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2017 IAAF WORLD ATHLETICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

Qatar's Barshim ready to hit new heights

In-form Qatari breezes through qualification with 2.31m effort for shot at world title tomorrow

Agencies
 London

Mutaz Barshim leapt into tomorrow's high jump final at the World Athletics Championships in the manner of a man ready to finally ascend to the very summit of his sport.

The wiry Qatari, who has jumped higher than anyone in history except Cuban world record holder Javier Sotomayor, breezed through yesterday's qualification, clearing the automatic qualifying height of 2.31 metres with the greatest of ease.

Barshim, whose only global title came at the world indoor championships in 2014, demonstrated why he is a warm favourite to win his first major outdoor crown following silver and bronze at the last two Olympics.

The 26-year-old, who has an Asian record best of 2.43m, is one of six athletes who cleared 2.31 but the only one to go through the morning without failing on a single jump.

His main danger again looks set to come from Ukraine's Bohdan Bondarenko, who beat him to the 2013 title, while Danil Lysenko, competing under a neutral flag following the Russian Federation's ban, also qualified easily after just one failure.

There was delight for the home crowd as Robbie Grabarz confirmed his place in the final amid plenty of cheering by going over 2.31m at the last attempt.

Countback determined the rest to advance. Majd Eddin Ghazal of Syria, neutral athlete Ilya Ivanyuk and Bryan McBride of the US didn't miss until topping out at 2.31m. They'll be joined

by Germany's Eike Onnen, Edgar Rivera of Mexico and China's Wang Yu.

Notable among the non-qualifiers is Italy's Gianmarco Tamperi whose comeback effort from injury and a pair of surgeries ran out of time. Nonetheless, he jumped a season's best of 2.29m.

Erik Kynard of the United States, who won the Olympic silver in this arena five years ago, had to pull out injured after one unsuccessful attempt at his opening height of 2.17m.

"Obviously, the main goal this season is the World championships in London, but it's not the only goal. This season I want to have a different and specific approach for every single competition. Each time I want to be successful, I want to be excellent," Barshim had said after winning his fourth Diamond League event in Paris with an effort of 2.35m earlier this year.

"So far, I feel really comfortable with my running and that's very important. I can jump at full approach with eight steps. I haven't really changed a lot of things in my training this year, just some small touch," he added.

The win in Paris gave Barshim a clean sweep of all the Diamond League high jump events that have been held this year.

The Qatari opened the season with a win in Doha where he jumped 2.36m. Barshim then headed to Shanghai and here a 2.33-metre jump was enough to hand him the gold.

After this the 28-year-old produced what has been his best show this year in Oslo. Barshim cleared an impressive 2.38 metres to win gold and also register a meet record. In that event too he had defeated Ukrainian Bondarenko, like in Paris.



Qatar's Mutaz Essa Barshim celebrates after clearing the automatic qualifying height of 2.31m during the men's high jump qualification round at the 2017 IAAF World Championships in London yesterday. (AFP)

FOCUS

Shock? Not to me says new 200m world champion Guliyevev

Reuters
 London

Among the eight sprinters lined up at the start of the world 200 metres final and the 56,000 people in the crowd watching, only one man probably thought Ramil Guliyevev would be the winner, and that was the Azerbaijani-born Turk himself.

His faith was fully justified as 20.09 seconds later he crossed the line ahead of a host of favoured rivals to take the gold medal that had been the property of Usain Bolt since 2009.

Wayde van Niekerk, seeking a 400/200m double had to settle for silver in 20.11, a thousandth of a second ahead of Jereeme Richards of Trinidad and Tobago.

The result was universally acclaimed as a shock but Guliyevev, who became a Turkish citizen in 2011 and was cleared to represent his new country in 2013, was having none of it.

"This is not a shock," he said. "I have shown my best throughout this competition. I delivered my best race at the right time. I was competing against some of the best athletes in the world, so it didn't bother me that the attention was on them. Maybe at



Turkey's Ramil Guliyevev celebrates his win in the men's 200m final at the 2017 IAAF World Championships in London on Thursday. (AFP)

the next competition everyone will look at me instead."

They certainly will and they probably should have been looking a little closer this time.

Whenever people questioned Bolt's amazing times his supporters pointed to his remarkable perform-

ances as a teenager, particularly his junior 200m world record of 19.93.

It would have been a tough quiz question before Thursday to name the second-fastest junior ever, but it was Guliyevev, who posted 20.04 as a 19-year-old when representing Azerbaijan.

LOST YEARS

Those lost years when he battled with the sport's officials to allow him to run for Turkey took him off the scene but when he came back he was not exactly tearing up trees.

A collection of medals from the Mediterranean Games, the Sum-

mer Universiade and the Islamic Solidarity Games did not mark him down for glory and even his silver at last year's European Championships came when most of the continent's top talent had skipped the event to concentrate on the Rio Olympics.

However, he reached last year's Olympic final and has shown good form this season, taking gold at the European Team Championships and beating a decent field to win the Paris Diamond League meeting.

Perhaps people should have taken more notice of his impressive run to win his semi-final heat on Wednesday, but instead the focus was on third-placed Van Niekerk and how he had struggled because of his 400m exertions, and on the remarkable exploits of Isaac Makwala.

Those two were the centre of attention on Thursday, with the extra diversion for home fans of Nethaneel Mitchell-Blake in land one.

But with all eyes elsewhere, Guliyevev ran his own race and earned the ultimate prize.

"I knew I came in the first three but wasn't sure where," he said, which was no surprise when two hundredths of a second divided the medalists.

"It's a dream for me and next it's the Olympics, I hope that's possible!"

SPOTLIGHT

IOC snubs Infantino and Coe in new members list

Reuters
 Berlin

The presidents of world football body FIFA and the international athletics federation (IAAF) have not been proposed for appointment to the International Olympic Committee when the IOC session votes in new members in September.

IAAF chief Sebastian Coe and Gianni Infantino, who heads FIFA, were passed over for a second year running, as they battle doping and corruption scandals in their fields. Previous FIFA and IAAF presidents had seats at the IOC table for decades.

The IOC's nine proposed new members include Luis Mejia Oviedo, head of the Dominican Republic's Olympic committee, Khunying Patama Leeswadtrakul, Thai entrepreneur and head of her country's badminton federation, International Equestrian Federation chief Ingmar De Vos and world rowing president Jean-Christophe Rolland.

Infantino was elected head of FIFA in 2016 to succeed scandal-plagued Sepp Blatter and lead the federation out of its biggest graft crisis.

Former double Olympic champion Coe took over the IAAF in 2015 as a doping scandal unfolded, severely damaging the credibility of the organisation.

Coe triggered the ire of the IOC when the IAAF blocked Russian track and field athletes from competing at the Rio Olympics over the doping affair. Coe's predecessor Lamine Diack faces a bribery and embezzlement investigation in France.

Both Blatter and Diack were IOC members for years until 2015. Blatter's predecessor at FIFA, Joao Havelange, was an IOC member from 1963 to 2011.



2017 IAAF WORLD ATHLETICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

Yet another world title, but Taylor still not a happy man

Edwards' 22-year-old record of 18.29 metres is on triple-jumper's mind

Reuters
London

Double Olympic champion Christian Taylor continued his dominance of the triple jump when he won his third world title on Thursday, once again beating fellow American Will Claye into second place.

Taylor leapt 17.68 metres with his third attempt to win by five centimetres, clinching the title when Claye was given a red flag on his last attempt. Portugal's Nelson Evora, Olympic champion in 2008, took bronze with 17.19.

The 27-year-old Taylor became the first triple jumper to win three world crowns, having also claimed victory in Daegu in 2011 and Beijing two years ago. He also took gold at the 2012 and 2016 Olympics with Claye finishing second on both occasions.

But he had made it clear beforehand that his ambition was to break Jonathan Edwards's long-standing record of 18.29 metres, set in 1995.

"I have this watch from my sponsor with 18.30 on it," Taylor said. "I will try to fight, I will get this number. The record is still on. I am still motivated to break that record."

"My motivation is to be the best athlete. This was not the night, I am a little disappointed. But the season is not yet over."

Edwards said beforehand that he thought his world mark could be under threat. In the event, the contest turned into something of an anti-climax with both producing their best jumps in the third round.



US athlete Christian Taylor competes in the final of the men's triple jump event at the 2017 IAAF World Championships at the London Stadium in London on Thursday. (AFP)

Claye led after the first round with 17.54 before Taylor took the initiative in the second with a jump of 17.57.

Claye briefly regained the lead with 17.63 in the next round but Taylor immediately took it back with the decisive jump.

"Will makes it tough every time," he

said. "If you do not have a rivalry – like I have with Will Claye – then the sport is boring."

"One month ago we did a competition in the mountains, we are trying everything to do this number, even in the mountains."

Claye felt he should have performed

better on the night.

"You can never complain about the silver medal," he said. "But I felt like I should have executed better today."

"With Christian, we both were in a good shape, he is unbeatable. He just executed better and I was missing five centimetres."

FOCUS

Aussie great Pearson eases into 100m hurdles semis

AFP
London

Australia's 2012 Olympic champion Sally Pearson's bid to put behind her two years of injury hell started well yesterday as she coasted into the 100 metres hurdles semi-finals.

The 30-year-old – the 2011 world champion – missed both the 2015 world championships and 2016 Olympics because of serious injuries, losing out on the former after suffering a "bone explosion" in her wrist in a ter-

rible fall at a meet.

The perils of this event were evident in the heats when Trinidadian Deborah John crashed into the fifth obstacle requiring medical attention for over 10 minutes before being fitted with a neck brace and stretchered off the track.

Pearson looked in determined mood right from the outset, dominating her heat to take it in 12.71sec from America's 2008 Olympic champion Dawn Harper-Nelson.

"It was a lot of fun out there," said Pearson, whose Olympic triumph came in the same stadium.

"I was pretty nervous because it has

been a while since I've done a championship race but I felt comfortable. "I feel I have more to give so I'm intrigued to see what I can do."

Pearson, a two-time Commonwealth champion, admitted she had thought her championship days were over, especially after a hamstring injury ruled her out of the defence of her Olympic title in Rio.

"You go through those thoughts thousands of times but there is something inside you which keeps you going and I'm glad I did," she said.

Pearson will reappear later on Friday for the semi-finals where she will face

stiffer opposition and be able to measure herself against American world record holder Kendra Harrison.

Harrison looked good in her heat as she flew from the blocks and crossed the line clear in 12.60sec, with Belarus's 2015 world bronze medallist Alina Talay edging Jamaica's former world youth champion Yanique Thompson for second.

Defending champion Danielle Williams looked silky smooth in her heat, the Jamaican gliding over the hurdles to win in 12.66sec ahead of promising German champion Pamela Dutkiewicz.

BOTTOMLINE

Russian dopers ordered to return Olympic medals, some say no

Reuters
Moscow

The silver medals Russian sprinter Tatyana Firova won at the Beijing and London Olympics are stored in a safe in her apartment near Moscow in defiance of the International Olympic Committee, which has wanted them back for months.

