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TENNIS

**Federer to open title defence against Slovenian Bedene**

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FOCUS

## 2,400 runners for today's Ooredoo Doha Marathon

Event features 10km run, half-marathon, full marathon, children's 1km fun run

By Sports Reporter  
 Doha

With as many as 2,400 runners, the sixth edition of Ooredoo Doha Marathon will begin today from the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA).

A host of internationally-renowned athletes, including multiple Olympic gold medalist Mo Farah, will be joined by enthusiastic runners from across Qatar's communities.

The Ooredoo Doha Marathon will begin at 6:30am and end at 11:30am, and all roads following the Corniche will be closed during this time.

To ensure the safety of spectators, organisers have requested that all visitors not participating, stand to the side of the road along the Corniche, or at the Finish and Starting line in MIA Park.

As part of the Ooredoo's vision to encourage more people to get fit and active, the company, in partnership with Qatar Tourism Authority, arranged a host of activities this week.

To inspire Qatar's children to live a more active life, some of the top international athletes visited Qatar Academy Primary School yesterday, and spoke about the determination it takes to be a professional athlete and rewards this brings.

A selected number of lucky Aspire Academy students were given the chance to take part in a training session with the athletes, led by Farah. The Marathon Master Class covered a host of subjects, such as warm-ups, pre-race preparation and stamina.

To ensure that Qatar's communities had the chance to take part in the

Ooredoo Doha Marathon preparations, the athletes also took part in a special 'Meet and Greet' at the Mall of Qatar on Wednesday night, taking the time to sign autographs, address the huge crowds and invite them all to attend the event.

Speaking about the Ooredoo Doha Marathon, Ooredoo CEO Waleed al-Sayed said, "Ooredoo is deeply grateful to such world-class athletes for taking the time to visit some of the schools in Qatar and people from across our country's communities. We believe that Qatar will soon be an internationally renowned sporting destination and we want to help nurture and inspire local talent to take part in this growth."

"We wish everyone the best of luck in today's race - whether you're a seasoned runner, or a beginner and thank you all for helping us show the world that #UnitedWeRun."

This year's marathon will once again feature courses for runners of all abilities, including a 10km run, half-marathon, full marathon and a special children's 1km fun run.

Prizes will be awarded to the best runners in a range of categories, based on age and gender.

As a special incentive for participants, Ooredoo has also announced that Nojoom members will be rewarded with 300 Nojoom Points for every kilometre they complete at the event.

Terms and conditions for the same and event details are available on the Ooredoo Qatar website.

The Elite athletes took part in a special 'Meet and Greet' at the Mall of Qatar on Wednesday night.



FOOTBALL / AFC U23 CHAMPIONSHIP

## Qatar not resting on their laurels as Oman loom large

AFC  
 Changzhou, China

Talismanic midfielder Akram Afif has said that Qatar remain focussed on the task in hand despite a morale boosting 1-0 win over Uzbekistan on the opening day of the AFC U23 Championship 2018.

An Almoez Ali strike gave Qatar a perfect start to their Group A campaign, but with a crunch game to come against regional rivals Oman today, Afif has said that his side should not get carried away by their early success.

"Our team really did well, and it was important to win that game," explained the 21-year-old, who plays in Belgium for Eupen.

"Yes, we won the game and got the three points, but that doesn't mean that we have won (the tournament). It's not enough, and right now we are only looking ahead to playing Oman."

With Qatar currently occupying second spot, China lead the way at the top of the group thanks to their comfortable 3-0 win over Oman, a margin of victory that came as no surprise to Afif.

"China are a very good team," he said whilst recalling the penalty he scored against the East Asians at the 2014 AFC U-19

Championship in Myanmar. "No one particular player stands out. They are all very good and they help each other out, and I think they will go far in this tournament."

Qatar will conclude their group stage matches against China at the Changzhou Olympic Sports Centre on Monday.

UZBEKISTAN BRACE FOR CHINA TEST

Captain Zabikhillo Urinboev believes Uzbekistan can rectify their poor start when they face China in the second round of Group A matches today.

The 22-year-old Pakhtakor striker was a star performer for his country in Tuesday's narrow 1-0 loss to Qatar, a result that, combined with China's 3-0 win over Oman, leaves the Central Asians currently occupying third place in Group A and needing a positive result against the host nation to realistically have any chance of progressing to the quarter-finals.

"After the first matchday results, it is fair to say that we are in a difficult situation," Urinboev said.

"We are busy preparing for the match against China because they are undoubtedly a strong opponent. Nevertheless, we will, of course, try to improve the current situation in the next game."

## Farah and co. hold training session with Aspire student-athletes

By Sports Reporter  
 Doha

Aspire Academy hosted four-time Olympic champion and six-time world champion Mo Farah, fellow British long-distance runner Chris Thompson, four-time Olympian Abdihakem Abdirahman from the USA, and Hendrik Pfeiffer from Germany yesterday.

The athletes, who are in Doha to take part in the Ooredoo Doha Marathon 2018, met with the young Aspire Academy athletes, spoke to them about their careers in sport and engaged them in warm-up exercises and a short training session, held on the Aspire outdoor athletics track.

Speaking on the sidelines of the visit, Farah said, "The kids see us winning on TV, but they don't see what it takes and what you have gone through to get to the top. That's why I appreciate opportunities like this when you can share experiences with young athletes."

Farah's told the young athletes that the key to his success include "hard work, commitment and your belief in yourself". He added: "I adopted an attitude that encouraged me not only to be better but be the best. I resolved to push myself to my highest potential and aimed to be more than just the British champion or a Europe champion but a world cham-



British long-distance star Mo Farah (left) runs with Aspire Academy student-athletes at the Aspire outdoor athletics track yesterday.

Nothing in life is given to you, you always have to work for it." When asked about the importance of rivalry in encouraging motivation, Thompson said, "I grew up with Mo Farah, we trained a lot together, we constantly battled each other. One time I was faster, the next time he was. Friendly competition and rivalry is definitely a good stimulus and can bring out the best in you and it definitely helped Mo and I get better when we were young." Commenting on the Academy's student-

athletes, Thompson said: "I'm very impressed. They are enthusiastic young lads with clearly a lot of talent. They have huge opportunities here and there is no doubt that they are on a pathway to become successful athletes." Meanwhile, praising the role of coaches in athlete development, Abdihakem Abdirahman said: "I have been with my coach for 25 years. He showed me the path and what I had to do in the different stages of my career to be successful. It's very important to surround yourself

with people that care about you." Abdihakem, who at 41 years of age is still competing at the top in marathons, extolled the student-athletes to find passion for their sport and find enjoyment in their sporting activity.

"When you love your sport and enjoy it, you are more likely to put in your all. That combination of passion and effort usually brings success and satisfaction," Farah agreed, and admitted that he might never have had his great career if his physical education teacher, Alan Watkinson, had not identified his talent and encouraged him to take up running and join a sports club from a young age. The support of his coaches, he admitted, played a crucial role in his career.

"You have to respect your coach, try to understand him, communicate with him and give him the right information. Then he will be able to get the best out of you."

German Pfeiffer said, like the student athletes, he is still learning from the likes of Farah, Thompson and Abdirahman. "It's a privilege for me to listen to these top athletes. I am still working hard on cultivating the right positive attitude that will drive me to be the best I can be." Some of the Aspire student-athletes, who attended the training session with the stars are travelling to Iten in Kenya for high altitude training in the coming period, and Pfeiffer, who will also be heading to train there, expressed his willingness to train with them if possible.



An Almoez Ali strike against Uzbekistan gave Qatar a perfect start to their Group A campaign at the AFC U23 Championship on Tuesday.



## INTERVIEW

## Zverev must be patient, says Becker

Reuters  
Melbourne

**B**oris Becker was a man in a hurry when he took Wimbledon by storm to win the title as a precocious 17-year-old in 1985 but says today's game requires a little more patience.

**Alexander Zverev**, Germany's latest tennis hope and the man many predict can go some way to emulating Becker's feats, found that out last year when, despite rising to fourth in the world rankings, the grand slams proved frustrating.

A third-round defeat in the Australian Open by Rafael Nadal in five sets was nothing to be ashamed of and he also made the second week of Wimbledon, reaching the last 16.

But at the US Open, when he was being lauded a potential champion, he buckled under the expectations and blew out in the second round to fellow youngster Borna Coric, playing what he described as his worst match of the season.

He will arrive in Melbourne as the fourth seed for the Australian Open, but Becker has urged caution, saying Zverev needs to be ready to play the long game.

"For him the important thing is to get comfortably into the second week, get to the quarter-final and feel good about his game and then he will be very dangerous," Becker, who will be working as an analyst for Eurosport during the tournament, told Reuters by telephone.

"The tough thing when you are young is that you don't have any patience. You want it to happen yesterday. Playing a grand slam over two weeks is tough for a 20-year-old to keep the concentration and keep the rhythm going.

"It's easier when you're older and you have done it before. When you are 19 or 20 you want to play the final tomorrow!"

Becker, who stormed past Kevin Curran to win Wimbledon in 1985 and went on to win a total of six grand slams and top the rankings, is confident that Zverev will win a major.

"He has all the tools," he said. "He has

shown last year when he won two Masters beating Novak (Djokovic) in one final and Roger (Federer) in another, which is as hard as it gets," Becker said.

"He has the quality to do it over a week, but needs a bit more experience to do it over two weeks."

Zverev, who could face his older brother Mischa in the third round, is one of a number of rising stars who are trying to dislodge one of the greatest men's generations ever.

Becker believes Australian Nick Kyrgios is beginning to show the mentality to have a deep run in Melbourne.

Blocking the way though is the 36-year-old reigning champion Federer who shows no sign of being ready to hand over power.

"He must be celebrated and enjoyed because we'll never see a player like him again, at least not in my lifetime," Becker said.

"What I hope is that he, Nadal, Djokovic and (Andy) Murray are all still at the top when the 20 somethings take over, not after they have declined."



## FOCUS

## Kerber marches on in Sydney, Muller beaten by Paire

'Being now in the semis again here, it's really a good feeling, especially that I had the goal, to have a lot of matches before going to Melbourne'



Angelique Kerber of Germany hits a return against Dominika Cibulkov of Slovakia in their quarter-final at the Sydney International in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Sydney

**G**ermany's Angelique Kerber won a seventh straight match as she steamed into the semi-finals of the Sydney International yesterday boosting her confidence for next week's Australian Open.

Kerber, who began last year as No.1 before finishing at No.22, continued her 2018 resurgence with a thumping 6-3, 6-1 win over Slovakia Dominika Cibulkova.

