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FOOTBALL

Wenger banned for three games over ref comments

Page 3

QATAR EXXONMOBIL OPEN

FOCUS

Rublev escapes match point to set up title clash with Monfils

Monfils hoping to be fourth time lucky in Doha

By Anil John
 Doha

Top seed Dominic Thiem of Austria withdraws hours before the semi-final because of high fever

By Anil John
 Doha

Russia's Andrey Rublev learnt yesterday that tennis is not all about pure power after he was taken the distance by Argentinian ATP journeyman Guido Pella in the semi-finals of the Qatar ExxonMobil Open yesterday.

Whether it's a lesson he would put to good use in his future endeavours would be somewhat evident today when he takes on the skilful Gael Monfils in the title match after the Frenchman's rival and top seed Dominic Thiem of Austria withdrew hours before their semi-final because of high fever.

Rublev, who at 20 has shown all the signs of potential greatness, defeated Pella 6-2, 4-6, 7-6 (7/2) in two hours and 26 minutes to say on course for his second ATP title following his victory at the Croatian Open last year.

"I feel happy. I don't even know what to say because I didn't expect this result. I was just focusing to do my best every match and that's it. Now I'm in the final and I'm really happy," said Rublev.

The Russian added that against Monfils he would stick to his natural game and try to dictate terms from the start.

"I mean, we'll see tomorrow. In my case it's everything simple to try to play my game, to try to play the speed of the ball that I'm going to dictate. Because I know that when I play with the speed that they can play, it's really tough for the opponents to play with me. I will try to increase the speed and we'll see tomorrow what's going to happen."

He appeared unperturbed despite the fact he would be meeting Monfils for the first time ever.

"Yeah. I mean, he's a great player. You can see that he was - he win



Russia's Andrey Rublev celebrates after winning his Qatar ExxonMobil Open semi-final against Argentina's Guido Pella yesterday. PICTURE: Jayan Orma

many great tournaments. He beat almost all the top players. I think for sure he was top 10. I mean, he's one of the greatest players now in this time. I mean, he moves amazing. He has big shots, amazing serve. We'll see. Because in the end I have nothing to lose tomorrow. We'll see. I will just try to go on court and enjoy the match."

After the first match yesterday failed to materialise yesterday because of Thiem's illness, it appeared that the proceedings on the penultimate day of the tournament would end in dramatically quick time when Rublev raced to win the first set in just 28 minutes after securing his first break in the very second game to go ahead 2-0. He then helped himself to another

break, in the seventh game, which he won at love, before going a set up, winning 11 points under just five shots. But the 20-year-old's game dramatically disintegrated in the second set as the left-handed Pella began to slowly find his composure and confidence.

Until then, Pella, who is yet to win a title despite turning pro 10 years ago, had given no indication whatsoever that he was capable of such craftiness.

But that was exactly what the 28-year-old Argentinian did, surprising not only his young rival but also the spectators many of whom suddenly began cheering for him.

Pella disturbed Rublev's aggressive rhythm by engaging him in longer rallies and eliciting plenty of

errors in the process from the Russian, who sprayed the ball all over, double faulted a few times and often appeared agitated with the sudden disappearance of his form.

The Argentinian earned his first break in the fourth game and repeated the feat in the sixth before another break in the 10th game helped take the match into the third set.

Games went with serve in the final set, but Pella's best chance to clinch the issue came in the 10th game when he led 5-4 and held match point at 40-30.

But Rublev saved the situation - with an ace - only his second yesterday, and then went on to take the match into the tie-breaker.

But the tie-breaker eventu-

ally proved one-sided as it suited Rublev's style, and he packed too much punch in his shots to book a spot in today's decider.

RESULTS

Singles (Semi-Finals)
 [WC] G. Monfils (FRA) d [1] D. Thiem (AUT) walkover
 A. Rublev (RUS) d G. Pella (ARG) 6-2 4-6 7-6(2)

Doubles (Final)
 [2] O. Marach (AUT)/M. Pavic (CRO) d [1] J. Murray (GBR)/B. Soares (BRA) 6-2 7-6(6)

**TODAY'S ORDER OF PLAY
 CENTRE COURT (From
 6:00pm)**
 ■ [WC] G. Monfils (FRA) vs
 A. Rublev (RUS)



SPOTLIGHT

Marach-Pavic claim doubles title

By Sports Reporter
 Doha

Oliver Marach and Mate Pavic first played together at Miami in March 2017, but began their partnership with a 7-7 record. According to Marach, their lack of early success led to a discussion about splitting up three months later in Stuttgart, where they would go on to reach the final, falling short against Jamie Murray and Bruno Soares.

"I like to forget it," Marach joked of the match yesterday.

Seven months later, you'd never think splitting was ever a possibility for the Austrian-Croatian duo. After a Grand Slam final at Wimbledon, the pair's first title together at Stockholm and a match win at the Nitto ATP Finals (d. Bryan/Bryan) as alternates, Marach and Pavic were flying high. And after earning their second title together at the Qatar ExxonMo-

bil Open with an impressive triumph over none other than Murray and Soares, the top seeds, 6-2, 7-6(6), Marach and Pavic are still on the rise.

