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HOCKEY | Page 4

**Australia, England grab World Cup semi-final spots**

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# GULF TIMES SPORT



CYCLING

**Team Sky upbeat despite loss of sponsor's backing**

Page 3

**UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE**

## CSKA dumped out of Europe despite stunning win at Real Madrid

AFP  
Paris

CSKA Moscow stunned a much-changed Real Madrid with a 3-0 victory at the Santiago Bernabeu yesterday, but still finished bottom of Champions League Group G as Viktoria Plzen beat Roma.

The Russian side, who also downed Real 1-0 in the reverse fixture, had to better Plzen's result to finish third and qualify for the Europa League.

But Plzen edged out Roma 2-1 in the Czech Republic to render CSKA's famous victory ultimately meaningless.

Holders Real had already progressed to the last 16 as group winners, with Roma through in

second place.

Home coach Santiago Solari boosted CSKA's hopes before kick-off by making seven changes to the starting XI which beat Huesca 1-0 in La Liga at the weekend, leaving Gareth Bale, Luka Modric, Raphael Varane and Toni Kroos on the bench.

Real's youngsters started brightly, with Vinicius Junior forcing visiting goalkeeper Igor Akinfeev into a fine one-handed save, and Marco Asensio then curling the ball against the crossbar.

But Viktor Goncharenko's CSKA claimed a shock lead in the 37th minute, as Fedor Chalov danced through the makeshift Madrid defence and bent a left-footed shot into the corner.

Georgiy Schennikov volleyed

home shortly before the interval after an excellent team move to leave Real facing an embarrassing loss.

At half-time Solari sent on Bale, the two-goal hero of last season's final triumph over Liverpool, with Kroos following soon after.

But it was CSKA who extended their advantage, as Arnor Sigurdsson fired low past Thibaut Courtois in the Real goal with 17 minutes to play.

It mattered little though, as Plzen secured a place in the Europa League last 32 thanks to Tomas Chory's 72nd-minute winner against Roma.

Midfielder Jan Kovarik tapped in to break the deadlock in the 62nd minute, only for Turkish youngster Cengiz Under to level for Roma midway through the

second half.

But Plzen extended their European campaign when Chory headed in after Kovarik's volley was pushed out by Antonio Mirante.

Teenage midfielder Luca Pellegrini was sent off in injury-time after picking up two bookings in quick succession, as Roma's winless run in all competitions stretched to five games.

**RESULTS**

**Group G: At Plzen, Czech Republic**  
Viktoria Plzen (CZE) 2 (Kovarik 62, Chory 72) Roma (ITA) 1 (Under 68)

**At Madrid**  
Real Madrid (ESP) 0 CSKA Moscow (RUS) 3 (Chalov 37, Schennikov 43, Sigurdsson 73)



CSKA Moscow's Fedor Chalov celebrates with teammates after scoring their first goal during the Champions League Group G match against Real Madrid in Madrid, Spain, yesterday. (Reuters)

**FOCUS**

# Qatar World Cup will meet high standards, say football officials at FIFA summit

From praise for the country's facilities to support for Qatar's initiatives in development of football, feedback was encouraging

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Officials attending the FIFA Executive Football Summit in Doha have said they are expecting 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar to be a memorable edition.

Iraq Football Association (IFA) president Abdul Khaliq Masood has said the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar will meet "high standards".

Masood said: "The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar will be ideal in everything. Qatar will meet all requirements - whether it is infrastructure, stadiums, transportation or hosting fans, it will be a World Cup that meets high standards."

He added: "It will be a unique World Cup since the distances between two stadiums is very less. It just takes minutes to go from one venue to another. You can actually watch two matches in a day and I am sure we will see an exciting World Cup."

Masood added AFC Presidential candidate Saud al-Mohannadi has every right to compete for the top post and that he can do a good job in projecting the image of Qatar so that his country has a voice in FIFA. Masood said al-Mohannadi has a likeable personality.

Syrian Football Federation president Fadi al-Dabbas praised Qatar's preparations for the 2022 World Cup.

"I am happy to be here for the FIFA gathering. It is a good opportunity to state our issues in front of the football family. It is also a good opportunity to discuss football plans," al-Dabbas said. He said FIFA officials have promised to visit Syria during the coming months.



QFA President HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani (left) with Iraq Football Association (IFA) president Abdul Khaliq Masood.

As for Qatar's preparations for hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup, he said: "As we have seen through the presentation at the workshop, there are tremendous preparations which are on-going. The Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy are doing a great job and we wish them success."

Bhutanese Football Federation president Dasho Ugen Tshechup

Dorji said he intends to support the candidature of al-Mohannadi for a seat on the FIFA Council.

"Qatar is the biggest supporter of the development of football in Asia. The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar will be seen by future generations as a model edition of the World Cup," he said. "It will be the best ever. I am sure of this."

Turkmenistan Football Asso-



Bhutanese Football Federation president Dasho Ugen Tshechup Dorji (right) arrives for the FIFA Executive Football Summit in Doha.



Philippines FA president Mariano Araneta.

ciation secretary-general Arslan Kyasovich expressed delight on visiting the Aspire Academy.

"Everything was high quality. The welcome accorded to us in Qatar was warm. I have the same impression about Aspetar, the sports medicine hospital. We are carrying a positive image of

Qatar with us. Hopefully we will have an understanding with QFA so that we could improve our bilateral relations further. We will look to have training camps here at your great facilities, maybe at the end of January or February.

"We will start a full collaboration next year with training camps, workshops and other exchange programmes. I take the opportunity to thank QFA for their wholehearted support extended to us.

"We haven't had the chance to visit the World Cup venues but at QFA headquarters we got to see the amazing projects that are about to be completed soon. We know Qatar is preparing eight great venues for the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

"The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, I think, would be of a high level. The World Cup in Qatar will be held in November and December and the weather is just great at this time of the year. I think the World Cup in Qatar will be unique, something that we may have not seen before," he said.



Syrian Football Federation president Fadi al-Dabbas speaks to the media on the sidelines of the summit.

Sudanese Football Federation secretary-general Dr Hassan Abu Gabal said, "First of all I would like to congratulate the QFA on their General Assembly held on Monday. Also I take this opportunity to congratulate the QFA President HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani on being re-elected for another four-year term. Mr Mansoor al-Ansari, the Secretary-General of QFA, has expressed their willingness to work with us to develop the game in a co-operative manner. I am sure we could join hands and take the game forward in both countries. Today at the FIFA gathering, there were a number of important issues discussed. I must say QFA is successfully hosting such key meetings along with FIFA. Such meetings are a great opportunity for football officials from around the world to gather and discuss the game's development."

He added: "I feel Qatar hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup is a great opportunity to showcase to the

world what sports means to people around this region. I have visited Qatar many times before and I have witnessed world-class sports events. Everything about Qatar is great news for the first-time visitors. From the Hamad International Airport to sports venues, you feel in awe watching the amazing infrastructure in the country."

Philippines FA president and FIFA Council member Mariano Araneta said, "I thank QFA for hosting this gathering. Each meeting is an opportunity to discuss the development of the game. As far as the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar is concerned, I am confident that the event here will have all the ingredients of success. I expect great organisation from Qatar."

Araneta added: "The infrastructure here in Qatar is truly world-class. Plus Qatar has great experience of hosting top-class sports events. I take this opportunity to thank the QFA family for taking great efforts to have this gathering."

## INDIA'S TOUR OF AUSTRALIA

# India quicks getting the thoroughbred treatment

Perth Stadium curator is keen to produce a fast, bouncy wicket for that would not be out of place at the WACA



India's Jasprit Bumrah (left) celebrates with captain Virat Kohli after taking a wicket on the fifth day of the first Test against Australia in Adelaide on Monday. Pace bowlers Bumrah, Ishant Sharma and Mohamed Shami took 14 of 20 wickets at Adelaide Oval. (Reuters)

Reuters  
Melbourne

India are treating their pace bowlers like prize-winning thoroughbreds after the series-opening win over Australia in Adelaide while cautioning them against straining too hard at the reins when the second match gets underway in Perth.

Ishant Sharma, Mohamed Shami and Jasprit Bumrah took 14 of 20 wickets at Adelaide Oval in a fine debut as a pace trio on Australian soil that helped fire the tourists to a 31-run win on Monday.

Former England captain Michael Vaughan wrote on Twitter that India skipper Virat Kohli and actress wife Anushka Sharma had given up their business class seats to two of the quicks for the three and a half hour flight from Adelaide to Perth on Tuesday.

India coach Ravi Shastri said

all three were being spared net duties on Tuesday in a bid to freshen up before day one of the second Test starting at Perth Stadium on Friday.

"I think fast bowlers are a precious commodity and they need to be taken care of like what you do with a racehorse," India bowling coach Bharat Arun told reporters in Perth yesterday.

"And that's exactly what's happening."

Friday's Test will be the first played at the new Perth Stadium, which has a drop-in pitch and succeeded the WACA as the city's premier venue for internationals.

Perth Stadium curator Brett Siphonpe is keen to produce a fast, bouncy wicket that would not be out of place at the WACA.

Arun said India's bowlers would welcome that prospect following the relatively unhelpful track served up at Adelaide.

"Definitely with a little help from the wicket, obviously the bowlers would love that sort of a

wicket," he said.

"Again, whatever is in the offing, we are happy with it."

However, he said he would urge his bowlers to stick to the same recipe that brought success in Adelaide — consistency and sustained pressure.

"You can be carried away with the extra pace and bounce but again you need to understand that on any responsive track, what is really going to be successful is your consistency," he said.

"And that's exactly what we're going to work with the bowlers." While the quicks were akin to racehorses, Arun likened spinner Ravichandran Ashwin, who took six wickets and bowled a huge load at Adelaide, to a fine wine.

"Spinners mature a lot with age, maybe they're like wine," he said.

"He helped us gain control. He gave us the control, bowling close to 90 overs for 147 runs and six wickets, you can't ask for better."

## Kohli engineered Kumble's exit, leaked e-mail suggests

AFP  
New Delhi

The acrimonious exit of India's cricket coach last year was given a fresh twist yesterday as a leaked e-mail suggested captain Virat Kohli had "frequently" worked behind the scenes against him. Former coach Anil Kumble quit over a rift with Kohli in June 2017, saying his relationship with the skipper was "untenable". The Board of Control for Cricket in India has denied any division in the Indian camp. But in a leaked email seen by AFP, senior administrator Diana Edulji wrote to board administrator Vinod Rai that Kohli "frequently sent SMSs to the CEO on which you acted and there was a change in the coach".

