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Boks skipper Kolisi not scared of fancied rivals

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GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

Neymar's Brazil look strong as Germany, Argentina battle issues

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TENNIS/ FRENCH OPEN

Nadal downs Del Potro, to face Austrian Thiem for title

'You have to be focussed and keep your passion for the game. I never dreamed in 2005 when I played my first final here that I would be in another one'



Spain's Rafael Nadal celebrates after winning his semi-final match against Argentina's Juan Martin Del Potro at the French Open yesterday.



Austria's Dominic Thiem reacts during his semi-final match against Italy's Marco Cecchinato in Paris yesterday.

PREVIEW

Halep 'doesn't feel pressure' ahead of Stephens clash

AFP Paris

Top seed Simona Halep insisted that she "doesn't feel pressure" ahead of her third French Open final today, where she will face American Sloane Stephens.

The Romanian is still waiting for a maiden Grand Slam title after three previous final defeats, while 10th seed Stephens is the reigning US Open champion.

Halep has been in fine form so far at Roland Garros and eased past former winner Garbine Muguruza 6-1, 6-4 in the last four – a victory which also ensured she will remain the world number one at the end of the tournament.

"I don't know who said that I feel pressure. Not me, obviously. I don't feel pressure," she said yesterday.

The 26-year-old has twice lost in the Roland Garros final.

She fought back from a set down against Maria Sharapova in 2014 only to lose a tight decider, before seeing a set and 3-0 lead disappear in a barrage of Jelena Ostapenko winners last year.

"I feel that it's a big challenge for me. It's a big chance to win my dream tournament," added Halep, who took time out from preparing for the final by watching Rafael Nadal's men's semi-final against Juan Martin del Potro yesterday.

"But this doesn't mean it's going to happen or something like that. I have just to play like I did yesterday (against Muguruza).

"So we will see what is going to happen tomorrow, but I just want to be smiling on court."

Halep's previous French Open final losses came against powerful ball-strikers in Sharapova and Ostapenko,

but Stephens's game is more defensive and the Romanian leads 5-2 in their head-to-head record.

But Halep doesn't want to focus on that, even though it must give her added confidence.

"I don't want to think about that because, as I said many times, it's a different match, different situation. Both of us will be ready to give everything we have," she said.

"But I believe in my chance. I believe that I have the game to win the match."

Halep has won her last four matches against Stephens and both of their meetings on clay, including in the 2014 French Open fourth round, while the two have never played a three-set encounter.

But the American 10th seed has never lost a WTA final, with her triumph in the Miami Open in March her sixth win from six.

"I think I'm pretty calm on the court all the time, I'd say. I don't get too up, too down," said Stephens.

"I think that it has helped me in finals, but, yeah, it's not something I really focus on. I just try to stay calm and play my game."

Halep is bidding to become only the second Romanian woman to win a Grand Slam after 1978 French Open champion Virginia Ruzici, who is now Halep's manager and had a special ceremony on Court Philippe Chatrier earlier this week to commemorate her victory 40 years ago.

But Stephens has had a steely determination about her since fighting back from injury and a ranking of 957 less than a year ago, and will have nothing to lose.

"Yeah, just another good opportunity," she said. "Just going to take it in (my) stride and just enjoy it and go out and compete."

AFP Paris

Ten-time champion Rafael Nadal reached his 11th French Open final yesterday when he demolished Juan Martin del Potro in straight sets, setting up a title showdown with Dominic Thiem, the only man to defeat him on clay in the last two years.

Nadal, a 16-time Grand Slam champion, claimed his 85th win in Paris against just two losses after weathering a big-hitting opening from 2009 US Open winner Del Potro to win 6-4, 6-1, 6-2.

In his 24th Grand Slam final, Nadal will face Thiem who ended Marco Cecchinato's French Open fairytale, reaching his first major final with a 7-5, 7-6 (12/10), 6-1 victory.

Seventh seed Thiem is the first Austrian to make a final at the majors since Thomas Muster was champion in Paris in 1995.

"It was a very difficult first set and Juan Martin had lots of opportunities. He was a little unfortunate," said Nadal who reeled off 14 of the last 17 games, having seen Del Potro fail to convert any of his seven break points.

Nadal is now just the second man to reach 11 finals at the same Slam, equaling Roger Federer's mark at Wimbledon.

"It's impossible without hard work and going through tough moments.

"You have to be focussed and keep your passion for the game. I never dreamed in 2005 when I played my first final here that I would be in another one."

Thiem is the only man to beat Nadal on clay in the last two seasons – in Madrid this year and Rome in 2017.

But the Spaniard was impressive on Friday, finishing with 35 winners and 19 unforced errors to Del Potro's analysis of 20 and 32.

"Thiem is an amazing player. He beat me in Madrid, he has big power so I have to be at my best and improve," said Nadal.

"But I believe I will be ready for the final."

World number one Nadal went into Friday's clash with a 9-5 career record against Del Potro, including all three

meetings on clay.

However, it was Del Potro who was in the ascendancy in the rallies in the first set.

The fifth seed, playing in his first Roland Garros semi-final in nine years, had three break points in the third game and three more in the ninth.

However, the 29-year-old was unable to capitalise and Nadal made him pay in the 10th game when he claimed the opener off a netted backhand.

Del Potro had required the doctor early in the first set after appearing to jar his ankle in the red clay.

He suffered a worrying power cut in the second set, slipping to 5-0 down on a double break, wasting his seventh break point out of seven on the way.

Nadal tightened his grip, going to 5-1 on another double break in the third set and sealed the match when Del Potro hit a backhand long.

World 72 Cecchinato had knocked out three seeded players to reach the semi-finals, including 12-time major winner Novak Djokovic in the quarter-finals.

But Thiem, 24, was too strong and now believes he has a particularly powerful weapon on his side for the final – breakfast.

"I need to regenerate and have a good breakfast to keep up my good level.

"Full power on Sunday."

Thiem, who was playing in his third successive French Open semi-final, admitted the second set had been a nervy encounter after needing five set points to get through it.

"The big key was the second set," he said.

"It was a really close tiebreak and I didn't want that especially after I missed an easy volley at 6/4.

"That was not a nice feeling."

Cecchinato had never won a Grand Slam match before this year's Roland Garros but made the semis with a string of stunning wins.

He put out seeded players Pablo Carrero Busta and David Goffin before the seismic shock of knocking out 2016 champion Djokovic in the quarter-finals.

"Today, all day, on Philippe Chatrier, the fans said 'Forza, Marco', so I think this is the best moment for me," said Cecchinato.

"Against Dominic Thiem, he is top 10, and today all the people were for me."

**BOOST**
Qatari national team rise in FIFA ranking

The Qatari national team rose three places in the monthly FIFA rankings for June issued on Thursday. Qatar are in 98th place with 348 points. Germany remain top of the FIFA rankings, ahead of Brazil, Belgium, Portugal, Argentina, Switzerland and France respectively. Poland jumped to eighth and Chile retained ninth place and Spain dropped to 10th. On the other hand, the Tunisian team topped the list of African and Arab teams, despite the decline. A few days before their participation in the World Cup Russia, Tunisia went down from 14th to 21st in the world.

INCENTIVE
WC glory worth more to Spain than Brazil or Germany

Each member of the Spain squad will take home a win bonus of 825,000 euros should they lift the World Cup in Russia, a Spanish newspaper has said. Sports daily *Marca* reports that the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) has incentivised the squad by offering them more than double what reigning champions Germany (350,000 euros) would give their players. They would also be entitled to more than favourites Brazil (800,000 euros). It is a significant increase on the 600,000 euros that was given to each member of Spain's World Cup winning squad in 2010, and on the reported 720,000 offered four years ago in Brazil. The report continues that no members of Julen Lopetegui's squad will receive any form of bonus should they fail to make the quarter-finals.

SETBACK
Argentina's Lanzini ruled out of WC due to knee injury

West Ham's Argentine midfielder Manuel Lanzini will miss the World Cup after injuring a knee during training in Spain, the Argentine football federation said yesterday. "Manuel Lanzini suffered, in today's morning training, the rupture of the anterior cruciate ligament of his right knee," the federation wrote in a Twitter message. The 25-year-old, who had been linked with a summer transfer to Liverpool, now faces a lengthy spell on the sidelines. His injury is a blow for Argentina coach Jorge Sampaoli who had counted on Lanzini for his starting line up. Argentina's national team is due to travel to Russia on Saturday for the World Cup. Argentina have been drawn in Group D alongside Iceland, Croatia and Nigeria.

CLARIFICATION
Zidane not in frame for France job now: FFF boss

Zinedine Zidane will not be taking over as coach of the French national team any time soon as Didier Deschamps will remain in that job for the rest of his contract, which runs to 2020, the head of the French Football Federation (FFF) said yesterday. Speculation about Zidane's possible return to France has intensified since his shock resignation last month as coach of Real Madrid less than a week after leading them to a third successive Champions League crown. "Didier Deschamps has a contract until 2020... he will stay until 2020," FFF president Noel Le Graet told a TV channel. Deschamps and Zidane were teammates when France last won the World Cup in 1998 as hosts of the tournament. Le Graet said he had held no discussions with Zidane.

HUNGRY
City need more titles to be considered the best: Pep

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola believes the Premier League champions need to build on his maiden title in charge of the club if they want to be considered among the best sides in English football history. City claimed a third title in seven seasons in record-breaking fashion as they racked up the highest number of victories, points and goals in a campaign, leading many fans and commentators to hail them as the one of the all-time greats. "We are the best? I'm not sure of that," Guardiola, who joined Manchester City in 2016, said in an interview with This is Premier League. "I'm completely with the people who say that to be considered the best team in the history of English football you have to win more. We won one Premier League (title)."

WARM-UPS

England, Portugal enjoy easy wins, Iceland held

Guedes stakes claim for place in Portugal's starting line-up with two goals vs Algeria

Reuters
Berne

England and Portugal enjoyed comfortable home wins in their final World Cup warm-up matches on Thursday, beating Costa Rica 2-0 and Algeria 3-0 respectively.

South Korea were held to an unimpressive 0-0 draw against Bolivia while Iceland, the surprise packages of Euro 2016 who are looking to pull off more upsets in Russia, drew 2-2 at home to Ghana after leading 2-0.

A stunning strike from Marcus Rashford and a Danny Welbeck header gave a confident-looking England victory over the Central Americans in a meeting of two World Cup qualifiers in Leeds.

England, whose manager Gareth Southgate made 10 changes from the side which beat Nigeria 2-1 at Wembley on Saturday, dominated possession against a mostly unadventurous Costa Rica side but they created few clear chances.

The match was the last for both teams before their World Cup openers, England facing Tunisia on June 18 and Costa Rica meeting Serbia the day before.

Forward Goncalo Guedes staked his claim for a place in Portugal's starting line-up with two goals in the win over Algeria, who missed out on Russia, at a soggy Stadium of Light in Lisbon.

Guedes fired the European champions ahead from Bernardo Silva's cushioned header and nodded in the third from Raphael Guerreiro's cross.

Captain Cristiano Ronaldo, making his only appearance in the warm-up friendlies, set up the second for Bruno Fernandes to head in. Portugal open their campaign against Spain on June 15.

Famed for their physique and set-piece prowess, Iceland went ahead in the sixth minute when defender Kari Arnason headed home a corner via a defender and Alfred Finnbogason made it two before the break. Ghana, who failed to qualify for the World Cup, hit back through Kasim Nuhu before Thomas Partey fired home three minutes from time.

