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**NBA | Page 5**  
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# GULF TIMES SPORT



**CRICKET**  
**Hope ton helps West Indies level series**  
Page 7

**FOOTBALL**

# Sadd break down Al Duhail's defence to go top of league

*This season Al Duhail had gone unbeaten until yesterday but it was evident for a few weeks that a defeat lurked around the corner*



**It's all up in the air:** Al Sadd's Hassan al-Haydos gets some special treatment from his teammates after the team's win over Al Duhail. At bottom, fans take a selfie with Baghdad Bounedjah. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil

**By Anil John**  
Doha

Is this the turning point that would end Al Duhail's stranglehold on the QNB Stars League? Al Sadd would be hoping it certainly is after they demolished the defending champions in their rescheduled Week 9 clash at the Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Stadium yesterday to go top of the table with 38 points from 15 matches.

The 3-1 win was not achieved in a particularly spectacular way. But it was convincing, nonetheless. And more so, it came about after Al Duhail had taken the lead in the sixth minute through a penalty, converted by Youssef El Arabi in the sixth minute of play.

Over the past few years, Al Duhail, previously known as Lekhwiya, had acquired an aura of invincibility. It was deserved all-right; after all, they had the best of coaches and the best of players who unfailingly did what was expected of them. When you win the league in the very first season of your existence, and then add five more titles in the next six years, there can't be any question marks about your ability.



But Al Sadd had run them close on a couple of occasions, missing out by a whisker, most notably in 2016-17 when Al Duhail won the title by a mere two-point margin (63-61). This season Al Duhail had gone unbeaten until yesterday but it was evident for a few weeks that a defeat lurked around the

corner, especially after they had conceded tame draws against Al Rayyan and Qatar Sports Club. The signs were all there and, as expected, it was Al Sadd who rose to the occasion. With that the Wolves laid down the marker for the rest of the season. If Al Sadd were looking for a confidence boost ahead

of the business end of the tournament, this was it.

Al Duhail made an impressive start to the match, working up plenty of speed on the flanks and threatening the Al Sadd defence a couple of times inside the first five minutes.

And sure enough they were the ones to take the lead after Italian referee Daniele Orsato awarded them a penalty after Boualem Khoukhi blocked Karim Boudiaf's shot with his hand. Moroccan El Arabi, who took the shot, sent Al Sadd goalkeeper Saad al-Sheeb the wrong way to give his side a 1-0 advantage.

Al Duhail's joy didn't last too long, however, as Al Sadd equalised four minutes later, through an own goal by Lucas Mendes. Star Al Sadd striker Akram Afif had made considerable ground before unleashing a shot at goal only for Mendes to deflect it into the Al Duhail goal while attempting a clearance.

As half chances went to waste on either side, the match appeared headed for a draw, causing consternation for Al Sadd coach Jesualdo Ferreira.

The prolific Baghdad Bounedjah had a fine opportunity to put Al Sadd ahead in the 34th minute after he was put

through by Jung Woo-young but the Algerian's effort was saved by Al Duhail goalie Khalifa Abu Bakr.

The teams were locked in a midfield battle in the second half, although Al Sadd had a few opportunities they failed to make good of.

In the 50th minute, Bounedjah back-heeled the ball to Afif, but his shot was deflected away for a corner. Boualem Khoukhi then received a fine cross from Hassan al-Haydos, but headed over the goal.

Al Sadd coach Jesualdo Ferreira then introduced Salem al-Hajri for Jung as his first substitution in the 64th minute. And after a few more wasted chances, al-Hajri struck in the 89th minute with a powerful shot, dribbling past three Al Duhail defenders inside the penalty area.

Al Duhail had five minutes of stoppage time to restore parity, but it was Al Sadd who found the net again after Bounedjah exchanged passes with Afif and struck from close range with two minutes remaining. Al Sadd then held firm and the referee soon blew the final whistle.

Even the dour Ferreira managed a smile.

**SPOTLIGHT**

# Al Arabi's Icelandic coach says Qatar is 'the place to be'



Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani (L), President of the Al Arabi Club, poses with Icelandic football coach Heimir Hallgrimsson after a press conference in Doha yesterday.

**AFP**  
Doha

Former Iceland boss Heimir Hallgrimsson said Qatar "was the place to be" as he was officially unveiled as the coach of club side Al Arabi in Doha yesterday.

It is Hallgrimsson's first job since leaving the Iceland post and guiding his country to their first World Cup finals earlier this year, and he admitted even he was "surprised" to end up in the Gulf.

He said he had been in talks with Bundesliga and Major League Soccer sides - Stuttgart and Vancouver Whitecaps - before being approached by Al Arabi, but had no regrets about choosing a team from the World Cup 2022 host nation.

"I had some opportunities, some discussions with clubs but nothing that was more interesting than this one," he said.

The 51-year-old has signed a one-and-a-half-year contract.

Hallgrimsson added: "This is a big, big challenge, a big club, that had historical success in the past and they would like to have that past again."

Al Arabi are currently mid-table in the 12-team Qatar Stars League at the halfway stage.

Starved of success in recent years, the last of Al Arabi's seven Qatari league titles was back in 1997.

Hallgrimsson said he wanted the owners to give him time to improve the side, in a league where coaches are changed regularly and ruthlessly.

"They know that this is not an instant job, this is not buying

success for today, this is a long-term project to build up success for the future," he said.

The Icelander is the club's eighteenth managerial appointment since 2010.

"A lot of people have warned me that this is a hot seat so hopefully a guy from Iceland can cool it a little."

"All the things from the president, from the club, the conversations, is that they will support me and I feel that they really mean it."

"Sacking coaches two times a year doesn't get you anywhere."

His first match in charge will be on December 21, a cup match against current league leaders Al Duhail, also managed by a coach who was at this year's World Cup, Tunisia's Nabil Maaloul.

Hallgrimsson resigned as Iceland manager in July after they were knocked out at the first stage of the World Cup in Russia, failing to win a game, ending the Nordic country's fairytale rise to the global stage.

"The reason I decided to stop with the national team was because I had been seven years doing the same job as a national team coach, and my feeling was that I was at a standstill," he said.

He added: "For me to improve personally, as a coach, this was the place to be."

Hallgrimsson began his coaching career in 1993 with an Icelandic women's team, Hottur.

Famously a dentist as well as a coach, Hallgrimsson said he would be concentrating only on football in Qatar.

"I am so confident that we are going to stay for a few years that I am not going to do any dentistry."

## FOOTBALL

# Guardiola praises Sterling for confronting racism

'He's an incredible person. It's tough in the 21st century to still be in this position, to have problems with diversity'

AFP  
Manchester, United Kingdom

**P**ep Guardiola has praised Manchester City star Raheem Sterling for refusing to be intimidated by the menace of racism in football. Sterling endured alleged racial abuse from a Chelsea fan during City's 2-0 defeat at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

The 24-year-old was targeted by the supporter while he was standing near fans on the touchline. Sterling appeared to laugh off the shocking incident at the time, but the abuse has drawn widespread condemnation amid fears the sport is being dragged back to the dark ages of the 1970s and 1980s when racism was rife.

The England winger later accused the media of fuelling racism in the way it reports certain stories about black players. And former England assistant coach Gary Neville revealed this week that Sterling complained during Euro 2016 of constant criticism from fans that carried racist undertones.

Speaking for the first time since the Chelsea incident, City manager Guardiola backed Sterling and hailed his decision to speak out on the controversy. "I was concerned with what happened but he made a statement on Instagram and was quite clear about his thoughts," Guardiola told reporters yesterday.

"He's an incredible person, an incredible human being. It's tough in the 21st century to still be in this position, to have problems with diversity. We have to be better, everyone."

Guardiola believes racism is a deep problem in society, not just football, and insisted more must be done to combat it. "It's everywhere, racism is everywhere. People focus on football but it's not just in football. You'd think in football we'd be safe but racism is everywhere," he said.

"What happens today – how we treat immigrants and refugees, when



Manchester City's Raheem Sterling (centre) trains with teammates in Manchester yesterday. (Reuters)

once in our lives our grandfathers were refugees. It's everywhere. That's why we have to fight every day. We have to fight for human rights to make a better society for the future. Today it's dangerous, not just in England, all across Europe. The message for the politicians is for them to be tough on human rights

and we have to defend democracy in the best way."

Former Barcelona and Bayern Munich boss Guardiola also pointed out the media has a crucial role to play in keeping racism in check.

"Today the real power is the media, not politicians, not the governments.

It's the media," he said.

The Metropolitan Police have launched an investigation into the Stamford Bridge incident, while Chelsea have suspended four supporters. "I appreciate what Chelsea did," Guardiola said. "If it happened in my club we should do the same."

Guardiola, whose side host Hoffenheim in the Champions League today, made it clear comments about players should be restricted to performances on the field rather than straying into foul abuse. "Hopefully the criticism is when he plays bad. That would be perfect. Everyone is exposed to that – the

managers, the players, everyone around the world," he said. "But just for the colour of his skin? Believe me, that's ridiculous and that's why everyone has to protect from that situation."

Sterling's teammate Leroy Sane also believes the former Liverpool player has shown great dignity in dealing with the abuse. "I think it's sad this happens still. We all support Raheem and are on his side," Sane said. "He is a strong guy, a good guy. He can handle it and he is not letting it get him down."

## CITY DOWN TO 15 PLAYERS FOR HOFFENHEIM CLASH: GUARDIOLA

Meanwhile, injury-hit Manchester City have just 15 senior players fit for today's Champions League tie against Hoffenheim, Guardiola revealed. David Silva and Fernandinho have joined an injury list at City that already featured Sergio Aguero, Kevin De Bruyne, Danilo, Benjamin Mendy and Claudio Bravo.

"We have 15 players available so I cannot do too much," Guardiola said when asked if he would make changes against Hoffenheim. City are already through to the Champions League last 16, but they need at least a point to be sure of finishing as Group F winners, which could ensure an easier draw in the first knockout round.

"We are going into a really tough game. We are in the next stage and that's important but we want to go through finishing first. If you finish first or second the last 16 is tough but to play at home (in the second leg) is a small advantage."

