Excitement builds as Qatar-UAE Super Cup returns with expanded format, high-stakes showdowns

Al Rayyan and Al Sadd to host home matches while Qatar SC and Al Wakrah travel to UAE; tickets go on sale

FAWAD HUSSAIN
THE PENINSULA

DOHA: The Organising Committee for the second edition of the Qatar-UAE Super Cup has confirmed that preparations are on track with thrilling clashes between top clubs from both nations set to be played from January 16 to 19.

Building on the massive success of the inaugural edition, which featured the Qatar-UAE Super Cup and Super Shield matchups, the event has been expanded to offer four trophies with four clubs from each country competing across three host cities: Doha, Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

Qatar Football Association (QFA) Head of Media Ali Al Salat, announced that Al Rayyan, runners-up of the Qatar Stars League, will host UAE's Shabab Al Ahli, who finished second in the ADNOC Professional League, at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium on January 16. The teams will compete for the Challenge Shield, with kickoff scheduled for 6:00pm.

The action continues the next day with the Super Cup clash, where Amir Cup runners-up Qatar SC will travel to Dubai to face Al Nasr, who were the President's Cup runners-up, at Al Maktoum Stadium.

Reigning QSL champions Al Sadd will then meet ADNOC Professional League winners Al Wasl at their home ground of Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium at 7:00pm on January 18, with the coveted Super Shield up for grabs.

The Challenge Cup will feature a high-stakes encounter between Al Wahda, winners of the Abu Dhabi Islamic Bank Cup, and Qatar Cup champions Al Wakrah at Abu Dhabi's Al Nahyan Stadium on January 19.

Al Salat also confirmed that tickets for the matches, priced at QR30 and QR50, will be available starting today via the QSL website (qsl.qa).

"The extended Qatar-UAE Super Cup will bring tremendous benefits on both technical and competitive fronts, and we're expecting electrifying matches between the elite clubs of Qatar and the UAE," Al Salat said at a press conference.

"Our preparations are progressing smoothly, and the Organising Committee is in close coordination with the UAE Football Association to ensure seamless attendance for fans and media at the two Qatar-based matches."

Al Rayyan Club's Director of Marketing and Public Relations Faisal Al Otaibi, said that the team's preparations are in full swing under new head coach Artur Jorge, who replaced Younes Ali.

"We're eager to see the return of key players from injury. Our new management's first match will be a league game against Umm Salal on Friday and we're determined to deliver a strong performance in the second half of the season," he said.

"We're also collaborating closely with the Organising Committee to ensure a memorable experience for fans at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium."

Al Sadd SC CEO, Turki Al Ali, expressed confidence ahead of their matchup against Al Wasl.

"Our preparations are progressing well, having played friendly matches during the break. We recently faced Al Wasl in the AFC Champions League Elite, so facing them again is an exciting opportunity," he said.

"We're expecting a great turnout from the fans for this highly anticipated game."

In the inaugural edition, Al Arabi lifted the Qatar-UAE Super Cup after a 1-0 victory over Sharjah in Doha, while Shabab Al Ahli claimed the Qatar-UAE Super Shield with a dramatic 2-1 comeback win over Al Duhail in Dubai.



FROM LEFT: Al Rayyan Club's Director of Marketing and Public Relations Faisal Al Otaibi, QFA Media Head Ali Al Salat and Al Sadd SC CEO Turki Al Ali during a press conference yesterday.



Al Sadd will play Al Wasl for the prestigious Super Shield at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium on January 18.



Action starts at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium with Al Rayyan hosting Shabab Al Ahli in Challenge Shield on January 16.

Basketball: Al Arabi fall to Al Ittihad in WASL

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Al Arabi suffered a narrow defeat to Saudi Arabia's Al Ittihad Jeddah, losing 85-81 in a thrilling match at Al Gharafa Hall yesterday.

The match was part of the fourth round of the West Asian Basketball Super League (WASL) for the Gulf region.

The game featured an exciting performance with dramatic shifts in momentum. Al Ittihad came out strong in the first quarter, leading 28-22, and maintained their advantage in the second quarter with a 21-20 score. However, Al Arabi made a strong comeback in the third quarter, thanks to tight defense and fast-paced attacks, winning it 24-13. Despite this, Al Ittihad regained control in the final quarter, finishing strong with a 23-15 score to secure the win. With the loss, Al Arabi's record stands at 6 points from two wins and two losses, while Al Ittihad Jeddah also move to 6 points, placing them in third place.

In another match in the same group, Bahrain's Manama secured a crucial 87-81 win over Kuwait's Al Qadsia, with the match remaining competitive and exciting until the very end.

