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GULF TIMES SPORT



TENNIS

Nadal chases 11th French Open crown

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TENNIS/FRENCH OPEN

Thrilling fightback gives Halep first Grand Slam title

'In the last game I felt like I could not breathe anymore'



Romania's Simona Halep kisses the trophy as she celebrates after winning the French Open final against Sloane Stephens of the US yesterday.

AFP Paris

Simona Halep – at a glance

– Yesterday's final was her fourth at the majors, having lost her previous three. She looked in danger of flopping again when she slipped a set and break down to Sloane Stephens.

– Last year, the 26-year-old Romanian squandered a set and 3-0 lead to lose the Paris title match to Jelena Ostapenko. In the 2014 final, she also lost in three sets to Maria Sharapova. At this year's Australian Open, she was defeated in the final by Caroline Wozniacki, again in three sets.

– When she was a teenager, Halep underwent breast reduction surgery for personal comfort and to ease her movement around the court. "I would have gone for surgery even if I hadn't been a sportswoman," she said.

– Halep is also a committed businesswoman. As well as buying up property, she opened her own restaurant, called 'SH' in her home town of Constanta.

– Praised for her modesty on and off court, Sports Illustrated has described her as an 'anti-diva'.

Simona Halep fought back from a set and a break down to finally achieve her "dream" of winning a Grand Slam title, beating Sloane Stephens 3-6, 6-4, 6-1 in a gruelling French Open final yesterday.

The world number one had lost all three of her previous major finals, including two at Roland Garros, and said she struggled to contain her emotions after staging a thrilling comeback.

"In the last game I felt like I could not breathe anymore", said Halep.

It was the perfect way for the Romanian to banish the demons of her painful final defeat by Jelena Ostapenko 12 months ago, when she blew a lead of a set and 3-0.

"Last year it was tough to talk because I lost this match," added Halep, only the second Romanian to win a Slam after Virginia Ruzici who won

the 1978 French Open.

"But it's emotional to be making this speech as a winner. I've been dreaming of this since I was 14." US Open champion Stephens had looked set to lift a second Grand Slam trophy when leading 6-3, 2-0, but

the American 10th seed wilted in hot conditions and Halep pounced.

"It's been amazing here for me," said Stephens. "It's not the trophy I wanted, but it's still beautiful."

Halep played a scintillating deciding set in which she made only five unforced errors, breaking her major duck in style after two hours and three minutes.

The 26-year-old celebrated her victory in a way usually seen at Wimbledon, climbing into her box to greet friends and family.

"I tried to not do the same thing as last year. It's a dream and it's so special to do it here in Paris," she said.

"When I was down a break in the second set I just tried to relax and enjoy the match."

The fans at Roland Garros preceded the match with a standing ovation for seven-time Grand Slam champion Maria Bueno after the Brazilian's death on Friday aged 78.

Halep had vocal support from the start on Court Philippe Chatrier, but Stephens was the better player in the



Sloane Stephens reacts during the final against Simona Halep.

ATHLETICS

Qatar's Saife bags his second gold medal at Asian Juniors

By Sports Reporter Gifu, Japan

Qatar's rising middle distance runner Saife Saifeldin claimed his second gold medal of the Asian Junior Athletics Championships in Japan when he surged to victory in the 3,000m steeplechase at the Nagatagawa Stadium in Gifu yesterday.

Saifeldin clocked 8mins 51.97secs to comfortably beat silver medallist Takumi Yoshida of Japan (8:52.79) and Trung Cuong Nguyen of Vietnam (8:59.32)

His victory yesterday took Qatar's gold medal tally to three after he and Ibrahim Moaaz Mohamed had won the 1,500m and shot put respectively on Friday.

Saifeldin's 1,500m gold on Friday came in a time of 3mins 49.30secs, with Japan's Reito Hanzawa claiming the silver in 3:49.66s and Iraq's Hussein Lafta taking the bronze in 3:49.75.

Ibrahim Moaaz Mohamed, who had won the shot put gold with a throw of 18.57m on Friday, added the discus silver

to his personal tally yesterday.

His throw of 61.50m in the discus was well short of Iran's Hossein Rasouli's 62.29m. Japan's Kosei Yamashita was a distant third with a heave of 56.51m. Huanhuan Yang of China won the gold medal in the women discus throw with a throw of 51.53m while her teammate Yuanyuan Yin secured silver medal with 51.17m and India's Arpandeep Kaur Bajwa took bronze medal in 46.57m.

Ayaka Kora of Japan and Jiawei Zhong of China were locked in the most thrilling women's long jump final when both cleared 6.44m in their 5th attempt to tie. Kora, riding on home support leapt 1cm more than Jiawei in the final jump to break the tie and win the gold medal.

Zuocheng Wu of China won the women's pole vault gold medal with a height of 4.00m. Anastasya Ermakova of Kazakhstan finished second clearing 3.60m. Chia-Ju Wu of Chinese Taipei took bronze in 3.60m.

Hosts Japan won the gold medal in the men's 4x100m relay with a performance of 39.63s.

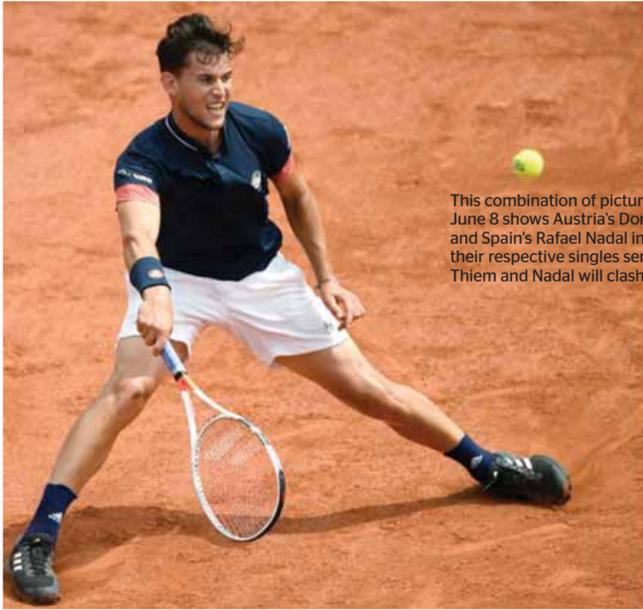


Qatar's Saife Saifeldin negotiates a water jump during the 3,000m steeplechase at the Asian Junior Athletics Championships yesterday. He won the event in a time of 8mins 51.97secs.

TENNIS

Nadal eyes 11th French Open title

'I have lost a lot of opportunities through injuries, and I know the years are going quick. So there is not 10 more chances to keep playing here'



This combination of pictures created on June 8 shows Austria's Dominic Thiem (L) and Spain's Rafael Nadal in action during their respective singles semi-final matches. Thiem and Nadal will clash in the final today.

AFP
Paris

Rafael Nadal admits that his desire to clinch an 11th French Open title today is fired by his growing realisation that the end of his career may not be too far away.

The 32-year-old Spaniard, with 16 majors to his name, will play his 24th Grand Slam final at Roland Garros against Dominic Thiem who is in his first.

Victory today will give Nadal an 11th title in Paris and equal Margaret Court's all-time record for wins at the same Slam event — in her case, the Australian Open from 1960 and 1973

Nadal still trails great rival Roger Federer by four major titles although the Swiss star is more than four years older.

"For me, the motivation to play here always is high, high as possible," said Nadal after breezing past Juan Martin del Potro 6-4, 6-1, 6-2 in Friday's semi-finals in what was his 85th win in Paris against just two defeats.

"But for me, I believe that there are limited chances in your career.

"I have lost a lot of opportunities through injuries, and I know the years are going quick. So there is not 10 more chances to keep playing here."

The statistics illustrate Nadal's concerns — he has missed at least eight Slam tournaments in his career through a legacy of wrist and knee problems.

Such is his motivation to win his 17th Grand Slam, that the task facing Austrian 24-year-old Thiem was described as "almost impossible" by Del Potro.

The Argentine believes that Nadal is playing better than he has for years.

"It is almost impossible to beat Rafa," said Del Potro who had his chances in the semi-final but failed to convert any of his

NADAL'S PERFECT 10 IN PARIS

Rafael Nadal goes for an 11th French Open title on Sunday when he faces Dominic Thiem in the final.

AFP Sport looks at the Spaniard's perfect 10 in Paris.

2005: bt Mariano Puerta (ARG) 6-7, 6-3, 6-1, 7-5 — At just 19, Nadal became the youngest winner of a Grand Slam title since Michael Chang won at Roland Garros in 1989 at 17. He was the first man since Mats Wilander in 1982 to win the French Open on his debut. Puerta was to later fail a drugs test and handed an eight-year ban, eventually reduced to two years.

2006: bt Roger Federer (SUI) 1-6, 6-1, 6-4, 7-6 — Nadal became the first man to beat Federer in a Slam final, ending the Swiss star's hopes of holding all four majors at the same time. It was Nadal's 60th win in a row on clay.

2007: bt Roger Federer (SUI) 6-3, 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 — The 21-year-old Nadal became the first man since Bjorn Borg in 1980 to win three successive titles at Roland Garros. He again also shattered Federer's hopes of becoming only the third man in history to hold all four majors.

2008: bt Roger Federer (SUI) 6-1, 6-3, 6-0 — Nadal condemned his great rival to his worst ever loss in a Grand Slam event. The Spaniard also won the title without losing a set, becoming the third man to do so in the Open era after Ilie Nastase and Borg.

2010: bt Robin Soderling (SWE) 6-4, 6-2, 6-4 — Nadal avenged his defeat to the Swede at Roland Garros 12 months earlier. Again, Nadal finished the tournament without having dropped

a set. He also regained the world number one ranking for the first time since July 2009.

2011: bt Roger Federer (SUI) 7-5, 7-6, 5-7, 6-1 — Nadal claimed his sixth French Open to equal the record of Borg, also taking his Slam total into double figures at 10. Federer had ended Novak Djokovic's 43-match undefeated run in the semi-finals.

2012: bt Novak Djokovic (SRB) 6-4, 6-3, 2-6, 7-5 — Nadal goes past Borg's record of six titles and ends Djokovic's bid to be the first man since Rod Laver in 1969 to hold all four majors. Rain meant that the final was completed on Monday which was tough on Djokovic who was a break up in the fourth set when the match was halted for the night.

2013: bt Stan Wawrinka (SUI) 6-2, 6-3, 6-1 — Nadal comfortably beats his compatriot for an eighth French Open but the hard yards were achieved in the semi-finals when he defeated Djokovic 6-4, 3-6, 6-1, 6-7, 9-7 in a 4-hour 37-minute epic.