The German will meet Italian qualifier and world No.100 Camila Giorgi, who upset Poland's former world No. 2 Agnieszka Radwanska 6-1, 6-2.

It is an impressive start to the new year for Kerber, having won her four matches at last week's mixed teams Hopman Cup in Perth before her three victories in Sydney.

"This start is not bad for 2018, for sure. Still, I'm just trying to focus on every match, trying to

learn from every single match," Kerber said.

"Being now in the semis again here, it's really a good feeling, especially that I had the goal, to have a lot of matches before going to Melbourne."

Kerber, who knocked out Venus Williams in her opening match in Sydney, said she was not yet back to her best form of 2016 when she won the Australian and US Opens.

"It's just the beginning of the year, so it's tough to say. But I'm feeling good - I'm healthy. I was working hard in the last few weeks," Kerber said.

"So now, I just am trying to playing like I played years before and enjoying it again."

The other semi-final will be an all-Australian affair between Ashleigh Barty and Daria Gavrilova.

Barty, ranked nineteenth, cruised past Barbora Strycova 6-3, 6-2, while 25th-ranked Gavrilova had direct passage to the last four when Spain's Wimbledon champion Garbine Muguruza withdrew after her win

over Kiki Bertens with a thigh injury.

"For us, it's perfect. We can go out and have a really good match, go hard at each other, and still shake hands, have a hug at the end of the match, and wish each other the best," Barty said.

Defending champion Gilles Muller was knocked out of the Sydney International men's event by unseeded Frenchman Benoit Paire 6-4, 6-4.

The 42nd-ranked Paire will meet rising young Australian star Alex de Minaur, who downed Spain's Feliciano Lopez in the night match, 6-4, 6-4.

Paire sent down 17 aces against the world No.25 to advance to his second semi-final in a week, after reaching the last four in India.

Italian fourth seed Fabio Fognini set up a semi-final against qualifier Daniil Medvedev following a 7-6 (7-4), 6-7 (7-4), 6-2 marathon against Frenchman Adrian Mannarino.

Medvedev is eyeing off his first career title after toppling veteran Italian Paulo Lorenzi 6-3, 6-3.



Camila Giorgi of Italy hits a return to Agnieszka Radwanska from Poland in their quarter-final at the Sydney International in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)

## SPOTLIGHT

## Vintage Ferrer stays on course in Auckland

AFP  
Auckland

**D**avid Ferrer may be heading into the twilight of his career but the 35-year-old rolled back the years as he beat Hyeon Chung to cruise into the ATP Auckland Classic semi-finals yesterday.

Spain's Ferrer, a four-time Auckland champion, disposed of the young Korean 6-3, 6-2 in their quarter final to set up a showdown with Juan Martin del Potro in the final four.

Del Potro beat Russian Karen Khachanov 7-6 (7/4), 6-3 in his quarter-final.

Chung had been a surprise package in the tournament, particularly with the way he outlasted fourth-seed John Isner in a three-set classic on Wednesday.

But he had no answer to the wiles of the veteran Ferrer and could only hold serve three times in the match.

Having seen the 21-year-old Chung chase down everything Isner fired across the net in the second round, Ferrer was in no

mood for long rallies and his plan to look for early winners paid off as he wrapped up the match in 74 minutes.

Ferrer, who has slipped from a career high number three to 38 has a 6-4 win record over the 13th ranked del Potro who struggled to get on top of Khachanov.

There were no break points in the first set but the Argentinian managed to break the Russian's first serve in the second set and felt it was an encouraging performance ahead of facing Ferrer.

"David is great fighter, we have a great relationship and it's going to be an interesting match to watch. I hope I can play even better than tonight," del Potro said.

In a battle between the 2016 and 2015 winners, the more recent champion Roberto Bautista Agut proved too good for Jiri Vesely with a 7-6, 7-2 victory to enter the semi-finals where he will play Robin Haase of the Netherlands today.

Haase won his quarter-final 6-4, 6-4 against Germany's Peter Gojowczyk who had beaten the top-seed and reigning champion Jack Sock the previous day.

## KOOYONG CLASSIC

## Bouchard puts pain behind her for first win of 2018

AFP  
Melbourne

**S**truggling star Eugenie Bouchard won her first match of the year yesterday, posting a 6-2, 6-0 defeat of Australian teen Destanee Aiava at the Kooyong Classic in Melbourne.

The Canadian had gone down in three group matches last week at the Hopman Cup in Perth, where she suffered a buttock injury, and was eliminated in the first round at Hobart on Monday, denting her Australian Open preparations.

"I was happy to be out there in a pretty official-feeling match," said the 23-year-old. "There were stands, a crowd, and an umpire. It was like a practice match but kind of real."

With time running out for her to be ready for the opening Grand Slam of the year, the 2014 Wimbledon finalist, now ranked 83rd after a dismal last season, eagerly accepted a late invitation for a hit-out at Kooyong, a non-tour event.

Bouchard, who made the Australian Open semi-finals in 2015 and the quarters a year later, said her game was a work in progress after changing her routine and coaches in the off-season.

"It's progressing," she said. "I was just focusing on myself and the things I have to work on throughout the match."

The Canadian, who said her buttock injury was now fine, added that she was keen to eliminate all memories of a poor 2017 campaign.

"I don't want to feel any continuation of 2017, it really wasn't a good year for me. I worked

hard in the off-season, changing some things," she said.

In other matches at the exhibition event, France's Richard Gasquet won his second match, overcoming Australian Matthew Ebden 6-4, 7-6 (7/4).

"It was perfect in these conditions," the 31-year-old said. "I'm preparing my game to be ready for the Open and to perform there."

Gasquet, who has never gone past the Australian Open fourth round, added: "I'll keep up the training. I have no injuries and am feeling great."

World number five Dominic Thiem, meanwhile, withdrew from his scheduled match as he recovers from illness, disrupting his Grand Slam plans.

**Bouchard, who made the Australian Open semi-finals in 2015 and the quarters a year later, said her game was a work in progress after changing her routine and coaches in the off-season**

The Austrian arrived late in Melbourne from Doha after pulling out prior to last weekend's Qatar Open semi-final with Gael Monfils after contracting a virus.

He lost in straight sets to Novak Djokovic on Wednesday and decided against playing any more matches.

Thiem's substitute, Russian Andrey Rublev, beat Lucas Pouille of France 3-6, 6-1, 6-4.

"I only arrived yesterday," said Rublev, who made the Doha final. "I'm happy to be here and pleased with my preparation after this match."

"We'll see what happens in a couple of days (at the Open)."

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

# Federer to open title defence against Slovenian Bedene

World number one and top seed Nadal takes on Estrella Burgos, Halep takes on Australian wildcard Aiava

Reuters  
Melbourne

Roger Federer will open his Australian Open title defence against Slovenian Aljaz Bedene next week, while top seed Rafa Nadal, the losing finalist last year, was paired with Dominican Victor Estrella Burgos at the draw yesterday.

Women's top seed Simona Halep of Romania faces Australian wildcard Destanee Aiava in the first round, with second seed Caroline Wozniacki starting out against Halep's compatriot Mihaela Buzarnescu.

Serena Williams will not defend the women's title having had her first child last year but 2008 champion Maria Sharapova, who failed a drugs test at the tournament in 2016, is back unseeded after a ban and will face Germany's Tatjana Maria.

Williams's sister Venus, who lost to her sibling in the final last year, is seeded fourth and the 37-year-old was handed a tricky first encounter against Swiss former world number seven Belinda Bencic, who is 17 years her junior.

Men's third seed Grigor Dimitrov will face a qualifier, with Alexander Zverev, ranked fourth, playing Italian Thomas Fabbiano but with 2014 champion Stan Wawrinka, returning after surgery, in his section of the draw.

Young gun Zverev had little luck in his first Australian Open draw as a top five seed with either Wawrinka, who plays Ricardas Berankis, or Novak Djokovic potentially standing in his path in the quarter-finals.

Six-times Melbourne Park champion Djokovic, seeded 14th after missing the back end of last season with an elbow injury, will take on American lefthander Donald Young in his first match with mercurial Frenchman Gael Monfils looming in round two.

Federer also has Milos Raonic, Juan Martin del Potro, David Goffin and Tomas Berdych in his quarter of the draw, while Nadal would appear to have the easier section, although former U.S. Open champion Marin Cilic looms as a last-eight opponent.

If the draw goes to seeding, Dimitrov would face American Jack Sock in the last eight, with ailing world number five Dominic Thiem, who withdrew from Kooyong because of illness on Thursday, taking on Zverev.



Switzerland's Roger Federer waves to the crowd as he stands near the men's trophy during the official draw ceremony ahead of the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)

## Australian Open rules to prevent first-round farce

Players could forfeit their prize money if they retire from first-round singles matches at the Australian Open, under new rules aimed at limiting the early injury withdrawals which have long caused controversy at Grand Slams.

Players will also be able to claim 50 percent of their prize money if they pull out before their first match, an incentive designed to allow a replacement to play instead.

With tens of thousands of dollars at stake just for playing in round one, early injury pull-outs have often caused suspicion at Grand Slams, particularly at last year's Wimbledon.

Eight players retired from the first round at the All-England Club, including the opponents of Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic during the second sets of their

matches on Centre Court.

"A player should not go on court if he knows he should not finish," Federer said at the time, while Djokovic noted his opponent, Martin Klizan, even "had issues walking onto court" with a calf injury. Now, under new rules by the International Tennis Federation (ITF), any Grand Slam player who withdraws after 1200 local time yesterday before the tournament draw will still receive 50 percent of first round prize money.

Their replacement - a "lucky loser" from the qualifying tournament - will get the other 50 percent of the first-round prize money. But players who do not "perform to the required professional standard" in round one, including by retiring, also risk being fined their prize money, the new rules say.

### 'Couldn't care less'

Australian bad boy Bernard Tomic was fined a third of his £35,000 (\$47,500) prize money for unsportsmanlike conduct at Wimbledon, after saying he felt "bored" and "couldn't care less" following a straight-sets defeat on day one.

Any repeat this year and he would lose the lot. A similar controversy blew up at the Auckland Classic this week when four players pulled out before their opening matches, citing injury or illness. Simply by turning up, they were eligible for prize money and avoided a fine. Chris Kermode, executive chairman of the men's tour, the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP), promised a shake-up, although he accepted the players' reasons for withdrawing.

"Ranking points, player withdrawals and how we deal with that is something we've got to and are looking at," he told Fairfax Media in Auckland.

In a separate rule change designed to get matches started more quickly, warm-up times will be strictly enforced. Players will be fined up to US\$20,000 for taking more than one minute after walking on court to get to the coin toss. They will also be restricted to five minutes' warm-up time on court, and another one minute before the first point.

