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GULF TIMES SPORT



SWIMMING

'Anxious' Le Clos beats out Dressel to win world gold

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FOCUS

Most in favour of 48-team 2022 World Cup: Infantino

'It not only means 16 more countries with World Cup fever but also 15 or 16 more countries being able to dream'

By Anil John
Sports Editor

Most countries are in favour of a 48-team World Cup in 2022 but it all depends on whether it is 'feasible', FIFA President Gianni Infantino has said, effectively hinting that the ball is in Qatar's court.

Infantino was speaking at the conclusion of the three-day FIFA Executive Football Summit in Doha which was attended by representatives of dozens of national football federations.

FIFA had already decided that 48 teams would figure at World Cup in 2026 when it is hosted jointly by the US, Mexico and Canada, but advancing the initiative by four years would pose logistical and scheduling issues for Qatar which has been planning for a 32-team event since they won the bid eight years ago.

The world football boss said that several countries who couldn't previously qualify for the World Cup because of the tough 32-team format can now "dream" of making the cut in a 48-team event.

"What we have to see is whether it is feasible or not," he said, adding that based on his interactions with various football federations, "the majority is in favour because 16 more teams would get to participate."

"It not only means 16 more countries with World Cup fever but also 15 or 16 more countries being able to dream."

FIFA has already announced that a final decision would be taken in March next year after a thorough feasibility study, before the qualifying process for 2022 begins.

Asked if he had held specific conversations with Qataris about sharing the event with other countries the region, Infantino said: "We discuss about everything but we didn't decide on anything concrete yet."

He stressed that FIFA is "not into politics" but it's up to Qatar whether it wants a 48-team



FIFA president Gianni Infantino (right) speaks to the media while FIFA Media Relations manager David Noemi looks on during a press conference in Doha yesterday. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

event.

"If Qatar can do something, if it is possible, it would be fantastic. Either way it would be a fantastic World Cup."

Infantino said the process to shift the World Cup to winter from summer itself was a "difficult" task.

"Now we don't want to put an additional burden on anyone."

He said it was important to talk with all stakeholders before such a huge decision is taken.

"We are talking about something

nice, not something dangerous," he said, adding that ultimately it will be a decision "for Qatar, football and FIFA."

He added that Qatar has been frank about its positions. "There is an openness on the part of Qatar and that is something that I really appreciate."

"Of course, the first partner with whom we are speaking about is the Qataris, the Qatar federation, the Qatari authorities."

When asked in what way FIFA can help Qatar to emulate or

even better Russia which this year hosted the "best ever World Cup," Infantino said there's no substitute for hard work.

"Work hard, work together," he said, adding there was a lot of prejudice against Russia before the world Cup, all of which vanished after the event was held.

"Russia was a surprise for many. It opened up peoples' eyes. There were prejudices before."

"The 2022 World Cup will be the first in the Middle East. It has to be an occasion for the world to

come and meet the Arab world. It's a good chance (to embrace the region).

"FIFA will come up with concrete initiatives on how this can be a unique event. I don't want to disclose (the details)."

Infantino once again praised Qatar for being ahead of schedule with its preparations for the 2022 World Cup.

"The blockade has had no impact on the preparations. All World Cup related projects will be completed at least two years

before the tournament is held.

"In fact this has never happened before, even in Europe (that a country has been ready two years before a World Cup)."

Speaking on the VAR (Video Assistant Referee) system that is being used in many countries these days, Infantino said it has only benefited the game.

"There were 455 cases in which VAR was used in Russia and it was correct in 99.3% of the cases. There was no scandal," he said, emphasising that the VAR tech-

nology sorted out all cases which could have caused a major uproar or scandal.

"This is progress. Of course we can still improve as technology keeps getting better."

He also spoke specifically on the piracy issue concerning Saudi owned rogue channel beoutQ which is continuing to telecast feed from Qatar's beIN Sports.

"We don't allow it and we will fight against it legally until it stops. We have to give out a strong message against piracy."

ROUND-UP

Lyon reach Champions League last 16, Bayern top group

AFP
Paris

Lyon clinched the final Champions League last-16 place as Nabil Fekir's second-half strike grabbed a 1-1 draw against Shakhtar Donetsk in a snowy Kiev on Wednesday, while Bayern Munich pipped Ajax to top spot in Group E.

Bruno Genesio's Lyon needed to avoid defeat against Shakhtar to progress from Group F with Manchester City, and a fifth successive draw in the competition achieved that aim.

"It was hard in difficult conditions. We gave ourselves a fright and it's a pity we didn't kill off the game in the first half," Lyon midfielder Houssem Aouar told RMC

Sport. "The main thing is that we've qualified."

Shakhtar forged ahead midway through the opening period with what proved their only shot of the first half, just seconds after Lyon forward Bertrand Traore had been denied by Andriy Pyatov when clean through one-on-one with the goalkeeper.

The Burkina Faso international was made to pay for his profligacy, as Junior Moraes slotted home after being picked out by Ismaily. Lyon continued to dominate, though, and finally equalised in the 65th minute as Nabil Fekir hammered a left-footed strike into the top corner following excellent play by Memphis Depay.

Man City wrapped up top spot in the group by coming from behind to beat Hoffenheim 2-1 at the Etihad Stadium.

Andrej Kramaric gave Hoffenheim a surprise 16th-minute lead from the penalty spot, although Leroy Sane levelled on the stroke of half-time with a magnificent free-kick.

City wasted a host of chances, with away goalkeeper Oliver Baumann in inspired form, but Sane grabbed his second just after the hour mark to complete the turnaround.

THRILLING DRAW KEEPS BAYERN TOP

Bayern Munich went into their game at Ajax just needing a point to beat their opponents to first place in Group E, and Niko Kovac's men did just that in a thrilling 3-3 draw.

The game burst into life in the second half when Dusan Tadic equalised Robert Lewandowski's



Lyon's Nabil Fekir (right) celebrates his goal against Shakhtar Donetsk in Kiev, Ukraine, on Wednesday. (Reuters)

early opener just after the hour mark, with Ajax defender Maximilian Woeber sent off in the 67th minute for a dangerous lunge on Leon Goretzka.

But Bayern were also reduced to 10 men only eight minutes lat-

er, as Thomas Mueller was given his marching orders for planting his studs into the head of Nicolas Tagliafico.

Ajax briefly moved top of the live standings when Jerome Boateng carelessly conceded a

penalty, which was dispatched emphatically into the roof of the net by Tadic.

But Tagliafico brought down Thiago Alcantara, with Lewandowski slotting in the spot-kick, before Kingsley Coman looked to have settled matters with a wonderful 90th-minute strike.

Tagliafico went up the other end to equalise again, but Ajax failed to find a winner as Bayern just about held on.

"That was an advert for football," smiled Kovac. "The most important thing was to finish top of the group and with 14 from 18 points we are happy."

Juventus finished at the Group H summit ahead of Manchester United despite slumping to a 2-1 defeat by Young Boys in Bern, as Jose Mourinho's Premier League giants lost at Valencia.

United had to beat Valencia and hope Juve failed to win in Switzerland, but Carlos Soler and a comical Phil Jones own goal did the damage for the visitors, with Marcus Rashford scoring a late consolation.

"I didn't learn anything at all," Mourinho said. "Nothing surprised me at all."

Guillaume Hoarau netted twice to help Young Boys end their European campaign on a high note.

CSKA Moscow stunned a much-changed Real Madrid with a 3-0 victory at the Santiago Bernabeu, but still finished bottom of Group G as Viktoria Plzen beat Roma 2-1.

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



PREMIER LEAGUE

United need old De Gea back for visit to Liverpool

Spanish goalkeeper has conceded 26 goals in 16 games so far this season

Reuters
London

Even Manchester United's reliable last line of defence David de Gea has struggled for form this season but the Spanish keeper will need to be at his best in Sunday's clash with bitter rivals Liverpool at Anfield.

Last season's Premier League Golden Glove winner has not looked himself since some uncharacteristic mistakes undermined Spain's World Cup campaign and they went out in the last 16.

De Gea's struggles have continued into this season as United sit sixth in the Premier League, 16 points behind the leaders. He had conceded 26 goals in 16 games whereas last season he let in only 28 in 37 appearances.

The 28-year-old may not, therefore, be relishing Sunday's showdown with Liverpool's back-in-form forward Mohamed Salah, who scored a hat-trick last week in a 4-0 win at Bournemouth that sent Jurgen Klopp's side to the top of the table and struck the vital winner against Napoli in the Champions League on Tuesday.

He has not been helped by manager Jose Mourinho chopping and changing his defence, but De Gea looks low on confidence and not the same formidable barrier that had him linked with moves to Real Madrid, Juventus or Paris St Germain.

With his contract due to be up next year De Gea might have been distracted by thoughts of a move, although United have now activated a one-year extension meaning an escape from Old Trafford may now depend on someone being willing to pay big money.

His form at the moment means his stock has slipped although if he can keep up Liverpool's free-scoring triumvirate of Salah, Roberto Firmino and Sadio Mane on Sunday then he will at least put his price back up.

His opposite number at Liverpool Alisson has made a flying start to his Premier League career, keeping 10 clean sheets.

Former Liverpool and United midfielder Paul Ince is torn on who would take the number one jersey in a combined team.

"If you look at reputation you'd say David de Gea but De Gea has made a few mistakes this season, and if you're looking at what's happening this



Manchester United midfielder Juan Mata (left) wraps the gloves for teammate and goalkeeper David de Gea during a training session at the Carrington Training complex in Manchester, England, on Tuesday. (AFP)

Alleged racist abuse of Sterling 'disgusting', says Sarri

Reuters
London

Maurizio Sarri has described the alleged racist abuse of Manchester City forward Raheem Sterling by Chelsea fans as "disgusting" and condemned discrimination in any form in his first public comments on the incident.

Chelsea said on Monday they had banned four supporters from their matches pending a police investigation into the incident which occurred during City's 2-0 Premier League defeat at Stamford Bridge last Saturday.