2014: bt Novak Djokovic (SRB) 3-6, 7-5, 6-2, 6-4 — Title number nine in his ninth final for Nadal and his 14th Grand Slam success on an afternoon where temperatures nudged 30 degrees. It was his 45th career clay-court title.

2017: bt Stan Wawrinka (SUI) 6-2, 6-3, 6-1 — Nadal coasts to a record 10th French Open title, demolishing Wawrinka in a brutally one-sided final which also earns the Spaniard a 15th Grand Slam crown. Nadal, 31, becomes the first man in history to win the same major 10 times. It is his most one-sided final win since allowing Federer just four games in the 2008 final.

seven break points before his challenge petered out into weary hopelessness.

Nadal raced away with 14 of the last 17 games.

"He's too strong. He's improving his backhand a lot. That's why he's the No 1 and beating all the guys.

"He is fresh, healthy. Everything is per-

fect" — "He looks fresh. He is healthy. And the strength that he has and the mentality, everything is perfect, works perfect for him playing on clay."

There have, however, appeared to be one or two chinks in his armour at Roland Garros this year.

On Friday, Del Potro was by far the

better player in the first set while, in the quarter-finals, Diego Schwartzman won the first set of his clash with Nadal.

It was the first time in three years that Nadal had dropped a set in Paris.

"You can win a set, but not a match against Rafa," said Del Potro keen not to over-egg any hint of weakness in Nadal's game.

At least Thiem has in the past found the key to unravelling the Nadal clay court enigma.

He is the only man to beat the world number one on clay in the last two years — in Madrid this spring and in Rome last year.

In Madrid, Thiem thrived in the quicker, higher altitude conditions to win their quarter-final in straight sets.

But that was only after Nadal had allowed him just two games in a last-eight mauling in Monte Carlo.

In Madrid, Thiem said the key was to be positive against Nadal.

"If I want to beat him, I have to play that way like I did in Rome and in Madrid. But I'm also aware that here it's tougher," said Thiem, the first Austrian in a major final since Thomas Muster won in Paris in 1995.

"He likes the conditions more here than in Madrid, for sure. Best of five is also a different story."

"But I have a plan."

Nadal and Thiem have met nine times — all of them on clay.

Thiem also defeated his rival in Buenos Aires in 2016, joining Novak Djokovic and Gaston Gaudio as the only men to have beaten Nadal three times each on clay.

However, Nadal has won both their clashes at Roland Garros — in 2014 and in last year's semi-finals by a comfortable 6-3, 6-4, 6-0 margin.

"I'm facing Rafa so I'm not the one who has the pressure," said Thiem.

CRICKET

Head and Stanlake star as Australia beat Middlesex

AFP
London

Travis Head's century and two wickets from Billy Stanlake helped Australia beat Middlesex by 101 runs at Lord's yesterday in their last warm-up fixture before a one-day international series against England.

Australia, despite a century from Travis Head, found runs hard to come by in a total of 283 for six.

Head made 106 and Australia vice-captain Aaron Finch 54.

Australia, for the second match in a row, following their 277 for nine in a 57-run tour-opening win over Sussex at Hove on Thursday, Australia failed to reach the now 50-over par total of 300.

But a target of 284 proved well beyond Middlesex, who were dismissed for 182 with nine overs to spare despite opener Max Holden's 71 that following a miserly one for 29 in 10 with his part-time off-spin. Fast bowler Billy Stanlake looked lively in taking two for 45, while Kane Richardson helped himself to some cheap dismissals as Middlesex lost their last six wickets for just 43 runs.

Australia's batting though was a concern ahead of a five-match one-day international series against number-one ranked England, the 2019 World Cup hosts,

that starts across London at The Oval on Wednesday. It was also a reminder they were without two outstanding batsmen in former captain Steve Smith and his deputy David Warner, who both received year-long bans for their roles in a ball-tampering scandal during the third Test against South Africa in Cape Town in March.

In addition to Smith and Warner, Australia arrived in England without their injured frontline fast-bowling trio of Mitchell Starc, Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood, as well as sidelined all-rounder Mitchell Marsh.

But their white-ball problems predate the ball-tampering scandal, with Australia losing their last three bilateral ODI series — against New Zealand, India and England. Head opened alongside D'Arcy Short as Finch dropped down the order after his 78 against Sussex.

Short fell for 18 when a mistimed pull off Thomas Barber was brilliantly caught one-handed by a leaping Nathan Sowter — born and brought up in western Sydney — at midwicket.

Shaun Marsh, playing his first match of the tour after Marcus Stoinis was left out following his hundred against Sussex, made 49 off 64 balls before he was well-held at midwicket by Middlesex captain Steven Finn, the England fast bowler, to give Holden a first List A wicket.

Captain Morgan wary of 'competitive' Scotland

London: England's limited-overs captain Eoin Morgan has promised to take nothing for granted when his side begin their white-ball season away to Scotland today.

Morgan's men continue their build-up to next year's World Cup, which will be on home soil, with a one-day international against the Scots in Edinburgh today.

Scotland won't be at the showpiece tournament after agonisingly missing out in this year's World Cup qualifiers.

But the non-Test nation have shown they had the potential to embarrass the sport's elite and Morgan was in respectful mood ahead of England's first match against Scotland in three years. "It should be a really good game," Morgan, whose England side are top of the ODI rankings, told reporters in Edinburgh yesterday.

"We haven't played Scotland for quite a while. "We watched them play in the qualifying tournament for the 50-over World Cup next year, which was an extremely competitive tournament and I don't think there was a lot between

the teams, so qualifying was difficult.

"It gives Scotland a lot more exposure and the days of not knowing who you are going to play against are gone. They are an extremely competitive side and we are looking forward to it," he added.

After the Scotland match, England are at home to world champions Australia in a five-match one-day series.

But as Australia completed their preparations for that contest with a one-day match against Middlesex — Morgan's county — at Lord's on Saturday, the England skipper was adamant he would treat Scotland just like any other international team.

"Gone are the days when there are any potential banana skins or anything like that," the former Ireland batsman said. "Cricket is moving forward at a fast rate and every team is moving forward with you, so I'd expect it to be very competitive."

England will face Scotland without injured all-rounders Ben Stokes and Chris Woakes or wicket-keeper/batsman Jos Buttler who is being rested.

FIRST TEST

West Indies stretch lead over Sri Lanka

AFP
Port of Spain

Kieran Powell missed out on a century but the West Indies further solidified an already dominant position at lunch on the fourth day of the first Test against Sri Lanka in Trinidad yesterday.

West Indies lost three wickets, including Powell for 88, in the morning session as they reached 209 for seven in their second innings at the Queen's Park Oval.

The hosts, who declined to enforce the follow-on despite a 229-run first-innings lead, now have an overall advantage of 438 runs with three wickets in hand.

The tail-enders have an opportunity to accelerate the scoring to set up a declaration by captain Jason Holder which would allow his frontline bowlers enough time to push for victory going into the final day today.

Holder showed his positive intent when he was out just before the break, trapped leg-before for 39 attempting a reverse sweep against veteran left-arm spinner Rangana Herath.

Before that, the general tenor of the first two hours of play,

as 78 runs were added from the overnight position of 131 for four, suggested that the West Indies were always thinking of batting into the afternoon to effectively eradicate any chance the Sri Lankans might have entertained of successfully chasing a daunting target.

Most attention was focused on Powell at the start of play.

The left hander had impressed with his elegant stroke-play in reaching 64 overnight, and looked on course to reach three figures in partnership with the first innings century-maker, Shane Dowrich. However fast-medium bowler Lahiru Kumara, who has enjoyed an excellent match, trapped Dowrich lbw on the back foot with a delivery that jaggged back sharply to the little right-hander to earn his seventh wicket of the match.

Holder replaced his fellow-Barbadian, putting on 42 for the sixth wicket before an error of judgement by Powell brought an end to his innings on 88. He failed to get to the pitch of the ball as he attempted a leg-side flick off spinner Dilruwan Perera. Substitute fielder Jeffrey Vandersay took a good catch diving forward at midwicket.

Powell's innings occupied 127 deliveries and was embellished with two sixes and seven fours.

BOTTOMLINE

Legendary Brazilian tennis player Maria Bueno dies

AFP
Sao Paulo

Maria Bueno, the Brazilian "queen" of tennis, who won three Wimbledon and four US championship singles titles, died Friday in Sao Paulo at age 78, the hospital where she was being treated said.

She had been suffering from mouth cancer since last year and was hospitalised in May.

Nicknamed the "Sao Paulo Swallow" for her ability to dominate the net, Bueno was a teen prodigy despite having no formal coaching, according to the International Hall of Fame, which she entered in 1978.

She swept the Brazilian scene, then the Caribbean circuit, and grabbed international attention by winning the Italian Championships in 1958, beating the best English and Australian players.

That same year she went on to win the Wimbledon doubles alongside American



Brazilian great Maria Esther Bueno in action during an exhibition match on Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro in 2005.

Althea Gibson. And although she once told reporters "I'm afraid of everyone I play," her glory days were only just beginning.

Bueno's death dominated Brazilian

Twitter on Friday night, with tributes pouring in. Brazilian President Michel Temer, writing on his official account, said Bueno "will always be remembered as the number one of tennis in the hearts of all Brazilians." On and off the court, Bueno "always showed a lot of fight," Brazilian tennis player Bia Haddad said.

"She was a pioneer in our country, where few people knew the sport and at a time when everything was much more difficult," said tennis player Thomaz Bellucci. Known for her stylishness and her exciting way of playing, she was the first South American woman to win the Wimbledon singles title.

One tennis writer, John Barrett, called her "the elegant queen of Brazilian tennis."

Her one major title of the open era, when big tournaments opened to professionals, was the 1968 US Open doubles alongside Australian legend Margaret Court.

Another doubles partner was Billie Jean King, with whom she won the Wimbledon title in 1965.

"In my era, tennis was totally amateur.

Lyon cancel dealings with Liverpool over Fekir

Lyon ended negotiations with Liverpool yesterday over the possible transfer of forward Nabil Fekir to the Premier League club. "Nabil Fekir is staying at Lyon... pending other propositions," said Lyon in a statement, just hours after the president of the French football federation (FFF) claimed Fekir had undergone a Liverpool medical. "The three-way negotiations with Liverpool and Nabil Fekir for the transfer of the Lyon captain have not succeeded and Lyon have decided to end these negotiations tonight (Saturday) at 8pm," added the Ligue 1 club in their statement. The latest development in the on-off transfer saga came after FFF chief Noel Le Graet had earlier said: "Nabil Fekir is in the process of being transferred."

