

President of the Olympic Council of Asia H E Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad Al-Thani, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan H E Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Minister of Sports and Youth H E Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed Al-Thani and OCA officials at the end of the OCA General Assembly in Tashkent yesterday.

OCA President vows support for all Asian NOCs, athletes

THE PENINSULA

TASHKENT: H E Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad Al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee and newly elected President of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), has pledged to serve all 45 national Olympic committees in Asia and support athletes by creating the best conditions for them to excel and present an honourable image of Asian sport.

Speaking at a press conference yesterday following his election by acclamation during the OCA's 46th General Assembly in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Sheikh Joaan said the council will focus on creatively organising tournaments using advanced technology and providing an ideal environment for athletes to showcase their talent.

He emphasised the importance of keeping pace with modern technological developments in sports administration and organisation. "We will work with our partners to invest all capabilities and energies in advancing sports in Asia," he said, adding that the OCA will rely on scientific and technological progress to elevate the Asian sporting landscape.


OCA President H E Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad Al-Thani speaks to the media in Tashkent yesterday.

Sheikh Joaan said he is proud to lead the council and promised to serve the continent with transparency, resolve and partnership. "My aim is to serve all 45 national Olympic committees with a spirit of cooperation and commitment," he said.

When asked about governance and transparency, he said these issues are top priorities. The OCA will focus on managing resources efficiently by organising upcoming tournaments in a highly professional manner and strengthening financial governance. The aim is to generate profits that benefit the Olympic movement in Asia and support national Olympic committees.

He stressed that the OCA seeks to build lasting relationships with all stakeholders, noting that the International Olympic Committee operates on established systems and standards.

"We must follow these systems and enforce them effectively," he said, adding that the council is open to partnerships with institutions and companies that serve athletes and the Olympic movement in Asia.

Sheikh Joaan said his leadership aims to support youth, not only athletes but also administrators, by developing new talent in sports management. He highlighted the role of Asian media as key partners in telling the world the inspiring stories of outstanding athletes and ensuring sports reach every corner of the continent. He said he welcomes media feedback to improve the council's work and communication.

The OCA, he said, is here to serve Asia and its national Olympic committees with the best available capabilities, stressing that he is not seeking personal recognition. "Shining is the right of athletes and national Olympic committees," he said.

Sheikh Joaan added that Asia's diversity should be viewed as an opportunity rather than a challenge. He called for unity and a shared vision to move the continent forward together.

Top Asian and Gulf officials see sports boost under Sheikh Joaan's leadership

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Top officials of Asian and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) sports bodies have expressed confidence that Asian sport will receive a significant boost under the leadership of

H E Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad Al-Thani, who was elected President of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) yesterday.

The President of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) was elected by acclamation after standing as the sole candidate for the position during OCA meetings held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

Sheikh Joaan has been a leading figure in the international Olympic Movement, with extensive roles across global sports institutions. He is a member of the IOC's Olympism 365 Commission and a Board Member of the Olympic Refuge Foundation, and serves as Senior Vice President and Vice President for Asia of the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC).

As President of the QOC, he oversaw Qatar's most successful Olympic and Paralympic performances, including historic gold medals at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. He also led Qatar's hosting of major global sporting events and currently serves as Vice President of the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, reinforcing Qatar's position as a global sporting hub.



Vice President of the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee (SOPC) Prince Fahd bin Jalawi Al-Saud said the election of Sheikh Joaan represents a triumph for sport across the entire Asian continent, and the Gulf region in particular. Speaking to QNA, he said Sheikh Joaan represents the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as he represents Qatar, reflecting the historic and long-standing relationship between the two countries.

He added that he is fully confident in the extensive expertise Sheikh Joaan possesses to help advance Asian sport and elevate it to the highest global levels, affirming his full support and trust in the QOC President's ability to lead the OCA into a new era of achievement.

President of the Kuwait Olympic Committee Sheikh Fahad Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah said Sheikh Joaan's leadership of the OCA is a gain for the entire Asian continent. He praised Sheikh Joaan's clear contributions to the advancement of Qatari and Asian sport and affirmed Kuwait's full support for his upcoming term.

Secretary-General of the United Arab Emirates National Olympic Committee Faris Al Mutawa said Sheikh Joaan's election is a source of pride for GCC nations and the Arab world. He added that the UAE looks forward to strengthening cooperation with the OCA under Sheikh Joaan's leadership to achieve further successes that reflect the ambitions of Asian nations.

