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FOOTBALL

Messi lifts Barca's mood, pressure on Bartomeu

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FOOTBALL/QNB STARS LEAGUE

Duhail aim to bounce back after Sheikh Jassim Cup loss

The match at the Abdulla bin Khalifa Stadium in Duhail could well set the tempo for Al Duhail, who will be looking for their sixth league crown

By Sports Reporter
 Doha

After suffering a 4-1 thrashing at the hands of Al Sadd in the season-opening Sheikh Jassim Cup, Al Duhail will aim to get their confidence and composure back when they take on promoted Qatar Sports Club on the opening day of the QNB Stars League tomorrow.

The match at the Abdulla bin Khalifa Stadium in Duhail could well set the tempo for Djamel Belmadi's men, who will be looking for their sixth league crown, having won the tournament five times in the past when they were known as Lekhwiya before their merger with El Jaish at the end of last season.

Of the five titles, three came under their Algerian Djamel Belmadi, one of the most successful coaches on Qatar's domestic circuit, while one each was won under Belgian Erik Gerets and Dane Michael Laudrup.

While a few players from El Jaish have found employment with Al Duhail, thereby strengthening the team, the outcome of the Sheikh Jassim Cup proved that won't guarantee success in Qatar where relatively unfancied teams have often played party-poopers.

In 2015-16, Al Rayyan won the QSL under Uruguayan coach Jorge Fossati with five matches to spare after playing in the second division the previous season.

The Lions, however, failed to repeat their feat last season, finishing third. Lekhwiya, too, had won their first title in their debut season in 2010-11, shocking the more established teams in the process.

Belmadi's philosophy of starting every season "from zero" therefore makes sense as Duhail take the field against Qatar Sports Club who won eight league crowns, the last of which came in 2003.



Duhail coach Djamel Belmadi (L) and his Qatar SC counterpart Gabriel Calderon interact with the media yesterday.



Will the former giants go all the way to win the title like al Rayyan did in 2016 after a season outside the top flight?

That remains to be seen but Belmadi is certainly a bit concerned about his team's opening match against Qatar Sports Club.

"I am expecting an interesting game against Qatar Sports Club because they have been promoted and I don't have too much information on the side," Belmadi said at his pre-match press conference.

"I feel that they have a good coach (Gabriel Calderon) and will do well in the league this season" added the Algerian.

But Belmadi insisted he doesn't feel any pressure because he has the confidence that his players will continue to stay motivated despite the Sheikh Jas-

sim Cup setback. "The squad has improved with the signings in the summer. I now have to manage these expectations over the season, my aim is to always win and I feel we can achieve something with this side."

Duhail winger Ali Afif added that his side can challenge for the title this season.

"We are a confident group of players and have been together for a number of years. We must start well, and take the season game by game."

Qatar Sports Club coach Calderon was excited that his team are once again in the top flight.

"I am happy to be coaching in the QNB Stars League. We have had a good two months of preseason and the team is prepared. It will be a real challenge against the former champions but

confidence is high and moral is good in my team," said the former Argentine World Cupper. "We will have to start at a high tempo and impose our game on our opponents. This will be tough against Duhail, but I feel that is we do this we have every chance of causing an upset," added Calderon.

Qatar SC player Mohamed Omar ended the press conference noting that the side are in an upbeat mood ahead of the opener.

"We are working well as a team in training, and our coach has lifted our confidence levels. We feel that we can do well this season in the league," Omar said.

Tomorrow's Fixtures
 Al Gharafa vs Al Ahli 6pm
 Duhail vs Qatar Sports Club 8:10pm
 Umm Salal vs Al Khairiyat 8:10pm

Al Gharafa, Al Ahli coaches call for patience

Doha: Al Gharafa coach Jean Fernandez has called for patience from fans as his side begin their campaign in the QNB Stars League with a match against Al Ahli tomorrow.

The seven-times champions have struggled to keep pace with the big guns since 2010 when they won the title last, finishing three points ahead of Al Sadd in the standings. Last year they finished in fifth place, dropping out of contention for a spot in the lucrative Asian Champions League.

The new season, therefore, brings new hope with Fernandez taking charge of the team who played last season under two coaches, Pedro Caixinha and Habib Sadeq.

"We have played plenty of games this preseason, and have trained well. It is now down to the players to show what we have worked on and I hope we can have a strong opening game," Frenchman Fernandez said.

"I feel that we can have a special team at Al Gharafa with the players that we have. Now I feel that we need some time to get used to the season, and after a few games we can see if we are capable of challenging at the top of the table."

Summer signing Luis Jimenez talked up the potential of the young players in the Cheetahs' ranks.

"From what I have seen in preseason we have a young team with plenty of individual talent. Now we need to come together and show what we can do this season. I have every confidence that Al Gharafa can do well this season."

As for Al Ahli, they also have a new coach in the form of vastly experienced Joaquin Caparros who will be managing in the GCC for the first ever time. The Spaniard is raring to go for his new side, hoping to make a good personal impression.

"I am glad to be working in the QNB Stars League with Al Ahli. Qatar has had many great Spanish players in the past, and I hope we have a real trophy at this great club," noted Caparros. The vastly experienced Caparros mirrored the views of his Al Gharafa counterpart, insisting that fans have to be patient with Al Ahli.

"I personally take each game as it comes. On Friday we have a real challenge against a tough Al Gharafa side, but I have real faith that my players can perform and come away with a positive result." Al Ahli defender John Benson concluded the press conference with a rallying call for his side.

"We all know how good Al Gharafa are in Qatar. This is an ideal match to show what we can do, and we are fully ready for the match."



Al Gharafa's Jean Fernandez and Al Ahli's Joaquin Caparros



CRICKET

Amla, Perera lead World XI to victory over Pak



World XI batsman Hashim Amla (R) plays a shot as Pakistani captain and wicketkeeper Sarfraz Ahmed looks on during their second Twenty20 international at the Gaddafi Cricket Stadium in Lahore yesterday.

AFP
 Lahore

Sri Lanka all-rounder Thisara Perera hit a towering six off the penultimate ball to steer the World XI to a thrilling seven-wicket win over Pakistan in the second Twenty20 yesterday.

Perera made a whirlwind 19-ball 47 not out with five sixes, while Hashim Amla finished not out 72 off 55 balls to help the World XI overhaul a 175-run target and level the three-match series 1-1 before a packed Gaddafi stadium in Lahore.

Pakistan had registered a 20-run win in Tuesday's first match, which marked the return of international cricket to Pakistan.

Left-hander Perera went on a rampage as the visitors needed 33 off the last two overs, smashing two sixes off the 19th over bowled by Sohail Khan before sealing the match in the last over.

Amla, who scored his seventh international Twenty20 half-century, was the steadier of the two, with two sixes

and five fours as he helped Perera add 69 runs for the fourth wicket off just 35 balls. That partnership lifted the World XI after they lost Tamim Iqbal (23), Tim Paine (10) and skipper Faf du Plessis (20).

Pakistan had scored 174-6 in their 20 overs. Babar Azam (45), Ahmed Shehzad (43) and Shoaib Malik (39) had good starts but none of them went on to score big, as Pakistan found it tough going on a slow and low pitch after winning the toss.

Opener Fakhar Zaman fell for 21 in the fifth over before Shehzad and Azam steadied the innings with a 59-run stand for the second wicket.

Malik hit two sixes in the last over before holing out off the last delivery of the innings.

During his 23-ball knock Malik became the leading run scorer for Pakistan in Twenty20 international cricket, overhauling Umar Akmal's aggregate of 1,690 runs in 88 matches by two runs.

He now has 1,692 in 88 matches. Perera (2-23) and West Indian spinner Badree (2-31) were the main wicket takers for the visitors.

SCOREBOARD

Pakistan

Fakhar Zaman lbw b Badree	21
Ahmed Shehzad c Miller b Tahir	43
Babar Azam c Miller b Badree	45
Shoaib Malik c Collingwood b Cutting	39
Imad Wasim c Tahir b Perera	15
Sarfraz Ahmed c Tahir b Perera	0
Sohail Khan not out	1
Extras: (lb1, nb1, w8)	10
Total: (for six wickets; 20 overs)	174

Bowling: Morkel 4-0-20-0 (3w), Cutting 4-0-52-1 (2w), Badree 4-0-31-2 (1w), Collingwood 2-0-18-0 (1w), Perera 3-0-23-2 (1nb), Tahir 3-0-29-1 (1w)

World XI

Tamim Iqbal c Malik b Khan	23
Hashim Amla not out	72
T. Paine b Wasim	10
Faf du Plessis c Shadab b Nawaz	20
T. Perera not out	47
Extras: (lb1, w3)	3
Total: (for three wickets; 19.5 overs)	D 175

Fall of wickets: 1-47 (Iqbal), 2-71 (Paine), 3-106 (du Plessis)

Did not bat: D. Miller, P. Collingwood, B. Cutting, S. Badree, M. Morkel, Imran Tahir

Bowling: Wasim 4-0-27-1, Khan 4-0-44-1 (1w), Shinwari 1-0-10-0, Raees 3-5-0-36-0 (1w), Nawaz 3-0-25-1, Shadab 4-0-32-0

Result: World XI win by seven wickets

Toss: Pakistan

EUROPA LEAGUE

Arsenal set for drop into Europe's second tier

'The priority is to focus on the Premier League'



Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger (left) watches Rob Holding take part in a training session in London yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
London

Premier League giants Arsenal make their Europa League bow this week, slipping into the continent's second-string competition after nearly two decades in the Champions League, with AC Milan also injecting star quality.

Arsene Wenger's men, fifth in the Premier League last season – their first finish outside the top four since 1995-96 – take on German side Cologne on Thursday at the Emirates Stadium in London.

The Arsenal boss said his team would take the competition seriously despite the disappointment of missing out on the Champions League after 19 consecutive seasons in Europe's premier competition.

"We will take it seriously but the priority is to focus on the Premier League and combining the two," he said in comments reported by Britain's Daily Telegraph.

"Then, in December, we will see, but at least we want to qualify for the next round. Thursday to Sunday morning is short so I have to think about that. But we have to win at home and you know how it is when you don't win at home."

Arsenal goalkeeper Petr Cech, who won the 2012/13 Europa League with Chelsea, said the competition was a worthwhile target.

"We decided that it was the first time and hopefully the last time we played the Europa League and we wanted to win it," he said.