Following this victory, Manama also reached 6 points, putting them on equal footing with Al Qadsia, Al Ittihad Jeddah, and Al Arabi.

As the preliminary round nears its conclusion, the race for qualification intensifies. The top team from each group advances directly to the semi-finals, while the second and third-place teams will face off in a best-of-three play-off series, with the winner advancing to the semi-finals.



Qatar go down in Slovenia friendly

The Qatar handball team put up a strong fight but lost to Slovenia 30-38 in a friendly match in Ljubljana, Slovenia, yesterday. The match was part of Qatar's preparations for the 29th IHF Men's World Championship, which will be held in Croatia, Denmark, and Norway from January 14 to February 2. Qatar will now face Algeria in their final friendly ahead of the World Championship tomorrow. The team is placed in Group C for the event, alongside France, Austria and Kuwait.

WTT Star Contender: Stage set for main round as thrilling qualifiers end in Lusail

CHINTHANA WASALA
THE PENINSULA

DOHA: The final day of the qualifying rounds presented a series of thrilling matchups as the WTT Star Contender Doha 2025 continued at the Lusail Sports Arena yesterday.

In the men's singles qualifiers, Swedish top seed Kristian Karlsson advanced by defeating Romania's Julian Chirita 3-1.

However, No.2 seed Lilian Bardet of France suffered a loss in the hands of Hong Kong's Yiu Kwan To who prevailed in a thrilling five-setter (3-2). Czech Tomas Polansky edged past American Ma Jinbao 3-2 in another thriller that extended to a tiebreak, while Chinese Taipei's Kuo Guan-Hong blanked India's Anirban Ghosh 3-0 to make it to the main round. South Korea's Cho Seungmin caused an upset by defeating China's fifth seed Xu Yingbin in a closely fought 3-2 battle. Germany's Kay Stumper, the third seed in the qualifying draw, also advanced when he beat Frenchman Alexis Kouraichi 3-1.

On the women's side, Filippa Bergand booked her spot in the main draw after edging past Spain's Sofia-Xuan Zhang 3-1. Bergand, ranked 156th in the world, had earlier beaten top seed and Swedish compatriot Christian Kallberg 3-0 in the second round yesterday. No. 2 seed Charlotte Lutz of France lost to Chinese Taipei's Yeh Yi-Tian in straight sets in the second round yesterday, before the latter overcame Hong Kong's Su Tsz Tungn 3-1 to advance.

Romania's Adina Diaconu overcame Ukraine's Margaryta Pesotska 3-1, while Macau's Zhu Yuling showcased her prowess by sweeping South Korea's Lee Zion 3-0. South Korea's Yang Ha Eun beat Hong Kong's Wing Lam 3-1, while Diya Chitali emerged victorious 3-0 in an all-Indian clash against Ayhika Mukherjee.

The opening round of the main draws in men's and women's singles will see two Qatar players in action today.

Aya Mohamed will face a formidable challenge against her Round of 64 opponent, Japan's Miyuuu Kihara who is currently ranked as high as 29th in the world. In the men's side, Qatar's Mohammed Abdulwahhab will take on Park Ganghyeon of South Korea.

The doubles competitions for men, women, and mixed pairs began yesterday with qualifying matches for the Round of 16.

In men's doubles, Qatar's wildcards Rawad Al Naser and Ahmed Korani went down to No.2 seeded French duo Jules Rolland and Lilian Bardet 0-3 yesterday. Another Qatar Qatari pair, Mohammed and Abdullah Abdulwahhab received a bye to the Round of 16, where they will face Indian qualifiers Sharath Achanta and Shehit Suravajjula.

In women's doubles, Qatari Maryam Ali and Aia Mohamed are set to face Serbia's Andrea Todorovic and Kazakhstan's Sarvinoz Mirkadirova in a challenging Round of 16 clash.



Swedish top seed Kristian Karlsson advanced by defeating Romania's Julian Chirita 3-1



Qatar's Rawad Al Naser and Ahmed Korani in action during the men's doubles qualifying round.

Postecoglou not in favour of VAR stadium announcements

LONDON: Tottenham boss Ange Postecoglou said yesterday he is "no cheerleader" regarding proposals for VAR decisions being announced inside stadiums -- an initiative being trialled during this week's League Cup semi-finals.

Referees will announce final decisions following a visit to the pitchside monitor or at the conclusion of factual matters such as accidental handball by a goalscorer or offside judgements.

Only the final decision will be announced to supporters. Tottenham are at home to Premier League leaders Liverpool in Wednesday's League Cup semi-final first leg, a day after north London rivals Arsenal's match against Newcastle. The trial is part of a broader commitment to transparency from referees body Professional Game Match Officials Limited, with the aim to provide greater clarity and understanding around key decisions.