"First of all, I want to say that I condemn any form of discrimi-

nation, of course. I think that I have to stop here," the Chelsea manager told reporters ahead of yesterday's Europa League match against Vidi in Budapest. "Because there is an investigation so I think it's better not to say something more. Of course, my opinion is that I condemn every sort of discrimination. "It was disgusting. You know very well my opinion, the opinion of the club, but now we have to go on."

Sterling posted a statement on Instagram last Sunday in which he said newspapers were fuelling racism in soccer due to their negative portrayal of young black players in comparison to their white counterparts.

His comments were echoed by

the Professional Footballers' Association and former players. One of the Chelsea supporters who has been banned admitted directing abuse at Sterling but said the vitriol was 'not racist in nature'.

Sterling's England teammate Ruben Loftus-Cheek said a strong response was needed to rid the sport of the problem. "It doesn't happen a lot in England, but obviously still happens. Most people don't like this and it needs to be out of the game as quick as possible," Loftus-Cheek said.

"He (Sterling) was right to say what he said. I don't think it should be in the game or anywhere. Him speaking out was the right thing. If it happened to me I would do the same."

year then Alisson would start," Ince told the *Mirror* newspaper

this week. United, beaten 2-1 by Valen-

cia in the Champions League in midweek, have drawn 0-0

on their two most recent trips to Anfield and according to their former midfielder Darren Fletcher would be well-advised to adopt another safety-first approach.

"Manchester United are not drilled enough, they don't have enough patterns so to go and do that, to play Liverpool in an open game, would be suicidal," he told the BBC.

Liverpool, bidding for a first league title since 1990, will go into the match extra motivated should Pep Guardiola's City reclaim top spot tomorrow by beating Everton at home in the day's early kickoff.

Third-placed Tottenham Hotspur will also be breathing down the Merseysiders' necks should they overcome Burnley at Wembley.

Fourth-placed Chelsea, who inflicted City's first league defeat of the season last week, go to Brighton and Hove Albion on Sunday when Arsenal play along the coast at Southampton.

SPOTLIGHT

Ronaldo to support Valladolid playing games abroad

AFF
Madrid

Ronaldo, the former Brazil striker and current majority shareholder of Real Valladolid, has said he would be in favour of the club playing La Liga games outside of Spain.

Ronaldo bought a 51-percent stake in Valladolid in September, with the stated aim of establishing the team in the top flight after they were promoted last season.

Staging fixtures abroad has become a controversial issue in Spanish football. La Liga were keen to hold a fixture between Barcelona and Girona in January in Miami but Barca have withdrawn their support due to a lack of consensus on the idea.

Ronaldo, however, has said he would be in favour if Valladolid were asked.

"I am in favour but our fans are the ones who decide," said Ronaldo yesterday.

"If it's good for the fans that we go to play a match abroad, to me it would seem a very interesting project for our club and our brand."

La Liga want to develop Spanish football in the United States but their plan has encountered strong opposition, primarily from the Spanish Football Federation and the players' union, AFE.

"Everything we do is for the



progress of our project and Valladolid has to be recognised nationally and internationally," added Ronaldo.

The three-time FIFA World Player of the Year, who played for Real Madrid, Barcelona and Inter Milan, said he had looked in England as well as Spain for a potential club to buy.

"I had been looking for a team to buy for two years," Ronaldo said.

"I studied the Spanish and English markets and some other markets and Valladolid came as a perfect gift."

He added: "We have a simple challenge and that is to stay in the first division, it is our one and only goal this season."

UPDATE

Ligue 1 fixtures hit by protests, terror threats

AFF
Paris

Six French Ligue 1 matches have been postponed for the second consecutive week because of heavy demand for police and security personnel amid ongoing protests and the threat of more terror attacks.

Marseille will miss a second consecutive league encounter after their weekend fixture with Bordeaux was postponed by league chiefs yesterday at the request of police.

Five other league games: Nice v Saint-Etienne, Nantes v Montpellier, Caen v Toulouse, Guingamp v Rennes and Amiens v Angers have been postponed.

Reigning champions Paris Saint-Germain's match away at Dijon is one of four that will go ahead.

Marseille's match with Saint-Etienne was among several also postponed last week due to security concerns linked to the France-wide 'yellow vests' movement.

Authorities are expecting more anti-government demon-

strations this weekend, which, combined with other "demands for police and security services elsewhere" according to the French Professional League (LFP), has left a shortfall in the numbers of available officers for league encounters.

Of the six postponed matches only Caen v Toulouse has since been rescheduled, for December 18.

"All the other postponed fixtures will be rescheduled at a later date," said a statement by the LFP.

Last week six league encounters were postponed amid mass 'yellow vest' demonstrations in France aimed at the government of President Emmanuel Macron. They were all rescheduled, to be played on January 15-16.

Although more protests are expected this weekend, France is also on tenterhooks following a shooting in Strasbourg in which three people died. The 29-year-old suspect on France's terror watchlist is still at large.

The victims of the attack will be honoured by a minute's silence at all remaining league fixtures this weekend.

FA chief Martin Glenn to step down at end of the season

Martin Glenn has resigned as chief executive of the Football Association and will leave his role at the end of the season, the governing body announced yesterday. The FA said Glenn, who was appointed in 2015, "had delivered much of what he came to do". "When I accepted the role of CEO at The FA, I was tasked with improving the effectiveness of the organisation and making it financially secure," said Glenn. "I also joined with the strong belief that the England team's performance in tournaments could and should improve, and that the experience of the millions of people who play football could be a better one. I will leave feeling proud of the success of the performance of all the England teams. I am confident that we have established in St. George's Park, a world-class centre which will ensure that the teams will continue to build on their current successes." England, under Gareth Southgate, reached the semi-finals of the World Cup in Russia and recently qualified for next year's Nations League Finals.

Club intermediaries paid 2.14bn euros in 2013-18 transfers: FIFA

Intermediaries acting for clubs in players' transfers have been paid \$2.14bn (1.88bn euros) since 2013, FIFA said in a report published yesterday. The report revealed that over half of the total amount paid by clubs to intermediaries over the last six years came from just six percent of transfers involving middle men acting for clubs. Commission paid by the clubs buying the player tended to be higher than the fee paid by the selling club, the report said. Since 2013, 16,825 of the total 86,212 international transfers involved at least one intermediary. The involvement of intermediaries in transfers in 2018 dropped dramatically to just 335 deals, most likely because most transfers this year have involved players who were out of contract, the report said. This year, clubs from England, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Spain and France were responsible for 83.9 percent of the global spend on commissions paid to intermediaries. The report did not detail the amounts paid by agents acting for players.

LA LIGA

Barca visit Levante with Dembele in spotlight again

Reuters
Madrid

La Liga leaders Barcelona visit Levante on Sunday with the cloud of in-form Ousmane Dembele's latest misdemeanour hanging over them.

Dembele, who joined the club in the wake of Neymar's departure to Paris Saint-Germain last summer for 105m euros, has had a number of off-field issues since joining Barca and local media reports said he was hit with a large fine for arriving late for training this week.

On the field Dembele has been impressive of late, netting three goals in his last five games including the opener in his side's 1-1 draw with Tottenham Hotspur in midweek.

Coach Ernesto Valverde has refused to be drawn on the matter, however teammate Carles Aleña suggest the Frenchman is ready to change his attitude for the good of his career.

"We have to look after Dembele," he said. "He apologised in



Barcelona's Ousmane Dembele (second from right) is congratulated by teammates after his goal against Tottenham during the UEFA Champions League group B match in Barcelona on Tuesday. (AFP)

front of the whole team and he knows he made a mistake.

"He won't arrive late anymore. He's committed some errors but he knows that and he's

going to correct them. We can't kill him for it. The important thing is how much he's giving us on the pitch. And when he improves those small things (off

the pitch), he'll give us more. "It was nice to see the reception he got from the fans when he went off. We appreciate that he got the support he needed

from the supporters and we are with him until the end."

Barca are three points ahead of Sevilla and Atletico Madrid and five better off than fourth-placed Real Madrid who host second bottom Rayo Vallecano still smarting from their heaviest ever European home defeat - a 3-0 loss to CSKA Moscow.

Coach Santiago Solari believed that result was just a blip in the road. "I think each game is different," he said.

"We played well in the opening half hour but just couldn't get the goal and from there on in we just didn't react well enough. They punished every mistake we made."

It remains to be seen whether forward Gareth Bale, who picked up a knock in the victory after coming on as a halftime substitute, will be fit for the game.

Elsewhere, Atletico visit Valladolid tomorrow, while second-placed Sevilla visit Girona in Sunday's early kickoff.

The weekend's action concludes with a Basque derby on Monday as Eibar host Athletic Bilbao.

FOCUS

Pochettino comfortable with future speculation

'We are playing for three very important points, to be in the top four, for me it is a massive motivation'

AFP
London

Tottenham manager Mauricio Pochettino said yesterday he will never get bored of stories linking him to other clubs because it means he is doing something right.

Fresh speculation about Pochettino's future has emerged this week following the club's qualification to the knockout stage of the Champions League, with reports suggesting the club are braced for interest from Manchester United and Real Madrid.

"This type of news I think does not upset or bore people," said the Argentine, who signed a five-year contract in May and has constantly spoken about how happy he is in north London. "I prefer that newspapers talk about things like this than talk about 'Tottenham is going to sack me', or 'people are tired of me', or 'we are in a difficult situation'."

"Of course, if I choose one situation I choose this one. I am not bored of it, of course."

Pochettino has steered Spurs into the last 16 of the Champions League and to third spot in the Premier League in spite of several challenges this season, including having to play their home games at Wembley. And he is relieved that most of the focus is on Manchester City and Liverpool.

"We are there, we are in a good position of course," he said. "It is normal that the perception is different. I am happy with the perception today when the perception from the media is only Manchester City and Liverpool and not us."

Spurs will find out their Champions League fate on Monday when the draw could pair them with Porto, Real Madrid, Borussia Dortmund, Paris Saint-Germain, Juventus or Bayern Munich. They will play their first leg at home in February and Pochettino is desperate for his side to be in their new home by then. Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, on the site of their old venue of White Hart Lane, is set for completion sometime in early 2019.

It will be tight as on Wednesday the club announced they will play their Premier League game with Manchester United on January 13 at Wembley.

"I hope and I wish to play our first leg in the new stadium," he said.