"Mr Kumble a legend in his own right was subjected to loss of face and made to look like a villain," added Edulji. "He was gracious enough to move on for which I respect him. There also, rules were broken and I had raised objections back then." Edulji's e-mail originated from a separate controversy in the women's national team, where former coach Ramesh Powar fell out with one-day captain Mithali Raj. As men's national team coach, Kumble helped India reclaim the No1 Test ranking and maintained an unblemished record in five Test series. But he resigned after his one-year term ended with a humiliating defeat to Pakistan in the 50-over Champions Trophy in June 2017, prompting a fallout with Kohli who reportedly didn't like the coach's training techniques.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Langer ready for pacey track in second India Test



Australia's Tim Paine is "ready to go" according to coach Justin Langer (not pictured). (AFP)

AFP  
Perth, Australia

Australia coach Justin Langer said yesterday he expected a pacey wicket at the new Perth Stadium for the second Test against India and declared "pretty boy" captain Tim Paine "ready to go" despite injury.

Australia are looking to avenge a 31-run defeat in Adelaide to level the four-Test series but Langer admitted there was some uncertainty over the surface in Perth.

The Test will be the first played at the new stadium and Langer said it appeared the wicket was similar to the fast track which made its predecessor, the WACA, a haven for pace bowlers.

"I'm really fascinated and can't wait to see what the wicket brings," he told reporters. "There's only been one four-day game in its history."

"I went and watched a bit of the NSW versus WA game — there was certainly some pace

and bounce there. We've also seen some pace and bounce in it during the one-dayers and T20 game."

But he said neither team would know how the drop-in pitch plays in Test conditions until the match begins on Friday.

"Time will tell what the wicket brings... If we can get (WACA-style pace and bounce) it'd be a great thing for Test cricket," Langer said.

Langer also scoffed at suggestions skipper Paine could miss the Test after a delivery in Adelaide smashed into a right finger that has required several operations in the past.

"Paine is the toughest pretty boy I've seen in my life," he said.

"Even if it was snapped in about four places he'd still be right. He's absolutely fine. He's obviously had issues with it before but he's 100% ready to go."

India's win was their first in Australia in a decade, and their first ever in the opening Test as they search for a maiden series win Down Under.

## PRIORITIES

## Maxwell says to spurn IPL in pursuit of Test berth



Reuters  
Melbourne

All-rounder Glenn Maxwell has said he will turn his back on the lucrative Indian Premier League next year and play a full season of English county cricket in a bid to regain his spot in the Australian Test side.

The hard-hitting 30-year-old played the last of his seven Tests against Bangladesh in September 2017 and missed out on a spot in the squad for the ongoing four-match series against India.

Maxwell will join up with former Australia Test opener Joe Burns and his former World Cup-winning teammate James Faulkner at Lancashire, and play all three formats with the county side.

"This is a pretty clear sign I still want to play Test cricket," Maxwell told Melbourne's *Her-*

ald Sun newspaper yesterday.

"To knock back a chance to play IPL was a big decision, and a tough decision. It's not something you make lightly, but the thought of playing Test cricket again still burns deep."

"I desperately want to get back out there and I still think I have a lot to offer the Australian Test team."

Maxwell has reaped millions of dollars playing in the IPL but had a poor tournament with Delhi Daredevils this year and was released by the franchise last month.

He was controversially overlooked for the tour squad to play Pakistan in United Arab Emirates in October, beaten out by four uncapped players.

Tim Paine's Australia are 1-0 down in the four-Test series against India after losing by 31 runs in Adelaide on Monday. The second Test starts in Perth tomorrow.

## BOTTOMLINE

## ICC boss 'confident' of corruption-free World Cup

AFP  
New Delhi

The head of cricket's world body said yesterday he is confident of a corruption-free 2019 World Cup as the sport works overtime to disrupt criminals who attempt to fix matches.

David Richardson, chief executive of the International Cricket Council, also called on national governments to do more to tackle match fixing, which has affected lucrative Twenty20 leagues as well as international matches.

The ICC anti-corruption unit "is trying to be much more proactive in first of all disrupting these criminals who are travelling the world trying to corrupt the game," said Richardson.

"Working hand in hand with the law enforcement agencies will help us do that. So (we are) very confident that we will keep the World Cup corruption free," Richardson told reporters at a promotional event in New Delhi. He added: "We are persuading



International Cricket Council chief executive David Richardson speaks at a promotional event in New Delhi, India, yesterday. (AFP)

governments to introduce legislation that can make attempts to fix cricket matches a criminal offence and put these people behind bars."

Richardson said there are currently investigations ongoing into

corruption and match fixing.

Sri Lanka bowling coach Nuwan Zoysa was the latest to face suspension in October over accusations of match fixing.

Former Sri Lankan opener and ex-selector Sanath Jayasuriya

was also charged for failing to co-operate with a match-fixing probe and concealing information in October.

The 2019 World Cup is due to take place in England and Wales from May to July.

The 59-year-old Richardson, who is a former South Africa wicketkeeper, also reiterated ICC's interest in taking cricket to the Olympics.

The vast majority of ICC members are keen to have the sport at the quadrennial event, but the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has its reservations.

"We have got an ambition to have cricket in the Olympics in 2028. That's easier said than done. We need to convince the International Olympic Committee to have cricket," said Richardson.

"103 out of 104 members are strongly behind that decision to get cricket in the Olympics. There are some issues that BCCI has with the Indian Olympic Association but I am very confident that those issues can be resolved."

The only time cricket has ever featured at the Olympics was in 1900, with just two men's teams competing. Great Britain won gold with hosts France taking silver.

CYCLING

# Team Sky upbeat despite loss of broadcast giant's backing

'Everyone at Team Sky has got big ambitions for 2019 and this news has made us more determined than ever to make them happen'

AFP  
London

The future of Cycling giant Team Sky was thrown into doubt yesterday after British media company Sky announced it was ending a partnership that has delivered six Tour de France titles in the past seven years.

Team Sky have clocked up eight Grand Tour wins since their formation, but they have also been plunged into controversy for using special exemptions to administer drugs that can enhance performance.

The outfit, which has 322 wins in total since 2010, will operate for the last season as Team Sky in 2019 and could continue under a different name if a new backer is found, a Sky statement said.

Team Sky boss Dave Brailsford is confident he can keep his group at the top of the sport regardless of their suddenly uncertain future.

"Every change brings opportunity. We like to build things, we're creators, we build. From our point of view I see it very much as an opportunity," Brailsford told *Sky Sports News*.

Insisting he wasn't caught unawares by the announcement, Brailsford added: "Let's face it, the reality of the situation with Sky and the environment and everything else...did it come as a surprise? No, not really."

"We started out with ambition, thinking: 'could we win the Tour de France in five years?'"

"Who'd have thought then that 10 years later we'd be looking at our 10th season?"

Sky's announcement closes an extraordinary chapter in Cycling that began with the dream of creating Britain's first Tour de France champion - which seemed overly ambitious at the time. But Bradley Wiggins made it reality in 2012, before Chris Froome won four Tour de France titles and Geraint Thomas became Sky's third winner of Cycling's landmark event this year.

Froome responded to the news by insisting his team expect to return stronger than ever with a new backer.

"We are not finished yet by any means. Everyone at Team Sky has got big ambitions for 2019 and this news has made us more determined than ever to make them happen," Froome



In this July 6, 2018, photo, British riders Christopher Froome (front centre), Luke Rowe (left), Geraint Thomas (second rear) and their Team Sky teammates ride during a training session near Saint-Mars la Reorthe, western France, on the eve of the start of the 105th edition of the Tour de France. (AFP)

wrote on his Twitter account.

"I can't predict the future but I can say this with absolute certainty, this is a really special team."

"We plan to be together in 2020 if at all possible and we will all be doing everything we can to help make that happen - in different colours with a new partner but the same values, focus and desire to win."

Deep-pocketed Sky are known for Brailsford's meticulous and innovative application of 'marginal gains', the theory that many small advantages in areas as diverse as wind resistance, diet and sleep quality can add up to a significant improvement in performance.

However, Sky's image was clouded in the controversy over so-called therapeutic use ex-

emptions, after a damning British parliamentary report said the team crossed an "ethical line" by using the loophole to administer drugs to enhance performance.

The Commons digital, culture, media and sport committee report said MPs believed that triamcinolone, used to treat asthma, "was being used to prepare Wiggins, and possibly other riders supporting him, for the Tour de France."

Sky were also in the crosshairs for a suspected anti-doping violation over a mystery package reportedly destined for Wiggins in 2011, although a UK Anti-Doping investigation concluded with no charges brought.

Sky was then caught in a long-running doping controversy that began when Froome returned an adverse doping test, for elevated

levels of the asthma medication salbutamol, on his way to victory in the Vuelta a Espana in 2017. He was cleared 10 months later.

Team Sky also have plenty of detractors within Cycling for tactics that many believe stifle racing. Their superior budget has allowed them to employ riders who would be leaders elsewhere in a support capacity and effectively shut down attacks in the biggest races, something that has proved unpopular with many, particularly at the Tour de France.

Sky began its involvement with the sport in 2008, when it successfully teamed up with British Cycling to increase participation and support the country's elite riders, who became a major force at world events including the Olympic Games.

## Tour of Spain to start from Netherlands in 2020

The 2020 Tour of Spain will start in Utrecht and the first three stages will take place in the Netherlands, organisers and Dutch officials announced yesterday.

"The team presentation, the start with a team time trial and the finish of the second stage are to be held in Utrecht in August," the Vuelta's official website said.

"The second stage will start in 's-Hertogenbosch, while the complete third stage will cover the Province of Noord-Brabant, both starting and finishing in Breda."

Utrecht will become the first city to host stages for the three major tours.

The 2015 Tour de France started in the city and the second stage of the 2010 Giro d'Italia ended there.

Organisers have not yet revealed all the details of the route for 2019, but they have confirmed that the race will begin in Spain. The Vuelta has only started abroad three times - in Lisbon in 1987, in Assen in the Netherlands in 2009, and in Nimes, France, in 2017.

Meanwhile four-time Grand Tour winner Vincenzo Nibali announced that he will ride in both the 2019 Tour de France and Giro d'Italia, according to Italian media reports.

The 34-year-old has never won

two Grand Tours in a single season, and said that his home race would be his main target next year. "Next year, I will do the Giro and the Tour. The Giro d'Italia is my main aim," he said at a presentation of his team, Bahrain-Merida, in Croatia.