Postecoglou, who has previously spoken out against VAR, said Tuesday he was not in favour of the latest initiative.

"No," the Australian told reporters at a pre-match press conference. "Do you think if they had shown the handball on the weekend (in the lead-up to a Newcastle goal) our supporters would have been happy? Would they have come away and said 'Oh, that's great, they explained it'.

"But, at the same time, I have to accept that it's coming in, I have to accept that this is the way forward. I have to accept that I have to be a part of it but it shouldn't surprise anyone if I'm not a cheerleader for those kind of things." Postecoglou said he had yet to decide whether to play new signing Antonin Kinsky, a Czech Under-21 international goalkeeper, against Liverpool.

Spurs have been without first-choice 'keeper Guglielmo Vicario since November and he is set to be sidelined until the end of February.

"He (Kinsky) had a couple of days of training," said Postecoglou. "He is registered and eligible to play." — ***AFP***

Countdown begins: Dates set for AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027

THE PENINSULA

KUALA LUMPUR: The upcoming edition of Asia's crown jewel – the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 – will take place from January 7 to February 5, 2027, across three cities – the Kingdom's capital Riyadh, Jeddah and Al Khobar, marking the two-year countdown to the 19th edition of the Continent's most prestigious men's football tournament.

A total of five stadiums in Riyadh will host the Continent's elite: the King Fahd Sports City Stadium, the King Saud University Stadium, Imam Mohammed Ibn Saud University Stadium, Kingdom Arena and the Al Shabab Stadium.

Two stadiums have been confirmed for Jeddah – the King Abdullah Sports City and the Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City Stadium – with a new state-of-the-art venue to be built in Al Khobar, completing the world-class infrastructure set to provide the backdrop for Asia's top 24 national teams.

Chairperson of the Organising Committee for AFC Asian Cup (OCAC) Mariano V. Araneta Jr., who received an overview of the upcoming plans during the 3rd OCAC meeting in Riyadh, before the decisions were ratified by the AFC Executive Committee, said: "The record-setting AFC Asian Cup in Qatar exceeded all our expectations. In every way, Qatar 2023 has set the benchmark of excellence for all future editions of Asia's flagship tournament.

"We are resolute in our commitment to improve Asia's crown jewel with each passing edition and the foundations are now in place for Saudi Arabia to host a truly exceptional tournament in 2027.

"The focus of global football is now shifting towards the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and we thank the Saudi Arabian Football Federation and the Local Organising Committee for their remarkable efforts thus far.

"We are confident that they will bring to bear their top-class hosting capabilities and warm hospitality for the benefit of everyone across the Continent and beyond, and we wish them the very best of success."

President of Saudi Arabian Football Federation Yasser Al Misehal commented: "Confirming the dates and selecting the stadiums for the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 is a strategic milestone in our journey to host the tournament. This announcement goes beyond simply identifying locations and schedules; it reflects the ongoing high-level collaboration between us and the AFC as we work towards delivering an exceptional tournament that fulfills the aspirations of the entire Asian continent."

He added: "We are working tirelessly to ensure that the stadiums not only meet the highest international standards but also offer an unforgettable experience for both players and fans. With the tournament's timing optimally set for teams and supporters, we are confident that we will deliver a comprehensive sporting experience that extends beyond the matches themselves, creating a unique and integrated event that showcases Saudi Arabia's status as a hub for major international sporting events."

Eighteen teams have already sealed their places at the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027.

The remaining berths will be decided via the Qualifiers Final Round, which is scheduled to commence from March 2025 and features six groups of four teams – confirmed at last month's draw – with the winners of each group to make up the final cast.

Jabeur beats Collins to step up comeback

ADELAIDE: Three-time Grand Slam finalist Ons Jabeur stepped up her comeback ahead of the Australian Open by beating fourth seed Danielle Collins 7-6 (8/6), 6-2 yesterday at the Adelaide International.

The 40th-ranked Tunisian wildcard, who last week reached the Brisbane quarter-finals, had a shoulder injury last year that kept her off court after August.

Collins, the 2022 Australian Open runner-up who cancelled a retirement scheduled for the end of 2024, was playing her first WTA match since September.

Jabeur faces Kazakhstan's Yulia Putintseva in the last 16 and said she relied on her forehand to earn victory.

"It saved me a lot, this was a really good match for me," she said.

"After being injured I was not expecting to win many matches, but time off helped me physically and mentally. I was a bit tired from years of tennis." Defending champion Jelena Ostapenko needed a set to get going but kicked up the intensity in a 4-6, 6-1, 6-1 defeat of Magdalena Frech.