Firova is one of six athletes who told Reuters they had yet to return Olympic medals and diplomas from the Beijing and London Games that were revoked over the last year after their samples, or those of relay teammates, tested positive for banned substances.

Two of these athletes said they had no intention of returning them, while three others said they would do so but were unclear how to proceed, had logistical constraints or were awaiting the outcome of an appeal. Another athlete was undecided.

"I don't want to return my medals because I think no one would have deserved them more," said Firova, who was stripped of her Beijing silver medal in the 4x400-metre relay after banned substances, including the anabolic steroid turinabol, were found in her samples.

Russia's athletics federation told Reuters that three stripped Olympic medals and one diploma had been returned, and that several appeals were still being heard. In February, it said 23 medals needed to be handed back.

The federation is already suspended over a 2015 World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) report that exposed systematic state-sponsored doping in Russian athletics. It remains unclear if not returning medals could lead to additional disciplinary measures or stop Russian athletes going to the Olympics.

It is also unclear whether the International Olympic Committee can compel athletes to return medals.

"They are not a police force," Olympic historian Bill Mallon said of the IOC.

"I think all they'll end up doing is reissuing the medals to the other people and saying, 'well, that person has a medal they don't deserve'."

The fact many medals have not been returned points to a broader issue with the culture of Russian sport.

While Russia has pledged to cooperate with global sports bodies over its anti-doping programme, it has never acknowledged state support for doping. Many in Russian sport, from officials to athletes and coaches, do not believe there was wrongdoing, and say their country is being unfairly targeted.

In a report last week, an International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) task force monitoring reforms at the Russian federation said it had yet to demonstrate "that it has established a strong anti-doping culture within its sport, or that it has created an open environment that encourages whistleblowing."

The IOC did not respond to Reuters questions about what it could do if ath-



letes refuse to return medals, saying it had already received a number of medals and was in contact with the relevant Olympic committees about the issue.

The Russian Olympic Committee, responsible for returning the medals to the IOC, did not reply to a request for comment.

RUSSIAN OBJECTIONS

The IAAF said Russia's athletics federation had yet to meet several reinstatement criteria, while WADA said Russian national anti-doping agency RUSADA still had to meet 12 conditions to regain accreditation.

The Russian athletics federation has warned athletes that their failure to return stripped medals could hinder its efforts to be reinstated in the IAAF,

which has cleared dozens of Russians to compete internationally as neutral athletes.

A federation official attributed the resistance to the fact that many of these athletes no longer compete, meaning they cannot be punished by measures such as exclusion from the national team.

Firova, who also has to surrender her 4x400-metre relay silver medal from London after a teammate's samples were retested, said she was sentimentally attached to her Olympic hardware.

"It's the objective proof of my labour," she said.

In Firova's case for the Beijing Games, the IOC ruled that she "has the medal, the medallist pin and the diplomas obtained in the Women's 400m and the

SPOTLIGHT

Semenya strides smoothly into final

Reuters
London

Olympic champion Caster Semenya looked ominously comfortable in advancing to the women's 800 metres final at the World Athletics Championships yesterday but a host of challengers also looked impressive and should push the South African all the way.

Semenya, who won bronze in the 1,500 on Monday, as usual looked as if she was out for a weekend jog while all around her were straining every sinew as she won the second of three heats in one minute 58.90 seconds.

"It would have been a waste of time staying at home, doing nothing so I thought I'd come here to entertain you people," Semenya said of her decision to run the 1,500 as well.

Burundi's Francine Niyonsaba and powerful Kenyan Margaret Wambui, silver and bronze medallists in last year's Olympics, went one-two again in the third heat to progress auto-

matically.

Ajee Wilson, who set a US record of 1:55.61 last month and has been in hot form, looked superb in winning the first heat in 1:59.21 from Melissa Bishop, the 2015 silver medallist from Canada who looked more like her normal self after labouring through the first round.

The United States have won only one medal in the event – Brenda Martinez's bronze in 2013 – but 23-year-old Wilson is certainly in the mix for another and will be joined in the final by compatriot Charlene Lipsey.

Poland's Angelika Cichocka produced a remarkable finish, cutting in from the outside of lane two to the inside of lane one to sneak second place in heat two and an automatic slot.

The final will be without defending champion Marina Arzamasova of Belarus, who was eliminated in the heats, and former champion Eunice Sum of Kenya, who withdrew due to illness.



Burundi's Francine Niyonsaba wins women's 800m semi-final at the IAAF World Championships in London yesterday. (AFP)

American Carter wins 400m hurdles from outside lane

American Kori Carter pulled off another shock at the World Athletics Championships on Thursday, achieving the rare feat of winning the 400 metres hurdles title from the outside lane. All eyes had been on Carter's US teammate, Olympic champion Dalilah Mohamed, who had been the favourite, but it was the former NCAA champion in lane nine who maintained her form best as she raced to victory in 53.07 seconds. Mohamed, the fastest in the world this year, earned the silver in 53.50 to complete a US one-two while Jamaican Ristananna Tracey, an Olympic finalist last year, took the bronze in 53.74. Czech Zuzana Hejnova, who had been seeking to achieve an unprecedented third successive one-lap hurdles victory, had to settle for fourth, despite running a season's best of 54.20.

Olympic champion Perkovic dominates discus qualifying

Double Olympic champion Sandra Perkovic looks set to land a second world title to go with her global collection as she dominated qualifying in the discus yesterday. After an initial no-throw, the Croatian launched a huge second round throw of 69.67 metres, an effort that only she has bettered this year, to lead the qualifiers into tomorrow's final. Back in the stadium where she won Olympic gold in 2012, Perkovic's effort was more than four metres longer than the next best, the 65.58m recorded by Cuban champion Yaima Perez. An even more relieved thrower was Cuba's other major medal hope, reigning world champion Denia Caballero, who was on the verge of elimination before surpassing the automatic qualifying mark of 62.50m with her final attempt of 63.79.

Women's 4x400m relay withdrawn, and is ordered to return these?"

Firova said she has appealed the decision but the outcome of her case would have little impact on her actions.

"From the very start of all this, I made the decision not to give it back," she said of her Beijing silver, although she might be willing to return the medallist pin and diplomas.

NOTIFICATIONS

Since Beijing and London, some Olympic medals and diplomas could have been sold, misplaced or lost, complicating Russia's efforts to have them returned.

"I don't know whether I've lost it or not, but I haven't seen it in a while," former decathlete Alexander Pogorelov, who was stripped of his Olympic diploma for a fourth-place finish in Beijing after turinabol was found in his samples, told Reuters.

"But even if I did find it, I probably wouldn't give it back because I think I earned it honestly," said Pogorelov, who now heads the sports committee of the city of Bryansk.

Some athletes said the Russian federation had not asked for the return of medals and diplomas, which its president denied.

"They are lying about the fact they weren't notified," athletics federation president Dmitry Shlyakhtin told Reuters, insisting it had contacted them by phone, e-mail and mail.

Sports minister Pavel Kolobkov downplayed the issue of medals not be-

ing promptly returned.

"Many athletes don't give back their medals, not only athletes in Russia," he told Reuters last month.

RECLAIMING PRIZES

Organisers of other sports events have also faced obstacles in reclaiming medals or prize money from Russian dopers.

The London Marathon has been trying to reclaim money from Russia's Liliya Shobukhova, who won the 2010 title and was runner-up in 2011 before being banned for doping.

Shobukhova was sued in Britain and the marathon's organisers are now waiting for a hearing in Russia to have the judgement applied there.

"We will spend whatever money it takes to pursue her and get the money back, even if it makes no commercial sense," the race's chief executive Nick Bitel told Reuters this week.

Shobukhova declined to comment.

Veteran US Olympic high jumper Chaunte Lowe is in line to receive bronze from Beijing, her first Olympic medal, after Russia's Anna Chicherova was stripped of it and the fourth and fifth place finishers were disqualified for doping.

But Chicherova has appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, saying she would only return her medal if her "guilt will be proven irrevocably".

"Obviously it would have been a great feeling to be able to go to the Olympics and experience having a ceremony," Lowe told Reuters. "A medal doesn't replace a ceremony."

PREVIEW

Sri Lanka eye win over India in Jadeja's absence

Left-arm spinner Jadeja was banned for one match for dangerous play in India's second Test win that secured the team an unassailable 2-0 lead in the series



Sri Lanka captain Dinesh Chandimal (top) and his Indian counterpart Virat Kohli speak to the media ahead of the third Test in Pallekele yesterday.

AFP
Pallekele, Sri Lanka

The absence of world number one all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja from India's team has given Sri Lanka hope that they can avoid a series whitewash in the third and final Test starting today, home skipper Dinesh Chandimal said.

Left-arm spinner Jadeja was banned for one match for dangerous play in India's second Test win that secured the team an unassailable 2-0 lead in the series.

But despite the hosts suffering huge defeats in the first two matches, Chandimal is confident of pulling one back against the world's top Test side in Pallekele.

"We are two down but still we are a really good team and are hoping to win this game. If we can do that, definitely we can get more confidence and move forward," Chandimal said Friday.

"We all know he (Jadeja) is the number one bowler at the moment. It gives us a bit of confidence – bit unfortunate for you (India) guys. As a team we have something up our sleeves," Chandimal said.

Sri Lanka have suffered a string of



injuries to key players in the series. Their bowling mainstay Rangana Herath will miss the third Test with a stiff back.

Paceman Nuwan Pradeep, who bowled only 17.4 overs in Colombo before pulling out with a hamstring injury, and all-rounder Asela Gunaratne, are already out.

"India is a really good team, especially in the last two to three years. But every time players of my team are getting injured. We cannot get the combination right," said Chandimal.

"But we don't want to give excuses," added Chandimal, who was appointed Test skipper after Angelo Mathews quit following the team's one-day series loss against Zimbabwe last month.

Fast bowlers Dushmantha Chameera and Lahiru Gamage have been added to Sri Lanka's squad that has faced mounting flak for their poor showing in recent months.

Chandimal believes two good performances can give a crucial lift to morale.

"It's a big challenge for the whole team but if one or two youngsters can come out and shine to a level that we can win this game, it's a great morale booster," said Chandimal.

"The series is not yet over. As a captain, I don't like to lose, we are giving out our full effort but we cannot control the ultimate result."

India skipper Virat Kohli warned his side against complacency in the final Test.

Kohli, the only India captain to win two Test series in Sri Lanka, has led his side to eight consecutive series wins since their 2015 triumph in the island nation.

"I personally feel that it's just a distraction that causes people to be over excited," said Kohli.

"I think we need to stay in the present and treat every session with respect to win a Test match, and that's exactly what we want to follow," he added.

Kohli admitted that he is "not looking to make drastic changes" to his winning combination.

He virtually confirmed left-arm wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav's place in the starting line-up in place of Jadeja.

"He has proven himself in Dharmasala which was not such a spin friendly wicket," said the captain.

"He turned the game around for us so he has ability, which is very rare to find," Kohli said of the young spinner who made an impressive debut against Australia in March.