Guardiola's injury problems come after City suffered their first Premier League defeat of the season at Chelsea on Saturday, a setback that saw Liverpool move above them into top spot in the table. Spanish midfielder Silva was substituted at Chelsea with a hamstring injury and Guardiola said he faces "a few weeks" out. Argentina forward Aguero, who has missed three games with a groin problem, could return to face Everton on Saturday.

## SPOTLIGHT

## QOC reveals schedule of 2nd edition of Flag Relay



QOC Secretary General Jassim Rashid al-Buainain and Director of QOC Marketing and Communication Sheikhha Asma al-Thani at a press conference yesterday.

**Q**atar Olympic Committee unveiled yesterday the final details of the second edition of Flag Relay, which takes place tomorrow and sees the Qatari flag tour the country, carried proudly by hundreds of participants.

Flag Relay aims to share pride, unity and inspiration through the flag in celebration of Qatar's National Day five days later. Jassim Rashid Al Buainain, Secretary General of Qatar Olympic Committee, briefed the media during a press conference in which he outlined the program for Flag Relay 2018 that will feature attempts to break two Guinness World Records.

Al Buainain said: "Flag Relay is based on three main axes: the Qatari flag, which represents our national unity, the event itself including participants, which represents our multicultural society in reflection of solidarity, unity and understanding, and the third element is sport through the participation in a number of different sports such as running, walking, swimming, cycling."

More than 1,000 people will take part in Flag Relay 2018, including current and former Team Qatar athletes, ambassadors and diplomats, nearly 800 schoolchildren, 10 cancer survivors, as well as 200 participants from the public.

International football superstars Wesley Sneijder and Samuel Eto'o, who play in Qatar, will also be part of Flag Relay, bringing a wealth of inspiration to the young participants and demonstrating the global status of Qatar as a sports pioneer.

"We are proud of Qatar Cancer Society's participation in order to spread awareness of early diagnosis of cancer. What distinguishes this edition of Flag Relay is the attempts to break two Guinness World Records. We would like to thank all sponsors and partners for their support in this national event and we thank everyone for their keenness to express their love for Qatar," al-Buainain added.

Participants will carry the Qatari flag across 19 iconic landmarks around the country, starting from Team Qatar's Winter Camp in Sealine and transporting it towards a grand finale at Aspire Zone.

"The idea behind Flag Relay is to express pride in the flag and what it means for the country's unity and people's solidarity across Qatar," said Sheikhha Asma al-Thani, Director of Marketing and Communications at Qatar Olympic Committee. "We chose the stops carefully to include landmarks that reflect different sides of Qatar's history and present from education to sport and culture to

entertainment, while also paying tribute to our beautiful nature and environment," she added.

Flag Relay 2018 will start at 6 am at QOC Winter Camp in Sealine before it flies on a small plane to Qatar Racing Club. After that, the flag's journey continues through several stops, including Hamad International Airport where flagbearers walk with the flag before a Guinness World Record is attempted on the way to Msheireb Properties for the most people in a cycling relay.

Jogging, cycling and walking are among the other activities that will continue the maroon flag's trip through Hamad Medical Corporation, the Museum of Islamic Art and Sheraton Park. After that, flagbearers will jog with the maroon flag and make a stop at Qatar Olympic Committee before carrying on to Katara, the Pearl and Qatar University via different activities, including driving, swimming, rowing and sailing. Flagbearers will fly with the flag over Al Thakira Mangroves and arrive at Qatar Foundation on a gyrocopter. Once at Qatar Foundation, participants which will include Team Qatar athletes and the public will attempt to break the Guinness World Record for the largest number of people running 100 meters in a 1-hour relay.

The penultimate stop for Flag Relay 2018 will be Qatar Football Association, from which flagbearers will walk to Aspire Park where the flag's journey concludes with a series of fun activities in celebration of Qatar National Day.

For Majdolina Langi, a cancer survivor who will take part in the second edition of Flag Relay, participation is a way to highlight the importance of sport in her journey. "I can say that cancer gave me a new lease on life, but sport gave me life. Qatar gave me life. I think that is a really important message. Sport crosses all boundaries."

"I'm really excited about the flag relay. I was invited by Qatar Olympic Committee to participate," she said, adding: "I felt this is really an interesting moment. I'll be proud to do it. It is time for me to give something back to Qatar."

Asked on the possibility of the Flag Relay turning into a global event, HE Al Buainain said: "The idea of this event came from the Olympic torch relay, and it was linked to the Qatari flag as it takes place in Qatar. It will remain in Qatar because it represents National Day celebrations. As for raising the flag out of Qatar, this is the duty of our athletes who always strive to make Qatar proud in international platforms."

## FOCUS

## SC and Portuguese Security Police sign co-operation agreement

QNA  
Doha

**T**he Security Committee of the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC) signed a co-operation agreement with the Public Security Police of Portugal on the organisation of major sporting events in preparation for the 2022 World Cup.

The agreement was signed for the Security Committee by Brigadier General Abdulaziz bin Faisal al-Thani, the Deputy Commander of the Lekhwiya Force and Deputy Chairman of the SC's Security Committee, and for the Portuguese side by Luis Manuel Farinha, the head of the Public Security Police at the Lekhwiya Force building.

On the occasion, Farinha said he was delighted to sign this agreement with the Security

Committee, adding it strengthens relations and partnership between the police services of the two friendly countries in order to prepare for the World Cup.

He said that Portugal will spare no effort in providing all forms of support to Qatar national police and share their expertise in conducting sports events.

Major Fahad Saeed al-Subaie, Director of the Training Department at the Police College and Head of the Training Unit of the Security Committee of the SC, said the agreement will ensure high level of training to officers.

He added that the officials from Qatar visited Portugal recently to get a first-hand experience of the progress made by Portugal police and was confident the partnership will help the Security Committee to organise the World Cup and raise the efficiency and qualification of officers in the management of major sports events.



Officials from the Security Committee of the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC) and Public Security Police of Portugal pose after the agreement signing in Doha yesterday.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# Bayern Munich head to Ajax for showdown

Bayern need just a point at Ajax to win Group E with the Bavarian giants currently top of the table

AFP  
Berlin

Resurgent Bayern Munich head to Ajax for today's Champions League group showdown with clear winners and losers among the star-studded squad after Niko Kovac's decision to end rotation. "We want to keep going," said Leon Goretzka, now a firm fixture in central midfield alongside Joshua Kimmich with Bayern having won their last three games after Saturday's 3-0 league home win over Nuremberg. "Now we travel to Amsterdam and want to finish first in the group – that's important for us."

Bayern need just a point at Ajax's Johan Cruyff Arena to win Group E with the Bavarian giants currently top of the table, two points ahead of their Dutch rivals, and both teams already into the last 16.

A 5-1 thrashing of Benfica at the Allianz Arena a fortnight ago, with Robert Lewandowski and Arjen Robben both scoring twice, signified an end to the poor results of October and November which also saw Bayern slide down the Bundesliga table.

Bayern have now clawed their way back up to third in the league and coach Kovac has taken a gamble by ditching rotation, risking ruffled egos with stars left on the bench. "The rhythm is there, the boys are in the flow – that's why we don't want to change anything," explained Kovac.

His decision has significant winners and losers. World Cup winners – Germany defender Mats Hummels, and Spain midfielder Javi Martinez – languished on the bench against Nuremberg alongside Euro 2016 winner Renato Sanches.

Martinez and Sanches find their path blocked by Kimmich and Goretzka, both 23, who each hit the woodwork against Nuremberg. "Both have



Bayern Munich players take part in a training session at the Amsterdam Arena, on the eve of the UEFA Champions League football match against Ajax in Amsterdam yesterday. (AFP)

a very good understanding of football and read the game well," said Kovac, at the helm at Bayern since July. "They get on well off the pitch and are in the national team together. It's an axis

that's really fun right now – not only for those two, but the whole team in the last three games."

However, Hummels looked like he was having anything but 'fun'; storm-

ing through the mixed zone after Saturday's win without a word as Jerome Boateng and Niklas Sule are now established as Kovac's centre-backs. Disgruntled stars watching from

Bayern's bench has caused problems for Kovac's predecessors and Robben's imminent return from a thigh injury threatens Serge Gnabry's place on the right wing.

Thiago Alcantara, a second-half replacement on Saturday who is returning to fitness after a knee injury, threatens to break up Kimmich and Goretzka's partnership in central midfield.

However, Kovac's decision has reaped dividends in attack with striker Robert Lewandowski scoring four goals in his last three games, supported by Thomas Mueller who is revelling in the attacking midfield role.

"At the start (of the season), we rotated as the coach tried to find the right team," said director of sport Hasan Salihamidzic. "Perhaps it was too much and some players didn't know where they fitted in. In the last few games, Niko hasn't done that and the team looks good."

Meanwhile, veteran Dutch winger Robben will play no part in Munich's clash at Ajax due to an ongoing knee injury. Robben, 34, has been out injured since scoring twice in a 5-1 win over group rivals Benfica last month and has yet to fully recover.

Robben, who scored Bayern's winning goal against Dortmund in the 2013 Champions League final, confirmed in yesterday's edition of magazine Kicker that he will quit the Bavarian giants at the end of the season.

TODAY'S CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FIXTURES

- GROUP E: Ajax vs Bayern Munich; Benfica vs AEK Athens
- GROUP F: Manchester City vs 1899 Hoffenheim; Shakhtar Donetsk vs Lyon
- GROUP G: Real Madrid vs CSKA Moscow; Viktoria Plzen vs Roma
- GROUP H: Valencia vs Manchester United; Young Boys vs Juventus

Yaya leaves Olympiakos after playing five matches

Former Manchester City and Barcelona midfielder Yaya Toure has left Olympiakos for a second time, after only playing five times, the Greek Super League club announced yesterday. Toure, 35, joined Olympiakos three months after originally making his mark in Europe with the Greek side during the 2005-2006 season. "Yaya is and remains an important member of the Olympiakos family, who has marked a central part of the history of the club," Olympiakos said in a statement. A Champions League winner with Barcelona in 2009, Toure only started three games since returning to Greece as a free agent in September. Toure was one of Manchester City's key signings that helped the club win three Premier League titles but was released at the end of last season.

Spain introducing VAR in Copa del Rey, 2nd division

The video assistant referee system will be used in the Copa del Rey from January and in second division games next season at the latest, the Spanish football (RFEF) association said yesterday. The RFEF introduced VAR in La Liga at the start of the season.