"We played the whole week really great tennis," Marach said.

"Especially for me it was very important. I didn't know how I would play because I had not a great winter, I was injured. Then I came here just three or four practices and if you look at that, that we're now the winners here, it's amazing."

The second seeds dominated the field without dropping a set in Doha. Six of the eight sets they won were by margins of 6-3 or greater.

"It's one of my favourite tournaments at the beginning of the year and we had a great week," Pavic said.

"From the beginning on we were playing just better and better and today was a great match."

The biggest complication for Marach and Pavic came in the second-set tie-break, while holding match points on

Pavic's serve at 6/3 and 6/4. Soares and then Murray came up with arguably their best returns of the match to re-gain two mini-breaks and then knotted the tie-break at 6/6 on Soares' serve.

But as they did all week, Marach and Pavic had the answer. The Croatian left-hander hit a tremendous inside-out forehand winner to earn another match point, which the pair did not waste.

Marach hit a forehand approach shot that Murray could not handle to clinch the title as well as the 250 ATP Rankings points and \$69,870 for the team that comes with it.

It was still a strong start to the campaign for Nitto ATP Finals semi-finalists Murray and Soares, who leave Doha with 150 points and \$36,730 to share.

Oliver Marach and Mate Pavic receive the doubles trophy from Qatar Tennis Federation President Nasser bin Ghanim al-Khalefi yesterday. PICTURE: Jayan Orma





SPOTLIGHT

'Super close' Serena out of Australian Open

AFP
Melbourne

Defending champion **Serena Williams** pulled out of the Australian Open on Friday, saying she was "super close" but still not at the level she needs to be after giving birth to her first child.

The American 23-time Grand Slam winner made a tentative return at an Abu Dhabi exhibition late last month, losing to French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko.

Prior to that her last competitive match was at the Australian Open final almost a year ago, which she won despite being two months pregnant, memorably beating sister Venus in the decider.

Since then, she has given birth to her first child and mar-

ried Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian at a star-studded wedding, where guests included Beyonce and reality TV star Kim Kardashian.

"After competing in Abu Dhabi I realised that although I am super close, I'm not where I personally want to be," the 36-year-old said in a statement.

"My coach and team always said 'only go to tournaments when you are prepared to go all the way'.

"I can compete, but I don't want to just compete, I want to do far better than that and to do so, I will need a little more time.

"With that being said, and even though I am disappointed about it, I've decided not to compete in the Australian Open this year," she added.

Her withdrawal deprives the opening Grand Slam of the year of another major star, after former world number one Andy

Murray and Japan's Kei Nishikori both pulled out injured on Thursday.

In Abu Dhabi, Williams was clearly sluggish and had problems with her serve.

She also stuck mostly to the baseline and only twice charged the net.

Despite this, she made it clear afterwards that she missed being on court and was desperate to play at Melbourne Park, where she has been crowned champion seven times.

'True champion'

Australian Open tournament director Craig Tiley expressed his admiration for her efforts to return to the game she loves.

"The true champion Serena is has been demonstrated in the Herculean efforts she has made over the past few months in her desire to play the Australian Open," he said.

"It was never going to be good enough for her to just compete, she wants to give herself the best chance to win.

"I've been in constant contact with Serena and her team and know this is why she has pushed it and pushed it until the eleventh hour to make her final decision."

Few players have successfully bounced back after giving birth, and even fewer have managed to go on to win Grand Slam titles.

Williams can look to Margaret Court, Kim Clijsters, and Evonne Goolagong Cawley as those who achieved the feat as mothers.

A key motivation for her is to match Court, who boasts 24 major titles and is renowned as the most successful player in Grand Slam history, but this must now wait until the French Open at the earliest.

The Australian Open starts

on January 15, with a host of top names either out or battling to be fit.

Murray has returned home after failing to recover from a hip injury sustained last year, while Nishikori has been on the sidelines since August due to a torn tendon in his right wrist.

World number one Rafael Nadal and six-time Australian Open champion Novak Djokovic also have injury issues, having yet to play a competitive match this year.

Stan Wawrinka, Milos Raonic, Johanna Konta, and Garbine Muguruza are among others either on the comeback trail or fighting to be ready.

The irrepressible Roger Federer appears to be one of the few top names to be fully fit, leading Switzerland into the Hopman Cup final with another masterclass against top-10 rival Jack Sock in Perth on Thursday.



FOCUS

Kerber helps Germany scrape into Hopman final

'Angie played unbelievable in both her matches. She is the reason we are in the final and I'm going to give her all the credit. I didn't play very well today'



Angelique Kerber of Germany in action during their mixed doubles match against Australia on day seven of the Hopman Cup in Perth yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Perth, Australia

Angelique Kerber's early season renaissance continued to flourish yesterday as she led Germany into their first Hopman Cup final since 1995 at the mixed teams tournament in Perth.