FIFA said it had allocated 2,403,116 World Cup tickets since sales started in September, 2017, with Latin Americans among the biggest non-Russian buyers.

Russian fans bought nearly 900,000 tickets, followed by supporters from the United States, Brazil, Colombia, Germany, Mexico, Argentina, Peru, China, Australia and England.

England's Rashford unfazed by limited Man Utd playing time

England's Marcus Rashford (right) vies with Costa Rica's Cristian Gamboa during their friendly match in Leeds, England, on Thursday. (AFP)

Limited playing time at Manchester United last season has added to striker Marcus Rashford's frustration but the England international believes he will be ready to make his mark at the World Cup. Rashford made 35 appearances in the league last season with 18 of them coming from the bench as manager Jose Mourinho preferred to use the 20-year-old as an impact substitute. Asked if the lack of playing time had added to his frustration Rashford said: "It's a bit of both... if you play a lot of

games it's difficult to be fresh... if you play fewer games you have the feeling that you need to play more. "It's a Catch-22, but I'm happy that I'm in good physical condition now - a lot better than I was at the end of last year. This year, I feel in better condition and that's good," Rashford told ESPN. The striker added that England appeared better prepared for the June 14-July 15 tournament in Russia than they were two years ago for Euro 2016 in France where they lost to Iceland in

the round of 16. "It's definitely a different sort of vibe," Rashford added. "You're a bit more prepared individually but also as a team as well, a bit more relaxed and going into the tournament we're more clued up about what we need to do." Rashford faces competition from the likes of Raheem Sterling of Manchester City to play alongside captain Harry Kane in attack. England play their first match in Group G against Tunisia in Volgograd on June 18.

ARRIVALS

WC matches can be abandoned over crowd discrimination

Reuters
Zurich

FIFA has reiterated that referees will have the power to abandon matches at this month's World Cup in cases of persistent discrimination in the crowd.

Russia has pledged to crack down on racism as the country faces increased scrutiny before and during the tournament which it will host from June 14 to July 15 in 11 cities including Moscow, St Petersburg and Sochi.

But there is still concern over the situation and England defender Danny Rose said on Wednesday that he has told his family not to attend the World Cup because he feared they may be racially abused.

FIFA secretary-general Fatma Samoura said the global football body took discrimination very seriously.

"Besides educational measures... we have systems in place to react to and sanction discriminatory acts as well as measures to ensure a discrimination-free environment at the FIFA World Cup," she said in a FIFA statement on Thursday.

FIFA said that, for the first time in the tournament's 88-year history, there would be a dedicated anti-discrimination monitoring system at each match.

A team of three observers from

the anti-discrimination FARE network would watch the behaviour of fans from both teams and neutrals.

"Those observers understand the language and are trained on the regional specificities of the respective fan cultures," said the statement.

FIFA said referees could also intervene under the so-called three-step procedure.

The referees will have the authority to first stop the game and request a public announcement asking for the discriminatory behaviour to cease.

They can then suspend the match if it continues and ultimately abandon it.

FARE's executive director Piara Power said the monitoring system had been "very effective" in the World Cup qualifiers especially in identifying homophobic behaviour.

A number of teams, mainly from Latin America, were fined or suffered stadium closures as a result of their reports.

"If issues arise, the observer system allows us to identify them early and have action taken during a match," he said.

FIFA's head of sustainability and diversity Federico Addiechi said that everyone who is part of the match organisation, including staff, volunteers, teams, stewards and security personnel, had been trained to take action if necessary.

SPOTLIGHT

World Cup bitter-sweet for double winner Pepe



Reuters
Santos

Winning the World Cup would be the absolute pinnacle for most footballers but achieving that feat not once but twice still rankles with Brazilian striker **Pepe**. The reason? He never got to play.

"There's a lot of joy and a lot of sadness too," Pepe, one of only three men to hold two World Cup winners medals without playing a game, and the only one still living, told Reuters.

"I was never very lucky with the Selecao. I got injured ahead of both World Cups, in '58 in Sweden and '62 in Chile. Serious injuries and I couldn't recover in time.

"So there's the sadness and then there's also the joy of being a champion, part of a winning group. I consider myself a double World Cup winner despite all these problems."

Pepe, whose full name is Jose Macia, was Brazil's first-choice left winger ahead of the 1958 tournament.

He was in goal-scoring form but injured his ankle in the final warm-up against Inter Milan and was replaced by a skinny winger-cum-midfielder called

Mario Zagallo.

Zagallo was less of a goal threat but more adept at chasing back and he performed well as Brazil, featuring a 17-year old Pele, stormed to their first title.

Pepe recovered his place after the tournament, and was in line to make the team that defended its crown four years later in Chile.

However, disaster struck again. Pepe limped out of the final warm-up match against Wales and was forced to watch from the sidelines in Santiago as Brazil retained their title.

Now 83, he still lives in Santos and is adored in the city where he scored 405 goals, a number second only to Pele.

He won the Copa Libertadores twice, the Intercontinental Cup twice and represented Brazil on 41 occasions, scoring 22 times.

When his playing days were over he moved into management, fondly remembering his days in Saudi Arabia coaching a certain Pep Guardiola at Al Ahli.

More than half a century after his double disappointment, people still ask him about his dubious 'feat'.

"It doesn't bother me, people ask me about it even today," he said with a wry chuckle. "But there's still a pang of hurt at not being able to play, even though I wanted to. That's life."

BOTTOMLINE

Van Marwijk pays for coaching team with Australia: report

AFP
Sydney

Head coach Bert van Marwijk will personally pay the salaries of eight assistant coaches and analysts to help Australia prepare the way for this month's World Cup in Russia, local media reported yesterday.

Dutchman Van Marwijk is reportedly on a short-term contract worth more than Aus\$1mn (\$760,000) to guide Australia through to the end of the World Cup and told Fairfax Media he will pay out of his own pocket to employ eight Dutch technical staff to fast track the Soccerroos' preparations.

His decision came after Football Federation Australia informed him they did not have the budget to hire a large team of new assistants, Fairfax newspapers reported.

Van Marwijk said that faced with such



a short period of time with the Australian team before the tournament, he needed to have his own people in place to deliver his message, style of play and tactics as quickly as possible.

"I need that because I don't have the time. When you try to develop a team in such a short time I need to work with people who know me," van Marwijk was quoted as saying.

"They must look through my eyes, they must know what I mean. I cannot afford communication problems.

"You need time to get to know each other and I don't have the time. I would like to work with Australian people."

Van Marwijk's backroom team are all people he has worked with in the past and include four assistant coaches, two video analysts and two scouts.

His assistants are Mark van Bommel, Roel Coumans, Jurgen Dirckx and Taco Van den Velde.

"I need them because they know how I work, they know how I want to work, they know how I want to play," van Marwijk said.

"I know these guys and they don't come for the money, they only come to perform. That must be very professional. "When you want to have a chance in the World Cup, those things must be very, very professional and I think that's the case now."

Van Marwijk has two analysts, one whose day job is at PSV and the other who is from FC Utrecht in the Eredivisie.

After qualifying for Russia 2018 with Saudi Arabia but quitting due to personal terms, Van Marwijk was appointed in charge of Australia's World Cup squad.

"I want to survive the first round. That's the pressure I gave myself and also the players," he said.

"For me, the first important thing is to perform in the World Cup."

FOCUS

Neymar's Brazil look strong as Germany and Argentina battle issues

'We have the biggest ambitions but we arrive at this World Cup feeling humble'

AFP
Moscow

Neymar's acclaimed return ahead of the World Cup supplied Brazil with an immeasurable boost, but holders Germany and Argentina arrive at the tournament battling inconsistent form and disrupted preparations.

The Paris Saint-Germain superstar's swashbuckling display in a 45-minute appearance against Croatia last weekend largely dismissed lingering concerns over his fitness after more than three months out with a fractured foot.

The 26-year-old admitted he was only at "80 percent" but promised he would be raring to go come Brazil's first game at the finals against Switzerland on June 17.

"For the first match back I actually expected less from him! I would have been happy with a quieter performance," Brazil coach Tite said of Neymar's eye-catching performance. "What he did was really extraordinary."

Brazil's form under Tite, appointed coach midway through a faltering qualifying campaign, suggests it will be difficult to stop the five-time world champions from adding another title in Russia.

A reinvigorated Selecao have won 16 of 20 matches with the former Corinthians boss at the helm, a 1-0 loss to Argentina last year in Melbourne the only defeat since he took charge.

Spain, unbeaten since Julen Lopetegui was appointed coach after Euro 2016, are back among the genuine contenders after a catastrophic 2014 World Cup and another early exit the European Championship.

"Spanish football has lived through an extraordinary, historic period in 2008, 2010 and 2012, but after that the team has not found the same consistency or success," Lopetegui told AFP.

"We have to grow again as a team. We have the biggest ambitions but we are also very aware that we arrive at this World Cup feeling humble and wanting to prove ourselves."

Spain cruised through a qualifying section featuring Italy, and delivered a further warning to their World Cup rivals with a 6-1 demolition of Argentina in March.

But they will be tested immediately in Russia when they launch their group stage campaign against Cristiano Ron-



People walk past a football billboard displaying Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo (left), Argentina's Lionel Messi (second from left), Germany's Mesut Ozil and Brazil's Neymar (right) in Nairobi yesterday. (AFP)

aldo's Portugal on June 15 in Sochi.

CONCERN FOR GERMANY

Germany received a timely shot in the arm with the return of goalkeeper and captain Manuel Neuer after eight months out with a foot injury.

But Joachim Loew's side are struggling for form ahead of their title defence following a run of five matches without a win, and a first defeat to neighbours Austria since 1986.

"If we play like that in Russia, then we have no chance," Loew raged after Germany lost 2-1 to Austria in Klagenfurt last Saturday.

The Germans will be without Mesut Ozil for their final warm-up match against Saudi Arabia due to injury, although centre-back Jerome Boateng could play his first game since April following a groin problem.

Argentina's build-up was jolted by the cancellation of a controversial friendly

against Israel in Jerusalem, a fixture set to be their final outing ahead of the World Cup.

The sold-out game had been due to take place on Saturday but was hotly opposed by Palestinians, who claim the eastern part of the city, annexed by Israel, as the capital of their future state.

"Argentina is seven days from the World Cup. We want to focus on what is really important and which is before us," an Argentine football federation spokesman told AFP.

Lionel Messi scored a hat-trick in a 4-0 rout of Haiti last month, but the friendly against a nation ranked 104th in the world was hardly a rigorous examination of Argentina's credentials.

POGBA WORRY FOR FRANCE?

A hugely talented France squad head to Russia with high expectations, but Didier Deschamps is still struggling to find a system that will enable him to unlock the

full potential in his team.

Paul Pogba, who will have a huge role to play if France are to succeed, was jeered by a smattering of home fans after an underwhelming performance in a recent 3-1 win over Italy.

"The whistles are part of football, you have to stay tough mentally. We're all playing for the same shirt," said Antoine Griezmann, in defence of the Manchester United midfielder. "He plays his game, you're used to him scoring. We don't expect that from him, only that he rotates the ball and plays for the team."

Unburdened by modest expectations, England's youthful side will go into the tournament riding a 10-match unbeaten run that stretches back nearly a year.

Gareth Southgate admitted he faces a selection dilemma after Marcus Rashford starred in a 2-0 win over Costa Rica, but a reasonable draw could allow them to reach a first World Cup quarter-final since 2006.