Ons Jabeur of Tunisia in action.

> *It (my forehand shot) saved me a lot, this was a really good match for me. After being injured I was not expecting to win many matches, but time off helped me physically and mentally. I was a bit tired from years of tennis.*
> ***Ons Jabeur***

The 17th-ranked Latvian, who won Roland Garros in 2017, will meet Madison Keys in the last 16 at the warm-up tournament leading into the first major of the year. American Keys crushed Brazil's Beatriz Haddad Maia, ranked four places above her at 16 in the world, 6-2, 6-1.

Ostapenko struggled in a scratchy opening set marred by more than 20 unforced errors against Poland's Frech.

"After the first set I just fought for every point," the 27-year-old said. "I found my game and got better and better."

Keys, who married her coach Bjorn Fratangelo in November, broke four times in her rout of Haddad Maia. "I didn't do much wrong -- and that doesn't happen very often," she said.

Greek lucky loser Maria Sakkari, who missed the latter part of 2024 with a shoulder injury, will next line up against top seed Jessica Pegula after defeating Czech Linda Noskova 6-3, 6-3.

"I'm coming back and have not had a lot of matches," the former number three said.

"Every match I play I feel better and my game is improving day by day." — ***AFP***

England captain Stokes undergoes hamstring surgery

LONDON: England Test captain Ben Stokes **(pictured)** yesterday said he had undergone surgery on his injured hamstring.

The 33-year-old all-rounder tore his left hamstring during the third Test against New Zealand in Hamilton -- England's final game of 2024. That left Stokes requiring surgery and needing a three-month absence.

Yesterday, Stokes posted a picture on Instagram of him in a car supported by a leg brace.

He captioned the photo: "Bionic Man for a while."

Stokes missed four consecutive Test matches after tearing the same hamstring while playing in the Hundred in August.

He resumed as a fully-fledged all-rounder against New Zealand.

But the additional workload from bowling proved a problem when Stokes pulled up in the middle of an over in Hamilton, left the field and played no further part in the match.



He had already been omitted from England's squad for next month's one-day international Champions Trophy and, with no Tests until May, Stokes has time to regain full fitness ahead of a busy home summer including a five-match series with India. — ***AFP***

China's most successful team kicked out of professional football

BEIJING: Guangzhou FC, China's most successful football team and former Asian champions, have been thrown out of the country's professional leagues because of "heavy historical debt", the club say.

The effective demise of the eight-time Chinese Super League (CSL) winners, once managed by Marcello Lippi and also Fabio Cannavaro, signals the end of an era in the domestic game in China.

Dozens of Chinese clubs, including fellow former CSL champions Jiangsu Suning, have folded in recent years in debt.

"The club tried various means to gain access to the professional league," Guangzhou FC, formerly known as Guangzhou Evergrande, said.

"However, because of the heavy historical debt burden, the funds we raised were insufficient to clear them." The Chinese Football Association (CFA) excluded Guangzhou from a list of 49 teams included in China's professional leagues for 2025.

Guangzhou once dominated Chinese football, winning seven consecutive CSL titles from 2011 to 2017 and two Asian Champions League crowns.

But they were relegated to China's second tier in 2022 after their majority owner, property developers Evergrande Real Estate Group, ran into financial difficulties as the country's property market slumped. The club's last title came in 2019.

Guangzhou had invested heavily in players, breaking China's transfer record multiple times as Evergrande Group pumped millions into the squad.

They paid $46m, then a record for an Asian team, for striker Jackson Martinez from Atletico Madrid in 2016. It was in an era of big spending by Chinese teams.

In that period they had a string of illustrious foreign managers including Italian World Cup winners Lippi and Cannavaro, and Brazil's Luiz Felipe Scolari.

In 2020 the club began construction on a new $1.86bn stadium that Evergrande Group said would have capacity for at least 80,000 fans.

The project was cancelled in 2022 as the group racked up $300bn in liabilities.

The club were renamed Guangzhou FC in 2021 after new CFA rules forbid teams from including references to companies or sponsors in their names.

Guangzhou finished third in second-tier China League One in the 2024 season, missing out on promotion.

