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QATAR EXXONMOBIL OPEN

Rublev sounds notice for the future, Thiem stays on course

Russian will face Argentine Pella, while Austrian top seed will face French wildcard Monfils

By Anil John
 Doha

Andrey Rublev started playing tennis at the age of three, likes Mike Tyson and Metallica besides being addicted to "action-packed films with fighting".

On top of that he hails from a sporting family - his father was a professional boxer and his mother and sister are tennis coaches. No surprise then that all these aspects contribute to his persona on the tennis court where he packs such a punch that his opponents can often only wonder in amazement.

Seventh-seeded veteran Fernando Verdasco certainly felt the same way when he was ousted by Rublev in the second round of the Qatar ExxonMobil Open, and yesterday at it was Croatian Borna Coric's turn to be at the receiving end.

Russia's Rublev, all of 20, showed once again that he is a player to watch out for in the near future as he brutally brushed aside the challenge of Coric to stay in the hunt for his second title on the ATP Tour yesterday.

"I knew since the beginning of the match that I have to try to dictate the points. I have to try to attack. I have to try to lead, but I have to try to do it with a good position. That was the key and that was the - how you say, not plan, but I was trying to do this since the beginning and I think it was working quite well," said Rublev after his 6-3, 7-5 win.

Coric, 21, is also a rising star with two wins over Rafael Nadal and Andy Murray under his belt. But the Croatian, himself a no mean belter of the tennis ball, had no clue whatsoever against Rublev's tremendous reach and power-packed passing shots on the centre court of the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex.

After the first three games of the first set went with serve, Rublev broke Coric in the fourth game, courtesy of a couple of scorching returns that would have left the best wanting for answers.

That saw the Russian take a comfortable 3-1 lead, which he soon extended to 4-1 after holding serve before going on to wrap up the set 6-3.

Coric was marginally better in the second set but after securing the first break in the sixth game to lead 4-2, he wasted his advantage with a poor service game to allow Rublev to break back.

Rublev secured the decisive second break in the 11th game where Coric failed to get his act together - double faulting and hitting the ball into the net



Russia's Andrey Rublev serves against Croatia's Borna Coric (not in picture) during their Qatar ExxonMobil Open quarter-final at Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex yesterday. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil



Austria's Dominic Thiem celebrates his win over Stefanos Tsitsipas of Greece.

once each and then sending a forehand wide.

That gave him a 6-5 edge and he comfortably held his serve to set up a last-four encounter with Guido Pella of Argentina, who defeated Bosnian qualifier Mirza Basic 6-2, 6-3.

Rublev brushed off a question if his win was much easier than expected, in-

sisting it was actually close.

"No. I mean, he's a great player. You can see that he beat many top players. I expected it was going to be tough to beat him today. You can see that both of us were really, really close. He had some breakpoints. He had break up. But then I came back. So it was a really tough match and it was really close.

"In the end I was a little bit luckier. Maybe I played a little bit better in some moments and then I won the match."

Rublev, who won the Croatian Open in Umag last year - his only ATP title to date - could become only the second Russian to pocket the Qatar title after Nikolay Davydenko, who beat Nadal in the 2010 final.

"First, I didn't expect that I'm going to be in the semifinal. I mean, I was expecting that I want to go as far as I can, to do my best, as best as I can. And that's it. And we'll see. If it's second round, it's second round. If it's first round, it's first round. But to do my best, to give everything, that was the main goal for the tournament.

"In the end, now I'm in the semifinal and tomorrow I'm playing a really good player. I know that last year he beat many top players, many good wins. He did final of ATP from qualies, so this means that he's playing tennis really well."

Meanwhile, Dominic Thiem, the last among the seeds standing in Doha, defeated Greek Stefanos Tsitsipas 7-5, 6-4 to reach the semis.

The world No 5 hit 33 winners against the 6'4" Tsitsipas, who had upset

French veteran and 2013 Qatar champion Richard Gasquet in straight sets on Wednesday.

"It was my best game today for sure so far. And I will try to play the same tomorrow," said Thiem. "I know the opponents. I know (Peter) Gojowczyk, I know (Gael) Monfils. I know both of them. So it's going to be nothing new. Both of them are really good players. Going to be fun. Doesn't matter against who," he said after his match even as his prospective opponents were battling it out."

The Austrian added that there is no difference in how the older generation play the younger players.

"The older generation, they want to keep us down. They want to keep us behind them. And the same is for us. When we play the younger guys, we don't want them to take us. It's important to make some statements to play good matches against them, so they know we are still better than them," said the 24-year-old Thiem.

Later on it emerged that Thiem will meet Monfils in the semifinal after the Frenchman beat German Gojowczyk 6-3, 7-6 (7) in their late night match.

RESULTS
Singles (Quarter-finals): 1-Dominic Thiem (AUT) bt Stefanos Tsitsipas (GRE) 7-5, 6-4; Guido Pella (ARG) bt Mirza Basic (BIH) 6-2, 6-3; Andrey Rublev (RUS) bt Borna Coric (CRO) 6-3, 7-5; WC-Gael Monfils (FRA) beat Peter Gojowczyk (GER) 6-3, 7-6 (6)
Doubles (Semi-finals): 2-Oliver Marach (AUT)/Mate Pavic (CRO) beat Pablo Carreno Busta (ESP)/Guillermo Garcia-Lopez (ESP) 6-3, 6-4; 1-Jamie Murray (GBR)/Bruno Soares (BRA) beat 3-Feliciano Lopez (ESP)/Rajeev Ram (USA) 6-3, 4-6, 10-6

TODAY'S ORDER OF PLAY
CENTRE COURT (from 4:30pm)
 ■ 1-Jamie Murray (GBR)/Bruno Soares (BRA) vs 2-Oliver Marach (AUT)/Mate Pavic (CRO)
 ■ Guido Pella (ARG) vs Andrey Rublev (RUS)
 ■ 1-Dominic Thiem (AUT) vs WC-Gael Monfils (FRA)

Tennis stars visit ExxonMobil stand to meet fans

The Qatar ExxonMobil Open promises to be an amazing time for tennis lovers who flock to Doha from all over the world. It is also a great place for fans of all ages to meet their favourite tennis players at the ExxonMobil Qatar stand in the tournament's public village. Dominic Thiem, Pablo Carreno Busta, Tomas Berdych, Malek Jaziri and Guido Pella have already visited the stand and made some fans very happy by signing autographs and taking pictures with them after waiting patiently in long lines to meet their favorite stars. Many more of this year's star-studded list of players are expected to drop by the stand and meet their fans throughout the week. Fans can increase their chances of seeing the players by regularly passing by the stand in the Public Village during tournament days. In partnership with the Qatar Tennis Federation, ExxonMobil Qatar has been the title sponsor of the Qatar ExxonMobil Open for 26 years. Since the start of their collaboration, the ExxonMobil Qatar stand has been one of the highlights of the tournament and a much sought-after spot at its Public Village. Each year, the stand is carefully and creatively designed so that it is appealing to visitors of all ages.

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Rublev to be seeded as Murray, Nishikori withdraw

By Anil John
 Doha

Andrey Rublev was pleasantly surprised yesterday when he was told by a journalist that he would be one of the 32 seeded players at the Australian Open later this month.

"Are you sure? I didn't know. You just tell me now," Rublev said, hardly believing his ears after the journalist informed him that his win over Borna Coric yesterday coupled with the withdrawals of Andy Murray and Kei Nishikori meant he could expect to get a relatively easy first couple of rounds

by virtue of being a seed. But as the glad tiding sunk in, Rublev became more composed.

"Yeah, it's an amazing feeling. Of course it's great for me to hear that I'm going to be seeded in Australian Open for the first time. I hope I can show great things there and I will try to do my best. But we'll see.

"Now it's still one week and a half to go for Australia. I have to finish this tournament and I have one more tournament. So it's a little bit too early to speak about Australia. But I'm happy to be seeded in Australia."

Even at the young age of 20, Rublev has experienced the highs and lows of a Grand Slam tournament.

Last year he had a dream run to the quarter-finals of the US Open before losing to eventual runner-up Rafael Nadal.

Although the great Spaniard won in straight sets, Rublev said nothing can beat the experience, because he grew up admiring him and even wearing Nadal-sized tennis wear when he was 10 or 11.

"I mean, like he's the fighter. You can see he never gives up. Even if he doesn't feel well, you can see he's doing everything still to compete. Most of the times, he's still winning matches even with the bad games," said Rublev.

"That's why he's one of best in my opinion. Even if you can beat good players with the bad game,

then it's amazing. If you feel the ball good, you will even destroy them. This is, I think, one of good-est things about him."

Rublev revealed he also has a superstitious side to him. In fact he picks up a superstition at every tournament he plays.

"Every tournament is different. I have some superstitions. Every tournament it can be something new. Some tournaments maybe I have dinner always in only one restaurant. Some tournaments maybe I sit only in the same place of the car every day. Some tournaments I eat the same breakfast every day."

When asked what he had been eating for breakfast in Doha, he said he was it was only "fruits and

omelettes". It's unlikely he would be changing that routine today too.

Murray's withdrawal was confirmed by Australian Open organisers who published a statement from the Scot on the tournament's Twitter account yesterday.

"Sadly I won't be playing in Melbourne this year, as I am not yet ready to compete," three-times grand slam champion Murray said. "I'll be flying home shortly to assess all the options but I appreciate all the messages of support and I hope to be back playing soon."

He joins Kei Nishikori on the absent list for this year's Australian Open after the Japanese withdrew to continue his rehabilitation on a wrist injury.



Britain's Andy Murray pulled out of Australian Open yesterday.



FOCUS

Flying Federer leads Swiss into Hopman final

Opponents will be decided today, with Germany, Belgium leading contenders

AFP
Perth, Australia

Roger Federer's early season confidence is soaring after he led Switzerland into the Hopman Cup final with another masterclass against top-10 rival Jack Sock at the mixed teams tournament in Perth yesterday.

The world number two maintained an unblemished record in five clashes with the eighth-ranked Sock, beating the American in straight sets as Switzerland beat the United States 3-0 to advance to tomorrow's final.

Their opponent will be decided today, with Germany and Belgium the leading contenders.

Federer had not dropped a set in four previous matches against Sock, but had to produce some of his very best to keep the American at bay and give the Swiss the early lead in the Group B tie.

Belinda Bencic's superb form continued when the world number 74 then upset 10th ranked CoCo Vandeweghe to secure the tie and put the Swiss into the final.

The dead mixed doubles rubber was extremely light-hearted, with the Swiss winning in straight sets.

Federer is aiming for a second Hopman Cup title, having also won the tournament back in 2001, before he had won an ATP singles title, when he partnered with Martina Hingis.