For his part, President of the Palestine Olympic Committee Jibril Rajoub said the election underscores Qatar's prominent role in supporting and developing Asian sport. He expressed confidence that tangible progress and success will be achieved in the coming period under Sheikh Joaan's leadership, building on his record of achievements.

Historic day

Meanwhile, QOC Vice President Mohammed Yousef Al Manaa said the OCA General Assembly meeting that elected Sheikh Joaan as president marks a historic day and will usher in a major transformation for the Council in the coming period.

Speaking on the sidelines of the General Assembly in Tashkent, Al Manaa said Sheikh Joaan's assumption of the presidency represents a significant gain not only for Qatar, but for Asian sport as a whole and for athletes across the continent.

"There is no doubt that Asian sport will enter a new phase of ambitious vision and remarkable development under the leadership of His Excellency Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad Al-Thani. His lasting impact on Qatari sport is evident, most notably through achieving Qatar's first Olympic gold medal, among many other major accomplishments," Al Manaa said.

Second Vice President of the QOC and Vice President of the Olympic Council of Asia for West Asia, Dr Thani bin Abdulrahman Al Kuwari, said the election of Sheikh Joaan was the culmination of a rich and distinguished sporting career.

He added: "Although the next phase carries significant challenges, our absolute confidence in His Excellency's leadership abilities assures us that he will guide Asian sport to the forefront." *With inputs from QNA*



2015 • Elected President of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC).
2017 • Became a Board Member of the IOC Olympic Refuge Foundation.
2018 • Joined the IOC Public Affairs and Social Development through Sport Commission.
2019 • Received the Contribution to the Olympic Movement Award from the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC).
2021 • Took chair of the Board of Al Shaqab and its steering committee for equestrian sport.
2022 • Elected Senior Vice President and Vice President for Asia of the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC First Vice President).
• Became a member of the IOC Olympism 365 Commission.
2024 • Re-elected President of the Qatar Olympic Committee for the Olympic term 2024-2028.
• Continued leadership of major event delivery in Qatar, including World Aquatics Championships Doha 2024 and others.
2025 • July 16: Officially announced his candidacy for President of the OCA.
• August 1: Confirmed as the sole candidate for OCA presidency.
2026 • January 26: Elected President of the Olympic Council of Asia.

MAJOR SPORTING EVENTS HOSTED AND OVERSEEN DURING H E SHEIKH JOAAN'S LEADERSHIP

- IHF Men's Handball World Championship, Qatar 2015.
- FIG Artistic Gymnastics World Championships 2018.
- ANOC World Beach Games 2019.
- World Athletics Championships Doha 2019.
- World Judo Championships 2023.
- World Aquatics Championships Doha 2024.
- Doha awarded 2030 Asian Games hosting rights (H E Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad Al Thani chairs the organising committee).

ACHIEVEMENTS UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF H E SHEIKH JOAAN AS QOC PRESIDENT

Olympic Games success

- **Tokyo 2020 Olympics**

Qatar won two gold medals (weightlifting and high jump) and one bronze, marking its best-ever Olympic result. Fares El Bakh won Qatar's first Olympic gold in weightlifting. Mutaz Essa Barshim won high jump gold. The men's beach volleyball team won bronze. This was a milestone in Qatar's Olympic history.
Qatar topped the Arab medal standings at Tokyo 2020.

- **Paris 2024 Olympics**

Qatar continued competitive performance with Mutaz Barshim adding a bronze medal in the high jump.

- **Paralympic Games achievements**

Qatar won a bronze medal at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, showing sustained success in Paralympic sports.

Awards and recognition

- Sheikh Joaan received the Contribution to the Olympic Movement Award from the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC) in 2019.
- He was awarded the Best Arab Sports Personality title.

National sports development

- QOC under his leadership supported Team Qatar to broaden success across regional competitions and training programs, contributing to increased medal presence and athlete support systems across Olympic cycles. The committee also expanded athlete development policies and training environments, evidenced through consistent results and participation growth.

Sheikh Joaan at OCA helm reflects Qatar's sports stature, says QMMF President

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: President of the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) Abdulrahman bin Abdul Latif Al-Mannai has congratulated H E Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad Al Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC), on his election as President of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA).