However, plans for a shot clock to enforce a 25-second time limit between points have been shelved, and will only be used in the qualifying tournament at Melbourne Park. New rules reverting Grand Slams to 16 seeds from the current 32 are due to come into force in 2019.

FOCUS

# Serena absence gives chance for a new superstar to emerge

Women's tennis starts its 2018 campaign with the usual early focus on the Australian Open and a huge question mark over who can fill the yawning gap left by the absence of Serena Williams.

No one was able to get anywhere close last year, not just in terms of consistently winning the biggest tournaments but also when it comes to charisma. Williams left Melbourne a year ago with a 23rd grand slam title under her belt but soon hung up her racket for the remainder of 2017 upon discovering she was eight weeks pregnant at the time of her triumph.

Her forced hiatus will extend past this year's tournament after she decided last week that she was not fully match-ready, giving the chasing pack more opportunities to stamp their authority on the women's game.

Boris Becker, who knows a bit about both winning grand slams and star appeal, believes the landscape at the top of the women's game is just too confused at the moment. "I think there is a real opportunity for the next superstar. It's not clear cut," he told Reuters.

"(Simona) Halep is number one but she could win the Australian Open, that's good and that's bad. I think the sport needs a strong rivalry because that's good for fans. But the women's game doesn't have that at the moment."

The remaining 2017 majors were



shared by three rising stars of the game, with Latvian teen Jelena Ostapenko storming to the French Open title, Garbine Muguruza winning Wimbledon and Sloane Stephens returning from injury to lift the U.S. Open crown. The world rankings saw three new names ascend to the top last season with big-serving Czech Karolina Pliskova's two-month reign ended by Spain's Muguruza in September, before Romania's Halep took over to end the year in pole position.

However, perhaps the most significant indicator of who could shine brightest in 2018 came in October when Caroline Wozniacki battled to a maiden WTA Finals title, displaying a new brand of ruthless tennis that suggested a first grand slam was imminent.

The Dane had lost six straight finals before winning the Pan Pacific Open in Tokyo a month earlier and she carried that momentum to Singapore before starting the season with a solid showing in Auckland to move up to second in the world rankings. "For me, the biggest thing was when I lost the first six finals of the year, I didn't

let it really put me down," the 27-year-old said after her Singapore triumph. "I looked at the positive and said I put myself in contention almost every week and eventually it will have to turn."

As Williams sits out a fourth straight grand slam, Halep and Pliskova will join Wozniacki in a quest for a major breakthrough in Australia. Halep is probably the best placed to claim the first grand slam of the season, the Romanian cementing her number one status with a Shenzhen Open triumph.

Maria Sharapova, however, is the one player who can match Williams' intensity and single-minded desire for success, not to mention her status as a drawcard. The Russian is lurking in the shadows as a major contender as she continues to rebuild her career after a 15-month doping ban after she tested positive for meldonium at the 2016 Australian Open.

Despite irking her critics with a tendency to paint herself as a victim, the 30-year-old has been welcomed back with open arms by fans and tournament organisers alike. Injury and illness stalled her initial return

to the circuit but a Tianjin Open win in October and run to the Shenzhen Open semi-finals suggests the five-time major winner is nearing her best and the 2008 champion will expect to go deep in Melbourne.

One former champion who will not be at Melbourne Park is Victoria Azarenka, whose protracted custody battle for her young son has prevented the Belarusian from playing since Wimbledon last July.

With Muguruza an injury doubt after withdrawing from her first two events of the year, Ukrainian Elina Svitolina, improving Frenchwoman Caroline Garcia and Julia Goerges of Germany will also attract backing after solid early form. Becker, though, has his eye on another of his compatriots, the 2016 Melbourne Park champion Angelique Kerber. "It's so tough to predict," the German said. "Kerber can come back, I think she had a good winter training camp and did well at the Hopman Cup. "She did it two years ago in Melbourne and that will give her belief. You can't buy that feeling of how to win a slam." (Reuters)

## Serena says motherhood may make her better player

Look out, women's tennis. Serena Williams isn't quite back on tour, but she says she wants more Grand Slam titles and may be an even better player after becoming a mother. In an interview with *Vogue* magazine published Wednesday, Williams also recounts the harrowing medical ordeal she went through after giving birth to her daughter, Alexis Olympia Ohanian Jr., on September 1. Williams, 36, played an exhibition match in Abu Dhabi in late December but pulled out of this month's Australian Open, saying she was "super close" but not yet playing at the level needed to compete. She is now eyeing a return to the women's tour at the Indian Wells tournament in March. Williams, a 23-time Grand Slam champion, told *Vogue* she is determined to win more major titles and surpass the record of 24 Slams held by Australia's Margaret Court. "Maybe this goes without saying, but it needs to be said in a powerful way: I absolutely want more Grand Slams," she said. "I'm well aware of the record books, unfortunately. "It's not a secret that I have my sights on 25," said the 36-year-old Williams. Williams, who married Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian at a star-studded wedding in New Orleans in November, said becoming a mother may boost her quest. "Actually, I think having a baby might help," she said. "When I'm too anxious, I lose matches, and I feel like a lot of that anxiety disappeared when

Olympia was born. "Knowing I've got this beautiful baby to go home to makes me feel like I don't have to play another match," she said. "I don't need the money or the titles or the prestige. "I want them, but I don't need them," she said. "That's a different feeling for me." Williams told *Vogue* she had an emergency caesarean section after the baby's heart rate fell dangerously low during contractions. The surgery went well "and then everything went bad," she said. Williams, who has a history of blood clots, suffered from shortness of breath the day after the birth and told her doctors she needed a CT scan. Several small blood clots were found in her lungs, and Williams was put on an anticoagulant. "I was like, listen to Dr Williams!" she joked. More complications followed as intense coughing caused her C-section wound to open and a haematoma was found in her abdomen. After returning home, Williams said she was unable to get out of bed for six weeks. In the interview, Williams also discussed her rivalry with her older sister, Venus. "I know that her career might have been different if she had had my health," Serena said. "I know how hard she works," she said. "I hate playing her because she gets this look on her face where she just looks sad if she's losing. Solemn. It breaks my heart. "So when I play her now, I absolutely don't look at her, because if she gets that look, then I'll start feeling bad, and the next thing you know I'll be losing," she said.



## PREVIEW

# No reprieve for India in Centurion Test

'In this series and for the rest of the summer, we will be looking to see how best we can fit four fast bowlers into whatever formula we come up with'



South African bowler Kagiso Rabada (left) celebrates the dismissal of Indian batsman Virat Kohli (right) during the fourth day of the first Test in Cape Town. (AFP)

Reuters  
Cape Town

If India were hoping for a reprieve from fast and bouncy South African wickets in the second Test starting tomorrow, they will not find it in Pretoria, a ground where the home side have a formidable record.

South Africa romped to a 72-run victory in the first test of the three-game series at Newlands in Cape Town on Monday, a match that effectively needed just three days to be completed with one lost to rain.

The Pretoria wicket is likely to be similar, with perhaps not the same sideways movement of Newlands, and will provide another test of the Indian batsmen's bravery against a seam bowling barrage.

Vernon Philander looked at times unplayable in Cape Town, while the new leading bowler in test cricket, Kagiso Rabada, brings plenty of pace, fire and skill. He took 13 wickets in a test

against England at the venue two years ago.

Morne Morkel will be the third seamer, with Chris Morris likely to play in place of the injured Dale Steyn. He will also strengthen the batting.

There have been murmurings that South Africa may even select a fifth seamer and leave spinner Keshav Maharaj on the sidelines, with Duanne Olivier, Andile Phehlukwayo and uncapped Lungi Ngidi in the squad to offer that option.

"In this series and for the rest of the summer, we will be looking to see how best we can fit four fast bowlers into whatever formula we come up with," South Africa coach Ottis Gibson told reporters this week.

"When you are playing at home, you must play to your strengths. 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.

"We have to get stuck in and be tough with the bat and the

ball; get in their faces a bit and use our physicality in terms of our pace."

#### SHOW INTENT

India know what is coming and their success will be determined by how they handle the threat. They managed a match aggregate of 344 over their two innings in Cape Town and captain Virat Kohli has told his batsmen to take the attack to the home side.

"We need to have intent because of the kind of bowling attack they have," Kohli said.

"You need to find the perfect balance to do well in South Africa, especially where there is more bounce. You cannot be casual at the same time you cannot have loose shots also."

South Africa have a dominant record in Pretoria, with 17 wins and three draws in their 22 tests. Four of their last six victories have been by an innings, including against India in 2010, and the other two by more than 200 runs.

#### Always good to face new challenges, says Bumrah

India pacer Jasprit Bumrah who made his Test debut in the series opener against South Africa at Cape Town, yesterday said it's good to face new challenges. Bumrah said he is relishing the challenges posed by the wickets and the conditions which he was unfamiliar with before making it to the Test squad.

"It's always challenging when you come to a new country. The wicket is different, weather is different. So it's always good to face new challenges and when you play more and more you get to know the wickets and conditions," Bumrah told reporters here.

India lost the first match by 72 runs and are trailing 0-1 in the three-match series but the right-arm pacer said the team is focussed on correcting the mistakes and prepare accordingly.

"We are not focussing on the result because when ever we look far ahead we drift away from the plan," Bumrah said.

"We are taking each day at a time and take it forward from there. We are focusing on our preparations, as far as the wicket is concerned, I have not played over here but there is a lot of bounce in the wickets at the nets.

"We are looking to adapt to it and rectify the mistakes that we did in the first Test and go forward," he added.

Reacting to many cricket experts suggesting that Bumrah could be the X-factor during the South Africa tour because of his bowling action, the Gujarat seamer said: "I don't think about these things. I just wanted to be here and it is always a dream to play Test with all these players."

"Now I've played a Test and hopefully go and play more," Bumrah added. (IANS)

## SPOTLIGHT

## Australia recall White to replace Lynn for England ODIs

Reuters  
Melbourne

Cameron White will fancy playing his first one-day international in three years after replacing the injured Chris Lynn in the Australia squad for the five-match series against England beginning on Sunday.

A calf injury to explosive batsman Lynn opened an unlikely door for 34-year-old White, who played the last of his 88 ODIs in 2015 and has since been critical of a pro-youth policy he felt did not reward the performance of senior players.

"Cameron's in very good form, as his figures demonstrate. He's playing very well,"

selector Trevor Hohns said in a statement yesterday, referring to White's impressive displays for Melbourne Renegades in this year's Big Bash League. "He's one of the leading run-scorers in this season's BBL, he's experienced, he's a very smart cricketer and he's a good fielder. He ticks all the boxes for what we need at this stage."

