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LIGUE 1

Neymar poised to make PSG debut on Sunday

AFP Paris

Neymar is poised to make his much-anticipated debut for Paris Saint-Germain on Sunday when they travel to Guingamp in their second game of the Ligue 1 season. However, the French league are still waiting on a transfer certificate from the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) before the Brazilian can finally play.

The certificate has to arrive before Sunday if Neymar is to take to the pitch at the Stade du Roudourou this weekend, with it possible that FIFA may have to intervene if the RFEF do not send the document by today.

But the French Football Federation (FFF) appear confident that the saga surrounding Neymar, who cost PSG a staggering world record of 222 million euros (\$264mn), is near its end.

"The transfer is complete, so this should not last," FFF president Noel Le



File picture of Paris Saint-Germain's Brazilian forward Neymar.

Graet told sports daily *L'Equipe*.

"The federation is in contact with our Spanish counterparts. There is no reason for this hold-up to continue.

"These are complicated deals, but there is no missing document today.

"I do not need to tell you that there are a few problems within the Spanish federation. I do not doubt that this will be quickly solved. Wolves do not eat each other, you know?"

Neymar watched from the Parc des Princes stands as PSG cruised to a low-key 2-0 win over newly-promoted Amiens in their Ligue 1 opener last time out, and coach Unai Emery will want the forward available sooner rather than later.

The 25-year-old scored 105 goals in his four seasons at Barcelona, and his new team will be expecting him to score far more over the next few years.

Although the main goal for the capital club is to finally challenge for the Champions League crown, their first task this term will be to retake the Ligue

1 title from Monaco.

Spaniard Emery has no doubt that his new arrival will help the team achieve those lofty goals, whether he makes his debut on Sunday or the following week against Toulouse.

"He's a player who will help the club get to a higher level," he said.

"Without Neymar PSG is a great club, but with Neymar it's a little better.

"The way we will adapt being close to a player like him... The other players here are also some great players, so together we can get better and grow."

Once again, PSG's main rivals for domestic honours appear to be Monaco, who are desperately trying to hang on to rising star Kylian Mbappe in the face of serious interest from Real Madrid.

The 18-year-old started in their opening 3-2 victory over Toulouse last weekend, as captain Radamel Falcao found the net.

Leonardo Jardim's principality outfit will be expecting to make it two wins from two when they pay a visit to Dijon

on Sunday.

Nice, who have the first leg of their Champions League play-off against Napoli on Wednesday, kick off the second weekend at home to promoted Troyes today without their two star players the injured Mario Balotelli and new signing Wesley Sneijder.

Lyon's youthful side started with a 4-0 thumping of Strasbourg last week and travel out to Brittany to take on Rennes today.

LIGUE 1 FIXTURES (ALL TIMES GMT)

Today

Nice v Troyes (1700), Rennes v Lyon (1845)

Tomorrow

Nantes v Marseille (1500), Amiens v Angers (1800), Bordeaux v Metz (1800), Caen v Saint-Etienne (1800), Toulouse v Montpellier (1800)

Sunday

Strasbourg v Lille (1300), Dijon v Monaco (1500), Guingamp v Paris Saint-Germain (1900)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE: PREVIEW

Arsenal's Wenger braced for knife-edge season

'A lot (of the trouble) was created by my own situation. Maybe I made a mistake. Overall I believe that it's down to us. The trend has always to come from the team'

AFP London

Arsene Wenger brokered a fragile truce with Arsenal's dissenting fans by winning the FA Cup, but has little margin for error ahead of today's Premier League opener against Leicester City.

Last season was by far the most difficult of Wenger's 21-year tenure as manager, with Arsenal's on-pitch travails exposing him to furious protests from sections of the club's support.

Having ended months of speculation by signing a new two-year contract, he is looking forwards and says that if the team put on a united front, the fans will fall into line behind them.

"A lot (of the trouble) was created by my own situation. Maybe I made a mistake," Wenger said after Arsenal beat Chelsea on penalties in last weekend's Community Shield.

"Overall I believe that it's down to us. The trend has always to come from the team."

Undermining Wenger's quest for harmony is the uncertainty surrounding several first-team players.

Alexis Sanchez, Mesut Ozil, Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain and Jack Wilshere are among the players whose contracts expire at the end of the season.

Sanchez in particular has been the subject of intense speculation about his future amid reported interest from the big-spending duo of Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain.

The Chile forward missed pre-season after being granted extra time off following the Confederations Cup and has been ruled out of today's game due to an abdominal strain.

That Wenger is not going into the new campaign with the fans still at his throat owes much to Arsenal's strong finish to last season.

After Wenger belatedly adopted a 3-4-2-1 formation – a tactical trend sparked by champions Chelsea – Arsenal won seven of their last eight league games and stunned Chelsea 2-1 in the FA Cup final.



File picture of Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger.

They defeated Chelsea again when the teams renewed acquaintances at Wembley in last Sunday's Community Shield, winning a penalty shootout 4-1 after a 1-1 draw.

IHEANACHO READY FOR ACTION

As well as the silverware, Arsenal's supporters have also had a major signing to celebrate after Wenger broke the club's transfer record to sign prolific French striker Alexandre Lacazette from Lyon.

The 26-year-old set Arsenal back an initial fee of £46.5 million (\$60.3 million, 51.5 million euros) and is expected to lead the line, flanked by Sanchez and Ozil.

Ozil is a doubt against Leicester, however, along with Aaron Ramsey, Per Mertesacker and Shkodran Mustafi,

while Laurent Koscielny is suspended. Gabriel and Santi Cazorla are definitely out.

For the first time since 1997, Arsenal are going into a season without Champions League football and Wenger has pledged to rest players in the Europa League.

He has said he intends "to focus completely on the Premier League", but if such an approach fails to yield a title challenge, he can expect the protests to ramp up quickly.

After going into last season as defending champions, only for a close shave with relegation to cost manager Claudio Ranieri his job, Leicester are targeting stability under Craig Shakespeare.

They have spent over £50 million,

strengthening each squad department with moves for goalkeeper Eldin Jakupovic, centre-back Harry Maguire, midfielder Vicente Iborra and striker Kelechi Iheanacho.

Spaniard Iborra has been ruled out of the trip to the Emirates Stadium with a groin strain and joins centre-back Robert Huth and midfielder Danny Drinkwater on the sidelines.

But 20-year-old Nigeria starlet Iheanacho, signed from Manchester City last week, has been passed fit after sustaining a knock in a friendly against Borussia Moenchengladbach.

"You've got the season ahead to look forward to and everyone's raring to go," said captain Wes Morgan.

"We've got our first game this Friday coming and we can't wait to get started."

Premier League newcomers face survival battle

Brighton and Hove Albion and Huddersfield Town are the fresh-faced newcomers in the Premier League this season, while Rafael Benitez's Newcastle United return after a term in the Championship. We run the rule over the Premier League's new boys.

BRIGHTON FACE REALITY CHECK

Back among the elite for the first time in 34 years after finishing second in the Championship, Brighton will not have to wait long for an indication of just how tough it will be to retain that long-prized status.

When manager Chris Hughton surveys the team-sheet for his side's opener against Manchester City, he will see an opposing line-up bolstered by over £200 million (\$264.8 million, 233.5 million euros) of new signings.

Hughton broke Brighton's transfer record to sign PSV Eindhoven midfielder Davy Propper on Monday and is set to shatter that mark with a £135 million swoop for Club Brugge winger Jose Izquierdo before the season starts.

But those deals pale in comparison to City's spending and Hughton said: "Whatever City's starting team is against our starting team, there's no doubt there is going to be an incredibly massive difference.

"They are expected to win league titles. Champions Leagues. Our aim is to make sure we are in the Premier League come the following season."

Against that backdrop, it would be a managerial masterstroke if Hughton can emulate Bournemouth manager Eddie Howe by keeping another modest club from England's sleepy south coast in the top flight.

WAGNER HAS HUDDERSFIELD DREAMING BIG

As David Wagner and his players danced joyously in front of 35,000 ecstatic Huddersfield fans at Wembley last season, the Terriers manager was already starting to dream of scaling even greater heights.

Huddersfield's dramatic penalty shootout victory over Reading in the Championship play-off final was the

culmination of the unglamorous Yorkshire club's remarkable rise under Wagner's astute leadership.

Plucked from Borussia Dortmund's reserve team two years ago by Huddersfield owner Dean Hoyle, the German coach has lived up to his billing as the protégé of Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp.

Having silenced the critics who wrote off him and his team 12 months ago, Wagner will again start this season with few giving Huddersfield a chance on their first appearance in the top flight since 1972.

He will not be intimidated by the Premier League big guns and has already broken the club's transfer record three times in the close-season in a £35 million spree on Laurent Depoitre, Aaron Mooy and Steve Mounie.

Taking inspiration from his former club Mainz's survival in Germany, Wagner said: "Mainz were promoted and got established in the Bundesliga. There are several examples comparable with a club like ours."

NEWCASTLE TRANSFER WOES WORRY BENITEZ

Newcastle manager Rafael Benitez cemented his place in the hearts of Magpies fans by staying loyal following their Premier League relegation and then leading the club to promotion as Championship winners.

But winning the financial backing of Newcastle owner Mike Ashley has proved much tougher and Newcastle's travails in the transfer market over the last two months threaten to lead to a messy divorce.

Frustrated by Newcastle's failure to sign Chelsea striker Tammy Abraham and Manchester City goalkeeper Willy Caballero, Benitez tried to shame Ashley into action.

"Hopefully Mike can keep his word and we can do what we want to do," he said. "He said he would give us 'every last penny'. I'm confident he will."

Since his complaints, Benitez has taken his spending to £30 million, but that will not be enough to satisfy the demanding Spaniard as he bids to re-establish Newcastle as a top-flight force. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Dembele suspended as Dortmund reject Barcelona bid

'As there is no other offer on the table, a transfer by the player to FC Barcelona is not at this time expected, nor currently very likely'



File picture of Dortmund's French midfielder Ousmane Dembele (C) during a press event in Dortmund, western Germany.

AFP
Berlin

Borussia Dortmund yesterday said they had rejected an offer from Barcelona for Ousmane Dembele, as the wantaway forward was suspended for missing training. Dortmund said a move by Dembele to the Camp Nou, where he is being lined up as a replacement for Neymar, was unlikely, after they turned down an offer that did not reflect the young winger's "extraordinary" value or the current state of the transfer market.

"As there is no other offer on the table, a transfer by the player to FC Barcelona is not at this time expected, nor currently very likely," said a club statement.

Dembele, who at the age of just 20 is considered one of the top talents in Europe, has been hotly pursued to fill the void left by Neymar's move to Paris Saint-Germain for a world-record 222 million euros (\$260 million) last week.

German tabloid *Bild* reported that Dortmund want an eye-watering 150 million euros (\$175 million) for their rising star, a price Barca appear unwilling to pay.