Arsenal's domestic rivals Manchester United won the trophy last year, giving them a route into this year's Champions League.

Wenger, whose Arsenal side lost the club's previous match in the competition to Galatasaray in the 2000 final, when it was branded the UEFA Cup, is likely to rotate his squad, giving some of his fringe players game time as he negotiates a tricky Group H that also includes Red Star Belgrade and Belarusian outfit BATE Borisov.

Seven-time European champions AC Milan have an easier task, with ties against Austria Vienna, AEK Athens and Rijeka of Croatia in Group D as they continue their return to European competition for the first time since 2013-14.

The Italians, looking to win the only major European trophy that has so far eluded them, appear to be on the road to recovery under Chinese ownership after a number of lean years.

Smarting after a 4-1 Serie A defeat at Lazio at the weekend, they open

their group-stage campaign at Austria Vienna after coming through two qualifying rounds.

"We are a new squad. It's my responsibility and the one of the boss and the management to lead this group to success," said captain Leonardo Bonucci, who joined the club from Juventus in the close season.

"We must stick together also when playing in Europa League," he told Milan TV. "It's a competition that many in the team have never played in before."

Wayne Rooney's Everton will have a stern test in Group E, which also includes French club Lyon, whose Groupama Stadium will host the final on May 16.

Other notable names in this year's group stage are Spanish sides Villarreal and Real Sociedad as well as Italy's Lazio.

SPOTLIGHT

I nearly quit Arsenal, admits Giroud

AFP
London

Arsenal striker Olivier Giroud admitted yesterday that he came close to leaving the club in the close season before deciding to stay because his "story is not over".

The France international has fallen behind club-record signing and compatriot Alexandre Lacazette in the pecking order this season but has come off the bench in all of the Gunners' games so far this season.

Danny Welbeck also appears to be ahead of Giroud in the manager's thoughts, but the 30-year-old is likely to get a rare chance to impress from the start in today's Europa League clash with Cologne.

Manager Arsene Wenger will make a number of changes as Arsenal play in the competition for the first time in 17 years, with Giroud expected to be one of several alterations.

The forward, who scored a late winner in the opening-day Premier League victory against Leicester City, has struggled to hold down a regular first-team place at the Emirates Stadium and admitted he nearly quit over the sum-

mer having been linked with the likes of Everton and West Ham United.

Asked how close he came to leaving Arsenal, Giroud told reporters at the club's training base north of London: "Actually that's a very private decision because it's true that I was close to leaving the club because I said that I wanted to play."

"But after a big reflection with everybody around me, like my family and my close friends, I (decided I) wanted to stay at Arsenal and I thought the story was not over, (not) finished at Arsenal."

"The club bring me a lot and I think I give it back. I still want to improve again and again and win some more trophies for the club, so as I said to the boss our story is not finished, so everybody was pleased with that."

Wenger has always maintained his desire to keep Giroud – who has 99 goals for the club – at Arsenal and was full of praise for the striker on the eve of the Cologne clash.

"I have said many times that his contribution has been huge," he said.

"He has had a great evolution here and overall (his) contribution has been tremendous, and I think he has shown a very loyal spirit and has a high respect from everybody inside the club, as well as (from) our fans."



Arsenal's Alexis Sanchez (left) and Olivier Giroud take part in a training session in London yesterday. (Reuters)

UPDATE

Injured Pogba could be out for 'weeks': Mourinho

AFP
London

Paul Pogba could be out of action for a "few weeks" after suffering a suspected hamstring injury that took the shine off Manchester United's successful return to the Champions League, manager Jose Mourinho said.

United, who missed out on qualification for Europe's premier club competition last season, coasted to a 3-0 victory on Tuesday, with goals for Marouane Fellaini, Romelu Lukaku and Marcus Rashford.

But, making his debut as United captain, Pogba lasted just 18 minutes of the Group A game before being forced off by an apparent left hamstring injury, with Fellaini taking his place.

The 24-year-old French midfielder reportedly left Old Trafford on crutches.

"I don't know (what the severity is)," Mourinho told MUTV, the club's in-house television station. "I just know from experience it's a muscular injury. In my experience, muscular injury stops you from playing for a few weeks, I think."

"It looks for me too (like a hamstring injury) but I haven't spoken yet to the medical department."

Pogba's injury will also concern France, who are hoping he is fit in time to play in the crucial World Cup qualifier against Bulgaria on October 7.

Mourinho said he had midfield options for the weekend's Premier League clash with Everton, including Ander Herrera, Michael Carrick, Fellaini and Nemanja Matic.

Rashford, who made his Champions League debut on Tuesday, said Pogba's loss was a big blow.

"Paul's going to be a massive miss and hopefully we can get him back fit as soon as possible," said Rashford.

"We have to play every game to win. If we want to be champions, then we have to win (those) types of games (like Sunday's). It's going to be difficult. Everton are a really strong team."

The teenager said United's strong squad would help them cope with the loss of Pogba.

Rashford has looked bright in the early weeks of the campaign but, like Anthony Martial, has been unable to nail down a starting berth due to United's impressive attacking options.

The teenager believes United's embarrassment of riches is helping rather than hindering his and Martial's development.

"It's difficult when you're in and out of the team but we have to find the positives out of it and I think we have both done that," the England international said.

"I think the competition is always positive competition because we're improving each other every day when we're in training and in the games we're pushing each other more and more."



Manchester United's Paul Pogba receives medical attention on Tuesday. (Reuters)

BOTTOMLINE

Conte expects selection gamble to pay off

AFP
London

Antonio Conte believes his decision to rest several of Chelsea stars for their Champions League demolition of Qarabag will be rewarded when the Blues face Arsenal on Sunday.

Conte left out David Luiz, Antonio Rudiger, Victor Moses and Alvaro Morata for Tuesday's 6-0 thumping of the Azerbaijan minnows at Stamford Bridge.

With those key players kept fresh and Eden Hazard coming off the bench for only his second appearance since close-season ankle surgery, Conte is confident Chelsea will go into their London derby in good condition to claim three valuable points.

"It was a good start, a perfect start us," Conte said. "To play the first game of the Champions League, then to win with a good result, to score many goals, to finish the game with a clean sheet."

"I saw a lot of positive things. Now we have to rest and get ready for a tough game against a strong Arsenal team."

Conte's selection gamble was never in danger of backfiring as goals from Pedro, Davide Zappacosta, Tiemoue Bakayoko, Cesar Azpilicueta and Michy Batshuayi ensured Chelsea made a strong start to their group stage campaign.

Giving his understudies a chance



Chelsea's Davide Zappacosta celebrates after scoring the team's second goal during the Champions League match against Qarabag FK at Stamford Bridge in London on Tuesday. (Reuters)

for valuable game time was an added bonus for Conte, who said: "I wanted to give a chance to Michy and also to Andreas Christensen."

"To play in the Champions League means the coach trusts you."

"My message tonight was this: I trust all my players, not with only words, but with facts."

PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

"Last season we played with only 13 players, to do that again would be crazy. We have to develop these players, to try and create a good competition, a positive competition, between them. It's very important."

Conte was also encouraged by Zappacosta's first start following his

deadline day move from Torino.

The Italy right-back capped a lung-bursting run with a cross that flew in for Chelsea's second goal.

"He played a really good game. For sure he knew very well my style of football and for this reason I decided to start with him," Conte said.

"It's not easy to change your life in one week, but his answer was very good. He scored and that's important us but I'm more pleased for his performance."

Despite Hazard's solid showing as a second half substitute, Conte admitted it might be too soon for the Belgian playmaker to start against Arsenal.

"It's early to speak about this. We must have a bit of patience with Eden,"

Conte said.

"We must give him the possibility to recover very well, to be totally fit."

"We must have calm to do the best for the player and the team. Otherwise we risk a bad injury."

It was a chastening first taste of the Champions League group stage for Qarabag, but Gurban Gurbanov, boss of the Azerbaijan minnows, insisted it was still a proud day for his club.

"The game was very difficult for us, Chelsea played very well," he said.

"We made lots of errors. I accept we must play better but I'm still satisfied with the performance given the quality of the opponent."

"We are happy we are part of this tournament."

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Emery warns five-star PSG can only get better

5-0 thrashing of Celtic real statement of intent from the Parisians

AFP
Glasgow

Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) coach Unai Emery says his side have learned lessons from the past after they started their Champions League Group B campaign with a 5-0 thrashing of Celtic.

Neymar, Kylian Mbappe, Edinson Cavani's double and a Mikel Lustig own goal consigned Celtic to their record home European defeat and propelled PSG to the top of the table on goal difference from Bayern Munich, who they host on match day two.

It was a real statement of intent from this summer's big spenders who signed Brazilian Neymar and teenage sensation Mbappe in a bid to make a real impression on the competition.

After four consecutive seasons of reaching the quarter-finals, PSG fell at the round of 16 last season when they capitulated against Barcelona after winning the first leg 4-0.

It was a result that convinced their Qatari owners to break the world transfer record to bring Neymar to the French capital.

The 6-1 defeat to the Catalan giants in the second leg was a humbling for PSG but Emery says they are approaching this season's campaign with a renewed confidence.

"We did learn from the past and what happened last year. We have worked really hard to improve things within the team," the Spanish coach said.

"I think my team showed a lot of character. What I was really pleased with was the fact we were in control with the ball and without the ball.

"Of course we have added to the team but it is more about all the people working together. As far as this is concerned I am really, really happy."

The French side's formidable front line terrorised the Celtic defence and Emery warned they would only get better.



Paris Saint-Germain's Neymar (centre) celebrates with teammates Kylian Mbappe (left) and Edinson Cavani after scoring the opening goal of the UEFA Champions League match against Celtic at Celtic Park in Glasgow on Tuesday. (AFP)

The PSG coach singled out Mbappe, who PSG have an option to buy from Monaco for a fee that could reach 180mn Euros, for praise.

"This is what he needs at the moment. He wants to be a great player and he is going to grow up into that role," Emery said of the 18-year-old who scored his second goal in two games.

"They have only played a few games together... but the key is that the team is going to improve more and more."

Celtic manager Brendan Rodgers said his side, who conceded five at home for the first time since Rangers beat them 5-1 in September 1960, said his side weren't at the same level of the

French superstars. "You have to give credit to them. They are a really special team and they are going to be close to winning it for sure," the Northern Irishman said.