The 36-year-old also opened his 2017 campaign at the Hopman Cup, following which he ended an almost four-year Grand Slam drought with a shock fifth triumph at the Australian Open in Melbourne.

Speaking after the 7-6 (7/5) 7-5 win over Sock, the 19-time Grand Slam champion said where he was uncertain heading into 2017, as he returned from a knee injury, he enters 2018 brimming with confidence.

"Yes, you could say that," he said when asked if his confidence was higher than at the same time last year.

"I think I'm more secure... I was 17 in the world as well, it does make a difference," he added.

"If I wasn't going to win a match in Australia, or win two matches, I was going to drop out of the top 30, so things were a little bit on edge last year."

Federer has at times toyed with his opponents in winning his three singles matches without dropping a set, and is a step ahead of his Hopman form last year when he was beaten by German young gun Alexander Zverev.

Having already beaten lower-ranked duo Yuichi Sugita of Japan and Karen Khachanov of Russia this week, he said the challenge of facing Sock



Roger Federer of Switzerland in action against Jack Sock (not in picture) of the US during their Hopman Cup match in Perth, Australia, yesterday. (AFP)

was a perfect one at this stage of his Australian Open preparation.

"I thought it was a very entertaining match, a high-quality level match and the right step forward for both of us," Federer said.

As brilliant as the Swiss star was, Sock was left ruing some missed chances, particularly when he held break points in the ninth and 11th games of the first set.

He was only broken once, in the 11th game of the second set, after Federer

produced some stunning defence under pressure.

"He came up with an unbelievable point to break in the second set," Sock said. "I had chances to win the first set or get up a break and then serve for it and was in there in the second obviously as well."

Bencic then continued her impressive week by claiming her second top-20 scalp in beating Vandeweghe in straight sets, having also disposed of the 15th-ranked Anastasia Pavly-

uchenkova.

Herself on the comeback trail after injury issues, the former world number seven maintained her perfect record in singles to win 7-6 (6), 6-4 and was delighted to have put the Swiss into the final. "We were so close last year," she said. "I am relieved we made it."

In the earlier tie yesterday, the Russian pairing of Khachanov and Pavlyuchenkova beat Japan's Sugita and Naomi Osaka 2-1, with both teams already out of contention for the final.

SHENZHEN OPEN

Sharapova, Halep cruise into semis

Reuters
Shenzhen, China

Former world number one Maria Sharapova cruised past Kazakhstan's Zarina Diyas and into the semi-finals of the Shenzhen Open in China yesterday.

Sharapova, who won 6-3 6-3, struck 24 winners and five aces to stay on course for a title clash with top-ranked Simona Halep after the Romanian dismissed Aryna Sabalenka 6-2 6-2.

"I'm glad that I ended up being the winner of the match," Sharapova said in a courtside interview.

"I didn't play my best tennis and there's certainly a lot of things to improve on in the next. The great thing is that I'm through and have another chance to play tomorrow."

The five-times grand slam cham-

pion committed 22 unforced errors in the match but stepped up her game at decisive moments of the contest to get past her spirited rival.

Sharapova's only title in 2017 came at the Tianjin Open, after she came back from a 15-month doping ban, and the world number 59 is aiming for a title-winning start to the year in her first visit to Shenzhen.

"I feel like I'm having a nice little tour of China. It's my fourth Chinese city in a few months," Sharapova added.

"It's obviously been a great welcome here. It took many years for me to play this event but I'm really glad that I did."

Sharapova plays Katerina Siniakova next after the defending champion beat fellow Czech Kristyna Pliskova 6-2 6-2.

Earlier, fourth seed Irina-Camelia Begu had to work hard to overcome Ti-meia Babos 7-5 7-5 to set up a semi-final meeting with her compatriot Halep.



Rain washes out entire day's play at Auckland Classic

Persistent rain washed out an entire day's play at the Auckland Classic yesterday with more showers predicted to affect today's packed schedule.

Czech Republic's third seed Barbora Strycova will square off against Taiwan's Hsieh Su-wei in the first quarter-final clash on Friday while Julia Goerges plays Polona Hercog in the revised schedule.

Top seed Caroline Wozniacki meets American wild card entry Sofia Kenin while fourth seed Agnieszka Radwanska faces American Sachia

Vickery in the other quarter-final matches.

The semi-final matches have been predicted for the evening but if rain affects today's schedule, the organisers could schedule the semi-finals and final tomorrow.

"We've done it before," tournament director Karl Budge was quoted as saying by the New Zealand Herald (www.nzherald.co.nz).

"There's been times where three matches have been played on a day as well. We've just got to hope the tennis gods start being kind to us."

SPOTLIGHT

Edmund downs Chung, to meet Dimitrov in QFs

Reuters
Brisbane

Kyle Edmund overcame a mid-match blip before defeating South Korea's Chung Hyeon in a tight three-setter to reach the Brisbane International quarter-finals yesterday.

The Briton was pushed hard by the inaugural Next Gen ATP Finals champion before coming through 7-6 (3), 5-7, 6-4 in two hours and 38 minutes. He set up a clash with defending champion Grigor Dimitrov who laboured past John Millman 4-6, 7-6 (8), 6-3.

Down 3-1 in the tiebreak of a fiercely-contested first set, Edmund scored six points in a row to edge ahead in the contest.

Chung, who trailed his rival in the second set, fought back with a decisive break after Edmund blew the chance to go 4-1 up. The 21-year-old pushed on and broke

Edmund again in the 12th game to level the match at one set apiece.

Edmund switched gears in the decider, breaking Chung for a 4-3 lead before clinching the match with three aces.

"He got a lot of momentum at the end of the second and broke me twice pretty quickly," said Edmund. "So it was a good third set. I made an effort to really try and step up the intensity and energy and put some pressure on him."

"It was good because the way I was serving in that third set, I knew if I got a break I was going to have a very good chance at holding out."

Uzbekistan's Denis Istomin defeated Jared Donaldson 7-6 (5), 6-2 to reach his first ATP Tour quarter-final since a title-winning effort at the Chengdu Open in September.

Donaldson's American compatriot Ryan Harrison fired 11 aces in his 6-7 (5), 6-4, 6-2 win over Yannick Hanfmann, the lucky loser who replaced the injured Andy Murray in the draw.



BRISBANE INTERNATIONAL

Pliskova survives Kanepi scare

AFP
Brisbane, Australia

Defending champion Karolina Pliskova survived a massive scare from Estonia's Kaia Kanepi to move into the semi-finals of the Brisbane International yesterday.

Second seed Pliskova lost the first set to an inspired Kanepi and was down 3-1 in the second before launching an epic comeback, winning 3-6, 7-5, 6-2 in two hours and 11 minutes.

Pliskova was in imperious form in her demolition of American Catherine Bellis in the last round, but the powerful Kanepi proved a far tougher challenge.

The 32-year-old Estonian won in Brisbane in 2012 but 12 months away from the game with injury in 2016-17 saw her ranking plummet and she had to qualify to make the main draw this year.

Kanepi looked like joining fellow qualifier Aliaksandra Sasnovich in the semi-finals as she outplayed Pliskova at her own power game.

But she faltered when serving to go to 4-1 in the second set, allowing Pliskova to break back and swing the momentum towards the Czech world number four.



"I was a little bit surprised the first set and a half how she played," Pliskova said.

"And for the big risks that she was

taking, she had almost zero mistakes," she added.

"The only thing that I could do is just wait for my chance, and I got it,

PREMIER LEAGUE

Wenger rages at 'farcical' penalty, FA asks him to explain comments

Arsenal Manager complains about two spot-kick decisions given against the Gunners

AFP
London

The Football Association yesterday asked Arsene Wenger to clarify remarks about penalties given against his side made before and after Arsenal's Premier League game with Chelsea. Wenger complained about two spot-kick decisions given against the Gunners, the first awarded to West Brom on Sunday and the second given to Chelsea on Wednesday night.

Both matches ended as draws and Wenger now has until 1800 GMT on Tuesday to respond. Wenger has said he intends to appeal a separate FA charge relating to his behaviour after last weekend's 1-1 draw with West Brom, when Arsenal defender Calum Chambers was penalised by Mike Dean for a handball. Arsenal conceded another late penalty against Chelsea at the Emirates Stadium on Wednesday, as Eden Hazard went down following a challenge from Hector Bellerin. The thrilling game finished 2-2. Wenger said before the game against Chelsea: "I must say what is more frustrating for me is that it happened many times this season - at Stoke, at Watford, at Manchester City, at West Brom.

That is a concerning coincidence for me." On Dean's decision to penalise Chambers, Wenger added: "He saw what he wanted to see and we have to deal with that." After the draw against Chelsea, Wenger said: "When opinions always go the same way it's coincidence. Statistically it's built on the fact that when it's repeated it's not coincidence."

Wenger vowed to fight a Football Association charge in his latest furious attack on the authorities. Wenger was seething after referee Anthony Taylor awarded a penalty for Bellerin's challenge on Hazard. The Arsenal manager felt there wasn't enough evidence of a foul to justify Taylor's decision and Hazard rubbed salt into the wound by converting the spot-kick to cancel out Jack Wilshere's opener.

After Marcos Alonso put Chelsea in front with six minutes left, Bellerin enjoyed a sweet moment of redemption as he blasted Arsenal's 90th-minute equaliser. But Wenger's anger



Arsenal's Spanish defender Hector Bellerin (right) scores past Chelsea's goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois during the English Premier League match in London on Wednesday night. (AFP)

wasn't soothed by that dramatic intervention and, recalling the controversial penalty awarded for a handball by Arsenal's Calum Chambers in Sunday's draw at West Brom, he launched another broadside at the officials.

"We got again a farcical decision on the penalty, but we knew that (could happen) before the game," Wenger said. "You could give 10 penalties like that a game. Since the start of the season it is what we have to take. I'm fed up with that. At the moment we have to face surprising decisions. Nothing will change and we have to

deal with that." Although he risked further censure with his latest outburst, the Frenchman, who could be given a touchline ban, insisted he has every intention of stating his case in front of the governing body. "I will contest the charge) 100%. You can listen to every interview and I stick to everything I said without any problem," he said. "I am 35 years in football and I know what I said. What I find terrible is we just saw a great game and we talk only about this and for me it would be nice if we think about football for a change."

Chelsea manager Antonio Conte said Wenger should show more respect for the officials as he responded to his rival's complaints. "For sure there is a lot of frustration from the coach after the game. Sometimes we don't agree with them, but we must have great respect for the decision of the referee," he said.

Conte also defended Alvaro Morata after the Chelsea striker missed a host of chances to continue his erratic first season in England following his move from Real Madrid. "For a striker it is very important to score, it is a pity, he had

many chances to score, but I'm very happy with his commitment and effort," Conte said.