Dembele, who has made no secret of his desire to play for Barcelona, failed to show up for practice yesterday.

"We don't know why. We tried to reach him but we were unable to," Dortmund coach Peter Bosz told reporters.

Unimpressed, Dortmund promptly suspended the Frenchman for his unexplained absence.

"We will of course sanction this misconduct," Dortmund's sporting director Michael Zorc said in a statement, adding that Dembele was suspended until after this weekend's Cup match.

Bild suggested that Dembele may have been trying to break the deadlock in the negotiations with his no-show.

"Dembele really wants to go to Barcelona but yesterday he had to swallow the fact that the two clubs could not agree on a transfer fee," it wrote.

Speculation about Dembele's possible

move to the Camp Nou reached fever-pitch in recent days after the French international deleted the words "Borussia Dortmund" and the team's slogan "true love" from his Twitter and Instagram profiles.

Dembele himself told *Gol TV* last week that it was "a pleasure" to see his name on Barca's wish list.

COUTHINO ALSO 'NOT FOR SALE'
Neymar's stunning departure to PSG has sent Barca scrambling for replacements before the transfer window closes.

They are looking for someone to slot into the famed attacking line-up alongside the world-class talents of Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez.

The Catalan giants have also approached Liverpool about signing Philippe Coutinho – though here too there has been no sign of a deal.

The Spanish club were reported to have increased their bid for Coutinho to £90 million (100 million euros, \$115 million) on Wednesday after two previous offers were rejected by the Premier League side.

But Liverpool manager Klopp remains adamant the 25-year-old will stay at Anfield no matter what Barca are prepared to pay. "We want to have the best possible team. This means keeping the guys we have," Klopp told *Sky* in Germany yesterday.

"Liverpool is not a club that needs to sell. That is set in stone. So what they pay in the end doesn't matter."

Precocious forward Dembele joined Dortmund last summer from French side Rennes for just 15 million euros.

He went on to enjoy a promising first season in the Bundesliga, scoring six goals in 32 appearances.

Dembele's skills on the pitch, including a series of dazzling assists, quickly impressed and earned him 'wunderkind' headlines in the German press, though he has been criticised at times for lacking discipline.

"I'm not a phenomenon, I'm just trying to be decisive for my teammates, there are a lot of talented young people in football," a modest Dembele said last March.

Turkey crackdown on football violence

Turkish authorities yesterday ordered arrests and stricter security measures at key football matches after last weekend's Super Cup was marred by a pitch invasion and ugly fighting between rival fans. Konyaspor defeated Besiktas 2-1 on Sunday to win the Super Cup, the annual curtain raiser to the season that brings together the winners of last season's Turkish Cup and Super Lig.

But the match will be remembered more for the pitch invasion by thousands of fans that followed the game, with rival fans exchanging punches and flinging chairs across the turf. Television pictures showed security forces initially overwhelmed as the fans streamed onto the pitch.

The incident – at the neutral venue of Samsun on the Black Sea – was a huge embarrassment for the Turkish football authorities who have in the last years sought to clamp down on once endemic crowd violence.

Sports Minister Osman Askin Bak said after a special meeting with Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu and Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul that in future only e-tickets would be sold for cup finals. Also matches would be subjected to a greater security analysis ahead of time, with the authorities giving them an 'A' 'B' or 'C' risk assessment level, he said.

Soylu said particular attention would be put on provocations made on social media while top local officials would also not attend matches dressed in club regalia.

"Our task is to ensure that the match passes in a gentlemanly fashion and everyone can enjoy it from the moment it starts," said Soylu.

"We remember the matches we went to in our childhood. The best gift we can pass on to our children is to watch games with this pleasure," he added.

Gul said arrest warrants had been issued for four individuals over the fighting and expressed confidence they would shortly appear in court. Turkey has in the last years taken major measures aimed at ending violence at football matches, to improve the image of the Turkish game abroad and encourage more people to attend matches.

Chinese team repaints stadium gold for luck – and it works

A superstitious top-tier Chinese team repainted their whole stadium gold to bring better luck following a dismal run – and this week duly celebrated a fifth big home win on the bounce.

Guangzhou R&F last month took the drastic action believing that gold made for better feng shui than blue, the colour of the Chinese Super League club's strip, badge and originally its home ground too.

It followed a rotten sequence of just one home win in four months. But since painstakingly repainting their 20,000-capacity Yuexiushan Stadium in mid-July, the team in southern China have seen their fortunes dramatically reverse.

On Wednesday they beat Fabio Capello's big-spending Jiangsu Suning 4-2 at home to climb to third in the CSL and make it four home wins on the trot in the CSL, scoring 18 goals in the process. They also beat city rivals Guangzhou Evergrande in a home cup game, and R&F coach Dragan Stojkovic told the club website: "After we changed the colour of our home stadium we got five wins and a high goal-scoring rate as well."

"I think this is what the fans want to see – beautiful offensive football." The Serbian former international added: "The gold colour of our home stadium is pretty nice, no need to change it now."

'Sorry' Poyet on the brink in China

Gus Poyet apologised and hinted he could quit after Shanghai Shenhua lost 3-0 at home in the Chinese Super League to leave the Uruguayan's future as coach hanging in the balance. Shenhua finished fourth in the league last year and invested heavily this season, bringing Carlos Tevez to China on

a contract which made him one of the world's best paid players.

But the Argentine striker has flopped, missing more than half of Shenhua's CSL games with injury, and he was again absent as they were well beaten in front of their own fans by mid-table Guizhou Zhicheng on Wednesday.

Defeat left Shenhua 11th in the 16-team CSL and Poyet said "I have reached my limit", as furious home fans called for him to be sacked.

"I'd like to say sorry to everyone, I don't know what to say really," Poyet told reporters afterwards, according to the Shanghai-based *Oriental Sports Daily*.

"As coach I shoulder responsibility for losing this game. I will not hide and I will face everyone."

"I'm proud of having this job but I'm not pleased that I have reached my limit."

"I don't want to keep talking because it will be bad for me to say too much. I hope you won't ask me and show some respect for me."

Defeat was all the more embarrassing for Shenhua because Guizhou are managed by the Spaniard Gregorio Manzano – the man Poyet replaced at Shenhua.

Shenhua have won just one of their last five league and cup games to ramp up the pressure on the 49-year-old Poyet, whose managerial career has included two years in the Premier League with Sunderland in 2013-2015.

But Shenhua's boss insisted Poyet's job is safe. "Every team loses games," said chairman Wu Xiaohui. "Every year we have one or two situations like this. It's very normal, it's nothing."

Marseille not big enough for Giroud, says coach

Marseille boss Rudi Garcia admitted Wednesday that Olivier Giroud would be the perfect goal scorer for the French club but believes the Arsenal striker has his sights on a bigger challenge.

"I think that he doesn't want to come to Marseille," Garcia tells sports daily *L'Equipe* in an interview to be published yesterday.

Giroud has the "right profile", but Garcia admits that the French international "may have other interests than Marseille".

Giroud, 30, has been linked with a move away from Arsenal following the record signing of fellow French striker Alexandre Lacazette.

Last season, he was restricted to just 17 starts for the Londoners.

"Giroud is a French international, he's playing at Arsenal and he's eventually going to change clubs...this shows that we still have barriers to cross to be completely attractive," added Garcia.

"Today, to have top players, we are a little short. We don't want people to dream and think that we are going to take a top player."

Garcia's fears echoed those of Marseille president Jacques-Henri Eyraud who said in July the club were unable to compete with the "crazy prices" being paid for players during the summer transfer window.

Rummnigge to step down as European Club Association chair

Bayern Munich boss Karl-Heinz Rummnigge is to step down from his position as chairman of the European Club Association (ECA), the organisation said following a board meeting yesterday.

"Following intense, successful, and good years I believe the time has come to pass on the responsibility," Rummnigge was quoted as saying in a statement. "I have always believed this office should only be held for a limited amount of time. My withdrawal from office expresses my sincerity concerning this issue."

Rummnigge, 61, has been ECA chair since its foundation in 2008 and re-elected to the position three times. His successor will be chosen at the next ECA board meeting in Geneva on September 5. Over nine years, the ECA has grown from 137 to 220 teams and has fought to give clubs a direct say in football's decision-making processes along with receiving compensation for players taking part in the European Championships and World Cup.

BOTTOMLINE

City, Spurs taking different routes to title challenge

DPA
London

After coming up short in the Premier League last season, Manchester City and Tottenham are taking markedly different approaches to chase down champions Chelsea.

City have spent more than 200 millions pounds (260 million dollars) so far this summer in strengthening their squad while Tottenham are yet to buy any new players.

With the new season kicking off this weekend, it won't be a long wait to see if either club has made the right choice.

"We have a lot of players with a lot of quality and I am so grateful for what the club has done," City manager Pep Guardiola, who begins his second season away to promoted Brighton on Saturday, said.

"Last season we were the oldest team in the Premier League but we have made the team younger."

"But I still think we need a little bit more. The transfer win-



File picture of Tottenham manager Mauricio Pochettino.

dow doesn't close till August 31 so we will see."

City have added five new play-

ers in their cash splash after finishing a distant third last time. Guardiola has defended the

"We've played a few years together and everybody knows their role in the team. This year is going to be a special year for us I think"

spending as being dictated by market value and said it was necessary to freshen an ageing squad.

Over-30s Gael Clichy, Aleksandar Kolarov, Bacary Sagna and Pablo Zabaleta have departed and replaced by 20-somethings Benjamin Mendy, Kyle Walker, Danilo and Bernardo Silva

"We don't change for the short period," Guardiola said.

"All the players, the average [age] is so, so young. So, it's for the next five or six or seven years."

Tottenham have fought to the end the past two seasons only to finish third and second.

Spurs highly impressed last season by losing just four league games while scoring the most goals (86) and conceding the least (26). But while their lack of spending may alarm supporters, manager Mauricio Pochettino

said there's no need for panic yet.

"It is so difficult when you have a very good team and at a club like Tottenham you have a very clear philosophy and a plan that you want to follow," he told *Sky Sports* ahead of Sunday's opener at Newcastle.

"It is not easy to find right footballer. I think we are working and we'll add some players to the end of the transfer window."

"We need to bring some new energy and strengthen our squad. I think everyone knows that – and first of all our chairman, Daniel [Levy], knows that."

While no new players have come in yet, only Walker has left for Man City and continuity is major key to Spurs success, according to Mousa Dembele.

"The way we have played the last few years... there is a lot of confidence in the team," the midfielder said. "The biggest aim was to keep everyone together. It's a positive thing."

"We've played a few years together and everybody knows their role in the team. This year is going to be a special year for us I think."

