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FOOTBALL

Pele praises Neymar's move to Paris St. Germain

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FOOTBALL/SHEIKH JASSIM CUP: 7PM

Belmadi to 'start from zero' as new season kicks off

Al Duhail to take on Al Sadd in battle for Sheikh Jassim Cup today



Al Duhail coach Djamel Belmadi (L) and his Al Sadd counterpart Jesualdo Ferreira speaking to journalists ahead of the Sheikh Jassim Cup match today. Belmadi, who won the title last season with Lekhwiya, will be beginning a new chapter in his coaching career with Al Duhail after the merger of Lekhwiya and El Jaish.

By Anil John
Doha

Djamel Belmadi says he will "start from zero" when Al Duhail Sports Club take on Al Sadd today in the Sheikh Jassim Cup, which serves as the curtain raiser to Qatar's eight-month long domestic football season.

Despite being the most successful coach in Qatar in recent times - he has guided Lekhwiya to three Qatar Stars League titles among other honours - Belmadi believes in blotting out the past and focusing on the present with an eye on the future.

"I always start from zero, a new page, a white piece of paper. That never changes," the Algerian told journalists at a press conference at the Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium (Lekhwiya) on Thursday.

Belmadi's team will be making history the very moment they will be stepping on to the field at 7pm today as it would be Al Duhail's first competitive match since the merger of Lekhwiya and El Jaish after the 2016-17 season ended in May.

Belmadi initially appeared a little upset with the decision to merge the teams but has since made peace with himself.

"It's difficult to talk about it but it's my responsibility to explain it to the players. We want to write a new chapter, a new history," he said.

The four-month break means the players are rusty, but Belmadi is keen to get off the blocks.

"The first official game, and that too against Al Sadd. It's always a challenge to take on Al Sadd but there is no better way to prepare for the long season ahead."



Al Duhail's new player Abdulrahman Abker.

Under Belmadi, Lekhwiya won the Sheikh Jassim Cup last year with a convincing 4-1 win over Al Sadd and later went on to claim the Qatar Stars League title, they had surrendered to Al Rayyan the previous season.

"We have prepared well and are looking forward for a good result, keeping the trophy and fighting for all other titles," Belmadi said.

"Last year we fought with Al Sadd till the last and we hope to do better this time."

Al Duhail have managed to retain their top players with whom they won the Qatar Stars League prior to the merger.

South Korean Nam Tae-hee, who won the QFA Player of the Year award with his stellar performances and top-scoring

Yousef El Arabi and Karim Boudiaf still form their core while several players from El Jaish including goalkeepers Saoud al-Khater and Ahmed Soufiane besides defender Abdulrahman Abker, who also attended Thursday's press conference.

"Our first appearance will be against a stubborn adversary, Al Sadd club, one of the biggest clubs in Qatar," said Abker.

"We will certainly face the match with the ambition and desire to win our first title this season and make an ideal start to the year. It will also motivate us motivation to do well in the league."

He praised the coaching staff for keeping the players fit during the off season.

"Thank God, the coaching staff have worked hard with the players and helped them on reach their highest levels of physical fitness."

Al Sadd coach Jesualdo Ferreira, however, was in a slightly downbeat mood, worrying about the combination he would field for the match today.

He seemed perturbed by the fact that Al Sadd couldn't manage to get the team together at any time during the off season.

"It's only yesterday that we managed to assemble everyone in one place and some of them are injured," the Portuguese national said through an interpreter.

"It's not easy for the team because many of our players were on national duty for either Qatar or Iran in the World Cup qualifiers. We don't know the level of the team."

Al Sadd finished second in the league but did well to win both the Qatar Cup and Emir Cup to round off the last season in style.

TENNIS

First-time finalists Stephens, Keys to vie for US Open title



This combination of two photos taken on September 7, 2017 show US tennis players Madison Keys (L) and Sloane Stephens celebrating after winning their semi-finals matches.

DPA
New York

Sloane Stephens and Madison Keys set up a battle of first-time grand slam finalists at the US Open on Thursday as American women re-emerged into the tennis spotlight. Both finalists will be in uncharted territory for tonight's title shootout after four Americans reached the semi-finals for the first time since 2002.

Stephens won a roller-coaster struggle with ninth seed Venus Williams, advancing 6-1, 0-6, 7-5; Keys dominated Coco Vandeweghe 6-1, 6-2, with the match timed at 66 minutes including a 7-minute medical timeout for the winner late in the second set to have her right thigh taped. Stephens holds a 1-0 lead over Keys in their series.

Both women are looking for a breakthrough victory as part of the new generation of emerging talent for the host nation.

Stephens, 24, was shocked by her own achievement against Williams, one of her childhood tennis idols, still playing strong at age 37.

"I'm honoured to be playing at the same time as her," said Stephens, who began a comeback from injury mid-season when her ranking stood outside the top 900.

"I went on court believing that I could win the match. Things didn't go my way in the second set, but I didn't get too down on myself."

"I knew that at some point I'd have an opportunity. It was whether I decided to step up and take it or not was going to be kind of like the deciding factor."

"I think I did that extremely well at the end of the third set."

Stephens swept the opening set as Williams committed 19 errors, but the veteran reversed the momentum in the second set, winning to love. The final set was competitive, with five breaks of serve.

But it was Stephens who got the final word, with her break for 6-5 as Williams returned out. The challeng-

er secured victory a game later on a first match point after Williams sent a backhand into the net.

"In the end, she ended up winning more points than I did. That's what it adds up to," 7-time grand slam champion Williams said.

"I continued to be aggressive and continued to play the kind of match that it takes to win. I just made too many errors there at the end."

Stephens was thrilled with her showing: "I'm super happy to be in a grand slam final. To do it here at my home slam, is obviously more special. I think this is what every player dreams about."

"Fortunately but unfortunately, I had to play Venus, but having four Americans in the semi-finals, I think that says a lot about American tennis and where we are right now."

"I don't think I would have had it any other way. I'm just super proud and honoured to be a part of what these four girls were, what we did tonight."

Williams entered the match with 49 career titles - including the US Open in 2000 and 2001 - compared to just three for her younger opponent. Stephens was playing in her second grand slam semi-final after an appearance at the Australian Open four years ago.

The American, who only started running and hitting again in May after an 11-month foot injury lay-off, denied Williams the chance to reach a third grand slam final this season. Stephens will now return to the top 35, after her huge leap of more than 900 spots in record time.

Keys took her match with Vandeweghe by the throat and never let go. The 15th seed barely paused for breath in her quick-fire victory, winning her 12th match from her last 13 to stand 17-8 on the season.

"It still doesn't feel real, I'm a little shaken," the winner said. "But I played pretty well tonight. I knew I had to rise to the occasion, I'm really happy to be in the final, I feel great and don't think I could feel any better. I'm so excited to be in the final - it cannot get any better than this!"

Venus not going anywhere despite US Open defeat

New York: Venus Williams rejected the suggestion she might be content to serve as an inspiration to younger players after her 6-1 0-6 7-5 defeat to fellow American Sloane Stephens in the semi-finals of the US Open on Thursday. The 37-year-old Williams was not amused when asked at her hastily-convened media conference if there was any consolation the younger generation of American players, three of whom made the semi-finals with her, have cited her as an inspiration.

"To be honest, I'm definitely here to win my matches, not for consolation," she said. "That definitely sums it up." Asked about her plans for the immediate future, she was again succinct. "I will continue to play tennis. It's nothing complicated." Williams was undone by errors brought about by the defensive-minded Stephens, who managed to track down balls and stretched out rallies at Arthur Ashe Stadium. "It was definitely well competed," she said. "In the end, she ended up winning more points than I did. That's what it adds up to."

SPOTLIGHT

Nadal counting on Serena return after giving birth



'Someone like that always has the possibility of getting back to the top. She's shown that tennis is a huge part of her life and it'd be an incredible example if she can do it'

DPA
New York

Rafael Nadal has full confidence that Serena Williams can be true to her vow to return to tennis in January, just five months after the birth of her daughter.

The Spaniard told *People* magazine in the US Open run-up that Williams also had a good shot at returning to the number one ranking, which she held through her last event, the Australian Open last January, which she won.

"I think she can. If she keeps the motivation she's had all these years, Serena has more than demonstrated that she's capable of anything," Nadal said.

"Someone like that always has the possibility of getting back to the top. She's shown that tennis is a huge part of her life and it'd be an incredible example if she can do it."

Nadal was among the first to congratulate Williams after the September 1 birth: "Congrats Serena!!! So much joy for you!!! Nadal himself has had something to celebrate as he returns to the top ATP ranking after a multi-year absence. "It's a nice feeling. Getting back to number one after so many years and everything that's happened means a lot," he said.

"I'm happy about it, the year has been really positive and I hope to finish it the best way possible."

Meanwhile, Bernard Tomic wasted no time in throwing a huge party back home in Australia after his first-round exit

from the US Open, with the player dropping an estimated 40,000 dollars on the nightclub festivities.

Local media reported the Melbourne blow-out, with the 24-year-old joining his girlfriend and friends at the exclusive Bond nightclub in a private room. On offer was a dinner, vintage champagne, caviar, signature cocktails plus private security and a personalised sound and light show on arrival at the club.

Tomic has boasted in the past about his tennis riches, saying that the cost of the blast was a drop in his financial bucket. "It is having fun and celebrating and maybe I just do it in different ways to other people," he told local media.

"I was not in Australia for 10 months and it is a chance to catch up with friends and (have) an enjoyable night. It (the cost) might seem ridiculous to other people, but then again it is peanuts to me.

"When you have close to 11mn, I think it only equals 0.36 per cent of what I am worth, so it is not a lot of money, but it might seem a lot to other people." While his hosting skills may be on point, number 146 Tomic's tennis has taken a dive this season, with the Aussie skipping all events between Wimbledon and the US Open – both venues where he failed to win a match.