"This is the first season he is playing with regularity, because he didn't play with Real Madrid and also Juventus. He has to stay calm and continue to play this way, the goals are coming."

With Chelsea 16 points behind runaway leaders Manchester City, Conte conceded the champions wouldn't be able to retain the title. "We must be realistic. It is very difficult to catch them. We fight for a place in the Champions League," he said.

SPOTLIGHT

Wilshere in 'best shape ever' thanks to new diet



Arsenal's Jack Wilshere celebrates after scoring against Chelsea on Wednesday night. (Reuters)

AFP
London

Arsenal and England midfielder Jack Wilshere says a new gluten-free diet has put him in the best shape of his career after re-establishing himself in Arsene Wenger's first team. Wilshere, 26, starred in a 2-2 draw at home to Chelsea on Wednesday night, opening the scoring with a thumping close-range finish which ended his more than two-year wait for a top-flight goal on Wednesday.

It was not enough to earn Arsenal victory, with Eden Hazard's penalty and a late goal from Marcos Alonso putting Chelsea in front, before Hector Bellerin added a final twist in stoppage time. The match was Wilshere's sixth consecutive 90 minutes in the Premier League after a nightmare few years blighted by injury.

"I have been dairy and gluten-free now for six weeks," Wilshere said. "I feel that I look better, I have certainly lost a bit of weight, and am leaner. I am probably fitter as well. I feel sharper and quicker on the pitch. I feel like I can last longer."

"For example, at the end of the Chelsea game when we scored the second goal, I felt, 'Come on, we can go on again here!' I was pressing them and felt good. I know my body well, I know the right foods to eat and the best way to recover. I'm also getting the right amount of sleep. I've learned that

over the years and I think I'm in the best shape I have ever been."

Wilshere, benefiting from an injury to midfielder Aaron Ramsey, said after the match there had been "no progress" in talks regarding an extension to his contract, which expires at the end of the season. England manager Gareth Southgate has challenged Wilshere to play regularly for Arsenal before thinking about an international recall. He last played for the national side in the defeat to Iceland at Euro 2016.

Meanwhile, Wilshere can reclaim his place in the England squad for this year's World Cup, Arsenal manager Wenger said. The injury-plagued 26-year-old midfielder last played for England in the humiliating defeat by Iceland at Euro 2016 and was loaned out to Bournemouth last season. Wilshere suffered a broken leg playing for Bournemouth in April and was a fringe player at Arsenal this season after recovering, but has started the last five league games.

"I think he is at the level now where not many people expected him to be," Wenger, who recently said he would allow Wilshere to leave to gain first-team football, told reporters.

"When was the last time he played for England? Exactly, against Iceland (at Euro 2016), he came on. Since he has not played for England and I would say that means that everybody had given up on him. Today, nobody would be surprised if he was selected again. I think first of all he deserves a great credit for remarkable strength and we do as well."

FOCUS

Liverpool boss Klopp refuses to discuss Coutinho Barcelona link

AFP
London

Liverpool coach Jurgen Klopp refused to be drawn on the future of Philippe Coutinho yesterday as speculation escalates about another Barcelona bid for the Brazilian forward. Coutinho handed in a transfer request in a bid to force Klopp to sell him before the summer transfer deadline but Liverpool refused to budge even in the face of offers of over £100m from Barca.

The Brazilian is out of today's FA Cup Merseyside derby at home to Everton with a thigh strain, but Klopp expects the Brazil international to be available to face Premier League leaders Manchester City on January 14. "I think he is in a bunch of available players for the City game," said Klopp. "All the things I could say now will only create stories. I have nothing to say about it."

Despite another injury to Coutinho coinciding with the opening of the transfer window - he missed the whole of August with a back problem - Klopp is already looking towards the City game to bring him back and dodged both the transfer speculation and reports that the player believes he has played his last match for the Reds.

"I opened the door half-way because I mentioned it was the transfer window but there is nothing I can say about it which



would help me, the player or the club." In August, the club's owners publicly stated that Liverpool would not sell the Brazilian.

There has been no such declaration so far this winter, and a bid has yet to materialise from Spain despite growing talk of another move for the playmaker. Asked whether he had to consider the possibility of having to replace Coutinho in January, Klopp added: "Whatever you can consider it is not my cup of tea. I really have nothing to say. Maybe 80 per cent of the cameras are here for these answers - that's a waste of time."

Both Coutinho and top scorer Mohamed

Salah, out with a groin injury, will miss the visit of Everton but the match could see a debut for £75m signing Virgil van Dijk. The Dutch international completed his move from Southampton on January 1 but Klopp is in no rush to send out the world's most expensive defender.

"I can imagine everyone is desperate to see him on the pitch but from our point of view there is no rush and it is much more important how many good games he can play for us," said Klopp. Loris Karius will start in goal with Simon Mignolet given the weekend off.

Mourinho dismisses Man United exit talk

Manchester, United Kingdom: Jose Mourinho has dismissed reports he may walk out on Manchester United this summer as "garbage", saying he sees himself staying long-term at the Premier League giants.

The United boss was in defiant mood when quizzed about his future ahead of today's FA Cup tie with Derby, with morning reports saying club officials fear he is disenchanted with life at the club.

"Look, it depends on what you want to know and what you want to speak about," Mourinho said. "If you want to speak about some news, I say 'garbage'. I don't find a better word to define the talk. If you want to ask me directly, which I suppose you want, if I see myself next season in Manchester United, I say I see myself here."

"And, as I said when I arrived, I'm going to leave when the club wants me to leave, because I have no intention to leave at all. My intention is to stay, and to work and to

improve and to bring the club to where the club belongs and I want to stay. And I don't see any reason not to stay."

Mourinho has looked an unhappy figure in recent weeks as United's title bid has faltered and they suffered a shock League Cup exit at Championship side Bristol City. There have been suggestions that Mourinho has been disappointed at the relative lack of spending power at his disposal, claims which he also denied.

And Mourinho was upset at suggestions that his decision to live in a hotel, rather than buying a home in Manchester, is a sign of a lack of professionalism or commitment to the job. "Speaking about my work and connecting my work to the garbage news is to say that the worst thing anyone can do to myself, is not to say that I am a bad manager, is not to say that I am under-performing or that I made a mistake in this game or that game, the worst thing

someone can do is put one inch of doubt about my professionalism, my dedication to my club, to my job, to my players," he said. "So yes, the garbage news affected me just on this aspect because it's something I don't admit."

Mourinho is in early talks over a contract extension with executive vice chairman Ed Woodward and believes he will remain beyond his current deal. The basic three-year contract ends in the summer of 2019, although the club holds a one-year option to extend. The United boss also defended himself against suggestions he may have lost his passion for the intense world of top-level football. "Because I don't behave as a clown, it means I've lost my passion?" said Mourinho. United expect to welcome back forward Romelu Lukaku after he suffered a suspected concussion against Southampton last week for today evening's cup tie with Derby.

SPOTLIGHT

PSG relishing prospect of Real showdown: Emery

'It is a chance for us to show that we are at the same level as them'

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain coach Unai Emery is confident his side can get the better of Real Madrid as he looked ahead to next month's heavyweight Champions League showdown in an interview.

And Emery dismissed suggestions that defeat to the reigning champions would constitute a failure for a club that invested huge sums in Neymar, Kylian Mbappe and Dani Alves in the hope of winning the Champions League.

"It is a chance for us to show that we are at the same level as them, that we can beat the best teams," the Spaniard said as his team prepares to return to action following the French winter break.

PSG play their first game of 2018 on Sunday away to Rennes when they begin their defence of the French Cup.

Their January schedule will be taken up by domestic action, but a nine-point lead over Monaco and Lyon at the top of Ligue 1 means they will perhaps already be starting to think about the first leg of their last-16 tie in Madrid on February 14.

"I always think positive," said Emery. "We will prepare well to come into the tie strong and compete with Real. I think we can win."

PSG are driven by the memory of what happened at the same stage of the competition last season, when they lost 6-1 away to Barcelona to go out having won 4-0 at home in the first leg in the French capital. "We can learn a lot of things from that tie," Emery said. "I think after that tie, and after the extra step PSG have taken, we will see teams, UEFA, referees have more respect for us, and I think we are now better prepared."

The extent of PSG's spending under their Qatari owners has not made themselves popular with Europe's traditional elite. A combined outlay of around 400 mn euros (\$483 mn) on Neymar and Mbappe alone – the two most expensive transfer deals in history – have led to questions as to how PSG can comply with UEFA's financial fair play rules. But Emery, the former Sevilla coach, said: "When I was in Spain, there were two clubs with huge financial power, Real Madrid and Barcelona. Real bought the best players in the world, (Luis) Figo, (Zinedine) Zidane, Ronaldo.

"In Spain, nobody ever talked about where the



Paris Saint-Germain's Spanish coach Unai Emery poses during a photo session in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, western Paris (AFP)

money they spent was coming from. And for Spanish football it was very good. I am at PSG, in Paris which is one of the most visited cities in the world, with great culture. When the possibility arose for a financial power like that of Qatar to come in, and to have some of the best players in the world... I think the whole of France, French clubs are happy. It is normal that other teams are saying 'wow' because

there is now greater competition. Outside the club there is a lot of talk about financial fair play. Here, the club is on the right road, within the rules of financial fair play."

Nevertheless, it seems certain that PSG will trim their wage bill during this month's transfer window in order to balance the books. The likes of Lucas Moura, Javier Pastore and former Newcastle

striker Hatem Ben Arfa look likely to move on.

However Emery insisted that Argentina midfielder Pastore had not asked for a move amid talk that he could return to Italy. He added: "Certain players who play less can maybe be protagonists in another team because they are good players and they don't have the chance to play here, like Lucas Moura or Hatem Ben Arfa."

SPANISH COPA DEL REY

'Happy' Costa scores on Atletico return in Cup rout

AFP
Madrid

Diego Costa scored for Atletico Madrid just five minutes into his return as the club cruised to a 4-0 win at Lleida Esportiu in the Spanish Copa Del Rey on Wednesday night. Costa, who rejoined from Chelsea in September but could not play until the transfer window opened this month, came on as a 64th-minute substitute and swept home Atletico's third goal in the 69th minute in the first leg of a last 16 tie.

"I'm really happy to feel like a footballer again and play once more with Atletico Madrid. It was very important for me," Costa said after the match. "I

couldn't have hoped for a better start to my second spell with Atletico. I was given the opportunity to play again and I had the chance to score a goal. That makes me even happier."