"We express our sincerest apologies to fans and everyone from all walks of life that have supported the club," the club said in their statement on Monday. — ***AFP***

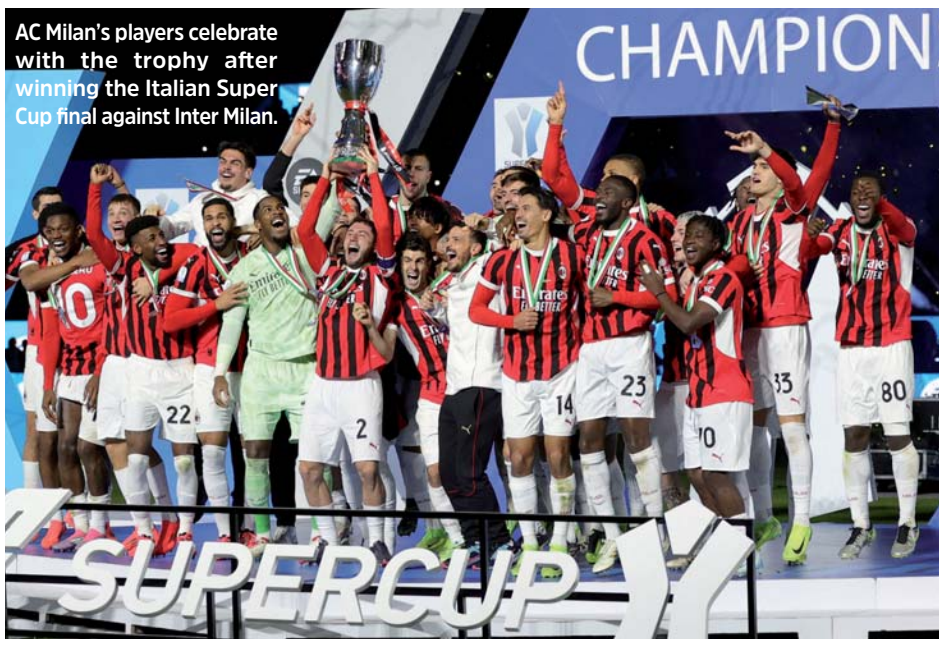
Milan stage late surge to win Italian Super Cup

RIYADH: Tammy Abraham grabbed a late winner as AC Milan came from two goals down to beat defending champions Inter Milan 3-2 and lift the Italian Super Cup trophy in Riyadh on Monday.

Inter looked on course for a fourth consecutive trophy in the tournament after goals from Lautaro Martinez and Mehdi Taremi either side of the break in Saudi Arabia.

But in a repeat of their 2-1 come-from-behind win against Juventus in the semi-final Milan returned transformed after the break.

To add to the Inter's woes the reigning Serie A champions lost Hakan Calhanoglu to a muscular injury just after half an hour with Kristjan Asllani coming on in place of the Turkish midfielder. Theo Hernandez revived AC Milan hopes with a free kick after 52 minutes as they chased a first trophy under new coach Sergio Conceicao.



AC Milan's players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Italian Super Cup final against Inter Milan.

US winger Christian Pulisic grabbed the equaliser with 10 minutes to go with English forward Abraham sealing the winner after 93 minutes to give his side the trophy for the eighth time and first since 2016.

Three-time defending champions Inter had dominated Atalanta 2-0 on Thursday in the Super Cup semis staged in Saudi Arabia for the third year in a row.

AC Milan's eighth Italian Super Cup trophy moves them equal with Inter Milan and behind Juventus who have won the tournament a record nine times. — ***AFP***

USA striker Vazquez joins Austin FC in club record deal

MIAMI: USA international striker Brandon Vazquez has returned to Major League Soccer joining Austin FC from Mexican club Monterrey in a club record deal.

The 26-year-old has signed a four year contract with the Texas club and will be registered as a 'Designated Player' who can be paid outside of the MLS salary cap.

Austin did not disclose the transfer fee but said it was a club record. Givemesport.com said the fee was in the region of $10m.

Vazquez played the first seven years of his career in MLS, making his league debut with Atlanta United in 2017.

The target man then moved to FC Cincinnati ahead of the 2020 season where he produced 26 goals and 12 assists in 62 MLS regular season matches. Cincinnati transferred the San Diego born Vazquez to Monterrey in January 2024 and he grabbed 14 goals in his year with the club.

"Austin FC is an organization with terrific fan support, with big plans for the future. I hope to make an immediate impact this season and help contribute to the success of the club for years to come," the striker said in a club release.