Qatar's Bader in javelin throw final



Qatar's Ahmed Bader in action during the qualification round of the men's javelin throw event at the 2017 IAAF World Championships in London yesterday. With an effort of 83.83m, Bader made it to the final, which is scheduled for tomorrow. (AFP)

FOCUS

Semenya safely into 800m semis

'I just want to keep winning. That's all I'm concentrating on'

AFP
London

South Africa's Caster Semenya advanced easily to the semi-finals of the 800m after winning her first round heat at the IAAF World Championships yesterday.

Semenya, a bronze medallist in the 1500m in London as she attempted an audacious double, clocked 2min 01.33sec.

"I just want to keep winning," said the South African, dogged by gender accusations since shooting to fame when she won world gold in Berlin in 2009.

"That's all I'm concentrating on. I'm feeling okay after the 1500m, so I'm ready to go again."

Defending world 800m champion Maryna Arzamasova of Belarus could only finish fourth in her heat, out of the automatic three qualifiers from each of the six heats.

Kenya's Margaret Wambui, bronze medallist at both the world indoors and Olympics last year, won that



(From left) Poland's Joanna Jozwik, South Africa's Caster Semenya and Cuba's Rose Mary Almanza compete in the women's 800m heat at the IAAF World Championships in London yesterday. (AFP)

heat, but Arzamasova's season's best of 2:01.92 was not fast enough to see her bag one of the faster loser places.

Wambui's teammate Eunice Sum, world champion in Moscow in 2013 and bronze medallist in Beijing two years later, was a late withdrawal.

Francine Niyonsaba of Burundi, world indoor champion and Olympic silver medallist, also qualified with heat victory in 1:59.86.

BOTTOMLINE

Bittersweet bronze sees Felix equal Bolt, Ottey

AFP
London

Bronze in the 400m proved to be a bittersweet consolation for US track legend Allyson Felix as she drew level with Jamaicans Merlene Ottey and Usain Bolt on having won 14 world championships medals.

Felix has also bagged an incredible nine Olympic medals including six gold. Of her 14 world medals, nine have been gold, while 12 in total were won as part of the US relay team.

Jamaican Bolt, in his swansong season, can move to 15 with a medal in the 4x100m relay this weekend, but Felix is slated to run both the 4x100 and 4x400m relays for the US team, which could take her to 16.

Felix crashed through into bronze in Wednesday's 400m after Bahamas rival and race leader Shaunae Miller-Uibo faltered 20 metres from the finish line.

In pouring rain, Felix's unheralded teammate Phyllis Francis ripped up the form book to claim a shock gold, with Bahrain's Salwa Eid Naser taking silver just ahead of Felix.

"I cannot lie, I am disappointed to lose one gold tonight but the cham-



US athletes Phyllis Francis (left) and Allyson Felix celebrate their first and third place finishes respectively in the women's 400m event at the 2017 IAAF World Athletics Championships in London on Wednesday. (Reuters)

pionships is not over yet so we keep going," said Felix, who kicked off her

startling medal haul with a 200m silver medal at the 2004 Olympics

SPOTLIGHT

Obiri on course to secure elusive 5,000m title

Reuters
London

Kenya's Hellen Obiri remained on course to win her first major 5,000 metres title after qualifying fastest from the heats at the World Championships yesterday.

The 27-year-old won world bronze in 2013 and came back from a year off to claim silver at the Rio 2016 Olympics. Obiri, the world leader this year, qualified for Sunday's final in a time of 14:56.70.

She will be challenged by defending champion Almaz Ayana of Ethiopia, who ran 14:57.06 in her first 5,000m race of the season five days after her runaway victory in the 10,000m in London.

Senbere Teferi, Ayana's compatriot and 2015 world silver medallist, was

also among the automatic qualifiers from heat one, along with Susan Krumin of the Netherlands and Shannon Rowbury of the United States.

American Molly Huddle led the second heat for more than 11 laps, but she was overtaken on the last bend by a congested pack including compatriot Shelby Houlihan, Ethiopia's Letesenbet Gidey, Sifan Hassan of the Netherlands, Britain's Eilish McColgan and Margaret Kipkemboi of Kenya.

Huddle still qualified via the fastest non-automatic places, along with Norway's Karoline Grovdal and Kalkidan Gezahegne of Bahrain.

The third Kenyan in the final will be Sheila Kiptotich, while the home crowd will be able to cheer two athletes on Sunday as Laura Muir ran fast enough to join fellow Briton McColgan.

Ethiopia's Genzebe Dibaba, the former world 1,500 metres champion, withdrew before the race.



Hellen Onsando Obiri (left) of Kenya, Almaz Ayana (centre) of Ethiopia and Susan Krumin of the Netherlands compete in the women's 5,000m heats at the IAAF World Athletics Championships in London yesterday. (Reuters)

UPDATE

Norovirus continues to plague world champs

AFP
London

Three people associated with the Athletics World Championships have contracted the norovirus with another 40 reporting symptoms, Public Health England (PHE) announced yesterday.

Isaac Makwala, one of those who was diagnosed with the illness on Monday, was scheduled to run later yesterday in the 200 metres final having been allowed to run a solo time-trial on Wednesday.

He had been barred from the heats after being placed under quarantine for 48 hours as is required under British health regulations.

The Botswana runner also missed the 400m final due to being in quarantine.

"PHE has been notified of a confirmed outbreak of norovirus among people associated with the World Athletics Championships," said PHE London deputy director for health protec-

tion Dr Deborah Turbitt.

"We have so far been made aware of approximately 40 people reporting illness and three of these cases have been confirmed as norovirus by laboratory testing.

"PHE has been working closely with the London 2017 organisers and venues to provide infection control advice to limit the spread of illness."

London 2017, the championship organisers, announced on Monday several competitors – staying at the same official team hotel – had suffered gastroenteritis.

A spokesperson for the Tower Hotel on Tuesday insisted it was "not the source of the illness"

Norovirus is often caught through close contact with someone carrying the virus or by touching contaminated surfaces or objects.

Norovirus, which brings on diarrhoea and vomiting, is rarely serious with most people making a full recovery within one or two days, without treatment.

LONG WAIT ENDS

Golden Gong finally wins women's shot

AFP
London

China's Gong Lijiao made the most of the absence of reigning champion Christina Schwanitz and four-time champion Valerie Adams to win gold in the women's shot put at the IAAF World Championships on Wednesday.

After claiming six major silver or bronze medals since the 2008 Olympic Games, the 28-year-old Chinese athlete managed a best of 19.94 metres for her country's first gold medal of the championships.

In difficult conditions under pouring rain at the London Stadium, Hungary's Anita Marton claimed silver with 19.49, while American Olympic champion Michelle Carter took bronze (19.14).

Gong was left delighted with China's first shot title since Huang Zhihong won her second gold in Stuttgart in 1993, saying: "I was a bit worried about my condition because two years ago I was heading for gold and I changed a couple of things after the Olympic Games in Rio.

"I competed more this year to be ready for these championships.



"It is 24 years since China won a shot put medal, so it's a very special moment for me. Of course, the rain affected the competition and that is the reason we didn't go past 20 metres tonight."

Gong added: "My next goal is, of course, the Tokyo Olympics. My memories of London 2012 are mixed because I was third originally, then I was moved to second later. I didn't like the way that happened.

"So I am glad to show all the hard work I've done in the past with this gold medal."



FOCUS

Van Niekerk and the hard act of following Bolt

Does the South African have the personality required to fill the great man's shoes?



South Africa's Wayde Van Niekerk at the start of the men's 400m final at the 2017 IAAF World Championships in London on Tuesday. (AFP)

DPA
London

For some, Usain Bolt's retirement from the sport after the 4x100-metre relay tomorrow represents athletics doomsday. For others, it creates a golden opportunity to give the sport a broader perspective.

Bolt has been arguably the best thing that has ever happened to the Olympic showcase sport in troubled times, with interest waning amid corruption and doping scandals.

He captivated millions of fans with his carefree attitude and pre- and post-race antics. His track record over a decade, with 11 world and eight Olympic titles, plus the 100m and 200m world records, speaks for itself.

Not even bronze in the last 100m race Saturday in London has dented his reputation as the face of the sport, and neither would another failure to get gold in his last appearance on Saturday.

"I am sad that he is going. The guy has been a sensation, [he] connected like no one else [other] than Muham-

mad Ali," Sebastian Coe, president of ruling body the IAAF, said last week.

"The guy has a personality. Other are somewhat pre-packaged. He has a view, an opinion. That's what we will miss and what athletes have to duplicate. It's all about retaining interest and relevance — he is an extraordinary competitor but sport goes on."

Coe has stated before that there will be life after Bolt in the sport, just as boxing produced stars after Ali and football new faces after Pele or Diego Maradona.

Athletics itself has survived the loss of such giants as Carl Lewis, Merlene Ottey, Michael Johnson or Gail Devers, all of whom were highly respected for their performances but not adored in the same way Bolt is.

A good indicator these days are figures on social media, where the sport is increasingly consumed.

Bolt has 4.8mn followers on Twitter, 18.8mn on Facebook and 7.4mn on Instagram.

The man most mentioned as his heir, South African 200m and 400m runner Wayde van Niekerk, has 80,000 followers on Twitter, 46,700 on Facebook

and 195,000 on Instagram.

Bolt has said that Van Niekerk is "a cool person but I've told him to open up his personality a little bit because he's really laid back".

Twenty-five-year-old Van Niekerk said it was "a massive honour to be mentioned" by Bolt. He says he is ready to take Bolt's advice.

"It is an area where I need to take the responsibility and create a new image. The person that I am and I will be in future will develop. I need to speak to more and more people. I enjoy learning and like to be in a challenging situation," he said.

But Britain's *Guardian* newspaper on Wednesday highlighted the difference between Bolt and Van Niekerk.

"Bolt sucks all the oxygen out of a stadium, draws all eyes to him. But before van Niekerk had even got back to his feet, everyone had switched their attention back to the pole vault final taking place at the far end of the stadium," the paper said.

"Athletics does have a new champion, a great athlete and an admirable man, but it does not have a new Bolt." However, Olympic 400m champion

and world-record holder Van Niekerk has been announced to ovations in London as the "new superstar," and his reputation will grow further if he emulates Johnson by completing a 200m and 400m double later on Thursday with victory in the 200m final.

Following Bolt will be a hard act, but for some it offers a chance to put sport first again.

"For me, the hype around Bolt was unjust," insisted German sprinter Julian Reus. "He has given unbelievable performances but athletics is more than one person, which it was what it had become reduced to."

Reus may be right in principle. Bolt did monopolise attention and was even called the saviour of athletics when he beat American rival Justin Gatlin, who had served two doping-related suspensions, to 100m gold in 2015. (Bolt lost to Gatlin on Saturday in a cruel twist of fate.)

But who's going to listen to Justin Reus? He has a mere 27,000 followers on Instagram, 17,000 on Facebook and 3,700 on Twitter, putting him light years behind the Jamaican — both on and off the track.