SPOTLIGHT

Pay war break may benefit Aussies, says Lehmann

AFP
Sydney

Darren Lehmann promised Australia won't be under-prepared for their tour of Bangladesh after a pay dispute left them temporarily unemployed – and said the enforced break may have even done them good.

But the coach said he would be sure to put his 14-man squad through their paces at a one-week training camp in tropical Darwin, before they leave for the two-Test tour next Friday.

The camp represents the first formal cricket environment for Australia's top internationals since they were booted out of the Champions Trophy in June.

Since then, they were among about 230 players who were technically unemployed for more than a month over a long-running pay dispute, which was finally resolved last week.

But despite having only a week to prepare for their first Test tour of Bangladesh in more than a decade, Lehmann said the disruption was not a concern.

"Until you get there you don't know, but we're squeezing enough in this next week, and guys have been doing stuff with their (home) states," Lehmann told the official Australian cricket website late Thursday.

"Even through the MoU (pay negotiations) they were training and preparing as though they were playing."

"So in terms of fitness, they are probably ahead of the game, they're really strong and fit which is really pleasing."

"Now it's just getting their skills up to the required level before we leave."



Lehmann said the break from playing and touring had even benefited some players by refreshing them mentally and physically heading into the Bangladesh tour.

"The break's been good for some of them, they've been at the back of a long summer with a lot of travel in the schedule so sometimes a refreshed mindset is really important," Lehmann said.

"They've all come in really excited to get going again."

Lehmann added: "The Darwin camp wickets are very similar to what we'll get in Bangladesh – they're low and they're slow, and they will spin."

"In terms of conditions and the heat and humidity that we'll face when we get there, it's great preparation especially for those who have come out of winter in the southern states (of Australia)."

"I think we'll be fine, we've got a lead-up two-day game on a wicket which will be very similar to what we encounter for the first Test then we've got training sessions before that Test starts as well."

Australia play Tests in Dhaka from August 27-31 and Chittagong from September 4-8, their first in Bangladesh since 2006.

Owzat, 13-year-old bowler takes six wickets in an over

London: A 13-year-old schoolboy cricketer in England has taken six wickets in six balls, all of them clean bowled.

Luke Robinson produced his match-winning performance this week for Philadelphia Cricket Club's Under-13s, based near Houghton-le-Spring, Tyne and Wear in north-east England. His family were all on hand to witness his remarkable achievement, with father Stephen having the best view of all – he was umpiring at the bowler's end at the time.

Meanwhile mother Helen was the first person to record her son's feat as she was scoring the match, while Luke's younger brother Matthew was fielding and grandfather Glenn was watching from the boundary. "It was surreal," said Stephen Robinson, who plays for the senior side. "I have been playing for 30 years and have taken hat-tricks but never anything like this."

"Time stood still and I thought, 'is this really happening?'"

FOCUS

India's Mukund slams trolls for comments on skin colour

Reuters
Mumbai

India opening batsman Abhinav Mukund has lashed out at social media trolls for comments he received on his skin tone and has called for a change in people's mindset.

The 27-year-old Tamil Nadu batsman posted a statement on Twitter late on Wednesday, saying that he had wanted to address the issue for a while.

"Ever since I was young, people's obsession with my skin colour has always been a mystery to me," said Mukund, who has played seven Tests for India.

"Anyone who follows cricket would understand the obvious. I have played and trained day in and day out in the sun and not even once have I regretted the fact that I have tanned or lost a couple of shades."

"It is simply because I love what I do and I have been able

to achieve certain things only because I have spent hours outdoors." Mukund, who hails from Chennai, considered one of the hottest places in India, said he had been subject to a lot of 'name-calling'.

"There were many times when I chose not to dignify these insults with responses," said Mukund, who is with the Indian squad in Sri Lanka, adding that the problem had grown with the rise of social media.

"Today I am speaking up not just for me but for many from our country who experience ridicule based on the colour of one's skin."

"Fair is not the only lovely or handsome guys! Stay true, stay focussed and be comfortable in your own skin."

He later clarified his post had nothing to do with the team's dressing room or politics. India captain Virat Kohli and teammates voiced their support for Mukund's stand.

"Very well said Abhinav," Kohli tweeted.

BOTTOMLINE

England skipper Root warns against hype over Crane

AFP
London

England captain Joe Root has warned not to expect too much from Mason Crane after the leg-spinner received his first call-up into a Test squad.

The 20-year-old Hampshire rising star was something of a surprise inclusion in a 13-man squad announced Thursday for next week's first Test against the West Indies at Edgbaston – the first floodlit and pink ball Test to be staged in Britain.

England come into this three-Test campaign on the back of a 3-1 series win over South Africa.

For Crane to play at Edgbaston, it would likely mean England reverting to the two spinner policy they employed early in the South Africa campaign rather than sticking with Moeen Ali – man of the series against the Proteas – as their specialist slow bowler following the Worcestershire all-rounder's starring role in wins at The Oval and Old Trafford.

But that Crane, who last year became the first overseas player to appear for Australia's New



South Wales in more than 30 years, is in the England Test squad at such a young age, is an enticing prospect.

"It's exciting as a captain because he is a very talented young cricketer and he's got a very bright future," Root said yesterday.

"But it's important we don't put too much pressure on him or expect too much from him at such a young age."

"He is fully deserving of the opportunity he's got in this squad and I'm very excited to see him go about his business. He's a very confident young man and hopefully he has a lot to offer England." Crane has come into the squad at the same time as uncapped Surrey left-hander Mark Stoneman, the latest batsman given a chance in the prob-

lem position of Alastair Cook's opening partner.

If both Crane and Stoneman play against the West Indies, it will mean England have fielded five Test debutants this season, with Tom Westley, David Malan and Toby Roland-Jones all having won their first caps in recent weeks.

England would like to establish a settled side before they defend the Ashes in Australia later this year and Root, speaking at an event for sponsor Vitality insurance, added: "Ideally we'd want to nail it down soon but it's a great opportunity for players to throw their hands up for what is an exciting winter."

"Mark and Mason fully deserve their opportunities in the squad and there are three Tests here where they can potentially put a strong case forward for the winter."

"Tom Westley came in and performed well against South Africa on some spicy wickets at the top of the order. It's great to see guys putting their hands up with strong performances like that and his challenge over the next three games is to drive that forward and make some really big scores."

MOVE

India bid to reinstate Sreesanth fixing ban

AFP
New Delhi

India's cricket board will appeal against a court order that lifted fast bowler Shan-thakumaran Sreesanth's life ban for match-fixing, a senior official told AFP yesterday.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) does not agree with the Kerala state high court order that acquitted Sreesanth for lack of proof, the official said on condition of anonymity.

"We don't agree with the order. It definitely needs to be challenged and within a week the appeal would be filed in the Kerala high court."

"We were always clear on this case as the board is firm on its zero tolerance policy on corruption and match-fixing," the official said.

Sreesanth, 34, slammed BCCI's decision to appeal the verdict and vouched to play again for the country.

"Cmon @bccci this is worst u can do to anyone that too who is proven innocent not just once but again and again... don't know why u doing this?" the cricketer tweeted.

"@bccci I'm not begging, I'm asking to give my livelihood back. It's my right. U guys are not above God. I will play again."

Sreesanth and two other Rajasthan Royals players were banned for life over alleged involvement in betting and spot-



fixing following a 2013 scandal in the Indian Premier League.

Sreesanth, Ankit Chavan and Ajit Chandila were arrested along with scores of bookies as part of a probe into allegations that players had under-performed in return for cash.

Criminal charges were later dropped, but the players remained banned for breaching the BCCI's code of conduct.

On the day of the court ruling Monday, Sreesanth had said he was hoping to get his career back on track and represent India at the next World Cup in 2019.

Sreesanth, who is 13 short of 100 Test wickets, has played 27 Tests and 53 one-day internationals since making his debut in 2005.

MLB

Darvish not as sharp but Dodgers still beat Diamondbacks

Throws 106 pitches in five innings but remains unbeaten in his first two games



In this multiple exposure image, Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Yu Darvish throws in the third inning of their MLB game against the Arizona Diamondbacks at Chase Field in Phoenix, Arizona, on Thursday. (USA TODAY Sports)

By Bill Plunkett
The Orange County Register (TNS)

The Dodgers have done everything they can to make Yu Darvish's transition to a new team easy, showering him with good will and run support.

It was Darvish who made things hard on himself Thursday night. The right-hander was far from sharp and threw 106 pitches in just five innings. But the Dodgers beat the Arizona Diamondbacks, 8-6, anyway.

Darvish is unbeaten in his two starts with the Dodgers. But those two starts were as different as the two opponents.

Against the sagging New York Mets in his debut, Darvish was dominant. He allowed just three hits and one walk in seven scoreless innings, striking out 10 and cruising to the finish. He retired 20 of the final 22 batters he faced.

Against the much more combative Diamondbacks, however, Darvish was forced to fight for every out.

He went to the full count on each of the first six batters he faced and seven of the first eight, searching for the strike zone with his fastball in particular. The Diamondbacks had seven baserunners in five innings against Darvish (five hits, two walks), including the leadoff man in three of his five innings - twice on leadoff walks.

But the Diamondbacks went 2 for 12 with runners on base. Seven of Darvish's 10 strikeouts came in those situations.

The only thing easy about Darvish's night was the offensive support. Only four times in his 22 starts with the Texas Rangers this season did the Rangers score more than four runs for him - and one of those was a 22-10 loss in his final Texas start.

But the Dodgers have scored 14 runs

in Darvish's two starts since they acquired him at the non-waiver trade deadline and Darvish has not thrown a pitch as a Dodger without the lead.

The Dodgers put three runs on the board before he took the mound Thursday. Kike Hernandez drove them all in with a bases-loaded double. Hernandez has 29 hits against left-handed pitchers this season - 20 of them went for extra bases (nine doubles, two triples and nine home runs).

The Diamondbacks chipped away at that with single runs off Darvish in the third and fourth innings (including a solo home run by JD Martinez) but undid their own work in the fifth inning. Chris Taylor led off the inning with a solo homer but a walk, a throwing error by catcher Chris Iannetta and two infield singles led to two more runs.

Justin Turner drove in two more with a double in the sixth inning and the Dod-

gers needed every bit of the offense.

Brock Stewart gave two of the runs back on a homer by Iannetta in the bottom of the sixth. Ketel Marte drove in two more with a single off Brandon Morrow in the eighth. But Tony Cingrani came in to strike out back-to-back lefties, Gregor Blanco and David Peralta, with a runner on and Kenley Jansen closed it out in the ninth.

RESULTS			
LA Angels	6	Seattle	3
Baltimore	7	Oakland	2
LA Dodgers	8	Arizona	6
Chicago Sox	3	Houston	2 (11 inns)
Minnesota	7	Milwaukee	2
St. Louis	8	Kansas City	6
Tampa Bay	4	Cleveland	1
Toronto	4	NY Yankees	0
Washington	3	Miami	2
NY Mets	10	Philadelphia	0
Pittsburgh	7	Detroit	5
Cincinnati	10	San Diego	3

NBA

Celtics to play 76ers in London

AFP
New York

The Boston Celtics will meet the Philadelphia 76ers at the O2 Arena in London in January for a regular NBA game, league officials announced Thursday.