"The Board of Directors of the RFEF today approved the extension of the VAR to further official competitions, the Copa del Rey and the Segunda Division," the RFEF said in a statement. VAR will be introduced from the round of 16 in this year's Copa. "Regarding the Segunda Division, video refereeing will start to be implemented during the 2019/2020 season, although there is a possibility that it will be used this season during the playoffs for promotion to La Liga," the statement added.

PSG to face fifth-tier Pontivy in French Cup

Holders Paris Saint-Germain were drawn at Pontivy from the fifth tier in the last 64 of the French Cup. The Parisians have won their last 42 domestic cup matches, a record stretching back to February 2014. Elsewhere, the lowest side left in the competition, Entente Crest-Aouste from the eighth level, will welcome Nancy from Ligue 2 if the minnows beat Le Puy in a postponed game from the previous round. Aiglon du Lamentin are only the third club in the history of the competition from the Caribbean island of Martinique to reach this stage and will become only the second side from an overseas territory in almost 30 years to reach the last 32 if they overcome Orleans from Ligue 2. The fixtures will be played on the weekend of January 5-6.

SPOTLIGHT

## Infantino opens FIFA Executive Summit in Doha



By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The three-day FIFA Executive Football Summit opened in Doha yesterday with the participation of a number of international football personalities including FIFA President Gianni Infantino. QFA President HE Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani and Ahmed Ahmed, President of the Confederation of African Football (CAF), joined FIFA Chief on stage yesterday.

Football representatives from Iraq, Oman, Jordan, Syria, China, Bhutan, Indonesia, Nepal, Tajikistan, Turkmeni-

stan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Iran were also in attendance at Sheraton Hotel Doha. A number of important seminars and workshops were held to discuss the future of football around the world.

The most important of these were the workshops related to the future of competitions and championships. One of the key discussions centred around hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. A separate workshop on the use of video assistant referee (VAR) was also held. The VAR was successfully launched at the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. It will be again used at the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup in France.

During the day's proceedings at the Summit, FIFA also discussed the positive impact of the European Championship on the world in general, especially as it was a tournament launched by the UEFA for the first time this season.

Apart from FIFA and Asian football workshops, the presence of 18 Asian nations at the event, nearly one third of the members of the General Assembly, was an opportunity to exchange views and talk about the AFC Presidential elections in Malaysia on April 6 and the chances of the candidates. QFA Vice President and AFC Vice President Saud al-Mohannadi is one of the candidates for the top Asian football post.

FOCUS

## Malaysia, Vietnam draw in Suzuki Cup final first leg

AFP  
Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia came from two goals down to salvage a 2-2 draw with Vietnam in the first leg of the AFF Suzuki Cup final at Bukit Jalil National Stadium yesterday.

Goals by Nguyen Huy Hung and Pham Duc Huy midway through the first half put the visitors in charge but Shahrul Saad halved the deficit before Safawi Rasid converted a stunning free-kick on the hour mark to restore parity for the home side.

Vietnam goalkeeper Dang Van Lam made a fine save in stoppage time to deny Syafiq Ahmad and keep the score level ahead of the second leg in Hanoi this Saturday. Malaysia exerted much of the early pressure in front of a capacity crowd of more than 87,000 but Vietnam took the lead after 22 minutes following a swift counter-attack.

Doan Van Hau lofted the ball

into space on the right for Phan Van Duc whose cross towards Duc Huy was cut off by Nazirul Naim but fell nicely for Huy Hung to tuck the ball into the net. The home side hardly had time to recover before Vietnam scored again three minutes later.

Van Duc was again the provider, pulling the ball back for Duc Huy who slipped as he met the ball with his left foot but saw his effort from 25 metres fly past goalkeeper Farizal Marlias.

Malaysia cut the deficit in the 36th minute when Syamer Kutty Abba's free kick from the left found Shahrul, who headed powerfully past Van Lam.

The home side then got back on level terms on the hour when they were awarded a free kick on the right edge of the box and Safawi curled a magnificent shot into the far corner of the net.

The home side had a final chance to win the game in stoppage time with a free-kick by substitute Syafiq that went through the Vietnamese wall but was punched clear by an alert Van Lam.

PREMIER LEAGUE

## Silva has last laugh as Everton escape

AFP  
Liverpool

Marco Silva had the last laugh against his former club Watford as Everton defender Lucas Digne's last-gasp free-kick rescued a dramatic 2-2 draw at Goodison Park on Monday night. Everton manager Silva was facing Watford for the first time since his acrimonious departure from Vicarage Road in January.

The 41-year-old was sacked by Watford after less than a year in charge, with the club's owners blaming Everton's interest in the Portuguese coach for distracting him from his job.

Convinced he treated them disrespectfully by showing interest in Everton, the Watford fans who travelled to Goodison Park waved inflatable snakes and directed abusive chants at Silva. With just seconds to go, it seemed Silva would be bitten by his old employers. Everton's Richarlison, signed from Watford by Silva, put the hosts ahead in the first half.

Seamus Coleman's own goal drew Watford level after the break and Abdoulaye Doucoure's header put them in front before Everton midfielder Gylfi Sigurdsson had a penalty saved by Ben Foster.

But Digne came to Silva's rescue in the sixth minute of stoppage-time to deny Watford the revenge they so badly wanted. Insisting he didn't care about silencing the Watford taunts, Silva said: "Of course not. I didn't see anything. It's



Everton's Lucas Digne (left) celebrates after scoring against Watford. (AFP)

not important to me. What I can control is my players. It's a difficult match to talk about. We lost our focus completely for their goals."

Eventually hired by Everton in May, Silva summed up the difficult nature of his Watford exit last week when he made it clear he was un sentimental about facing his old club. Watford are still waiting for the Premier League to settle their complaint against Everton for the alleged illegal approach for Silva.

And the Silva feud threatened to spill

onto the pitch after Watford captain Troy Deeney last week said he would "smash" Richarlison for leaving the Hornets.

Yet it was Richarlison who did the early damage as the Brazil forward put Everton ahead in the 15th minute with his eighth goal in 14 Premier League appearances – three more than he managed in 38 games for Watford last season. Watford were left frustrated by the goal as they appealed in vain for offside against Theo Walcott during a move that ended with Andre Gomes crossing for Richarlison to stroke

a cool finish past Ben Foster.

Some players opt not to celebrate when they score against their former teams.

But in keeping with the fractious mood, Richarlison, who had been targeted by some crunching Watford tackles, had no qualms about sprinting away in jubilation. Roberto Pereyra squandered a good chance to equalise when the Watford forward headed wide from Ken Sema's cross.

Pereyra curled a free-kick just wide and Deeney saw his strike saved by Jordan Pickford after the interval. Watford's pressure paid off in the 63rd minute when Pereyra met Kiko Femenia's cross with a shot that cannoned off the post and hit Coleman as he tried to control it before bouncing into the net.

That self-inflicted wound was followed by more defensive chaos as Watford snatched the lead two minutes later. Pereyra was the catalyst again with a cross that looped up to Doucoure, who rose above Coleman to head home from close-range.

The drama wasn't over and Everton squandered a chance to equalise when Christian Kabasele's foul on Yerry Mina earned the hosts a 68th-minute penalty. Sigurdsson took the spot-kick, but his shot was too close to Foster and the Watford keeper saved with his legs.

But Everton kept pushing and were rewarded in the final seconds of stoppage-time when Kabasele handled and Digne curled a fine free-kick into the top corner for his first goal since his move from Barcelona.

BARCELONA BACK OUT OF NEXT MONTH'S LA LIGA MIAMI MATCH

Barcelona: La Liga's plans to stage a match in the United States next month have been derailed after Barcelona, who were scheduled to play Girona in Miami, withdrew their support for the game on Monday following a board meeting.

The Spanish league signed a 15-year agreement with entertainment company Relevant Sports designed to promote the sport and La Liga in North America back in August. The deal included hosting one regular season Spanish league game on American soil per season – with Girona's home match against Catalan neighbours Bar-

celona earmarked to be played on Jan. 26 at the home of the NFL's Miami Dolphins.

The proposal received opposition from the Spanish FA and football's world and European governing bodies, UEFA and FIFA, and it now appears that Barca's support is also wavering whilst the various parties involved cannot reach agreement.

A source close to the negotiations downplayed the setback, saying that holding the match next month was probably too aggressive a timeline and adding that it was likely to be played sometime next year.

SWIMMING

# Seto breaks short-course swim record to stun Le Clos

AFP  
Shanghai

Japan's Daiya Seto smashed Chad le Clos's short-course record in the men's 200m butterfly as he grabbed gold at the world championships to stun the South African yesterday.

The 24-year-old Seto pipped his more famous rival by only 0.08sec to make a piece of history on the first day of action in the Chinese city of Hangzhou.

Seto, who won bronze in the 400m medley at the Rio 2016 Olympics, recovered from a comparatively slow start to hold off Le Clos down the stretch and triumph in 1min 48.24sec.

It was a disappointing silver for the 26-year-old Le Clos, the reigning long-course and short-course world champion.

He had also held the short-course record of 1:48.56, set in Singapore in 2013, until Seto

bettered it in style.

A distant third was China's Li Zhuohao.

"I didn't expect the world record," Seto was quoted by the Xinhua news agency as saying.

"Now I will focus on the 400m IM (individual medley) and I hope I can break the 400m IM world record also."

Australian teenager Ariarne Titmus stormed back to win the women's 200m freestyle gold and underline her status as a rising star of swimming.

The 18-year-old, who won 400m and 800m freestyle gold at the Commonwealth Games in her home country earlier this year, ran down the American Mallory Comerford to seal victory in a thrilling race.

Titmus was back in third after 150m, but she burst to the finish in a time of 1:51.38 to relegate Comerford into silver, with Femke Heemskerk of the Netherlands taking bronze having led for half of a nail-biting

race.

Titmus put her head in her hands when she realised she had taken gold, powering to the win with 0.43sec to spare over Comerford.

Hungary's Katinka Hosszu, a triple gold medallist at the 2016 Rio Olympics, was strong favourite in the women's 400m individual medley - and she did not disappoint.

Dubbed the "Iron Lady", Hosszu dominated the short course world championships two years ago in Canada, carrying home seven golds.

