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Sparks fly as Fury and Wilder face off ahead of bout



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Westbrook fuels Thunder, Harden fires but Rockets fall

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# GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

Neymar inspires PSG to leave Reds in danger of exit

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Qatar Olympic Committee President HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani speaks with International Olympic Committee President Dr Thomas Bach on the sidelines of the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC) General Assembly in Tokyo yesterday.

SPOTLIGHT

Bach says IOC committed to aiding Korean peace efforts

Reuters  
 Tokyo

The International Olympic Committee remains committed to helping the Korean Peninsula find lasting peace with its chief Thomas Bach praising the role his organisation and the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics had in easing tensions.

Held at the South Korean resort in February, the Winter Games were seen as a turning point in relations between the neighbours, who are still technically at war, after a unified Korean team competed in women's ice hockey.

As their relationship continues to thaw, the Koreans agreed in September to pursue a bid to co-host the 2032 Summer Games.

Speaking at the General Assembly of the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC) in Tokyo yesterday, Bach said the IOC

would be involved in further discussions to "strengthen peace efforts".

"We have committed ourselves to this," the German said.

"At the very beginning of next year, there will be new talks to get together with the two NOCs of the Korean states and the two governments, to see what we can do there to strengthen these peace efforts that are underway on the political level now."

Relations between the nations have greatly improved this year, with South Korean President Moon Jae-in meeting his North Korean counterpart Kim Jong-un at three different summits.

"I refer to President Moon from the Republic of Korea, who has said that we have opened the door to peace talks with our initiatives on the Korean Peninsula and who has that there the IOC deserves a lot of credit for this," Bach added.

FOOTBALL

# Xavi, Sadd coach Ferreira hail Abdelkarim's success

'Abdelkarim has been amazing this season and this great achievement is a victory not only for Al Sadd but also for Qatar football. He is a source of great pride for Asian football'

By Sports Reporter  
 Doha

AFC Player of the Year Abdelkarim Hassan is a source of pride not only for Qatar but also for the whole of Asia, Al Sadd captain Xavi Hernandez said yesterday.

Spain and Barcelona legend Xavi was effusive in his praise for his 25-year-old teammate who beat some of the best players in Asia to clinch the continent's top football award at Wednesday's AFC gala in Muscat.

"Abdelkarim has been amazing this season and this great achievement is a victory not only for Al Sadd but also for Qatar football. He is a source of great pride for Asian football," said Xavi who won eight La Liga titles with Barcelona.

"I am proud that Abdelkarim is the best player in Asia, this is a great honour for him and fantastic for his future. We wish him all the best, his win is a historic moment and we are extremely pleased for him," added Xavi.

Xavi's glowing commendation of Hassan was further echoed by Al Sadd's head coach Jesualdo Ferreira, who added: "Abdelkarim continues to display incredible tactical discipline not only in matches but also during training."

"He is one of the most important and reliable players in my team. He has great strength and contributes significantly to the team's success and his performances have continued to grow from strength to strength."

"I am deeply honoured to train the best player in the Qatar League and now in Asia," said the former FC Porto and Panathinaikos manager.

"On behalf of the Al Sadd family, I congratulate Hassan for another outstanding year. It



Al Sadd captain Xavi (sitting, centre), coach Jesualdo Ferreira (standing, centre) and other team members pose with Abdelkarim Hassan's AFC Player of the Year trophy during a training session yesterday. Abdelkarim is standing next to coach Ferreira.

has been a remarkable journey and there is still plenty of room for him to grow because he has great potential to perform even better.

Abdelkarim was warmly received at the Hamad International Airport by club officials and teammates when he arrived from Muscat.

He also attended Al Sadd's training where the entire team congratulated him and posed with him for personal photographs.

Qatar captain Hassan al-Haydos, who is Abdelkarim's colleague at Al Sadd, was also all praise for the player.

"Congratulations to him. His victory is a great achievement for the club too. We hope that he will continue to sparkle in the future and reach greater heights," said al-Haydos.

For his part, Abdelkarim said he was thrilled with the well wishes he received from everybody.

"I am very happy and proud to win this award. Every player dreams of winning such a prestigious award and I thank my fellow players at the club because without their support I wouldn't have won it," he said.

"Football is a team game and without the team's support nothing is possible. I am incredibly happy. It gives me the feeling that I have contributed something. Even if I had not won the award, I would have been happy with just my nomination."

Abdelkarim said while he hopes to win further accolades with Al Sadd, his ultimate ambition is to play for a top European club.

"I'm still at the beginning of my career. I am ambitious but I have to continue training and develop myself further so that I can win the QNB Stars League with Al Sadd, the Asian Cup in January and next season's AFC Champions League."

"But playing in Europe is also one of my priorities."

SPOTLIGHT

# Neymar inspires PSG to leave Reds in danger of exit

'Everyone was ready to suffer for each other. That was necessary against Liverpool'

AFP  
Paris

Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp hit out at the referee and Neymar as his side slumped to a 2-1 defeat to Paris Saint-Germain on Wednesday that leaves last season's runners-up dangerously close to an early Champions League exit.

Juan Bernat and Neymar scored to put PSG in control in the first half in the French capital, before a James Milner penalty on the stroke of half-time ensured this pivotal game remained in the balance until the death.

PSG knew a defeat here coupled with an unfavourable result in the night's other Group C game could see the ambitious Qatar-owned club eliminated already.

But instead it is Liverpool – beaten in each of their last five games away from Anfield in the Champions League – who now seem the more likely to miss out on the last 16.

"When you saw their line-up, the approach they chose was full risk, especially in the beginning, to try everything as long as your legs carry you. The quality they have meant it was obviously quite intense to deal with," admitted Klopp.

He acknowledged that his team had not been good enough, but hinted that a "clever" Neymar had play-acted to break the game up. He was also unhappy at Polish referee Szymon Marciniak for his decision not to send off Marco Verratti for a challenge on Joe Gomez in the first half.

"For me it's a red card. I look like a bad loser, but I don't care," said Klopp.

"Tonight we looked like butchers when you look at how many yellow cards we had. It was clever from PSG, especially Neymar, but a lot of others went down like it was something serious and we were not that calm anymore."



Paris Saint-Germain's Brazilian forward Neymar (R) celebrates with Dani Alves after scoring against Liverpool at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris on Wednesday.

With Napoli beating Red Star Belgrade 3-1, in a tight group Liverpool must now win either 1-0 or by two clear goals at home to the Italians in a fortnight if they are to progress.

Such a regression in Europe would be a big blow to Liverpool, even if it could conceivably help them in the Premier League. Meanwhile, PSG head to Belgrade for their last game still needing to win to be certain of advancing, but at least they have their fate in their hands.

"It was our last chance to show that we are capable of competing with a team like Liverpool, a team with an incredible mentality," said PSG coach

Thomas Tuchel.

"Everyone was ready to suffer for each other. That was necessary against Liverpool and it was a big step forward for us."

PSG had only won one of their previous seven games in the competition. However, Klopp's side were completely overrun in the opening stages at the Parc des Princes.

Angel di Maria had forced a fine save from Alisson with a dipping volley before Paris went in front in the 13th minute.

Kylian Mbappe tried to square for Edinson Cavani, but the ball broke to Bernat, and the Spaniard swept home his second goal in this season's competition.

Verratti's challenge on Gomez came midway through the first half, but PSG survived that and went on to double their lead thanks to a clearly wound up Neymar.

He had been drawing fouls from opponents and whipping up a fervent home crowd before he burst down the left in the 37th minute, combining with Mbappe.

The France star crossed low for Cavani, whose attempt was saved by Alisson, but Neymar converted the rebound.

That should have ensured a comfortable cushion for the hosts at the break, but Liverpool were gifted a route back into

the game in first-half stoppage time.

Di Maria brought down Sadio Mane just inside the area. The referee did not initially give a penalty but then rightly changed his mind, and Milner beat Gianluigi Buffon from 12 yards. Understandably given the high stakes, PSG sat back more and more in the second half, although they still came closest to scoring again from a Marquinhos header, and their win was fully deserved.

"We were not worried about playing at home. We know how strong we are and we always knew we could do it," said Mbappe.

FOCUS

## Mertens, Hamsik lift Napoli but battle for knockouts goes down to the wire

AFP  
Naples

Dries Mertens bagged a brace to add to Marek Hamsik's early goal as Napoli beat Red Star Belgrade 3-1 on Wednesday to go top of their Champions League Group C but the battle for a place in the knock-out rounds will go down to the wire in the final round of games mid-December.

Carlo Ancelotti's Serie A club have to wait to advance to the knock-out rounds after French champions Paris Saint-Germain beat Liverpool 2-1 in France.

Hamsik got the hosts off the mark after 11 minutes in Naples with Mertens adding two more either side of half-time to lift the Italians before the final game at Anfield.

"I said it wasn't going to be a decisive match," said Ancelotti. "We've done what we needed to. We're top of the group so you have to be positive."

Napoli now have nine points, one more than PSG with Liverpool back on six.

That means a point at Anfield would be enough for Napoli to reach the round of 16 at the expense of Liverpool.

Red Star are fourth on four points, but they will finish third if they win at home to PSG in their final fixture and Liverpool lose at home to Napoli.

The Italians are unbeaten in this year's competition and welcomed Red Star Belgrade after playing a 0-0 draw in Belgrade.

Ancelotti's side were reeling after being held 0-0 by bottom Serie A club Chievo at the weekend to fall eight points behind Juventus.

And three-time Champions

League winning coach Ancelotti had warned his team they would be "proper idiots" not to qualify for the last 16 of this year's competition.

They came out firing with Mertens almost scoring the opener after five minutes at the Stadio San Paolo, with a clever back-heel flick from a Jose Callejon assist denied by Red Star goalkeeper Milan Borjan.

But minutes later captain Hamsik broke through with a close range volley as the club's record all-time goal scorer finding the net for the first time this season.

Veljko Simic had a chance for Red Star but was denied by Napoli goalkeeper David Ospina with one hand.

And Senegalese centre-back Kalidou Koulibaly almost grabbed the hosts' second after 28 minutes racing to pick up a Jose Callejon cross but his header was tipped over by Milan Borjan.