Nibali, a winner of two Giro d'Italia titles and the 2014 Tour, has competed in both races twice before, including when he claimed his second maglia rosa in 2016.

The 102nd edition of the Giro gets underway in Bologna on May 11, with Geraint Thomas' defence of the Tour de France yellow jersey to begin on July 6 in Brussels.

SPOTLIGHT

## Late birthday gold for Jamaica's Atkinson but US rule swim Worlds

AFP  
Shanghai

Jamaican star Alia Atkinson celebrated turning 30 by finally winning 50m breaststroke gold at the short course World Swimming Championships yesterday as the record-smashing United States dominated.

Atkinson's landmark birthday was on Tuesday but she had to wait a day to really mark the occasion in imperious style in the Chinese city of Hangzhou.

When it came she lapped the opportunity up as Atkinson, the world record-holder in a 25m pool, stormed to victory in 29.05sec. It was comfortably short of her world-leading time of 28.56sec, set in October, but was Atkinson's first 50m gold after three world championship silvers.

"I'm really happy to finally get the gold in the 50m," Atkinson said with a broad smile.

"There's a lot of stereotypes about age, and I just turned 30, so it's really cool. To see the 30-year-olds still able to do it..."

The United States started the evening session of day two with a bang, setting a new short-course world record in the women's 4x50m medley relay.

Their scorching time of 1:42.38 smashed the previous best time of 1:43.27, also set by



Alia Atkinson of Jamaica competes in the women's 50m breaststroke finals at the 14th FINA World Swimming Championships (25m) in Hangzhou, China, yesterday. (Reuters)

the Americans, two years ago.

The United States backed that up with victory for Olympic champion Ryan Murphy in the men's 100m backstroke, pipping home swimmer Xu Jiayu into silver by 0.03sec and putting the US into the early lead in the medals table with four golds overall.

Four became five for the Americans when Blake Pieroni, out in lane eight, took victory in the men's 200m freestyle.

On Tuesday, the first day of action, the US men - with Pieroni on the second leg - set a new world record in the 4x100m freestyle. Katinka Hosszu, a triple gold medallist at the 2016 Rio Olympics, grabbed her second gold in Hangzhou as the Hungarian triumphed in the women's 200m butterfly.

Dubbed the "Iron Lady", Hosszu dominated the short course world championships

two years ago in Canada, carrying home seven golds.

But she was shocked in the 100m backstroke, forced into second by Olivia Smoliga to underline the United States' superiority.

The all-powerful Americans made it a fifth gold out of eight up for grabs on the day when they triumphed in the mixed 4x50m freestyle in another world-record time.

GOLF

## World No. 2 Rose primed to defend Indonesia Masters title

Reuters  
Jakarta

Justin Rose will have a chance to finish a stellar year on a high when the world number two tees off today in the defence of his Indonesian Masters title.

The 38-year-old will be the highest-ranked player at the Royale Jakarta Golf Club with Ryder Cup team mate Henrik Stenson and India's Shubhankar Sharma, the newly crowned Asian Tour Order of Merit champion, expected to be among main challengers.

"I have always had the mentality that the golf course doesn't recognise who is the best player in the world," Rose said ahead of the season-ending Asian Tour event.

"I don't tee off ahead of these



guys because of my ranking. We tee off together with the same score on Thursday. It is about a great week's work. There is no complacency from that point of view."

Sharma, 22, played in all four major championships this year and won the European Tour's rookie of the year. And 2013 US Open champion Rose has been impressed with the rise of Asian players on the global circuits.

"We are seeing Asian players crop up all over the world

and compete at the highest level. More and more players are graduating from the Asian Tour," said Rose, who lead from the first round to win last year's tournament by eight strokes.

"I think it is a sign of things to come. If you look at the LPGA, they are strongly represented by Asia unbelievably well. We are beginning to see that happen on the men's side."

Stenson hopes the fact that he has never played in Indonesia before will not hurt his chances. "I've come up with a plan and hopefully I can play some decent game and I can be one of the guys in the mix on Sunday," said Stenson, who won the 2016 British Open.

"It's a good golf course. I like it. I don't have much experience as compared to Justin and the other players who have played here in the past!"

## World champion Momota makes electric start to BWF Finals

World badminton champion Kento Momota made a lightning start at the BWF World Tour Finals in China yesterday, rampaging past India's overwhelmed Sameer Verma in just 36 minutes.

The Japanese star is looking to put the seal on a breakthrough year in which he has risen to number one in the rankings and become world champion for the first time.

It is all a far cry from 2016, when Momota was expelled from Japan's team for the Rio Olympics

and banned for more than a year for visiting an illegal casino.

The 24-year-old had too much quality and power for Verma - ranked 14th in the world - thrashing him 21-18, 21-6 to confirm his status as the man to beat in Guangzhou.

Also untroubled in her opener was the women's number one, Tai Tzu-ying from Taiwan, who defeated Zhang Beiwen of the United States 21-15, 21-17 in 30 minutes.

## HOCKEY

# Australia, England grab World Cup semi-final spots

Aussies to face the winner of match between India and the Netherlands in last-four

IANS

Bhubaneswar, India

England edged past Argentina 3-2 in a pulsating quarter-final of the hockey World Cup, while Australia thrashed France 3-0 for their spot in the last four here yesterday.

Veteran dragflick expert Gonzalo Peilát (17th, 48th minutes) converted a couple of penalty corners for Argentina.

England, who were impressive with their free flowing attacks and well organised defence, scored field goals through Barry Middleton (27th), Will Calnan (44th) and Harry Martin (49th).

It was an end-to-end affair with plenty of scoring chances for both teams although England enjoyed a slightly upper hand for the most part.

Although England dominated the opening quarter, Peilát gave Argentina the lead with a powerful dragflick. England goalkeeper George Pinner had dived the correct way but was beaten by the sheer power in Peilát's shot.

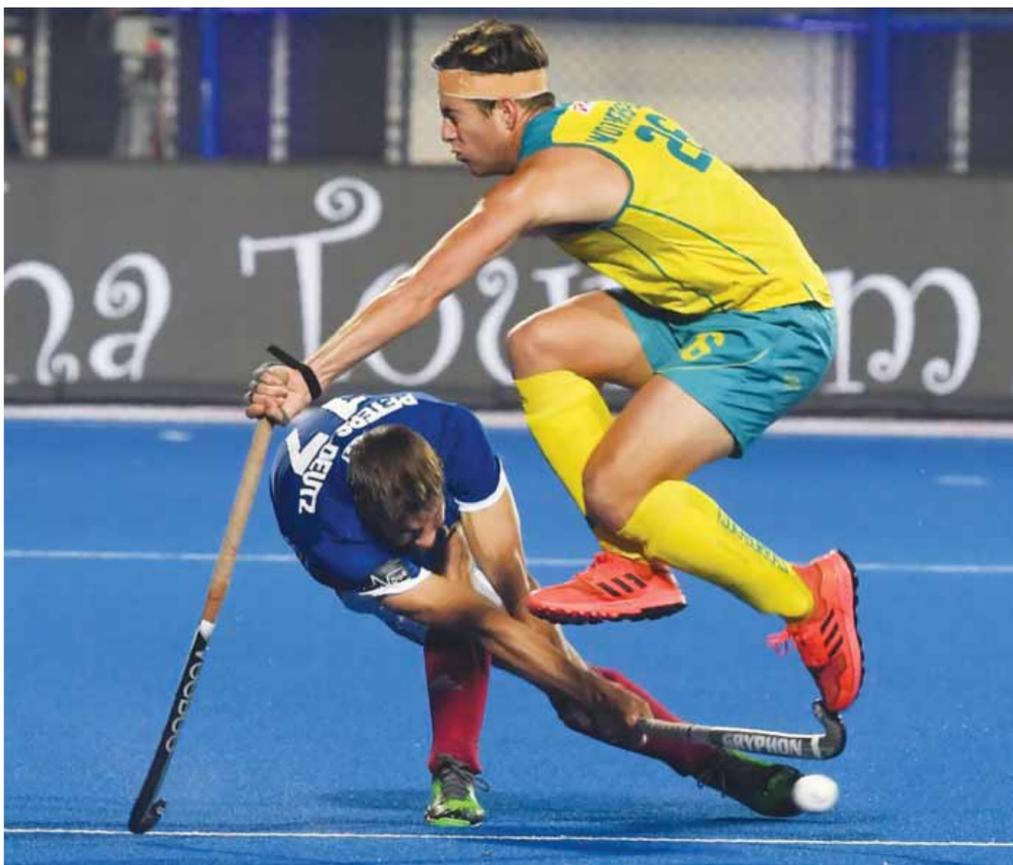
England almost struck back in the next minute but an excellent save by goalkeeper Juan Manuel Vivaldi at his near post maintained Argentina's lead.

There were chances at both ends and Vivaldi was soon forced to make another good save to keep Argentina ahead.

But the relentless England pressure finally bore fruit when Middleton scored a field goal with an excellent finish after a well worked build-up.

Calnan, who had to sit out for a while after picking up a yellow card, made amends soon after coming back in when he beat Vivaldi at his near post with a powerful finish.

England had a narrow escape a couple of minutes into the final quarter when the umpire initially awarded a penalty stroke to Argentina which was changed



Australia's Dylan Wotherspoon (right) in action with France's Cristoforo Peters-Deutz during the 2018 Hockey World Cup quarter-final in Bhubaneswar, India, yesterday. (AFP)

to a penalty corner for the South Americans after a review.

But if the English players had heaved a sigh of relief, it turned out to be temporary as Peilát scored with another powerful dragflick.

England struck back at the other end in the very next

minute when Martin scored to make the issue safe for the European powerhouse.

Argentina seemed to disintegrate under pressure in the closing minutes with two of their players sent off for yellow card offences as England clinched a well-deserved victory.

In the second of the day, Jeremy Hayward scored from the penalty corner for Australia as he found space between two players and the goalkeeper failed to protect.

Australia took a 2-0 lead as Blake Groves found the back of the net in the 19th minute.

The Kookaburras scored their third goal from fourth penalty corner as stunning work by Aran Zakerski put the finishing touches on the move.

In the semi-finals, Australia will now take on the winner of today's quarter-final between India and the Netherlands.

## RUGBY

# Under-fire Cheika 'has to go', says Wallabies great Burke

AFP  
Sydney

Wallabies legend Matt Burke has urged Rugby Australia to axe Michael Cheika along with his coaching staff after a review was announced into their positions less than a year before the World Cup.

