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# GULF TIMES SPORT



**CRICKET**  
**Guptill shines as New Zealand hand Pakistan 2nd ODI loss**  
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**FOOTBALL**

# Almoez strikes in Qatar's winning start over Uzbeks

The Al Duhail forward's goal leaves Qatar second in Group A behind table-topping China who beat Oman 3-0



**Qatar's Almoez Ali celebrates his goal against Uzbekistan in Changzhou, China, yesterday.**

Qatar responded well however, with dynamic captain Ahmad Moein, a member of the squad when his country finished fourth at the tournament's last edition in 2016, fizzing a shot narrowly wide shortly after the half hour mark.

With Qatar clearly growing in confidence, midfielder Salem al-Hajri then rattled the Uzbekistan bar with a rasping drive from distance as the opening period came to an entertaining close.

Urinboev headed just wide of the target from a pinpoint Javokhir Sidikov free-kick shortly after the restart, before Qatar took the lead on 55 minutes in stunning fashion.

A swift move down the right saw the impressive Hashim Ali break into the box and deliver a delightful cross that the advancing Almoez rifled into the net past the despairing dive of Uzbekistan goalkeeper Dilshod Khamraev.

As Uzbekistan desperately pushed for an equaliser, successive Qatari counter-attacks saw Khamraev deny both Hisham and, in the game's dying embers, substitute Khaled Mohammed.

"It was always going to be a difficult game against Uzbekistan as we know they are tough opponents," said Qatar coach Felix Sanchez.

"I think the team did a very good job today and that they performed well in every department. I feel that one of the great strengths of this group of players is that they work very hard. They have a great spirit."

Uzbekistan coach Ravshan Khaydarov admitted the defeat left his team with a mountain to climb.

"It was a very tough game for us today, and I feel that some of my players were not able to perform to their best ability," said Khaydarov.

"The result now leaves us in a rather difficult position in what is a very difficult group. We made too many mistakes and we must go away and see where and how we made those errors."

Qatar's next outing comes on Friday when they face Oman, while Uzbekistan will tackle host nation China.

Meanwhile, host nation China PR began campaign in fine fashion yesterday thanks to a comfortable 3-0 win over Oman at the Changzhou Olympic



**Qatar players celebrate their win. At bottom, coach Sanchez reacts during the match.**



Sports Center. Goals from Yang Liyu, Li Xiaoming and Wei Shihao proved the difference on a bitterly cold afternoon, as China laid down an impressive early marker in a group which saw Qatar beat Uzbekistan 1-0 in their opening tie.

In what would prove to be an entertaining opening period, it was China who threatened first, Yang seeing his shot from 12 yards smothered by the visiting defence, and Beijing Guoan forward Wei forcing a smart save from Oman goalkeeper Ibrahim al-Mukhaini with 18 minutes gone.

With China in the ascendancy, Oman's defence was to be breached twice in quick succession, as first Yang expertly converted Li Shuai's pinpoint delivery on the half hour mark, and then Li Xiaoming headed home Wei's superb floated cross to double his side's

advantage just four minutes later. To their credit, Oman rallied briefly after the break, but the game was effectively ended as a contest in the 53rd minute when the impressive Wei powered home a header after being found by Yao Junsheng.

Omani defender Thani al-Rushaidi saw a close-range effort scrambled off the line by Gao Zhunyi shortly after, before Wei was stretched off in the 66th minute following a hefty challenge much to the consternation of China head coach Massimiliano Mardaloni.

In the game's last meaningful action, substitute Liu Ruofan was expertly denied by al-Mukhaini on a day when China took a significant step towards reaching the knockout phase of the AFC U23 Championship for the first time.

**AFC**  
 Changzhou

**A**lmoez Ali's second half strike proved the difference as Qatar recorded a narrow 1-0 win over Uzbekistan in their AFC U23 Championship 2018 opener at the Changzhou Olympic Sports Center yesterday.

The Al Duhail forward's goal leaves Qatar second in Group A behind table-topping China PR who beat Oman 3-0 in the day's earlier game.

In a closely fought first half, it was Uzbekistan who dominated the early proceedings, Zabikhillo Urinboev firing inches over following a neat interchange of passes with Dostonbek Khamdamov on the edge of the area after 14 minutes.

**DAKAR RALLY**

# Loeb upstages al-Attiyah to win fourth stage

**Agencies**  
 San Juan de Marcona, Peru

**S**ebastien Loeb saw off Peugeot teammate Carlos Sainz to win the fourth stage of the 2018 Dakar Rally, as yesterday timed test proved treacherous for several frontrunners in the car class.

Nine-time WRC champion Loeb was fourth heading into yesterday's stage and had admitted he lacked experience with the type of terrain prevalent in the opening Peruvian leg of this year's Dakar.

Yet the Frenchman followed up his comments by topping the 330km timed special - the longest test of the rally so far - around Peru's San Juan de Marcona, as



**Peugeot's French driver Sebastien Loeb and co-driver Daniel Elena compete in the Dakar Rally yesterday.**

he recorded his 10th career Dakar stage win.

Loeb led for most of the stage, briefly dropping behind reigning champion Stephane Peterhansel only to reclaim first place during the final stretch.

He ended the day 1m35s quicker than nearest rival Carlos Sainz, with Peterhansel making up an all-Peugeot top three as he finished three minutes off the pace.

This was enough for the 13-time Dakar champion to end yesterday seven and 13 minutes ahead of Loeb and Sainz respectively in the general classification.

Having escaped any major dramas, the trio have had their Dakar 2018 hopes boosted significantly by another day of high attrition.

Fellow Peugeot driver Cyril Despres, who was runner-up head-

ing into the day, was the big name to drop out of contention during stage four.

The Frenchman, a five-time Dakar winner in the bike class, was halted by suspension damage on his 3008DKR Maxi and was left waiting for assistance just over the halfway point of the test.

Several kilometres further into the route, Monday stage winner Nasser al-Attiyah's stoppage was marginally less disastrous as he finished ninth on the stage and is now fourth overall.

The Qatari soon resumed the rally in his Toyota Hilux but struggled to maintain pace and went on to complete the test 54 minutes down on Loeb.

He is now almost an hour down on rally leader Peterhansel in the overall classification.

In the motorcycle category, reigning champion Sam Sunderland has dropped out of this year's race with a back injury, allowing Frenchman Adrien Van Beveren to take the overall lead after winning the fourth stage.

Sunderland, riding for dominant team KTM and leading the overall rankings coming into yesterday's stage in San Juan de Marcona, withdrew after injuring his back while entering a jump according to the rally organisers.

Van Beveren finished five minutes ahead of teammate Xavier de Soultrait and seven minutes in front of the Austrian KTM rider Matthias Walkner.

The Yamaha rider takes the lead in the overall standings, 1 minute 55 seconds ahead of Chilean Pablo Quintanilla (Husqvarna).



## OPINION

# Australia's bowling riches can deliver an Ashes win in England

The pace trio of Starc, Hazlewood and Cummins, supported by spinner Lyon, are a rare gift for captain Smith

By Jason Gillespie  
The Guardian

Keep the bowling attack fit and healthy over the next 18 months and there is no reason why Australia cannot break a drought that stretches back to 2001 and win the next Ashes series in England.

In fact it looks there for the taking if they do. Right now Steve Smith is a blessed Test captain who possesses an envious blend of bowlers in Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood, Pat Cummins and Nathan Lyon.

Never before have a side had only four wicket-takers over the course of a five-match series but it is easy to see how it occurred. Through Starc's left-arm angle and fuller length, Hazlewood's relentless accuracy and heavy ball, the ability of Cummins to switch from mid-80s workhorse to 90mph shock bowler and Lyon both tying up an end and yet still attacking in the process, pretty much every base is covered.

When people ask about the greatest Australia attack, it is hard to look beyond any of those that included Glenn McGrath and Shane Warne.

But while statistically McGrath and myself are the most prolific Australia fast-bowling pairing in history, sharing 484 wickets from the 58 Tests together, I have maintained for some time that Starc and Hazlewood will go beyond us.

Add Cummins in there and that is three potential all-time great fast bowlers in the same side and we are just scratching the surface with him too, following a first home summer in which he has ended up the leading wicket-taker on either side.

It is a truly heartening story after battling back from setback after setback since his debut in 2011. The body has adapted and the mental toughness has shone through. Here's to a long and fulfilling career from now.

Smith described winning the Ashes away from home as being on his bucket list and with these three seamers it can be achieved, especially if Starc and Hazlewood remember the right lengths

from their past tours. That said, to level up some of this Australian optimism it must be noted there remains a challenge for the batting lineup when it comes to conditions. The two wins in the last away Ashes tour came on the flattest pitches, at Lord's and The Oval.

It is here where Australia's selectors must back the bulk of the current side during the intervening time and not chop and change too much. In the recent past there has been a bit too much overthinking in Test cricket played away from home. This has mainly manifested itself on the subcontinent but there is a danger that past records in England could be factored in.

Batsmen, in my opinion, need to be afforded the chance to learn from failings on foreign pitches. Ricky Ponting averaged 18 after his first two tours of India before going on to become a fine player in those conditions and yet Usman Khawaja has seen early struggles in that part of the world result in little patience. Will three under-par Tests in England in 2013 count against him? You would hope not. The same goes for the Marsh brothers too.

The makeup of the England bowling attack Australia will face remains a great uncertainty. My suspicion is Jimmy Anderson and Stuart Broad will still be around, although much of this will hinge on their desire to keep going. And out of the two, it is strange to see Broad, the younger man by four years, look the more vulnerable.

Broad has not fully fired for a year and 11 wickets over the course of the Ashes, including five in one Test when the urn was gone, is slim pickings for a player of his pedigree. England will probably find themselves hoping for a renaissance from him, because there appears to be a dearth of seamers applying unanswerable pressure on these two at a time when it is needed most.

Can Craig Overton and Tom Curran find a bit more in themselves, now they have tasted Test cricket? Will the bodies of Mark Wood, Liam Plunkett and Toby Roland-Jones allow them to push for a place in 18 months' time? And what on earth happened to Jake Ball on



From left: Australian bowlers Josh Hazlewood, Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Starc and Pat Cummins pose with the Ashes trophy after a dominant series win over England at the Sydney Cricket Ground on Monday. (AFP)

this tour? He was the big hope during the warmup matches but disappeared after Brisbane. Chris Woakes will undoubtedly be a threat at home but Eng-

land need more from the chasing pack. Two seamers being talked up are George Garton and Jofra Archer and I am looking forward to working with

them in my new role as the Sussex coach. The former is only 20 and the latter, whose pace has caught the eye, is just over three years from qualifying

to play for England. As with any player, I will do my best to try to help them achieve their dreams. (The writer is a former Australian fast bowler)

## FOCUS

## Bayliss to stand down as England head coach at end of 2019 Ashes

By Ali Martin in Sydney  
The Guardian

Trevor Bayliss intends to stand down as England head coach at the end of the World Cup and Ashes home summer in 2019, but has said he will still look to lay the foundations for their next tour of Australia in four years' time alongside captain Joe Root. Speaking after the 4-0 Ashes defeat, Bayliss revealed he has already told Andrew Strauss, the director of England cricket who hired the Australian back in May 2015, that he will not be renewing his contract when it expires in 18 months time.