Several Qatari sports bodies congratulated Sheikh Joaan on his election, saying the achievement reflects Qatar's advanced standing in sports at both the continental and international levels.

Al Mannai said the election of Sheikh Joaan to this prestigious position is a well-deserved culmination of a career filled with successes and accomplishments. It also recognises his pioneering role over more than a decade in leading the Qatari Olympic movement, establishing Doha as a global capital of sport, and setting a benchmark for modern sports management, he added.

The QMMF President noted that the unprecedented organisational successes and outstanding Olympic results achieved under Sheikh Joaan's leadership, most notably Qatar's best-ever Olympic performance at the Tokyo 2020 Games, along with hosting major international and continental championships, are clear evidence of his leadership competence and comprehensive strategic vision, capable of guiding Asian sports to new heights.

Al Mannai added that the extensive experience of Sheikh Joaan, both through his presidency of the QOC and his position as First Vice President of the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC), in addition to his contributions to developing sports talent through the Qatar Olympic Academy, enhances the prospects for a qualitative leap forward for the OCA in the coming period.



President of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) H E Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad Al Thani speaks during OCA's 46th General Assembly in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, yesterday.

Al Mannai affirmed his great confidence in Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad Al Thani's ability to represent the Asian continent in the best possible way and to continue promoting the values of the Olympic Movement. He wished him success in his new role and praised the unlimited support provided by the wise leadership to sports and athletes, in line with Qatar National Vision 2030.

Meanwhile, Qatar Football Association President and QOC Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashid Al Buenain congratulated Sheikh Joaan on his election.

"Heartfelt congratulations to His Excellency Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad Al-Thani on the occasion of his election as President of the Olympic Council of Asia. A leadership stemming from extensive experience and an ambitious vision that will contribute to the development of the Olympic movement on the continent and the enhancement of the Asian sports journey," he wrote on X.

Mohammed Ahmed Al Mudahka, President of the Qatar Chess Association also welcomed the appointment of Sheikh Joaan as President of the Olympic Council of Asia.

He said it is a significant gain not only for the State of Qatar but for Asian sports as a whole. He noted that the Asian continent is poised for an ambitious vision and substantial development in the future under the leadership of His Excellency Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad Al Thani.

Al Mudahka expressed his pride in the election of Sheikh Joaan to head the world's largest regional organization, a decision stemming from confidence in his ambitious vision to lead Asian sports to greater heights.

Also, Executive Director of the Qatar Olympic Academy (QOA), Khalil Al Jaber, expressed his best wishes for success to Sheikh Joaan during his tenure as President of the Olympic Council of Asia, which is considered the second-largest sporting organisation in the world.

Al Jaber explained that Sheikh Joaan left a clear and lasting mark during his presidency of the QOC, whether through the major sporting events hosted by the State of Qatar or through the notable achievements realised by Qatari sport.

He added that the OCA is set to witness a significant qualitative leap during His Excellency's presidency, given his strong vision and great ambition to develop the sports system and host major international sporting events.

Sheikh Joaan's OCA presidency key for Asian sport: AFC President

THE PENINSULA



DOHA: Asian Football Confederation (AFC) President and FIFA First Vice President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa **(pictured)** said the election of President of the Qatar Olympic Committee H E Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad Al Thani as President of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) reflects the strong confidence of the Asian sports family in his leadership and ability to guide the Council toward greater excellence and development.

In a statement, Shaikh Salman said Sheikh Joaan's presidency will have a direct and positive impact on the future of sport in Asia by strengthening cooperation among continental sports institutions, supporting development and sustainability pathways, and reinforcing Olympic values across federations and national Olympic committees.

He congratulated Sheikh Joaan on his election and stressed that the next phase requires leadership marked by experience, vision and strong institutional capability. Shaikh Salman noted that Sheikh Joaan's high administrative competence and extensive experience make him well qualified to lead the OCA toward a bright future that meets the aspirations of the Asian sports community.

Qatar and Saudi Olympic academies sign cooperation agreement

TASHKENT: The Qatar Olympic Academy signed a cooperation agreement yesterday with the Saudi Olympic Academy on the sidelines of the 46th General Assembly of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), currently underway in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent.

The agreement aims to strengthen regional and Gulf sports cooperation and comes as part of ongoing efforts to promote the Olympic movement and support sport as a tool for community and regional development.