The two-time world champions have won just four Tests this year and slipped to sixth in the world rankings, heaping pressure on Cheika as a sense of turmoil engulfs the national side.

Burke said the Wallabies needed change "from the top down", calling for Cheika and his assistants, Stephen Larkham and Nathan Grey, to go.

"Michael Cheika after that (season) has to go" Burke, who played 81 Tests for Australia and was a World Cup winner in 1999, told Big Sports Breakfast radio.

"There has to be a change. I don't think just getting rid of the assistant coaches will be enough," he added.

Despite club success at Leinster and the NSW Waratahs, Cheika has struggled to stamp his authority on a Wallabies side that is replete with world-class players, but has consistently underperformed of late.

"I think they have to change it from the top down. Getting rid of the assistant coaches won't be enough because it's still the same voice," said Burke.

"At the moment it's untenable when you're looking at the situation from the coaches and then the high performance managers and the rest of it."

Rugby Australia has promised a decision on Cheika and his coaching staff "ahead of Christmas".

Cheika's contract is due to run out in a year and he had previously received the backing of Rugby Australia chief executive Raelene Castle to take the Wallabies to the World Cup in Japan.

However, three defeats out of four on their northern hemisphere tour renewed the pressure on Cheika, who took the Wallabies to the last World Cup final in 2015.



## World Cup-winning All Blacks Ben Smith to join Pau

AFP

Pau, France

New Zealand three-quarter Ben Smith will join Pau after next year's Rugby World Cup, the

club's president told French broadcaster RMC Sport on Tuesday.

Smith lifted the Webb Ellis trophy in 2015 and the 32-year-old has featured on 76 occasions for his country, scoring 33 tries since making his international

debut in 2009. He will move to an unnamed Japanese club after finishing the 2020 Top 14 season and will be unable to feature for his national side while playing outside of New Zealand.

"It's a great satisfaction. He will

have an impact on the squad and considering his calibre it will allow him to help our youngsters," Bernard Pontneau said.

On the other hand, New Zealand back-rower Ardie Savea will not join the club who sit in

11th place in the table, despite originally agreeing a three-year deal in the autumn.

The 36-time All Blacks has decided to re-sign with the New Zealand Rugby Union. His brother Julian plays for Toulon in the France's top tier.

## SPOTLIGHT

# 'Game-changing' Premiership investment remains on course

AFP  
London

Premiership Rugby chairman Ian Ritchie on Tuesday insisted his organisation remain on track to complete a multi-million pound investment deal that will change the face of rugby union.

Ritchie had been expected to announce the completion of the £230m (\$288m) deal with CVC Capital Partners following Premiership Rugby's latest meeting on Tuesday.

Instead, cash-strapped English top-flight clubs will have to wait.

"We had a good PRL board meeting and there remains a unanimity about our approach and our desire to enter into (this deal)," Ritchie said of the plan, which would earn each club an estimated £18m in exchange for CVC becoming the PRL's partners.

"We remain on track with our objectives. These discussions are inevitably complex but we have had a good meeting today and we remain with that shared objec-

tive."

PRL chief executive Mark McCafferty indicated the deal was close enough that it might not even require another formal meeting before the biggest investment in the history of the game can be announced.

Officials hope it will transform the domestic competition, leading to a much greater strength in depth and more opportunities for the smaller clubs to challenge for silverware.

Under the PRL's existing rules, the salary cap level remains at £7m irrespective of the prospective investment levels.

"I wouldn't say there were sticking points, it's more that these are not straightforward negotiations because they have got a number of different angles to them," McCafferty said.

"With the collective will around the table today, we can find the results to those remaining few items.

"It will be a landmark moment, if we can get there, which will usher in a new era for the game going into next year, and that will allow the clubs to make the next big investment in the game."

## Qatar and Uzbekistan equestrian federations sign MoU



Asian and Qatar Equestrian Federation (QEF) secretary-general Badr Mohamed al-Darwish (right) and Uzbekistan Equestrian and Modern Pentathlon Federation president Bakromjon Gaziev pose after signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent yesterday.

NBA

# Ibaka leads Raptors' rout of Clippers

'Finally back at home and seemed like we were playing well. We've been putting some good quarters together, but tonight was a four quarter game and we had to just build around it'

AFP  
Los Angeles

The Toronto Raptors shrugged off the absence of Kawhi Leonard to stretch their lead at the top of the Eastern Conference on Tuesday, breezing past the Los Angeles Clippers with a 123-99 victory.

Leonard, ruled out just hours before tip-off after complaining of a sore hip, could also miss the Raptors' game against the reigning NBA champion Golden State Warriors on Wednesday.

Toronto, however, laid on a devastating scoring display to overwhelm the Clippers and serve notice that they remain a formidable threat even without the in-form Leonard. Serge Ibaka and Kyle Lowry led the way for the Raptors with 25 and 21 points respectively while four other players made double figures.

The Clippers offense however struggled to make any inroads against the Toronto defense, with starters Tobias Harris and Danilo Gallinari producing just 21 points between them.

RESULTS

Houston	111-104	Portland
San Antonio	111-86	Phoenix
Toronto	123-99	Clippers

Tyrone Wallace (15 points) and Boban Marjanovic (18) produced a burst of scoring off the bench, but the Clippers never threatened a Toronto team that surged into a 36-23 lead at the end of the first quarter. The Raptors improved to 22-7 with the win to go three games clear of Milwaukee at the top of the standings. The Clippers loss gives them an identical record to city rivals the Los Angeles Lakers, with both teams on 17-10.

Earlier Tuesday, James Harden scored 29 points as the Houston Rockets halted their three-game losing streak with a 111-103 victory over the Portland Trail Blazers on Tuesday.

Reigning NBA MVP Harden also chipped in four assists on a night when seven Rockets players finished in double digits. Rockets point guard Chris Paul produced a triple double with 11 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists as Houston improved to 12-14. Mike D'Antoni's side remain near the foot of the Western Conference, one place off the bottom ahead of the Phoenix Suns, who are 4-24. "It's a big time for us," Harden said of the win.

"Finally back at home and seemed like we were playing well. We've been putting some good quarters together, but tonight was a four quarter game and we had to just build around it."

The Trail Blazers slipped to 15-12 with



Toronto Raptors forward Serge Ibaka dunks the ball as LA Clippers guard Milos Teodosic looks on during their NBA game at Staples Center. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

the defeat, leaving them in eighth place in the Western Conference table. The Blazers led the scoring on Tuesday with Damian Lillard pouring in 34 points and C.J. McCollum adding 22.

But the Rockets scoring off the bench proved decisive for Houston, with Nene (10 points), Daniel House Jr (12) and Gerald Green (13) all contributing. In San Antonio, Spurs coach Gregg Popovich bagged his 1,211th career win, putting him

fourth on the list of career victories, after a 111-86 blowout over the hapless Suns.

The victory took Popovich one game clear of Pat Riley, the five-time NBA champion, who has 1,210 career wins.

Don Nelson leads the list of coaches with the most victories with 1,335 wins ahead of Lenny Wilkens and Jerry Sloan.

Popovich ignored questions about his milestone win after the victory, preferring instead to let his players do the talking.

"It's an awesome achievement to get to fourth all time," Spurs veteran Patty Mills said. "You almost pinch yourself at times when you step back and realise where you are and who is coaching you. It's an honour to be in this locker room and to be coached by him, and I think everyone feels that way."

Tuesday's win lifted the Spurs to 14-14 for the season but they remain in 10th place in the Western standings, two places outside the playoffs.

SPOTLIGHT

## NBA star Curry signals willingness to meet with Nasa over Moon landing doubts

Reuters  
New York

Three-time NBA champion Stephen Curry on Tuesday signalled that he is willing to take Nasa up on its offer to tour its lunar lab in Houston after his pronouncement this week that he does not believe humans ever walked on the Moon.

During the "Winging It" podcast released on Monday, the Golden State Warriors guard asked fellow players Vince Carter and Kent Bazemore whether they believed humans had ever been to the Moon.

The players said they did not, to which two-time MVP Curry said: "They're gonna come get us. I don't think so either."

"Sorry, I don't want to start conspiracies."

After Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first men to walk on the Moon in 1969, a further 10 American astronauts on five subsequent missions stepped onto the lunar surface.

The 30-year-old's statement created a commotion on social media and led Nasa to extend an invitation to Curry to come and see evidence of the Moon landing for himself.

"There's lots of evidence Nasa landed 12 American as-

tronauts on the Moon from 1969-1972," Allard Beutel, a spokesman for the US federal agency, said in a statement.

"We'd love for Mr. Curry to tour the lunar lab at our Johnson Space Center in Houston, perhaps the next time the Warriors are in town to play the Rockets," he added.

Beutel said the lab housed hundreds of Moon rocks and the Apollo mission control.

"During his visit, he can see first-hand what we did 50 years ago, as well as what we're doing now to go back to the Moon in the coming years, but this time to stay," he said.

Curry responded on Twitter to a CNN story on the controversy that included Nasa's statement with a smiling emoji wearing sunglasses, an indication that he may be willing to make the trip when the Warriors visit the Houston Rockets on March 23.

The commotion over his remarks came after Boston Celtics guard Kyrie Irving was widely mocked last year for saying he believed the world was flat.

In October, Irving apologised for the comments, saying science teachers had approached him to say he was making their jobs more difficult.

Curry attended Davidson College in North Carolina from 2006-2009 but left for the NBA before his final year and did not graduate.



NHL

# Ovechkin hat-trick leads Caps over Wings

Reuters  
Washington

Alex Ovechkin scored three goals, and Nicklas Backstrom added four assists as the Washington Capitals jumped out to a big lead early and defeated the visiting Detroit Red Wings 6-2 Tuesday night.

Ovechkin's three goals gave him points in 12 straight games, helping fill the absence of T.J. Oshie, out for the past 11 games (concussion).

However, Oshie returned and scored a goal, and Brett Connolly and Travis Boyd also found the net.

Ovechkin leads the NHL with 25 goals. The multi-goal game was the 126th of his career, moving Ovechkin past Dino Ciccarelli into 10th place in NHL history.

Backstrom also helped with his four assists, getting helpers on the final four Washington goals. John Carlson and Evgeny Kuznetsov both added two assists.

Goalie Braden Holtby made 35 saves in the win and carried a shutout into the third period before the Red Wings scored. The Capitals now have won three straight games.

Connolly made it 1-0 when he tipped a Carlson shot past Detroit goalie Jonathan Bernier 3:39 into the game for a power-play goal.

