to become the new national selector.

Gough, 55, believes a key aspect of the role is to challenge the current England management, all of whom were retained despite a 4-1 Ashes series loss in Australia in 2025/26.

McCullum and red-ball captain Ben Stokes have retained their positions ahead of an upcoming three-Test series at home to New Zealand.

"I think Baz McCullum is realistically very lucky to carry on as England's head coach," he told The Overlap's Stick to Cricket show.

"If you're not winning games your job is going to come under scrutiny. It's a four-year cycle, so if you go to Australia on the fourth year of it and you win, or you get really close, you can say there's been a big change and let's give it another couple of years.

"It didn't happen but I wish them the best of luck. I like the way they play but it needs toning down a bit. We need a bit of steel and I'd like to think we'll see that this summer."

Gough, asked if New Zealander McCullum would face increased scrutiny this season, added: "Absolutely. They're under pressure and they should be, I don't think there's any doubt about that."

As for his failure to become England's new national selector, with the England and Wales Cricket Board preferring former Australia batsman North, a frustrated Gough said: "I was disheartened. I'll be honest, it did hurt me. I could have challenged them in the right areas. I'm mature now, I'm not like I was 10 years ago, a hothead. I've mellowed a lot, I've managed people."

### Langer left in awe by Sooryavanshi's 'breathtaking' batting

Former Australia coach Justin Langer lauded Vaibhav Sooryavanshi for his "breathtaking" batting after the 15-year-old's latest destructive IPL innings. Sooryavanshi struck a 38-ball 93 on Tuesday to lead Rajasthan Royals closer to the IPL play-offs with a win over Lucknow Super Giants. The batting blitz from the opener added to a string of impressive performances in the T20 competition this season, including a 36-ball century. Sooryavanshi hit 10 sixes as he went past Lucknow opener Mitchell Marsh's total of 563 runs in the IPL batting chart. The teenager is now top with 579 runs in 13 matches, earning him the right to wear the orange cap as the competition's highest run-scorer. "I've seen some amazing players in 35 years of cricket," Langer, the former Australia opening batsman and now Lucknow coach, told reporters in Jaipur. "To see a young man bat like that, not just tonight but throughout the series, is breathtaking." Sooryavanshi took apart some world-class fast bowlers including Australia's Mitchell Starc and South Africa's Anrich Nortje. "It's quite incredible, actually, to be able to play that way, and now have the orange cap," said Langer, who played 105 Tests for Australia. "The scary thing going forward - if the expressions on the face of Mitch Starc and Nortje and every bowler tells a story now - is what about when he learns how to bat?" Langer said. "Gosh, he's so young. He's a brilliant player, and it's a real privilege to watch him bat."

CYCLING

## In-form Narvaez makes it three Giro d'Italia stage wins

Reuters  
Porcari, Italy

Ecuador's Jhonatan Narvaez edged out Spaniard Enric Mas at the end of yesterday's stage 11 to win his third stage of this year's Giro d'Italia as Afonso Eulalio retained the leader's pink jersey.

Narvaez (UAE Team Emirates XRG) and Mas (Movistar) battled for the win after leaving the breakaway group on the final climb and Mas made the first move, only for the Ecuadorean to overtake him before the line. "Mas was the strongest in the climb and I knew I had to play my game, I just tried to defend myself on the uphill," Narvaez said.

"I was scared because when he did the sprint he almost closed me on the barriers and I was on the limit, but it was full gas racing all day, because we don't race just in the uphills, we race on the downhills also."

Italian Diego Ulissi (XDS Astana) won the race for third place at the end of the 195-km ride from Porcari to Chiavari.

There was no change at the top of the general classification, with Portugal's Eulalio maintaining his 27-second lead over race favourite

Jonas Vingegaard.

The first half of the stage gave plenty of opportunities for breakaways from the peloton before the riders reached the first of three categorised climbs. Early attacks were reeled in and the group that managed to get away grew in size as others left the bunch to go in chase, before the race settled down on the second climb with a 12-man group over three minutes ahead of the peloton.

A crash on the descent brought down three of the leaders, and the breakaway began to split.