Perez covers for Argentina's injured Lanzini

River Plate midfielder Enzo Perez will replace the injured Manuel Lanzini in Argentina's 23-man World Cup squad, the country's football association said yesterday. The 32-year-old Perez was called up by Argentina coach Jorge Sampaoli after Lanzini ruptured the anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee during training on Friday. West Ham midfielder Lanzini, 25, had been linked with a summer transfer to Liverpool, but he now faces a lengthy spell on the sidelines. His injury is a blow for Sampaoli who had counted on Lanzini for a place in his starting line-up. Former Valencia and Benfica midfielder Perez was part of the Argentina squad at the 2014 World Cup, starting in the final as his side lost to Germany 1-0 after extra time.

Liverpool great Dalglish awarded knighthood

Liverpool great Kenny Dalglish was awarded a knighthood in Queen Elizabeth's birthday honours list that was announced on Friday. Dalglish, 67, won three European Cups and six league titles as a Liverpool player and then managed the club in two spells. He secured three league titles as manager, including a league and cup double in 1986 and was the first person to ever achieve that feat as a player/manager. He was also recognised for his work in supporting the victims of the Hillsborough stadium disaster. "Obviously it was for others with more education and knowledge than myself to decide whether or not I deserved a knighthood, and it goes without saying that I am hugely grateful to them," Dalglish said on Liverpool's website.

Ghana boss resigns, apologises to president

The head of Ghana's football federation, who was accused of taking kickbacks, said on Friday he had resigned. Kwesi Nyantakyi, a member of FIFA's decision-making Council, also apologised to Ghana president Nana Akufo-Addo. "After a meeting of the Executive Committee this afternoon I decided to resign as President of the Ghana Football Association," he said in a statement. Nyantakyi was filmed by an investigative journalist and seen taking \$65,000 from a supposed businessman who said he wanted to sponsor the Ghanaian football league. The president's deputy chief of staff had told reporters last month that Nyantakyi had been captured on video using the name of the president to induce "potential investors" to part with money.

No wrong in partying after match: Mexico coach

Mexico coach Juan Carlos Osorio said a group of his players did nothing wrong in having a late-night party following last Saturday's friendly against Scotland, saying they deserved "some time for themselves". The party, reported to involve at least eight players, was made public when pictures were published in the magazine TVNotas. "It was in their free time," Osorio told reporters in Copenhagen where Mexico face Denmark in a friendly yesterday. "We had been together in concentration for 19 games before that and, hopefully, we will be together for another 25 to 30 days and it was important that they had some time for themselves." Midfielder Andres Guardado agreed. "I don't think we've committed any act of discipline."

REPORT

Morocco end World Cup warm-ups on a positive note

Belhanda and Ziyech score in Morocco's 3-1 victory over Estonia

Agencies
London

Younes Belhanda and Hakim Ziyech scored in the first half to ensure Morocco continued to show good form and finished their World Cup preparations with a confidence-building 3-1 away win over Estonia in a friendly international yesterday. Belhanda scored after 11 minutes and Dutch-born Ziyech added a penalty seven minutes before the break. Substitute Youssef En-Nesyri added a third with 15 minutes to go but Estonia pulled one back through Ats Purje. Morocco beat Slovakia on Monday and drew with Ukraine last week in their other two warm-up games. They meet Iran in their Group B opener in St Petersburg on Friday before also taking on Portugal and Spain.



Morocco's Younes Belhanda celebrates with teammates after scoring a goal against Estonia during their international friendly match in Tallinn, Estonia, yesterday. (Reuters)

MITROVIC LEADS SERBIA
Elsewhere, Aleksandar Mitrovic's hat-trick led Serbia to a 5-1 thrashing of Bolivia in their final World Cup warm-up yesterday. Mitrovic struck twice, with Adam Ljajic and Branislav Ivanovic also scoring, as Serbia led 4-0 at half-time. After Bolivia pulled one back, Mitrovic added his third goal in the 68th minute to wrap up the scoring. Serbia play their World Cup opener on June 17 against Costa Rica, followed by games against Switzerland and Brazil. Australia too completed preparations for Russia by winning away. Australia beat Hungary 2-1 in Budapest in a match featuring plenty of late action. Daniel Arzani's first international goal with 16 minutes remaining looked to have won it for Australia but Hungary equalised through Trent Sainsbury's own goal in the 88th minute. The visitors were then gifted the winner as Tamas Kadar directed a cross through the legs of goalkeeper Denes Dibusz for another own goal in stoppage time. The Soccereroos' first World Cup game is June 16 against France, who face the US later in their final tune-up. Three other games matching teams headed to Russia are also on tap as Sweden face Peru, Denmark play Mexico and Spain take on Tunisia. In a pair of friendlies involving teams that won't be in Russia, Azerbaijan beat Latvia 3-1 and Finland defeated Belarus 2-0.

Lacklustre Germany beat Saudi Arabia 2-1 in World Cup warmup

World champions Germany failed to hit top gear as they edged to a 2-1 victory over Saudi Arabia in a lacklustre World Cup dress rehearsal on Friday, less than a week before the tournament starts. It was their first win in six matches but the Germans, who leave for Russia in four days, rarely put their foot on the gas, seemingly fearful of any last-minute injuries, while the Saudis confirmed their good form heading into the World Cup. With keeper Manuel Neuer starting for the second consecutive game after a nine-month injury break and Jerome Boateng also back from a muscle injury, Germany fielded as close as they could



to their tournament team. Mesut Ozil was left out of the squad, recovering from a minor knock on the knee, but they quickly went ahead with Timo Werner finding the net from an assist

by Marco Reus. Yet they failed to maintain the tempo and their defence suffered a few lapses of concentration. Omar Hawasawi scored an own goal just before the break after Germany twice hit the woodwork and they could have added a few more were it not for a string of fine saves from Saudi goalkeeper Abdullah al-Mayouf. The Saudis pulled a goal back when Taisir al-Jassim scored on the rebound after Marc-Andre ter Stegen saved a penalty in the 85th minute and he missed a golden opportunity to level in stoppage time. Germany are in Group F along with Sweden, South Korea and Mexico. Saudi Arabia take on hosts Russia in the tournament's opening match on June 14 and also play Egypt and Uruguay in Group A.

FOCUS

Belgium's Boyata ready to step in for Kompany

Reuters
London

Dedryck Boyata said he is ready to step in for Vincent Kompany if Belgium's battle-hardened defender fails to recover from his groin injury in time for their opening World Cup Group G game against Panama in Sochi on June 18.

Kompany, 32, was injured in a pre-tournament friendly against Portugal and did not train along with the rest of the team yesterday.

"If I have the chance to play, of course I will be very happy," said Celtic defender Boyata, who came on as a substitute for Kompany last Saturday and would be again expected to fill in if the Manchester City defender fails to regain fitness for the tournament. "I know he (Kompany) has

been working very hard," Boyata told Sky Sports.

The injury is the latest in a long line of fitness problems for Kompany, who managed just 17 Premier League appearances for City last season. However, he told Belgian broadcaster RTBF he believes he will be fit in time. "I am confident it will be okay," he said. "I feel good and have often fought back."

"The goal to play at the World Cup is in my head and I try to achieve that. But Belgium midfielder Kevin De Bruyne suggested Kompany may only be available for later games."

"He may not be there for the first games in Russia but the team can play the group stage without him," he told reporters. Their opener, Belgium face Tunisia on June 23 followed by a potential group decider against England five days later.

SPOTLIGHT

Salah hopeful of making World Cup opener for Egypt

Reuters
Madrid

Liverpool forward Mohamed Salah is confident he will be fit enough to take part in Egypt's World Cup opener against Uruguay in Yekaterinburg next Friday, Spanish newspaper Marca reported yesterday.

The 25-year-old went off with a shoulder problem in the first half of Liverpool's 3-1 defeat to Real Madrid in last month's Champions League final but the speedy forward expects to play some part in Egypt's first Group A fixture in Russia.

"Now I'm feeling better," Salah told the Spanish daily. "I'm hopeful of being able to play in our first game, but this will depend on how I feel when the day comes around."

Salah, who laughed off Real Madrid defender Sergio Ramos's claim that he would have been able to continue in Kiev had he taken a pain-killing injection, scored the penalty that sealed Egypt's place at a first World Cup in 28 years and insists they are not in Russia to make up the numbers.



"We've got a great team and a great coach. We want to get into the next round and do things well there," he added.

"We're strong as a group, we all have the same objective, which is to win and that's the most important thing. We don't just have one strong point, but the main thing is we play together as a group."

"The pressure was to qualify for the World Cup. Of course, you can then say 'right, we've got there, that's that', but for me it's not like that. We want to make history and achieve something different."

"It's not a simple case of going, playing three games and thank you very much. That's not going through my head."

Saudi Arabia and hosts Russia are the other teams in Egypt's group.

BOTTOMLINE

Neymar to start as Brazil unleash feared quartet on Austria

Reuters
Vienna

Brazil will unleash their full attacking might against Austria today as the feared quartet of Neymar, Willian, Philippe Coutinho and Gabriel Jesus start together for the first time. The foursome were all included as coach Tite confirmed his team for Sunday's match at the Ernst Happel stadium, Brazil's last before they open their World Cup campaign against Switzerland on June 17.

Many feel the four would form the ideal attacking line-up at the World Cup but, for one reason or another, they have only played around 60 minutes together, split between three matches.

Tite did not promise that today's team would be the one that starts the tournament in Russia.

"I don't know if I can say that this will be the team at the start of the World Cup," he told reporters. "The match (against Austria) and the performance will decide that."

Neymar, the world's most expensive player, will start a game for the first time since he fractured a metatarsal and sprained his ankle playing for Paris St Germain in a French league match against Olympique de Marseille on Feb. 25.

The 26-year-old made his comeback last Sunday when he scored in the 2-0 friendly win over Croatia after coming on in the second half.

"We are following his progress in training, in matches and keep-

ing an eye on his level of confidence," said Tite.

"I've told him not to pull out of tackles, and not to stop competing, because the best way to recover his rhythm is with tough and high-quality training."

Brazil have lost only one game out of 20 since Tite was appointed in June 2016 and have regained their confidence which was shattered by the 7-1 semi-final defeat to Germany at the last World Cup.

Tite said Sunday's match against Austria, who failed to qualify for the World Cup but are unbeaten in eight games, would be a "real challenge."

"Emotionally, it's probably the most difficult one to play," he said. "It's one week before the start of the World Cup, there's the matter of performing well, a risk of injury, a loss on confidence."