"This is a level where you have to look after the ball, and you have to make the ball work for you, and in the first half we didn't do that."

COMMENT

German legend Matthaeus slams Ribery for tantrum

AFP
Berlin

Germany legend Lothar Matthaeus has criticised France winger Franck Ribery for throwing his Bayern Munich shirt in temper after being substituted late in the Champions League win over Anderlecht.

Having picked up an early booking for arguing with the referee in Tuesday's 3-0 victory over the Belgian side, Ribery was taken off with 12 minutes to go in Munich and hurled his shirt at the Bayern bench.

"Ribery has been here long enough now - he is emotional, but you can't throw your shirt on the bench like that," ex-Bayern midfielder and Germany captain Matthaeus told Sky.

"That is a bad sign against the club." Bayern head coach Carlo Ancelotti was equally unimpressed by the 34-year-old Frenchman's behaviour.

"Of course, the player wants to play 90 minutes, but I decided to take him off because there were 10 minutes left, we had the game under control and he already

had a yellow card," said the Italian. "He had had problems (an injury knock) at the weekend, so I don't understand his reaction and I will talk to him about it."

Ribery's rage could well have consequences.

"Something like that shouldn't happen. We are FC Bayern, that is not okay and we will talk about it," added director of sport Hasan Salihamidzic.

Bayern played nearly 80 minutes against 10 men after Anderlecht had defender Sven Kums sent off just before Robert Lewandowski converted a penalty.

Ribery's is just the latest Bayern star to show unrest.

Last week, Lewandowski criticised the club's spending policy while Germany forward Thomas Mueller complained about starting on the bench in the 2-0 win at Werder Bremen a fortnight ago.

Defending champions Bayern have made a poor start to the new Bundesliga season as Saturday's 2-0 defeat at Hoffenheim left them sixth in the table, their worst position after three games since 2010-11.



Bayern Munich's Franck Ribery takes off his jersey after leaving the pitch during the Champions League match against Anderlecht in Munich on Tuesday. (AFP)

BOTTOMLINE

Messi lifts Barcelona's mood, pressure on Bartomeu

AFP
Barcelona

Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu hailed Lionel Messi as the best player of all-time as the Argentine lifted the mood at the crisis-ridden Catalan giants with a double in a 3-0 thrashing of Juventus to start their Champions League campaign.

Messi also set up Barca's second, scored by Ivan Rakitic, as Barca exacted revenge for their 3-0 quarter-final defeat by Juventus in last season's Champions League quarter-finals.

Bartomeu has faced repeated calls for his resignation after Neymar's world record move to Paris Saint-Germain last month and Barca's bungled attempts to replace the Brazilian in the transfer market.

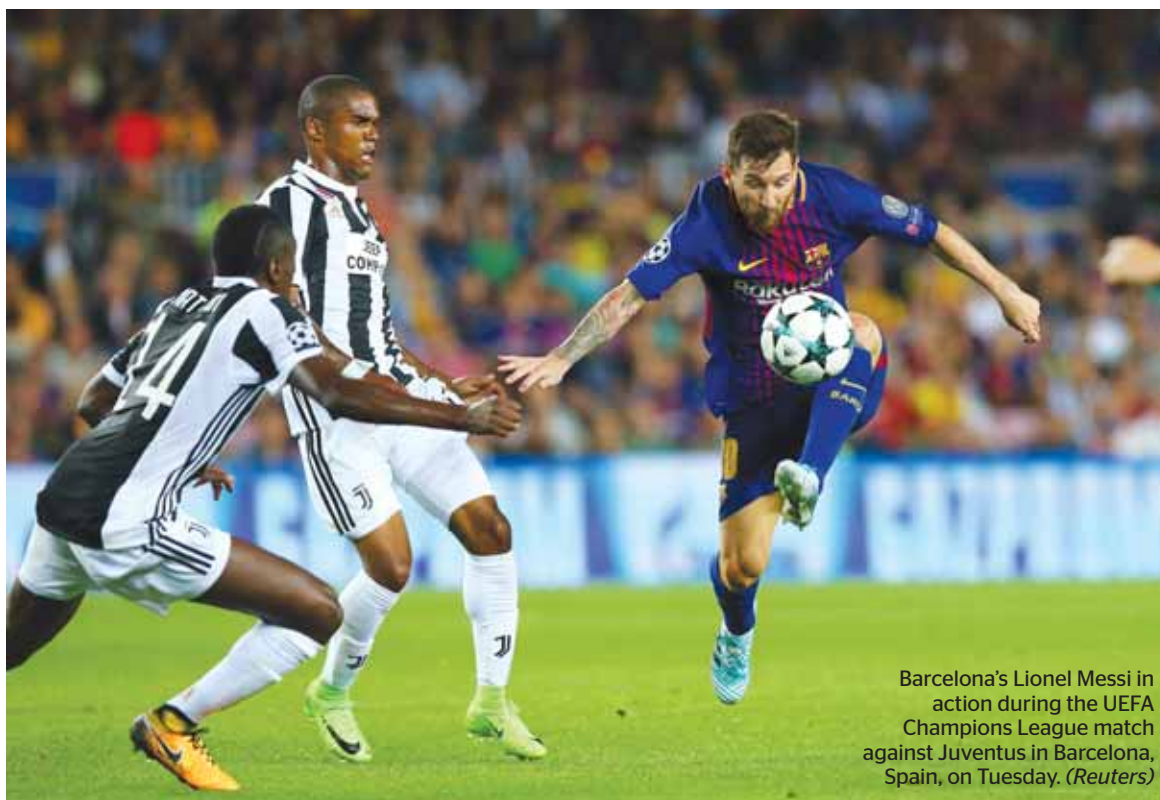
Moreover, Messi is yet to sign an extension to his contract, which is due to expire in June, despite Bartomeu's insistence that an agreement in principle has been reached with the player.

"Leo Messi is unique, he is the best player in the history of football and he has shown that again in the Champions League," Bartomeu told Spanish TV station MEGA. "He shows in every game, that is why he is the best."

Messi has also led Barca to a perfect start in La Liga after three games, to open up an early four-point lead over rivals Real Madrid.

And Bartomeu claimed Barca's start to the season was reason for the club's members to reject a vote of no confidence motion against him launched by a former presidential candidate Augusti Benedito.

"The vote of no confidence is something that a member is trying to get off



Barcelona's Lionel Messi in action during the UEFA Champions League match against Juventus in Barcelona, Spain, on Tuesday. (Reuters)

the ground," added Bartomeu. "He is within his right to do so, but I don't think there are the extraordinary conditions for such a motion."

"There is no sporting crisis because we have started the project with Ernesto Valverde very well. Economically the club is in rude health with a record turnover."

Valverde has suffered plenty at the hands of Messi in his coaching career at Espanyol, Valencia and Athletic Bilbao before being given the reigns at

the Camp Nou. And he admitted it is far easier being on the same side as the five-time World Player of the Year after his first taste of Champions League action as Barca boss.

"I have suffered many times playing against Messi and now I have the luck to have him on my side," said Valverde.

"We know that when he gets the ball anything can happen. Today he opened up the game in one moment where no one saw the gap and he found it."

Valverde has already experienced the ups and downs of his new role just over a month into the season as his reign started with a 5-1 thrashing by Madrid in the Spanish Super Cup before a run of four straight victories.

"In football when you lose it seems like you are never going to win and when you win that you will always win," Valverde added, warning against complacency. "Inside the club we need to maintain calm because we know how difficult every game is."

Celtic charged by UEFA over pitch invasion

European football's governing body UEFA has opened disciplinary proceedings against Celtic following a pitch invasion during their Champions League tie against Paris Saint-Germain. A supporter raced onto the Parkhead pitch late in the first half on Tuesday with the hosts 3-0 down and darted towards 18-year-old superstar Kylian Mbappe. He aimed a fresh-air kick at the former Monaco striker but failed to make contact before being whisked away by stewards. Celtic have been charged with a count of "field invasion" and will have their case heard by the UEFA Control, Ethics and Disciplinary Body on October 19, a UEFA statement said. Celtic have already been fined 11 times in less than six years over fan behaviour issues ranging from pro-IRA chants to fireworks, crowd disturbances and illicit banners. PSG have also been charged after their fans were accused of breaking seats at Celtic Park and will have their matter addressed at the same hearing as Celtic. Police said they made seven arrests at Celtic Park, including a 21-year-old man accused of an alleged pitch incursion and assault. Four men were expected to appear in court later yesterday. UEFA has also opened proceedings against Basel after fans set off fireworks at Old Trafford on Tuesday. The Swiss club lost 3-0 to Manchester United.

Marcelo extends Real Madrid contract

Real Madrid vice-captain Marcelo extended his 11-year stay with the Spanish giants by signing a new contract until 2022, the club announced yesterday. The Brazilian, 29, has won three Champions League and four La Liga titles in over 400 appearances since joining from Fluminense in 2006. "Real Madrid and Marcelo have agreed to extend the contract of the player, who will remain tied to the club until June 30, 2022," the club said. Marcelo will, though, be suspended for Madrid's next two La Liga games after his ban for being sent off for a kick at Jefferson Lerma in Saturday's 1-1 draw at home to Levante was also confirmed yesterday. The left-back will be absent for Sunday's trip to Real Sociedad and the visit of Real Betis on September 20. Real will seek to put a disappointing start to their La Liga campaign behind them when they begin their defence of the Champions League title later on Wednesday at home to Cypriot championsAPOEL Nicosia.

Bundesliga wants shorter transfer window

The Bundesliga looks set to follow the example of England's Premier League by voting to shorten the transfer window, with German Football League (DFL) chief Reinhard Rauball proposing changes. Germany's 36 professional clubs are set to hold a vote at their general assembly in December and Rauball wants the Bundesliga clubs to agree to close the transfer window before the season starts. Last week, the English Premier League clubs voted to shut the 2018 close-season window before the start of the 2018-19 campaign in a move that sparked approval across the European game. Now Rauball is hoping the German clubs will do the same. Currently, the season in Germany starts in mid-August and the transfer window closes on the last day of the month, which can unsettle squads with players coming and going with fixtures already underway. The Bundesliga was particularly affected in August when winger Ousmane Dembele refused to train with the Borussia Dortmund team before eventually being sold to Barcelona. Like their counterparts in the England, senior figures in German football want a Europe-wide, uniform date when transfer window will close.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Urawa Reds stun Kawasaki, reach Asian semi-finals

2007 champions will face China's Shanghai SIPG in the last four



Urawa Reds' Toshiyuki Takagi (right) vies for the ball with Kawasaki Frontale's Elsinho during the AFC Champions League quarter-final yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Saitama, Japan

Urawa Reds scored three goals in a 15-minute blitz to floor Japanese rivals Kawasaki Frontale 4-1 in a fiery encounter yesterday and reach the Asian Champions League semi-finals.