Spain international Costa started the move that led to his goal, driving forward before moving the ball wide, allowing Juanfran to whip in a low cross that Costa clipped past Lleida keeper David Oliveros. Costa appeared to have injured himself stretching to score the goal, but carried on and finished the game. "Costa's return has filled us with enthusiasm," said Atletico coach Diego Simeone. "He brings speed, strength and physicality, which is what we expected of him."

Two goals in four first half minutes from Diego Godin and Fernando Torres



set Atletico up for the comfortable win away to third tier Lleida, with Godin heading home a drilled free-kick after 33 minutes and Torres doubling the lead soon after, just about staying onside to tap home Kevin Gameiro's low cross.

Costa's fellow sub Antoine Griezman completed the rout in the final seconds, his deflected free-kick sailing past Oliveros giving Simeone's side a seemingly unassailable lead ahead of Tuesday's second leg at the Wanda Metropolitano in Madrid.

Meanwhile Vincenzo Montella got off to a winning start as Sevilla coach, the former AC Milan coach's new side beating Cadiz 2-0 thanks to goals from Nolito and Jesus Navas.

Barcelona and Real Madrid were playing their respective first leg clashes with Celta Vigo and second-tier Numancia late last night, with Barca coach Ernesto Valverde set to rest Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez, who both returned late from holidays in South America, as well as captain Andres Iniesta.

ROUND-UP

Torino sack Mihajlovic, appoint former Watford coach Mazzarri

Former Inter Milan and Watford coach Walter Mazzarri was handed the reins at Torino yesterday after the Serie A side sacked Sinisa Mihajlovic. Mihajlovic was fired following Torino's 2-0 Italian Cup defeat to holders Juventus, allowing the experienced 56-year-old to take over the northern side. Torino said Mazzarri began work immediately and took charge of training yesterday. Torino had earlier confirmed Mihajlovic's departure after 18 months in charge, thanking the 48-year-old and his staff "for their commitment and passion".

He paid for Torino's recent form which has left the club tenth in Serie A with just five wins in 19 games this season including six draws in their last eight league games. Mazzarri arrives just in time for the January transfer window. Torino play Bologna, just below them in Serie A tomorrow, in their last game until January 21, before a two-week break.

Mihajlovic joined Torino in the summer of 2016, having been sacked by AC Milan in April that year. He previously managed Bologna, Catania, Fiorentina, Sampdoria and the Serbia national team.

Mazzarri was sacked by Watford last May after just one season in England despite ensuring the club's Premier League survival. The cigar-loving Italian has plenty of experience in his home country having previously coached top flight clubs including Sampdoria, Napoli and Inter Milan. He has reportedly signed a contract with Torino until 2020.



PROSINECKI TO BECOME BOSNIA'S NATIONAL COACH

Former Croatia star Robert Prosinecki was appointed as the new coach of Bosnia's national team, replacing Mehmed Bazdarevic following his failure in World Cup qualifiers. The 49-year-old was picked "unanimously" by the Bosnia Football Federation's executive committee, its vice president Milorad Sofrenic told reporters. Prosinecki's international experience was key to the decision, according to Sofrenic.

A former star of both Real Madrid and Barcelona, Prosinecki was also assistant coach to Croatia's national team from 2006 to 2010 and

Azerbaijan's coach from 2014 to 2017. Prosinecki should sign his contract in the coming days, shortly before friendly matches against the United States and Mexico in late January.

After retired from the pitch, Prosinecki also coached Belgrade's Red Star from 2010 to 2012, the club with which he won the Champions League in 1991 – the biggest trophy win in the history of Yugoslav football. Since becoming independent in 1992, Bosnia has qualified only for the final phase of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. At the time the national team was led by Safet Susic, who was replaced by Bazdarevic in late 2014. Up against Prosinecki for the coaching job was Amar Osim, son of another Yugoslav football legend, Ivica Osim.

ATLETICO MADRID LOAN VIETTO TO VALENCIA

Valencia announced the loan signing of Argentine forward Luciano Vietto from their La Liga rivals Atletico Madrid. Valencia confirmed that Vietto, 24, would join on a deal until the end of the season with an option to make the move permanent then.

Vietto, who failed to score in 10 games this season for Atletico, had found himself relegated down the pecking order there after Diego Costa's return to the club from Chelsea. He played under Valencia coach Marcelino at Villarreal in 2014-15 before moving to the capital on a deal until 2021. Valencia are currently third in La Liga, two points behind second-placed Atletico and 11 adrift of leaders Barcelona.

MANCHESTER CITY TOP FINANCIAL FIREPOWER LIST

Premier League leaders Manchester City have more financial muscle than any other club in world football, according to a study that sees English clubs dominate the top 10.

The Soccerex Football Finance 100, which ranks the world's top teams based on both their playing and fixed assets, money in the bank, owner potential investment and debt, was published on Wednesday. City, who have dropped just four points in the league this season, lead the way ahead of Arsenal. Tottenham are fifth on the list ahead of seventh-placed Manchester United, with Chelsea in ninth.

According to the study, Arsenal have £766mn (\$1bn) worth of fixed assets – following their move from Highbury to the Emirates Stadium – more than any other club in world football, while only Manchester United have more money in the bank (£307mn) than Arsenal's £300mn. Liverpool are 16th on the list, while 2016 Premier League champions Leicester are 20th. French giants PSG, who broke the transfer record to sign Neymar last summer, are third ahead of Chinese side Guangzhou Evergrande. Real Madrid are sixth with their La Liga rivals Barcelona only 13th.

ARSENAL TO SIGN GREEK DEFENDER MAVROPANOS, SAYS WENGER

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has confirmed they will sign Greek defender Konstantinos Mavropanos from PAS Giannina in the current

transfer window. According to British media reports, Mavropanos will complete a move to the Emirates Stadium this week in a deal worth around 2mn pounds (\$2.70mn).

When asked about the deal after Arsenal's 2-2 draw with Chelsea on Wednesday, Wenger said: "Yes but he's not ready to play for us, we'll give him out on loan." Mavropanos, 20, has impressed at both ends in his first full season in Greece's Super League for PAS Giannina, scoring three goals in 14 appearances.

FORMER ENGLAND DEFENDER COLE REJOINS MLS GALAXY

Former England defender Ashley Cole, a long-time Premier League star with Arsenal and Chelsea, has signed a one-year deal to remain with the Los Angeles Galaxy, the Major League Soccer club announced Wednesday.

The 37-year-old left back has 55 Galaxy appearances over two seasons, scoring one goal and setting up two others in 29 games for Los Angeles last season. Cole won two Premier League crowns and three FA Cups with Arsenal from 1999 to 2006, then added a Premier League crown, four FA Cups and a UEFA Champions League title from 2006 to 2014 with Chelsea.

He then spent two years at AS Roma before joining the Galaxy in 2016. Cole played for England in the 2002, 2006 and 2010 World Cups and with more than 100 international appearances became the most capped fullback in English history.

Juventus enter Italian Cup semi-finals

Turin, Italy: Douglas Costa and Mario Mandzukic scored in either half as defending champions Juventus advanced to the semi-finals of the Italian Cup on Wednesday night with a 2-0 win over city rivals Torino.

Brazilian Costa opened after quarter of an hour in the Allianz Stadium with Croatian Mandzukic adding the second amid controversy on 69 minutes to set up a meeting with Atalanta, who eliminated Serie A leaders Napoli 2-1 on Tuesday, in the final four.

Lazio, finalists in 2017, will meet AC Milan in the other semi-final played over two legs on January 31 and February 28. The winning team will earn a direct entry to the group stages of the Europa League. "We've reached the semi-final for the fourth year running and the lads took the right approach to this game," said coach Massimiliano Allegri.

Torino had wanted a free-kick for Sami Khedira's challenge on Afriyie Acquah in the build-up to Mandzukic's goal which was awarded after consultation with the video assistant referee (VAR). "I didn't see the incident and I will not comment. I never comment on VAR. I will just say we could have scored another couple of goals at least."

Allegri added that the three-time reigning champions were not taking anything for granted against Atalanta who won their only ever title in the Italian Cup back in 1963. "Atalanta deservedly beat Napoli to reach the semi-final and it won't be easy against them, but we'll make sure we are ready," added the Juventus coach.

Torino suffered badly during their last meeting with Juventus 4-0 in September but this time came close to scoring through Mbaye Niange just after Costa's opener. But they were no match for the record 12-time winners with Costa almost getting a second after 59 minutes with Paulo Dybala also on form.

Mandzukic beat the offside trap to lob over Vanja Milinkovic-Savic in the Torino goal, with VAR confirming to the fury of coach Sinisa Mihajlovic who was banished from the sidelines for dissent.

Torino assistant manager Attilio Lombardo blasted a decision "which killed off the game." "Acquah gets the ball and is then hit by Khedira. I don't understand what is evaluated via VAR and I don't understand how the referee saw the opposite," said Lombardo. Torino – who eliminated AS Roma in the last 16 – now turn their focus back to Serie A to try to earn European football next season as they sit tenth. "There are regrets, it was a good opportunity, but Saturday against Bologna will determine a lot of our journey."

NHL

Blackhawks look Sharp in win over Rangers

Reuters
Chicago

Patrick Sharp scored the go-ahead goal early in the third period, and the Chicago Blackhawks pulled away for a 5-2 win over the New York Rangers on Wednesday night at Madison Square Garden in New York.

Vinnie Hinostroza, Nick Schmaltz, Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane also scored for the Blackhawks, who registered three-plus goals for the third straight game after failing to do so in each of the previous three contests. Chicago (19-14-6) improved to 9-9-4 on the road.

Nick Holden and Mika Zibanejad scored in a losing effort for the Rangers. New York (21-14-5) dropped to 15-7-3 on its home ice and lost in regulation for only

the second time in the past nine games.

Blackhawks goaltender Jeff Glass earned his second win in three career games, all of which have come in the past week with No. 1 netminder Corey Crawford out due to an injury. The 32-year-old turned aside 23 of 25 shots, including a point-blank attempt from Rangers left winger Rick Nash in the final two minutes when New York pulled its goaltender for an extra attacker.

Rangers goaltender Henrik Lundqvist fell to 18-10-4 despite making 30 saves on 33 shots.

Chicago opened the scoring on Hinostroza's second goal of the season with 3:51 to go in the first period. Two minutes later, New York evened the score at 1 on a long slap shot from Holden.

Schmaltz broke the tie midway through the second period with his eighth goal of the season and

his second in the past four games. The Rangers clawed back again on a slap shot by Zibanejad for his 12th goal.

Sharp put Chicago on top for good 2:24 into the third period. His snap shot from the left circle hit the underside of the crossbar and ricocheted into the net for his fourth goal of the season and his first since Nov. 27. The 36-year-old has struggled badly this season and recently sat out several games as a healthy scratch.