"Now, I don't know if it is going to be there or not, or in Wembley. We need to wait. But my wish and hope



Tottenham manager Mauricio Pochettino applauds their fans after Champions League match against Barcelona at Camp Nou, Barcelona, on Tuesday. (Reuters)

is we can pay the first leg in our new stadium." Tomorrow's match against struggling Burnley gives them the opportunity to cut the gap on leaders Liverpool to three points while next Wednesday they face Arsenal again in the quarter-final of the League Cup.

"We are playing for three very important points, to be in the Premier League top four, for me it is a massive motivation and it is going to be a tough game," Pochettino said. "(Playing) every three days is always tough but we need to try to find the

way to approach the game in the best condition." Pochettino will assess the fitness levels of few players in training before selecting his squad for the weekend. The club confirmed defenders Davinson Sanchez and Juan Foyth (both hamstring) have both

entered the late stages of conditioning work, while full back Kieran Trippier (groin) continues his individual rehabilitation programme.

Burnley travel to Wembley seeking their first away win against Spurs in any competition since 1983.

SPOTLIGHT

Mueller apologises for horror kick on Ajax defender

Reuters
Amsterdam

Thomas Mueller has apologised for his kung fu-style kick to the head of Ajax defender Nicholas Tagliafico which saw the Germany star being sent off in Wednesday's six-goal thriller in Amsterdam.

"No, no - of course I didn't mean to do it," the 29-year-old told reporters over the first straight red card of his career in 462 appearances for Bayern in the thrilling 3-3 draw as both teams progressed to the last 16 of the Champions League. Mueller said he went to the hosts' changing room to apologise to Tagliafico after the match, but the defender, who scored the home side's 95th-minute equaliser, had already left.

Instead, Mueller wrote "@tagliafico3 - I am very sorry for that what happened yesterday! Was not intentionally (sic). Get well soon" on his Instagram account.

Mueller was sent off 15 minutes from time after trying to control the ball with his out-stretched boot, but succeeded only in kicking the head of Tagliafico, who needed treatment, in a bad-tempered game.

Both Mueller's team-mates and coach said the foul warranted a straight red card. "Thomas didn't see him," said Bayern boss Niko Kovac, "but it was a clear red - he should have been aware of the opponent."

Earlier in the fixture Ajax had Maximilian Woeber sent off for horror foul on Bayern midfielder Leon Goretzka, who witnessed Mueller's head-high tackle on Tagliafico at close quarters. "I saw the scene as it happened. You only have to see how the lad looked afterwards - it wasn't good," said Goretzka. "As I saw it, it was a clear red card."

It was a bitter end to the night for Mueller, who made his 105th Champions League appearance, putting him level with ex-Bayern captain Philipp Lahm, who skipped Germany to the 2014 World Cup title.

Mueller will be banned for the first leg of Bayern's last 16 tie in the new year with the draw to be made in Nyon on Monday. The Bavarians claimed the point they needed to finish as Group E winners in an action packed second-half which saw five goals, two penalties and a pair of red cards with Ajax also through to the last 16 as runners-up.



Bayern Munich's Thomas Mueller kicks the head of Ajax's defender Nicolas Tagliafico during their Champions League tie. (AFP)

SERIE A

Torino's Mr. Angry hoping to upset unbeaten Juve

Reuters
Milan

He is known as one of Italy's angriest coaches but tomorrow Torino's Walter Mazzarri will hope to make the headlines as the man whose team handed runaway Serie A leaders Juventus a first league defeat of the season.

Mazzarri's arguing with match officials has earned him three sendings-off already this season, most recently in Sunday's 0-0 draw at AC Milan - only his third game back on the touchline after doctors had ordered him to take a rest.

"The president and the doctors made me take a break and they were right, because I did need a complete check-up," he said on his return. "Now I am back, feeling better than ever, fired up and eager to do well."

There are no exact figures but Italian media said the Milan match was around the 20th time that Mazzarri had been ordered from the touchline in his 17-year coaching career.

Despite the dismissal, Mazzarri was left off with a warning by Serie A's disciplinary tribunal and will be able to sit on the bench when his sixth-placed side face their bigger and more famous neighbours on Saturday.

It is a tough ask for Torino, who have beaten Juve only once in their last 23 meetings. Juventus have dropped only two points in their first 15 league games of the season, putting them eight points clear of Napoli and well on course for an eighth successive title.

Mazzarri's old club Napoli, who went out of the Champions League in midweek after a 1-0 loss at Liverpool, are away at Cagliari on Sunday while third-placed Inter, who also failed to reach the last-16 of the Champions League after only drawing at home to PSV Eindhoven, host Udinese.



Torino's head coach Walter Mazzarri reacts during the Italian Serie A match against AC Milan at Giuseppe Meazza stadium in Milan on Sunday. (EPA)

Mazzarri's volatile temperament is likely to be put to the test by Juventus. He has a degree in degree in psychology and sociology which he says helps him deal with young players - even if it does not seem to calm him down during matches. Sometimes it is the players who are on the end of the Mazzarri treatment but he usually reserves his wrath for match officials and the introduction of the VAR system has given him extra reason to be angry.

He was particularly annoyed after being sent off during the match against Fiorentina in October for what Mazzarri claimed was simply asking a question.

"What I cannot abide is the arrogance of

power that allows you to send off a coach who was simply asking for an explanation," he said, adding that referees were often failing to use the VAR system, especially at Torino matches.

"I want referees to recognise their mistakes," he added. "Why don't they use the VAR when we're playing? Udinese, Bologna, Fiorentina and now this game... The technology is useless."

He concluded that rant by saying maybe officials just did not like him. "They think it's better to send off Mazzarri, that way he won't talk," he said.

"I guess I'm just not a very nice person."

BUNDESLIGA

Fit-again Coman is key to Bayern improvement

Reuters
Berlin

The return of Bayern Munich's Kingsley Coman after a four-month injury break is the best news the champions have had for weeks, with club bosses banking on the Frenchman to carry them higher up the table after a rocky start to the season.

The speedy winger had been sidelined since August with yet another ankle injury that required surgery but the former Juventus player returned this month. France international Coman also missed this summer's World Cup with a similar injury and was forced to watch from afar as his team were crowned world champions.

The 22-year-old hinted days ago of possible early retirement should he injure the ankle again, a thought quickly brushed aside by club bosses, who are committed to keeping him in Munich and developing him into a team stalwart.

Coman, who came through the Paris Saint-Germain's youth system and joined Bayern from Juve in 2015, told French television last week he would consider his future as a player in case of another major injury. But Coman's mind was certainly not on retirement when he netted a late goal in the 3-3 draw at Ajax Amsterdam on Wednesday - a result that put Bayern into the last of



Bayern Munich's Kingsley Coman (right) celebrates with Bayern Munich's Thiago Alcantara after scoring a goal during the UEFA Champions League match against AFC Ajax in Amsterdam. (AFP)

Champions League as group winners.

"I am delighted about his goal," said Bayern coach Niko Kovac, who has himself had a tough first season.

"Because King had a really tough injury break behind him and with this goal (the discussion on potential retirement) has been closed and he will still be playing football at 35."

He is expected to reclaim his starting spot ahead of veteran Franck Ribery.

Bayern have been in desperate need of Coman's services down the wings, with top forward Robert Lewandowski struggling alone up front for much of the season so far. The

return of Thomas Mueller in his familiar role behind the striker, along with Coman's comeback, have also seen Bayern return to their winning ways. The Bavarians have now won their last two league games after failing to win any of the previous three.

They have climbed up to third on 27 points and victory over Hannover 96 on Saturday could see them move into second place behind leaders Borussia Dortmund.

Dortmund, who are on 36 points, host Werder Bremen while second-placed Borussia Muenchengladbach, two points ahead of Bayern, travel to Hoffenheim tomorrow.



FOCUS

Qatar Olympic Academy honours new graduates

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Qatar Olympic Academy (QOA) on Wednesday held a graduation ceremony for the sixth batch of their diploma programme in advanced management of sports and Olympic institutions.

The ceremony was attended by the graduates and the guests, headed by Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) secretary-general HE Jassim bin Rashid al-Buainain.

QOA executive director Saif Mohamed al-Nuaimi said that during the seven-month course, students studied and worked hard to obtain the diploma.

Al-Nuaimi said that the programmes and courses offered by the Academy are of a high quality and include many



fields and sciences, such as sports management, human resources management, financial management of sports institutions.

He added that the students are lucky as they obtained this diploma accredited by the In-

ternational Olympic Committee (IOC). It is a global certificate, not a local one signed by the IOC President and the QOC President, he said.

He said Qatar is one of the most prominent countries in the region thanks to the hosting

of many international sporting events and that Qatari teams and athletes have won many medals across the globe. The Academy through this and other programmes promote education in the field of sports and contribute to the preparation of cadres.

Al-Nuaimi said the QOA has also launched a master's programme in sports law, besides a course in sports psychology for 2019.

He said the Olympic Academy is in the process of launching a project with Qatar University and will soon be launching a master's degree in sports administration. There have been negotiations with Qatar University officials who have expressed their enthusiasm and willingness to co-operate on the master's degree.

Al-Nuaimi also pointed out that there is an intention for the Academy to become an independent academic institution, adding that the Academy with the support of the Olympic Committee applied to the Ministry of Justice to be considered as a public and non-profit organisation and its goal is to serve the community.

MOTORSPORT

Susie Wolff has more than gender on her agenda

Reuters
London

Susie Wolff can expect plenty of attention when Formula E starts season five this weekend with a first ever race in Saudi Arabia, a country that only this year ended a ban on women driving.

The Scot, who served as a Williams development driver in Formula One before hanging up her helmet in 2015, is the first and only female team boss in the all-electric city-based racing series.

The 36-year-old is also active in encouraging and highlighting female involvement in motorsport through her 'Dare to be Different' initiative.

But, while happy to stand out by example, Wolff is looking forward to a time when her gender becomes less of a talking point.

"I've never played on my gender. It was a little bit of a shock to me, when I was announced in my role (last June), that it was still all about my gender," the shareholder and principal of the Monaco-based Venturi team told Reuters in an interview.