(From left) Brazil's forward Neymar, goalkeeper Danilo and forward Gabriel Jesus attend a training session in Vienna, Austria, yesterday. (AFP)

Tite angrily denies any contact with Madrid

Brazil coach Tite angrily denied yesterday that he had been in contact with Real Madrid over the possibility of replacing Zinedine Zidane, who resigned at the end of May, dismissing the suggestion as a lie.

Tite was asked about reports that he was set to take charge of the Champions League winners during a news conference ahead of today's friendly against Austria, although it was not clear where they had originated.

"This is a disrespectful attitude and a lie," he said. "I haven't been in contact with anyone. Gilmar Veloz (Tite's agent) hasn't been in contact with anyone."

"I'm doing what I like and I'm in the best possible place; I'm in a place that any other professional would like to be. I value this enormously, and that's why I'm upset."



FOCUS

Sterling relishes World Cup stage as England's No 10

'He is a fighter, he is dynamic, he's so good, but he has to improve that'

AFP
London

Fresh from the best season of his career, Raheem Sterling has been handed the responsibility and role he craved by England manager Gareth Southgate to deliver on his abundant potential at the World Cup.

Sterling scored 23 goals in all competitions as Manchester City romped to the Premier League title in record-breaking fashion and lifted the League Cup.

Yet in keeping with his career so far, there was still a feeling that more is to come if his finishing can match the quality of his skill and movement.

"The moment he is going to be able to increase (the number) of goals he will become one of the best players in the world because he has everything," said City boss Pep Guardiola. "He is a fighter, he is dynamic, he's so good, but he has to improve that."

To prove the point, Sterling hasn't scored in his last 20 games for England, stretching back to 2015.

Sterling has also had to cope with consistent negative publicity from some sections of the English press, often for issues far removed from football.

Treated as a scapegoat during a series of poor England performances before a humiliating exit to Iceland in the last 16 of Euro 2016, Sterling dubbed himself 'The Hated One' on Instagram during the tournament.

He most recently hit the headlines last week for a tattoo of an M16 assault rifle on his leg.

Sterling's route to the top hasn't been easy. Born in Kingston, Jamaica, he said the gun tattoo is a tribute to his dad who was murdered there when he was just two.

Sterling moved to North London at the age of five with his mother, and his abundant talent on the football field soon became recognised as he was snapped up by Queen's Park Rangers and then Liverpool



as a 15-year-old.

NUMBER 10 TATTOO

He shot to fame as part of a free-flowing Liverpool side that just missed out on a first league title for over two decades in 2013/14 to force his way into England's World Cup team four years ago, and was one of few bright sparks in a group stage exit.

A £49 mn move to Manchester City followed in 2015, but it wasn't until Guardiola's arrival as coach a year later that Sterling started to deliver on his potential.

Unlike at City, where Guardiola still largely utilises Sterling's pace on the

wing, Southgate has handed him the number 10 shirt to create from a central role just off England's talisman Harry Kane.

"I know I shouldn't mention it but I've got a tattoo of it on my arm!" he said this week of the No.10 after some unwanted attention for tattoos. "It's something I've always wanted to do: wear the number 10 for England."

"I feel, because I'm really fast, that's one of the reasons I've been put out there (on the wing), and now I'm closer to the goal and the area I want to be."

Sterling scored some of the most important goals of City's title triumph, notching late winners early on in the sea-

son to beat Bournemouth, Huddersfield and Southampton.

"I think you've seen a guy who has stood up and made himself available in the big games," said Sterling's City and England team-mate Fabian Delph.

"In terms of being dedicated, he's one of the most dedicated footballers I've come across. His work ethic is fantastic, his desire to improve is there and he's still on 23."

"It's scary to think what his potential could be and I'm constantly on his case to do better as an older player should be."

"I think this World Cup is a massive stage for him to go and showcase what he can do."

SCANDAL

Promoted Parma under spotlight for alleged fix attempt

AFP
Rome

Newly-promoted Parma are under investigation for an alleged attempt to fix the match that sealed their incredible rise from financial collapse to Serie A in just three years.

The Italian Football Federation (FIGC) is probing text messages sent by two Parma players to players from Spezia ahead of their clash on the final day of the Serie B season, the club admitted yesterday.

Sports daily *Gazzetta Dello Sport* earlier claimed that the messages appeared to ask their opponents to not try too hard.

"The players Emanuele Calaiò and Fabio Ceravolo were spoken to yesterday afternoon by federation prosecutors. They were simply asked about two text messages sent to ex-teammates playing for Spezia," Parma said in statement.

"Parma has seen the messages in the last few hours... they don't contain any sort of irregularity or malice."

A 2-0 win at Spezia on May 18 saw two-time UEFA Cup winners Parma promoted to the top division just three years after a financial meltdown led to relegation from Serie A and rebirth in the semi-professional Serie D, Italian football's fourth tier.

Just a year earlier Roberto Do-

nadoni had led Parma to sixth place in Serie A and a spot in the Europa League but late payment of income tax on salaries saw them stripped of their place by the Italian Olympic Committee.

The *Gazzetta* and *Corriere Della Sport* write that the investigation into the match is still in the preliminary phase.

"Those who have the task of ensuring the honesty of a league have the right and duty to carry out any investigations necessary. For this reason every director, player and employee of the club will be accessible to the relevant authorities," the club added.

Ceravolo was one of Parma's promotion heroes at Spezia, setting the away side on the way with an 11th-minute opener.

Parma's Serie A status was sealed when Amato Ciciretti scored a second just after the hour and Foggia, who like Spezia had nothing to play for, scored a last-minute equaliser at promotion-chasing Frosinone.

Foggia's leveller allowed Parma to move level on points with Frosinone and pip them to second place - their third promotion in as many years - thanks to a better head-to-head record.

Spezia fans reacted furiously to their team's display after the match, directing particular anger toward former Italian international and ex-Parma player Alberto Gilardino, who smashed a penalty for Spezia high and wide with the hosts still only a goal down.

SPOTLIGHT

Abramovich knocks back approach to buy Chelsea: reports

Reuters
London

Britain's richest man has had a bid to buy Chelsea football club turned down by Roman Abramovich, according to British media reports.

The *Daily Mail* reported that Jim Ratcliffe, the chairman and chief executive of multinational petrochemicals group Ineos, expressed an interest in the Premier League club which the Russian has owned for 15 years.

Chelsea's future has become uncertain since Abramovich ran into UK visa problems, which caused him to miss Chelsea's FA Cup final victory over Manchester United last month.

The delay in renewing his UK tier one investment visa, which has been reported to be linked with worsening UK-Russian relations, led to him applying for Israeli citizenship, which was granted last month.

Israeli passport holders can enter Britain without a visa for short stays, although they require visas to work there.

Speculation over his commitment to Chelsea intensified when the club announced it would not go ahead with a one bn pound (\$1.34 bn) redevelopment of Stamford Bridge, a project intended to place it on a firmer financial footing.

Despite the uncertainty, the *Daily Mail* report said Abramov-



ich remains committed to Chelsea, who are valued at around one bn pounds, and had knocked back Ratcliffe's approach, which it said was one of several.

Ratcliffe, 65, is reported to be a Chelsea season ticket holder and last month topped the *Sunday Times* rich list which valued his personal fortune at 21.05bn pounds, compared with Abramovich's 9.3bn pounds.

Last year Ineos purchased Swiss club FC Lausanne-Sport, which is based near to its offices in Rolle in the Canton of Vaud.

Ratcliffe, who grew up in Manchester, has not previously linked with buying into English football.

A spokesman for Ineos said they did not respond to market rumour or speculation and Chelsea, who refused to comment publicly on the story to the *Mail*, did not respond to phone calls from Reuters.

Egyptians rush to get beIN contracts ahead of World Cup

AFP
Cairo

Like it or not, Egypt is having to resort to beIN sports TV network subscriptions to watch the national team, The Pharaohs, play in the World Cup for the first time in 28 years.

In a country of 97mn people where the average wage does not exceed 200 euros (\$235), only better-off football enthusiasts can afford private subscriptions to the sports broadcaster at home. In Egypt, subscribers have to buy a beIN decoder for 1,630 pounds (78 euros) and pay an annual subscription of 2,280 pounds.

Coffee shop owners are hoping to recoup their investment by pulling in the crowds.

In cafes where shisha smoke will mix with the chatter and enthusiasm of fans, a large screen linked to beIN channels will prove a huge draw.

For 40-year-old Ahmed Ibrahim, the owner of a cafe in downtown Cairo, a beIN subscription is "a must".



One of his regulars, 19-year-old Magdi Arafa, has grown his hair long to look like Liverpool's Egyptian star player Mohamed Salah.

Arafa said he will just have to go to the cafe to watch the World Cup, which starts on June 14.

"What can I do? I want to watch the matches, I want to watch my country's national team," he said, seated with friends at the cafe.

Egypt plays its opening game against Uruguay on June 15, followed by matches against host country Russia on June 19 and Saudi Arabia on June 25.

Apart from the decoder, the World Cup matches will only be available through a special subscription of 2,052 pounds. While existing subscribers will get a discount, the additional cost has angered them.

"This is almost equal to the salary of so many people in Egypt," said Mahmoud Ibrahim, a 30-year-old trader.

beIN, contacted by AFP, did not respond to questions on the subscription costs or the number of subscribers it has in Egypt. At a beIN store in Cairo, owner Mahmud Mostafa acknowledged the complaints but said the price was little changed from that for the 2014 World Cup.

"The difference is the value of the pound versus the dollar, which has led to higher prices," he said, referring to the currency's decline.

The government, facing economic turmoil after Egypt's 2011 uprising, has adopted austerity measures in the face of both runaway inflation and security threats.

In November 2016, the IMF granted Egypt a \$12-billion loan over three years. The loan was linked to measures including the adoption of value-added tax,

energy subsidy cuts and floating the pound, which saw it lose half its value.

SPECIAL DEAL FOR YOUTH CLUBS

Egyptian authorities have tried but failed to secure broadcast rights for The Pharaohs' matches on state television. An Egyptian court has ordered beIN to pay two fines of 18 mn euros each for "violating the law" on competition.

But the youth and sports ministry said it would make screens available to broadcast the games in more than 5,000 affiliated youth centres and clubs.

Also, the ministry's Mohamed el-Kourdy told AFP it has reached an agreement with the company representing beIN in Egypt to offer them discounts.

Qatar's beIN Media Group has also been under the spotlight in other Arab countries which like Egypt broke ties with Doha last June.

The broadcaster said Tuesday it has not yet reached agreement with Saudi Arabia, likewise a qualifier for the finals in Russia, although the UAE has struck a deal to restore beIN broadcasts in the country.