Toews added an empty-net goal with 53.4 seconds remaining to make it a two-goal game. Kane flicked a backhand shot into the back of an empty net with 4.9 seconds left to finish the scoring.

Athanasίου, Wings make quick work of Senators in OT
Andreas Athanasίου scored six seconds into overtime to give the Detroit Red Wings a 2-1

victory over the Ottawa Senators on Wednesday in Detroit. Athanasίου broke free after the Red Wings won the faceoff and lifted a backhand over Senators goaltender Craig Anderson. Detroit (16-16-7) had been 0-6 in overtime games, not counting shootouts.

Athanasίου also scored the Red Wings' regulation goal in the first period. Jimmy Howard made 33 saves as Detroit won its third straight. Ryan Dzingel scored the lone Ottawa goal while Anderson stopped 33 shots. The Senators (12-17-9) have dropped six of their past seven. The Senators outshot the Wings 14-11 in the first period but headed to the locker room trailing 1-0.

Anderson robbed Mantha on a two-on-one situation midway through the first. An Ottawa giveaway in its own end led to the goal. Detroit's Martin Frk made a steal

and fed Anthony Mantha, who was stopped in front. Athanasίου knocked in the rebound with a backhand over Anderson's right shoulder at the 11:15 mark.

Bobby Ryan came the closest to scoring for the Senators in the first as he banged one off the post late in the period. Both teams had 11 shots on goal in the second period, but the Red Wings had the better scoring chances. Anderson robbed Frk with a leg save at the 12:39 mark. Tomas Tatar hit the goal post on a breakaway with two minutes left in the period.

The Senators tied it 39 seconds into the third. Dzingel stole a pass intended for Darren Helm and drilled the puck past Howard.

Athanasίου was rewarded the first penalty shot of his career with 9:19 remaining. Dion Phaneuf pulled him down on a breakaway, but Anderson made a pad save on his freebie.



Chicago Blackhawks left wing Patrick Sharp (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring a goal against the New York Rangers during the third period at Madison Square Garden. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

NBA

Celtics rout Cavs as Thomas gets ovation in Boston return

'From day one we've always had that next man up mentality and we've kept it going'



Boston Celtics guard Terry Rozier (right) drives the ball against Cleveland Cavaliers forward Jeff Green (centre) in the third quarter at TD Garden. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

AFP
Washington

Terry Rozier scored 20 points off the Boston bench to lead six double-figure scorers Wednesday and the Celtics routed visiting Cleveland 102-88 in an NBA Eastern Conference showdown. Jayson Tatum and reserve Marcus Smart each scored 15 points, Jaylen Brown added 14 points and Kyrie Irving and Al Horford each contributed 11 and nine rebounds as the East-leading Celtics improved to 31-10.

"That shows what type of team we are," Rozier said of the Celtics' scoring depth. "From day one we've always had that next man up mentality and we've kept it going."

LeBron James led Cleveland with 19 points and added seven rebounds and six assists but the Cavaliers (25-13) had a season-low point total.

"Their defense was very good.

They were very in tune to what we wanted to do execution-wise offensively," Jaoints on 1-of-11 shooting. Cleveland's Isaiah Thomas sat out a night after making his season debut, missing more than two months with a hip injury after being traded from the Celtics in the deal that sent Irving to Boston.

"I don't know who we are and who we can be until we get it back consistently," James said. "We haven't played well as of late so we are trying to figure that out as well. We will be fine, though."

Thomas exchanged hugs and smiles with his former teammates and when he was shown on the scoreboard videoreel, Boston fans responded with a standing ovation.

"This is genuine love from both sides," Thomas said. "The fans are everything here. Boston is definitely in my heart and will always be some type of home for me."

The Celtics avenged a 102-99 opening-night loss at Cleveland in which Gordon Hayward suf-

fered a broken left ankle in his Boston debut. DeMar DeRozan scored 35 points to power the Toronto Raptors (26-10) to a 124-115 victory at Chicago while Greek standout Giannis Antetokounmpo had 31 points and 10 rebounds in Milwaukee's 122-101 home romp over Indiana.

Curry's 3-pointer wins for Warriors

Stephen Curry scored 32 points, including the game-winning 3-pointer with 3.4 seconds remaining, and reigning champion Golden State improved to an NBA-best 30-8 with a 125-122 triumph at Dallas. Kevin Durant and Klay Thompson each added 25 points for the Warriors. Durant had 11 rebounds while Draymond Green contributed 18 points and 10 rebounds.

Paul George and Terrance Ferguson each scored 24 points, Carmelo Anthony added 21 and Russell Westbrook had 20 points and 12 assists to spark Oklahoma

City over the host Los Angeles Lakers 133-96. The Houston Rockets, playing without guard James Harden due to a hamstring injury, had 27 points off the bench from Gerald Green and 21 more from Clint Capela in a 116-98 romp at Orlando.

Bradley Beal scored 27 points while John Wall added 25 and nine assists in Washington's 121-103 home rout of New York.

Aussies rule in Sixers' win

Australian guard Ben Simmons scored 26 points while Joel Embiid shook off a right hand injury to produce 21 points and 11 rebounds in Philadelphia's 112-106 home victory over San Antonio.

Aussie reserve guard Patty Mills scored 26 points to lead the Spurs while LaMarcus Aldridge added 24 points and 14 rebounds.

Canadian Kelly Olynyk had 25 points and 13 rebounds while Slovenian Goran Dragic added 24 points and 13 assists to lead Miami over visiting Detroit 111-104.

Spencer Dinwiddie, who scored 26 points and passed off nine assists, sank the winning jumper with nine seconds remaining to give Brooklyn a 98-97 victory over Minnesota. Jimmy Butler led the visiting Timberwolves with 30 points but missed a decisive jumper at the final buzzer.

Anthony Davis scored 29 points and grabbed 15 rebounds to spark New Orleans over host Utah 108-98 while Gary Harris scored 36 points to lead Denver over visiting Phoenix 134-111.

RESULTS

Philadelphia.....112	San Antonio.....106
Washington.....121	New York.....103
Houston.....116	Orlando.....98
Miami.....111	Detroit.....104
Brooklyn.....98	Minnesota.....97
Boston.....102	Cleveland.....88
Toronto.....124	Chicago.....115
Milwaukee.....122	Indiana.....101
Golden State.....125	Dallas.....122
Denver.....134	Phoenix.....111
New Orleans.....108	Utah.....98
Oklahoma C.....133	Lakers.....96

NFL

Gase backs Tannehill as 2018 starting QB

Reuters
New York

After missing the 2017 season due to August surgery on a torn ACL in his left knee, quarterback Ryan Tannehill still has Adam Gase's support as the Miami Dolphins' starter, the head coach told reporters Wednesday.

"I see him as the starting quarterback next year," Gase said, adding that the 29-year-old QB will "probably be stronger than he's ever been" in 2018.

Tannehill landed awkwardly on a non-contact play in practice Aug. 3 and was placed on injured reserve before having season-ending surgery. He was wearing a brace on the knee when the play in question happened, protection after a similar injury late in 2016.

Tannehill sprained the ACL and MCL in the same knee during Week 14 of the 2016 season but did not undergo surgery. Instead, he wore a cast and worked to recover while backup Matt Moore carried the Dolphins the rest of the way to the postseason. Reports late in the season suggested Tannehill could return sometime in the playoffs, if the Dolphins advanced far enough. They did not, losing in the wild-card round, and Tannehill continued his recovery without surgery in the offseason.

By Gase's account, the August injury was an aggravation of the original issue.

"Really, I don't look at it

as two injuries," Gase said Wednesday. "I look at it as, he had the knee (injury in 2016). We were advised - and so was he - to handle it in a certain way, and it didn't work out. So that's kind of a part of the business that's tough. We went with the advice that we all felt like was good for us, and it didn't work out."

Gase expects Tannehill to be healthy enough to take part in offseason activities in the spring, when he will be about nine months removed from surgery.

Per Spotrac, Tannehill will count \$19.8 million against the cap this season, but the Dolphins could save \$15.5 million by releasing him. Tannehill is due \$5.53 million in guaranteed money, the last of the guarantees on a four-year, \$77 million extension signed in May 2015.

The 2012 first-round pick has gone 37-40 with a QB rating of 86.5 across six seasons with the Dolphins. Before missing the final three games in 2016, Tannehill posted career bests in completion percentage (67.1), yards per attempt (7.7) and QB rating (93.5) in his first campaign under Gase's direction.

Signed out of retirement in August to replace Tannehill, Jay Cutler was far less efficient this season, completing 62.0 percent of his passes for 2,666 yards (6.2 yards per attempt), 19 touchdowns and 14 interceptions for a rating of 80.8. He has said he will only return to the NFL as a starter, an opportunity that is not expected in Miami.

Broncos, Texans to coach Senior Bowl teams

The Denver Broncos and Houston Texans have been selected to coach the 2018 Senior Bowl from Jan. 22-27 in Mobile, Ala. the event's website announced on Wednesday.

The Broncos, who hold the fifth overall pick in April's NFL Draft, will coach the North Team, while the Texans - who do not have a first-round pick after trading it as part of a package to draft Deshaun Watson 12th overall last year - guide the South.

Denver has coached in the game six times before, though not since 1989, while the Texans did so once, in 2003.

"Anytime you get to work hands-on with these young players and put them through the rigors of NFL-level practices and meetings, it can be tremendously beneficial to both parties," Texans head coach Bill O'Brien said in a press release. "We are all looking forward to the week and making the most of it."

Texans general manager Rick Smith is not expected to be in Mobile during the week. The team is in the process of searching for a GM to fill in for Smith after he announced Sunday that he is taking an extended leave of absence to care for his wife, who was recently diagnosed with breast cancer.

Broncos head coach Vance Joseph has coached in the Senior Bowl three times, all when he was a part of the San Francisco 49ers staff from 2006-08.

"The Senior Bowl provides our staff an up-close look at some of the top prospects in this year's draft," he said in a release. "Having coached the Senior Bowl in the past, it's a tremendous evaluation tool spending all week with these players in a variety of group and individual settings."

Broncos GM John Elway added that the team "jumped at the opportunity" to coach in the event.

The news comes a day after Elway emphasised the Broncos' need to upgrade at quarterback in 2018. Among the signal-callers who have accepted invitations to the Senior Bowl are Oklahoma's Heisman Trophy-winning Baker Mayfield, Oklahoma State's Mason Rudolph and Washington State's Luke Falk. Mayfield is widely considered a candidate to go in Round 1 of April's draft, while Rudolph and Falk are pegged as mid-round prospects.