Under the agreement, both sides will enhance cooperation in the development of sports training personnel, while supporting the exchange of knowledge and practical expertise between the two brotherly countries, reflecting the strong historical and sporting ties between the State of Qatar and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Key provisions of the agreement include the exchange of invitations to attend courses, seminars, and conferences organized by both academies, enabling participants to benefit from diverse professional experiences.

The agreement also provides for the organization of joint training courses for professionals working in sports academies, with a focus on advanced training methodologies.

In addition, the two academies will hold joint workshops to address key sports-related issues, including the development of educational programs and the discussion of administrative and organisational challenges.

The cooperation framework further includes the implementation of joint programs aimed at developing specialized sports training personnel, particularly through initiatives designed to qualify and prepare coaches across various sports disciplines.

The signing of the agreement represents a strategic step toward building a new generation of sports leaders in Asia and the Gulf, especially in light of global challenges such as the shortage of qualified sports professionals and the impact of pandemics on the sports sector.

The agreement also contributes to enhancing the sustainability of sports development.

The partnership aligns with Qatar National Vision 2030, which emphasizes sport as a driver of human and social development, as well as Saudi Vision 2030, which seeks to diversify the economy through sports and entertainment initiatives. — ***QNA***

Europe's elite jostle for last-16 places

PARIS: Holders Paris Saint-Germain, Real Madrid and Liverpool are among the clubs battling for direct passage to the last 16 of the Champions League going into the final round of the league phase this week.

Fifteen teams have already sealed their progress to the knockout rounds but a further 17 sides will be competing for the remaining places with all 18 games kicking off at the same time tomorrow.

The top eight receive a bye into the last 16 while the next 16 teams enter Friday's draw for the play-offs, although PSG demonstrated last season that is no obstacle to lifting the trophy.

Here is a look at what's at stake on matchday eight:

Arsenal, with seven wins from seven, and Bayern Munich are the only two clubs already assured of a place in the last 16. The Gunners could become the first team to win all eight games since the league phase was introduced last season. They host Kairat Almaty, who are bottom of the table with just a single point.

Bayern's lone defeat in Europe came at Arsenal in November. Vincent Kompany's side go to PSV Eindhoven in their final fixture.

Knockout place guaranteed Real Madrid, record 15-time winners of the competition, will wrap up a last-16 berth with victory away to Jose Mourinho's Benfica. Liverpool will join them if they beat Qarabag at Anfield, while Tottenham know victory at Eintracht Frankfurt will allow them to also bypass the play-offs despite their domestic struggles.

Eight teams are locked on 13 points, with reigning champions PSG hosting Newcastle at the Parc des Princes. Chelsea currently occupy the final top-eight spot but face a tricky assignment at Napoli, coached by former Blues boss Antonio Conte.

Barcelona and Manchester City are ninth and 11th respectively. They are poised to sneak into the top eight if any of the teams above them slip up. At least PSG or Newcastle, if not both, will drop points. Sporting Lisbon, Atletico Madrid and Atalanta are also in the mix, while Inter -- who have lost three matches in a row -- and Juventus sit on 12 points. All of those clubs will progress from the league phase regardless of Wednesday's results.

On course for knockouts Borussia Dortmund are all but certain to advance alongside Galatasaray. Azerbaijan's Qarabag are on track to reach the knockouts for the first time after a last-gasp win over Eintracht last week. Marseille, Bayer Leverkusen, Monaco, PSV, Athletic Bilbao and Olympiacos round out the top 24 as it stands, but there are seven clubs beneath them who could force their way back into contention.

Outside looking in Italian champions Napoli are the most notable team at risk of missing out on the knockout phase. They are 25th -- behind Olympiacos by virtue of fewer goals scored.

FC Copenhagen also have eight points. Benfica and Ajax, both former European champions, must win to stand a chance of qualifying. The same is true for Club Brugge, Bodo/Glimt, Pafos and Union Saint-Gilloise. — ***AFP***

Mourinho between Real and Champions League last 16

LISBON: Real Madrid are aiming to seal direct passage to the Champions League last 16 at Benfica tomorrow, but standing in their way is their divisive former coach Jose Mourinho.



Benfica's Portuguese head coach Jose Mourinho.

The veteran Portuguese still has slim hopes of taking Benfica into the play-off round, needing victory and other results to go their way, but pride alone is enough of a reward as he takes on Alvaro Arbeloa's 15-time European champions.