"Even now still, for every interview I do it's still a massive part talking about my gender and gender issues within the sport.

"I'm not doing what I do to prove what a woman is capable of. I'm not doing what I do to make Formula E more diverse. I'm doing what I do to be successful. If that's inspirational, then great."

Wolff does not have to look far for her own inspiration – no further than home, in fact.

Husband Toto has led Formula One world champions Mercedes to the last five constructors' and drivers' titles, and Wolff said she had learned a lot from how he goes about his job.

"Especially this year when the challenge was even greater, how he builds his team, how he puts the people together and really makes sure that they are motivated in the right way," she said.

"The energy he brings into the team, the energy that you feel when you go to the factory or walk into that team at a race weekend.

"They have an absolute trust and belief in each other and when failures happen, they learn from them. They don't allow cracks to appear. They come out of it even stronger and that takes a lot of mental strength.

"He is inspirational how he does it and I'm lucky to watch it first hand."

STEP UP

Wolff has also had to show plenty of mental strength through her career, chasing a dream of trying to become the first woman to compete in Formula One since



Wolff, who was a development driver for Williams F1, is the only female team boss in Formula E.

1976.

That did not happen but she did take part in two grand prix practice sessions for Williams, a team also with a woman at the helm in Claire Williams.

Venturi, owned by businessman Gildo Pastor, is her debut in team management.

"The main job for me right now is getting all the structure in place and making sure that the team is led in the right way," she said. "Because of the step up in competition in Formula E we also need to step up."

The team lineup is Brazilian ex-F1 racer Felipe Massa and Swiss-Italian Edoardo Mortara, while Switzerland's Simona de Silvestro is the test driver.

De Silvestro has raced previously in the series, which has attracted increasing manufacturer interest including Mercedes in 2019-20, and will feature in a test session with some seven women drivers on the Ad Diriyah layout on Sunday.

Wolff is supportive of that move, promoted by local organisers, but also wants to see some real substance emerge from it.

"I do hope some of those girls can go out and really show what they are capable of and that it can lead to more long-term opportunity, because it shouldn't just be a one-off test day which is window-dressing," said Wolff. "It has to lead to more."

"We need to get more women into sport, whether that's young girls in karting or off the track. The more we get into sport, the more you are going to get rising to the top of the sport," she added.

"You need to get female talent which is good enough to compete at the right level because no team is going to compromise on on-track performance just to tick a gender box."

SWIMMING

'Anxious' Le Clos wins world gold

Le Clos wins 100m butterfly final in 48.50sec for fourth straight title in the event

AFP
Shanghai

Chad le Clos raised both hands to the heavens after seeing off American golden boy Caeleb Dressel to win the 100m butterfly at the short course World Swimming Championships yesterday.

In one of the most eagerly anticipated duels in the Chinese city of Hangzhou, the South African star romped to victory in 48.50sec and a fourth consecutive title in the event.

He was 0.21sec ahead of rival Dressel, who at age 22 has drawn comparisons with US swim legend Michael Phelps.

Le Clos, who appeared close to tears as he towered atop the podium, conceded that Dressel was disadvantaged by racing in the 50m freestyle semi-finals beforehand, but said: "It was the biggest race of my short-course career.

"I was up against the best field by far and this was the main event of the whole week.

"I was anxious because I was waiting the whole day for this, the whole week and the past three months because I knew this one could come."

Victory for Le Clos was some compensation for the disappointment that he suffered on Tuesday, the first day of competition, when the 26-year-old went under his own world-record time in the 200m butterfly but still came second to Japan's Daiya Seto.

"After the first night people thought I was winded and I have



Chad le Clos (right) of South Africa celebrates his win in the men's 100m butterfly final at the 14th FINA World Swimming Championships (25m) in Hangzhou, China, yesterday. (AFP)

always told them that is the biggest mistake they can make because after I have lost, I come back much stronger," said Le Clos.

The other eye-catching individual performance of the night was by China's rising star Wang Jianjiahe.

Just 16, the gifted teenager had the home crowd on its feet as she left the rest of the field

behind to win the women's 800m freestyle.

Lisa Bratton meanwhile grabbed a surprise gold in an American one-two in the women's 200m backstroke as the United States stepped up their dominance in the 25m pool.

Bratton pipped Olympic gold medalist Kathleen Baker into second by just 0.08sec in a

thrilling finish with Australia's decorated Emily Seebohm taking bronze.

Hungary's Katinka Hosszu, who won three golds at the Rio 2016 Olympics and is the short-course world record-holder, was stunned into fourth and out of the medals.

Bratton's nail-biting triumph in 2:00.71 took the United

States' growing gold medal haul in these championships to eight. They grabbed a ninth with victory in the mixed 4x50m medley relay in world-record time.

In the men's 200m breaststroke, Russia's Kirill Prigoda blitzed his way to a new record time of 2:00.16, beating home swimmer Qin Haiyang into silver by nearly one second.

SPOTLIGHT

Dutch FA delegation visits Aspetar

By Sports Reporter
Doha

A high-profile delegation from the Dutch Royal Football Association (KNVB) visited Aspetar, the orthopaedic and sports medicine hospital, on Wednesday, as part of their official trip to Qatar this week.

The delegation was led

by KNVB secretary-general Gijs de Jong, and a number of senior officials who were accompanied by Dr Bahiah Tahzib-Lie, the Dutch ambassador to Qatar.

Aspetar acting chief executive officer Dr Abdulaziz al-Kuwari welcomed the delegation and briefed them in detail on the services that the hospital provides for athletes. Dr al-Kuwari also accom-

panied the delegation on a comprehensive tour of Aspetar's world class facilities.

Commenting on his first visit to Aspetar, De Jong said, "We are very impressed by the facilities and all the work we've seen Aspetar's professionals doing here. We think Aspetar will really improve medicine and football practices around the world and help take sports medicine to the

next level."

Ambassador Tahzib-Lie said, "We were really impressed at how Aspetar deals with injuries in a very focused manner and in accordance with the latest industry developments. We would like to thank everyone at Aspetar and pledge our support to help this fantastic programme; we are all willing to help and work closely with Qatar."

FINA to stage \$3.9mn elite 'swim series'

AFP
Shanghai

FINA plans to launch a "Champions Swim Series" in 2019 with \$3.9mn prize money after swimming's governing body faced a backlash and legal action from some of the sport's biggest stars.

FINA made the announcement yesterday saying that the event will consist of a three-leg competition between March and May and include the Olympic and world champions, as well as world-record holders and top-ranked swimmers.

Swimming's elite will receive prize money and appearance fees and be grouped in teams for what FINA said will be "an exceptional showcase".

It will involve individual and relay races – finals only – in 50m pools.

Swiss-based FINA has been on the receiving end of growing criticism and also legal action over its running of the sport.

A trio of world and Olympic champions, including Hungarian "Iron Lady" Katinka Hosszu, filed a class-action anti-trust lawsuit last Friday in the United States after FINA effectively shut down an independent competition in Italy, threatening to ban top swimmers who took part.

WADA completes RUSADA audit but still no access to lab

The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) said on Wednesday it had completed an audit of the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) as required following the tainted body's conditional reinstatement. Over two days a three-person WADA delegation inspected the premises, processes and practices of RUSADA and will file a report highlighting any issues. Details of the audit were not made public. WADA director general Olivier Niggli described the audit as an important step along the way to RUSADA again becoming a fully trusted anti-doping partner. But a major hurdle still must be cleared with RUSADA yet to allow WADA inspectors into the former Moscow laboratory and access the Laboratory Information Management System (LIMS) and underlying data. WADA has set a December 31 deadline for RUSADA to meet the condition or once again be found non-compliant and face even tougher sanctions laid out in the International Standard for Code Compliance by Signatories.

Rally king Loeb joins Hyundai for six-stage WRC stint

World rallying's most successful driver Sebastien Loeb has signed a two-year contract to race six stages of next year's World Rally Championship (WRC) with Hyundai Motorsport, the team announced yesterday. Loeb has won the WRC a record nine times and joins Hyundai after driving part-time for Team Peugeot last season, when he stunned the field at the Rally of Catalunya to win his first race since 2013. The Frenchman, 44, retired from full-time championship racing in 2012 after he won his final title. His long-standing co-pilot Daniel Elena has also signed for the South Korean constructor. "Joining Hyundai will give us a fresh challenge and one that I can't wait to tackle. I've been impressed with the team's approach and their determination to succeed," Loeb said in a statement. Loeb's first race with be in Monte-Carlo, France in January.

NBA

Lowry, Ibaka power Raptors in lopsided win over Warriors

'We didn't make shots early in the game and it affected our energy'

AFP
Los Angeles

Kyle Lowry and Serge Ibaka combined for 43 points as the Toronto Raptors beat the two-time defending champion Golden State Warriors at home for the first time in 14 years with a 113-93 victory on Wednesday.

Lowry finished with 23 points and 12 assists and Ibaka tallied 20 points and 12 rebounds as Toronto won despite not having Kawhi Leonard in the lineup.

"It is good for us to get out there and everyone is touching and moving the ball. Move it, swing it, play with some pace," Lowry said. "It is our second game on this road trip so a good win for us. Something to build off."

Danny Green scored 15 points, Pascal Siakam had 13 and Fred VanVleet added 10 to help the Raptors improve to an league-best 23-7, matching the best start in franchise history.

RESULTS		
Charlotte	108-107	Detroit
Cleveland	113-106	New York
Indiana	113-97	Milwaukee
Brooklyn	127-124	Philadelphia
Boston	130-125	Washington
Memphis	92-83	Portland
New Orleans	118-114	Oklahoma City
Dallas	114-17	Atlanta
Utah	111-84	Miami
Sacramento	141-130	Minnesota
Toronto	113-93	Golden State

Toronto won despite not having Leonard for a second consecutive night with a sore right hip. The Raptors also lost seven-foot centre Jonas Valanciunas to a dislocated left thumb in the first half.

The Warriors lost their second straight game to the Raptors and were so hopelessly outclassed that they sat their starters and went with their reserves late in the fourth quarter.

"We didn't make shots early in the game and it affected our energy," said Stephen Curry, who had 10 points. "They got into us early and played aggressive and that set the tone."