FEAT

Polish superfan, 78, heads to his 11th World Cup

Reuters
Warsaw

Dressed in a patriotic red and white suit and a golden crown adorned with small footballs, Andrzej Bobowski is getting ready to attend his 11th soccer World Cup.

The 78-year-old Poland fan has been to every World Cup since 1978 — even when his own national team did not qualify.

There are no such worries this time, though. "I actually dreamt that we'll play in the final against Russia," he said.

"I'm going to attend the first match with Senegal at Spartak stadium. Then I fly to Kazan... then to Volgograd."

Well-known at home as "king of Polish fans", Bobowski, nicknamed Bobo, said he had been told by fans he has met at previous tournaments to expect a "royal welcome" in Kazan.

The former builder, who also supports the Polish club champions Legia Warszawa, has seen 135 World Cup games since he headed to Argentina in 1978 with a ticket bought by his wife.

Since then, he has married again — and even at 78, does not balk at making the complex travel arrangements for two people.

"I worked out my routes using the Internet: first — where I land, second — the hotel, third — how to get to the stadium from the hotel."

The outfits are already prepared.

For day wear, he has a T-shirt with the contest's emblem on the front and a list of all the World Cups he has attended on the back — with a question mark for Qatar in 2022.

For the matches, he will wear an appropriately regal coat in Poland's red-and-white, with its white-eagle crest on the back. The coat, made by a local theatre company, has a white furry collar and cuffs with a motif of small footballs.

Under the coat will be a white tail-coat, red shirt, red bow tie and red trousers.

And on his head, above the mandatory scarf, a soft golden crown, decorated with badges from the tournaments he has attended, and emblazoned with the slogan "King of Polish fans".



Andrzej Bobowski, known as "the King of Polish fans" speaks at his apartment in Warsaw, Poland, on Wednesday. (Reuters)

ODDBALL

Ahead of World Cup, France claims a win in off-pitch context

Reuters
Paris

French football has won one world contest before its players even fly to Russia for this year's World Cup, with more blue jerseys sold across the globe than any other national strip, even more than the famous yellow shirt of Brazil.

The Nike-branded strips are huge money-spinners. France's official shirt costs 85 euros, even for a child, according to the French Football Federation (FFF) website.

"It's dramatic. Stocks have run out all over the world. We can't meet demand. We're ahead of

Brazil in numbers of jerseys sold," Noel Le Graet, head of the FFF, told BFM TV in an interview.

"As soon as a jersey turns up in any of our shops across the world, it's snapped up."

Nike, which only got heavily involved in football when the World Cup was played in the United States in 1994, is supplying shirts for 10 countries, including Brazil, France and England.

Rival Adidas is sponsoring 12 of the 32 teams, including strong contenders Germany and Spain, along with hosts Russia.

Le Graet said French team players under Didier Deschamps would each get a 150,000 euro (\$176,580.00) bonus if Les Bleus reach the semi-finals and 280,000 euros for the final.

The weird to the wonderful — football pitches of the world

Playing football, nothing could be simpler, right? All you need is a ball, a few players and — a pitch. Around the world and whatever the landscape, football grounds abound — and are as varied and diverse as the people who play on them.

Perched on top of a Japanese department store, lost on a dusty mountain trail in Nepal or nestled at the foot of an ancient aqueduct in Rome.

Where there is a love of football, there will always be a pitch.

In football-mad Brazil, pitches are crammed between crowded neighbourhoods in big cities like Sao Paulo or swallowed in Rio's Tavares Bastos favela by buildings piled up like a house of unsteady cards.

In New York's Brooklyn, footballers play by the waterside with the Statue of Liberty for backdrop. Seoul's nightlife includes a pitch ablaze with light on a rooftop above a shopping centre.

In Switzerland players drink in the beauty of mountains and valleys with Lac Lemman in the distance.

The Arctic circle boasts Henningsvaer FC's ground, whose green synthetic turf is squeezed between Norway's snow capped mountains and icy seas. In Turin, a local pitch nestles atop a building among church spires and reddish-brown rooftops while in Rugeley, central England, teams play beneath the massive cooling towers of a huge coal-fired power station.



Somali people play football in the smoky air due to burning litters at the destroyed and abandoned secondary school, in Mogadishu, Somalia, on Thursday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Brazil's blind footballers see way to their glory

AFP
Sao Paulo

Brazil's all-conquering blind footballers kick off their blind world cup campaign yesterday knowing they're not only top dogs — but top targets.

The International Blind Sports Federation's Blind Football World Championships began in Madrid Thursday and runs through 17 June.

Reigning world and Paralympic champions, the Brazilian team hopes to strike gold yet again, setting the example for their colleagues at the World Cup in Russia.

Brazilian star Ricardinho, who already has three Paralympic golds, says he's ready to battle for a back-to-back world title, starting with the first game against Mali. "Everybody wants to take down

the reigning champs, Brazil, and we want to get the title again. It will be complicated but we're going to fight a lot," he said.

Ricardinho, 29, was born to play soccer. Even as a tiny kid, when he still had good eyesight, admiring neighbours told his father to take him for trials at the big clubs.

However a problem in his retina that appeared at six year old left him totally blind at eight.

"In addition to the shock that I couldn't see, I was in pain because I thought I'd never play football again," he said at Brazil's Paralympic football field in Sao Paulo before leaving for Spain.

At 10, though, he discovered blind football, which is five-a-side and uses a ball with a bell. Only the goalkeepers are sighted.

"I started to train. It was a second chance to chase a dream I'd had since I was very small," he said. Lacking access to the proper

blind footballs, he'd wrap regular balls in plastic, so that they'd make noise, allowing him to practice. Then his family moved to the seaside city of Porto Alegre so that he could attend a specialised school.

At 17, he played in his first world championship and he went on to score more than a century of goals for the national team, earning two world titles — and now gunning for his third.

PLAYING FOR THEIR LIVES

Every player on a team of the blind has his own compelling story.

Ricardinho's teammate Mauricio Dumbo escaped war in Angola and was brought to Brazil at 11. Childhood measles robbed him of his sight but not his love of football and now at 28 he plays winger for Brazil.

His sporting idols, whom he always followed by listening to ra-

dio commentaries, are France and Real Madrid legend Zinedine Zidane and Brazil's own World Cup champion striker Ronaldo "the Phenomenon".

But Dumbo's true sights go much further. Although he arrived in Brazil all but unable to read, he now has a law degree, and he wants the public to recognise him and his teammates as top-flight winners.

"My dream is that we be seen as professional athletes, which is what we are," he said.

That 2016 Olympics gold medal in Rio de Janeiro also brought rewards of another kind: a chance to return to Angola and hug his mother again for the first time in 15 years.

Brazil are fancied to win in Spain but these players know that the real battle is life itself.

"Everyone's a fighter with his own challenges," Dumbo said.

ELSEWHERE

Alternative world cup: ethnic Hungarians eye shock win

AFP
London

An obscure team of ethnic Hungarians is one win away from the alternative World Football Cup title following an eye-catching run to the final — just weeks after being called up as a late replacement.

Karpatalja, representing ethnic Hungarians in modern-day Ukraine, will take on Northern Cyprus in today's final at the tournament for the globe's outsiders and unrecognised nations.

The event in London has proved a colourful counterpart to the FIFA World Cup, which starts in Russia next week,

with exuberant fans, music and also a stormy walk-out by the Isle of Man.

Karpatalja's run to the final is all the more remarkable given that a few weeks before the tournament, they were not even in it.

They were a late replacement for Felvidek, the side for ethnic Hungarians in modern-day Slovakia, who pulled out. "We came here with less time to prepare so it was a difficult start but we work as a team and work very well," midfielder Ronald Takacs told AFP.

"It's an amazing feeling. We came here not just to play football, we came here to reach the final. Northern Cyprus are a very good team, they play good football — but we are not

afraid." The 16-team 2018 CONIFA World Football Cup is for associations outside the game's global governing body FIFA, including cultural regions.

Northern Cyprus will count on strong local backing as the biennial competition reaches its climax at the Queen Elizabeth II Stadium in Donkey Lane.

The final is close to the heartland of London's Turkish Cypriot community, which turned the stadium into the team's bastion during the group stages, decking it out in flags and lining the pitch.

Today's game is expected to draw several thousand fans once again to the stadium, which is the home of seventh-tier north London side Enfield Town.

FOCUS

Kane commits to Spurs for long-term

'We are delighted to announce that Harry Kane has signed a new six-year contract'

AFP
London

England captain Harry Kane gave a huge boost to Tottenham Hotspur yesterday by signing a new six-year contract through to 2024 with the Premier League club.

The 24-year-old striker scored a personal best 41 goals this season and had been mentioned as a possible target for European champions Real Madrid with other clubs also lurking in the wings.

Some had speculated Kane would want a move away so he could win some silverware as despite Spurs manager Mauricio Pochettino gaining plaudits for the attractive style of football they play they are yet to win a trophy under him since he took over in 2014.

"We are delighted to announce that Harry Kane has signed a new six-year contract with the Club, which will run until 2024," read a statement from Spurs on their website.

Kane — who may have been inspired to commit himself after Pochettino signed a five-year contract in late May — said it was exciting times for the players at the club as apart from seeking a title they are also looking forward to moving into their new state-of-the-art stadium having had to play their home matches at Wembley last season.

"I'm really excited, it's a proud day," Kane told the club website.

"Obviously it's been a great few seasons and I'm looking forward to the future."

"I'm looking forward to the new stadium first and foremost and just to keep progressing as a Club."

"It's been fantastic to consistently get in the Champions League so I'm really



England's Harry Kane scored a personal best 41 goals this season. (Reuters)

excited to have another go at that.

"For us as a Club, it's just about keeping improving and we'll work hard to do that."

The settling of Kane's long-term future will also be pleasing for England manager Gareth Southgate as it will not serve as a distraction during the World Cup finals this month.

"I'm obviously really excited about the World Cup coming up so it's nice to get this done before that and I'm just look-

ing to go out there and enjoy it now," said Kane.

"It's been a great season, like always the aim is to try to improve so hopefully I can do that this summer and obviously next season as well."

Kane — who will be seeking in Russia to make up for a disappointing Euro 2016 campaign — has established all kinds of landmarks since breaking into the Spurs first team four seasons ago.

He became the Club's leading scorer

in the Premier League era, surpassing Teddy Sheringham's total of 97, while he has also joined the elite group of players to score 100 Premier League goals, doing so in just 141 games.

Kane finished the 2017 calendar year as the top goalscorer in European football with 56 goals for Club and country, as well as breaking Alan Shearer's record for the most Premier League goals scored in a calendar year, recording 39 in total.

SPOTLIGHT

Premier League agree winter break

AFP
London

England's Premier League has agreed to introduce a winter break in a historic move to give players a rest during an increasingly crowded season, the Football Association (FA) announced yesterday.

The break — which falls well short of those taken in mainland European leagues — will give the 20 Premier League teams a weekend off football in February beginning in the 2019-20 campaign.

Five matches will be played one weekend with the second batch of five the following weekend.

The FA's part of the bargain — also agreed with the English Football League responsible for the divisions outside the Premier League — is to switch FA Cup fifth round ties to midweek in that period.

In addition they will have to be played to achieve a result with no possibility of a replay as was the case before.

"This is a significant moment for English football and one that we believe will greatly benefit both club and country," said FA chief executive Martin Glenn.