On the uncategorised climb before the finish, Mas attacked and Narvaez followed and with the Spaniard unable to shake off the Ecuadorean before the descent, Narvaez was always going to be the favourite in a sprint finish.

Mas, three-times runner-up in the Vuelta a Espana, is out of contention for the overall win and the Spaniard was desperate for a stage victory on his Giro debut, but Narvaez claimed the fifth Giro stage win of his career.

The peloton, containing all the GC contenders, trailed in over three minutes behind the winner, and Eulalio (Bahrain Victorious) will wear the pink in Thursday's stage 12, a flat 175-km ride from Imperia to Novi Ligure.



Jhonatan Narvaez celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the 11th stage of Giro d'Italia between Porcari and Chiavari in Italy yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

## KKR see off MI to keep IPL playoff hopes alive

AFP  
Kolkata

A clinical bowling display, followed by a decisive stand between Manish Pandey and Rovman Powell, kept Kolkata Knight Riders in the hunt for a place in the IPL playoffs after a comfortable four-wicket win over already-eliminated Mumbai Indians yesterday.

Put in by Ajinkya Rahane on a tricky, two-paced surface of uneven bounce, five-time former champions Mumbai were blown away by pacers Saurabh Dube and Cameron Green, who took two wickets apiece in their respective first spells, and limped to 147-8 at Kolkata's Eden Gardens.

West Indian spinner Sunil Narine choked the middle order, conceding just 13 runs in four overs, and it wasn't until Corbin Bosch lashed two sixes in the final over from Kartik Tyagi did Mumbai flirt with respectability.

Mumbai lost at least three wickets in the powerplay for the fifth time this season, slumping to 46-4 after six overs, and even though skipper Hardik Pandya, back in action after missing the last three games with back spasms, and Tilak Varma put on 43, they took 49 deliveries in doing so.

Coming into the game with four wins in their last five games, Kolkata lost prolific opener Finn



Kolkata Knight Riders' Manish Pandey plays a shot during the IPL match against Mumbai Indians at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata yesterday. (AFP)

Allen in the first over, bowled by Deepak Chahar.

When Rahane and Green both fell to Bosch for the addition of just six runs, they found themselves in a spot of bother at 54-3.

But Pandey and Powell then joined hands to thwart Mumbai's hopes of a consolation victory, playing with great common sense and maturity.

Pandey, the first Indian to make an IPL century in 2009, was batting for the first time this season

but showed no signs of rust, playing with characteristic cheekiness through the off-side, while Powell rode his luck with Chahar failing to go for a catch when the ball was tantalisingly within reach.

The two right-handers punished anything loose as the pitch eased out somewhat until Pandey, one of only three players - alongside Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma - to have played at least one game in each of the 19 IPL

seasons, was cleaned up by Jasprit Bumrah special. Powell fell to a spectacular catch by Bosch, diving full length to his right at point, but Rinku Singh got the job done without fuss to ensure that Kolkata stayed afloat, if only just.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
**Kolkata Knight Riders 148 for 6** (Pandey 45, Bosch 3-30) **beat Mumbai Indians 147 for 8** (Bosch 32\*, Green 2-23, Dube 2-34, Tyagi 2-37) **by four wickets**

### LIV CASH CRUNCH HITS ASIAN TOUR AS KOREA OPEN PRIZE MONEY CUT

Golf's Asian Tour yesterday said it had axed a planned increase in prize money for this week's Korea Open, just weeks after announcing a \$500,000 cash boost from LIV Golf. The LIV injection would have pushed the total prize fund from around \$1mn (KRW 1.4bn) to a record \$1.5mn for the historic tournament first played in 1958. However, on Wednesday, a statement to AFP said: "The Asian Tour can confirm the prize money for the Kolon Korea Open has been revised to the original amount of KRW 1.4bn, the same as last year. "We communicated this revision to our members following an update from the title sponsor Kolon.