Slovenian Zlatan Ljubijankic, Brazilian Rafael Silva and Toshiyuki Takagi all scored late goals against 10-man Kawasaki as the home side overturned a two-goal deficit to win 5-4 on aggregate.

The Reds, who won Asia's premier

club competition in 2007, will face China's Shanghai SIPG in the last four after a see-saw struggle.

Brazilian Elsinho put Kawasaki in front after 19 minutes, flicking the ball home after a comic error from goalkeeper Shusaku Nishikawa to stretch their lead to three goals after winning the first leg 3-1.

But Shinzo Koroki pulled one back for Urawa in the 35th minute before the tie took a dramatic twist moments later when Frontale defender Shintaro Kurumaya was sent off for a high boot that caught Koroki in the face.

At times it appeared that both teams

were more interested in fisticuffs and rolling on the ground in mock agony than playing football, while several shots were more of a threat to low-flying aircraft than the goalkeepers.

But when substitute Ljubijankic headed Urawa's second of the night to make it 4-3 on aggregate, Kawasaki began to look frayed and a Rafael Silva bullet levelled the tie on 83 minutes.

As Kawasaki wilted in the humid conditions, Takagi's shin connected with an attempted left-foot volley two minutes later and the ball looped over goalkeeper Jung Sung-Ryong for a dramatic winner.

"To be honest, that goal wasn't 100 percent how I planned to hit it but it went in so I'll take it," said Takagi sheepishly. "We've come this far so we have to make sure we reach the final now."

Urawa, currently eighth in the J-League table, face Andre Villas-Boas's Shanghai side away on September 27 in the first leg of their semi-final. The return fixture will be played on October 18.

Japanese sides have struggled in the Asian Champions League since Urawa's victory in 2007 and Gamba Osaka's triumph a year later, and Shanghai SIPG will go into the semi-final as firm favourites.

BOTTOMLINE

Powerful Guangzhou 'dominate' AFC: Villas-Boas

Reuters
Hong Kong

Shanghai SIPG coach Andre Villas-Boas has said powerful Chinese rivals Guangzhou Evergrande are "dominating" the Asian Football Confederation and enjoyed the referees' favour during their Asian Champions League quarter-final.

Nine-man SIPG reached the ACL semi-finals in dramatic fashion on Tuesday, with a 5-4 penalty shootout win after home side Guangzhou had overturned a 4-0 first leg deficit to take the game into extra-time.

Despite seeing his side advance to the last four for the first time in the club's history, former Chelsea and Porto boss Villas-Boas rolled off a long list of grievances across both legs of the quarter-final against Luiz Felipe Scolari's side.

"In the last game Fu Huan had a very clean slide tackle which led to his suspension in this match," Villas-Boas told reporters after the match in Guangzhou.

"Yan Junling is suspended for the first leg of the semi-final because the referee gave him a yellow card.

"The referee chose the end of the Guangzhou fans to take the penalties. The referee gives two red cards to our players.

"Zhang Linpeng should be suspended from this game because he used his elbow in the first game and he's not suspended because the committee of ethics



and discipline at AFC did not judge an elbow as violent conduct.

"This is the greatest achievement for SIPG ever because it's against a club that is dominating the AFC." The AFC and Guangzhou did not

provide comment when contacted by Reuters.

DISGRACE

Villas-Boas went as far as to say the southern China side had engineered

FOCUS

Infantino accused of interference by ousted expert

AFP
London

A governance expert fired by FIFA yesterday accused the leadership of world football's governing body of interfering with his work, ignoring rules and removing him in order to stay in power.

Speaking to MPs on Britain's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Miguel Maduro gave a devastating indictment of FIFA president Gianni Infantino's commitment to reform and said only "external pressure" would force the organisation to change.

Appointed as chairman of FIFA's governance committee in May 2016, the Portuguese academic was replaced, without warning, 11 months later after falling out with Infantino over several "sensitive" decisions.

Foremost among those was Maduro's refusal to allow Russian Deputy Prime Minister Vitaly Mutko to stand for a seat on FIFA's council because it was a clear breach of the rules against governmental interference in football.

Maduro told the MPs when he raised objections to Mutko's candidacy, Infantino made his opposition "very clear".

According to Maduro, Infantino said blocking Mutko would have a negative impact on the 2018 World Cup in

Russia and he believed there was "no evidence" the former Russian sports minister had been involved in the state-sponsored doping programme revealed by a World Anti-Doping Agency investigation last year.

Maduro was blocking Mutko for the reason that having a deputy prime minister on the council undermined FIFA's actions against some associations for political interference.

Maduro described Infantino as a man who he believes started with the intention of tackling an "embedded culture" that is "extremely resistant to independent scrutiny" but who has chosen "to survive politically".

Infantino replaced the disgraced Sepp Blatter as FIFA boss in 2016, vowing to lead the scandal-tainted body into a new era.

Former Portuguese minister for regional development Maduro said the "systemic culture" comes "from the ground up" and there are associations and confederations that do not understand what good governance looks like or why it is even desirable.

"FIFA is a system of rules without the rule of law," he explained.

Maduro said he was more than happy to take advantage of parliamentary privilege, which provides protection from legal action in British courts, to speak freely about FIFA, as there was an obvious "public interest" defence.



FIFA president Gianni Infantino.

SPOTLIGHT

Shanghai Shenhua drop 'overweight' Tevez

AFP
Shanghai

Handsomely paid Carlos Tevez is overweight and will not play again for Shanghai Shenhua until he gets fit, the Chinese club's new coach has warned.

The 33-year-old Tevez is one of the best-paid players on the planet on reported weekly wages of about 730,000 euros (US\$870,000) but has scored just twice this season and missed half the games with injury.

The former Manchester United, Manchester City and Juventus star has hinted that he will quit China at the end of the season in November and has been branded "very homesick boy" by angry Shenhua fans and Chinese media.

Tevez recently returned to the country from a two-week break in his native Argentina to seek treatment for a leg-muscle injury.

He was jeered when he came on as a substitute last weekend in a 2-1 home defeat, and Wu Jingui, who took over after Gus Poyet quit as coach on Monday, is taking a hardline stance.

"I had a talk with him today about tactics, but I won't let him play for now, he isn't physically ready," Wu said in an

interview published yesterday with the Shanghai Morning Post.

"Both him and (Colombian Freddy) Guarin are overweight. I need to be responsible to the team and responsible to the players.

"When you are on the pitch, if you can't play at 100 percent, then it is completely meaningless."

It is the latest sorry chapter in Tevez's turbulent nine months in China.

He angered fans of struggling Shenhua earlier this year when he missed an important match due to injury and was instead spotted at Shanghai Disneyland.

The forward has been a controversial character throughout an itinerant career spanning stints in Argentina, Brazil, England and Italy, before he left Boca Juniors for a surprise money-spinning move to China in December last year.

His most notorious moment in his colourful career came at Manchester City when he refused to warm up as a substitute in the last moments of a Champions League match against Bayern Munich in September 2011.

Tevez fell out with then-City boss Roberto Mancini and flew back to Argentina to mull retirement, before eventually returning to England in February 2012.



MLB

Kluber leads Indians to record-tying 20th straight victory

'We haven't talked about it at all. I haven't heard anybody talking about how many games in a row we've won. We're aware of it just because the attention it gets'

AFP
Washington

Cleveland's Corey Kluber pitched nine shut-out innings Tuesday as the Indians tied the American League record with their 20th straight victory, a 2-0 triumph over the Detroit Tigers.

Before an enthusiastic home crowd in Cleveland, Francisco Lindor homered in the first inning to put the Indians in front.

When it was over, they had tied the American League mark for consecutive victories set by the 2002 Oakland Athletics.

The only other major league teams with winning streaks of 20 games or more are the 1916 New York Giants with a 26-game win streak, and the 1935 Chicago Cubs with a 21-game streak. The Indians have outscored their opponents 134-32 during their run. Their starting pitchers are 18-0 with a 1.71 ERA during the streak.

"We haven't talked about it at all," Kluber said of the winning streak. "I haven't heard anybody talking about how many games in a row we've won. We're aware of it just because the attention it gets, but it's not something we're focusing on. It's more coming to the field each day and preparing to win a game."

Kluber struck out eight and didn't walk a batter, giving up five hits in a display that underscores his status as a Cy Young Award candidate.

"He's one of the best in the game," Detroit manager Brad Ausmus said. "He throws four pitches. They all look the same coming out of his hand, but they all move differently."

The Indians notched their seventh shut-out of the streak. Their 19th shut-out of the season leads the major leagues.

Tigers starting pitcher Matthew Boyd threw 116 pitches in five innings, giving up one run on six hits with five strikeouts.

"We got some good pitching. We just couldn't muster any runs against Kluber," Ausmus said.

Leading 1-0 and having stranded runners in the second and third, the Indians pushed across a second run in the sixth.

Tigers relief pitcher Blaine Hardy started the sixth and gave up a double to Carlos Santana. Santana moved to third on a groundout by Jay Bruce.

Drew VerHagen replaced Hardy and struck out Yandy Diaz on three pitches for the second out. Francisco Mejia, pinch-hitting for Brandon Guyer, was inten-



Cleveland Indians starting pitcher Corey Kluber delivers in the second inning against the Detroit Tigers. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

Desperate Dodgers end skid, clinch playoff berth

The Los Angeles Dodgers snapped an 11-game skid yesterday, clinching a playoff berth with a 5-3 victory over the San Francisco Giants. Dodgers starting pitcher Clayton Kershaw allowed eight hits in six innings, but limited the Giants to two runs in a win that couldn't come soon enough for the Dodgers. They were feted less than a month ago as possibly one of the best teams in Major League history - their 91 wins with a month left in the regular season matching their entire total from 2016.

tionally walked.