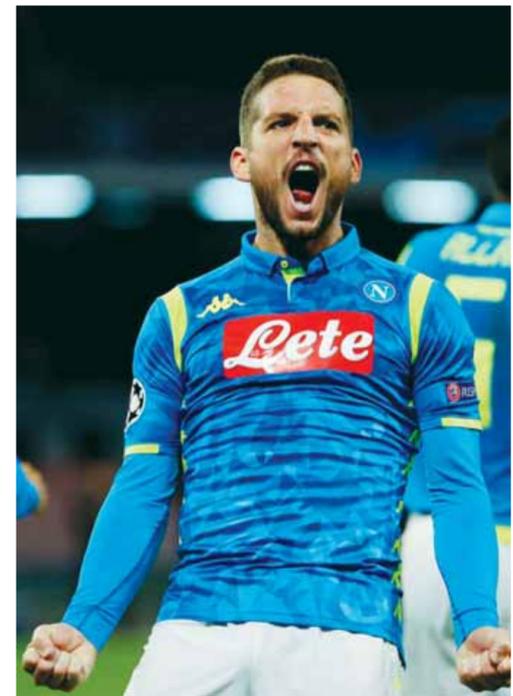
Fabian Ruiz sent in a cross for Mertens with the Belgian tapping in his first after 33 minutes, completing his brace six minutes after the break to bring his tally to 100 goals in the Napoli jersey.

Red Star were not bowled with Camorian forward Ben Nabouhane pulling a goal back for the visitors after 57 minutes.

The goal could have an impact on the standings with all still up for grabs between Napoli, PSG and Liverpool.

"Liverpool are tough, but we've proved we can beat them and I think it'll be a spectacular game at Anfield," Hamsik told Sky Sport Italia.

Napoli beat Liverpool 1-0 in their home leg, thanks to a 90th-minute Lorenzo Insigne goal.



Napoli's Dries Mertens celebrates scoring their second goal on Wednesday night.

### RESULTS CHECK

**Group A**  
At Madrid  
Atletico Madrid 2 (Koke 2, Griezmann 24) Monaco 0

**Group B**  
At Dortmund  
Borussia Dortmund 0 Club Brugge 0

**Group C**  
At Wembley  
Tottenham 1 (Eriksen 80) Inter Milan 0

At Eindhoven  
PSV Eindhoven 1 (L. de Jong 83) Barcelona 2 (Messi 61, Pique 70)

**Group D**  
At Naples  
Napoli 3 (Hamsik 11, Mertens 33, 52) Red Star Belgrade 1 (Nabouhane 57)

At Paris  
Paris Saint-Germain 2 (Bernat 13, Neymar 37) Liver-

pool 1 (Milner 45+1-pen)

**Group E**  
At Moscow  
Lokomotiv Moscow 2 (Krychowiak 43, Ignatyev 54) Galatasaray 0

At Porto  
Porto 3 (Millitao 52, Corona 55, Marega 90+4) Schalke 1 (Bentaleb 89-pen)

BOTTOMLINE

# Eriksen's late show keeps Spurs in the hunt

AFP  
London

Mauricio Pochettino backed Tottenham to complete their Champions League escape act in Barcelona after Christian Eriksen's late strike kept alive their last 16 hopes with a 1-0 win over Inter Milan.

Pochettino's side were 10 minutes away from being eliminated at the group stage as they laboured to break down the massed Inter defence at Wembley.

But Eriksen, surprisingly dropped to the bench by Pochettino, came to Tottenham's rescue when the substitute fired home to take their Group B qualification bid down to the final game.

It was a dramatic end to a hard-fought clash that Tottenham had to win to avoid bowing out at the group stage for the second time in three seasons.

After taking one point from their opening three matches, Tottenham had scored twice in the last 12 minutes to



Tottenham Hotspur's Danish midfielder Christian Eriksen exults after scoring the opening goal of the UEFA Champions League group B football match against Inter Milan at Wembley Stadium in London on Wednesday.

avoid an early exit against PSV Eindhoven earlier this month.

And this latest act of European escapology means second placed Tottenham are now level on points with third placed Inter.

They head to Barcelona to face the group leaders on December 11 knowing they will reach the last 16 as long as they match Inter's result against PSV on the same night.

That won't be easy against Lionel Messi and company, but Pochettino has faith.

"All is possible in football. We have big respect to Barcelona, they are one of the best teams in Europe, it will be so tough. But we have belief and faith that we can win," Pochettino said.

"We need fresh legs, fresh mind and no injuries. We need to arrive that way in Barcelona." Barca may rest players given they are already through, but Pochettino is not expecting any favours.

"I expect that they are going to play with all the best players, but I don't know how they are going to prepare the

side," he added.

"We need to approach the game in the best way and believe that we can win. What Barcelona is going to do is not in our hands. In the Champions League no one is going to give a present and not care about the result."

Inter boss Luciano Spalletti still expects they will advance if they beat PSV because Barca are so formidable at home.

"As long as we do our job I think we will go through. It is about what we do," he said.

"They have got some top class players at Barcelona, they haven't lost at home in the last five years in the Champions League and they will want to keep that record."

Faced with a do-or-die situation, Pochettino had claimed it was "massive motivation" for Tottenham to silence the critics who said they had blown their chance to make the last 16.

His players seemed to have taken that message to heart as they dominated the first half. Inter's knowledge that a

point would send them through meant they approached their first competitive match at Wembley with extreme caution.

Content to defend deep for long periods, Inter's safety-first game-plan was almost undone when Harry Winks curled a superb effort against the bar from 25 yards.

Pochettino introduced Eriksen in the 70th minute and it proved an inspired move as the Denmark playmaker turned the game in Tottenham's favour.

Hugo Lloris made a fine save to deny Ivan Perisic and Tottenham finally broke through in the 80th minute.

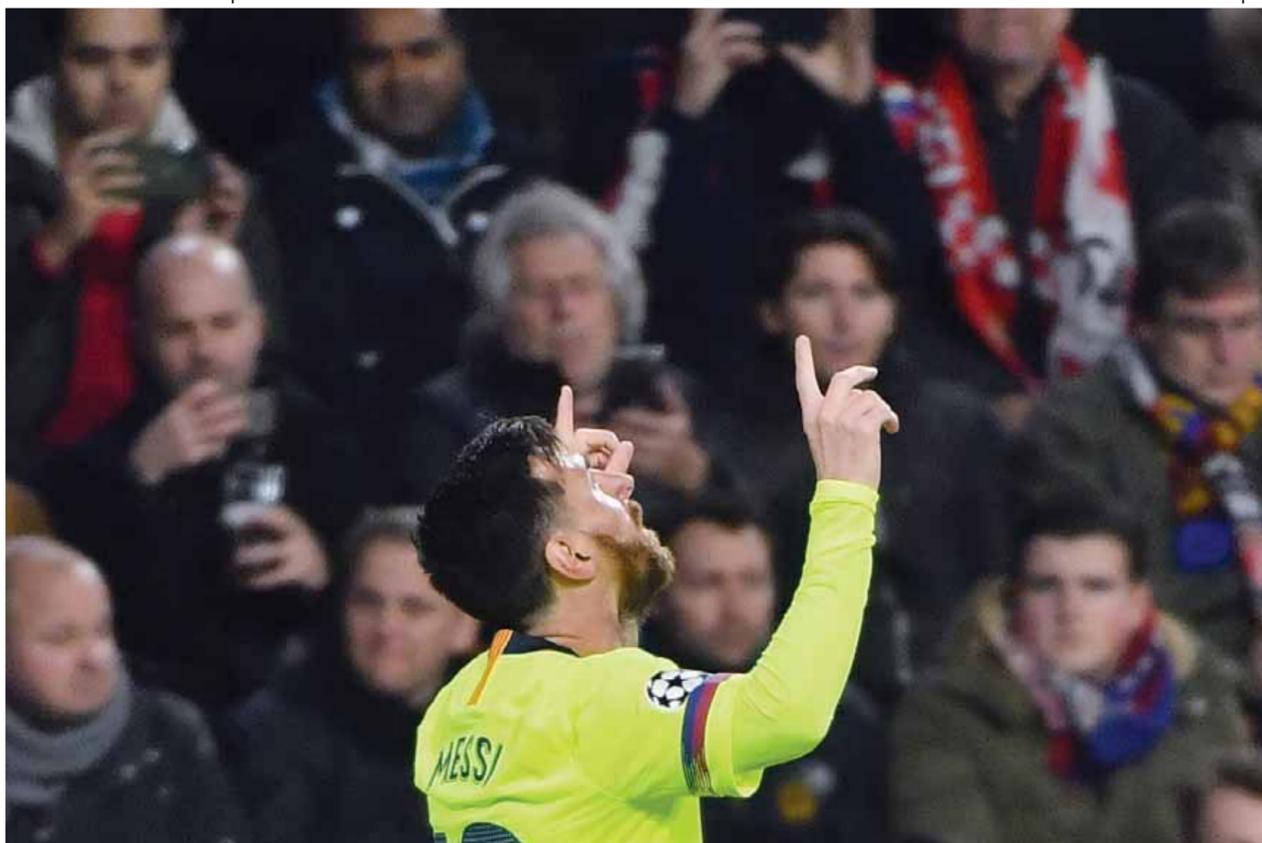
At last unlocking the stubborn Inter defence, a sweeping move featured Moussa Sissoko and Dele Alli exchanging passes before Eriksen was teed up for a cool finish from 10 yards out.

Pochettino's relief was clear as he looked to the heavens and pumped his fists, but Tottenham still have one last daunting hurdle to overcome in Barcelona before they can celebrate a last 16 berth.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# More magic by Messi seals Barca victory at PSV

Barca have 13 points from their five matches and an unassailable lead at the top



Barcelona's Argentine forward Lionel Messi celebrates after scoring during the UEFA Champions League football match between PSV Eindhoven and FC Barcelona at Philips stadium in Eindhoven on Wednesday.

