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FOOTBALL

Juve on the brink of fourth straight double after Cup win

Page 2

FOOTBALL / AMIR CUP

Arch-rivals Duhail, Al Sadd are at it again

'We will meet one of the best Qatari and Asian teams. We played many exciting semi-final matches against Duhail and our goal tomorrow is to win and qualify for the final'

By **Sahan Bidappa**
 Doha

For one final time this season, Duhail and Al Sadd go head to head, this time in HH The Amir Cup semi-final today. The two teams have produced edge-of-the-seat thrillers whenever they have clashed this season.

QNB Stars League champions Duhail and runners-up Sadd were given byes into the quarter-final stage of HH The Amir Cup, where they got past Umm Salal and Al Khor respectively.

And strangely, the two top teams in Qatar are drawn to face-off in the last four, while a title clash would have given a fitting end to a cracking rivalry.

Nevertheless, one can expect another exhilarating contest at the Jassim bin Hamad stadium. The other semi-final between Al Gharafa and Al Rayyan will take place tomorrow at the same venue.

Undoubtedly Al Sadd will carry a huge burden when they face their nemesis Duhail for more than one reason. The Wolves, coached by Jesualdo Ferreira, will also have a point to prove as they finished runners-up to Al Duhail in the league and Qatar Cup.

Ferreira is also facing a dilemma whether to play a full strength side as there is another important game awaiting them on Monday - the AFC Champions League last-16 second leg. Sadd beat Saudi's Al Ahli 2-1 at home last Monday but conceded an away goal, which makes the return leg in Jeddah a difficult one.

After the Al Ahli match, Ferreira had complained how his players were suffering from fatigue. But the Portuguese manager knows he cannot afford to field a weaker line-up against arch-rivals Duhail, that too in a prestigious tournament as HH The Amir Cup.

While Ferreira admitted it will be tough on his players to play two crucial matches in four days, he said they had no option but to go for broke. "Because if we win the body and mind recovers from the strain and stress fast," said Ferreira yesterday.

"We have an important semi-final match and we will meet one of the best Qatari and Asian teams. We played many exciting semi-final matches against Duhail and our goal tomorrow is to win and qualify for the final," he added.

To make matters worse for Sadd, striker Baghdad Bounedjah will miss the match, as he will serve his second suspension which the Algerian received for showing dissent during their Qatar Cup final loss. However, Spanish midfielder star Xavi Hernandez will be back in action.

Ferreira conceded Bounedjah's absence will make it tough for them. He was also hopeful that referees would not make the same mistake that they did in the Qatar Cup final, when a contentious penalty was given to Duhail in injury time despite the availability of Video Assistant Referee (VAR).

"But if they take the help of the video referrals and still make mistakes it is not fair. The VAR is here to assist teams, not to punish them," he said.

As for Duhail, they have had one less day to recover after an impressive Champions League win at UAE champions Al Ain. But they also play a day later to Sadd in the return leg at home with a 4-2 cushion and are favourites to go into the quarter-finals.

Belmadi's men are also keen on completing a treble of domestic trophies, so they will be up pumped up for the clash. "It's true that AFC Champions League is a big priority for us but we want to win and get to the final of Amir Cup," said Belmadi yesterday.

"This is a chance for us to prove that we are capable of giving our best under stressful conditions. We have defeated Sadd three times this season, but this does not mean we are guaranteed our fourth victory. Every game has a different



Duhail coach Djamel Belmadi (right) speaks to the media during a press conference yesterday as Duhail player Bassam al-Rawi looks on. **PICTURES:** Othman Iraqi



Al Sadd coach Jesualdo Ferreira (right) speaks to the media while player Yasser Aoubaker looks on.

ambition and a different ambience," the Algerian added.

The Red Knights will be without the services of regular captain and attacking midfielder Youssef Msakni, who underwent a cruciate ligament knee surgery in the US on Monday.

But as Duhail showed against Al Ain and in the Qatar Cup final, they are not a one-man team. South Korean playmaker Nam Tae-Hee has been outstanding so far, while Qatar international Almozez Ali has improved with every outing.

They also have Karim Boudiaf and Moroccan striker Youssef El Arabi, who emerged as the QNB Stars League's top scorer with 26 goals. El Arabi was the top scorer last season as well.



Duhail has been without Youssef Msakni owing to a cruciate ligament injury, while Al Sadd's Baghdad Bounedjah (right) will miss the match, serving his second suspension.

Belmadi, Ferreira, Laudrup finalists for Best Coach Award

QNA
 Doha

The race to win the QNB Stars League season's Best Coach Award has narrowed down to Djamel Belmadi of Al Duhail, Jesualdo Ferreira of Al Sadd and Michael Laudrup of Al Rayyan. The trio guided their respective teams to the top three positions. Belmadi and last season's award winner Ferreira took their teams to the knockout stage of AFC Champions League, with the former going a step further by leading Al Duhail to the Qatar Cup title as well.

The winners will be announced at the end-of-season ceremony at the Qatar National Convention Center in Education City on May 17.

QNB Stars League team coaches, Qatar national team coach, Qatar Olympic team coach, team managers, media representatives, representative of Qatar Football Association (QFA), representative of Qatar Stars League Management, as well as president and Board members of the QFA participated in the final voting process.

Belmadi guided Al Duhail to the QNB Stars League and Qatar Cup triumphs this season. A shrewd tactician, he has consistently been producing excellent results at both domestic and continental levels, with Al Duhail's invincible season, as they didn't lose any league game, proof of the same. They finished with 60 points from 19 victories and three draws, and defeated Al Sadd in the Qatar Cup final. Belmadi was named QNB Stars League's best coach for the months of February, March and April, 2018. Belmadi has achieved a lot in Qatar football at both club and country levels. He led Qatar to the Gulf Cup triumph in 2014,

beating Saudi Arabia in the final.

At the domestic level, four of Lekhwiya's league titles (2010-11, 2011-12, 2016-17 and 2017-18) came when he was at the helm. Meanwhile, Al Sadd saw remarkable technical improvement throughout the QNB Stars League season under the much-experienced Ferreira.

Al Sadd turned to the vastly-experienced coach in November 2015, and since then has been instrumental in many youngsters' graduation from the junior ranks.

Ferreira is a result-oriented master tactician. He is more experienced, having been in the profession since 1981 and coached teams in Spain, Greece and Egypt besides his native Portugal.

His most successful period was when he guided native side Porto to three consecutive league titles between 2006 and 2009.

As for Laudrup, he took over Al Rayyan in October 2016 and turned them into a more offensive side. They scored 54 goals, the third best in the QNB Stars League after Al Duhail (86) and Al Sadd (68).

The legendary Danish player is no stranger to coaching in Qatar, having guided Lekhwiya to a league and cup double during the 2014-15 season.

He has managed a host of clubs around the world including stints in Russia, Spain and England. His most successful spell came with Premier League side Swansea City, lifting the league cup during the 2012-13 season. It was the first major English trophy in their history.

The Dane has had much more credentials as a forward, having donned the jerseys of Spanish giants Real Madrid and Barcelona. He had also represented top Italian side Juventus and Dutch stalwarts Ajax Amsterdam besides playing for the Denmark national team umpteen times.



SPOTLIGHT

Juventus on brink of fourth straight double after Cup win

Massimiliano Allegri's side are one point away from claiming a seventh consecutive Serie A title with two games to play

AFP
Rome

Juventus ran riot to beat blundering AC Milan 4-0 on Wednesday night in Rome's Stadio Olimpico and lift the Italian Cup for a fourth consecutive year. Juve are now poised to become the first Italian team to complete the league and cup double four years in a row after their 13th Italian Cup triumph.

Massimiliano Allegri's side are one point away from claiming a seventh consecutive Serie A title with two games to play and could seal it this weekend against Roma in the same Stadio Olimpico stadium.

"It's not that Juve have to win, but I'm now unfortunately used to the idea that people take our victories for granted," said Allegri. "Nothing is to be taken for granted. The lads had an extraordinary game and deserved this win. Now we have to ensure the Scudetto mathematically and enjoy this extraordinary season."

The Turin giants put their foot on the gas after a balanced first half with Gennaro Gattuso's Milan crumbling with two errors from young goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma and a Nikola Kalinic own goal gifting the cup to Juventus. Mehdi Benatia opened the floodgates after 56 minutes for the first of a double on the night for the Moroccan with Douglas Costa also finding the net, before Kalinic's blunder after 76 minutes. AC Milan – sixth in Serie A – had been hoping for a win which would have guaranteed them a place in the Europa League group phase.

"I think it hurts more that we took 40,000 fans here and gave them a result like this," said coach Gennaro Gattuso. "Now we have two games against sides who are in better shape than us and must try to get into the Europa League with better performances than this."

The match had been dubbed a duel between Juventus legend Gianluigi



Juventus players pose with the trophy as they celebrate after winning the Italian Cup beating AC Milan in the final at the Olympic stadium in Rome on Wednesday night. (AFP)

Buffon who at 40 is set to retire and Donnarumma, 19, his touted replacement in the Italian national team.

While Buffon kept a clean sheet Donnarumma finished the night in tears after a game to forget. Buffon made an early save from Patrick Cutrone minutes into the game with Costa and Paulo Dybala both testing Donnarumma. But there was controversy before the break

when Hakan Calhanoglu was brought down only for the referee to blow the whistle for the break without letting Milan take the free-kick.

Gattuso ran onto the pitch to calm his players. But after the interval defender Benatia turned goalscorer heading in from a 56th-minute Miralem Pjanic corner – the first goal conceded by Milan in the Italian Cup this season. Don-

narumma then conceded two goals he should have saved – letting Costa slip through five minutes later and then failing to control a Mario Mandzukic header from a corner, allowing Benatia to tap in his second off the rebound.

Three goals down, Milan were in disarray and when Kalinic turned into his own net off a Pjanic corner it ended Milan's hopes of a first major trophy since

Allegri led them to the Serie A title in 2011.

"Juve always do something special, it's not the first time. We have a winning mentality," said Benatia, who had come in for criticism after letting in Kalidou Koulibaly's goal in a 1-0 defeat to Napoli two weeks ago.

"After my error... everyone said I was useless. I felt bad for a few days, but

fortunately the lads completed the job and I thank them for being close to me."

The team now could celebrate the Serie A title at the Stadio Olimpico on Sunday. "The Scudetto is the main target and I'll be glad if we do it here, because I had an extraordinary campaign at Roma and it's a special stadium for me," added the 31-year-old former Roma player Benatia.