"The champion will receive a bonus of KRW 200mn as previously announced." In April, the Asian Tour announced the Korea Open prize fund boost to great fanfare. "With \$500,000 in prize money support from LIV Golf, with whom we have been expanding our partnership, the winner's share will be 700 million won and the total purse 2 billion won, making this the largest tournament in its history," tournament organisers trumpeted on April 24. However, just a week later Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) announced it would cease bankrolling LIV after the 2026 season after plunging a reported \$5 billion dollars into the breakaway circuit since it was

founded in 2021. It has left the rebel tour facing an uncertain future as it scrambles to find new investors and sponsors. A number of LIV players will be in the field for the Korea Open when it begins in Chuncheon on Thursday, including two-time US Masters Champion Bubba Watson, Mexico's Abraham Ancer and Korean-born New Zealander Danny Lee. LIV has also been bankrolling the Asian Tour's International Series, leaving in doubt the future of the mini-circuit elevated events which each offer \$2 million in prize money and a pathway to the LIV tour. The next International Series tournament is scheduled to take place in Morocco from June 11-14.

SPOTLIGHT

# Eala, Tjen bring a Southeast Asian 'sense of pride' to Roland Garros

AFP  
Paris

**A**lexandra Eala and Janice Tjen have taken different routes to the women's top 40, but both began their journeys from a region that is rarely on the tennis map.

In January, Eala, who turns 21 the day before Roland Garros starts, became the first player from the Philippines to break into the top 50.

Tjen turned 24 earlier in May. When she entered the top 40 in February, she became the highest-ranked Indonesian woman since Yayuk Basuki, who reached the top 20 in 1997 and 1998.

While their far-flung countries are more than 1,500 kilometres apart, they share a maritime border. The impact of the sometime doubles partners, not only on the court but in the stands, has brought them the nickname 'SEA-Sters'.

The huge Filipino expat population flock to see their first tennis star everywhere she plays.

"The start of the season is when I seriously noticed that people were really coming, they were buying tickets, they were taking time out of their day. It was like,

wow," world number 38 Eala told the Served website.

She added she had been a "little bit in denial" about her popularity.

"After I broke that barrier of not accepting, thinking, 'I don't think I'm really famous; every week they just kept coming, so I was, 'Okay, you have to accept it, absorb it, it's here, it's a really good position'."

Her opponents notice. "I love that she has such an incredible fan base. I've seen the atmosphere. It's amazing," American Amanda Anisimova said in Dubai.

Yet, Eala is cautious. "I want to give back all the support they give me, but my first obligation is to myself," she told the Punto de Break website.

"I try to find the healthiest way to deal with all of this, because I feel like many things could go wrong... It's all about balance."

Representing a nation of 288 million, 41st-ranked Tjen is also proving a draw.

"I don't think too much about it," she told the Times of India ahead of a Billie Jean King Cup match in Delhi in April.

"I know that as long as I keep working hard and giving my best, I always have Indonesia behind me. That's something I'm proud of."

Two Thai women, Lanlana



The Philippines Alexandra Eala (left) and Indonesia's Janice Tjen are leading a new South-east Asian wave in women's tennis after both breaking into the world's top 40.

Tararudee and Mananchaya Sawangkaew are also hovering around the top 100.

"I'm super, super proud to be part of this group. And these are girls that I grew up with," said Eala.

"I think Southeast Asia has its own little charm. We have certain humour that's very similar, maybe cultural things that we share.

There's definitely that shared sense of pride for my region."

Eala left home aged 12 to join the Rafael Nadal Academy in Mallorca. She won the US Open junior singles in 2022.

After breaking into the top 50 last season, she became the first person to hit with Nadal since his retirement over a year earlier.

"It was crazy," Eala told The

National. "It was my first time ever hitting with him and I was so nervous and it was definitely physically demanding for me.

"Just to say that you hit with Rafa, it's insane."

She has Nadal's willingness to go to the limits.

After beating Magdalena Frech in a tough three-setter at the Italian Open earlier this month, she

said on Tennis Channel: "I told myself that I wasn't tired enough."

Eala is a lefty, like Nadal, but has not yet displayed the 14-time Roland Garros champion's love for clay.

"I'm starting to build that relationship," she said in Rome. "This is my first season where I've really done these high-level tournaments."