"It's no secret that we have a very congested fixture calendar and over recent years we have been working with the whole game to find a solution."

"Today's announcement proves that football can come together for the good of the game."

CONTROVERSIAL

Glenn added the hectic schedule over the Christmas and New Year period — which has become increasingly a controversial issue with fans and players alike with Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola telling the BBC in January with such a schedule "We're going to kill the players." — had been retained.

"We have also found a way to give the players a much needed mid-season break, whilst keeping the much-loved Christmas

schedule in place."

The deal will also add to the rich legacy which Premier League executive chairman Richard Scudamore will leave when he steps down later this year after nearly two decades in charge, first as chief executive and then in his present role since 2014.

"We have been discussing the football calendar with the FA and EFL for several months, including ways we can work together to ease fixture congestion, keep the Premier League action going right through the season and provide a mid-season player break," said 58-year-old Scudamore.

"We are very pleased to have an outcome that will include an exciting first for fans — a full fixture programme split over two weekends with all matches broadcast live in the UK."

Scudamore's reference to TV coverage — rights for which under his aegis has risen from below £1bn in 1999 to over £5bn today — will see BT Sport show all five matches live of one of those weekends as a result of the final package it was awarded on Wednesday.

However, whilst the elite players in the Premier League can look forward to one weekend off there will be no such respite for those in the lower divisions in terms of the league programme.

"It is currently impractical even if it was desirable for the EFL to do so," said EFL chief executive Shaun Harvey, citing the 46-game seasons and resulting promotion playoffs.

The EFL, though, did make one move to reduce the playing time by abolishing extra-time for their League Cup competition — if the scores are level after 90 minutes the game will be decided on penalties.

"The rationale put forward by the EFL is that withdrawing the additional 30 minutes of play would directly address any additional fatigue issues that are occasionally caused when the midweek ties go beyond the traditional 90-minute period," read an EFL statement.

Stoney to coach new Man United women's team

AFP
London

Casey Stoney will be the head coach of Manchester United's new professional women's team, the English football giants announced yesterday.

United have come under fire for not running a senior women's side, in marked contrast to Premier League rivals such as Chelsea, Manchester City, Arsenal and Liverpool.

But by appointing Casey, who won 130 caps for the England women's team and 12 major trophies during a playing career that only ended with her retirement earlier this year, the Old Trafford club



hope to show they are serious about their commitment to women's football. "I am delighted to have joined Manchester United. This is the biggest club in the world," Stoney, 36, told United's website. Stoney, who also represented Great Brit-

ain at the 2012 London Olympic Games, added: "The fact that we are going to have a women's team and I'm going to be able to introduce that from scratch, to build a team, build a philosophy, with the biggest club in the world, means that, for me, there is no more exciting opportunity."

"My ultimate aim is to grow this team so that every little girl growing up dreams of playing for Manchester United when she's older, because they're the most successful team in women's football."

United executive vice-chairman Ed Woodward said Stoney shared the Old Trafford club's longstanding commitment to youth development, which would now apply just as much to their new women's team as it did to the men's

side. "Her experience and knowledge of the game, both as a coach and as a player, made her a stand-out candidate for the role," Woodward said.

"During her successful playing career, spanning over 18 years, she earned over 100 caps for England and is a proven leader as a coach and having captained many of the sides she has played for, she brings a positive and winning mentality which will be a huge benefit to the team."

He added: "Casey will build on the success of the girls' regional talent club and shares our philosophy of creating a pathway from academy to first team. "I'd like to take this opportunity to welcome her to Manchester United."



AZF signs MoU with SC



Aspire Logistics chief administration officer Ahmed Ibrahim al-Sulaiti and Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC) executive director of Administration Sami Mohamed al-Shammari shake hands after signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on behalf of Aspire Zone Foundation (AZF) and SC respectively yesterday. The MoU establishes a framework for co-operation and knowledge exchange between the two organisations in fields of mutual interest. In particular, AZF and the SC will work together on projects and initiatives planned for the 2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar. Employees of both organisations will also benefit from the training programmes, workshops and seminars that AZF organises for its employees.

PROPOSAL

FIFPro calls for longer recovery times between games

AFP
The Hague

Professional footballers' union FIFPro yesterday called for longer recovery times for top players between matches and when taking long-haul flights, saying current schedules failed to "adequately safeguard health and performance capacity."

FIFPro's call comes in the run-up to the 2018 FIFA World Cup next week, ahead of which many players were called up by national squads despite a mandatory FIFA rest period, the union said.

Most players "are likely to join their club teams soon after the tournament as well," FIFPro added, saying "the reality is that many players are coming under extreme

pressure to perform at their best in difficult circumstances."

Between February and April, the union surveyed a total of 543 players "including those with clubs in some of the biggest European leagues of England, France, Germany and Italy."

Of those surveyed, 300 players represented their national teams. "In many countries across all FIFPro's divisions, the number of matches played is too high," FIFPro concluded in the study, released at its headquarters in Hoofddorp outside Amsterdam.

It found that almost half of national team footballers who played 50 or more matches per season are being too stretched by the current schedule.

It called on FIFA, leagues and clubs to adopt the following minimum requirements "to pro-

tect the health" of professional footballers:

- At least 72 hours to recover between matches and as a general rule, not play more than three matches every two weeks.

- Extra recovery time after long international flights.

- A mid-season break of 10 to 14 days.

- An off-season break of four to six weeks.

"The survey findings enforce the need for federations, leagues and clubs to pay closer attention to player recovery time," FIFPro's chief medical officer Vincent Gouttebarge said.

"It is important, for example that all national team members returning to their clubs after the World Cup in Russia are given enough time to fully recuperate," Gouttebarge added.

Ghana football boss banned for 90 days by FIFA

Ghana football boss Kwesi Nyantakyi, a member of FIFA's decision-making Council, is under investigation for possible ethics violations and has been provisionally suspended for 90 days, the global football body said yesterday.

The ban was imposed one day after the Ghanaian government dissolved the country's football association (GFA) after officials,

including Nyantakyi, were shown in a documentary allegedly taking kickbacks.

Nyantakyi has not replied to multiple requests for comment while the GFA has said it would cooperate with any investigation. Nyantakyi, who has been GFA president since 2005 and was elected to the FIFA Council in September 2016, was filmed in a hotel room appearing to take

a \$65,000 bribe from a supposed businessman seeking to sponsor the Ghanaian football league.

Information Minister Mustapha Abdul-Hamid said in a statement on Thursday that the government was shocked and outraged at the contents of the documentary and would refer the alleged culprits to the police for investigation.

NHL

Capitals edge Knights to claim first Stanley Cup

'This team just had a calmness about it. I don't think I have ever been so calm throughout a playoff run'

AFP
Las Vegas

The Washington Capitals ended 44 years of playoff frustration on Thursday, beating the expansion Vegas Golden Knights 4-3 to claim their first Stanley Cup title in franchise history.

Lars Eller and Devante Smith-Pelly scored third period goals just 2:31 apart as the Capitals came from behind to win the National Hockey League championship series in five games - and end the fairy-tale run of the Golden Knights' first season.

"It means everything. I think this moment, we waiting a long, long time," said forward Alex Ovechkin. "This organisation wanted it so bad."

"It's nice to be part of it. It's nice to be in this organisation all 13, 14 years, whatever. It just was a joy. Was tough time, but we fight through it and we get results."

The title ends decades of heartbreak not only for the NHL team but for the city of Washington, as it had been over 26 years since a major sports team from the US capital had won a championship.

"You can never imagine how this feels. This is one of the best feelings ever," said American forward T.J. Oshie.

It also marks the first Stanley Cup title for Russian star Ovechkin, who scored his 15th playoff goal in the second period and was named Most Valuable Player of the 2018 playoffs.

Ovechkin was the league-leader in goals during the playoffs and finished second overall in scoring with 27 points.

The Capitals won their 10th game on the road in the post-season to equal the league record which had been set four times previously, most recently by the 2012 Los Angeles Kings.

Washington, who entered the league as an expansion team in 1974, ended the miraculous season of the Knights, who are just the third NHL team in league history to reach the finals in their inaugural campaign.

They join the Toronto Arenas and St. Louis Blues, but the Golden Knights had a much more difficult road to get there.

The Arenas did it in the league's first ever post-season and Blues were part of a division comprised of all expansion teams in the late 1960s.

"They're disappointed and dejected," said Vegas coach Gerard Gallant. "We had an out-



Washington Capitals players pose with the Stanley Cup after their team's 4-3 win over the Vegas Golden Knights in game five of the 2018 NHL Stanley Cup Final at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas, Nevada. (AFP)

standing year, but it doesn't feel like it right now. Obviously, we'll get to that in a few days' time."

Czech forward Jakub Vrana had the other Capitals goal as he opened the scoring in a five-goal second period after the team failed to produce a goal in a tight-checking first period.

Denmark's Eller scored the winning goal with 7:37 left in the third period in front of a crowd of 18,500 at Las Vegas' T-Mobile Arena.

"It is amazing," said Capitals goaltender Braden Holtby, who finished with 28 saves. "We have a lot of different personalities on this team but we meshed like crazy."

Capitals coach Barry Trotz said they had the right combination of skill, toughness and desire to get the job done.

Comeback kids

"You can get pushed out of a

series if you have skill and you don't have the will," said Trotz. "You got to have the heart and will first and once that base is there the skill comes out."

"This team just had a calmness about it. I don't think I have ever been so calm throughout a playoff run. We had pretty good clarity about how we wanted to play."

The Capitals had never won the Stanley Cup but made it to the final once before, in 1998, and lost to the Detroit Red Wings in four straight games. In these playoffs they had to come from behind constantly.

"We have been in a deficit every series. People said we didn't have what it takes," Trotz said. "I think it was fitting that we came back in the third period to night. We been doing it all year. "It just shows that we have a great group of guys that have a great belief and we stuck with it."

Ovechkin's Stanley Cup dream finally comes true

Alex Ovechkin hoisted the silver mug up high over his head and said he could not think of any better feeling than the joy of winning his first Stanley Cup title. "This is even better than I imagined. I think it's just like a dream," said Ovechkin after the Washington Capitals defeated the Vegas Golden Knights 4-3 to capture their first NHL championship in franchise history on Thursday.

Ovechkin didn't want to leave the ice surface at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas. After parading the Stanley Cup around, he disappeared into the dressing room but then reappeared wearing sandals instead of skates. He spent the next half hour hugging teammates and coaches, doing interviews and taking pictures with family and friends.

"You know, it was hard, long season," he said. "We fight through it. We work so hard through all the years. We always together. It was the whole one team sticking to the system. It doesn't matter what happens, we didn't panic. Even after the third period, we knew we just have to push it and get result done." And they did, as Devante Smith-Pelly and Lars Eller scored third period goals to cap a come-from-behind victory that sparked a wild celebration by the Capitals and their fans who crowded around the edges of the ice surface and behind the players bench cheering their heroes well after the final buzzer sounded. "I don't think anybody was thinking it was going to be the Stanley Cup finals between the Capitals and Knights."