Reuters  
Eindhoven

Lionel Messi scored an excellent individual goal and laid on another as Barcelona beat PSV Eindhoven 2-1 to secure top spot in Group B of the Champions League on Wednesday. Messi provided an assist for defender Gerard Pique to score the second for the Spanish side, who have 13 points from their five matches and an unassailable

lead at the top of the pool. PSV will finish bottom. Captain Luuk de Jong scored a late consolation for the home side as they matched Barcelona for much of the contest at the Philips Stadion, striking the woodwork three times in the first half alone and missing a number of other chances. In a bright start, PSV forward Gaston Pereiro latched onto a poor pass from Ivan Rakitic but his low drive came back off the post, and minutes later he shot over the crossbar from five yards. PSV had some good fortune, too,

though, as Barca had two efforts cleared off the line within the space of a minute, with Arturo Vidal the unlucky player on both occasions. His hooked effort from 12 yards was cleared by Pablo Rosario before Angelino blocked the Chilean's goal-bound header from the resulting corner. It was Barcelona thanking their lucky stars just before halftime, though, when De Jong's header from a free-kick came off the crossbar and the follow-up from close-range by Denzel Dumfries struck

the post. The visitors took the lead just past the hour mark, thanks to a typical piece of Messi magic as he picked up the ball on the edge of the box and, with four defenders around him, managed to drive forward and provide a thunderous finish. It was 2-0 with 20 minutes remaining when the Argentine's free kick was guided into the PSV net by an unmarked Pique. De Jong set up a frenetic finish with his headed goal but Barcelona were able to hold on under heavy home pressure.

PROGRESS

## Dortmund into last 16 after goalless draw with Brugge

AFP  
Dortmund

Borussia Dortmund eased into the last 16 of the Champions League with a goalless draw at home to Brugge on Wednesday, but Axel Witsel suffered a knee injury for the Bundesliga leaders. After leaders Atletico Madrid had earlier secured their last 16 passage from Group A with a 2-0 win against Thierry Henry's Monaco, second-placed Dortmund got the point they needed to also reach the knock-out stages. However, the draw may have come at a price as Dortmund's Belgium midfielder Witsel limped off with a knee injury in the dying stages. Brugge can not now qualify and will go into the knock-out stages of the Europa League with a guaranteed third place. Dortmund can still win the

group, if they beat Monaco away in a fortnight and Atletico fail to beat Brugge in Madrid in the final round of matches. "We had two big first-half chances and then things got more and more difficult - we just couldn't find the gaps," said Dortmund sports director Michael Zorc. "But qualifying for the last 16 was the priority." Dortmund dominated at Signal Iduna Park, enjoying 75% possession and making nearly three times as many passes as the Belgians, but there were precious few clear chances for either side. Captain Marco Reus squandering Dortmund's best first-half chance when he fired millimetres wide with half an hour played, then Raphael Guerreiro had a shot snuffed out. Dortmund's fleet-footed attack combined at the start of the second-half and repeatedly came within a whisker of scoring.

SPOTLIGHT

## Henry happy to take inspiration from Simeone



Reuters  
Madrid

Fledgling coach Thierry Henry admitted he could learn a lot from Atletico Madrid's seasoned manager Diego Simeone as he marvelled at the Argentine's boundless energy during his AS Monaco side's 2-0 defeat to the Spaniards on Wednesday. Goals from Koke and Antoine Griezmann clinched Atletico's place in the last 16 of the Champions League and ensured struggling Monaco will finish bottom of Group A, ending their slim hopes of qualifying for the Europa League.

middle. That intensity which he brings to the team, which he used to have as a player, is incredible." While Henry now can focus on trying to steer struggling Monaco, who are second-bottom of Ligue 1, to safety, Simeone is setting his sights on maintaining Atletico's push for the La Liga title and plotting a possible path to the Champions League final, which will be held at their shiny Wanda Metropolitan stadium next June. And after seeing Simeone and his tireless team up close, Henry believes Atletico are more than capable of winning Europe's elite competition for the first time after losing two finals in agonising circumstances to Real Madrid in 2014 and 2016. "He is so passionate about football, he seems like he is still a player. For me Simeone is a reference point for all coaches," Henry added. "Why couldn't they win it? They were a second from winning it (in 2014) and they lost another final. With the team and the coach I saw today I say they certainly can. The final is at their place, too. "Of course, you have to think about Juventus, Barcelona or Real Madrid. There are many teams that could win the Champions League, and Atletico are one of them."

BUNDESLIGA

## Internal strife hurts Bayern as rivals capitalise

Reuters  
Berlin

Bayern Munich's slump in form has opened up a Pandora's box at the German champions this season, with players turning against coach Niko Kovac, a team mole leaking stories to the media and club bosses struggling to contain the escalating crisis. The Bavarians, who have won the last six Bundesliga titles, have slipped to fifth in the standings this season after failing to win any of their last three league matches. Their once dominant attacking style has been replaced with a timid, inaccurate passing game that appears to be regularly accompanied by poorly thought out tactics. Leaders and usual rivals Borussia Dortmund have already forged nine points ahead of them with Bayern's hopes of securing a seventh consecutive

title fading with each passing week. Kovac, who took over this season, knows their 5-1 win over Benfica in the Champions League on Tuesday that carried them through to the knockout stage, was merely a temporary reprieve and a slip-up at Werder Bremen would likely cost him his job. His team twice squandered a two-goal lead at home against promoted Fortuna Dueseldorf last week, the 3-3 draw prompting a reported meeting between club president Uli Hoeneß and several players seen as not backing their manager. Kovac's predecessor Jupp Heynckes spoke of players acting like "divas" adding extra pressure to an already difficult task. "The talk was about four who are allegedly against me," Kovac told reporters after the Benfica win. "But there was no talk at all about those who are on my side. It is clear there are many of them in the team." Kovac has blamed a lack of focus in games against sides considered as weak domestic opponents for the

growing gap to Dortmund in the standings. "It sounds strange but when we play in the Champions League or the Bundesliga against the big teams, then I can see that we are capable," the Croat said. "But against the seemingly smaller teams, we think maybe we can do it with half the strength. These are the points we are missing now." The problem, however, is more than just one confined to the pitch, with sports director Hasan Salihamidzic vowing to expose the mole, whose details of an uneasy dressing room atmosphere has provided compelling headlines but angered club bosses. "There are some people who are well-connected with some others," Salihamidzic said when asked about the informant. "But we will deal with that. You can imagine what it would mean if I caught him." Dortmund, who also advanced to the Champions League knockout stage with a 0-0 draw against Club Brugge on Wednesday, will hope to continue their strong start at home to Freiburg on Saturday.

BOTTOMLINE

## Parma on course for Europe three years after playing in fourth tier

Reuters  
Milan

Only three years after being declared bankrupt and demoted to the fourth tier of Italian football, a re-born Parma are on course to return to the European stage where they excelled in the 1990s. Having risen from the ashes with three successive promotions, Parma - twice winners of the old UEFA Cup and once winners of the Cup Winners Cup - were expected to face a battle for survival this season on their return to Serie A.

Instead, Roberto D'Aversa's team have climbed to sixth despite having spent only 13mn euros (\$14.77mn) in the transfer market. On Sunday, they visit AC Milan, the team immediately above them, and a win at San Siro - where they have already beaten Milan's neighbours Inter this season - will take them up to fifth. So far, it has been a classic case of a team making the most of limited means. Unable to afford marquee signings, Parma focused on bringing in youngsters with promise or veterans who they felt still had something to give. Former AS Roma and Arsenal forward Gervinho was the best known name,

the 31-year-old returning to Serie A on a free transfer after two years in China. The Ivorian has scored five goals in nine games including a magnificent solo effort against Cagliari, but his striking partner Roberto Inglese, a 27-year-old journeyman on loan from Napoli, has been arguably an even more astute signing. "Gervinho and Inglese are two top players, I'm very lucky to have them available: the more they know each other, the more they produce," said D'Aversa. Portugal defender Bruno Alves is another familiar name, the 37-year-old making Parma the latest stop in a career

that has already taken him to Greece, Turkey, Russia and Scotland. Handed the captaincy, he has been ever-present and is partnered at the centre of the defence by 19-year-old Alessandro Bastoni, on loan from Inter Milan. Other signings have included winger Jonathan Biabiany, who previously played for the club before their bankruptcy, as did Massimo Gobbi, who has returned at the age of 38. Both are examples of what Italian football calls "reheated soup". There has certainly been no room for sentiment, with only three survivors from last season's Serie B campaign

keeping regular places in the side. Parma's last Serie A season in 2014-15 ended in ignominy as the club's ownership twice changed hands. Players had to pay for their own laundry and fixtures were called off because the club could not afford to provide security. They were allowed to enter the fourth tier of the Italian league in 2015-16 after a group of local businessmen, under the name Nuovo Inizio, came forward to re-found the club. They won promotion that year and two more promotions in the subsequent two seasons under D'Aversa to return to the top flight. Last year, Chinese investors Desports, led by businessman Jiang

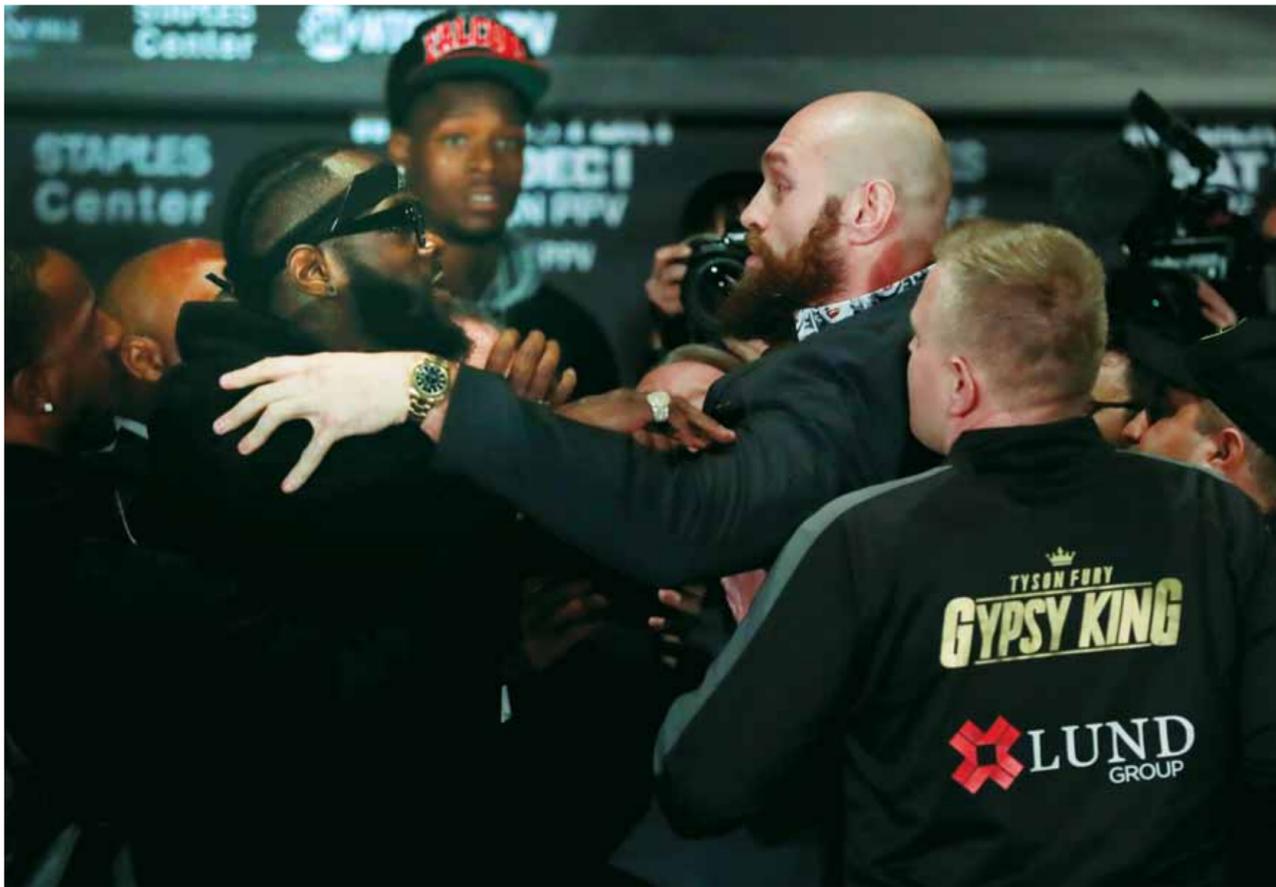
Lizhang, bought a 60% stake in the club, however Nuovo Inizio took back by control by regaining a majority stake last month. Parma have scored only 14 goals in their 13 games but D'Aversa has shrugged off suggestions that they play "Catenaccio" style football, emphasising defence. "I don't engage in Catenaccio tactics or anything. I'd say I'm effective," he said. "But I don't take offence - as long as this run continues, I'm happy with that label." He added: "Each coach must make the most of what he has - so what interests me is to try to get results."