Tjen developed later on tennis scholarships at US universities, spending one year at Oregon and three at Pepperdine by the beach in Malibu. She has hardly any experience on clay and played her first tour-level matches on the surface in April.

"So I'm just taking things one at a time," she told the Roland Garros website.

She also admitted she had previously held doubts about pursuing a tennis career.

"Tennis demands a lot of you," she told the Times of India.

"You basically have to travel every week of your life and that's a very tough demand for me. I don't like travelling as much and considering that I wouldn't be able to enjoy it and being away from home for that long I decided to quit, but I had a lot of good people around me and they kept convincing me to give it a try."

TENNIS

# Djokovic trying to hold back time at French Open

'IT'S NOT AN IDEAL PREPARATION, TO BE HONEST'

AFP  
Paris

**N**ovak Djokovic arrives at Roland Garros this year facing a familiar opponent, but one that cannot be outmanoeuvred even by the record 24-time Grand Slam champion: time.

The Serbian, who turns 39 this week, is no longer the immovable presence he once was, his famed durability now increasingly a concern in a sport shaped by younger, physically explosive rivals.

The question is not simply whether he can win another French Open, but how he continues to adjust his game and mindset to defy the natural erosion that comes with advancing years.

While his scheduling is more selective and his approach more pragmatic, Djokovic conceded he would have liked more time on clay before coming to Paris.

He has played in just three tournaments in 2026, and lost his only match on clay to Croatian qualifier Dino Prizmic at this month's Italian Open. Djokovic pulled out of tournaments in Miami, Monte Carlo and Madrid while dealing with a shoulder injury - with strapping visible during his brief stay in Rome.

"It's not an ideal preparation, to be honest," said Djokovic, who will be seeded third at Roland Garros.

"I don't recall the last time I had in the last couple of years a preparation where I didn't have any kind of physical issues or health issues coming into the tournament. There's always something. Kind of a new reality that I have to deal with."

It is a candid admission from a



player who has built his career on meticulous planning and physical resilience, but who is confronting the realities of an ageing body.

"It is frustrating," he said. "At the same time it's my decision to still perform in that kind of state and conditions."

Djokovic's record at Roland Garros underlines why he cannot be discounted. The absence of defending two-time champion Carlos Alcaraz is another factor in his favour.

A three-time French Open champion and one of the few players to consistently trouble Rafael Nadal on the surface, Djokovic has reached the quarter-finals or better at each edition since a third-round loss in 2009.

But the physical demands of clay are unforgiving, and Djokovic is acutely aware of the mar-

ginal losses that come with age. "I see what I'm missing," he said. "Late half a step. I'm not definitely where I want to be for the highest level and to compete at the highest level and to be able to get far."

Recent seasons have also shown the growing challenge of sustaining peak performance over the two-week grind of a Grand Slam. Matches that once tilted towards him now demand sustained excellence from first point to last.

His preparation, as he openly acknowledges, has limits. "I train hard. I train as much as the body allows me to," he said. "Then how it turns out on the court, that's really unpredictable."

However, Djokovic is one of just two men to beat red-hot title favourite Jannik Sinner this season, having ended his Australian Open reign. Djokovic delivered what he

called one of his best performances in a decade to outlast the Italian in five sets in the semi-finals in January, fired up by those who had written him off.

"I never stopped doubting. I never stopped believing in myself," said the former world number one at the time.

"There's a lot of people that doubt me. I see there is a lot of experts all of a sudden that wanted to retire me or have retired me many times the last couple of years.

"I want to thank them all because they gave me strength. They gave me motivation to prove them wrong."

Djokovic would go on to lose to Alcaraz in the final - and has not added to his Grand Slam haul since the 2023 US Open - but it would be foolish to dismiss him again, as he has proved many times over.

