

Qatar Masters returns with stellar field at 'immaculate' Doha Golf Club

FAWAD HUSSAIN
THE PENINSULA

DOHA: The Qatar Masters returns for its 29th edition, once again drawing a star-studded field to Doha Golf Club (DGC) as golfers vie for the iconic Mother of Pearl Trophy.

The picturesque course will host 144 players, including eight former champions, all chasing a repeat victory in the Qatari capital when the DP World Tour event tees off tomorrow.

The past winners in the field include Darren Fichardt (RSA), Chris Wood (ENG), Eddie Pepperell (ENG), Justin Harding (RSA), Jorge Campillo (ESP), Antoine Rozner (FRA), Ewen Ferguson (SCO) and Rikuya Hoshino (JPN).

DGC will also witness a major milestone as Irish legend Padraig Harrington makes his 500th DP World Tour start, becoming the 50th player to reach the mark.

With the course in immaculate condition and forecasts promising mostly sunny, light winds, the stage is set for a thrilling week of golf at a venue that has delivered many dramatic finishes over the years.

"The forecast is looking very good. A bit windy on Thursday afternoon, but the rest of the week should see light winds and sunshine. We may see a little rain over the weekend, but not much," DP



FROM LEFT: QGA Board Member Mohammed Faisal Al Naimi, QGA General Secretary Fahad Nasser Al Naimi, QGA President Hamad Al Mana, Head of Middle East for the DP World Tour Tom Phillips, DP World Tour Senior Tournament Director Mikael Eriksson and QGA Technical Director Mike Shoueiri at a press conference.

World Tour Senior Tournament Director Mikael Eriksson said at a pre-event conference at DGC yesterday.

"I've been coming here for 12 years, and I don't think I've ever seen the course in such immaculate condition. I received several messages from key players last night saying how grateful they are to be back. We're expecting a very tough and fantastic week."

Head of Middle East for the DP World Tour Tom Phillips praised the event's growth and longevity.

"Twenty-nine years is an incredible run. We work closely with the Qatar Golf Association (QGA) and have received

crucial support from the Qatar Olympic Committee," Phillips said.

"In 2027, we'll celebrate 30 years, which will be a huge milestone."

Qatar's hopes rest with Ali Al Shahrahi, Saleh Al Kaabi and Daniil Sokolov, with QGA General Secretary Fahad Nasser Al Naimi optimistic about their chances.

"We have three national team players in good shape," he said. "They started the season in September and have produced strong results. We are hoping one of them can make history and make the cut."

With three events completed and three still to follow

after this week, the Qatar Masters marks the halfway point of the International Swing, and the final Middle East stop before the DP World Tour Play-Offs.

The Swing winner earns entry into every Back 9 event, a \$200,000 bonus, and a chance to qualify for the Genesis Scottish Open if they are the highest-ranked non-exempt player.

Schaper eyes win to extend SA legacy in Doha

Meanwhile, Race to Dubai leader Jayden Schaper is aiming to continue South Africa's rich history at the Qatar Masters as he chases his third win of the season.

Across 28 editions, South Africa leads the Qatar Masters with six victories. Branden Grace has won twice, while Fichardt, Ernie Els, Retief Goosen and Justin Harding have also lifted the Mother of Pearl Trophy.

"If you look to the past, South Africans have had a lot of success here," said Schaper.

"I enjoy this course, from tee to green it's one of the best we play all year. It's brutal and tough, and the greens are firm and fast. I like using slopes around the greens."

"Fourth week in a row, but it's nice to be back in Qatar. I've got good memories and results here."



A view of Doha Golf Club.



تحذير

بتاريخ ٤-٧ فبراير ٢٠٢٦ سيقام سباق رالي قطر الدولي بمناطق لجذيع شمال طريق الحويلة / وعب المشرب / ام بركه / الخور / راس لفان / الذخيرة / العقدة وسيتم استخدام الطرق الموضحة في الخريطة يرجى اخذ البيطة و الحذر الشديد اثناء القيادة أو التخييم في المناطق المذكورة.