"This year has been my worst year on tour," he said. "It's not been that great, but I've had good years on tour since I was 17 and I am only 24 so I have got the next eight to 10 years ahead of me.

"I need to finish in the top 100, that is my goal and maybe (I have to) push in the next six months to get back to the top 30."



Rafael Nadal is enthusiastic about Serena Williams making a successful comeback after childbirth. At right, Bernard Tomic who blew \$40,000 in a party after his US Open exit.

FOCUS

Five facts about US Open women's final



Sloane Stephens (L) and Madison Keys of the United States.

Five facts about today's US Open women's final between Americans Sloane Stephens and Madison Keys at Arthur Ashe Stadium:

All-American finals

First-time Grand Slam finalists Stephens and Keys are the first Americans to meet in a US Open final since Serena Williams defeated older sister Venus Williams in the 2002 final. But it has only been since January's Australian Open that two Americans have met in a Slam final, with a pregnant Serena carrying the day again over Venus Williams.

First-time Slam winners

No matter which American captures the title on Saturday, it will be the fifth time in the past nine Grand Slam events that a first-time Slam champion is crowned. The run of new major winners began on the New York hardcourts and includes Italy's Flavia Pennetta at the 2015 US Open, Germany's Angelique Kerber at the 2016 Australian Open, Spain's Garbine Muguruza at the 2016 French Open and Latvia's Jelena Ostapenko at this year's French Open. The last American to become a first-time Slam winner was Jennifer Capriati at the 2001 Australian Open.

Four aces every three years

Every three years starting in 2005, there have been four different winners of the women's titles in the year's four Grand Slams and this year will keep that run going after Serena Williams won the Australian Open, Jelena Ostapenko won the French Open and Garbine Muguruza won Wimbledon. The 2005 lineup was Serena in Australia, Venus at Wimbledon, Justine Henin at Roland Garros and Kim Clijsters at the US Open.

In 2008 it was Maria Sharapova at Melbourne, Ana Ivanovic in Paris, Venus in London and Serena in New York. In 2011 it was Clijsters in Australia, China's Li Na at the French Open, Petra Kvitova at Wimbledon and Aussie Samantha Stosur at the US Open. In 2014 it was Li in Australia, Sharapova in Paris, Kvitova at Wimbledon and Serena in New York.

How low can you go and win?

At 83rd in the world rankings, Sloane Stephens would be the fourth-lowest-ranked Grand Slam champion since computer rankings began in 1975. Evonne Goolagong was unranked when she won the 1977 Australian Open after giving birth to her first daughter seven months earlier. Kim Clijsters was unranked after coming out of retirement when she won the 2009 US Open. And Chris O'Neil was ranked 111th when she won the 1978 Australian Open. Stephens would also become just the fifth unseeded player to win a Grand Slam title in the Open Era (since 1967) after O'Neil, Clijsters, Serena Williams at the 2007 Australian Open and Jelena Ostapenko in June at the French Open.

Slam-tastic injury comebacks

Each of this year's US Open finalists was recovering from a serious injury just three months ago. Keys underwent her second left wrist surgery in 10 months after a second-round exit at the French Open while Stephens spent 11 months recovering from a left foot injury before making her return at Wimbledon. Both showed signs of what was coming in US Open hardcourt tune-ups, however, with Keys winning at Stanford and Stephens reaching the Toronto and Cincinnati semi-finals.

REACTION

In a Slam final? I'd have passed out, says Stephens

AFF
New York

US Open finalist Sloane Stephens said she would have "passed out" if she had been told a month ago when her world ranking was 957 that she would be in a first Grand Slam title match so soon.

The 24-year-old American stunned veteran compatriot and two-time champion Venus Williams 6-1, 0-6, 7-5 in a thrilling semi-final on Thursday.

Stephens, now ranked at 83, will play either CoCo Vandeweghe or Madison Keys, both also of the United States, in Saturday's final.

"If someone had told me when I started my comeback that I would make two semi-finals and a Grand Slam final I would have passed out," said Stephens.

The American player missed 11 months of the season after undergoing foot surgery and only returned to the tour at Wimbledon.

Since then, she has racked up 14 wins in 16 matches, reaching the semi-finals in Toronto and Cincinnati before making a second career semi-final at the majors in New York.

"I have no words to describe

The 24-year-old American stunned veteran compatriot and two-time champion Venus Williams 6-1, 0-6, 7-5 in a thrilling semi-final on Thursday

my feelings and what it took to get here," she added.

"I also have no idea how I have done it...just hard work. I hung tough, gritted it out. I worked my tail off."

In a thrilling final set, Stephens was 2-0 ahead before 37-year-old Williams clawed her way back to 5-4.

In a dramatic eight-minute 11th game, Stephens pounced before claiming victory in the 12th with Williams finally undone by 51 unforced errors.

"We played some incredible points in the third set," said Stephens, who saluted Williams – celebrating her 20th anniversary at the US Open.

"I am honoured to play at the same time as one of the greats of the game. She is the most graceful, the most elegant player."

Williams, who made the Australian Open and Wimbledon finals this year, admitted Stephens had edged the crucial points.

"It was definitely well competed. She ended up winning more points than I did. That's what it adds up to," she said.

DOUBLES WINNERS



Dutchman Jean-Julien Rojer and Romania's Horia Tecau celebrate winning the men's doubles title after beating Spaniards Feliciano Lopez and Marc Lopez 6-4, 6-3. The number 12 seeds hit 41 winners between them and made just seven unforced errors as they romped to the title in just under an hour and a half.

COMMENT

Lewandowski criticises Bayern's spending policy

'I thank everyone who makes suggestions to me, but I don't need them'

AFP
Berlin

Top striker Robert Lewandowski has said Bayern Munich must spend more on star players or risk being left trailing their rivals.

"Bayern have to think something up and be more creative if the club wants to attract a world-class player to Munich," Lewandowski told magazine Der Spiegel in a critical interview.

"If you want to play on the front foot, you need the quality players."

Bayern set a new Bundesliga record in June by signing France midfielder Corentin Tolisso from Lyon for 41.5 million euros (\$49.9mn).

However, the figure was dwarfed by the 222 million euros Paris Saint-Germain, who Bayern face in their Champions League group, paid Barcelona for Neymar.

In July, Bayern president Uli Hoeness described the inflated fees as "madness. That's something that we will refuse totally at Bayern".

However, Lewandowski says they need to spend big if they are realistic about winning the Champions League for the first time since 2013.

"To date, Bayern has never paid more than around 40 million euros for a player," added the Poland striker.

"In international football, that has long since been a figure which is only average, rather than at the top."

Lewandowski says the gap between what Bayern spend and what PSG paid for Neymar and France striker Kylian Mbappe, who they signed in a deal which could reach 180 million euros, is "really huge".

"Paris has bought up a world-class squad, whether or not that will become a world-class team, we will have to wait and see," said Lewandowski.

"Bayern Munich, as a team, has experienced a lot together. Football is pure capitalism, everyone wants to make money in this sector."

Lewandowski says European



Bayern Munich striker Robert Lewandowski.

football's governing body UEFA should investigate the huge transfers in a thinly-veiled attack on PSG.

"UEFA must look into the huge transfers this summer and work alongside FIFA to close any holes in the regulations," added Lewandowski.

Meanwhile, head coach Carlo Ancelotti says rotation will sort out any issues in his star-studded squad as Bayern start a heavy fixture list.

The defending champions are at Hoffenheim today in the first of six matches this month.

Bayern host Anderlecht on Tuesday in their opening Champions League match, then Mainz, Schalke, Wolfsburg and travel to face PSG in rapid succession.

Germany star Thomas Mueller was left out of the starting line-up for the 2-0 win at Werder Bremen a fortnight ago while new signing James Rodriguez is

also in contention for the attacking midfield role after injury.

Mueller moaned to the German media after being benched at Bremen, but Ancelotti says no player has a guaranteed place.

"He (Mueller) is fit, he could play tomorrow, but we have a lot of good and important players and I can't go through the season with 11 players," said Ancelotti.

"I can give no guarantees. "We have to rotate, there will

always be someone on the bench or even in the stands."

Mueller's disgruntlement on Bayern's bench did not pass by the Germany set-up with national team manager Oliver Bierhoff wishing "that someone in the club would say, 'he must play'".

"I thank everyone who makes suggestions to me, but I don't need them. I know what I have to do and I don't worry about it," replied Ancelotti.

SPOTLIGHT

Jose Mourinho disappointed over Pereira loan move

AFP
Manchester, United Kingdom

Jose Mourinho has questioned young midfielder Andreas Pereira's decision to leave Old Trafford on loan to Valencia rather than stay and fight for a place in Manchester United's first-team squad. The 21-year-old Brazilian defied Mourinho's express advice when he sought, and accepted, a temporary move to the La Liga side, having spent all of last season on loan at Granada.

Pereira, signed as a youth player from PSV Eindhoven five years ago, has yet to start a league game for United but is so highly regarded that he was handed a new, long-term deal by Mourinho this summer, just as he decided to move elsewhere.

"His was a personal decision that I don't agree with, a decision I don't think honestly is the best decision for him, a decision that disappoints me," Mourinho said at the team's Carrington training base on Friday.

"He has the potential to be fighting for a position, fighting for opportunities and fighting to be a Manchester United player."

Given the depth of the squad Manchester United voted this season, it is not hard to understand why Pereira might have thought he would be better served by moving elsewhere to gain more experience.

But Mourinho, who takes his table-topping side to Stoke on today, added: "His decision can be considered a young player who wants to play every weekend but also a young player that is not ready to fight for

something difficult."

Transfer window

Mourinho also welcomed the decision made by Premier League clubs to bring forward the summer transfer window in 2018 to the Thursday before the new campaign kicks off.

But he is wary of the danger that some English clubs may lose players to foreign teams who can still sign stars until the end of August.

Pereira defied Mourinho's advice when he sought, and accepted, a temporary move to the La Liga side

He said: "As the head coach of Manchester United, obviously I am in favour of that because if I focus just on the training process of course.