"It was one of those tough nights. They are obviously a great team."

Elsewhere, Kyrie Irving drained a clutch three pointer with 16 seconds left as the short-handed Boston Celtics used a variety of interchangeable parts to beat the Washington Wizards 130-125 in overtime.

Irving delivered a game-high 38 points, including consecutive three-pointers in the final 40 seconds of overtime, to prop-



Toronto Raptors guard Kyle Lowry (left) shoots the basketball against Golden State Warriors forward Alfonzo McKinnie during the fourth quarter at Oracle Arena. **PICTURE:** USA TODAY Sports

pel Boston past the Wizards for their seventh-straight victory. Irving outduelled Wizard star guard John Wall and scored Boston's last 12 points.

"Those last two shots were amazing. He made it look easy," coach Brad Stevens said of Irving, who has had six career overtimes with at least 10 points.

Jayson Tatum scored 12 points and grabbed 12 boards for a double-double and Marcus Morris added 27 points for the Celtics, who had to shuffle the roster because they were missing three top players, Al Horford, Gordon Hayward and Jaylen Brown. The Celtics had five players in double figures and made all 25 of their

free throws.

Also, Anthony Davis scored 44 points and grabbed 18 rebounds as the New Orleans Pelicans held on to defeat the Oklahoma City Thunder 118-114.

Jrue Holiday had 20 points and 10 assists, and Julius Randle added 22 for New Orleans, which has alternated wins and losses in its past 10 games.

Paul George had 25 points and 11 rebounds, and Dennis Schroder scored 24 points for Oklahoma City, who have won five of their last seven contests.

Also, Jeremy Lamb sank the game-winning shot with less than a second left to lift the Charlotte Hornets to a thrilling

108-107 victory over the struggling Detroit Pistons, who failed to hold onto a 10-point lead late in the contest.

Lamb's 22-foot jump shot with 0.3 seconds on the clock resulted in a penalty to the Hornets. Lamb's teammate Malik Monk ran onto the court before the final horn sounded to celebrate and was called for a technical. The basket still counted and the Pistons ran out of time.

Kemba Walker finished with a game-high 31 points and had nine assists and eight rebounds for the Hornets, who won their third straight and moved into sixth place in the Eastern Conference - a half-game ahead of Detroit.

SPOTLIGHT

Angels, free-agent Bour agree to one-year deal

By Maria Torres
Los Angeles Times

Mere hours after manager Brad Ausmus gave a rave review of veteran Albert Pujols' pedigree, the Angels agreed to a preliminary one-year contract with free-agent first baseman **Justin Bour**.

Bour would share duties with Pujols at first base, should both make it through spring training healthy. Of course, Pujols' health has long been a point of concern. He had season-ending knee surgery last year and elbow surgery in September. He has not played more than 80 games at first base for the Angels since he played 95 games there in 2015, leaving a hole the Angels tried to plug with former players CJ Cron, Jeffrey Marte and the late Luis Valbuena.

It appears the Angels were not ready to gamble on Pujols' vitals or even their depth chart, which includes first base pros-

pect Matt Thaiss.

They chose, instead, to go with a left-handed power hitter who could serve as a platoon with Pujols. Over his five-year career, most of it with the Miami Marlins before being traded to the Philadelphia Phillies in August, Bour has slugged .466 with 84 home runs, 66 doubles, two triples and 277 runs batted in.

Bour, 30, was nontendered last month by the Phillies, with whom his slugging production dropped off.

Bour batted .227 in a career-high 141 games last season. It was the worst season average of his career. But his 20 home runs were only five fewer than his total from 2017, when he played in the All-Star game home run derby and lost 23-22 to the New York Yankees' Aaron Judge in the first round.

When Shohei Ohtani makes his eventual return from elbow ligament-replacement surgery as a hitter next season, the Angels will have to get creative in their use of the designated hitter.



Suns owner Sarver threatens to move team to Seattle or Las Vegas

The contentious battle to get Talking Stick Resort Arena renovated has led to Phoenix Suns owner Robert Sarver dipping into the leverage file and issuing a few threats.

In short, Sarver is telling Phoenix City Council members he will move the team to Seattle or Las Vegas if the renovation of the facility isn't approved, according to the Arizona Republic. The Suns committed to a 40-year lease in 1992, but they can opt out in 2022. The city council was slated to vote on a \$230 million renovation package Wednesday, but serious backlash from the community is leading to the vote being pushed back - likely to January 23.

Mayor Thelda Williams would like to host two community meetings to gain feedback

before the council makes a decision. The Suns have attempted to get the city council to consider a renovation in the past, but this is the first time the council has seriously considered a proposal. Phoenix would pay \$150 million towards the renovations and the Suns would pay \$80 million. The Suns would build a new practice facility and commit to playing at the downtown arena through 2037 with an option to extend through 2042. The Suns would be fined \$200 million if they departed Phoenix before 2037. Phoenix's on-court performance hasn't gone well. The Suns own the NBA's worst record at 4-24 and have lost 10 straight games. Phoenix has missed the playoffs in each of the past eight seasons.

NHL

Blackhawks blast Pens, end eight-game skid

Reuters
Chicago

Marcus Kruger scored the tie-breaking goal in the third period Wednesday, and the Chicago Blackhawks broke an eight-game losing streak with a 6-3 win over the visiting Pittsburgh Penguins.

At 3:49 of the third, Kruger was at the lip of the crease when he converted a centring pass from the corner by Andreas Martinsen to give the Blackhawks a 4-3 lead.

Jonathan Toews and Brandon Saad added empty-net goals in the last 62 seconds. Toews finished with a goal and two assists while Kruger, Martinsen, Saad and Brent Seabrook each had a goal and an assist for Chicago. Alex DeBrincat also scored for the Blackhawks, who moved out of last place in the NHL, a point ahead of the Los Angeles Kings. Bryan Rust broke a goal slump with a hat trick to account for the goals for Pittsburgh, which had been 3-0-1 in its previous four games. The Penguins fell to 0-6-3 in their past nine games against the Blackhawks.

Rust had four assists and 30 shots, but no goals, in his previous 21 games. Chicago's Corey Crawford stopped 40 of 43 Penguins shots. Casey DeSmith made 23 saves for Pittsburgh. The Blackhawks had gone 11 games without scoring first, but they got the first two against Pittsburgh.

Martinsen made it 1-0 after a long, furious scramble around the Penguins net at 14:14

RESULTS		
Las Vegas	3-2	Islanders
Chicago	6-3	Pittsburgh
Calgary	6-5	Philadelphia
Anaheim	6-3	Dallas

of the first period. Seabrook upped it to 2-0 when he moved in from the right point and ripped a shot past DeSmith's glove 3:36 later.

Rust got his first at 18:40 of the first. He curled out of the corner and beat Crawford to the glove side to cut Pittsburgh's deficit to 2-1. At 5:46 of the second, Rust tied it. Derek Grant stole the puck from Seabrook in the neutral zone. Crawford made a pad save on Grant's uncontested shot, and Rust deposited the rebound. Chicago regained the lead, 3-2, when DeBrincat roofed a shot past DeSmith on a power play at 15:28 of the second. Rust, with a little luck, completed his hat trick with 56.8 seconds left in the second. His cross-ice pass from the left circle hit Seabrook's stick and deflected past Crawford for a 3-3 tie.

FLAMES FLIP FLYERS IN OT AFTER FINISHING FLURRY

Johnny Gaudreau scored the overtime winner to cap a three-point night, and Sean Monahan tallied twice, including a game-tying goal with seven seconds left in regulation, as the host Calgary Flames stormed to a thrilling 6-5 comeback win over the Philadelphia Flyers on Wednesday night. Trailing 5-3 and with their goalie pulled, the Flames launched

yet another crazy comeback. After Rasmus Andersson scored his first NHL goal with 68 seconds left on the clock, Monahan netted his 20th of the season as time was nearly up.

Monahan set up Gaudreau on an odd-man rush for the winner 35 seconds into overtime. David Rittich, who took the net at the start of the third period, stopped four of the five shots he faced to record the victory.

Calgary owns a 3-1 record in games decided in overtime, and Gaudreau has scored all three of his team's OT winners.

The Flames have a 7-9-2 record when trailing after two periods, and they have outscored their opponents by a 52-25 margin in third periods and overtime. They are on a 7-1-1 run that has them atop the Western Conference standings. The hosts actually opened the scoring when Sam Bennett snapped a nine-game goal drought at 9:13 of the first period, but Travis Sanheim drew Philadelphia even just 52 seconds into the second period to kick off a wild frame.

Flames captain Mark Giordano, who returned to the lineup after serving a two-game suspension, put the hosts up 2-1 with a short-handed goal at the 5:32 mark of the period, only to see the Flyers respond with a lightning-quick trio of goals in 108 seconds on Mike Smith, who did not return to the Calgary net after the second intermission.

James van Riemsdyk scored on the same power play only 23 seconds after Giordano's goal, Sean Couturier tallied 32 seconds after that, and Dale Weise made it 4-2 as the visitors scored four goals in a five-shot span.



Chicago Blackhawks centre Marcus Kruger (left) celebrates his goal against Pittsburgh Penguins during the third period at United Center. **PICTURE:** USA TODAY Sports

TENNIS/DAVIS CUP

This is our best chance to beat Italy: Bhupathi

IANS
Kolkata

Davis Cup non-playing captain Mahesh Bhupathi yesterday said this will be India's best chance to beat Italy in the qualifiers for the finals as they are playing on grass.

India has had a recent spate of positive results on grass and Bhupathi feels that will hold them in good stead in the two-day tie beginning on February 1 at the South Club.

"It's the best chance we have. That's why we chose grass," Bhupathi told reporters on the sidelines of the Premjit Lal Invitational Tennis tournament at the Jaidip Mukerjee Tennis Academy here.

"Now the team we have, grass suits lot of the players and we are happy to be back," said Bhupathi.