Ovechkin said. "But if we play the right way, we're going to stick together, stick to the system, play smart, and we're going to get results. I think everybody was on same page, and we ended up with a Stanley Cup." And Ovechkin ended up with the Conn Smythe Trophy as the most valuable player of the playoffs. He finished with a league leading 15 playoff goals and placed second overall behind teammate and fellow Russian Evgeny Kuznetsov in points with 27. Ovechkin becomes the second Russian-born player to win the Conn Smythe Trophy and the fourth player born outside of North America to earn the honour, joining Russian Evgeni Malkin 2009; Swede Henrik Zetterberg 2008 and Swede

Nicklas Lidstrom in 2002. "It's amazing. He's worked so hard, I mean it's been a long time," said forward Smith-Pelly of Ovechkin. "He's one of the greatest players ever and now his legacy is 100 percent cemented." Ovechkin said this team had an inner belief that made it special. "The last couple years we didn't pass through the second round of the playoffs," he said. "Just playing, but no satisfaction. Finally we did. We knew this year is going to be our year." The Capitals fell behind in the second period in game five after Reilly Smith scored in the final minute to make it 3-2. Ovechkin said there were no great speeches in the locker room in between the second and third period, just a collective confidence among the group.

SPOTLIGHT

Ali family lawyer to Trump: thanks, but no pardon needed

Agencies
Washington

US President Donald Trump's comment yesterday that he might pardon boxing legend Muhammad Ali drew a prompt response from the late heavyweight champion's estate: thanks but no thanks.

"We appreciate President Trump's sentiment, but a pardon is unnecessary. The US Supreme Court overturned the conviction of Muhammad Ali in a unanimous decision in 1971. There is no conviction from which a pardon is needed," said Ron Tweel, a lawyer for the boxer's estate and his widow, Lonnie. Before leaving to attend the Group of Seven summit in Canada, Trump told reporters he was considering pardoning some 3,000 people, including Ali, who died in 2016.

"I'm thinking about somebody that you all know very well, and he went through a lot and he wasn't very popular then," Trump said. "His memory is very popular now. I'm thinking about Muhammad Ali. I'm thinking



US President Donald Trump pumps his fist as he arrives to attend the nearby G7 Summit in Charlevoix after landing aboard Air Force One at Canadian Forces Base Bagotville in La Baie, Quebec, Canada, yesterday. (Reuters)

about that very seriously." The boxer refused to be inducted into the U.S. Army in 1967 during the Vietnam War, claiming conscientious objector status, and was sentenced to five years in prison. He was never imprisoned while his case was under appeal and in 1971 the US Supreme Court overturned the conviction.

Tweel, reached by telephone at his home in Virginia, said the White House had not contacted him or Lonnie Ali about a potential pardon. He said he had been in contact with the widow after Trump's comments and they decided to issue a statement on

behalf of the family. "We heard what he was contemplating and it needed a response," he said. It was unclear why Trump would consider a pardon, given that Ali's conviction was overturned. The White House did not immediately comment on the lawyer's statement. Trump said many of the 3,000 people he was considering for pardons were treated unfairly or given unfairly long sentences.

A charismatic fighter who won his first world heavyweight title in 1964, Ali was banned from boxing for three years as a result of his conviction but went on to reclaim the championship in a

stellar career that lived up to his boast of being "the Greatest."

Trump has wielded his presidential pardon powers recently in ways that appear intended to dramatise his own complaints of being the victim of a "witch hunt" by US prosecutors. Trump has wielded his presidential pardon powers recently in ways that appear intended to dramatise his own complaints of being the victim of a "witch hunt" by US prosecutors.

On Sunday, he asserted for the first time his "absolute right" to pardon himself, sparking fierce debate and a warning from Republican House speaker Paul Ryan that no one is above the law. "No. I'm not above the law. I never want anybody to be above the law. But the pardons are a very positive thing for a president. I think you see the way I'm using them," Trump told reporters. "Yes, I do have an absolute right to pardon myself. But I'll never have to do it because I didn't do anything wrong. And everybody knows it. There's been no collusion. There's been no obstruction. It's all a made up fantasy. It's a witch hunt."

FOCUS

NBA champs won't get invite, but Capitals might, says Trump

Reuters
Washington

President Donald Trump took a parting shot at the Cleveland Cavaliers and Golden State Warriors yesterday as he prepared to leave for the G7 Summit in Canada.

Trump told reporters that neither of the teams in the NBA Finals, nor stars LeBron James or Stephen Curry, would be receiving an invite to the White House after this year's champion is decided.

"I didn't invite LeBron James, and I didn't invite Steph Curry. We're not going to invite either team," Trump said to reporters.

Trump says the Washington Capitals, who clinched the Stanley Cup on Thursday night, are likely to be invited.

"I think we'll have the Caps. We'll see. You know, my attitude is if they want to be here, the greatest place on Earth, I'm here. If they don't want to be here, I don't want them," said Trump.

Earlier this week, members of both NBA teams - and especially James - ripped Trump

over his decision to disinvite the Super Bowl champion Philadelphia Eagles and made it clear the eventual NBA champion wouldn't be going to the White House, either.

Speaking with the media on an off day Tuesday, members of the Cavaliers and Warriors sounded off on the situation between the NFL champs and the president, and leading the charge was James.

"It's typical of him," James said of Trump. "I'm not surprised... I know no matter who wins this series no one wants the invite, anyways. It won't be Golden State or Cleveland going (to the White House)."

"It's not surprising, hearing the news today with the Eagles," James continued. "But I think more importantly we shouldn't, as Americans and especially the people in Philadelphia, shouldn't let that news take away from what that unbelievable team did and accomplished."

"Winning a Super Bowl or winning a Stanley Cup or winning a World Series or winning an NBA championship or a national championship is way bigger than getting invited to the White House," James

added, "especially with him in there, in my opinion."

Curry agreed with James, alluding to what his team did last season after winning the NBA title.

Warriors players indicated after winning the championship in 2017 that they would not go to the White House, then as they were set to meet as a team to formally decide, Trump rescinded the invitation.

"I'm pretty sure the way we handled things last year, (we will) kinda stay consistent with that," Curry said on Tuesday when asked whether the Warriors would skip the visit should they win this time.

Trump set off a firestorm Monday when he announced there would be no customary White House visit for the Super Bowl champions, alluding to NFL players kneeling for the national anthem and the ensuing controversy last season.

Numerous people responded to Trump, including Eagles players, noting among other things that few players were going to attend, anyway, and that no Eagles player knelt during the playing of the national anthem last season.

MLB

Winker's HR sends Reds past Rockies in 13th inning

'Joey getting on to start the inning was huge, obviously'



Cincinnati Reds left fielder Jesse Winker celebrates at home plate after hitting a walk-off two-run home run against the Colorado Rockies in the 13th inning at Great American Ball Park on Thursday. **PICTURE:** USA TODAY Sports

Reuters
Cincinnati

Jesse Winker's two-run home run in the bottom of the 13th inning Thursday capped the Cincinnati Reds' comeback from a 5-2 deficit as they dumped the Colorado Rockies 7-5 at the Great American Ball Park in Cincinnati.

Rockies reliever Chris Rusin (0-2) hit Joey Votto with a pitch to start the winning rally. Winker followed up Eugenio Suarez's flyout with his second homer of the season into the seats in right-centre.

"Joey getting on to start the inning was huge, obviously," Winker said.

"He went fastball away, slider and then I thought he was going to go back to the fastball. I just recognized it and tried to put a good swing on it."

Dylan Floro (2-1) pitched three scoreless innings for the win as Cincinnati avoided a series sweep and snapped a four-game losing streak. The Reds forced extra innings when Colorado closer Wade Davis tossed a wild pitch with two outs in the bot-

tom of the ninth that scored Curt Casali from third.

Colorado starter Tyler Anderson sailed through seven innings, permitting just five hits and two runs while walking one and whiffing five, but was denied a win by the Reds' late comeback. Rookie right-hander Tyler Mahle got a no-decision for Cincinnati. He pitched five innings, yielding six hits and three runs, two earned. He walked two and fanned six.

A Nolan Arenado double play ball got the scoring started for Colorado in the first, but Casali tied the game in the second when he ripped a double into the left field corner to barely score Adam Duvall. The Rockies challenged Tripp Gibson's safe call at the plate, but replay upheld it.

Carlos Gonzalez gave Colorado the lead in the third when he lined a two-out single up the middle that scored DJ LeMahieu. Anderson's fielder's choice bunt plated Mike Tauchman in the fourth for a 3-1 advantage.

Scott Schebler brought the Reds within 3-2 in the fifth by slicing a double to left that scored Billy Hamilton. But the Rockies upped the lead to 5-2

in the sixth when Ryan McMahon tripled home Tauchman and scored on a sacrifice fly by LeMahieu.

Cincinnati pulled within 5-4 in the eighth on run-scoring groundouts by Votto and Suarez. But its bid to tie the game was gunned down at the plate by Gonzalez, who nailed Suarez from right field as he tried to score on a pinch-hit single by Winker.

Jays rally in 9th, top Orioles in 10th

Aledmys Diaz singled home the winning run with two outs in the 10th inning as the Toronto Blue Jays came back to defeat the visiting Baltimore Orioles 5-4 Thursday night.

The Blue Jays scored three runs against Brad Brach in the bottom of the ninth to tie the game at 4.

In the bottom of the 10th, Teoscar Hernandez hustled a lead-off double against Miguel Castro (1-2). Justin Smoak was walked intentionally. Kendrys Morales and Luke Maile struck out before Diaz lined his game-winning hit to left.

Danny Barnes (2-1) pitched a

perfect top of the 10th with two strikeouts to pick up the win.

Austin Wynns hit his first career major league home run, and Danny Valencia and Mark Trumbo also hit solo shots for Baltimore.

Curtis Granderson homered for Toronto. Maile took a one-out walk from Brach in the ninth and advanced to third on a double by Diaz. Randal Grichuk hit a two-run double, cutting the deficit to 4-3.

Pinch hitter Devon Travis walked, and Kevin Pillar tied the game with an RBI single. Castro replaced Brach and ended the inning on a double-play grounder by Yangervis Solarte.

Baltimore starter David Hess allowed one run, five hits and two walks with four strikeouts in six-plus innings.

Toronto starter Jaime Garcia gave up one run, four hits and three walks (one intentional) over six innings. The left-hander struck out six.

The Orioles led 1-0 in the first inning after Trey Mancini led off with a double, took third on a groundout and came home on Manny Machado's sacrifice fly.

Granderson tied the game

when he led off the bottom of the first with his fifth homer of the season. It was his 46th career leadoff home run.

Tyler Clippard took over from Garcia in the seventh and surrendered the home run by Wynns with one out to give the Orioles a 2-1 lead. Clippard struck out the other three batters in his lone inning.

Hess was replaced by Mychal Givens after Morales led off with bottom of the seventh with a single. With two outs, Grichuk beat out an infield single but Gio Urshela fouled out to first.

John Axford gave up Valencia's sixth homer of the season and Trumbo's third with one out in the eighth. Baltimore's Richard Bleier pitched around a single in the eighth.

RESULTS

Reds	7	Rockies	5
Blue Jays	5	Orioles 4 (10 innings)	
Dodgers	8	Pirates	7
Cardinals	4	Marlins	1
Astros	5	Rangers	2
Twins	7	White Sox	2
Cubs	4	Phillies	3
Mariners	5	Rays	4
Tigers	7	Red Sox	2
As	4	Royals	1

NBA

LeBron might sign with Rockets: Bosh

Reuters
New York

With the Cleveland Cavaliers' season on the verge of ending, the NBA's next soap opera is on the verge of beginning.

Where will LeBron James be playing next season?

James, whose team trails the Golden State Warriors three games to none in the NBA Finals, is a potential free agent this summer.