PREMIER LEAGUE

# Maddison 'embarrassed' by Spurs' survival fight

AFP  
London

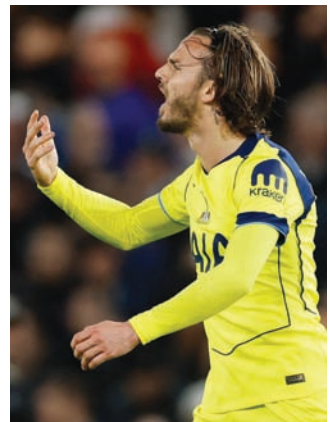
**J**ames Maddison accepts it is "a little bit embarrassing" for Tottenham Hotspur to be involved in a final-day battle to avoid relegation from the Premier League.

Spurs, one of English football's traditional 'Big Six' clubs, missed the chance to make sure of their top-flight status in a 2-1 defeat at London rivals Chelsea on Tuesday. A point would have almost certainly sent West Ham down given Tottenham's superior goal difference, but the fight to stay up will now continue on to Sunday's final day of the season, when a win, or most likely even a draw, at home to Everton would guarantee Spurs' safety.

Maddison, who played the final 21 minutes at Stamford Bridge in only his second appearance since a return from a knee injury, is well aware of what is at stake for Spurs in their quest to remain a Premier League club.

"It's non-negotiable," the Tottenham midfielder said. "We have to (get over the line) for this club. We've got to give everything for this club, for the badge and for our fans. It is unacceptable and a little bit embarrassing that we're in this position as Tottenham Hotspur but it's the reality, unfortunately, and it's up to us to get out of it."

The 29-year-old England international added: "Sunday is



going to be a big day. We're going to need everyone, we're going to need our fans, who were absolutely unbelievable (against Chelsea) by the way... We need to repay them with a good performance and some points on Sunday to secure Premier League survival."

Chelsea went ahead through Enzo Fernandez's 30-yard strike and Andrey Santos made it 2-0 in the 67th minute. Richarlison pulled a goal back with 16 minutes left and substitute Maddison was denied by an excellent Jorrel Hato block before Tottenham had a penalty appeal turned down. Spurs captain Micky van de Ven was thrown to the floor by Marc Cucurella, who was booked, but referee Stuart Attwell ruled the incident had taken place before the ball was in play and ordered the corner to be retaken.

FOCUS

# Al Shaqab nurtures emerging talent through showjumping league

**A**l Shaqab League continues to strengthen its position as one of Qatar's leading showjumping championships, with the launch of its third season hosted at the Longines Indoor Arena at Al Shaqab. The league brings together talented riders of different levels in a fully integrated sporting experience that celebrates the spirit of competition, equestrian excellence, and passion for show jumping.

The league is organised as part of Al Shaqab's, a member of Qatar Foundation, commitment to supporting and developing equestrian sport in Qatar by providing a high-level competitive platform that contributes to refining riders' skills, discovering emerging talent, and promoting equestrian culture across different communities.

Al Shaqab League stands out as more than just a sporting competition, combining athletic challenge with world-class organization in a professional environment that allows participants to gain experience and further develop their abilities, while also offering exceptional experience for spectators and equestri-

an enthusiasts alike. This reflects Qatar's growing position on the international equestrian stage.

The season continues through two highly anticipated upcoming rounds, beginning with Al Shaqab League 2 on May 29-30, and concluding with Al Shaqab League Finals from June 4-6.

The upcoming rounds are expected to witness strong competition and distinguished participation from riders, supported by the integrated organizational environment provided by Al Shaqab, which continues to establish the championship as a prominent sporting destination for show jumping enthusiasts in Qatar and the region.



## Zverev still hoping for entry to Grand Slam champions club

Germany's Alexander Zverev has been knocking on the door for the best part of a decade but is still waiting to enter the club of Grand Slam champions and time might be running out.

Zverev, 29, will get another chance at Roland Garros where he will chalk up a 41st Grand Slam main draw appearance. With one sizeable hurdle removed, he may not get a better one.

The world number three will be seeded second following the withdrawal of defending champion Carlos Alcaraz and while he still faces a daunting task, he is capable of a deep run. Few players

have been as consistent on the Parisian red clay as Zverev. After successive semi-final appearances between 2021 and 2023 he reached the final in 2024 only to lose to Alcaraz. Last year he bowed out in the quarter-finals to Novak Djokovic.