## BOXING

# Sparks fly as Fury and Wilder face off ahead of title fight

'I'm looking to drop him like a tree... And he's going to get the best Tyson Fury'



Tyson Fury (right) squares up with Deontay Wilder during the press conference ahead of their WBC heavyweight title fight in Los Angeles on Wednesday. (Reuters)

DPA  
Los Angeles

**T**yson Fury has vowed to become the first man to knock out World Boxing Council (WBC) heavyweight champion Deontay Wilder when they meet in the ring at the Staples Center in Los Angeles tomorrow.

The 30-year-old Briton is unbeaten in 27 fights and has 19 knockout victories but his last stoppage win came against Joey Abell in 2014.

Wilder has claimed 39 knockouts in 40 fights but was almost knocked out in his last fight against 39-year-old Cuban Luis Ortiz in March, when he climbed

off the canvas in the seventh round to claim a 10th round victory.

Fury, who outboxed Wladimir Klitschko to become a four-belt heavyweight world champion in 2015, is aiming for a more thrilling and spectacular finish to his second championship contest.

"I'm going to box his face off and then I'm going to knock him out," Fury said.

"I'm looking to drop him like a tree. He will be known as the guy who got knocked out by Tyson Fury after this fight. And he's going to get the best Tyson Fury there's ever been.

"You're going to see a different Wilder. He knows he's going to lose but if he wants a scrap, let's go to war, no problem. I was born

to fight. This is normal to me."

The heavyweight giants clashed at their final press conference on Wednesday, leading Fury to believe the reigning WBC title-holder is nervous.

However, Wilder claims he sensed a weakness in Fury when they came face to face.

"I've beat every man by knockout. You've seen it every fight. And I can see the fear in him," Wilder said.

"The thing about fear is you can sense it and you can smell it. I know what fear looks like. I can identify it.

"He's scared and he should be. I'm very dangerous. The most dangerous in the sport. I've never doubted myself or not done what I've said I was going

to do."

Fury disappeared for three years after beating Klitschko into a dark world of drug abuse, suicidal depression and excessive weight gain.

He was stripped of his titles as punishment for his actions.

However, the unbeaten former champion says he will not go back down that road, even though anything less than an emphatic triumph over Wilder will not satisfy him.

"What I've been through and the state I got myself in, it's a victory in itself just to be here," said Fury.

"Losing is not an option for me because I need to keep winning to inspire people out of their struggles.

"But if I don't beat Deontay Wilder, I obviously ain't no good. I think I can beat Wilder comfortably. If I win against Wilder in a close fight, I would class that as a loss."

Wilder has a relaxed attitude towards a possibility of losing because he backs himself to come back like some of the former greats.

"I'm not afraid to lose my record or my reputation," Wilder said. "I don't plan for the idea to stay undefeated because I know I can lose and come back. Muhammad Ali was the greatest of all time and he lost five times.

"Everyone gets tired of a winner eventually. Everyone wants to see me lose but they will be waiting a long time!"

## BOTTOMLINE

## 'Exhausted' Woods to adjust schedule after hectic season

Reuters  
Toronto

**T**iger Woods plans to modify his tournament schedule next year after admitting being exhausted during a busy close to his comeback season following injury.

The 14-times major winner enjoyed a strong finish on his return to golf following spinal-fusion surgery in 2017, playing in 18 PGA Tour events — the most he has been involved in since 2012.

But he admitted it was a mistake to take on such a heavy schedule, participating in seven events in the final nine weeks.

"I was not physically prepared to play that much golf at the end of the year," Woods said ahead of this week's Hero World Challenge in the Bahamas, an event he hosts.

"It was just hard for me to maintain my strength and my weight through all that. I tend to lose a lot of weight when I play. I was exhausted by the time I got to the Ryder Cup. I was worn out mentally, physically, emotionally."

Woods, who turns 43 on Dec. 30, is no longer able to train like he did in his prime, and the hectic end to the season ultimately took its toll.

Still, Woods was able to produce good enough form to triumph at the season-ending Tour Championship and cap a stretch in which he posted five top-10 finishes over eight tournaments.

"I played all my good tournaments when I had time off and I felt rested," said the former world number one.

"If I didn't feel rested, I didn't play well. Maybe that's just being a little bit older, but I think it's important, and playing seven of the last nine last (season) was

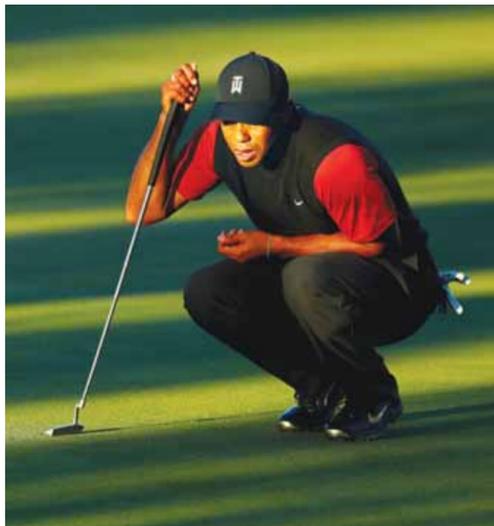
too much. I have to make sure that doesn't happen again."

Woods, whose tally of 14 major championships is second only to the 18 held by Jack Nicklaus, may play fewer tournaments next season but he is hopeful that will allow him to be nothing short of his best whenever he plays.

"Being physically in better shape going into next season is very important in being able to handle the condensed schedule and all the big events we play every month," said Woods.

"There's literally a big event every single month, so physically I've got to be in better shape than I was last year."

The Hero World Challenge, which begins on Thursday and benefits Woods' foundation, features an elite field of 18 top-ranked golfers, including four of the top five players in the world, at the Albany course on the island of New Providence.



## SPOTLIGHT

## Fowler hoping major success begins at 30



AFP  
Nassau, Bahamas

**D**efending Hero World Challenge champion Rickie Fowler is hoping that hitting 30 will signal an overdue era off success at golf's highest level.

The American, who turns 30 on December 13, has three runner-up finishes and five other top-fives in his 36 major championship appearances since his debut at the 2008 US Open.

While he's not about to panic, Fowler would dearly like to see his name crossed off the "best players never to win a major" list.

"I've always heard that 30s were your prime, so we're just getting into it," he said Wednesday as he prepared to defend his title in the elite 18-player unofficial event on the Albany course, where Fowler stormed to victory last year with a blistering final-round 61.

The win was Fowler's eighth since turning professional in 2009. It was his last trip to the winner's circle, but Fowler remains confident he'll be hoisting more trophies.

"There's no urgency, and I don't see any kind of rush or anything like that," said Fowler, whose two runner-up finishes in 2018 included a second place at the Masters.

"I look at the next five to 10 years as the time to take advantage of things and make sure that we're not sitting back and just relaxing, go out and take care of what we want to take care of and

see what can happen.

"I would say the 40s is a little bit more of where we'd look at prime would be kind of in the rear-view mirror.

"So, I'm looking forward to these next five to 10 years of taking advantage of them and making them count."

Fowler arrives in the Bahamas off of a tie for fourth place in the Shriners Hospitals for Children and a share of 16th at the Mayakoba Classic earlier this month.

Unlike those events, this week's tournament is not part of the official US PGA Tour 2018-19 season. But the elite field, world rankings points on offer and host Tiger Woods give the event plenty of prestige.

Last year when Woods presented the trophy to Fowler the 14-time major champion's return to competition was still shrouded in uncertainty.

Although Woods has proven himself able to win again, Fowler said he doesn't think Woods is as far ahead of the pack as he once was.

"He's someone that we want to go beat up on, he wants to beat up on us," Fowler said. "I feel like it's a lot more of a level playing field now."

"You look at the kind of late the '90s, early 2000s when he was 30% win percentage and all that, he stepped on the tee and it was a different presence. He still carries that presence. He's still won 14 majors, 80 wins, so it's got to count for something.

"But no, we're not scared to go toe to toe and go have some fun out there with him."

John Senden, twice a winner on the US PGA Tour, was left fuming with officials at the ninth when his driver's shaft snapped mid-swing at the tee and pinched his hand.

Although the big-hitting Australian had not made contact with the ball, it was ruled a stroke.

Lacking another driver in his bag, the 47-year-old removed the tee and hit his second shot with an iron before going on to bogey the hole.

Senden finished with an even-par 72, one better than playing partner Geoff Ogilvy, the 2006 US Open winner.

