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Curry leads charge as Warriors cruise past Hawks

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GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

Aussie captain Paine to focus on India challenge

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MOTORSPORT

Al-Attiyah confident as Dakar Rally looms

The 2019 edition of the Dakar Rally is an event where al-Attiyah has an advantage, perhaps offering him the best chance in four years to win the prestigious title for the third time

By Anil John, Sports Editor
Doha

Peru is about 15,000 kilometres away from Qatar, but for Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah the South American nation could yet prove a bridge not too far.

As a rally driver of immense ability – and we are not wasting words here describing his qualities – al-Attiyah never looks for favours from the terrain. You are supposed to adapt to whatever challenge is thrown at you, but occasionally special circumstances do put you in a position of relative comfort, sometimes very minor, that top athletes are supposed to exploit.

The 2019 edition of the Dakar Rally is one such event where al-Attiyah has an advantage, perhaps offering him the best chance in four years to win the prestigious title for the third time.

The reason for this is simple: the 5,000km event will be contained within the borders of only one country, Peru, and 70% of the route is made of desert with plenty of dunes.

It's the kind of terrain which sons of the desert revel in, on foot, bike, camel or car. And there's nobody who can possibly boast better credentials in such conditions than al-Attiyah, who has dominated regional rallies for close to two decades and earlier this year won his 14th Middle East Rally title, shifting another giant of the dunes, Mohamed bin Sulayem, of the UAE.

"Mentally and physically I am in great shape. I've been training in Qatar for the Dakar Rally and I'll be heading for Peru on December 28," al-Attiyah told the *Gulf Times* in an exclusive interview.

The Paris-Dakar Rally, earlier originated from the French capital and culminated in Dakar, Senegal, but was moved to South America in 2009 for security and sponsorship reasons. It was held across multiple countries since then but Argentina, Chile and Bolivia opted out for reasons of austerity this time, although organisers denied it was a "cut price" edition.

Al-Attiyah, for one, is not complaining. "I like racing across the desert and the dunes. I feel it's my area. It gives me added confidence that I can go on to win the event again," said the 2011 and 2015 champion who will be driving a Toyota Hilux."

While the Dakar rally route has added to al-Attiyah's confidence, it's not the only factor that puts him in a positive frame of mind.

"My form has been excellent. I won the Rally of Morocco recently for the fifth straight time. Winning adds to your confidence, naturally."

In all, 334 vehicles will line up at the start of the event on January 7, with drivers tasked with



Qatar's Nasser al-Attiyah (R) along with his French co-driver Matthieu Baumel of Toyota Gazoo Racing team celebrate their second place finish in the Dakar Rally 2018 in Cordoba, Argentina.

navigating almost 3,000km of intense special stages.

"It is a little like as if we were competing in the Vendée Globe only in the roaring 40s," says race director Etienne Lavigne in defining the degree of difficulty of the 2019 edition.

Al-Attiyah, however, has a host of illustrious rivals to contend with, especially Stephane Peterhansel and Carlos Sainz.

Frenchman Peterhansel is undoubtedly the Dakar Rally king with 13 titles under his belt, six times of which was in the motorcycle category

before he switched to cars in 1999. Spaniard Sainz won the 2018 event at the age of 55, with al-Attiyah a close second.

"No doubt the competition is always very tough but this time I am ready to win," declared al-Attiyah.

SPOTLIGHT

Saudi chess event moved to Russia

AFP
Jerusalem

A World Chess Federation tournament has been moved from Saudi Arabia to Russia after concerns over Israeli players being barred, the federation announced yesterday.

Israeli players backed by a New York-based NGO, The Lawfare Project, were threatening legal action over not being allowed to play in Saudi Arabia, which has no diplomatic ties with the Jewish state.

The federation, known as FIDE, said it decided to move its World Rapid and Blitz Championships scheduled for December 25-31 to Russia "due to the policy adopted by Saudi organisers". The decision was made "in spite of the generous financial offer made by Saudi Arabia", FIDE said in a statement.

"FIDE will no longer stage its official events in the countries that deny entry visa and fair treatment to all the eligible players," it said.

It added that "officials in Riyadh could not guarantee an entry to representatives of all the national federations who had a right to participate in the event".

It is not the first time Israeli players have raised such concerns.

In December 2017, the Israel Chess Federation said it was seeking compensation from the organisers of last year's World Rapid and Blitz Championships, also in Saudi Arabia, after the Gulf state refused to issue visas for its players.

Budapest to host 2023 IAAF World Championships

Reuters, Monaco

Budapest will host the 2023 athletics world championships, the governing IAAF announced yesterday.

The Hungarian capital is the first host city to be named under a new bidding process announced in February last year by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF).

IAAF president Sebastian Coe said after a meeting of the IAAF Council in Monaco that Hungary boasted both athletic tradition and experience in organising world-class sports events.

"It has been the scene of some of our greatest moments as a sport. We are excited about their plans for a new stadium that will become a great legacy for athletics," he said.

The new stadium will be built on the eastern bank of the River Danube with a capacity of 40,000 for the championships, reduced to 15,000 for future events.

Budapest has twice hosted the IAAF world indoor championships and the European athletics championships.

The 2019 world championships will be held in Doha, Qatar, and the 2021 edition in Eugene, Oregon.

FOOTBALL

2022 matches could start early

AFP
Doha

World Cup matches in Qatar could kick-off as early as 1000 GMT if it holds four games a day during the 2022 tournament group stage, organisers confirmed yesterday.

The other three games would start at 1300, 1600 and 1900 GMT, Nasser al-Khater, assistant secretary general for the World Cup organising body the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, told local broadcaster, Qatar Television.

"There's a proposition to hold four matches a day, one at 1300, 1600, 1900, and 2200 Doha time. This will be finalised with FIFA," he said.

"We are currently planning for three matches per day, but also considering four a day as the weather

and temperature will be good, and also all stadiums enjoying air conditioning."

Al-Khater added that building work at four of the proposed eight stadiums would be completed by the end of next year.

In addition to the already refurbished Khalifa Stadium, Al Wakrah, Al Bayt, and Al Rayyan will all be finished in 2019, he said.

Reporters were allowed to view Al Bayt yesterday, which is 56 kilometres (35 miles) from the capital Doha and will be the most northerly stadium at Qatar's tournament.

The stadium's design is based on the traditional Bedouin tent in Qatar, Bayt Al Sha'ar.

"This is a unique design among all the stadiums in the world," Nasser al-Hajeri, the venue's project director told AFP.

"It shows people who will attend the World Cup, the type of tent which people used to live in."

Kipchoge, Ibarguen win IAAF awards



Kenya's Eliud Kipchoge (L) and Colombia's Caterine Ibarguen won the IAAF Male and Female Athlete of the Year awards in Monaco yesterday. Kipchoge set a world record at the Berlin Marathon clocking 2 hours 1 minute and 39 seconds, while Ibarguen dominated the long jump in the Diamond League series and other competitions.

ABU DHABI TEST

Azhar leads Pak fightback against New Zealand

Pakistan are still 135 runs adrift of New Zealand's first innings total of 274



Pakistani batsman Azhar Ali (L) plays a shot as New Zealand wicketkeeper BJ Watling (R) and teammate Ross Taylor look on in Abu Dhabi yesterday.

AFP
Abu Dhabi

Azhar Ali struck a fighting half century to help Pakistan recover to 139-3 at close on the second day of the third and final Test against New Zealand in Abu Dhabi yesterday.

It marked a good recovery from 17-2 after Kiwi pace bowler Trent Boult ripped out openers Imam-ul-Haq and Mohamed Hafeez, who later announced his retirement from Test cricket. Azhar was unbeaten on 62 at the close having shared a dogged, unbroken fourth wicket partnership of 54 with Asad Shafiq who will resume on 26.

Pakistan are still 135 runs adrift of New Zealand's first innings total of 274 in which BJ Watling made a gutsy and vital 77 not out. The three-match series is tied at 1-1 after New Zealand won the first Test in Abu Dhabi by four runs before Pakistan bounced back with an

NEW ZEALAND 1ST INNINGS (OVERNIGHT 229-7)		PAKISTAN 1ST INNINGS	
B. Watling not out	77	Imam-ul-Haq c Southee b Boult	9
W. Somerville b Asif	12	M Hafeez c Southee b Boult	0
A. Patel c Shafiq b Asif	6	Azhar Ali not out	62
T. Boult b Asif	1	H Sohail c Watling b Southee	34
Extras (b11, lb6)	17	Asad Shafiq not out	26
Total: (all out, 116.1 overs)	274	Extras: (b 1, lb 6, nb 1)	8
Fall of wickets: 1-24 (Latham), 2-70 (Raval), 3-70 (Taylor), 4-72 (Nicholls), 5-176 (Williamson), 6-203 (de Grandhomme), 7-209 (Southee), 8-254 (Somerville), 9-272 (Patel), 10-274 (Boult)		Total: (for 3 wkts; 61 overs) 139	
Bowling: Hasan Ali 20-6-58-1, Shaheen 23-6-52-1, Yasir Shah 41-11-75-3, Asif 30.1-4-65-5, Haris 2-0-7-0		Still to bat: Babar Azam, Sarfraz Ahmed, Bilal Asif, Yasir Shah, Hasan Ali, Shaheen Shah Afridi	
		Fall of wickets: 1-0 (Hafeez), 2-17 (Imam), 3-85 (Haris)	
		Bowling: Southee 12-3-27-1, Boult 14-4-39-2, Grandhomme 9-2-17-0 (Inb), Patel 14-3-33-0, Somerville 12-3-16-0	

innings and 16-run win in the second in Dubai.

Azhar remains key for Pakistan if they are to build any kind of first innings lead. The 33-year-old dropped an-

chor and found the boundary just four times as he crawled through to his 32nd Test half century. His 62 not out was carved painstakingly from 169 deliveries as the Pakistan scor-

ing rate struggled to rise above two an over. The equally-experienced Shafiq hit the same number of fours in his 26 which has so far occupied 85 balls. The Pakistan top order was jolted by Boult's double strike either side of lunch. Hafeez has been struggling for form for a while, having made just 66 runs in seven innings since scoring a hundred against Australia in Dubai in October, following his recall to the Test side after a two-year absence. It was no surprise when Boult had him caught low down at second slip by Tim Southee for a fourth-ball duck in his first over, right before the lunch interval.