White's unexpected selection ahead of Glenn Maxwell follows Tim Paine's shock and inspired inclusion in Australia's Ashes-winning team despite the wicketkeeper not even being Tasmania's number one choice.

Melbourne hosts the first one-dayer between the Ashes rivals, before the series moves on to Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide and Perth.

#### India, Oz tours are biggest challenges for England, says Buttler

Ahead of the five-match ODI rubber against Australia, starting on Sunday, English top-order batsman Jos Buttler yesterday rated the tours of India and Australia as the toughest challenges for his side. Buttler, who is also the vice captain of the 50-over side, feels the One-day International series, starting at the Melbourne Cricket Ground will be a "great test" for the Englishmen, who were humiliated 0-4 in the preceding Ashes Test rubber. "Coming here and going away to India are the two biggest challenges for us in the last few years. Massive challenges for us and exciting ones," Buttler was quoted as saying by ecb.co.uk. "The Australians became the world champions here at the MCG three years ago, so it will be a great test for us as a side. But the swashbuckling batsman is confident of turning things around in coloured outfit and indicated that they will stick to their own game plans in the series.

"We won't be trying to change much with the way we play. You got to be smart and adaptable to the conditions and try to play the type of cricket we normally play," he said. After the opener at the MCG, the visitors will play the second ODI in Brisbane on January 19, followed by the third game in Sydney on January 21. The final two games will be played at Adelaide (January 26) and Perth (January 28). The ODI rubber between Australia and England will be followed by a T20I tri-series also involving New Zealand.

#### ICC approves Perth Stadium to host all international formats

Perth Stadium is set to take over hosting duties from the historic WACA ground after the International Cricket Council (ICC) approved the newly-built venue to host all international formats, Cricket Australia (CA) said yesterday.

The 50,000-seater stadium will now become the main venue for cricket in Western Australia, and the fifth one-day international between Australia and England on Jan. 28 will be the first major sporting event held at the ground.

"The stadium is a magnificent asset for the state of WA and its sports fan," said Cricket Australia CEO James Sutherland. "We very much look forward to bringing this big Australia-England one-day match to Perth to the Stadium on 28 January."

The state-of-the-art stadium will also host matches from the domestic Big Bash League, Australian rules football and soccer. ICC match referee Richie Richardson said the stadium was "world class" after an inspection.

"The new Perth Stadium is a wonderful, refreshing, world class stadium, and I have no hesitation in recommending that the venue is approved for staging all three formats of international cricket," he added.

The ODI between Australia and England will be the fifth and final match of the series, which begins on Jan. 14. It follows the home side's dominant 4-0 Ashes test series win.

The WACA, which has hosted cricket matches since the early 1890s, will be turned into a boutique ground with a capacity of 10,000-15,000 by the local board.

## SELECTION

# Stokes, Livingstone in England squad for NZ Tests

AFP  
Sydney

All-rounder Ben Stokes was included in England's 16-man cricket squad for their Test tour of New Zealand yesterday, while Lancashire batsman Liam Livingstone got his first call up.

Seamer Mark Wood returns after struggling with injury, and Ashes underperformers Moeen Ali, James Vince and Mark Stoneman were all retained.

But Gary Ballance, Jake Ball and Tom Curran, who were all part of the Australia Test squad, miss out.

England play two Tests in New Zealand starting in Auckland on March 22 after being thrashed 4-0 by Australia in the Ashes series that ended in Sydney this week.

In the chastening campaign, Australia record four comprehensive wins - including two innings victories and a 10-wicket triumph.

Stokes missed the entire series in Australia after being banned from international duties while police investigate his alleged role in a fight outside a nightclub in

Bristol three months ago.

He kept his hand in by playing for Canterbury, his New Zealand birth province, for a month, but has since returned home to be with his wife and young family.

England selectors said he was in the frame "though his involvement remains subject to any relevant legal or disciplinary developments in relation to the incident in Bristol in September".

"Should the ECB Board receive formal confirmation that Stokes has either been charged or that he will face no charges, they would convene within 48 hours to make a decision on his availability for the team at that stage," they said.

Livingstone was rewarded for his form with Lancashire, with National Selector James Whitaker saying they had been watching him for some time.

"Liam has been a player that we have been impressed with for quite some time, having performed well in the county system with Lancashire and over the past couple of years with the England Lions," he said.

"He is a very talented and tough cricketer who has the ideal qualities and character to be

successful in the Test arena."

Selectors also recalled Durham seamer Wood, who is back in the Test squad for the first time since last year.

"After a frustrating period with injuries, Mark is now back to full fitness and is looking forward to being part of our Test plans," said Whitaker.

"He will play a significant part in our forthcoming ODI tour of Australia and we will be paying close attention to his efforts over the next few weeks."

England play five one-dayers against Australia, starting in Melbourne on Sunday.

From the Ashes Test squad, Yorkshire batsman Ballance, Nottinghamshire seamer Ball and Surrey all-rounder Curran all miss out and will return to county cricket.

"They are talented players and I am sure their time will come again," said Whitaker.

**England:** Joe Root (capt), Moeen Ali, James Anderson, Jonny Bairstow, Stuart Broad, Alastair Cook, Mason Crane, Ben Foakes, Liam Livingstone, Dawid Malan, Craig Overton, Ben Stokes, Mark Stoneman, James Vince, Chris Woakes, Mark Wood



England all-rounder Ben Stokes.

NBA

# Williams scores 50, milestone for Durant

Durant becomes the 44th player in league history to score 20,000 career points



Los Angeles Clippers' Lou Williams (right) shoots as Golden State Warriors' Nick Young (left) tries to block during the NBA game on Wednesday night. (USA TODAY Sports)

AFP

Los Angeles

**L**ou Williams scored a career-high 50 points as the Los Angeles Clippers spoiled a milestone night for Kevin Durant with a 125-106 victory on Wednesday. Durant became the 44th player in league history to score 20,000 career points, reaching the achievement with a pull-up jump shot late in the second quarter.

NBA finals MVP Durant needed 25 points to get to 20,000 and that is the number he finished on at the end of the first half. At age 29 he is the second youngest to do it behind LeBron James.

"He is one of the all-time greats," said Warriors coach Steve Kerr of Durant, who finished with 40 points. "There is going to be another one (milestone) in a month. He's Kevin Durant. The second youngest to do it... Who is the youngest? LeBron,

not bad company?"

Williams tallied 27 of his 50 points in the third quarter for the visiting Clippers who beat Golden State for the first time in more than three years. Williams also had eight three pointers and seven assists and rookie Tyrone Wallace came off the bench to score a season-high 22 points.

"It was hard to stop him," Durant said of Williams. "His pull-up three is a cash shot. We were too loose on him and let him go where ever he wanted."

Elsewhere, Jimmy Butler finished with 26 points and eight assists on as the Minnesota Timberwolves defeated struggling Oklahoma City 104-88, handing the Thunder their third consecutive loss. Centre Karl-Anthony Towns tallied 18 points and 12 assists for the Timberwolves who are playing some of their best basketball of the season and have three straight resounding home wins in a row.

When we start to compete on the defensive end like that we are tough to beat,"

said Butler. Butler, who is in his first season with Minnesota after coming over from the Chicago Bulls, said he is trying to be one of the veteran leaders on a young team. "Last year this team didn't understand how important every possession is," he said.

Andrew Wiggins finished with 19 points in 42 minutes of playing time for the Timberwolves. Thunder star Russell Westbrook had a game-high 38 points and 10 rebounds but he didn't get much help from his supporting cast.

Carmelo Anthony continues to struggle with his new team as he finished with 15 points and one rebound. Paul George was the only other Thunder player in double figures with 13 points as Oklahoma City has lost five of their last seven games.

The loss drops the Thunder to 22-20 on the season and into sixth place as they dropped below Portland in the Western Conference standings.

Minnesota is on the rise having beaten New Orleans, Cleveland and Oklahoma City in recent home games thanks to their improving defence and consistently solid offence. Minnesota had won seven of eight games before a disappointing East Coast road trip featured losses at Brooklyn and Boston.

Then the Wolves beat New Orleans at home and led by as many as 34 points, a season-high mark to that point. Hosting James and Cleveland on Monday, Minnesota dominated play, led by as many as 41 points on its way to a 127-99 victory.

RESULTS

Golden State 106, LA Clippers 125; Brooklyn 80, Detroit 114; New York 119, Chicago 122 (OT); Denver 97, Atlanta 110; Houston 121, Portland 112; Memphis 105, New Orleans 102; Milwaukee 110, Orlando 103; Minnesota 104, Oklahoma City 88; Charlotte 111, Dallas 115; Indiana 106, Miami 114; Washington 104, Utah 107

NHL

# Suter's goal lifts Wild to win over Blackhawks

Reuters  
Chicago

**R**yan Suter's go-ahead goal early in the third period proved to be the winner as the Minnesota Wild held on for a 2-1 victory against the Chicago Blackhawks on Wednesday night at the United Center in Chicago. Suter's strike came with both teams short-handed 3:03 into the third.

The 13-year veteran's dragging wrist shot from the right circle sailed just above Anton Forsberg's glove, with Mikko Koivu and Mikael Granlund assisting. Jonas Brodin also had a goal for Minnesota (23-17-4), which snapped its two-game skid.

Suter's goal was his sixth of the season and Brodin's was his fourth. Brent Seabrook scored the lone goal for Chicago (21-16-6). It was Seabrook's first goal since the Blackhawks' opening-night 10-1 rout of Pittsburgh on Oct. 5. The Blackhawks had won two straight games.

The Wild were coming off a couple of tough losses, 7-2 at Colorado last Saturday and 3-2 in overtime versus Calgary on Tuesday. Devan Dubnyk stopped

34 of 35 shots for Minnesota. Anton Forsberg made 25 saves for Chicago.

Seabrook tucked in a rebound of Michal Kempny's one-timer off Dubnyk's blocker with 7:36 remaining in the first period to put Chicago up 1-0. Nick Schmaltz, playing in his 100th NHL game, was credited with a secondary assist.

Minnesota challenged the goal on the basis of offsides, but the call was upheld. The Wild answered one period later when Brodin's slap shot deflected off a defender's stick past Forsberg with 10:02 to go in the second.

Jason Zucker and Matt Dumba got the assists. Minnesota's Nino Niederreiter missed his second straight game with a lower-body injury. Chicago made waves on the trade front before the game, dealing Richard Panik and Laurent Dauphin to Arizona for Anthony Duclair and Adam Clendening. Prior to puck drop, Chicago's Patrick Kane and Minnesota's Eric Staal were named NHL All-Stars for the seventh and fifth times, respectively.