Zverev possesses a damaging first serve and backhand and moves serenely on clay. The dilemma though is how he can convince himself that his time is still to come. While he would not have to contend with Sinner until the final, the mere presence of the Italian in the draw is enough to darken his mood. Four times he has faced

Sinner this season and four times he has shaken hands defeated, without winning a set.

After the most recent beating, in the Madrid final when he won only three games, Zverev spelled out the problem. "It's not like I'm the only one losing to him. I'm just losing to him more because I get to him every single time and I lose to him. So it's like that," he said. "I think there's a big gap between Sinner and everybody else right now. It's quite simple."

Zverev suffered from fatigue at the Italian Open where he lost to Luciano Darderi in the last 16 and pulled out of his home city

tournament in Hamburg with a back niggle.

He will need to be firing on all cylinders if he has any hope of breaking through the glass ceiling and might secretly be hoping world number one Sinner's relentless run of form will end before June 7 - the date of the men's final. Publicly, however, he remains hopeful that even if he crosses paths with the Italian again he can find the key. "I do have to believe that I'm capable of beating him. I do have to believe it, otherwise we can just give him the trophy without playing the tournament," Zverev said.

## MOTORSPORT

# Team Qatar drivers line up and livery unveiled ahead of historic 24 Hours of Le Mans debut

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**T**eam Qatar will make its debut at the iconic 24 Hours of Le Mans from June 10 to 14, marking a landmark moment for Qatari motorsport as the nation takes its place on the grid of one of the world's most prestigious and demanding races.

The programme is delivered through a strategic partnership between Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) and Iron Lynx, alongside a collaboration with Mercedes-AMG Motorsport, with Team Qatar set to compete in the LMGT3 category aboard the Mercedes-AMG Motorsport LMGT3.

Taking place at Circuit de la Sarthe in Le Mans, France, the 24 Hours of Le Mans stands as the pinnacle event of endurance racing and the centerpiece of the FIA World Endurance Championship calendar.

First held in 1923, the race tests drivers, teams and manufacturers across an uninterrupted 24 hour contest where speed, reliability, strategy and endurance determine success.

Team Qatar will arrive at Le Mans following a rapid rise in international endurance racing competition. In a short period, the programme has established itself through a series of standout performances across leading endurance championships and events.

Recent milestones include securing the 2025 24H Series Overall championship with victories in the 992 AM Drivers Championship, 992 AM Teams Champi-



Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) and Lusail International Circuit (LIC) President Abdulrahman bin Abdullah al-Mannai, QMMF CEO Amro al-Hamad and LIC CEO Abdulaziz Ali al-Mohannadi pose with Team Qatar drivers Julian Hanes (left), Abdulla al-Khelaifi (second left) and Giuliano Alesi (second right), and Iron Lynx Team Principal and CEO Andrea Piccini (right).

onship and Overall 992 Teams Championship. Team Qatar also claimed victory in the 24 Hours of Dubai in the 992 AM category and continued its momentum into 2026 with category wins at the 6 Hours of Abu Dhabi and the 12 Hours of Mugello.

The team has also delivered strong performances in the European Le Mans Series campaign with pole positions in Barcelona and Paul Ricard in the LMGT3 category.

At the season opener in Barcelona, Abdulla al-Khelaifi earned Most Valuable Driver honours after leading the race for more than seventy percent of the event

before Team Qatar ultimately secured fourth position. The Team Qatar lineup for Le Mans brings together Qatari driver Abdulla al-Khelaifi alongside Julian Hanes and Giuliano Alesi, combining international endurance racing experience with local talent on motorsport's biggest stage.

Abdulrahman bin Abdullah al-Mannai, President of QMMF and Lusail International Circuit (LIC), said: "Team Qatar's participation in the 24 Hours of Le Mans is an important moment for Qatari motorsport and reflects the country's growing presence on the international stage.



Team Qatar is set to compete in the LMGT3 category aboard the Mercedes-AMG Motorsport LMGT3 at 24 Hours of Le Mans.

The achievements and the participation of Team Qatar represents the fruition of the long term investment and vision of QMMF, and its continuous goal to inspire future generations, and creating a pathway for them to compete at the highest level of motorsport.