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 league announced the London game, its opening night contests and Christmas Day games as part of a partial release of its 2017-18 schedule on Thursday.

Chris Paul will make his debut with Houston on October 17 when the Rockets visit the Golden State Warriors on opening night.

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 London 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.

The Houston-Golden State contest will not only feature nine-time all star Paul in a new uniform but the Warriors will receive their NBA championship rings for the second time in the past three seasons.

Gordon Hayward's Celtics will also take on LeBron James's Cleveland Cavaliers on opening night in a NBA playoff semi-final rematch.

The NBA announced its five Christmas Day matchups Thursday with an NBA finals rematch between the Cavaliers and host Warriors representing the marquee contest. The two teams have met in each of the past three finals.

The remainder of the NBA schedule will be announced next week. The October 17 opening is the earliest start since the 1980-81 campaign began on October 10, 1980.

NBA preparing to approve 'rest rule'

Fans get upset when a healthy superstar sits out a game for a day of rest, and the NBA apparently plans to do something about it this season. In September, the NBA owners are expected to approve rules designed to discourage teams from benching healthy players for regular-season games. USA Today reported Thursday.

The rules will be in effect at the start of the 2017-18 season, and teams will be penalized for not abiding by them.

The specifics of the rules and the consequences remain unknown at this point, however.

Enforcing any rules regarding the resting of a healthy player may be difficult to do, starting with the problem of determining whether the player is actually healthy.

Earlier this week, the league office announced scheduling improvements designed to provide more rest for players. Teams will no longer play four games in five nights, and the number of back-to-back games has been reduced. It will require the regular season schedule to start a week earlier. Commissioner Adam Silver suggested changes might be in store during at April news conference.

"There is an expectation among partners that teams are going to act in appropriate ways, (and) find, as I said, that right balance between resting on one hand and obligations to fans and partners on the other," Silver said in April, according to USA Today.

"There is a recognition from teams that on one hand a certain amount of resting is just inevitable and appropriate to keep the players healthy, but that they shouldn't be resting multiple starters on the same night.

"And, incidentally, wherever possible, they should rest at home. Because there, while I feel for the home fans, just as much as the away fans, the away fans may only get a chance to see that team once. And of course, the home team home fans can see that team many times."

BOTTOMLINE

One year after anthem protest, Kaepernick frozen out of NFL

AFP
Los Angeles

One year after refusing to stand for a rendition of the US national anthem in a pointed protest at racism and police brutality, Colin Kaepernick finds himself frozen out of the NFL.

The former San Francisco 49ers quarterback convulsed America's most popular sport last year with his decision to sit through the playing of the Stars and Stripes, triggering a raging national debate about race and patriotism.

Initially, when Kaepernick chose to remain seated for the anthem during a pre-season game against the Houston Texans on August 14, and again against Denver six days later, the 29-year-old's protest went unnoticed.

Yet an unupswell of outrage erupted after he sat again during a game against Green Bay, and by the time he elected to take a knee during the anthem against San Diego on September 1, a foaming tsunami of opprobrium was heading his way.

Legions of critics, including future US President Donald Trump, branded the athlete a traitor unworthy of US citizenship. "Maybe he should find a country that works better for him," Trump remarked.

At the other end of the spectrum, Kaepernick's defenders hailed the

quarterback as an American hero, a civil rights icon willing to risk a lucrative career by drawing attention to the rights of oppressed minorities.

'CAREER WILDERNESS'

Fears that Kaepernick may be placing his own career in jeopardy through his political activism appear to have been well-founded: 12 months on from his first protest, the quarterback is in the wilderness.

In a sport where competent quarterbacks are prized more than any other players, Kaepernick's unemployment is strikingly anomalous.

It was only four years ago that Kaepernick shined in a thrilling Super Bowl comeback with the 49ers, coming within a whisker of overturning a 22-point deficit against the Baltimore Ravens while passing for more than 300 yards.

But while free agent Kaepernick - who in March assured potential future employers he would no longer protest the anthem - has failed to find a team willing to pick him up, dozens of less accomplished practitioners have found themselves being offered contracts.

The fact that the Los Angeles Rams hired Dan Orlovsky as a back-up, a 33-year-old journeyman most famous for going 0-16 with the Detroit Lions in 2008, is evidence, for some, that Kaepernick is being blackballed by the sport.

That viewpoint was given further



A fan sits behind a sign referring to former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick (right) in the second half of the Washington Redskins and Baltimore Ravens preseason game in Baltimore, Maryland, on Thursday. (AFP)

momentum by reports that Baltimore Ravens head coach John Harbaugh - the brother of Kaepernick's former 49ers coach Jim - and general manager Ozzie Newsome were keen to sign the player but had met resistance from team owner Steve Bisciotti.

Kaepernick's continued isolation has prompted some players, such as Seattle wide receiver Doug Baldwin, to revise their opinions.

"My original position was I thought that the situation last year with him taking a knee didn't have anything to do with it," Baldwin said.

"After viewing what's going on, I've got to take that back. I definitely think that the league, the owners are trying to send a message of, 'Stay in between the lines.' It's frustrating because you want to have guys who are willing to speak out about things that they believe in,



whether you agree with it or not."

'NOT ABOUT FOOTBALL OR COLOR'

Baldwin's teammate, the reliably thoughtful, articulate Richard Sherman, is in no doubt that Kaepernick is paying the price for his activism.

"What is it about?" Sherman said. "It's not about football or color. It's about, 'Boy, stay in your place.' He may not be the best, but he's better than a

lot of these dudes starting."

For others, the fact that Kaepernick remains unemployed while the NFL continues to offer a pathway to redemption for players accused of criminality, remains particularly galling. The New York Giants signed kicker Josh Brown to a new contract after he was arrested for domestic violence, and continued to employ him following his suspension last year before he was later released.

Yet Giants owner John Mara, who has acknowledged that negative fan feedback was a factor in Kaepernick's inability to find work, denies that the quarterback has been unfairly ostracised.

"Anybody that thinks that there's been any conversations going on among teams about Colin Kaepernick is crazy," Mara told ESPN radio's Michael Kay Show. "That just is not the case... I think there are certain issues obviously that go along with Colin Kaepernick and that may have scared some teams away, but there is absolutely no blackball going on here. I just don't see that at all."

Plenty of players remain unconvinced however that Kaepernick's fate is unconnected to his protest.

"I think it shows the racial divide in the league," Seattle defensive lineman Michael Bennett told USA Today. "There are rapists and drunk drivers in the league. Kaepernick didn't do anything. That's why racism is the biggest issue in America."

TENNIS

Nadal's pursuit of No. 1 derailed by Canadian teen

'Worst loss of the year because I lost against a player with a lower ranking. At the same time because of the opportunity I had to get back to Number One'



Denis Shapovalov of Canada reacts after defeating Rafael Nadal of Spain (not pictured) during the Rogers Cup tennis tournament at Uniprix Stadium in Montreal.

PICTURE: Eric Bolte-USA TODAY Sports

AFP
Montreal

Canadian teenager Denis Shapovalov shocked top seeded Rafael Nadal to reach the quarter-finals of the ATP Montreal Masters tournament, temporarily spoiling the Spaniard's chances of returning to world number one.

The 18-year-old Shapovalov continued his giant killing form at the hardcourt tournament by rallying to stun Nadal in three sets 3-6, 6-4, 7-6 (7/4) on Thursday. "I was just swinging for the fences," said Shapovalov, who needed a wild card to get into the tournament.

The 31-year-old Nadal would have returned to No. 1 in the world if he had reached the semi-finals.

But Nadal struggled to get the ball to Shapovalov's backhand and didn't have an answer for the Canadian's blistering forehand winners.

Nadal described it as the worst loss of the season for him for a number of reasons.

"Worst loss of the year because I lost against a player with a lower ranking," Nadal said. "At the same time because of the opportunity I had to get back to Number One."

Shapovalov's biggest win of his young career against the 15-time Grand Slam winner came as a result of some inspired tennis in front of a boisterous home crowd who cheered his every shot.

"He won. It is an amazing for him. It is a great story. I am not happy to be part of this story," Nadal said.

Shapovalov, who is ranked 143rd in the world, quickly got on a roll in Montreal, beating Brazil's Rogerio Dutra Silva in the opening round 4-6, 7-6 (10/8), 6-4. He then defeated former US Open winner Juan Martin Del Potro in the second round in straight sets 6-3 7-6 (7/4) to set up the showdown with Nadal.

Shapovalov fell behind 3-0 before winning seven of the final eight points of the third set tiebreaker. He closed out the match with a forehand winner down the line and celebrated by falling onto his back then covering his face with his hands.

Nadal easily won the first set but couldn't put the free-swinging Canadian away with a second set victory.

The third game of the second set lasted 14 minutes with Shapovalov finally holding serve when Nadal's volley sailed into the net. Shapovalov managed to win the game despite double faulting three times.

"Was it only 14 minutes?" Shapovalov asked. "It felt like three hours."

"I just kept fighting. I knew it was going to be really tough. I went for my shots in the big moments and I caught a couple of lines got a little bit lucky."

Shapovalov said he didn't think he had a chance to win at all before the match. It wasn't until he levelled the sets at one each that he realized he could beat the 10-time French Open champion.

"The whole day I was like - there's no chance. I will go and have fun but there is no way I am beating this guy," Shapovalov said.

"I went up a break in the second set early and even though he broke me back I felt like - OK, I am capable of breaking him."

"So when I won that second set I

thought let's go one more set and who knows, anything can happen."

Shapovalov blasted a total of nine aces. He also had seven double faults and won 67% of his first serve points.

"It is incredible. I can't even talk right now. I grew up watching Rafa so just to be able to compete with him is one thing but to come out winning is a dream come true for me." Nadal won 77% of his first serve points, but had just two aces and six double faults in the two hour, 45 minute centre court match.

This is a setback for Nadal in the build-up to the US Open starting August 28 but he still has a chance to regain No. 1.

"The worst thing is playing bad in matches that really matter," Nadal said. "You have to win these matches. I didn't today. I have another week in Cincinnati and then I have the Grand Slam coming."

In other matches Thursday, Germany's Alexander Zverev defeated Nick Kyrgios 6-4, 6-3, Roberto Bautista outlasted Gael Monfils 4-6, 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/2) and Kevin Anderson of South Africa cruised past Sam Querrey 6-4, 6-1.

SPOTLIGHT

Federer overcomes sloppy start to down Ferrer in Montreal

Reuters
Montreal

World number three Roger Federer dropped his first set since June on Thursday but recovered to dispatch Spaniard David Ferrer 4-6 6-4 6-2 at their last 16 meeting in the Rogers Cup.

Federer was sloppy from the start on centre court, sending routine forehands wide and providing the underdog Ferrer with early break opportunities in the ATP 1000 event in Montreal.

Ferrer capitalised by winning the first set to end Federer's streak of 32 consecutive sets won, a record that dates back to his defeat by Tommy Haas at the Stuttgart Open on June 14.