Defending champion Cameron Smith, who won last year's tournament in a playoff, opened with a 70 to be four off the pace on two-under, in a huge group that included Briton Andrew Johnston.

"I just need to stay really fo-

## GOLF

## McLeod, Jager share lead at Australian PGA Championship

Reuters  
Sydney

**J**ake McLeod continued his strong home season with a six-under-par 66 to take a share of the lead alongside compatriot Matt Jager after the first round of the Australian PGA Championship on the Gold Coast yesterday.

Queenslander McLeod, who claimed his maiden professional title at the New South Wales Open earlier this month, rolled in six birdies in a bogey-free round to upstage a slew of bigger names at the European Tour co-sanctioned event.

He and Western Australian Jager ended the day one stroke ahead of South Korea's Eom Jaewoong and Dimitrios Papadatos, who came second at the Australian Open two weeks ago, at the Royal Pines Resort.

Australian number two Marc Leishman was a stroke further adrift on four-under in a group five players that also featured Spain's Adrian Otaegui.

McLeod finished third at the Australian Open at The Lakes course in Sydney and the 24-year-old credited his recent good form to the help of a new psychologist.

"I just need to stay really fo-

cused on the shot and have a bit of a laugh out there and just stay relaxed," said McLeod, who got off to a flying start with four birdies in six holes after teeing off from the 10th.

Jager also started brightly in brilliant sunshine on the 10th, grabbing eagles at the par-five 12th and 15th holes to make the turn at four-under before adding three birdies and a lone bogey to close out his round.

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NBA

# Westbrook fuels Thunder, Harden fires but Rockets fall

'We haven't really been playing well on the road this year. So it's good to get a win'

AFP  
Los Angeles

Oklahoma City Thunder guard Russell Westbrook celebrated another triple-double milestone and an NBA victory Wednesday, while Houston star James Harden's first triple-double of the season spelled only frustration in a loss to the Dallas Mavericks.

Westbrook's 23 points, 19 rebounds and 15 assists propelled the Thunder to a 100-83 victory over the Cleveland Cavaliers.

With the 107th triple-double of his career Westbrook tied for third on the all-time list with Jason Kidd, the former Dallas Mavericks star who needed 1,247 games to reach 107 while Westbrook reached the mark in just 760 games.

Westbrook, who seized the single-season record for triple-doubles from Oscar Robertson with 42 in the 2016-17 campaign, remains a long way from Robertson's record career total of 181.

Former Los Angeles Lakers great Magic Johnson is second on the list with 138.

Westbrook said he continues to relish every opportunity to chase the greats who came before him, saying the triple-doubles – the achievement of double-digit totals in three key statistical categories – are something to celebrate "as long as we win."

For Harden, a superb all-around effort of 25 points, 17 assists and 11 rebounds – along with six steals – wasn't enough in a 128-108 home loss to the Dallas Mavericks.

Dallas took full advantage of the injury absence of Houston point guard Chris Paul, leading by as many as 21 in the third quarter before the Rockets cut the deficit to five late in the period.

Dallas, who had 20 points each from rookie Luka Doncic and reserve Devin Harris, opened the fourth quarter on a 10-2 scoring run to regain full control.

The Mavericks notched just their second road win of the season while the Rockets, who led the league with 65 victories last season, endured a fourth straight defeat.

"It's really good," said Harris. "We haven't really had too much success against this team in the last couple of years. We haven't really been playing well on the road this year. So it's good to get a win and play the way we did tonight."

The Los Angeles Clippers, the surprising Western Conference leaders, survived 21 turnovers to beat the Phoenix Suns 115-99.

## ANTETOKOUNMPO LEADS BUCKS

The Bucks won a close one in Milwaukee, where Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 36 points with 11 rebounds and eight assists and Khris Middleton drained a three-



Oklahoma City Thunder guard Russell Westbrook reacts after scoring against the Cleveland Cavaliers during the fourth quarter at Chesapeake Energy Arena. **PICTURE:** USA TODAY Sports

pointer with 5.2 seconds remaining to secure the hosts' 116-113 victory.

The Bulls were unable to corral two loose balls just prior to Middleton's shot, and Justin Holiday missed a potential game-tying three-pointer just before the buzzer.

The Portland Trail Blazers edged the Orlando Magic 115-112, aided by a franchise record and career-best 10 three-pointers from Damian Lillard.

It was far from close in Minneapolis where the Minnesota Timberwolves led by as many as 48 points on the way to a 128-89 rout of the San Antonio Spurs.

The Timberwolves improved to 11-11, reaching .500 for the first time since October 31.

Robert Covington led the Timberwolves with 21 points. Karl-Anthony Towns and Derrick Rose added 16 apiece for Min-

RESULTS		
LA Clippers	115-99	Phoenix
Utah	101-91	Brooklyn
Portland	115-112	Orlando
Dallas	128-108	Houston
Milwaukee	116-113	Chicago
Minnesota	128-89	San Antonio
New Orleans	125-104	Washington
Oklahoma City	100-83	Cleveland
Charlotte	108-94	Atlanta
Philadelphia	117-91	New York

nesota, who out-scored the Spurs 29-9 in the second quarter and never looked back.

In more bad news for San Antonio,

coach Gregg Popovich said the foot injury that has sidelined veteran Pau Gasol for 12 games has been diagnosed as a stress fracture.

There's no timetable for the 38-year-old Spaniard's return.

The Philadelphia 76ers never trailed in a 117-91 victory over the New York Knicks. Joel Embiid notched his league-leading 21st double-double of the season with 26 points and 14 rebounds as the Sixers notched their sixth victory in seven games and improved to 11-1 at home.

In contrast, the Utah Jazz rallied from a double-digit third-quarter deficit to beat the Brooklyn Nets 101-91.

Donovan Mitchell scored 10 points in a 15-4 Utah scoring run to end the game, Rudy Gobert contributing the other five points in the run as the Jazz handed the Nets a fourth straight defeat.

NHL

# Avs top Penguins despite Crosby's natural hat trick

AFP  
Denver

Gabriel Landeskog broke a tie with a goal at 10:05 of the third period, and the Colorado Avalanche recovered from blowing a three-goal lead to beat the Pittsburgh Penguins 6-3 in Denver on Wednesday night.

Nathan MacKinnon had a goal and three assists for his sixth straight multi-point game, and Mikko Rantanen had two assists to extend his NHL-high point total to 42. MacKinnon ranks second in the NHL with 41 points. Samuel Girard, Erik Johnson, Colin Wilson and Carl Soderberg scored goals for Colorado, which has won six in a row and eight of nine.

Pittsburgh captain Sidney Crosby put on a show with his first hat trick of the season – a natural hat trick tallied in a span of just 5:35 – but it wasn't enough. He has 11 hat tricks in his career.

Crosby's third goal came 4:43 into the third to wipe away Colorado's lead, but Landeskog got the winner when his shot went off the stick of defenseman Juuso Riikola and past goalie Tristan Jarry midway through the third period.

Jarry stopped 20 shots in his second start of the season.

The Penguins (10-9-5) pressed for the equalizer after that, but goaltender Philipp Grubauer made big saves down the stretch to preserve the win. Pittsburgh pulled Jarry for an extra skater with 2:14 left, but MacKinnon scored an empty-net goal with 29 seconds left, and Soderberg tacked on another 13 seconds later with Jarry back in the net. Grubauer finished with 22 saves. Girard got the Avalanche on the board with his second goal of the season midway through the first period. Johnson made it 2-0 in the second period when he scored his second goal at 5:13, which held up after Pittsburgh challenged for goaltender interference.

Wilson put the Avalanche up by three just 2:39 after Johnson's goal when MacKinnon drew the defense to him and slid a pass across to him. It was Wilson's seventh goal.

Crosby then took over late in the second period when he scored twice in a span of 42 seconds. He got the first one when he knocked in the rebound of his breakout attempt, and then made it 3-2 with his 12th goal just five seconds into a power play at 19:50.

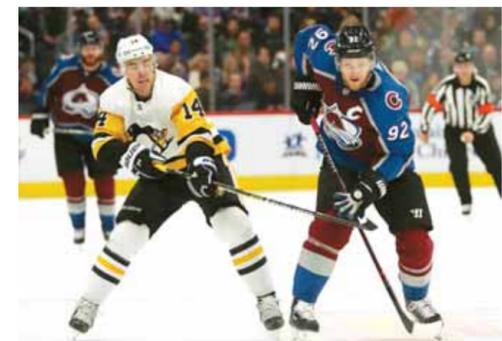
The Avalanche played their second consecutive game without Tyson Barrie, the team's top-scoring defenseman who is out due to a lower-body injury.

RESULTS		
Detroit	4-3	St. Louis
Anaheim	3-2	Florida
Toronto	5-3	San Jose
Colorado	6-3	Pittsburgh

## RITCHIE'S LATE GOAL LIFTS DUCKS OVER PANTHERS

Nick Ritchie scored two goals – including the game-winner with 1:28 left in the third period – as the Anaheim Ducks defeated the host Florida Panthers 3-2 on Wednesday night. Ritchie has four goals this season, doubling his production in one night.

John Gibson made 42 saves to earn the win for Anaheim while Florida goalie James Reimer took the loss, making 22 saves. Josh Manson also scored for Anaheim. Florida received goals from Aaron Ekblad and Evgenii Dadonov. It was the fifth goal this season for Ekblad, passing Keith Yandle for the top spot among Panthers defensemen. For Dadonov, it was his 10th goal, second best on the team. The Panthers, counting Dadonov's goal, have scored on the power play in 13 of their past 14 games. The game was a matchup between two teams with shared history as the Panthers and Ducks entered the NHL as expansion teams in 1993.



Colorado Avalanche's Gabriel Landeskog (right) fights for control of the puck against Tanner Pearson of the Pittsburgh Penguins in the second period in Denver. (Getty Images/AFP)

NFL

# Panthers attempt to right ship at Buccaneers

Reuters  
Los Angeles

The Carolina Panthers appear in a freefall. They're counting on getting it together by visiting the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

A three-game losing streak has pushed the Panthers out of the playoff picture and with a flurry of desperation Carolina enters Sunday afternoon's game at Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Fla.

"We still have five games left to go," Panthers coach Ron Rivera said. "We control it. Go out and play. You have to play to win."

The Panthers (6-5), who have four games remaining against NFC South rivals, don't want to look at it as a lost cause. They've dropped their last two games by a total of four points.

The latest snags have come with a limping secondary giving up crucial third- and fourth-down plays and shortcomings with red-zone offense.