Mourinho never won the Champions League with Madrid, coaching the club between 2010 and 2013, a period in which rivals Barcelona had the upper hand both at home and on the continent.

His opposite number at the Estadio da Luz is a former disciple of his in ex-Madrid defender Arbeloa, one of his most loyal foot soldiers during his reign.

However, their strong prior relationship has not stopped the oft-antagonistic Mourinho from taking an apparent dig at him ahead of the match.

"For me, it's a surprise when coaches with no history get the opportunity to manage the most important clubs in the world," said Mourinho last week, interpreted as commentary on Arbeloa's appointment to replace Xabi Alonso earlier in January. Arbeloa had been coaching Madrid's reserve team, with Los Blancos his debut first team job. He responded with grace to Mourinho's words.

"You all know what Mourinho means to me. If a coach like that speaks, especially him, I listen and analyse it," said the 43-year-old Spaniard.

Madrid crashed out of the Copa del Rey at second-tier Albacete in Arbeloa's first match at the helm but have won the following three games, including a 6-1 demolition of Monaco.

Sitting third in the league phase table, victory would ensure Madrid progressed to the last 16, avoiding the play-off round, and gaining second-leg home advantage.

Madrid moved on after Mourinho but some of his hallmarks have returned, particularly in recent years as the club regularly rail against officiating in Spain.

Mourinho's siege mentality has been embraced by club president Florentino Perez, and Arbeloa's appointment means some aspects of the Portuguese's game returning too.

The now-Benfica boss advocated for a counter-attacking Madrid and Arbeloa says he would be foolish not to utilise that strategy.

Mourinho, a rare coach admired by Perez, has only faced Real Madrid once since leaving the club in 2013. While coaching Manchester United in 2017 he fell to a 2-1 defeat by Madrid in the European Super Cup final in Macedonia.

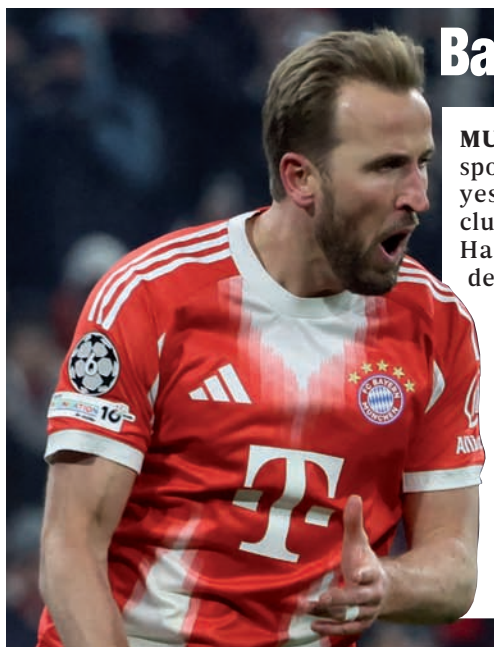
In the first few years after leaving Madrid he was occasionally linked with a return, although Perez never pulled the trigger on it, seemingly aware of the negative effects it could have.

Mourinho stoked the rivalry between Madrid and Barcelona to unprecedented heights in the modern game, controversially poking then Barca assistant Tito Vilanova in eye during a brawl following a Spanish Super Cup defeat in 2011. There were also fractures in the Madrid dressing room under the pressure of Mourinho's approach and demands.

Since his heyday at Porto, Chelsea and Inter Milan, which led him to Madrid, Mourinho's career has taken a turn for the worse. He won the Europa League with Manchester United in 2017 during a difficult spell there, before modest stints at Tottenham, Roma and Fenerbahce.

Benfica appointed him in September, hoping he could turn things around, but several defeats in the Champions League have left them facing an early European exit.

Domestically Benfica sit third, some way behind leaders Porto, who knocked them out of the Portuguese Cup earlier in January, with fans left furious. Amid the problems Mourinho has, Madrid's visit to Lisbon is an invitation for him to reassert some dominance, albeit for one night only, before a club which has never forgotten him. — ***AFP***



Bayern confirm talks to extend Kane's contract

MUNICH: Bayern Munich sporting director Max Eberl yesterday confirmed the club are in talks to extend Harry Kane's **(pictured)** deal at the club.

