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SPOTLIGHT

QOC organises half marathon and NSD events in Lusail

First-ever QOC half marathon, held as part of National Sport Day celebrations, saw over 6,000 participants

HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC), attended the Qatar Olympic Committee Half Marathon 2025 and the Team Qatar Village events organised today in Lusail, coinciding with the National Sport Day.

The first-ever QOC Half Marathon 2025, held at Lusail Boulevard as part of the National Sport Day celebrations, saw an incredible turnout with over 6,000 participants. The event brought together citizens, residents, officials, athletes, amateurs, and people from all ages, cultures, and backgrounds, making it a truly exceptional occasion.

Jassim bin Rashid al-Buainain, Secretary-General of the QOC, along with senior officials from the QOC and national sports federations, crowned over 80 winners across the four race categories. The ceremony took place in front of a large and enthusiastic crowd, beautifully embodying the Olympic principle of “solidarity” a key value of the International Olympic Movement.

Men, women, youth and children took part in four exciting categories suited for various ages and fitness levels: 21km Half Marathon, 10km Race, 5km Race, and the 1km Fun Run.

The QOC organised a variety of sports and entertainment events accompanying the Half Marathon race in Team Qatar Village in Al Sa'ad Plaza in Darb Lusail, with the attendance of a number of VIP guests and senior figures in the country, and Ali al-Ali, The CEO of Qatari Diar.

This was done in co-operation with several national sports federations, namely: Qatar Athletics Federation, Qatar Basketball Federation, Qatar Football Association, Qatar Handball Federation, Qatar Volleyball Federation, Qatar Shooting Federation, Qatar Golf Federation and Qatar Taekwondo, Judo and Karate Federation.

On this occasion, HE Sheikh Joaan said: “We are delighted to return to Lusail Boulevard, a venue that holds such cherished memories from the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, to host the inaugural Qatar Olympic Committee Half Marathon in 2025. This event provides a wonderful opportunity for us to come together once again under the banner of sport. This year, we are championing the sport of running, inviting enthusiasts of all cultures, backgrounds, and ages to participate in the Half Marathon. Through this event, we send a clear message to the world: Qatar is a nation that embraces sport and peace. This event also marks an exciting new chapter of progress and excellence for our sporting and Olympic movement, made possible by the grace of God and the unwavering support of our wise leadership.”

“Continuing a valued tradition, our national sports federations will be present in Team Qatar Village, alongside our athletes, to encourage community participation in this annual celebration. Together, we will underscore the vital role of sport in human development, a cornerstone of the Qatar National Vision 2030” added QOC President.

For his part, QOC Secretary-General al-Buainain said: “We are excited for the



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, Qatar Olympic Committee President, shoots a starting pistol as children take part in 1km Fun Run as part of the QOC Half Marathon in Lusail.



QOC President HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani with Secretary-General Jassim bin Rashid al-Buainain and other QOC officials and athletes at the Team Qatar Village events.

overwhelming response from all segments of Qatari society – citizens and expats of various ages, backgrounds, and cultures – to the first edition of the QOC Half Marathon 2025, held as part of the Sport Day activities. This occasion is dear to our hearts and reflects the nation’s commitment to raising awareness of the importance of sports in promoting physical health.”

He added: “QOC has achieved remarkable success in conveying and disseminating its values among all participating age groups, both in the race itself and in the accompanying sports and recreational events of Team Qatar Village.”

He confirmed: “This race will become one of our most important community

sports events, through which we aim to raise the level of awareness among individuals and society of all ages and backgrounds about the importance of sports and physical activity in building successful generations that contribute to moving our country to new horizons of success and excellence.”

For her part, Sheikhha Asmaa bint Thani al-Thani, Director of Marketing and International Co-operation Sector at the QOC, said: “Our main goal in organising this historic race was to raise awareness about the importance of sports for individuals and communities and to spread this inspiring message worldwide. This helps strengthen Qatar’s position on the global sports stage while showcasing its organisational and technical capabilities in hosting events. Team Qatar Village at Al Sa’ad Plaza, Lusail Boulevard serves as a microcosm of a

diverse world, sending a message of peace and unity through sports.”