"We've got guys who have to step up and make plays," Rivera said.

In the first meeting with Tampa Bay, the Panthers delivered. The 42-28 victory marks the most points of the season for Carolina.

But the Panthers are 1-5 on road this season, with a fourth-quarter

comeback at Philadelphia the lone success away from home.

A playoff berth is within reach, but quarterback Cam Newton said there's no sense in looking at the big picture.

"We need one win. Let's start with one win," he said. "We have a lot of possibilities and a lot of potential, but I've said it before, potential has never (meant anything)."

The Buccaneers (4-7) are aiming for back-to-back victories for the first time since the first two games of the season. "In the NFL, part of winning is not losing, not beating yourself," Buccaneers coach Dirk Koetter said. "All we can do is hang in there."

But Koetter doesn't put much stock in results without seeing a trend despite last week's 27-9 whipping of the visiting San Francisco 49ers.

"It's a week to week league," he said. "We had a good week. We played well in all phases. Carolina this week brings a whole set of challenges."

Three of the Buccaneers' victories have come at home.

Jameis Winston is in line for his fifth start of the season as Tampa Bay's quarterback. It will be his second start in a row, showing improvement since earlier this season.

"He made decisive decisions," Koetter said. "He didn't hold it too long and he didn't wait for plays to develop that might happen as time

went on. He took the sure thing when it was there."

The Panthers faced quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick in the first meeting.

With 79 career touchdown passes, Winston is one shy of Josh Freeman's franchise record.

"It has been a difficult road and he sees what that looks like," Koetter said. "If he can play like that, he can be one of the best."

The Buccaneers have reached the four-sack mark in the past two games, showing an ability to be a disruptive defense.

The Panthers placed receiver Damiere Byrd on injured reserve with an arm injury. In a move that shows the concern about the defensive backfield, Byrd was replaced on the roster by cornerback Lorenzo Doss. Carolina will have to find ways to replace Byrd's role as a returner on special teams.

The Panthers have relied on second-year running back Christian McCaffrey, who set a franchise record with 237 yards from scrimmage in last week's Seattle game. He gained 125 rushing yards and 112 receiving yards. "He's a smart player, exceptional quickness and vision and cutting," Koetter said. "As a halfback you're not going to find many route runners like that. He's a good route runner, that's for sure."



Carolina Panthers coach Ron Rivera.

## HOCKEY WORLD CUP

## Argentina clinch 4-3 thriller against Spain

IANS  
Bhubaneswar

Races from Gonzalo Peillat and Agustín Mazzilli guided Argentina to a narrow 4-3 win against Spain in their campaign opener of the Hockey World Cup 2018 at the Kalinga stadium yesterday.

In a see-saw Pool A contest, Enrique Gonzalez handed Spain an early 1-0 lead in the 3rd minute of the game before Mazzilli deflected a right wing cross perfectly to the net in the next minute to level the score.

Spain took a 2-1 lead after Josep Romeu found the back of the net in the 14th minute however, within 45 seconds of conceding the second goal, Argentina replied back as Mazzilli struck again, leveling the contest at 2-2. Soon, the South American nation extended the lead to 3-2 as drag-flicker Gonzalo Peillat converted a corner in the 15th minute.

However, Vincenc Ruiz brought Spain back into the contest after a field goal in the 35th minute as the scorecard was once

again tied at 3-3.

In the 49th minute, Peillat scored again for Argentina after placing a shot between two defenders which the Spanish goalkeeper Fred Soye failed to save.

Both the sides then failed to score in the last 10 minutes of the game and Argentina clinched the nail-biting contest 4-3.

**NEW ZEALAND DEFEAT FRANCE 2-1** New Zealand pipped France 2-1 in its opening game of the Hockey World Cup 2018 at the Kalinga stadium yesterday.

After a goalless first quarter, Kane Russell scored for New Zealand in the 17th minute and as France failed to convert opportunities in the later part of the second quarter, the Kiwis enjoyed a 1-0 lead at half-time.

Later, a long pass from midfield was well controlled by Stephen Jenness, who made no mistake in finding the back of the net, making the scoreline read 2-0 in New Zealand's favour with just four minutes of play left. It seemed France wouldn't be able to open its account but Victor Charlet converted a penalty corner in the 59th minute to make the score 2-1.



Argentina players celebrate a goal during their group stage match against Spain at the 2018 Hockey World Cup in Bhubaneswar yesterday. (AFP)

## RUGBY

## Argentina coach pushes back against scrum rule change

'More than to me in particular, (the rule) is detrimental to all Argentine rugby'



A general view of a scrum during Argentina-Scotland match at Murrayfield, Edinburgh, on November 24, 2018. (Reuters)

Reuters  
London

Pumas coach Mario Ledesma says a rule introduced in Argentine rugby two years ago following a spate of serious injuries has emasculated their once-feared scrums and potentially weakened their World Cup challenge.

When San Isidro Club prop Jeronimo Bello was left severely disabled from a collapsed scrum in a Buenos Aires first division match in September 2016, the fourth serious injury in a year, the governing body of Argentine Rugby (UAR) took action.

The UAR ruled that teams in Argentine domestic competitions would be penalised for pushing more than one and a half metres, except at five-metre scrums.

The rule change affected all top-flight domestic competitions, which are amateur in Argentina, from which the Pumas

and the professional Jaguares Super Rugby franchise recruit players.

Ledesma, who took charge of Argentina before the southern hemisphere's mid-year Rugby Championship, told Reuters that the Pumas' scrummaging culture had been severely impacted and it would take two years of hard work to recover the full power of Argentina's scrum.

The Pumas, however, have less than a year until the 2019 World Cup in Japan where Argentina share a pool with England, France, Tonga and the United States.

"More than to me in particular, (the rule) is detrimental to all Argentine rugby," said Ledesma, who will use his team's fourth European tour match against the Barbarians at Twickenham tomorrow to give his young forwards more experience against top opposition.

Ledesma said he understood why the measure was taken due to the injuries that had occurred, although he feels that

they had not suffered more than average in Argentina.

"I'd say that in Australia there are quite a few more (serious injuries) than in Argentina," added Ledesma, who spent two years working as an assistant to Wallabies coach Michael Cheika.

"Not only does it weaken Argentine scrummaging culture, which is part of our DNA, but it's also part of a forward's soul," Ledesma said the rule change had left Argentina's emerging talents unprepared for the demands of top-level rugby.

"Today scrums in Argentina last five or six seconds which is why the kids who come to us from their clubs are surprised by the hardness of a scrum and if it lasts more than 10 seconds it discomfords them in a manner of speaking," he said.

"You have to be able to enjoy that kind of wrestling and (understand) the bearing it has on other areas of the game," said the 45-year-old former hooker, a member of Argentina's most

successful World Cup side that won the bronze medal in France in 2007.

"The cohesion you achieve in a team with a solid scrum and the psychological boost (you get) from that is immeasurable."

## DEFENSIVE FLAWS

Argentina won two out of six tests in the Rugby Championship and have suffered three defeats in three tour matches in November.

Ledesma said that results had depended on how well the forwards had peeled away from rucks into defensive positions, with the Pumas having on occasions left themselves thin defensively on one flank or the other. He singled out victories over South Africa and Australia in the Rugby Championship and last Saturday's 14-9 loss to Scotland, which Argentina could have won with better place kicking from the normally reliable Nicolas Sanchez.

"If we want to get past the Pool round at the World Cup we

definitely have to have a good defence and that's what we're working on," he said.

"With the work we've started now with these kids who are

19, 20 years old, it's going to take two to three years to reach a very good standard. I'm sure we'll get there, they have the physical and mental strength for us to work on," Ledesma said. Argentina had a very good World Cup in England in 2015 under Ledesma's predecessor Daniel Hourcade, reaching the semi-finals for the second time.

To help them in Japan, the UAR has relaxed their ban on calling up foreign-based players, allowing Ledesma to pick experienced props like Saracens' Juan Figallo and Ramiro Herrera of Stade Francais.

"A World Cup year is different," said Ledesma.

"In the meantime, it's been more important to go developing our kids by putting them up against the hardness of northern hemisphere scrums."

## FOCUS

## Rugby Australia hang up on White after Wallabies coach bid

AFP  
Sydney

Jake White has offered to replace under-siege Michael Cheika as Wallabies coach and was due to have a phone hook-up with Rugby Australia yesterday, but it was cancelled after news of the call was leaked.

The South African, who steered the Springboks to the 2007 World Cup title, approached the governing body after Australia won just four of their 13 Tests this year. Rugby Australia chief executive Raelene Castle has repeatedly said Cheika continues to have her backing to take the team to the World Cup in Japan next year, which is when his contract runs out.

But mounting pressure came to a head after their 37-18 defeat by England last weekend, with calls intensifying for a change of guard. It followed a tryless loss to Wales and an uninspiring win over Italy.

The phone call was to assess what White - a former ACT Brumbies coach - had to offer as a possible alternative, but it was hastily called off after being leaked to the media.

"Jake White approached Rugby Australia and asked to have a conversion," a RA spokesman told AFP. "Rugby Australia has decided not to proceed with the call."

White has previously expressed a desire to coach Australia after being overlooked for the job in favour of Ewen McKenzie in 2013.

The Rugby Australia board is due to meet on December 10 for a regular end-of-season review where the future of Cheika, who



is currently in Europe, and his coaching team are set to be discussed.

Castle said she understood there was intense interest after "a challenging year".

"We acknowledge and understand the frustrations of Wallabies fans over recent results and we are completing a thorough review ahead of an important year for the team which culminates with the rugby World Cup in Japan," she said in a statement, without mentioning White.

"The outcomes of the full review will be presented at the December meeting of the Rugby Australia board with Wallabies head coach Michael Cheika in attendance."

Several former Wallabies have called for change in the Test set-up after their worst year since 1995, including fullback Matt Burke who said the team was no longer well-regarded by their rivals.

"I reckon that respect factor's gone. We're down at (sixth) in the world, we started at No.3 at the start of the year," he said.

## Wales flanker Jenkins to undergo surgery

Wales flanker Ellis Jenkins will have surgery after suffering a serious knee injury in last Saturday's 20-11 win over South Africa, his club Cardiff Blues said yesterday.

"Further specialist reviews are needed to establish an accurate prognosis following surgery," the club added.

The player told the BBC he was still hoping to be part of next September's World Cup. "That is still my goal at the moment unless someone tells me otherwise," he said.