FERGUSON OUT OF INTENSIVE CARE

London: Pep Guardiola and Mauricio Pochettino said they were delighted that former Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson is out of intensive care following surgery on a brain haemorrhage. United announced on Wednesday that Ferguson no longer needed intensive care following his emergency operation at the weekend and would continue rehabilitation as an inpatient.

Before the club issued their update about the 76-year-old's condition, current boss Jose Mourinho spoke positively about his hopes for Ferguson's recovery. Gestures of support continue for the Scot, who retired in 2013 after guiding United to 13 Premier League titles as well as five FA Cups and the Champions League twice.

United are reportedly considering a gesture of support for Ferguson at their final



Premier League match of the season, at home to Watford on Sunday. Tottenham manager Pochettino said he would try to visit Ferguson after his side secured a top-four finish and Manchester City boss Guardiola said he was "so happy" to hear Ferguson was out of intensive care. "I am so pleased, so happy," said Pochettino. "If I have time I will visit him, he is a

massive personality in football and he is a fantastic person. I am so happy for him and all the people that love him."

Eric Cantona also joined the words of support for the recovery for his former manager, appearing in a short video clip posted on Twitter. The former France striker proved a pivotal signing when Ferguson bought him from Leeds in 1992 as

United went on to win the inaugural Premier League title.

"This friend of mine, he is not doing too well," Cantona said in a video. "He is like a mentor to me, he nurtured me, he never judged me. He is such a fighter, he will pull through. It is Fergie time, and you will win. You always do."

United midfielder Michael Carrick, who is due to make his final appearance for the club on Sunday, wrote on Twitter: "Amazing to hear such positive news." Wales manager and former winger Ryan Giggs said the warmth of the response from around the world showed the esteem in which Ferguson was held. "No matter who you support you've got to recognise what he's done for the game. Like everyone I was shocked to hear the news. I was with him just a couple of weeks ago at a dinner," Giggs said.

LA LIGA

Barca edge closer to unbeaten season as Real lose at Sevilla



Sevilla's Clement Lenglet (left), Steven N'Zonzi (centre) and Nicolas Pareja celebrate after their win over Real Madrid in the La Liga at Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan in Seville, Spain, on Wednesday night. (Reuters)

AFP
Barcelona

Ousmane Dembele scored twice as Barcelona thrashed Villarreal 5-1 on Wednesday night and edged closer to their first ever unbeaten season in La Liga. But Real Madrid slipped to their only league defeat since February as a heavily-rotated side lost 3-2 away at Sevilla.

Lionel Messi volleyed in a sumptuous pass from Andres Iniesta at Camp Nou to put Barca three up at half-time after Philippe Coutinho and Paulinho had scored one apiece in the first 16 minutes. The second period, however, belonged to Dembele, who capped an excellent individual display with two goals after the Frenchman's sensational run had also earlier set up Coutinho.

Villarreal managed a consolation when Pablo Fornals' shot deflected in off Nicola Sansone but any fears Ernesto Valverde's side would feel the effects of Sunday's 'Clasico' proved unfounded. The league leaders moved 15 points clear of Atletico Madrid at the top while Villarreal stay sixth. The Yellow Submarine are only three points ahead of Sevilla, however, who climbed back into the Europa League qualification

spots with a well-deserved win over Real. Zinedine Zidane said he wanted to maintain momentum ahead of their Champions League final against Liverpool on May 26 but Marcelo, Luka Modric and Cristiano Ronaldo were among those not even included in his squad.

Sevilla took full advantage as Wissam Ben Yedder, Miguel Layoun and a Sergio Ramos own-goal put them three up, before Real substitute Borja Mayoral and a late Ramos penalty late gave Real a flattering close result.

Barca drew last weekend against Real, despite playing the entire second half with 10 men, and they now need only avoid defeat in matches away at Levante and home to Real Sociedad to complete the campaign as invincibles. It would be the first time a team has finished a 38-game La Liga season unbeaten and the first in any format since Real avoided defeat in a division of only 10 teams in 1932. "In the end we have scored two great goals, we are happy about this and we keep the run going," Valverde said.

Already crowned champions and winners of the Copa del Rey, Barca were controversially denied a guard of honour by Real but Villarreal were happy to perform the 'pasillo' as the hosts

walked out before kick-off.

Valverde left some key players out, with Marc-Andre ter Stegen, Luis Suarez, Jordi Alba and Ivan Rakitic all missing from the starting line-up. Messi, however, was included despite calls for the Argentinian now to be rested ahead of this summer's World Cup. It meant a start for Dembele, who took his chance to impress with the stand-out performance of the night. Dembele has endured a difficult debut season since joining for 147m euros from Borussia Dortmund last year but Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu said this week he is not for sale, and the 20-year-old delivered the perfect response.

His run that set up Coutinho's opener in the 11th minute was arguably the moment of the match as he picked up the ball 10 yards inside Villarreal's half before driving past three defenders and unleashing a shot.

Villarreal goalkeeper Sergio Asenjo palmed the ball away but only to Coutinho, who was left with a tap-in. Dembele then grabbed a late brace, his first an easy finish after a brilliant run by Rakitic down the right, his second coming after he sped away from Villarreal's defence, and lifted the ball over the helpless Asenjo.

FOCUS

Turkey bans Turan for record 16 games

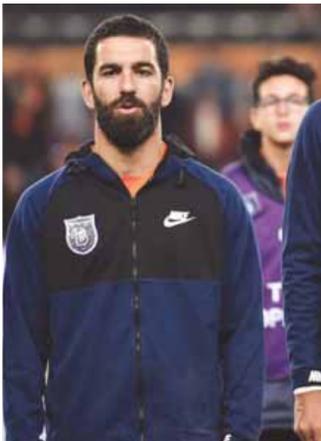
AFP
Istanbul

Turkish football authorities yesterday banned the country's best known player Arda Turan, on loan at Super Lig contenders Basaksehir from Barcelona, for a record 16 games after he shoved and verbally abused a referee.

Turan – who will now miss the last two rounds of this season and almost half of next season – was banned for 10 matches for attacking the assistant referee, three matches for insulting him and another three matches for threatening him. "In total he is suspended for 16 matches," the Turkish Football Federation (TFF) said in a statement following a meeting of its disciplinary committee.

Turkish media said the punishment was the lengthiest ever handed to a player in the history of the Turkish game. He was also fined 39,000 lira (\$9,200). Basaksehir, contenders for the league title this season, had been leading 1-0 to Sivasspor in the May 4 game but conceded a late equaliser in a major blow to their championship hopes.

Seeking to launch a final attack down the wing, Turan felt the assistant referee's decision had gone against him and marched up to the official, remonstrating in his face



and then shoving him firmly back with both hands. Turan was then given an instant red card by the match referee and could be seen continuing to rant as he marched off the pitch.

Basaksehir chairman Goksel Gumusdag said he did not approve of Turan's actions

and vowed the club would also punish the player. But he accused the TFF of double standards and said that Basaksehir would go to arbitration in a bid to have the suspension reduced.

"As the Basaksehir family we cannot agree to this... Arda Turan should have been given a ban of 6-8 matches," Gumusdag said. Turan joined Basaksehir this season on loan from Barcelona, where he had largely endured an unhappy spell on the bench after joining from Atletico Madrid.

Currently third in the Super Lig, Basaksehir have risen from obscurity to challenge the traditional Istanbul giants in the last three seasons. Critics deride the team as a pro-government outfit but this is rejected by the club.

Turan, who has won 100 caps for Turkey, makes no secret of his admiration for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who attended his wedding earlier this year. The new incident came with Turkish football facing one of its biggest crises in recent years after an Istanbul derby Turkish Cup semi final between Fenerbahce and Besiktas was abandoned last month due to crowd violence.

Fenerbahce were facing Akhisar late last night in the final after being given a walkover when Besiktas refused to turn up to the resumption of the abandoned game.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Kane fires Spurs into Champions League as Chelsea falter

Only defeat for Champions League finalists Liverpool at home to Brighton at the weekend will give Chelsea any chance of a top-four finish



Huddersfield Town's players celebrate after draw with Chelsea yesterday ensured their stay in the premier league next season. (Reuters)

AFP
London

Harry Kane fired Tottenham Hotspur into next season's Champions League as Chelsea faltered in a 1-1 draw at home to Huddersfield on Wednesday night that secured survival for the Terriers. A point for Huddersfield also ensures Swansea will join West Brom and Stoke in being relegated to the Championship barring a 10-goal swing in goal difference between the Welsh side and Southampton on the final day of the season on Sunday.

At the other end of the table, only defeat for Champions League finalists Liverpool at home to Brighton at the weekend will give Chelsea any chance of a top-four finish as their late season charge came undone at Stamford Bridge.

Spurs capitalised on Chelsea's slip-up to ensure they will have Champions League football for a third consecutive campaign when they move into a new 62,000 capacity stadium next season. "For the club (it) is a massive thing to move to the new stadium and play Champions League," said Tottenham boss Mauricio Pochettino.

Tottenham had won just one of their previous five matches and were again far from their best in a nervy display. But Kane proved to be their talisman once more as his 39th goal of the season just after half-time was enough to move Spurs above Liverpool into third.

A surprisingly much-changed Chelsea side from the one that beat Liverpool four days ago fell behind when Laurent Depoi-



Tottenham's Harry Kane celebrates after scoring against Newcastle. (Reuters)

forced the ball home five minutes into the second-half. Recognising the error of his team selection, Antonio Conte threw on Olivier Giroud and Eden Hazard from the bench, and was quickly rewarded when Marcos Alonso levelled just after the hour mark. "We had so many chances and you must be good to take them. It is not the first time that we are not clinical," lamented Conte, who ducked questions over his future.

However, Huddersfield held on desperately in the final half hour to secure the vital point that guaranteed survival

on their return to the top flight for the first time in 45 years. "I was shocked that we had the lead! People said we had no chance, I will not criticise one of them because they were right," said Huddersfield manager David Wagner.

"We were everything but a Premier League club last summer, but we have given it a go. We have showed everybody that we are humble but we are ambitious."

At the Etihad, champions Manchester City added three more records to a sensational season by breaking the previous best Premier League marks for wins,

points and goals in a 3-1 victory over Brighton. Pep Guardiola's men also bid farewell to Yaya Toure in the Ivorian's final home game in City colours. Toure was an inspirational figure in City's first two title wins of a free-spending era under Sheikh Mansour's ownership.

However, he has been relegated to a supporting role this season in a supremely talented squad that has now racked up 31 wins, 105 goals and 97 points to beat Chelsea's hitherto records of 30 wins, 103 goals and 95 points. "Thank you for being such a wonderful teammate," City captain Vincent Kompany told Toure. "If there is ever going to be a legend at this club it is this man." Leroy Sane bagged a hat-trick of assists for City as Danilo, Bernardo Silva and Fernandinho found the net.