WARNING

On 4th to 7th February 2026 Qatar International Rally will be held in- Lejthaya north Al huwaila road / Waab Al Mashrab / Al Waab / Umm Birka / Al Khor / Ras Laffan / Al Thakhira / Eikda areas using the routes marked on the map. Please take extra care if you are driving or camping near these areas.



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QSL: Al Duhail target full points against struggling Umm Salal

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DOHA: Coach Djamel Belmadi and Al Duhail are eyeing full points against struggling Umm Salal to continue their push towards the top four in the Qatar Stars League (QSL) at Al Khor Stadium.

Al Duhail, currently placed sixth, are aware that any slip-up could further distance them from the top-four race, while under-pressure Umm Salal desperately need to win to escape the relegation zone.

Coach Belmadi stressed the need to return to winning ways after his side dropped points in their previous round, having drawn with Al Rayyan, but his team is hit by a wave of injuries.

"This is another important match coming after our game against Al Rayyan, which we did not win. Therefore, winning this match is crucial," Belmadi said.

Belmadi highlighted the challenges the team faced due to injuries since the beginning of the season, and said he has a young team, made up of mainly from the reserves from the bench.

"These are circumstances I am experiencing for the first time in my coaching career. I have never faced anything like this before, even as a player. I



Djamel Belmadi



Ruben Alves

never witnessed such a large number of key players being absent, players who directly impact the team's performance. But we have to adapt to this reality," Belmadi said.

The Algerian coach also pointed to Umm Salal's recent coaching change.

"We must also consider the fact that the opposing team has a new coach. The most important thing for us is to focus on ourselves and work on delivering the performance required to achieve victory in this match," he said.

Al-Duhail, runners-up last season, have collected 20 points, while Umm Salal - placed last - have just nine from three wins.

Umm Salal's new coach Ruben Alves said his players are aware of the task ahead.

"The team is aware of the challenge, but will play with high spirit to overcome it and achieve a positive result," the Spaniard said.

"We are facing a tough match, but we will work hard to overcome this challenge. We are currently focused on significantly impacting the players both psychologically and technically. Each player has clear and defined roles on the field, and everyone is well aware of his responsibilities."

"We believe in our ability to achieve victories in the upcoming rounds. The team has good potential, but we need spirit and confidence. Our current position at the bottom of the table requires us to work even harder."

World Cup a key 'trial run' for visas for LA Games

MILAN: The head of the US Olympic committee said yesterday the 2026 World Cup will be a first "trial run" of the United States' ability to host spectators ahead of the 2028 Los Angeles Games.

"This entire process of welcoming visitors from other countries to the United States for sporting events is getting something of a trial run on a smaller basis, but with still a very extensive worldwide experience," Gene Sykes told a meeting of International

Olympic Committee members ahead of the 2026 Milan-Cortina Winter Games.

Sykes faced questions during his progress report on preparations for LA 2028 about whether ticketholders would be able to obtain visas, given the toughened immigration policy implemented by President Donald Trump.

The organisers of the Los Angeles Games have set up, together with federal authorities, a platform intended to facilitate entry procedures into

the United States for athletes, support staff, and stakeholders, but it does not apply to spectators.

Dagmawit Girmay Berhane, an Ethiopian IOC member, asked how "equal opportunity" could be guaranteed for spectators.

Sykes said he would like to see a system in which officials with the US State Department were designated to handle visa issues for spectators attending the Olympics. —AFP

Morocco says to appeal AFCON bans and fines after final chaos

RABAT: Morocco's football federation said it will appeal disciplinary sanctions and fines imposed by the Confederation of African Football (CAF) after the chaotic scenes at the Africa Cup of Nations final against Senegal last month.

The Royal Moroccan Football Federation (FRMF) was fined a total of \$315,000 last month, added to bans against two of its players. In a statement, the FRMF said it would lodge an appeal "in order to preserve all rights guaranteed by the regulations".