Boyd, who scored his first NHL goal in Washington's last game, stretched his streak to two games by taking a slick pass from Nic Dowd and scoring from the right side just past the midway mark of the first period.

Ovechkin then made it 3-0 in the first when he fired a shot that appeared to be going wide but hit a Detroit player, quickly changed direction and went in with 7:01 left.

Ovechkin and Oshie teamed up for two

RESULTS

Boston	4-3	Arizona
Buffalo	4-3	Los Angeles
Toronto	4-1	Carolina
Vancouver	3-2	Columbus
Washington	6-2	Detroit
St. Louis	4-3	Florida
Nashville	3-1	Ottawa
Minnesota	7-1	Montreal
Winnipeg	6-3	Chicago
Edmonton	6-4	Colorado

goals just 61 seconds apart midway through the second period.

The first one went to Ovechkin at 9:05 before Oshie celebrated his return with a power-play goal 10:06 into the period, giving the Capitals a 5-0 lead.

That ended Bernier's night, and Jimmy Howard came on to replace him. Bernier stopped 10 of 15 shots; Howard 9 of 10.

Dylan Larkin broke up Holtby's hopes for a second consecutive shutout when he scored 1:03 into the third period. Ovechkin then completed his hat trick at the 9:33 mark with a shot that Howard stopped, but the puck trickled through.

Gustav Nyquist also scored for the Red Wings later in the period and finished with a goal and an assist.

IMPROVING OILERS DUMP SLIDING AVALANCHE

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins scored two of Edmonton's four second-period goals, and the surging Oilers beat the Colorado Avalanche 6-4 on Tuesday night in Denver.

Leon Draisaitl had a goal and two assists, and Connor McDavid, Darnell Nurse and

Kyle Brodziak had a goal and an assist each for Edmonton, which has won four straight and improved to 8-2-1 since Ken Hitchcock took over as coach.

Mikko Koskinen made 39 saves to win his second straight game. He blanked the Calgary Flames 1-0 on Sunday.

Colorado's Mikko Rantanen had a goal and three assists to increase his NHL-leading points total to 52.

Gabe Landeskog had two goals and two assists, and Colin Wilson also scored for the Avalanche, who have lost three of four following a 9-0-2 stretch. Colorado has allowed 21 goals in its past four games.

Semyon Varlamov has given up 14 of those goals in three starts. He allowed six goals at Pittsburgh and five at Tampa Bay on Saturday before being pulled in a 7-1 loss. He was removed Tuesday after allowing the first three goals on 18 shots.

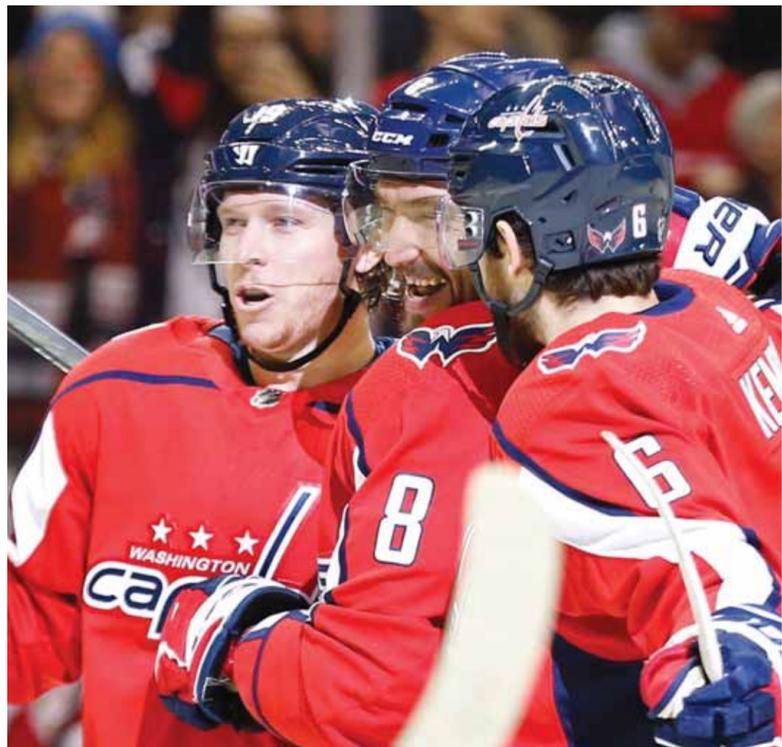
Philipp Grubauer came on and allowed three goals on the first six shots he faced. He finished with five saves.

Brodziak gave Edmonton a 1-0 lead in the first period, and then the Oilers broke it open in the second. Nugent-Hopkins scored a power-play goal at 9:26 and then made it 3-0 with his 10th goal at 13:37, chasing Varlamov.

Just 1:37 later, McDavid scored his 17th on the first shot Grubauer faced. Colorado finally got one by Koskinen when Rantanen's wristed beat him under his right arm at 16:01, but Edmonton responded 42 seconds later on Draisaitl's 16th of the season.

Wilson's power-play goal early in the third period made it 5-2 and gave Colorado some pep, but Nurse restored the four-goal lead 1:24 later with his fourth.

Landeskog added his 18th and 19th in the final four minutes, but the Avalanche's comeback effort fell short.



Washington Capitals left wing Alex Ovechkin (centre) celebrates with centre Nicklas Backstrom (left) and defenseman Michal Kempny after scoring a goal against the Detroit Red Wings in the first period at the Capital One Arena. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

## EUROPA LEAGUE

# Koscielny set for first Arsenal start since May

French defender had ruptured his Achilles against Atletico Madrid last season

AFP  
London

**A**rsenal defender Laurent Koscielny will make his first appearance since May when the injury-plagued French international starts today's Europa League tie against Qarabag. Koscielny ruptured his Achilles in Arsenal's Europa League defeat against Atletico Madrid last season. The 33-year-old missed France's World Cup-winning campaign due to the injury.

He finally returned for Arsenal's reserves in a Checkatrade Trophy clash with Portsmouth last week and Emery confirmed yesterday that Koscielny will start against Qarabag.

The Gunners have a defensive crisis ahead of Sunday's trip to Southampton with Rob Holding injured, Shkodran Mustafi struggling with a hamstring problem and Sokratis Papastathopoulos suspended. That could mean Koscielny will be asked to play twice in four days if he proves his fitness. "Because we are going to play a lot of matches, in the next 10 days we play four matches — each of them very important...it is in our planning to start with Laurent Koscielny," Emery told reporters.

"We are going to decide after tomorrow's match, as it's the first match with us that Laurent Koscielny will play. We are going to look also if he can play 90 minutes or less minutes in this game. We are going to decide but the first is to think about the match tomorrow because we need to receive information on how he can feel."

Mesut Ozil could also feature against Qarabag having lost his place in Emery's Premier League side.

Germany midfielder Ozil has missed the last five games in all competitions with a combination of a back injury and Emery preferring other options in his starting line-up.

Emery was forced to deny reports of a training ground row with Ozil earlier this season after claims he had told the former Real Madrid star to work harder.



Arsenal's Laurent Koscielny (second right) trains with his teammates in London yesterday. (Reuters)

"Tomorrow he is in the group, there are 18 players in the squad for this match and I am going to decide if he plays tomorrow from the beginning or during the match in the 90 minutes," Emery said of Ozil.

## UEFA EUROPA LEAGUE FIXTURES

(All times GMT)  
Rennes v Astana (1755); Dynamo Kyiv v Jablonec (1755); Besiktas vs Malmö FF (1755) Genk vs Sarpsborg 08 (1755); Villarreal vs Spartak Moskva (1755); Rapid

Wien vs Rangers (1755); PAOK v BATE (1755); Vidi vs Chelsea (1755) Sevilla v Krasnodar (1755) Olympique Marseille v Apollon (1755) Lazio v Eintracht Frankfurt (1755) Sporting CP v Vorskla (2000) Arsenal v Qarabag (2000) København

v Bordeaux (2000) AEK Larnaca v Bayer Leverkusen (2000) Olympiakos Piraeus v Milan (2000) Spartak Trnava v Fenerbahçe (2000) Dinamo Zagreb v Anderlecht (2000) RB Leipzig v Rosenborg (2000) Celtic v Salzburg (2000)

## FOCUS

## Arsenal's Ainsley makes racism claim

AFP  
London

**A**rsenal midfielder Ainsley Maitland-Niles claims he has endured similar racist abuse to Manchester City star Raheem Sterling. Sterling allegedly suffered racist taunts from a Chelsea fan during City's 2-0 defeat at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

The shocking incident has reignited the debate over how to tackle racism in football after the sport struggled for decades to eradicate the problem. Now Maitland-Niles has revealed his own disturbing experience of racism. Asked if he has been on the receiving end of racist abuse, the 21-year-old replied: "Yes, I have. Not at a professional level but growing up in the youth ranks. I think it's disgusting, honestly. I really do credit Raheem for coming out and standing up for himself and other players and speaking about it."

A week before Sterling's incident, Arsenal striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang had a banana skin thrown in his direction as he celebrated in front of Tottenham supporters after opening the scoring in the north London derby. England Under-21 international Maitland-Niles said his own encounter with racism came during his time in Arsenal's academy. "It was pretty much similar to what Raheem got to be honest," he said. "I literally went out to pick up the ball for a throw-in and there was a bit of racial abuse behind me. What can I do? I just got on with the game, as he did. It hurts. It hurts me to talk about it. But I think that's why it's so important that we need to get rid of it from the game. It's not just footballers who need to be on board with it. It's everyone else: the press, the media and the staff as well."

Maitland-Niles revealed he informed authorities of the incident, but nothing was done. "At the time, I just spoke to my dad about it and he did sort of give me the heads up and showed me a few things about racism before my time, when I was playing football," he added.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Japan shuns Kagawa for Asian Cup

AFP  
Tokyo

**J**apan dropped former Manchester United star Shinji Kagawa from the Blue Samurai's bid to reclaim the Asian Cup, opting instead for a squad filled with young Europe-based talents.

Coach Hajime Moriyasu yesterday selected several players with only a handful of caps to their names for Asia's showcase football tournament in the United Arab Emirates starting in January. The likes of Ritsu Doan of Groningen, Shoya Nakajima of Portimonense and Takumi Minamoto of Salzburg will lead Japan's bid for a record-extending fifth title. But there was no place for midfielder Kagawa, 29, now struggling for playing time at Borussia Dortmund.