Arsene Wenger's penultimate game in charge of Arsenal ended in depressingly familiar fashion as the 10-man Gunners were defeated 3-1 at Leicester. Arsenal remain the only team in England's top four leagues without a point away from home this year having now lost seven straight Premier League games on the road.

Kelechi Iheanacho had already fired the Foxes into an early lead before Arsenal were reduced to 10 men when Konstantinos Mavropanos was shown a straight red card for hauling down Iheanacho. Pierre Emerick Aubameyang scored his ninth Arsenal goal in just 13 appearances since a club record move from Borussia Dortmund in January to draw the visitors level. But Arsenal were left ruing another refereeing decision as Demarai Gray tumbled inside the area and Jamie Vardy rifled home the resulting penalty before Riyad Mahrez added a late third for Leicester.

SPOTLIGHT

'It's not easy to say goodbye', says Wenger

AFP
London

Arsene Wenger admits his long goodbye to Arsenal has been a bit-tersweet experience as he prepares to finally say farewell on Sunday. The Frenchman will take charge of Arsenal for the last time as his 22-year reign comes to an end with the Gunners' Premier League clash at Huddersfield this weekend.

The 68-year-old has been on a prolonged farewell tour since Arsenal announced on April 20 that he had agreed to part ways with the north London club following another troubled season. Wenger has tried to stay focused on football, but he conceded it hasn't always been easy amid all the nostalgia triggered by his impending departure.

"I enjoyed some aspects of it, yes - and not all," Wenger said during his final pre-match press conference at Arsenal's training base yesterday. "It was not always easy to cut slowly with what you do everyday and always you want to do it as well as you can and you don't want to forget to thank people who deserve it. There are some people here who I employed 20 years ago who did fight for me every single day so it is not easy to say goodbye."

While Arsenal have insisted Wenger's exit was on mutual terms, the Gunners boss has dropped several hints that he would have preferred to stay on for the final year of his contract. But that was impossible after Arsenal's dismal run left them languishing in sixth in the Premier League amid growing fan unrest at Wenger's failure to win the title since 2004.

The final weeks of Wenger's reign have seen that inconsistent form continue as the Gunners crashed out of the Europa League semi-final against Atletico Madrid - condemning the club to another season without Champions League football. A 3-1 defeat at Leicester on Wednesday

leaves Arsenal without an away league point in 2018.

The highlights of Wenger's farewell have been home victories over West Ham and Burnley, the latter followed by an emotional on-pitch presentation to mark his final match in charge at the Emirates Stadium. Wenger would have liked the announcement of his departure to have been delayed until the end of the season to avoid all the attention.

"Yes, of course. Because there was more questioning as well, you do not feel the same adhesion to what you do and when you stay here for such a long period you question yourself 'is it time now to go or not?'" he said. "We live in a society where people want quick change and that has changed in recent years."

Wenger led Arsenal to three Premier League titles and seven FA Cups, as well as reaching the Champions League final in 2006 and transforming English football with his ground-breaking commitment to sports science.

Those feats will see Wenger ranked as Arsenal's greatest manager, but the urbane Frenchman's professional image sometimes obscured his fierce will to win. He engaged in long-running feuds with Jose Mourinho and Alex Ferguson, while battling several bosses in touchline rows that turned physical.

"I'm very passionate and at a very young age, I realised that if I wanted to survive in this job, I had to get control of my emotions or I wouldn't survive," he said. "There's a long learning process of controlling who you really are. Control the animal that is inside you. That helps me a lot."

"I went through some fantastic periods in my life, and as well some more difficult periods. The fact that I managed to keep control of my emotions and reactions helped me a lot to do my job. You have seen the real Arsene Wenger, one aspect of me, which is a desperate guy who wants to win football games. That's the thing that matters. That's what is a really big part of my personality."



Arsene Wenger will take charge of Arsenal for the last time as his 22-year reign comes to an end with the Gunners' Premier League clash at Huddersfield this weekend. (AFP)

FOCUS

Rooney agrees 'deal in principle' to move to MLS: Reports

AFP
London

Wayne Rooney has agreed a "deal in principle" to join Major League Soccer side DC United from Premier League club Everton, reports said yesterday. It has been suggested a £12.5m (\$17m) deal has been agreed that could see the 32-year-old leave his boyhood club just 12 months after rejoining them from Manchester United. Reports say Rooney has been offered a contract until the end of the 2020 season, although the MLS transfer window does not open until July.

DC United are currently rock-bottom of the MLS Eastern Conference table with five points from seven games. Earlier this week, Everton manager Sam Allardyce said he wanted England's and Manchester United's record goalscorer to see out the final year of his contract next season.

"There have been rumours about Wayne going abroad, China or America. It would have to be massive for him to want leave

Everton," the Toffees boss said. Allardyce and Rooney have had their differences and the player's show of dissent when substituted in April's Merseyside derby resulted in clear-the-air talks between the pair.

Rooney, who first burst onto the scene aged just 16 at Everton, is the club's top scorer this season with 11 goals but he has not scored since December 18. Allardyce has played him in a midfield role in the second half of the season in an attempt to inject some creativity into the team but that has impacted on the player's personal form and led to growing frustration.

Neither Everton nor Rooney's agents were available for comment, while sources at DC United said they did not comment on player speculation. The former England captain left United last year on a free transfer following 13 trophy-laden years after becoming a peripheral figure under Jose Mourinho.

He talked about how he wanted to play a part in Everton winning silverware after a long trophy drought, dating back to their 1995 FA Cup win.



ROUND-UP

Guardiola eyes 100 points for Man City

Pep Guardiola is targeting 100 points to cap an "almost perfect season" after champions Manchester City set a hat-trick of Premier League records and home fans said farewell to veteran midfielder Yaya Toure. City's 3-1 win against Brighton on Wednesday took them to 97 points and 105 goals for the season as they registered their 31st win of the campaign - all three are new records. On his final home appearance as a City player, Toure, who is leaving the club at the end of the season after eight years, captained the side.

City boss Guardiola said: "97 points, a lot of goals, a lot of wins - that's a consequence of the season we have done. It's good. Now it's one more game (away against Southampton on Sunday). We're going to try for 100 points and finish this almost perfect season in the Premier League. It's fantastic because we did that (break the records) in the day we always will remember - the day for Yaya."

Guardiola said he agreed with those who argue that City need to win more titles to be considered the equals of the great sides of the past, including Liverpool and Manchester United.

MOURINHO WANTS POGBA TO STAY AT MAN UTD

Jose Mourinho says he wants Paul Pogba to stay at Manchester United as fresh reports linked the midfielder with a move away from Old Trafford, this time to French giants Paris Saint-Germain.

The Frenchman, 25, has endured a difficult season at Old Trafford, with Mourinho leaving him out of the starting line-up for both legs of the Champions League last-16 defeat by Sevilla.

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola said last month that Pogba had been offered to the club by agent Mino Raiola during the January transfer window and it has been reported in recent days that PSG have also been asked if they want the midfielder.

Mourinho said last week that there was "no chance" of goalkeeper David de Gea, voted the club's player of the year, leaving after he was linked with a move to Real Madrid. Yet the manager was far more equivocal when asked about Pogba, despite saying he wanted the midfielder to stay. "I think he's going to be here next season," Mourinho said. "That's my feeling."

Pogba joined United's youth academy from Le Havre in 2009, then left for Juventus in 2012 after getting limited first-team opportunities at Old Trafford. He returned in 2016 for a club-record fee of £89m, and helped United win the League Cup and the Europa League in his first season but has since suffered injury problems and reportedly had a falling out with Mourinho.

The United manager, asked to guarantee that Pogba would not leave, made clear that he wanted the player to stay, but was cautious beyond about his long-term future. "I can give the guarantee that I don't want him to leave, that the club doesn't want to sell him and I can give you the guarantee that we don't have any approach from him or his

agent or from any club," he said. "In this moment for me, he's staying, yes."

ZIGANDA TO LEAVE ATHLETIC BILBAO AT END OF SEASON

Athletic Bilbao coach Jose "Cuco" Zidanda will leave at the end of the season after a disappointing campaign which has left them on course for their lowest La Liga finish in 11 seasons, the club said.

"This situation causes us pain but the interests of the club are above everything," club president Josu Urrutia said at a news conference. A former coach of the club's reserve team Bilbao Athletic, Zidanda was promoted to first-team coach last year when Ernesto Valverde left for Barcelona.

Valverde secured European football at Bilbao in each of his four seasons there but Zidanda's side lie 14th in the standings with two games remaining in the campaign. They have secured survival but unless they overhaul 13th-placed Alaves they will record their lowest finish in the top flight since coming 17th in 2006/07.

"I felt strong enough to continue but I understand this decision," said Zidanda. "I leave feeling proud and grateful to have been at such a unique club."

Athletic, who select only players with ties to the Basque country, have won eight Liga titles and 23 King's Cups and are the only team, other than Real Madrid and Barcelona, never to have been relegated. According to reports in the Spanish media, former Sevilla and Celta Vigo coach Eduardo Berizzo is the frontrunner to succeed Zidanda.

FOCUS

Skipper Paine ready for hostile reception in England

If we can play well as a team and show we're moving forward then hopefully the talk around that stuff will die off'

Reuters
Sydney

Australia's players must be ready for a hostile reception in England over the ball-tampering scandal when they tour the country for next month's limited-overs series, stand-in captain Tim Paine said yesterday.

Paine will lead a new-look squad for the five-match one-day international series, with former skipper Steve Smith and vice-captain David Warner suspended for their parts in the scandal in South Africa in March.

It will be the first series since the scandal for Australia, who will also play a T20 match against England during their June 13-27 tour, a warm up for the 50-over World Cup in the same country next year.

"It's certainly going to be raised. The English are going to be basking in the glory of what's happened," Paine said in Hobart yesterday.

"Guys are certainly going to have to be ready for that.

"If we can play well as a team and show we're moving forward then hopefully the talk around that stuff will die off."

Paine replaced Smith as test captain after the tampering scandal broke during the third test of the South Africa tour in March. Knowing that a permanent ODI captain will be named later in the year, he hopes he can at least take advantage of the situation to cement his place in the 50-over side.

"I certainly wasn't expecting to be part of the one-day set-up going forward - that was sort of the information I was given," he said.

"My goal is to make it last. I want to be involved in the World Cup if I possibly can."

Australia's selectors have installed Aaron Finch as the ODI team's vice-captain in place of the disgraced Warner and named the Victorian as captain of the T20 side.