With Yan Gomes at the plate, VerHagen's wild pitch bounced far enough from home plate to allow Santana to score from third, putting the Indians up 2-0.

But on August 26, a shut-out loss to the Milwaukee Brewers marked the start of a downward spiral of 16 defeats in 17 games. Their 11 defeats on the trot marked their worst losing streak in 25 years. Dodgers teams of 1961 and 1992 lost 10 in a row while the 1944 Brooklyn Dodgers lost 16 straight.

A four-run fourth inning for Los Angeles started with Chase Utley's home run into McCovey Cove. Kershaw's line drive to left center eluded Giants left fielder Austin Slater and the Dodgers hurler was credited with a dou-

'Fun game'

Lindor had led off the bottom of the first by belting a 2-2 pitch from Boyd over the left field wall.

Lindor's third homer in the past four games was his 30th of

the season. With two outs in the ninth inning, Kluber gave up a double to Alex Presley, bringing Miguel Cabrera to the plate.

In 57 career at-bats against Kluber, Cabrera has six home

runs, with 12 runs-batted-in.

"Miggy's the last guy you want to see hitting," Indians manager Terry Francona admitted. But Cabrera grounded out on Kluber's 113th pitch of the night to end the game. "That was a fun game to be a part of," Francona said.

RESULTS

LA Dodgers	5	San Francisco	3
Houston	1	LA Angels	0
Colorado	4	Arizona	2
St. Louis	13	Cincinnati	4
Minnesota	16	San Diego	0
Chicago Cubs	8	NY Mets	3
Seattle	10	Texas	3
Milwaukee	5	Pittsburgh	2
Cleveland	2	Detroit	0
Tampa Bay	2	NY Yankees	1
BOSTON	11	Oakland	1
TORONTO	3	Baltimore	2
Atlanta	8	Washington	0
Philadelphia	9	Miami	8
		(15 innings)	
Kansas City	4	White Sox	3

NBA

Lakers set to honour Bryant in December

AFP
Los Angeles

The Los Angeles Lakers will retire both jersey numbers worn by club legend Kobe Bryant before a December 18 game against NBA champions Golden State, the team said yesterday.

Bryant, an 18-time All-Star who won five NBA titles with the Lakers before retiring after the 2015-16 season, wore number eight in his first 10 seasons before switching to number 24 for another decade.

"As a kid growing up in Italy, I always dreamed of my jersey hanging in the Lakers rafters, but I certainly never imagined two of them," Bryant said in a statement released by the team.

"The Lakers have bestowed a huge honour on me and I'm grateful for the fans' enthusiasm around this game."

In his two-decade career - all spent with the Lakers - Bryant scored 33,643 points, the third-most in NBA history behind Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Karl Malone.

He'll become the 10th Lakers player to have his number retired, joining Wilt Chamberlain (13), Elgin Baylor (22), Gail

Goodrich (25), Magic Johnson (32), Abdul-Jabbar (33), Shaquille O'Neal (34), James Worthy (42), Jerry West (44) and Jamaal Wilkes (52).

"Kobe's jerseys are taking their rightful home next to the greatest Lakers of all time," Lakers chief executive and controlling owner Jeanie Buss said. "There was never any doubt this day would come, the only question was when. Once again, Lakers fans will celebrate our hero, and once again, our foes will envy the legendary Kobe Bryant."

"This honor is very well deserved," Lakers President of Basketball Operations Johnson said. "Kobe was one of the greatest Lakers and NBA players of all-time and he's definitely on my Mount Rushmore. I look forward to seeing BOTH of his jerseys be retired and celebrating this special day with Kobe and his family."

Bryant is the Lakers' all-time leader in regular season games played (1,346), points (33,643), three-pointers made (1,827), steals (1,944) and free throws made (8,378), while owning club playoff records for games played (220), points (5,640), three-pointers made (292) and free throws made (1,320).



Former NBA basketball player Kobe Bryant attends a basketball teaching activity in Haikou, China. (AFP)

All 30 MLB teams to open 2018 season

Major League Baseball will start 2018 with a bang, with all 30 teams in action next March 29.

It will mark the first time since 1968 that every club has opened play on the same day.

In addition, March 29 represents the earliest start to a major league season - apart from some scattered games held overseas.

It will be just the 12th time - and the first since 2011 - that the season will begin on a Thursday.

Opening Day features eight divisional matchups among the 15 games, in addition to an interleague contest between the Detroit Tigers and host Pittsburgh Pirates.

The New York Yankees open at American League East division rivals the Toronto Blue Jays for the first time since 2003 while the San Francisco Giants visit the Los Angeles Dodgers in a National League West clash.

The final day of the 2018 regular season features 12 divisional games on September 30, including the Yankees visiting the rival Boston Red Sox.

Interleague play between National League and American League franchises will pit teams from one league against those from the same division of the other league.

The Philadelphia Phillies will clash with the Tampa Bay Rays on April 13-15 in a rematch of the 2008 World Series, while the Cubs and Cleveland Indians will square off on April 24-25 in a rematch of the 2016 World Series.

The Minnesota Twins and Indians will travel to San Juan, Puerto Rico, for a two-game series at Hiram Bithorn Stadium on April 17-18. It will be the first regular-season play in Puerto Rico since the New York Mets took on the then-Florida Marlins in 2010.

Washington will host All-Star Week, culminating in the 89th Midsummer Classic on July 17.

NFL

McVay trying to treat it like it's just another game

By Gary Klein
Los Angeles Times

It's going to be "weird."

Los Angeles Rams coach Sean McVay acknowledged as much this week when asked if it would be difficult to separate his emotional connection to the Washington Redskins with scheming to defeat them on Sunday at the Coliseum.

McVay, at 31 the youngest coach in modern NFL history, was a member of the Redskins staff for seven seasons, the last three as offensive co-ordinator.

"So many people in that organisation have been instrumental in helping me get this position," McVay said. "But, once that game starts it's just like any other game and we're going to do the best that we can to compete to go win it."

McVay is undefeated as a head coach after the Rams routed the

Indianapolis Colts 46-9 on Sunday in the season opener.

Now he is preparing to coach against Jay Gruden, a mentor who elevated him from tight ends coach to offensive coordinator and charged him with developing quarterback Kirk Cousins.

"He's taught me a large portion of things that I know and things that we do here," McVay said.

McVay is not the only Rams coach with a Washington background.

Linebackers coach Joe Barry, cornerbacks coach Aubrey Pleasant and tight ends coach Shane Waldron were members of Gruden's Redskins staff. Offensive coordinator Matt LaFleur also coached with McVay in Washington under former coach Mike Shanahan.

Gruden was among those who reached out after the Rams' victory over the Colts, McVay said.



"I've got a great relationship with a lot those people in Washington and I'm always pulling for those guys, except for this com-

ing week," he said.

Before the season opener, McVay said that he did not sleep much in the days leading up to

games, regardless of the opponent. He does not anticipate spending extra time preparing for his former team, a 30-17 loser to the Philadelphia Eagles in its opener.

"I'll probably be cranky later on in the week like I am normally," he joked.

When the game is over, McVay is looking forward to leveraging his Washington relationships as the Rams prepare for matchups against shared opponents.

This season, the Rams and Redskins play the Eagles, the Dallas Cowboys, New York Giants, San Francisco 49ers, Arizona Cardinals, Seattle Seahawks, Minnesota Vikings and New Orleans Saints.

"We can kind of try to be able to help each other out as we move forward into the regular season, getting deeper into it," McVay said.

McVay helped build the Redskins' offense into one of the

NFL's most productive units in 2016. He called on that experience while implementing and calling plays for a Rams offense that showed promise in the opener.

The Redskins and new offensive coordinator Matt Cavanaugh could see a slightly different Rams defense than the one that dominated and produced 16 points against the Colts.

Lineman Aaron Donald ended his holdout on Saturday and is expected to practice Wednesday. McVay said Monday that "the goal" was for Donald to play.

"Just getting him back in here is the first step," McVay said.

Donald was listed among the projected starters on the unofficial depth chart. But it seems unlikely that the Rams would expose one of their most valued assets to an overly heavy workload on game day after one week of practice.

Donald, even in a limited ca-

capacity, would bolster a pass-rushing front that includes Robert Quinn, who appears to be physically sound.

Quinn moved from end to edge-rushing linebacker in defensive coordinator Wade Phillips' 3-4 scheme. He was held out of preseason games so that he would be ready for the opener, and the strategy appeared to pay off.

Quinn recorded a sack and another tackle for a loss in the same series against the Colts.

"When No. 94 is right, you feel him and he is an elite rusher and he certainly looked like that guy" against the Colts, McVay said.

Quinn said the entire Rams team has responded to McVay.

"He raised our accountability level, our standards," Quinn said after the game. "And I think guys are having fun."

"It's a game you know, so you better have some fun."



TENNIS/JAPAN OPEN

Serbia's Krunic rolls on, qualifier Fett stuns Mladenovic

'I didn't cope with the pressure and I just think emotionally I wasn't really there'



Jena Fett of Croatia returns a shot against top seed Kristina Mladenovic of France during their first round match of the Japan Open in Tokyo yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Tokyo

Serbia's Aleksandra Krunic powered on at the Japan Women's Open yesterday by eliminating seventh seed Alison Riske, a day after ushering local favourite Kimiko Date into retirement.

It was a day of upsets at the Tokyo hardcourt tournament, with top seed Kristina Mladenovic the biggest scalp as the Frenchwoman was bundled out 6-4, 6-3 by Croatian qualifier Jana Fett in the first round.

World number 67 Krunic, who whitewashed the 46-year-old Date yesterday, stormed to a 6-3, 6-4 win over American Riske in sweltering conditions to reach the quarter-finals.

Third seed Elise Mertens also booked her place in the last eight, the Belgian overpowering Poland's Magda Linette 6-1, 7-5.

But there was another sur-

prise later on Wednesday when Japan's Miyu Kato toppled fourth seed Kristyna Pliskova - twin sister of world number one Karolina - 7-5, 6-3 to set up a meeting with Krunic.

In first-round matches, Kuru-mi Nara upset sixth seed Naomi Osaka 6-3, 6-0 as the next generation of Japanese tennis players took centre stage after Date's tearful exit.

Osaka, who reached the third round of the US Open earlier this month after stunning defending champion Angelique Kerber, left her game in the locker room as she came out inexplicably flat.