In the fourth full over after the break, Imam-ul-Haq took his eye off a Trent bouncer and was hit on the back of the helmet. Next ball, he edged to Southee at third slip and was on his way for just nine.

Azhar then dug in with Haris Sohail, adding 68 for the third wicket before Sohail edged Southee to Watling behind the

stumps for 34. It was Watling, with an unbeaten 77, who carried New Zealand's overnight total from 229-7 and added an invaluable 45 runs over the last three wickets to frustrate Pakistan.

During his five-and-a-half-hour knock in his 56th Test, Watling became the 14th New Zealander to pass 3,000 runs.

Watling, dropped on nine by Imam off Bilal Asif on Monday, and debutant Will Somerville extended their eighth wicket partnership to 45 before Bilal Asif took all three final wickets to finish with 5-65, his second five wicket haul in five Tests.

The 33-year-old playing his 56th Test, reached his 16th Test half-century. His 77 not out came from 199 balls in five hours and 32 minutes, and included four boundaries.

Leg-spinner Yasir Shah, in his 33rd Test, failed to add to his three wickets on Monday, leaving him two short of becoming the fastest man to reach 200 Test scalps.

SPOTLIGHT

King Kohli eyes glory in Australia



India captain Virat Kohli.

AFP
New Delhi

Virat Kohli is at the top of his game but he must get his other batters to perform if he is to grab the crowning glory of India's first Test series victory in Australia.

Kohli, 30, has led India's batting charge with admirable consistency across all three formats as he tops the International Cricket Council (ICC) rankings in Test and one-day internationals.

Dubbed "King Kohli" by the Indian media, the star batsman and India skipper has accumulated 1,063 runs in 18 Test innings this year, number one ahead of England skipper Joe Root (948 runs, 24 innings).

But as series defeats in South Africa and England this year showed, Kohli piling on the runs will be no guarantee of victory when the four-Test series starts tomorrow in Adelaide.

Kohli made 286 in three South Africa Tests but India lost the series 2-1 while the world's top Test side went down to England 4-1 despite the captain's 593 runs in five matches.

"Apart from Kohli himself no other batsman is making runs. So one man's show is not likely to win you a series overseas," veteran sports journalist Ayaz Memon told AFP.

"Barring the one at Lord's (where India lost by an innings and 159 runs) most of the matches that we have lost they actually have got themselves in a winning position and squandered it.

"Kohli's challenge is to get the best out of his batsmen and seize the winning moments which India has failed to latch on to," he added.

Memon said that Australia are weakened by the absence of top stars Steve Smith and David Warner, but that may also make Kohli's task harder.

"With Smith and Warner not being there the pressure of winning will be that much more on Kohli. If you can't beat an Aus-

tralia without Smith and Warner then who you will beat?" Memon told AFP.

"So this is his opportunity, because the next cycle of overseas matches will come after a couple of years and who knows what happens in that much time," he said.

India started the key Australia tour with a loss in the first Twenty20 on November 21 but went on to level the three-match series after the second game was rained off and they won the final match.

But it is the five-day format that Kohli and India are looking to conquer, with India never having won a series in Australia in more than 70 years of trying.

India's dismal record Down Under, which started with a crushing series loss to Don Bradman's side in 1948, is just five wins in 44 Tests.

Kohli is confident that now is the time to buck the trend.

"Looking at how much experience we have gained in the four years since we have last been here, and how the team has played, we definitely feel we have what it takes to win Test matches away from home," he said in an interview with Macquarie Radio.

"And, hopefully, this time around, a full series," said Kohli, who recently became the fastest to reach 10,000 runs in ODIs, surpassing India legend and former captain Sachin Tendulkar.

However Australia batsman Travis Head is confident the pace trio of Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins will keep Kohli in check.

Kohli led his team's batting in the 2014 series in Australia, amassing 692 runs in four matches despite India losing 2-0.

"Hopefully the boys get him under control," said Head. "We know he's a good player, I've seen it first-hand at Bangalore. He's an extremely good player, but I think we've got the bowlers to do the job.

"They're one of the best bowling units in the world. It's going to be an exciting battle, hopefully we'll come out on top," he added.

SPOTLIGHT

Australia still favourites: Rahane

Reuters
Sydney

Australia are still favourites to win the four-Test series against India even without Steve Smith and David Warner because of the strength of their bowling attack, Ajinkya Rahane said yesterday.

Many pundits have tipped India to end their 70-year wait for a first test series triumph in Australia after their top batsmen Smith and Warner were banned for a year in the aftermath of March's ball-tampering scandal in South Africa.

Rahane, however, was keen to throw the pressure of expectation back on the hosts when the much-anticipated series gets underway in Adelaide on Thursday, and scoffed when he was asked whether Australia

would be ripe for the picking. "Not really," the India vice-captain told reporters at Adelaide Oval. "I feel that any team that plays at home, they feel really good, and I feel that Australia are still the favourites to win the series.

"We are not going to take them lightly at all. Yes, they (will) miss Steve Smith and David Warner but I don't think they are vulnerable.

"You see their bowling attack, they've got a really good bowling attack, and I think to win Test matches, you need to have a really good bowling attack.

So I feel that Australia are really still the favourites."

Although not quite reaching the heights of captain Virat Kohli's 692 runs, Rahane had a good tour the last time India visited Australia in 2014-15 with 399 runs at an average of 57.

BOTTOMLINE

Hafeez to quit Test cricket

AFP
Abu Dhabi

Struggling Pakistan opener **Mohamed Hafeez** said yesterday he will be retiring from Test cricket after the ongoing third and final match against New Zealand in Abu Dhabi.

The 38-year-old has managed just 66 runs in seven innings since scoring a hundred against Australia in Dubai last month following his Test recall after two years away.

The Abu Dhabi Test is Hafeez's 55th since making his debut against Bangladesh in 2003. He has so far scored 3,644 runs with 10 hundreds and 12 half centuries, with the chance to add to that in his second innings



in this Test.

"I feel time is up. I am announcing my retirement and feel happy that I worked hard in

my career," said Hafeez, who has also played 203 one-day internationals and 89 Twenty20s.

"I had been thinking of retir-

ing from Tests for the last two weeks and thought that now is the time to leave the five-day format but I will continue to play limited-over matches."

His early career was marked by off-and-on performances before he settled in the team in 2011.

His top score of 224 came against Bangladesh in Khulna in 2015 but he struggled in England the following year and was dropped.

Hafeez said he was not forced into retirement.

"This is my own decision," said Hafeez, after falling for nought on the second day of the third Test. "I had conveyed the decision to Pakistan Cricket Board and the selection committee."

Hafeez came back after a two-

year gap in October, notching a brilliant 126 against Australia in Dubai but he has struggled since.

Also an off-break bowler, Hafeez took 53 Test wickets but his career as bowler was marred by questions over the legality of his bowling action.

His action was reported on three separate occasions, the last in October last year. After the second report of his action in August 2014 Hafeez was banned from bowling at international level for 12 months.

Hafeez said he was satisfied with his Test career.

"I am satisfied with what I have achieved," said Hafeez. "As an opener I worked hard and maintained a standard, so I am proud to have served my country."

SPOTLIGHT

'Sick of ball tampering talk' – Paine focuses on India challenge

'There has been so much talk in the last 10 months that everyone is sick of it'

AFP
Adelaide, Australia

Australia skipper Tim Paine says he is sick of all the ball-tampering talk and it is time to move on and focus on halting powerhouse India from winning their first Test series Down Under. The scandal in March has haunted Australian cricket, with Steve Smith and David Warner banned and a swathe of executives from the governing body axed or falling on their swords in the aftermath.

With the world's number one Test nation awaiting them in Adelaide in the first of four Tests tomorrow, Paine said it was time to start looking forward. "There has been so much talk in the last 10 months that everyone is sick of it," he said ahead of Australia's first home Test since "sandpapergate", where Smith, Warner and Cameron Bancroft tried to alter the ball in South Africa.

"There has been so much talk, it's time for action. There are 11 guys going out and trying their best who will be so keen because of what has gone on."

The odds are stacked in favour of the tourists – they top the Test rankings and boast the world's best batsman in Virat Kohli, plus a high-class pace bowling attack. Throw in Australia being without Smith and Warner, and it points to India starting as overwhelming favourites.

The last time they met, India won an engrossing series 2-1 on home soil, with Smith hitting three centuries. But the Indians have never won a Test series in Australia and if pace bowlers Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins are firing the tourists could be in for another tough time.

In the wake of the tampering scandal, Australia vowed to overhaul their infamous win-at-all-costs attitude, tone down the sledging and be more respectful. Paine said his message to the team was to keep their cool but also play to their strengths. And if that meant some verbal banter, then so be it. "It's just about picking your time and picking your moment and doing what the team requires," he said.

Australia could give a debut to in-form opener Marcus Harris, likely to partner Aaron Finch at the top of the order with Usman Khawaja appearing to be sufficiently recovered from knee surgery to come in at number three. A question mark remains over whether Peter Handscomb or Travis Head will fill the vacant middle-order spot.



Australian captain Tim Paine says his message to the team was to keep their cool but also play to their strengths. (AFP)

Previous series between the two rivals have been heated, with the combative Kohli usually front and centre. But the Indian skipper is insisting he has grown up and will not be looking for confrontations, although he added that "if they want to play a certain way we will reciprocate".

"I think from last time round, I've become more assured of myself, I don't really find the need to prove anything to anyone," he told Macquarie Sports Radio at the weekend. India suffered a

huge blow ahead of the Test with young opener Prithvi Shaw ruled out after suffering ankle ligament damage during their final warm-up game against a Cricket Australia XI.

But veteran opener Murali Vijay, who was dropped following a pair in the second Test against England this year, rose to the challenge with a century in the same match and is expected to face the new ball with KL Rahul.

India's middle order also looks in good form with Cheteshwar Pujara,

Kohli, Ajinkya Rahane and Hanuma Vihari all making half-centuries in the CA XI game. And they have an experienced set of bowlers in Ishant Sharma, Mohammad Shami, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Umesh Yadav and Jasprit Bumrah. "In terms of skill, in terms of experience, in terms of how we are playing, our mindset, we definitely feel we have the ability to win a series here," said Kohli.