SPOTLIGHT

Shotputter Walsh won world title with groin tear

Reuters
Wellington

Newly-crowned world shotput champion Tom Walsh won the title in London despite a large tear in his groin that will limit his outings for the rest of the season.

Walsh's World Championships gold medal was the first ever for a man from New Zealand and the 25-year-old said he had been battling the groin injury when he threw 22.03 metres to clinch it on Monday.

"I've got a seven centimetre tear in my groin, and that pretty much means some time off from competing to rehab and repair," Walsh told Fairfax Media yesterday.

"I've got some training to do in the next wee while to test out if it's any good or not, and we'll go from there." The Rio Olympics bronze medalist suffered the injury in his final training session before he went out to top qualifying with a season best throw of 22.14m.

The Christchurch-based builder was limping noticeably after winning the title and said he would need a scan to determine the extent of the

injury.

He had the scan in Britain on Wednesday and said he would now have to adjust his schedule as he sought a lucrative payday in the Diamond League.

"I'm meant to be doing five comps, but I will now not be able to do all five," he added.

"My first competition may be touch and go for the Birmingham Diamond League on August 20 but I will definitely be able to compete in Zagreb (Aug. 29) and the Diamond League final in Brussels (Sept. 1)."

Walsh is second in the Diamond League on 14 points behind American Olympic champion Ryan Crouser, who leads on 24, with the overall winner of the series pocketing \$50,000.

Walsh earned \$60,000 by winning the world title and said any additional prize money would be a big factor in keeping him going throughout the year.

"There is a long time between drinks, so to speak," he said.

"It is a costly business I'm in. I'm lucky that I get supported by the government yet and by Athletics NZ. It does make things slightly easier, but it's also good to make a bit more money if I can as well."



Tom Walsh of New Zealand in action during the men's Shot Put final in London on Sunday. (Reuters)

BOTTOMLINE

Warholm aiming to avoid cracking like porcelain

AFP
London

Norwegian Karsten Warholm aped 'The Scream' by Edvard Munch when he realised he had won the men's 400 metres hurdles title and his victory could prove as valuable to the sport as the painting is to the Norwegian tourism industry.

Athletics is desperately seeking new and quirky characters to fill the huge vacuum that will be left by the retirement of Jamaican superstar Usain Bolt and to a lesser extent British distance legend Mo Farah.

Warholm fills several boxes being only 21 years old and exhibiting an exciting style of running, showing no fear in leading from the gun to the tape and leaving one of the all-time greats in Kerron Clement trailing in his wake.

Not bad for someone who was doing the decathlon not so long ago. He has taken to the event like a duck to water.

"I truly don't believe it," said Warholm, who donned a Viking hat on his lap of honour.

"I've worked so hard for this, but I don't know what I have done. This is an amazing feeling. I'm world champion, that's crazy."

Warholm, who hails from the tiny town of Ulsteinvik — population just over 6,000, says in self-deprecatory fashion he wouldn't be able to run any other way.

"I have one way to do it, and I did it," he said. "I'm young, I'm stupid, going hard works for me."

'Pinch me!' demands Warholm — and photographer obliges

On Wednesday, it only dawned on Warholm that he had become world champion when he made a Reuters photographer an offer he could not refuse. Still barely able to comprehend what had happened after becoming Norway's first world track champion for 30 years, Warholm was down on his haunches having been given a flag to parade when he looked straight at photographer Phil Noble.

"What's going on, is this real?" the 21-year-old asked Noble. When assured it was, Warholm still wasn't satisfied. "Pinch me," he demanded.

A surprised Noble leant across and did as he was told, pinching the youngster's wrist, at which point Warholm concurred.

"Yes, it's real," he said before disappearing for his lap of honour in a viking helmet.



Warholm, who hinted he could be a danger when he won at the Bislett Games and then Stock-

holm Diamond League meets earlier this year, said that he didn't want to sound arrogant but he

wouldn't have stood a chance of winning if he'd lacked self-belief despite being a relative novice.

"I think everyone has to believe they will become a world champion," he said.

"These two (silver and bronze medalists Yasmani Copello and Kerron Clement) are good competitors and I have respect for them.

"This event was wide open so I'm not saying I'm a better runner, it was just my day. The times were not that good as there were challenging conditions, but that didn't matter. It was all about the win."

'SPORT IS LIKE PORCELAIN'

Warholm, who was giving Norway their first world gold in the event, said accepting his coach's advice to switch to the hurdles had not been a bone of contention.

"It wasn't that hard for him," he said. "We are cooperating very well. We are on the same frequency — we both have very bad sense of humour."

"We felt it (400m hurdles) was working over the winter so we gave it a shot. He is a great guy."

Warholm also made light of the terrible weather conditions which saw the final take place in pouring rain. "For me this is a Norwegian summer," he joked. "There were no worries, it is almost an advantage for me. You have to take it as it is."

However, before athletics chiefs get too excited about the prospect of Warholm being one of the new poster boys he also knows that sport can be a fickle friend.

"This sport is like porcelain, you can crack at any time," he said earlier this year. "I can suddenly fall on my way into the train."

MLB

Porcello pitches Red Sox to eighth consecutive win

Porcello gave up two runs, four hits and two walks while striking out seven in six-plus innings

Reuters
Boston

Rick Porcello took a shutout into the sixth inning as the Boston Red Sox won their eighth consecutive game, pulling away to an 8-2 victory over the slumping Tampa Bay Rays in the Major League Baseball games on Wednesday.

Porcello (6-14) allowed home runs to Adeiny Hechavarría and Brad Miller in the sixth. He gave up two runs, four hits and two walks while striking out seven in six-plus innings.

Tampa Bay starter Jake Odorizzi (6-5) took a line drive off his right ankle in the fifth and had to leave the game.

X-rays came back negative, and he is listed as day-to-day with a contusion. Andrew Benintendi had three hits and scored twice, and Sandy Leon provided a two-run single to cap a five-run fifth inning that gave Boston a 6-0 lead.

NATIONALS 10, MARLINS 1

Ryan Zimmerman went 4-for-4 with two home runs and five RBIs, setting the all-time franchise RBI record as Washington hammered Miami. Zimmerman has 910 RBIs in his career, breaking the Montreal/Washington franchise record of 905 set by Tim Lincecum.

Howie Kendrick had three hits and three RBIs, and Gio Gonzalez (10-5) allowed only one run in seven innings for the Nationals. The Marlins' Adam Conley (4-5) gave up five runs on 11 hits in five innings.

ODGERS 3, DIAMONDBACKS 2

Cody Bellinger homered and scored twice, and Los Angeles handed Arizona's Zack Greinke his first loss in 13 home starts this season. Bellinger homered in the second and doubled to open a two-run seventh inning.

Joc Pederson drove in Bellinger with a two-out double off Greinke (13-5) to tie the game. Yasiel Puig followed with single for a 3-2 lead, chasing Greinke. Greinke gave up four hits, walked four and struck out eight in 6-2/3 innings. Los Angeles' Alex Wood (14-1) allowed two runs on six hits in six innings. He struck out four and walked one.

ROCKIES 3, INDIANS 2 (12 INNINGS)

Charlie Blackmon homered in the 12th inning after Jonathan Lucroy sent the game into extra innings with an RBI double in the ninth as Colorado gained a split of the two-game series.

Blackmon hit a 1-0 pitch from Zach McAlister (1-2) over the right field wall for his 27th home run.

The Rockies' Carlos Estevez (5-0) pitched two scoreless innings for the win.

Tyler Chatwood, normally a starter, pitched the 12th inning to pick up his second career save.



Boston Red Sox starting pitcher Rick Porcello throws a pitch during the second inning against the Tampa Bay Rays at Tropicana Field in St. Petersburg, Florida on Wednesday. (USA TODAY Sports)

Six Colorado pitchers held Cleveland scoreless on four hits over the last nine innings.

TIGERS 10, PIRATES 0
Justin Verlander won his third consecutive start

despite having a no-hit bid broken up with two outs in the sixth inning, as Detroit snapped a four-game slide. Josh Bell's double off the glove of third baseman Nicholas Castellanos was the lone hit off Verlander (8-7), whose eight-inning stint was his longest of the season. Verlander struck out four of the last five batters he faced. He walked three and struck out six.

CARDINALS 8, ROYALS 5

Yadier Molina cracked a grand slam in the sixth inning — one pitch after a cat ran on the field and delayed the game — to lift St. Louis to its fifth straight victory. Kansas City led 5-4 before Molina lined a 1-0 sinker from Peter Moilan into the seats in left field for his 14th home run of the year and his fifth career slam.

Matt Bowman (3-4) worked a scoreless sixth as the Cardinals pulled within 1-1/2 games of the Chicago Cubs for first place in the National League Central.

YANKEES 11, BLUE JAYS 5

Gary Sanchez, Didi Gregorius and Todd Frazier hit solo home runs as New York defeated Toronto. Garrett Cooper had four hits and two RBIs for the Yankees. Frazier had three RBIs and three hits, and Gregorius added three hits for New York.

Jose Bautista homered for the Blue Jays. New York's Masahiro Tanaka allowed two hits, five walks and three runs (two earned) in four-plus innings. Reliever Chad Green (2-0) allowed two runs in 1-1/3 innings and was awarded the win.

MARINERS 6, ATHLETICS 3

Nelson Cruz hit two home runs, and Kyle Seager launched a three-run blast as Seattle topped Oakland. Cruz hit a two-run shot in the third inning and a solo blast in the fifth for his second multi-homer game of the season.

TWINS 4, BREWERS 0

Bartolo Colon pitched seven shutout innings and Brian Dozier homered for the second consecutive game as Minnesota defeated Milwaukee. Coming off his first complete game of the season, the 44-year-old Colon (2-1) scattered five hits and walked one batter while striking out five. Dozier added a double during a three-hit day, and Jorge Polanco had two hits.

Brandon Woodruff (1-1) got through 5-2/3 innings, allowing two runs on three hits and three walks with two strikeouts in his second big-league start.

GIANTS 3, CUBS 1

Madison Bumgarner allowed four hits and one run over seven innings as San Francisco beat Chicago. Jarrett Parker snapped a 1-1 tie in the seventh inning with an RBI single, and Hunter Pence homered in the eighth.

Sam Dyson pitched a 1-2-3 ninth for his eighth

save in nine opportunities with the Giants.

WHITE SOX 7, ASTROS 1

Tim Anderson homered and drove in three runs, and Miguel Gonzalez took a shutout into the eighth inning as Chicago beat Houston. Anderson sparked the White Sox in the fifth and sixth innings when they hit the Astros' Colin McHugh (0-1) hard and tallied all their runs.

Anderson's RBI double in the sixth gave Chicago a 5-0 lead before Leury Garcia followed with a two-run single. Gonzalez (6-10) allowed one run on five hits and struck out four while walking only one in eight innings. Derek Fisher finally got to Gonzalez with a solo home run to lead off the eighth inning.