The left-hander wound the clock back to 2016 with her menacing forehand as she thrashed Australia's Daria Gavrilova in straight sets in the singles and then lifted the Germans to victory in the deciding mixed doubles as they notched a dramatic 2-1 win in their final Group A tie.

Kerber and Alexander Zverev only had to beat the Australians to reach today's final against Switzerland's Roger Federer and Belinda Bencic.

But it came down to a tense

mixed doubles clash after world number four Zverev suffered a shock loss to Thanasi Kokkinakis in the men's singles.

With Zverev's form faltering noticeably, the Germans dropped the first set in the Fast4 doubles.

Although they levelled the match, their fate looked grim when Australia led 3-1 in the first-to-five third set tie-breaker, with the in-form Kokkinakis having two serves to come.

But the Germans won the next four points to advance to the final, denying the Belgium pairing of David Goffin and Elise Mertens, who had beaten Canada earlier in the day and would have gone through to the final with an Australian win.

Zverev said Kerber deserved all the plaudits for their place in the final.

"Angie played unbelievable in both her matches," he said.

"She is the reason we are in

the final and I'm going to give her all the credit. I didn't play very well today."

The German pairing of Boris Becker and Anke Huber won the final in 1995, with Michael Stich and Steffi Graf winning it two years earlier. Kerber started 2017 ranked number one in the world but slumped to 21 by the year's end and on paper appeared to have her work cut out against the 26th-ranked Gavrilova in the singles.

The Australian held four break points in the first game of the match, but it was one-way traffic from there as Kerber produced a procession of winners on her way to an emphatic 6-1, 6-2 victory.

Kokkinakis stuns Zverev

Kerber has won all three of her singles matches at the Hopman Cup and hasn't dropped a set. The confidence of 29-year-old is rising as she heads to-

wards Melbourne, where she won her maiden Grand Slam in 2016.

"I am really happy with my three wins," she said.

"It's still the beginning of the year, but having good matches under my belt before heading to Melbourne gives me much confidence."

She will face another player unbeaten in singles this week in today's final in Bencic, the former world number seven rebuilding her career after injury.

The injury-plagued Kokkinakis is ranked 209th but stunned world number four Zverev, coming from a set down on the back of a booming forehand and superb serving to win 5-7, 7-6 (7/4), 6-4 and keep the tie alive against the odds.

Little separated the pair throughout as they traded blows, with Zverev staving off seven set points in the second set before the Australian lev-

elled the match.

One break in the fifth game of the third set was enough for Kokkinakis to record one of the wins of his career on his third match point. Zverev beat Federer in three sets, all tie-breakers, in Perth last year.

Earlier in the day, troubled Canadian Eugenie Bouchard suffered an untimely injury setback in her final singles match as Belgium beat Denmark 3-0.

Bouchard suffered a buttock injury late in her straight-sets loss to Mertens.

After Mertens beat Bouchard, who produced her best performance of the tournament prior to the injury, world number seven Goffin then cruised past Vasek Pospisil to secure the tie for the Belgians.

They were handed a clean sweep when Bouchard pulled out of the mixed doubles, but it wasn't quite enough to get them into the final.

BRISBANE INTERNATIONAL

Stylish Kyrgios sets up Dimitrov semi-final

Reuters
Brisbane

Nick Kyrgios turned on the style in time to beat Ukraine's Alexander Dolgoplov and set up a semi-final against top seed and holder Grigor Dimitrov at the Brisbane International yesterday.

The mercurial Australian huffed and puffed in a miserable first set but eventually found some rhythm to come through a tricky encounter 1-6 6-3 6-4.

Bulgarian Dimitrov also had to battle hard against Britain's Kyle Edmund, winning 6-3 6-7(3) 6-4 in two hours and 23 minutes at the Pat Rafter Arena.

Kyrgios, who will be under the home spotlight at this month's Australian Open, made 36 unforced errors against Dolgoplov but there were 27 winners too.

"As bad as it is to say, it's kind of like a tap. I can turn it on when I want to," the third seed told reporters.

"I'm feeling pretty good. I'm hitting the ball well and I'm serving really well. So the first two matches of the year, I've got through two tough three-setters," added Kyrgios, who beat compatriot Matthew Ebden 6-7(3) 7-6(5) 6-2 in the second round.

Dimitrov was in control against Edmund as he took the first set but was dragged into a second-set tiebreak which the Briton edged to set up the decider.

Dimitrov, who survived two match points to beat local hope John Millman in the previous round, needed a solitary break to close out the match.

Kyrgios was joined in the last four by fellow Australian Alex De Minaur as the teenager followed up his win over Milos Raonic by beating American qualifier Michael Mmoh 6-4 6-0.

De Minaur will play unseeded American Ryan Harrison for a place in the final. Harrison was leading 7-6(6) 4-2 when Uzbekistan's Denis Istomin retired from the contest.