"I've never been anywhere more than four or five years," said Bayliss. "Whether you're going well or not, I have always felt that it's time for a change around about that four-year mark - a new voice, a different approach reinvigorates things."

Bayliss was hired with the intention of reviving England's fortunes in white-ball cricket ahead of the home World Cup in 2019 and has overseen a dramatic improvement in this regard. Test results have been up and down, however, and his record now sits at 14 wins and 18 defeats. The past two winters have also included heavy defeats at the hands of India and Australia.

There is clearly no intention to change the coaching set-up as things stand, with Colin Graves, the chairman of the England and Wales Cricket, having now echoed the recent sentiment of chief executive Tom Harrison in stating that Bayliss is secure despite the Ashes defeat.

It will therefore leave the next head coach just over two years to plan for the Ashes series in Australia in 2021-22. Asked how he can work towards a tour he personally won't oversee, Bayliss replied: "Root will still be there as captain and there's a base of six or seven players that will still be young and good enough to be in the team."

"The captain is in charge - we're there to help out. You leave a coaching position hopefully with the team in a better place than when you started. I've got no problem working towards a long-term goal, even if I'm not going to be there."

The virus that saw Root hospitalised on the final morning of the series, before briefly emerging to bat for an hour during the final rites of the innings and 123-run defeat, has seen the selection of England's Test squad



Head coach Trevor Bayliss (left) has backed captain Joe Root to lead England in the 2021-22 Ashes series in Australia. (AFP)

for the New Zealand tour in March delayed.

James Vince and Mark Stoneman, who averaged in the mid-20s and made just two half-centuries apiece, appear the players most under pressure, but are expected to make the cut. Bayliss believes they have the games to succeed and is keen to give the pair at least two more matches to show they can cut it at Test level.

He added: "I can't see any big changes. We've known for a couple of years that we have been three or four performing players short of a very, very good team. We've had some good performances at home in Test cricket, but that has been on the back of our big five or six players."

"Dawid Malan has probably cemented one of the spots we were after. Vince and Stoneman have shown what they are capable of, but will be disappointed that they weren't able to capitalise on their good play. They do deserve a bit more of a chance."

"They were playing against one of the best attacks in the world in their home conditions. They showed people how they can play, the potential they have. They are aware that it's about performance and scoring enough runs. If over a period of time that doesn't happen and you have to look for someone else, that is the way of the game. Hopefully they can learn from it and become even better players."

## SPOTLIGHT

## Ponting named Australia assistant coach for T20s

AFP  
Sydney

Ricky Ponting will be an assistant coach during Australia's Twenty20 international series against England and New Zealand next month, Cricket Australia said yesterday. The former Australia captain will work under head coach Darren Lehmann, while Troy Cooley and Matthew Mott will help out during the series.

They have been brought on board while regular support staff Graeme Hick, David Saker and Brad Haddin are in South Africa to assist in preparations for Australia's four-Test tour from March. Lehmann has previously said he will not seek to renew his contract when his current deal expires at the end of 2019, with Ponting seen as a potential successor.

Ponting undertook the T20 role last year when he worked with the Australia squad for the three-match series against Sri Lanka. He has extensive experience of the shortest form of the game, captaining his country in the first ever T20 international against New Zealand in 2005, and then leading the side in the first two editions of the ICC World Twenty20 in 2007 and 2009.

"I loved working with the squad last year against Sri Lanka and I can't wait to be working alongside Darren, Troy and Matthew this time around," Ponting said. "Watching the Big Bash League in my role as a commentator has shown me we have a wealth of talent available to us in this format and a tri-series like this will give us a great chance to establish a



pattern of play that works best for the players."

The T20 series will involve matches against New Zealand in Sydney (February 3) and Auckland (February 16) and England in Hobart (February 7) and Melbourne (February 10).

## India's Yusuf Pathan suspended for failed dope test

**New Delhi:** Indian cricket board yesterday suspended former international all-rounder Yusuf Pathan for five months for taking a banned stimulant. The ban on the 35-year-old, who last represented India in 2012, was backdated so that it ends on January 14.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India said the explosive batsman was routinely tested during domestic Twenty20 competition last year

and a sample showed traces of Terbutaline. But the board said it was satisfied with Pathan's explanation that the substance entered his body through medication while taking a cough syrup and "not as a performance-enhancing drug".

Pathan, who also bowls off-spin, played 57 one-day internationals and 22 T20 games for India and has been an Indian Premier League regular. In 2014 he hit the IPL's fastest

50 off just 15 balls. He is only the second Indian cricketer to fail a dope test.

In 2013 Delhi left-arm pacer Pradeep Sangwan was banned for 18 months. The BCCI strongly opposes tests by India's National Anti-Doping Agency.

It insists that as a member of the International Cricket Council - a signatory to the World Anti-Doping Agency - it already has strict anti-doping rules.

SECOND ODI

# Guptill bludgeons New Zealand to win over Pak

Guptill made 86 not out off 71 deliveries while Taylor remained unbeaten 45 from 43 balls

AFP  
Nelson, New Zealand

**M**artin Guptill was at his belligerent best as New Zealand thrashed Pakistan by eight wickets in Nelson yesterday, although captain Kane Williamson admitted a rain delay had done the hosts a favour.

The second one-day international was evenly poised when rain forced the players from the field for more than two hours with New Zealand 64 for two after 14 overs in reply to Pakistan's 246 for nine. When play resumed under the Duckworth-Lewis system New Zealand's target was revised to 151 in 25 overs meaning they had 11 overs left to make 87.

"Pakistan showed some real resistance at the end and put some partnerships together which would have been a tricky total on that surface," Williamson said, adding the rain break "worked in our favour a little bit".

But the New Zealand skipper also hailed the "brilliant" partnership involving Guptill and Ross Taylor to get New Zealand home with seven balls to spare. Guptill, 31 off 40 at the break, was 86 not out off 71 deliveries at the end. Taylor advanced from 14 in as many balls to 45 off 43.

"For Martin and Ross to come out after that rain break... and play so beautifully and to see Martin play with freedom at his best was great to watch," Williamson said. "And (with) Ross a calming influence at the other end it was a brilliant partnership to get us across the line."

It left Pakistan winless after two rain-affected matches in New Zealand with both decided under the Duckworth-Lewis method. "We are very disappointed with our batting," said captain Sarfraz Ahmed. "The first 10 overs is very important and we lost too many wickets in the first 10 overs. "Our batting is not performing well but later on our lower order batted really well."

After Pakistan won the toss and elected to bat Mohammad Hafeez (60) held the first half of the innings together as Pakistan struggled to 141 for seven in the 37th over before Shadab Khan (52) and Hasan Ali (51) struck out with a 70-run partnership for the eighth wicket.

Pakistan still harboured hopes of levelling the series when they made early inroads into the New Zealand innings claiming Colin Munro for duck and Williamson for 19 to have New Zealand



New Zealand's Martin Guptill plays a shot en route to an unbeaten 86 in the second ODI against Pakistan at Saxton Oval in Nelson, New Zealand, yesterday. (AFP)

at 47 for two in the 10th over.

However, the momentum changed when Taylor joined Guptill in the middle. New Zealand now lead the five-match series 2-0 ahead of game three in Dunedin on Saturday.

SCOREBOARD

PAKISTAN INNINGS

Azhar Ali lbw Southee 6  
Imam-ul-Haq c Munro b Boult 2  
Babar Azam c Taylor b Ferguson 10

Mohammad Hafeez c Guptill b Santner 60  
Shoaib Malik c Southee b Astle 27  
Sarfraz Ahmed st Latham b Astle 3  
Shadab Khan c Latham b Ferguson 52  
Faheem Ashraf c Southee b Ferguson 7  
Hasan Ali c Astle b Southee 51  
Mohammad Amir not out 8  
Rumman Raees not out 6  
Extras: (b1, w12, nb1) 14  
Total: (for 9 wickets; 50 overs) 246  
Fall of wickets: 1-5 (Imam-ul-Haq), 2-14 (Azhar Ali), 3-39 (Babar Azam), 4-84

(Shoaib Malik), 5-108 (Sarfraz Ahmed), 6-127 (Mohammad Hafeez), 7-141 (Faheem Ashraf), 8-211 (Hasan Ali), 9-239 (Shadab Khan)  
Bowling: Southee 10-1-57-2 (3w), Boult 10-0-54-1 (1nb), Santner 10-1-34-1, Ferguson 10-0-39-3 (4w), Astle 7-0-50-2 (1w), Munro 3-0-11-0  
NEW ZEALAND INNINGS (revised target 151 in 25 overs)  
M. Guptill not out 86  
C. Munro c Faheem b Amir 0

K. Williamson c Shadab Khan b Faheem 19  
R. Taylor not out 45  
Extras: (nb 1) 1  
Total: (for 2 wickets; 23.5 overs) 151  
Fall of wickets: 1-1 (Munro), 2-47 (Williamson)  
Bowling: Amir 5-1-18-1, Rumman Raees 4.5-0-37-0 (1nb), Faheem 5-0-30-1, Hasan 5-0-37-0, Shadab 4-0-29-0  
Toss: Pakistan  
Result: New Zealand won by eight wickets  
Five-match Series: New Zealand lead 2-0

SPOTLIGHT

## Sri Lanka's Mathews back as limited-overs captain

AFP  
Colombo

**S**ri Lanka yesterday announced Angelo Mathews would return as skipper for limited-overs cricket ahead of the 2019 World Cup, just six months after the all-rounder stepped down from the post. The move comes as a surprise after Mathews, 30, quit last July as captain in all three formats of the game following repeated bouts of injury. Sri Lanka Cricket president Thilanga Sumathipala said the board asked Mathews to reconsider following close consultations with new coach Chandika Hathurusingha and team selectors. Mathews said he took a few days to decide before accepting the captaincy of Sri Lanka's one-day and Twenty20 teams. "It is a national duty, and we need stability moving into a World Cup in 18 months," said Mathews.

Dinesh Chandimal remains Sri Lanka's Test captain. Sumathipala said Mathews was expected to prepare the squad ahead of the World Cup in England and Wales in 2019.