Jenkins was injured when he was cleared out of a ruck and his leg got stuck.

He received treatment on the pitch for several minutes after the final whistle with players from both sides going over to check on him. Wales coach Warren Gatland said at the time that it looked like an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) tear.

"It would be nice if the game had finished thirty seconds earlier," Jenkins, a late inclusion in the side after Dan Lydiate suffered an elbow injury, told Wales Online.

## ENGLAND WINGER NOWELL FACES TWO MONTHS OUT WITH HAMSTRING INJURY

Exeter Chiefs winger Jack Nowell has been ruled out for up to eight weeks with a hamstring injury but could return in time for England's Six Nations campaign early next year, the Premiership team has said.

Nowell featured in England's November internationals against South Africa, New Zealand and Japan but the 25-year-old missed the win over Australia after sustaining the injury in training.

"Jack's got a pretty significant hamstring tear. It's one of those injuries which is likely to be around the eight-week mark, give or take a week depending on how his rehab goes," Exeter rugby director Rob Baxter told the club website <https://www.exeterchiefs.co.uk/news/nowell-out-for-eight-weeks>.

"He should be back in time to fight for a place in the Six Nations," Baxter added.

England made a poor defence of their Six Nations title this year when they could only finish fifth after a string of poor displays and begin next year's campaign against Ireland in Dublin on February 2.

FOCUS

# Bangladesh eye rare Test series win

Hosts beat WI by 64 runs in the first Test to take a 1-0 lead in the two-match series



Bangladesh's Tajjul Islam (left) celebrates with captain Shakib Al Hasan (centre) and another teammate after the dismissal of West Indies' Devendra Bishoo on the third day of the first Test at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong on Saturday. (AFP)

AFP  
Dhaka

Bangladesh will be looking for a rare Test series win when they take on the West Indies in the second and final Test at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Dhaka today. The home side lead the two-match series 1-0 thanks to their 64-run win the first Test in Chittagong when their spinners accounted for all 20 West Indies wickets. A win in Dhaka will give Bangladesh only their fourth Test series win in history and first since

2014 when they triumphed over Zimbabwe 3-0 at home. Bangladesh came close to winning series twice in the past two years, respectively against Australia and Sri Lanka but on both occasions they stumbled at the final hurdle. Skipper Shakib Al Hasan said his team has the ability to overcome the odds. "We have a challenge and we believe we can overcome this," Shakib said at the pre-match press conference yesterday. "Naturally, West Indies will also go into the match more excited. They will give their best to win. We have to perform better than them, more than what we

did in Chittagong," he said. "It will be very special for us if we can win the series 2-0... whatever it requires we are preparing to do that," he said. "If it is not possible to win, our target will be taking series 1-0, because the ultimate target is winning the series." Shakib promised positive cricket. "But we don't want to win series by playing defensive cricket. We will go into the match with a positive frame of mind," he said. Bangladesh's chances, however, got a blow when wicketkeeper-batsman Mushfiqur Rahim hurt his finger during a training session on Wednesday.

Though Shakib did not rule out Mushfiqur playing the game, the home side had recalled Liton Das as a back-up option. West Indies captain Kraigg Brathwaite said he remained optimistic despite the challenge ahead. "Staying positive on this type of wicket is key. The bounce varied a lot in the first Test," said Brathwaite. "The onus is on ourselves to trust our defence and attacking methods. I think the key is to be light in your feet, and treat each ball as it comes." The visitors will miss pace bowler Shannon Gabriel, who was banned from the second Test after being handed two de-

merit points in the first. Gabriel was the pick of the West Indies bowlers in a spin-oriented pitch, claiming four wickets in a short spell in the first innings that had nearly swung the game to their way. Brathwaite said he was "backing both spin and pace to do a good job" unsettling Bangladesh. "There will obviously be a balance. Spin did most of the damage in the first Test but it doesn't mean pacers can't take wickets," he said. The West Indies will also play three one-day internationals and three Twenty20 internationals against Bangladesh during their month-long tour.

## Bangladesh to send cricketers to Pakistan after safety assurances

AFP  
Dhaka

Bangladesh will send a cricket squad to Pakistan for the first time in three years, officials said yesterday after receiving assurances from their counterparts about security.

Pakistan and Sri Lanka are co-hosting an Asian Cricket Council tournament next month, with Bangladesh playing all their group matches in Karachi. Most cricket nations have steered clear of Pakistan since gunmen attacked Sri Lanka's team bus in 2009, killing several people. But international cricket is

slowly returning, with Zimbabwe and the West Indies among countries to visit Pakistan in recent years. The Bangladesh squad being sent for the Emerging Teams Asia Cup starting December 6 is the first since 2015 to visit Pakistan. "We agreed to the tour following assurance of adequate security

by the Pakistan Cricket Board," said Bangladesh Cricket Board boss Nizamuddin Chowdhury. The board would also send a security detail with the squad, he added. Bangladesh are in Group B alongside hosts Pakistan, Hong Kong and the UAE. Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, India and Oman in Group A will play their

matches in Colombo, which will also host the semis and final. **SQUAD:** Nurul Hasan (Capt), Mosaddek Hossain, Nazmul Hossain, Mizanur Rahman, Shafiqul Islam, Zakir Hasan, Saif Hassan, Yasir Ali, Tanvir Islam, Afif Hossain, Nayeem Hasan, Shoriful Islam, Qazi Onik, Khalid Ahmed, Mohor Sheikh

INDIA'S TOUR OF AUSTRALIA

## First Root, now Kohli: Australian giantkiller strikes again

AFP  
Sydney

Australian teenager Aaron Hardie snared the wicket of India captain Virat Kohli yesterday, his latest high-profile victim after dismissing England skipper Joe Root in a similar warm-up match last year. The 19-year-old paceman had Kohli caught and bowled for 64 as the tourists prepared for next week's opening Test by scoring 358 all out against a Cricket Australia XI on day two of the four-day match. Kohli had smashed seven fours and a six against an inexperienced attack before English-born Hardie dismissed him, nonchalantly tossing the ball in

the air in celebration. Hardie, who ended with 4-50 off 13 overs, is one of Western Australia's most exciting prospects, having captained the state at under-17 and under-19 level, and earned a rookie contract for 2018-19. After torrential rain scuppered the opening day of play at the Sydney Cricket Ground on Wednesday, India were keen to get in the middle for some batting practice in their only game ahead of the four-Test series. Impressive young opener Prithvi Shaw, Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane all also managed half-centuries, with KL Rahul the only one of India's main batsmen to fail, scoring three. The CA XI were on 24 without loss at stumps.

SPOTLIGHT

## Mithali 'saddened' as World Twenty20 row escalates



AFP  
New Delhi

India cricket star Mithali Raj said yesterday she was "deeply saddened" by accusations that she threw tantrums and threatened to quit before being controversially dropped during the Twenty20 World Cup. Raj, the highest run scorer in the women's international game and still India's one-day captain, was left out of the squad for last week's semi-final loss to England, triggering a high-profile row with team staff. Coach Ramesh Powar blasted the veteran batswoman for "blackmailing" officials, amid reports she had demanded to choose her own batting position earlier in the tournament. "I'm deeply saddened and hurt by the aspersions cast on me. My commitment to the game and 20yrs of playing for my country," Raj tweeted yesterday. "The hard work, sweat, in vain. Today, my patriotism doubted, my skill set questioned and all the mud slinging - it's the darkest day of my life."

Raj hit two straight half-centuries at the tournament in the West Indies before missing India's last group game against Australia due to a knee injury. She was declared fit on the eve of the England semi-final but selectors declined to bring her back. T20 captain, Harmanpreet Kaur, said selectors opted to stay with the "winning combination". Raj, 35, sent a fiery letter to India's cricket board singling out Powar and other officials, accusing them of bias and claiming they were trying to destroy her career. Powar briefed the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) on Wednesday about the behind-the-scenes tumult at the T20 tournament. "I hope Mithali stops blackmailing, pressurising coaches and putting her interest first than the team," Powar wrote in a 10-page post-tournament brief for the BCCI, seen by AFP. "I was saddened by her attitude and it gave me an impression that Mithali Raj comes first and then India. She threw a lot of tantrums and created a lot of chaos." The BCCI is yet to comment on the issue.

OUTBURST

## Clarke slams 'headline-chasing coward' as war-of-words heats up

AFP  
Sydney

Former Australian captain Michael Clarke has angrily rejected suggestions he helped create a culture that led to the ball-tampering scandal, slamming a leading broadcaster as a "headline-chasing coward". The war-of-words stems from comments Clarke made on Wednesday criticising attempts to improve the cricket team's image in the wake of the cheating row in South Africa this year, insisting they "won't win a game" without their infamous abrasive attitude. "Australian cricket, I think, needs to stop worrying about being liked and start worrying about being respected," he told commercial radio. "Play tough Australian cricket. Whether we like it or not, that's in our blood." Long-time Clarke rival Simon Katich blasted him for "once again... missing the point", saying the team were

caught "blatantly cheating" and that "our behaviour is a big part of that". Current skipper Tim Paine, who has advocated a more nice-guy approach, also weighed in, saying the team's friendlier way of playing was not so much about being liked, but knowing when to ease up on the aggression. But it was the reaction from Melbourne-based sports broadcaster and writer Gerard Whateley that sparked a scathing Instagram response from Clarke late Wednesday. "Clarke's interpretation of the predicament the Australian men's Test team finds itself in is breathtaking," said Whateley. "That he would continue to rely on the line - the fiction his and subsequent teams used to excuse all manner of boorish behaviour - might be the single greatest piece of nonsense over the past nine months." Clarke said he would not stand by while "my leadership, my integrity" were attacked, insisting his conduct as an honest and rules-based captain had never been questioned. "For Gerard Whateley to insinu-

ate that I am responsible for the ball-tampering issue makes him nothing more than a headline-chasing coward," Clarke wrote. "If you think that the current No.1 team in the world in cricket right now puts being liked as of higher importance than being respected and playing to win inside the rules of our game than you're as delirious as you are ill-informed." The cheating scandal involved Australian players using sandpaper to alter the flight of the ball in a Test match against South Africa last March in Cape Town. Coach Darren Lehmann quit in the wake of the controversy and then-captain Steve Smith, deputy David Warner and batsman Cameron Bancroft received lengthy bans. The affair also claimed the scalps of Cricket Australia chief executive James Sutherland and chairman David Peever. The Australians have endured a dire run of form since losing 17 matches out of 24 in all formats, ahead of a home Test series against top-ranked India starting on December 6.