Svitolina knocks out holder Pliskova to reach final

Elena Svitolina switched gears after a poor start to knock out holder Karolina Pliskova and set up a title clash with qualifier Aliaksandra Sasnovich at the Brisbane International yesterday.

Third seed Svitolina was starting at a potential hammering at the hands of her big-hitting Czech opponent as she went behind 4-0 in the opening set before finding her feet to seal a 7-5 7-5 victory in an hour and 39 minutes. Sasnovich became the first qualifier to reach the final at Brisbane as she overcame a leg injury to dump out seventh seed Anastasiya Sevastova 7-6(3) 6-4 in the other semi-final.

Trailing early in the contest, Svitolina reeled off seven of the next eight games to take the first set. The Ukrainian raced to a 5-2 lead in the second but Pliskova was not ready to surrender and saved a match point before levelling at 5-5.

A double fault by Pliskova gave Svitolina the opening she needed to serve for the match and the No 6 completed the job in style.

Earlier, world No 88 Sasnovich began her match strongly but allowed Sevastova to push the first set to a tiebreaker before regaining composure to secure the early advantage.

Clearly feeling the effects of playing her seventh match of the tournament, Sasnovich called for a medical timeout before the second set.

She soldiered on with heavy strapping on her legs and saved two breakpoints to hold for 3-3 and won a decisive break in the ninth game of the second set to set up the victory.

SHENZHEN OPEN

Siniakova to meet Halep in final

Reuters
Shenzhen

Czech defending champion Katerina Siniakova fended off Maria Sharapova in a fiercely contested match at the Shenzhen Open yesterday to set up a final with world number one Simona Halep.

Siniakova fired 27 winners and 10 aces to prevail 6-2 3-6 6-3 but was made to work hard for the win after Russian Sharapova rediscovered her rhythm midway through the contest.

After losing the first set, Sharapova attacked Siniakova's serve to seal an early break in the second set.

The five-times grand slam champion gave little away after that and levelled the contest at one set apiece.

A stinging backhand down the line gave Siniakova a decisive break in the final set and the sixth seed hung on to close out the match in just under two

hours. Halep beat fellow Romanian Irina-Camelia Begu 6-1 6-4 in one hour 29 minutes to claim a second career final spot at Shenzhen.

The top seed broke Begu early in the contest to race into a 4-1 lead. Begu sent a forehand wide in a see-sawing sixth game as Halep broke again and took the first set on serve.

Fourth seed Begu, seeking a first win over Halep at her sixth attempt, fought back to lead 3-2 in the second set but Halep eventually subdued the comeback attempt to seal victory.

"It was a tough match," Halep said in a courtside interview. "I know she is a strong player and in the second set you could see she was improving her game so it was a tougher battle."

"I think I was strong enough to stay there and hit the ball stronger in the end because the energy (from Begu) was falling a little bit. I came back, I served pretty well in the last game and I'm pretty proud of my victory today, it was a tough one."

PREMIER LEAGUE

Wenger gets three-match ban for ref comments

The Arsenal boss will serve a touchline ban for next three matches and was also fined £40,000

AFP
London

Arsene Wenger was yesterday handed a three-match touchline ban and fined by the Football Association over comments he made about the refereeing of Sunday's Premier League game against West Brom. In a separate case, the Arsenal boss has also been asked by English football's governing body to provide his observations on what he said about penalty decisions that went against the Gunners in each of their past two matches over the festive period, against the Baggies and Chelsea.

"Arsene Wenger will serve a touchline ban for Arsenal's next three matches after he was charged with misconduct," an FA statement said. "It follows an independent regulatory commission hearing today at which the Arsenal manager admitted that his language and behaviour in the match officials' changing room after the West Brom game on Sunday was abusive, improper and questioned the integrity of the match referee. He was also fined £40,000 (\$54,000)."

The veteran French coach was furious after the 1-1 draw at the Hawthorns on New Year's Eve, when Arsenal defender Calum Chambers was penalised by referee Mike Dean for a handball that resulted in the home side scoring a last minute spot-kick equaliser.

Arsenal conceded another penalty in their Premier League fixture against Chelsea at the Emirates Stadium on Wednesday, when Eden Hazard went down following a challenge from Hector Bellerin. The match ended 2-2 after defender Bellerin thrashed home an equaliser in stoppage time.

Wenger will start his touchline ban for tomorrow's FA Cup third-round tie at Nottingham Forest. His ban will also cover the League Cup semi-final first leg at Chelsea on January 10 and next weekend's Premier League trip to Bournemouth.

Wenger was asked about his controversial comments during a press conference yesterday ahead of tomorrow's match at the City Ground. "I maintain what I said in the press conference (af-



Arsene Wenger was furious after the 1-1 draw at West Brom on New Year's Eve, when Arsenal defender Calum Chambers was penalised by referee for a handball that resulted in the home side scoring a last minute spot-kick equaliser. (AFP)

ter the Chelsea game) – 100 per cent. I have nothing to change in that," said the Gunners boss.