Vazquez has scored four goals in 11 appearances for the USA team. — ***AFP***

Coach Dyche accepts Everton job under scrutiny from new owners

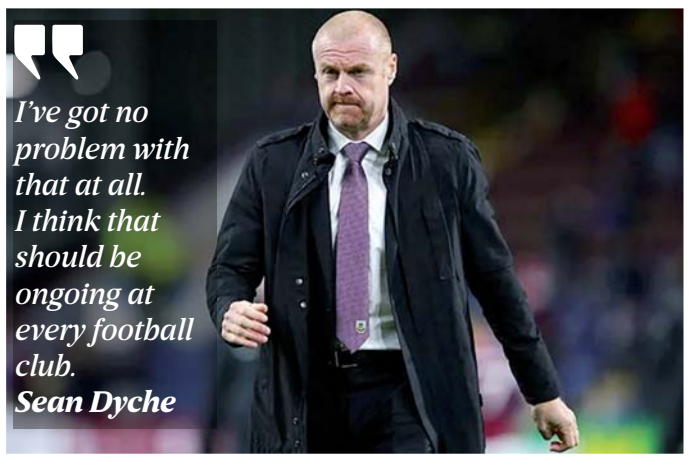
LONDON: Everton manager Sean Dyche said yesterday he understands the Toffees' new owners may be considering his position as he battles to preserve the club's Premier League status.

Speculation about his future has intensified amid reports the US-based Friedkin Group have been talking to potential successors after completing a takeover of the Liverpool club worth more than an estimated £400m ($500m) last month.

Everton have been ever present in the English top flight since 1954 but have flirted with relegation in recent seasons.

They are again battling to beat the drop this term, having won just one of their last 11 games -- a run that has left them in 16th place and one point above the drop zone.

Dyche, speaking at a pre-match press conference ahead of Everton's third-round FA Cup tie against third-tier Peterborough at Goodison Park on Thursday, was asked if he knew the club were considering his position. "To be clear, it should be," he said.


> *I've got no problem with that at all. I think that should be ongoing at every football club.*
> ***Sean Dyche***

"At the end of the day, if you're a business of this size, succession planning should surely be part of their diligence.

"I've got no problem with that at all. I think that should be ongoing at every football club. That's part of the business, surely. I'm sure it is in what we'd call normal business life outside of football... We've got to win games -- we haven't won enough this season," he said.

But former Burnley boss Dyche, who took charge almost two years ago, insisted he was still the man to turn things around.

"I am putting a lot of effort in and trying different ways and trying to work and look at all the different parameters on and off the pitch, the different ways of working," he said.

"That's part of being a manager. I'm well versed in it." — ***AFP***

Dakar Rally: Qatar's Al Attiyah climbs to second overall as teenager Variawa claims third stage

AL HENAKIYAH: Qatar's five-time Dakar Rally champion Nasser Saleh Al Attiyah moved up to second place in the overall standings while 19-year-old South African Saood Variawa secured the victory in Stage 3 yesterday.

Dacia Sanriders driver Al Attiyah and his French navigator Edouard Boulanger finished the gruelling 793-kilometre stage in three hours 20 minutes and 26 secs.

He was three minutes and 34 seconds behind the day's winner in fifth place.

"I will try to do my best to win this race. I have a good feeling and Edouard did a good job with the navigation. Everything is going well as we need it to and we're trying to do our best," Al Attiyah said after the stage.

"For the moment, everything is fine and I'm happy. It's not easy, but it's not about to open up. When we caught all the Toyotas, nobody wanted to open for us. We received a lot of sentinel system warnings, it was a real shame. I'm going to check if there's a problem. Now I will try to do my best and finish every day, but we are in a good way," the Qatari rally ace added.

Rally legend Sebastien Loeb struggled to complete the stage after rolling his car near the start, a setback that is likely to cost him his dream of a first title in the event.

"I've just heard that Sébastien Loeb rolled his car. I hope he's ok and can continue, because we need to finish with all three cars on the podium, it's very important for Dacia,"Al Attiyah said.

The nine-time World Rally Champion went off the road 12 kilometres into the 327-stage between Bisha and Al Henakiyah. After a nasty bounce his Dacia performed several impressive rolls, which seriously damaged the vehicle.

The 50-year-old Frenchman and his Belgian co-driver Fabian Lurquin set off again after a five-minute stop for repairs, but struggled throughout the rest of the stage.

Loeb, who has finished second three times in the Dakar Rally, ended the stage in 4 hours 20 minutes 12 seconds, more than an hour behind the day's winner, Variawa.

"We were able to continue but suddenly the steering rod broke, I think because of the rollover," said Loeb at the finish.

"Then we had a problem with the engine overheating. We tried to finish the stage. We managed to do so, but we lost an hour.

"It wasn't the kind of day we prefer. We lost an hour and we got the feeling that we were in 'it' up to our necks. But it is what it is, we just have to continue. We'll keep on racing and we'll see, even if winning the rally is starting to look complicated." Variawa, in a Toyota, finished 33 seconds ahead of Frenchman Guerlain Chicherit in a Mini.



Australian Daniel Sanders still leads the overall standings In the motorbike competition. PIC: DAKAR.COM

Another South African Toyota driver, Henk Lategan retained the overall lead after finishing 12th on the day, 7mins 31sec behind Variawa.