Ramkumar Ramanathan finished as the runner-up in his first final on the ATP World Tour, a grass court tournament in Newport earlier this year while Prajesh stumped World No. 23

Dennis Shapovalov on grass in the opening round of the Stuttgart Open. The Italians, led by world No 13 Fabio Fognini are superior to India on hard and clay courts but India would be look-



India's non-playing captain Mahesh Bhupathi.

ing to repeat their 1985 heroics when they got the better of Italy in the World Group first round here. Asked about the new Davis Cup format consisting of a six-player squad playing three-set matches over two days, Bhupathi said: "The format is altered so regardless of what anybody says, it is what it is today."

"As captain I take the rules and our team tries to win by the rules, that is the bottomline."

The premier team competition in men's tennis will return to the South Club after a gap of 16 years and Bhupathi said he made his debut here and therefore it is always special to be back.

"We are just happy to be play-

ing a big match at home and obviously Calcutta for me is a special place, where I made my debut. There is so much amazing tradition of tennis here. I am excited to play here at the South Club, put the Italians on grass and see what we can give them."

Bhupathi was asked about the lack of ATP and WTA tournaments in the country. "We were fortuitous about the timing of our WTA event. We went and chased WTA event and brought it to India because of Sania's (Mirza) breakthrough. And when Sania was playing, there were a lot of people watching. In any sport, you need to have a champion to champion the sport."

The multiple Grand Slam champion cited the example of badminton, saying India does not have a female player in the top 50 in tennis right now to draw enthusiasts.

"In badminton, Saina (Nehwal) did well, now (PV) Sindhu and P Kashyap and all are doing well. We don't have a girl in the top 50 to champion a WTA event. So if we bring it, I don't think it's going to be a big success," Bhupathi said.

On Sania Mirza, who recently gave birth to a baby boy, making a comeback Bhupathi said: "She will comeback when and if she is ready. When you have a baby, priorities are different. When I had a baby, priorities were different. It didn't come out of my stomach, I can imagine it's harder for her. So she has to take her time and decisions as they come."

Bhupathi, 44, added that Swiss ace Roger Federer cannot be ruled out despite his age ahead of the Australian Open.

"Four years ago, lot of people told me Federer can never win a Grand Slam again and then he won three."

"The genius of Roger Federer, you can never write him off. Of course he is 37 years old, its going to be tougher for him with every year. But you should never write him off in my opinion."

Djokovic and Halep named 2018 ITF world champions

Novak Djokovic and Simona Halep were yesterday named as the 2018 ITF world champions by the governing body of global tennis. World number one Djokovic receives the honour from the International Tennis Federation for the sixth time, while it is the first year that Romania's top-ranked Halep has been recognised. "I am very honoured to be named ITF world champion again," said Serbia's Djokovic, who stormed back to the top of the rankings after injury, winning Wimbledon and the US Open. "I am particularly proud of this achievement after all that I've been through physically this year, but part of me always believed I could make it back to the top. It is very satisfying to join Pete Sampras by winning my sixth award."

Halep also enjoyed Grand Slam success in 2018, claiming her maiden major title at Roland Garros and reaching the final at the Australian Open. "It's a great honour to be named as ITF world champion for the first time," she said.

"I had an incredible year, winning my first Grand Slam at Roland Garros and finishing the year as world number one." US pair Mike Bryan and Jack Sock won the men's doubles award while the women's doubles world champions are Barbora Krejickova and Katerina Siniakova.

The ITF uses an objective system that considers all results during the year but gives special weight to the Grand Slam tournaments and two ITF international competitions, the Davis Cup and Fed Cup. "Congratulations to our 2018 ITF world champions who have demonstrated immense skill, talent and dedication on their way to achieving great success on the court," said ITF president David Haggerty. "They are a credit to our sport and have all

contributed to another memorable year for tennis."

NADAL TO JOIN FEDERER IN 2019 LAVER CUP

Spaniard Rafael Nadal will team up with perennial rival Roger Federer for the third edition of the Laver Cup in Geneva next year. The team event featuring the best of Europe against a World team will be taking place for the third time, with Nadal and Federer also teammates in the inaugural match in 2017. Team Europe non-playing captain Bjorn Borg said having Nadal and Federer was a boost for the September competition. "It doesn't get much better for a captain than naming both Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal for the Laver Cup in Geneva," former world number one Borg said in a statement. "Bringing together two of the greatest players, and rivals, the sport has ever seen together on one team is very exciting for our sport -- and will give us the best possible chance to win the Laver Cup three years in a row."

Federer and Nadal, first and second in the all-time list of men's Grand Slam winners with 20 and 16 respectively, won a doubles match together at the Laver Cup in Prague in 2017. "I think we all underestimated how powerful it would be to see them sitting side by side, coaching each other and cheering each other on," Borg said. Swiss Federer, one of the instigators of the event, said having Nadal in the team again after he missed this year's edition in Chicago due to injury was an exciting prospect. "We had a lot of fun in Prague and it will be very special for me to team up with him again in Switzerland to try and defend our title," Federer said. Next year's match will take place on a black court inside Geneva's 17,000-seat Palexpo venue.

HOCKEY

India crash out of World Cup after 1-2 loss to Netherlands

Belgium down two-time champions Germany 2-1 to face England in semi-finals



Netherlands players pose for a selfie as they celebrate their team's win over India in the 2018 Hockey World Cup quarter-final in Bhubaneswar yesterday. (AFP)

IANS
Bhubaneswar

India's 43-year long wait to reach a hockey World Cup semi-final continued after going down 1-2 to the Netherlands at the jam-packed Kalinga Stadium yesterday.

Thierry Brinkmann (14th minute) and Mink van der Weerden (50th) scored for the Dutch while India's lone goal came in the opening quarter from Akashdeep Singh (12th).

Both sides started with a bang in an eventful first quarter that witnessed Akashdeep giving the hosts ahead in the 12th minute with a brilliant reverse flick after the initial penalty corner attempt was parried by the Dutch goalkeeper.

The visitors pulled off a stunning equaliser just before the

end of the first quarter, thanks to Thierry hitting the box to make it 1-1.

The second half saw both teams battling for the lead even as the tourists managed to keep possession of the ball on most occasions, only to return to the dug out locked at 1-1 by half time.

On resumption, the tourists earned three back-to-back PC's but India blocked away all of them even as the hosts were temporarily reduced to 10 men after Hardik was shown the green card towards the end of the quarter.

With both sides desperate for the lead, the Netherlands started the final quarter by successfully converting their fourth PC to make it 2-1.

It was in the 50th minute, when Van Der Weerden hit the ball dead straight into to find

India's custodian P.R. Sreejesh wrong footed as the ball found the target.

With 10 minutes to go, India were once again penalised after Amit Rohidas was shown the yellow card but the Manpreet Singh-led side kept pressing for the equaliser. In the next minute, India had a golden opportunity to square things off but Harmanpreet's shot was saved by the Dutch goalkeeper.

From there on, the Dutch defence did not allow any room to the home side as the tie ended in a heartbreak for the vociferous home crowd.

Speaking after the match, Netherlands match winner Mink van der Weerden said: "It's been an exciting game to look at, I guess. It's been going up and down. We didn't get the control we really wanted, I think. It's hard playing In-

dia. They were really creative and fast and sometimes a bit unpredictable, which is one of their strengths. But I think we did well. It's been a pleasure to be on the field. The crowd was crazy. It's been impressive and it's been a lot of fun playing this game."

Looking ahead to the semi-final meeting with Australia, Van der Weerden said: "Australia and the Netherlands are two different teams from four years ago, so we cannot compare now with the 2014 final. It's a new game. We'll see what happens and may the best team win!"

The Dutch side will meet Australia in the semi-finals tomorrow.

Earlier, Olympic silver medalists Belgium edged out two-time champions Germany 2-1 in a keenly contested quarter-final. In a neck and neck fight,

third ranked Belgium held their nerves and came back from a goal down to enter the semi-finals for the first time.

Speaking after the match, Belgium's Simon Gougnard was understandably thrilled about the result, but indicated that the team's focus had already switched to tomorrow's semi-final against England.

"We had to fight really hard," said Gougnard. "We are really happy but now we have to refocus and reboot and we're looking forward to play the next game against England. The English team has some really quality players on the ball. A really physical team so we're going to have to bring our 'A' game if we want to be able to contest with them. We will have to analyse them on video and come back with a really good plan if we want to win."

GOLF

Rose chases leaders at storm-hit Indonesian Masters

AFP
Jakarta

Justin Rose was hot on the heels of the leaders at the Indonesian Masters yesterday despite having his opening round curtailed by a severe thunderstorm that forced play to be abandoned.

Former US Open champion Rose, who needs a top-15 finish in Jakarta to reclaim the number one spot in the world golf rankings, fired four birdies and an eagle before his round was cut short after 14 holes.

At five-under-par he was just one shot behind US golfer John Catlin and South Korea's Sungcho Lee, who both set the early pace at the Asian Tour's season-ending event with opening rounds of 66. Lightning halted play just before 4.00pm local time (0900 GMT), meaning 62 players including England's Rose - the defending champion - will have to finish their first rounds on Friday.

Co-leader Catlin notched up seven birdies and one bogey in his completed round. "The only bogey I made was on the fourth hole where the putt lipped out from about three feet," Catlin said.

"But I'm obviously happy with a 66 on a difficult golf course."

Sungcho Lee, whose best result this season was a tied-14th finish in Taipei, bagged eight birdies for his share of the lead.

"I putted well and hit all my tee shots very well," Lee said.

"It was very hot and I'm going to take it step-by-step as the round progresses"

Rose, the current world number two, has pledged to donate \$50,000 to help with reconstruction efforts on the earthquake-hit islands of Lombok and Sulawesi. He will resume play from the 15th hole today.

Asep Saefulloh and Rinaldi Andiyandono were the best-placed Indonesians at the par-72 Royale Jakarta Golf Club, both shooting a four-under-par 68 to finish the day tied for 10.

Gimelstob pleads not guilty to assault

Two-time Grand Slam mixed doubles champion Justin Gimelstob pleaded not guilty to a felony battery charge in a Los Angeles court. Gimelstob, 41, appeared before Judge Keith L. Schwartz in Los Angeles County Superior court in connection with an October 31 incident in which he is accused of attacking onetime friend Randall Kaplan, who was taking his family trick-or-treating. Kaplan said Gimelstob hit him multiple times and threatened to kill him. Gimelstob, who had surrendered to police and been released on \$50,000 bail, was ordered to return to court on January 31. "On the advice of my counsel, I will not be commenting in detail regarding the evening of October 31, 2018 except that I look forward to presenting the true and complete facts concerning this matter, not only about what really happened that night but also about the long history of Mr. Kaplan's behavior and toxic interference in my life," Gimelstob said in a Facebook post hours after his court appearance.