She added: “The atmosphere at Team Qatar Village reflects the core values of the Qatar Olympic Committee: inclusivity, solidarity, unity, diversity, and sustainability. These principles play a key role in building strong, respectful sporting communities that embrace diversity, promote sustainable sports, and preserve their legacy for future generations. I also want to thank the media outlets for their exceptional coverage of every stage of the race.”

Sheikh Khalifa bin Khalid al-Thani, Director of the Sports Sector at the QOC, said: “Our goal today was to create activities that bring people together, regardless of age or ability. Sports have the power to unite communities, offering a fun and rewarding experience that enhances both physical and

mental well-being – not just for individuals, but for society as a whole.”

On other hand, Eng Fahad Abdullatif al-Jahrami, Chief Development and Asset Management Officer, at Qatari Diar, stated: “We at Qatari Diar are proud to host the QOC Half Marathon 2025 at Lusail Boulevard, which serves as a comprehensive platform for hosting exceptional events, reaffirming its pivotal role in promoting a healthy lifestyle and enhancing quality of life in our community.”

“Our participation in this event stems from our belief in the race’s objectives of encouraging sports as a sustainable lifestyle. We are also pleased to further strengthen our ongoing partnership with the QOC, which is a key component of Qatari Diar’s vision of fostering successful collaboration between the public and private sectors.



CRICKET

Reshuffled Australia weigh Champions Trophy options

Attention turns to the two-match one-day series before the ICC tournament from Feb 19 to Mar 9

Reuters
Colombo

After sweeping the Test series in Sri Lanka, an injury-depleted Australia will look to carry the momentum into ODI matches against the South Asians and build confidence ahead of the Champions Trophy.

Selectors will confirm Australia's final Champions Trophy squad today as a bevy of fringe players look to impress in the first of two ODIs against Sri Lanka in Colombo.

With the Sri Lanka tour following a long, attritional home summer, Australia's Champions Trophy roster will have a different look to the peerless squad that took a record-extending sixth World Cup title at the 2023 tournament in India.

Regular captain Pat Cummins, fellow quick Josh Hazlewood and all-rounder Mitch Marsh have been ruled out with injuries, while Marcus Stoinis was a late withdrawal last week after his surprise retirement from ODIs.

Selectors responded by calling up a small army of reserves

for the Sri Lanka series, adding fast bowlers Sean Abbott, Spencer Johnson and Ben Dwarshuis along with legspinner Tanveer Sangha, spin-bowling all-rounder Cooper Connolly and batter Jake Fraser-McGurk.

Selectors have yet to decide on Cummins' replacement as captain, though coach Andrew McDonald confirmed it will be either Steve Smith, who led the Test side in Cummins's absence, or Travis Head.

Other selections remain up in the air even if fresh faces in the bowling are guaranteed starting with today's clash.

The international ambitions of Australia's reserve quicks have long been thwarted by the durability and consistency of the front-line trio of Cummins, Hazlewood and Starc.

However, at least two of Abbott, Johnson and Dwarshuis are expected to be included in the Champions Trophy, joining pacers Mitchell Starc and Nathan Ellis for the tournament co-hosted by Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

With Starc almost certain to be rested for today's ODI due to the quick turnaround from the second



Sri Lanka's captain Charith Asalanka (right) and his Australian counterpart Steve Smith pose with the trophy on the eve of their first one-day international at the R Premadasa International Cricket Stadium in Colombo yesterday. (AFP)

Test, fellow left-armers Johnson and Dwarshuis may hope for a last chance to impress selectors in his place.

The hard-hitting Fraser-McGurk is in line to replace Marsh at number three in the batting order, while Connolly may be re-

tained in the Champions Trophy squad as a replacement for Stoinis even if he lacks the all-rounder's seam bowling.

Selectors want all of Australia's Test players included in the ODI squad to play at least one of the Colombo matches to get into the rhythm of the shorter format, even if the venue's spin-friendly conditions may be quite different to those in Pakistan.

Australia open their Champions Trophy campaign against England in Lahore on Feb 22, with their other group matches against South Africa and Afghanistan also in Pakistan.

McDonald said it would be a fine balance tuning up the squad for the Feb 19-March 9 tournament as the selectors look to pick a team that can continue to build momentum in Sri Lanka.

"You want to play to win, there's no doubt about that because winning form always helps the confidence of a group," he told Cricket Australia's website.

"The consideration is the conditions (in Colombo) are potentially somewhat different to what we get in Pakistan," McDonald told reporters.