"I felt really nervous," shrugged Osaka. "I didn't cope with the pressure and I just think emotionally I wasn't really there."

Australia's former US Open winner Samantha Stosur was bundled out by Spain's Sara Sorribes, who came from a set down to beat the fifth seed 3-6, 7-5, 6-1.

Second seed Zhang Shuai safely progressed to the last

16 by thrashing Dutchwoman Richel Hogenkamp 6-3, 6-3 as Tokyo organisers looked to clear a backlog of matches caused by rain yesterday.

Nadal has many more years at the top, says Moya

Rafa Nadal can compete at the top level for years to come if he managed to stay healthy, his coach Carlos Moya has said after the Spaniard won two grand slams titles this year.

Former world number one Moya joined Nadal's coaching team to work alongside his uncle Toni Nadal in December last year and has helped revitalise the 31-year-old Spaniard's career.

Plagued by injuries and a loss of form in the past two years, Nadal has risen to number one in the rankings and won his 10th French Open title and third U.S. Open this year. He lost to his great rival Roger Federer in the Australian Open final.

"If he can stay as healthy as he

is now, without injury, motivated, looking after himself the way he is, we will be talking about Rafa for years to come," Moya told the ATP Tour website (www.atpworldtour.com).

"He is a player who broke records as a teenager and who is now breaking them as a veteran as well. This is something we haven't see much in the history of tennis. When I joined the team I knew that there was much more to come for Rafa, that if he stayed injury free and continued training with the same motivation, desire and confidence, that the tennis would come."

Moya, who shares a close friendship with Nadal, said nothing about his compatriot would surprise him anymore.

"...He always gives the best of himself. We are talking about one of the greatest players in history and, as such, my faith in him is rock solid."

Nadal and 19-time major winner Federer sit first and second on

the all-time Grand Slam champions list, but it is the first time they have occupied the top two places in the rankings since 2011.

Nadal, 31, had retaken the world number one spot from Murray the week before winning his third US Open title, and now holds a substantial lead over reigning Australian Open and Wimbledon champion Federer.

Swiss legend Federer, 36, was out of sorts in New York and lost to Juan Martin Del Potro in the last eight. Murray missed the final major tournament of the season with a hip injury.

German youngster Alexander Zverev moved to a career-high ranking of fourth despite suffering a shock second-round loss to Borna Coric at Flushing Meadows.

South African Kevin Anderson, who was swept aside in straight sets by Nadal in Sunday's final, jumped 17 places to 15th, while surprise semi-finalist Pablo Carreno Busta broke into the top 10 for the first time.

FOCUS

Sharapova reflects on Serena rivalry in new autobiography

AFP
Los Angeles

Maria Sharapova muses on her long, lopsided rivalry with Serena Williams in a new autobiography released yesterday and how she believes a locker room moment fuelled the American's drive to dominate her.

The Russian-born Sharapova was 17 when she defeated Williams in the 2004 Wimbledon final. Rather than proving the start of a long, close-run rivalry, it was one of just two victories Sharapova can claim against the US great, who has beaten her 19 times.

In her new book, *Unstoppable: My Life So Far*, Sharapova says it was not only her victory, but the fact that she overheard Williams weeping afterwards in the locker room that ensured the American would always find a way to elevate her game in their future contests.

"Guttural sobs, the sort that make you heave for air, the sort that scares you," Sharapova writes of the moment, according to excerpts released by The New York Times.

"It went on and on. I got out as quickly as I could, but she knew I was there. People often wonder why I have had so much trouble beating Serena; she's owned me in the past ten years.

"I think Serena hated me for being the skinny kid who beat



her, against all odds, at Wimbledon," she said.

In the memoir published by Sarah Crichton Books, an imprint of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Sharapova details her tennis career from the time of her move to Florida at the age of six - and Williams caught her attention early on.

Sharapova recalls surreptitiously watching Serena and her sister Venus play during a visit to the Florida academy where she trained - unwilling even then to "put myself in the position of worshipping them, looking up, being a fan."

Tensions between Sharapova, a five-time Grand Slam champion who returned to competition in April after a 15-month doping ban, and 23-time Grand Slam champion Williams - who gave birth to a daughter this month - have sometimes spilled over into public spats.

Sharapova ponders the reasons, wondering if the antagonism between them has perhaps driven each to excellence.

"Maybe that's better than being friends," she writes, adding: "Someday, when all this is in our past, maybe we'll become friends. Or not. You never can tell."

RUGBY

England to play All Blacks in 2018 after four-year wait

AFP
London

England will face the All Blacks for the first time in four years in the standout fixture of next year's autumn Test series as they build towards the 2019 Rugby World Cup.

Eddie Jones's side will also face the two other southern hemisphere giants, Australia and South Africa, as well as Japan, giving a good gauge of their strength in the run-up to the four-yearly showpiece in Japan. Due to a quirk of the international fixture list, England have not played New Zealand since 2014 - a frustrating hiatus that led to aborted attempts to arrange a match this autumn.

In 2014 England lost four times to the All Blacks, including a three-Test series in New Zealand. They last beat their rivals in 2012. England, second in the international rankings behind the All Blacks, have won 19 of their 20 Tests under head coach Eddie Jones, facing

all major nations except Steve Hansen's All Blacks during that run.

"We will have to work hard and be smart in what we do to bridge the gap between us and the All Blacks," said Jones, who wants England to be the world's top team going into the World Cup.

"The 2018 series is incredibly important for England as we build towards the World Cup," he added.

"We want to win that series 4-0 and we will need to play extremely well to beat four very good teams over a four-week period.

"The series will give us a really good indicator of where we are as a squad a year out from the World Cup and gives us a real focus on what we have to do over the next 12 months to be ready for that series and win."

England will host South Africa at Twickenham Stadium on November 3 in the first match of the 2018 series. They play the All Blacks on November 10, Japan on November 17 and Australia on November 24.

SPOTLIGHT

Serena reveals baby to world in touching home movie

AFP
Washington

Two weeks after becoming a first-time mother, tennis legend Serena Williams revealed her baby daughter to the world Wednesday in an online montage that featured moments from early sonograms to just after the birth.

In the touching compilation posted on Williams' Instagram account, the 23-time Grand Slam singles champion also said that there had been "complications" in the delivery of Alexis Olympia Ohanian.

"It's been a long time, but we had a lot of complications, but look who we got 0 we got a baby



Serena Williams has revealed her daughter to the world on Instagram.

girl!" said Williams in one segment of the home movie as she left the hospital with fiance and

Reddit co-founder Alex Ohanian.

She said the couple had spent almost a week at the hospital after the September 1 delivery, but did not say what the complications had been. Media reports said the birth had been induced by doctors.

The clips show the pregnant tennis star - who turns 36 at the end of this month - showing off her belly bump, dancing and practicing her game, as well as shots of the expectant couple assembling their daughter's nursery.

The film appeared to be meant as much for her daughter's future viewing as for Williams' millions of ecstatic fans, with the pregnant tennis mom telling the camera as she filmed her bel-

ly, "You move at 10:15 or 10:30 every night."

Williams won the Australian Open while newly pregnant with her daughter, a fact reflected in a shot on the Instagram post that read "Born: September 1, 2017, Weight: 6LB 14 Oz, Grand Slam Titles: 1"

Williams has vowed to return to defend her title next January. "It's the most outrageous plan," she told *Vogue* last month.

"I just want to put that out there. That's, like, three months after I give birth. I'm not walking anything back, but I'm just saying it's pretty intense."

Williams had used Snapchat in April to confirm reports that she was pregnant.

DEVELOPMENT

Indo-Pacific league takes shape with Australian Rugby Union help

AFP
Sydney

Australian and Indo-Pacific rugby chiefs are working to collaborate on a new league initiated by mining magnate Andrew "Twiggy" Forrest that will allow Super Rugby stars to feature, it was announced yesterday.

Plans for the competition were flagged by the billionaire founder and chairman of Fortescue Metals this month after Western Force lost an appeal against their controversial axing from Super Rugby.

Forrest said the new league, due to start next year, would initially feature six teams, with the Perth-based Force one of them. The other five would come from either Singapore, Hong Kong, Samoa, Fiji, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai, Tonga or

Kuala Lumpur. In a breakthrough, Forrest revealed he was in negotiations with the Australian Rugby Union (ARU) to ensure players who compete in his league will also be eligible to play Super Rugby and represent the Wallabies.

This would involve the Indo-Pacific Rugby Championship selecting its schedule to avoid direct clashes with Super Rugby. The plan is to allow ARU contracted players to sign up to the Indo-Pacific league for four months each year, encouraging Australians playing in Europe, or those considering leaving, to instead join the new competition and still be eligible to play for Australia. Currently, only overseas-based Australians who have played a minimum 60 Tests can be selected for the Wallabies. In return, the IPRC would work with the ARU to grow grassroots rugby while attracting sponsorship

and broadcaster interest from the booming Asia-Pacific. It would also help to develop player, coach and referee skills in the region. "We envision the future of rugby union as a most popular global competition in the fastest-growing consumer market in the world, where over 60 percent of the world's people live in the same time zone," Forrest said.

"We are now consulting with sovereign governments, international broadcasters, media organisations and other global businesses, with great interest in the Indo-Pacific, as well as Australia's leading coaches and players, both here and overseas."

The West Australian newspaper said the teams would likely be made up of internationals, Pacific Islanders, expat Australian and New Zealanders and some local players in an attempt to keep all sides on a level playing field.

SPOTLIGHT

Aspire welcomes student-athletes for new academic year

'I'm delighted to welcome a new generation of student-athletes to the Academy, where we look forward to developing them into successful, responsible young men'

By Sports Reporter
Doha

This week Aspire Academy welcomed new and current student-athletes for the new academic year with a week-long series of events and activities.

Two hundred and eighty students, including 70 new faces, hit the ground running on Sunday ahead of another year of expected hard work and achievement in both academics and sports at the Academy's world class facilities.

The agenda for new students' first week included various entertainment and educational games to help them adapt to life at the Academy and enhance their social and behavioural skills. The programme started with a welcome assembly in the auditorium where all the Academy's teachers were also present. Afterwards, these students were split into groups led by senior students and began to familiarise themselves with the Academy premises timetables and facilities.

The new students got to participate in a number of educational activities and games in their classrooms, receiving life lessons amongst these: how to live a healthy life-style and how to support each other in such a high-achieving environment.