SQUADS

Australia: Tim Paine (capt), Josh Hazle-

wood, Mitch Marsh, Pat Cummins, Aaron Finch, Peter Handscomb, Marcus Harris, Travis Head, Usman Khawaja, Nathan Lyon, Shaun Marsh, Peter Siddle, Mitchell Starc, Chris Tremain

India: Virat Kohli (capt), Murali Vijay, KL Rahul, Prithvi Shaw, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ajinkya Rahane, Hanuma Vihari, Rohit Sharma, Rishabh Pant, Parthiv Patel, Ravi Ashwin, Ravi Jadeja, Kuldeep Yadav, Mohammed Shami, Ishant Sharma, Umesh Yadav, Jasprit Bumrah, Bhuvneshwar Kumar

Marsh ready to justify Australia Test spot

Sydney: Questions over Mitchell Marsh's place in the Test team are fast becoming as traditional a part of the Australian summer as a backyard barbecue and a trip to the beach.

The all-rounder has a batting average of 26 and just 35 wickets from 30 Tests but not only will he almost certainly play the first Test against India at Adelaide Oval tomorrow, he will take the field as vice-captain of the side.

Former Test paceman Geoff Lawson was the first high profile figure to launch a broadside at his selection over the weekend but there will be many more if the ebullient 27-year-old fails to fire against the tourists.

Against Pakistan in October, Marsh managed 30 runs from four innings with the bat and two wickets at the cost of almost 100 runs with the ball and he knows he needs to produce against India.

"I'm just really excited, really pumped for the test summer to start," he said. "After the UAE, there's a few question marks over me (but) I'm just really pumped, if I'm selected, to get out there and play in front of the Australian crowds again. I'm doing my best to make the number six spot my own, that's all I can do."

The number of times Marsh used the word "pumped" in a short news conference might be an indication of why he was given the test vice captaincy despite not being an automatic selection. Marsh is clearly one of life's enthusiasts, as his summation of Australia's full-on training sessions amply illustrated.

"It's been unbelievable, hasn't it? I don't know what it's been like to watch but to be part of it has been unbelievable," he gushed. "We've got a great feeling in this group... we've all trained exceptionally well. We've prepared as best we possibly can."

Marsh's older brother Shaun is also an almost certain starter despite his even more paltry return of 14 runs from four innings against Pakistan. The 35-year-old's frequent recalls to the test side have likewise strained the credulity of cricket fans to the point that some have joked the Marsh family must have some kind of hold over the selectors. Of course, the brothers can point to the torrent of runs they produced in last year's Ashes sweep of England, and Mitchell yesterday came out with a defence of his brother that might have served for them both. "He's always got his knockers, but hopefully people respect him for the fact that he keeps coming back, he keeps working hard and hopefully he'll keep proving some people wrong," he said.

FOCUS

India's Gambhir to retire from cricket

AFP
New Delhi

Indian opener and World Cup hero Gautam Gambhir yesterday announced his retirement from all forms of cricket, finally heeding voices that were telling him "it's over". Gambhir, who played a key role in two of India's World Cup triumphs, will play his final domestic Ranji Trophy game for his home team Delhi starting tomorrow.

The 37-year-old Gambhir, an attacking yet compact left-handed batsman, accumulated 4154 runs in 58 Test matches since making his debut in 2004 against Australia. He also represented India in 147 one-day internationals and 37 Twenty20 matches.

But Gambhir, who formed a successful opening pair with Virender Sehwag until 2012, started to lose favour with the selectors and last played a Test against England in 2016. "The thought has been with me day and night...it has accompanied me to practice sessions, mocking at me like a menacing bowler," Gambhir said in a video message on social media.

"Each time I got out playing for India, or KKR (Kolkata Knight Riders) or Delhi Daredevils, this thought would turn into a sharp disturbing noise and walk with me all the way to the dressing room shouting that 'it is over Gauti'," he added.

Gambhir was part of India's 2007 win at the inaugural World T20 and played a pivotal role in the team's 50-over World Cup triumph in 2011. The Delhi native, who was part of the Indian team that rose to the number one Test spot in 2009, led Indian Premier League (IPL) side Knight Riders to two titles in 2012 and 2014.



Gautam Gambhir, who played a key role in two of India's World Cup triumphs, will play his final domestic Ranji Trophy game for his home team Delhi starting tomorrow. (Reuters)

"This may sound a little wishful but I've seen wishes come true. Two World Cups, highest run-getter in the final of both of these games is the stuff dreams are made of," Gambhir said. "Somewhere on the top is being the No. 1 Test team in the world. A trophy, I'll look at very fondly, is the one I got for being awarded the ICC best Test batsman of the year in 2009.

"For a purist like me, it is a reward for somewhat knowing where my off stump was. The historic series win in NZ (New

Zealand) and the CB series in Australia will be reflected upon fondly. But I do hope the current Indian team Down Under can overshadow our feats."

Gambhir went on to thank his coaches, teammates and family members for standing by him and said his most meaningful partnership was with the supporters of Indian cricket. He recently turned to commentary, sharing the mike with legends of Indian and Australian cricket during India's three T20 matches in Australia.

BOTTOMLINE

Stokes and Hales to find out if they face further punishment

By Ali Martin
The Guardian

After 14 months of what has at times felt like glacial progress, English cricket is finally approaching closure over Ben Stokes, Alex Hales and the street fight in Bristol that led to the former being removed as Test vice-captain and stood down from an Ashes tour.

A two-day hearing by the cricket discipline commission gets under way behind closed doors in London today with Stokes and Hales having both been charged with two counts of bringing the game into disrepute by the England and Wales Cricket Board following the incident on 25 September 2017.

Though Stokes was found not guilty of affray by a jury at Bristol crown court in August – and Hales was not charged at all – the pair still face possible cricketing sanctions, having become embroiled in the early-hours incident near the Mbargo nightclub in Clifton while the England one-day squad was celebrating a victory over West Indies.

A three-strong CDC panel, which is funded by the ECB but is meant to be independent in its deliberations, must now decide

whether the pair contravened ECB directive 3.3.

It states: "No participant may conduct himself in a manner or do any act or omission at any time which may be prejudicial to the interests of cricket or which may bring the ECB, the game of cricket or any cricketer or group of cricketers into disrepute."

A verdict is expected on Friday afternoon – the second day of the hearing – with the CDC able to hand down unlimited fines, suspensions or even terminate a player's registration in the most extreme cases. Both the players and the ECB, whose legal team are the prosecution in this instance, then have 14 days to appeal should they wish.

Were the pair to be found guilty and suspensions follow, Hales could receive a stronger net punishment than Stokes as the regulations permit time already served to be factored in.

The one-day opener missed two England games at the end of the 2017 season – a costly spell, given Jason Roy took his place in the side and has been a mainstay ever since – while Stokes sat out five Ashes Tests and 11 white-ball internationals in total.

The CDC panel, which is chaired by the former Derbyshire batsman Tim O'Gorman and also includes Mike Smith, an ex-Eng-

land left-arter, and Chris Tickle, an employment tribunal judge who has sat on Warwickshire's committee, undoubtedly faces a complex task in determining the damage to the sport's reputation.

Footage of the pair's involvement in the fight – not least that published by the *Sun* newspaper – does not fit in with English cricket's desire for a clean-cut, family-orientated image.

Late-night drinking midway through a series, while not breaking any team curfew at the time, is also problematic and has already led to three other players out that evening – Jake Ball, Liam Plunkett and Jonny Bairstow – being fined £1,000 each.

But Stokes has long maintained that his fight with Ryan Hale and Ryan Ali – both of whom were also acquitted during the trial – was a case of defending Kai Barry and William O'Connell after they were subjected to alleged homophobic abuse. The pair, though not called as witnesses during the court case, have since thanked the all-rounder publicly for stepping in. Hales, meanwhile, faced no criminal charge but it was established during the court case that he kicked Ali during the melee and misled a police officer at the time of Stokes's 2.35am arrest by claiming to have not been present.

SPOTLIGHT

World athletics body maintains Russia ban

'I hope they'll deliver the data by the end of this year. But I cannot go any further than that'

AFP
Monaco

The governing body of world athletics yesterday maintained Russia's ban from track and field over mass state-backed doping, citing two conditions before the powerhouse can return to international competition.

Rune Andersen, head of the IAAF's taskforce on Russia, said Russian authorities, in the form of the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA), had to grant access to data from testing of samples at a Moscow laboratory from 2011 to 2015.

The second condition is that Russia must pay the IAAF's costs incurred in the work of the taskforce and in bringing or defending Russian cases at the Court of Arbitration of Sport (CAS). Access to the samples would hand the Athletics Integrity Unit, the independent body that manages all doping and non-doping integrity-related matters in athletics, the opportunity to determine whether any suspicious findings should be investigated.

"I hope they'll deliver the data by the end of this year," Andersen said of the samples taken and stored in the Moscow laboratory. "But I cannot go any further than that."

"We've received no assurances it will be delivered to us directly."

"Assurances have been given to WADA (World Anti-Doping Agency) and WADA have set a deadline of December 31 to receive the data. We'll have to rely on receiving the data from WADA before handing it to the AIU to examine the data before we are satisfied that the data is correct data."

The International Association of Athletics Federation's decision means Russia will not, for the moment, be able to compete under its own flag at the European Indoor Championships in Glasgow in February 2019, with the IAAF Council not scheduled to meet again until March.

Russian athletics federation (RUSAF) president Dmitry Shlyakhtin said the decision was no surprise.

"It is not a surprise but we did have hope, because RUSAF has worked very hard (to comply with IAAF demands)," he told Interfax news agency. He said negotiations were underway on debt repayment and access to doping control data.



IAAF president Sebastian Coe and head of the IAAF taskforce on Russia Rune Andersen during the press conference in Monaco. (Reuters)

Andersen insisted that the task force's relationship with the Russians was "business-like" and expressed the view that the end was in sight after three years of talks, longer than expected.

"We see the glimmer of light (at the end of the tunnel) all the time," he added. "There has been progress all the way. Many of the criteria has been met by Russia, either by USAF or Russian authorities," he said.

Andersen, however, dodged the politically sensitive question of whether he thought Russia had truly acknowledged the findings of the McLaren and Schmid reports, a major sticking point on the taskforce's initial criteria.

"We consider that the substance of what was in the Schmid report has been met, that has been acknowledged by Russia," Andersen said, adding that the major

difference between that and the McLaren report was the absence of a reference to Russia's FSB security service.