"Last time we came here (in 2022) it spun square in the one-day series, so hopefully they're flatter surfaces for us to prepare, but who knows?"

SPOTLIGHT

Pace ace Bumrah ruled out of Champions Trophy due to injury

Reuters
Mumbai

India's pace spearhead **Jasprit Bumrah** has been ruled out of the Champions Trophy after failing to recover from a lower back injury in time for the tournament, the Indian cricket board (BCCI) announced yesterday.

Bumrah, the highest wicket-taker in the recent Test series with Australia which India lost 3-1, had back



spasms during the final Test in Sydney last month, which also ruled him out of a five-match T20 international series with England.

His absence will be a major blow to India, with the 31-year-old widely considered one of the best all-format fast bowlers in the sport.

"Fast bowler Jasprit Bumrah has been ruled out of the 2025 ICC Champions Trophy due to a lower back injury. The men's selection committee has named Harshit Rana as Bumrah's replacement," the BCCI said in

a statement. The BCCI added that spinner Varun Chakaravathy would replace batter Yashasvi Jaiswal. India are in Group A in the Champions Trophy and meet Bangladesh in Dubai on February 20, before taking on defending champions and rivals Pakistan and ending their group campaign against New Zealand.

India squad: Rohit Sharma (captain), Shubman Gill (vice captain), Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, KL Rahul, Hardik Pandya, Axar Patel, Washington Sundar, Kuldeep Yadav, Harshit Rana, Mohammed Shami, Arshdeep Singh, Varun Chakaravathy, Rishabh Pant, Ravindra Jadeja.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Bangladesh's Akhter gets 5-year ban for anti-corruption code breaches

Reuters
Dhaka

Bangladesh women's player **Shoheley Akhter** has been banned from all cricket for five years after the spinner was found guilty of breaching the International Cricket Council's (ICC) anti-corruption code, the sport's governing body said yesterday.

The 36-year-old formally admitted to breaching five provisions of the code, relating to approaching a Bangladesh player and offering a sum worth two million takas (\$16,465) for getting out hit wicket in a Women's



T20 World Cup match against Australia in 2023.

Akhter, who has played two one-day internationals and 13 Twenty20 internationals, made the approach in a series of voice

notes sent on Facebook and was reported to the anti-corruption unit by the player she spoke to.

"The ICC has considered all of the circumstances of this case, including giving Ms Akhter credit for agreeing an outcome that avoids the need for a hearing and so saves considerable time and money for use elsewhere in the fight against corruption..." the ICC said. "The ICC therefore considers that a period of ineligibility of five years is reasonable and proportionate. Ms Akhter has agreed to this sanction."

Akhter last played for Bangladesh in 2022 and was not part of the squad for the 2023 T20 World Cup held in South Africa.

FOCUS

PSG launches 'Legends Club' to honour iconic players who have passed through Paris

PSG never forgets its legends. The club has a young but rich history, shaped by several great players who have worn the red and blue jersey for over 50 years. To pay tribute to the many emblematic figures who have passed through Paris, the club's directors have decided to launch the 'Legends Club,' an exclusive programme designed to honour and strengthen the connection with the players who have left their mark on the club's history.

A total of 236 personalities, including 179 male and 57 female players, are involved in this project, which is designed to highlight their achievements and the impact they had during their Parisian careers.

The selection criteria are simple: only players who have played more than 50 matches and have officially retired, or those who have left a significant mark on PSG's history, are eligible.

This tribute to the great names who have passed through the PSG ranks comes in the form of an all-black card, which former midfielder Pierre Ducrocq revealed on X this weekend. A letter of thanks from President Nasser al-Khelaifi also accompanied the card.

The club boss is behind this programme, which aims to honour the past, showcase Parisian legends, and celebrate those who have helped make PSG a stronghold of French and

European football. Another key objective is to use the club's history as a foundation for its future development.

The 'Legends Club' members will also enjoy several benefits, including privileged access to matches, the Poissy Campus, seminars, and discounts on PSG products.

They will also contribute to the club's activities by engaging with young players at the training centre and serving as international ambassadors for commercial operations.

These legends will have the opportunity to reunite at various galas and tournaments, where they will again wear the red and blue shirts that earned them the admiration of the fans.