ANGELS 5, ORIOLES 1

CJ Cron hit a two-run homer to highlight a three-hit performance, and rookie Troy Scribner allowed one run in five innings as Los Angeles defeated Baltimore. Cron's home run, his seventh of the season, came in the sixth inning against Orioles starter Kevin Gausman and stretched the Angels' lead to 4-1.

Kole Calhoun joined Cron with three hits, and Mike Trout added two. Scribner (2-0), making his second big-league start in his fourth game, gave up a home run to Wellington Castillo in the third and a single to Tim Beckham.

PHILLIES 3, BRAVES 2

Jerad Eickhoff pitched 6-2/3 strong innings, and Odubel Herrera provided the offense with a pair of triples to help Philadelphia beat Atlanta. Eickhoff (3-7) allowed two runs on nine hits and struck out six without issuing a walk.

The right-hander is 3-0 with 38 strikeouts in his past seven starts. Herrera was 2-for-4, scored one run and drove in a run. Atlanta rookie Sean Newcomb (1-7) gave up three runs (two earned) in six innings. He allowed five hits, struck out six and walked one.

RANGERS 5, METS 1

Martin Perez snapped a four-start losing streak by allowing one run over eight strong innings as Texas beat New York. Perez (6-10) gave up three hits and walked none while striking out five in his longest outing since Aug. 2, 2015.

REDS 8, PADRES 3

Stuart Turner and Eugenio Suarez hit two-run homers, and Jose Peraza went 2-for-3 with three RBIs to lift Cincinnati past San Diego. Rookie Asher Wojciechowski (3-1) allowed three runs in 5-2/3 innings, with no walks and six strikeouts.

He also singled in the fourth inning for his first career hit. Manuel Margot led off the sixth with his 10th home run of the season, and Wil Myers snapped an 0-for-11 skid later in the inning with his 22nd home run, a two-run shot to make the score 6-3.

NBA ROUND-UP

Sacramento forward Randolph arrested on marijuana charge

AFP
Los Angeles

Sacramento Kings forward **Zach Randolph** was arrested on a charge of marijuana possession with intent to supply after a late-night disturbance in Los Angeles, reports said yesterday.

Randolph, 36, was detained by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department after a crowd gathered at a public housing estate in the gritty Watts neighborhood on Wednesday. Randolph, a two-time All Star who joined the Kings on a two-year \$24mm contract earlier this summer from the Memphis Grizzlies, was detained along with another man. He was cited for intent to supply because of the large amount of marijuana found at the address, reports said citing law enforcement.

Randolph was arrested at around 11pm local time and booked five hours later with bail set at \$20,000 (17,000 euros). Randolph, who spent eight years at Memphis, averaged 14.1 points and 8.2 rebounds last season.

CELTICS TO PLAY 76ERS IN LONDON IN JANUARY

The Boston Celtics will meet the Philadelphia 76ers at the O2 Arena in London in January for a regular NBA game, league officials announced yesterday. The game, to be played January 11, will be the Celtics' second trip to London, having played Minnesota there in a 2007 pre-season contest, and the first for the 76ers, whose prior British experience was a 2013 pre-season game at Manchester against Oklahoma City.

The 76ers boast some of the NBA's top young talent, including 2016 NBA Draft top pick Ben Simmons of Australia, who missed all of last season with a foot injury, and 2017 top draft selection Markelle Fultz as well as 2016-17 campaign All-Rookie selections Joel Embiid of Cameroon and Dario Saric of Croatia.

"I look forward to coming back to Lon-



don with the Sixers after visiting for the first time this summer," Embiid said.

"We are a young, hungry team and will be sure to give the fans an exciting game against Boston in January."

The Celtics feature two-time NBA All-Star point guard Isaiah Thomas, who led Boston with a career-high 28.9 points a game last season, plus newly acquired All-Star Gordon Hayward from Utah and four-time NBA All-Star Al Horford, the team's top rebounder, from the Dominican Republic.

"It's very exciting for our team and the whole Celtics organization to compete in front of our loyal fans in London," Thomas

said. "I can't wait to connect with them at the NBA London Game 2018 and hopefully make new fans in the process."

Counting pre-season contests, it will be the NBA's 16th game in London. "Our events have become an annual opportunity for basketball fans across Europe to come together and share their passion for the NBA," league commissioner Adam Silver said.

CASSPI, ROBINSON TO INSTRUCT AT ISRAELI HOOPS CAMP

Golden State Warriors forward Omri Casspi, the first Israeli player in the NBA, and retired San Antonio Spurs legend David Robinson are among instructors at the Basketball Without Borders camp starting Sunday in Israel.

The youngsters appearing at the 16th European edition of the global camps organized by the NBA and governing body FIBA were announced yesterday. Top boys and girls from 22 nations will attend the sessions in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Netanya, the first to be staged in Israel.

Casspi, 29, signed a free agent deal with the reigning NBA champion Warriors last month after spending parts of last season with Sacramento, New Orleans and Minnesota. He has also played for Cleveland and Houston since starting his NBA career in 2009.

Robinson, a 10-time NBA All-Star center, was a two-time NBA champion, two-time Olympic champion and the 1995 NBA Most Valuable Player during a career that spanned from 1989-2003. Other active NBA players at the camp include Philadelphia guard Jerryd Bayless, Los Angeles Clippers forward Sam Dekker and Toronto Raptors swingman Normall Powell, all from the United States.

"Landed in Israel! Excited for a good week of Basketball Without Borders with the @NBA," Dekker tweeted. More than 2,860 participants from 134 nations have taken part in 51 Basketball Without Borders camps in 26 countries since 2001, with 46 of them having been selected in the NBA Draft.

FIBA ASIA CUP

Japan sail past Chinese Taipei

Agencies
Beirut, Lebanon

Japan picked up their first win in Group A, with a comfortable 87-49 victory over Chinese Taipei at the FIBA Asia Cup 2017 yesterday.

Despite trailing early, Japan secure the lead with a few minutes left in the first period and would not relinquish it the rest of the way.

A dominant 18-5 second period saw Japan get a stranglehold on the contest to run out 38-point winners. Makoto Hiejima and Furukawa top scored for Japan with 15 points each, whilst Chu was the only player in double

figures for Chinese Taipei, also with 15. Japan improved to 1-1, whilst Chinese Taipei dropped to the same record.

Qatar, who lost their opening match to Iraq on Wednesday, will take on China today. The Maroons need to win their match against continental powerhouse to keep their hopes alive of qualifying for the next stage from Group B.

Australia continued their dominant start in their first ever FIBA Asia Cup, defeating Hong Kong 99-58. Australia led from start to finish in the impressive display, sharing the ball and seeing six players reach double figures.

Todd Blanchfield led the Boomers with 18 points, as Mitch

Creek added 11. Yi Ting Lo led three players in double figures for Hong Kong with 11 points, along with 5 assists. Australia are now 2-0 atop of Group D, whilst Hong Kong continue to look for their first victory at 0-2.

In Wednesday's late match, Jordan survived a furious late rally from Syria to prevail 68-66. Jordan appeared to be in control of the contest, before Syria cut a 20-point lead to single digits, even taking a lead momentarily. However, Jordan made plays when it counted to hold on for the win. Sixteen points from Mousa Alawadi led Jordan, with a game-high 25 points from Tarek Aljabi proving not to be enough for Syria.



Daiki Tanaka of Japan in action against Chinese Taipei during the FIBA Asia Cup 2017 in Beirut yesterday.

TENNIS

Federer, Nadal stroll in Montreal openers

Federer attributes his renaissance to rediscovering full fitness after knee surgery

AFP
Montreal

Rejuvenated Roger Federer believes he is still reaping the benefits of his extended break from tennis after a comfortable opening victory at the ATP Montreal Masters gave him his best start to a season since 2006.

The Swiss star, who celebrated his 36th birthday on Tuesday, swatted aside Canada's world number 116 Peter Polansky 6-2, 6-1 in just 53 minutes to book his place in the second round. Federer was joined in the last 16 by top seed and old adversary Rafael Nadal, who made similarly short work of his opening assignment.

Nadal, who will depose the absent Andy Murray as world number one if he reaches the semi-finals in Montreal this week, routed Croatian youngster Borna Coric 6-1, 6-2. Federer is riding high after a spectacular year which has netted him both the Australian Open and Wimbledon crowns.

On Wednesday's evidence, few would bet against him adding the US Open to that haul after a masterful performance that left Polansky groping at shadows. A one-sided win gave him a 32-2 start to the season, his best beginning to a campaign since 2006 when he began 38-2 and finished the year at world number one.

Federer attributed his renaissance to rediscovering full fitness after knee surgery in 2016 and taking a two-month break from the game earlier this year. "I guess for me the key is that I'm actually healthy," Federer said.

"I knew that when I was healthy, I was going to be able to have chances to win slams again, to play against the best, beat the best. That's also reasons why I'm still playing today. If I felt like I couldn't do all these things, it would not be enjoyable or I wouldn't be doing it any more. I think the belief was always there. The body always needed to be there, too. I think the break just rejuvenated me. I came in refreshed. It was a different mindset."

Federer took control immediately against Polansky, holding his opening service game comfortably before quickly going 0-40 up in the second game. A Polansky double fault gave Federer the break and the Swiss was soon 3-0 up after holding serve to love in the next game.

Polansky held his next two service games but never looked like breaking Fed-



Rafael Nadal of Spain hits a shot during his win over Borna Coric of Croatia at the Montreal Masters. (USA TODAY Sports)

erer's serve as the veteran moved into a 5-2 lead. Federer then broke Polansky to take the first set, following a signature backhand with a deft forehand volley that left the 29-year-old Canadian scrambling.

Federer was soon in control in the second set, scoring an early break and holding twice to move 3-0 up before a further break made it 4-0. Polansky earned a stay of execution after holding serve in the sixth game to make it 5-1, but Federer raced into the next round with a comfortable hold, finishing with an emphatic overhead smash.

Federer will face Spain's David Ferrer in the third round. Ferrer upset 15th seed Jack Sock 7-6 (9/7), 3-6, 6-1. Elsewhere on Wednesday, France's Gael Monfils saved four match points before digging

deep to defeat Japanese fifth seed Kei Nishikori in an attritional three-set duel.

Monfils prevailed 6-7 (4/7), 7-5, 7-6 (8/6) to advance. There was almost another French Houdini act in the evening session, when Richard Gasquet fought back from triple match point down to earn three match points in the final set of his duel with Germany's Alexander Zverev. Fourth-seed Zverev however fought back brilliantly to claim victory in a tie-break, winning 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (7/3). Zverev will now face Australia's Nick Kyrgios in the last 16. Kyrgios swatted aside Victor Troicki 6-1, 6-2.