The returning captain will face his first test this month when Sri Lanka travel to Bangladesh for a tri-nation ODI tournament. The all-rounder bore the brunt of criticism after Sri Lanka's embarrassing loss to lowly-ranked Zimbabwe in a home Test series last year. Mathews at the time described the shock defeat to Zimbabwe as the lowest point in his career and a "hard pill to swallow".

**Sri Lanka's 16-member squad for the tri-nation series:** Angelo Mathews (captain), Upul Tharanga, Dhanushka Gunathilaka, Kusal Mendis, Dinesh Chandimal, Kusal Janith Perera, Thisara Perera, Asela Gunaratne, Niroshan Dickwella, Suranga Lakmal, Nuwan Pradeep, Dushmantha Chameera, Shehan Madushanka, Akila Dananjaya, Lakshan Sandakan and Wanidu Hasaranga.

SRI LANKA CRICKET CLEARED OF CORRUPTION, BOARD SAYS

Sri Lanka Cricket said yesterday the sport's global governing body had found no evidence of wrongdoing following allegations of match-fixing and other forms of corruption. The board said the interna-



tional Cricket Council had failed to uncover evidence of graft during an investigation into explosive accusations levelled by former Sri Lankan players.

SLC chief executive Ashley de Silva said ICC anti-corruption investigators visited the island in September and conducted a wide-ranging inquiry. "They do not put out statements after an inquiry, but if there is anything adverse, they would inform us. To date, they have not told us of anything (against Sri Lankan players or officials)," de Silva told reporters. There was no immediate comment from the ICC. The council's announcement in September that it had begun an inquiry followed corruption allegations by former skipper Arjuna Ranatunga and ex-player and national selector Pramodya Wickremasinghe.

SLC said its executive committee had directed players and staff to cooperate with the ICC's probe. Ranatunga, who captained the islanders during their 1996 World Cup win, has alleged that insider meddling cost Sri Lanka a repeat tournament crown during the 2011 final against India.

FOCUS

## Coach Gibson wants South Africa to continue pace barrage

AFP  
Cape Town

**I**f Ottis Gibson gets his way – and as coach and a selector he has a big say – South Africa will continue to challenge India with a four-pronged fast bowling attack in the two remaining Test matches. Reflecting on South Africa's 72-run win in the first Test at Newlands, Gibson said: "When you are playing at home you play to your strengths and at the moment we have some high-quality fast bowlers."

"I'm a very fast bowling-minded kind of coach," said former West Indies player Gibson, explaining why two fast bowlers, Duanne Olivier and Lungi Ngidi, had been added to an already big squad following a series-ending heel injury to Dale Steyn.

Even without Steyn, a pace attack of Vernon Philander, Morne Morkel and Kagiso Rabada sent India crashing to 135 all out in the second innings after they had been set a victory target of 208 at Newlands.

Gibson said the balance of the team depended on conditions but added that Centurion, where the second Test starts on Saturday, usually had pace and bounce, which would incline him towards four fast bowlers.

"If you want to beat the best team in the world, which India are, then maybe we have to do something slightly different to what we've done in the past," said Gibson. "We have to get stuck in and be tough with the bat and the ball. Get in their faces a bit, use our physicality in terms of our pace."

Asked how he intends to keep them all firing through the summer, Gibson explained that he is working on a national plan that will cover all the country's quicks to achieve their long-term availability. "Last week we had a discussion with the medical panel about trying to set up a group of people to look after fast bowlers better. I think that fast bowlers are the bedrock of a really good



South African fast bowler Kagiso Rabada is lifted by Dean Elgar as he celebrates with teammates after dismissing India's Hardik Pandya in Cape Town on Monday. (AFP)

cricket system and if we want to be No.1 in the world, especially in our conditions, fast bowlers are very important to that process," Gibson said. "We need to find ways of looking after, monitoring, training our fast bowlers better because there have been a lot of injuries even before I got here."

Olivier and Ngidi are specialist fast bowlers. Olivier, 25, has played in five Test matches with moderate success, while Ngidi, 21, is regarded as one of South Africa's most promising young bowlers. Gibson admitted he had only seen Ngidi on television and was keen to take a closer look at a bowler who made a good impression in three Twenty20 internationals against Sri Lanka before being injured. "I've heard a lot of good things about him," said Gibson. Ngidi has shown good form for the Titans franchise in all forms of the game this season.

While Chris Morris and Andile Phehlukwayo are both all-rounders who can add to

the batting depth of a team whose fragility was exposed when they were bowled out for 130 in the second innings.

Morris is capable of bowling at more than 140kmh, while Phehlukwayo is a medium-pace bowler. Phehlukwayo's lack of raw pace could count against him. He will remain in Cape Town when the rest of the squad travel to Centurion today in order to play in a domestic one-day match for the Dolphins franchise. Team spokesperson Lerato Malekutu said Phehlukwayo had not been released from the Test squad but had been given permission to play for his franchise because he had not played in the Test match.

**South African squad**  
Faf du Plessis (captain), Hashim Amla, Temba Bavuma, Theunis de Bruyn, Quinton de Kock (wkt), AB de Villiers, Dean Elgar, Keshav Maharaaj, Aiden Markram, Morne Morkel, Chris Morris, Lungi Ngidi, Duanne Olivier, Andile Phehlukwayo, Vernon Philander, Kagiso Rabada

## Kohli calls for Indian batsmen to change mindset

**Cape Town:** India's batsmen must show a more positive mindset to combat the South Africa bowling attack, their captain Virat Kohli said after losing the first Test on Monday. The match was effectively over in three days with Sunday washed out as 18 wickets fell in 64 overs on day four on a seamer-friendly Cape Town wicket and South Africa won the match by 72 runs.

Set 208 for victory, India were bowled out for 135 in under 43 overs with South African seamer Vernon Philander collecting career-best figures of 6-42. "The pitch was outstanding. I really like the type of wicket this was," Kohli told reporters.

"It was great for test cricket and we got a result within four days having lost a day. It was not one-sided, both teams were in it at different stages. As a team, we really enjoyed being part of this test match and so did South Africa."

Kohli says the failure of his side to build partnerships was ultimately the difference between defeat and what would have been a sweet victory in such unfamiliar conditions. "It was a wicket where things were happening every day and we let ourselves down with the bat," he said. "We wanted one big partnership to get the job done, which we failed to do."

Kohli suggested that with tracks that are likely to have even more bounce and pace to come in Pretoria and Johannesburg for the rest of the series, his batsmen needed to find a way to transfer the pressure on to the South African bowlers.

"The mindset matters when you're travelling away from home on pitches which challenge you. You need to be positive in defence and when you're leaving also. You need to grab scoring opportunities.

"We need to think about taking the attack to the South African bowlers more. That is something for all the batsmen, starting at the very top. They (South Africa) force you to play good cricket in every over that you play against them, which I think is a good credit to their bowling attack. As batters we need to step up." The second Test in Pretoria starts on Saturday.

FOCUS/AUSTRALIAN OPEN

# Federer eyes fresh 'fairy tale' as Slam rivals struggle

'I just have to pace myself all the way up to the tournament in Melbourne, and I'll be ready,' he said after his Hopman Cup final victory with Swiss teammate Bencic

AFP  
Melbourne

The prospects of an unprecedented 20th Grand Slam victory have strengthened for ageless wonder Roger Federer as his main rivals flounder ahead of the Australian Open.

The 36-year-old is coming off an extraordinary 2017, when he won a fifth Australian Open title and a record eighth at Wimbledon, and there could be yet more glory with a depleted field of top contenders in Melbourne.

Andy Murray and Japan's Kei Nishikori are already out of the year's opening Grand Slam with injuries, while 12-time major champion Novak Djokovic is troubled by an elbow complaint and hasn't played for six months.

World number one Rafael Nadal withdrew from his first tour event of 2018, in Brisbane, with continuing knee problems, and is seeking match practice in a Melbourne exhibition event ahead of the January 15 start.

The 2014 winner Stan Wawrinka, who hasn't played since last year's Wimbledon and subsequent knee surgery, has had little warm-up work and is no longer with his four-year coach Magnus Norman.

Yet amid it all Federer keeps going, winning all his matches at the mixed-teams Hopman Cup in Perth this month and seemingly injury-free.

"I just have to pace myself all the way up to the tournament in Melbourne, and I'll be ready," he said after his Hopman Cup final victory with Switzerland teammate Belinda Bencic.

"I'm just excited going back to Melbourne where I had my fairy tale run last year. It was crazy.

"It's great to be the defending champion. I take it the right way. I won't put extra pressure on myself, regardless of who's going to play, or not play. "For me it's just important to be in a good mindset, well prepared, and ready to go. And I feel like I am ready."

Nadal, who lost to Federer in five sets in a vintage Australian final last year, has opted to join Djokovic at the Kooyong Classic exhibition event for some match practice in the week before the Open.

The Spaniard, who hasn't

played since the World Tour Finals in London, had a stellar 2017, winning his 10th French Open, a third US Open crown and the year-ending world number one spot.

The Australian Open is the second straight Grand Slam to be badly hit by injury issues.

The US Open was missing Wawrinka, Djokovic, Nishikori, Raonic and Murray, and after the early eliminations of Alexander Zverev, Marin Cilic, Grigor Dimitrov and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, it was one of the rare Grand Slams where big names didn't dominate the quarter-finals.

If there is to be a winner outside the top guns in Melbourne, those who look most likely are Bulgarian Dimitrov, third in the rankings behind Nadal and Federer, Germany's Zverev and tempestuous Australian Nick Kyrgios.

Dimitrov, once nicknamed 'Baby Fed' for his playing style, enjoyed the best season of his career in 2017, winning four titles, including his first Masters crown in Cincinnati. Zverev, 20, has been touted as the "next big thing" for some years and is coming off five titles last season, yet he has never made it past the fourth round of a Grand Slam.

Kyrgios will have his supporters, especially in Australia, after beating Dimitrov on the way to winning his fourth ATP Tour title and first at home in the lead-up Brisbane International.

"Right now it's all about recovering and feeling the ball for the Oz Open. Because obviously I'm playing well under pressure and in pressure situations," said Kyrgios, whose talent has often been undermined by der-peturbursts.

Other form players include France's Gael Monfils, who won the lead-up Qatar Open in a depleted field, and his countryman Gilles Simon who rolled back the years to claim the ATP Maharashtra Open title.

Six-time Australian Open champion Djokovic pulled out of events in Abu Dhabi and Doha with elbow soreness before heading to Melbourne, and hasn't hit a ball in anger since the problem forced him to quit Wimbledon in the quarter-finals in July.

Big-serving Canadian Milos Raonic is another with a chequered preparation after wrist surgery last year, while American world number eight Jack Sock hurt his hip while playing in the Hopman Cup.

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CONFIDENT

## Wawrinka says he's ready for Australian Open



AFP  
Melbourne

Former winner Stan Wawrinka yesterday said he's hungry to return to action at next week's Australian Open after six months on the sidelines.