A LOOK BACK

How a 31-0 'farce' helped change Australian football

AFP
Sydney

When the Socceroos defeated American Samoa 31-0 in a World Cup qualifier in 2001, the freak result not only rewrote the record books but also helped change the course of Australian football.

The lop-sided scoreline, still football's biggest win at senior international level, was greeted with frustration rather than jubilation in Australian footballing circles.

It renewed Australia's determination to shift from the Oceania Football Confederation to the stronger Asian grouping, offering the chance of direct qualification to the World Cup.

The match itself, played before a

crowd of 2,500 in Coffs Harbour, had the air of a ritual slaughter well before kick-off.

Australia had beaten Tonga 22-0 to set a goal-scoring record days before, and American Samoa were rated the worst team in the world at 203 in the FIFA rankings.

Worse still, the Pacific minnows could not field most of their senior players due to eligibility issues, and were forced to put out a team with an average age of just 18.

"Frightened is not the word," coach Tumoai Lui said, before his novice side faced Australia's hardened professionals.

"We are going to ask for help from above. We are asking the Lord to help keep the score down."

MEN AGAINST BOYS

Luihe's prayers briefly appeared to have

been answered as American Samoa held the Australians goalless in the first eight minutes - before Con Boutsianis scored directly from a corner.

It opened the floodgates for an unprecedented drubbing as Australia raced to a 16-0 lead at half-time then kept hammering in goals after the break.

The rout was so comprehensive that the scoreboard operators lost count and showed the score as 32-0 at the final whistle.

Once that was cleared up, the scale of the result became apparent.

Striker Archie Thompson had 13 goals to his name - still an individual record at senior level - while David Zdrilic scored eight and Boutsianis finished with a hat-trick.

Reaction to the men-against-boys hiding was swift.

"International football was reduced to

a farce," Britain's *Daily Telegraph* thundered, while the *LA Times* said "fair play (took) a real beating Down Under".

Even Thompson was sheepish, despite describing his world record as a dream come true.

"That sort of thing doesn't come along every day," he said.

"But you have to look at the teams we are playing and start asking questions. We don't need to play these games."

In Australia, attention focused on the drawbacks of keeping the Socceroos in Oceania, the smallest and weakest of FIFA's six continental confederations.

'FINAL NAIL IN COFFIN'

"It is too late to end the carnage this time around, but there should be no repetition in four years," football correspondent Michael Cockerill wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Comprised largely of impoverished, small island nations, the OFC is the only confederation not guaranteed an automatic berth at the World Cup.

Instead, the Pacific region's best side must prove its worth through a play-off with a team from another, stronger confederation.

It repeatedly led to a situation where the Socceroos breezed through Oceania qualifiers, only to fail during the inter-continental play-offs when they encountered quality opponents for the first time.

The pattern was repeated in 2001, when Australia lost a two-legged tie against Uruguay for a spot at the 2002 tournament in South Korea and Japan.

Australia qualified for the 2006 tournament, this time beating Uruguay in the play-off, but by then the move to Asia had been sealed.

It has proved a smart move: since

joining the Asian confederation the Socceroos have not failed to qualify for a World Cup in 12 years, compared to a 32-year drought from 1974-2006 in Oceania.

Football historian Roy Hay said the record-breaking American Samoa game may have been the last straw for Australia's membership of the OFC.

"Australia trying to get into Asia goes back to at least the 1950s, if not the inter-war period," he told AFP.

"All through the ASF (Australian Soccer Federation) period (1961 to mid-2000s) they were well aware that apart from New Zealand there were no games against Oceania teams that were of any value to Australia."

"They didn't get any crowds, didn't get any interest, you couldn't sell it to the media. It (the 31-0 match) may have been a final nail in the coffin"

SPOTLIGHT

Warriors rout Cavaliers to complete NBA Finals sweep

'It feels great to go out there and win a championship with these guys the way we did it. To finish it off with a sweep feels so good'

AFP
Cleveland

An overpowering Golden State Warriors squad captured its third NBA crown in four seasons late Friday, routing Cleveland 108-85 to complete a sweep in the best-of-seven NBA Finals.

Stephen Curry scored 37 points and Kevin Durant was named the NBA Finals Most Valuable Player for the second consecutive year after 20 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists - his first finals triple double.

"To win in a sweep, it feels pretty good," Durant said. "Just knowing the work you put in paid off means something. It feels great to go out there and win a championship with these guys the way we did it. To finish it off with a sweep feels so good."

The Warriors inflicted the first 4-0 NBA Finals blanking since the Cavaliers were swept by San Antonio in 2007.

"It's an unbelievable feeling to come here with a mission and get the job done," Curry said. It was the fourth year in a row the Warriors and Cavaliers met in the finals, Golden State winning in 2015 and the past two years.

"This is so hard to do and to do it three years out of four years is incredible," Warriors guard Klay Thompson said.

Golden State claimed the sixth crown in club history, matching the Chicago Bulls for third on the all-time list. The Warriors won in 1947 and 1956 when based in Philadelphia plus 1975, 13 years after their move to the San Francisco Bay area, and the latest run.

"This was the hardest one we've had by far," Warriors coach Steve Kerr said. "It was definitely the toughest from the standpoint that it's the fourth year in a row that we've attempted to get back to the finals. It was hard and it gets more and more difficult as you go through."

Cavaliers star LeBron James revealed after the game he had been playing with a broken right hand for the past three games.

"Self-inflicted, post-game after game one. Very emotional. For a lot of different reasons," James said.

"I let the emotions get the best of me. Pretty much played the last three games with a broken hand."

James struck for 51 points in the opener, the fifth-best game total in finals history but it was a post-game punch out of frustration, into a blackboard according to ESPN, that caused the injury.



The Golden State Warriors celebrate with the Larry O'Brien Trophy after defeating the Cleveland Cavaliers in game four of the 2018 NBA Finals at Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland, Ohio. (Getty Images/AFP)



Kevin Durant of the Golden State Warriors celebrates with the MVP trophy after defeating the Cleveland Cavaliers during game four of the 2018 NBA Finals in Cleveland. (Getty Images/AFP)

James saw a referee call reversed against him and J.R. Smith forego a final shot with the score level, thinking the Cavs were ahead.

James, playing his eighth consecutive finals, scored 23 points, grabbed seven rebounds and passed off eight assists on Friday but fell to 3-6 in the finals for his career.

'Brings out the best'

A James slam dunk capped a 14-4 Cavs run to open the second quarter, putting Cleveland ahead 39-38, but Golden State answered with a 11-4 run and stretched the half-time lead to 61-52.

The Cavaliers would come no closer in the second half.

"They made some mini-runs, but over the course of 48 minutes our will took over," Curry said. "We knew they were going to come out with a tough first punch and we answered it and ran right back at them, set the tone for the whole game."

Golden State outscored Cleveland 25-13 in the third quarter, James managing only four points, and the Warriors rolled through the final minutes.

James was removed with 4:03 remaining and congratulated the Warriors before taking a seat on the bench. "When you play one of the best it brings the best out of you as well," Durant said of playing against James.

Finals loss puts LeBron future with Cavaliers in doubt

Cleveland Cavaliers fans endured another NBA Finals letdown on Friday but worse could yet follow with LeBron James, the man who has carried the team for years, set to walk out of the exit door once more for pastures new. James, who has almost single-handedly led the team to four straight NBA Finals since returning to Cleveland in 2014, is considered by many to be the best player on the planet and widely expected to sign elsewhere as a free agent after July 1. "I have no idea at this point," James told reporters after his Cavs were swept in four games by the Golden State Warriors on Friday. "Sitting down and considering everything, but my family is a huge part of whatever I'll decide to do in my career, and it will continue to be that."

Whatever team lands James will become an instant contender and there will be many with several pieces of a championship puzzle in place trying to prevent the four-times NBA MVP from re-signing with his hometown Cavs. Despite claiming the Eastern Conference crown for a fourth straight year, James was given a blunt reminder of how far short the Cavs are as they failed to win a game

against a team who have won three of the last four NBA titles. Barring some significant changes to the roster, it would be hard to see James staying put, especially since he said he had plenty of gas in the tank. "I still have so much to give to the game," James added. "When you have a goal and you're able to accomplish that goal, it actually - for me personally, it made me even more hungry to continue to try to win championships."

When James first left the Cavs in 2010 to join Miami, where he won two titles, it sparked riots in Cleveland as locals burned replicas of his No 23 jersey and hurled rocks at a 10-story banner of him that towered over the city. But James returned in 2014 and his likeness has since been replaced, the black-and-white image of the three-times NBA champion with his muscular arms outstretched now serving as both a tourist attraction and symbol of civic pride.

'UNFINISHED BUSINESS'

James fulfilled a promise when he led the Cavaliers to a maiden NBA title in 2016 as the city celebrated a first professional sports

championship since the 1964 Cleveland Browns claimed the NFL crown. "I came back because I felt like I had some unfinished business," James added. "To be able to be a part of a championship team two years ago with the team that we had and in the fashion that we had is something I will always remember."

But after nine trips to the NBA Finals, including in each of the last eight seasons, the 33-year-old Akron, Ohio, native only has three championships. He does not have much of a supporting cast in Cleveland and some reports suggest he could go to the Houston Rockets, a team that boasted the best record during the regular season and features his close friend Chris Paul. James may also find the Philadelphia 76ers an attractive landing spot given their talented young duo of Ben Simmons and Joel Embiid, for which he could serve as the veteran presence needed to catapult them into contenders. The New York Knicks, Los Angeles Lakers and Los Angeles Clippers are among the other possible destinations for James but Ohio, where his family are based and where he has lived nearly all his life, could convince him to stay.

MLB

Late Yankees' homers sink deGrom, Mets

Reuters
New York

Brett Gardner hit a tie-breaking two-run homer in the top of the eighth inning on Friday night for the New York Yankees, who overcame an injury to starting pitcher Masahiro Tanaka in a 4-1 win over the host New York Mets at Citi Field.

The Yankees have won three straight and eight of nine. The Mets have lost the first seven games of a nine-game homestand, during which they have scored just eight runs, including three in the last five games.

The Mets took their first lead in a week when Brandon Nimmo homered on Tanaka's second pitch of the game. But Tanaka retired 14 of the next 15 batters he faced before helping the Yankees tie the game in the sixth, though it came at a cost. Tanaka, an .042 career hitter, reached on a one-out error by Mets first baseman Adrian Gonzalez, went to second on Gleyber Torres' single and to third on a walk to Gardner.

Aaron Judge followed with a fly to medium right field. Tanaka tagged up and easily beat Jay Bruce's off-target throw home for his first big league run, but

he appeared to slow down on his final two steps and did not slide.