RESULTS

x-denotes seeded player:
Second round: Rafael Nadal (ESP x1) bt

Borna Coric (CRO) 6-1, 6-2; Denis Shapovalov (CAN) bt Juan Martin Del Potro (ARG) 6-3, 7-6 (7/4); Chung Hyeon (KOR) bt David Goffin (BEL x9) 7-5, 6-3; Adrian Mannarino (FRA) bt Milos Raonic (CAN x6) 6-4, 6-4; Alexander Zverev (GER x4) bt Richard Gasquet (FRA) 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (7/3); Nick Kyrgios (AUS x16) bt Paolo Lorenzi (ITA) 6-2, 6-3; Kevin Anderson (RSA) bt Pablo Carreño-Busta (ESP x11) 6-3, 7-6 (8/6); Sam Querrey (USA) bt Jo-Wilfried Tsonga (FRA x8) 6-1, 3-6, 6-4; Grigor Dimitrov (BUL x7) bt Mischa Zverev (GER) 6-3, 3-6, 6-3; Robin Haase (NED) bt Ernesto Escobedo (USA) 6-4, 6-1; Gael Monfils (FRA) bt Kei Nishikori (JPN x5) 6-7 (4/7), 7-5, 7-6 (8/6); Roberto Bautista (ESP x12) bt Ryan Harrison (USA) 7-5, 6-2; David Ferrer (ESP) bt Jack Sock (USA x15) 7-6 (9/7), 3-6, 6-1; Roger Federer (SUI x2) bt Peter Polansky (CAN) 6-2, 6-1

ROGERS CUP

Pliskova begins No.1 reign with ragged victory

Reuters
Toronto

Karolina Pliskova began her reign as world number one with a ragged 6-3, 6-3 second round win over Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova on a blockbuster Wednesday when eight of the top 10 ranked players were in action at the Rogers Cup.

Pliskova, playing in her first tournament since her shock second round defeat at Wimbledon, struggled with a misfiring first serve and was guilty of some lapses in concentration. However, the lanky Czech was never seriously threatened as she disposed her 19th ranked Russian opponent in a tidy 70 minutes.

"I had a little bit (of nerves) before the match but during the match I felt much better especially at the end," Pliskova said.

"I think it was not the best tennis from my side but I was trying to improve in the match. I'm definitely happy I am through to the next round, the first match is always tough."

A star-studded day with fourth-ranked Wimbledon champion Garbine Muguruza taming Belgian qualifier Kirsten Flipkens 7-5, 6-2. Second seed Simona Halep took care of surprise Wimbledon semi-finalist Magdalena Rybarikova with a relatively straightforward 6-3, 6-4 win, while third seed German Angelique Kerber outlasted Donna Vekic 6-4, 7-6(5).

American Venus Williams, playing in her first tournament since reaching the final at Wimbledon, again had to battle to advance as she defeated 21-year-old Katerina Siniakova 7-5, 7-5. The 37-year-old will next face Elena Svitolina. American teenager Catherine Bellis continued her brilliant form on the North American hardcourts by taking down eighth seeded Russian Svetlana Kuznetsova 6-4, 7-5 to reach the third round. The 18-year-old arrived in Toronto after reaching the semi-finals in Stanford last week.

Kuznetsova departed along with her 16th seeded compatriot Elena Vesnina, who suffered a 6-3, 5-7, 6-4 loss to Australian qualifier Ashleigh Barty, while

Czech Lucie Safarova overcame 11th seeded Dominika Cibulkova 6-2, 6-4.

In another upset, British seventh seed Johanna Konta was worn down by last week's Citi Open champion Ekaterina Makarova 5-7, 7-6(4), 6-3.

Tenth seed Agnieszka Radwanska cruised easily past Tímea Babos 6-0, 6-1, while Petra Kvitová was eliminated by Sloane Stephens 7-6(4), 3-6, 6-2.

RESULTS

x-denotes seeded player:
Second round: Angelique Kerber (GER x3) bt Donna Vekic (CRO) 6-4, 7-6 (7/5); Karolina Pliskova (CZE x1) bt Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova (RUS) 6-3, 6-3; Naomi Osaka (JPN) bt Anastasia Sevastova (LAT x15) 6-3, 6-4; Agnieszka Radwanska (POL x10) bt Tímea Babos (HUN) 6-0, 6-1; Sloane Stephens (USA) bt Petra Kvitova (CZE x14) 7-6 (7/4), 3-6, 6-2; Lucie Safarova (CZE) bt Dominika Cibulkova (SVK x11) 6-2, 6-4; Ekaterina Makarova (RUS) bt Johanna Konta (GBR x7) 5-7, 7-6 (7/4), 6-3; Venus Williams (USA x9) bt Katerina Siniakova (CZE) 7-5, 7-5; Ashleigh Barty (AUS) bt Elena Vesnina (RUS x16) 6-3, 5-7, 6-4; Garbine Muguruza (ESP x4) bt Kirsten Flipkens (BEL) 7-5, 6-2; Catherine Bellis (USA) bt Svetlana Kuznetsova (RUS x8) 6-4, 7-5; Caroline Garcia (FRA) bt Varvara Lepchenko (USA) 6-1, 6-4; Simona Halep (ROM x2) bt Magdalena Rybarikova (SVK) 6-3, 6-4



Karolina Pliskova of Czech Republic in action at the Rogers Cup in Toronto. (AFP)

MOTHER OF ALL COMEBACKS NOT EASY FOR SERENA: CLIJSTERS



Kim Clijsters won three of her four Grand Slam titles before retiring at 29. (AFP)

Singapore: Serena Williams will face a difficult path ahead if she attempts to return to tennis after having a baby, Kim Clijsters has warned. Clijsters completed the 'Mother of all Comebacks' when she won the US Open in 2009, just 18 months after giving birth to her first child.

The Belgian enjoyed her best days in tennis after becoming a mother, as she won three of her four Grand Slam titles before retiring at 29. But Williams' situation is unique, and the 23-time Grand Slam winner will have to pick her way through some tough challenges if she comes back to the tour, Clijsters told AFP. "Every player is different, every

pregnancy is different, every delivery is different so it's really hard to comment on how quickly she'll be able to bounce back," she said in a phone interview in her role as ambassador for the WTA Finals, which take place in Singapore in October.

"Tennis-wise, she won 23 Grand Slams before she went to have her baby. I (had) won one, so I think she has that part completely covered, no problem with the Grand Slams. But you have to find your way, especially as a first-time mother. I had a little bit of help too, my husband was able to travel with me. I wouldn't be able to do it if my family wasn't there. So it also depends on the situation

and on how they see themselves as a mother and athlete. And I'm sure there will be challenges ahead."

Williams, who was pregnant when she won the Australian Open in January — without dropping a set — has strongly hinted that she intends to return to tennis next year. She could give birth during the US Open, which starts on August 28, after revealing her pregnancy in April when she accidentally posted a picture captioned "20 weeks" on Snapchat.

Victoria Azarenka, the two-time Australian Open champion and former world number one, returned in June after having a baby late last

year, and reached the last 16 at Wimbledon in July. While Azarenka is 28, and Clijsters was just 26 when she ended her two-year career break, Williams will turn 36 next month.

But the American has made a habit of pushing the sport's boundaries and she is likely to be motivated by the goal of surpassing Margaret Court's all-time record of 24 major victories. Clijsters said Maria Sharapova, the five-time Grand Slam winner, also faced a difficult comeback — but for very different reasons.

Sharapova, 30, has suffered injuries since returning from a 15-month doping ban in April, and Clijsters said mental pressures were likely to

be weighing heavily on the Russian.

"No matter how hard you train, when you come into a match, the level of intensity, the focus, the added pressure that's put on it, has an effect on your body as well," she said. "It's normal. I've been in this situation too where I feel like I've trained very, very hard and practised a lot harder than any situation you would get to in a match, but then when you add the mental side of it all, then it becomes hard," added Clijsters.

"I'm sure she's had to deal with a lot of stuff mentally in the last year or so. And it'll all come back out on court, whether you like it or not."

RUGBY ROUND-UP

Injury rules out All Black Jordie Barrett for rest of season

AFP
Wellington

A severe shoulder injury is likely to bring an abrupt end to the season for rising All Blacks utility back Jordie Barrett, the younger brother of fly-half Beauden. The 20-year-old, who earned a start in the third Test against the British and Irish Lions last month, has not recovered from the injury suffered in the Wellington Hurricanes' Super Rugby semi-final against the Golden Lions in Johannesburg.

As Canterbury Crusaders fullback David Havili was rushed into the squad on Thursday, Barrett was to undergo further scans. "If it's an operation it will knock him out for the rest of the year," All Blacks assistant coach Ian Foster said. "While it's disappointing for him it's been a massive year for him. He's done magnificently well in the Hurricanes environment. He's come in and had a couple of Test matches and started a pretty big one and has done himself proud."



Like Barrett, the 22-year-old Havili is comfortable at both fullback in the midfield. "While he's a utility, he's stepped into that fullback role really well," Foster said.

"He's a reasonably experienced footballer now he's played in a number of positions so he brings that to the table but he looks pretty settled at fullback. It's just nice to reward a player who has played his way in with form."

All Blacks vice captain and first choice fullback Ben Smith is scheduled to take a break from rugby following the

first two matches in the Rugby Championship. The All Blacks play their first match in the competition against Australia in Sydney on August 19.

WALLABIES CENTRE KEREVI KEEN TO SEE THE REAL BEALE

An untimely knee injury to Kurtley Beale paved the way for Samu Kerevi's Wallabies debut last year but the Fiji-born centre hopes both men can slot into Australia's midfield during the upcoming Rugby Championship.

Beale is back training with Michael

Cheika's squad ahead of the opening test against the All Blacks in Sydney next week, having been rested from the June internationals after returning from his spell at English club Wasps with a hamstring injury.

Kerevi is also on the comeback trail from a high ankle sprain but has enjoyed training alongside playmaker Beale, who is likely to slot in at inside centre if fit. "Kurtley is an exceptional player with an exceptional rugby brain," the 23-year-old said at the Wallabies' training camp in Cessnock, New South Wales yesterday.

"We have been doing a lot of opposed stuff with the boys and trying different combinations in the centres. For me, when I do train with Kurtley or train against him, just seeing how he plays excites me. I know he can bring that X-factor to the backline and then we have guys like Israel Folau out back, Tevita Kuridrani and Henry Speight out wide that can finish off amazing tries."

Playing both midfield positions, Queensland Red Kerevi managed eight tests last year but repeated ankle problems ruled him out of the season-end-

ing tour of Europe and the June internationals against Fiji, Scotland and Italy.

He has been easing back into full contact training this week but is confident he will be fit for the match at Sydney's Olympic stadium.

Few give the Wallabies any chance of winning back the Bledisloe Cup, the annual series contested with world champions New Zealand, to end a losing streak dating back to 2003.