"Through our partnership with Iron Lynx and collaboration with Mercedes-AMG, we are creating opportunities to learn, grow, and establish a stronger foundation for Qatar in global endurance racing. We are proud to see Team Qatar compete at one of motorsport's most iconic events and look forward to what this journey can achieve."

Andrea Piccini, Iron Lynx Team Principal and CEO, said: "We are proud to have joined forces with QMMF, especially for this landmark moment, the first entry in the world's most legendary race. Working with such a brilliant and dynamic federation is an important step for our team and

we really appreciate the trust that they put into us."

He added: "The QMMF achieved outstanding results in a really short time and we will give our maximum effort to help it continue its rise. We are confident in the potential of our lineup for this race and we will give our one hundred percent to deliver the best results possible."

Abdulla al-Khelaifi said: "For all of us at Team Qatar, competing at Le Mans is a proud and exciting moment. This race represents the highest level of endurance racing and being part of it is an incredible opportunity for our team."

"We arrive with great respect for the challenge ahead and with a strong desire to learn from the experience, continue developing as a team, and represent Qatar in the best possible way. We are excited for the opportunity ahead and hope to make our mark on one of the biggest stages in motorsport."

## PREMIER LEAGUE

# Arsenal critics 'not laughing anymore' after triumph: Saka

Arteta's side had faced accusations of "bottling" their title bid



Arsenal players celebrate after being confirmed as Premier League champions for the first time in 22 years.

AFP  
London

**B**ukayo Saka said that Arsenal's critics were "not laughing at us anymore" as the club celebrated their first Premier League title in more than two decades.

Gunners players and staff gathered at the club's London Colney training ground on Tuesday to watch closest challengers Manchester City draw 1-1 away to Bournemouth - a result which gave Arsenal an unassailable four-point lead at the top of the table with just Sunday's final round of matches remaining.

As the Arsenal squad relished the club's first Premier League title since 2004, there were also joyous scenes at the north London side's Emirates Stadium, where thousands of supporters gathered to mark the occasion by lighting fireworks and flares.

Arsenal, runners-up in the league for the previous three seasons, had faced accusations of "bottling" their title bid, with several observers questioning their temperament and ability to handle pressure following a 2-1 defeat at City on April 19.

But while City subsequently drew at Everton and then at Bournemouth, Arsenal won their next four league games without conceding a goal. Arsenal's success meant Gunners boss Mikel Arteta joined a select group who've won English titles both as a player and manager.

Arteta, who rejoined Arsenal as manager in December 2019 with the club in dire straits,

installed a blacked-out Premier League trophy at Colney which would light up only when the Gunners won the title

"Light that up," Saka said in footage posted by defender Jurrien Timber on his Instagram account. "Let me tell you something. Twenty-two years, 22 years. There was laughing, there was joking, they're not laughing anymore," the England international added. "Look, it is going to be shining, it is going to be shining bright."

In an Instagram post, this time on Saka's channel, Arsenal's Myles Lewis-Skelly was seen holding a champagne bottle. "They called us bottlers," said Lewis-Skelly who, like Saka, came through the club's Hale End Academy youth system. "And now we're holding the bottle."

Former Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger featured in a celebratory post put out by his old side. The Frenchman, who won three Premier League titles with the Gunners, including the 2004 'Invincibles', said: "You did it. Champions go on when others stop. This is your time. Now, go on and enjoy every moment."

City manager Pep Guardiola, who had Arteta as his assistant for two of the Manchester club's league titles, paid tribute to his fellow Spaniard. "On behalf of everyone at Manchester City, we congratulate Mikel and all the staff, players and fans on winning the Premier League," Guardiola said. "They deserve it, for so much hard work and effort."

Arsenal will be presented with the Premier League trophy after their final match of the domestic season at Crystal Palace on Sunday.

The Gunners could yet end the campaign with an impressive double when they go in search of their first Champions League title against Paris Saint-Germain in a Budapest final on May 30.