The tampering case resulted in year-long bans to Smith and Warner, with batsman Cam-

Captain Paine (right) says he would 'absolutely' welcome David Warner (left) back into team after ban is over.



Australian skipper Paine denies Warner rift

Australian skipper Tim Paine yesterday denied David Warner was a divisive figure widely disliked within the team, insisting he would be welcomed back after his ban for a cheating scandal. Disgraced former vice-captain Warner is serving a year-long suspension for his part in the plan to use sandpaper to tamper with the ball during the third Test in South Africa in March. He was considered the mastermind of the scandal that rocked the sport and also saw former captain Steve Smith and batsman Cameron Bancroft suspended. Respected News Corp cricket writer Robert Craddock this week questioned whether Warner could fit back into a team under the leadership of new coach Justin Langer given "half the players can't stand him". But Paine said the comments were "off the

mark" and "really unfair". "I certainly like Craddock's writing and when he's on TV I'm a fan of his," Paine told reporters in Hobart in his first press conference since officially being made one-day and Test skipper. "But I thought he was a little bit off the mark there and really unfair on David Warner as a person and as a cricketer." He said while Warner's competitiveness might sometimes "rub the opposition up the wrong way," he was well received within the Australian camp. "Within our team he's someone with that energy and that competitiveness who we love playing with," he said. "There's a side of David that people don't know which is a really loyal, really caring and a good team man to have around." Langer, who was appointed this month to

replace Darren Lehmann who quit as coach in the wake of the tampering scandal, has said he would welcome Warner back, but only if he meets his behavioural standards. Paine said he had been in touch with all suspended players. "All three are certainly going to be welcomed back into our team, if they're prepared to toe the line with our new brand of cricket, which I know they will," he said. "I know they'll all do the right thing and score enough runs to be back in our side and they'll be certainly be welcomed back." Speaking to SEN radio this week, Craddock claimed some in the team had contacted Cricket Australia saying they didn't want to play with Warner again. "If (Langer) wants cultural shift, how do you have cultural shift and Warner in the same team? That's my question," he said.

eron Bancroft suspended for nine months. Head coach Darren Lehmann, who was cleared of wrongdoing, resigned and

was replaced last week by Justin Langer. The damage to Australia's reputation was far-reaching, with local fans disgusted and a

major sponsor abruptly ending its support of the team. Paine said the players cannot afford to go overboard again. "There's go-

ing to be times where it does get heated. We've just got to make sure we're doing the right thing at all times," Paine said.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Afghanistan to host Bangladesh T20 series in India

AFF
New Delhi

Afghanistan will host Bangladesh for three Twenty20 internationals in India next month, the country's cricket board chief said.

The Afghanistan cricket team, which has had its training base in India since 2015, will play their matches on June 3, 5 and 7 in the northern Indian city of Dehradun.

"ACB is delighted to host Bangladesh for the T20I series in Dehradun in early June which will be a good opportunity for both sides to play competitive cricket," Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) chairman Atif Mashal said in a statement.

Afghanistan cricket CEO

Shafiq Stanikzai said selectors would pick from the pool of players currently taking part in a training camp in India.

"These matches will be important for both sides to gain valuable points in the ICC rankings and the lead-up to the 2020 ICC World Twenty20," Stanikzai said.

Bangladesh Cricket Board chief executive Nizam Uddin Chowdhury said he was looking forward to "a very competitive series".

"Afghanistan have some fine players for this format and they will have the advantage of familiarity with the conditions in Dehradun," he said.

Afghanistan, who became a full ICC member along with Ireland last year, will play the first Test match in their history - against top-ranked India - starting June 14 in Bangalore.

SPOTLIGHT

UAE-based coach suspended over spot fixing offer

AFF
Karachi

United Arab Emirates based coach Irfan Ansari was suspended following allegations from Pakistan's captain Sarfraz Ahmed that he was approached to participate in a spot fixing scheme, Cricket's administrative body said yesterday.

The International Cricket Council (ICC) said Ansari was charged with three counts of breaching the body's anti-corruption code.

"Ansari has been provisionally suspended with immediate effect and has been charged for directly soliciting, inducing, enticing or encouraging a participant to breach the code and for failure or refusal to cooperate with the anti-corruption unit's investigation," said an ICC release.

Ansari, who is originally from Pakistan, has coached a number of small professional clubs in the UAE for years.

The ICC said the suspension comes after Ansari failed to provide requested information to group's anti-corruption wing on two separate occasions.

The charges centre on Sar-

fraz's admission to the Pakistan Cricket Board and the ICC that Ansari had approached him about spot fixing during the one-day series between Pakistan and Sri Lanka in the UAE last October.

Spot-fixing involves determining the outcome of a specific part of a match rather than the overall result, and is therefore harder to detect than match-fixing. Ansari will now have two weeks to respond to the charges.

"The ICC will not make any further comment in respect of these charges at this stage," said the body in a statement.

The PCB took extra measures to stem spot-fixing, with all six teams in this year's league monitored by anti-corruption officers.

Pakistan has a history of fixing cases, the latest being last year's scandal which rocked the Pakistan Super League held in UAE.

A spot-fixing case during Pakistan's tour of England in 2010 ended in five-year bans on then Test captain Salman Butt, Mohamed Asif and Mohamed Amir.

Pakistan leg-spinner Danish Kaneria is also serving a life ban on charges of spot-fixing during a county match in England in 2009.

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Pant's century in vain as Sunrisers beat Daredevils

IAN S
New Delhi

Rishabh Pant's valiant century went in vain as Sunrisers Hyderabad made light work of Delhi Daredevils' challenging 187/5 to romp home by nine wickets and consolidate their stay at the top of the Indian Premier League (IPL) points table.

The visitors overcame the early loss of opener Alex Hales (14) as the other opener Shikhar Dhawan (92 not out off 50 balls; 4x9, 6x4) and skipper Kane Williamson (83 not out off 53 balls; 4x8, 6x2) stitched together a 176-run second stand to demoralise bottom-placed Delhi's spirited effort midway into the match.

With the loss, Delhi's hopes of reaching the play-off are up in the smoke and can now only play the party spoilers in the cash-rich tournament. Returning to his home ground, Dhawan started the chase by slamming pacer Harshal Patel for a boundary through point even as Williamson continued his glorious run with the willow this season.

The Delhi bowlers started losing the plot right after the powerplay when the right-left duo of Williamson and Dhawan propelled the Sunrisers to 51/1 before racing to 91/1 midway into the innings.

Dhawan used the flat Ferozshah Kotla track to the most, slamming the Delhi bowlers all over the park to bring up his half century in 30 balls before Williamson caught up with the southpaw to race to his sixth fifty of the season in 38 balls.

By now, Delhi had lost all hopes of a comeback as the Sunrisers duo handsomely outbatted the efforts of the hosts with seven balls to spare.

Earlier, Pant once again stepped up to the occasion with his maiden IPL century to rescue Delhi from a dismal start and help them post a

challenging 187/5.

Involved in two avoidable run-outs, Pant compensated the miscommunication on the field with a blistering unbeaten 63-ball 128 which contained 15 boundaries and seven sixes, to arrest a careless start from the hosts.

Electing to bat, Delhi had themselves to blame for a sluggish start which saw them lose the opening duo of Prithvi Shaw (9) and Jason Roy (11) in consecutive deliveries before skipper Shreyas Iyer (3) departed off a silly run-out.

Fortunately for Delhi, the fall of three quick wickets did not affect Pant, whose purple patch with the bat continued and together with Harshal Patel (24 from 17 balls; 6x2) steadied the ship with a 55-run stand for the fourth wicket.

With five overs left in the innings, Delhi stared at some sort of respectability before another miscommunication between the batsmen ended Patel's stay.

Pant, however continued his onslaught as he launched Shikhar for a massive six to bring up his half century in 36 balls even as the out-of-form Glenn Maxwell (9) remained a mere spectator to the southpaw's fireworks.

The Delhi stumper, who became the youngest to 1,000 IPL runs, immediately moved into the 90s when he clobbered Afghan leg-spinner Rashid Khan for a four and a six off consecutive balls before treating Bhuvneshwar Kumar with disdain.

Pant then muscled pacer Siddharth Kaul's full toss to the deep midwicket boundary to bring up his maiden IPL ton in mere 56 balls before slamming Bhuvneshwar for two fours and three consecutive sixes to milk 26 off the final over.

Brief Scores: Delhi Daredevils 187/5 (Rishabh Pant 128 not out, Harshal Patel 24; Shikhar Al Hasan 4/27) lose to Sunrisers Hyderabad 191/1 (Shikhar Dhawan 92 not out, Kane Williamson 83 not out) by 9 wickets.



Delhi Daredevils batsman Rishabh Pant plays a shot during their IPL match against Sunrisers Hyderabad at the Feroz Shah Kotla Cricket Stadium yesterday. (AFP)



Sunrisers' Shikhar Dhawan in action during the IPL match against Delhi Daredevils yesterday. (AFP)

NBA

Celtics beat Sixers to book spot in East Conference finals

'We got a lot of heart and a lot of talent on this team, nobody expected us to get this far'

AFP
Los Angeles

Rookie Jayson Tatum scored the go-ahead layup with 22 seconds remaining in the fourth as the Boston Celtics punched their ticket to the NBA Eastern Conference finals with a 114-112 win over Philadelphia.

Tatum made it 111-109 after catching a pass from Marcus Smart under the basket and Terry Rozier helped seal the win by making a pair of clutch free throws with nine seconds left as the Celtics eliminated the 76ers four games to one.

"We got a lot of heart and a lot of talent on this team, nobody expected us to get this far," said Tatum.

The Celtics advance to the NBA's final four to face LeBron James and the Cleveland Cavaliers for the second straight year for a berth in the finals.

Boston was coming off a defeat in game four, but managed to impose their will on the 76ers down the stretch in Wednesday's thriller, improving to 7-0 on their home court in these playoffs.

The 76ers made the Celtics work in a game that featured 21 lead changes.

But Philadelphia had dropped the first three games and were ultimately unable to become the first team to rally from 0-3 down to win an NBA playoff series. Teams have now gone 130-0 when leading 3-0.

Forward Tatum tallied 25 points, guard Jaylen Brown had 24 and Rozier finished with 17 points and six rebounds for the Celtics who are 37-0 when taking a 2-0 lead in a playoff series.

Joel Embiid and Dario Saric, of Croatia, each scored 27 points, while Australia's Ben Simmons finished with 18 points and eight rebounds and six assists for Philadelphia, who are 0-15 when losing the first two games of a series.