The three-time Grand Slam champion hasn't played since Wimbledon, but said he has recovered sufficiently from a knee injury to feature in the year's opening Grand Slam, starting in Melbourne on Monday.

"I'm really, really happy to be back on the tour and seeing the sun," the 32-year-old Swiss told reporters in Melbourne.

"Still a lot to do but I'm feeling really positive, so looking forward to starting."

Wawrinka, who defeated Rafael Nadal to win the 2014 Australian title, has slipped to nine in the world rankings, having not played since his first-round Wimbledon loss to Russian Daniil Medvedev in July.

He pulled out of an exhibition event in Abu Dhabi late last month before travelling to Australia to prepare for the

Open. "For me, the first thing is to play a match, to play a tennis match again. It's been many months out of the tour," Wawrinka said. "It's not always the best when you are an athlete so I'm looking forward to it, enjoying the crowd."

"It's always an amazing atmosphere here. The people love the sport, love the tennis so I always enjoy to share that with them."

With five-times runner-up Andy Murray and Japan's Kei Nishikori already ruled out with injuries, Australian Open tournament director Craig Tiley welcomed Wawrinka's intention to play.

"There's been a lot of questions (around Wawrinka) and in fact this is the first time publicly in six months that he's said anything, so we are excited that he agreed to come here and is ready to play," Tiley said.

Wawrinka is in Melbourne without his long-time coach Magnus Norman after their split late last year.

Norman ended his four-year spell with Wawrinka after deciding to take a break from full-time coaching.

UPBEAT

## Nadal beaten in Melbourne but injured knee 'fine'

AFP  
Melbourne

World number one Rafael Nadal lost his first match of the year 6-4, 7-5 to Richard Gasquet at the Kooyong Classic yesterday, but said he was happy after his troublesome knee held up "fine".

Nadal's knee injury hampered the end of his 2017 season and forced him to skip last week's Brisbane International, but he was able to give it a workout at the non-tour event in Melbourne.

Though he lost in straight sets, the Spaniard said he would keep working hard until the start of the Australian Open at Melbourne Park on Monday.

"I'm very happy to be back in Australia," he said. "I had a heavy year in 2017 and I started my preparation later than usual."

"But I've arrived in plenty of time. It's great to get the feeling once again of playing a match."

"This was a good test for me after some good training, that's the most important thing."

The 16-time Grand Slam winner was far from his best in the exhibition encounter against a player he has beaten 15-0 on the ATP Tour in a rivalry dating back to junior days.

Nadal, 31, heads the entry list for the Australian Open and said he will be ready to front up for the first round.

"The knee is fine," he said in answer to the inevitable question. "I'm here."

"If I was not feeling good I would not be here, so that's good news."

"I'll train hard over the next few days for the Australian Open, I will be ready."

Nadal is not playing any more matches at Kooyong, but he is also scheduled to turn out for a Tie Break Tens tournament at Melbourne Park on Wednesday evening.

Gasquet, who missed Kooyong

last year through illness and injury, was happy to get even an informal win over the Spaniard. "It's always a pleasure to play Rafa - I hope to beat him one day on the ATP before retiring. He's a friend of mine and it's great to play him," he said.

"I'm happy with how I'm playing after a test against Rafa, who along with Federer is the best in history."

Gasquet took the opening set, relying on a single break for 5-4 before serving it out against an opponent still trying to shake off the rust of inactivity.

The Frenchman found himself in more of a battle in the second set despite going up a double break for 3-0.

The deficit barely bothered Nadal, who showed some of his classic form in closing the gap to 3-3.

Gasquet forced Nadal to save break points throughout as the pair stayed level-pegging.

But the Frenchman finally broke for 6-5 and claimed victory with a smash winner on his first match point a game later.

Separately, Spain's Pablo Carreno Busta defeated Belgian world number seven David Goffin 1-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-3.

In the women's competition, Germany's Andrea Petkovic rallied to defeat Australian teenager Destanee Aiava 3-6, 6-3, 6-2 in windy conditions.

**'I'll train hard over the next few days for the Australian Open, I will be ready'**



SPOTLIGHT

## ATP pledges shake-up as four quit Auckland

AFP  
Auckland

Men's tennis boss Chris Kermode yesterday pledged a shake-up in ATP rules as four players pulled out of the Auckland Classic before their opening matches, citing injury or illness.

Four lucky losers from the qualifying tournament found themselves on centre court as Ryan Harrison, Andrey Rublev, Guido Pella and Kyle Edmund all withdrew.

By turning up in Auckland, the players became eligible for first-round prize money and avoided an ATP fine.

Kermode, executive chairman of the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP), warned that rules around withdrawals were under review. But he also said he believed the players' reasons for pulling out.

"The bigger concern would be players pulling out before they got here, that would be an issue," Kermode told Fairfax Media in Auckland.

"They make the effort to come to the event and that's demonstrated the desire to play here."

"Tennis is such a physical sport that these things are going

to happen. We are currently doing a whole review process of our business and plans for 2019.

"Ranking points, player withdrawals and how we deal with that is something we've got to and are looking at."

Harrison, who lost the Brisbane International final to Nick Kyrgios on Sunday, said he was too tired to play after arriving in Auckland early on Tuesday.

Eighth seed Rublev, who lost the qualifying tournament to Gael Monfils last week, cited injury, as did Pella, a semi-finalist in Doha, and Edmund, who played in Brisbane.

All four players are on the entry list for next week's Australian Open, the first Grand Slam tournament of the year.

"A lot of it is about wording. You can withdraw through personal reasons, fatigue and things like this," Kermode said.

"If there is a good, concrete, obvious reason, then I think fans realise that sport is live, dynamic and there are going to be withdrawals."

"When there's the grey area at the beginning of the year, fatigue doesn't sound that great. At the end of the year people would say, 'OK, it's been a long season.'"

"So we've got to clear that up, that's part of this whole process we're doing."

ROUND-UP

## Defending champion Konta, Williams exit Sydney event

Reuters  
Sydney

Defending champion Johanna Konta was bundled out in the first round of the Sydney International by Agnieszka Radwanska and Venus Williams also lost in her first match of the tournament yesterday.

Radwanska, overpowered in 82 minutes by Konta in last year's final, raced to a 6-3 7-5 victory over the Briton at the Olympic Tennis Centre.

Neither player was able to dominate on service in the first set and Konta won just two of her 11 second serve points as Radwanska converted three of her five break opportunities.

Konta again had trouble holding serve in the second set but showed signs of a fightback when she broke while trailing 4-1, but she could not push on as Rad-

wanska sealed victory in one hour, 49 minutes.

Second seed Williams was beaten 5-7 6-3 6-1 by Germany's Angelique Kerber in under two hours.

Kerber started the first set stronger and looked to have Williams on the ropes when she opened up a 5-3 lead and created two set points on the American's serve before Williams rallied.

The seven-times grand slam champion survived the Kerber onslaught with an ace and a forehand winner and, with her confidence restored, took the first set.

But Kerber fought back strong as Williams struggled with her service.

The German levelled the match at a set apiece and raced into a 5-0 lead in the decider before Williams rallied again, but the American succumbed to the inevitable on her fifth match point, sending a backhand return wide.

Konta's first-round loss continued some worrying early season performances for the 26-year-old world number nine.

She struggled last week in Brisbane before withdrawing from her quarter-final with a hip injury.

Radwanska, who was upset by American qualifier Sachia Vickery in the Auckland quarter-finals last week, meets American qualifier Catherine Bellis in the second round in Sydney while Kerber faces Dominika Cibulkova in the quarter-finals.

PARIS: Former Wimbledon champion Marion Bartoli just wants to enjoy herself and play big matches when she returns to competitive tennis in March after more than four years in retirement.

The Frenchwoman quit tennis in 2013 weeks after winning her maiden grand slam title at Wimbledon, saying her body could no longer cope with the demands of

the sport. She contracted a serious virus last year and feared for her life.

The 33-year-old said she had been psychologically damaged by a relationship that pushed her to lose a lot of weight, resulting in her being barred from playing in an invitational event at Wimbledon in 2016.

"I let myself get destroyed by someone and I did not think it was possible," Bartoli told French sports daily L'Equipe.

"When I retired, I was the happiest in the world. Then I met my ex boyfriend in May 2014 and everyday he would tell me that I was fat. Every day. He would see a thin girl on the street and tell me: 'See how skinny and pretty she is.'"

Bartoli plans to return in March in Miami if she is in shape.

"I want to prove to myself that I am alive. If I come back, it is to try and play big matches on big courts and feel those emotions again," she said.

NHL

# Blue Jackets stun Leafs with overtime victory

Agencies  
Toronto

Columbus Blue Jackets goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky had a difficult time holding back his smile after his team's come-from-behind victory over the Toronto Maple Leafs on Monday.

Bobrovsky made 35 saves, and kept his team hanging around in the third period long enough to erase a two-goal deficit en route to a 3-2 overtime win.

Toronto looked to have secured two points, but Columbus scored twice in the final 4:35 of regulation and Artemi Panarin completed the comeback at 3:11 of the extra period.

"Those kind of wins make good atmosphere in the locker-room, lots of energy, lots of happiness," said the 2017 Vezina Trophy winner.

"That's a good win for us as far as going through some of the crap we've been going through," said Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella. "I really respect how they kept their head up and kept playing."

The Leafs (25-16-3) entered the third period up two goals on Columbus (25-16-3) and did everything they could to try and put the game out of reach. Connor Brown and Nazem Kadri had point-blank chances to increase the lead as Toronto outshot Columbus 13-4 only to have Bobrovsky keep out everything his way.

"Some nights when you're ahead you get on your heels and the other team takes it to you. That wasn't the case at all. It was the opposite way

around. But they scored on their opportunities that we gave them," said Leafs coach Mike Babcock.

"That's a free point we gave away"

Nick Foligno started the comeback with 4:55 remaining on a play that Frederik Andersen lost the bouncing puck on before it found its way behind him and in the net. Jordan Schroeder was originally credited with the goal before it was changed to the Columbus captain.

"We knew if we scored one somehow that it changes momentum," said Tortorella. "The saves (Andersen) made during the game and that one goes in... it's a funny game."

Rookie Pierre-Luc Dubois then tied it with 2:47 left on the clock, snapping a wrist shot blocker side on Andersen from the slot after defenceman Morgan Rielly turned the puck over on a long outlet pass.

"Line change where we just could have been patient, we were under no pressure and threw it out and they came in on an odd-man rush and in the end that cost us the hockey game. It's all part of the learning process," said Babcock.

"I think Morgan's having a real good year, made a mistake tonight."

James van Riemsdyk and William Nylander scored for the Leafs while Andersen stopped 30 shots in defeat.