The Blackhawks continue their six-game homestand today against Winnipeg, who then visit the Wild tomorrow.



Vinnie Hinostroza of Chicago Blackhawks (left) tries to keep the puck away from Minnesota Wild defenseman Ryan Suter during the third period of the NHL game in Chicago. (USA TODAY Sports)

FOCUS

# Grace soars to joint lead of SA Open

Reuters  
Johannesburg

**S**outh African Branden Grace carded three eagles on his way to a seven-under-par 65 for a share of the lead with American Chase Koepka after the first round of the European Tour's South African Open yesterday.

Grace, the highest ranked player in the field at number 30 in the world, also recorded three birdies and two bogeys as he attacked the pins, particularly on the front nine. All his eagles came on par-five holes, the second, eighth and 15th, the last following an excellent 20-foot putt.

Koepka, the younger brother of 2017 US Open champion Brooks, carded an eagle and seven birdies to go with two bogeys. The pair were one shot ahead of England's Chris Paisley, who had seven

birdies and a bogey in his round of 66. South African major winners Ernie Els (71), Retief Goosen (69) and Charl Schwartzel (69) all had solid opening rounds, but Trevor Immelman carded 79 on a day to forget for the 2008 US Masters champion.

Defending champion Graeme Storm from England struggled to an opening 75. The tournament is the second oldest Open championship in the world having first been formally played in 1903.

LEADING SCORES

(RSA unless noted):  
65 – Branden Grace, Chase Koepka (USA)  
66 – Chris Paisley (ENG)  
67 – Nacho Elvira (ESP), Bradley Neil (SCO), Erik van Rooyen, Richard Sterne  
68 – Ulrich van der Berg, Jacques Blaauw, Kyle McClatchie, Tyrone Ferreira, Garrick Higgo, Jacques Kruijswijk, Adrien Saddler (FRA)

# Qatar tennis team to take part in tournaments in Turkey



Qatar's Jabor al-Mutawa.

**Doha:** The Qatari tennis team will participate in three futures tournaments to be staged in Antalya, Turkey from January 15. The Qatari squad includes Mubarak Shanan, Mousa Shanan and Jabor al-Mutawa. The Turkey Tennis Federation has given wild cards to the three players to participate in the main draw of the three futures tournaments.

FRANCE SHOOTING TEAM HOLDS ITS WINTER TRAINING CAMP AT LUSAIL COMPLEX

The French shooting team (for rifle and pistol events) has been holding its winter training camp at Lusail International Shooting Complex

since last week. The camp, which will conclude tomorrow, is held as part of French team's preparation for the upcoming tournaments.

The French team includes Jean Quiquampoix, who claimed the silver medal in the men's 25 m rapid fire pistol event at Rio Olympics and Alexis Raynaud, who clinched bronze in the men's 50 m rifle three positions event at Rio Games.

Nicolas Schianchi, coach of the French team extended his thanks to the Qatar Shooting and Archery Association for hosting the French team and for the support provided to his players during the training camp.

GOLF

# Europe's Ryder hopefuls face Asia in EurAsia Cup

AFP

Kuala Lumpur

**R**yder Cup captain Thomas Bjorn will run the rule over a heavyweight European team when he skips them against Asia in this week's EurAsia Cup. Bjorn, who will captain Europe against USA in September, has six Ryder Cup veterans among his players as they take on Team Asia from today.

All 12 of Bjorn's team in Kuala Lumpur are European Tour winners, including world number nine Henrik Stenson and Race to Dubai champion Tommy Fleetwood. It gives Denmark's Bjorn a great chance to test players in a team environment before the showdown against USA in Paris. But despite Europe's emphatic 18 1/2 to 5 1/2

win over Asia last time around in 2016, Bjorn said he is taking nothing for granted. "We're very well aware that Asia has never fielded a stronger team than they do this time," the Dane said, according to the European Tour website.

"Golf is a strange game. Whatever it says on the paper very rarely comes out on top. Golf in Asia is growing dramatically and the amount of players that are coming out of Asia in world golf shows where golf is going for the future."

Team Asia captain Arjun Atwal of India said that his players also refused to see themselves as underdogs. "Definitely everybody knows we are underdogs – except my team," said Atwal. "There is no such thing as an underdog in match play golf. You can be underdogs on paper, but once the matches start, anything can happen."

The Asians have already proved they can match the Europeans, after they held them 10-

10 at the inaugural EurAsia Cup in 2014. Leading players on Atwal's team include world number 36 Yuta Ikeda from Japan and world number 49 Kiradech Aphibarnrat of Thailand, Anirban Lahiri of India and South Korean star An Byeong-Hun. Promising young Malaysian Gavin Green, the latest Asian Tour Order of Merit winner, is among a handful on the Asian side playing in the event at the Glenmarie Golf and Country Club for the first time. The \$4.8mn EurAsia Cup runs from today to Sunday at Glenmarie Golf and Country Club. A total of 24 points are on offer, meaning the first team to 12.5 points will win.

SCHEDULE:

**Today, January 12:** Six fourball matches  
**Tomorrow, January 13:** Six foursome (alternate shot) matches  
**On Sunday, January 14:** 12 singles



Asia captain Arjun Atwal of India (centre right) and Europe captain Thomas Bjorn of Denmark pose with their teammates ahead of the EurAsia Cup golf tournament in Kuala Lumpur. (AFP)

## LEAGUE CUP

# Neymar strikes as PSG storm into semis

PSG will travel to Rennes for semi-finals at the end of the month

AFP  
Paris

Neymar scored a second-half penalty as four-time defending champions Paris Saint-Germain toiled before overcoming 10-man Amiens 2-0 to reach the semi-finals of the French League Cup on Wednesday night.

PSG were again without leading scorer Edinson Cavani, who also missed Sunday's French Cup rout of Rennes after returning late from his Christmas and New Year break in Uruguay.

Amiens' hopes of springing an upset were heavily undermined by the dismissal of goalkeeper Regis Gurtner on 34 minutes for a foul on Kylian Mbappe after charging out of his area.

And Neymar eventually made the visitors' numerical advantage count by winning and converting a spot-kick eight minutes into the second half at the Stade de la Licorne.

Mbappe, earlier denied by a fingertip save from Jean-Christophe Bouet, was then thwarted by a combination of the substitute keeper and the crossbar before firing another effort narrowly wide.

Marquinhos also struck the woodwork after connecting with a cross from Giovanni Lo Celso, but Adrien Rabiot wrapped up a remarkable 35th consecutive win in domestic cup ties for PSG with a glancing header from an Angel Di Maria corner on 78 minutes.

The goal was given following consultation with the video assistant referee (VAR) — being used for the rest of the competition as a test ahead of its expected arrival in Ligue 1 next season — after goal-line technology failed to award it.

"Our team worked hard but we didn't shine like on Sunday, but we also didn't concede chances. It was easier to win because we played with an extra man," said PSG coach Unai Emery.

PSG will travel to Rennes, who they thrashed 6-1 in the last 64 of the French Cup, in the semi-finals at the end of



Paris Saint-Germain's Neymar attempts to get past Amiens' Serge during the French League quarter-finals. (Reuters)

the month, with Monaco set to host Montpellier in the other last-four tie.

"All teams prefer to play at home. But we will make another trip to Rennes full of desire to reach the final and win the title," Emery added.

Isaac Mbenza scored with four minutes left as Montpellier snatched a 1-0 win at

Angers, while Adrien Hunou struck twice late on as Rennes defeated Toulouse 4-2. Monaco became the first side to reach the last four of the competition on Tuesday as goals from Thomas Lemar and Adama Diakhaby saw Leonardo Jardim's team overcome Cote d'Azur rivals Nice 2-1 at the Allianz Riviera.

**FRENCH LEAGUE CUP RESULTS**  
Quarter-finals: Rennes 4 (Yago 21-og, Bourigeaud 42, Hunou 86, 90+3) Toulouse 2 (Sylla 40, Sanogo 63); Amiens 0 Paris Saint-Germain 2 (Neymar 53-pen, Rabiot 78) Angers 0 Montpellier 1 (Mbenza 86)  
Play-off: Nice 1 (Plea 18) Monaco 2 (Lemar 3, Diakhaby 37)

## Zidane pens new Real Madrid deal until 2020

Madrid: Real Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane on Wednesday confirmed that he has signed a contract extension which will keep him at the European champions until 2020. "It's signed," said the French star after his side drew 2-2 with Numancia to progress to the quarter-finals of the Copa del Rey 5-2 on aggregate.

After a dream start at Real, with eight trophies out of a possible 10, Zidane has endured a tough season with his side 16 points behind Barcelona in the La Liga title race.

And the 45-year-old cautioned: "I'm enjoying what I do every day, because that's the way it is. I can't imagine myself as a coach in two, three years, because things are not like that. I know how it goes, nothing more, even with this contract it does not change anything."

On Wednesday, Real fielded an almost unrecognisable team and struggled into the Copa del Rey last-eight. Zidane could afford to rest his superstars with one eye on La Liga and the Champions League last 16 with a clash against Paris Saint-Germain next month. However, they were far from convincing at the Bernabeu. Lucas Vazquez scored both of Real's goals after the 11th and 59th minutes.

But on both occasions, their modest visitors fought back thanks to a brace from Guillermo on the stroke of half-time and then after 82 minutes. Numancia ended the game with 10 men after captain Dani Calvo was red-carded in the dying moments.

Leganes, a modest club from the Madrid suburbs, reached the quarter-finals of the Copa del Rey for the first time in their 89-year existence. Despite losing 2-1 at Villarreal, who are currently sixth in La Liga, Leganes progressed on away goals having won the first leg 1-0.

Moroccan international Nabil El Zhar scored the crucial away goal for mid-table Leganes on the half-hour mark. In the



night's other early second leg tie, last season's runners-up Alaves downed third division Formentera 2-0 for a 5-1 aggregate win.

Last night, three-time defending champions Barcelona were playing Celta Vigo with the two sides locked at 1-1.

### SPANISH COPA DEL REY LAST 16, SECOND LEG RESULTS

Alaves 2 (Demirovic 55, Pedraza 90+1) Formentera 0

Alaves win 5-1 on aggregate Villarreal 2 (Raba 48, Cheryshev 89) Leganes 1 (El Zhar 31)

Aggregate score 2-2, Leganes through on away goals

Real Madrid 2 (Lucas Vazquez 10, 59) Numancia 2 (Guillermo 45, 82)

Real Madrid win 5-2 on aggregate

**Played Tuesday**

Atletico Madrid 3 (Carrasco 57, Gameiro 74, Vitolo 81) Lleida 0

Atletico Madrid win 7-0 on aggregate

Valencia 4 (Vietto 30, 48, 66, Maksimovic 54) Las Palmas 0

Valencia win 5-1 on aggregate

## FOCUS

## Mancini wants to fulfil dream as Italy coach



AFP  
Milan

Former Italy international Roberto Mancini said Wednesday he wanted to take over as Italy national football coach to fulfil his dream of winning the World Cup. Mancini, 53, is positioning himself among the favourites to manage the four-time World Cup winners, with Chelsea manager Antonio Conte and former Bayern Munich coach Carlo Ancelotti, also being touted as candidates.