Jonathan Holder entered in the bottom of the inning. Shortly thereafter, the Yankees said Tanaka, who allowed one walk while striking out eight, experienced stiffness in both hamstrings while scoring the run and would be re-evaluated Saturday.

Judge's sacrifice fly began a stretch of seven straight outs recorded by Mets starter Jacob deGrom (4-1), but the Yankees broke the tie when Torres singled with two outs in the eighth and Gardner followed with a homer to right, his fifth of the season.

Giancarlo Stanton added his 15th home run in the ninth.

Gardner's homer made a winner out of Chad Green (4-0), who allowed two hits in the seventh. Dellin Betances threw a perfect eighth, and Aroldis Chapman earned his 16th save despite hitting a batter and allowing a hit in the ninth.

DeGrom took the loss after allowing three runs (two earned) on four hits and two walks while striking out eight over eight innings. His National League-leading ERA rose from 1.49 to 1.57. DeGrom has allowed six runs (five earned) over 55 1/3 innings in his last nine starts, during which the Mets are just 2-7.

Giants pile up runs to beat Nats; Strasburg exits early

Andrew McCutchen and Gorkys Hernandez homered as the San Francisco Giants defeated the Washington Nationals 9-5 on Friday night at Nationals Park. Washington starter Stephen Strasburg (6-6) left after just two innings. He allowed three runs on five hits, including the McCutchen homer, and this was his shortest outing of the season. The right-hander threw only 35 pitches. Nationals manager Dave Martinez said after the game that the right-hander had inflammation and tightness in his throwing shoulder and is to have an MRI on Saturday.

Washington wound up allowing 15 hits overall as San Francisco repeatedly came up with offensive chances. The Giants went 6-for-14 with runners in scoring position and stranded six. Overall, they scored in five of the nine innings as Strasburg's early exit forced the Nationals to use seven pitchers.

For the Giants, Andrew Suarez nearly got the victory but could not make it through the necessary five innings. He allowed four runs on six hits in 4 1/3 innings after being staked to an early 3-0 lead. The Giants used six pitchers, and Reyes Moronta (2-0) got the win after coming

in for Suarez and getting the last two outs in the fifth. San Francisco has won seven of eight, including two in a row.

McCutchen started things with a solo homer two outs into the first inning. The Giants added two more in the second thanks to an RBI single from Alen Hanson plus a Hunter Pence run-scoring double.

They stretched the lead to 5-0 when Hernandez belted a two-run homer off Wander Suero in the fourth. Juan Soto's two-run homer cut the lead to 5-2 in the bottom of the fourth before Brandon Crawford gave the Giants another run in the fifth with an RBI double.

RESULTS

Giants.....	9	Nationals.....	5
Yankees.....	4	Mets.....	1
White Sox.....	1	Red Sox.....	0
Indians.....	4	Tigers.....	1
Mariners.....	4	Rays.....	3
Cubs.....	3	Pirates.....	1
Brewers.....	12	Phillies.....	4
Blue Jays.....	5	Orioles.....	1
Marlins.....	4	Padres.....	0
Dodgers.....	7	Braves.....	3
Cardinals.....	7	Reds.....	6

(10 innings)

Astros.....	7	Rangers.....	3
Diamondbacks.....	9	Rockies.....	4
Athletics.....	7	Royals.....	2
Angels.....	4	Twins.....	2



New York Yankees centerfielder Brett Gardner (left) celebrates with right fielder Aaron Judge after hitting a two-run home run against the New York Mets during the eighth inning at Citi Field. PICTURE: USA TODAY

TOP OF THE LINE

Boks hold on for come-from-behind win over England

Five tries each in action-packed match, England were 24-3 ahead after only 17 minutes



South Africa's Aphiwe Dyantyi scores their fifth try against England during their first Test at Ellis Park Stadium, Johannesburg, yesterday. (Reuters)

Reuters
Johannesburg

South Africa began a new era for their Rugby with a dramatic 42-39 victory over England in the first Test at Ellis Park yesterday, coming back after conceding three tries in a horrific opening 17-minute spell to go 1-0 ahead in the three-match series.

The Springboks, with their first-ever black captain in Siya Kolisi and a new coach in Rassie Erasmus, powered their way back with five tries of their own after falling 24-3 behind in the early exchanges of a high-scoring and action-packed encounter but had to hold on grimly at the end for their narrow victory.

Debutant winger S'busiso Nkosi and Aphiwe Dyantyi scored three tries between them but it was the return to the side of English-based scrumhalf Faf de Klerk and fullback Willie le Roux that propelled the home side to victory while condemning England to a fourth successive test defeat after they lost their Six Nations crown earlier this year.



England's Chris Robshaw (left) looks dejected during the match against South Africa yesterday. (Reuters)

England got off to a dream start as they eased through a leaky home defence and saw Mike Brown, Elliott Daly and George Farrell all score in a blistering start. Late tries from Maro Itoje and Jonny May allowed them to come close to snatching a win at the end.

Brown powered through two tackles for the opening score after just four minutes and

then Daly and Farrell added two more tries as England leapt into a 21-point lead to stun the 55,000-strong crowd.

George Ford's shuttle ball put Daly in untouched in the 13th minute and then a skip pass to Farrell allowed the England captain to ease his way through a porous backline four minutes later.

But England suddenly lost

momentum as South Africa found their straps with De Klerk dictating the pace of play in a triumphant return to his former home ground.

Nkosi's strong run at the England defence took the ball towards the line and De Klerk picked up the loose ball to stretch his arm over the line for a first reply in the 20th minute.

Nkosi then scored himself on

the half-hour mark with a kick and chase as Daly missed the ball and the new Springbok wing touched down, with a large dollop of good fortune.

Four minutes afterwards, De Klerk kept front-foot ball going for the Boks and Nkosi went over on the other wing after a sharp inside pass from fellow debutant Dyantyi.

A rolling maul on the stroke of halftime provided the hosts with their first chance to take the lead, as De Klerk cleverly switched direction to space outside to see Le Roux to power over at speed.

A 29-27 lead at half-time was extended when Dyantyi went over, albeit almost fumbling the ball, in the 64th minute.

England finished the stronger of the sides as Itoje stretched over the ruck to reduce South Africa's lead to 39-32 and then May ran through the home defence to leave the Boks three points ahead with one minute left. But South Africa held on for a narrow win as they go into the next test in Bloemfontein next Saturday and the final game of the series at Newlands in Cape Town on June 23.

FOCUS

Pocock shines as Australia beat Ireland in Brisbane

Reuters
Sydney

David Pocock returned to test rugby with a bang yesterday to help Australia to a hardfought 18-9 win over Ireland in Brisbane and give the Wallabies a 1-0 lead in the three-match series.

The openside flanker, who sat out 2017 on a sabbatical, scored Australia's second try in the 72nd minute and was a constant menace at the breakdown as the Irish fell to a first defeat in 13 tests.

Flyhalf Bernard Foley scored the rest of Australia's points at Lang Park with a try, a conversion and two penalties, the second of which gave Australia a two-point lead with 12 minutes remaining.

"We got that win tonight with attitude and some silky play and silky finishes," said Australia skipper Michael Hooper, who led from the front as the hosts outmuscled the Irish at times.

"It was tough for us to get out of our area, but we did that well so I'm pleased."

Irish flyhalf Joey Carbery, getting a rare start ahead of Johnny Sexton, kicked three penalties for the Six Nations champions in a tight match that will only whet the appetite for the remaining tests in Melbourne and Sydney.

"Every test match we play against each other is of incredible intensity and physicality and I thought it was the same again tonight," said Ireland skipper Peter O'Mahony. "I thought credit to Australia, they came out on top in a lot of physical battles."

The match opened at a frenetic pace and it was Australia who got the first points on the board when Foley landed the first of his penalties in the second minute.

Hooper put in a huge hit on Carbery in the 13th minute but the flyhalf got back up,

brushed himself off and levelled the scores from the kicking tee a minute later.

Prolific Irish winger Jacob Stockdale had to showcase his defensive skills in the 20th minute when he made a try-saving tackle on Marika Korobete as his opposite number was charging for the line.

Carbery edged the tourists in front with his second penalty in the 26th minute and the Irish kicking from hand continued to keep the hosts penned in their own half.

The first try came in the 34th minute when the hosts finally got the ball out wide in the Ireland half with winger Dane Haylett-Petty and centre Samu Kerevi linking well on the left before Will Genia's quick pass sent Foley over in the corner.

Foley was unable to convert so the hosts went into half-time 8-6 ahead but the Irish came out from the break firing and number eight CJ Stander soon stormed through the midfield and crossed the line only to be held up. Ireland went through 19 phases from the ensuing five metre scrum before a Pocock turnover ensured the visitors would come away with no points.

Pocock was penalised in the 54th minute, though, and Carbery's last act before making way for Sexton was to put Ireland 9-8 ahead.

Fullback Israel Folau thought he had given Australia the lead with a try just after the hour mark but play was called back for a foul brought to the attention of the referee by the TV official.

Australia would not be denied, though, and Foley slotted his second penalty after a scrum infringement before Pocock put the icing on the cake by flashing across the line from close range. "He was outstanding," Hooper said of his back row partner. "He can do some great things over the ball. His presence on the field is fantastic."

Japan get flash to bash Italy for shock win

Japan conjured a hat-trick of magical scores to floor Six Nations side Italy 34-17 yesterday in the first game of their two-match rugby series. The Brave Blossoms, who finished with four tries to Italy's two, produced moments of breathtaking skill as Amanaki Mafi, Kenki Fukuoka and Lomano Lemeki scored for the home side in Oita, western Japan.

Japan fly-half Yu Tamura made six out of seven kicks in a confident performance for the 2019 World Cup hosts. Prop Tizano Pasquale opened the scoring for Italy with an opportunistic try after 15 minutes.

But a slick exchange of passes between Kenki Fukuoka and Japan captain Michael Leitch allowed Amanaki Mafi to restore parity. Fukuoka added another try for the Brave Blossoms after 28 minutes when the jet-heeled winger escaped the clutches of two beefy Italians to score. Fly-half Tamura slotted a penalty before Italy flanker Braam Steyn bulldozed over for a try converted by Tommaso Allan to reduce Japan's half-time lead to 17-14.

Allan and Tamura traded penalties early in the second half to tie the game before Japan blew it wide open with one for the highlights reel. Tamura kicked wide for Shota Horie to touch the ball back in for Lemeki to storm over.

Kotaro Matsushima added a fourth try for Japan after 65 minutes to dash Italian hopes of a comeback. The teams meet again in Kobe next weekend.