"I want to arrive, day one, I want to have my squad, my players, I want to work and travel with them in pre-season, I don't want to be waiting for late decisions.

"But there is another perspective and I have to share the problems the board has and that is that obviously when the decision is not uniform around Europe and all the championships then we are opening a disadvantage for the English clubs.

"That was the reason why Manchester United voted against because there is another element - the market will be closed for us and is open for others and they can come to the English clubs."

The Manchester United boss said he wanted a broader solution, adding: "I hope it goes to the perfect situation, which is to close for every championship and not just the Premier League."

OPINION

Pele delighted by Neymar's PSG switch

AFP
Paris

Brazilian legend Pele hailed Neymar's move from Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) as an opportunity for his compatriot to "be the big star", in an interview with goal.com yesterday.

Pele, who won the World Cup three times as a player and scored over 1,000 goals during his career, said that it would be good for Neymar to leave the shadow of former Barca teammate Lionel Messi.

"For Neymar, I think it (moving to PSG) was the best thing," he said. "I think it was the best thing because there was always the discussion,

'Neymar, Messi, Neymar, Messi? Now, he will have the opportunity to be the big star.'

Neymar spent four seasons with Barcelona before joining big-spending PSG in a world-record transfer worth 222 million euros (\$267mn). The 25-year-old forward started out at Santos, where Pele played for the majority of his glittering career.

"It's a great responsibility he has now," Pele, 76, added.

"Because people started comparing Neymar to Messi. And as a Brazilian, I say that there's no doubt that Neymar is one of the best in his position, because we have Cristiano Ronaldo who is a centre-forward as well. "But with Messi it's a bit different. Messi is an organiser and he also scores goals."



SPOTLIGHT

Zidane, Ancelotti want transfer window closed before season start

AFP
Madrid

Real Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane and Bayern Munich boss Carlo Ancelotti yesterday added to growing calls for the summer transfer window to close before the season starts across Europe.

English Premier League clubs voted on Thursday to shut the 2018 close-season transfer window before the start of the 2018-19 campaign following complaints by managers that transfer activity disturbs their preparations.

The window in Europe's other major leagues runs until August 31, meaning clubs outside England could buy players from English top-flight teams after the new Premier League deadline.

"I think the same thing as most people do," said Zidane. "The transfer window must stop when the league restarts. When official competition restarts, it must stop, that's clear."

Zidane added: "We can't change our team during competition, that's what I think and that's the opinion of most people."

Bayern coach Ancelotti, who won the 2014 Champions League title as Real's head coach with Zidane as his assistant, says he hopes the Bundesliga follows the example set by English clubs.

"No one is happy with the situation, so this is a very good idea," the Italian said at a press conference in Munich. "I hope the Bundesliga will soon follow this rule."

Ancelotti, who won the 2014 Champions League title as Real's coach, says he hopes the Bundesliga follows the example set by EPL

"The market has to close before the start of the season."

UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin has also given his support to making the close-season player trading period, introduced by world governing body FIFA in 2002, shorter.

Catalan referendum

Turning to matters even more political, Zidane said he could "not imagine a La Liga without Barcelona" in reference to another attempt by Catalonia to wrest free of Madrid. Catalan leaders have slated an independ-

ence referendum for October 1, something Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has branded an "intolerable act of disobedience".

Spanish sporting authorities have often warned that Barca and other Catalan clubs would be excluded from national competition should there be secession in Catalonia.

"I don't know what's going to happen exactly," Zidane said. "There some people for, some against, it's a complicated debate. I hope that it won't happen, I don't want it."

La Liga president Javier Tebas confirmed that Barca would indeed be barred from the league should independence come about. "Should the process advance in the current direction, and I hope not, well they will not be able to play in Liga," Tebas said Friday, adding that Barca's sole avenue would be playing in a Catalan league.

"A Catalan championship, without saying anything more about it, would be comparable to, or a little better than, the Dutch league," he said.

"Barca would be a super-Ajax. It would stop being a great European club, that's for sure."



Real Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane

Berlin offer cheap tickets for female ref debut

Bertha Berlin are offering women half-price tickets for tomorrow's German league match against Werder Bremen with Bibiana Steinhaus set to make history as the first female referee in a top European league.

The German Football Association (DFB) have confirmed the 38-year-old will take charge of the Bundesliga clash at Berlin's Olympic Stadium to become the first female ref in the German, English, French, Italian or Spanish leagues. Hertha are offering up to 500 "Bibi-Steinhaus-tickets", only available to women, at half-price.

"We want to offer all women the chance to experience this historic moment," said a statement on the Hertha website. Steinhaus has been refereeing since 2007 and earned her right to whistle in Germany's top flight after officiating the women's Champions League final this year and the 2012 women's Olympic tournament final in London.

The police officer has already proven she can handle Bundesliga stars. As an assistant referee, she shrugged off an attempted hug by ex-Bayern Munich coach Pep Guardiola during a pitchside exchange in 2014.



EPL

Coutinho left out of Liverpool squad to play Manchester City

'It is not the first time and it won't be the last time in history when similar things will happen'

AFP
London

Philippe Coutinho has been left out of Liverpool's squad to face Manchester City this weekend over his fitness but manager Jurgen Klopp said the Brazilian did nothing "unforgivable" during Barcelona's pursuit of him.

The playmaker, who returned from international duty this week, was linked with a move to the Catalan giants following the departure of his compatriot Neymar to Paris Saint-Germain but Liverpool refused to budge.

Coutinho has not yet played for Liverpool this season, with the club citing a back injury, but he joined up with his national side for World Cup qualifiers and made two substitute appearances against Ecuador and Colombia, scoring against the former.

That, however, has not been enough to prove his fitness to Klopp, who stressed that fitness was the only reason why the 25-year-old would not be lining up at the Etihad today.

"I can explain it a little – maybe a few of you have had a split in a good relationship, with your wife or whatever, and it is not good to think about the time you were split," said Klopp.

"It was not the most easy time, but that is the transfer window. It is not the first time and it won't be the last time in history when similar things will happen."

"I really think we handled it really well," Klopp added.

"Not all the things in newspapers were 100 percent right but it is normal a lot of things were coming up in a situation like this."

"But nothing I am aware of was unforgivable. The most important thing is no one told me anything where I thought 'Oh, that is too much!'"

"He came in yesterday, accepted 100 percent the situation – I didn't even have to say anything about it."

Klopp praised Coutinho's attitude, saying he was in a good mood and training had been positive.

"Before he went to Brazil he couldn't train for about three weeks so that means we need to try to prepare him for the rest of the season and that is quite difficult with our schedule," said



Jurgen Klopp says Coutinho needs more time to be fully match fit.

Klopp.

"So I decided to leave him out of the squad for City so we can use these four or five days for proper training."

Liverpool, who thumped Arsenal 4-0 in their last match before the international break, are second in the Premier League after three matches, with two wins and a draw.

Pep Guardiola's big-spending City have the same number of points but trail Liverpool on goal difference.

Kompany out

Manchester City captain Vincent Kompany will miss his side's Premier League showdown with Liverpool today due to a calf injury, manager Pep Guardiola revealed yesterday.

The centre-back, who has a long history of calf problems, sustained the injury after completing the 90 minutes of Belgium's 4-0 victory over Gibraltar in World Cup qualifying last week.

"He played with Belgium against Gibraltar. They won 9-0. He had a little problem in his calf. I think he will not be able to (play) tomorrow," Guardiola told reporters at City's training centre in Manchester.

Guardiola predicted that Kompany would only be sidelined for a "short" period of time. City are level on points with second-placed Liverpool in the Premier League table after winning two and drawing one of their three games to date.

Guardiola was also upbeat

about City's failure to sign a centre back during the recent transfer window, saying he had enough cover for the position in Eliaquim Mangala and 19-year-old Tosin Adarabioyo.

On a more positive note for the City manager, midfielder Ilkay Guendogan is available for selection against Liverpool after an extended layoff with a knee injury.

Everton fans will be looking for far better things, starting with today's home game with Tottenham Hotspur, than the anonymous performance he put in during the limp 2-0 defeat by Chelsea.

Spurs fans have bitter experience of Sigurdsson flatteringly to deceive when he was with them, so Everton manager Ronald Koe-

man will hope that is an extra motivating factor for the Icelandic international. Not least because the pressure is also on the Dutchman, who made him his main target in the close season.

Fixtures (1400GMT kick-offs unless stated):

Today
Arsenal v Bournemouth, Everton v Tottenham, Leicester v Chelsea, Manchester City v Liverpool (1130), Stoke v Manchester United (1630), Brighton v West Brom, Southampton v Watford.

Tomorrow
Burnley v Crystal Palace (1230), Swansea v Newcastle (1500).

Monday
West Ham v Huddersfield (1845)

SPOTLIGHT

Guardiola said 'no' to Sanchez-Sterling swap

AFP
Manchester, United Kingdom

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola personally made sure Raheem Sterling would not be allowed to join Arsenal in a swap deal for Alexis Sanchez, he revealed yesterday.

The two clubs spent transfer deadline day locked in talks over City's desire to sign Sanchez, only for the deal to collapse because Arsenal were unable to sign their preferred replacement, Monaco winger Thomas Lemar.

At one point Sterling was mooted as a potential make-weight in the Sanchez deal, but Guardiola said he was determined not to allow the 22-year-old England forward to leave.

"When we started to speak with Arsenal in the last days before it was not impossible, they wanted to make a swap with Raz," Guardiola told reporters at the City Football Academy in Manchester.

"And they talked to me and I said: 'No chance. Zero chance. Not one percent chance' to take a swap deal with Alexis because I have a lot of trust in Raz."

"He is 22 years old, an English player and he has a lot of gap (potential) to improve. So the only thing we can do if possible is to try and do a deal with cash."

"We tried to make an offer that they would accept, but in the end they could not sign the player they wanted and Alexis stayed with Arsenal."