## GUARDIOLA SWERVES MAN CITY EXIT TALK AS TITLE HOPES ENDED

Pep Guardiola said he would speak to Manchester City's hierarchy over his future after a 1-1 draw at Bournemouth ended his team's hopes of winning the Premier League. The result at the Vitality Stadium confirmed Arsenal as English champions after a 22-year wait. City are four points behind their rivals with just one game remaining and cannot catch them. Widespread reports on Monday said City boss Guardiola would stand down after Sunday's final Premier League game against Aston Villa.

The club have yet to respond publicly to the speculation. "Allow me to talk with my chairman," Guardiola said.

"I have one more year (of my) contract. When I finish the season every time we talk about it. I never talk with anyone. First of all, I talk with my chairman and my bosses. "I have from my experience when the boss or manager is anticipating he is leaving -- the players don't follow you any more. You have to lead. Now is the moment to talk to him."

The Catalan was again asked for clarity in his post-match press conference but instead chose to congratulate Arsenal and their manager Mikel Arteta, who previously worked under him at City.

## SPOTLIGHT

# Aston Villa win Europa League to end 30-year trophy drought

AFP  
Istanbul

**A**ston Villa ended their 30-year trophy drought in style as spectacular goals from Youri Tielemans and Emiliano Buendia inspired a 3-0 win against Freiburg in the Europa League final yesterday.

Unai Emery's side took the lead late in the first half in Istanbul through Tielemans' thunderous volley. Buendia increased Villa's advantage with a sublime curler seconds before the interval.

Morgan Rodgers' second-half goal finished off the outclassed Germans, sealing Villa's first silverware since the 1996 League Cup and their first major European prize for 44 years. That famous European Cup final upset of Bayern Munich in 1982, secured by Peter Withe's goal in Rotterdam, has stood as the most iconic moment in Villa's 152-year history.

But Villa's current stars were determined to follow in the footsteps of the club's golden generation. Now Tielemans, Buendia, John McGinn and company can share the rarified air previously reserved for Withe, Tony Morley, Dennis Mortimer, Nigel Spink and the rest of the Class of '82.

Fittingly, with Withe and Mortimer watching from the stands, Villa crushed Freiburg while wearing white shirts instead of their traditional claret and blue kit -- just as they did against Bayern.

Villa's long-awaited continental conquest was the latest Europa League masterclass for Emery,

who has now won the tournament five times after victories with Sevilla in 2014, 2015 and 2016 and Villarreal in 2021.

Emery said this week that he didn't feel like the "king" of the Europa League, but his team's coronation got the royal seal of approval from Villa fan Prince William, who was celebrating along with around 20,000 ecstatic supporters in the Besiktas Stadium.

Hollywood actor Tom Hanks, another famous Villa fan, joined the party, sending a good luck message to the team before kickoff. It has been a memorable finish to the campaign for Villa, who sealed qualification for next season's Champions League with a win against Liverpool last week.

Villa's success over the last six days would have been impossible to imagine when they started the season with a run of six matches without a win, scoring just twice in that dismal streak. Their maiden win this season came in the Europa League against Bologna, the first of 13 victories in 15 games in the competition that culminated in their ruthless demolition of first-time European finalists Freiburg.

Despite losing in the UEFA Conference League semi-finals in 2024, and the Champions League quarters and FA Cup semis last year, Emery was convinced Villa would eventually cast off their 'nearly men' tag. The 54-year-old Spaniard's unshakable faith has been rewarded. The Europa League triumph underlined Villa's impressive renaissance since Emery took charge in October 2022 with the club languishing just three points above the relegation zone.

## Rizkallah wins thriller in third round, Hassiba retains QKC lead



Karim Rizkallah claimed a dramatic victory in Round 3 of the Qatar Karting Championship (QKC) after edging Victor Litaudon by a razor-thin margin of just 0.031 seconds in the Grand Final at Lusail International Circuit. Alfie McElroy secured third place after finishing 5.320 seconds off the pace. Felice Carena delivered another consistent performance to finish fourth, with Tameem Hassiba rounding off the top five. Hassiba continues to lead the championship with 60 points, while Litaudon sits second overall on 54 points. Rizkallah moved closer to the top after climbing to third with 52 points.