BADMINTON

Sindhu stuns Tai in World Tour Finals

AFP
Shanghai

India's PV Sindhu pulled off a shock at the badminton World Tour Finals yesterday as she defeated top-ranked Tai Tzu-ying of Taiwan in three thrilling games.

Sindhu sank to her knees at the end of an exhausting 14-21, 21-16, 21-18 victory in 61 enthralling minutes in the Chinese city of Guangzhou. The 23-year-old, a silver medalist at the Rio Olympics in 2016, faces Zhang Beiwen of the United States on Friday looking to make it three wins out of three in Group A.

It was a disappointing day for Taiwan. As well as Tai going

down to the sixth-ranked Sindhu, men's world number three Chou Tien-chen also lost, this time in the men's draw.

Chou was on the end of an 18-21, 21-11, 21-14 defeat to South Korea's buoyant Son Wan-ho. There was no such trouble for men's number one and world champion Kento Momota of Japan. He is in ominous form as he looks to put the seal on a breakthrough year and swatted aside Thailand's Kantaphon Wangcharoen 21-15, 21-7 for a second win in a row.

China's Shi Yuqi, one of the main threats to red-hot Momota, was even more emphatic in dismissing Anthony Sinisuka Ginting of Indonesia, 21-8, 21-19 in 37 minutes.

CRICKET

Perth wants to poach Boxing Day or New Year Test match

The state-of-the-art 60,000-capacity Perth Stadium, also known as Optus Stadium, opened in January this year and has since been used to host Australian Rules football games

AFP
Perth

The boss of Perth's swanky new stadium, which hosts its maiden Test this week, wants it to be used for a Boxing Day or New Year's Test, traditionally played in Melbourne and Sydney.

Mike McKenna said he was keen to raise the issue with Cricket Australia. The governing body's contract with the Melbourne Cricket Ground expires at the end of this summer and their deal with the Sydney Cricket Ground runs out in 2022.

"I know that Cricket Australia will be looking to have those conversations and I dare say they will have the first conversation with the MCG but if the opportunity comes to talk to us, we would be very keen to have those conversations," McKenna told Fairfax newspapers yesterday.

"We are always talking behind the scenes. We had a very good conversation with Cricket Australia and we know what the timings are and what the opportunities are.

"I think the Boxing Day Test

match, New Year's Test match, iconic events like that, if they were to become available, the government over here would be very keen to look at them, for sure."

Fairfax said Cricket Australia had no immediate intentions of changing its "venue hire agreement" with the MCG and the SCG, but had also made clear that financial returns from Tests were paramount.

The state-of-the-art 60,000-capacity Perth Stadium, also known as Optus Stadium, opened in January this year and has since been used to host Australian Rules football games.

It is the third largest sports ground in Australia and home to the Perth Scorchers Big Bash League (BBL) team.

England and South Africa played one-day internationals at the venue this year, but it has yet to host a Test.

Five-day games were previously played at the venerable WACA Ground, across the Swan River. That ramshackle venue held its 44th and last Test a year ago, when England were in town.

Today, the new Aus\$1.6bn (US\$1.15bn) stadium will be in the spotlight when Australia look

to level their four-match series with India after crashing in Adelaide by 31 runs.

Like the WACA, a fast and bouncy deck is expected to confront the teams.

"I'm really fascinated and can't wait to see what the wicket brings," Australia coach Justin Langer told reporters. "If we can get (WACA-style pace and bounce) it'd be a great thing for Test cricket."

So far only four cricket games have been held there, with the home side ominously losing all of them.

The Perth Scorchers were hammered by 71 runs in a BBL semi-final against the Hobart Hurricanes earlier this year, and both England and South Africa beat Australia in one-dayers at the venue.

Western Australia then lost to New South Wales in a domestic four-day clash last month.

Test opener Marcus Harris, a Perth native, has never played at the ground but denied that the home team losing all four games was a bad omen.

"No I don't think it is a hoodoo at all," he told reporters. "I wasn't aware of it (those results) so I'm not too worried about it."



A general view of the Perth Stadium ahead of the second cricket Test match between Australia and India starting today.

RUGBY

European big guns target Champions Cup last-8 spots

AFP
Paris

Former champions Toulouse, Saracens and last season's runners-up Racing 92 can all clinch qualification for the Champions Cup quarter-finals with fourth-round wins this weekend.

Racing 92 are unbeaten in the top-tier tournament this campaign and could secure a last-eight berth with a second victory in the space of a week over Leicester Tigers.

Three-quarter Virimi Vakatawa says the club, bankrolled by multi-millionaire Jacky Lorenzetti, are targeting a home tie in the next round.

The Parisians need to be one of four teams with the highest points at the end of the group stage to clinch a first knock-out tie at their La Defense Arena ground which opened in 2017.

"It's our main objective, so we will continue to work for that. It's going to be big to have a home quarter-final in front of our fans," he said.

"We know we are on top. We have three more games left so we need to keep on working in order to keep on winning games to top our pool."

The France international crossed in last Sunday's end-to-end affair to bring his tally this term to nine tries – the joint highest in European club rugby alongside Gloucester's Charlie

Sharples.

Their back-line also include Ireland international Simon Zebo and Argentina winger Juan Imhoff, who have eight touchdowns, each as well as Scotland playmaker Finn Russell.

2016 and 2017 winners Saracens are aiming for an eighth quarter-final in as many years.

They are yet to lose this campaign and travel to the Cardiff Blues after a seven-try 51-25 thumping of the Welsh region in London last Sunday and will remain without England lock Maro Itoje who has a knee injury.

Elsewhere, Glasgow welcome already-eliminated Lyon with the tournament's joint-top scorer in fly-half Adam Hastings in good form since making

his Scotland debut in June.

In a re-run of the 2004 final, Toulouse welcome Wasps to the Stade Ernest-Wallon with the French side on top of Pool 1 on 12 points after beating the English club 24-16 in Coventry last weekend.

A victory in France on Saturday would stretch Toulouse's unbeaten run across all competitions to nine games and would clinch a last-eight spot for the four-time champions after missing out last year.

Young full-back Thomas Ramos joins Hastings at the top of the points-scoring table, while France three-quarter Sofiane Guitoune tops the try-scoring chart on four and Wasps will also be wary of South Africa's

Cheslin Kolbe who dotted down in a very impressive performance in the English midlands.

Toulouse are battling with Leinster for top spot in the group.

The reigning champions welcome Bath to the Aviva Stadium after their fans were forbidden from taking flags into the Recreation Ground for health and safety reasons in the 17-10 win.

The Irish province will be without international centre Robbie Henshaw with an hamstring injury but can rely on world player of the year Johnny Sexton – who signed a contract extension until 2021 this week.

The two final rounds of the competition take place in January.

LOOKING AHEAD

Sri Lanka gets Lewis in coaching revamp for World Cup

AFP
Colombo

Jonathan Lewis was yesterday named Sri Lanka's new batting coach, with the former England player to be tasked with preparing the national team for next year's World Cup.

His appointment by Sri Lanka Cricket comes just days after Australia's Steve Rixon was brought on as fielding coach.

Lewis, 43, was head coach of the Durham County Cricket Club before accepting the post.

He played 13 ODIs for England and one Test, the latter against Sri Lanka in 2006 in which he scored 27 runs.

Lewis will join Rixon, 64, later this month for Sri Lanka's tour of New Zealand, where the visitors will play two Tests, three ODIs and one Twenty20 match.

They are also scheduled for two Tests in Australia from January 24. Sri Lanka Cricket chief executive Ashley de Silva said both Lewis and Rixon will coach the national team until the end of the World Cup, which wraps up in July 2019.

Sri Lanka have struggled for form recently, losing the home ODI and Test series to England, and have been plagued by crisis off-field.

Bowling coach Nuwan Zoysa was suspended by the International Cricket Council in October after he was accused of match-fixing and other "corrupt conduct".

Earlier that month, ex-chief selector and former captain Sanath Jayasuriya was charged for failing to cooperate with a match-fixing probe and concealing information.

The country recently sought help from neighbouring India to draft laws to combat cheating in the game.

BOTTOMLINE

Austria announces probe into Russian biathlon team

AFP
Vienna

Austrian prosecutors announced yesterday that members of Russia's biathlon team are being investigated over alleged doping offences dating back to the World Championships in 2017 in the Austrian town of Hochfilzen.

Preliminary proceedings have been launched against five biathletes for "serious deception in connection with doping" and against five support staff for "use of forbidden substances or methods for the purpose of doping", anti-corruption prosecutors confirmed in a statement.

The Russian Biathlon Federation said Austrian police had visited members of the team – currently in Hochfilzen again for a stage of the biathlon World Cup – on Wednesday and had questioned several "Russian athletes and specialists".

"The national team will continue its participation in the World Cup," the federation added in a statement.

Some of the athletes concerned took to Instagram to react to the accusations.

Biathlete Evgeniy Garanichev, a bronze medallist at the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, said: "I am on the list of people suspected of breaking anti-doping rules!! Another scandal!!! We are clean..."



Russia's Evgeniy Garanichev, who is among those probed by Austrian authorities.

Mentor of World Cup winner Wilkinson joins Queensland Reds

Sydney: Kicking coach Dave Alred, who helped hone the skills of World Cup-winning England flyhalf Jonny Wilkinson, is joining the Queensland Reds for the 2019 Super Rugby season.

Alred was a member of Clive Woodward's coaching staff at the 2003 World Cup, which England won after beating the Wallabies 20-17 in Sydney with an extra time drop-goal from Wilkinson.

Alred, who has a PhD in performing under pressure from the world-renowned Loughborough University in Britain, left the England set up after the 2011 Rugby World Cup, having attended four global tournaments.