"At least 50 minutes or so we played great, I think we could have put it away in the third and we didn't. Then they get a good bounce and, yeah, it's tied up," said Andersen.

Andersen held the Leafs in it long enough for van Riemsdyk to open the scoring at 11:09 of the second period,

deflecting a Roman Polak point shot past Bobrovsky for his 18th goal of the season.

The Leafs maintained momentum and Nylander doubled the lead on the power play with 3:58 to go in the second, rifling a wrist shot over the glove hand of a screened Bobrovsky for his ninth of the campaign.

Blue Jackets forward Sonny Milano left the game in the second period with an upper-body injury and didn't return after being on the receiving end of a check from Andreas Borgman. Tortorella didn't have an update post-game.

The 18,933 in attendance at Air Canada Centre were chanting "Freddie, Freddie," for Andersen, who stopped all 25 shots his way through 40 minutes. But they were left silent as Andersen's near shutout quickly turned into defeat.

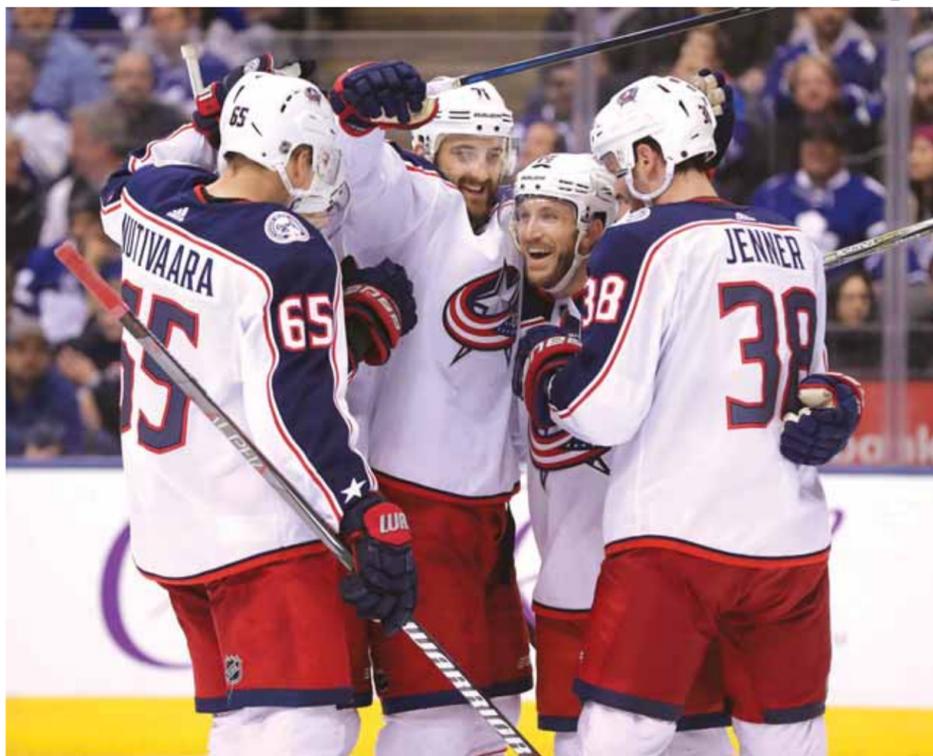
"I think when the overtime really gets going is when there's chances each way and unfortunately, I wasn't able to capitalize on mine and they came back and got one there," said Tyler Bozak, who was turned away on a breakaway in overtime by Bobrovsky.

"It's a tough way to lose but we've got to look forward to the next game."

Toronto hosts Ottawa Wednesday before starting its bye week. Columbus' next game is Thursday in Buffalo.

Toronto defenceman Travis Dermott played his second straight game since being called up from the AHL Marlies.

The 34th pick from the 2015 NHL Draft started on a pairing with Borgman but quickly found himself alongside Jake Gardiner.



Columbus Blue Jackets left wing Jordan Schroeder (second right) is congratulated by defenceman Markus Nutivaara (left) and left wing Nick Foligno (second left) and centre Boone Jenner after scoring a goal in the third period against the Toronto Maple Leafs at Air Canada Centre. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

NBA

# Wolves trounce Cavaliers, Warriors and Raptors win

'I apologised right away because I knew I didn't mean to do that. I'm just glad he's all right'

AFP  
Los Angeles

The Minnesota Timberwolves humbled LeBron James and the Cleveland Cavaliers on Monday, leading by as many as 41 points en route to a 127-99 triumph in Minneapolis.

Andrew Wiggins scored 25 points to pace a Timberwolves team that led from start to finish against a Cavs team that went to the last three NBA Finals, winning the title two seasons ago.

Karl-Anthony Towns - the only Timberwolves starter to play in the fourth quarter - added 19 points with 12 rebounds and Wolves forward Taj Gibson added another double-double of 16 points and 13 rebounds.

Jimmy Butler flirted with a triple-double, amassing 21 points with nine assists and eight rebounds while playing a key role in limiting four-time NBA Most Valuable Player James to 10 points, eight rebounds and five assists.

James and the rest of the Cavs starters also sat out the fourth quarter - although for Isaiah Thomas that absence came courtesy of his third-quarter ejection.

Thomas was tossed when he reached out toward a driving Wiggins and caught the Minnesota forward under the chin. Assessed a flagrant-2 foul, Thomas was immediately ejected, although he said he was merely reaching in for a steal.

"I've gotten numerous steals like that, so it just happened that I hit him in the throat," Thomas said. "I apologised right away because I knew I didn't mean to do that. I'm just glad he's all right."

Thomas was playing his third game for the Cavs after a hip injury had sidelined him since he joined the team in a pre-season trade. In his first two games back, the Cavs averaged 129 points a game, but they never fired on Monday.

"As a team, we just had no rhythm on both ends," Thomas



Minnesota Timberwolves guard Andrew Wiggins (left) dribbles against Cleveland Cavaliers forward LeBron James (23) during the third quarter of their NBA game at Target Centre. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

said. "It's tough when you're getting the shots that you want and they're just not falling - it kind of rubs off on the defensive end."

**Bruising battle**

The Cavaliers fell to 26-14. They're third in the Eastern Conference behind Thomas's former team, the Boston Celtics, and the Toronto Raptors -- who edged the Nets 114-113 in over-time in a bruising encounter in Brooklyn.

DeMar DeRozan's 35 points included a three-point play with 26.1 seconds remaining in over-time that put the Raptors up 114-113.

Spencer Dinwiddie, who led the Nets with a career-high 31 points, had a last chance for the

hosts but missed a driving layup in the final second.

The Raptors lost Kyle Lowry in over-time as the guard went down hard on a frightening fall in which he was sandwiched between two Nets players and landed on a hip.

He got to his feet, but quickly crumpled to the court again clutching his lower back and was finally carried off by two teammates. He was diagnosed with "an acute back spasm" the Raptors said. Brooklyn saw guard Allen Crabbe depart with an apparent left ankle injury in the fourth quarter.

**Warriors roll**

The reigning champion Golden State Warriors shook off an injury scare for superstar

Stephen Curry to beat the Denver Nuggets 124-114 in Oakland, California. Curry left the game briefly after a hard fall, but returned with his left knee taped to score 32 points.

Warriors forward Draymond Green scored 23 points with 10 assists and five rebounds and guard Klay Thompson chipped in 19 points as Golden State again coped admirably with the absence of Kevin Durant, who missed his third straight game with a strained right calf.

Denver's Nikola Jokic notched a triple-double of 22 points, 12 rebounds and 11 assists. In Los Angeles, C.J. Williams drained the game-winning three-pointer with 9/1 seconds left to lift the Clippers to a 108-107 victory over the

Atlanta Hawks.

In New Orleans, the Pelicans held on for a 112-109 victory over the Detroit Pistons despite losing star forward Anthony Davis to a sprained right ankle in the third quarter.

The Houston Rockets, without NBA leading scorer James Harden for a fourth straight game, drained 20 three-pointers in their 116-107 victory over the Bulls in Chicago.

**RESULTS**

Golden State.....124	Denver.....114
LA Clippers.....108	Atlanta.....107
Brooklyn.....113	Toronto114 (OT)
Sacramento.....100	San Antonio 107
Chicago.....107	Houston.....116
Minnesota.....127	Cleveland.....99
New Orleans.....112	Detroit.....109
Indiana.....109	Milwaukee.....96

NFL

# Chicago Bears name Chiefs assistant Nagy as new coach

AFP  
Chicago

Kansas City Chiefs offensive coordinator Matt Nagy was named Monday as the new head coach of the Chicago Bears, the NFL team announced.

The NFL's oldest club, formed in 1920, will introduce Nagy as the 16th head coach in franchise history on Tuesday.

Nagy interviewed for the job on Sunday, a day after the Chiefs squandered a second-half lead in a 22-21 loss to the Tennessee Titans in a first-round NFL playoff game. Nagy will replace John Fox, who was axed by the Bears on Monday after the team finished 5-11 and last in the NFC North division for the third consecutive season.

The Bears went 0-6 in games this season against division rivals, their first winless season against divisional foes in nearly half a century, and Fox departed with a total three-season record of 14-34.

Nagy, 39, spent the past five seasons with the Chiefs, initially as a quarterbacks coach before being promoted to offensive coordinator after the 2016 campaign. Kansas City was sixth in the NFL in points with 25.9 a game and fifth in total offense with 375.4 yards a game this past season.

The Bears were fourth-worst in the 32-team league in points with 16.5 a game, and third worst in total offense with 287.4 yards a game last season. Nagy also served as an assistant with the Philadelphia Eagles from 2008-2012 on the staff of Chiefs coach Andy Reid during his time there.

**Pink named to perform US anthem at Super Bowl 52**

Singer Pink will perform the US national anthem at next month's Super Bowl 52 in Minneapolis, the National Football League said Monday. The 38-year-old American will make her first appearance at the NFL's championship spectacle in the February 4 matchup, protected from Minnesota's winter cold by a domed stadium. "I'm really looking forward to 2018," Pink tweeted. "I'm really excited about the Grammys. Tour. Some other stuff that's a secret still and I can't wait til it's not a secret."

Pink follows stars like Lady Gaga, Idina Menzel, Kelly Clarkson, Luke Bryan, Alicia Keys, Carrie Underwood, Billy Joel and Beyonce in performing "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the annual championship game.

The singer is from a suburb north of Philadelphia and her home-region Philadelphia Eagles are among the eight clubs still in contention to play in the Super Bowl. Justin Timberlake will be the half-time musical performer at Super Bowl 52, returning after a controversial 2004 Super Bowl appearance in which he is infamously remembered for a "wardrobe malfunction" that exposed one of Janet Jackson's breasts for a moment. Pink's latest album, "Beautiful Trauma," was released in October while Timberlake is set to unveil his newest collection, "Man of the Woods," two days before the game.