"There has been an acknowledgement of the involvement of persons in the state, that is clear. Whether that means that you can draw that line to say that it has been an acknowledgement of state-sponsored doping, that remains for everyone to determine on what's been written, but it's been finely worded by Russia."

Russia's athletics federation was initially banned by the IAAF in November 2015 over allegations of widespread government-backed doping fraud.

Its athletics team was barred from the 2016 Rio Olympics and also missed the IAAF World Championships in London a year later. A number of Russian athletes, however, have been granted permission by the IAAF to compete as neutrals after

meeting the exceptional eligibility criteria, essentially demonstrating that they have come through transparent anti-doping testing.

The International Olympic Committee lifted its ban on Russia at the end of the Pyeongchang Olympics while WADA in September lifted its ban on RUSADA for non-compliance.

WADA drew heavy international criticism when it voted to declare RUSADA "compliant", before being granted access to Moscow raw data.

It responded by promising it will impose new sanctions if Russia did not cooperate by December 31 and a team visited the Russian capital last week and another is due next week to carry out an audit.

The WADA decision led RUSAF to appeal against its IAAF suspension at the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

HONOUR

Capewell takes QREC Arabian award

Gary Capewell has been presented with the much coveted Qatar Racing and Equestrian (QREC) Award at the 2018 Horserace Writers & Photographers Derby Awards at London's Royal Lancaster Hotel on December 3.

Following a unanimous decision, the award has been made in recognition of Capewell's extraordinary contribution to UK Arabian Racing. Well known for his accurate calling, excellent preparation and strong voice, Gary has spent over 10 years as ARO's commentator, hitting a landmark at Wolverhampton Racecourse on June 10 this year when he made his 1,000 Arabian race call.

His enthusiasm for racing started at an early age and he was encouraged by his grandfather. Aged eight, Gary began doing race commentaries from the TV, making his first live Arabian race call at Uttoxeter in 2004.

Two years later he was covering half the meetings with existing ARO commentator Martin Harris and by 2008 it was a full-time occupation. He has only missed three races since.

Commentating with ARO in the summer gives him the opportunity to work at some of the most prestigious racetracks in the country, which has led to offers of more work abroad. So far, this has included a season in Dubai and he has called Arabian races in Qatar at the HH The Amir's Sword Festival.

In addition to his work for ARO, Gary presents on William Hill Radio and TV all year round.

QREC Chief Executive Officer Nasser bin Sherida al-Kaabi said: "Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club is proud to have supported the Horserace Writers and Photographers Association Award Ceremony since 2012. Our congratulations go to Gary Capewell for his commitment and achievements commentating for Arabian Racing in the UK, well deserved and well done."

ARO Chairman Charles Gregson commented, "We are delighted to see Gary Capewell honoured in this way. He has made a huge contribution to UK Arabian racing over many years and we are delighted to congratulate him on this award."

"We are also extremely grateful to both the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club and the Horserace Writers and Photographers Association for their support of UK Arabian racing."

The Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club-sponsored Horserace Writers & Photographers Derby Awards are held every year to celebrate work from broadcasters, photographers and writers in the horseracing industry.

Awards include; Horserace Writer of the Year, Reporter of the Year, Photographer of the Year and Picture of the Year.



QREC CEO Nasser bin Sherida al-Kaabi (left) presents QREC Award to Gary Capewell.

FOCUS

Ooredoo announces sponsorship of Clement Fencing Academy

Ooredoo has announced it is now the official sponsor of the Doha-based Clement Fencing Academy.

Affiliated to the Qatar Fencing Federation and the French Fencing Federation, the Clement Fencing Academy currently has more than 200 members representing 42 nationalities participating in fencing at its two locations in Doha.

The Academy hosts cross-training programmes inviting national athletes to compete and train with members of the club, as well as running after-school and physical education classes for Doha students aged 6 to 16 years.

The Academy also offers wheelchair fencing training for both wheelchair users and the fully able, in order to promote opportunity for all and full integration for every sector of society. And, as the CFA teaches fencing in both French and English, the Academy has developed short fencing educational programmes to initiate and encourage the use of French in Qatari schools.

As part of the sponsorship, Ooredoo is supporting events

such as the National Sports Day With Ooredoo, a community sporting event that attracted some 1,500 participants to come together, try fencing and get involved in a range of fun activities promoting the importance of health and fitness for all.

Manar Khalifa al-Muraikhi, Director Communications and PR at Ooredoo, said: "Supporting the community in Qatar is of paramount importance to Ooredoo and we are grateful for opportunities such as these to work with local associations that benefit our community and our people. We recognise the importance of staying fit and healthy, and we welcome any opportunity to promote this within our community. We are confident our partnership with Clement Fencing Academy will help young people get involved in this wonderful sport and learn valuable life lessons."

Ooredoo is delighted to have cemented this relationship with the Clement Fencing Academy and looks forward to a long and fruitful partnership in support of health and fitness for the community in Qatar.

Wesley win Lions Touch 7s title for sixth consecutive time

Wesley won the 8th edition of the Lions Touch Rugby 7s for the sixth consecutive time by beating Zahira 3-0 last Friday at the Doha Rugby Football Centre.

The Blues led 3-0 at halftime before a boisterous 500 crowd. Captain Shiv-an Madawa, opened up the account, turning and twisting untouched to plant the first crossover.

The second try was posted by paceman Lahiru Prasad, while the third nail in the coffin for Zahira was scored by Sajith Ariyawansa. Trailing 3-0 at the break Zahira was mentally out of contention, however, their second-half start and enthusiasm told a different story as they threatened to score and challenged the champs keeping them scoreless for the entire second period.

Winning captain Madawa could not hide his excitement after the final hooter telling media, "I'm really excited, it was a great match I'm so proud of the boys".

"Zahira pressured us in attack and held us out in defence in the second half, it was really tough but thankfully, we had a game plan and we executed it".

Zahira player maker and former captain Murshid Ahamat was disappointed at the loss saying, "It is unfortunate we couldn't get the win. We lost the game in the first half as we strayed from our strategy".

"Our boys never gave up, they dug in hard in the second half to defend well but we just couldn't get the tries on. Congratulations to Wesley for a fantastic win".



CRICKET

QS TEC claim Division-II crown

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar Solar Technologies (QS TEC) defeated Serandeep-B by 27 runs to clinch the Division-II 1st Zaffran Café Cricket Tournament 2018, organised by Qatar Veterans Cricket League at the Losail Cricket Complex.

After winning the toss and batting first QS TEC batsmen scored 130 runs in 20 overs.

Sameer scored 26 runs in 12 balls with the help of three sixes and one boundary. Zahir and Haleem contributed 33 and 28 runs respectively. Bandulla, Indika and Tharanga took two wickets each for Serandeep-B.

In reply, Serandeep-B batsmen were bundled out for 103 runs in 17.4 overs.

Chanaka contributor 30 runs off 18 deliveries, while Bandulla and Milan scored 15 each. Kazi took three wickets and Zahir and Haleem claimed two each. For his all-round performance,



QS TEC captain Kamran and his teammate Dr Sanjay receive winners trophy.

Zahir was adjusted Man-of-the-Finals. He was also declared best bowler of the tournament.

Vimal of Orxy Challengers was declared best batsman, while QS TEC's Fauzan and Sanjay

received the best-allrounder and best wicket-keeper awards respectively.

Business development manager of Zaffran Cafe Siddiq Fahad gave away the prizes.

NBA

Curry leads charge as Warriors cruise past Hawks

‘They’re not going to just sag off and let me have open threes. I’ve got to find a way to knock them down. I will’



Stephen Curry of the Golden State Warriors drives against Kent Bazemore of the Atlanta Hawks at State Farm Arena in Atlanta, Georgia. (Getty Images/AFP)

AFP
Los Angeles

Stephen Curry, Kevin Durant and Klay Thompson combined for 85 points as the two-time defending champion Golden State Warriors used a balanced offense to roll over the Atlanta Hawks 128-111 on Monday.

Curry was playing in just his second game after missing 11 contests with a groin injury. That meant that in order to keep all their big guns happy, the Warriors needed to spread the offense around.

Curry finished with 30 points, Durant - who carried the club through Curry's absence - finished with 28, and Thompson delivered 27 as Golden State improved to 31-3 when dynamic trio all have 20 points.

"I think he's now back in the groove," coach Steve Kerr said of Curry. "He looked great handling the ball."

The Warriors snapped a six-game losing streak on the road and won for just the fourth time in their last 10.

Curry got things rolling with 18 points in the first quarter as he single-handedly outscored the Hawks, who managed just 17 points in the opening 12 minutes.

Curry nailed his first six shots, four of them beyond the arc. He finished six of 10 from three-point range.

The Warriors led 61-47 at halftime and stretched the margin as high as 24 points. "Our defense set the tone," Curry said. "Everybody gets to touch the ball."

John Collins led Atlanta with 24 points, and Trae Young added 20 as the Hawks lost their third consecutive game.

Hawks first round draft pick Young continued to struggle. The young guard had seven turnovers and missed all five of his three-point attempts. Coming into the game, Young was averaging 15.6 points, which is good for third place among all rookies - but he's been mired in a shooting slump of late.

"They're picking me up full court," Young said. "They're not going to just sag off and let me have open threes. I've got to find a way to knock them down. I will."

Elsewhere, Nikola Jokic drained three clutch free throws in the final seven seconds and the Denver Nuggets upset the Toronto Raptors 106-103. Jokic had 23 points, 15 assists and 11 rebounds, Jamal Murray scored 21 points for the Nuggets who won their sixth straight and halted Toronto's winning streak at eight.

RESULTS		
Atlanta	111-128	Golden State
Brooklyn	97-99	Cleveland
New York	107-110	Washington
Toronto	103-106	Denver
Minnesota	103-91	Houston
New Orleans	126-129	Clippers
Detroit	83-110	Oklahoma City

NUGGETS' HARRIS EXITS WITH INJURY

In just his second game back from an ankle injury, Nuggets guard Gary Harris left Denver's road win over the Toronto Raptors on Monday due to a different injury.

Multiple media outlets reported that Harris will undergo an MRI exam Tuesday, but the exact nature of the injury was unclear.

The Nuggets initially announced that Harris exited the game in the first quarter due to a right hip ailment, but ESPN later reported that Harris hurt his right groin.