Kagawa has long been among the leading stars of Blue Samurai and at his German outfit, but the attacking player has found himself unable to get regular first-team football under Dortmund coach Lucien Favre.

He told Japanese media last month that he wished to move to Spain to take on a new challenge. Moriyasu suggested he had been tempted to turn to veterans like Kagawa, but said he needed to pick players in their best form.

However, the young squad will be supported by Werder Bremen striker Yuya Osako and Galatasaray defender Yuto Nagatomo, both veterans of past World Cups. Japan won the Asian Cup in 1992, 2000, 2004 and 2011, but failed in the last edition, won by Australia in 2015.

"Japan's national team did not win the title last time. We will reclaim the Asian Cup and bring back the title," Moriyasu said.

**Japan squad:** Masaaki Higashiguchi, Shuichi Gonda, Daniel Schmidt, Yuto Nagatomo, Tomoaki Makino, Maya Yoshida, Sho Sasaki, Hiroki Sakai, Sei



Muroya, Genta Miura, Takehiro Tomiyasu, Toshihiro Aoyama, Genki Haraguchi, Gaku Shibasaki, Wataru Endo, Junya Ito, Shoya Nakajima, Takumi Minamoto, Hidemasa Morita, Ritsu Doan, Yuya Osako, Takuma Asano, Koya Kitagawa

## AUSTRALIA HIT BY MOOY BLOW AS INJURY RULES STAR OUT OF ASIAN CUP

Australia midfielder Aaron Mooy will miss the Asian Cup after the Huddersfield star was ruled out until February with a knee injury, the club announced. Mooy suffered a tear to the medial collateral ligament in his right knee in the defeat at Arsenal on Saturday. "After consulting a specialist on Tuesday, Aaron has been ruled out until February," Huddersfield said in a statement. "I'm gutted to be missing an important time for club and country," Mooy said. The 28-year-old's absence will be a major blow for both the Socceroos and Huddersfield.

Australia will be aiming to retain the Asian Cup title they won in 2015 when they head to the United Arab Emirates for the latest edition of the tournament, which gets underway on January 5. The Socceroos have been drawn to face Jordan, Syria and Palestine in Group B.

Mooy played a key role in Huddersfield's successful attempt to avoid relegation from the Premier League last season.

He has been in fine form this term, scoring twice in his club's 2-0 win at Wolves last month. The Terriers are third bottom of the Premier League and sit two points from safety.

## BOTTOMLINE

## Playing top Asian sides key for India: Chhetri

Reuters  
Mumbai

**I**ndia must have regular competition against the continent's top sides if they are to have any hope of taking their game to another level, captain Sunil Chhetri has said ahead of next month's Asian Cup in the United Arab Emirates.

Since their last appearance at the finals in Qatar in 2011, India have played twice against a top-six Asian side when they were grouped with Iran for the Russia World Cup qualifiers. Chhetri, who will lead India in just their fourth appearance at the finals, said they had to be given the chance to stretch themselves more.

"It's very, very important for us to keep playing against the big giants — the UAEs, the Australias, the Korea Republics," Chhetri told FIFA.com.

"It's one thing to do well against your neighbours, and without demeaning any one of them, it's a different thing when you go out and play the giants of Asia."

Cricket-loving India has a population of 1.3 bn but it is a massive underachiever as far as football is concerned. The national side is 97th in the FIFA rankings and yet to make an appearance at the World Cup finals.

The Asian Football Confederation's (AFC) decision to increase the number of finalists at the Asian Cup to 24 teams from 16 has helped the country return to the tournament.

"I was really dejected when we missed out on the last edition," Chhetri said of the 2015 tournament in Australia.

"I think it's very, very important for a



country like us to keep qualifying for this big tournament, because that tells you where you are and if you're doing well.

"It also gives you a chance to rub shoulders with the biggest teams in Asia. If you do well, other teams take notice of you."

India, managed by English coach Stephen Constantine, are in Group A alongside hosts United Arab Emirates,

Bahrain and Thailand for the January 5-February 1 tournament and Chhetri is under no illusions about the task facing them.

"Without putting ourselves down, when you're India and you qualify for the Asian Cup any team that you face are going to be difficult," said Chhetri, India's record scorer with 65 goals and their most

experienced player with 103 caps.

"In UAE and Thailand we have two teams who are very, very technically gifted. I think even Bahrain are going to be very physical.

"I'm just looking at it as one game at a time. I don't think we will be thinking about the mathematics of the group from the moment go."

## KOORA TIME KICKS OFF AT DARB AL SAAI

**Doha:** The Qatar Football Association (QFA) and Qatar Shell announced Koora Time's Qatar National Day activities at Darb Al Saa'i, which began yesterday and will run until December 20.

The award-winning programme and will provide kids and families days of physical activity, opportunities and spaces to play football and the chance to practice skills, for all age groups, in a fun and non-competitive environment.

The Koora Time football pitch will sit

at the heart of the event and will be the venue for games, training and exercises; there will even be opportunities to train with former professional players from QFA. Activities will also include games such as the Speed Kick, Target Shot, and Robo Keeper, as well as a play zone for younger kids, promoting a healthy lifestyle for the whole family.

In addition to sports, there will also be non-physical activities which will include a fun photo booth, the Koora Time

Museum, showcasing the story of the programme, virtual reality headsets, and a screen and beanbag zone — ensuring there is something for everyone.

Koora Time was developed by Qatar Shell in partnership with the QFA, and the initiative has won eight CSR awards since 2014. It is designed to improve the health and well-being of young people in Qatar through football, and contributes to the Social Development pillar of the Qatar National Vision 2030.

Koora Time is based on FC Barcelona Foundation's FutbolNet methodology and provides children with an extra 72 hours of extra-curricular physical education per year. Since its launch in March 2013, the programme has benefitted over 20,000 children across Qatar, and last year's programme saw a reduction in Body Mass Index (BMI) of 93% of participants. To find out more about Koora Time or to register a child for the programme, visit [www.kooratime.qa](http://www.kooratime.qa).

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# Salah sends Liverpool into last 16, Moura comes to Spurs' rescue

'Wow, what a game. I am not sure a manager could be prouder of a team than I am'

AFP  
Paris

Mohamed Salah's first-half goal and a stunning late save from goalkeeper Alisson saw Liverpool edge into the Champions League knockout stage after a tense 1-0 win over Napoli on Tuesday night, while Lucas Moura's late strike saw Tottenham progress with a draw at Barcelona.

Last year's runners-up Liverpool knew victory by two goals or a 1-0 triumph would put them through to the last 16 from Group C, and Salah's cool 34th-minute strike proved enough as they finished ahead of Napoli on goals scored. "Wow, what a game. I am not sure a manager could be prouder of a team than I am," Reds boss Jurgen Klopp said.

Paris Saint-Germain reached the knockout rounds as group winners thanks to a 4-1 victory over Red Star Belgrade, with Neymar, Kylian Mbappe and Edinson Cavani all on the scoresheet. Liverpool grabbed the crucial goal at a raucous Anfield, as Salah jinked past Kalidou Koulibaly inside the area and slotted the ball beyond goalkeeper David Ospina.

Salah, who had already wasted an earlier chance with a heavy touch, continued to run Napoli ragged early in the second half, but Ospina saved from Jordan Henderson and James Milner curled wide as Carlo Ancelotti's men stayed a goal from turning the group on its head.

The atmosphere around Anfield became increasingly tense as the Premier League leaders continued to miss opportunities, with Ospina springing to his left to tip away Salah's attempted lob before denying Mane from point-blank range.

Senegal forward Mane was guilty of two further snatched efforts in front of goal, and Napoli almost made the Reds pay in the dying moments.

The ball fell for substitute striker Arkadiusz Milik unmarked in the area, but Alisson raced from his line to keep out the Pole's strike with his legs. "I have no idea how Alisson made a save like this," gushed Klopp. "It was amazing."

PSG went into their match in Belgrade knowing that victory would send them through, and Edinson Cavani gave the French champions the perfect start by tapping in after an excellent run and pass by Kylian Mbappe.

Neymar's strike five minutes before half-time appeared to have put the game to bed, but Red Star, who had already beaten Liverpool and held Napoli in Serbia earlier in the campaign, pulled one back before the hour mark through Marko Gobeljic.

But PSG finally sealed their spot in the last 16 as Marquinhos headed in Angel Di Maria's free-kick with 16 minutes to go and Mbappe added fur-



Liverpool's Mohamed Salah (right) runs past Napoli's Mario Rui during the UEFA Champions League group C match at Anfield stadium in Liverpool. (AFP)

ther gloss to the scoreline in added time. "We made mistakes, but I really liked the reaction after Belgrade's goal. We controlled the match," PSG coach Thomas Tuchel said.

Spurs went into their final Group B game at the Camp Nou needing to match Inter Milan's result against PSV Eindhoven in Italy, but Mauricio Pochettino's side fell behind in only the seventh minute as Ousmane Dembele scored a wonderful individual goal.

Hirving Lozano gave PSV a shock early advantage at the San Siro, though, to leave Tottenham heading through as it stood. The English club had plenty of half-chances against a much-changed Barca, who had already won the group, but Philippe Coutinho almost made it 2-0 when his

low shot struck the post. Mauro Icardi levelled for Inter against PSV with 17 minutes left to leave Spurs needing to score at least once. Tottenham, who were facing an early elimination when trailing PSV in their fourth group match before rallying to win and then beating Inter, continued to push and Moura met Harry Kane's low cross in the 85th minute to cap a dramatic group-stage revival.

"I always believed it was possible to win the game," Spurs manager Pochettino said. "We fully deserved to go through with Barcelona. We were the best (two) teams in a difficult group."

Borussia Dortmund snatched top spot in Group A with a 2-0 win over rock-bottom Monaco, as Atletico Madrid were held to a goalless draw

at Club Brugge. Raphael Guerreiro tapped in Maximilian Philipp's low cross in the 15th minute against Thierry Henry's crisis-hit Monaco, before slamming in a second late on. "It's a perfect evening. On the whole it was a deserved victory," said Dortmund coach Lucien Favre.