Frustration boiled over for the Swiss in the second set after he misfired with an overhead smash.

Federer, who turned 36 this week, responded by hitting a ball into the stands, earning a scolding but no official ball abuse call from the umpire.

The outburst appeared to steady the Swiss, whose serve and overall accuracy improved as the two-hour match progressed.

Ferrer has now lost all of his 17 contests against Federer, who is vying to take the world number one spot from injured Briton Andy Murray.

Next up for Federer is a quarter-final against 12th-seeded Spaniard Roberto Bautista Agut, who defeated Frenchman Gael Monfils in a marathon match 4-6 7-6(5) 7-6(2) on Thursday.



Roger Federer of Switzerland reacts after recording match point against David Ferrer of Spain (not pictured) during the Rogers Cup tennis tournament in Montreal. PICTURE: Jean-Yves Ahern-USA TODAY Sports

FOCUS

Dovizioso fastest in Austrian MotoGP

AFP
Spielberg

Italy's Andrea Dovizioso topped yesterday's first two free practice sessions for this weekend's Austrian MotoGP at Spielberg.

Dovizioso, runner-up in Austria last year behind Italian Andrea Iannone, clocked a fastest lap of 1min 24.46sec at the end of the session run in cloudy and wet conditions.

The 31-year-old finished ahead of Spaniards Maverick Vinales, who clocked 1:24.280 on a Yamaha, and Honda's Dani Pedrosa in 1:24.474.

"We're starting with a good feeling again. Today we did a really good job," said Vinales.

"Especially after the Brno test we improved the set-up a lot. For tomorrow, I think it will be very important to work further on the electronics and also on the acceleration, which is really crucial here." In the battle for the MotoGP world title, Vinales upped

the pressure on Spanish world championship leader Marc Marquez, who managed just seventh fastest for Honda.

Marquez - winner in Germany and the Czech Republic in the last two races - sits top of the standings with a 14-point lead on Vinales.

"We're satisfied with how it went today," said Marquez.

"The weather forecast shows possible rain for tomorrow morning, but I decided to take that gamble because I wanted to prepare well for the Sunday race." Italian veteran Valentino Rossi, struggling with flu symptoms, was outside the top ten riders.

"When I woke up this morning I also didn't feel very well, I didn't have energy, it felt like the flu, so this morning was difficult," said the Yamaha rider.

"This afternoon, unfortunately, in the end my position was not in the top-10, which was the target, but we improved the bike and we improved the feeling."



Andrea Dovizioso (C) of Italy makes selfies with fans during the MotoGP Austrian Grand Prix weekend at Red Bull Ring in Spielberg, Austria yesterday. AFP

BOTTOMLINE

Pliskova reaches Rogers Cup quarters as Osaka retires

Reuters
Toronto

World number one Karolina Pliskova was dragged into a mighty battle before being granted a berth in the Rogers Cup quarter-finals when Japanese teenager Naomi Osaka retired with an abdominal injury on Thursday.

Czech Pliskova, playing her first tournament with the top ranking, was pushed into a deciding set by qualifier Osaka before the 19-year-old called for the trainer when trailing 6-2 6-7(4) 1-0 and promptly withdrew.

"She played well, especially in the second set she was fighting pretty hard, much better than the first," said Pliskova.

"I was just trying to stay in the game, the first game of the third set was very tough I didn't even know she was injured."

Pliskova, playing her first tournament since a shock second round defeat at Wimbledon, had shown signs of rust in a ragged opening win over Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova but looked more like a world number one as she swept four straight games to take the first set from 50th-ranked Osaka.

But the Japanese rallied to match the



lanky Czech shot-for-shot in a gripping second set, then dominated the tiebreak.

During the changeover, Osaka told her coach that she was feeling discomfort and was told to withdraw if the pain persisted to avoid the risk of further injury.

Osaka did just that, calling for the trainer after dropping serve to open the third set.

"I think my game today was much better, especially my serve," said Pliskova, who clubbed 13 aces. "I didn't lose my serve in this match today, I'm happy with the way I was serving today."

Pliskova will need to have her serve firing on all cylinders when she meets sixth seed and former world number one Caroline Wozniacki in the last eight.

In a battle of former-Rogers Cup champions, a ruthless Wozniacki showed no mercy by sweeping past her good friend Agnieszka Radwanska 6-3 6-1 in just 78 minutes.

The only hiccup in an otherwise polished effort against the 10th-seeded Pole came when Wozniacki was up 5-0 in the second and squandered three match points.

But the Dane closed out the match on the next chance with a stinging forehand winner.

"We've known each other since we were five and six years old so there are no secrets out there," said Wozniacki, who has reached five finals this season without winning a title.

"It is always unfortunate to play a good friend in such an early round but at the same time it is part of the game."

Czech Lucie Safarova also made the last eight by outlasting Russia's Ekaterina Makarova 6-3 6-7(3) 6-2, while France's Caroline Garcia beat 18-year-old American Catherine Bellis 6-4 6-2.

Ukraine's Elina Svitolina broke American Venus Williams six times en route to a near-perfect 6-2 6-1 victory.

Svitolina's 40th win of the year booked her first Rogers Cup quarter-final appearance.

Unseeded American Sloane Stephens upset former world number one Angelique Kerber 6-2 6-2 on Thursday as she continues her comeback from a year-long absence due to a foot injury.

Stephens will face Czech Lucie Safarova in the quarter-finals.

Fourth seed Garbine Muguruza dispatched Ashleigh Barty of Australia 6-0 3-6 6-2 at their centre court meeting.

Qatar lose to China in volleyball qualifying

Lausanne, Switzerland: China defeated Qatar 3-0 (25-22, 25-21, 25-22) in Pool A of the Asian qualifiers for the 2018 FIVB Men's World Championship at the 6,000-capacity Rezaazadeh Stadium in the city of Ardabil. Iran, who rested on Day 1 of the competition Thursday, crushed South Korea 3-0 (25-10, 27-25, 25-18) with A. Ghafour scoring 13 points and M Ebadipour and F. Ghaemi adding another 11 each. This was South Korea's second straight defeat in the tournament after being beaten by Qatar on the opening day on Friday.

Jiang C. and Liu L.B. scored 14 points each for China. China wrapped up the opening day with a 3-1 (25-15, 25-21, 22-25, 25-23) win over Kazakhstan, led by Chuan Jiang's 23 points and another blocking party with 16 stuffs. The top two teams of the Ardabil tournament qualify to the 2018 World Championship, which will be jointly hosted by Italy and Bulgaria next year.

SPOTLIGHT

Kisner soars to four-shot PGA lead on eagle's wings

'My bad shots are working out, my good shots are working out and I'm making putts. I'm loving playing right now'

AFP
Charlotte

American Kevin Kisner, seeking his first major title, sank a 48-foot eagle putt and seized a four-stroke clubhouse lead early in yesterday's second round of the 99th PGA Championship. Kisner's spectacular shot at Quail Hollow's par-5 seventh hole highlighted a second consecutive four-under par 67 that left the world number 25 on eight-under 134 for 36 holes in the year's final major tournament.

"I'm hitting the ball really nice and things are going my way. I'm enjoying that," Kisner said. "My bad shots are working out, my good shots are working out and I'm making putts. I'm loving playing right now."

Kisner, a US PGA winner three months ago at Colonial, shared the 18-hole lead with Thorbjorn Olesen, the Dane who stood second as he teed off. "Kisner is on fire right now," said fourth-ranked Rory McIlroy, who fired a second consecutive 72. "I hope he slows down and gives the rest of us a chance."

Kisner offered rivals little hope for a weekend collapse or an attack of nerves leading his first major so late. "I'll be plenty loose," Kisner said. "I have a 3-year-old running around all day."

Growing up only a two-hour drive south of the course, Kisner has long played on the Bermuda grass installed around much of the course ahead of hosting its first major. He knows driving accuracy is crucial. "The ball is coming out of the gun right where I'm looking at it," Kisner said. "The key around here is keeping the ball out of the fairway."

Kisner began round two off the 10th tee and found a fairway bunker, but blasted out into the fairway, dropped his approach 10 feet from the cup and sank the birdie putt to claim the lead alone. After sinking a six-foot birdie putt at the par-4 12th, Kisner gave one back on the par-3 13th, missing the green, chipping back into the



Kevin Kisner of the United States plays his shot out of the bunker on the 17th hole during the second round of the 2017 PGA Championship at Quail Hollow Club in Charlotte, North Carolina, yesterday. (AFP)

fairway, then rolling the ball to five feet and making his bogey putt.

Kisner sank a five-footer for birdie at the par-5 15th then parred the next nine holes before reaching the seventh, where his second shot was just shy of the green, setting up the dramatic putt to a front pin position. He closed with back-to-back pars. Kisner, 33, endured four runner-up finishes in 2015 before a breakthrough first US PGA Tour victory at Sea Island, Georgia, in his 109th attempt.

American DA Points, who won his first US PGA title in four years in March at the Puerto Rico Open, had closed within a stroke of Kisner with birdies on 14 and 15 only to stumble with back-to-back double bogeys at 16 and 17 to finish with a 73 and seven adrift.

McIlroy, who owns the course record of 61 from before the course revamp, began on the back nine and birdied the par-5 15th, but faded with a run of four bogeys in five holes on the front side, capped by a par putt lip-out at sixth.

The 28-year-old from Northern Ireland answered with birdies at the par-5 seventh and par-4 eighth. "Tougher than yesterday," McIlroy said. "If anything the greens were a little firmer and some of the pin positions were really tough. I think anything under 71 today is a good score. It's amazing how they have been able to make this course so much tougher, with the Bermuda grass and the putting surfaces."

US star Rickie Fowler fired a 70 to stand on 139, five off the pace. South Korean An Byeong-Hun also eagled the par-5 seventh in a round of 69 to finish on 140. World number two Jordan Spieth, chasing his fourth career major title and completion of a career Grand Slam at age 24, would become the youngest player to win all four majors at least once if he can lift the Wanamaker Trophy this weekend.

Spieth, coming off a British Open triumph last month, teed off in the afternoon heat alongside this year's fellow major champions, US Open champion Brooks Koepka of the United States and Masters winner Sergio Garcia of Spain.

FOCUS

Quail Hollow takes revenge on record-holder McIlroy

AFP
Charlotte

Rory McIlroy humbled Quail Hollow on his way to two US PGA victories, setting a course record of 62 then breaking it with a 61, but the course is taking its revenge this week at the PGA Championship.

Toughened for hosting its first major tournament, the 7,600-yard, par-71 layout has played havoc with fourth-ranked McIlroy's title hopes, leaving the record scorecard posted in the clubhouse a relic of a bygone era.