Qatar Chess Association marks NSD with various events



The Qatar Chess Association (QCA) organised various events on the occasion of the 14th National Sport Day in co-operation with the Ministries of Sports and Youth, Education and Higher Education at Aspire Park, Old Doha Port, and Education City. The events witnessed great interaction from fans of the game with the participation of a number of players and coaches of the Qatari national teams in the presence of the President of the QCA and members of the Board of Directors. Mohammed al-Mudhaka, President of QCA, praised the large public attendance at the National Sport Day events as well as the participation in the tournaments held at Education City, noting that the slogan of this year's Sport Day "At a Time" emphasised on the importance of practicing sports at all times and has many connotations that contribute to raising awareness of practicing sports continuously.

QATAR STARS LEAGUE PARTICIPATES IN NATIONAL SPORT DAY ACTIVITIES



DOHA: The Qatar Stars League (QSL) participated along with Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy in co-operation with United Development Company (UDC) in the activities of National Sport Day, which falls on the second Tuesday of February, at the Gewan Island (Golf Club) - The Pearl. A number of officials from the participating entities, staff and their families, and players from Ooredoo Stars League clubs attended. The activities, which included a Walkathon from the Crystal area, distinctive games for children and mini golf, drew a lot of attention from all participants. On the occasion, Hani Taleb Ballan, CEO of QSL, said, "As part of our participation in the Sport Day, a wonderful annual initiative, we're pleased to co-operate with SC and UDC to emphasise the importance of practising sports and contributing to promote healthy lifestyles. We look forward to this day full of vitality and activity as an incentive for everyone to practise sports throughout the year and not just on the Sport Day, one of the most important goals of which is promotion of the concept of community sports by expanding the base of participation in various sports activities."

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

Wakrah face tough task against Taawoun



Al Wakrah's 2024 Qatar Cup triumph meant a return to continental competition for the first time since 2002, when they featured in the Asian Club Championship.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Al Wakrah will have no margin for error when the Qatari side host Al Taawoun in the first leg of their AFC Champions League Two last 16 tie today at the Al Janoub Stadium. Wakrah snuck into the knockout stage as the runners-up of the three-team Group A while Al Taawoun soared to the Group B top spot.

Al Wakrah's 2024 Qatar Cup triumph meant a return to continental competition for the first time since 2002, when they featured in the Asian Club Championship. Progression to the knockout stage was secured after overcoming a tough challenge, with the two-time Qatar champions finishing just a point ahead of Tajikistan's FC Ravshan of Tajikistan and will head into the tie plagued by inconsistency on the domestic front.

Al Taawoun, on the other hand, had the look of champions in Group B as the side from Saudi Arabia topped the standings with 15 points. Their recent domestic form, however, has been indifferent but Al Taawoun will believe they have the quality to extend their stay on the continental stage.

Wakrah head coach Poya Asbaghi expressed confidence in the team's preparation, saying: "We have a good opportunity to prepare for the match since our last local league match. The motivations are different here as we are competing in a continental championship,

and we need to prove our worth. We are facing a strong team, but we are ready for the challenge."

Asbaghi emphasised the importance of giving their best performance: "Our players will rise to the occasion. We've played several matches against Saudi clubs before. They are usually favourites to win, but the reality of these matches has been different. We have good motivations and talented players. I ask our players to give 100% effort."

The coach also highlighted the significance of playing in a continental tournament, noting: "It's great to compete in a tournament beyond the league. I want to stress that the two losses in the league don't matter in this competition. After this match, we'll focus on the local league again. The match against Taawoun will be intense, and we know the stakes in continental competition. We need to be fully prepared and represent Qatari football in the best way possible."

Al Taawoun coach Mohammed al-Abdeli said: "We are fully prepared. We know it will be a difficult, high-stakes game. I want the players to enjoy the match. We have top-level players, both local and international. The last 16 is different from the group stage. We are focused on this first leg and aim to put in a strong performance and secure a result that will help us in the second leg at home."

"The period leading up to this match was tough for us, but now we are fully focused on the continental competition and will do our best to achieve our goals."

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar to take on China in AFC U-20 Asian Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar will take on hosts China in their opening AFC U-20 Asian Cup Group A fixture on Shenzhen today. Head coach Felix Sarriugarte will look to his Spain-based trio – Bassam Adel Eid, Mohamed Khaled Gouda and Ibrahim Mohammadali – who combined for eight goals in the qualifiers to lead Qatar to further success.