"I've been in England for 21 years and I try to serve this game with honesty and integrity and when I have something to say I will say it. On that front, nothing will change, never."

WENGER COMPARES GEORGE WEAH'S LIFE TO FILM SCRIPT

Meanwhile, Wenger has compared the life of George Weah to a film script following his former player's election as president of Liberia. Weah, who played

for Monaco, Paris Saint-Germain and AC Milan during a glittering career, last week secured a stunning run-off victory in the West African country's first democratic transfer of power in decades.

Idolised in Liberia as "Mister George", Weah, 51, is to be sworn in on January 22, replacing Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who in 2006 took the helm of the nation first founded for freed US slaves. Arsenal boss Wenger has been invited to Weah's inauguration but expects to be too busy to attend.

Wenger signed Weah in 1988 when

he was manager of Monaco, guiding his career for the next four years, and views the 1995 FIFA world player of the year as a shining example to the rest of the game. "I have been invited by George to come to the day where he will be president. I believe I will be busy. Maybe if I'm suspended I'll have time to go," Wenger joked.

Although he was handed a three-game touchline ban yesterday, Wenger will be back pitch-side by mid-January. "What's important is when you look at his life, and I think the life of this guy is a real film, it's unbelievable. You can

make a fantastic film.

"I remember when I saw him for the first time in Monaco, coming in a bit lost, not knowing anybody, not being rated by anybody as a player and after, in 1995, becoming the best player in the world. "Now he's president of his country – it's an unbelievable story. But it's down to the fact that one thing that was common in George's attitude is being strong mentally, absolutely unbelievably convinced that he has a mission."

Wenger said Weah, who entered politics in 2002, suffered for his country and showed care for other people.

Tevez poised to end miserable China spell

Shanghai: Carlos Tevez looks poised to end his miserable 12-month spell in China with the Argentine former international in talks with his club Shanghai Shenhua to terminate his mammoth contract.

It would allow the forward to seal a rumoured return to Boca Juniors, the club he left to join Shenhua in January 2017 on an estimated 730,000 euros a week, some of the highest wages in football.

A Shenhua spokesman said yesterday that the club were in discussions with the former Manchester United, Manchester City and Juventus striker to end his contract.

The spokesman declined to give further details, but Tevez is thought to be on a two-year deal. The 33-year-old scored just four times in the Chinese Super League (CSL), missed half the matches injured or out of shape and was a notable absentee when Shenhua won the FA Cup in November.

Tevez was not in the squad for either leg of the cup final against Shanghai SIPG and flew back to Argentina just as his side lifted the trophy. Tevez, who has often found it difficult to settle anywhere, saw his time in China unravel quickly. He arrived in Shanghai a year ago to a hero's welcome and was touted as a symbol of football's fast rise in the country. But he soon fell out of favour with Shenhua fans who questioned his fitness and commitment.

He earned the unflattering nickname "Very Homesick Boy", a nod to past antics of jetting home to Argentina in times of strife, and he was accused of being overweight when new coach Wu Jingui took over at struggling Shenhua in September.

Wu later said that Tevez was working hard of his own volition to get fit and shed the bulk, but that did nothing to earn him a recall for the FA Cup final. Tevez has been strongly linked by Argentine media with a return to Boca, where he made his name early in his career in his first stint at the club.

SPOTLIGHT

Son's gem saves Spurs after Obiang stunning goal

AFP
London

Son Heung-Min's stunning strike cancelled out Pedro Obiang's thunderbolt as Tottenham salvaged a 1-1 draw against London rivals West Ham on Thursday night. Tottenham winger Son and West Ham midfielder Obiang staged their own goal of the season contest at Wembley with sublime efforts that will live long in the memory.

Obiang put West Ham ahead midway through the second half with a sensational 30-yard drive. But South Korea star Son had the perfect response, unloading a blistering 25-yard shot for his sixth goal in his last nine appearances. Both goals deserved to be ranked among the best scored at Wembley since the national stadium was rebuilt, but the result was rough justice for Tottenham, who dominated throughout but failed to convert their chances.

Mauricio Pochettino's side remain fifth in the Premier League, three points behind fourth placed Liverpool in the race to qualify for the Champions League via a top four finish. West Ham are two points above the relegation zone after stretching their unbeaten run to three matches.

Harry Kane was back in the Tottenham line-up

after recovering from the illness that meant he was only used as a substitute in Tuesday's win at Swansea. Aiming for his third hat-trick in his last three league starts, Kane almost made the perfect start when he prodded a shot across goal. Kane went close when his curling strike from the edge of the area had Adrian diving to his left to save.

Christian Eriksen wasn't far away either with a fierce long-range drive. When Serge Aurier picked out Kane's run, the net seemed certain to bulge, but for once the Tottenham forward fluffed his lines as the ball squirted out of his control with just Adrian to beat. Kane appealed for a penalty after Pablo Zabaleta's sly tug at the forward's shirt, but referee Mike Dean ignored his protests.