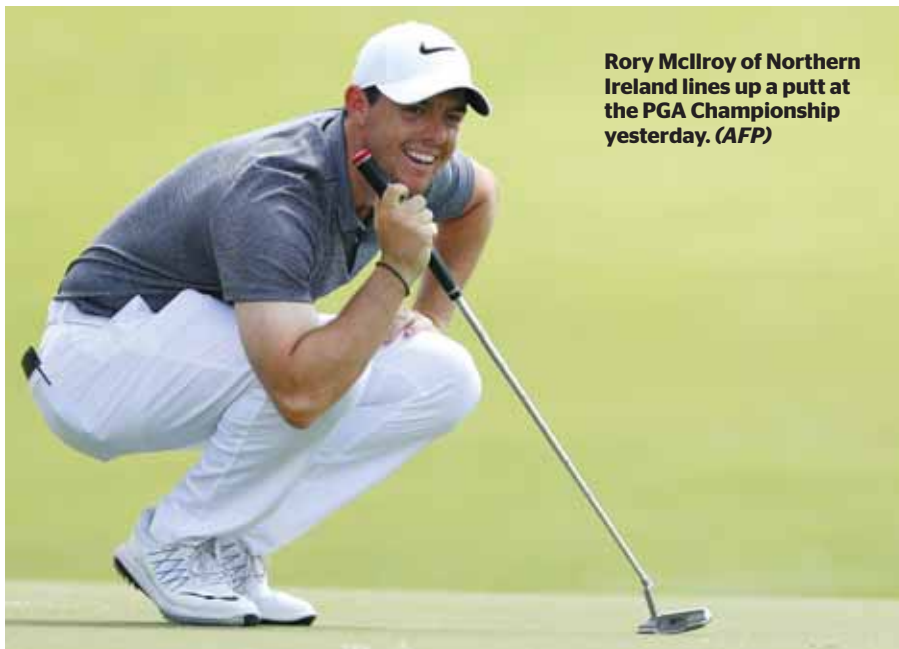
And the edge McIlroy was thought to have based on past success at Quail Hollow has been shattered with the Northern Ireland star firing back-to-back 72s to open the year's final major tournament.

"I guess a low round used to be a 61 or a 62," McIlroy said. "A low round now is a 66 or a 67. You're playing your ass off to get that."

And the old chum of a course McIlroy had expected has been replaced by a monster. "It surprised me. This is not the Quail Hollow we have gotten to know over the last 10 years," McIlroy said.

"It's a completely different golf course. It's longer than before. One hole was broken into two. And Bermuda grass was made the surface to play upon.

"Even if they didn't do anything else with the golf course and just changed it to full Bermuda like it is now, all of a sudden makes the golf course two shots more difficult, just with the lies that you get in the rough, trickiness around the greens," McIlroy said. "After what I've witnessed over the past two days, no, I'm not surprised to see so many guys be over par." McIlroy began on the back nine and made



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland lines up a putt at the PGA Championship yesterday. (AFP)

eight pars and a birdie at the par-5 15th. "I was battling. I was scrambling well to be under par for that back nine," McIlroy said. "I probably didn't quite hit it as well off the tee as I did yesterday and wasn't putting myself in positions where I could go at a lot of pins. But greens are firm. Some of the pin positions are really tricky. Anything under par today is a really good score."

McIlroy made four bogeys in five holes, the last a lip out for par at the par-3 sixth. He answered with birdies at the par-5 seventh and par-4 eighth but was 10 back of leader Kevin Kisner. "Had a little bit of a mini-rally at the

end which I needed," McIlroy said. "I feel a lot better about myself being 2-over instead of 4-over. I think it's quite a big difference.

"But the four bogeys on the front nine, that's just down to being out of position off the tee and not being able to get it very close with my second shot."

McIlroy hasn't given up hope of taking a fifth major title this weekend. "If I shoot two 67s over the weekend, I'm going to have a really good chance. A lot of golf to be played. I still feel I'm right there in the tournament. It's only going to get tougher as this course dries up a little bit more."

FIBA ASIA CUP

Guo scores 30 points to lead China past Qatar

Agencies
Beirut, Lebanon

Ailun Guo had a dominant individual performance to lead China past Qatar 92-67 at the 2017 FIBA Asia Cup basketball tournament yesterday.

Guo knocked down five three-pointers on his way to 30 points, adding 4 rebounds and 4 assists, as China picked up their first win after an opening defeat to the Philippines.

It was not until the second half the Chinese pulled away for good, momentarily falling behind midway in the second quarter before regrouping. Abdulrahman Saad and Ali Saeed Erfan were the high men for Qatar with 19 and 18 points, respectively. Qatar continue to look for their first win in Group A at the FIBA Asia Cup 2017.

It's clear that Guo is the most important player in this Chinese quintet, and no less than head coach Du Feng knows that to be true. There are still a lot of things China must do better to defeat some of the elite teams in this competition, but as long as Guo is productive, they should be in a position to win every contest.

Philippines recovered from a slow first half to defeat Iraq 84-68 with a dominant third period. A 26-7 third quarter run, whilst limiting Kevin Galloway's effectiveness, saw Philippines get the cushion they need to stay perfect atop of Group B at 2-0. Christian Karl Standhardinger had 16 points and 7 rebounds for the Philippines, whilst Terrence Romeo added 17 points and 4 assists.

Galloway did his best efforts to keep Iraq in it, finishing with 23 points (15 in the first half), 14 rebounds, 6 assists, 2 steals and 2 blocks, but it would not be enough.

Meanwhile, Jordan improved to 2-0 with a 61-54 victory over a much-improved India side. After a mauling at the hands of Iran in their opener, India bounced back and managed to hang with



China's Ailun Guo attempts to score against Qatar during the 2017 FIBA Asia Cup basketball tournament in Beirut yesterday.

Jordan the entirety of the game, though ultimately were plagued by turnovers, as Jordan registered 12 steals on the game. Alawadi had 22 on 9 of 17 shooting and Ahmad Alhamarshah had 13 rebounds to go with his 8 points for Jordan. India were led by 17 points from Amjot Singh Gill and Aravind Annadurai's 6 points.

New Zealand made a statement with a 86-82 win over hosts Lebanon, in what was one of the games of the tournament so far. Fadi El Khatib's near triple double would not be enough for Lebanon; he was unstoppable with 33 points, 11 rebounds and 8 assists, as very little would separate the two sides throughout the majority of contest.

Illi led New Zealand's charge with 22 points, whilst Te Rangiri and Smith-Milner added 15 each for the young Tall Blacks squad. New Zealand improve to 2-0 in Group C, with the home side falling to 1-1.

BOTTOMLINE

Not even Michael Phelps could ease Spieth putting woes

AFP
Charlotte

Not even the inspiration of being watched by pal Michael Phelps, the Olympic swim legend with a record 23 gold medals, could help Jordan Spieth solve his putting woes on Thursday at the PGA Championship. World No. 2, seeking a career Grand Slam at age 24 after winning the British Open last month, struggled to a one-over 72 in the opening round at Quail Hollow.

Jordan needed 32 putts to navigate the faster-

than-expected greens, which proved formidable despite absorbing an inch of rain at the start of the week. "I can't putt any worse than I did today," Spieth said.

"If you told me I was going to hit my driver the way I did today, I would have definitely thought I shot a few under par, which was an awesome score. The score won't be any higher than it was today if I'm driving the ball like today."

The disappointing score came as Phelps, who set a single Olympics record with eight gold medals at Beijing in 2008, walked the course watching Spieth launch his bid to become only the sixth man to win all four major titles in his

career, and be the youngest to do it.

"It was great," Spieth said. "He has become a good friend and mentor. It's pretty awesome to have a mentor like that. He texted earlier in the week. I think he was here for an outing and said he was going out to be out following today. We've had dinner, talked through a lot of things that I will probably just keep to myself. A lot of mental approach and preparation stuff."

Such things are just what Spieth will need if he is to lift the Wanamaker Trophy and join Tiger Woods, Jack Nicklaus, Gene Sarazen, Gary Player and Ben Hogan on the career Slam list. "When I had the chances that I had and I just

couldn't get the ball to go in on the greens, that is when I get the most frustrated I can get out there," Spieth said.

"I don't think I missed any short putts. I just had really poor speed on my really long ones. Everything else was fine. It was just the putter."

Spieth began on the back nine and made the turn at level par but had three bogeys in the first six holes on the front, missing 10-foot par putts in each case. A three-footer for birdie at the par-5 seventh and a tap-in birdie at eighth lifted some of the gloom.

"If I were to finish par, par, par, I would have thrown myself out of the tournament," Spieth

said. "I had three looks (at birdies) and almost got back all the way to even. I needed those from short range because it seemed like the lid was on today. I burned a lot of edges. Some were good putts, some weren't. Overall that's what I'm going to work on is hitting some more putts."

The late rally gave Spieth hope his victory dream can still happen, but he knows it puts more pressure upon second round. "I'm still in it but I know tomorrow's round becomes that much more important to work my way and stay in it," Spieth said. "I've got to make up ground. If I'm five back at the start of the day, I've got to be less than five back after Friday."

LIGUE 1

Neymar in line for debut as PSG go to Guingamp

'He's a player who will help the club get to a higher level'



Paris St Germain's Neymar (left), Dani Alves (centre) and Thiago Silva train at the Saint-Germain-en-Laye, near Paris, yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Paris

Neymar is poised to make his much-anticipated debut for Paris Saint-Germain tomorrow when they travel to Guingamp in their second game of the Ligue 1 season. The French Football Federation finally received the necessary documents to register the Brazilian yesterday after Barcelona confirmed the 222 million-euro (\$261mn) cheque used to pay his buy-out clause had cleared.

"Neymar's contract will be ratified during the afternoon. He will be able to play on Sunday," said the LFP yesterday. The world's most expensive player should therefore run out into the mundane surroundings of the Stade du Rodourou – capacity just over 15,000 – in the tiny Brittany town of barely 7,000 people.

"Quite honestly it's better if he's there, much better," said Guingamp coach Antoine Kombouare, a former PSG player and Paris coach from 2009 to 2011.

"For us it is an extra source of motivation. We know that by beating PSG with Neymar it would be even more momentous. If Neymar is there it is all the better for the spectacle, for the supporters and for those who want to see him play, but we will be ready with or without him."

Neymar was unveiled to the PSG fans at the Parc des Princes last weekend but was forced to watch from the stands as his new teammates cruised to a low-key 2-0 win over newly-promoted Amiens in their Ligue 1 opener. The 25-year-old Brazilian 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 Cham-

pions League crown, their first task this term will be to retake the Ligue 1 title from Monaco. Coach Unai Emery has no doubt that his new arrival will help the team achieve those lofty goals.

"He's a player who will help the club get to a higher level," said the Spaniard. "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, but they are in serious danger of losing rising star Kylian Mbappe to the capital outfit.

The 18-year-old striker, who is also wanted by Real Madrid, started in their opening 3-2 victory over Toulouse last weekend, as captain Radamel Falcao found the net.

Leonardo Jardim's principality out-

fit will be expecting to make it two wins from two when they pay a visit to Dijon tomorrow.

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

Marseille visit Claudio Ranieri's Nantes today looking to build on their 3-0 win over Dijon last time out but with captain Dimitri Payet missing due to injury.