On Thursday, a day before the Cavaliers try to extend the NBA Finals when they play host to Golden State in Game 4, James praised the Warriors for their basketball IQ. According to multiple media outlets, Golden State is a potential landing spot for James in free agency.

Meanwhile, former James teammate Chris Bosh said that James' next destination is likely to be Houston.

Speaking on "The Herd with Colin Cowherd," Bosh said, "I would guess that he goes to Houston. It's like the next Avengers movie. Golden State with like 100 superheroes and then Houston with 100 superheroes and they fight. That's just what it's coming down to."

James, still focused on the opponent in front of him, lauded the Warriors.

"In order to win, you've got to have talent, but you've got

to be very cerebral too," James said. "Listen, we're all NBA players. Everybody knows how to put the ball in the hoop. But who can think throughout the course of the game?"

"This is so challenging for me to sit up here and say because people who really don't know the game don't really know what I'm talking about. They just think that you go out, and, 'Oh, LeBron, you're bigger and faster and stronger than everybody, you should drive every single time and you should dunk every single play and you should never get tired, never.' Like it's a video game and you went on the options and you turned down fatigue all the way to zero and injuries all the way down to zero. So we come back here and we get the minds and we build a championship team."

He added that all of the recent title teams with combinations of mega-stars, including his run with the Miami Heat as well as the Boston Celtics, the San Antonio Spurs and the Warriors, have found success in part due to their smarts. One of the Warriors' mainstays remarked about the possibility of James becoming the latest star to join the club.

According to Sports Illustrated, forward Draymond Green said, "I think if LeBron James went to the Golden State Warriors then there would be a high possibility I won't be here."

SPOTLIGHT

Pulev fumes at Whyte, Hearn after fight falls through

Reuters
Sofia

Bulgarian Kubrat Pulev was fuming at Dillian Whyte and his promoter Eddie Hearn yesterday after the announcement that the British boxer would fight recently dethroned WBO Champion Joseph Parker instead of facing him in his native country.

Pulev and Whyte were ordered in April by the International Boxing Federation (IBF) to fight to decide the challenger for the IBF world heavyweight title held by Anthony Joshua. The Bulgarian said last week he was "95 percent sure" that the fight would take place in Sofia in August.

"I was expecting from Dillian Whyte and his team to run away from the fight, but I didn't expect from them to be such bullshit artists," Pulev said on his official website <http://kubratpulev.com> yesterday. "They are extreme manipulators and plain schizophrenics. I can't believe what I'm hearing and what a tricky way they chose to run away from the fight in Bulgaria."

Whyte, who is also a con-

tender for the World Boxing Council (WBC) title held by American Deontay Wilder, will face New Zealander Parker on July 28 in London.

Parker was beaten by Joshua in March on a unanimous points decision in their title unification bout in Cardiff.

Hearn, who is also Joshua's promoter, said that a Whyte-Parker fight was the most intriguing option. "Outside Joshua-Wilder this is the biggest fight in the heavyweight division..." Hearn said. "It's a pure 50-50 fight with two guys who have everything to lose."

Pulev, however, said he's still hoping to meet Whyte in Sofia. "Dillian, if Hearn is misleading you somehow, let me tell you personally - I am still waiting for you in Bulgaria to help you get out of the delusion and bring you back to earth!"

Pulev pulled out of fighting Joshua in October last year after suffering a shoulder injury. Joshua, who also holds the WBA, IBO and WBO titles, went on to beat his replacement Carlos Takam. Known as The Cobra, he previously challenged for the IBF world heavyweight title in 2014, losing to Wladimir Klitschko in Hamburg on a fifth-round knockout.

BOXING

Fury hopes troubles in the past

AFP
Manchester

Former world heavyweight champion Tyson Fury makes his Boxing comeback today after almost three years in exile that left him feeling suicidal.

The 29-year-old Englishman has never been far from attention while away from the ring due to the trials and tribulations that left him experiencing "the lowest of the lows to the point of not wanting to live".

Fury has remained news while inactive due to a personal crisis that involved problems with mental health, excessive drinking, admitting cocaine use and serving a doping ban.

But the talking - and Fury does a lot of it - will stop when he takes on 39-year-old Albanian Sefer Seferi - who has suffered just one defeat in 24 fights - in a ten-round non-title bout at the Manchester Arena.

"It was a rollercoaster few years and I'm just glad to be back," Fury said at a press conference this week.

Fury is back with the aim to regain the

status he enjoyed briefly after outpointing Ukraine's Wladimir Klitschko for three world title belts in November 2015. After climbing to the heavyweight summit, 6ft 9in Fury then crashed to earth as his career and personal life spectacularly unravelled.

He twice pulled out of rematches with Klitschko due to injuries before then admitting to suffering from depression.

The 29-year-old Englishman has never been far from attention while away from the ring due to the trials and tribulations that left him experiencing 'the lowest of the lows to the point of not wanting to live'

As Fury lay idle and piled on the pounds, the World Boxing Association (WBA), International Boxing Federation (IBF) and World Boxing Organisation (WBO) title belts slipped from his grasp for others to fight for.

Fury claimed he was finished and the revelation of a positive drugs test in February 2015, which resulted in a back-dated two-year ban, left the prospect of him Boxing again looking unlikely.

But Fury rediscovered his passion un-

der a new trainer, 25-year-old Ben Davison, after splitting from uncle Peter Fury. Fury claims to have lost eight stone for his comeback.

"I'm looking good, feeling good," Fury said. "I don't remember ever feeling this good, this quick, this strong."

"I've got more power and I want it more. When I was world champion I fell out of love with the game and it was a lost relationship. I was married to the game too long but now we are back in love."

'Just watch me swim'

Fury says he is feeling some love from well-wishers. In 2016, Fury caused controversy after making homophobic, sexist and anti-Semitic remarks but he has gained popularity during his exile for his comments on mental health and offbeat sense of humour.

"I'm doing it for people who need inspiration and have mental health problems themselves," he said.

"If I can do it, then anyone can. To come from 27 stone (171 kg) to fighting level is a statement for sure."

Fury, who is unbeaten in 25 fights with 18 knockouts, still talks a good game and in the last couple of weeks has compared

himself to the late Muhammad Ali, Floyd Mayweather Jr and a goldfish.

"There's no nerves at all, I feel like I've been a goldfish trapped in a tank and now I'm being released back into the river where I belong, so just watch me swim," Fury said.

Fury, though, ditched the humour when he assessed how good he ranks in the heavyweight division.

"I am the greatest heavyweight of all time. I've not got to be modest. I am the best ever. Me, Tyson Fury, the Gypsy King, the one and only," he said.

"When has there ever been somebody like me? There have been plenty of come-forward aggressors, there have been plenty of boxers off the back foot, but when has there ever been a 6ft 9in (2.05metres) switch-hitter with the confidence of Muhammad Ali and Floyd Mayweather rolled into one?"

"There has never, ever been anyone like me. I'm unbeaten, I'm fast, I'm brash, I'm young, I'm good-looking, I'm tanned. I've even got white teeth."

Sefer Seferi picks up Tyson Fury during the weigh in at Great Northern Amphitheatre in Manchester yesterday. (Reuters)



RUGBY

Springbok captain Kolisi not scared of higher-ranked rivals

'Every individual on the team that will be playing feels like they belong there'

AFP
Johannesburg

Siya Kolisi, who will become South Africa's first black Test captain today, has confidence in his youthful side for the first Test against higher-ranked England in Johannesburg.

On the eve of his historic debut as the first black skipper after 127 years of white captains, the flanker told journalists his belief in his squad was unshakable despite it including many young players. There are three new caps in a run-on team that will include a record-equaling seven blacks if tighthead prop Trevor Nyakane passes a fitness test on a rib injury that has been put back to today.

"Every individual on the team that will be playing feels like they belong there. No one feels like they haven't earned their spot. We all worked hard and played (trained) well.

"Me and the guys all feel we deserve to be on the team and the coach has helped us to develop that confidence."

England, ranked third in the world and four places above South Africa, will test the youthful home team at Ellis Park stadium and Kolisi is aware that the youngsters will have to "fight for opportunities.

"What is important is that we put in the work. We can't be scared, we need to be focused, we need to show them that we want this because we know that at Test level, everyone is good (and) it comes down to who wants it more."

Kolisi also reflected on his first opportunity to wear the green and gold colours - five years ago he made his Test debut as a 21-year-old against Scotland in Nelspruit. "I remember everything about my debut. I was sitting on the bench, and I wasn't watching the game early on. I was drinking water and spitting it out for some reason, probably because I was so nervous.

"Johann van Graan (an assistant coach) quickly pulled me aside, though, and just told me to forget everything because I had been struggling a bit in the week with getting to know all the new stuff. "He just told me to do what I do, and every time I got



South Africa captain Siya Kolisi (centre) and his teammates at the Jabulani Technical High School in Soweto for a rugby clinic coaching session with aspiring rugby players from nearby high schools. (AFP)

the ball - and it came my way all day - I just ran with it."

Kolisi has come a long way since. His father, wife and children will be among the Ellis Park crowd rooting for him.

Wales replace injured Jones with Evans

A calf injury has forced loose-head prop Wyn Jones out of the Wales team to play Argentina in San Juan today in the first of a two-Test series. Rob Evans comes off the bench to replace Jones in the starting line-up for the seventh match between the countries in Argentina with each having won three. Nicky Smith, part of the run-on team in a 22-0 victory over South Africa in Washington last weekend, takes the place of Evans on the bench. The two Tests form part of the build-up for Los Pumas and the Dragons for the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan.

France hoping for 'masterstroke' against All Blacks

Underdogs France are looking to pull off a trademark "masterstroke" against the All Blacks when they open their three-Test series today, captain Mathieu Bastareaud said. France memorably upset New Zealand at the 1999 and 2007 World Cups but they haven't arrived in the best of shape, after finishing fourth in this year's Six Nations. Bastareaud, who has a chequered record in New Zealand after falsely claiming he was assaulted in Wellington in 2009, described the All Blacks as "a mythical team and jersey". But despite the overwhelming odds facing them, he said France were still eyeing their first win in nine years against the triple world champions. France were the last team to overcome New Zealand at Auckland's Eden Park, way back in 1994, since when the hosts are unbeaten in 40 games - including the 2011 World Cup final, when they edged Les Bleus 8-7. "We are here because we think we can challenge them. A win would be a masterstroke," said Bastareaud, who said he preferred to leave his personal history in New Zealand aside. In New Zealand, Bastareaud is well known for the 2009 French tour when, as a 20-year-old, he lied about

cuts and bruises on his face, claiming he was assaulted on the streets of Wellington. It caused an international uproar at the time, and public safety in the New Zealand capital was under scrutiny until video evidence proved he had returned to his hotel safely. It later emerged the injuries were the result of a drunken fall in his hotel room. "I'm not a man who reads the press," said the 120kg-plus centre, who is on his second visit to New Zealand since the incident but his first as captain. I try to focus on what I have to do as a captain and player for the team. It will be a big battle, a big challenge and my personal case comes after the team." Stand-in All Blacks captain Sam Whitelock urged his team to keep it simple against the French, warning they were much better than their Six Nations record of two wins and two losses would suggest. "You look at the (French) defence and how they've improved through the Six Nations. They've had a lot of improvement," he said. "The same with the ball in hand so they've got some quality players that love to use the ball in hand and I'm sure they'll be trying to get those guys into space."