**Curry serious about interest in owning Panthers**

Golden State Warriors guard and Charlotte native Stephen Curry wasn't kidding about his interest in being part of the Carolina Panthers' next ownership group.

A month after responding "I want in!" to Diddy's tweet about wanting to buy the Panthers, the 29-year-old told reporters Monday that he's "had conversations with plenty of people about the right way to go about [joining an ownership group]."

"Obviously, I have a day job, but I've got people that are plugged in and trying to see how to make that happen," Curry said.

The two-time MVP grew up in Charlotte, where his father, Dell Curry, played 11 seasons for the Hornets and is now part of the team's game broadcasts.

With the Panthers' season ending Sunday in New Orleans, the franchise is officially up for sale by owner and founder Jerry Richardson, who is the subject of an NFL investigation regarding workplace misconduct. *Sports Illustrated* reported last month that Richardson paid off at least four former employees to keep quiet allegations of sexual harassment and the use of a racial slur toward a former scout. Richardson owns 49 percent of the franchise, which Forbes valued at \$2.3 billion in September. The last NFL team to be sold was the Buffalo Bills, with reports pegging the price over \$1.1 billion.

NFL

# Brees' experience could be pivotal for Saints vs Vikings

'Brees, now in his 17th season, remains one of the game's great passers as the Saints prepare to play the Vikings a day before Brees' 39th birthday

By Ben Goessling  
Star Tribune (Minneapolis)

There's not much about the New Orleans Saints, and certainly not much about the Vikings, that remains the same since the two teams' dramatic NFC Championship Game meeting eight years ago. Perhaps the most important thing for the Saints, though, is one of the things that does remain the same: the identity of their quarterback.

Drew Brees, now in his 17th season, remains one of the game's great passers as the Saints prepare to play the Vikings a day before Brees' 39th birthday. He reclaimed his NFL single-season completion percentage record from Sam Bradford this year, connecting on 72 percent of his passes to lead the Saints to the playoffs for the first time since 2013.

The Saints will play in the division round of the playoffs for the first time since that season, against a Vikings team that hasn't gone this far since the season it lost to the Saints.

That was the year, of course, the Vikings had Brett Favre as their quarterback; they haven't had a starting QB in his 30s since Favre left. On Sunday, they'll give Case Keenum his first playoff start, while Brees makes his 12th.

That raises the question, in a week full of matchups between playoff veterans and postseason neophytes, how much experience matters at this point of the season. And while it's certainly not a guarantee of anything in a stadium where the Vikings have lost just once this season - recent history suggests it does carry some weight.

In the last four seasons, quarterbacks who are 31 years and older have accounted for 19 of 32 starts in division playoff games, posting 11 of the 16 possible wins. Quarterbacks who were 30



New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees.

and younger (Keenum turns 30 in February) started only 13 playoff games in that time, winning five and losing eight.

None of the four under-30 QBs who won division playoff games from 2013-2016 (Russell Wilson, Colin Kaepernick, Andrew Luck and Cam Newton) was making his first career playoff start when he did it. Of those four QBs, only Kaepernick won in his first career trip to the divisional playoffs.

QB 30 and younger have completed 60.6 percent of their passes in division playoff games over the past four years, throwing 25 touchdowns against 20 in-

terceptions and posting a modest passer rating of 83.3. In those same years, QBs 31 and over have connected on 61.7 percent of their passes in divisional games, throwing 30 touchdowns against 10 interceptions and compiling a collective passer rating of 91.7.

Now, teams with older quarterbacks are often further along in their roster-building process, and might enjoy better supporting casts than teams making their first run; the Patriots certainly fit in that category.

There's a strong argument to be made that the Vikings have a better team around Keenum than the Saints do around Brees

this time around, and Brees' experience certainly doesn't mean the Saints can expect to stroll into U.S. Bank Stadium, silence what figures to be a deafening roar at the beginning of the game and cruise to victory.

But if we're going to key on one stat here, to me, it's the fact that older QBs have thrown half as many interceptions in divisional round games than their younger counterparts over the past four years, despite making six more starts. In the postseason, where one turnover can change the complexion of a close game, the wherewithal of a veteran QB can sometimes make the difference.

Brees has statistically been the NFL's most accurate QB for a long time; he's also one of its hardest to sack.

He's thrown six interceptions in 11 career playoff games with the Saints, including one on Sunday, but expecting him to unload a raft full of bad passes against the Vikings probably isn't likely.

If the Saints do come into U.S. Bank Stadium and beat the Vikings on Sunday, it's a good bet Brees will be a big part of the reason why. And his experience in the playoffs is a big part of the reason he remains such a formidable threat.

GOLF

## Fritsch banned for three months for doping violation

Reuters  
Toronto

Canadian golfer Brad Fritsch has been banned for three months after he reported himself to PGA Tour officials for violating its anti-doping policy, the governing body said on Monday.

The 40-year-old, who plays on the secondary Buy.com Tour and is eligible to return to competition on Feb. 28, said the banned substance was in a supplement he had been taking to assist weight loss.

"Mr. Fritsch self-reported this information after discovering that an ingredient in a supplement that he was taking was on the prohibited list," the Tour said in a statement.

"He has acknowledged his inadvertent error and accepted his suspension."

Fritsch, in a Facebook post, said his heart had "sank" when he realized that one of the supplements he was taking included dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA).

"That... supplement ended up containing a substance called DHEA," he wrote.

"I'm just so upset with myself that I didn't think to question what was in the supplements. But I never did. And in the program rules, it stipulates that a self-report is the same as a positive test."

Fritsch has won once on the Buy.com Tour. DHEA is a hormone produced by the adrenal glands and its production peaks when someone is in their mid-20s, according to the webmd.com website. In most people, production gradually declines with age. Fritsch joins a small list of players suspended since the PGA Tour began drug testing in 2008.

With the exception of former world number one Vijay Singh, most have been little-known journeymen.

Singh was suspended for 90 days in 2013 after saying in a magazine interview that he was using deer antler spray.

The tour banned Singh for using the spray, which contained an insulin-like growth factor on its banned list.

The suspension was lifted after the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) concluded that the spray should be removed from its list of banned substances.

QATAR BASKETBALL LEAGUE

## Big wins for Gharafa and Al Sadd

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Mychal Ammons scored 23 points while three others also excelled with double-figure contributions as Al Gharafa thrashed Al Khor 95-63 in the Qatar Basketball League yesterday.

Al Gharafa were off to a quick start and never gave their rivals any opportunity to settle down to keep their hopes of winning the title. They led 29-16 at the end of the first quarter but by the time the third period ended they had taken an unassailable 77-47 advantage with 10 minutes remaining.

James Justice was the second-highest scorer for 19 points, while Sammy Monroe and Abdulrahman Sadd chipped in with 18 each.

Of Justice's 19 points, 12 came from three-pointers, while Sadd had a trio of three-pointers. For Al Khor, Khobi Williamson scored 24 points while Ja'wan Davis had 16. None of their other players could get into the double digits.

In another match, Al Sadd defeated Al Ahli 88-67 with Darrius Oldham top-scoring with 27. Julius Coles with 18 and Michael Moser with 14 also excelled for the winners.

For Al Ahli, Nenad Zivchevick scored 23 points while Nemanja Besovic had 16.



Al Gharafa and Al Khor players in action during their Qatar Basketball League match yesterday.



Action from Al Sadd-Al Ahli match.

Qatar beat France youth team in rugby friendly

Qatar's senior rugby team defeated France's youth team 21-14 in a friendly match yesterday at Aspire Zone Stadium. The match was part of Qatar team's preparations for the upcoming tournaments. The French team is also in Doha for a training camp before the Youth World Championship. The head of the Qatar Rugby, Hockey and Cricket Federation, Youssef al-Kuwari has expressed his delight over the performance of the Qatar team in the match. Speaking after the match, al-Kuwari said, it was a useful experience for the Qatar team. He also informed that the Qatar has received invitations to participate in the Asian Rugby Championship (15) in Lebanon and Malaysia Rugby Championship (7) in April.

FOCUS

## Serbian Olympic Committee panel impressed by Aspire philosophy

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

During a recent visit to Aspire Dome last week, the president of the Olympic Committee of Serbia (OCS) Božidar Maljkovic spoke of his admiration of Aspire Academy's philosophy and opportunities it offers to young athletes.

Aspire Academy's director general Ivan Bravo welcomed Maljkovic and members of the OCS delegation including vice president Zecevic Zarko and Meric Ivan, the chairman of QCS' International Relations Committee accompanied by the Qatar Olympic Committee secretary general, Jassim Rashid al-Boenin.

Following the visit, Maljkovic, who has successfully worked as a professional basketball coach in seven different countries and spent some time in Spain coaching clubs like FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, said: "I have worked in sports for 40 years, but I have never seen an academy like Aspire. The facilities here are second to none. I know the Academy's Director General Ivan Bravo very well from my time in Spain and he is a great organizer and educator. He is definitely the right man not only to develop and educate young athletes, but



Members of the Olympic Committee of Serbia pose during their visit to Aspire Academy.

also set up the right team and organisation around them."

The training philosophy of the Academy is tailored to the capabilities, talents and goals of Qatar and follows a strategy that is geared towards the development

of the individual athletes. Aspire Academy's training programs place each student-athlete at the centre of an ecosystem consisting of world-class coaching and sports science expertise supported by world-class facilities.

While at Aspire Academy, student-athletes also have the chance to develop in a competitive environment by playing against other youth teams from leading clubs and academies

across the globe. Selected players also have an opportunity to train in a professional environment through short training placements with clubs in Europe organised by the Academy.

PREVIEW

# Wenger eyes new recruits as Arsenal face Chelsea test

'It's very important in this moment of the season to have all the squad in the best physical form, because you have to play a lot of games and everyone must be ready'



Arsenal's French manager Arsene Wenger poses for a selfie with a fan as he arrives for the English FA Cup third round match against Nottingham Forest at The City Ground in Nottingham, central England, on January 7, 2018. (AFP)

AFP  
London

Arsene Wenger has warned his Arsenal fans that new recruits are on the way as the furious Gunners boss prepares for Wednesday's League Cup semi-final against Chelsea.

Wenger's side suffered one of the most chastening defeats of his increasingly tarnished reign on Sunday as second tier Nottingham Forest won 4-2 in the FA Cup third round.

It was the first time Wenger had crashed out at that stage of the competition since arriving at the north London club in 1996. Wenger's decision to make nine changes backfired, with the understudies delivering a listless display at the City Ground.

The Frenchman prioritised the League Cup showdown with Chelsea by keeping his main men fresh for the first leg clash at Stamford Bridge means he can ill-afford a damaging defeat against Antonio Conte's men.