He also was involved in three British and Irish Lions tours and worked with the Springboks, the England cricket team, Premier League side Manchester City and several golfers, including current British Open champion Francesco Molinari.

"I've missed working with a team," Alred said of joining Brad Thorn's coaching group in Brisbane.

"Having been in touch with Brad and seeing the ethos, work ethic and attitude he's created is really a coaching dream to come in and start from scratch and try to have an influence on players in a way which hopefully will help them throughout the whole of their rugby career."

Alred said he would initially help with the biomechanics of the Queensland kickers and teach them techniques to help them perform under pressure. "Dave is a world-leader in his field and his appointment completes our 2019 coaching staff roster," Reds interim chief executive David Hanham said. "Improving the quality of our kicking from our academy through to the Reds is a priority and we believe Dave will provide our players the development needed to achieve this."

SECOND TEST

Paine defends Finch, Starc in unchanged team

AFP
Perth

Australia skipper Tim Paine yesterday came to the defence of under-fire Mitchell Starc and Aaron Finch as they were included in an unchanged team for the second India Test despite below-par performances in the defeat in Adelaide.

The home side are gunning to level the four-Test series at the new Perth Stadium from today after losing a hard-fought opening Test earlier this week by 31 runs.

Once again Starc, Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins will shoulder the bowling load on an expected pacy wicket, with Nathan Lyon the spin option.

There had been speculation that Peter Siddle could replace Starc who had some wayward spells at Adelaide, including a string of costly byes in India's second innings.

Paine, who has recovered after a delivery in Adelaide smashed into a right finger that has required several operations in the past, said the criticism of Starc was over the top.

"The criticism he has come under this week has been pretty unfair to be honest.

I think barring two or three overs in



Australia cricket captain Tim Paine (L) talks with coach Justin Langer during a training session in Perth yesterday.

Adelaide where he got his radar a little bit wrong, I thought he bowled really well," he said.

"I think his best and his worst are getting closer together. I think we're getting really close to his best and the conditions here are going to suit him down to the ground."

He added that Starc took the comments personally, and it had fired him up.

"One thing I know about Starc is that if he cops a bit of criticism he takes it personally and that sometimes gets the best out of him. So I'm pretty pumped to see him go tomorrow or the next day and see what he can produce."

The selectors also retained Finch to face the new ball alongside rookie Marcus Harris despite his first Test failures and talk that he could move down the order with Usman Khawaja bumped up to opener.

Finch, Australia's one-day and Twenty20 captain, spent time with former skipper Ricky Ponting at training yesterday, and Paine backed him to find form.

"We encourage all our players to back their strengths and Finchy has been successful at international cricket," he said.

"He's like no other player and he just needs that one score to, I suppose, just

get that little bit more self-belief that we know he's got at international one-day and T20 cricket.

"You're not going to succeed at international cricket unless you stick to your strengths and Finchy knows the best way he goes about his batting and he'll make sure he keeps trying to do that and if he does he'll come good for us."

India have their tails up after a tense win on the fifth day in Adelaide for their first victory on Australian soil in a decade. They now have sights firmly set on a first-ever series win in Australia.

Paine said he had no doubt Virat Kohli's men would be "coming really hard" in Perth, but Australia would be ready for them.

"They've got a sniff of something special, something they're never done before in Australia so we know it's going to be another hard-fought, highly-competitive Test," he said.

"It's going to be a huge test for our whole group, not just out batters or our bowlers.

It's going to take all eleven of us."

Australia: Marcus Harris, Aaron Finch, Usman Khawaja, Shaun Marsh, Travis Head, Peter Handscomb, Tim Paine (capt), Josh Hazlewood, Pat Cummins, Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Starc

SPOTLIGHT

Kohli undaunted by injuries to Ashwin, Sharma

'We are definitely confident of the percentage of chances we have'



India's cricket captain Virat Kohli (L) and coach Ravi Shastri attend a training session in Perth yesterday.

AFP
Perth

India skipper Virat Kohli was undaunted despite losing prolific spinner Ravichandran Ashwin and batsman Rohit Sharma to injury as he looks to twist the knife in the second Test against Australia.

The visitors went 1-0 in the four-Test series after a tense, 31-run win in Adelaide earlier this week – their first victory in Australia in a decade.

But India, who are searching for their first series win in Australia, suffered a setback when Ashwin and Sharma were declared unavailable for the second Test in Perth, starting today.

Ashwin is receiving treatment for a left-sided abdominal

strain, while Sharma jarred his back while fielding in Adelaide, the Board of Control for Cricket in India said.

Also missing, as expected, will be exciting young opener Prithvi Shaw, who suffering ligament damage in a warm-up match ahead of the Adelaide Test.

The BCCI said Shaw, 19, was "recovering well" but was still undergoing treatment.

However, Kohli was bullish about India's prospects in the inaugural Test at the new Perth Stadium, which has replaced the city's venerable WACA Ground as its premier cricket venue.

"We are definitely confident of the percentage of chances we have and we want to build on that," said Kohli at a pre-match press conference before the injury problems were announced.

"Obviously Australia is going to be a strong team in their home conditions and on a wicket like Perth, which probably offers you more than most other pitches in Australia.

But we have an equal chance." Ashwin took six wickets in the first Test, while Sharma hit scores of 37 and one.

They were the notable absences in India's initial 13-man squad. All-rounder Hanuma Vihari is expected to slot in for Sharma, with the final spot a toss-up between pacemen Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Umesh Yadav or Ravindra Jadeja, who has taken 185 Test wickets with his left-arm spin and also averages 32.44 with the bat.

The Test will be the first at the new 60,000-capacity Perth Stadium, whose wicket is likely

to be fast and bouncy like the old WACA, just over the Swan River.

Kohli said he was impressed by the new arena and not concerned by a wicket that is set to favour fast bowlers, with Australia having a world-class line-up of Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins.

He pointed to his own attack of Ishant Sharma, Mohamed Shami, Jasprit Bumrah, saying they were "at the peak of their abilities".

"We certainly get more excited than nervous looking at lively pitches now because we understand that we do have a bowling attack that can bowl the opposition out as much as they are confident about their attack," he said.

"When you have fast bowlers who are at the peak of their abili-

ties it is always a great thing to have in the side. "And as batsmen it gives us a lot of motivation and boosts us up to put in those significant match-winning batting performances, because we have so much belief in our bowling unit at the moment.

"We understand that if we bat well, we will definitely get the result that we want."

Despite Kohli's confidence, he cautioned his team not to be complacent, noting that "we need to keep repeating good things to win series".

India: Virat Kohli (capt), Murali Vijay, KL Rahul, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ajinkya Rahane, Hanuma Vihari, Rishabh Pant, Ravindra Jadeja, Ishant Sharma, Mohamed Shami, Jasprit Bumrah, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Umesh Yadav

FOCUS

Sarfraz calls on Pakistan to play 'without fear' in SA

AFP
Karachi

Pakistan skipper Sarfraz Ahmed yesterday urged his fellow teammates to play "without fear" during their tour of South Africa – a country where they have won only two Tests during their past five tours.

The Pakistani side is en route to South Africa to play three Tests, five one-day internationals and three Twenty20 internationals, with the first Test starting in Centurion on December 26.

Pakistan head into the series after losing 2-1 to New Zealand in the United Arab Emirates last week.

In the wake of the tough loss, Sarfraz said he still had high hopes of earning a good result against the Proteas.

"Conditions in South Africa are tough with bouncy and seaming pitches so anyone who plays without fear and with a big heart will succeed," Sarfraz told AFP. Pakistan's two wins out of 12 Tests in South Africa came in 1998 and 2007, having lost nine with just one draw.

On their last tour in 2013, Pakistan were routed 3-0 and bowled out for their lowest Test score of 49 in the first Test in Johannesburg, with both senior batsmen Younis Khan and Misbah-ul-Haq in the line-up.

Now without the two stal-



warts, Pakistan will look to Azhar Ali and Asad Shafiq to help guide the squad.

"We need big innings from both Azhar and Shafiq and they are capable of doing that, so if we put good totals on board we have a good bowling attack to win the match," said Sarfraz, who also singled out recalled paceman Mohamed Amir as key to any success.

"Amir is back after a good performance at the domestic level so we hope he gets us key wickets in Tests," said Sarfraz of Amir, who was dropped from the series against Australia and New Zealand due to poor form.

Pakistan open the tour with a three-day game against Cricket South Africa Invitation XI at Benoni from December 19.

The second Test is in Cape Town from January 3-7 and the third in Johannesburg from January 11-15.

Southee hails green grass but remains cautious

Wellington: A green Basin Reserve wicket was welcomed by New Zealand's Tim Southee after his recent exertions against Pakistan on dry, low and slow pitches in the United Arab Emirates, but the paceman was quick to point out that looks can often be deceiving. New Zealand open their domestic test season against Sri Lanka tomorrow and were greeted by a verdant strip at the country's most historic ground, where sides that win the toss tend to try and exploit the seamer-friendly conditions. However, Neil Wagner used a short-pitched barrage to set up the hosts' victory against West Indies last December, while South African spinners JP Duminy and Keshav Maharaj ran through New Zealand in the first innings in March 2017.

Two months earlier against Bangladesh, New Zealand captain Kane Williamson won the toss and opted to field, but watched his bowlers toil for almost two days before Mushfiqur Rahim declared his side's innings closed at 595 for eight. "It's nice to be back in conditions we're used to," Southee told

reporters. "We've come from a place that wasn't easy for pace bowlers, so there was a bit of a spring in the step of the fast bowlers anyway.

"It's nice to see some grass on the wicket but... we don't know what it's going to play like until we get out there. You can get in and it can be a batting paradise as well."

New Zealand enter the two-match series, their first at home under new coach Gary Stead, flying high after they beat Pakistan in an away series for the first time in almost 50 years.

The 2-1 triumph came courtesy of the turn and bounce achieved by spinners Ajaz Patel and Will Somerville, as well as Williamson's batting in the decider, but Southee said they had already moved on and were focused on Dinesh Chandimal's side. "It's something the group is very proud of," he said of the victory.

A lot of good sides have gone to the UAE and haven't been able to tip Pakistan up.

"We know we can't let that overhang into our home summer and start afresh in different conditions."