Tatum is the second rookie this post-season to notch seven straight 20-plus point playoff games. He joined Utah's Donovan Mitchell, who did it over the first two rounds for a Jazz team ousted by the Houston Rockets on Tuesday.

Boston Celtics forward Jayson Tatum attempts a layup against the Philadelphia 76ers during the first-half in game five of the second round of the 2018 NBA Playoffs at the TD Garden. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports



Embiid had an opportunity to tie it after Tatum's layup but was guarded closely and missed the shot. He grabbed his own rebound but lost that too when Rozier slapped the ball away with 10.8 seconds remaining.

Rozier made it 113-109 with his free throws but then a JJ Reddick's three pointer got the 76ers back to one point with 3.8 seconds left.

Smart went to the line and missed his first free throw. He tried to miss the second which would have run the clock down but it rattled in stopping time and allowing Philadelphia to try one more play. The 76ers then attempted a Hail Mary pass down the length of the court but it was intercepted by Smart who had raced back to defend after his bungled free.

"That's a Marcus Smart sequence," said Brown of his Celtic teammate. "The first guy

back and he makes the steal. He didn't care if he runs into somebody or hurts himself."

Embiid ditches mask

Embiid, who was wearing a black oval mask to protect his face because of a fracture, took the vizard off for the final sequence.

"The thought was this could be the last possession of the season. I was against all the doctors but I had to toss it aside," Embiid said.

Both the Celtics and Cavaliers have undergone roster overhauls since the Cleveland ousted the Celtics in five games last year. Only four players on each side remain from that series.

The Conference finals are now set as the East series begins Sunday at the Boston Garden and the West on Monday when the Houston Rockets host the

Golden State Warriors.

Asked how the Celtics were going to shutdown James, Tatum gave his honest reply, "It is my first year. I don't have the answer. I am going to enjoy this tonight and then go to practice tomorrow and figure it out."

Al Horford said they will be ready.

"People from the outside probably didn't expect much from us. But I've seen the way these guys prepare and they want to be great."

THE SCHEDULE
Best-of-seven conference finals

Eastern Conference Finals
Cleveland Cavaliers v Boston Celtics
Sun, May 13: Cleveland at Boston
Tue, May 15: Cleveland at Boston
Sat, May 19: Boston at Cleve-

land
Mon, May 21: Boston at Cleveland

Wed, May 23: Cleveland at Boston (if necessary)

Fri, May 25: Boston at Cleveland (if necessary)

Sun, May 27: Cleveland at Boston (if necessary)

Western Conference Finals

Golden State Warriors v Houston Rockets

Mon, May 14: Golden State at Houston

Wed, May 16: Golden State at Houston

Sun, May 20: Houston at Golden State

Tue, May 22: Houston at Golden State

Thu, May 24: Golden State at Houston (if necessary)

Sat, May 26: Houston at Golden State (if necessary)

Mon, May 28: Golden State at Houston (if necessary)

NBA Finals begin on May 31

NHL

Bruins' Marchand remorseful toward playoff antics

Reuters
Boston

Boston Bruins forward Brad Marchand made headlines for the wrong reasons during the NHL playoffs, and he knows it.

Marchand, who was told by the league to stop licking the faces of his opponents, told reporters Wednesday that he wants to clean up his act in order to avoid embarrassing the team.

"The biggest thing for me is taking a pretty hard look in the mirror and realise that some of the things I'm doing have much bigger consequences," Marchand said. "The last thing I ever want to do is bring embarrassment to my teammates and the organisation like I did."

"I have to be a lot better. I know I have said that in the past, but I think that's got to be the thing that I really work on the most."

Marchand first licked Leo Komarov of the Toronto Maple Leafs during the first round of the playoffs, then repeated the act on the Tampa Bay Lightning's Ryan Callahan during the second round. The Lightning were none too happy with the gesture, with coach Jon Cooper saying, "There is absolutely no place in our game for that."

"Some things I've done clearly need some fixing," said Marchand. "So I think that's going to be the biggest thing that I take away from what's happened the last few days - to actually take a look and really understand these things have much bigger consequences."

"When you play a certain way with no consequences for 25 years, it's hard to flip a switch and have it all be gone. Maybe I

haven't paid enough attention to it, because I thought I could get away with it because I was being a good player. If I wasn't having the years that I was having, would I be in the league? I don't know. Would the Bruins put up with it? Probably not."

Marchand, who turns 30 on Friday, led the Bruins with 85 points (34 goals, 51 assists) during the regular season. He was second on the team with 17 points (four goals, 13 assists) in the playoffs.

Marchand noted he must improve his behaviour if he's ever going to grow into a leader on the team like Patrice Bergeron or captain Zdeno Chara.

"That's something I've wanted to work on for the last few years, to move more into that role," he said. "I gotta figure some out before that's really going to happen. To get to that next level. I gotta get rid of that stuff."

Chara, for one, believes Marchand will take the steps needed to get there.

"He realises he needs to get better," said Chara. "And he will. I am sure that he is going to have some thoughts about some of this stuff... and he will be better."



Eagles sign RB Jones, lock up draft class

The Philadelphia Eagles added some backfield depth Wednesday, or maybe even got a steal, after signing running back Matt Jones to a two-year deal.

Jones, a third-round pick of the Washington Redskins in 2015, spent last season bouncing up and down from the practice squad to the team roster with the Indianapolis Colts, where he played in five games, rushing for 14 yards on five carries.

Fumble issues wore out his welcome in Washington after two seasons, where he coughed up the ball eight times, losing six of them. His best year came as a rookie when he rushed for 490 yards on 144 carries and three touchdowns and added 19 receptions, 340 yards and a TD through the air.

Jones may have an uphill climb to make the Eagles with Jay Ajayi, Corey Clement, Darren Sproles, Wendell Smallwood and Donnel Pumphrey already loading up the roster, but Jones is bigger and stronger than all of them and has shown enough speed to be a feature back.

In other moves, the Eagles waived two-year veteran wide receiver Dom Williams, who has never played in an NFL game, and also signed its entire 2018 draft class.

Second-round pick (No 49 overall) Dallas Goedert was the defending Super Bowl champ's first pick in this year's draft and led the signings Wednesday. The tight end from South Dakota State was a two-time FCS All-American and two-time Walter Payton Award nominee. Other draftees signed were cornerback Avonte Maddox (No 125), defensive end Josh Sweat (150th), tackle Matt Pryor (206th) and tackle Jordan Mailata (233rd).

MLB

Dodgers ride small ball to win over D-backs

Reuters
Los Angeles

Chris Taylor reached base in his first four trips to the plate as the Los Angeles Dodgers proved to be opportunists, scoring twice on wild pitches on Wednesday in a 6-3 victory over the visiting Arizona Diamondbacks.

The Dodgers didn't collect a hit until the fourth inning, when Taylor singled, and didn't need a hit at all to bring home any of their first four runs. Their only RBI hit in the game was Chase Utley's two-run double in the eighth inning.

The Dodgers scored on wild pitches in the fourth and sixth innings, added another on a Kyle Farmer sacrifice fly in the sixth and one when Taylor was hit by a pitch with the bases loaded in the sixth. Taylor also walked twice.

The Dodgers won while overcoming an inside-the-park home run from the Diamondbacks' Nick Ahmed seven pitches into the game. It was the 15th inside-the-park home run in Arizona franchise history, including three last season. Daniel Descalso had the most recent one in August 2017. Ahmed's drive to centre field against Alex Wood hit off the top of the wall as Dodgers centre fielder Enrique Hernandez crashed

into the padding. Right fielder Yasiel Puig tracked down the ball, but a relay throw home was late.

The Diamondbacks cut a 4-1 deficit to 4-3 in the seventh inning on an RBI single from Paul Goldschmidt and a run-scoring groundout from AJ Pollock. The starters battled to a draw while ending their night with no-decisions. Wood gave up one run on five hits over five innings. The Diamondbacks' Patrick Corbin allowed one run on three hits over five innings. Kenley Jansen recorded his sixth save with a perfect ninth inning.

Corbin nearly escaped a bases-loaded jam with one in the fourth inning, but the Dodgers scored on a wild pitch. In the fifth, Corbin faced the same bases-loaded, one-out issue, only to escape this time when Hernandez popped up to centre field and Matt Kemp grounded into a force out.

Puig, who came off the disabled list earlier in the day after recovering from hip and ankle injuries, went 3-for-4 and scored two runs. The Dodgers won for just the fourth time in 12 games against the Diamondbacks. The teams will not meet again until the last day of August.

Cole dominates, Astros top A's

Gerrit Cole pitched his third straight overpowering game, while teammates Max Stassi and Derek Fisher stunned Daniel Mengden

with back-to-back, two-strike home runs with two outs in the seventh inning Wednesday afternoon, sending the visiting Houston Astros to a 4-1 win over the Oakland Athletics and a sweep of their three-game series.

Cole (4-1), a California native who never previously pitched in Oakland, struck out nine in six innings to run his total to 37 in his last three starts covering 21 2/3 innings. He allowed one run, which put the Astros in a 1-0 hole in the bottom of the sixth.

A one-out single by Matt Joyce and RBI double by Jed Lowrie provided the game's first scoring. The Astros, who completed a 4-2 trip, bounced right back against Mengden, who had shut out Houston on four hits before allowing the two homers.

RESULTS

Astros.....4	Athletics.....1
Yankees...9	Red Sox.....6
Padres....2	Nationals.....1
Phillies...11	Giants.....3
Dodgers...6	Diamondbacks...3
Blue Jays..5	Mariners.....2
Orioles....5	Royals.....3
Braves....5	Rays.....2
Angels....8	Rockies.....0
Pirates....6	White Sox....5
Cubs.....13	Marlins.....4
Reds.....2	Mets.....1 (10 innings)
Indians...6	Brewers.....2
Rangers...5	Tigers.....4 (10 innings)



Los Angeles Dodgers outfielders Matt Kemp (left), Kike Hernandez (centre) and Yasiel Puig celebrate after defeating the Arizona Diamondbacks at the Dodger Stadium. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports



GOLF

Scott, seeking US Open berth, returns to long putter

'I feel like my game is getting to a place where I can put top-10s together'

AFP
Ponte Vedra Beach, United States

Adam Scott has put a long putter back in his bag at the Players Championship this week as he vies to qualify for the US Open and keep his streak of major championship starts alive.

The 37-year old Australian has slipped to 71st in the world – with the top-60 in the world as of June 11th qualifying automatically for the second major of 2018, which starts on June 14 at Shinnecock Hills on New York's Long Island.