Other top prospects expected to attend in Mobile include Boston College pass-rusher Harold Landry, Alabama linebacker Rashaan Evans, Michigan defensive tackle Maurice Hurst and South Dakota State tight end Dallas Goedert.

Senior Bowl rosters will be announced later in January, before players arrive Jan. 22. Both teams will practice the next three days before playing Jan. 27 at Ladd-Peebles Stadium at 2:30pm ET. NFL Network and ESPN will televise practices during the week, and NFL Network will broadcast the game live on Saturday.



ASHES

Australia hit back with late wickets in Sydney

Root makes 83 before late exit, Cook falls just short of 12,000 runs; Malan survives two scares, batting on 55



England's captain Joe Root (left) walks off the ground after being dismissed during the first day of the Sydney Test yesterday. (Reuters)

Reuters
Sydney

Australia stunned England with two late wickets, including that of Joe Root for 83, to leave the tourists wobbling on 233 for five at the end of the rain-disrupted opening day of the fifth and final Ashes test yesterday.

A day that started with rain washing out the first session had looked like ending with a packed Sydney Cricket Ground bathed in summer sunshine and England's Barmy Army of fans in full triumphant voice.

Root and Dawid Malan had combined for a 133-run partnership to help steer the tour-

ists to 228 for three when Australia took the second new ball with two or three overs of play remaining.

First, Mitchell Starc, back after missing the fourth test with a bruised heel, induced Root into a half volley to square leg where Mitchell Marsh took a superb catch.

Then Jonny Bairstow, who had eschewed a nightwatchman, was removed caught behind by Josh Hazlewood with what turned out to be the last ball of the day.

"It was great to get the late reward as a bowling group for our hard toil," said Marsh.

"Two three-hour sessions really took it out of us, certainly in that last hour, it felt pretty long. So to get those two wickets was

great for our confidence and we've got a two-over new ball tomorrow, so hopefully we can get stuck into them."

Despite the Ashes already having been relinquished after the loss of the first three Tests in the series, the tourists had been determined to build on their performance in the drawn fourth Test and secure a consolation win.

Malan, who survived a few scares to notch up his fifth test half century and reached stumps unbeaten on 55, said England were obviously disappointed.

"It sort of sums up where we've been in on this tour, we've been on top for so long in games and then make a couple of mistakes and let the Aussies back in," he said.

"I thought Rooty played fantastically well to get to that position, obviously he was disappointed to get out and to be five down after the hard work we put in today is obviously not ideal!"

"He still averages (52) in Test cricket and the day will come when he will probably start converting as well as Steve Smith does or the other greats have done. And when that happens, it will be scary to see how good he can be and how high his average can jump to."

Mark Stoneman, James Vince and Alastair Cook departed relatively cheaply before tea but Australia's bowlers were unable to drive home their advantage until the dramatic climax.

Both Root and Malan scored slowly - the captain had six

boundaries in his half century and his partner five - and there were chances to dismiss the latter in particular.

Root had just reached the 50 mark when he called for a single off Nathan Lyon only for Malan, who was on 28, to stand his ground and then set off very late. Marsh fielded the ball but fired it to the striker's end and Tim Paine's throw to Lyon caused the spinner to spill the ball, allowing Malan to make his ground.

Malan had eked his tally to 34 when he got an edge off to a Lyon delivery that eluded both wicketkeeper Paine and captain Steve Smith at first slip.

They were chances that Australia would have rued had the day not ended as well for them as it had started.

Stoneman and Vince had got starts under brightening skies but departed for 24 and 25 respectively, both caught behind off Pat Cummins.

Cook made 244 not out

Scorecard



England first innings

A. Cook lbw b Hazlewood	39
M. Stoneman c Paine b Cummins	24
J. Vince c Paine b Cummins	25
J. Root c M. Marsh b Starc	83
D. Malan not out	55
J. Bairstow c Paine b Hazlewood	5

Extras (lb1, w1) 2

Total (5 wickets; 81.4 overs) 233

Fall of wickets: 1-28 (Stoneman), 2-88 (Vince), 3-95 (Cook), 4-228 (Root), 5-233 (Bairstow)

Bowling: Starc 16-4-63-1, Hazlewood 17-4-2-47-2, Cummins 17-4-44-2 (1w), Lyon 26-4-61-0, M. Marsh 5-0-17-0

in Melbourne last week and looked to be creeping assiduously towards another big tally when Hazlewood intervened to remove him lbw for 39, a review leaving the former England captain five runs short of 12,000 test runs.

Malan said he was surprised team-mate Jonny Bairstow did not employ a nightwatchman on day one of the fifth Ashes Test in Sydney.

Bairstow lasted just seven balls as Australia followed up their dismissal of Joe Root (83) with the new ball to leave England 233-5 at the close.

"It takes a lot of guts to go against what people normally do," said Malan, who ended the day unbeaten on 55.

"Perhaps he felt he was better suited to face the new ball."

Middlesex left-hander Malan added: "Some people like it and some people don't. I'll have a nightwatchman every time if there is an opportunity given to me."

IPL

CSK retain Dhoni; KKR release Gambhir

IANS

New Delhi

Former India skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni will once again be seen in his favourite yellow jersey in the Indian Premier League's (IPL) 2018 season as the Chennai Super Kings retained the Rancho stumper along with Suresh Raina and all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja.

The CSK franchise, back into the IPL fold after serving a two-year ban, has two Right-to-Match options left, which they can use during the IPL auction on January 27 and 28. Rajasthan Royals, the other franchise to return after a two-year ban, has retained Australia skipper Steve Smith and surprisingly pushed the likes of star batsman Ajinkya Rahane back into the auction pool.

The other surprise came in the form of Gautam Gambhir, who was sent into the auction pool despite guiding the Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) to lifting the silverware twice (2012 and 2014).

KKR retained the West Indian duo of Sunil Narine and Andre Russell.

Similarly, Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB) released West Indian power-hitter Chris Gayle while retaining India skipper Virat Kohli South African AB de Villiers and young Sarfraz Khan. Delhi Daredevils expectedly retained the young Indian duo of Rishabh Pant and Shreyas Iyer along with South African all-rounder Chris Morris.

Mumbai Indians also went along expected lines retaining their three-time IPL winning skipper Rohit Sharma along with Hardik Pandya and Jasprit Bumrah. Sunrisers Hyderabad also sprang a surprise by releasing India opener Shikhar Dhawan and Afghanistan spin sensation Rashid Khan but retained Australian David Warner along with Bhuvneshwar Kumar. After another dismal 2017 season, Kings XI Punjab retained just Axar Patel for the next season. Daredevils unveiled former Australia captain Ricky Ponting as the new coach of the outfit for the season.

SL sacks ODI skipper Perera

Sri Lanka yesterday ousted Thisara Perera as one-day captain and said it would announce a replacement next week. Perera took on the job in late November, succeeding Upul Tharanga, who was sacked after a series of losses.

Sri Lanka Cricket said it would name a successor after consulting new coach Chandika Hathurusingha, who has pledged to get tough with the under-performing national team.

PREVIEW

India face fierce examination in South Africa

AFP
Cape Town

India's status as the world's number one Test team will face a fierce examination when they come up against second-ranked South Africa in a three-Test series which starts at Newlands on Friday.

South Africa will be banking on their formidable fast bowling attack to dismantle India's strong batting line-up but after nine successive Test series wins India are brimming with confidence - and a belief that they can thrive in any conditions.

Six of India's winning series were played at home and the others - two in Sri Lanka and one in the West Indies - were in conditions where fast bowling was not a major factor.

The last time India lost a series was when they were beaten 2-0 in Australia in a four-match contest in 2014/15 but it was a series which showed India's batsmen could stand up to raw pace on hard, bouncy pitches.

They scored more than 400 in each of their first innings, losing the first two Tests before drawing the last two.

"The tour to Australia is the one that laid a great foundation for this team," said Indian captain Virat Kohli during his arrival press conference last week.

Kohli hit four centuries in that series and it marked the start of his captaincy, initially in a stand-in capacity in two of the Tests in Australia but afterwards on a full-time basis when Mahendra Singh Dhoni retired from Test cricket.

India have a poor record in South Africa, losing five out of six series with one drawn, and winning only two out of 17 Test matches against eight defeats and seven draws.

Significantly, though, they have pushed South Africa hard on their two most recent tours, in 2010/11 and 2013/14, sharing the first series and narrowly losing the second.

Thirteen of the 2013/14 tourists are in the current party and they are a vastly more experienced squad who have become accustomed to winning. Both teams have selection dilemmas. South Africa have to make



India's right handed batsman and captain Virat Kohli runs during a training session at the Newlands Cricket ground in Cape Town, prior to the first of three Test matches against South Africa. (AFP)

room for returning captain Faf du Plessis in their batting order and will have to decide on their best bowling line-up. Fast bowler Chris Morris will vie with medium-pace Andile Phehlukwayo as an all-rounder to augment an expected pace attack of Morne Morkel, Vernon Philander and Kagiso Rabada.

India have to choose between Lokesh Rahul and Shikhar Dhawan as an opening batting partner for Murali Vijay, while in pace-friendly conditions there may be room for only one specialist spinner, meaning that one of Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja, a match-winning combination in India, could miss out.

SQUADS

South Africa: Faf du Plessis (captain), Dean Elgar, Aiden Markram, Hashim Amla, AB de Villiers, Temba Bavuma, Quinton de Kock (wkt), Theunis de Bruyn, Vernon Philander, Chris Morris, Andile Phehlukwayo, Keshav Maharaj, Kagiso Rabada, Dale Steyn, Morne Morkel.
India: Virat Kohli (captain), Murali Vijay, Lokesh Rahul, Shikhar Dhawan, Cheteshwar Pujara, Ajinkya Rahane, Rohit Sharma, Wriddhiman Saha (wkt), R Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja, Parthiv Patel (wkt), Hardik Pandya, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Mohamed Shami, Ishant Sharma, Umesh Yadav, Jasprit Bumrah.

It's the pitch we wanted: Du Plessis

South African captain Faf du Plessis yesterday said the pitch for the first Test against India, starting at Newlands today, looked ideal for his team. "The groundsman has done a fantastic job," said Du Plessis. "It's been very, very hot but it looks like it's going to be a good cricket wicket, nothing too extreme but it looks like it's going to be exactly what we wanted." After several days of hot weather the match pitch had a mottled appearance. It looked less green than it was when the South Africans assembled on Tuesday but there was still a good covering of grass.

The ideal pitch, according to Du Plessis, is one that offers pace, bounce and some seam movement. "You don't want excessive movement that brings both bowling attacks into the game. We feel that our seam resources on a wicket that offers a bit of pace and bounce can exploit some areas in their batting line-up," he said.