The 32-year-old England forward, who joined Bayern in 2023, has a deal until 2027.

"We're talking to Harry, we're talking," Eberl said at a Bundesliga event in Frankfurt.

"Everyone knows at some point a decision has to be made," he added.

Club CEO Jan-Christian Dreesen said on Monday: "Harry has great confidence in us and he feels comfortable in Munich.

"He and his family are settled in. Therefore we've got absolutely no reason to rush."

Long without a team trophy, Kane broke his drought in 2025 when Bayern won the Bundesliga.

This campaign, Bayern are eight points clear in the league and sit second in the 36-team Champions League table.

Speaking in October, Kane said he could "definitely imagine" extending his stay in Germany.

Kane has scored 119 goals in 126 games for Bayern, while adding 30 assists.

This campaign, Kane has 34 goals in 30 games. With 21 goals in 19 Bundesliga matches, Kane is on track to break the single season league record of 41 goals set by Robert Lewandowski in 2020-21. — ***AFP***

Al Arabi win marathon shootout as Muaither, Al Waab reach quarters

FAWAD HUSSAIN
THE PENINSULA


Al Arabi players celebrate their win over Qatar SC.


Action during the match between Al Waab and Mesaimeer.

DOHA: Al Arabi edged Qatar SC 12-11 in a marathon penalty shootout after a 2-2 draw in regulation time to reach the quarter-finals of the QSL Cup at Saoud Bin Abdulrahman Stadium yesterday.

In contrast, Muaither and Al Waab enjoyed an easy passage to the last-eight stage after registering comfortable victories in their respective matches.

Al Arabi, who qualified for the play-off after finishing fourth in the league with 19 points, trailed from Yan Matheus' 14th-minute strike until Karl Toko Ekambi converted a penalty in 57th minute to level the scores.

However, Qatar SC regained the lead in the very next minute through Joao Pedro.

Al Arabi forced the match into penalties when Joao Pedro Darros scored a dramatic equaliser in the second minute of stoppage time.

Both teams showcased a near-perfect display in the ensuing penalty shootout, which extended to 12 rounds. The contest was finally decided when Ibrahim Abdelhalim Masoud missed Qatar SC's final penalty, paving the way for Al Arabi's progression to the quarter-finals.

At Al Khor Stadium, Siriky Diabate and Etyan Morales were on target as Muaither produced a strong second-half performance to defeat Al Kharaitiyat 2-0 in their play-off match for a place in the last eight.

After a goalless first half, Diabate broke the deadlock in the 56th minute, before Morales sealed the victory with a goal in the 76th minute. Muaither had finished third in the league phase with 20 points.

Meanwhile, Al Waab delivered a commanding display to beat Mesaimeer 3-1 and book their place in the quarter-finals.

Mekki Mohsen struck early for Al Waab in the third minute, with Ameer Fowadah doubling the lead in the 32nd minute at Al Shamal Stadium. Baha Faisal's strike in the 69th minute effectively put the game beyond doubt, before Mohammed Djenidi scored Mesaimeer's consolation goal five minutes later.

Al Waab had earlier finished fifth in the league standings with 18 points.

Three more matches will be played today as teams eye the remaining quarter-final spots. Al Markhiya face Al Khor at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium to open the action, before Al Sailiya take on Al Bidda at Grand Hamad Stadium, and Al Shahania square off with Al Shamal at Hamad Bin Khalifa Stadium in simultaneous kick-offs.

Al Rayyan and Umm Salal have already secured their places in the quarter-finals after finishing in the top two positions of the single-stage league table.

Sinner races on as heatwave hits Melbourne


Italy's Jannik Sinner hits a shot against Italy's Luciano Darderi.

MELBOURNE: Jannik Sinner sent an Australian Open statement in rolling into the quarter-finals yesterday but fellow champion Madison Keys was dethroned as Melbourne braced for forecast 45C heat.

Fifth seed Lorenzo Musetti battled stifling conditions to set up a last-eight showdown with Novak Djokovic and six-time major champion Iga Swiatek progressed in rampant fashion.

Two-time defending champion Sinner raced to a 6-1, 6-3, 7-6 (7/2) victory over fellow Italian and close friend Luciano Darderi.

The second seed plays United States eighth seed Ben Shelton or Norway's 12th-seeded Casper Ruud next.

Djokovic and Sinner are on course for a blockbuster last-four showdown.