The AFCON final on January 18 took a series of dramatic turns from late in regular time when an Ismaïla Sarr goal was disallowed for a foul on 2025 African player of the year Achraf Hakimi. Morocco were then awarded a penalty when forward Brahim Diaz was fouled, sparking furious Senegalese protests. Morocco missed the penalty with a weak shot from Diaz saved by Edouard Mendy. The match then went to extra time and Pape Gueye scored to give Senegal a second AFCON title. While play was halted over the penalty, some Senegal supporters threw projectiles and others temporarily invaded the pitch before police and security staff intervened.

Morocco were fined \$200,000 for the "inappropriate behaviour of the stadium ball boys". Another fine of \$100,000 was imposed for the "improper conduct" of players and technical staff. There was also a \$15,000 fine after Moroccan supporters used lasers to try and distract Senegalese players.

Moroccan forward Ismaïla Saïbari was handed a three-match ban and a fine of \$100,000, while captain Achraf Hakimi was suspended for two. The Senegal Football Federation (FSF), was fined a total of \$615,000 for various offences while head coach Pape Thiaw was banned for five games. —AFP

Qatar International Rally ready to roar into action

THE PENINSULA

LUSAIL: The countdown is on the start of this weekend's Qatar International Rally, the second round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship organised by the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF).

Eight drivers joined the QMMF's Executive Director Amro Al Hamad at the pre-event press conference at the Lusail International Circuit yesterday evening.

Championship leader Nasser Saleh Al Attiyah and former champion Abdullah Al Rawahi attended alongside Qatar's Nasser Khalifa Al Atya, Mohammed Al Marri and Rashid Al Mohammadi, Jordan's current FIA MERC2 leader Shaker Jweihani, his Kuwaiti rival Jassim Al Muqahwi and Saudi Arabia's young Hamza Bakhshab.

QMMF President Abdulrahman Al Mannai was then called forward at the conclusion of the press conference to



QMMF President Abdulrahman Al Mannai presents a celebratory cake to Nasser Saleh Al Attiyah, marking the Qatari's sixth Dakar Rally victory.

present a cake to Al Attiyah on behalf of the QMMF to celebrate the Qatari's recent sixth success in the Dakar Rally.

Should the multiple regional champion achieve glory this weekend, it will be his fourth

international win in as many weeks to follow on from the Dakar success, victory in the opening round of this championship in Oman and a triumph at last weekend's Saudi Baja, round one of the FIA World Baja Cup.

Al Attiyah spent much of the morning in the service park at Lusail with his Autotek team discussing the car set-up, a new livery for his Škoda and in-car camera fitment. Upbeat after winning last weekend's Saudi

Baja, the Qatari said: "It has been a fantastic start to the year. We've had three very good performances - Dakar, Oman and Saudi Baja - and we are leading three different championships. Now it's my home event in Qatar.

"We will miss some top European drivers coming here this year, but we need to focus and manage with the drivers from the Middle East. We will try to win this race. We will check out the new stages on Wednesday. It's really good this year that we have a compact rally. Sometimes we lost a lot of time travelling to Lusail or the Corniche for the start or the finish. Now, at Lusail, we have the start here, the podium, the service park and a Qualifying Stage and no super special.

"We really pushed for the Qualifying Stage from a long time. It will be really nice. Now you can choose your start position to an extent. The

Shakedown is also very important now."

Oman's Abdullah Al Rawahi finished second at the opening round in his home nation less than two weeks ago and is upbeat about his chances this weekend.

He said: "I am happy to be here. I wasn't sure if I was going to make it. We are trying our best to do all the championship. With the budget it is quite tough. I think we are better prepared this time with the set-up. It's going to be fast but we are getting closer and closer to Nasser every year. We are always aiming to get the podium. We are going to push from the beginning and see what we can do."