Parents of new athlete-students were also invited to stay overnight at the school's dormitory and join their sons on an entertainment programme that included swimming and wall-climbing sessions.

Badr Jassim al-Hay, Director of Education and Student Care at Aspire Academy, said to mark the start of the new academic year: "I'm delighted to welcome a new generation of student-athletes to the Academy, where we look forward to developing them into successful, responsible young men."

"The Academy is now an official Council of International Schools-accredited institution and we aim to maintain our



Aspire Academy's student-athletes on the first day of the new academic year.

world-class standards even as we continue to shape the future of our student-athletes and build leadership and educational skills. This year, we will be focusing on further enhancing the quality of the Academy's activities and I am confident that every student we have will feel the full benefit of our endeavours."

Al-Hay also pointed out that one of the goals of the Academy this year is to increase the number of students who take up residences when school is in session, which he described as a "crucial factor" in building and boosting their skills.

He went on to add that all the Academy's departments are working together to improve the educational process and embed positive behaviours in students.

He mentioned Mutaz Barshim, Aspire Academy graduate and Olympic silver medalist, as a role-model of self-discipline and commitment in this regard, explaining that Barshim boasts all the elements that a leader in sports ought to aspire to.

Commenting on the school's expectations for this academic year, Jassim al-Jaber, School Principal at Aspire Academy said: "Our objective is to enable our student-athletes to realise their full potential and achieve remarkable things in whatever they choose to pursue."

"We, as a school, achieve this by constantly working with students, their parents and teachers to improve the academic and sporting mix we offer each individual."

Al-Jaber went on to explain the school's development system, which he said is based on continuous consultation and feedback with student's stakeholders, including the students themselves, their parents, teachers and other members of staff.

This system helps to quickly and effectively identify and implement new ideas that promote positive behaviour, encourage learning, and overcome any obstacles. The Academy also uses some of the latest technologies available to improve

students' living and learning experience and help them become self-learners and knowledge seekers. It also keeps an open line of communication with parents through regular meetings and several applications, such as the Blackboard and Parent Corner programmes, which keep them abreast of students' results and performance.

In terms of its facilities, the Academy continuously upgrades its physical environment to ensure it remains at the forefront of sports education. Currently, a new extension is underway that will add a library, new classrooms and dormitories, and a sports performance lab.

Aspire Academy student-athletes are developed through comprehensive athlete portfolio management, whereby coaches, educators, support service, service providers and management personnel actively cooperate to achieve an integrated Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) programme based on specific and measurable per-

formance outcomes.

The progressive development, duty-of-care and creation of a fun and interactive national sports academies in the world. Working as part of the Aspire Zone Foundation - an international sport destination - Aspire Academy is at the heart of a sporting revolution currently taking place in Qatar and around the region.

The Academy is conceiving, promoting and implementing game-changing excellence in sports training and elite athlete development that is enabling an entire generation of talented, disciplined and committed individuals, both Qataris and internationals to pursue their sports dreams.

Together with the other members of the Aspire Zone Foundation (Aspire Logistics and ASPETAR Qatar Orthopaedic and Sports Medicine Hospital), the Aspire Academy is developing sports champions, promoting healthy lifestyles and galvanising the sports economy of today, and the future.

EUROBASKET

Russia beat Greece to enter semi-finals

DPA
Istanbul

Russia defeated Greece 74-69 to enter Eurobasket semi-finals yesterday.

Russia's star playmaker Shved struggled in the first half but later exploded for 13 points in the third quarter to turn the game around for the 2007 champions.

NBA centre Timofey Mozgov chipped in with 15 points, 10 rebounds and two blocks as Russia reached their first semi-finals since taking bronze in 2011.

Dmitry Khvostov and Vitaly Fridzon finished the game strong for Russia with six points in the final 44 seconds.

The two-time champions Greece made just 25 percent of their three-pointers while hitting a poor 50 percent from the

free throw line in losing at the final eight stage.

Nick Calathes collected 25 points, seven assists and five rebounds and Georgios Printezis added 19 points in the loss.

In tomorrow's semi-final, the Russians will take on the winner of the final quarter-final between Italy and Serbia.

Earlier Spain's defeated reigning champions Germany 84-72 to meet undefeated Slovenia in the semi-finals.

Marc Gasol scored career high four three-pointers in his 28 points with 10 rebounds, while his brother Pau Gasol scored 19 points as Spain reached the semi-finals for the 10th straight time.

Marc scored 18 of his points in the third quarter, including 12 points in a 15-3 Spanish run to close the period and give them control of the game, which had been tied at 50-50.

Volleyball league from Nov 20



Qatar Volleyball Association (QVA) senior league will begin in Doha on November 20. A new system has been introduced by the association to accord the rankings to the participating teams. Under the supervision of QVA board members Saeed Salem and Mubarak Eid, QVA's technical director Hussein Imam Ali conducted the draw yesterday. Police got the top billing. The draw for the Mini League was also held on the occasion. PICTURE: Jayaram

LPGA forced to cancel China tournament scheduled for October

The LPGA yesterday had to cancel a tournament in Shanghai less than one month before it was due to be played after failing to get local government approval for the event. The Alisports LPGA tournament, won last year by seven-times LPGA winner Kim Inkyung, had been scheduled for October 5-8.

It is the second time in three years the tournament, previously known as the Reignwood LPGA Classic, has been scrapped. "Unfortunately, we have just received word that the tournament was unsuccessful in obtaining approval from the local district government," LPGA commissioner Mike Whan said in a statement.

"The hardest part about this news is that we have a title sponsor, a tournament operator, a TV production group and a host venue all set to go.

"However, in China, sporting events of this nature cannot take place without approvals at multiple levels - and the local approval was denied. "This news is very disappointing, particularly in that it comes less than a month before the event was scheduled to take place."

Whan said the LPGA expected the event to return to the schedule in 2018. Alisports, a division of Alibaba Group, announced in October that it was partnering with the LPGA "to own an LPGA tournament hosted annually in Mainland China for the next 10 years."

FOCUS

China's Linpeng hails Qatar's stadium cooling technology

By Abilash Nalapat
Doha

China's star defender Zhang Linpeng believes the innovative stadium cooling technology developed by Qatar could be a game-changer for Asian football.

Linpeng played in China's 2-1 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifying victory against Qatar at Khalifa International Stadium last week. It was the first international match to be played at the redeveloped facility - a proposed 2022 FIFA World Cup venue.

Cooling technology was deployed during the match for the benefit of players and fans. The outside temperature was 38C but the pioneering cooling system maintained the playing area at 24C throughout the game.

Talking exclusively to www.sc.qa, the Guangzhou Evergrande right-back said Qatar's cooling technology could significantly boost Asian football.

"The cooling technology used in the game was very impressive," said Linpeng, who has won 60 caps for his country. "In most AFC countries, top-level foot-



ball matches are played during the warm months of the year, so the use of cooling technology will help AFC players to raise their standards on the pitch."

Developed by Qatar University professor Saud Abdul-Aziz Abdul-Ghani, the cooling technology at Khalifa International Stadium has received widespread praise since being unveiled at the Emir Cup final in May. The system could now be adopted by other Asian countries who play matches in warm conditions.

Many Asian leagues play in summer, including Japan and South Korea. The Chinese Super League kicks off in March, while leagues in the Gulf region gener-



Plastic nozzles are an integral part of Qatar's stadium cooling technology.

ally start in September. In addition, FIFA has a key international window in June - a challenging assignment for many Asian nations. Linpeng, who also played at Khalifa International Stadium during the 2011 AFC Asian Cup, went on to heap praise on his Qatar experience.

He added: "The training facilities in the stadium are very advanced and the pitch is of

good quality. The design of the redeveloped stadium is very nice and it was exciting to play an important World Cup qualifier. I look forward to coming back again when the stadium is filled to capacity."

Should China qualify for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, a 33-year-old Linpeng could well get the chance he craves in front of 40,000 fans.

QATAR GYMNASTS SHINE IN ARAB MEET



Qatar gymnasts and team officials pose in Doha on their return from Beirut after taking part in the Arab School Gymnastics Meet. Qatar won five medals in the meet.

FORMULA ONE

Mercedes confirm Valtteri Bottas for 2018 season

Reuters
Singapore

Formula One world champions Mercedes announced what they said was a 'no-brainer' of a deal yesterday by signing Finnish driver Valtteri Bottas for another season alongside Lewis Hamilton.

Bottas joined from Williams in January after Hamilton's previous teammate, Germany's 2016 world champion Nico Rosberg, decided to retire within days of winning the title last November.

The 28-year-old has won two races so far this season, in Austria and Russia, and is third in the standings with a 41 point gap to championship leader Hamilton.

The extension was widely expected after four-times world champion Sebastian Vettel signed a new long-term deal with Ferrari last month, removing a leading candidate for the job.

"We gave Valtteri a big challenge this year: joining the team at the 11th hour, stepping up to the forefront of F1 and pairing with the sport's best driver as his team mate," said team boss Toto Wolff in a statement.

"With that in mind, his results have been probably even more impressive... the balance of his performances and his upward trajectory made it a no-brainer for us to continue with him into 2018.

"For our team, the bonus factors are the respect and sportsmanship that have

grown between our two drivers. The chemistry and dynamic between Valtteri and Lewis work and are what we need to take the fight to our competitors."

Bottas joined on a one-year-deal and his new contract still leaves everything open for 2019, when the driver market is likely to go through major upheaval with several top names in the spotlight.

Both Red Bull drivers Max Verstappen and Daniel Ricciardo are tied to that team for 2018 but are hot properties while Ferrari are likely to be seeking a replacement for Kimi Raikkonen.

Hamilton's contract is also up for renewal and expires at the end of 2018, although he has said he expects to agree a

new deal.

Bottas at least gets a chance to cement his reputation and win more races.

"Together, we continue to grow stronger day by day, and by keeping up our hard work I believe the sky is the limit," said the Finn, thanking Mercedes for their 'leap of faith' in him.

"Since joining the team in January, I've enjoyed every day working with them... as a driver, I've been able to learn and grow massively, and we have already enjoyed some really good moments this season that I will never forget.

"Partnering Lewis has also been really good, and I'm enjoying the respect we have and the will to push this team forward together."