Sinner told Margaret Court Arena, where temperatures hovered around 30C in the early evening: "It was difficult to put the match away, happy I closed it in three sets." Sinner sent down a bumper 19 aces in the match, and said his hard work had paid off.

"Still room to improve but happy how I have come back in the new season," he added.

In another clash between compatriots and friends, Jessica Pegula defeated title-holder Keys, 6-3, 6-4.

The Americans host a tennis podcast together, "The Player's Box", and had even been planning to record an episode on the eve of their match.

All that was put aside as a clinical Pegula dominated to set up a last-eight encounter with another American in fourth seed Amanda Anisimova.

Anisimova, beaten finalist at last year's US Open and Wimbledon, cooled herself off with bags of ice before taming China's Wang Xinyu 7-6 (7/4), 6-4.

Pegula, the sixth seed, is chasing an elusive Grand Slam title aged 31, her best performance to date reaching the US Open final in 2024.

AUSTRALIAN OPEN RESULTS

Men's singles: 4th round
Lorenzo Musetti (ITA x5) bt Taylor Fritz (USA x9) 6-2, 7-5, 6-4
Jannik Sinner (ITA x2) bt Luciano Darderi (ITA x22) 6-1, 6-3, 7-6 (7/2)
Ben Shelton (USA x8) bt Casper Ruud (NOR x12) 3-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-4
Novak Djokovic (SRB x4) bt Jakub Mensik (CZE x16) w/o

Women's singles: 4th round
Jessica Pegula (USA x6) bt Madison Keys (USA x9) 6-3, 6-4
Amanda Anisimova (USA x4) bt Wang Xinyu (CHN) 7-6 (7/4), 6-4
Elena Rybakina (KAZ x5) bt Elise Mertens (BEL x21) 6-1, 6-3
Iga Swiatek (POL x2) bt Maddison Inglis (AUS) 6-0, 6-3

An erratic Keys made 27 unforced errors to Pegula's 17 and fired down six double faults as her title defence folded.

Fifth seed Elena Rybakina dismantled 21st seed Elise Mertens of Belgium 6-1, 6-3 and will play second seed Swiatek.

The Pole demolished home qualifier Maddison Inglis 6-0, 6-3 as she closes on a first Australian crown, having won all three of the other majors. Inglis, ranked 168, was in the biggest match of her life after two-time Melbourne champion Naomi Osaka pulled out injured from their third-round meeting.

Just being in the fourth round earned Inglis a life-changing Aus$480,000 ($330,000).

After brutal weather caused the suspension of matches on Saturday, temperatures rose sharply again.

Longer matches on Monday had 10-minute breaks in certain circumstances as part of measures to protect player health.

Temperatures are forecast to hit a blistering 45C on Tuesday, meaning matches are likely to be played under roofs on the three courts that have them.

Melbourne Park king Djokovic was supposed to face the 20-year-old Jakub Mensik in the night match.

But the Czech player pulled out injured on Sunday, sending 10-time champion Djokovic into the last eight without hitting a ball.

The 38-year-old Serb will play Musetti after the Italian defeated American ninth seed Taylor Fritz 6-2, 7-5, 6-4.

Djokovic has won nine of their 10 previous meetings, but Musetti said: "I feel ready to try to push him to his maximum." — ***AFP***

Ex-Spain coach Moreno denies using AI to manage Sochi

BARCELONA: Former Spain coach Robert Moreno denied using artificial intelligence tool ChatGPT to prepare for games during his time in charge of Russian club Sochi yesterday.

Moreno left top-flight side Sochi in September 2025 after a poor run of results and reports emerged recently in Russia saying he had heavily relied on ChatGPT in his role, even using it to decide between potential signings.

"I have never used ChatGPT or any AI to prepare matches, decide line-ups, or choose players. That is completely false," wrote Moreno in an open letter sent to Spanish newspaper *Marca.*

The 48-year-old said he used technology in his job but made his decisions himself and with his staff.

"My career in football began precisely through data and video analysis. It's what I specialise in and what made the difference in my early days," continued Moreno.

"Like any professional coaching staff, we use analysis tools -- GPS, Wyscout (a football analytics database), video, scouting platforms.

"Technology helps process information faster, but the sporting decisions are always made by the coaching staff."

Moreno said the reports about his use of ChatGPT came from former club executive Andrei Orlov whom he had differences with.