But regardless of Arsenal's League Cup fortunes, Wenger has clearly had enough of another underachieving season which sees his team in danger of failing to qualify for the Champions League for a second successive

year. Wenger insists the Gunners, who last week signed Greek defender Konstantinos Mavropanos, will do further business during the transfer window in an effort to turn things around.

Unsettled Chile forward Alexis Sanchez could be sold to Manchester City and Wenger wants several fresh faces to arrive as soon as possible.

Asked whether there could be developments this week, Wenger said: "Yes, because we are in the second week of January and, after that, it passes quickly. "We signed a Greek boy (Mavropanos) who looks quite good in training but apart from that, we have not done anything. Will we be out there to do something? Yes we will."

**Breaking point**

Arsenal's last League Cup-winning campaign came in the pre-Wenger era in 1993, with the Frenchman's team losing in both his final appearances in 2007 and 2011.

To return to the final, Wenger knows Arsenal need a positive result at the Bridge ahead of the second leg at the Emirates Stadium on January 24. But the Gunners, who drew both Premier League encounters with Chelsea this season, haven't won at their

London rivals since 2011. Fortunately for Wenger, Chelsea are in the midst of a hectic schedule that Conte admits is stretching his squad to breaking point.

Having complained all season that Chelsea don't have enough depth to cope with the demands of competing in four competitions, Conte's fears are coming true. The Italian made a host of changes for Saturday's FA Cup third round draw at second tier Norwich, but Chelsea were well below their best, prompting Conte to bemoan the demands put on his players. "When you play every three days and you have to play many games, it means you are facing every competition," Conte said.

"Now on Wednesday we have to play a semi-final against Arsenal. I think we deserved to reach this target. "It's very important in this moment of the season to have all the squad in the best physical form, because you have to play a lot of games and everyone must be ready."

Chelsea are bidding to reach the League Cup final for the first time since they last won the tournament in 2015. That would be a huge boost for Conte, who has found himself embroiled in a bitter feud with Manchester United manager Jose Mourinho in recent weeks.

**Conte will 'not forget' war of words with Mourinho**

Antonio Conte says he will "not forget" Jose Mourinho's personal slight about match-fixing, but the Chelsea manager added Tuesday he wants to call a halt to the increasingly bitter dispute with his Manchester United counterpart.

The 48-year-old Italian - who served a four-month ban in Italy in 2012 in relation to a match-fixing scandal but has always denied wrongdoing relating to his time as coach of Siena - said he did not want the League Managers' Association (LMA) to intervene. "He said serious words, he has used serious words. And I won't forget this," he said ahead of his side's League Cup semi-final first leg with Arsenal today.

"I think it's not important, the association, you understand. It's not important. This is not a problem for the club, it's a problem between me and him. Now I stop. Stop." Conte - who was acquitted of sporting fraud charges in 2016 over accusations he failed to report episodes of

match-fixing while in charge at Serie B side Siena in 2011 - said he had no regrets about his response to Mourinho's attack.

The former Juventus and Italy coach labelled Mourinho 'a little man' over his remarks on match-fixing, and prior to that suggested the Portuguese was suffering from senile dementia for forgetting how he used to celebrate wildly on the touchline.

Mourinho had provoked the latter riposte by saying he no longer 'acts like a clown' on the touchline which was seen as a barb at both Conte and Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp.

"Do I have the look of a person with regret? I don't think so," said Conte. "I think we both said things, and we'll see what happens in future."



EPL

## Manchester City make new £20mn offer for Sanchez

By Fabrizio Romano and Ed Aarons  
The Guardian

Manchester City have offered Arsenal £20mn in an attempt to secure the signing of Alexis Sanchez in the January transfer window, with the forward understood to have already agreed terms on a contract worth around £250,000 a week.

Sanchez, who came close to joining Pep Guardiola's side in the summer only for the deal to collapse when Arsenal failed to sign a replacement in time, is out of contract at the end of the season and is now permitted to discuss terms with overseas clubs.

Paris Saint-Germain and Bayern Munich are believed to be keen on signing the 29-year-old but, regardless of whether Arsenal decide to accept the latest offer, City remain frontrunners for Sanchez, who played for Guardiola at Barcelona. A contract worth £13mn a season until 2023 is understood to have been offered to Sanchez's representatives, although City say they have no intention of increasing their offer if it is rejected by Arsenal.

Yesterday, Arsene Wenger said Sanchez is in contention to face

Chelsea on tonight in the League Cup semi-final first leg at Stamford Bridge but maintained they had yet to receive a new offer.

They agreed a deal with City worth £55mn plus £5mn in additions in the summer. Asked if he expects the Chilean to stay, Wenger said: "I expect nothing."

City had intimated they would wait until the summer to attempt to sign Sanchez but the knee injury suffered by Gabriel Jesus against Crystal Palace has increased Guardiola's desire to add him to his squad. The Brazil forward sustained a medial collateral injury and is expected to miss the next two months.

Any move in the January window is likely to reignite Arsenal's interest in Monaco's Thomas Lemar, with the France international having failed to agree personal terms for a £92mn switch.

The Monaco manager, Leonardo Jardim, said earlier this week the versatile 22-year-old could be on his way this month, although Arsenal are also believed to be interested in Leicester's Riyad Mahrez and Cristian Pavon of Boca Juniors.

"We are not used to selling in the winter," Jardim said, "but the transfer window lasts until the end of the month and many things can happen."



Alexis Sanchez

SPOTLIGHT

## Zidane looks to gear up squad amid talk of Madrid crisis

AFP  
Madrid

Real Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane has defended his players and dismissed talk of a crisis at the reigning Spanish and European champions after seeing them fall further behind La Liga leaders Barcelona.

Madrid ended an outstanding 2017 with a 3-0 defeat at home to their bitter rivals in the Clasico and their first La Liga outing of 2018 saw them draw 2-2 at Celta Vigo on Sunday.

That means they lie fourth in the table, 16 points behind Barca, the unbeaten leaders, as the halfway stage in the season approaches. They have a game in hand, but their hopes of a successful title defence already appear in tatters.

"When things go wrong, I am not someone to throw two or three players into the shit. We are all in the same boat, all responsible, me the first as coach," said the Frenchman as he refused to blame any individual members of his squad for their slump in form.

"We had two spectacular years and people should not forget that. I know the next game is the most important. We will not live in the past, but will not throw away what has been done either."

Real are preparing for Wednesday's Copa del Rey last 16, second leg at home to second-tier Numancia, which should be a formality after they won 3-0 in Soria last week.

Zidane, who was named French coach of the year for 2017 by France Football magazine after leading Madrid to a record five trophies in the last 12 months, held a meeting with his squad on Tuesday that delayed the start of his pre-game press conference.

"I am not going to tell you what we spoke about, it was just one of these chats that teams have. You can analyse it however you like, call it a crisis or whatever, but we are looking for solutions and to make things better," he said.

"When things are not going as we want them to, we have work to do. The players think the same, we are going to work harder than ever, in every sense. It is not a physical thing or more in the head... it is a little bit of everything."

Zidane said he has no interest in signing a striker in the January transfer window despite an injury to Karim Benzema.

Real may be off the pace in La Liga but they are still alive in the Copa del Rey, a competition they have won only twice in the last 25 years. They also have a Champions League last-16 tie against Paris Saint-Germain to prepare for in February.

"I don't mind if people think the league is over. The most important thing is to give our best. We'll see what happens in the league, but we have the cup and the Champions League too," Zidane said.

Holders Barcelona host Celta on Thursday after drawing 1-1 in the first leg at Balaídos last week.

New signing Philippe Coutinho will not make his debut until later in the month after arriving in Catalonia with a thigh injury.

The draw for the quarter-finals is set to take place on Friday, with the first legs scheduled for next midweek.

**Fixtures**  
Last 16, first leg (1830 GMT unless stated; first-leg scores in brackets)  
Today  
Villarreal v Leganes (0-1)  
Alaves v Formentera (3-1)  
Real Madrid v Numancia (3-0) (2030 GMT)

FOCUS

## Hodgson praises VAR system after English debut

AFP  
London

Crystal Palace manager Roy Hodgson praised the video assistant referee (VAR) system after its debut in English competitive football following initial confusion around Brighton's winning goal.

Brighton's Glenn Murray scored a late winner in the home side's 2-1 FA Cup third-round defeat of Palace on Monday but, with suggestions of handball, there was confusion among players, fans at the ground and TV viewers over whether VAR

had had any influence on the decision. According to Hodgson and Brighton manager Chris Hughton, match referee Andre Marriner had been in contact with fellow official Neil Swarbrick, working with VAR from a London studio, about the goal.

That Marriner did not indicate as such or use the pitch-side VAR monitors contributed to the confusion, and Hodgson said: "We had suspicions. The people close to it seemed to be incensed, and from our angle it looks as if he's guided the ball in with his arm."

"You've got to congratulate the system: when you watch it

lots of times like they've been able to do, from different angles, it would have been very harsh (to disallow it). "It was a genuine goal, and the referee was helped by the fact he had Swarbrick in the VAR studio making a judgement that'd help him out, so I have no complaints."

Hughton said he was "under the impression that VAR was used. That's what I am led to believe: that it was used and there was not a decision to be made. At the time I wasn't aware some thought it was handball."

The VAR system is currently being trialled in Italy and Germany and was employed for the

first time in an official game in Britain during the international friendly between England and Germany in November, when it was not called on.

Criticised by some fans for slowing the game down, it is used for "clear and obvious errors" relating to goals, penalty decisions, straight red cards or mistaken identity for red or yellow cards. The VAR automatically checks every relevant incident and informs the referee if necessary. The referee has the power to change the original decision based on new information provided by the VAR or watch a replay on the side of the pitch.

Marriner did not feel the need to consult the pitchside monitor after Murray's goal as he felt it was legitimate. The system allows for dialogue between the on-pitch referee and the VAR without a formal review. Former England striker Gary Lineker tweeted: "So VAR so good."

But former Palace forward Mark Bright said the referee should have looked into the incident more carefully. "The debate in the boardroom is did the ball or did it not touch Glenn Murray's arm before it went into the net?" he tweeted. "Clearly & Obviously missed? Should have been viewed #VAR"

## QNB STARS LEAGUE

# Sneijder's arrival to boost Al Gharafa

Seventh placed Al Gharafa travel to sixth placed Al Ahli on Friday

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**A**l Gharafa can take the field with renewed vigour and boosted confidence for many reasons, when the QNB Stars League's second-phase campaign starts this Friday. The seventh-placed Al Gharafa (11 points) travel to sixth-placed Al Ahli (14 points) for their gameweek 12 on Friday at 4:20pm.