Scott's five-year exemption into the US Open from winning the 2013 Masters ended last year, raising the spectre that he could miss the championship for the first time since making his debut in 2002 at Bethpage Black.

Through last month's Masters, Scott has played 67 straight major championships, a streak stretching back through the 2001 Open Championship.

But a progression of poor performances since securing third place in the 2016 end-of-season Australian PGA Championship has seen Scott slowly slip down the world rankings.

The former world number one, who won the Players in 2004, is hoping a return to TPC Sawgrass will mark a change of better things, and he believes the long putter could help.

Scott first turned to a long putter early in 2011 and in August that year he captured the WGC-Bridgestone Invitational in Akron, Ohio.

And while Scott has since used two other long putters as well as a "regulation" putter, he said the long-shafted version in his bag this week is the first one he ever used, although current rules no longer allow it to be anchored against his body.

"It is actually the first long-handled putter I ever used from back in 2011 as I have only used three in my time of using



Adam Scott of Australia plays his shot from the third tee during the first round of The Players Championship on the Stadium Course at TPC Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, yesterday. (AFP)

long putters," he said.

"This one has a bit smaller head and a different weight to the one I finished up using, and it also feels a lot better given it is no longer anchored.

"It is the same length as I had before and it swings much better."

"I won Akron with this putter whereas the putter I won the Masters was the first

week I used it, so it's not the same putter as that this week."

Scott, who won the Players in 2004, voiced confidence that he can curb his world ranking slide.

"It is only a couple of good weeks' play and the competitor in me is never going to say I can't do it," he said. "I feel like my game is getting to a place where I can put

top-10s together.

"There have been moments of frustration," he said. "I have spoiled a lot of my golf by putting balls into the water and taking doubles at inopportune times and they have been momentum killers.

"When your confidence isn't right there and you are fighting to get it back up that's kind of shattering."

German F1 race future uncertain, says Hockenheim official

The future of Formula One racing in Germany remains uncertain for financial reasons after this year's race at Hockenheim, according to the circuit's managing director. "I don't know how it will continue," Hockenheim GmbH managing director Georg Sailer said. Sailer is set for a new round of talks with F1 bosses around Sunday's Spanish GP in Barcelona. Hockenheim will stage this season's race on July 22, with Sailer saying organisers could break even if some 70,000 fans attend the event.

Hockenheim hosted F1 races every year until 2006 and then agreed with Nuerburgring to alternate. But cash-strapped

Nuerburgring was unable to stage their grands prix in 2015 and 2017. "We will not sign another deal which bears a financial risk. The promotion fee is simply too high," Sailer said, referring to the fee which is said to be around 30 million dollars. "We are a race track which doesn't get funds from the region, the federal state or the country," he added, naming this situation unique. Sailer said the matters would improve if they had advertising rights or found investors.

Chief designer Wood leaves struggling Williams F1 team

Williams' chief designer Ed Wood has left for personal reasons, the struggling former Formula One world champions

said yesterday. The team, who have not won a race since the 2012 Spanish Grand Prix, are last in the constructors' standings after four rounds despite using the same winning engines as champions Mercedes. Wood, 50, helped create the FW36 and FW37 cars that took the British-based team to third place overall in the 2014 and 2015 seasons. Williams thanked the Briton in a statement at the Spanish Grand Prix for his work over 12 years with them. This year's FW41 car followed a different aerodynamic concept to its predecessor but has proved a disappointment in the hands of Canadian teenager Lance Stroll and Russian rookie Sergey Sirotkin. Williams had drawn a blank until Stroll finished eighth in Azerbaijan at the end of April. Sirotkin retired from that race after a first lap collision and has a three place

grid penalty for Sunday's race at the Circuit de Catalunya.

F1 cars to be slower again in 2019, to make overtaking easier

Formula One cars will be a little slower again from next season onwards in an effort to make racing more attractive, the technical chief of the ruling body FIA, Nikolaus Tombažis, said yesterday. "We expect to lose around 1.5 seconds per lap," Tombažis said in the pits at the Spanish Grand Prix. The reason behind the lower speed are planned aerodynamic changes which are to make overtaking easier. The 2019 cars are to have simpler front wings and lower and wider rear wings.

RUGBY

England recall Cipriani for tour of South Africa

AFP
Twickenham, United Kingdom

Danny Cipriani's three years in the England wilderness came to an end when he was recalled by coach Eddie Jones yesterday for next month's tour of South Africa.

The Wasps fly-half, regarded as one of the most talented English players of his generation, has not played for England since he built-up to the 2015 World Cup – when Stuart Lancaster was the Red Rose coach.

Cipriani's stop-start international career has been interrupted by injuries, while his occasionally colourful off-field lifestyle has not endeared him to several England coaches.

But the 30-year-old has been in fine form for Wasps this season and he now has the chance to add to a tally of 14 Tests caps, the first won back in 2008, after persuading Australian coach Jones to include him in a 34-man squad for a three-Test series against the Springboks in June.

Hurricanes captain Brad Shields, set to join Wasps, was one of seven uncapped players in Jones's squad despite being midway through the Super Rugby season.

With regular skipper Dylan Hartley still recovering from concussion, Saracens centre

Owen Farrell has been appointed England captain for the tour, while the like likes of Danny Care, James Haskell and Dan Cole have been rested.

England head to South Africa on the back of a miserable end to their Six Nations which saw them lose successive matches to Scotland, France and Grand Slam champions Ireland – their worst run under Jones since the former Wallaby and Japan boss took over after their first-round exit at the 2015 World Cup.

While England have won Tests in South Africa, they've yet to win a series there. Indeed they've only been successful in 23% of their matches against the Springboks in South Africa, with the last win coming in Bloemfontein in 2000.

"Our tour to South Africa will be the most exciting challenge for us as a group since 2016," said Jones in a Rugby Football Union statement. "We have an opportunity to create some history next month and win the Test series, something no England side has done before," he added.

But although South Africa are traditionally one of rugby union's strongest nations, the Springboks suffered a woeful couple of seasons under former coach Allister Coetzee.

There is optimism, however, that new boss Rassie Erasmus can spark a revival ahead of next year's World Cup in Japan.



SPOTLIGHT

Australia boss Castle blasts predictable Super Rugby

AFP
Sydney

Rugby Australia boss Raelene Castle says the performance of the country's Super Rugby teams is not good enough and the tournament needs to be more competitive to flourish.

"We need teams that are performing consistently and that any team – be that South African, New Zealand or Australian – has the capability to win," Castle, a New Zealander, told Fox Sports late Wednesday.

All-conquering New Zealand sides dominate Super Rugby with Australia's teams losing all six encounters against them this season, continuing a miserable run stretching back to 2016 that has seen Aussie sides lose the last 38 trans-Tasman matches.

The axing of the Western Force this season, reducing Australian teams to four from five, was supposed to improve the strength and depth Down Under. But little has changed.

"What we've seen this year is some better TV audiences, we've seen some better performances, but we haven't beaten a New Zealand team (and) that's still the thing that everyone is looking for," Castle said.

Super Rugby restructured this year, slimming down to 15 teams in three conferences from 18 in four, in a bid to keep the compe-

tion relevant.

It followed a strategy paper by governing body SANZAAR saying the previous format was "confusing, lacked integrity and was ultimately not supported by fans, stakeholders and commercial partners".

But even with 15 teams, there is apparent discord with Australian media reporting this week that disillusioned South African teams could leave once the current broadcast agreement expires in 2020 to play in Europe.

SANZAAR denied this, insisting all member unions were still on board and involved in an ongoing review to determine Super Rugby's future up to 2030.

Castle said the most important thing was to produce a competition that "has uncertainty of outcome".

"We certainly haven't had that over the last couple of years with the New Zealand team performances and that's what (does not) involve crowds, doesn't sell tickets, doesn't have people watching on the television.

"The hope that when you buy a ticket and sit down you believe your team can win – that's the competition model that hugely important and what we're striving for."

She said the structure of such a competition was what rugby authorities were working on, amid reports that a push into North America was being considered.

BOTTOMLINE

Sad Alonso hints at Formula One exit

AFP
Barcelona

Fernando Alonso yesterday bemoaned his lack of any real home advantage for this weekend's Spanish Grand Prix and hinted that he may be considering a future without Formula One next year.

The two-time world champion, who has one win at the Circuit de Catalunya to his name, told reporters that he felt saddened by the current direction of F1 and would not decide his plans for 2019 until after this year's European summer break in August.

Talking ahead of this weekend's Spanish Grand Prix, he suggested he was feeling the strain of his efforts to combine racing in different series.

"I'm attempting two world championships at the same time," he said, referring to F1 and the sports car world endurance championship, which includes the classic Le Mans 24-Hours race.

"I'm happy with the progress we did here at McLaren and the direction things are going – so I'm happy here, but it's quite demanding – especially the F1 calendar.

"The biggest thing here is how pre-



(From left) Force India's Sergio Perez, McLaren's Fernando Alonso and Renault's Carlos Sainz during a press conference ahead of the Spanish Grand Prix yesterday. (Reuters)

dictable everything is. We can put in the paper now what would be the qualifying here on Saturday, what it would be in Monaco, what it would be in Silverstone.

"So that's something you need to take into account for future decisions. This is sad in a way for Formula One, the direction everything went."

Alonso is highly regarded by all of the leading F1 drivers despite it being five years this weekend since he last won a Grand Prix.

Sitting with another Spaniard Carlos Sainz of Renault, he also grinned and complained at the fact that the Barcelona

track is used so much for winter testing.

"This year, for example, the track, they put new asphalt last winter so it's still a challenge for all of us to understand the best set-up and how you get around this new track," he explained.

"The same with the wind direction, the temperature. You know we come here over the winter with very cold temperatures and then in May you need to re-adapt a little bit, so it's always challenging."

Alonso was, however, optimistic about his McLaren team, despite a disappointing start this year, and was keen to talk about his sustained motivation.

"I kept the motivation because I'm a competitive man," he said. "I love to win. In 2013, we won here. I think the tyres were degrading a lot that year and we make an extra stop and we managed to win the race.

"And not with the quickest car. Nico (Rosberg) was on pole by six tenths or something. That was a good call by the team. In 2014, we had quite a difficult season and then the last three years you know that we struggled a lot.

"It's the same this year. As I said, I think the start has been not too bad, in terms of results especially and the number of points. My win last weekend in Spa will not change anything. I think it's two different series and two different worlds.

"It will not change anything for me. Every time that I will have a car that is close to victory, I will go for it. I did some better races in the last five years, even if the last victory was five years ago.

"Here, in the last five years, I did much better races than previously, even if I was not able to win the race.