## FOCUS

## Younousse-Tijan enter Aspire beach volleyball SFs

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Top-seed Qatari pair of Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan marched into the semi-finals of the Asian Volleyball Confederation (AVC) Aspire Qatar Master yesterday.

Younousse and Tijan, who are looking for a title hat-trick, defeated the Australian pair of Chris McHugh and Zachery Schubert 2-1 (21-17, 19-21, 23-21) in an hour-long match.

The Qatari team has won the Asian Beach Volleyball Championship title in Satun, Thailand, in September and the Jakarta Asian Games gold in August and are now eyeing for the third title in front of the home crowd.

Earlier in their last Group A match, the top seeds defeated Omani pair of Ali and Hooda.

The hosts will take on Japan's Yuya Gottsu and Ageba Ishijima, who defeated Asia Championship runner-up Iran's Arash Vakili and Bahman Salemiin-jeboroun 2-0 (21-17, 21-11), in the semi-finals today.

In the third quarter-finals, Kazakhstan's Alexandr Dyachenko and Alexey Sidoranko, who finished third in Asia



Qatar's Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan in action during the Aspire Qatar Master beach volleyball yesterday. PICTURE: Jayaram

Championship, defeated Iran's Rahman Raoufi and Abolhamed Mirzaali 2-0 (23-21, 21-19).

The other Qatar teams of Nasser Ahmed al-Meer-Hamad al-Kuwari and Assam

Mahmoud-Tamer Abdelrasoul failed to win any of their group matches.

A total of 16 teams are taking part in the tournament with players eyeing maximum points

to increase their chances of qualifying for World Championships, which has just four slots from Asia.

The semi-finals and final will take place today.

The second seed-pair from Australia Damien Shuman and Cole Durant defeated Oman's Mazin al-Hashmi and Nouh al-Jalboobi 2-1 (18-21, 21-14, 15-7) in the last quarter-final.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Last Samurai on top of the Doha Darts League standings

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Reigning Doha Darts League champions Last Samurai will go into the end-of-year break at the top of the standings, even though some of the other teams have games in hand.

The Doha Darts League is one of the oldest continuously running sport competitions in Qatar and has been active since the early 1970s. In its current format, the league plays every Wednesday evening from September to April each year and consists of eight teams.

Last Samurai captain Graham "The Finisher" Matthews was quoted as saying, "Our position looks comfortable 10 games in but it is a 21-game season, so there is a long way to go. We cannot be complacent and with the teams below us having games in hand nothing is certain."

At the bottom of the table, it looks like a two-horse race for the dreaded wooden spoon between Who Darted and GCC

Rebels, with GCC Rebels having the points of the board but Who Darted having the game in hand, so positions could change on a weekly basis.

With just one more scheduled game before the New Year break on December 12, all teams will be looking for a good result before the league returns on January 9.

Also in January are two special events being hosted by the Doha Dart League, the first welcomes two professional dart players from the PDC on January 24, 2019 – Jamie Caven from the UK and Devon Peterson from South Africa – who will be demonstrating their exceptional dart skills to the Doha dart community.

Members of the Doha Dart League will also test their ability against the professionals hoping for a win. The second event takes place the following day (January 24) and is the annually held Qatar Darts Open, a knockout competition open to all Qatar residents.

The Doha Dart League secretaries may be contacted via social media channels (Facebook and Twitter) for further details.

## HORSE RACING

## Prepare For Battle stars in Guineas; treble for al-Malki

Golam helms Prepare For Battle in Gr3 race; Pedroza rides three al-Malki winners – Abercrombie, Nahaab, Could Be



Argentina's ambassador to Qatar Carlos Hernandez (fourth from right), QREC general manager Nasser Sherida al-Kaabi (third from right) and QREC Racing manager Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi (right) with the winners of the Thoroughbred Guineas (Gr3) after Prepare For Battle won the mile-long race at the Al Rayyan Park yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim



Argentina's ambassador to Qatar Carlos Hernandez (centre), QREC general manager Nasser Sherida al-Kaabi (third from right) and QREC Racing manager Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi (right) with the winners of the Purebred Arabian Guineas after Abercrombie won the mile-long race yesterday.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Deborah Mountain-saddled Prepare For Battle made a winning debut in Qatar in the Group 3 Thoroughbred Guineas, even as Ibrahim al-Malki registered three winners including the Local Thoroughbred and Purebred Arabian Guineas at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Rayyan Park yesterday.

Having shed his maiden status in Ireland in September, yesterday, under a fantastic ride by Saleem Golam, Prepare For Battle held a slender lead on the back straight coming off Gate 4 in the mile. However, going on to the home straight, the Hassan Ali al-Abdulmalik-owned colt pulled away and built a healthy lead one and a half furlong out.

The lead was too much for the rivals to make up, even as Al Shaqab Racing's Al Adaid and Al-hazn, both saddled by Alban de Mieuille, picked up pace to push the leader but had to settle for second and third under Ronan Thomas and Faleh Bughanaim respectively.

Eduardo Pedroza helmed all three winners for al-Malki, with Abercrombie topping the mile-long Purebred Arabian Guineas and Nahaab winning the Local Thoroughbred Guineas. In the second race of the day, Abdullatif Hussain al-Emadi's Could Be won the Class 4 Thoroughbred Handicap event for horses rated 85 and below for al-Malki.

In the penultimate race of the day, al-Emadi's Abercrombie went one better than his last outing four weeks ago, edging out



Saleem Golam rides Prepare For Battle to victory in the Thoroughbred Guineas (Gr3) yesterday.

Osama Omer al-Dafea's Evolution Du Croate, with Carlo Fiocchi in the saddle, by a head at the post after the two were locked in duel for the last furlong or so.

Nahaab led a one-two for the trainer with Jimmy Quinn riding Surra Man Raa to a close second, a quarter of a length behind the winner.

His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani's Ebraz, His Highness The Amir's Sword winner last year, was back to winning ways in impressive fashion after Julian Smart's ward won the Purebred Arabian Handicap for horses rated 90 and above.

Ebraz had to settle for places on his European swing, finishing

third in the Qatar Arabian World Cup at Longchamp in October, but got a nice little prep win at the start of the home season.

Ladjadi rode the five-year-old to a fine victory over Jassim Mohamed Ghazali-trained Carab, with a little more than two lengths to spare at the post.

De Mieuille had a winner in the Purebred Arabian Plate event for three-year-olds with Qatari jockey Faleh Bughanaim notching his eighth victory of the season astride Al Shaqab Racing's Dalaab in the 1850m race.

Muraikh Cup-winning trainer on Wednesday, Mohamed Riyaz, saddled the winner in the nine-race card-opener, a Local Thor-

oughbred Handicap yesterday, JP Guillambert rode four-year-old filly to a comfortable victory in the miler.

Stefano Ibido-schooled Courageux and Hadi Nasser al-Ramzani-trained Holy Shambles won Thoroughbred Plate events under Fiocchi and Thomas respectively.

## RESULTS

**Race 1:** 1. Al Khazileah (JP Guillambert), 2. Zuzi (Saleem Golam), 3. Al Watan (Gerald Avranche), 4. Mister Lal (Eduardo Pedroza). Won by: 2, 3 ½, ¼. Time: 1:40.19. Owner: Meshaal bin Ali al-Attiyah. Trainer: Mohamed Riyaz.

**Race 2:** 1. Could Be (Eduardo Pedroza), 2. Hajaj (Faleh Bugh-

naim), 3. Woodkid (Pier Conventino), 4. Noble Masterpiece (Harry Bentley). Won by: ¾, Shd, 1 ¾. Time: 1:37.47. Owner: Abdullatif Hussain al-Emadi. Trainer: Ibrahim al-Malki.

**Race 3:** 1. Holy Shambles (Ronan Thomas), 2. Strategist (Harry Bentley), 3. Random Decision (Tomas Lukasek), 4. Beckton (Marco Casamento). Won by: Nk, 1 ¾, Hd. Time: 1:12.79. Owner: Mubarak bin Saeed Aljafai al-Naimi. Trainer: Hadi Nasser al-Ramzani.

**Race 4:** 1. Courageux (Carlo Fiocchi), 2. Mixi Charm (Ronan Thomas), 3. Izzer (Stephan Ladjadi), 4. High Horse (Marco Casamento). Won by: 2 ¼, ½, ½. Time: 1:13.15. Owner: Abdulhadi Mana al-Hajri.

Trainer: Stefano Ibido.

**Race 5:** 1. Daloob (Faleh Bughanaim), 2. Tabouk (Jean Baptiste Hamel), 3. AJS Moaddie (Tomas Lukasek), 4. Gtnah (Ronan Thomas). Won by: Hd, ½, 2 ¾. Time: 2:07.36. Owner: Al Shaqab Racing. Trainer: Alban de Mieuille.

**Race 6:** 1. Ebraz (Stephan Ladjadi), 2. Carab (Marco Casamento), 3. AJS Anfowan (Faleh Bughanaim), 4. Lucky Sand (Ray Fuentes). Won by: 2 ¼, 1. No. Time: 1:45.92. Owner: His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani. Trainer: Julian Smart.

**Race 7:** 1. Nahaab (Eduardo Pedroza), 2. Surra Man Raa (Jimmy Quinn), 3. Latamah (Tomas Lukasek), 4. Qate'e (Tomas

Lukasek). Won by: ¼, 2 ¼, 3 ¾. Time: 1:40.20. Owner: Mohamed Abdulla Abdulmalik. Trainer: Ibrahim al-Malki.

**Race 8:** 1. Abercrombie (Eduardo Pedroza), 2. Evolution Du Croate (Carlo Fiocchi), 3. Meelad (Mathieu Pelletan), 4. AJS Dhab (Tomas Lukasek). Won by: Hd, 1 ¾, 3 ¾. Time: 1:47.01. Owner: Abdullatif Hussain al-Emadi. Trainer: Ibrahim al-Malki.

**Race 9:** 1. Prepare For Battle (Saleem Golam), 2. Al Adaid (Ronan Thomas), 3. Alhazm (Faleh Bughanaim), 4. Che Bella (Jean Baptiste Hamel). Won by: 1 ½, 2, ¾. Time: 1:38.19. Owner: Hassan Ali al-Abdulmalik. Trainer: Deborah Mountain.