MOTORSPORT

Mistake-free Verstappen tops Canada practice

Reuters
Montreal

Red Bull's Max Verstappen, under pressure to clean up his act after a string of crashes and costly errors, kept his nose clean yesterday to clock the fastest time in opening practice for the Canadian Grand Prix.

Verstappen, who started from the rear of grid at the Monaco Grand Prix after a crash in qualifying, offered the promise of something much better in Montreal, taking full advantage of an upgraded power unit to clock a polished one minute, 13.302 seconds around the 2.7 mile (4.34km) sun-splashed Circuit Gilles Villeneuve.

Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton, chasing a record equalling seventh Canadian Grand Prix win, once again figured near the top of the time sheets, just 0.88 seconds behind the Dutchman but in front of the other Red Bull of Monaco winner Australian Daniel Ricciardo.

German former world champion Sebastian Vettel was fourth quickest as Ferrari also used opening practice to break in their upgraded engine.

Finland's Valtteri Bottas was fifth best in a Mercedes that will run with an old power unit that will be on its seventh race.

Another Finn, Kimi Raikkonen, was sixth for Ferrari in front of McLaren's Fernando Alonso, who is entered in his landmark 300th Grand Prix.

The home crowd had very little to get excited about as Williams' Lance Stroll, who collected his first points at the Canadian Grand Prix last year, continued his struggles, posting only the 18th best effort.

Right behind Stroll was fellow Canadian Nicholas Latifi, whose father recently purchased a 10 percent stake in McLaren. He got his first taste of what it is like to take part in a Grand Prix weekend, sitting in for Sergio Perez in the Force India for the first practice.

The 22-year-old, who is currently racing in the For-

mula 2 Championship, was 19th fastest ahead of only Nico Hulkenberg, who interrupted the session for nearly 15 minutes when his Renault coasted to a stop with suspected gearbox problems.

Hamilton hoping Mercedes have resolved tyre problems

Lewis Hamilton hopes his Mercedes team have overcome the problems they had in Monaco with the 'hyper-soft' tyre ahead of this weekend's Canadian Grand Prix. The world championship leader and defending four-time champion said yesterday he believed the issues experienced in Monte Carlo were a 'one-off' and were now understood.

"I think Monaco was a one-off," said Hamilton. "We've understood where and why our tyres didn't last and there's some fundamental things we've changed on the car which affected it.

"So I think we have a much better understanding coming into this weekend."

The team's problems with the tyres meant they were out-qualified and Hamilton lined up only third on the grid behind Australian Daniel Ricciardo of Red Bull and title rival four-time champion German Sebastian Vettel of Ferrari.

Hamilton had problems in the race and abandoned using the 'hyper-softs' earlier than expected, switching to the 'super-softs' to reach the finish.

He added: "This is usually a track where warm-up is difficult and the target is always moving, all the time. We got it wrong the last weekend and in hindsight we know that and could have done something different. Now we will."

Ricciardo said he felt confident of running well using the 'hyper-softs' again in Montreal on the power-hungry Circuit Gilles Villeneuve.

He said: "We were good on the hypersofts in Monaco and it gives us a chance to do well again this weekend. This circuit could suit us better than a few of the others coming up."



Max Verstappen of the Netherlands driving the Aston Martin Red Bull Racing RB14 TAG Heuer on track during practice for the Canadian Formula One Grand Prix at Circuit Gilles Villeneuve in Montreal, Canada. (Getty Images/AFP)

CYCLING

Thomas takes lead, Martin claims stage

AFP
Valmorel, France

Ireland's Dan Martin resisted a late challenge from Welsh all-rounder Geraint Thomas to clinch his first win in 16 months after a thrilling summit duel at the Criterium de Dauphine yesterday.

Team Sky leader in the absence of Chris Froome, Thomas finished four seconds back from Martin on the 130km fifth stage to seize the overall race lead by 1min 09sec from Italian Damiano Caruso with just two stages remaining, both of them summit finishes. Thomas's Italian Sky team-mate Gianni Moscon is third overall on the same time as Caruso. "I think these four days are the hardest four days I've raced in a one-week stage race," said Thomas. "They're super hard climbing stages and even harder over the weekend. I'll try to enjoy it in the jersey tomorrow. It's super hard and anything can happen but so far so good.

"There's a lot of climbing (on Saturday), it might be short but there are three big climbs and a little one as well so it will certainly be a big test."

The 32-year-old Thomas, winner of Paris-Nice in 2016,



Britain's Geraint Thomas, wearing the overall leader's yellow jersey, celebrates on the podium after the fifth stage of the 70th edition of the Criterium du Dauphine cycling race between Grenoble and Valmorel yesterday. (AFP)

is coming into form at just the right time with the Tour de France a month away. England's Adam Yates, who's twin Simon wore the pink jersey at the Giro d'Italia for 13 stages in May, was third on the day at 15 seconds.

In the final steep climb Martin, trailing the overall leaders by almost three minutes, was allowed to escape as the overall contenders eyed each other. Thomas

then launched a spectacular bid to catch Martin and only French hope Romain Bardet was able to follow. But the Frenchman ran out of gas as Thomas quickly narrowed the gap on Martin, who stood up out of the saddle in a final show of defiance. "I've been feeling good all year," the Irishman said after the race. "And the pack let me go because I'm a bit back in the standings.

"I'm in better condition than I expected," he added, before playing down the significance of his 16-month win drought. "I'm more worried about my form for the Tour de France. It's been a learning process starting in a new team so getting this win for UAE is great," he said.

Today's stage is almost the same as the Tour de France stage 16 with four major climbs on the

menu and a summit finish at La Rosiere.

RESULTS AND STANDINGS AFTER 5TH STAGE

1. Dan Martin (IRL/UAE) 3hr 21min 19sec, 2. Geraint Thomas (GBR/SKY) at 04sec, 3. Adam Yates (GBR/MIT) 15, 4. Emanuel Buchmann (GER/BOR) 16, 5. Dani Navarro (ESP/COF) same time, 6. Romain Bardet (FRA/ALM) s.t., 7. Damiano Caruso (ITA/BMC) 24, 8. Ilnur Zakarin (RUS/KAT) s.t., 9. Guillaume Martin (FRA/WGG) 26, 10. Antwan Tolhoek (NED/LNL) s.t.

Selected others

12. Julian Alaphilippe (FRA/QST) s.t., 16. Vincenzo Nibali (ITA/BAH) 59, 21. Gianni Moscon (ITA/SKY) 1:13

Overall standings

1. Geraint Thomas (GBR/SKY) 17hr 16min 53sec, 2. Damiano Caruso (ITA/BMC) at 1:09, 3. Gianni Moscon (ITA/SKY) s.t., 4. Julian Alaphilippe (FRA/QST) 1:10, 5. Michal Kwiatkowski (POL/SKY) 1:15, 6. Adam Yates (GBR/MIT) 1:18, 7. Romain Bardet (FRA/ALM) 1:53, 8. Bob Jungels (LUX/QST) 2:03, 9. Marc Soler (ESP/MOV) 2:10, 10. Emanuel Buchmann (GER/BOR) 2:23
- Selected others**
11. Ilnur Zakarin (RUS/KAT) 2:24, 14. Dan Martin (IRL/EAU) 2:26.

Formula E brings circuit racing back to Switzerland

Formula E is set for a momentous weekend in Switzerland, even if French driver Jean-Eric Vergne fails to clinch his first title with two races to spare in the all-electric series.

Today's Zurich ePrix will be the first major circuit race held in Switzerland since 1955, when a ban came into force after a Le Mans 24 Hours disaster in France that killed at least 83 spectators and injured more than 100. Circuit restrictions were lifted in 2015 for fully-electric vehicles. "This is another great symbol of how Formula E is changing things: in a country where racing was banned, now there is going to be racing," Formula E chief executive Alejandro Agag said in a recent column for motorsport.com. "It's good for motorsport in general that we open up new countries - especially a country like Switzerland, which has so much potential and so many companies there that can support motorsport."

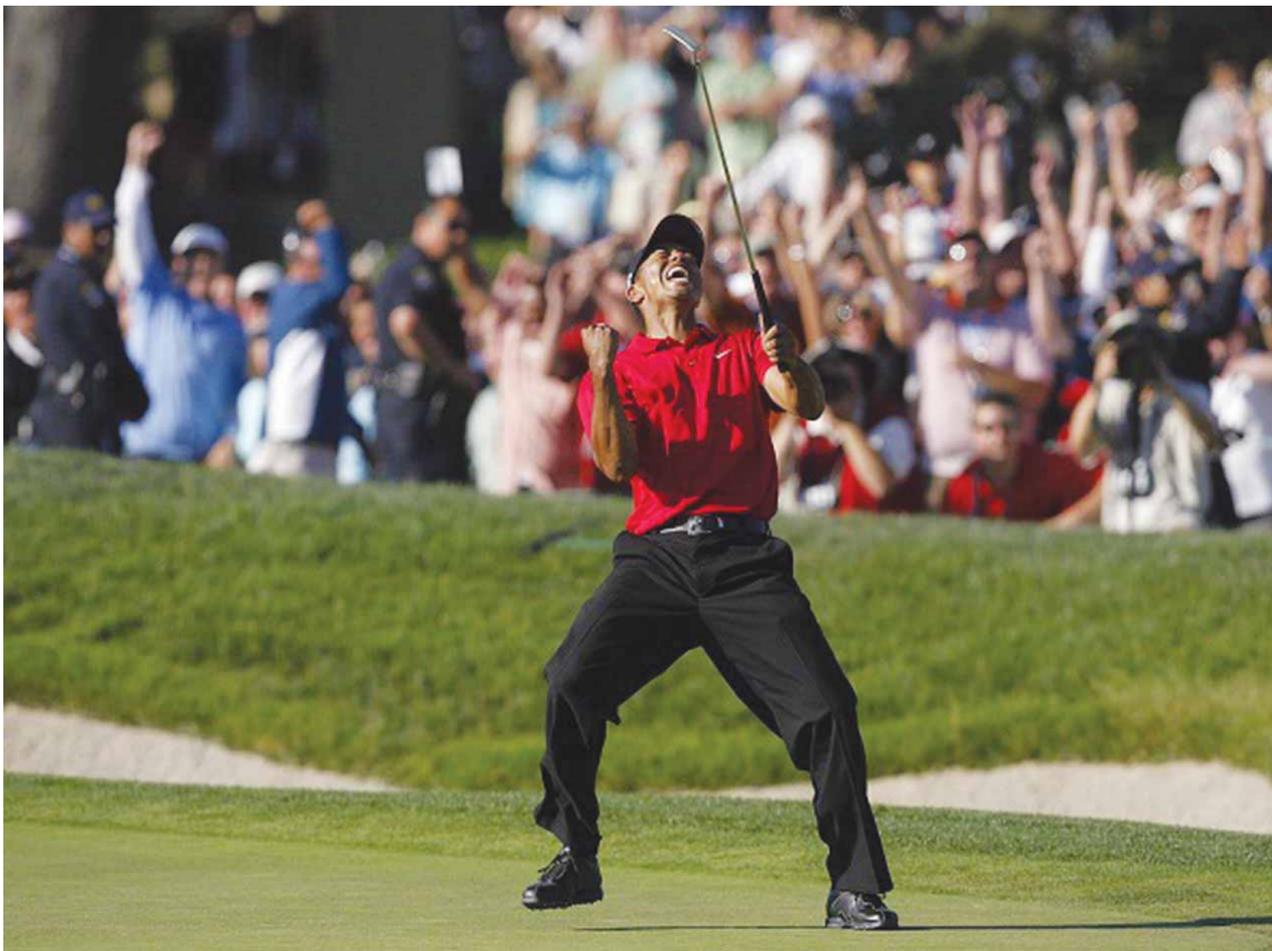
For years, Switzerland has been known more in motor racing circles as home of the Sauber Formula One team and several racers plying their trade abroad, as well as providing top sponsors. It is also the adopted home of Germany's seven-times Formula One world champion Michael Schumacher, who has vanished from the public eye after suffering severe head injuries in a 2013 skiing accident in France. Swiss driver Sebastian Buemi, an ex-Formula One driver, won the second Formula E championship in 2015-16 and was World Endurance Championship (WEC) champion in 2014 but will be racing on home soil for the first time.