For the first time in more than a year, South Africa have all their key bowlers fit, while the returning AB de Villiers needs to be slotted into what has been a settled batting middle order. "There are so many combinations," said Du Plessis. "It is the hardest team selection I've been involved in. We have so many different options, we can almost pick different teams for different venues." Although coach Ottis Gibson indicated earlier in the week that



South African captain Faf du Plessis

it was unlikely Dale Steyn would be part of the fast bowling line-up after a long injury break, Du Plessis said the former world number one bowler had lost none of his skill.

"Dale for me is the best bowler in the world," said Du Plessis. "He hasn't played for a while. He hasn't got the overs under his legs that he would have wanted but facing Dale in the nets it feels like he's got the same pace, the same swing." Du Plessis admitted that South Africa had produced some disappointing results in the past two years, notably away to India and at home to England in 2015/16 and in England in 2017, but said conditions, particularly in India, and injuries has been a factor. He said he looked forward to his team challenging for the number one Test ranking, currently held by India. "The next two or three years

are going to be very exciting for South African cricket. We can push very hard to not only get to number one but to stay there for quite a bit."

Indian batting coach Sanjay Bangar said India were confident after preparing well since their arrival in South Africa last week. He said India's fast bowlers were ready to step up after largely providing a supporting role to the spinners during India's successful run of Test matches in India. "They have bowled with consistency and discipline and I am pretty sure that discipline will help us maintain pressure on the batsmen," said Bangar. Bangar said Shikhar Dhawan had recovered from a minor ankle injury and was available for selection but left-arm spinner Ravindra Jadeja was still under observation after suffering from a viral illness.

HORSE RACING

Salman Bu Thaila wins feature, double for al-Malki, Pedroza

Under Carlo Fiocchi, Salman Bu Thaila beat Asaaf, helmed by Marvin Suerland, by a little more than a length for a fine win

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Running his longest distance yet, Abdulhadi Mana al-Hajri-owned Salman Bu Thaila registered his second career victory, winning the 2400m Halul Island Cup for Local Thoroughbreds, yesterday's feature on turf at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club yesterday.

Stefano Ibido's charge had finished fourth against the field in his last outing in November, when Zuhair Mohsen-trained Asaaf had picked up the victory. Yesterday, under Carlo Fiocchi, Salman Bu Thaila beat Asaaf, helmed by Marvin Suerland, by a little more than a length for a fine victory, while Theo Bachelot was astride Mohamed Hussain's Absher in third.

The owner-trainer-jockey trio of Abdulatif Hussain al-Emadi, Ibrahim al-Malki and Eduardo Pedroza combined well in the penultimate race of the day, with Mango Tango extending her unbeaten streak this season to three outings.

Pedroza helmed Mango Tango to a smashing victory, almost four lengths, in the 2000m Thoroughbreds event for fillies and mares yesterday. Stefano Ibido's ward Croara and Mohamed Jassim Ghazali's Scudding completed the top three.

Al-Malki also had a winner in the third race of the evening, when Pedroza helmed al-Emadi's Daleem to victory in the Local Thoroughbred Handicap event for horses rated 85 and below.

Mohamed Rashid al-Kuwari's charge Akram had to settle for second place for the second straight race, while Mohamed Hussain's Jakom completed the top three.

Julian Smart-trained Al Shaman continued to impress in Qatar, picking up his second straight victory since making his debut here after arriving from France. Theo Bachelot, riding in the famous silks of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani, beat Mohamed Jassim Ghazali's ward Carigrad, while Opera Baron, saddled by Ghazali's father, Jassim, completed the top three.

Mohamed Jassim Ghazali had winners in two straight races on the day with Harry Bentley riding Sheail bin Khalifa al-Kuwari's Zahwa to her second victory this season, while Pier Convertino ensured Injaaz Stud's Moamar made a winning debut in Qatar.

Zahwa topped the Local Purebred Arabian Handicap event for horses rated 85 and below, going past the line three lengths ahead of Mansoor Mesfer al-Hajri's Haddaj Dukhan, who missed out on a victory despite making it to the frame for the fifth straight time. Pierre Deymonaz-schooled E'zaaz was third under Carlo Fiocchi.

Moamar, a useful performer in Britain, won the 2000m Thoroughbred Handicap event for horses rated 80 and below, with Convertino helming the gelding to a victory ahead of al-Malki's ward Could Be and Jassim Mohamed Ghazali's Yaarmen.

Hamad Ahmed al-Malki al-Jehani's China Club, after staying winless for almost three years, is having a memorable season of sorts, with the six-year-old registering his second victory this season, topping the Thoroughbred Handicap event for horses rated 80 and below.

Marc Lerner guided the horse to a close win over al-Malki's ward Munira Eyes, with Hydroxide, saddled by Ghazali Sr, in third.

Alban de Mieuille-schooled Djelamer registered his first victory this season, winning the 1850m Purebred Arabian Conditions event with ease under Stephan Ladjadi.

Pierre Deymonaz-saddled Rasi and Julian Smart's Aaley Al Magam were second and third respectively. Earlier in the day, Khalid Abdulaziz al-Kuwari guided Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari-owned Al Malhoufa to her second career win in the Local Purebred Arabian Novice



Jockey Carlo Fiocchi is congratulated on returning to the winners' enclosure after he guided Salman Bu Thaila to victory in the Halul Island Cup at the QREC yesterday.



Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC) deputy chief steward Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi (second from right) with the winners of Halul Island Cup after Salman Bu Thaila won the 2400m race at the QREC yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim



Khalid Abdulaziz al-Kuwari (left) rides Al Malhoufa to victory ahead of Mujahidah, ridden by Ali Khalid al-Mosallam, in the Local Purebred Arabian Novice Plate event for Qatari riders only yesterday.

Plate for Qatari riders only.

RESULTS

Race 1: 1. Al Malhoufa (Khalid Abdulaziz al-Kuwari), 2. Mujahidah (Ali Khalid al-Mosallam), 3. Zakhir Al Majd (Rashid Ali al-Marri), 4. Muzn (Meteb Ali al-Marri). Won by: Shd, 2, No. Time: 1:19.03. Owner: Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari. Trainer: Jassim Mohamed Ghazali.

Race 2: 1. China Club (Marc Lerner), 2. Munira Eyes (Eduardo Pedroza), 3. Hydroxide (Pier Convertino), 4. Atteq (Marvin Suerland). Won by: ¾, 1 ¼, ¾. Time: 1:10.79. Owner: Ahmed Hassan al-Malki al-Jehani.

Trainer: Hamad Ahmed al-Malki al-Jehani.

Race 3: 1. Daleem (Eduardo Pedroza), 2. Akram (Saleem Golam), 3. Jakom (Theo Bachelot), 4. Tanja Bu Thaila (Carlo Fiocchi). Won by: 1 ¾, ¾, ¾. Time: 1:12.52. Owner: Abdulatif Hussain al-Emadi. Trainer: Ibrahim al-Malki.

Race 4: 1. Zahwa (Harry Bentley), 2. Haddaj Dukhan (Darren Williams), 3. E'zaaz (Carlo Fiocchi), 4. Al Yem (Pier Convertino). Won by: 3, Shd, 4 ½. Time: 1:30.76. Owner: Sheail bin Khalifa al-Kuwari. Trainer: Mohamed Jassim Ghazali.

Race 5: 1. Moamar (Pier Convertino), 2. Could Be

(Eduardo Pedroza), 3. Yaarmen (Harry Bentley), 4. Shingle (Vaclav Janacek). Won by: ¾, ½, 1 ¾. Time: 2:02.14. Owner: Injaaz Stud. Trainer: Mohamed Jassim Ghazali.

Race 6: 1. Al Shaman (Theo Bachelot), 2. Carigrad (Harry Bentley), 3. Opera Baron (JP Guillambert), 4. Perfect Storm (Eduardo Pedroza). Won by: 2, ½, ¾. Time: 2:15.44. Owner: HH Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani. Trainer: Julian Smart.

Race 7: 1. Djelamer (Stephan Ladjadi), 2. Rasi (Carlo Fiocchi), 3. Aaley Al Magam (Theo Bachelot), 4. Meqdam Al Zaidy (Saleem Golam). Won by: 2, 3/4, 2.

Time: 2:01.81. Owner: Khalifa bin Hamad bin Khalifa al-Attiah. Trainer: Alban de Mieuille.

Race 8: 1. Mango Tango (Eduardo Pedroza), 2. Croara (Carlo Fiocchi), 3. Scudding (JP Guillambert), 4. Stars N Angels (Pier Convertino). Won by: 3 3/4, 1/4, 1/2. Time: 2:02.61. Owner: Abdulatif Hussain al-Emadi. Trainer: Ibrahim al-Malki.

Race 9: 1. Salman Bu Thaila (Carlo Fiocchi), 2. Asaaf (Marvin Suerland), 3. Absher (Theo Bachelot), 4. Al Ajdal (Darren Williams). Won by: 1 1/4, 5, 1. Time: 2:30.88. Owner: Abdulhadi Mana al-Hajri. Trainer: Stefano Ibido.

QNB STARS LEAGUE

Al Gharafa honour former coach Jean Fernandez



Al Gharafa Sports Club President Sheikh Jassim bin Thamer al-Thani (left) presents a memento to ex-coach Jean Fernandez.

QNB Stars League side Al Gharafa honoured their former coach Jean Fernandez, who took over The Cheetahs at the start of this season and was replaced by Turk Bulent Uygun recently.

Al Gharafa Sports Club President Sheikh Jassim bin Thamer al-Thani presented a memento to the Frenchman, who parted ways with the club by mutual consent, in recognition of his efforts with the team. The most notable among them was the QSL Cup triumph last month when they defeated Al Rayyan in the final to end a long title drought. In the QNB Stars League, Al Gharafa are seventh with only 11 points from two wins, four draws and five defeats. They travel to Al Ahli for their 12th-round match on 12th January. Sheikh Jassim thanked Fernandez for his contributions to the club, especially the grooming of youngsters, and wished him all success in his future endeavours.

On his part, Fernandez reciprocated by saying, "It was a pleasure working

at Al Gharafa. I'll certainly continue my relationship with the club and will follow them whether I'm in Qatar or not."

AL SAILIYA GO DOWN FIGHTING

QNB Stars League side Al Saliya lost to Tianjin Quanjian 0-1 in a friendly played on Wednesday at the Aspire Zone, where the Chinese team's winter camp is based.

Liu Yemenig netted the goal in the 54th minute by sending the ball to the left of goalkeeper Hassan Idris.

Al Saliya's Tunisian coach Sami Trabelsi rotated the players in order to test their physical and technical levels before they embark on the second half of the season.