China, under head coach Dejan Durdevic, have set ambitious targets for the tournament, particularly the goal of securing a place at the FIFA U-20 World Cup Chile 2025. Having last qualified for the World Cup in 2014, China will be looking to

make their mark in front of a home crowd.

"The team performed very well in the warm-up matches and improved in every game," said Durdevic. "We will select the best players through these games and prepare for the Asian Cup. Our goal has not changed, which is to get into the top four of this Asian Cup and get a ticket to the World Cup."

To get there, China has prepared with a series of friendlies, including victories over Syria and draws against Uzbekistan and Thailand. However, they face a tough challenge ahead in Qatar, who enter the tournament as the 2015 champions and the dominant force in their qualifiers. Qatar topped Group J with a perfect record, defeating Jordan, Singapore, and Hong Kong.



Qatar U-20 players train in Shenzhen, China, yesterday.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Liverpool ready for 'battle' at Everton: Slot

'It's probably going to be a fantastic atmosphere and that's never easy to play against'

AFP
Liverpool

Arne Slot said his Liverpool players are "ready for another battle" as they prepare to take on Everton in the final Merseyside derby at Goodison Park today.

The Premier League leaders have struggled to win at the home of their neighbours in recent years, with nine of the past 12 games there ending in draws. Everton, much improved under returning manager David Moyes, will be leaving their historic home at the end of this season to play in their new 52,888-capacity Bramley-Moore Dock stadium on Liverpool's waterfront.

Slot, preparing for his first and last derby at Goodison, believes the emotion of the occasion today will add to Liverpool's challenge. "It's probably going to be a fantastic atmosphere and that's never easy to play against because every single time they cross the half-way line or they get a corner kick or whatever happens, the fans will cheer for that," he said.

"And then you have to be mentally really strong as an away team to resist all that complete atmosphere and you still have to be focused on what you have to do, defending the corner kick, defending the set-piece, and when you have the ball, be as calm as you can in this fantastic atmosphere. I assume our players are ready for another battle tomorrow, for the simple reason that they've been ready for the whole season."

The Dutchman, in his first season at Anfield, said his players would have to keep a "cool head but not cool legs" against an Everton team who have won their past three Premier League matches to ease relegation fears. "Every time you play against a team that wants to fight with you, and that's almost every time we play against any opponent, but maybe this one even more, you have to be ready for that," said Slot.

"So you have to run just as much, you have to be just as intense in tackles. Not going across the line, but be cool enough



Liverpool are seeking to go nine points clear at the top of the table with a win over Everton today.

to play a good and firm tackle. And that's where it starts and then nine out of 10 times, after 10, 15, 20 minutes, a game settles down a bit, and then you can start to think even more about playing football."

Liverpool are six points clear of second-placed Arsenal at the top of the Premier League with a game in hand but their push for an unprecedented quadruple was ended by defeat at Championship strugglers Plymouth in the FA Cup on Sunday.

"There was a wise man that once said to me 'Nothing good comes from losing a football game', and I completely agree," said Slot. The Liverpool boss, who made wholesale changes for the match, described the loss as "unacceptable".

"We have to show a different side of us tomorrow, because it wasn't only the result, the performance was far from what Liverpool standards are as well," he said. Trent Alexander-Arnold could return from injury

against Everton but Liverpool will definitely be without fellow defender Joe Gomez.

EVERTON'S MOYES AIMS TO BRIDGE GAP TO MIGHTY LIVERPOOL

David Moyes admits the gap between Everton and Liverpool is "as big as it's been for a long time" as he prepares for the final Merseyside derby at Goodison Park. Slot's Reds are seeking to go nine points clear at the top of the table while their hosts will kick off a whopping 30 points behind their rivals.

Everton have not finished above their neighbours since the 2012/13 season, which was Moyes' last in charge at Goodison before he left to join Manchester United. In recent years the Toffees have battled relegation on a number of occasions and have been dogged by financial issues, while Liverpool have not finished lower than fifth in the past eight seasons.

Moyes, 61, who finished above Liverpool

three times in his first spell at Everton, from 2002 until 2013, said the gulf between the two clubs had widened. "I think the gap between the two teams at the moment is probably as big as it's been for a long time," the Scot said. "It's something I have to try and bridge and start bringing the two clubs closer together. I certainly need to bring my club closer to their club if I can."