City were reported to have agreed a fee of around £60 million (\$79 million, 66 million euros) for Sanchez, who played under Guardiola at Barcelona.

The 28-year-old Chile forward is out of contract at the end of the season but Guardiola was coy when asked if City would reactivate their interest in him in one of the next two transfer windows.

"I don't know what's going to happen in the wintertime



or next season," said Guardiola, whose side face Liverpool at the Etihad Stadium today.

"He's an Arsenal player. Of course we were interested in him. At the end Arsenal decided not to sell him. So all the best for Alexis. I know him from Barcelona."

"And that's all. Sometimes the deals work, sometimes not. We will see in the future."

Tebas 'could learn things'

City are believed to be one of the five clubs who voted against a proposal to shut the close-season transfer window in England before the start of the season, which was voted through by Premier League clubs on Thursday.

But Guardiola said the club's only concern was that rival teams in other European leagues will still be able to sign players – potentially from English clubs – after the window has closed in the Premier League.

"I am so happy with the decision the Premier League have taken. I think it's really good," he said.

"Manchester City, what I know is they agree about that. We just have to reflect that the transfer window in England will be closed sooner than in Europe."

"Hopefully we can fix it so all the other clubs in Europe finish at the same time."

La Liga mulls Barca and Real games abroad

The likes of Real Madrid and Barcelona may soon play competitive La Liga games in China or the United States, Spanish league president Javier Tebas revealed yesterday.

Tebas suggested the staging of La Liga games abroad from next season would help Spanish soccer compete for foreign revenue with its English and German rivals.

"It would only be one or two games a season, like the NFL or NBA do," said Tebas.

"If we want to compete with the Premier League or the Bundesliga we have to look for added value," he said.

"We would look into it deeply before presenting the idea to the clubs, there are legal and social implications and you'd have to look at the hours too," he said.

"But it's not a bad idea." The 55-year-old Tebas has been in the news of late accusing Qatari-owned French side Paris Saint-Germain of "laughing" at UEFA's financial fair play (FFP) system.

The NFL has been staging games in London since 2007, calling those game the 'International Series'. The NBA calls its version the Global Games, with two or three matches each season in places such as China, Brazil or France.

FOCUS

Conte slams talk of botched Barkley move

AFP
London

Antonio Conte has laughed off claims Chelsea botched their bid to sign England midfielder Ross Barkley from Everton on transfer deadline day.

Chelsea were reported to have agreed a £35 million (\$46 million, 38 million euros) fee for Barkley hours before the window shut on August 31.

But the deal never went through amid claims the Premier League champions were unable to convince Barkley to sign. Some reports said Barkley had attended a medical with Chelsea, but later decided to reject the Blues, while there were suggestions Chelsea boss Conte had been told not to speak to the player while he debated his future.

Barkley, out of contract at the end of this season, explained he did not undergo a medical at any club on deadline day and had not wanted to be rushed into a transfer he might later regret.

With Tottenham also interested in Barkley, it was claimed the Everton star, who is currently sidelined with a hamstring injury, was willing to wait until the window reopens in January to decide his future.

Asked about the reports at a press conference yesterday, Conte said: "First of all, I don't like to speak about players on other teams, it shows a lack of respect. "About this issue I think it's ridiculous what I read, so I stop. It is ridiculous. With this word I told you my thoughts about this."

Conte also missed out on England winger Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, who snubbed Chelsea to join Liverpool from Arsenal.

The Blues fared better with two other deals just before the window closed as they snapped up Leicester midfielder Danny Drinkwater and Torino defender Davide Zappacosta.

Conte had been unhappy with Chelsea's failure to land his top targets earlier in the close season, but he was more diplomatic when quizzed on the lat-

est transfer activity. "I think the club tried to do its best in the transfer market," Conte said.

"Sometimes you are able to buy players, and sometimes not for many reasons, but I think the club tried to do its best."

"Now the window is closed. I'm very happy to work with these players that we have."

No resolution

With Chelsea facing Leicester today at the start of a busy September featuring seven games in 21 days, the new recruits were much needed by Conte. He is also boosted by the return to fitness of Eden Hazard, who could feature at the King Power Stadium this weekend after missing Chelsea's first three league games while he recovered from close-season ankle surgery.

Hazard played for Belgium last week and Conte was happy to see his star playmaker back in action after initially expressing surprise at his international call-up.

"I think now I can count on him for sure. I have to decide when is the right moment and

the right minutes for him but for sure he's available," Conte said.

There remains no resolution to the Diego Costa saga, with the Chelsea striker still exiled while the club try to sell him following his fall-out with Conte.

Conte made it clear Costa was no longer part of his plans, sparking a furious response from the Spaniard. Despite talk of a move to Fenerbahce, with the Turkish transfer window open until Friday, Conte would only say: "There is no news about him. My focus is on English football, not Turkey."

Given the messy transfer period Conte has endured, it was little surprise he backed the Premier League's decision to move forward the end of their signing period. From next season, the window will shut in England before the start of the season.

"The transfer market is always a very difficult period for the coach. You wait for new players and sometimes you lose players," Conte said. "For this reason I don't love this period. For me if this period is short, that's good."



Chelsea manager Antonio Conte during a press conference in London yesterday. (Reuters)

NFL

Brady and Patriots stunned as Chiefs romp to upset

'We just stuck together. We're like the underdogs, a lot of people didn't believe in us'

AFP
Boston

Rookie running back Kareem Hunt upstaged Tom Brady as the Kansas City Chiefs launched the new National Football League season with a stunning 42-27 upset of the New England Patriots on Thursday.

Chiefs quarterback Alex Smith threw for 368 yards and four touchdowns to puncture the festive atmosphere as the Super Bowl champion Patriots raised their championship banner in the traditional season kick-off at Gillette Stadium.

But it was 22-year-old Hunt who stole the show for the Chiefs, recovering from a fumble on his first possession to finish a debut to remember with three touchdowns.

"We just stuck together," Hunt said. "We're like the underdogs, a lot of people didn't believe in us. We just wanted to come out and shock the world."

Smith meanwhile produced a virtuoso display at quarterback for the Chiefs, completing 28 of 35 pass attempts with no interceptions.

Brady had a frustrating night, throwing for 267 yards and no touchdowns. The 40-year-old five-time Super Bowl champion completed only 16 of 36 attempts.

"It's a terrible feeling," a stony-faced Brady said after the defeat. "But the only guys that can do something about it are back in that locker room. We've got to dig a lot deeper than we did tonight. Because we didn't dig very deep tonight."

Patriots coach Bill Belichick was typically blunt in his assessment of the loss.

"We didn't really do much of anything well enough to deserve a win," Belichick said. "We gave up 42 points. Gotta coach better, gotta practice better, gotta play better."

'Lot of work to do'

"We've got a lot of work to do. That's obvious. So we'll go back to work and see if we can improve pretty much everything. We made too many mistakes and our fundamentals weren't good enough."

Patriots fans had launched the evening in Foxborough in raucous mood, raining boos down on NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell at the opening ceremonies.

Brady was quickly into his groove, leading a nine-play, 73-yard drive that culminated with Mike Gillislee's two-yard touch-



Kansas City Chiefs tight end Demetrius Harris (centre) and wide receiver Tyreek Hill (right) and offensive tackle Eric Fisher (left) celebrate a first quarter touchdown against the New England Patriots at Gillette Stadium. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

down run.

The Pats looked to have grabbed another touchdown after recovering a Chiefs fumble, only for Rob Gronkowski's end zone reception to be deemed incomplete after a video review.

Instead it was the Chiefs who recovered, getting on the board when Demetrius Harris gathered Smith's seven-yard pass after a 90-yard drive.

A Stephen Gostkowski field goal and a second Gillislee touchdown saw the Patriots go 17-7 up but Hunt's first touchdown of the night from a three-yard Smith pass pulled the Chiefs back to 17-14.

A superb 75-yard touchdown pass from Smith to Tyreek Hill then put the Chiefs 21-17 ahead only for Gillislee to barrel over from one yard to put the Patriots 24-21 ahead with 5:01 remaining in the third quarter.

A further Gostkowski field goal stretched the Patriots lead to 27-21 but Kansas City hit back almost immediately with a brilliant 78-yard touchdown from Smith to Hunt to put the Chiefs ahead.

The Chiefs stopped the Patriots on a crucial fourth and inches early in the fourth quarter, and Hunt then dived over in the corner for his third touchdown of the night to make it 35-27.

Charcandrick West then add-



New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady (left) passes the ball against the Kansas City Chiefs during the second quarter at Gillette Stadium. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

PREVIEW

Bennett brothers in arms as Packers and Seahawks highlight season openers



Seattle Seahawks defensive end Michael Bennett.

AFP
Los Angeles

The Seattle Seahawks and the Green Bay Packers take centre stage as the NFL season cranks into gear tomorrow, bringing into sharp focus anthem protests that have divided the sport.

The Lambeau Field clash between two of the NFL's best teams will see Seattle's Michael Bennett line up opposite younger brother Martellus, who joined the Packers from New England in the off-season.

It promises to be an emotional reunion for the two men, who have been among the most prominent figures in the wave of activism that has swirled around the NFL since former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick launched his protests last year.

Kaepernick's rallying cry against the treatment of minorities by law enforcement resonates even more deeply with Michael Bennett, who alleged this week that he had been the victim of racial discrimination after being threatened at gunpoint by Las Vegas police.

"Las Vegas police officers singled me out and pointed their guns at me for doing nothing more than simply being a black man in the wrong place at the wrong time," Bennett said in a statement.

Bennett's allegations, denied by police in Las Vegas, prompted an outpouring of support from fellow players, coaches and NFL officials.

Martellus Bennett became emotional when discussing his brother's treatment with reporters on Wednesday, revealing he had left a team meeting in tears after learning of it.

"I had to walk out of meetings because I broke down crying, just thinking about what could have happened, what could have been," Martellus

Bennett said. "So for me, I'll just be happy to see my brother, because there's a chance I couldn't see him."