"My departure was by mutual agreement at a time of inconsistent results and disagreements over sporting planning, as is common in football," added Moreno.

"To present it as being 'fired for using ChatGPT' simplifies something much more complex and is also untrue." Moreno, who has also coached Monaco and Granada, took over the Spanish national team on a temporary basis in 2019 from Luis Enrique.

He was appointed on a full-time basis in June that year after Luis Enrique resigned because his daughter Xana was diagnosed with a rare bone cancer.

Spain rehired Luis Enrique to replace Moreno in November 2019 after his daughter's death. The coach accused Moreno of being "disloyal" for trying to stay in charge for Euro 2020. — ***AFP***

Pakistan delay final call on T20 World Cup participation

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan cricket chief Mohsin Naqvi said yesterday a final decision on the team's participation in next month's Twenty20 World Cup will be delayed by up to a week, keeping open a possible boycott over Bangladesh's withdrawal.

Naqvi met Pakistan's Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif on Monday to take his advice on the situation, after which a call was expected to be made, but the cricket board boss posted on X that "the final decision will be taken either on Friday or next Monday".

Describing a "productive meeting" with the premier, he said Sharif "directed that we resolve it while keeping all options on the table".

Naqvi threw the national cricket team's participation into doubt on Saturday, saying Pakistan could pull out after the International Cricket Council (ICC) replaced Bangladesh in the tournament.

Local media also reported that Pakistan could also boycott a February 15 match against arch-rivals India over political tension.

Pakistan's reaction comes after the ICC rejected Bangladesh's demands to relocate their World Cup matches from India to Sri Lanka over security fears.

On Saturday, the ICC replaced Bangladesh with Scotland as per the Twenty20 international rankings.

Pakistan backed Bangladesh's stance in Wednesday's ICC Board virtual meeting, saying there was a precedence of relocating India's matches on security fears from Pakistan in last year's Champions Trophy.

Then India, who have not toured Pakistan since 2008, played all their matches in Dubai. The same option was given to Pakistan who will not tour India and play their Twenty20 World Cup matches in Sri Lanka under an agreement signed last year saying the two countries will play on neutral venues whenever one of them hosts an ICC event.

Pakistan and Bangladesh revived their sour relations after the ousting of prime minister Sheikh Hasina in a student-inspired uprising in Bangladesh. In contrast, Dhaka and New Delhi fell out over demands India hand over the fugitive former premier. — ***AFP***

Carrick relishes Manchester United opportunity after stunning Arsenal

LONDON: Michael Carrick urged Manchester United to build on the remarkable start to his interim reign after Matheus Cunha's rocket sealed a stunning 3-2 win at Premier League leaders Arsenal on Sunday.

Carrick has been hired until the end of the season following Ruben Amorim's dismissal on January 5.

The former United midfielder jumped at the chance to return to Old Trafford after being sacked by second-tier Middlesbrough in June.

United opted to go with a caretaker boss to give them time for a comprehensive search for a permanent success to Amorim.

But co-owner Jim Ratcliffe and his army of advisers in the United hierarchy might have stumbled across the solution with their move for Carrick.

He has galvanised United to play in a far more vibrant manner than their timid displays under Amorim, securing a 2-0 victory over Manchester City in his first game before putting a dent in Arsenal's title charge with an impressive win in north London.

United are up to fourth in the Premier League and Carrick praised the players for responding to his tactical demands.

"The boys have been fantastic in terms of taking things on, wanting to do it and investing into it. I think in the messages we're giving them and how we behave. I've got belief in them and I try and show that," Carrick said.


Manchester United's interim coach Michael Carrick (centre) looks out at his players during match against Arsenal.

> *The boys have been fantastic in terms of taking things on, wanting to do it and investing into it.*
> ***Michael Carrick***

"It's not so much the words, it's easy for me to tell the players something, or the boys to speak about a game, but to have the feeling to really put it in.

"You've got to feel that confidence and that belief through and they've definitely got that and we need to keep that."

Carrick, who spent 12 successful years as a United player, responded to Cunha's glowing assessment by admitting he is relishing his unexpected opportunity.

"I've been here less than two weeks and I'm desperate to do well and improve the team and finish as high as we can," he said.

"And having days like this and last week is something you get greedy for and we want to keep building on this for weeks to come." — ***AFP***