SPOTLIGHT

Eight-try spree as All Blacks thrash France 52-11

AFP
Auckland

Karl Tu'inukuafe made his immense presence felt with a game-changing introduction to Test rugby as the All Blacks came from behind to record a runaway 52-11 win over France in Auckland yesterday.

The All Blacks scored eight tries, seven of them after the man mountain, who was not on their radar a few weeks ago, came on five minutes into the second half and used his immense bulk to give the world champions a much-needed scrum dominance.

From being 8-11 down at the break, the All Blacks piled on 44 unanswered points in a blistering second half to stretch their Eden Park unbeaten run to 41 games.

Codie Taylor, Ben Smith, Damian McKenzie, Ardie Savea and Ngani Laumape all scored tries in the second period, while Rieko Ioane ran in two.

French fullback Maxime Medard will have nightmares about his last-ditch attempt to block Laumape when the All Blacks replacement charged at the line.

Nine years ago, Medard was the French

hero with a match-winning try when they beat the All Blacks in Dunedin, but this time he will be remembered for being sent flying as Laumape ran through him.

It epitomised a brutal turnaround by the All Blacks after France had claimed the better of the first half to hold a three-point lead at the turn.

Floodgates opened

Props Dany Priso and Uini Atonio were in the thick of the early action as France used their muscle to best the All Blacks in the scrums and mauls, while their backs were willing to run at every opportunity.

The All Blacks moved the ball from side to side as well as employing long-range grubber kicks and short chips over the backline, all to no avail.

Left wing Remy Grosso was gifted the opening try when Ben Smith swooped on the ball at the back of an unprotected French ruck. His clearing pass, which would have put Ioane in the clear, was instead intercepted by Grosso who had an easy run to the line.

After an exchange of penalties by Beauden Barrett and Morgan Parra, the three Barrett brothers featured in an equalising try. Scott and Jordie Barrett

created space for Ryan Crotty to take the ball to the line, where Beauden Barrett finished the move.

A booming 51-metre penalty by Parra lifted France to 11-8 and while the All Blacks pounded the French line in the closing minutes of the first half, they were unable to draw level again until the introduction of Tu'inukuafe early in the second half.

In the first scrum of the second half when Tu'inukuafe was on the field, the French pack was driven back and in the following rucks and mauls the impact was the same.

His first scrum effort produced a penalty for Beauden Barrett to level the scores, and when Paul Gabrillagues was sin-binned, the floodgates opened.

The All Blacks ruthlessly scored 32 points in 20 minutes with the tries to Taylor, Ben Smith, Ioane, McKenzie and Laumape. Beauden Barrett, having an off-night with the boot, contributed two conversions and a penalty.

France pressured the All Blacks line in the closing 10 minutes but Ioane snafled an intercept pass to for his second try before Ardie Savea barged over on the stroke of fulltime.



New Zealand's Codie Taylor is tackled by France's Anthony Belleau during their Test at Auckland yesterday. (AFP)

FORMULA 1

Ferrari's Vettel takes pole for Canadian GP, Hamilton fourth

'Yesterday we were a bit in trouble, I was not really happy with the car and I could not get the rhythm. Today was switched on and what a day, the car was incredible'

DPA
Montreal

Sebastian Vettel will start his Ferrari from pole position in today's Formula One Canadian Grand Prix while standings leader Lewis Hamilton qualified only fourth.

Vettel produced a track record 1 minute 10.764 second lap round the 4.361-kilometre Circuit Gilles-Villeneuve in Montreal yesterday to take his 54th career pole, 0.093 seconds ahead of Mercedes' Valtteri Bottas.

Max Verstappen qualified third for Red Bull ahead of Hamilton, who was 23 hundredths off the pace after an unimpressive Q3. Kimi Raikkonen in the other Ferrari was fifth with Daniel Ricciardo behind him in the other Red Bull.

Hamilton, Vettel and Ricciardo are all on two season wins after six races, with the Briton leading the way with 110 points to Vettel's 96 and Ricciardo's 72. Hamilton is seeking a record-equalling seventh win at the Canadian GP, matching the tally of Michael Schumacher.

Ferrari struggled in the practice sessions but Vettel delivered when it mattered.

"Yesterday we were a bit in trouble, I was not really happy with the car and I could not get the rhythm," he said in his track interview.

"Today was switched on and what a day, the car was incredible. Thanks to the team, thanks the crowd. A very good day."

Both Ferrari and Mercedes will start the race on ultrasoft tyres, having set their best Q2 times with that rubber, while Red Bull will be on the quicker hypersoft.

That means Verstappen and Ricciardo will be in position to attack early but their rivals will be able to drive a longer first stint.

Verstappen has been criticised for the number of crashes he has had this season but responded by topping every practice session and being safe in qualifying.

"I am very happy with this weekend so far," said the Dutch-



Top three qualifiers Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel, Mercedes' Valtteri Bottas and Red Bull Racing's Max Verstappen pose after the qualifying round of the Canadian Grand Prix at Circuit Gilles Villeneuve in Montreal, Canada, yesterday. (Getty Images/AFP)

man. "The car has been working really well, we are just missing top speed but to be third is great and I think we can do a good job."

Nico Huelkenberg (Renault), Esteban Ocon (Force India), Carlos Sainz (Renault) and Sergio Perez (Force India) completed the top 10.

Fernando Alonso is entering his 300th F1 race but exited a disappointing 14th in Q2, one place ahead of McLaren teammate Stoffel Vandoorne. Kevin Magnussen (Haas), Brendon Hartley (Toro Rosso) and Charles Leclerc (Sauber) departed ahead of the pair.

Romain Grosjean did not make out of the pitlane in qualifying as his Haas gave up in a plume of smoke. Marcus Ericsson, after smacking his Sauber into the

wall at the chicane, Pierre Gasly (Toro Rosso), home favourite Lance Stroll and Sergey Sirotkin (both Williams) also failed to survive the first section.

F1 not a true championship without Germany: Rosberg

Formula One needs to keep the German Grand Prix on the calendar for the credibility of the sport, former world champion Nico Rosberg said on Saturday.

Hockenheim is back this year but the future is uncertain beyond that and local promoters have said they cannot continue without a new deal that is free of financial risk to them.

"Without a German race I struggle to see it as a real world championship," Rosberg told Reuters television at an event or-

ganised by F1 sponsors Heineken to promote drink-driving awareness.

"Germany is so legendary, so important for Formula One it really has to be there so I hope they find a solution," added the German, who won his 2016 title in a season that included a race at Hockenheim.

The circuit, near Mannheim in the Upper Rhine valley, has hosted the race in alternate seasons over the past decade, sharing it with the Nuerburgring until that track pulled out after 2013 for financial reasons.

Hockenheim receives no state funding, unlike races in some countries with little motorsport heritage -- such as Azerbaijan, Bahrain and Abu Dhabi -- which pay tens of millions of dollars for

their slot. Germany is a home race for world champions Mercedes as well as Ferrari's four-times title-holder Sebastian Vettel, who grew up nearby.

In the glory days of seven-times world champion Michael Schumacher with Benetton and Ferrari, Germany hosted two races a year with huge crowds drawn to Hockenheim and the Nuerburgring. Those crowds have dropped significantly since Schumacher departed the scene at the end of 2012.

With Miami likely to debut next year, as a second race in the United States, and Vietnam seemingly also in the pipeline, F1's commercial rights holders Liberty have plenty of options on a calendar currently at a record-equalling 21 rounds.

CYCLING

Thomas cements Dauphine pole as Bilbao wins stage

AFF
La Rosière, France

Team Sky's Welsh rider Geraint Thomas cemented his control of the Criterium du Dauphine after finishing second on yesterday's 6th and penultimate stage won by Spaniard Pello Bilbao. Bilbao made his move late on during the gruelling stage that is almost the same as stage 11 in the Tour de France next month, with four major climbs and a summit finish at la Rosiere. Thomas came in second, managing to put further valuable seconds between himself and his rivals for the yellow leader.

Briton Adam Yates, riding for Mitchelton, is second overall, 1min 29sec behind Thomas. France's Romain Bardet, of AG2R, jumped to third from seventh overnight and is at 2min 01sec.

"It wasn't ideal but AG2R rode really well today, they really took the race on and put us under pressure," Thomas said.

"Fortunately we've got such a strong team that if one guy's not so good, another guy steps up. Tao and Castro (teammates Tao Geoghegan Hart and Jonathan Castroviejo) were really good today and fortunately we were always just in control. We never panicked - but fair play to AG2R for taking the race on."

Thomas added to ITV: "I always felt in control, I always felt pretty good, but I didn't want to get too carried away (on the final climb). It's easy to underestimate how far there is to go and I didn't want to go too early, die off, and lose time."

"Obviously there's a big day tomorrow as well, so I tried to do the minimum and then at the end, I just thought 'I'll go for it and see what happens'. I managed to get a few more bonus seconds which is good."

Today's seventh and final 136km stage ends in the ski resort of Le Bettex after five climbs.

RESULTS

1. Pello Bilbao (ESP/ASTANA) 3hr 34min 11sec, 2. Geraint Thomas (GBR/SKY) at 21sec, 3. Dan Martin (IRL/EAU) 2:3, 4. Romain Bardet (FRA/ALM) 2:3, 5. Adam Yates (GBR/MIT) 2:6, 6. Emanuel Buchmann (GER/BOR) 1:0:2, 7. Ilnur Zakarin (RUS/KAT) 1:2:0, 8. Pierre Latour (FRA/ALM) 1:4:0, 9. Tao Geoghegan Hart (GBR/SKY) 1:4:5, 10. Valerio Conti (ITA/EAU) 1:4:5

Overall standings

1. Geraint Thomas (GBR/SKY) 20hr 51min 19sec, 2. Adam Yates (GBR/MIT) at 1:29, 3. Romain Bardet (FRA/ALM) 2:0:1, 4. Dan Martin (IRL/EAU) 2:39, 5. Damiano Caruso (ITA/BMC) 2:39, 6. Emanuel Buchmann (GER/BOR) 3:1:0, 7. Ilnur Zakarin (RUS/KAT) 3:29, 8. Marc Soler (ESP/MOV) 3:4:0, 9. Pierre Latour (FRA/ALM) 3:49, 10. Pierre Rolland (FRA/EPD) 4:00



Spain's Peio Bilbao celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the sixth stage of the 70th edition of the Criterium du Dauphine race between Frontenex and La Rosiere yesterday. (AFP)

Kung takes lead as BMC win opening time-trial

Switzerland's Stefan Kung will wear the first race leader's jersey at the Tour de Suisse after his BMC outfit won Saturday's opening team time-trial.

Swiss time-trial champion Kung was first over the line as his team finished the 18km race against the clock around Frauenfeld. The result was a bonus for BMC's team leader Richie Porte who stole a march on his rivals for overall victory in the week-long stage race.