"He's frustrated, just getting back from an injury, and to have that (and) not be

able to come back in tonight," Nuggets coach Michael Malone said postgame, according to ESPN. "We'll see how severe the injury is, and hopefully we can get him back really soon. But Gary's such a big part of what we're trying to do. Big loss."

It is unclear if Harris will be available Wednesday night when the Nuggets oppose the Magic in Orlando.

Harris, 24, scored three points in nine minutes Monday as Denver beat the Raptors 106-103. For the season, he is averaging 16.6 points, 3.2 rebounds and 2.9 assists through 21 games.

Harris had missed two games with the ankle injury before returning to score 27 points Friday in the Nuggets' 113-112 road win over the Portland Trail Blazers.

A 2014 first-round draft pick (No. 19 overall), Harris is in his fifth NBA season, all with Denver. He has career averages of 12.7 points, 2.6 rebounds and 2.2 assists in 276 games (224 starts).

In the absence of Harris on Monday, Malik Beasley came off the bench to contribute 15 points in 26 minutes. Beasley had been averaging 7.1 points per game.

Denver has won six consecutive games, the longest active victory streak in the NBA.

SPOTLIGHT

Chicago Bulls fire head coach Hoiberg



Fred Hoiberg, who was named Bulls coach in 2015, has been fired.

By K C Johnson
Chicago Tribune

Three years and six months after the Bulls anointed him as the missing piece to a championship-ready roster, Fred Hoiberg was fired as coach on Monday morning.

The Bulls promoted associate coach Jim Boylen to head coach. There's no interim in Boylen's title because he's well-regarded by management and ownership and has a chance to win the job permanently, executive vice president of basketball operations John Paxson said at Monday afternoon's news conference at the Advocate Center. "We believe Jim will be able to effect change," Paxson said. "We expect him to be our head coach moving forward. Jim has paid his dues in this league. He has a passion and energy to him that I think our players will respond to. I think Jim will bring a strong voice to our locker room."

Paxson also put to rest any questions about general manager Gar Forman's job security, saying, "Gar is absolutely safe."

Hoiberg, who compiled a 115-155 record and one playoff berth in his three-plus seasons, arrived at the team's practice facility Monday morning prepared to run the 11 a.m. practice. Paxson and Forman were there to relieve him of his duties. "(The decision) was made most difficult because all of us in this organization like Fred Hoiberg a lot," Paxson said. "He had to deal with a lot of difficult circumstances. This decision wasn't based on our record."

"We were in a similar situation last year at this time. Poor record. But the entire energy about this group was different then. What we're lacking is an energy and spirit. It's not as simple as saying we would've got that with healthy players. You have to be able to get your identity across to your team."

Boylen, who said he talked to Hoiberg on Monday morning, said he will be "forever grateful to Fred and the opportunity he gave me." He said all of the assistant coaches will be retained and he will add G League Windy City Bulls coach Dean Cooper to the staff. "I think I'm a more passionate in-game coach than Fred," Boylen said.

Hoiberg's first season began with championship aspirations but quickly devolved because of a divided locker room and a team on its last legs. This was best exemplified by Jimmy Butler undermining Hoiberg following a December 2015 loss at the Knicks.

"I believe in the guys in this locker room but I also believe we probably have to be coached a lot harder at times," Butler said at the time. "I'm sorry, I know Fred is a laid-back guy and I really respect him for that, but when guys aren't doing what they're supposed to do, you have to get on guys - myself included."

The following season, management added Rajon Rondo and Dwyane Wade in free agency. Neither piece was best suited for Hoiberg's preferred offensive philosophy. Nevertheless, Hoiberg guided the Bulls to a 2-0 lead in a first-round playoff series over the second-seeded Celtics before Rondo fractured his thumb and the Celtics won four straight.

Last season, the first of a full rebuild following the trade of Butler to the Timberwolves, the Bulls finished 27-55 and drew widespread praise throughout the league for their competitiveness and player development. Hoiberg also adroitly managed the preseason alteration when Bobby Portis drew an eight-game suspension for punching Nikola Mirotic's breaking two bones in Mirotic's face. Mirotic missed 23 games and both players played well until Mirotic's trade to the Pelicans in January.

This season, Hoiberg has had Portis for only four games, Kris Dunn and Lauri Markkanen for one each and Denzel Valentine for zero. While Hoiberg knew he was under the microscope, he fully expected to at least get some time coaching a relatively healthy roster before management acted. Hoiberg still wants to coach, preferably at the NBA level, a source said. His five-year, \$25 million contract that runs through next season is fully guaranteed, sources said, which means he'll be paid fully until he lands another job.

NHL

Streaking Lightning sweep past faltering Devils

Reuters
New York

Tampa Bay's Nikita Kucherov and Brayden Point continued their sizzling play as the Lightning cruised to another lopsided win over New Jersey, beating the Devils 5-1 in Newark, N.J., on Monday.

Kucherov recorded a goal and three assists to extend his point streak to 10 games, and Point had a goal and two assists for the Lightning, who won their third straight overall and swept the three-game season series against the Devils.

In their three wins over New Jersey, the Lightning outscored the last-place Metropolitan Division team 18-6.

Kucherov moved out of a third-place tie with Toronto's Mitchell Marner in the scoring race. His four points gave him 42, moving him closer to Colorado Avalanche teammates Mikko Rantanen (45) and Nathan MacKinnon (43).

The high-scoring Russian has 24 points in the 10-game streak - five goals and 19 assists. Point had a whopping 11 points in the three wins over New Jersey.

Tampa Bay's Tyler Johnson, Yan-ni Gourde and Steven Stamkos also

scored goals. Louis Domingue won for the 11th time and started his 11th straight contest - the longest goalie-start streak in the NHL this season - and posted 26 saves.

Defenseman Egor Yakovlev scored his first NHL goal for the Devils, who have lost six straight. Keith Kinkaid stopped 16 shots in two periods in goal, and Cory Schneider made five saves in relief during the third period.

Kucherov zipped in his 12th goal at 13:31 of the first period. Using New Jersey defenseman Sami Vatanen as a screen, the right winger fired a shot from near the left circle that beat Kinkaid on the glove side for a 1-0 lead.

On the power play as the period was winding down, Kucherov fed a pass from the right circle to Point, who lifted a shot from the slot with 26 seconds left in the period for his 20th goal - nine of them on the man advantage.

Johnson deflected in a long shot by McDonagh for his 11th goal at 8:20 of the second period for a 3-0 lead. Shortly after Yakovlev's goal at 11:26, Gourde chipped in a clever backhand pass from Stamkos for his 10th marker and a 4-1 lead.

Stamkos scored his ninth goal of the season on the power play 20 seconds into the third period on

Kucherov's third assist, and the Lightning kept the Devils scoreless down the stretch en route for the win.

RINNE, PREDATORS HOLD OFF SABRES

Pekka Rinne made 21 saves, including five in the final 90 seconds, to lead the Nashville Predators to a 2-1 victory over the visiting Buffalo Sabres on Monday night.

Kevin Fiala and Ryan Ellis scored goals for the Predators, who were playing their 13th game over a 24-day span and were without the services of Filip Forsberg (broken hand), P.K. Subban (upper body), Viktor Arvidsson (broken thumb) and Kyle Turris (undisclosed).

Rinne was playing in his 10th consecutive game and starting his fifth straight contest. It is Rinne's longest streak since playing in 27 games in a row from Feb. 5 to April 9, 2015.

Sam Reinhart scored his seventh goal of the season for Buffalo, which took its third straight loss after winning 10 games in a row. Carter Hutton had 22 saves for the Sabres.

RESULTS		
Tampa Bay	5	New Jersey
Nashville	2	Buffalo
Dallas	4	Edmonton



Tampa Bay Lightning's Nikita Kucherov (left) skates in on Damon Severson of the New Jersey Devils during the first period at the Prudential Center in Newark, New Jersey. (Getty Images/AFP)

FOCUS

Lions stuck in the past while the Rams are future of the NFL

Rams playoff spot isn't a surprise. They've been one of the best teams in football all year

By Shawn Windsor
Detroit Free Press

The Los Angeles Rams clinched a playoff spot on Sunday afternoon at Ford Field. This isn't a surprise. They've been one of the best teams in football all year.

I mention this to remind you that these same Rams lost 12 games two years ago. That's right: 12.

Then fired their coach. Hired a 30-year-old offensive wizard. And led the NFL in offense the next season.

Preposterous, right? Well, that isn't the half of it. That same coach, Sean McVay, now 32, is the talk of the league. Or at least his mind is. And that mind has turned the Rams into a Super Bowl favourite.

In less than two years. So... it can be done. That's the good news.

The bad news? The Lions are a long way from the kind of offensive attack we saw Sunday in the 30-16 loss. And the Rams weren't at their best.

Matt Patricia deserves some credit here. He mixed up the back end of his defense and confused L.A.'s young quarterback, Jared Goff. Goff also missed some throws he's been making most of the year.

Still, the Lions' effort and scheme held the Rams almost a touchdown under their scoring average and more than 100 yards under their total yards average. It was an impressive plan and display designed by a coach who arrived in Detroit as something of a wunderkind himself - Patricia is just a little older.

And yet, defense is not the future of the NFL. Not the immediate future, anyway. The top teams in the league this year are also the top offenses. This isn't a coincidence.

Now, maybe league brass will tweak the rules the next few years and give defenses the kind of physical freedom they once had. But I doubt it. Science and worried families of teenage sons should keep that from happening.

Which means the Lions have some catching up to do. In personnel, sure. But mostly in structure and philosophy.

While Patricia employs an ag-



Los Angeles Rams running back Todd Gurley (left) hurdles Detroit Lions free safety Glover Quin (No 27) during the second quarter at Ford Field. Play disqualified due to penalty. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

gressive and nimble outlook on defense, unafraid to mix up his strategy week to week and to demand that his players keep up, he hides behind an oddly conservative outlook on offense.

You can point to offensive coordinator Jim Bob Cooter all you want. He isn't building any kind of game plan without Patricia's approval.

Too many times Sunday the Patricia-Cooter tandem dialed up feeble-minded plays when the down and distance and, frankly, season, called for something bold.

Run on third-and-long? Toss a quick out on the same? Hand off up the middle inside the red zone when a shot at the end zone through the air was there to take?