Michael Bennett, along with several Seahawks team-mates have protested the national anthem in pre-season games this year. Martellus, a talented cartoonist who has authored children's books, has not, but said he planned to express himself through other means.

"I like to speak through my art, my words and things like that," Martellus Bennett said.

'Fantastic' Rodgers

When the pre-match anthem is over, the Bennett brothers will turn their attention to stopping two of the most talented quarterbacks in the NFL.

The Packers will once again pin their hopes for the season on the form of the majestic Aaron Rodgers, the Packers quarterback viewed by many as the best signal-caller in the league even if he is still waiting for a second Super Bowl title.

"He's at the peak of his career. He's at the top of his game," Seattle coach Pete Carroll said of Rodgers. "It's hard to imagine what more he can do or how much better he can play. He is just such a fantastic football player."

Elsewhere tomorrow, the other standout fixtures include the Dallas Cowboys' NFC East clash with the New York Giants in Arlington, Texas. Dallas running back Ezekiel Elliott will be available for the Cowboys as he battles an NFL suspension for domestic violence.

The Cowboys will aim to avenge last season's home-and-away losses to the Giants as "America's Team" aim to build on their 13-3 regular season record from last year.

Meanwhile the Atlanta Falcons will launch what they hope is a season of redemption against the Chicago Bears at Soldier Field.

Gasol eclipses Parker's Euro points record

Spain star Pau Gasol surpassed French icon Tony Parker on Thursday as the all-time leading scorer in European Championship history by moving on to 1,111 career points.

The 37-year-old Gasol, an NBA team-mate of Parker's with the San Antonio Spurs, climbed to the top of the list with a 20-point effort in Spain's 87-64 group-stage victory over Hungary in Romania.

The veteran centre, who signed a new three-year deal with San Antonio in July, is a three-time European champion with Spain - in 2009, 2011 and 2015.

Gasol eclipsed Parker's previous record of 1,104 points while German legend Dirk Nowitzki, set for his 20th season with the Dallas Mavericks, is third on 1,052.

MLB

Indians win 15th straight with win over White Sox

By Colleen Kane
Chicago Tribune

The Indians scored four runs before Mike Pelfrey recorded an out in the first inning at Guaranteed Rate Field, and that was far from the most alarming thing to happen to the White Sox early Thursday night.

About 15 minutes before the first pitch of the Sox's 11-2 loss to the Indians, the Sox announced Pelfrey would start because left-hander Carlos Rodon had been scratched with left shoulder stiffness.

Any pitcher's shoulder issue would be of note, but Rodon's scratch draws attention because of his long early-season absence due to left biceps bursitis, essentially in his shoulder. Rodon

missed much of spring training and didn't make his first start of the year until June 28. Rodon was around the Sox clubhouse Thursday afternoon, appearing to prepare for his start as usual.

The third-year starter is viewed by some as the possible future ace of a contending Sox rotation, and he had found a groove over his last seven starts, when he posted a 3.00 ERA with 13 walks and 45 strikeouts over 45 innings. He had one rough start - allowing five earned runs in five innings against the Tigers on August 26 - and his last start against the Rays on Saturday was shortened by rain.

Just a day earlier, Sox manager Rick Renteria said Rodon would have a shot to be the leader of a rotation that could include any from the group of Reynaldo Lopez, Lucas Giolito, Michael

Kopech, Carson Fulmer, Alec Hansen, Dylan Cease or Dane Dunning.

"He has been around, has some pretty good stuff to show on the mound," Renteria said. "He's going to be the senior of these guys moving forward, so it's almost by default, but hopefully it's also by example, by the way he goes about his business every time he gets the baseball, and hopefully these guys follow suit."

Having Pelfrey start on short notice against an Indians team on a franchise-record-tying 14-game winning streak didn't go well. Edwin Encarnacion's three-run homer capped the Indians' four-run first, and Francisco Lindor and Erik Gonzalez also homered off Pelfrey as the Indians led 7-2 through three innings. Yolmer Sanchez and Jose Abreu homered off Indians ace

Corey Kluber in the first inning, but Kluber allowed just one more hit, walked none and struck out 13 through six innings.

Sox reliever Chris Beck gave up one earned run over 2 2/3 innings, and Jace Fry surrendered a two-run homer to Greg Allen. Catcher Rob Brantly became the first Sox position player to pitch this year. He gave up one hit in the ninth inning - Gonzalez's second homer of the game.

The Sox were facing a team on a 14-game winning streak for just the second time in franchise history. They snapped the Yankees' streak at 14 with a 7-1 victory in 1941, according to Stats, LLC. Renteria said before the game that the rebuilding Sox use the Indians as an example from which to draw.

"We use the clubs that are having success and doing it a

certain way as barometers," Renteria said. "They have seen this club build from within, put themselves in a position over the last few years to continue to compete for a postseason position and to go to the World Series. Why wouldn't you want to look at clubs that are doing it ... and aspire to have your players attain those feats?"

"We talk about it a lot, because unless you talk about it, how can you attain anything?"

Results		
Colorado	9	LA Dodgers 1
San Diego	3	St. Louis 0
Minnesota	4	Kansas City 2
Cleveland	11	White Sox 2
Atlanta	6	Miami 5
NY Mets	7	Cincinnati 2
Chicago Cubs	8	Pittsburgh 2
Washington	4	Philadelphia 3
NY Yankees	9	Baltimore 1



Cleveland Indians right fielder Greg Allen (right) is congratulated by shortstop Francisco Lindor after hitting two-run home run off Chicago White Sox relief pitcher Jace Fry (not pictured) during the seventh inning at Guaranteed Rate Field. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports



RUGBY

All Blacks stick up for under-pressure Pumas

The history of this championship is they have been very tough opponents for us'

AFP
New Plymouth, New Zealand

New Zealand talked up Argentina as a "dangerous" foe yesterday on the eve of their Rugby Championship Test in New Plymouth, dismissing the South Americans' form slump over the past two years.

After rising to fifth in the world rankings when they made the 2015 World Cup semi-finals, Los Pumas have since dropped to 10th despite a regular diet of Rugby Championship matches against New Zealand, South Africa and Australia.

"I don't take any notice of those rankings. The history of this championship is they have been very tough opponents for us, even here in New Zealand," All Blacks captain Kieran Read said.

"They're unpredictable. They've certainly got some players who've got experience — in Super Rugby and at this level — so (they are) a dangerous side."

Since Argentina joined the championship in 2012, in a move aimed at lifting their standard of play, they have never beaten New Zealand in 10 matches with the All Blacks scoring 44 tries to 11 and producing an average winning score of 36-14.

All Blacks coach Steve Hansen argued that Argentina were in a difficult situation with an arduous travel schedule to reach any of the top tier playing nations.

"They've gone from being a team that was spread all around the world, which has its ups and downs, to a team that were brought together and put into the Super Rugby competition," he said.

"Now they play four or five home games every year and then their next closest game is New Zealand, which I think is 15 hours' flight time.

"It's an horrific schedule they've got. I think that takes a lot out of them. I certainly wouldn't want to be doing it, but it is what it is for them."

SACRIFICES MADE

Hansen and Read also had sympathy with the underperforming Argentines as they tried to move away from their traditional brute-strength forward game to play more open rugby.

"Through Super Rugby they've developed more of a rounded game and have they got to where they want to get to? I don't think so yet," Hansen said.

"Has that been at the expense of some of their forward play? Not sure. But there will be some compromising going on if you're trying to work hard on your other type of game."



Argentina fullback Joaquin Tuculet (left) reacts after South Africa scored their fourth try during their Rugby Championship match at Padre Ernesto Martorearena stadium in Salta, Argentina, last month. (AFP)

Read said it was obvious they were no longer a one-dimensional side and had threats across the park.

"Probably their ball carriers in the loose forwards are among the best in the world and their backs, on their day, are pretty dangerous counter attackers, alongside that is the scrum and the maul.

"So a dangerous side. They've certainly got better playing in this

championship."

When Los Pumas arrived in New Plymouth on Friday, after a week training in Auckland, captain Agustin Creevy accepted there were problems but said they were being addressed.

"We are training a lot. We know we have to improve our scrum so we can get the scrum we used to have before," he said.

He added they were also learning

that the Jaguares in Super Rugby had to be handled differently to Los Pumas, but the project of keeping most of the Test players together year round had to continue.

"It is not the same for Super Rugby and the Rugby Championship so we are learning about that and taking the good points to develop. This is part of the sacrifice we have to make for the future of Argentina rugby."

SPOTLIGHT

IOC has no 'plan B' for Pyeongchang, says official

AFP
Berlin

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has no 'plan B' to move the 2018 Winter Olympic Games from Pyeongchang, which lies near the border with North Korea, says IOC official Gian Franco Kasper.

Pyeongchang, which will host the 2018 Winter Olympics from February 9-25, is 80 kilometres (50 miles) from the border with North Korea.

North Korea's recent nuclear test and a string of missile tests have led to tensions within the international community and there are fears some athletes may boycott the Games due to safety fears.

"In the IOC and in the executive committee, no plan B has been discussed so far," Kasper, a member of the

IOC's executive committee and head of skiing's governing body FIS, told SID, an AFP subsidiary.

"In personal conversations, it is certainly a topic and I have read that Sochi or Munich come into play, but I think it would be wrong now to arrange a plan B.

"To burden a replacement venue with such a big commitment wouldn't be justifiable and we have a responsibility to Pyeongchang."

Despite the political tension Switzerland's Kasper believes the Games will be safe, but admits some athletes may not agree as South Korea prepares to host the Winter Games for the first time.

"I am convinced that Pyeongchang will be the safest place during the Games," said the 73-year-old Kasper.

"What I fear is that some nations may boycott the Games, because they have concerns for their athletes."