Variawa is 41st, 7 hours 47 minutes 11 seconds behind after losing eight hours the day before following a head-on collision with team-mate and compatriot Giniel de Villiers.

Loeb sits 16th, almost an hour and a quarter off first. He also lost 30 minutes on Sunday when a fan problem caused his engine to overheat. Reigning champion Carlos Sainz had retired on Monday after his Ford Raptor flipped, damaging its roll bar.

With rain forecast, the stage was shortened from the original 496 km.

In the motorbike competition, Spaniard Lorenzo Santolino, riding a Sherco and making his seventh appearance in the Dakar Rally, won a stage for the first time.

Australian Daniel Sanders still leads the overall standings.

The Rally through Saudi Arabia ends on January 17 in the Empty Quarter desert. — ***AGENCIES***



Qatar's Nasser Al Attiyah and navigator Edouard Boulanger of France steer their Dacia Sandrider during Stage 3. AFP



Al Ahli extend Julian Draxler contract until 2028

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Al Ahli SC of the Qatar Stars League confirmed yesterday that German midfielder Julian Draxler **(pictured)** has signed a contract extension, keeping him with the club for an additional three seasons, until the summer of 2028.

The former German international joined Al Ahli at the start of the 2023-2024 season from Paris Saint-Germain, initially signing a two-season contract.

The attacking midfielder played a key role in helping Al Ahli secure third place in the top flight with 22 points, trailing second-placed Al Sadd on goal difference and sitting three points behind leaders Al Duhail.

He has scored 7 goals for Al Ahli in the current season of the top flight and was named the league's Best Player of the Month for September.

Al Ahli are preparing to face Al Wakrah in the 12th round of the league at Al Thumama Stadium on Saturday.

Sinner turns focus to Australian Open defence after 'amazing' year

MELBOURNE: World number one Jannik Sinner said yesterday his "amazing" 2024 was history as he warmed up for the defence of his Australian Open title with a tough exhibition match victory on Melbourne's centre court.

The Italian is coming off a breakthrough year in which he backed up his maiden Grand Slam title at Melbourne Park by winning the US Open and ATP Finals.

He then starred for Italy as they claimed a second consecutive Davis Cup triumph, ending as the world's undisputed top player.

The 23-year-old skipped any lead-up events to the opening major of the year and instead flew straight to Melbourne for his first match of 2025.

He faced a testing battle on a hot afternoon against Australian world number 25 Alexei Popyrin, eventually prevailing 6-4, 7-6 (7/2), rallying from 5-2 down in the second set on Rod Laver Arena.

"2024 was an amazing season for me, but it has already gone now," said Sinner, who spent Christmas at home in the snow and arrived in Melbourne to a 40 degree Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) day.

"So many things have happened for me on this court and off the court," he added.

"I'm very happy to be back, even if it is a kind of exhibition. For us it's always very important trying to feel the court, the pace.

The Australian Open starts on Sunday.

Sinner is kicking off his campaign with a doping cloud hanging over him after twice testing positive for traces of the steroid clostebol in March.

He was exonerated by the International Tennis Integrity Agency, which accepted his explanation that the drug entered his system when his physiotherapist treated a cut.

But the World Anti-Doping Agency appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport and the Italian is still awaiting the verdict. — ***AFP***

Sabalenka eyes Australian Open hat-trick but Swiatek, Gauff lurk

MELBOURNE: World number one Aryna Sabalenka is gunning for a third consecutive Australian Open crown but will face a stiff challenge from Iga Swiatek, Coco Gauff and last year's runner-up Zheng Qinwen.

Sabalenka won the Brisbane International on Sunday but the headline was in Sydney where a red-hot Gauff beat Swiatek in the United Cup final in a statement victory.

The 20-year-old American Gauff bounced back impressively from parting with coach Brad Gilbert to win the WTA 1000 in Beijing and the WTA Tour Finals to end 2024.

The world number three again looked in prime form as she inspired the US to victory over Poland in the mixed-teams event and confidence is high heading into Melbourne.

"Honestly, before every Grand Slam I have the belief that I can win," said Gauff, who triumphed at the 2023 US Open for her only major title so far.

"And especially after the US Open, I proved that I could do it. I definitely have belief that I can win." The United Cup was Swiatek's first event since it was revealed she had served a one-month doping suspension.

The world number two began her 2025 campaign with four straight singles wins until coming up against Gauff, where she went down 6-4, 6-4 a week before the start of the Australian Open.

Swiatek is a five-time major champion but she has never shone at Melbourne Park, only progressing beyond the fourth round in 2022, when she was upset by Danielle Collins in the semi-finals.