You can quibble with any call when it doesn't work, and I'm not here to do that. Partly because it's silly to assume a different call would've worked in its place. The math doesn't work like that.

And while offensive style and approach can be about percentages, it's about something harder to see as well.

When the Lions break the huddle with almost no chance of picking up a first down because of a play call that the fans - and the players - can sniff out, maybe that particular call is part of the long view, meant to keep the status quo until the offense gets the ball back on the next possession.

The problem is it's tough to know if that next possession will come. Or if it does, how the parameters of the game might have changed by then.

Meaning some times you've just got to throw the damn ball. Take a chance.

This isn't to say that the young Rams coach favours tossing it out around 60 times a game. But from the start of the game Sunday, the difference in how each offense attacked was striking. It's true that McVay enjoys a

roster of speedy - and healthy - receivers and one of the best running backs in football. (Hello, Todd Gurley.) It's also true McVay took over a four-win team with a second-year quarterback the previous coach didn't think could play and...

...well, you get the idea.

Goff didn't have his most efficient passing day in Detroit. Yet this didn't stop McVay from dropping his young quarterback several steps behind the line of scrimmage and letting it fly down the field.

It was, I don't know, refreshing, and looked like post-modern football, just as most of the best teams in the sport do when they play offense. It's a relentless, aerial assault, where the pass is used to set up the run, not the other way around.

The Lions, on the other hand, are stuck in mud, and before you blame the injuries and trade of Golden Tate, remember that this offense wasn't much better at

the start of the season.

Meanwhile, McVay reportedly reached out to offensive coordinator Kliff Kingsbury last week. The innovative mind behind the high-scoring teams at Texas Tech.

Kingsbury got fired by the good folks in Lubbock, Texas, because his teams didn't win enough; at some point you have to play defense. Yet his name has surfaced many times since his dismissal because of his offensive track record.

That McVay reached out to Kingsbury says plenty about the 32-year-old coach. He's got the best, most balanced offense in the game and he's seeking voices that could make it even better.

Yet the Lions step to the line of scrimmage with a plan built for another generation, and that generation has passed.

This offseason, Patricia has a chance to bring his offense into the light. It's where the game is headed.

HOCKEY

Defending champs Australia beat England 3-0 in WC

FIH
Bhubaneswar

Reigning world champions Australia made it two wins from two Pool B matches on the seventh day of action at the Odisha Hockey Men's World Cup Bhubaneswar 2018, finishing first in the pool and earning the automatic ticket to the quarter-finals that comes with it.

Australia defeated England 3-0 but were not immediately confirmed as the pool winners, something that was settled by the result of the match that immediately followed.

China, the lowest ranked team in the pool, claimed their second successive draw of the competition against Ireland, a result which meant that Australia stayed four points clear of all teams in the pool and therefore uncatchable.

England and Australia could not be separated in the first two quarters of their Pool B meeting, with both sides having good chances to break the deadlock. The goalkeepers excelled, with England's George Pinner making two fine penalty corner blocks to deny the Kookaburras before Tyler Lovell pulled off a miraculous stick save from Mark Glegghorne's penalty corner drag-flick to deflect the ball over his own crossbar.

Australia's Blake Govers and Phil Roper of England also went close; Govers firing just wide of the target with a spinshot before Roper clipped the outside of the Australia goal after some great build-up play from Liam Ansell.

Australia were the better team in the third quarter but were thwarted by some solid defensive work from England. However, their resistance was ended by two quick Australian goals in the fourth quarter. Jake Whetton found the bottom left corner of Pinner's goal with a pinpoint accurate slapshot in the 47th minute before Blake Govers smashed home a second three minutes later.

A 3-0 score-line was com-

pleted four minutes from full time by Corey Weyer, who rattled the backboard with a low backhand effort to give Australia Head Coach Colin Batch his second win from two matches.

Like the Australia versus England match, the contest between Ireland and China remained scoreless throughout the first two quarters. The Green Machine had the better of the two periods, showing patience in the build-up but failing to strike that killer blow in the China circle. Shane O'Donoghue went close on two occasions, while Matthew Nelson had arguably the best chance of the half when he fired a backhand effort into the side of the China goal after being forced wide by an opposition defender.

Ireland continued to pressure the China goal, with Alan Sothern shaving the post before a dramatic final three minutes of the third period. A yellow card five-minute suspension to Ireland's Jonathan Bell was followed by the opening goal of the match, with China being the beneficiaries. Guo Jin finished off a beautifully worked penalty corner routine with a glorious high finish that went in off the left post to give China a shock 1-0 lead. Incredibly, Ireland - still down to ten players - found the perfect response, with Sothern diving in to touch home Michael Robson's perfect backhand pass from left field.

Shane O'Donoghue had a chance to win it with a late penalty corner drag-flick, but China goalkeeper WANG Caiyu made a fine save to ensure that his team remain unbeaten in Bhubaneswar. Even more remarkably, a win for either England or Ireland in their meeting on 7 December will put China through to the knock-out stages.

The result I am very satisfied with", said China Head Coach Kim Sang Ryul. "We are still unbeaten, but our play is not good enough so I am still not satisfied. Our mentality is that we are still trying to win. We will try to show our abilities against Australia."



England's Ansell Liam (right) fights for the ball with Australia's Jace Harvie (left) during their group match at the 2018 Hockey World Cup in Bhubaneswar yesterday. (AFP)

MLB

Dodgers manager Roberts signs 4-year extension

By Bill Plaschke
Los Angeles Times

The roster changes daily. The lineup changes nightly. The bullpen reorganises. The rotation rotates.

Throughout the last three Los Angeles Dodgers seasons, amid the constant rearranging of a clubhouse that sometimes feels like a bus station, there has been one constant presence, one unwavering voice, one clear caretaker of the culture.

It has been Dave Roberts. He's the one who has convinced even the most hardened veterans to buy into the persistent platooning. He's the one who has gained the trust of even the most precocious of pitchers as they adjust to playing musical roles.

Roberts has used old-school nurturing to sell a cold analytics blueprint to a team that has responded by following him deep into October, and if you don't think that's crazy strong, you try telling Clayton Kershaw he's not starting the first game of the playoffs. A cornerstone amid the cacophony, Roberts has been the unquestioned leader of this

team, something the Dodgers smartly recognised on Monday in making what could be their most important move of the off-season.

About a month after exercising a one-year option on a contract that could have cut into his clubhouse credibility and made him a lame duck, the Dodgers announced Roberts had agreed to a four-year deal that gives him the security his job requires and his accomplishments deserve.

"Like I said from the beginning, this is where I want to be, I love this city, I love this fan base, and we've done some good things together," he said on Monday night in a phone interview. "For me to get that vote of confidence from the organization is just great."

There were indications that if the Dodgers had insisted Roberts manage this season under that one-year deal, they would lose him to another team next offseason. Now, if he keeps the job for three more years, he will be the longest-tenured Dodgers manager since Tommy Lasorda, and it only figures that Roberts celebrated it with Lasorda swagger.

"With the culture we've created, this team has a legitimate chance to win the World Series



Los Angeles Dodgers manager Dave Roberts celebrates after a 5-2 win against the Colorado Rockies in a NL West tiebreaker game at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles on October 1, 2018. (Los Angeles Times/TNS)

every year," Roberts said. "And we're going to do it, we will win a championship here soon, I expect it to be in 2019, and it ain't going to be just one championship."

In ranking fourth among all managers for regular-season wins (287) in his first three years, Roberts has led the Dod-

gers to consecutive World Series appearances after a National League Championship Series berth. Three seasons, three West Division championships, three final four, what's there to argue?

Well, OK, those Dodgers fans who chanted for Roberts' firing throughout this year's World Series loss to the Boston Red Sox

might debate. I know why some of you are still mad at him. Lots of people were mad at him. He made some lousy bullpen decisions. He was criticized for them by this columnist.

He should never have replaced Pedro Baez with Alex Wood in a Game 1 loss. He never should have gone to Ryan Madson in-

stead of Baez in a Game 2 loss. And he never, ever, should have pulled Rich Hill while the left-hander had a one-hitter in the seventh inning of a Game 4 loss.

Of that Hill decision, I wrote, "A horrible managerial move," and then I described a postgame scene featuring cheers and jeers.

While Boston fans chanted, "Let's go Red Sox," there were Dodgers fans chanting, in the same rhythmic pattern, "Let go of Roberts."

Actually, some of you folks are still mad at Roberts for pulling Yu Darvish too late in Game 7 of the 2017 World Series against the Houston Astros, and I get that, too. Certainly, he has had some tough moments when the Dodgers have been on baseball's biggest stage, and fans have had every right to boo.

"That's what I signed up for," Roberts said. "This passion and care that our fans have for their team, that's something I don't take lightly."

Brewers in the NLCS.

And, understand, once they reach the postseason, the front-office involvement can be intense. Although Roberts makes the final calls on the pitching changes, the front-office directives are even more detailed, and that can make things tricky.

The guess here is, over the last three years, no manager in baseball has had to deal with more dugout scripts, more clubhouse upheaval, more front-office decisions that require a strong will to execute them.

The obscure personnel moves and maddening lineup switches made by the Andrew Friedman regime have been successful in the regular season - he's four for four in division series - but the commotion has come with a price. It is the price of having to explain to a guy that is getting benched the night after he hits two home runs.

It is the price of asking a starting pitcher to come out of the bullpen in a high-leverage situation.

It is the price of dealing with the human side of a numbers racket, and Roberts pays that price daily, with a smile and a swagger, and does it well.

LIGUE 1

Injured Neymar to miss PSG's Strasbourg clash

PSG's home game against Montpellier on Saturday postponed after a request from Paris police

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain will be without the injured Neymar as they look to continue their unbeaten record in Ligue 1 this season today at Strasbourg. The world's most expensive player came off early in the second half in Sunday's 2-2 draw at Bordeaux after hurting the same groin he injured playing for Brazil against Cameroon last month.

Neymar had earlier put PSG in front but the reigning champions ended up seeing their perfect domestic record this season come to an end after 14 straight wins. "With 'Ney' it is almost the same thing but not too serious," coach Thomas Tuchel said. "He can't play against Strasbourg but after that it is the same as after the international break — he rested against Toulouse but played against Liverpool."

Neymar has scored 15 goals this season and his performance in last week's Champions League win over Liverpool was one of his best since moving to Paris from Barcelona last year. Without him Edinson Cavani will hope to return to the starting line-up after being left on the bench in Bordeaux, as PSG seek revenge for a 2-1 defeat at Strasbourg last season.