West Ham had been so cautious that they hadn't managed a single shot until Obiang took aim from 30 yards. Given time to size up his shot by Tottenham's slow to react defenders, Spanish midfielder Obiang unleashed a blistering strike that raced past Hugo Lloris into the top corner for only his second goal of the season.

Fortunately for Pochettino, Son was able to conjure up a moment of magic almost as jaw-dropping as Obiang's in the 84th minute.

Seizing possession 25 yards out, Son's rocket fizzed over Mark Noble's head and left Adrian with no chance as it flashed past him.



West Ham United's Pedro Obiang (second right) celebrates with teammates after scoring a stunning long-range goal against Tottenham Hotspur in the Premier League on Thursday night. (Reuters)

FOCUS

Conte questions Mourinho's sanity after 'clown' barbs

AFP
London

Chelsea boss Antonio Conte suggested yesterday that Jose Mourinho has "senile dementia" and that the Manchester United manager is still focused on events at Stamford Bridge two years after he was sacked.

Mourinho, who had two spells as Chelsea boss and is Conte's immediate predecessor, appeared to take a swipe at the Italian – and Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp – for their antics in the technical area on Thursday, when he said he did not feel the need to behave like "a clown" on the touchline. Asked about Mourinho's comments yesterday, Conte used the Italian phrase "demenza senile" in relation to the Portuguese, which translates as senile dementia. "I think he has to see himself in the past – maybe he was speaking about himself in the past," said Conte.

"Maybe, sometimes, I think that someone forgets what's said in the past, which is his behaviour. Sometimes I think there is, I don't know the name, but demenza senile... when you forget what you do in the past."

Conte is in his second season as Chelsea head coach, as Mourinho is at United. Mourinho was sacked by Chelsea in De-



ember 2015 and the Blues finished 10th, after which Conte guided them to the title in his first season as boss. Conte added of the Portuguese: "There is a person that continues to look here. You understand? He went away, but he continued to look here."

The Italian, whose side play at Norwich in the FA Cup third round today, described

the verbal sparring between Premier League bosses as "very strange" but he also responded to comments from Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger. Wenger accused Eden Hazard of diving to earn a penalty in Wednesday's 2-2 Premier League draw, but Conte believes other decisions went the Gunners' way and referred to previous meetings.

TRANSFER

Everton's Barkley completes Chelsea switch

AFP
London

Ross Barkley has completed his widely anticipated move from Everton to Chelsea, the reigning Premier League Champions announced yesterday. The 24-year-old England midfielder has signed a five-and-a-half-year contract and will wear the number eight shirt.

"I'm overwhelmed, I'm looking forward to it and I'm really excited to get started," said Barkley. "To be given a fresh start at a new club like Chelsea, it's unbelievable for me. I'm looking forward to continuing where I left off at the end of last season and hoping to improve and add more goals to my game."

A hamstring injury has kept Barkley out since August, which means he is eligible to play for Chelsea in all four competitions

in which they are competing. Earlier, Conte talked up Barkley's strengths at his press conference ahead of the side's FA Cup third-round tie against Norwich today. "We are talking about an English player, a young player," he added.

"He has good prospects for Chelsea. I think the club decided for this investment also for his contract. I think this is a good opportunity for the club to buy this player. For sure he is a good

prospect for Chelsea." Barkley has made 150 Premier League appearances for Everton, scoring 21 goals.

A move to Chelsea on transfer deadline day in August did not materialise, meaning Barkley was available for a cut-price fee, reported to be in the region of £15m.

Conte earlier declined to address rumours West Ham striker Andy Carroll was a target, saying transfers were not his remit.

SPOTLIGHT

Cup kings PSG wait for transfer moves

French giants have won 33 consecutive domestic cup ties going back four years

AFP
Paris

Paris Saint-Germain play their first game in 2018 as they begin their quest to win the French Cup for the fourth year running with a trip to Rennes tomorrow.

PSG may have missed out to Monaco for the Ligue 1 title last season but they won both domestic cups.

Indeed, they have won 33 consecutive domestic cup ties going back four years. Extending that sequence is the priority at the start of the new year, with the game in Brittany being followed by a League Cup quarter-final at Amiens on Wednesday before Ligue 1 resumes next weekend.

The Cups are "very important objectives", coach Unai Emery insisted, as his side returned to training after the winter break. In the back of their minds will be the Champions League last-16 showdown with Real Madrid in February, with the chase for European success the main reason they committed to the two biggest transfer deals in history to sign Neymar and Kylian Mbappe at the start of the season.

Emery, whose team are nine points clear at the top of Ligue 1, added: "The league shows how consistent a team is, and our start to the season has been close to excellent. We want to maintain our consistency, and the league helps you for other competitions, ensuring that you are better prepared for the Champions League club."

While PSG could give some fringe players a run-out in the upcoming Cup games, they are hoping to move on the likes of Lucas Moura and Hatem Ben Arfa this month. Javier Pastore reportedly wants out too, hoping that more regular game time elsewhere will help him clinch a place in Argentina's World Cup squad.