She wasted no time getting her first victory in Hangzhou, sealing a dominant win in 4:21.40, comfortably ahead of Melanie Margalis of the United States, who won silver, more than four seconds back.

Third was France's Fantine Lesaffre. Hosts China clinched their first gold medal of the meeting when Wang Shun took victory in the men's 200m individual medley.



Daiya Seto of Japan celebrates after winning the 200m Butterfly race of 14th FINA World Swimming Championships (25m) in Hangzhou. (Reuters)

HOCKEY WORLD CUP

# Netherlands and Belgium in quarters

'Argentina are a strong and experienced team and we will have to be at our best to get a result'



Belgium's Thomas Briels (second from right) celebrates after scoring a goal as Pakistan's Ahmed Butt (third left) and others look on during their cross-over match at the 2018 Hockey World Cup in Bhubaneswar yesterday. (AFP)

FIH  
Bhubaneswar

Belgium and the Netherlands both claimed cross-over play-off victories at the Odisha Hockey Men's World Cup Bhubaneswar 2018, securing their respective places in the upcoming quarter-finals of the competition on another high-quality day of action at the Kalinga Stadium.

Belgium's 5-0 victory over four-time world champions Pakistan sets up a mouth-watering all-European quarter-final against Pool D winners Germany, a match that will take place tomorrow. On the same day, home favourites India have a quarter-final meeting against the Netherlands, who defeated Canada 5-0 yesterday.

The World Cup quarter-finals begin today 12th December with Argentina facing England and top-ranked Australia going head-to-head against France, the lowest ranked of the 16 competing nations here in Bhubaneswar.

In the day's opening cross-over match, Belgium had the better of the first period against Pakistan, with the Olympic silver medalists from Rio 2016 taking a 2-0 lead against the giants of Asian

hockey. Alexander Hendrickx opened the scoring with a low penalty corner before Red Lions captain Thomas Briels completed the simplest of finishes after a wonderful run along the backline from Nicolas de Kerpel.

Pakistan improved greatly in the second quarter and could well have reduced the deficit through Ali Shan and Muhammad Irfan Jr, who both missed the target when they had a clear sight of goal.

Those missed opportunities were punished just before half time when Cedric Charlier's speculative cross-shot took a wicked deflection off the stick of Pakistan captain Ammad Butt and flew into the goal to give Belgium a 3-0 lead at half time.

The team coached by Shane McLeod added a fourth goal to their collection when Sebastien Dockier finished off a flowing team move to leave Pakistan with a mountain to climb in the final 25 minutes. As they have done throughout the event in Bhubaneswar, the Green Shirts gave it everything but could not get the goal their endeavour deserved, with Tom Boon completing a 5-0 score-line from the penalty spot in the fourth quarter.

It was a special day for Belgium duo Florent van Aubel and Simon Gougnard, with the former making his 200th international

appearance for his country and the latter being named Odisha Player of the Match for his creativity in midfield.

Speaking after the game, Van Aubel said: "I think we played our best game in the tournament so far. Winning 5-0 and getting into the quarter-finals, I think it's really good. The whole team worked really hard to get there, so it's really positive. We knew we were going to face Germany or the Netherlands in the next round. It's Germany. We have to get ready for them. They're playing really well at the moment, so I expect a tough game."

With a quarter-final meeting against host nation India on the line, the cross-over match between the Netherlands and Canada produced a fascinating opening fifteen minutes as the Pan-American team frustrated the European champions.

Canada goalkeeper David Carter - later named Player of the Match - bravely charged down a shot from Bob de Voogd that crashed against the shot-stopper's helmet, while Mink van der Weerden wasted a penalty corner effort towards the end of the period. The breakthrough arrived in the opening moments of the second period when defender Lars Balk found himself at the other end of the

field to smash a blistering first-time effort under the cross-bar, producing the sort of finish that most strikers would be proud of.

Carter denied the Dutch a second when he saved a penalty stroke from Jeroen Hertzberger, although the Netherlands did take a 2-0 lead into half-time when Robbert Kemperman guided home a cross-shot from Thijs van Dam.

The Netherlands put some clear water between themselves and the Canadians with a solid display in the third quarter, netting twice to take the score to 4-0. Van Dam scored the third while Kemperman was the creator of the Netherlands' fourth goal, stealing possession and dancing through the Canadian defence before eliminating goalkeeper Carter with a perfect pass to Thierry Brinkman, who walked the ball over the line to effectively end the contest with quarter to spare.

The scoring was completed in the fourth quarter by Thijs van Dam, starting and finishing a rapid counter-attack to give the Netherlands a 5-0 victory over Canada to confirm a quarter-final meeting against India tomorrow. Speaking after the match, Netherlands captain Billy Bakker said: "We wanted to play better against Canada than we played

against Pakistan. We just looked at the statistics and we had about 30 circle penetrations and we made five goals, so it could be more but we should be proud of this result. We're very happy and we're confident for playing the quarter-final against India. It's lovely. My team gets a lot of energy in front of this big crowd and this enormous stadium so it's only an advantage for us."

The first two matches of the Odisha Hockey Men's World Cup Bhubaneswar 2018 quarter-finals will take place today 12th December. Reigning Olympic champions Argentina face England, cross-over winners against New Zealand, at 16:45IST before reigning world champions Australia play France - who defeated China in the cross-overs - at 19:00.

Assessing his team's performances so far whilst also looking towards the meeting against Olympic title holders Argentina, England's Adam Dixon said: "We've grown into the tournament and improved game by game. Our young players have really stepped up and made themselves counted for. Argentina are a strong and experienced team and we will have to be at our best to get a result. However, we are full of confidence and looking forward to the challenge."

SPOTLIGHT

## Accreditation Canada awards Aspetar Diamond Level status



Aspetar, the orthopaedic and sports medicine hospital, has been awarded Diamond Level Status under the Qmentum International Accreditation Program - an internationally recognised system that focuses on quality and safety throughout all aspects of an organisation's services including governance and leadership, direct care and infrastructure in order to benefit patients, staff and other stakeholders.

This is the highest level of accreditation award possible under the program and awarded to highly committed and quality-oriented organisations that monitor outcomes, use evidence and best practice to improve services.

The accreditation program is administered by Accreditation Canada.

After a rigorous process including an assessment survey visit in November 2018, Aspetar is now the first hospital in the State of Qatar to be awarded this coveted Diamond Level Status.

The comprehensive assessment evaluates a range of criteria related to quality, safety, risk management and ethics across medical services and support services including financial, IT, human resources,

infrastructure and administration. Overall, Aspetar complied with 99.5% of applicable standards during the accreditation survey visit.

Commenting on the accreditation, Aspetar Director General, Mohamed al-Suwaidi, said: "This accreditation cements the hospital's exceptional commitment to quality, safety and the delivery of world-class medical care and services in accordance with international standards. It further reinforces Aspetar's commitment to providing the highest quality clinical outcomes for patients. It also brings Aspetar a step closer towards our vision of being a "global leader in sports medicine and exercise science by 2020."

He continued: "This is a milestone to be celebrated, and I extend my heartfelt thanks to all our staff and our partners across Aspire Zone Foundation that helped contribute to this major milestone."

The latest achievement follows earlier excellence awards in 2017 when Aspetar was officially recognised by World Health Organisation's Patient Safety Friendly Hospital (PSFH) level 3 award and in 2015 received Platinum Level accreditation status from the Accreditation Canada International (ACI).

### Ireland flyhalf Sexton extends contract until 2021

World Rugby player of the year Johnny Sexton extended his contract with the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) yesterday to keep playing in his homeland until the end of the 2020/21 season.

Sexton, 33, was crowned as the world's best player for 2018 last month after leading Ireland to a Six Nations Grand Slam, a Test series victory in Australia and a first ever win over New Zealand on Irish soil, as well as spearheading Leinster's Champions Cup and Pro14 success at club level. "I am delighted to sign a new IRFU contract to continue to play for Leinster and Ireland. It is where I have always wanted to play so I am delighted to extend," said Sexton in an IRFU statement.

"We get looked after extremely well here and it is an exciting time for Irish Rugby. I am looking forward to hope-

fully being a part of that over the next few years" The 33-year-old fly-half has won 78 caps, scoring 738 points, and has twice toured with the British and Irish Lions. Sexton had a two-year spell with Racing Metro in France between 2013 and 2015 before returning to Leinster, where he is now expected to finish his career.

His contract was due to expire after next year's World Cup where Ireland are expected to challenge the All Blacks to win the tournament for the first time in Japan. "Johnny's hunger and drive mark him out as a truly world-class competitor," said IRFU performance director David Nucifora. "He is a model professional and has been at the centre of a lot of the success enjoyed by Irish Rugby over the past few years."

NBA

# James wins final duel with Wade as Lakers roll on

'It's tough. This is what you play for, playing against one of the greatest players ever'

AFP  
Los Angeles

LeBron James won the final instalment of his long rivalry with Dwyane Wade on Monday, scoring 28 points as the Los Angeles Lakers held on for a 108-105 victory over the Miami Heat at the Staples Center.

James and Wade, who arrived in the NBA together as part of a star-studded draft in 2003, have formed one of basketball's most famous rivalries and closest friendships over the course of their careers. Former teammates at the Miami Heat, where the duo won back-to-back NBA championships in 2012 and 2013, the two faced each other for the last time on Monday with Wade retiring after the 2018 season. The 31st meeting of the two men finished with a victory for James, who seized control of the contest in the fourth quarter to finish with 28 points, nine rebounds and 12 assists.

RESULTS		
Indiana	109-101	Washington
Philadelphia	116-102	Detroit
Boston	113-100	New Orleans
Sacramento	108-89	Chicago
Milwaukee	108-92	Cleveland
Oklahoma City	122-113	Utah
Dallas	101-76	Orlando
Denver	105-99	Memphis
Clippers	123-119	Phoenix
Golden State	116-108	Minnesota
Lakers	108-105	Miami

Wade scored 15 points off the bench for Miami, whose top scorer was Justise Winslow with 28 points. The Lakers win means James finished with 16 wins to Wade's 15 in head-to-head meetings between the two players. The two NBA icons embraced at the buzzer before swapping jerseys in a mutual show of respect.