Schurter looks to seal dominance in elite at mountain bike worlds

Switzerland's defending world champion Nino Schurter will be bidding to extend his record-breaking winning run in the men's elite event at the world mountain bike championships in Australia today.

Schurter, the reigning Olympic champion, has won all six events in the World Cup this season and is after the world title to complete his domination.

The Swiss will be challenged in Cairns in northern Australia by two former world and Olympic champions Julien Absalon of France and the Czech Republic's Jaroslav Kulhavy. Schurter's winning streak at the World Cup began in May at Nove Mesto and continued in Albstadt and Vallnord.

The closest match to Schurter this season was at the fourth round in Lenzerheide, when Kulhavy chased back from a bad start to come within three seconds of the Swiss at the

finish line. "I'm stoked I've achieved this 6/6 strike but it takes a good portion of luck and a reliable team and equipment to conquer," Schurter said.

Schurter has already had success at the world championships, helping Switzerland end France's dominance in the cross country team relay.

Schurter anchored the Swiss team to victory 24 seconds ahead of Denmark and France.

France had won the past three relays before the format changed to five riders for 2017. There are plenty of contenders for the elite women's category, led by the newly crowned world cup champion Yana Belomoina of the Ukraine. Other strong contenders include defending champion Annika Langvad (Denmark), Jolanda Neff (Switzerland) and Maja Wloszczowska (Poland). Belomoina beat Wloszczowska to win her first World Cup title.



BOTTOMLINE

Wallabies plan to counter dynamic Bok backrow

AFP
Perth, Australia

Australia is looking to match the Springboks dynamic backrow to claim their first win of this year's Rugby Championship, skipper Michael Hooper said yesterday.

South Africa are unbeaten in the southern hemisphere championship after home and away wins over Argentina with blindside flanker Siya Kolisi and Jaco Kriel standouts at the back of the scrum.

"We expect them to be very strong over the ball, both of those players (Kriel and Kolisi) are really good carriers and defenders there," Hooper told reporters ahead of today's Test in Perth.

"It's a different jersey size at the end of the day from some of the guys that used to be playing to what they are now.

"But (they're) no less effective in what they do and how they get around the field."

Hooper said the Wallabies have their own backrow strike weapon in No.8 Sean McMahon, who was immense in the 35-29 loss to New Zealand in Dunedin a fortnight ago.

"Sean's strong in the tackle, strong making his tackles and he's good over the ball as well," Hooper said.

"It's nothing new there, just everyone doing their role and particularly Sean can have a massive influence when he gets that right."

Kolisi has claimed man-of-the-



Coach Allister Coetzee's (third from right) Springboks are unbeaten in the southern hemisphere championship after home and away wins over Argentina.

match awards in both wins over the Pumas in Port Elizabeth and Salta and is looking at another tip top performance against the Wallabies.

"I want to play well and make sure that I put my firm hand on the jersey because I haven't played a lot in a starting position so I am trying to use that as best as I can," Kolisi said.

"We are very young and I've only got a couple of Tests under my belt and we learn a lot from each other.

"We started our own culture this year that we can live by and that is

what we are driving," he added.

'GOT THEIR SWAGGER'

Australian coach Michael Cheika said his Wallaby forward pack will face a physical challenge against the Springboks, who are on a five-match winning run.

The Wallabies' scrum looked shaky in their last outing against the All Blacks, prompting Cheika to recall tight-head prop Sekope Kepu for Allan Alaalatoa.

Tatafu Polota-Nau comes in at

hooker for the experienced Stephen Moore, while lock Adam Coleman returns from a shoulder injury.

"Obviously, they've got their swagger at the moment," Cheika said of the Springboks.

"They've had a couple of really good wins and traditionally, they'll look at pushing us around in the pack.

"We're going to have to be at our best to make sure we can go toe-to-toe with them."

It has been a torrid year for Australia, winning only two of their five internationals and coming off a miserable Super Rugby season climaxed by the contentious axing of Perth-based Western Force from next year's competition.

There have been reports that the Perth rugby public may boycott the Test as a way of protesting against the Australian Rugby Union's vexed decision to cull the Force, or wear their blue Western Force jerseys instead of the Wallabies' gold.

Hooper said the Wallabies were well aware of the power they possessed in shaping people's moods at such a dark time in Australian rugby.

"We represent Australia," he said. "We have the control to change and help people's moods and feelings towards everything."

"You know, wake up on Sunday morning just stoked to be Australian and see our colours. We're fully aware of that.

"I'm pumped to see them all turn out here supporting gold — whatever jersey they wear."

FIELD HOCKEY

Women's coach Marijne to take charge of India men's team

AFP
New Delhi

India yesterday put women's field hockey coach Sjoerd Marijne in charge of the men's team following the sacking of fellow Dutchman Roelant Oltmans.

India's new Sports Minister Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore, an Olympic medalist, announced the appointment on Twitter.

"Current chief coach of Indian senior women hockey team, Mr. Waltherus (Sjoerd) Marijne, will take over as chief coach of Indian senior men hockey team," Rathore wrote.

Hockey India sacked Oltmans on Saturday after a poor European tour. It placed an advertisement this week, which was quickly taken down.

The 43-year-old Marijne is expected to start this month after returning from a tour of Europe with the women's team.

"I'm excited to take the new role and

thank Hockey India for showing their confidence in my abilities," Marijne was quoted as saying in a statement by the hockey federation.

In February, Marijne and Eric Wonnink were named as chief coach and analytical coach of the women's team until the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. But now India's Harendra Singh takes over as the chief coach of the women's team.

Oltmans, who joined as performance director in 2013, was sacked after two years as coach because of a string of poor performances.

India finished sixth in the Hockey World League semi-finals in London and went on to suffer a 3-1 loss against hosts Belgium in a European tour in August.

The 63-year-old Oltmans was the seventh foreigner to coach India in 12 years.

Ric Charlesworth, Michael Nobbs and Terry Walsh from Australia, Spaniard Jose Brasa and Dutchman Paul van Ass have faced unceremonious exits from the coaching hot seat.

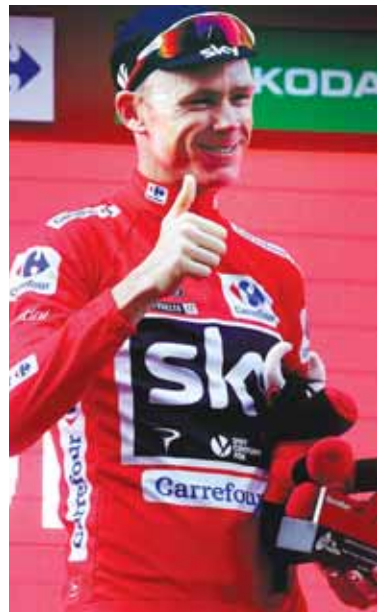
CYCLING / VUELTA A ESPAÑA

Froome closes in on win as De Gendt takes 19th stage

One mountain stage remains before 21-day race ends in Madrid tomorrow



Thomas De Gendt (left) of team Lotto-Soudal celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the 19th stage of the Vuelta a España in Gijón, Spain, yesterday. (AFP)



Chris Froome of Sky retained the red jersey yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Gijón, Spain

Britain's Chris Froome maintained his Vuelta a España lead of one minute 37 seconds over nearest challenger Vincenzo Nibali yesterday ahead of the decisive final mountain stage.

Froome, bidding to become the first rider in 39 years to win the Vuelta and the Tour de France in the same season, finished the 19th stage along with Italy's Nibali and 28 other riders.

There were no major changes in the general classification, with only one mountain stage today remaining in the 21-day race, which ends with tomorrow's procession into Madrid.

Belgian Thomas de Gendt finished strongest in the bunch sprint at the front of a nine-man breakaway group to take his first Vuelta stage win, completing his set of victories from each of the grand tours.

De Gendt outlasted Colombian

Jarlinson Pantano and Spaniard Ivan Garcia at the finish line, meaning no home rider has won a stage on this year's Vuelta with two days to go.

The last time a Spaniard failed to win a stage on the Vuelta was in 1996, Spanish cycling great Miguel Indurain's last race.

Home favourite Alberto Contador, who is also in his last race as a professional, staged another brave attack as he continued to chase a podium place.

He led the general classification group of riders by over 20 seconds towards the end before being hoovered up by the group with 2.5km remaining.

Today's penultimate stage is a short, sharp 117.5 km ride ending on the notorious Alto de l' Angliru, regarded as one of the toughest mountains in Spain.

Contador sealed his first Vuelta victory thanks to a stage win on the Angliru in 2008, while the mountain also decided the 2011 and 2013 editions of the race.

If Froome can stave off Nibali there, he will almost certainly become the

first rider since French great Bernard Hinault in 1978 to win the Vuelta and the Tour de France in the same season.

STAGE 19 RESULTS

1. Thomas De Gendt (Lotto) 3:35:46"
2. Jarlinson Pantano (Trek) same time
3. Ivan Garcia (Merida)
4. Rui Costa (Emirates)
5. Floris De Tier (LottoNL)
6. Bob Jungels (Quick-Step)
7. Romain Bardet (AG2R)
8. Nicolas Roche (BMC)
9. Daniel Navarro (Cofidis)
10. Koen Bouwman (LottoNL) +45"

OVERALL CLASSIFICATION

1. Chris Froome (Sky) 75:51:51"
2. Vincenzo Nibali (Merida) +1:37"
3. Wilco Kelderman (Sunweb) +2:17"
4. Ilnur Zakarin (Katusha) +2:29"
5. Alberto Contador (Trek) +3:34"
6. Miguel Angel Lopez (Astana) +5:16"
7. Michael Woods (Cannondale) +6:33"
8. Fabio Aru (Astana) +6:47"
9. Wout Poels (Sky) +6:47"
10. Steven Kruijswijk (LottoNL) +10:26"

GOLF

Thompson motors to first-round lead in Indianapolis

Reuters
Indianapolis

Lexi Thompson is off to a fast start at the inaugural Indy Women in Tech Championship at the Brickyard Crossing Golf Course at Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

The 22-year-old Thompson birdied 11 holes and had two bogeys Thursday while racing to the top of the leaderboard with a 9-under 63.