And with Emery hoping to strengthen his midfield, France midfielder Lassana Diarra has been heavily linked with a move to the club. "I know him well. When



PSG players (from left) Neymar, Dani Alves, Lucas Moura and Marco Verratti laugh during a training session at Ooredoo Training Centre in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France, yesterday. (Reuters)

he was at Real Madrid he put in some great performances. Last year he played well for Marseille," said Emery.

Diarra, 32, has been playing for Al Jazira in the United Arab Emirates. Lagging behind PSG in the league and already out of Europe, the French Cup takes on added importance for Monaco, who visit fourth-tier minnows Yzeure.

Radamel Falcao will miss the opening game of the year, ahead of which coach Leonardo Jardim spent more time battling away questions about possible departures in the January window.

"Monaco are not used to making big sales in winter. It is our strategy. The players understand and know how it works here," said Jardim. Speculation continues to link Thomas Lemar with a move away after Liverpool and Arsenal failed with big offers in August.

Fabinho is more likely to leave in the summer, while Terence Kongolo and Soualiho Meite have already moved on loan to Huddersfield Town and Bordeaux respectively.

FRENCH CUP LAST-64 FIXTURES
(only games involving Ligue 1 clubs)

Today: Toulouse v Nice, Pontarlier (5th tier) v Montpellier, Le Mans (4th tier) v Lille (all 1400GMT), Yzeure (4th tier) v Monaco, Guingamp v Niort (Ligue 2), Hazebrouck (6th tier) v Caen (all 1700GMT), Nancy (Ligue 2) v Lyon (2000GMT)

Tomorrow: Marseille v Valenciennes (Ligue 2), Granville (4th tier) v Bordeaux, Strasbourg v Dijon, Saint-Etienne v Nimes (Ligue 2), Angers v Lorient (Ligue 2) (all 1315GMT), Senlis (5th tier) v Nantes, Sochaux (Ligue 2) v Amiens, Dunkerque (3rd tier) v Metz, Still (8th tier) v Troyes (all 1630GMT), Rennes v Paris Saint-Germain (2000GMT)

COPA DEL REY

Real spot on while Barcelona held to cup draw

AFP
Madrid

Two penalties helped Real Madrid to a healthy 3-0 win in the first leg of their Copa Del Rey tie with second-tier Numancia on Thursday night, while Barcelona were held to a 1-1 draw as the La Liga giants rested their stars.

Gareth Bale was one of a handful of Real first-team regulars on display at the Estadio Los Pajaritos, and was on hand to slot home the first from the penalty spot ten minutes before the break after Lucas Vazquez was clumsily brought down in the box by Carlos Gutierrez. They survived a serious scare in the 76th minute when Inigo Perez snatched the ball from Marcos Llorente and launched a 40-yard shot over the head of keeper Kiko Cassila that thumped the crossbar and came agonisingly close to crossing the line. Real sealed the win with another spot kick a minute from the end, again won by Vazquez but this time slammed home by substitute Isco, and Baroja Mayoral completed the rout a minute later with a close range header.

Shorn of attacking stars Lionel

Messi and Luis Suarez, Barca coach Ernesto Valverde also left out captain Andres Iniesta and others including goalkeeper Ter Stegen, centre-back Samuel Umtiti and midfielder Ivan Rakitic from the starting line-up for their match at Celta.

However striker Ousmane Dembele made his first appearance, as a 71st-minute substitute, since tearing his hamstring at Getafe on September 16, just three games into his Barca career following a 105-million-euro move from Borussia Dortmund.

Despite the raft of absences Barca took the lead after 15 minutes through a neat Jose Arnaiz finish, but after a bright start they ceded control to the hosts.

Celta hit back 16 minutes later through Pione Sisto, who reacted quickest after Iago Aspas hit the bar from close range and rifled a shot past Barca keeper Jasper Cillessen from a tight angle to give his side a chance in the return leg at the Camp Nou next Thursday. In Thursday's other matches, Leganes beat Villarreal 1-0 thanks to an Nordin Amrabat goal while strikes from José Luis Morales and Ivan Lopez Alvarez saw Levante come back from a goal down to win 2-1 at Espanyol.



Real Madrid's Gareth Bale (left) vies for the ball with Numancia's Dani Nieto during the Spanish Copa del Rey on Thursday. (AFP)

FOCUS

Costa's sizzling return reignites Atletico

Madrid: Diego Costa's return to Atletico Madrid began in typically explosive fashion on Wednesday night, and his second spell in La Liga has raised hopes that his new team might challenge runaway leaders Barcelona.

Costa swept home his first Atletico goal since leaving the club for Chelsea in 2014 just five minutes into his first appearance since May, scoring Atletico's third in a 4-0 hammering of third-tier Lleida Esportiu in the Copa Del Rey. Atletico, who

host Getafe today, are second in La Liga having lost only once all season but are nine points behind Barcelona.