"And the Baku race is one of the best... I will never probably do a race as I did in Baku and I finished seventh. It's difficult to see from the outside, but extremely proud and motivated every time you do a one-off performance."

CYCLING / GIRO D'ITALIA

Chaves wins sixth stage as teammate Yates takes pink

Frøome finishes tenth in first chasing group alongside defending champ Dumoulin

AFP
Nicolosi, Italy

Colombian Esteban Chaves, of the Mitchelton team, won a thrilling sixth stage of the Giro d'Italia yesterday that saw Britain's Chris Froome lose more time to his pink jersey rivals.

Chaves, taking his second Giro stage win, finished just ahead of British teammate Simon Yates, whose late surge to join the 28-year-old Colombian earned him the overall leader's pink jersey.

FDJ's Thibaut Pinot finished third, some 30 seconds behind the leading pair, after a 164km ride between Caltanissetta and Etna, with Froome finishing seconds behind the Frenchman.

There was suspense all the way as both Mitchelton riders approached the finish line, but in the end Yates sat up to allow Chaves to savour the stage victory.

"Chaves had been out on the road all day, so he deserved the stage win," said Yates, who takes the pink jersey from Australian Rohan Dennis of BMC.

Chaves was part of a 28-rider escape group, which fell apart at the foot of Sicily's Mount Etna, the highest volcano in Europe.

After a series of attacks and counter-attacks on the way up to Etna, the Colombian climbing specialist pulled away from his rivals with 5.5 km to race.

With Chaves confidently ahead on his own, Yates bided his time amid a series of further skirmishes before pulling away in commanding fashion to join the Colombian in the final kilometre.

"I felt really good, I looked across the road and everyone was looking at each other. I took a chance," added Yates.

"The start was crazy. I didn't really have to do anything, I could sit in the wheels and save energy."

Four-time Tour de France winner Froome finished in tenth place in the first chasing group alongside defending



Mitchelton-Scott's Colombian rider Esteban Chaves (left) crosses the finish line ahead of British teammate Simon Yates to win the sixth stage of the 101st Giro d'Italia at Mount Etna, Italy, yesterday. (AFP)

champion Tom Dumoulin of the Netherlands, who is now second overall at 16sec behind Yates.

From today, after three days in Sicily, the Giro continues on Italian mainland with the 159km seventh stage between Pizzo and Praia a Mare in Calabria.

STAGE 6 RESULTS (top 10)
1. Esteban Chaves (MIT) 4hr 16min 11sec

- 2. Simon Yates (MIT) same time
- 3. Thibaut Pinot (FDJ) +26sec
- 4. George Bennett (LNL) same time
- 5. Domenico Pozzovivo (BAH) +43
- 6. Miguel Angel Lopez (AST) +45
- 7. Richard Carapaz (MOV) +53
- 8. Tom Dumoulin (SUN) +1:03
- 9. Fabio Aru (EAU) +1:10
- 10. Chris Froome (SKY) +1:11

- 1. Simon Yates (MIT) 22hr 46min 03sec
- 2. Tom Dumoulin (SUN) +16sec
- 3. Esteban Chaves (MIT) 26
- 4. Domenico Pozzovivo (BAH) +43
- 5. Thibaut Pinot (FDJ) +45
- 6. Rohan Dennis (BMC) +53
- 7. Pello Bilbao (AST) +1:03
- 8. Chris Froome (SKY) +1:10
- 9. George Bennett (LNL) +1:11
- 10. Fabio Aru (EAU) +1:12

OVERALL STANDINGS (top 10)

TENNIS

Pliskova ends Halep's Madrid hat-trick bid

Agencies
Madrid

World number one Simona Halep's Madrid Open hat-trick hopes bit the dust as she was overpowered 6-4 6-3 in the quarter-final by inspired Czech Karolina Pliskova yesterday.

Halep, who has won the tournament for the last two years, had looked imperious on her way to the last eight, dropping only nine games in three matches including Wednesday's win against Pliskova's twin sister Kristyna.

But her winning streak in the Spanish capital ended at 15 matches as her 26-year-old opponent continued her impressive form on the red clay having won the Stuttgart title last month.

It was sixth seed Pliskova's first clay-court victory over Halep and it was the kind of authoritative performance that will turn a few heads as the French Open looms later this month.

Pliskova broke for a 4-3 lead in the opening set and although Halep saved two set points serving at 3-5 Pliskova closed out the opener with a love hold.

Romanian Halep's error-count was surprisingly high and she found herself under pressure early in the second set as Pliskova pounced to break in the third game.

Halep could make little impression on Pliskova's powerful serving and she buckled at 3-5, dropping serve again to bow out.

She quickly shrugged off the loss, however, saying she would now focus on Rome next week before turning her thoughts to another attempt to land a first grand slam title.

"I'm not stressing myself about the points. I'm not stressing myself about this busy schedule," she said.

"I just want to enjoy it. I enjoy it. I'm looking forward already to start the next tournament. There is no pressure. I feel like it's an opportunity to play my best tennis."

"Maybe I didn't play my best game, but maybe she didn't let me play my best game. She was really good today."

France's Caroline Garcia also made the



Czech Republic's Karolina Pliskova in action during her quarter-final match against Romania's Simona Halep at the Madrid Open yesterday. (Reuters)

semi-finals with a straight sets defeat of Spain's Carla Suarez Navarro.

SHARAPOVA BEATEN BY BERTENS
Maria Sharapova's French Open preparations were dealt a blow yesterday as she was beaten in three sets by Kiki Bertens at the Madrid Open.

Sharapova, the Madrid champion in 2014, led by a set on Arantxa Sanchez court and threatened a comeback from 5-1 down in the decider but her Dutch opponent held on for a 4-6, 6-2, 6-3 victory.

Bertens, who reached the semi-finals at Roland Garros in 2016, will now face France's Caroline Garcia for a place in tomorrow's final.

EDMUND BEATS GOFFIN FOR QF SPOT
Britain's Kyle Edmund followed up his surprise win over Novak Djokovic by beating Belgium's David Goffin yesterday to march into the quarter-finals of the Madrid Open.

Edmund had lost in five sets to Goffin when they last met, also on clay, in the 2015 Davis Cup but the 23-year-old's rise has been sharp since then and this was a completely different contest.

The Briton won it 6-3, 6-3, breaking Goffin's serve twice in the first set and once in the second, to move into the last eight of an ATP Masters 1000 event for the first time in his career.

Goffin is no slouch on clay. He reached the French Open quarter-finals last year and made the semis in Barcelona earlier this month.

He is also only the second top-10 player Edmund has beaten, coming four months after the Yorkshireman ousted world number three Grigor Dimitrov at the Australian Open.

Djokovic, recently back from injury, is currently under-ranked at 12th.

Edmund will now face Canadian Denis Shapovalov for a place in the semi-finals, with Alexander Zverev a possible foe in the last four. Rafael Nadal lurks in the

other half of the draw. Goffin is one of the most consistent baseliners in the game but he simply was unable to cope with Edmund's heavier weight of shot.

After breaking twice to seal the first set, Edmund spurned one match point at 5-2 on Goffin's serve and then delivered a double fault a game later to set nerves jangling.

But, just as he had done against Djokovic the day before, Edmund did not waver, serving out when a Goffin forehand hit the net to confirm victory in a brief hour and 12 minutes.

His next opponent Shapovalov scored a 6-4, 6-4 win over Milos Raonic, his fellow Canadian who is still recovering from an injury-plagued few months.

In other match yesterday, Austrian fifth seed Dominic Thiem rallied from one set down to beat Croatia's Borna Coric 2-6, 7-6 (5), 6-4, while Serbian qualifier Dusan Lajovic shocked Argentine fourth seed Juan Martin Del Potro 3-6, 6-4, 7-6 (6).

BADMINTON

Praneeth, Sameer, Manu-Sumeeth, Shlok-Arjun in QFs

IAN S
Sydney

B Sai Praneeth and Sameer Verma joined the Indian pairs of Manu Attri-B Sumeeth Reddy and Ramachandran Shlok-Arjun MR to enter the quarter-finals of the Australian Open badminton tournament after registering victories in their respective games here yesterday.

The third-seeded pair of Manu and Sumeeth defeated the South Korean duo of Hyuk Gyun Choi and Kyung Hoon Park 21-17, 21-17 in the 35-minute clash.

On the other hand, seventh-seeded Arjun MR and Ramachandran Shlok booked their place in the last-eight round after beating Japan's Hiroki Okamura and Masayuki Onodera 21-15, 25-23 in a hard-fought battle.

Earlier yesterday, Praneeth defeated Maulana Panji Ahmad of Indonesia in straight games in a one-sided men's singles clash.

The second-seeded Indian needed just 32 minutes to chalk up a comfortable 21-12, 21-14 victory against his unseeded opponent from Indonesia. This was the second win on the trot for Praneeth in this tournament.

In another men's singles match of the day, fourth-seeded Verma defeated Takuma Ueda of Japan 21-16, 21-12 in 37 minutes.

However, it was the end of the road for India in the women's doubles affair as Jakkampudi Meghana and Poorvisha S Ram bowed out, suffering a 11-21, 13-21 defeat against Miki Kashihara and Miyuki Kato of Japan.

The mixed doubles pair comprising Shivam Sharma and Poorvish S. Ram also crashed out after losing 6-21, 13-21 to the fifth-seeded South Korean combination of Seung Jae Seo and Chae Yujung.

India's campaign in the women's singles too came to an end as Jukka Vaishnavi Reddy succumbed to China's Fan Yue in straight games 21-5, 21-5.

HOPE

Injured Murray could still return in time for Wimbledon

AFP
London

Andy Murray hasn't ruled out returning from his troublesome hip injury in time for Wimbledon, according to his mother Judy.

Former world number one Murray has been out of action since last year's Wimbledon and underwent hip surgery in January.

Murray had made the grass-court season his target as he continues his rehabilitation and was believed to be ready to play at a Loughborough Challenger event, which starts on May 21.

But reports this week suggested the two-time Wimbledon champion was in danger of missing his home Grand Slam after apparently scaling back his training programme.

However, Murray's mother is adamant the 30-year-old

can still be ready for the start of Wimbledon on July 2.

"His goal was always to be ready for the grass-court season and, fingers crossed, that will happen," Judy Murray told the BBC yesterday.

"I'm sure when he's got some news he will share that."

Murray has publicly committed himself to the Rosmalen grass-court tournament in the Netherlands that starts on June 11 and is also scheduled to play the prestigious Wimbledon warm-up event at Queen's Club in west London.

Asked if she had any fears about the three-time Grand Slam winner's career being over, Judy added: "I don't think so; he's still got a lot of things he wants to achieve in the game."