Earlier on Tuesday in Group D, Galatasaray secured a Europa League last-32 place despite losing 3-2 to Porto in an entertaining game which saw two of three penalties scored.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE RESULTS

Group A: At Bruges, Belgium: Club Brugge (BEL) 0 Atletico Madrid (ESP) 0; At Monaco: Monaco (FRA) 0 Borussia Dortmund (GER) 2 (Guerreiro 15, 88)

Group B: At Barcelona, Spain: Barcelona (ESP) 1 (Dembele 7) Tottenham (ENG) 1 (Moura 85); At Milan, Italy: Inter Milan (ITA) 1 (Icardi 73) PSV Eindhoven (NED) 1 (Lozano 13)

Group C: At Liverpool, England: Liverpool (ENG) 1 (Salah 34) Napoli (ITA) 0; At Belgrade: Red Star Belgrade (SRB) 1 (Gobeljic 56) Paris Saint-Germain (FRA) 4 (Cavani 10, Neymar 40, Marquinhos 74, Mbappe 90+2)

Group D: At Istanbul, Turkey: Galatasaray (TUR) 2 (Feghouli 45+1, Derdiyok 65) FC Porto (POR) 3 (Felipe 17, Marega 42-pen, Oliveira 57); At Gelsenkirchen, Germany: Schalke (GER) 1 (Schoepf 90+1) Lokomotiv Moscow (RUS) 0

PSG trip to Dijon goes ahead as Ligue 1 games postponed

Paris Saint-Germain will travel to take on Dijon in Ligue 1 this weekend, the league (LFP) said, after several matches were postponed because police resources are required to deal with possible anti-government protests. The LFP had announced the postponement of the games between Nice and Saint-Etienne and Nantes and Montpellier earlier and then added Caen-Toulouse.

Local government officials in Dijon said the fixture against the league champions will be played but no travelling Parisian fans will be allowed into the Stade Gaston Gerard to watch the league leaders on Saturday.

Liverpool title bid hit by Matip injury

Liverpool defender Joel Matip will be out of action for up to six weeks after suffering a fractured collarbone. Matip was injured in the final minutes of Liverpool's 1-0 win against Napoli in the Champions League at Anfield on Tuesday. The 27-year-old landed awkwardly following an aerial challenge and is now set to undergo surgery. Matip had started the Reds' last three matches and his injury is blow to Liverpool's hopes of remaining on top of the Premier League. Jurgen Klopp's side, who sit one point above Manchester City, are already without Joe Gomez.

Chelsea target Pulisic not for sale in Jan: Dortmund

Bundesliga leaders Borussia Dortmund have insisted Chelsea-target Christian Pulisic will not be allowed to leave in the January transfer window. According to British media reports, Chelsea are interested in the 20-year-old US international, but Dortmund, who want 50m euros for the right winger, have blocked a possible departure next month. "We won't let any important players go who are indispensable to achieving our sporting goals," director of sport Michael Zorc said with Dortmund seven points clear in the league table. "I strongly assume that Christian will still be wearing the Borussia Dortmund shirt in February."

Ex-Gunner Adams named English rugby body chief

Former Arsenal and England captain Tony Adams has been named the new president of English rugby league's governing body. Despite his roots in football, Adams has close links with rugby league through his Sporting Chance charity. The 52-year-old will replace current Rugby Football League (RFL) president Andy Burnham, a politician for the centre-left Labour party and the mayor of Manchester, in the middle of next year. Adams made more than 500 appearances for Arsenal and won 66 caps for England. Since the end of his playing career, Adams has had spells as manager of Wycombe, Portsmouth, Gabala and Granada.

FIFA bans Afghan football chief pending abuse probe

FIFA yesterday suspended the president of the Afghanistan Football Federation Keramuddin Karim for 90 days pending an investigation into allegations of sexual and physical abuse against the national women's team. FIFA's independent ethics committee said in a statement that the provisional ban "may be extended pending proceedings on the merits of the case." Karim is barred from all football-related activities at both the national and international level, the statement said. Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani has ordered an investigation into claims of abuse by male officials against members of the women's team.

SPOTLIGHT

## Tottenham defied doubters, says Pochettino

AFP  
Barcelona

Mauricio Pochettino revelled in Tottenham defying what he said many had dubbed "mission impossible" on Tuesday as they drew away to Barcelona and qualified for the Champions League's last 16. Spurs needed to match Inter Milan's result at home to PSV Eindhoven, which they did, thanks to Lucas Moura's 85th-minute equaliser snatching a 1-1 draw at the Camp Nou.

Inter were held to the same scoreline by PSV, sending Pochettino's side through in second place in Group B, despite them taking just a single point from their opening three games. "No-one believed in us," Pochettino said afterwards. "People said it was mission impossible but we are here. It is a massive achievement for the club."

Ousmane Dembele's superb early goal looked set to put Tottenham out, as Son Heung-min, Harry Kane and Moura all missed excellent chances. Moura's late strike, however, set up a dramatic finale, with Spurs players left to wait after the final whistle for the finish to be confirmed in Italy.

Victory, and progress to the knock-out stages, represents an impressive achievement for Tottenham, particularly given they have had to play home games at Wembley this term while their new stadium continues to be delayed. "It is great for the club," Pochettino said. "It gives us the possibility to play Champions League in our new stadium, which will be a massive boost for the club."

With Barcelona already guaranteed to go through as group winners, their coach Ernesto Valverde took the chance to rest several key players, including Lionel Messi. Messi came on in the 64th minute but was quiet, while the likes of Jordi Alba, Marc-Andre ter Stegen and Sergio Busquets were also missing from the starting line-up. On Messi's introduction in the second half, Valverde said: "It's good to keep him busy." He added: "We qualified quickly and that speaks for itself."

Dembele's surging run and finish in the seventh minute was the perfect riposte from the 21-year-old to more reports of indiscipline this week. "It was a great goal, the kind only players with his talent can score," Valverde said. "We are happy with him. Throughout the season, things happen with the players and we solve them internally, that's it."



Tottenham's Lucas Moura (right) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Barcelona in the Champions League at Camp Nou on Tuesday. (Reuters)

FOCUS

## Celtic star Griffiths takes break to deal with personal issues

AFP  
Glasgow

Celtic striker Leigh Griffiths is taking a break from football as he seeks help for ongoing personal issues, Hoops manager Brendan Rodgers revealed yesterday. Griffiths has endured a difficult season marred by injury problems, but Rodgers said the Scotland international's decision to step away from the sport was prompted by off-field troubles.

The 28-year-old is widely reported to have entered a treatment facility to deal with a gambling addiction. "Leigh will be taken out of football now for a little period of time," Rodgers told reporters. "Leigh has had ongoing issues now for a number of months and

he has done amazing to play to the level and score some of the goals he has. But he has reached the point where it is a struggle for him and we are going to give him all the professional help that he possibly needs to get himself into a good place again."

Griffiths came off the bench in Celtic's 5-1 Scottish Premiership win over Kilmarnock at the weekend, but is out of the Europa League Group B clash with Salzburg today. Asked if it was more than a physical injury, Rodgers said: "Yes it has been ongoing in my time here with Leigh. "I am very close with him, we have a very strong relationship and he has had a number of issues around outside of the football environment and thankfully for him, there is great support out there and it is no longer a weakness now to talk."

## CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# PSG keeping cool heads after making last 16

'We need to stay humble and have a professional attitude. We are improving and we are hard to beat'

AFP  
Belgrade

Paris Saint-Germain coach Thomas Tuchel said his side need to "stay humble" after they thumped Red Star Belgrade 4-1 on Tuesday night and qualified for the last 16 of the Champions League, finishing ahead of Liverpool and Napoli to top a tight Group C.

First-half goals from Edinson Cavani and Neymar set the French champions on their way, before a bullet header from Marquinhos, Kylian Mbappe's injury-time strike and Liverpool beating Napoli 1-0 ensured first place in the group after Marko Gobeljic pulled one back for the hosts early in the second half.

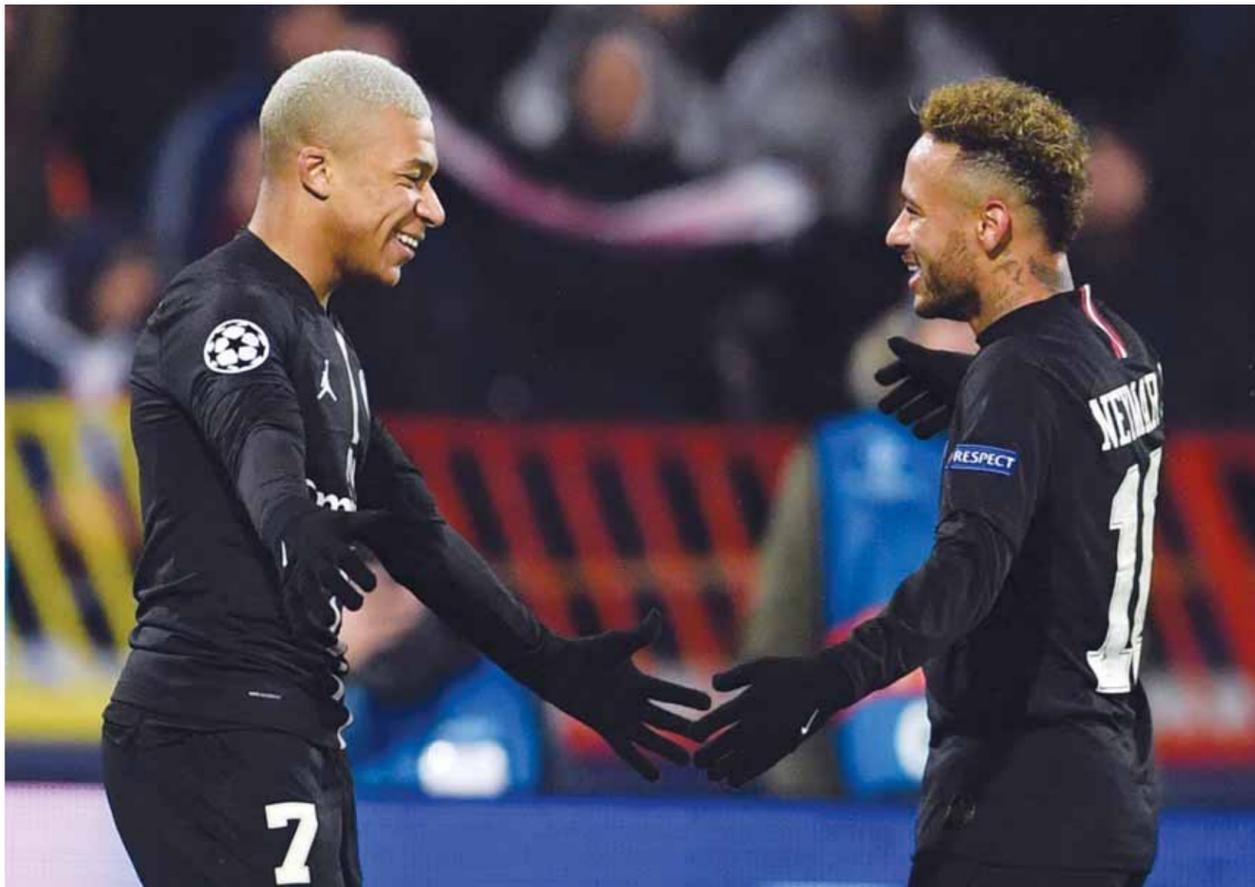
"We made mistakes, but I really liked the reaction after Belgrade's goal. We controlled the match," said Tuchel said after the win. "We need to stay humble and have a professional attitude. We are improving and we are hard to beat."