The Cheetahs saw many positive changes during the QNB Stars League's month-long break, during which the semi-finals and final of QSL Cup was played and also the Gulf Cup in Kuwait.

First, Al Gharafa triumphed in the sixth edition of QSL Cup, defeating Al Rayyan in the final. Thus, they ended their long title drought, of five seasons. They had qualified for the semi-finals with an unbeaten record.

Turkey's Bulent Uygun then replaced Jean Fernandez as coach after the Frenchman parted ways with the club by mutual consent. Uygun had a long stint with Qatar's Umm Salal. His familiarity with Qatar's football scene should help him stand in good stead as Al Gharafa embark on the second half of the season with great hopes and high ambitions.

Al Gharafa could register only two wins in the first phase and Bulent straightaway got down to business by putting the players through their paces over two sessions daily. The friendly they played against Qatar SC gave Bulent an opportunity to try out various combinations before giving a final shape to his strategy.

To top it all, Al Gharafa pulled off a coup of sorts by roping in Dutch star Wesley Sneijder for one-and-a-half seasons. The 33-year-old attacking midfielder has an impressive CV in his illustrious club career and is also the most capped player for the Netherlands.

At 33, Sneijder, clearly is well past his best. But what Gharafa want from him is his experience and to carry the club forward by nurturing the young talent. So it wasn't a surprise that Sneijder has been given the captain's armband and No. 10 jersey as soon as he touched Doha.

"I am very excited to be here," said a beaming Sneijder to packed audience. "I feel very welcomed. I am here to bring my experience and quality into the team. Also I want to help out the young players and improve their skills and qualities. From what I have heard, this team has lot of quality and also good young players. I hope we can have a great season together," he added.

The most capped Dutch footballer with 133 matches under his belt, Sneijder, has played in three World Cups and also won Champions League with Inter Milan in 2010. Sneijder confirmed that he has signed an 18-month contract with Gharafa, who will be hoping he can change their fortunes with the club occupying seventh place in the table.

In fact, Al Gharafa and Al Ahli, both mid-table teams, are the only sides playing their first match post-break under new coaches. Al Ahli handed the reins to youth team coach George Jorge immediately after Spaniard Joaquin Caparros quit the job because of personal reasons, dealing a blow to The Brigadiers at a time when

Dutch star Wesley Sneijder has signed a 18-month contract with Al Gharafa.



they were on a high after doing well towards the end of first phase.

Al Ahli had registered shock wins over strong contenders Al Rayyan and Al Saliya in the last two rounds. They have recorded double the number of wins than Al Gharafa, but have a goal difference of -4 as against the rivals' -1. Although they lost to German Bundesliga

champions Bayern Munich, who were in Doha for their annual winter training camp at Aspire, by a big margin, the friendly provided Jorge with a chance to assess his players in a match situation for the first time at the senior level.

The big question is will the result go Al Gharafa's way this time, after their 1-1 draw in the first phase?

## ROUND-UP

## Umm Salal sign Darragi

**U**mm Salal unveiled their new signing Oussama Darragi at the club's premises yesterday.

The Tunisian midfielder was unveiled in the presence of Umm Salal Sports Club President Sheikh Hamad bin Nasser al-Thani and Vice President Sheikh Tamim bin Mohammed al-Thani. Umm Salal, placed fifth in the QNB Stars League standings with 16 points, signed Darragi as replacement for Moroccan Youssef Sekour, whose contract was terminated by mutual consent recently.

The deal with Darragi is still the end of this season with a clause to extend it for one more season. Sheikh Hamad wished Darragi all success with the club, saying he was added to the squad after much thought and after rating him as the best choice in the present scenario. Darragi expressed his delight to have joined the Umm Salal ranks and playing in the QNB Stars League. He promised to do his best towards the team's cause.

"I know the Qatar league well because of the presence of a number of Tunisian players, including Al Duhail captain Youssef Msakni. I hope to be a good addition to the squad and also make the fans happy in the second half of the season," said Darragi.

The 30-year-old was the first signing by any Qatari club in the winter transfer period that started on 1st January and will end on 31st January.

The Orange Fortress will play Al Kharaitiyat at the Al Khor Stadium in the opening fixture of 12th round tomorrow.

### QFA, QSL TO HOLD MATCH ANALYSIS TRAINING COURSE

The Football Development Departments of the Qatar Football Association and Qatar Stars League (QSL) will jointly organise a Match Analysis training course during the forthcoming annual Al Kass International Cup. The course will be held at the National Team Super Club conference room in Aspire Zone on 25th, 27th, 28th January and 1st February from 8am to 1:30pm.

The topics covered will be 'Methodology of offensive analysis', 'Practical usage of Match Analysis System - Videobrowser software for Live tagging and Panoramic System', 'STATS Technical and Physical Analysis reports' and 'Playing Methodology from two team coaches from Al Kass tournament'.

A maximum of only 25 participants will be allowed to register. Registration will be done on a first come, first served basis and the fee is QRI,500. Registration deadline is 20th January.

Candidates must have football background (i.e. coaches, players, sports and physical education degree holders). They should be proficient in Microsoft Office and IT. For further details contact Mohamed el-Imam at melimam@qsl.com.qa, or call on 44754067 and 55590252.



Tunisian midfielder Oussama Darragi was unveiled in the presence of Umm Salal Sports Club President Sheikh Hamad bin Nasser al-Thani and Vice President Sheikh Tamim bin Mohammed al-Thani.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Iceland's Sigthorsson completes rehab programme at Aspetar

**I**celand national football team striker, Kolbeinn Sigthorsson, has successfully completed his rehabilitation programme at Qatar's orthopaedic and sports medicine hospital, Aspetar. The footballer, who scored the winning goal for Iceland against England at the quarter-finals of the UEFA Euro 2016, sustained a left knee injury while on international duty in September 2016.

The injury left the striker, who is currently signed with France Ligue 1 club FC Nantes, out-of-action for a year and a half. Following successful treatment at Aspetar, Sigthorsson is hopeful that he'll return to the game early next year and may even be ready to take part in the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia. Commenting on his treatment in Aspetar, Sigthorsson said he was impressed with Aspetar's facilities, adding: "The services are really top class. The physiotherapy facilities are great and this is the perfect place for me to be in for rehabilitation."

In an interview held in Aspetar, Sigthorsson spoke about his nation's 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia ambitions, saying: "The ambitions of the national team are always high, and the results over the past few years have shown that we can beat accomplished teams. We will go with the mentality to win every match and go as far as possible. Why not have high goals and try to reach them?" He added: "It's my dream to go to the World Cup in Russia, (as is the case with) all other football players. I came (to Doha) with that goal in mind and hopefully I can be part of the team. There's still a long way to go, but I'm really positive I can make it."

Sigthorsson also spoke about the 2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar saying, "It's interesting. It's never been held here in the Middle East and I think it's going to be a great tournament. I spoke to people who work here and everybody is enthusiastic about it and they want to make this a great World Cup. The stadiums here are also quite impressive, so I think it will be a really good event and it'll be interesting to see how it



Iceland footballer Kolbeinn Sigthorsson trains at Aspetar.

goes. You have everything here to make it happen and hopefully I will come here with my team."

Whilst reminiscing about his stunner against England, the striker said: "Our win against England, especially for a striker from Iceland, is something you don't think is possible as a young kid. It was a great experience for me and a great moment for our country as well. We all watch England and the English Premier League on TV so to win against England is something you never forget."

Aspetar boasts one of the most advanced rehabilitation departments in the region, which is integral to Aspetar's multidisciplinary approach to athlete management. The hospital's method focuses on assessment and treatment of injured athletes by implementing personalised injury treatment programmes, including the hamstring pro-

ocol. Utilising an evidence-based model, Aspetar's experienced practitioners aim to return patients to their pre-injury lifestyle as quickly and safely as possible with a proven track record of treating international athletes from the PGA, WTA, ATP, World leaders in track and field, as well as weightlifting and professional footballers from all major leagues.

Aspetar has become an ideal treatment and rehabilitation destination for elite athletes from Europe, including South African 400m world record holder, Wayde van Niekerk, who was recently in Aspetar for treatment, fellow Icelandic footballers Eidur Gudjohnsen and Alfro Finnogason, Bournemouth striker Callum Wilson, Stoke City goalkeeper Jack Butland, Watford's Craig Cathcart, Sunderland's Younes Kaboul and Brugge's Abdoulay Diaby have also visited the facility.

## FOCUS

## We can still finish in the top four: Gharafa defender Ali

**D**efender Almahdi Ali is confident Al Gharafa can finish in the top four in the QNB Stars League, as the action resumes this Friday after mid-season break.

Ali admitted that this week's match against Al Ahli would be difficult, especially since it comes after a long gap and at the start of second phase of league competition. He said it was a foregone conclusion that both mid-table sides would go all out for a win and bag full points to get themselves a strong start to the second half of the season.

"All these factors make me admit how tough the encounter will be and no one can predict the result," said Almahdi. Al Gharafa are seventh in the standings with 11 points, only three behind Al Ahli who are sixth. Their first-phase match had ended in a 1-1 draw.

Ali said Al Gharafa had a slight advantage over Al Ahli. "Both teams have quality players. In my opinion, the team having more ball possession and making less mistakes will win the game. We've many distinguished players in our ranks and, with more harmony and team spirit, we can achieve a positive result," he said.

Both sides go into the game under new coaches. Al Gharafa replaced Frenchman Jean Fernandez with Turk Bulent Uygun, who has previously coached Umm Salal for long, while Al Ahli now rely on their youth team coach George Jorge following the resignation of fellow-Spaniard Joaquin Caparros due to personal reasons.

Ali pointed out the fact that, with a new coach at the helm, the players were more excited and motivated, and are ready to play to



Defender Almahdi Ali (right) says Al Gharafa's match against Al Ahli on Friday would be a difficult one.

their full potential. "We truly aim at changing the team's image in the league and improving our position in the table," he said.

The player gave his takes on Al Gharafa's performance in the first phase and his expectations from the second. "Definitely, there's a huge difference between the first and second phase mainly because of the weather factor. We're very keen to improve our seventh place, which belittles Al Gharafa's reputation and history," he said.

He commented on Dutch star Wesley Sneijder joining the side, "There's no doubt that he's a big star with huge experience and credentials. I believe Al Gharafa

needed such a big name in the team. It's also a great opportunity for young players to benefit from his expertise. I'm lucky to be playing alongside a player of huge repute such as Sneijder."

The 25-year-old spoke about Al Gharafa's chances of winning the QNB Stars League title. "It's very difficult. The points we lost during the first phase made things tough for us. However, we still hope to be among the top-four teams. Also, we hope to beat Uzbek side Pakhtakor in the AFC Champions League play-off and qualify for the tournament proper. The QSL Cup triumph has further motivated us," he concluded. (qsl.com.qa)