"It's bitter sweet man," said James. "A lot of emotions for me right now, just knowing that I'm losing a brother in this game that I've had so many wars against, so many wars together."

"There's no better way to end it than here at the Staples Center. We're going to miss him in this league. That's for sure."

Wade paid an emotional tribute to James. "It's tough," he said. "This is what you play for, playing against one of the greatest players ever. Whether we were teammates or whether we were opponents, we brought the best out of each other. I'm just so grateful to have been drafted at the same time as this guy. "The friendship we have is beyond basketball. But I'm going to miss the shit out of this."



LeBron James (left) of the Los Angeles Lakers and Dwyane Wade of the Miami Heat pose after exchanging their jerseys after a 108-105 Laker win at Staples Center in Los Angeles. (Getty Images/AFP)

The win saw the Lakers improve to 17-10 in the Western Conference and was another sign that James's arrival is starting to bear fruit. Wade said he is confident James will be able to transform the Lakers into championship contenders. "He can do anything he wants. He's shown that, he's proven that," he said. "I have no doubt this team will be in the finals at some point."

Elsewhere Monday, Stephen Curry scored 38 points as the Golden State Warriors improved to 19-9 with a 116-108 win over the Minnesota Timberwolves.

**TRIPLE FOR WESTBROOK**

The Oklahoma City Thunder are in first place in the Western Conference, however, following their 122-113 win over the

Utah Jazz. Paul George scored 31 points and Russell Westbrook recorded his sixth triple double of the season as the Thunder bounced back from their upset loss against the Chicago Bulls on Friday to improve to 17-8.

Former NBA MVP Westbrook's triple included 12 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists. In Philadelphia, Joel Embiid set aside his recent indifferent form to score 24 points as the 76ers kept up the pressure on Eastern Conference leaders Toronto with a 116-102 win over the Detroit Pistons. Cameroon big man Embiid has reportedly grown increasingly frustrated with his form since the acquisition of Jimmy Butler. Last week he voiced unhappiness at his new positional role in the team

following Butler's arrival. Against Detroit on Monday, Butler left the court with a groin strain towards the end of the first quarter to allow Embiid to carry the offensive load for the Sixers. The 24-year-old had no difficulty imposing himself, adding eight rebounds and three assists in addition to his double-digit points tally. Ben Simmons had 18 points along with Furkan Korkmaz, who had 18 points from the bench for Philadelphia. Simmons also had 10 rebounds to complete a double-double. Small forward Luke Kennard led the scoring for Detroit with 28 points while Andre Drummond had 21. The win saw the Sixers improve to 19-9 to hold onto the third place in the Eastern Conference, two games back from leaders Toronto.

SPOTLIGHT

## Yankees not pursuing free agent Harper

By Erik Boland  
Newsday

This much Brian Cashman made clear on Day 1 of the winter meetings:

The Yankees will not be pursuing Bryce Harper.

They will, however, continue to be involved with the other big-ticket item of this year's free-agent class: Manny Machado.

"I've had several conversations with Dan Lozano about Manny Machado," Cashman said of the infielder's agent.

"So we are definitely focused in the marketplace in those areas of need and he obviously is available and solves that area of need. I'm not going to deny we've had a conversation or two."

A need that arose with the end-of-season news that Didi Gregorius would be missing the first two months of the season - at least - after undergoing Tommy John surgery on his right elbow.

Interest in Machado, however, does not mean the Yankees using unlimited means, both in terms of money and years committed, to get him.

"We're evaluating all opportunities that exist in the marketplace, both high end and low end and see how they fit in our world and if they do," Cashman said.

And Harper is not a fit, which Cashman stressed the most he has all offseason.

In saying that the Yankees have no room for Harper, Cashman rattled off Aaron Judge Giancarlo Stanton, Brett Gardner, Clint Frazier, Aaron Hicks and Jacoby Ellsbury as outfielders he already has on the roster.

"We don't have amount of dollars to be playing with in

any marketplace, so I think you want to ask about something that fits more," Cashman said.

"I've always said, 'follow what I say.' We're looking for a starter, we're looking for, how do we address the loss of Didi? At no time at all, all winter, have I said I'm looking for an outfielder. So that Harper stuff ... I'm surprised you're still asking."

Cashman, who also has said he's looking for a bullpen piece or two, saw two potential rotation targets come off the free-agent board last week. Patrick Corbin, rated by most teams, including the Yankees, as the best pitcher on the market, agreed to a six-year, \$140-million deal with the Nationals. Nathan Eovaldi, a former Yankee, re-upped with the Red Sox for four years and \$67.5 million. The Yankees never made an official offer to either player.

Cashman has had talks with the agent for left-hander JA Happ since early November and those discussions will continue in Las Vegas.

The Yankees will keep looking at the remaining free-agent pitchers - a group that includes Dallas Keuchel, Charlie Morton, Lance Lynn and Wade Miley - and Cashman said he's spoken to Scott Boras, the agent for Yusei Kikuchi, the Japanese lefthander just recently posted.

"We've stayed engaged throughout the marketplace on trades and free agency and we have our comfort levels," Cashman said.

"If and whenever we do match up on the trade or free-agent front, we'll have something to show for it. But there's no guarantee that'll happen anytime soon. It could happen today. We're very active, but at the same time disciplined about what we're willing to do and we're not willing to do."



NHL

# Stamkos' hat-trick helps Lightning handle Rangers

Reuters  
New York

Steven Stamkos recorded his ninth career hat-trick and first in more than four years, and the Tampa Bay Lightning ran their season-high winning streak to seven games with a 6-3 victory over the visiting New York Rangers on Monday.

Stamkos recorded his first hat trick since October 13, 2014, by getting a pair of power-play goals in the opening two periods, then adding an even-strength goal in the third.

It was the first time he scored two power-play goals since Dec. 26, 2015, and the eighth time overall. The second goal made him the third player in team history to get reach 700 points, joining Martin St Louis (953) and Vincent Lecavalier (874).

Stamkos has eight goals in Tampa Bay's fourth winning streak of at least seven games in the past three seasons. He finished off the hat trick with 9:19 left in the third period with a one-timer from the low slot that sailed past Rangers goalie Henrik Lundqvist.

Anthony Cirelli scored twice and former Rangers defenseman Ryan McDonagh scored the go-ahead goal in the second period as the Lightning won for the 10th time in 11 games and scored at least five goals for the eighth time in that stretch.

Tampa Bay's Louis Domingue made 23 saves as he continues to fill in for starting goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy, who returned to the ice in practice on Saturday for the

RESULTS		
Pittsburgh	2-1	Islanders
Detroit	3-1	Los Angeles
Tampa Bay	6-3	Rangers

first time since breaking his foot last month. Cirelli sealed the win on an empty-netter in the final minute after New York's Jesper Fast nearly scored his second goal of the night.

Kevin Hayes scored twice in the first period for the Rangers, who could not overcome allowing six power plays and fell to 2-5-1 in their past eight games. New York went ahead with 7:41 left in the first period when Ryan Strome made a drop pass to Hayes, whose backhand from the right circle deflected off McDonagh's right skate and over Domingue's stick.

Tampa Bay tied the game on Stamkos' one-timer from the left circle with 5:51 left in the first, but Hayes tapped in a rebound from the doorstep 58 seconds later. Tampa Bay tied the game moments after Domingue made a glove save on Hayes during an odd-man rush.

Stamkos tied the game for a second time when he ripped a rising one-timer from the left circle under the crossbar for his 700th career point. The Lightning move in front on McDonagh's wrist shot from the right circle that trickled under Lundqvist with 7:18 left in the second. Cirelli's takeaway on Rangers defenseman Fredrik Claesson led to him sliding the puck through the crease and past Lundqvist midway through the third period

for a 4-2 lead. Stamkos capped his hat trick before Fast scored at 17:34 of the third.

**HOWARD STOPS 42 SHOTS AS WINGS CLIP KINGS**

Jimmy Howard made 42 saves, and Dylan Larkin scored an unassisted goal as the host Detroit Red Wings topped the Los Angeles Kings 3-1 on Monday. Larkin has two goals and five assists over the past four games. Dennis Cholowski and Frans Nielsen also scored for Detroit, which bounced back from a 3-2 home loss to the New York Islanders two nights earlier.

Anze Kopitar scored the lone goal for the struggling Kings, who kept constant pressure on Howard but couldn't break through until the third period. Jonathan Quick stopped 18 shots for the Kings, who have lost five of their past seven games. The teams were awarded just one power play apiece and didn't score on their opportunity. The Kings had a 10-8 edge in shots on goal in the opening period, but the Red Wings scored the only goal.

Christoffer Ehn threaded a pass through traffic to Cholowski, who lifted a shot over Quick's right shoulder just inside the crossbar at the 6:32 mark. That gave the rookie defenseman five goals this season. Jacob de la Rose also assisted on the goal. Detroit made it 2-0 at the 6:06 mark of the second period when Nielsen banged in his own rebound for his fifth goal. Andreas Athanasiou and Thomas Vanek were credited with assists. Nielsen had gone scoreless into the month of December until he collected his first goal against Boston on December 1.



Tampa Bay Lightning centre Steven Stamkos (centre) is congratulated by right wing Nikita Kucherov (no 86), defenseman Victor Hedman, centre Yanni Gourde (right) as he scores a goal against the New York Rangers during the second period at Amalie Arena. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

## SPOTLIGHT

## Elliott frustrated with officiating – and justifiably so

By Mac Engel  
Fort Worth Star-Telegram

The NFL has a rulebook, which you can read for fun, but just don't bother applying it to an actual NFL game.

Despite the league's best intentions to outline what is and is not a penalty, and making a violent game "safe," all infractions are not the same. With increasing regularity, nothing a ref calls makes any sense.

Starting with the first play of the game, the Cowboys' 29-23 overtime win over the Philadelphia Eagles on Sunday featured some of the most bewildering officiating for any game this season. I asked Cowboys running back Ezekiel Elliott if the players are frustrated with the "pattern" of calls this season.

"I think a little bit but what we do here is focus on what we can control. We can't control what the refs do," Zeke said.

"We've just got to do our best if we're penalised, we recover take that penalty and try to make

the best of it. We did a great job recovering from penalties we have, especially late in the game."