"I have a dream, to win as national coach what I couldn't win as a player — a World Cup," Zenit Saint Petersburg coach Mancini said in an interview to *Gazzetta dello Sport*.

"I've been working on the pitch every day for 40 years as a player and a coach. Besides, I'm young, I could always return to clubs after the national team. I've worked in big clubs and won. Coaching the national team is a beautiful thing. It would be an honour, a source of pride. And winning a World Cup or European Championships even more."

Mancini never became a regular with Italy during his ten-year international career during which the former Lazio and Sampdoria forward won 36 caps and scored four goals. He reached the semi-finals of Euro 1988, and was on the squad that finished third in the 1990 World Cup in Italy.

Giampiero Ventura was fired as coach last November days after Italy's shock failure to reach the World Cup final for the first time in 60 years. His successor will be appointed after elections for Italian Football Federation (FIGC) president on January 29, with outgo-

ing boss Carlo Tavecchio saying he did not expect that before June.

Mancini joined Zenit, currently second in the Russian league, last June and is under contract until 2020.

"Money wouldn't be a problem," continued Mancini when asked of the 5mn euro (\$5.6mn) budget reportedly set aside by FIGC for the coaching role. "Let's make it clear though, we're just talking here: I have a contract with Zenit, who are doing well."

Mancini has won silverware with all clubs he has managed. He led Manchester City in 2012 to their first English title in 44 years, and won three Serie A titles with Inter Milan and Italian Cups with Inter, Fiorentina and Lazio, and a Turkish Cup with Galatasaray.

And despite their recent woes he sees potential in the demoralised Azzurri. "There are good young people there, I like (Andrea) Belotti, (Lorenzo) Pellegrini, and (Alessio) Romagnoli, who can still grow a lot. And more are coming through every season.

"Italians have something more. The materials are there to do a good job, perhaps we need to give a common approach to all the youth teams as happened when I was there."

"I'd like to see (federation) jobs for former players, but not just by virtue of who they were. Only those with something to give, with passion and charisma. And they'd have to be in roles proportionate to their knowledge and their experience, symbols don't help anyone."

Mancini added he would be favourable towards a return of in-form Nice striker Mario Balotelli. "He's only 27, he has to go back to the national team. Someone like him can decide certain matches on his own."

## ROUND-UP

## France halts goal-line technology

The French league (LFP) has decided to "immediately suspend" the use of goal-line technology after a series of glitches with the system, LFP director general Didier Quillot said yesterday. The decision covers all matches under the jurisdiction of the LFP, notably Ligue 1 and the French League Cup, and comes in the wake of two errors during Wednesday's League Cup quarter-finals.

France is also trialling the video assistant referee (VAR) system in the League Cup — from the quarter-finals onwards — with a view to introducing it in Ligue 1 next season. It has also encountered hitches while being tested by several countries, although FIFA is hoping to use the VAR at this year's World Cup in Russia.

**REFeree ADMITS ERROR IN WORLD CUP PLAY-OFF**  
The Romanian referee in a fateful World Cup play-off between Switzerland and Northern Ireland in November has admitted making a mistake in awarding the Swiss a match-winning penalty. "It was a sad and not very nice moment for me," Ovidiu Hategan told Romanian television at a gala event for the country's football association this week.

Hategan awarded Switzerland a penalty after deeming Corry Evans

to have handled inside the area at Windsor Park, although replays clearly showed the ball having struck his shoulder. Switzerland's Ricardo Rodriguez duly converted and the Swiss won the game 0-1.

A goalless return leg draw in Basel saw the Swiss go through 1-0 on aggregate, booking them a place in Russia. Northern Ireland's dreams of playing in the World Cup for the first time since 1986 were crushed.

Hategan was chosen as Romania's best referee last year by the country's association of professionals and amateurs. But he is not among the 36 referees chosen by FIFA for this summer's World Cup.

**MALOUDA TO LEARN BAN APPEAL FATE IN FEBRUARY**

Former Chelsea winger Florent Maloua will learn his fate over an appeal against a two-match ban in mid-February, the international Court of Arbitration for Sport said yesterday. The 37-year-old former France international was handed a two-match ban and \$3,500 (2,930 euros) fine after playing for French Guiana at last year's CONCACAF Gold Cup.

Because French Guiana is an overseas department of France, and therefore not a full member of world governing body FIFA, Maloua can play for the team, despite his 80 appearances from

France from 2004 to 2012. But the Gold Cup tournament uses FIFA rules, which has been deemed to make him ineligible.

The North and Central American confederation CONCACAF handed down the sanction after Maloua played in a 0-0 draw against Honduras in the United States in July.

CONCACAF awarded Honduras a 3-0 victory and fined the Guiana federation due to Maloua's participation. Maloua, who had previously played for Guiana in June in a different competition, told AFP on Wednesday that he was "within my rights" as he took his appeal to CAS.

Maloua played for Chelsea for six seasons, winning the Champions League in 2012, the Premier League in 2010 and the FA Cup three times. He has not played club football since featuring for the Delhi Dynamos in the Indian Super League more than a year ago.

**TOULOUSE OUTCAST MACHACH JOINS NAPOLI**

French midfielder Zinedine Machach has signed for Serie A leaders Napoli until June 2022, the Italian club confirmed. There 22-year-old midfielder saw his Toulouse contract terminated last month following a training ground bust-up with coaching staff. Machach spent last season on loan at Mar-

seille and has scored three goals in 38 Ligue 1 games.

### JAPAN'S 'KAZU' RENEWS CONTRACT AT 51

Former Japan striker Kazuyoshi Miura, who will turn 51 next month, renewed his contract with Yokohama FC yesterday, extending his record as the oldest player in the J-League. The golden oldie, admirably nicknamed "King Kazu" for his spirited grit and style, will kick off his 33rd career season this year after a stunning 2017 in which he surpassed the previous professional longevity record set by England legend Stanley Matthews.

Miura also became the oldest player to score a competitive goal in a professional match last year, another record held previously by Matthews. "I was able to renew the contract this season too," Miura said second-division Yokohama FC. Miura shot to fame in the early 1990s, becoming Asia's best-known footballer and helping to put the Japanese game on the map after the professional J-League was launched in 1993.

He blazed a trail for Japanese players in Europe when he joined Italy's Genoa in 1994, and scored 55 goals in 89 games for Japan. Miura has said he wants to play on until he's 60.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Flores top target for Stoke manager job

The Guardian  
London

Quique Sanchez Flores is Stoke's first choice to succeed Mark Hughes. It is understood a Stoke delegation met the Espanyol manager, who was in charge at Watford for the 2015-16 season, in Barcelona on Wednesday.

Stoke sacked Hughes last Saturday after the 2-1 FA Cup defeat at League Two Coventry, which followed a run of seven losses in 10 Premier League games. They were interested in Derby's manager, Gary Rowett, until he signed a new contract on Tuesday.

The Republic of Ireland manager, Martin O'Neill, remains under consideration.

Flores guided Watford to a 13th-placed Premier League finish and reached the FA Cup semi-finals. The Spaniard took charge at Espanyol in the summer of 2016, on a three-year deal, and they finished eighth in La Liga last term. They were 14th going into the match at Levante on Thursday.

O'Neill and his coaching team agreed contract extensions with the Football Association of Ireland last October. But the 65-year-old said after the Republic lost their World Cup qualifying play-off the following month that he would need to have "a real think" about his future, and still nothing has been signed.



SPOTLIGHT

# United offer £25mn for Arsenal's Sanchez

Chilean has already agreed personal terms worth around £250,000 with Man City

By Fabrizio Romano and Ed Aarons  
The Guardian

**M**anchester United have made a bid to sign Alexis Sanchez from Arsenal as Jose Mourinho attempts to scupper Manchester City's hopes of securing the Chile forward this month.

Sanchez has already agreed personal terms worth around £250,000 a week with Pep Guardiola's side, with City having submitted a £20mn offer for the 29-year-old earlier this week. Arsenal have yet to respond to that but it is understood United have since entered the race with a bid in the region of £25mn.

Their proposal would also see Sanchez earn more than proposed by City, with Mourinho believed to be confident of winning the race despite the forward having played under Guardiola at Barcelona. United have offered Arsenal the opportunity to sign Henrikh Mkhitaryan, although a stumbling block to that deal could be the Armenian international's wages, which are believed to be around £200,000 a week.

Sanchez's representatives have already held talks with City having agreed to join them last summer, only for the deal to collapse when Arsenal failed to sign Thomas Lemar as a replacement on deadline day. He remains a target for Arsene Wenger, although the Frenchman is also keen on signing Malcom from Bordeaux and held preliminary talks with his agent this week. The Brazilian forward is understood to have another firm proposal to leave this month, although not from United or Tottenham, who have both been linked with the 20-year-old in recent weeks.

Bordeaux are demanding a fee of €50mn (£44.5mn) and would prefer to retain Malcom until the end of the season. The situation is complicated by his ownership status, with the French side reported to own only 50% of his economic rights and the remainder held by a number of agents.

Meanwhile, Wenger insists Sanchez remains committed to Arsenal even though the Gunners boss left out his



Alexis Sanchez came on as a substitute in the first leg of the League Cup semi-final against Chelsea on Wednesday night. (AFP)

unsettled star for the League Cup semi-final clash with Chelsea. Wenger opted to keep Sanchez on the bench until the last 25 minutes of Wednesday's 0-0 first leg draw at Stamford Bridge.

It was a bold gamble by Wenger given the League Cup represents one of the few chances for Arsenal to win silverware in another frustrating season. Some Arsenal fans and pundits say Sanchez no longer gives 100% because his contract expires at the end of the season and he has so far refused to sign a new deal amid reports he is a divisive figure in the dressing room.

Wenger claimed he is still completely focused on the Arsenal cause despite a series of lacklustre performances. "The performance of Alexis Sanchez and the

commitment does not depend on the duration of his contract, just depends on the fact when he's on the football pitch he wants to play," Wenger said.

"People don't know Alexis Sanchez. This is a guy completely focused on playing football. Did you see how he came on today? How he warmed up? Like a player who wants to play football. He can make a difference between what's going on outside and what's going on on the football pitch.