After tomorrow's match against a Strasbourg side who ended the weekend in eighth place, PSG will have a free weekend before their crucial Champions League trip to Red Star Belgrade. They had been due to host Montpellier on Saturday, but that game has been postponed following a request from Paris police, probably due to concerns about a repeat of last weekend's violence in the French capital amid demonstrations against planned fuel tax increases.

PSG need to win in Belgrade to be certain of qualifying for the last 16 of the Champions League for the seventh straight season, but Tuchel said he was unsure if the postponement would help his side. "Honestly I don't know if it's good or not. I am not thinking too much about it, but for me it is absolutely clear, security has to come first," said the German, who will also be without Lassana Diarra in Strasbourg due to a knee problem.



Neymar came off early in the second half in Sunday's 2-2 draw at Bordeaux after hurting the same groin he injured playing for Brazil against Cameroon last month. (Reuters)

"It is a new situation for us but one that we need to deal with. That is our challenge now, to find a good training plan to get us ready for Belgrade." PSG's dominance is such that they are already 14 points clear at the top of the table from Montpellier, who host fourth-placed Lille.

Third-placed Lyon are at home to Rennes today aiming to extend a nine-

game unbeaten run in all competitions that included a rousing performance in drawing with Manchester City in the Champions League last midweek.

Rennes come into the match in turmoil after suspending coach Sabri Lamouchi on Monday in the wake of a 4-1 home defeat against Strasbourg. The move means the former France midfielder will almost certainly not

return, and reserve team coach Julian Stephan will take interim charge.

With just one win in nine games since the appointment of Thierry Henry as coach, relegation-threatened Monaco are at Amiens. The principal side are without as many as 14 players due to injuries and suspensions. "I have never in my career seen half a squad out injured. It is unusual

and it complicates things for us," said goalkeeper Diego Benaglio.

FIXTURES (KICK-OFFS 1800GMT UNLESS STATED):

Bordeaux v Saint-Etienne, Caen v Nimes, Dijon v Guingamp, Lyon v Rennes, Nantes v Marseille, Reims v Toulouse, Strasbourg v PSG (2000)

Klopp fined for running onto pitch in derby

Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp was fined 8,000 pounds yesterday for running onto the field of play after Divock Origi scored a 96th-minute winner in the weekend's Merseyside derby against Everton at Anfield. The German had admitted a charge of improper conduct and accepted the standard penalty after his wild celebration on Sunday. "I couldn't avoid it obviously... if there was no rule we as managers would do it every week. That's what rules are for and if you break rules you have to be fined for it," he told reporters. "I don't think anyone thought it was massively wrong. It happened, a fine, I'll pay it, no problem." Klopp said his forward Sadio Mane faced a late fitness test to be in contention for today's trip to Burnley after sustaining a foot injury.

Suarez close to recovery, says Barca boss Valverde

Ernesto Valverde is optimistic Luis Suarez will be fit to face Espanyol on Saturday, three days before Barcelona take on Tottenham in the Champions League. Suarez has been out with a knee injury since Barca's draw with Atletico Madrid on November 24, but the Uruguayan could be available for this weekend's Catalan derby in La Liga. Barcelona then host Spurs in their last Champions League group game but as Valverde's team have already qualified top of Group B, meaning Suarez may still be rested. "We are optimistic for the game against Espanyol," said Barca coach Valverde ahead of match against Cultural Leonesa in the second leg of the Copa del Rey's round of 32. Barca hold a 1-0 advantage over Leonesa going into the match at the Camp Nou.

Vichai's death a sad end to Leicester fairytale: Ranieri

Claudio Ranieri said the Leicester fairytale which he played such a pivotal role in came to an end with the death of Thai owner Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha in a helicopter crash in October. Ranieri is preparing to welcome Leicester to bottom club Fulham today, the first time the amiable 67-year-old Italian pits his wits against the club he guided to the title in 2016 but was sacked from in February 2017. Vichai died with four other people when the helicopter they were travelling in crashed near the stadium shortly after taking off. Ranieri — who was out of work at the time — travelled from Italy to pay his respects at a shrine set up outside the ground.

River Plate confirm Madrid trip for Libertadores final

The River Plate team will leave for Spain today to play the second leg of the highly controversial Libertadores Cup final, the club announced. In a statement, the Argentinian club said the team would leave for Spain in a charter flight from Ezeiza airport. River Plate had earlier said it was opposed to moving Sunday's match against fierce local rivals Boca Juniors from Buenos Aires to the Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid. Coach Marcelo Gallardo had called it "absurd", adding that his side had lost home advantage. River should have hosted the match at their own El Monumental stadium on November 24 but it was postponed after River Plate fans attacked the Boca Juniors team bus.

Man City \$5mn winners from World Cup hand-out

English champions Manchester City are the biggest beneficiaries from the \$209mn handed out by FIFA to clubs who released players for the 2018 World Cup, the global body said. City will receive \$5mn, ahead of Real Madrid (\$4.81mn), Tottenham Hotspur (\$4.38mn), Barcelona (\$4.14mn) and Paris St Germain (\$3.89 mn), FIFA said. They are followed by Chelsea, Manchester United, Atletico Madrid, Juventus and AS Monaco. In all, English clubs — including those from the lower tiers — will receive \$37.41mn between them while Spanish clubs will receive \$22.56mn, German clubs \$18.92mn and Italian clubs \$17.45mn. Overall, 416 clubs from 63 countries will receive payments.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Mourinho admits top four by end of year is improbable



AFP
Manchester, United Kingdom

Jose Mourinho has acknowledged Manchester United are unlikely to meet his target of climbing into the Premier League's top four by the end of 2018. However, the United manager has played down comments he made to Brazilian television suggesting that it would be a "miracle" if his team finished in the Champions League qualification places at the end of the season.

Mourinho set his players the challenge of reaching the top four by the end of December when they returned from the November international break to begin a run of eight league fixtures in the run-up to the New Year.

However, successive draws against Crystal Palace and Southampton, in which United produced below-par performances, has seen them slip to seventh and forced the manager to reassess that target. Mourinho, though, is adamant he still sees a top-four finish in May as realistic, despite not denying the comments he made to a Brazilian television interviewer after Saturday's 2-2 draw at Southampton.

"I don't know if I said it or if I didn't but if I

used that word, it is not what I feel at all," said Mourinho at his press conference on the eve of their match with in-form Arsenal.

"We are eight or nine points from fourth, something like that. I don't think we need a miracle at all. We need a good run of results. We need to not waste points that we shouldn't waste."

Mourinho, who reportedly clashed again with French World Cup winning midfielder Paul Pogba after the 2-2 draw with Southampton, said if some players performed better they could stay in touch with the top four and then finish in the Champions League spots at the end of the campaign.

"Last week, before the Crystal Palace game, I said what my hopes and targets were, at the end of December, to be in that position," he said. "The target changed but let's try to close the distance as best as we can and be very close to these positions. We need some players to perform better than they are. We need to perform better as a team, but it would be far from a miracle."

United started the week eight points behind fourth-placed Arsenal, who are unbeaten in 19 league and cup games as they visit Old Trafford. Mourinho agrees that seventh place is not good enough for a club of United's stature.

Mourinho agreed it was unacceptable to be

below Everton in the standings. "I can agree, in spite of the fact that the investment Everton made was phenomenal and obviously there was a great improvement in that team from last season in relation to this," he said.

"But I don't think Everton will be in front of Manchester United at the end of the season. There are six teams that should stay in the first six positions, season after season two of these teams are finishing outside the top four. For example, last season it was Arsenal and Chelsea. And this season two of these six are going to stay outside."

Mourinho suggested Arsenal's good league form may have been aided by manager Unai Emery resting a number of his senior players for their Europa League matches. "It will be a very difficult match for us because we are going to play against a good team in a good moment without having faced a backlog of matches because they are playing in the Europa League," said Mourinho. "When you play in the Europa League, you normally play with second choices and give good rest to the players."

Midfielder Ashley Young is suspended for the game while defenders Luke Shaw, Eric Bailly, Chris Smalling and Phil Jones are doubtful with injury problems.

SERIE A

Super sub Milik lifts Napoli with Atalanta victory

AFP
Milan

Arkadiusz Milik came off the bench to snatch a late 2-1 win for Napoli over Atalanta on Monday night that consolidated second place in Serie A and reduced the gap on leaders Juventus to eight points.

Polish forward Milik scored the winner five minutes from time shortly after coming on after Fabian Ruiz had put the visitors ahead just two minutes into the clash in Bergamo and former Napoli man Duvan Zapata had pulled Atalanta level 11 minutes after the break.

Napoli close the gap on Juventus, who pulled 11 points clear with a 3-0 win at Fiorentina on Saturday. Carlo Ancelotti's

side came out firing on all cylinders after their title hopes took a serious hit with a goalless draw against bottom club Chievo last weekend. The coach stuck with the same starting line-up that beat Red Star Belgrade 3-1 in the Champions League midweek. Captain Marek Hamsik started the move that led to the opener with just a minute on the clock, passing to Lorenzo Insigne who crossed for Spaniard Ruiz to tap in his third goal since joining Napoli from Real Betis.

Insigne was ruled offside early as his volley rattled the bar with a lob shortly after the Italian international forward shot wide as he slipped. Zapata tested Napoli goalkeeper David Ospina in the first half with defender Raul Albiol also clearing off the Colombian after the break.

But the former Napoli forward broke



Napoli's Arkadiusz Milik celebrates after scoring against Atalanta. (Reuters)

though on 56 minutes when Hans Hateboer headed the ball down and he blasted in from close range. Milik came on for Dries Mertens after 81 minutes and four

minutes later picked up a Mario Rui cross to fire in the winner for his fifth goal this season. And the Polish striker said the win gave his side confidence ahead of next week's decisive Champions League clash against Liverpool at Anfield. "Before the Champions League, we have another tough Serie A game against Frosinone. Of course we want to beat Liverpool, we know it won't be easy, but we believe in ourselves," said Milik.

Napoli move three points ahead of Inter Milan, who played out an entertaining 2-2 draw against Roma. Atalanta are in 11th position after their second consecutive defeat. Luciano Spalletti's Inter travel to Turin next Friday to face Juventus in the hope of derailing their bitter rivals' title procession, with Napoli hosting second from bottom Frosinone on Saturday.