With 11:32 remaining in the game, Zeke drew a 15-yard penalty for lowering his head and initiating contact to erase a 14-yard catch and run. He became the first offensive player to be penalised for such an infraction this season.

"I mean when you're on that sideline, I got to protect myself," Zeke said. "And if a guy's going low, I got to go low too. The rule is meant for the betterment of the game. The rule is for our safety and if there was illegal helmet-to-helmet contact on there, that's something I need to go look at and work on. That's not OK. It's just a tough play."

Official Clete Blakeman told a pool reporter after the game, "It applies to both offense and defense. The ruling was basically he lowered his head and initiated the contact against the defender with the helmet as it's defined in the rulebook. ... We feel good about the call. A couple of us had it as the same foul from different

angles."

No disagreeing that, by definition, Zeke's play was a penalty. No argument that implementing such a rule will eventually force offensive players to simply keep their head up, thereby reducing the risk of injury.

The argument is that sort of hit is routine in an NFL game.

Speaking of tough plays and questionable calls, the Eagles began the game with one when Cowboys returner Jourdan Lewis clearly lost a fumble that the Eagles recovered on the opening kickoff. The ruling was that there was not a clear recovery.

"I knew I was down so I was not worried about it," Lewis said after the game.

Uh yeah ... not sure the Eagles agree with that, especially after replays show he lost the ball before his knee was down, and the Eagles came up with the ball.

Blakeman said of that call: "We've got to have clear evidence that there was a fumble, which we did. We confirmed there was a fumble in the replay review. The second component of it is was there a clear recovery.

And that's just what we couldn't confirm with the angles we had ... so we had to stay with the ruling on the field."

OK, moving on from that logic-defying explanation, with 2:55 remaining in regulation, Eagles tight end Dallas Goedert caught a pass and turned it into a 75-yard touchdown.

The play was overturned when officials called him for offensive pass interference that was questionable, at best. And by questionable I mean, horrendous.

On the next play, Cowboys defensive end Randy Gregory was penalised for a roughing the passer that appeared to be anything but. It was the second time in the fourth quarter Gregory was called for roughing the passer. All in all, the Cowboys were penalised 11 times for 111 yards. The Eagles were penalised five times for 49 yards.

Exactly how many of those combined 16 penalties were actual infractions, we may never know. You can read the rule book, but don't expect those regulations to be anything other than selectively enforced.



Philadelphia Eagles Nigel Bradham tries to take down Cowboys running back Ezekiel Elliott during their NFL game on Sunday.

## NFL

## Defence dominates as Seahawks beat up on Vikings 21-7

Seahawks are the only NFC team other than the four division leaders that owns a winning record



Seattle Seahawks Chris Carson dives passed Ben Gedeon (No 42) of the Minnesota Vikings for a touchdown in the fourth quarter in Seattle. (Getty Images/TNS)

By Bob Condotta  
The Seattle Times

It was the kind of game that seemed to deserve a blocked field goal standing as the most memorable play.

The Seahawks, in their latest and maybe most mind-boggling effort at simply finding a way to win, beat Minnesota, 21-7, on Thursday night in front of 69,007 at CenturyLink Field.

They did so with their best defensive effort of the season. Ironically, this was overshadowed by a special teams play – their best defensive player, linebacker Bobby Wagner, leaped over the line of scrimmage to block a field goal with 5:46 left.

That kept the score at 6-0, which was in every way an accurate portrayal of the way the game had been played.

Seattle, though, then scored two touchdowns in a span of 18 seconds to blow the game open. Then, the Vikings then scored with 1:10 left to snap Seattle's first potential shutout since 2015. But the Seahawks will take it, getting their eighth win in their last 11 games since an 0-2 start. While it didn't clinch a

playoff spot for the Seahawks, it went a long way toward assuring one, with statistical models now giving Seattle a 99 percent chance of getting to the postseason. Now 8-5, the Seahawks are the only NFC team other than the four division leaders that owns a winning record. Minnesota, regarded as a Super Bowl favorite before the season, fell to 6-6-1.

Wagner's block was set up by a dizzying sequence in which the Vikings were first stopped on a fourth down at their 2. Then, after holding the Seahawks' offense and forcing a punt, Minnesota got the ball back and moved to the 29.

The Vikings got one first down to the 30.

But the drive stalled there thanks to consecutive pass breakups from Shaquill Griffin on second and third down, first against Stefon Diggs and then against Adam Theilen.

That set up a 47-yard field goal attempt by Dan Bailey.

Wagner, who once leapt over the line to block a field goal on the road against Arizona in 2016, jumped between the guard and tackle and blocked the kick. (That is a legal play –

a flag was initially thrown and a penalty could have been called if he had jumped over the center.)

Seattle's offense then finally broke through thanks to Russell Wilson redeeming what was statistically the worst passing game of his career – he finished with a career-low 72 yards – with a 40-yard scamper to set up a 2-yard touchdown by Chris Carson. That put Seattle ahead 14-0 with 2:53 left.

On Minnesota's next possession, Jacob Martin forced Kirk Cousins to fumble and Justin Coleman picked up the ball and returned it 29 yards for a touchdown with 2:35 left.

Thus, a game that once appeared like it might be remembered for Seattle's lost opportunities became yet another "W" in a season surprisingly filled with them. The Vikings threatened to take the lead early in the fourth quarter, driving to the 4 thanks to a 48-yard pass from Cousins to Diggs. But the Seattle defense – so good of late in the red zone – rose up again.

A run, an incomplete pass, and another run gained three yards and the Vikings decided to go for it from the 1.

From there, Cousins threw

behind tight end Kyle Rudolph with Bradley McDougald getting his hand in to break up the pass with 9:06 left.

Seattle, though, couldn't move it, forced to punt from its own 2, with a rare Michael Dickson mis-hit punt going just to the Seattle 41. Seattle then went three-and-out, but Wagner followed with his field goal block that ignited a party.

The Seahawks dominated the first half, outgaining the Vikings 175-61, including 136 rushing yards on 22 attempts against a Minnesota defense that came into the night allowing only 99 per game. But Seattle had just a 3-0 lead to show for it, twice being stopped on drives inside the Minnesota 20, and with the first half ending in disaster.

Seattle had a first-and goal at the 1 with 16 seconds left after a Wilson scramble. But thanks to the run Seattle had to take its final time out. And that led to disaster. On the next play, Wilson dropped back and rolled to the right. But with no one open, Wilson then tried to reverse course and then slipped. Once that happened, Minnesota's Danielle Hunter broke through and Wilson tried to spin out of trouble.

But once in Hunter's grasp, Wilson flung the ball to the right side of the field hoping for an incompleteness to stop the clock because a sack would have ended the half.

Only, the ball went right to Minnesota linebacker Eric Kendricks, who (fortunately for the Seahawks) had trouble controlling the ball cleanly and fell down. Otherwise, he might have run it back for a touchdown. As it was, it turned a long drive – 13 plays, 59 yards – into nothing.

The Seattle defense played as well as it has all season in the first half, holding Cousins to just 4-8 passing for 27 yards. The play of the Seattle secondary got a lot of attention during the week after the 49ers threw for 386 a week ago Sunday.

The Vikings also helped a bit by sticking true early to their stated quest to run the ball more – Minnesota came into the game with the highest percentage of passes in the NFL at 67 but ran it 11 times on 19 plays in the first half. The Vikings punted at the end of their first five drives (other than a kneel down at the end of the first half) and didn't get past their own 41.

## FOCUS

## Falcons failed to meet expectations, says coach Quinn

Reuters  
New York

Atlanta Falcons' Coach Dan Quinn isn't hiding from the fact that the Falcons (4-9) are one of the biggest disappointments in the NFL. "As we're sitting here at Week 15, we have four wins," Quinn told reporters.

"So you'd better believe we're evaluating everything and doing anything to get it right." Atlanta has dropped its past five games. Early-season injuries began the team's derailment, but mistakes and inconsistent play have continued the decline.

"As we're going through it, from players to staff to everything, we want to make sure we look at the body of work and get clear, concise evaluations on everybody," Quinn said. "When you're standing where we're at, it's not what you want to do, but that's part of it and what we're looking at for sure. If you're clearly at four wins during this time, then we have not met expectations."

Carolina Panthers: A once-promising campaign has disintegrated with five consecutive setbacks. Carolina has gone from battling the New Orleans Saints for the NFC West lead to being an outsider in the NFC wild-card chase. "Things happen," veteran defensive end Julius Peppers said. "Your plans don't always

work out how you want them to." That is certainly true with the Panthers, but Peppers said the team still has a positive vibe.

"To be honest with you, I don't feel like there is a loss of confidence or anything," Peppers said. "We're just not putting a good product on the field."

Meanwhile, wideout Devin Funchess, who is slated for free agency after the season, played in just 32 of 72 snaps Sunday in Carolina's loss to the Cleveland Browns and has just three catches over the past three games. Rookie DJ Moore played 66 snaps vs. the Browns and second-year pro Curtis Samuel played 58.

New Orleans Saints: The offense came to life by scoring 25 points over the final 19-plus minutes Sunday in the Saints' 28-14 victory over the Tampa Bay Buccaneers after a slump of more than 6 1/2 quarters. New Orleans scored just 13 points during its funk – a stunning development for a team that averaged 41 points over its previous five games while scoring at least 30 in each.

"A lot of people expect us to come out and be perfect, but that's just not reality," Saints running back Alvin Kamara told reporters. "You know, people make mistakes. We may start slow sometimes. But it's not when adversity hits, it's how you respond to it. And I think this team responds well to adversity."

## BADMINTON

## Malaysian star Lee reveals tears over cancer diagnosis

AFP  
Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian badminton great Lee Chong Wei has revealed how he broke down in tears after learning he had nose cancer – and detailed the "nightmare" treatment that left him unable to speak or eat.

Lee, who is eyeing a return to action next year, told *The Star* that he was about to leave for a training session when his wife broke the news, after she received a call from a doctor.

"She came towards me, hugged me and cried. I knew it was bad news. It's nose cancer, she broke the news," the 36-year-old said, according to the *Malaysian* newspaper. "My badminton bag slipped from my grasp and I started to cry too. I slumped on the sofa crying and asked why it had to be me."

The three-time Olympic silver medalist said the cancer was detected following a check-up in July, after he had been unwell.