BMC finished in 20min 18sec to beat Sunweb by 20sec with Quick-Step third at 27sec.

Overall contenders, such as Movistar pair Nairo Quintana and Mikel Landa lost more than 30sec. Sunday's second stage of the traditional Tour de France warm-up is a 155km run around Frauenfeld.

Ogier takes narrow lead over Neuville into Sardinia decider

Five-time world champion Sebastien Ogier held a narrow lead of less than four seconds over championship leader Thierry Neuville at the Rally of Italy in Sardinia yesterday.

With 49-kilometres of racing left on Sunday, Frenchman Ogier said "it's tight" as he looks to defend a 3.9sec lead over Belgian Neuville.

"It was a good afternoon, I just strug-

gled to find the tempo in the second of the three specials," added M-Sport Ford driver Ogier.

He is aiming for a fourth rally victory in seven this year.

Finland's Jari-Matti Latvala in a Toyota was third at 48.9sec, however he could be hit with a penalty after needing to make some running repairs on the day's final special.

He leads compatriot and team-mate Esapekka Lappi by just 5.3sec.

Standings after yesterday's stages

1. Sebastien Ogier-Julien Ingrassia (FRA/Ford Fiesta) 3hr 02min 16.9sec, 2. Thierry Neuville-Nicolas Gilsoul (BEL/Hyundai i20) at 3.9sec, 3. Jari-Matti Latvala-Mikka Anttila (FIN/Toyota Yaris) 48.9, 4. Esapekka Lappi-Janne Ferm (FIN/

Toyota Yaris) 54.2, 6. Hayden Paddon-Seb Marshall (NZL-GBR/Hyundai i20) 2:01.8, 5. Mads Ostberg-Torstein Eriksen (NOR/Citroën C3) 2:03.9, 7. Craig Breen-Scott Martin (IRL-GBR/Citroën C3) 3:13.6
Special stage winners: Ogier (SS1, SS6, SS11, SS14), Mikkelsen (SS2, SS3), Tanaak (SS4, SS10), Neuville (SS5, SS8, SS12, SS15, SS16), Suninen (SS7), Latvala (SS9), Lappi (SS13).

CRICKET

Alliance B emerge Division II champions

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Alliance B defeated Serandib B by 26 runs in the final to emerge Division II champions of the 24th Gulf Incon Metabo Ramadan Cricket Tournament.

Put in to bat, Alliance made 127 runs in their allotted 12 overs. They were reeling at 37 for six at the end of the fifth over, but Amol scored 30 off 10 balls to lead the recovery. Rashid, Rafiq and Azeez contributed 14 runs each. Bandula of Serandib B took three wickets for 17 runs and Nuwan claimed two for nine.

In reply, Serandib B could only make 101 runs for the loss of six wickets. Priyantha top-scored for Serandib B with 17 runs while Tharanga and Milan made 16 runs each. Rashid of Alliance B took two wickets for 19 runs. Amol of Alliance B was declared Man-of-the-Finals.

Taabish of QS Tec was declared best batsman, while Akalanka of Serandib B adjudged best bowler. Best all-rounder award went to Tharindu of Serandib B and Chamara of Serandib B won the best wicket-keeper award.



Captains of Alliance B and Serandib B pose with their trophies and chief guest Senior Sales and Marketing Manager of Gulf Incon and Sajjad Ahmed Khan and QVC officials.

ATHLETICS

Having found his rhythm, Samba looks to join the greats

As star Qatari 400m hurdler takes on world champion Warholm again in Stockholm today, he feels he can go faster yet

By Cathal Dennehy
IAAF

Samba – a Brazilian musical genre or dance style with African roots, renowned for its rhythmic nature and energy.

Samba – a lightning-fast 400m hurdler who grew up in Saudi Arabia, lives in Qatar, has a Mauritanian father, a South African coach, and is, at 22, one of the most exciting talents in the sport today.

Samba – the moves being busted out by the above athlete (first name: Abderrahman) at City Hall in Oslo, shortly after 6pm on Wednesday, the eve of the IAAF Diamond League meeting, to oblige the request of a local TV journalist who wanted to know if his name reflected his nature.

As Samba duly launches into a few swivelling moves, his friend and Qatari compatriot Mutaz Essa Barshim watches and laughs along at the ridiculous sight, surprised and impressed at his ability, even if he's got some work to do before Carnival

comes calling.

"I'm not a good dancer," said Samba.

The following evening, things are far more serious, Samba settling into the blocks as a hush descends over a packed Bislett Stadium, the crowd anxiously awaiting the performance of local hero Karsten Warholm, who is positioned two lanes outside the Qatari.

"That was samba over the hurdles. The hurdles is like a dance, and I hope I dance always," Samba said after winning in Oslo with a meet record of 47.60 seconds

It's the clash everyone was waiting for, and when the gun fires Warholm duly screams out of the blocks with a terrified ferocity that would please Edvard Munch. But as they turn for home, the Norwegian's power begins to fade, his stride starts to shorten, while Samba, unrelenting, continues to churn out a metronomic rhythm.

A week before, Samba set the Asian 400m hurdles record at 47.48, and as

he approaches the line it's clear that that's again under threat, but on this night in Oslo it survives. Samba hits the finish in 47.60, a meeting record in the bag.

"That was samba over the hurdles," he says afterwards with a laugh. "The hurdles is like a dance, and I hope I dance always."

FOOTBALL FAMILY

For one so accomplished, even at the tender age of 22, little is known about Samba's background. He was born and grew up in Saudi Arabia but chose to represent Qatar and moving to Doha in 2015.

"All my family were athletes," he says. "But all of them footballers."

In 2011, Samba broke that trend by starting out in athletics, first trying the high jump (where he had a best of 1.90m in his first season), long jump, 200m and 400m. At the age of 18 he had a best of 47.45 for 400m, a time he lowered to 46.04 at the age of 20 after several months' training in Qatar.

But only last year, at the age of 21,

did he transfer his talents to the 400m hurdles, proving himself an astonishing prospect by clocking 48.31 at a meeting in South Africa before claiming victory at the IAAF Diamond League meeting in Doha in 48.44.

However, injuries would hamper him later in the summer. Samba reached the final at the IAAF World Championships London 2017 but was only able to finish seventh in 49.74 as Warholm took gold in 48.35.

But that disappointment helped fuel his fire for 2018, Samba improving rapidly under the continued guidance of Hennie Kotze, the South African who previously coached Kenya's Nicholas Bett to the world 400m hurdles title in 2015.

Kotze once described viewing his protégés in the 400m hurdles as like "watching a beautiful musical concert" and if that's true, then his star performer's season to date has played out like a sweet symphony.

Samba broke the Qatari record on his first outing with a 47.90 clocking in Potchefstroom, South Africa, then lowered it again to 47.57 in Doha, be-

fore his recent hard-fought victories over Warholm in Rome (47.48) and Oslo (47.60).

Samba is now on the brink of achieving his fifth consecutive sub-48-second performance in back-to-back races. The last 400m hurdler to achieve such a feat was Derrick Adkins back in 1995.

RISING TOGETHER

The rivalry with Warholm is one that stokes his fire like nothing else, and in Oslo Samba explained how the Norwegian's presence helps him reach a new level.

"He did great and made the race more exciting by going that fast, forcing me to go with him," said Samba.

"It's helping us both; everyone goes to the line to fight together and it makes it more exciting for me."

"The people in the world now see the 400m hurdles as the exciting race on the track, people tune in to see what's going to happen. Me and Karsten make that race exciting, running sub-48, and that's good for the sport. In the future we'll make it faster?"

How much faster? We may get an idea this Sunday, when the IAAF Diamond League moves east to Stockholm, with Samba and Warholm set to lock horns once again in the Olympic Stadium.

And Samba sees plenty of room for improvement. On Thursday, he ran with 13 strides between barriers until the seventh hurdle (of 10) but the wind swirling around Bislett forced him to switch down to 14 strides earlier than usual, so he thinks with calmer conditions on Sunday a quicker time is on the cards.

"I hope for another great one, maybe running faster and a new track record," he says, "but maybe we'll have a surprise."

Given his rapid progression, talk has inevitably arisen about the possibility of challenging the world record of 46.78 by Kevin Young, but Samba is not getting ahead of himself. "I can't give a comment now about the world record, I don't know," he says. "But you can be sure I can run faster, maybe close to 47 seconds."

"Always, I think I have more."



Qatar's Abderrahman Samba (centre) leaves the competition behind on his way to victory in the 2018 Doha Diamond League meet last month. **PICTURE:** Noushad Thekkayil

SPOTLIGHT

AZF to set up Fan Zone for 2018 World Cup at Khalifa stadium

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Football fans are in for a spectacular and unique public experience from inside the iconic Khalifa International Stadium, as Aspire Zone Foundation (AZF) prepares to host the country's biggest Fan Zone area for those keen to watch the world's biggest sporting event, the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia, starting this June.

The Fan Zone will seat more than 1000 people, providing a unique atmosphere for football fans in Qatar. It will also be equipped with the latest cooling technologies, a giant screen, food and beverage stalls, children's play zone and convenient car parking. Put together, these will provide fans with a sneak peek on what it will be like to experience a FIFA World Cup at one of the 2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar stadiums.

Commenting on the occasion, Nasser Abdullah al-Hajri, director of PR and Communications at Aspire Zone Foundation, said, "AZF is proud to utilise its world-class stadium and one of the iconic 2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar venues, Khalifa International Stadium. Fans will get to experience the stadium's facilities and cutting-edge technology, and get first-hand experience in what it feels like to expe-



Nasser Abdullah al-Hajri, director of PR and Communications at Aspire Zone Foundation.

rience the games in the stadium that's set to host the very same tournament, the 2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar, in four years' time."

AZF will unveil more details about the Fan Zone area, including where to



Khalifa International Stadium, one of the venues for the 2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar, hosted HH The Amir Cup final between Al Rayyan and Al Duhail last month.

buy tickets, through its various official social media channels.

One of the most unique features of the Fan Zone at Khalifa International Stadium is its capacity to fit thousands of fans keen to watch the entire tour-

namment via giant LED screens. Fans will also benefit from the stadium's advanced infrastructure, including the cooling technology.

In addition, fans can choose their preferred seating area as AZF has pre-

pared a range of options whether it's private partitions for those seeking privacy, Majlis, or dining services.

Aspire Zone Foundation has also previously set up Fan Zones for the 2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil, which housed

more than 1,500 spectators a day, as part of its mission to engage with football fans and provide the best entertainment experience for them to watch one of most popular tournaments on the planet.