BANANA-THROWING SPURS FAN WILL NOT FACE RACISM CHARGE

London: The Tottenham Hotspur fan who threw a banana skin onto the pitch at the Emirates Stadium as Arsenal forward Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang celebrated scoring a penalty in front of Tottenham fans will not be charged with a racist offence. A 57-year-old grandfather — will face a charge of throwing a missile after police judged it not to be a racially aggravated offence. Pantelli — who says he will plead guilty to the charge when he is in court on December 18 — has also been informed by Tottenham he will be banned from their games for life. "The police were happy to say it was not racism," he told

The Sun. "I phoned Tottenham to apologise and they said they would be getting in touch with me to ban me for life."

Pantelli, who says his only previous brush with the authorities was when he ran onto the Spurs pitch aged 14 and was ejected from the stadium, said he had been lured by Aubameyang celebrating in front of the Tottenham fans. The Gabonese star's spot-kick gave Arsenal an early lead and the Gunners eventually ran out 4-2 winners. "I am not racist whatsoever," said Pantelli. "I am actually a Greek Cypriot. I am 100% not a racist. I swear on my kids' lives that I am not that kind of guy."

FOCUS

AFC Asian Cup trophy tour makes stop in Doha

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The AFC Asian Cup trophy tour made a stop in Doha yesterday. The glittering trophy was on public display at the Al Bidda Tower, the headquarters of the Qatar Football Association, with fans getting an opportunity to have a closer look at the trophy.

The 17th edition of the Asian Cup will be held in the UAE from the January 5 to February 1. Qatar is in Group E along with Lebanon, North Korea and Saudi Arabia. The trophy began its tour in Hong Kong, then arrived in Doha, and from here it will fly to Japan, Australia and several other Asian countries.

The AFC Asian Cup is the oldest, largest and most prestigious football event in Asia, and the Trophy is one of the most coveted trophies in world sport. It has international stature and significance. The Trophy is almost 50 years in age after Korea Republic won the inaugural AFC Asian Cup in Hong Kong in 1956.

Vice-president of Qatar and Asian Football Confederation Saud al-Mohannadi, Qatar Stars League CEO Hani Ballan, Secretary General of the QFA Mansour al-Ansari, Marketing Manager Khalid al-Kuwari and other officials received the trophy at Al Bidda Tower. Later the trophy was also displayed at Souq Wa-



qif, Katara and the Museum of Islamic Art. Saud al-Mohannadi said the Asian Cup is the most important and most exciting championship in the continent. He believes Qatar have a good chance to lift the trophy but played down the significance of the team's good run in the recent friendly matches.

"Qatar were at good level in the friendly matches and I wish the success in the Asian Cup. But we must keep in mind that the results in friendly matches are different from the official matches. We are undoubtedly in a difficult group but it won't be an impossible task for Qatar. Our team has good qualities and will be able to pose a tough challenge," al-Mohannadi said.

The expanded Asian Cup will see 24 teams vying for honours



Vice-president of Qatar and Asian Football Confederation Saud al-Mohannadi, Qatar Stars League CEO Hani Ballan, Secretary General of QFA Mansour al-Ansari, Marketing Manager Khalid al-Kuwari and other officials pose with the AFC Asian Cup trophy at Al Bidda Tower yesterday.

and al-Mohannadi said the presence of eight additional teams in the tournament will garner ex-

citement. "The increase in teams reflects the development of the tournament, while at the same

time giving the opportunity to those teams that have not qualified to play with the strongest

teams in the continent. The presence of eight new teams in the tournament may increase excite-

ment, especially if these teams succeed in winning against top teams," he added.

WORLD'S BEST

Modric, from Croatian war child to Ballon d'Or winner

Modric's grandfather was killed by Serb forces, the house was burned and the family had to flee to Zadar

AFP
Modrici, Croatia

Luka Modric's journey from Croatian war child to the world's best footballer was celebrated on Monday night when the Real Madrid midfielder hoisted the Ballon d'Or. A national hero in his home country and crowned the best player on the planet, Modric was rewarded for his key role in Croatia's historic run to the World Cup final and his club Real Madrid's third straight Champions League trophy.

"It's a unique feeling. I'm happy, proud and honoured," said Modric, who also won the FIFA Player of the Year award in September.

The star-studded Paris ceremony could hardly be further removed from Modric's early years as a child refugee, fleeing the burned-out shell of a remote Croatian cottage where he spent part of his childhood.

Hidden in the folds of Velebit mountain, with the nearest neighbours several kilometres away, trees now grow inside the roofless ruin and a sign warns of "Mines - Keep out!" The player's grandfather, also named Luka, lived in the house, lying on a mountain road winding through the Modrici hamlet.

His grandfather was killed by Serb forces, the house was burned and the family fled to the coastal town of Zadar, some 40 kilometres (19 miles) away. It was there that Modric, born in 1985, began his footballing odyssey, drawing attention for the first time to his budding abilities.

"I heard about a little hyperactive boy constantly playing with a football in the corridor of a refugee hotel, even going to sleep with it," said Josip Bajlo, who was

then coach at the First Division club NK Zadar. As soon as Bajlo saw Modric play he signed him up for the club's football school, where he immediately stood out. "He was an idol to his generation, a leader, a favourite," Bajlo said earlier this year.

The 1991-1995 war with Serb rebels, during which Zadar and the surrounding region were heavily shelled, toughened Modric, according to those close to him. "It happened a million times that we were going to training as the shells were falling, and we were running to shelters," said childhood friend Marijan Buljat, who trained and played with Modric while growing up.

Modric left Zadar, where he remains a legend, for Dinamo Zagreb in 2000 and then joined English Premier League club Tottenham Hotspur in 2008. After a bidding war he was snapped up by Real Madrid in 2012.

But his popularity in Croatia and his image as a modest family man was tarnished by his testimony last year during the multi-million-euro corruption trial of former Dinamo Zagreb chief Zdravko Mamic. Modric's testimony supported Mamic's case against allegations of corruption, angering many fans who saw the trial as a chance to clean up the corruption-ridden sport.

Prosecutors eventually charged Modric in March for giving false evidence, but dropped the case on Monday due to a lack of evidence. Any lingering anger against Modric had evaporated long ago, however, after he brilliantly inspired Croatia to their first World Cup final last summer.

Despite the 4-2 defeat by France, more than 500,000 people gave captain Modric and his team a heroic welcome on their return to Zagreb.



Real Madrid's Luka Modric poses with his wife and kids after winning the Ballon d'Or award in Paris on Monday night. (Reuters)

FOCUS

Modric sees off French stars to end Messi, Ronaldo reign

AFP
Paris

Luka Modric saw off competition from a host of French World Cup stars as the Real Madrid and Croatia midfielder won the 2018 Ballon d'Or on Monday, ending the 10-year stranglehold on the award by Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. Modric, 33, was announced as the winner of the prestigious prize in a glitzy ceremony held in Paris.

Ronaldo was second, with France and Atletico Madrid striker Antoine Griezmann completing the podium. Paris Saint-Germain's teenage forward Kylian Mbappe came fourth, leaving Messi to settle for fifth position. Another Frenchman, Modric's Madrid teammate Raphael Varane, was seventh, just behind Liverpool's Egyptian forward Mohamed Salah. "As a kid we all have dreams. My dream was to play for a big club and win important trophies," Modric said. "The Ballon d'Or was more than just a dream for me and it is really an honour and a privilege to hold this trophy."

Mbappe, who does not turn 20 until later this month, picked up the consolation prize of the Kopa Trophy for the best young player. The gala ceremony also saw a women's Ballon d'Or named for the first time, with Lyon's prolific Norwegian striker Ada Hegerberg taking that award.

Modric - the oldest winner since Italy's Fabio Cannavaro, also 33, in 2006 - was crowned after an outstanding year in which he starred in the Real side that retained the Champions League before heroically helping drag his country to the final of the World Cup for the first time in their history. Croatia lost 4-2 to France in Moscow in the final in July.



Kylian Mbappe, who picked up the Kopa Trophy for the best young player, poses with his brother Ethan. (AFP)

BOTTOMLINE

'Twerk' request doesn't overshadow historic Ballon d'Or: Hegerberg

AFP
Paris

Norwegian striker Ada Hegerberg said the introduction of a women's Ballon d'Or was a "big step forward" for the game, playing down suggestions her historic victory was overshadowed after being asked to perform a "twerk" live on stage.

The Lyon star - whose prolific form in front of goal helped the French club secure a third successive Champions League victory - edged out Danish forward Pernille Harder to claim the inaugural prize at a ceremony in Paris on Monday.

But the 23-year-old was asked if she would perform a sexually provocative dance by French host DJ, Martin Solveig, and appeared embarrassed as she rejected the request. Hegerberg later said: "He



came to see me after and apologised. The Ballon d'Or is the most important thing."

"I am touched and very proud, for women's football, for myself, for the club. I share this with

Olympique Lyonnais, my teammates, the staff," she beamed after joining men's winner Luka Modric and men's best young player Kylian Mbappe on the stage with her trophy. "It's historic, it's incredible, a great day for women's football and a big step forward."

Hegerberg, one of seven players from the all-conquering Lyon side to feature among the 15 nominees, dismissed suggestions that the night was marred by the "twerk" request. "I didn't feel it was like that at all to be honest and I am sad if people thought about the situation like that."

Solveig later tweeted an apology, saying Hegerberg "told me she understood it was a joke. Nevertheless my apologies to anyone who may have been offended. People who have followed me for 20 years know how respectful I am especially with women."

Hegerberg was Lyon's top scorer with 15 goals

in the Champion's League - including one in the final in Kiev in May, as Lyon came from behind to beat VfL Wolfsburg 4-1 after extra time and retain the trophy. Harder had put the Germans in front in that game.

Lyon also won the French title for the 12th season in succession, with Hegerberg top-scoring with 31 goals, and she continues to bang in the goals for her team who are top of the table again this season.

Her goal-scoring exploits have led to comparisons with five-time Ballon d'Or winners Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, and she felt that had made the difference for her compared to her Lyon colleagues.

"I think the fact I scored 54 goals last season and 53 goals this year - it's a lot of goals in one year," she said. "I know it's difficult to score 50 goals every season. It is a challenge. That is where I set the bar."