Five Formula One races were held in Switzerland, at the Bremgarten circuit, from 1950-54 and a Swiss Grand Prix was also held in 1982 at the Dijon-Prenois circuit in neighbouring France. Formula E will bring race cars to the heart of the city on a 2.4km track along the Zurich lake front. Vergne, who spent three seasons in Formula One with Toro Rosso, has a 40 point advantage over Britain's Sam Bird with three races remaining. The Frenchman, who races for the Chinese-owned Techeetah team, will take his first title and become the fourth different champion in four years if he outscores his DS Virgin Racing rival by more than 18 points. Otherwise the title battle goes on to New York, host of the last two rounds. "Technically I (can be) champion in Zurich, but I don't think about that," he said.

GOLF

10 years after last major win, Tiger fancies US crown

'Last year in September, I didn't know, I just didn't know if I would ever be able to do it again. I was just hoping to be able to walk again without hurting, to be able to sit down again without having this burning pain down the leg'



FLASHBACK: Tiger Woods celebrates after his victory over Rocco Mediate in a playoff at the US Open in 2008 at Torrey Pines.

AFP
New York

It's been 10 years since Tiger Woods limped to victory in the 2008 US Open, an unlikely triumph that has been followed by a once inconceivable major championship drought.

Woods defied the pain of a damaged left knee and two stress fractures to defeat Rocco Mediate in a Monday playoff at Torrey Pines 10 years ago — forcing the decider in dramatic style with a birdie in the 72nd hole.

"That was a pretty special week, because I've had probably four majors where I've putted like that: '97 Masters, 2000 US Open, 2000 British (Open) and then that 2008 (US Open)," Woods said.

"I don't think I really missed a putt inside 10 feet in any of those four major championships. And that was a week that I needed it because I didn't really hit the ball as well as those other three majors that I mentioned."

Making Woods's 2008 US Open victory even more remarkable, it was his first tournament since an arthroscopic procedure on his left knee eight weeks earlier — although only a handful of people knew the extent of Woods's injuries at the time.

Two days after the victory, Woods announced he was having season-ending knee surgery.

The decade that followed saw scandal, success and further fitness woes that finally left Woods wondering not only whether he would resume his pursuit of Jack Nicklaus's record of 18 major titles but whether he would ever compete or even have a normal life again.

"The last couple years have felt like a very long time," Woods says. "A second seemed like 24 hours."

"Last year in September, I didn't know, I just didn't know if I would ever be able to do it again. I was just hoping to be able to walk again without hurting, to be able to sit down again without having

this burning pain down the leg.

"To somehow be out here now doing it again, it's a blessing."

Woods will be playing his 26th major since Torrey Pines when he tees it up in the 118th US Open at Shinnecock Hills next Thursday.

He's had nine top-10 finishes in Grand Slam events since his last win. A runner-up finish in the 2009 PGA Championship notwithstanding, Woods says his best chance to snag a 15th major came at the 2011 Masters, where he started the last round seven adrift but surged into contention with a five-under front nine.

"I felt like I had all the momentum," said Woods — who cooled off coming in to finish with a share of fourth. "That was the one I could have gotten."

Woods hasn't won a tournament since he captured his eighth WGC Bridgestone Invitational title at Akron, Ohio, in 2013 — one of five titles he claimed that year as he reclaimed the world number one ranking.

Woods's latest return from injury has shown inevitable inconsistencies but enough quality to predict he'll win again.

Woods put on his best ball-striking display of the season at the Memorial, leading the field in strokes gained tee to green.

But a balky putter cost him shots and after he electrified the crowd at Muirfield Village by briefly putting his name atop the leaderboard on Saturday he finished tied for 23rd.

"I just need to hit better putts," said Woods, who certainly will if he's to have a shot at Shinnecock.

But Nicklaus sees no reason the 42-year-old superstar won't add to his tally of major titles.

"I've always said that if Tiger comes back and plays then he's still got a shot at breaking my record," Nicklaus said. "Even with now 10-years passing it doesn't make any difference. He's still a great athlete and a great golfer."

BOTTOMLINE

Mickelson, Koepka chase Power in Memphis

AFP
Los Angeles

Phil Mickelson, aiming to fill the glaring gap on his major resume at next week's US Open, was pleased to finish one off the lead of Seamus Power Thursday in the St. Jude Classic.

Mickelson, who has six runner-up finishes at the US Open and could complete a career Grand Slam with a victory at Shinnecock Hills next week, said he kept his round together despite some late struggles at TPC Southwind in Memphis, Tennessee.

"I finished the round off, even though I didn't quite have it there at the end," said the 47-year-old American, whose round included an eagle at the par-five third hole. "I had a nice



simple round going and then I missed the last four fairways.

"I was able to gather myself if you will and control my thoughts a little bit better."

Mickelson was among 11

players sharing second behind Ireland's Power, who had six birdies and one bogey in his five-under par 65.

Power, who attended university in Tennessee, was unable to

secure a US Open spot in sectional qualifying in Memphis earlier this week — earning only second-alternate status.

But he enjoyed a solid round, capped by a birdie at 18 where he landed his approach shot within five feet of the pin.

"I played here last year and it kind of suits my eye," he said. "So I feel good going out — but it's tough to get out of there with 65."

Brooks Koepka, the reigning US Open champion, joined Mickelson on 66 thanks largely to a stellar day on the greens.

"I didn't play well at all," Koepka said. "We were all over the place. I'm a good putter. I just need to figure out everything else."

Also a shot behind power were Troy Merritt, Wesley Bryan, Fabian Gomez, Chris Kirk, Michael Kim, Brandon Harkins, Steve

Stricker, Mackenzie Hughes and Stuart Appleby.

World number two Dustin Johnson headed another big group on 67, his three-under round including a chip-in birdie at the par-four 12th.

His approach shot there landed on the edge of the water hazard and Johnson stripped off his right shoe and sock to take his stance with one foot in the muddy water — then saw his wedge shot find the hole.

"I actually didn't hit it very well and got lucky and it went in the hole," said Johnson, who was pleased with his play overall.

"Three-under's a solid score around here," he said. "I felt like I played a little better than that, but if I can keep hitting it like I am now I'll continue to shoot good scores."

"I'm pretty happy with the position I'm in."

CRICKET

Sri Lanka rally to 125-5 at lunch against West Indies



Dinesh Chandimal of Sri Lanka takes evasive action during day 3 of the 1st Test against the West Indies at Queen's Park Oval, Port of Spain, Trinidad, yesterday.

AFP
Port of Spain

Sri Lanka lost the vital wicket of captain Dinesh Chandimal in the final over before lunch to slip deeper into trouble at 125 for five in reply to the West Indies first innings total of 414 for eight declared on the third day of the first Test at the Queen's Park Oval yesterday.

With their immediate target of 214 to avoid the follow-on still some 89 runs away with five wickets in hand, the tourists will look to wicketkeeper-batsman Niroshan Dickwella (25 not out) and new batsman Dilruwan Perera to defy the home side.

The West Indies enjoyed immediate success on the third morning but were then frustrated by the defiance of the fifth-wicket pair until Chandimal's error of judgement.

Taking on the responsibility to repair the considerable damage done to the innings late on the second day and in the third over of the morning when Kemar Roach bowled Roshen Silva, the Sri Lankan captain played positively and dominated a 78-run stand with Dickwella.

Despite continuing assistance from the pitch for the faster bowlers who so unsettled the

opposition's top-order, Chandimal and Dickwella saw off the early threat of Roach and Shannon Gabriel.

It prompted the introduction of support seamers Jason Holder and Miguel Cummins, although they failed to have any impact with the Sri Lankan pair growing in confidence and working towards rebuilding the innings from the depths of 43 for four.

Holder finally summoned his lone specialist spinner, Devendra Bishoo, into the attack but it was the return of Gabriel for the last over before the break which brought about the potentially critical breakthrough.

Chandimal, well set and looking good on 44, immediately went after a short, wide delivery and miscued an attempted cut to offer a simple catch to Rossington Chase at backward point, his third of the innings.

BRIEF SCORES:

West Indies 414-8 declared (S. Dowrich 125 n.o., S. Hope 44, J. Holder 40, D. Bishoo 40; L. Kumara 4-95, S. Lakmal 2-55) Sri Lanka 125-5 (D. Chandimal 44; S. Gabriel 2-30, K. Roach 2-34)

Match situation: Sri Lanka trail the West Indies by 289 runs with five wickets in hand in the first innings

Toss: West Indies

New Zealand women post new ODI record total of 490-4

London: New Zealand's women's team posted the highest score in any one-day international match when they made a mammoth 490 for four against Ireland in Dublin yesterday.

New Zealand captain Suzie Bates, one of the world's leading female cricketers, won the toss and promptly led from the front with an innings of 151, as well as sharing in a first-wicket stand of 172.

Madeline Green made a century as well, her innings of 121 helping New Zealand break their own 21-year-old record women's ODI total of 455 for five, also made in 50 overs, against Pakistan at Christchurch in 1997.

Ireland are one of the weaker

teams in the women's game and their inexperienced attack had a hard time yesterday, with teenage leg-spinner Cara Murray conceding 119 runs in her maximum 10 overs, although the 17-year-old did take two wickets — including that of Bates, whom she had stumped to end a 94-ball innings featuring 24 fours and two sixes. The highest total in any men's one-day international is England's 444 for three against Pakistan at Trent Bridge, Nottingham, in 2016.

And the highest score in any men's senior limited overs or List A match remains Surrey's 496 for four against Gloucestershire at The Oval in 2007, an innings that featured Ali Brown's 176.

SPOTLIGHT

S. Africa announce new T20 league

AFP
Johannesburg

Cricket South Africa (CSA) announced yesterday that it will stage a Twenty20 tournament later this year featuring the country's top players and international stars.

South African television company SuperSport will be partners in a deal which CSA acting chief executive Thabang Moroe said would be "the biggest in the history of South African domestic cricket".

A CSA statement gave no details about the format of the tournament, which will be played in November and December.

However, it seems unlikely to be as ambitious as the aborted T20 Global League, which was planned for last season but did not take place.

The Global League was to be a city-based franchise tourna-

ment, with foreign owners of seven of the eight teams.

But it fell through, leading to the departure of then CSA chief executive Haroon Lorgat because no television deal and no major sponsors were in place.

Although no details of the number of teams were revealed, it seems unlikely that there will be private ownership of the franchises.

Moroe said the owners who had signed up for last year's league had been refunded their deposits.

The Global League cost CSA an estimated 180mn rand (about \$13.7mn, 11.7mn euros), including compensation pay-outs to 144 players who had been signed.

If all South Africa's leading players are to be available, the tournament will have to start in late November because South Africa will play three one-day internationals and a T20 international in Australia, ending on November 17.