Moyes, who replaced Sean Dyche as Everton manager last month, said derbies had been more competitive in his first spell in charge but it was always a challenge to compete against Liverpool. "I think it was only in the last couple of years where we did finish above them in the Premier League (as well as 2005) so it's something we have to try and aim to do again," he said.

"We've always been chasing Liverpool and probably no more so than now... we've got a few years to go before we're going to be ready to compete against Liverpool again."

US Open revamps mixed doubles format, increases prize money

New York: The US Open mixed doubles competition will now be played before the singles main draw, the United States Tennis Association (USTA) said yesterday as it announced an overhaul of the category's format and an increase in prize money.

The US Open will also extend its main singles draw to 15 days, starting a day earlier on Sunday, August 24 for the tournament's first weekend start in the Open Era. The mixed doubles competition will be staged from August 19-20 and feature a \$1 million winners' prize - a significant increase on the \$200,000 pocketed by winners Sara Errani and Andrea Vavassori last year.

"We'll be scheduling mixed doubles on the centre stage and enabling more fans worldwide to enjoy the thrill of watching their favourite stars compete for this coveted Grand Slam Championship title," USTA chief Lew Sherr said in a statement. "By giving the competition its own spotlight, we're elevating mixed doubles to put an even greater focus on the incredible talent we have across the sport."

The competition's format has also been overhauled, with 16 teams participating - half the 32 that competed last year. Eight teams will earn direct entry via their combined singles ranking. The other eight will be wild-card entries.

Early matches will be best-of-three sets played to four games, with a tiebreak at 4-4 and a 10-point match tiebreak instead of a third set, while the final will be a best-of-three set match to six games. All matches will be played in Arthur Ashe Stadium or Louis Armstrong Stadium - the main show courts at Flushing Meadows.

"As a player who enjoys competing in doubles, I'm excited for the opportunity to play the 2025 US Open mixed doubles Championship during the first week," world number five Jessica Pegula said in a statement. "I appreciate the importance of innovation and exploring new ways to engage more fans and grow our sport."

MILAN BOSS WARNS OF TOUGH FEYENOORD GAME DESPITE COACHING CHANGE

Milan: AC Milan coach Sergio Conceicao is expecting a fierce Champions League challenge against struggling Feyenoord, despite the Dutch side appointing an interim coach only yesterday. Eredivisie fifth-placed Feyenoord host AC Milan on Wednesday, with Pascal Bosschaart - who has no experience as a senior coach - in charge after the dismissal of Brian Priske.

Conceicao challenged his players to rise to the occasion after falling short of direct qualification for the round of 16. "We have an important match, and we're in this situation because of our own mistakes. We take full responsibility," the Portuguese manager said. "The change of coach is

huge motivation for players. Plus Rotterdam is traditionally a difficult place to play, I was here three years ago with Porto, it's a fiery atmosphere. We have our problems too. The story of this game will be written by us, it depends on what we do. If we go out there with the right attitude and do what we prepared, then we're more likely to get a good result."

The former Porto boss hinted he may take an attacking approach by fielding January signings Joao Felix and Santiago Gimenez to join Christian Pulisic and Rafael Leao in attack. "We don't have many alternatives, because we've only got 15 outfield players plus the youngsters

due to injuries and the lads who aren't in the list," Conceicao said. "Coaches have to find solutions, these four are in the squad and so tomorrow we'll see."

Conceicao was full of praise for Gimenez, who will be facing his former team Feyenoord after scoring his first goal for Milan in Saturday's 2-0 Serie A win over Empoli. "Santi is a player I've been following for years. In football, he's young and has a long way to go. But he's already a top-level player," he said. "He needs to keep working hard because the team needs him, both with and without the ball. I'm very happy with him and with everyone else right now."

RODGERS HOPES TO MAKE BAYERN MUNICH 'HURT' AT CELTIC

Brendan Rodgers said a glamour Champions League play-off tie against Bayern Munich is the stage he wanted for Celtic and is determined to make the German giants fight for a place in the last 16. Celtic reached the knockout stages of the Champions League for the first time in 12 years by finishing 21st in the new 36-team league phase table.

Rodgers has hoovered up domestic trophies during two spells with the Scottish champions but was determined to make progress in the Champions League.

He won just two games in his first three

campaigns with Celtic in the competition, but three victories in eight matches this season secured progress to the play-offs.