Ligue 1 fixtures (all times GMT)
Today: Nantes v Marseille (1500), Amiens v Angers (1800), Bordeaux v Metz (1800), Caen v Saint-Etienne (1800), Toulouse v Montpellier (1800)
Tomorrow: Strasbourg v Lille (1300), Dijon v Monaco (1500), Guingamp v Paris Saint-Germain (1900)

Monaco coach Jardim evasive on Mbappe talk

Monaco: Monaco coach Leonardo Jardim insists he is not worried by the ongoing speculation surrounding the future of star striker Kylian Mbappe amid reports that he is close to joining Paris Saint-Germain.

"I am not going to talk about conjecture. I am staying focused on my work and helping my team to evolve," Jardim told reporters yesterday.

Mbappe, 18, scored 15 times on Monaco's remarkable run to the French title last season but has been constantly linked with a move away from the principality over the summer.

Real Madrid and PSG are both reportedly desperate to sign the young France international, who is valued at 180mn euros (\$212mn).

It is understood that the player himself favours joining PSG, where he would team up in attack with Neymar, signed last week for a world record 222mn euros. Mbappe hails from the Paris suburbs.

On the possibility of Mbappe joining the club Monaco pipped to the Ligue 1 crown in May, Jardim recalled the day "a leading director of a Portuguese club, with whom I had a meeting, said to me: 'The transfer market is not just made to strengthen your team, but also to weaken your rivals.' I think that is a strategy used by many. But I am staying calm."

This summer Monaco have already sold Tiemoue Bakayoko, Bernardo Silva, Benjamin Mendy and Valere Germain, all

key players in their run to the title. While they appear weakened as a result, they have made a host of new signings, including this week recruiting Algerian international winger Rachid Ghezzal, who was a free agent after leaving Lyon. The transfer window shuts at the end of this month.

"I am waiting calmly for the 31st. I like to make the most of each day...we are here to make the best of Monaco," added Jardim, whose team visit Dijon in Ligue 1 tomorrow.

Jardim also evaded a question as to whether Mbappe had informed him of a desire to leave the Stade Louis II.

"The players come to talk to me. I have private conversations with all of them. I try to listen to all of them about their objectives and ambitions. It is something I try to do about once a month. And it is not just the case for Kylian."

Mbappe has started both of Monaco's games so far this season, although he didn't score in the 2-1 Champions Trophy defeat to PSG or in last Friday's 3-2 win over Toulouse that began their title defence.

So is he disturbed by all the talk about his future?

"The start of the season differs for every player. Every player has a different way of reaching the top of his form. After that, when there is a lot of movement in the transfer market, the players cope with more or less difficulty. But that is how it is."



Monaco's forward Kylian Mbappe takes part in a training session in La Turbie, near Monaco, yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Barca's Valverde primed for baptism of fire in Super Cup against Real

Reuters
Barcelona

Coach Ernesto Valverde will get his first proper taste of the scorching rivalry between Barcelona and Real Madrid when the two giants of Spanish football meet tomorrow at the Nou Camp in the first leg of the Spanish Super Cup. Barca beat Real 3-2 in a pre-season 'Clasico' friendly in Miami in July but the stakes will be far higher in the Super Cup, the annual curtain raiser in Spain between the Liga champions and King's Cup holders.

The second leg takes place next Wednesday in Madrid. The two teams have not met in the competition since 2012, which was the last time Real lifted the trophy.

One of the most defining images in the recent history of the rivalry came in the 2011 edition, when Jose Mourinho poked Barca's then assistant coach Tito Vilanova in the eye as tensions boiled over following a dramatic 3-2 win for the Catalans.

Barca beat Juventus and Manchester United in addition to the Spanish champions in a promising pre-season tour of the United States, but have since been rocked by losing Neymar, one third of the 'MSN' strike force including Luis Suarez and Lionel Messi that routinely battered Liga defences.

Barca have so far failed in their efforts to spend the 222mn euros Paris St Germain paid them for Neymar, seeing bids rejected for Liverpool playmaker Philippe Coutinho and Borussia Dortmund's Ousmane Dembele which leave the club wracked with doubts before facing a supremely confident Madrid side. With Paco Alcacer or Gerard Deulofeu as his only options to join Messi and Suarez in a front three, Valverde may stray from the 4-3-3 formation his predecessor Luis Enrique preferred in order to bolster the midfield to counter Real.

Madrid outclassed Manchester United to win the European Super Cup 2-1 with a powerful four-man midfield although they will be without Luka Modric in the first leg due to a suspension dating back to Madrid's last appearance in the Super Cup in 2014.

The Croatian's absence gives Real coach Zinedine Zidane a dilemma over whether to bring in another midfielder against Barca,



Barcelona coach Ernesto Valverde.

such as Mateo Kovacic or new signing Dani Ceballos, or revert to a front three to accommodate Gareth Bale, with Cristiano Ronaldo set to make his first start for Real since the Champions League final.

Ronaldo will be the centre of attention at the Nou Camp after a summer in which he reportedly threatened to leave Madrid although Valverde's tactics should also focus

on how to shackle Isco, the chief conductor of Real's win over United and who has been in scintillating form in 2017.

Zidane's side, meanwhile, will be equally attentive to the movements of Messi, the all-time top scorer in the Clasico who stunned the Bernabeu with a last-minute 3-2 winner but who has not scored against Real at the Nou Camp since 2012.

QSL

Al Sadd resume training in Doha

QNA
Doha

Qatar Stars League side Al Sadd continued their training in Doha after returning from Austria, where they held their pre-season camp from 20th July to 5 August.

Al Sadd trained in the absence of international players Saad al-Dosari, Pedro, Ali Asad, Khoukhi Boualem, Hassan al-Heidos, Musab Khader and Salem al-Hajri, who are currently with the Qatar national team preparing for the last two rounds in the World Cup qualifiers.

Al Sadd coach Ferreira has been keen on raising the fitness level of the players, especially after they have returned from a break after the overseas training camp. Qatar and Al Sadd goalkeeper Saud al-Hajri underwent a successful cruciate ligament operation at the Aspetar hospital.

Al-Hajri suffered an injury during Al Sadd's friendly match against Turkish side Gaziantep on July 27.

The goalkeeper joined Al Sadd this summer after the end of his contract with Al Rayyan.

RAYYAN TO FACE DUTCH SIDE PEC ZWOLLE

Al Rayyan are set to take on PEC Zwolle in their third pre-season friendly match during their Dutch preparation camp. Rayyan coach Michael Laudrup is aiming to make the most of this important match in the final stages of team's Dutch camp.

The coach will check on the technical and physical readiness of the players before returning to Doha on Monday. Al Rayyan played two friendly games, which the Qatari side won both of them. The team continues its daily training on two morning and evening sessions, during which the Danish coach focuses more on the technical stuff, after

focusing in the first part of the camp on the physical stuff.

QATAR SPORTS CLUB SIGN RAJAB HAMZA

Qatar Sports Club has announced that they reached an agreement to sign former Al Arabi goalkeeper Rajab Hamza in a one-season deal. Hamza signed the deal in the presence of deputy director of the football team Rashed Shaheen al-Ateeq.

The goalkeeper will join the team's training camp in Slovenia tomorrow. Hamza expressed his happiness to sign for big team like Qatar Club.

Rajab Hamza refused to travel with Al Arabi to their pre-season camp, demanding the termination of his contract.

Hamza joined Qatar Club after parting away from Al Arabi. For his part, deputy director of the football team Rashed Shaheen al-Ateeq said Rajab Hamza is a very experienced goalkeeper and a big addition to Qatar Club.

FOCUS

Morocco to bid for 2026 WC

AFP
Rabat

Morocco's football federation (FRMF) announced yesterday it had told the sport's world governing body FIFA it will bid to host the 2026 World Cup. It would be Morocco's fifth candidacy having come up short already in 1994, 1998, 2006 and 2010.

"Morocco considers itself capable of organising a World Cup," youth and sports minister Rachid Taïbi Alami told AFP. "We have the necessary infrastructure in terms of stadiums, transport, hotel capacity and sanitation." In April, the United States,

Canada and Mexico had already announced a joint North American bid to host the tournament. If successful, Morocco would become only the second African country to host football's flagship event following South Africa in 2010.

The north Africans have received backing from African confederation (CAF) president Ahmad Ahmad. "We are convinced that Morocco could organise this competition just as was done by South Africa in 2010," said Malagasy Ahmad after he was elected to succeed Cameroon's Issa Hayatou as head of the African body.

However, FIFA last year accepted that the country had paid bribes to the former head of the North and Central American

Confederation in trying to win the right to host the 1998 and 2010 tournaments – something that could prejudice any future bid. But FIFA president Gianni Infantino has echoed Ahmad's endorsement, saying that Morocco has the necessary "infrastructure and organisational capacity" to host the World Cup. The 2026 tournament will be the first with an expanded 48-team tournament, up from the current 32 qualifiers. Morocco had won the right to host the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations but pulled out at the 11th hour over concerns related to the Ebola outbreak in western Africa at the time. But the country has embarked on a professionalising drive to improve its football infrastructure.

SPOTLIGHT

Giroud earns Arsenal madcap opening win over Leicester

Wenger's double change turned the game, Ramsey drilling in an 83rd-minute equaliser and Giroud notching the winner

AFP
London

Substitutes Aaron Ramsey and Olivier Giroud scored as Arsenal twice came from behind to beat Leicester City 4-3 yesterday in a dizzily entertaining opening Premier League game.

Record signing Alexandre Lacazette put Arsenal ahead after only 85 seconds at the Emirates Stadium, before a Shinji Okazaki header and a Jamie Vardy brace saw 2016 champions Leicester go 2-1 and then 3-2 up.

But Arsene Wenger's double change turned the game, FA Cup final hero Ramsey drilling in an 83rd-minute equaliser and Giroud notching the winner two minutes later with a header that hit the bar and bounced over the line.

The Ramsey-Giroud rescue act spared Arsenal from a fourth season-opening defeat in five campaigns and enabled Wenger to start the season with victory for only the second time in eight years. The Arsenal manager faced open dissent from fans last season as his side missed out on a place in the Champions League for the first time in 20 years.

But after winning a record seventh FA Cup with victory over Chelsea, he penned a new two-year contract and his side's Houdini act against Leicester means that late-season momentum remains intact, albeit only just. The fans at the Emirates were getting their first glimpse of Lacazette in a competitive game and the £46.5mn (\$60.3mn, 51.1mn euros) man needed less than two minutes to find the net.

From Hector Bellerin's lay-off, Mohamed Elneny swept a first-time cross into the box and Lacazette deftly glanced a header past Kasper Schmeichel before spreading his arms to take the acclaim of the crowd. Within three minutes Leicester were level. Following a short corner on the left, Marc Albrighton's deep cross was headed back across goal by Harry Maguire and Okazaki leapt to nod a header past Petr Cech.

Arsenal stepped things up, Schmeichel saving from Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain and home debutant Sead Kolasinac, but they were careless in possession and shortly before the half-hour, Leicester went in front.

Granit Xhaka's sloppy pass was picked up by Albrighton and he forged down the left flank before bending a sublime cross into the danger



Arsenal's French striker Olivier Giroud (centre) celebrates after scoring the winner during the English Premier League match against Leicester City at the Emirates Stadium in London. (Reuters)

area that Vardy tapped home. "We're gonna win the league!" sang the Leicester fans and they almost had a third goal to cheer when Okazaki's header from Christian Fuchs's cross bounced just wide of Cech's left-hand post.