One shot behind Thompson are Sandra Gal of Germany and Kris Tamulis at the Pete Dye-designed course located inside the famous 2.5-mile racing oval.

Two shots out of the lead are Moriya Jutanugarn of Thailand and Lydia Ko of New Zealand.

Thompson was sharp. She used only 26 putts and hit every fairway but one and 16 of 18 greens in regulation. The 63 was her second-best round of the year, falling short of a 61 she posted at the Pure Silk-Bahamas LPGA Classic.

"It was just overall a very solid round," Thompson said. "It was quite the early morning, so it was a bit cold on the range and struggled a bit on the range, but I just hit a few good drivers at the end and I just committed to one thing going into the round and I think that's what made my day a lot easier on me."

"I just stuck to my routine and committed to my golf shots."

"That round definitely gave me the confidence that I can make those birdies if I just let it go and fire at pins and just commit to my shots and don't doubt it."

Tamulis and Gal had bogey-free rounds. Last week, the 36-year-old Tamulis posted her best finish of the season with a tie for 15th at the Cambia Portland Classic.

"I putted good and been hitting it a lot better, which thank goodness because I've been really hitting it all over the park," Tamulis said. "So I didn't necessarily think that I was going to shoot 8 under."

Gal birdied four of the first five holes and three of the last four. The 32-year-old has only four top-20 finishes this year.

"I struck it pretty well out there and then I made a few good putts," Gal said. "I've been feeling like my game's been pretty good the last couple months, but I just haven't been scoring, so everything just came together."

Jutanugarn and Ko also played bogey free. Ko's 65 is her lowest opening-round score of the year.

"Obviously with our last major next week, you want to go in with good momentum and good results where it gives you confidence," Ko said. "All I can do is just try my best to have a lot of fun."

Amy Olson is three strokes behind Thompson at 66 along with Candie Kung of Taiwan and Nanna Koertzen Madsen of Denmark.



Lexi Thompson of the US hits her tee shot on the 9th hole during the first round of the Indy Women in Tech Championship at the Brickyard Crossing Golf Course in Indianapolis, Indiana, on Thursday. (AFP)

Wie out of Evian Championship

Michelle Wie withdrew from next week's Evian Championship on Thursday, citing medical advice following surgery to remove her appendix.

The 27-year-old, who has not played since pulling out before the final round of the Canadian Pacific Women's Open on August 27, said doctors had advised to her to rest rather than travel to France for the final major of the season.

"Unfortunately my doctors have advised me to continue resting which means I have to withdraw from @evianchamp next week," the 27-year-old Wie wrote in a post on Instagram. "It breaks my heart to do so because

there is nothing more I want right now than to be able to compete.

"I love the Evian Championship and it holds a special place in my heart. I grew up playing this championship and I can't wait to get back next year. As soon as the docs say I'm fully recovered, I will be back practicing and playing, but for now I'm going to listen to them and lay low."

Wie is chasing her second major win after a triumph in the 2014 US Open. She posted a third place finish at the British Open last month.

In July she withdrew from the second round of the US Women's Open at Trump National Bedminster due to muscle spasms in her neck.

MOTOGP

Leader Dovizioso looks to home comforts

AFP
Misano Adriatico, Italy

New MotoGP championship leader Andrea Dovizioso heads into this weekend's San Marino Grand Prix with a slender nine-point advantage to defend over reigning world champion Marc Marquez.

The Italian, who overtook Marquez at the top of the riders' standings last time out with victory at Silverstone, is a native of Forlimpopoli, a town just 65km from the Misano circuit in Rimini.

The Ducati man will be looking to make good use of home comforts, especially with his legendary compatriot Valentino Rossi missing after breaking his leg in training.

"Coming to Misano as leader of the championship is fantastic, even though I'm really sorry that Rossi will not be there, as it would have been great to also battle against him," Dovizioso said.

"In the past the Misano circuit hasn't been too favourable for Ducati, but a couple of weeks back we did a very positive test at this circuit and we are on good form, so we'll be trying to take home the best possible result."



Ducati rider Andrea Dovizioso (also inset) takes part in a practice session for the San Marino Grand Prix race at the Marco Simoncelli Circuit in Misano yesterday. (AFP)

The 31-year-old was losing ground in the title race a month ago, when he was 21 points adrift of Marquez after the Spaniard's back-to-back wins in Ger-

many and the Czech Republic. But Dovizioso has hit back with successive victories of his own, although has five riders within 35 points of him in

a close championship. Rossi, 38, now looks unlikely though to claim a record 10th world title this year after his injury, and Maverick

Vinales will be Yamaha's sole rider on Sunday in his absence.

"It's a big pity that I can't be at my home GP," Rossi lamented.

"For sure, I was really looking forward to the round in Misano, because riding in front of the fans there is something very special, but I have to treat the injury with care."

Marquez has won four times in total at this race, which is called the San Marino Grand Prix because of its proximity to the country and the fact that there is already an Italian race at Mugello.

'PUTTING LAST RACE BEHIND US'

But only one of those Marquez wins has come in the top class, and the Honda rider knows he needs to find his best form after being forced to quit in Britain with engine failure.

"We'll try and have a great weekend in Misano, putting the last race behind us," said the three-time MotoGP world champion.

"The important thing is that lately we've been competitive at all kinds of tracks, so now we go to Misano, which has a twisty, tight layout, with the same approach and mentality that have worked very well for us so far."

Marquez's Honda teammate Dani Ped-

rosa won in Misano last year and sits fifth in the standings, although he hasn't won since edging out Marquez on home soil at Jerez de la Frontera back in May.

"I'm looking forward to the Misano race and it's a track I like," he said.

"I have good memories there and I've enjoyed some strong results, so I hope to be able to work well in every session."

The 22-year-old Vinales still has championship hopes of his own and is only 13 points behind Dovizioso and four adrift of second-placed Marquez, thanks largely to his two straight wins right at the start of the campaign.

"I'm starting to have the same feeling on my M1 that I had at the beginning of the season and that gives me a lot of calm and allows me to focus on continuing to get points in each race," he said.

MOTOGP STANDINGS

1. Andrea Dovizioso (Ducati) 183 pts
2. Marc Marquez (Honda) 174
3. Maverick Vinales (Yamaha) 170
4. Valentino Rossi (Yamaha) 157
5. Dani Pedrosa (Honda) 148
6. Johann Zarco (Yamaha Tech3) 109
7. Jorge Lorenzo (Ducati) 90
8. Cal Crutchlow (LCR Honda) 89
9. Jonas Folger (Yamaha Tech3) 77
10. Danilo Petrucci (Ducati Pramac) 75

FOCUS

England press for Windies series win

Visitors have slender lead of 22 runs; Anderson enters 500-wicket club

AFP
London

James Anderson became the first England bowler to take 500 Test wickets as the hosts pushed for a series-clinching win against the West Indies at Lord's yesterday.

In a three-match contest all square at 1-1, West Indies ended the second day of the third Test on 93 for three in their second innings — a lead of just 22 runs.

Anderson had stumps figures of two for 17 in nine overs.

Shai Hope, West Indies' batting star this series, was 35 not out and Roston Chase three not out.

After Ben Stokes (60) and Stuart Broad (38) had given England a valuable first-innings lead of 71, it was Anderson who fittingly made the breakthrough.

Starting West Indies' second innings on 499 Test wickets, it took the 35-year-old just 12 deliveries to become only the sixth bowler and third paceman with 500 when he bowled Kraigg Brathwaite for four with a superb inswinging.

Anderson, arms outstretched in celebration, ran down the pitch before being engulfed by his joyful teammates.

As a capacity crowd at Lord's rose to give Anderson a standing ovation, he acknowledged their applause by showing them the ball with which he had made history.

Anderson, in his 129th match at this level, had seen his Test career come full circle after making his debut at Lord's against Zimbabwe in 2003 — a match where he took five wickets in his first innings.

Brathwaite's wicket meant Anderson was the only active cricketer in a 500 club containing the spin trio of Sri Lanka's Muttiah Muralitharan (800 Test wickets), Australia's Shane Warne (708), India's Anil Kumble (619).

He was the third paceman to the milestone, with Australia's Glenn McGrath (563) and West Indies fast bowler Courtney Walsh (519), in common with their other 500 club stars, having long since retired.

West Indies were now six for one and that became 21 for two when Kyle Hope, Shai's older brother, saw his miserable series end when he was lbw to Broad for one.

Stokes was on a hat-trick after taking two wickets in two balls at the end of the tourists first innings.

Kieran Powell, dropped on two, denied



England's James Anderson celebrates the wicket of West Indies' Kraigg Brathwaite, his 500th Test wicket, on second day of the third Test at the Lord's cricket ground in London yesterday. (Reuters)

him that prize.

But there was nothing Powell, who made a fine 45, could do when Anderson, from around the wicket, produced an unplayable delivery that speared in towards the left-hander's stumps only move away late off a full length and clip the off ball.

West Indies were now 69 for three — still two runs behind and with plenty of overs left in an extended third session under the floodlights after rain earlier in the day.

Shai Hope, whose twin hundreds — his first in Test cricket — had done so much to secure a series-levelling win at Headingley — again showed his class when he covered Stokes for four after making a stylish 29 in difficult, overcast conditions during West Indies' first innings 123.

England, finished on 194 all out after resuming on their overnight 46 for four.

Stokes, fresh from his Test-best bowling figures of six for 22 on Thursday, top-scored in a 74 ball-innings featuring 10 fours.

Kemar Roach took five for 72, with West Indies captain and fellow seamer Jason Holder following up with four for 54.

But it might have been a very different story when, just two balls into the second session Stokes, on 24, edged Shannon Gabriel only for Brathwaite to drop a tough chance as he dived far to his left at second slip.