Al Saliya, fourth in the standings with 19 points after the conclusion of first phase, will host Al Arabi at the Al Ahli Stadium in the QNB Stars League's 12th round on 12th January.

The Peregrines had a camp at the Aspire Zone, from 23rd to 29th December, that enhanced the players' performance on physical, technical

and mental fronts.

QATAR SC LOSE TO IRAQ OLYMPIC TEAM

Qatar SC went down fighting to the Iraq Olympic team in a friendly match, played as part of their preparations for the second phase of QNB Stars League.

The Iraq Olympic team, which is camping in Doha, won the match at the Al Gharafa Stadium on Wednesday by a second-half goal.

Qatar SC had also played two friendlies. They were held goalless by Al Khor before their 3-0 victory over Umm Salal. The Kings will face Al Gharafa in another friendly fixture on Sunday. Qatar SC, who are placed 11th with eight points, host Al Duhail in the QNB Stars League's 12th round on 13th January.

Qatari coach Abdullah Mubarak is busy shaping up the team for the tough and hectic second phase of the tournament, given that they did not enjoy a good run in the first half of the season, to the dismay of team management and fans.

FOCUS

SC showcases 2022 hosting preparations at Gulf Cup in Kuwait

'We are fully prepared to be with our Qatari brothers to support their efforts'

The Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy's booth at the Qatar Zone pavilion offers football fans the opportunity to explore Qatar's ongoing preparations to host the first-ever World Cup in the region on the sidelines of the 23rd Gulf Cup in Kuwait.

Organised by SC in association with Qatar Tourism Authority (QTA) and Katara - the Cultural Village, Qatar Zone pavilion aims to promote Qatar as a tourist destination and update regional football fans on latest progress being made to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. It also provides visitors with a unique cultural discovery experience about Qatar through several exciting entertainment activities.

Football fans visiting the SC booth learn about the designs of the 2022 World Cup stadiums and the SC's region-wide legacy initiatives, such as Challenge 22, Generation Amazing and the Josoor Institute.

Upon his visit to the pavilion, Kuwait's Minister of Commerce and Industry, Khalid al-Roudhan, was given a presentation about 2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar hosting preparations by SC assistant secretary-general for Tournament Affairs Nasser al-Khater.

"Qatar Zone pavilion reflects our belief that the 2022 World Cup would not only be a source of inspiration for Qatar, but for the Arab world and the Middle East as well," SC secretary-general Hassan al-Thawadi said

Al-Roudhan, who was greeted at the SC booth by secretary-general Hassan al-Thawadi and Qatar Football Association (QFA) president Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, expressed his admiration at the distinctive development of the stadiums that will potentially host 2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar.

He said: "What drew my attention was the Supreme Committee's successful endeavour to give each stadium its own character and architectural splendour. It was as if each stadium was telling us a unique story. We are proud that Qatar are hosting the 2022 World Cup Qatar. We are fully prepared to be with our Qatari brothers to support their efforts to host this huge international event as we are partners in this tournament, which does not represent Qatar alone. Qatar's success in organising this tournament means the success of all of us."

Al-Thawadi expressed his happiness at



al-Roudhan's visit to the Qatar Zone pavilion. He said: "It is not new for our Kuwaiti brothers to be with us, and we, on our turn, are seeking to repay them. We are all celebrating in Qatar Zone the lifting of the ban on Kuwaiti football."

Al-Thawadi added: "Qatar Zone pavilion reflects our belief that the 2022 World Cup would not only be a source of inspiration for Qatar, but for the Arab world and the Middle East as well. We are keen to be at the big events to inform the members of the community of our plans, and to show them of our preparations and readiness to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup."

Al-Khater hailed Qatar Zone pavilion as a wonderful platform that connects with regional football fans. He said: "We came here to celebrate with Kuwait and support the country after the lifting of the FIFA ban. Qatar Zone is a fantastic opportunity for us to connect with regional football fans and to update them on both the progress being made in our preparations for a historic FIFA World Cup and our efforts to make sure it is one that all Arabs will be proud of!" (SC.qa)



FOOTBALL

Rodriguez happy at Bayern as Bundesliga giants continue training at Aspire Zone

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Star Midfielder **James Rodriguez** issued an emphatic statement as to how long he intends to stay at Bayern Munich, as the Bundesliga giants continued their winter training camp at Aspire Zone's outdoor football pitches yesterday.

On loan from Real Madrid at the Bavarian giants until summer 2019, the Colombian plans to remain in the Bundesliga. "I'm staying here," Rodriguez said yesterday, speaking after Bayern's training camp at Aspire. "My present is here and I'm very happy in Munich. I don't want to think about anything else."

Bayern do have an option to purchase the playmaker at the end of his loan spell, and Rodriguez has repeatedly professed his enjoyment of life in Germany and the Bundesliga in recent weeks.

"I like the stadiums in the Bundesliga a lot," said Rodriguez. "They're always full. You also play against very good teams, it's a top league."

Before any purchasing options can be exercised next summer, there is the small matter of a three-pronged trophy assault that will dominate Bayern's focus until the end of the season.

"I have a very good feeling with the team," said Rodriguez. "I hope things go well in the second half of the season because I still want to achieve a lot with this team."

Part of Bayern's recent success - the Bundesliga champions boast an 11-point cushion at the top of the standings - is no doubt

down to the 26-year-old's swift adaptation to German football: Rodriguez has scored twice and returned three further assists in the Bundesliga so far this term, as well as helping Jupp Heynckes' side to a place in the UEFA Champions League Round of 16.

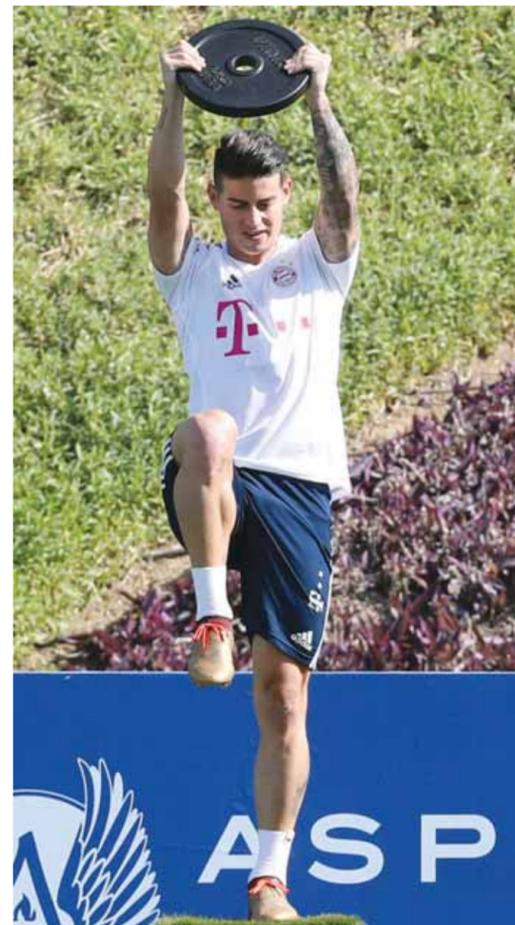
"I slowly found my rhythm," Rodriguez said of his personal first half of the season. "It helped that I got so much playing time. Jupp Heynckes is a top coach - second to none worldwide. We speak a lot and it helps me that he speaks Spanish."

Bayern arrived in Doha on Tuesday night for their eighth annual winter training camp in Doha, which will run until Sunday. Tomorrow, the team will also play a friendly match at 5 on Pitch 05 against Qatari club Al Ahli SC.

Coach Jupp Heynckes again did not have his full squad available for the morning session yesterday.

Defender Joshua Kimmich had a slight cold and was sidelined as a precaution. Goalkeeper Sven Ulreich, who sprained the middle finger of his right hand on Wednesday, did complete most of the training session but did not take part in goalkeeping drills or the practice match at the end. The 29-year-old will return to full training when the swelling on his bruised finger has gone down.

Star striker Robert Lewandowski did initially join in with the training session. The striker, who has a problem with his knee, took part in the warm-up routine with his teammates but then worked on his own doing runs on a neighbouring pitch. Due to a groin problem, Mats Hummels was only able to do some light running.



BOTTOMLINE

QOC and Serbian committee sign MoU for collaboration

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar Olympic Committee and the Serbian Olympic Committee signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to strengthen co-operation between the two organisations for development of sports in both the countries.

QOC vice-president Sheikh Saud bin Ali al-Thani and Olimpijski Komitet Srbije (OKS) president Bozidar Maljkovic signed the MoU, in the presence of QOC secretary-general Jassim Rashid al-Buenain.

"We have long and good relations with Serbia. This is a co-operation agreement regarding development of a wide range of sports and games and we're delighted to sign it," Sheikh Saud said.

"We will not only share the coaching methods, but we will also exchange expertise in sports science to ensure an all-round progress in various sports and games. They have a strong sports culture for a long time and we hope to learn a lot from them," he added.

Al-Buenain, while welcoming the Serbian delegation, said, "The strong links between Qatar and Serbia will help push the Olympic movement forward in both the nations. I hope that this agreement will be beneficial for Qatar as well as Serbia."

OKS head Maljkovic thanked the QOC for the MoU and said, "We're very happy to sign this protocol. Serbia is a big country sports wise. We know that Qatar is facing some diplomatic problems right



QOC vice-president Sheikh Saud bin Ali al-Thani (third from left), Olimpijski Komitet Srbije (OKS) president Bozidar Maljkovic (centre) and QOC secretary-general Jassim Rashid al-Buenain (third from right) pose after signing the MoU.

now. We want to say that people of Serbia are always with you.

"We've strong base in many sports like basketball, football, water polo, handball, volleyball and shooting. In the past season, we won about 20 medals in various

European and world championships.

"We're working with many countries under sports exchange programmes and agreements. I wish to have the agreement with Qatar for a long time," added Maljkovic.

"Basketball is quite popular in Serbia. We have about 30 players in the NBA. We can help Qatar a lot in this sport through coaching clinics, visits by teams and sport education seminars," Maljkovic, a former professional basketball coach, said.

120 teams for expatriate cricket tournament

By Sports Reporter
Doha

In what is billed as the "biggest" league in Qatar, about 120 teams have confirmed their participation in the Qatar Expatriate Cricket Community (QECC) T20 tournament starting later this month. The matches will be played on different grounds in Qatar with important latter stage games

scheduled for the Asian Town Stadium. The 120 teams will be divided into 10 groups of 12 teams each, with four from each group advancing to the second round after playing 11 league games. The remaining 40 teams will then take the tournament forward. The groupings will be decided today at the Asian Town Stadium where a meeting of captains will be also held.