The Pole also appears to be carrying a niggling left thigh injury that needed strapping during the week, but she brushed off any fears after the United Cup final.

Sabalenka is the woman to beat in Australia after the best season of her career in 2024, capped by being named WTA Player of the Year last month.

The Belarusian will be the first woman to win the Australian Open three years in a row since Martina Hingis in 1999 should she go all the way.

The 26-year-old showed she was in the mood with a romp to the trophy at the season-opening Brisbane International, dropping only one set.

"Mentally, physically, I'll be ready to go at the Australian Open," she said.

"I definitely feel confident in my game." The victory continued her superb form from 2024 where she reached seven finals and won four tournaments.

She began 2024 by successfully defending the Australian Open and bookended it by lifting her first US Open, as well as winning WTA 1000 events in Cincinnati and Wuhan.

Sabalenka recaptured the number one ranking from Swiatek, who had mysteriously pulled out of the WTA's Asian swing citing "personal matters".

Only later was it revealed Swiatek had been absent because of a one-month ban for testing positive for a banned heart medication. She denies knowingly doping.

China's Zheng had a stellar 2024 including winning Olympic gold but she goes into the first Grand Slam of the year without playing a warm-up event.



Aryna Sabalenka celebrates after winning her semi-final against Mirra Andreeva at the Brisbane International on Saturday.

Other fancied players, Jasmine Paolini, Mirra Andreeva and two-time Melbourne champion Naomi Osaka have all shown glimpses of their best form to begin the season.

Late bloomer Paolini, 29, won two of her three singles at the United Cup to follow a 2024 where she reached the finals at Roland Garros and Wimbledon and rose to world number four.

Former number one Osaka returned to the circuit last year after the birth of her daughter but failed to recapture the form that took her to four Slam crowns.

Now under the wing of Patrick Mouratoglou, who formerly coached Serena Williams, she reached her first final since 2022 at Auckland before pulling out on Sunday with an abdominal problem.

Osaka, who is not thought to be badly injured, is ranked 50 and so will be unseeded and a dangerous potential early opponent for anyone.

Teenage sensation Andreeva, a semi-finalist at Roland Garros in 2024, is expected to figure at the sharp end of Grand Slams this season.

The 17-year-old Russian already has one WTA title to her name and although she lost in the semi-finals at Brisbane to Sabalenka, the match was a lot closer than the 6-3, 6-2 scoreline suggested.

One current Grand Slam champion will be absent, however, as Wimbledon winner Barbora Krejcikova of the Czech Republic has pulled out with a back injury. — ***AFP***

Ex-England skipper Vaughan backs shake-up 'to keep Test cricket relevant'



SYDNEY: Former England captain Michael Vaughan **(pictured)** threw his support yesterday behind a two-tier structure "to save" Test cricket with the ICC reportedly meeting this month to discuss the issue.

Vaughan joined former India coach Ravi Shastri in urging a shake-up which would include relegation and promotion to help ensure the survival of the red-ball game.

Both men were on commentary duties during the thrilling five-Test series between Australia and India which the hosts won 3-1 in front of huge crowds.

"It has been a series that has only served to strengthen my views on where the game is headed and what administrators should be looking at," Vaughan said in a column for The Telegraph in London and The Sydney Morning Herald.

"I believe it is a four-day product with a set number of overs each day enforced, three matches minimum per series and two divisions of six, including promotion and relegation." Shastri said the Australia-India series proved Test cricket continued to hold its own in the face of ever-increasing T20 franchise cricket.

But, like Vaughan, it only reinforced his view that to survive, the biggest teams needed to be playing each other more often.

The Herald reported Tuesday that Australia, England, India and the International Cricket Council's new chairman Jay Shah would meet this month to discuss a two-tier structure.

Any move to two divisions would kick in after the end of the current Future Tours Programme in 2027, it added, citing sources with knowledge of the talks.

"I was delighted to read in this masthead the ICC are considering a two-tier structure from 2027 which could see the Ashes staged twice every three years," said Vaughan.

"I have been saying for a long time this is the way to keep Test cricket relevant by ensuring the best play the best as often as possible, and we get fewer mis-matches.

"There is much to iron out before any major changes are made for 2027, but there is time." The ICC has been contemplating a two-tier system for years but the plans have never got off the ground.

A proposal for a de facto premier league featuring the top seven sides was on the agenda of the world governing body in 2016.

It was scrapped after the powerful Indian board led a backlash.

While India stand to gain from playing more matches against teams such as England and Australia, the BCCI said at the time the cost to smaller cricketing nations was too great. — ***AFP***