"He doesn't need to tell me he speaks to anybody else. He doesn't need to alert the club. He can do it on his own. We live with facts, not with psychological theories. When you come on to the pitch you play football and give 100 per cent. That's

what he does."

Remarkably, Wenger appears to believe Sanchez could still be persuaded to remain in north London. "I want him to stay for longer," he added. "I have no problem if he signs with us now or in June."

Meanwhile, United's hopes of signing Ryan Sessegnon this month have been dealt a blow after Fulham's head of football operations insisted the 17-year-old would not be leaving Craven Cottage in January.

Sessegnon, who finished as joint-top scorer at the European Under-19 Championship in June with three goals, has been tracked by United's scouts for some time and has also attracted interest from Tottenham and Real Madrid.

## Chelsea frustrated by Arsenal in League Cup stalemate

**London:** Chelsea wasted a chance to take control of their League Cup semi-final against Arsenal as the misfiring Blues were forced to settle for a 0-0 draw in Wednesday night's first leg. Antonio Conte's side dominated possession for long periods at Stamford Bridge – where the Video Assistant Referee system (VAR) was in operation – but lacked the killer instinct required to take a step towards the final.

They had 21 shots to just eight from Arsenal, yet the tie remains on a knife-edge heading into the second leg at the Emirates Stadium on January 24. "We are not so clinical despite creating chances. If you want to win you have to score," Conte said. "We didn't concede a goal, but we know we play away at Arsenal and we must be ready to fight if we are to play the final."

While it was a frustrating evening for Chelsea as they chase a first League Cup final berth since 2015, the stalemate was a welcome tonic for their London rivals. Arsenal, who also drew both Premier League encounters with Chelsea this season, suffered one of the most chastening defeats of Arsene Wenger's reign on Sunday as second tier Nottingham Forest won 4-2 in the FA Cup third round.

While Arsenal were well below their best once again, in contrast to their surrender in Nottingham, the Frenchman will be encouraged that they showed enough spirit to keep Chelsea at bay. "I felt there was great togetherness. I am pleased with the spirit and determination," Wenger said. "You want first to be solid, but ideally you want to score as well."

Conte had mostly fielded fringe players en route to the last four, but Eden Hazard, back from a calf injury, N'Golo Kante and Thibaut Courtois were called upon with a Wembley showdown against Manchester City or Bristol City in sight.

Wenger surprisingly left Alexis Sanchez on the bench amid talk of the unsettled Chile forward joining Manchester City, while Mesut Ozil missed out with a knee injury. Wenger was watching from the press box as he serves his touchline ban and the Gunners boss was shifting anxiously in his seat

early on when Hazard's pass gave Alvaro Morata an opportunity that he drove into the side-netting.

After a tepid opening from Arsenal, Alexandre Lacazette escaped the Chelsea defence to collect Jack Wilshere's pass, but the French striker wasted the chance as he scuffed a hurried shot wide. Chelsea wing-back Victor Moses forced David Ospina into action with a stinging drive that the Arsenal goalkeeper fumbled before recovering to snatch the ball away from Morata.

Moses was proving a problem for young left-back Ainsley Maitland-Niles and the Nigerian found space for another shot moments later, this time his low shot hit Ospina's near post before Arsenal scrambled it away.

Alex Iwobi was selected despite Wenger saying he could be fined for reportedly partying until the early hours of Saturday morning and the Arsenal winger almost repaid his manager's faith with a drive that Courtois pushed away.

When Maitland-Niles went down under pressure from Moses in the area, referee Martin Atkinson consulted the video assistant referee, but no penalty was given. Fabregas should have given Chelsea the lead just before half-time, but the former Arsenal midfielder wastefully headed straight at Ospina from close range.

Andreas Christensen fared no better after the interval when the Chelsea defender dived to head over from inside the six-yard box. Chelsea were piecing together their most convincing spell of pressure, but they couldn't find the finishing touch as Morata's powerful effort was well saved by Ospina.

Wenger's response was to send on Sanchez for the ineffective Lacazette with 25 minutes left, yet within seconds Moses almost broke the deadlock when his goal-bound shot was deflected over by Shkodran Mustafi.

When Christensen headed wide of an open goal after Ospina misjudged a corner, Conte must have feared it wouldn't be Chelsea's night. So it proved as Willian was denied by Ospina and Fabregas clipped a post in the closing moments.

BUNDESLIGA

## Bayern Munich resume title quest today

AFP  
Berlin

**B**undesliga leaders Bayern Munich will kick-off the second half of the German league season at Bayer Leverkusen today without star striker Robert Lewandowski and key defender Mats Hummels. Bayern hold a commanding 11-point lead over their nearest German league rival, but fourth-placed Bayer Leverkusen are on a 12-match unbeaten run dating back to September in all competitions.

Bayern will be missing key stars. Lewandowski, the Bundesliga's top-scorer with 15 goals in 17 games so far, is labouring with a knee injury while Hummels has a groin strain and the away match at Leverkusen's BayArena has come too early.

"Both have been taking part in team training and we will only increase their training schedule on Monday, anything else would be negligent," said Bayern head coach Jupp Heynckes. With Lewand-



Bayern Munich players trained in Doha last week. (AFP)

owski out, burly Germany striker Sandro Wagner is set to make his first Bundesliga appearance since joining from Hoffenheim last month, reportedly for 12mn euros.

In Hummels' absence, Heynckes will most likely pair Niklas Suele and Jerome Boateng at centre-back. Bayern were five points adrift in the league when Heynckes, 72, replaced Carlo Ancelotti at

the start of October, but built up a commanding lead as key rivals RB Leipzig and Borussia Dortmund faltered.

Bayern ran out comfortable 3-1 winners over Leverkusen when the teams last met in Munich in August, but Heynckes' side last won away at Leverkusen in 2013.

Leverkusen's Jamaica winger Leon Bailey, 20, made a name for himself in

the first half of the season with six goals and four assists. However, Heynckes warns there is plenty of talent in Bayer's ranks, pointing to Germany winger Julian Brandt and teenager Kai Havertz, 18, who are both dangerous in front of goal. "They are also strong in defence and are a convincing team, that is why they have gone 12 games without a defeat," added Heynckes. Having also steered the club to the 2013 treble of Champions League, Bundesliga and German Cup titles, Bayern's bosses want to keep Heynckes on, but he insists he will leave – as promised – when the season finishes in May.

FIXTURES

(all times 1430 GMT unless stated)  
**Today:** Bayer Leverkusen v Bayern Munich (1930)  
**Tomorrow:** Werder Bremen v Hoffenheim, Eintracht Frankfurt v Freiburg, Augsburg v Hamburg, Hannover 96 v Mainz, Stuttgart v Hertha Berlin, RB Leipzig v Schalke (1730)  
**On Sunday:** Cologne v Borussia Moenchengladbach, Borussia Dortmund v Wolfsburg (1700)



Manager Arsene Wenger (right) and his assistant Jens Lehmann sat in the press box at Stamford Bridge during Arsenal's 0-0 draw with Chelsea in League Cup on Wednesday. (Reuters)

ROUND-UP

## Arsenal's out of favour midfielder Coquelin joins Valencia

**A**rsenal midfielder Francis Coquelin joined Valencia yesterday in a four year deal, the La Liga side announced.

The 26-year-old Frenchman moves to Spain for an undisclosed fee with an 80 mn euros (96.4 mn dollars) buy-out clause attached to his new contract. "I'm very happy, it's a big challenge for me, I start a new life, but I'm very excited," Coquelin said, saying he had talked to coach Marcelino Garcia Toral. Coquelin joined Arsenal in 2008 and made 160 appearances for the club. Jack Wilshere's return to the Arsenal team helped limit Coquelin to one Premier League appearance this season. He had been linked to West Ham and Crystal Palace as well as Valencia. After leaving Coquelin out of Arsenal's team for Wednesday's League Cup semi-final first leg draw at Chelsea, Wenger confirmed: "He goes to Valencia. He didn't get enough games for us this season. He had an opportunity and I let him go."



Naby Keita will not be moving before next season, amid reports the Merseyside club want the Guinea midfielder immediately to replace Philippe Coutinho.

Keita, 22, already has a contract with Liverpool which comes into effect on July 1, but having completed the sale of Brazil star Coutinho to Barcelona on Monday for 160mn euros,

Liverpool are reportedly keen to bring Keita to Merseyside early.

In November, RB Leipzig also ruled out Keita joining Liverpool earlier than planned. Coutinho's departure has changed the situation at Liverpool. Report say the Reds are prepared to pay 15mn euros extra to sign Keita this month. Keita has not been impressing in training in a bid to force the German club's hand.

Leipzig will get 75mn euros for Keita if they qualify directly for the Champions League next season, which will drop to 65mn euros if they fail to qualify for Europe. The German club, who are fifth in the Bundesliga, have repeatedly said they need their midfield dynamo to help them qualify again for the Champions League.

**VARDY FIT TO RETURN AGAINST CHELSEA**

Jamie Vardy will be fit to play for Leicester in a clash of the past two Premier League champions when they visit Chelsea on Saturday, the Foxes manager Claude Puel said.

Vardy, who turned 31 yesterday, has recovered from the groin injury that kept the England international out of the 2016 champions line-

up for the FA Cup third round 0-0 draw with his former club Fleetwood Town last weekend. Vardy has scored 10 Premier League goals this season including one in the 2-1 home defeat by Chelsea in September.

**COLOMBIA MINA JOINS BARCA**

Colombia centre-back Yerry Mina joined Barcelona from Brazilian side Palmeiras yesterday on a five year contract for a fee of 11.8mn euros (\$14mn), the Catalan club announced. The 6ft 5in (1.95m) 23-year-old is set to fill the void left by Javier Mascherano, who is on the verge of a 10mn euro switch to China's Hebei Fortune.

The Colombian international will be Barcelona's second signing of the January transfer window after Philippe Coutinho's 160 million-euro capture from Liverpool. Mina has a 100mn euro release clause attached to his contract.

With Mascherano set to leave and injured young French centre-back Samuel Umtiti widely reported to be in talks with Manchester City, Barcelona had faced being left with only two recognised centre backs in Gerard Pique and Thomas Vermaelen.

**AUBAMEYANG DEAL DEAD AS CHINA CHAMPIONS VOW TO FOCUS ON YOUTH**

Chinese champions Guangzhou Evergrande appear to have ended any interest in Borussia Dortmund striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang after a public dressing-down by football authorities in the country.

The club coached by Italian legend Fabio Cannavaro had reportedly won a 72-million-euro tug-of-war with Chinese Super League (CSL) rivals Beijing Guoan for the Gabon hotshot.