The might of the Bundesliga leaders over two legs is a daunting task for Rodgers' men, but he wants Europe's best to fear the trip to Glasgow once more.

"It's great. It's where I wanted to take the club back to," Rodgers said ahead of first leg at Celtic Park. Celtic received a huge boost on Monday when top scorer Daizen Maeda was cleared to play in the first leg. The Japan international had been due to serve the second of a two-match ban for a red card against Young Boys in the penultimate game of the league phase.

TENNIS / QATAR TOTALENERGIES OPEN 2025

Alexandrova stuns World No.1 Sabalenka, Kostyuk beats Gauff on Day Three

‘This victory took a lot of energy and focus. It was difficult match as she is a great player’

By Sports Reporter
DOHA

Ekaterina Alexandrova of Russia yesterday survived a late onslaught to beat top seed and world No 1 Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus on day three of the Qatar TotalEnergies Open.

Alexandrova won 3-6, 6-3, 7-6 (5) in two hours and 36 minutes at the Centre Court of the Khalifa International Tennis Complex.

A long return by Sabalenka on third match point gave Alexandrova her fourth win over her superior rival over eight matches on the Tour.

Fresh off her fifth WTA title in Linz last week, Alexandrova arrived in Doha in strong form.

The tournament’s best fan turnout yesterday saw Alexandrova take out another Grand Slam winner after her win over Emma Raducanu on Sunday.

Sabalenka was playing her first match since her three-set loss to Madison Keys in the Australian Open final in January.

“This victory took a lot of energy and focus. It was difficult match as she is a great player,” Alexandrova said after her match. “I just tried to do my best on the court. You can’t do any more than that. I am glad I won because it feels amazing now,” she added with a smile.

“The atmosphere was so electric, thanks to the fans. It was great to play tonight in front of these amazing fans. I hope I enough energy (today). I will try to do the same thing that I did today,” Alexandrova added.

Despite dropping the first set, Alexandrova fought back fiercely, refusing to let her streak end without a struggle.

She twice recovered from a break down in the third set, twice held serve to stay in the match, and ultimately secured her second career win against a world number one in under a year.

Also yesterday, Marta Kostyuk of Ukraine stunned the No 3-seeded Coco Gauff of the US with a dominant 6-2, 7-5 victory.

The 22-year-old from Ukraine will play a third-round match against Magda Linette of Poland.

Serving to reach a second-set tiebreak, an error-prone Gauff committed back-to-back double faults, her sixth and seventh of the match, to give Kostyuk two match points. She converted the second when Gauff’s backhand found the net.

Kostyuk had lost all three previous matches to Gauff on hard courts; Gauff was the highest-ranked player she’s ever beaten on this surface.

“Coco is an incredible fighter,” Kostyuk said in her on-court interview. “We always have incredible matches. I tried to stick to what I had to do. I’m very happy it worked out in two sets.”

Gauff finished with 39 unforced



Ekaterina Alexandrova of Russia celebrates after beating Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus in her Round of 32 match during the Qatar TotalEnergies Open 2025 at the Khalifa International Tennis Complex in Doha yesterday. **Right:** Marta Kostyuk of Ukraine in action against Coco Gauff of the United States. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil



Ons Jabeur of Tunisia competes in her Round of 32 match against Qinwen Zheng of China in Doha yesterday.

errors and only eight winners, marking her third straight loss in Doha. She fell in her opener last year to Katerina Siniakova and exited in the quarter-finals in 2022 and 2023. Still, heading into her second-round match against Kostyuk, the 20-year-old American had won 17 straight against opponents ranked outside the Top 20.

Kostyuk, currently No. 21 in the PIF WTA Rankings, isn’t a classic Top 20 outsider. She

began her career by losing 14 straight matches against Top 10 players - she’s 9-6 since. She has steadily risen through the ranks. She saw her ranking soar as high as No 16 last year and finished at No 18. Kostyuk, a two-time finalist last year, has created all kinds of expectations and this win certainly will whet appetites for even more.

The first set was a microcosm of Gauff’s occasional struggles in the

opening set. She won fewer than half her first-serve points and was broken three times.

There were three double faults and 19 unforced errors, most of them on the forehand side.

Gauff came out for the second set with greater intensity - and accuracy. Her serve was better and her groundstrokes more precise. She broke Kostyuk in the third game and saved two set points at 3-2 to maintain that margin.