It wasn't until September that officials revealed he had cancer and was having treatment

in Taiwan – opting for specialists there rather than in China, where he feared his story may be leaked, or Japan or South Korea because of the language barrier.

Lee, the former long-time world number one, said he went through 33 sessions of proton therapy treatment, where beams are aimed at the cancer, calling it "a nightmare".

"By the third week, it has taken a toll on my throat. I could not speak or eat," he said. "I'm just so glad that the worst is over now."

Lee, now down to 15th in the world rankings, is expected to return to training next month, although he is still waiting for the all-clear from his doctors.

He said his comeback was motivated by the prospect of playing a fifth Olympics at Tokyo 2020, after finishing runner-up in 2008, 2012 and 2016. "I really want to go for one more Olympics to make it my fifth consecutive appearance," said Chong Wei.

"No athlete from Malaysia has ever competed five times at the Olympics and I want to create history. It's not an easy feat to make it to five Olympics, that's equivalent to 20 years!"

SECOND ODI

# Brilliant Hope ton helps West Indies level series

Opener hits unbeaten 146 to guide the visitors past Bangladesh's 255-7 in Dhaka



West Indies' Shai Hope (right) plays a shot as Bangladesh's Mushfiqur Rahim looks on during the second ODI in Dhaka yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Dhaka

Shai Hope smashed a brilliant century as West Indies edged Bangladesh by four wickets in the second one-day international to level the three-match series 1-1 in Dhaka yesterday.

Opener Hope hit an unbeaten 146 off 144 balls, guiding West Indies to 256-6 in 49.4 overs after the visitors relied on three wickets from paceman Oshane Thomas to restrict Bangladesh to 255-7 in 50 overs.

Hope shared 71-run in an unbroken seventh wicket stand with Keemo Paul to help West Indies get their first victory on the tour and stay alive in the series after they suffered a five-wicket loss in the opening match on Sunday.

Paul, who remained unbeaten on 18, pushed spinner Mahmudullah towards midwicket to complete the victory.

The fate of the game was

Scorecard		
<b>BANGLADESH</b>		
T. Iqbal c Roach b Bishoo	50	(Mahmudullah) 5-208 (Sarkar), 6-234 (Das), 7-239 (Shakib)
L. Das c Hetmyer b Paul	8	<b>Bowling:</b> Roach 10-0-39-1 (w2, nb1), Thomas 10-0-54-3 (w3, nb2), Chase 3-0-22-0 (w3), Paul 10-0-68-1 (w1, nb1), Bishoo 10-1-27-1 (nb1), Powell 7-0-41-1
I. Kayes c Hope b Thomas	0	
M. Rahim c Hope b Thomas	62	
Shakib Al Hasan b Roach	65	
Mahmudullah c Hetmyer c Powell	30	
S. Sarkar c Bishoo b Thomas	6	
M. Mortaza not out	6	
M. Hasan not out	10	
<b>Extras</b> (b1, lb3, w9, nb5)	18	
<b>Total</b> (seven wickets; 50 overs)	255	
<b>Fall of Wickets:</b> 1-14 (Kayes), 2-125 (Iqbal), 3-132 (Rahim), 4-193		
<b>WEST INDIES</b>		
C. Hemraj lbw b Hasan	3	R. Chase c Iqbal b Rahman 9
S. Hope not out	146	K. Paul not out 18
D. Bravo b Hossain	27	<b>Extras</b> (lb 5, w6, nb1) 12
M. Samuels c Rahim b Rahman	26	<b>Total</b> (six wickets; 49.4 overs) 256
S. Hetmyer c sub b Hossain	14	<b>Fall of Wickets:</b> 1-5 (Hemraj), 2-70 (Bravo), 3-132 (Samuels), 4-155 (Hetmyer), 5-157 (Powell), 6-185 (Chase)
R. Powell c Sarkar b Mortaza	1	<b>Bowling:</b> Shakib 10-0-28-0, Hasan 9-0-39-1 (w1), Rahman 10-1-63-2 (w2), Mortaza 10-1-52-1 (w2, nb1), Mahmudullah 1.4-0-12-0, Hossain 9-0-57-2 (w1)
		<b>RESULT:</b> West Indies won by four wickets

hanging in the balance until Hope struck three fours off pace bowler Mustafizur Rahman in the penultimate over.

Hope, who has now three centuries in ODIs, hit 12 fours and three sixes in his innings.

"I just kept backing myself

and knew that as long as I bat till the end, we will win. I asked Keemo to bat deep. It wasn't an easy wicket in the beginning," man of the match Hope said.

Rubel Hossain and Mustafizur claimed two wickets each for Bangladesh giving away 57 and

63 runs respectively. Shakib Al Hasan, Mushfiqur Rahim and Tamim Iqbal earlier each scored a half-century to steer Bangladesh to a decent total at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium. Shakib top-scored with 65 off

62 deliveries while Mushfiqur and Tamim made 62 and 50 respectively after West Indies invited the hosts to bat first.

Mushfiqur and Tamim laid the foundation of the innings with a 111-run second wicket stand after Oshane Thomas worked up lively pace early in the innings.

Thomas, who returned with bowling figures of 3-54, forced opener Liton Das to leave the field with a toe injury before handing Imrul Kayes a duck for West Indies' first breakthrough.

Leg-spinner Devendra Bishoo dismissed Tamim, who faced 63 balls, to break his partnership with Mushfiqur, who became the second victim of Thomas.

Shakib, who smashed six fours and a six, then guided the lower-order to give Bangladesh a competitive score.

"It was a 50-50 match in the end, but we couldn't hold onto the pressure. It was a good match. Hopefully we'll come back strong in the next game," said Bangladesh captain Mashrafe Mortaza.

FOCUS

# Buoyant India keen to carry momentum on to Perth

Reuters  
Adelaide

Having become the first Indian team to win a Test series-opener on Australian soil, Virat Kohli's side are determined to keep the momentum rolling into the second clash in Perth and inch closer to a breakthrough series triumph Down Under.

India were made to work harder than expected in the 31-run win at Adelaide Oval, and their bowlers will have only three days' rest before taking to the field again at Perth Stadium on Friday.

Despite the quick turnaround, Kohli suggested the tourists were leaping out of their skins to land another blow on Tim Paine's shaky side in the four-match series.

"They are at their peak, all of them together and it's something that we as batsman look at as an opportunity to put in good performances," Kohli said of his attack, rated India's most potent in years.

"We will be, in every Test match, gunning for a result."

Compared to his counterpart Paine, weighed down by a sore index finger and a long list of concerns, Kohli heads to Perth with a spring in his step.

India's Ishant Sharma, Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Shami enjoyed a stellar debut as a pace unit in Australia, sharing 14 of the 20 wickets at Adelaide Oval, bowling with sustained pressure and limiting the hosts to a single 50-run partnership.

Kohli's batsmen got off to a shaky start and needed man-of-the-match Cheteshwar Pujara's glittering 123 to achieve a modest first innings total of 250.

However, after Australia were bowled out for 235, they were quick to seize the momentum and build valuable partnerships to all but bat Australia out of the game.

Though beaten and vulnerable, a chastened Australia can be expected to fight back hard on a wicket likely to suit their classy pace attack.

Kohli will hope for more from the recalled opener Murali Vijay, who has struggled to justify his place in the side this year. He managed only 11 and 18 in Adelaide, undone by Australia's pace spearhead Mitchell Starc both times.

With sidelined young opener Prithvi Shaw seen limping around Adelaide Oval after his ankle injury during a tour match, the veteran Vijay should have another chance to stake his claim.

Kohli, who struck four centuries in the 2014-15 tour of Australia, is also due a score after being dismissed for three and 34 in Adelaide.

The India skipper noted that his team's tail-end batting was trumped by Australia's as their last five wickets could only muster 25 runs in the second innings.

A more determined application could have set Paine's side a higher target than the 323 for victory, while saving India a lot of nerves on day five.

India first toured Australia in 1947-48 and have yet to win a Test series Down Under in 11 previous attempts.



Indian players celebrate their victory over Australia in the first Test in Adelaide on Monday. (AFP)

SOLUTIONS

# Australia look for quick fix ahead of second Test

AFP  
Adelaide

Australia skipper Tim Paine admitted there was little time to regroup after the first Test defeat to India, but said he had no doubt under-fire fast bowling spearhead Mitchell Starc would bounce back in Perth.

The second Test starts on Friday with India full of confidence after their tense, 31-run win in Adelaide – their first in Australia in a decade, and first ever in the opening Test as they search for a maiden series win Down Under.

Australia skipper Tim Paine admitted there were shortcomings in Adelaide, but he was largely happy with how the team performed.

"There was a number of reasons why we lost," he said.

"We thought we could have cleaned them up on day one for 200-210 and we let that slip a bit. Clearly we'd like to score more than 230 in a first innings in Australia. There's things we do need to tighten up."

Starc received some criticism for some wayward spells, in-



Australia's fast bowler Mitchell Starc (centre) received some criticism for some wayward spells, including a string of costly byes, in India's second innings in Adelaide. (AFP)

cluding a string of costly byes, in India's second innings in Adelaide. But Paine said the left-arm paceman would come good.

"He didn't set the world on fire but I think, for a long time, there's been a really big gap between Starc's best and his

worst," said Paine. "And from what I'm seeing, that is getting closer and closer every day. Was he at his best? Probably not. But I still thought he played his role."

One key area of concern is opening batsmen. Debutant Mar-

cus Harris scored 26 in each innings and showed enough to warrant another crack, but one-day specialist Aaron Finch failed both times, out for a duck and then 11.

Paine acknowledged the top order must start delivering, but indicated they are likely to stick

with the same line-up although there could be further discussions with coach Justin Langer before Friday's team is named.

"Justin's the coach and he's got a fair say," Paine said. "So I imagine if he wants to talk about it, it will be on the agenda when we get to Perth."

On what is expected to be a bouncy and seam-friendly pitch at the new Perth Stadium, similar to the WACA Ground it has replaced, spin great Shane Warne said he would like to see all-rounder Marcus Stoinis replace middle-order batsman Peter Handscomb.

"Perth, given what we are hearing, it's going to be a nice, fast bouncy pitch, so I would be making one change and that would be to bring in Marcus Stoinis who got 85 in the last (Sheffield) Shield match and a 60 in the Shield game before," said Warne.