Valtteri Bottas

SPOTLIGHT

Silverstone and Donington bid for British MotoGP slot

Reuters
London

Silverstone's future as a venue for MotoGP, as well as Formula One, looks uncertain after a draft calendar published yesterday had no circuit listed for next year's British motorcycle grand prix.

A slot for the 12th of 19 races, with the only novelty being a grand prix in Thailand on Oct. 7, was included on Aug. 26 but with asterisks to indicate that the circuit was yet to be decided.

Silverstone has hosted MotoGP since 2010, most recently as part of an agreement with the unbuilt Circuit of Wales that had secured a five-year deal with series promoters Dorna from 2015-19.

A slot for the 12th of 19 races, with the only novelty being a grand prix in Thailand on Oct. 7, was included on Aug. 26 but with asterisks to indicate that the circuit was yet to be decided

That contract has ended after the 433m pound (\$574m) project failed to get off the ground, with the Welsh government ruling out under-writing half of the costs.

The hosting rights are again up for tender, with Donington Park back in contention after being taken over in January by ex-Formula One racer Jonathan Palmer.

"We plan a great new era for

Donington, with some exciting new events and much enhanced quality of experience," he said at the time.

Donington hosted the British Motorcycle Grand Prix for 23 years before losing it to Silverstone when the East Midlands track fell into disrepair following a failed bid to host Formula One.

Silverstone, which has become a popular track with MotoGP riders, this year activated a break clause in its Formula One contract that cast uncertainty over the future of that race after 2019.

Stuart Pringle, the circuit's managing director, told Reuters yesterday that the MotoGP contract came down to Donington or Silverstone.

He said that, while ultimately the decision may come down to money, Silverstone had shown Dorna it could stage a secure event with grandstand seating for 75,000 spectators.

Pringle expected a decision within weeks but said he was also 'very relaxed' about the possibility of losing the MotoGP race.

"These events have to make economic sense," he said. "It's not business critical whereas haemorrhaging money on promoters' fees does become critical."

John Grant, the chairman of the British Racing Drivers' Club that owns Silverstone, said in July that the circuit sustained losses of 4.8m pounds on the Formula One race in 2016 due mainly to annual increases in hosting fees.

2024 AND 2028 OLYMPICS

Paris, Los Angeles confirmed as hosts

'You can't imagine what this means to us, incredible, so strong'



Paris 2024 bid delegation members French National Olympic Committee president Denis Massegria (L) and Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo (R) celebrate during the 131st International Olympic Committee (IOC) session in Lima yesterday.

AFP
Lima

The International Olympic Committee named Paris and Los Angeles as hosts for the 2024 and 2028 Olympics yesterday, crowning two cities at the same time in a historic first for the embattled sports body.

Loud applause rang out at the Lima Convention Centre shortly after the IOC membership voted to approve a deal hashed out in July which arranged for Paris to be given 2024 and Los Angeles 2028.

Paris and Los Angeles bid leaders joined International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach on stage as the award was confirmed, embracing after an outcome hailed as a "win-win-win" by the IOC.

Both Paris and Los Angeles made final presentations to IOC delegates before the formality of the rubber-stamp vote was taken.

"You can't imagine what this means to

us, incredible, so strong," Paris 2024 co-chairman Tony Estanguet told delegates shortly before the vote.

It marked the final act of a campaign that had been stripped of the usual intrigue ever since Paris and Los Angeles agreed to carve up 2024 and 2028 in July following encouragement from the IOC.

Paris 2024 officials hugged and cheered following the vote, basking in victory after three previous failed bids to land the 1992, 2008 and 2012 Olympics.

The 2024 Games will mark the third time Paris has staged the Olympics, coming exactly 100 years after they last hosted the Games.

Los Angeles 2028 officials also celebrated the return of the Olympics to US soil.

The 2028 Olympics will be the first held in the United States since the chaotic 1996 Games in Atlanta.

It will also mark the third time that Los Angeles has hosted the Olympics following successful editions in 1932 and 1984.

"Los Angeles reflects the face of America's future and the heart of American values of inclusiveness, generosity and

unity," Los Angeles mayor Eric Garcetti said during his final pitch to IOC members.

Paris and Los Angeles emerged from the initial bidding race for the 2024 Games after a number of cities withdrew citing waning public support and concerns over budget.

Hamburg, Rome, Budapest and Boston all fell by the wayside during the competition, reflecting the political difficulties in persuading voters that staging the Olympics is worth the multi-billion-dollar price tag.

IOC chief Bach first signalled publicly that the double-award of an Olympics could be on the agenda in December last year, lamenting that the bidding process produced "too many losers".

As the tussle for 2024 unfolded, and as the field thinned to leave just Los Angeles and Paris, the IOC's determination to secure two high-quality bids for the next two summer games became apparent.

In July, the IOC announced it would award the staging rights for the 2024 and 2028 Olympics at the same meeting in Lima, laying the way for a swift agree-

ment between the two over the running order. The drama-free conclusion to the race also eliminates the risk of the vote being tainted by the sort of scandal that has embroiled the ballot for the 2016 Olympics.

The IOC was left tackling a fresh wave of graft allegations last week when investigators in Brazil swooped on the country's Olympics chief Carlos Nuzman.

Nuzman stands accused of plotting to bribe IOC members into awarding Rio de Janeiro the 2016 Games at a 2009 vote in Copenhagen.

The allegations swirling around Rio's bid revived memories of the Salt Lake City bribery scandal, which led to 20 IOC members being either kicked out of the Olympics' ruling body or pleading guilty to accepting bribes for votes.

French investigators meanwhile have already announced they are investigating the 2013 vote in Buenos Aires which awarded the 2020 Olympics to Tokyo, following reports of secret payments into a Singapore-based bank account linked to the son of disgraced former world athletics chief Lamine Diack.

CRICKET

WI face tough World Cup challenge after washout in Belfast

AFP
Belfast

West Indies will need to smash hosts England in the upcoming one-day international series to avoid the ignominy of being forced to qualify for the World Cup after a washout against Ireland yesterday.

The game at Stormont was scrapped without a ball being bowled after fresh rain followed an overnight soaking for the pitch, leaving the umpires with no choice.

It means the 1975 and 1979 World Cup winners will have to beat England 5-0 or 4-0 with either a tie or a no-result in order to qualify ahead of eighth-placed Sri Lanka, who are eight points ahead in the rankings.

Only the top seven ODI sides, apart from hosts England, currently ranked fourth, as of September 30 will qualify directly for the 50-over showpiece event in 2019.

Teams that do not gain direct entry will get another shot through a qualifying tournament.

West Indies captain Jason Holder said qualifying automatically would be a tough task but he is looking forward to the series, which starts in Manchester next week.

"England are a quality cricket side and they are playing at home," said the skipper.

"We're at the stage where we are looking to turn a corner and qualify for the World Cup, whether we have to go through the qualifiers or qualify auto-

matically. We're excited for the series and hopefully we can play some good cricket.

"It won't be an embarrassment to play in the qualifiers. We are where we are and if we do have to play in them, we will take it one step at a time."

The West Indies, who lost the recent Test series against England 2-1, have been boosted by the return of Chris Gayle while Marlon Samuels will join up with the squad after a family bereavement.

"We are still a work in progress and hopefully more players are coming back," said Holder.

"Meantime, we have a young group of players challenging for places and hopefully they can come in and make their presence felt and feel more comfortable in the international arena."

Holder was disappointed at missing out on playing on Wednesday but could not disagree with the umpires' decision.

"Very disappointed. It was set to be a good occasion for Irish cricket and it's great to be here, albeit it's very, very cold," he said.

"It's just unfortunate the weather intervened but it was very wet out there and the last shower settled it."

The abandonment means Ireland are still waiting to play their first match against a Test-playing side since being granted full member status by the International Cricket Council in June.

West Indies fly to England today ahead of a one-off Twenty20 international at Chester-le-Street on Saturday. The ODI series starts at Old Trafford on September 19.

Ashes consistency key for England – Vaughan

AFP, London: Joe Root's greatest challenge on his first Ashes tour as captain will be to improve consistency and England must hit the ground running in Australia, former skipper Michael Vaughan told AFP.

England, fresh from home series wins against South African and the West Indies, head to Australia in November for a five-match series, desperate to exact revenge for the 5-0 drubbing they suffered in 2013-14.

Despite their successful summer, Root's men have had some wobbly moments, being soundly beaten in the second matches of both series by the touring teams. Vaughan, who is happier with the state of the England team now than after their humiliating 340-run loss against South Africa, said it was crucial that the tourists avoid a hammering in the first Test at Brisbane, where they have a poor record.

"The way the team has played for the past few years it they have been inconsistent and he (Root) will want to bring consistency," Vaughan told AFP on the sidelines of the Betting On Sports conference in London.

"I don't mean lose a game, that happens, but the problem is when they have lost they have been hammered, bowled out in a session or a day. Against the West Indies in the second Test they fought their way back into the game after being outplayed in the first two days and only just lost.

"Lose the first day against Australia and you are gone," added the 42-year-old. Vaughan, who said there would be two or three players on each side who would have question marks over them ahead of the first Test, believes several will be determined to put matters right after England were hammered under

Alastair Cook on their last tour Down Under.

England regained the Ashes at home in 2015 so travel to Australia as holders. "The last memory for these players or some of them of touring Australia is the 5-0 thrashing," said Vaughan, who captained England 51 times. "There was turmoil, the (Kevin) Pietersen fallout, (Graeme) Swann retiring abruptly and management issues.

"They will try and put it right this winter. It won't be easy but if they can get something out of Brisbane then

there is hope.

"Lose and it will be difficult, but above all don't get blown away so at least morale is all right coming to Adelaide." Vaughan says it is crucial Root and the selectors are ruthless in the selection of the teams in the pre-Test warm-up matches.

"You have to win these so you arrive in Brisbane with strong morale," he said. "Don't feel as if you have to play 13-a-side in these games, where everyone gets a piece of the action. Be ruthless in your selection, get your first 11 out and into form going into the first Test."

The former skipper said he is "excited" about the start Root has made in his role as England skipper but that it is too early to judge him.

"I've said before that Joe as captain has been given a great pass, with the players he has," said Vaughan.

"His declaration at Headingley (against the West Indies, setting them a huge target with just over a day's play remaining), that is the way I expect him to play cricket.

"Even though it didn't work, if they had caught their catches it would have done."