PSG finished the group stage on 11 points, two ahead of second-placed Liverpool and Napoli, who were eliminated due to their defeat at Anfield. Topping such a keenly-contested group is a huge boost for PSG, who have dominated French football since being taken over by Qatari investors but flattered to deceive on the continent.

Arrival in the knockout stage comes after two straight wins for PSG, with Tuesday's beating of Red Star coming after a crucial 2-1 victory over Liverpool that put qualification in their hands.

"We showed for a second time after the match against Liverpool that we are ready for this kind of match," added Tuchel, whose side began the group stage with a 3-2 defeat by the impressive Reds at Anfield and then struggled to contain Napoli in the two draws with the Italian side.

However, PSG scored 10 goals in two games against Red Star, who beat Liverpool and drew with Napoli in Belgrade — dropped points that allowed the Ligue 1 leaders to finish top. "We are happy, we came for qualification and we showed our intentions (with the win)," said Mbappe, who also laid on Cavani's opener. Asked about PSG's chances of winning the Champions League, Mbappe added: "We need to see what we'll have in front of us. The goal is to



Paris Saint-Germain's Kylian Mbappe (left) celebrates with Neymar after scoring a goal against Red Star Belgrade at the Rajko-Mitic stadium in Belgrade. (AFP)

get to the quarter-finals, but we'll deal with what we are given in the draw."

PSG had Red Star on the back foot from the start, and their blistering attacking trio of Neymar, Mbappe and Cavani did not waste time in putting the away side ahead.

Just eight minutes were on the clock when Cavani tapped Mbappe's pass into an open goal, after the French teenage sensation met the excellent Marco Ver-

ratti's through ball, brushed Filip Stojkovic aside and slipped a perfect pass for the Uruguayan.

Red Star captain Stojkovic had a torrid evening, and Neymar made light work of the 25-year-old on his way to a wonderful solo goal in the 31st minute, dribbling into the box and sitting down the hosts' keeper Milan Borjan before lifting the second into the net.

The Ligue 1 leaders should have been

out of sight three minutes before the break, but Mbappe wasted an excellent chance to make it three, again bursting through past Stojkovic on the left only to fluff his shot into the side netting.

Red Star came out firing in the second half, and could have scored twice before Gobeljic smashed past Gaijuigi Buffon in the 56th minute to set the Rajko Mitic stadium ablaze with noise. However Marquinhos snuffed their enthusiasm

out when he met Di Maria's beautiful deep free-kick to make sure of the three points with 17 minutes remaining.

Mbappe's neat finish as the final seconds ticked away and Liverpool's win were the icing on the cake for PSG. "We knew it was going to go to the very end ever since the draw," said Marquinhos. "We knew this group was very difficult, so it's great to finish first, it's a good sign for the future."

## Sanchez names preliminary Qatar squad for Asian Cup

**Doha:** Qatar coach Felix Sanchez yesterday named a provisional squad of 27 players for the AFC Asian Cup, which will be held in the UAE from January 5 to February 1.

The squad will be pruned to 23 after the four friendlies games. The squad is expected to assemble for training from tomorrow and then is scheduled to play friendlies against Jordan on December 23, Kyrgyzstan on 25, Algeria on 27 and Iran on 31 in Doha.

Sanchez's men are in good form going into the Asian Cup, having won four of the six friendly matches in the last few months. They beat China, Palestine, Ecuador and Switzerland and tied with Iceland. Their only loss came against Uzbekistan.

Qatar is in Group E along with Lebanon, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia. Al Anabi's opening match in the prestigious competition will be against Lebanon on January 9 in Al Ain, before they take on North Korea on 13 and Saudi Arabia on 17. Only two teams from each group will qualify for the knockout stage.

Meanwhile, five referees from Qatar will officiate at the Asian Cup. Abdulrahman al-Jassim, Khamis al-Kuwari and Khamis al-Mari are chosen as match referees, with Taleb Salem and Saud Ahmed also making the list as assistant referees. With the expansion of Asia's most prestigious tournament from 16 to 24 teams, a record 60 match officials — comprising 30 referees and assistant referees each — have been appointed for the month-long tournament.

### QATAR PROVISIONAL SQUAD

**Goalkeepers:** Saad al-Sheeb, Youssef Hassan, Mohamed al-Bakri, Jassim al-Hail, Yazan Naim

**Defenders:** Bassam Hisham, Sultan al-Brake, Hamed Ismail, Boualem Khoukhi, Tariq Salman, Abdelkareem al-Ali, Pedro Miguel, Mohamed Alaa, Abdul Karim Hassan, Ali Afif, Mohamed Musa

**Midfielders:** Salim al-Hajri, Assem Madbo, Karim Boudiaf, Ali Awad, Ahmed Fahmy, Abdulrahman Fahmy, Abdulaziz Hatem

**Forwards:** Hassan al-Haydous, Akram Afif, Almoze Ali, Ahmed Alaa

## SPOTLIGHT

## Sports minister elated with response to Qatar Motorsports Academy

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**H**E the Minister of Culture and Sports Salah bin Ghanem bin Nasser al-Ali has lavished praise on Qatar Motorsports Academy (QMA) and said he was confident that Qatari champions will graduate from the academy in the future.

Last month, Lusail Circuit Sports Club (LCSC), Dorna Sports SL and Aspire Academy joined forces to launch the QMA, which gives young riders between the age of eight and 16 years the opportunity to learn from the experts and improve their skills. Al-Ali paid a visit to the academy at Lusail Circuit last weekend and was briefed about the international class facility, which provides both theoretical and practical lessons for the budding riders. The minister lauded the efforts of LCSC for their initiative to launch the academy. "Lusail Circuit have taken a special step to launch the academy, which is open to Qatar citizens as well as residents," he said.

Al-Ali was impressed with the enrollment of 24 Qatari children in the academy out of 71 children. "It's a remarkable and unexpected number and I am optimistic more Qatari children will enrol in the academy next year. Our ambition in the academy is to create strong relations with academies all over the world and expand the sport in Qatar. Qatar has many heroes in motorsport, most notably Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah, and want to create new heroes for the future," he said.

The academy received tremendous response when the registration was opened, with more than 200 children taking part in the activities of the Family Open Day programme in November. Registrants were made up of 17% Qatari children and there were a total of 25 nationalities represented among all the children. However, the academy had to prune the number to 71 in the first season.



HE the Minister of Culture and Sports Salah bin Ghanem bin Nasser al-Ali with the young riders at the Qatar Motorsports Academy.

LCSC vice-president and general manager Khalid al-Remaihi was pleased with the response. "LCSC has made great efforts in co-operation with Aspire Academy in order to bring this huge project to light and make it a reality on the ground," he said.

Al-Remaihi noted that the initial plan was to have 30-40 children in the first year but they had to enrol more children thanks to the large turnout, which he pointed out has led to increase in number of trainers and training days. "We have added more trainers to the academy's repertoire. We had a difficult job to choose from 200 children, and we have selected the best ones among them to

make it 71 for the pilot batch," the LCSC vice-president said.

"The club will provide the best of experts, trainers and academics in motorsport with QMA's Motorcycling head and former MotoGP and WorldSBK rider Jose Luis Cardoso leading the training process," he added.

Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation Abdul Rahman al-Mannai said the academy will play an important role in providing many young children with the opportunity to learn and develop in sport.

He expected the academy to develop significantly in the coming period to become a regional centre in the region. QMA's Motorcycling head Jose Luis

Cardoso was excited to see the desire of young riders for the sport. "I am very happy to see many kids at the beginning of our Academy," said Cardoso. "It has been a few months of hard work, enthusiasm and desire to see our goals fulfilled. The participation of our riders has been incredible and I am sure that we will enjoy passing our experience on to the kids."

Qatari rider Saeed al-Sulaiti, one of the QMA coaches, said: "I'm very happy because we've been waiting for an academy like this for a long time. Having partners like Dorna and Aspire is a guarantee for all of us and this great project. I did not expect to have so much demand from the beginning so I am very happy about it."

## QNB STARS LEAGUE

## Delighted to go top of the league: Al Sadd's Ferreira

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**A**l Sadd head coach Jesualdo Ferreira was a happy man on Tuesday night, after his side went top of the QNB Stars League table with a thrilling 3-1 win over Al Duhail. Speaking after the match, Ferreira said: "As I said before, the most important thing is the win and the three points. Al Duhail were not weak for most of the match; we were not deceived by their draws in their last two games. Their players have a winning mentality and they came into this game looking to win and increase the gap. But we turned up and got the win."

The Portuguese coach was not happy with his players show and said there was room for improvement. "Despite this win, I am not satisfied with the players' performance because they could have put a better show. I think the players' performance needs to improve in the next period if we want to win the league," he said.

Ferreira pointed out that the passing game of his side was not up to the mark. "It was an even match. We made a lot of mistakes in passing and the players were evidently fatigued. The pressure was more on the Al Sadd players than on Al Duhail. But I am delighted that we are on top of the league table, this has come about after a lot of effort put in by the players throughout the season," the veteran coach said.

Ferreira paid tribute to Duhail, even saying they were better than his team on Tuesday. "Duhail were better than us in



this game despite us winning it. They are capable of achieving big things after the return of their injured players. Both of us have a tough task in the upcoming period because of the absence of the players who will join the national team. Everyone knows how much Sadd and Duhail contribute to the national team and I am worried that the players will get injured. I hope they return in their best conditions, all prepared to restart the league with the same momentum," he said.

Al Sadd have one-point advantage going into the winter break, with the league now resuming only in February after the conclusion on AFC Asian Cup. And Ferreira said it was not easy to predict who will be the title.

"For us, the first phase of the league is over now. It is difficult to predict who will win the league. There is a two-month break and we will suffer more than Duhail due to the absence of the international players. I don't know what we will do without these players," he said.