"But mainly it would be for his all-round capabilities, just to relieve a little pressure on Starc who might be able to bowl one less spell and be a little bit better."

Paine himself is a slight doubt after being on the right finger by a Mohammed Shami delivery – the same finger that has required several operations in the past.

SPOTLIGHT

# Australia Big Bash League swaps coin toss for bat flip

AFP  
Sydney

Australia's high-octane Big Bash League (BBL) will break with tradition and do away with the coin toss when its new season starts later this month.

Instead captains will flip a bat, calling "hills" or "flats" rather than heads or tails.

"For me it's a great moment which reflects what BBL is about," Kim McConnie, Cricket Australia's head of the Big Bash League said on the competition's website.

"Some people don't like change but I'd also challenge people to say when was the last time anyone watched the coin toss or really focused on it to a great extent?"

"Now we are making it much more relevant to families, we are creating a moment which is

much more fitting with kids." Australia's Twenty20 BBL has steadily gained traction since it was launched eight years ago with the fast-paced, family-friendly competition attracting big crowds and strong television ratings.

It has always tried to innovate and was the tournament that first introduced Zings flashing stumps, which light up when the balls are dislodged.

They are now used in international matches.

McConnie dismissed concerns over the fairness of the bat-flipping process.

"I've got it from great authority at our (bat-maker) Kookaburra friends that this is a tested and weighted bat to deliver that equity," she said.

The new BBL season starts on December 19 and runs through till February 17, featuring eight teams. Adelaide Strikers are the defending champions.

FOCUS

# Big challenges ahead, starting with prepping for 2022: QFA president

HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani re-elected for four years

QNA  
Doha

**Q**atar Football Association (QFA) president **HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani** stressed on Monday that the association will embark on a new journey filled with significant challenges awaiting the new Executive Board, most notably the World Cup 2022 in Qatar, the Asian Cup 2019 in the UAE, and the participation in Copa America 2019 in Brazil.

Sheikh Hamad was re-elected as the president of the association for the next four years at the QFA's General Assembly at the Sheraton Hotel, with representatives of the 17 football clubs and Qatar Stars League attending. It also led to the election of Ibrahim Khalil al-Mohannadi, Sheikh Ahmed bin Ahmed al-Thani, Ahmed al-Buainain, Saoud al-Mohannadi, Abdulrahman al-Qahtani, and Hani Talib Ballan.

QFA president said that it was worth noting that the youth team also qualified for the World Cup, while Qatar clubs have performed well in the AFC Champions League. He expressed hope that they can go even further next year, and praised Asia's best player Abdulkareem Hassan. He also said that he hopes the coming period will bring even more achievements as the national team gets set to participate in Copa America.



He said the team is currently being prepared well, highlighting that that Copa America will be an important criterion for measuring the level of the team

before the World Cup. As for refereeing, Sheikh Hamad said it was improving significantly. He highlighted that VAR will also be imple-

mented in the next round of the QNB Stars League, adding that the technology was not used sooner for technical reasons. He acknowledged that the

only problem facing football in Qatar is the lack of fans, which he said must be addressed swiftly. He said that the technical level is somewhat high, but the lack of attendance makes the matches resemble friendly games, stressing that the next phase requires the solidarity of all to solve this problem.

He praised the presence of representatives of all clubs and their role in enriching the activities of the General Assembly meeting with their important questions and discussions aimed at developing the reality of football in Qatar.

After the president's speech concluded, Qatar, Al Shahaniya and Al Ahli clubs were appointed to review the minutes of the meeting. Al Arabi, Al Khor and Al Mesaimmer were appointed as auditors of the votes. The minutes of the previous general assembly meeting held on December 13, 2017 were also ratified.

Head of the electoral committee Abdullah Hamad al-Mulla thanked members of the general assembly for their cooperation.

At the end of the General Assembly, Sheikh Hamad thanked the clubs for their support of the board. He also congratulated the two new members, Sheikh Ahmed bin Hamad al-Thani (Al Ahli Club) and Abdul Rahman al-Qahtani (Mesaimmer Club) and wished success to the former members of the Committee Khalifa Khamis al-Sulaiti and Ali al-Thawadi.

SPOTLIGHT

## Qatar and Dutch football associations sign MoU



QFA secretary-general Mansoor al-Ansari (right) and KNVB secretary-general Gijs de Jong.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**T**he Qatar Football Association (QFA) and the Dutch Royal Football Association (KNVB) signed a memorandum of understanding at the QFA's headquarters in Al Bidda Tower yesterday.

QFA secretary-general Mansoor al-Ansari and KNVB secretary-general Gijs de Jong signed the agreement, which focuses on areas of cooperation between the two parties.

The signing ceremony was also attended by Dr Bahiä Tahzib-Lie, the ambassador of the Netherlands; Johan van Geijn, KNVB's director of International CSR Partnerships/WorldCoaches; and Johan Neeskens, former well-known international football player of the Dutch national team.

The two federations aim to establish a closer co-operation between themselves and this agreement intends to specify ways of sharing expertise and resources, while at the same time supporting the development of football in both nations.

The memorandum signed will see both associations invest in bilateral relations and share expertise and experiences in the areas of training of technical personnel, sports science, and youth development.

Al-Ansari said, "We are proud to sign this cooperation agreement with The KNVB in order to develop our existing strong ties for the development and promotion of football in Qatar and the Netherlands. This is a great opportunity for us to exchange experiences and expertise in different aspects including national teams, grassroots football, youth development and player performance which will have a direct positive impact on football ahead of the World Cup in Qatar."

Commenting on the occasion, De Jong said, "Cooperation with Qatar FA fits perfectly in our international strategy, where we want to be seen as an open and innovative association, looking for impact and working for the future of our football. We see similarities with QFA, both being responsible for football in smaller countries within the football family and we can learn a lot from each other. Cooperation in football is important for developments towards the future, related to a fair, equal and transparent game, which is played and watched worldwide by millions."

Tahzib-Lie stated: "We are delighted that Qatar Football Association and the Royal Dutch Football Association signed today a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to enhance bilateral co-operation. It demonstrates the strong commitment of the Netherlands to enthusiastically work with Qatar towards a more vibrant and diverse sports sector. The development of female football features prominently in the MoU. This is important as football has huge potential to empower. We are also thrilled that the signing of the MoU takes place shortly after Russia handed over the relay baton for hosting the FIFA World Cup 2022 to Qatar. It is amazing to see how Qatar works hard towards its success and overcoming the challenges that lie in its way. The Netherlands is happy to help create a lasting positive legacy."

The delegation was also present for the opening of the refresher women WorldCoaches program held at the headquarters of the Qatar Women Sports Committee.

Following the official meeting, Mr. de Jong and his accompanying delegation were then given an exclusive tour of Al Bidda Tower's 'Legacy Pavilion' - which brings to life the plans for the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

### Khalifa tennis complex gets ready for 2019 Qatar ExxonMobil

With less than three weeks to go before the 2019 edition of Qatar ExxonMobil Open, the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex in Doha has started to wear a new look as the necessary branding materials are already being put in place. The annual tennis tournament will be held at the venue from December 31, 2018 to January 5, 2019. As parts of the preparations, the courts are getting the required facelifts while other facilities are being put in place to ensure another very suc-

cessful week-long feast of tennis. Novak Djokovic, the current Wimbledon and US Open champion, tops the entry list of star players billed to feature at this year's event. He will be joined by the likes Dominic Thiem, Nikolov Basilashvili, David Goffin, Karen Khachanov and this year's French Open semifinalist Marco Cecchinato. Qatar ExxonMobil Open is one of the season-opening events on the ATP World Tour. Tournament director Karim Alami said, "Tennis fans are set to witness the best of their be-

loved sport as the world's top players compete in Doha yet again. Qatar ExxonMobil Open has earned the reputation of being one of the best organised tournaments on the ATP tour and this year won't be an exception. Fans are guaranteed the best of entertainment as they watch their beloved stars slug it out on the courts of the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex." The tickets for the tournament are currently on sale online at www.qatartennis.org and at the City Centre, Landmark and Villaggio malls.



BOTTOMLINE

## Italian fencing team concludes training camp at Aspire Academy

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**T**he Italian national U14 fencing team recently concluded a week-long training camp at Aspire Academy.

The 12 young fencers travelled to Doha as part of a joint initiative between Aspire Academy, the Italian Fencing Federation, and the Qatar Weightlifting and Fencing Federation. This alliance was formed in December 2017 to develop young Qatari and Italian fencers by providing them with quality training and top competition opportunities in both Qatar and Italy.

As part of this partnership, Aspire Academy can host annual training camps for Italy's top young fencers, and the Italian Fencing Federation can mutually allow Qatari athletes to be included in Italian domestic competitions including the U14, U17, U20 and the senior circuits, giving them international exposure.

The delegation was led by the Italian Fencing Federation president Giorgio Scarso, who was excited to be back in Qatar.

"The relationship between Italy and Qatar stretches beyond these fencing training camps and serves as a cultural exchange between the two nations and their people. This training camp con-



firming the agreement we entered into force with our Qatari partners and Aspire Academy and we are happy to put into action what we have agreed to last year. We look forward to the continuation of Italian and Qatari fencers travelling and training with each other," he said. Commenting on the benefits of the training camp to Qatari athletes, Qatar national fencing team and Aspire Academy's coach Massimo Omeri said, "The training camp offers great benefits to fencers from Qatar and Italy. The Italian team athletes are very competitive in Europe, and it's a great benefit for us. Our fencer Ali Turki will join a senior training camp in Italy which is deemed one of the top federations in the world. Ali has

improved his world ranking to No 46 and this is a great leap for fencing in Qatar."

Meanwhile, Italy's national team coach Serena Pivotti said, "We have trained together on all weapons including foil, epee and the sabre. I believe that Aspire Academy's athletes have a bright future and the president of the Italian Fencing Federation is very excited and wants to go further with this collaboration."

Whilst in Qatar, Aspire Academy provided sports science services for the Italian fencers, including strength and conditioning assessments, physiology, biomechanics, performance analysis, sports psychology, sports nutrition, physiotherapy and medical support in case of injuries.



Italy's national fencing team takes part in a training camp at Aspire Academy.