"The strength and depth of men's tennis is so great that I don't think anybody would want to come back into that environment unless you are 100 per cent.

Qatari riders ready for Global Champions Tour in Hamburg



Qatar riders **Sheikh Ali bin Khalid al-Thani** and Hamad bin Ali al-Attiyah will participate in the fifth round of Longines Global Champions Tour, which began yesterday in Hamburg, Germany. Prominent riders from across the world are due to compete in the three-day event. Hamburg is a hugely popular venue which attracts tens of thousands of people to its vast show ground due to the world-class show jumping on offer.

AFC Champions League quarter-finals draw on May 23

The draw ceremony of the AFC Champions League quarter-finals stage will take place on May 23 at AFC Headquarters in Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur. The first leg encounters of Round of 16 concluded recently, with the second leg matches scheduled to take place on May 14-15. Qatar's sides Al Sadd and Al Duhail became closer to the last eight stage following their deserving victories over Al Ahli (Saudi Arabia) and Al Ain (United Arab Emirates) respectively.

Qatar football team to begin training in Vienna

Qatar's senior football team will hold a two-week training programme in Vienna, Austria, starting May 24 in preparation for upcoming AFC Asian Cup 2019, which will take place in the United Arab Emirates. It is worth mentioning that the championship draw has placed Qatar in group E alongside Lebanon, North Korea and Saudi Arabia. Qatar will begin their AFC Asian Cup campaign against Lebanon on January 9, followed by second encounter against North Korea and will play against Saudi Arabia on January 17.

SPOTLIGHT

SC participates in fifth edition of the World Stadium Congress

The Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC), the organisation responsible for delivering the infrastructure required to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, participated in the fifth edition of the World Stadium Congress, a leading industry conference focused on exploring and celebrating the most exciting sports venues in the world today, on Wednesday.

Ali Mohamed al-Asmakh, the SC's Commercial and Procurement Director, led the delegation, giving a keynote speech to hundreds of attendees on Qatar's hosting plans and the rapid progress being made towards the 22nd edition of the FIFA World Cup, which kicks off on November 21, 2022.

With one host venue, Khalifa International Stadium, already operational, and main contractor works on two more – Al

Bayt Stadium-Al Khor City and Al Wakrah Stadium – due to finish within 12 months, Qatar's World Cup progress dominated discussion among the industry leaders in attendance.

"There are many things that make the Qatar World Cup unique," al-Asmakh explained during his speech. "From our compact tournament footprint, which means fans will be able to watch two live games per day for the first time in World Cup history, to our eight beautiful, innovative stadiums, we are going to deliver on the promise we made in 2010 when we told the world to expect amazing."

World Stadium Congress 2018 was a two-day conference that took place at the Johan Cruyff Arena, home of Eredivisie side Ajax, in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Henk Markerink, CEO of Cruyff Arena,

which boasts Europe's first retractable roof, opened the conference and offered delegates a tour of the stadium's facilities. During the tour, he emphasised the importance of stadium legacy and involvement in the community, positively framing the SC's unique legacy plans – such as modular seating tiers and community engagement activities.

In addition to al-Asmakh's speech, the SC delegation engaged with a number of businesses and media representatives to explain Qatar's World Cup hosting plans and answer questions. The conference will continue for a second day with a panel discussion on the world's first and only fully-dismountable FIFA World Cup stadium – Ras Abu Aboud Stadium, which is under construction on Doha's iconic Corniche.

(SC)



CRICKET / PAKISTAN'S TOUR OF IRELAND

Imam-ul-Haq set for Test debut against Ireland

'It's going to be a special occasion for the 11 that are lucky enough to take the park'

AFP
Dublin

Imam-ul-Haq is set to make his Test debut when Pakistan face Ireland in Dublin today.

Pakistan captain Sarfraz Ahmed told reporters at the Malahide ground yesterday that the tourists would field the same side as played in their preceding nine-wicket win at Northamptonshire, in what will be Ireland's first Test match.

That would mean opener Imam, the nephew of selection chief and former Pakistan batsman Inzamam-ul-Haq, making his debut instead of Sami Aslam, who opened during Pakistan's drawn Test series in England two years ago.

Imam's selection in the squad provoked allegations of nepotism.

But the 22-year-old left-hander, who hit a hundred on his one-day international debut against Sri Lanka last year, has made fifties against both Kent and Northamptonshire in Pakistan's two warm-up matches ahead of this one-off Test.

Aslam, by contrast, made 13 against Kent and did not play against Northamptonshire.

"We have already decided, we will play the same team that played against Northamptonshire," said Sarfraz.

"We played our first match against Kent and they (Imam and Sami) both played together so we saw who was playing well," added the wicket-keeper.

"Nowadays we saw that Imam was playing better: he scored two fifties in the practice matches (61 against Kent and an unbeaten 59 against Northamptonshire) so that's why we go with Imam-ul-Haq."

Pakistan are without the injured Yasir Shah for a tour where, after their match against Ireland, they will also play two Tests in England.

But they appear to have an able replacement in fellow leg-spinner Shadab Khan, with the 19-year-old taking a first-class career-best 10 for 157 against Northamptonshire.

Pakistan's drawn four-day tour opener against Kent in Canterbury saw two whole days washed out, but conditions in Northampton allowed them to complete a morale-boosting win.

"Two days (in Ireland) was very cold but today it is very shiny (sunny)," said Sarfraz.



Ireland captain William Porterfield (left) and his Pakistani counterpart Sarfraz Ahmed pose with the trophy ahead of their Test match in Malahide, Ireland, yesterday. (Reuters)

"The last practice match was very good – everything was complete, batsmen batted well, bowlers bowled well, so we are ready to play a Test match."

PORTERFIELD GLAD 'DRUM BANGING' HAS IRELAND ON TEST BEAT
William Porterfield will captain Ireland in their inaugural Test proud of the years of campaigning that have led to today's match against Pakistan in Dublin.

Ireland, who famously pushed Pakistan out of the 2007 World Cup in the Carib-

bean, will become the 11th men's Test nation when the coin is tossed at the Malahide ground.

For Porterfield and his 10 team-mates it promises to be an especially memorable occasion, but he was quick to pay tribute yesterday to all those who had helped make Ireland's Test debut a reality.

"There has been a lot of banging the drum," Porterfield told reporters at the Malahide ground.

"It's going to be a pretty special occasion for the 11 that are lucky enough to

take the park tomorrow.

"Every one that's ever worn the jersey and done things behind the scenes and devoted their lives to it deserve a lot of credit for what's going to happen tomorrow."

The opening batsman added: "We're obviously pretty excited. It's been quite a while building up to this since it was announced.

"I am sure there will be a lot of different emotions that will flow through everyone over the next 24 hours, but excitement is the main one."

FOOTBALL

Duhail duo, Al Sadd defender vie for U-23 player honours

QNA
Doha

Al Duhail's duo Bassam al-Rawi and Almoez Ali will vie along with Al Sadd's Salem al-Hajri as the finalists for the Best Under-23 Player Award by the Qatar Football Association's (QFA) Awards Committee.

The winners will be announced at the end-of-season ceremony at the Qatar National Convention Center in Education City on May 17.

QNB Stars League team coaches, Qatar national team coach, Qatar Olympic team coach, team managers, media representatives, representative of QFA, representative of Qatar Stars League Management, as well as president and board members of the QFA participated in the final voting process.

Al-Rawi is one of the most prominent U-23 players in Qatar football in general and Al Duhail in particular. He produced some outstanding performances in the QNB Stars League season as he played a part in The Red Knights' title-winning campaign with an unbeaten record.

He also played an instrumental role in Al Duhail's march into the AFC Champions League's Round of 16 as they became the first team to reach the knockout stage this year. He recently starred in Qatar's triumph in an international friendly tournament in Iraq.

Al-Rawi was loaned out to Celta Vigo in 2015 and KAS Eupen in 2016 by Al Rayyan. He re-

turned in 2017 to Al Rayyan and then moved to Al Duhail.

Meanwhile, Ali is another prominent Al Duhail player who played an instrumental role in their QNB Stars League and Qatar Cup triumphs this season.

At 21, Ali scored crucial goals and gave many assists as teammates Youssef El Arabi (26 goals) and Youssef Msakni (25) emerged as the best scorers in the QNB Stars League.

He has a vital role in coach Djamel Belmadi's plans. He has sound technique and physical abilities, and is highly talented.

A graduate from Aspire Academy in 2014, Ali is also an important member of the Qatar Olympic and senior national teams.

He had emerged as the best player when Qatar finished third at the Asian U-23 Championship in China early this year.

As for al-Hajri, he is an influential player for Al Sadd, who won the season-opening Sheikh Jassim Cup and finished runners-up in the QNB Stars League and Qatar Cup.

He has exhibited excellent levels and was consistent in performance throughout the season. Salem was one of the three finalists for the same award last season as well, proving the steady growth he has been making.

Al-Hajri's confidence grew under the tutelage of Al Sadd's Portuguese coach Jesualdo Ferreira. A graduate from Aspire Academy, the defender has great technical skills and has the potential to make it really big. He also represents the Qatar Olympic and senior national teams.



VOLLEYBALL

Rayyan, Ahli set for Amir Cup final

By Sports reporter
Doha

The stage is all set for the prestigious HH The Amir Cup Volleyball Championship final which will take place on Saturday.

The final of the season-ending tournament carries a prize money of QR800,000 with the winner will take home QR500,000.

The Qatar Volleyball Association has made elaborate arrangements for the final, including an award to recognise the services of late setter Jamal Sayyar. The lifter, who played for the national team, Al Arabi Club, Police and Al Shamal Club, died an while fishing at the sea.

The final is scheduled at the QVA Indoor Hall on May 12 at 7pm with defending champions Al Rayyan Club facing Al Ahli Club.

QVA board member Saeed Salem, while

addressing a press conference Doha yesterday, said the association is making efforts to make the final a memorable experience.

"For Al Rayyan Club, the final is routine affair. They have had an outstanding season this year, including the QVA League, the Arab Club Championship and the Qatar Cup. Al Ahli Club is also a big team and they also have a good chance to win the final, the first for them in 22 years," Salem said.

Speaking on the occasion, QVA execu-

tive director Ahmed Shibani gave details of the prize money and other awards.

"HH The Amir Cup is the biggest event of the domestic season. So we've made the best possible efforts for a grand finale. The winners will be rewarded with QR500,000, while the runners-up will get QR300,000. We will give awards to the best professional and local players.

"We will also give special awards to the junior category team managers, coaches and players on the occasion," Shibani said.