Young Qatari Mohammed Al Marri has made the transition to a Rally2 car this weekend after engine issues put a damper on his progress in Oman last month.

Al Marri said: "We had a disappointing start in Oman after a strong start. We lost the engine but now we want to come back stronger and here I will drive a Citroën in Rally2. It's a new beginning. I will be trying to compete with the guys at the same time as learning the car. We tested already and are getting better and better every time. It's one of the best cars in Rally2. Hopefully, we can achieve a good result."

Today, crews will carry their reconnaissance of the special stages in the north of Qatar, while scrutineering checks are carried out on the race vehicles at the Lusail International Circuit.

Vehicles undergoes pre-rally preparations at Lusail.



QMMF Executive Director Amro Al Hamad with participating drivers at a pre-event press conference.



Marquez fastest on first day of pre-season test

SEPANG: Reigning world champion Marc Marquez came in fastest on the opening day of pre-season testing in Malaysia after the Spaniard clocked 1 min 57.018sec at the Sepang circuit yesterday.

The 32-year-old Ducati Lenovo ace, who missed the final four races of last season after suffering a collarbone injury at Indonesia's Mandalika circuit, surged top of the timesheets on his 18th lap to replace Italy's Fabio Di Giannantonio who finished a fraction behind in 1 min 57.274sec.

Maverick Vinales completed the top three after the Spaniard secured 1 min 57.295sec on his 27th lap on a clear and scorching day in Sepang.

Marquez's younger brother Alex Marquez topped the morning session's practice, but

finished the day fourth fastest. The day belonged to his seven-time world champion sibling, who opted for short stints on track having just returned from injury.

"We did short runs, 2-3 laps to avoid extra fatigue. I knew with experience if you use too much energy having come back from an injury, you can suffer a lot," Marquez said.

"I try to take care of my physical condition because if I feel well, the speed is there," added Marquez, who added the aim is to feature at the 2026 season opener in Thailand next month.

The morning session witnessed 2021 champion Fabio Quartararo crashing and requiring a medical check, but the Frenchman was able to return for the afternoon session and finish in the top 10. — AFP

Marc Marquez in action.



Karim Benzema trains with Al Hilal yesterday.

Former France striker Benzema switches Saudi Arabian clubs

RIYADH: French striker Karim Benzema, who fell out with his club Al-Ittihad, has joined another Saudi club, Al-Hilal, the current league leaders, where he has signed an 18 month contract, the Riyadh club said yesterday.

"Karim Benzema is officially Hilali," the club announced on social media.

The 2022 Ballon d'Or winner, who scored eight goals in 14 league matches this season, joined on a free transfer, his new club added.

The 38-year-old did not take part in Al-Ittihad's last two matches because he was unhappy with the extension offer he received, media reported.

Benzema reportedly received an offer from Michael Emenalo, sporting director of the Saudi league, which he considered "insulting" as it would amount to "playing for free", apart from his image rights, according to his entourage.

The former France international moved to Saudi Arabia in 2023 after 14 seasons with Real Madrid. Last season he scored 21 goals as Al-Ittihad won the league.

This season Al-Ittihad trail leaders Al-Hilal by 12 points.

Al-Hilal, who play in Riyadh, and Al-Ittihad, in Jeddah, are both owned by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund (PIF). — AFP

Nagelsmann backs Ter Stegen for World Cup despite injury

BERLIN: Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann yesterday backed Marc-André Ter Stegen in his bid to regain fitness ahead of the 2026 World Cup, after the goalkeeper's latest injury setback.

Playing his second match for Girona on Saturday, having joined on a six-month loan from Barcelona in hope of more playing time ahead of the showpiece tournament, the 33-year-old suffered a muscle injury in his thigh.

Girona said Ter Stegen will "undergo further tests" but the goalkeeper looks set to miss several months with injury, including Germany's two March friendlies against Switzerland and Ghana.

"This is unbelievably cruel," said Nagelsmann.