After Wilfred Ndidi had survived a penalty shout for handball, Arsenal levelled in first-half stoppage time, Danny Welbeck tapping in

from Kolasinac's square pass after Lacazette's shot was blocked. Though Arsenal began the second half on the front foot, Leicester created the cleaner chances, Cech rushing out of his box to tackle Vardy and then tipping over a shot by Riyad Mahrez, and after 11 minutes they went in front again.

Again a set-piece proved Arsenal's undoing as

Mahrez's in-swinging corner from the right was nodded in by Vardy. Schmeichel thwarted Oxlade-Chamberlain and Bellerin before Wenger turned to his bench in the 67th minute, pitching Ramsey and Giroud into the fray in place of Elneny and Rob Holding.

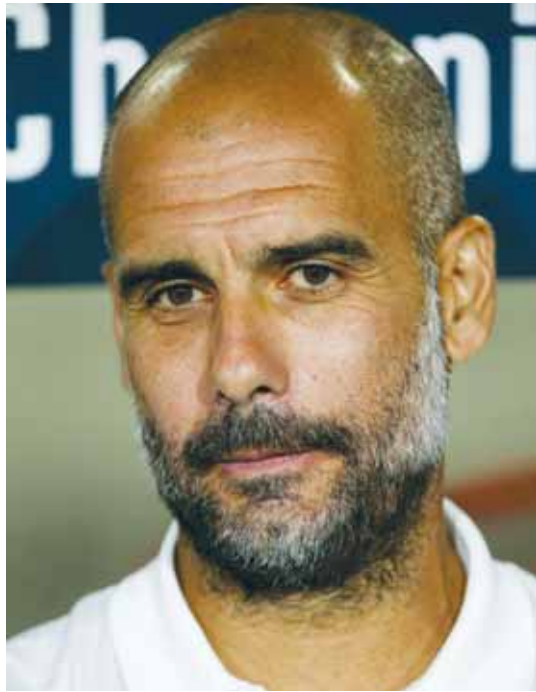
The ensuing reshuffle left Arsenal with a winger — Oxlade-Chamberlain — at right-

back, a right-back — Bellerin — at left-back and two left-backs — Kolasinac and Nacho Monreal — at centre-back.

It seemed an unlikely platform for victory, but Ramsey neatly controlled Xhaka's dinked pass to drill in an equaliser and moments later Giroud's header from Xhaka's corner completed a remarkable turnaround.

FOCUS

Guardiola forecasts end to City spending spree



AFP
Manchester, United Kingdom

Manchester City manager **Pep Guardiola** has said the club will curb their transfer spending in future years after a huge outlay on players during the close season. Defenders Benjamin Mendy, Kyle Walker and Danilo have all arrived at the Etihad Stadium along with goalkeeper Ederson and midfielder Bernardo Silva to take City's expenditure to £217mn (\$281mn, 238mn euros).

Former Barcelona and Bayern Munich coach Guardiola claimed it was necessary to reinvigorate City's ageing squad but he will only seek to add one or two new faces in forthcoming seasons. "Hopefully next season I will be here and we are not going to spend how we spent this season," Guardiola said yesterday on the eve of his side's opening game of the new Premier League season at promoted Brighton and Hove Albion.

"Six players were out of contract. In the last six or seven years Manchester City didn't buy full-backs. We didn't have full-backs and you have to buy full-backs," the Spaniard added. "The market is so demanding for all the teams, not just Manchester City."

Guardiola said the current spike in football transfer spending, which culminated in Neymar's recent world record move from Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain for 222mn euros (£200mn, \$260mn), had been building for some time.

"It started with Real Madrid and Ronaldo going for £80mn and then Bale for £85mn and everything went more expensive. Now with Neymar. But it is going to finish, it is unsustainable. In the next three or four years Manchester City will buy one, two, maybe three players.

"We needed to do that because it was one of the oldest teams in Europe, not just the Premier League, and we need to change it. We were not able with those players to find a solution. But the solution is not changing players every season. The group of players this season are going to stay here for a long time. We will maybe change one important player."

Despite making such significant investments, Guardiola claimed City have actually saved money by getting the majority of their transfer business done earlier in the close season. "We did it earlier and we are lucky because it would be more expensive now," said the Catalan.

"The club was clever like that because we anticipated what we needed. But I think it is unus-

tainable. Sooner or later it's going to finish. The fact that we signed earlier helped us avoid signing players who are so expensive like now. We go to sign and other clubs are always going to ask us for more."

After bolstering their squad, Guardiola's side — who came third last season — have been made favourites to win the title, but the City manager said he could cope with that burden. "It's the same pressure as I had last season," Guardiola explained.

"We are here to win the games and titles. The big fail now takes one week in football! The pressure it's never a big problem. I'm honest in my job. I will do my best like I did last season. I feel the same pressure at Barcelona when I arrived. People say in my first press conference we are favourites. We have to deal with that and handle that. We are going to see at the end of the season what happens, knowing how difficult it is."

FIXTURES (1400 GMT UNLESS STATED):

Today: Brighton v Manchester City (1630 GMT), Chelsea v Burnley, Crystal Palace v Huddersfield, Everton v Stoke, Southampton v Swansea, Watford v Liverpool (1130 GMT), West Brom v Bournemouth
Tomorrow: Manchester United v West Ham (1500 GMT), Newcastle v Tottenham (1230 GMT)

Higuain snubbed for Argentina World Cup clashes

Buenos Aires: Juventus striker Gonzalo Higuain was axed by Argentina coach Jorge Sampaoli yesterday for crucial World Cup qualifiers against Uruguay and Venezuela as the South American giants look to resurrect their faltering campaign.

Higuain, who has scored 31 international goals in 68 appearances, failed to convince recently-appointed coach Sampaoli of his strengths in two friendlies against Brazil in June. Argentina currently occupy fifth place in South American qualifying for the 2018 World Cup to be held in Russia with just the top four nations guaranteed to make it through. The fifth-placed team will have to negotiate a play-off against the winners of the Oceania zone in order to reach Russia.

TRANSFER

Coutinho going nowhere: Liverpool

AFP
London

Liverpool insisted yesterday that Philippe Coutinho would not be sold at any price amid reports the Brazil star has submitted a transfer request in a bid to force a move to Barcelona. Coutinho is Barcelona's top target to replace Neymar following the striker's world record move to Paris Saint-Germain.

After having two previous offers rejected, the Spanish club are believed to have increased their bid for the Liverpool forward to £90mn (\$117mn, 99mn euros). Liverpool are determined to hang onto Coutinho no matter what offer Barca make, but the 25-year-old is keen to move to the Camp Nou and reports yesterday claimed he tried to push his club into letting him leave by sending an email containing the official transfer request.

Coutinho's demand is believed to have been rejected by Liverpool, who only hours earlier had gone public with their intent to keep the playmaker at all costs. A statement issued by Fenway Sports Group, Liverpool's US-based owners, said: "We wish to offer clarity as regards our position on a possible transfer of Philippe Coutinho. The club's definitive stance is that no offers for Philippe will be considered and he will remain a member of Liverpool Football Club when the summer (transfer) window closes."

FSG's statement was an endorsement of Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp's previous comments that Coutinho was not going anywhere. And the German boss, speaking at his pre-match press conference ahead of Liverpool's 2017/18 Premier League season opener away to Watford today, said: "I think if somebody, in this case FSG, is saying something like this it is the statement. I think I have said it already a few times,

but maybe that's not 100% clear."

Liverpool launched their PR offensive at the same time as Sky Sports News reported a member of Coutinho's family had released a statement stating the player's case. "Philippe has tried very hard to find an amicable solution to this situation but to no avail," the statement read. "He has tremendous love for the club and its fans but, like Steven Gerrard and Luis Suarez have pointed out in the past, Liverpool does not let its players leave on amicable terms."

Coutinho, who joined Liverpool from Inter Milan for £8.5mn in 2013, signed a new five-year contract with the north-west side in January that did not include a buy-out clause. Barcelona want Coutinho to replace Neymar following his compatriot's 222 million-euro transfer to PSG last week.

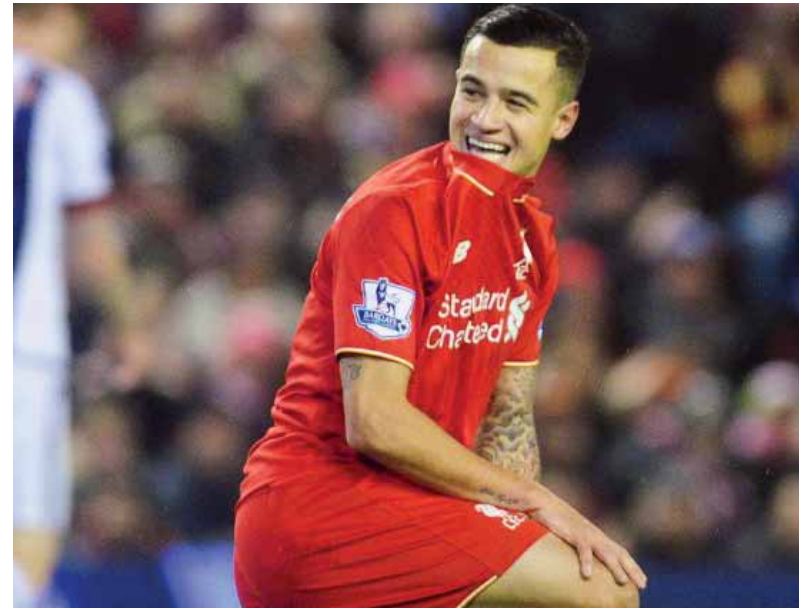
They had two previous bids rejected by the Premier League side but could yet come back with an offer in excess of £100mn. Barca believe Coutinho

can step in for Neymar alongside Lionel Messi and former Liverpool favourite Luis Suarez in a star-studded front three, and could also provide cover for 33-year-old Andres Iniesta in midfield.

Although five-time European champions, most recently in 2005, the last of Liverpool's 18 English league titles came in 1990 — before the start of the Premier League era.

Klopp, however, is determined to show he is serious about bringing back the glory days to Anfield by retaining Coutinho, Liverpool's top scorer with 14 goals in all competitions last season when the Merseysiders finished fourth.

But Coutinho will be missing from the Watford match with a back problem that could also rule him out of the first leg of the Champions League play-off away to German club Hoffenheim on Tuesday. Asked if Coutinho would play at Vicarage Road today, Klopp replied: "No, he has back problems. He was not in training since last Fri-



Philippe Coutinho is Barcelona's top target to replace Neymar following the striker's world record move to Paris Saint-Germain.

day. No he is not available, he is also a doubt for Tuesday, unfortunately!" Questioned on whether his job now was to keep Coutinho happy, Klopp added:

"I can't keep players happy. That's how life is. It's not about this, Phil is not available for us, that's the biggest issue that he's not available to play!"