Kerevi, however, can sniff an upset. "I want to make sure I take every opportunity this year," he said. "This group can change history and be part of it, that's what excites me."

ROBshaw SIGNS NEW HARLEQUINS CONTRACT

Former England captain Chris Robshaw has agreed a new long-term contract with Harlequins, the English Premiership club announced yesterday. The 31-year-old flanker has spent his entire senior career with the London side and this latest deal will keep him at the Twickenham Stoop until 2020.

"I am extremely proud to have re-signed with the club that gave me my

first chance as a player and I've cheered for since I was a child," said Robshaw, who made his Quins debut 12 years ago and has since won 56 England caps, including captaining his country during their ill-fated 2015 World Cup campaign on home soil.

Robshaw, 31, remains a key member of Six Nations champions England's side under Eddie Jones and Harlequins director of rugby Kingston was delighted to see him stay at the Stoop, saying: "I am absolutely delighted that we have agreed a further contract extension with Chris. He continues to be a fantastic advert for Harlequins in the way he conducts himself both on and off the pitch."

Kingston added: "His influence within the group is immense, and I know, in talking at length with him, he has an incredible appetite to win further major domestic and European honours with the only club he has represented. "This is brilliant news for Harlequins at a time when we are preparing for what will be an incredibly exciting season, back in the (European) Champions Cup."

Qatar football chief in Paraguay



Qatar Football Association president HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmad al-Thani gestures as he arrives at the CONMEBOL (South American Football Confederation) headquarters to attend a meeting with its president Alejandro Dominguez in Luque, Paraguay, yesterday.

GOLF

Olesen grabs PGA lead while putting woes foil Spieth

'The first 15 holes I played really well. I putted very nice'

AFP
Charlotte

Denmark's Thorbjorn Olesen closed with a 27-foot birdie putt yesterday to seize a one-stroke lead at the PGA Championship while Jordan Spieth stumbled in launching his career Grand Slam bid.

The 78th-ranked Dane birdied three of the last five holes to fire a four-under-par 67 at Quail Hollow, one stroke ahead of US Open winner Brooks Koepka and his fellow Americans Gary Woodland and Grayson Murray.

"I just felt like I was playing nicely," Olesen said. "The first 15 holes I played really well. I putted very nice."

World number two Spieth, who won his third major title at last month's British Open, struggled with his putter in firing a 72. At 24, he would become the youngest on the career Slam list by winning the Wanamaker Trophy this week.

"Tee to green it was pretty solid," Spieth said. "On the green was the problem. My speed and lines were a little off."

Spieth, who also won the 2015 Masters and US Open, can become only the sixth man to sweep the four current major ti-



Thorbjorn Olesen of Denmark.

ties in a career after Jack Nicklaus, Tiger Woods, Ben Hogan, Gary Player and Gene Sarazen. Koepka, who captured his first major title in June at Erin Hills, had five birdies and two bogeys, the last at 16 to fall back. He has again peaked at the right time, he said.

"These are the events where you want to play your best," Koepka said of majors. "Sometimes it's a lot simpler than peo-

ple think. It just comes down to preparation."

World number one Dustin Johnson, in a pack on 70 that included Australia's Jason Day and Japan's Hideki Matsuyama, said putting was as tough as he has seen all season.

"It was tough to get the ball close to the hole," he said. "I'm very pleased with that the way the course played."

Olesen, 27, seeks his first major title. His most recent of four career European Tour victories came at last year's Turkish Airlines Open. But he is fighting to keep the excitement and pressure well managed.

Olesen sank a seven-foot birdie putt at the second, missed the green and made bogey at the par-3 sixth, then birdied the par-5 seventh by two-putting from 60 feet and the par-4 eighth on a 15-footer from the fringe.

He birdied the 14th from 12 feet and the par-5 15th after chipping to three feet, then missed the green and took bogey at the par-3 17th only to seize the solo lead with his longest putt of the day.

Spieth, who began on the back nine, birdied the par-5 15th but found a green-side bunker at 16 and missed a 14-foot par putt, then missed 10-foot par putts at the first fifth and par-3 sixth holes. Spieth answered with birdies from three feet at the par-5 seventh and inches from the cup at the par-4 eighth.

"It was a day that should have been a couple under par and ended one-over," Spieth said. "It's a little disappointing but I brought it back with a couple birdies to at least having a chance going forward."

OPINION

Accuracy key in France for 2018 Ryder Cup: Furyk



Jim Furyk addresses the media at a press conference on Wednesday. PICTURE: Kyle Terada-USA TODAY Sports

AFP
Charlotte

US 2018 Ryder Cup captain Jim Furyk said yesterday that accuracy will be critical in next year's Ryder Cup showdown with Europe after a visit to Le Golf National in France.

The 47-year-old American, whose lone major title came at the 2003 US Open, will lead holders America into the biennial team matches next year against a European squad captained by Denmark's Thomas Bjorn.

"It doesn't look like a place where you're going to be long and wild and bomb it all over the place and score," Furyk said of the course near Paris. "It looks like a place where you need to control the golf ball, hit a lot of greens. It will favor a good ball-striking team."

"Looking at the champions on the wall at Le Golf National, you see a lot of guys that can control the golf ball, that are accurate hitters, that hit a lot of fairways, a lot of greens."

Furyk dubbed Trianon Palace, where the teams will reside, as "beautiful" and said European Tour players were impressed with Le Golf National. "Most of the folks I've talked to would consider that one of the top-5, even top-3, courses they play on The European Tour every year," Furyk said.

And that, Furyk said, bodes well for Europe's chances to reclaim the trophy. Europeans had won eight of the prior 10 Ryder Cups before the Americans re-

captured the Cup with a 17-11 home triumph last year at Hazeltine.

"One of the genius moves of all for Ryder Cup Europe is really having that event at a course where their players are comfortable and where their players really like," Furyk said. "They've had the French Open there I think over 20 times in 25 years. Players know the golf course well and they like the golf course and they are used to the shots that it takes."

The Americans lead the overall rivalry 26-13 with two drawn, but since their rivals were expanded beyond a British-Irish side, the Europeans own a 10-8 edge with one drawn. Not since 1993 has a US squad won in Europe.

Among those in position for the American squad with the deadline still more than a year away are British Open winner Jordan Spieth and runner-up Matt Kuchar, US Open champion Brooks Koepka and world number one Dustin Johnson.

"It's very early in the process," Furyk said. "But it's good to see the guys playing well. We want to put the guys on the team that really are playing well and are in good form going into the Ryder Cup. With the way the points work, that will give everyone a great opportunity to make the team next year."

Furyk says the PGA Championship's move to May starting in 2019, which won't impact next year's plans, shouldn't cause any future Ryder Cup disruptions, depending on the gap between the end of the US PGA playoffs and the Ryder Cup.

Woods pleads not guilty to impaired driving

Miami: Former world number one Tiger Woods pleaded not guilty on Wednesday to driving under the influence, but agreed to a lesser charge and to go on probation.

Woods, 41, did not appear at the brief court hearing in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, held to resolve charges stemming from his May arrest, according to press reports and court documents.

A 14-time major golf champion, Woods was arrested on May 29 by police in Jupiter, Florida, who found him asleep at the wheel of his Mercedes-Benz. Woods, who has not won a PGA Tour title since 2013, was arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol, although a breathalys-

er test found no trace of alcohol in his system.

Woods told authorities he had not been drinking but had a reaction to several prescription drugs used for back pain and insomnia.

At an arraignment on Wednesday, Woods's lawyer, Douglas Duncan, entered a plea of not guilty to the charge of driving under the influence, the *New York Post* reported.

According to the newspaper, Woods will plead guilty to a lesser charge of reckless driving, serve 12 months of probation and enter a program for first-time impaired driving offenders.

Woods will also reportedly be required to perform 50 hours of community service.

CRICKET

Stoneman gets England call as opener Jennings dropped

AFP
London

Mark Stoneman is set to become Alastair Cook's latest England partner after being selected to make his debut in next week's day/night first Test against the West Indies at Edgbaston.

Surrey batsman Stoneman was included in a 13-man squad announced Thursday from which the struggling Keaton Jennings was dropped.

The Durham opener only averaged 15.87 in eight innings during England's recent 3-1 series win over his native South Africa, which concluded with a 177-run victory in the fourth Test at Old Trafford on Monday.

Now Surrey batsman Stoneman, a former Durham teammate of Jennings, is in line to



Dropped: Keaton Jennings

become Cook's 12th partner at the top of the order in five years since the retirement of former captain Andrew Strauss.

The 30-year-old Stoneman has scored 1,000 runs in first-class cricket this season, including a highest score of 197, while averaging 58.82 with three centuries.

By replacing Jennings, Stoneman will form another all-left-handed combination at the top of England's order with Cook in a match that starts at Birmingham's Edgbaston ground on Thursday, July 17.

Meanwhile Hampshire leg-spinner Mason Crane has been called into a Test squad for the first time having also impressed in England's first-class County Championship this season.

"Selectors would like to offer their congratulations to Mark Stoneman and Mason Crane who thoroughly deserve their opportunity in the squad," said England selector James Whitaker in an England and Wales Cricket Board statement.

The former England batsman had some words of consolation for Jennings, saying: "Keaton Jennings will return to Durham and will look to recapture the form that earned him selection

in the first place.

"I am sure he will find his confidence and look to score runs in the remaining matches of this season." Fit again pace-bowling all-rounder Chris Woakes has replaced Steven Finn in the squad for a match on his Warwickshire home ground that will be the first day/night Test ever staged in England.

Woakes has fully recovered from a side strain sustained during the Champions Trophy in June and has missed most of the season.

But he made a return to the County Championship earlier this week, where he took five wickets in the match and scored 53 in the second innings as Warwickshire beat Middlesex at Lord's.

"He was impressive in his return game at Lord's this week and if selected in the final line-up, he will be relishing the prospect of playing on his

home ground," said Whitaker of Woakes.

The West Indies campaign will see Joe Root, in conjunction with coach Trevor Bayliss, looking to carry on from where he left off after his first Test series as England captain ended in a resounding victory.

"On behalf of the selectors, I would like to wish Joe Root, Trevor Bayliss and all the squad the very best for what will be an exciting series against West Indies," said Whitaker.

England squad for the first Test against the West Indies:

Alastair Cook (Essex), Mark Stoneman (Surrey), Tom Westley (Essex), Joe Root (Yorkshire, capt), Dawid Malan (Middlesex), Ben Stokes (Durham), Jonny Bairstow (Yorkshire, wkt), Moeen Ali (Worcestershire), Toby Roland-Jones (Middlesex), Stuart Broad (Nottinghamshire), James Anderson (Lancashire), Chris Woakes (Warwickshire), Mason Crane (Hampshire)

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar move to 78th spot in FIFA rankings

QNA
Zurich

Qatar national football team moved up a rung to the 78th position in the FIFA world rankings released yesterday. They stand ninth in Asia and are just behind China who are ranked 77th in the world.