"Marc had just returned and was on

a good path. We were very much awaiting his return in the national team."

"Right now all that matters is that he gets healthy in peace, without any additional pressure. We're all behind him."

Long Germany's number two behind World Cup winner Manuel Neuer, Ter Stegen took over between the sticks after the former's retirement in 2024, but has suffered a series of injury setbacks.

He missed much of last campaign with a knee injury and was sidelined this season with a back complaint.

His injury woes have contributed to him being forced out of Barcelona, where the 2015 Champions League winner became third choice behind Joan Garcia and Wojciech Szczesny. — AFP



Bethell spins England to 3-0 sweep over Sri Lanka in World Cup warm-up

PALLEKELE: Jacob Bethell underlined his importance to England's T20 World Cup hopes as he spun them to a hard-fought 12-run win over Sri Lanka to complete a 3-0 clean sweep at Pallekele yesterday.

The series served as a dress rehearsal for the 20-nation showpiece that Sri Lanka is co-hosting with India.

The contest hung in the balance heading into the 18th over with Sri Lanka needing 21 runs off 18 balls with four wickets in hand but the part-time spin of Bethel turned the game.

The left-arm snared three wickets in a dramatic over to flip the game on its head as the hosts were skittled for 116 with three balls to spare. Bethel finished with career-best figures of four for 11.

England had mustered only 128 for nine but showcased their depth and nous, defending a total



that looked well below par on a surface offering turn and bounce.

After just four overs from the quicks, the spinners took centre stage and wove a web around the Sri Lankan batters, much as they had throughout the tour.

The spinners had been pivotal in England's ODI series triumph in Colombo last week and again proved the ace up their sleeve.

England head to India to

launch their World Cup campaign with momentum at their backs, while Sri Lanka have plenty of soul-searching to do with their frailties against spin brutally exposed.

Bethel found able allies in Will Jacks, who bagged three wickets, while fellow tweakers Adil Rashid and Liam Dawson chipped in with one apiece to keep the hosts on a tight leash.

Sam Curran, England's hero in the opening game with a hat-trick, showed his all-round pedigree in the dead rubber, carving out a career-best 58 from 48 balls to rescue the side that had slipped to 60 for six.

Returning quick Dushmantha Chameera, back after a groin injury, was a rare bright spark for Sri Lanka, claiming his maiden five-wicket haul in T20Is. His five for 24 are the best figures in England-Sri Lanka contests and the third-best ever at Pallekele.

Both sides begin their World Cup campaign next Sunday with Sri Lanka hosting Ireland in Colombo while England face Nepal in Mumbai.

BRIEF SCORES
England 128 for 9 (Curran 58, Chameera 5-24) beat Sri Lanka 116 (Bethell 4-11, Jacks 3-14) by 12 runs. — AFP

Australia's Hazlewood to miss start of T20 World Cup

SYDNEY: Fast bowler Josh Hazlewood will miss the early stages of the Twenty20 World Cup as he recovers from hamstring and Achilles injuries in another setback for Australia. The 35-year-old, who missed the entire Ashes series against England and has not played any cricket since November, will remain in Sydney to continue his recovery.

Sean Abbott has been called up as a travelling reserve. "We felt with Josh it was more practical and beneficial for him to continue his rehabilitation at home in a familiar environment before travelling to Sri Lanka," selector Tony Dodemaide said in a statement. No timeframe for his return was given. Australia head to the World Cup in disarray after being thumped 3-0 by Pakistan in a warm-up series and are winless from their past five T20s. Adding to their woes, star paceman Pat Cummins has been ruled out of the entire tournament in India and Sri Lanka beginning on Saturday.

Test skipper Cummins was hoping to be fit as he slowly recovers from a lower back injury, but ran out of time with Ben Dwarshuis replacing him. Fast bowler Nathan Ellis along with big-hitters Glenn Maxwell and Tim David are due to join the touring party on Tuesday after missing the Pakistan series. — AFP