But on Tuesday, the Chinese Football Association (CFA) warned the two clubs – without naming them or Aubameyang – against "engaging in a bidding war" and said that its prohibitive 100% tax on incoming foreign players would be strictly enforced.

CSL champions Evergrande consequently denied that they were pursuing the 28-year-old – though they too did not name him – and on Wednesday reiterated that they want to field an all-Chinese team within two years. The club won a seventh CSL title on the bounce in October.

## HORSE RACING

# Molheb Al Naif, Umm Qarn's TM Thunder Struck shine

Owner-trainer-jockey trio of Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari, Jassim Mohamed Ghazali and Harry Bentley register hat-trick



His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Thani with trainer Alban de Mieuille after Umm Qarn's TM Thunder Struck won HH Sheikh Abdullah Bin Khalifa Al Thani Cup (Gr3 PA) yesterday. **PICTURES:** Juhaim



His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Thani with the winner of Al Sabiq races yesterday.



Gerald Avranche rides Molheb Al Naif to victory in the HH Sheikh Abdullah Bin Khalifa Al Thani Trophy at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club yesterday.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**M**olheb Al Naif continued his upward run and in style when Yousef Ben Taher's ward won the mile long HH Sheikh Abdullah Bin Khalifa Al Thani Trophy at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club yesterday.

The turf race-day also saw Umm Qarn's TM Thunder Struck take the honours in the HH Sheikh Abdullah Bin Khalifa Al Thani Cup (Gr3 PA) for the second straight year, while Qatar Derby winner Easter De Faust stayed unbeaten in Qatar topping HH Sheikh Abdullah Bin Khalifa Al Thani Silver Cup.

Al Naif Racing's Molheb Al Naif, the highest rated horse in the field, had come into yesterday's feature on the back of three straight wins under Gerald Avranche, who was astride the grey son of Amer once again, and the result was no different yesterday as the six-year-old beat Hassan Ali al-Matwi's impressive colt Raqee with two lengths and three quarters to spare.

His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani's Reda, also rated 122 like Molheb Al Naif, completed the top three for Julian Smart under Theo Bachelot's ride.

In the penultimate race of the day, Alban de Mieuille's ward, TM Thunder Struck, was back in the winner's enclosure, having beaten a Smart ward for the second straight year in the race. After denying Ba'sil last year, this time, the eight-year-old Umm Qarn horse, who had won the Group 2 Qatar National Day Trophy last month, beat a capable Shabih Alreeh by a length un-



His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa al-Thani with the winners on HH Sheikh Abdullah Bin Khalifa Al Thani's Cups and Trophy Day at QREC yesterday.

der Jean Baptiste Hamel. The owner-trainer-jockey trio of Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari, Jassim Mohamed Ghazali and Harry Bentley swept three straight races with French recruit Easter De Faust notching a hat-trick of wins that also includes a Group 1 in France and the Derby last month.

And just like in the Derby the four-year-old filly beat Umm Qarn's Al Kabeer for the victory, while Hossin Mohamed Ashour's ward Monfarid was guided to third by talented Qatari

jockey Faleh Bughanaim in Al Shaqab Racing silks.

Caid De L'Ardus and The Blue Eye were the other winners of the trio, with the former winning the Majid Al Arab Sprinters Championship (Gr3 PA), while the 2016 HH The Emir's Trophy toppler leading a one-two for Ghazali in the Umm Qarn Trophy for Thoroughbreds.

Smart and jockey Theo Bachelot did have two winners on the day with Sheikh Mohamed-owned Barwod

opening the eight-race card with a win in the Very Nice Name Cup, a Class 5 Thoroughbred Graduation Plate event, while, Al Shahania Stud's Oryx stayed unbeaten in Qatar with a victory, his second straight, in the Charm Spirit Cup, a Thoroughbred handicap event for horses rated 70-90.

Ibrahim al-Malki's Khataaf brushed aside his Qatar Derby disappointment with his fourth victory this season, when Saleem Golam guided the four-year-old gelding to victory in the

1850m Yasmeeen Cup, a Thoroughbred handicap event for horses rated 70-90.

## RESULTS

**Race 1:** 1. Barwod (Theo Bachelot), 2. Beach Samba (Saleem Golam), 3. Tea Leaf (JP Guillambert), 4. War Order (Carlo Fiocchi). Won by: 1 ¼, ½, ¼. Time: 1:36.55. Owner: His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani. Trainer: Julian Smart.

**Race 2:** 1. Oryx (Theo Bachelot), 2. Al Maftoon (Harry Bentley), 3. Hillside

Dream (Pier Convertino), 4. Poet's Song (Tomas Lukasek). Won by: ½, Shd, 1 ¼. Time: 1:23.49. Owner: Al Shahania Stud. Trainer: Julian Smart.

**Race 3:** 1. Khataaf (Saleem Golam), 2. Ard San Aer (Vaclav Janacek), 3. Shabbab (Faleh Bughanaim), 4. Parkes and Ride (Gerald Avranche). Won by: ½, ¼, ¼. Time: 1:54.02. Owner: Ibrahim al-Malki. Trainer: Ibrahim al-Malki.

**Race 4:** 1. The Blue Eye (Harry Bentley), 2. Opera Baron (JP Guillambert), 3. Al Mohalhal (Stephan Ladjadj), 4. Duke of Dundee (Jean Baptiste Hamel). Won by: 2, ¾, ½. Time: 2:03.36. Owner: Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari. Trainer: Jassim Mohamed Ghazali.

**Race 5:** 1. Caid De L'Ardus (Harry Bentley), 2. Qassy (Marc Lerner), 3. Ba'sil (Theo Bachelot), 4. Mutazz (Gerald Avranche). Won by: 1 ½, 1 ¾, No. Time: 1:11.60. Owner: Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari. Trainer: Jassim Mohamed Ghazali.

**Race 6:** 1. Easter De Faust (Harry Bentley), 2. Al Kabeer (Stephan Ladjadj), 3. Monfarid (Faleh Bughanaim), 4. Anouf (Marvin Suerland). Won by: 1 ¾, 4 ½, 1 ¼. Time: 2:30.38. Owner: Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari. Trainer: Jassim Mohamed Ghazali.

**Race 7:** 1. TM Thunder Struck (Jean Baptiste Hamel), 2. Shabih Alreeh (Theo Bachelot), 3. AJS Al Rayyan (Eduardo Pedroza), 4. Mahess Du Soleil (Carlo Fiocchi). Won by: 1, 3 ¼, 1 ½. Time: 1:44.67. Owner: Umm Qarn. Trainer: Alban de Mieuille.

**Race 8:** 1. Molheb Al Naif (Gerald Avranche), 2. Raqee (Marc Lerner), 3. Reda (Theo Bachelot), 4. Rassan (Harry Bentley). Won by: 2 ¾, 1 ½, Shd. Time: 1:44.40. Owner: Al Naif Racing. Trainer: Yousef Ben Taher.

## QNB STARS LEAGUE

# Darragi makes dream start in Umm Salal win

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**O**ussama Darragi had a dream start for Umm Salal as he helped his team to a 3-1 victory away to Al Kharaitiyat at the Al Khor Stadium yesterday.

Darragi, the first signing in the QNB Stars League in the current winter transfer window, found the net in the 20th and 24th minutes before Mohamed Abu Bakr grabbed the third in the 42nd. Abdulaziz al-Ansari replied for Al Kharaitiyat in the 84th.

Having threatened with a long-range strike that was well saved in the fourth minute, it did not take Darragi long to open his account for The Orange Fortress. After collecting the ball 30 yards out, he found strength to counter the pressure of a number of opposition players before drilling the ball into the far-right corner from distance.

Just a few minutes later, Mahmoud al-Mawas played a one-two inside the area with Mohamed Abu Bakr before sending a pass across the six-yard line for Darragi to tap home.

Al Kharaitiyat tried to respond, but Umm Salal pounced on the counter just prior to half-time. Al-Mawas found Abu Bakr with



Umm Salal's Oussama Darragi scored a brace in the win over Al Kharaitiyat yesterday. **PICTURE:** Noushad Thekkayil

a through ball and he confidently powered it past the goalkeeper when in on goal.

The Thunders did try to apply pressure in the second half, with Rashid Tiberkanine hitting the post before Abdulaziz gave them

a late consolation.

All in all, Umm Salal's strategy allowed them to control the second half and see out the win. They will be delighted with the victory, which can strengthen their challenge for the top four.

## Sneijder boost for Al Gharafa against Al Ahli

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**M**uch focus of Week 12 action will be on the encounter between mid-table sides Al Ahli and Al Gharafa on the former's home turf.

Their first-phase clash had ended in a 1-1 draw, but Al Gharafa start as favourites this time. The very presence of Dutch star Wesley Sneijder can tilt the scale in their favour. The UEFA Champions League-winning attacking midfielder joined them in the current winter transfer window.

The Cheetahs are also under new coach Bulent Uygun, who replaced Frenchman Jean Fernandez. His vast experience in Qatar football, having coached Umm Salal from 2013 to 2016, should give Al Gharafa an added advantage.

To add to that, Iranian striker Mehdi Taremi is expected to join Al Gharafa and strengthen their attack. Even though influential midfielder Vladimir Weiss is out for the season injured, the good form of captain Luis Jimenez, Almahdi Ali as well as youngsters such as Ahmed Alaeldin, Othman al-Yahri and Amro Seraj augur well for Al Gharafa.

Al Ahli, playing their first competitive game under George Jorge who recently replaced fellow Spaniard Joaquin Caparros, will be bolstered by the return from injury of cap-



tain Meshaal Abdullah.

It has to be seen whether Jorge succeeds in helping them improve their sixth place in the standings. Yassine Chikhaoui and Ali Qadri are players who can cause trouble for the rivals.

### AL SAILIYA FACE AL ARABI

Al Sailya are having one of their best seasons this time. They are likely to face competition from Umm Salal, Al Gharafa and Al Ahli to stay there eventually. Uzbek striker Temurkhuja Abdulkholiqov, Wagner Ribeiro and Valentin Lazar lead their charge. Defender Ghanem al-Qahtani, who underwent an intensive rehabilitation

programme following a surgery he had at Qatar's orthopaedic and sports medicine hospital Aspetar on December 11 to correct an injury on his ankle, is a doubtful starter. Al Arabi are also determined to move up the table after finishing the first phase in ninth position with just nine points.

They strengthened their porous defence by signing Croat Ivan Foster, replacing Tunisian defender Ammar Jemal, in the winter transfer window. Coach Luka Bonacic would expect Khalfan Ibrahim and co to also take the positives from the friendlies they played against Al Mesaimer and Al Markhiya during the break.