Brazil regained the top spot in the international standings, while Germany dropped to second place. The Brazilian team topped the list with 1604 points, with Germany in second place with 1549 points while Argentina maintained third with 1399 points. Switzerland and Poland are fourth and fifth, respectively.

Iran remained top of the Asian standings in the world rankings, despite dropping to the 24th place globally with 893 points.

Asian teams will return to strong competition with the last two rounds of Asian qualifiers for the 2018 World Cup at the end of this month and the first week of September.

Meanwhile, the Qatar U19 football team defeated Thailand 3-0 in their second friendly match held yesterday. Youssef Abdelrazzaq, Khalid Walid and Hashem Ali scored the national team goals. The Qataris are preparing for the Asian Cup qualifiers, to be held in Doha from four to eight November. Qatar is in Group C along with Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan in the Asian qualifiers.

MOTORCYCLING

Austria misery threatens Marquez quest for treble

The Spanish rider goes into the 11th round of the championship with back-to-back wins in Germany and the Czech Republic



Marc Marquez of Spain (Repsol Honda) attends a press conference ahead of the Austrian Grand Prix in Spielberg, Austria.

AFP
Spielberg, Austria

World champion Marc Marquez looks to wrap up a third successive MotoGP victory on Sunday but is wary of the challenges at the Austrian Grand Prix, where he managed just a fifth-place finish in 2016.

The Spanish rider goes into the 11th round of the championship with back-to-back wins in Germany and the Czech Republic and with a 14-point lead over compatriot Maverick Vinales in the title race.

However, like a host of rivals, the Honda star struggled at the Red Bull Ring 12 months ago when the Austrian leg of the championship returned to the schedule for the first time since 1997.

"The Red Bull Ring is a circuit where we struggled quite a bit last year, but hopefully this year it will be different," said Marquez, whose racing brain both on and off the track was highlighted at Brno last Sunday where he judged the drying track conditions to perfection.

"Brno also used to be a challenging

track for us but in the end we got a fantastic result, so we're going to Austria feeling positive."

Last year's Austrian Grand Prix was won by Italy's Andrea Iannone with Italian compatriot and Andrea Dovizioso just behind in a Ducati 1-2.

Nine-time world champion Valentino Rossi was fourth 12 months ago in a race rich in symbolic significance – the legendary Giacomo Agostini won the first ever Austrian GP in 1971 when it was staged at the Salzburgring before the circuit was dropped when it was judged too dangerous.

Yamaha star Rossi, whose only win this season came at Assen in the Netherlands, is fourth in the standings, 22 points behind Marquez and without a podium finish in the last two races.

But Rossi says he is buoyed by testing which followed the Czech Grand Prix, when he and Yamaha teammate Vinales were the two fastest men on the track. "Going back to the track immediately is very important to us, especially after a test like Monday's in Brno, where we tried so many things," said Rossi.

"During the weekend in the Czech Republic we were fast in every condi-

tion and the test helped us to understand a bit more.

"Now we go to the circuit of Austria, that's not very favourable to us, but I hope we can fight for a good result. I'm fine with the YZR-M1 now, I can ride the bike better.

"The championship is still open and it will be important to take as many points as possible."

Vinales, with three wins in 2017 at Qatar, Argentina and France, admits that with the Hondas of Marquez and Dani Pedrosa, who were 1-2 in the Czech Republic, looking increasingly confident, a top-three finish is crucial this weekend.

"We know that we have to be on the podium at the next races if we want to win this championship, and for that we have to continue this good feeling and go for the victory," said the Spaniard.

Standings ahead of Sunday's Austrian Grand Prix, the 11th round of the 2017 series:

MotoGP

1. Marc Marquez (ESP/Honda) 154, 2. Maverick Vinales (ESP/Yamaha) 140, 3. Andrea Dovizioso (ITA/Ducati) 133,

4. Valentino Rossi (ITA/Yamaha) 132, 5. Dani Pedrosa (ESP/Honda) 123, 6. Johann Zarco (FRA/Yamaha Tech3) 88, 7. Jonas Folger (GER/Yamaha Tech3) 77, 8. Danilo Petrucci (ITA/Ducati Pramac) 75, 9. Cal Crutchlow (GBR/LCR Honda) 75, 10. Jorge Lorenzo (ESP/Ducati) 66

Moto2

1. Franco Morbidelli (ITA/Kalex) 182, 2. Thomas Lüthi (SUI/Kalex) 165, 3. Alex Marquez (ESP/Kalex) 133, 4. Miguel Oliveira (POR/KTM) 133, 5. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA/Kalex) 87, 6. Mattia Pasini (ITA/Kalex) 73, 7. Takaaki Nakagami (JPN/Kalex) 69, 8. Simone Corsi (ITA/Speed Up) 63, 9. Luca Marini (ITA/Kalex) 54, 10. Xavi Vierge (ESP/Tech 3) 51

Moto3

1. Joan Mir (ESP/Honda) 190, 2. Romano Fenati (ITA/Honda) 148, 3. Aron Canet (ESP/Honda) 126, 4. John McPhee (GBR/Honda) 93, 5. Jorge Martin (ESP/Honda) 89, 6. Marcos Ramirez (ESP/KTM) 88, 7. Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA/Honda) 85, 8. Andrea Migno (ITA/KTM) 83, 9. Juanfran Guevara (ESP/KTM) 69, 10. Enea Bastianini (ITA/Honda) 59

CRICKET

Gibson is S. Africa's top choice as coach, says du Plessis

Reuters
Cape Town

England bowling coach Ottis Gibson is South Africa's preferred choice as new head coach, the Proteas' test captain Faf du Plessis said yesterday.

Du Plessis made the announcement, which followed media speculation in both countries, at a press conference on the team's return home from England, where Gibson helped mastermind the hosts' 3-1 Test series win.

Incumbent Russell Domingo's contract will expire next month and although he had reapplied for the job, according to Du Plessis he is not the favourite to get it.

Cricket South Africa (CSA) convened a selection panel including former national team coaches Gary Kirsten and Eric Simons to identify an individual to take the team forward.

"It's been told to us that the decision has been made by the coaching panel," Du Plessis told reporters.

"They've chosen Ottis Gibson as their recommendation and now...the board decides whether they want to use that recommendation or not."

Du Plessis said he had already done extensive homework on his potential new coach.

"For me it was important, because I don't know Ottis, to try and find something out about him," he said.

"I spoke to a few of the West Indian players because he was their coach and then I spoke to the English guys about their thoughts on him.

"There were one or two differences in opinion, but the comments were positive."

Barbadian Gibson was coach of West Indies between 2010 and 2014 before rejoining England and taking up his previous role as bowling specialist.



Favourite: Ottis Gibson

Haddin replaces Blewett as Australia fielding coach

Reuters, Sydney: Former Test wicketkeeper Brad Haddin has replaced Greg Blewett as Australia's fielding coach until the end of 2019, Cricket Australia said yesterday.

Haddin, who played 66 Tests despite Adam Gilchrist blocking his path into the side until he was 30, has cut his coaching teeth with the Australia A side and Islamabad in the Pakistan Premier League since retiring in 2015.

The 39-year-old, who will work under head coach Darren Lehmann, said he was looking forward to working with what is a relatively inexperienced Australia team.

"I grew up in an era of players like Andrew Symonds and Ricky Ponting who gave Australian cricket a real identity in the standards of world class fielding," he said in a news release.

"They were the type of players who took it personally if the team wasn't fielding well and that created a level for the rest of the group to aspire to.

"I want to hold this group accountable to that kind of standard and I believe we have the talent to do that." Former Test all-rounder

Blewett has stepped down to take up a role as under-19 coach at the South Australian Cricket Association, where he played Sheffield Shield cricket for 15 years.

"It has been fantastic having Greg involved in the side," said Lehmann.

"Brad had a wonderful career as a player for Australia and will bring a multi skill set to our environment.

"His primary focus will be on fielding, carrying on the good work that Greg has done, but will also work very closely with our wicket-keepers." Australia next play two Tests in Bangladesh in August and September before a one-day series in India and the home Ashes series around the New Year.



BOTTOMLINE

Turbulent Sri Lanka flirt with India sweep

AFP
Pallekele, Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka are flirting with an embarrassing series whitewash in the third Test against India from tomorrow as they struggle with problems on and off the pitch which have thrown the team into turbulence.

A series of poor results, the early departure of their coach and accusations against players and the country's cricket chief have made for a difficult few months for the former one-day world champions.

Sri Lanka, lampooned by fans and described as pot-bellied by their sports minister, can now ill afford a third loss to top-ranked India in Pallekele, following their crushing defeats in Galle and Colombo.

They have not been helped by a succession of injuries, capped by a back problem which has sidelined their number one bowler, Rangana Herath, for the third Test.



Virat Kohli's India have proven far too strong for Sri Lanka in the ongoing Test series.

Paceman Nuwan Pradeep could bowl only 17.4 overs in Colombo before pulling out with a hamstring injury, and all-rounder Asele Gu-

naratne are already out of the series.

Sri Lanka failed to reach the semi-finals of the eight-team Champions Trophy in June, and

then lost their coach when Graham Ford quit mid-contract.

Worse was to come when they humiliatingly went down 3-2 in a home one-day series to bottom-ranked Zimbabwe.

Former captain Arjuna Ranatunga, a government minister, told AFP that he blamed Sri Lanka's losses on cricket chief Thilanga Sumathipala, and accused him of links to gambling – a claim Sumathipala denies.

There have also been reports of attempts to approach Sri Lankan players for alleged match-fixing.

Skipper Dinesh Chandimal, who missed the first Test with pneumonia, says a consolation victory over India would help put the smiles back on his players' faces.

"If we can win even one match against a team like this (India), we will be able to really boost the mental state in the team. They are the number one team," said Chandimal.

"We need to pick up the positives and look forward to the next game."

There are no such problems for Virat Kohli,

who became the only India captain to win two Test series in Sri Lanka as his side smashed first innings of 600 and more in the opening two Tests.

Cheteshwar Pujara leads India's run-scorers with two centuries and an average of more than 100 in India's three innings so far.

India's bowlers have also shone with spinners Ravindra Jadeja and Ravichandran Ashwin topping the wicket-takers' chart with 13 and 11 respectively.

Jadeja is suspended for the third Test for a dangerous throw, with Axar Patel brought in as his like-for-like replacement in the India squad.

Despite their form, wicketkeeper-batsman Wriddhiman Saha insists India are taking nothing for granted.

"We haven't thought about 3-0. Our process is match by match," he said.

"We are ahead by 2-0, so in the next match the aim is to give similar performance as last two matches as a team in batting, bowling and fielding. We will try to be consistent and if we do then we can win."