But more errors from Gauff allowed Kostyuk to break through to level that match at 4-all. It stayed that way until Kostyuk broke through at the end.

Top 10 seeds Jasmine Paolini and Elena Rybakina both swept past dangerous opponents in straight sets to reach the last 16 of the Qatar TotalEnergies Open.

No 4 Paolini came from a break down in the second set to defeat French wild card Caroline Garcia

6-3, 6-4 in 1 hour and 12 minutes. “I started the match really well. I had a little bit of issues closing the match, but overall happy that I managed to win in two sets and get through another round,” Rybakina said.

She was followed on Grandstand 1 yesterday by No 5 Rybakina, who held off a late charge by Peyton Stearns of the US to come through 6-2, 6-4 in 1 hour and 13 minutes.

Linda Noskova, a rising star from the Czech Republic, defeated Yulia Putintseva of Kazakhstan 6-2, 6-3 to advance to the last 16, where she will face three-time defending champion Iga Swiatek.

Jabeur crushes Zheng

Ons Jabeur, the Tunisian superstar, yesterday continued her strong performance with a dominant 6-4, 6-2 victory over No 7 Zheng Qinwen, securing her place in the Round of 16.

Yesterday’s dominant win followed her 6-2, 6-0 victory against McCartney Kessler on Monday.

“Yes, definitely a great win today. I’m pretty happy with my level. It was very tough playing against her like always, but I’m glad that I got my win,” Jabeur said yesterday.

FOOTBALL

Dembele produces a brace as PSG beat Brest in Champions League

AFP
Guingamp, France

Ousmane Dembele kept up his remarkable form in front of goal with a double as Paris Saint-Germain took a big step towards qualifying for the last 16 of the Champions League with a 3-0 win over French rivals Brest in the first leg of their play-off tie yesterday.

PSG were overwhelming favourites coming into this tie against opponents who had never taken part in European competition before this season, and there seems little prospect of Brest recovering from this loss in next week’s second leg.

Vitinha opened the scoring for PSG at the Stade de Roudourou in Guingamp with a penalty just before the midway point in the first half, and Dembele swept in a second on the stroke of half-time be-

fore netting again on 66 minutes.

The French international forward now has 23 goals for the season, including 18 in 11 appearances over the last two months.

Indeed he has 10 goals in just the last four games, a run which includes a hat-trick against Brest in Ligue 1 only 10 days ago.

He is irresistible just now, and Luis Enrique’s side are unbeatable at the moment against French opponents, against whom they have not lost since last May.

The teams will meet again in the return leg of this knockout phase play-off tie next Wednesday in Paris, with the winners advancing to a last-16 showdown with either Liverpool or Barcelona.

Assuming they make it through, PSG will feel they are capable of beating either of those sides on current form.

Paris too strong

Brest had not defeated the Parisi-

ans in any competition in 40 years, since January 1985, and had lost 17 of the last 18 meetings between the teams.

Once again hosting a Champions League game an hour away from Brest itself in Guingamp, they nearly got lucky early on, when an attempted clearance by PSG goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma struck the face of forward Ludovic Ajorque and almost ricocheted into the net.

However, PSG were handed the chance to go ahead when a Dembele shot struck the arm of Pierre Lees-Melou inside the Brest box in the 17th minute.

The Bosnian referee had to come across to check the pitchside monitor before pointing to the spot, and Vitinha then stepped up to send goalkeeper Marco Bizot the wrong way with the penalty.

Brest did not let their heads go down and Abdallah Sima had two big chances to equalise, first be-

ing denied by Willian Pacho’s great recovery tackle and then heading against the far post from the resulting corner.

Achraf Hakimi almost scored an own goal too, but instead Paris struck again just before the break, majestically playing their way out of Brest’s press and breaking away.

Hakimi fed Dembele, who cut in from the right and beat the goalkeeper at his near post.

Brest then saw Sima hit a post at the start of the second half, but the visitors continued to look so dangerous.

Desire Doue had the ball in the net only for his effort to be ruled out for a tight offside in the build-up, while Dembele fired wide from a good position.

Dembele did then strike again almost midway through the second half, trying to feed Bradley Barcola and then seeing the ball break back to him before shooting past Bizot with the aid of a deflection.