Brathwaite had to go for the catch as there was no third slip.

Next ball saw Holder reinforce his slip cordon but, as if to underline the error, Stokes celebrated his reprieve by driving Gabriel down the ground for four.

West Indies then negated the swing on offer in overcast conditions by bowling too short to tailender Broad, who carved Roach for two sixes before he was last man out.

SCORECARD

WEST INDIES 1st Inn 123

ENGLAND 1st Inn (o/n 46-4)

A. Cook c Dowrich b Roach 10
M. Stoneman c Dowrich b Roach 1
T. Westley lbw b Holder 8
J. Root c Powell b Holder 1
D. Malan c Dowrich b Roach 20
B. Stokes b Gabriel 60

J. Bairstow lbw b Roach 21
M. Ali c K Hope b Roach 3
T. Roland-Jones c S Hope b Holder 13
S. Broad c Dowrich b Holder 38
J. Anderson not out 8

Extras (lb4, nb7) 11

Total (all out, 52.5 overs, 267 mins) 194

Fall of wickets: 1-1 (Stoneman), 2-15 (Cook), 3-19 (Westley), 4-24 (Root), 5-63 (Malan), 6-119 (Bairstow), 7-128 (Stokes), 8-134 (Ali), 9-163 (Roland-Jones), 10-194 (Broad)

Bowling: Roach 24-8-72-5; Gabriel 15-1-64-1 (6nb); Holder 13.5-1-54-4 (Inb)

WEST INDIES 2nd Inn

K. Brathwaite b Anderson 4
K. Powell b Anderson 45
K. Hope lbw b Broad 1
S. Hope not out 35
R. Chase not out 3

Extras (lb5) 5

Total (3 wkts, 31 overs, 148 mins) 93

Fall of wickets: 1-6 (Brathwaite), 2-21 (K Hope), 3-69 (Powell)

Bowling: Anderson 9-2-17-2; Broad 8-2-25-1; Roland-Jones 6-2-17-0; Stokes 8-2-29-0

SPOTLIGHT

Pakistan's Ali seeks to bowl out Amla at World XI

AFP
Lahore, Pakistan

Pakistani bowling sensation Hassan Ali said yesterday he wants to bowl out South Africa's Hashim Amla when he plays an international before a home crowd for the first time at next week's World XI tour in Lahore.

Ali, 23, the highest wicket-taker at the Champions Trophy which underdogs Pakistan won earlier this year, said he "can't wait" to take on the star-studded World XI in the three-match Twenty20 series.

It is the highest-profile international fixture to take place in Pakistan since a deadly militant attack eight years ago drove international cricket — and most other sports — from the country.

"This is my first international match on my home ground in Pakistan. I'm very excited to play in front of my home crowd on my home ground," he told reporters after a practice session at the stadium yesterday.

The attack on the Sri Lankan team in Lahore in March 2009, which killed eight people and wounded nine, isolated Pakistan, forcing it to host its "home" fixtures in neutral venues.

Ali said he was "sad" about this, but put the international players who are coming for the World XI on notice: especially Amla.

"The World XI is a good team, it has very good players, I will try to bowl well to all of them. Especially I would like to out brother Hashim Amla, it would give me more pleasure," he said.

He said he would partner with strike bowler Mohamed Amir to take as many wickets as possible.

"There are partnerships in bowling too just like batting. If one bowler in the pair is being thrashed, the other tries to contain, so there is no competition."

He said coaches were working on fitness and his reverse swing at training.

Pakistan is preparing to deploy several thousand security forces in Lahore for the series, scheduled to begin on September 12.



Pakistan coach Mickey Arthur (centre) watches bowlers Hasan Ali (left) and Usman Shinwari during a practice session at the Gaddafi Cricket Stadium in Lahore yesterday. (AFP)

James Anderson, England's 500-wicket 'king of swing'

AFP
London

"King of swing" James Anderson took time to establish himself as England's leading Test bowler but reaching 500 wickets at a sun-drenched Lord's seals his place in cricket history.

It was at the "home of cricket" where the 35-year-old Lancashire paceman made his Test debut against Zimbabwe back in 2003 — a match in which he took five wickets in the first innings.

Anderson's greatest skill has been an ability to swing the ball late, a qual-

ity that has made him highly effective in English conditions, especially at a "swing-friendly" Trent Bridge in Nottingham.

But no one gets to 500 wickets simply by starring on home soil and Anderson's career has featured many memorable away successes — notably when he led England's attack during their 2010-11 Ashes triumph in Australia.

Burnley-born Anderson, the first English bowler to reach the landmark, had played just three one-day games for Lancashire when he was called into England's limited-overs squad in Australia as cover for Andy Caddick in 2002-03.

He impressed to such an extent he

forced his way into England's squad for the 2003 World Cup in southern Africa.

Then came his Test debut. Yet within a couple of years, Anderson had been relegated to the role of a "net bowler" with England, delivering countless balls at cones in practice sessions.

His unusual action, in which Anderson appeared to dip his head at the moment of delivery rather than having eyes firmly fixed on the batsmen, raised eyebrows and he played no part in England's 2005 Ashes success that saw them end a 19-year wait for a Test series win over Australia.

A long-feared stress fracture side-

lined him for most of 2006 but come the end of 2007, with the 2005 attack all sidelined, Anderson was the leader of England's bowling unit.

It is a position he has occupied ever since.

'Jimmy and James'

A bright dyed streak in his hair early in his career belied the fact that Anderson was then an almost painfully shy and even slightly retiring figure.

But as his haircut has become ever more conventional, so too has Anderson's ability to indulge in "sledging", or verbal sparring with the opposition, become ever more noticeable.

Indeed, Anderson once said he had

to force himself to become increasingly confrontational — a process he likened to being "Jimmy on the field and James off it".

Numerous statistical landmarks have come his way, with Anderson passing Ian Botham's previous England record of 383 Test wickets in the Caribbean in 2015.

Now the reliable close-catcher and often dogged tailender has become just the sixth bowler and only the third paceman, after West Indies' Courtney Walsh and Australia's Glenn McGrath, to take 500 Test wickets.

Having gone wicketless in the second innings of England's surprise defeat by the West Indies in the second

Test at Headingley — a result that left the three-match series all square at 1-1 — Anderson was philosophical about his chances of joining the "500 club" at Lord's.

"I'm a bit of a believer in fate," he said. "So if it's meant to be this week then it will happen — as long as we get the win I'm not too fussed."

Anderson was left dangling on 499 wickets after England bowled West Indies out cheaply in the first innings of the third and deciding Test at Lord's.

But that just delayed the inevitable as he finally reached the landmark yesterday — shattering the stumps of Kraigg Brathwaite and raising the ball to the skies.

BOTTOMLINE

Megabucks deal just the start, says IPL chairman

AFP
New Delhi

The Indian Premier League is expecting even higher returns in the years ahead after striking a bumper \$2.55bn broadcast deal to become one of the world's richest sports competitions.

IPL chairman Rajeev Shukla believes there is plenty more growth to come for the glitzy Twenty20 cricket league, whose heady success comes despite its history of corruption scandals.

This week Rupert Murdoch's Star India beat rival bids from Facebook, Sony and India's Airtel to land the IPL's TV and digital rights over five years from 2018.

The deal, a four-fold increase after Sony paid \$1.2bn for broadcast rights over 10 years in 2008, puts the IPL on a similar level to football's English Premier League, a bellwether for global sports marketing.

The eight-week IPL's 60 games are

now valued at roughly \$8.5mn each, not far off the estimated \$9.6mn per Premier League match — and well over the \$6.2mn price tag attached to home internationals in India.

Shukla said he wasn't surprised at the IPL's new earning power, which is tipped to have a wide-ranging impact on cricket, much as Kerry Packer's renegade World Series Cricket of the 1970s ushered in a new era for the sport.

"Every year IPL is growing in terms of reach, in terms of value and impact. In 10 years it has gone up manifold and I hope in future also the enhancement will keep on happening," Shukla told AFP.

"Since the value of property has seen significant gains with each passing year so in future also it will keep on increasing," he added.

The IPL has spawned copycat leagues in Australia, Pakistan and elsewhere, and has already swelled the bank accounts of scores of players, making domestic T20 a lucrative alternative to the international game.



Indian Premier League (IPL) chairman Rajeev Shukla (centre).

'GAME-CHANGER'

India captain Virat Kohli was the best-

paid player at this year's IPL, earning \$2.26mn with Royal Challengers

Bangalore, while the most expensive foreigner was England's Ben Stokes on \$2.16mn.

Earning hundreds of thousands of dollars a week — albeit for only two months — is usually the preserve of footballers and NBA players, but IPL cricketers can expect a step-change in their wages next year.

"It's a game-changer, not only in Indian cricket but world cricket. The kind of money that's generated in India through cricket is enormous," former India captain Mohamed Azharuddin told AFP.

"You never know what's in store. If you compare it to EPL then an IPL player's worth can be even more in coming years.

"The bar is raised and I am all for players making money," he added.

Many critics are concerned the growing sums on offer will have a negative impact on international cricket, as players prioritise earning money over representing their countries.

But Delhi Daredevils spinner Shah-

baz Nadeem, as yet uncapped by India, said international cricket remained the pinnacle for players.

"Money is no doubt a factor in IPL but the ultimate goal is to represent your country. Yes, IPL can act as a good launchpad for showcasing your talent," the 28-year-old said.

The IPL, which is broadcast around the world, is hugely popular for its mix of sport and showbiz, with a number of teams fronted by Bollywood stars.

It is the brainchild of Indian cricket administrator Lalit Modi, who is now in Britain and refusing to return to his home country to face corruption charges.

The IPL was also hit by a spot-fixing scandal in 2013 which led to the Chennai Super Kings and Rajasthan Royals being suspended for two seasons in 2015.

But the IPL has thrived regardless, and has inspired a range of other franchise-based leagues in India in sports as diverse as boxing, badminton, poker and kabaddi.