FIXTURES (ALL TIMES GMT)

Today: Atletico Madrid v Getafe (1200), Valencia v Girona (1515), Las Palmas v Eibar (1730), Sevilla v Real Betis (1945)

Tomorrow: Leganes v Real Sociedad (1100), Barcelona v Levante (1515), Athletic Bilbao v Alaves (1730), Villarreal v Deportivo (1730), Celta Vigo v Real Madrid (1945)

Monday: Malaga v Espanyol (2000)

SALAH WINS AFRICAN PLAYER OF THE YEAR AWARD

Accra: Prolific Liverpool scorer Mohamed Salah was named African Player of the Year in Ghanaian capital Accra on Thursday night, the first Egyptian to win the award since Mahmoud al-Khatib in 1983. The 25-year-old has scored 23 goals in 29 matches in all competitions this season for the Premier League outfit after moving from AS Roma in the summer. He also starred for resurgent Egypt, who last year finished runners-up to Cameroon in the Africa Cup of Nations and secured a first World Cup appearance since 1990. In the penultimate round of World Cup qualifying, Salah scored the brace that edged Congo Brazzaville in Alexandria, including the stoppage-time winner from a penalty that sealed a trip to Russia.

Salah's Liverpool teammate Sadio Mane, of Senegal, was runner-up and 2015 winner, Gabon and Borussia Dortmund striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang third after a 30-player list had been trimmed to three. National coaches, Confederation of African Football (CAF) officials, journalists and the public were involved in the voting.

"Winning this award is a dream come true - 2017 was an unbelievable year for me I had a fantastic time with the



African Footballer of the Year, Egypt and Liverpool striker Mohammed Salah, speaks after the CAF awards in Accra, Ghana, on Thursday. (AFP)

national team," said Salah after receiving the trophy. "This is a big award for me, a special moment in my career. I would like to dedicate it to all the kids in Africa and Egypt. I want to tell them to never stop dreaming, never stop believing."

The Egyptian succeeds Algerian Riyad Mahrez of Leicester City as holder of the most prized CAF individual award. It is the first time since 1986 that stars from the north of the continent, which along with the west is the strongest football

region, have won successive titles.

Victory on Thursday completed an awards hat-trick for Salah, who was named BBC African Footballer of the Year in December and Arab Player of the Year earlier this week. Mane was voted 2016-2017 Liverpool Player of the Season, but the 25-year-old has since been overshadowed at Anfield by Salah's scoring exploits. He did stand out for Senegal, however, as they secured a first World Cup appearance since 2002, providing much of the creativity in a team stacked with physically formidable footballers. Aubameyang was Bundesliga top scorer with 31 goals last season, holding off Bayern Munich and Poland ace Robert Lewandowski.

He flopped with Gabon, though, failing to take the 2017 Cup of Nations hosts past the first round and shunning several World Cup call-ups as Gabon failed to qualify. Other award winners included Women's Footballer of the Year Asisat Oshola of Nigeria and Youth Player of the Year Patson Daka of Zambia.

Argentine Egypt manager Hector Cuper was named Coach of Year and other honours went to Egypt (national team), South Africa (women's national team) and Wydad Casablanca (club).

ROUND-UP

Messi can quit Barcelona, if Catalonia leaves Spain



Barcelona's Lionel Messi (centre) and Luis Suarez (right) pose with children at the Sant Pau hospital in Barcelona yesterday. (AFP)

Lionel Messi has ensured he could become a free agent if Barcelona no longer plays in a major European league as a result of Catalan independence, Spanish media wrote. According to a report in Madrid daily *El Mundo*, the contract Messi signed last November includes a clause that he must remain a Barcelona player only as long as the club is playing in "a top-level European league."

A source at Barcelona said that "for reasons of confidentiality the club never comments on contractual relations with players." Catalan nationalists proclaimed independence from Spain after a referendum on October 1, precipitating a crisis which is still unresolved.

The Spanish civil and football authorities have said repeatedly that Catalan secession would end the participation of the region's clubs in the Spanish League. If Catalonia becomes independent and Barcelona are booted out of La Liga and cannot persuade another major league (France, Italy, Germany or England) to give them a home, Messi could leave without having to pay his 700 million euro (\$843 million) buyout clause, said *El Mundo*.

The newspaper said that leaving La Liga would have the same impact on the rest of the Barcelona squad, whether they have specific clauses or not, because it would represent a substantial change to the circumstances under which they signed their contracts.

SERGIO RAMOS COULD MISS TWO TO THREE WEEKS

Real Madrid defender Sergio Ramos could miss two to three weeks, Spanish media estimated, after the club said on Friday that he has a calf injury. Ramos could be out for between two and three weeks.

That could mean he would miss the second legs of a Copa Del Rey tie against Numancia and four games in La Liga, but should have time to regain match fitness before the first leg of the Champions League showdown with Paris Saint-Germain on February 14.

Ramos suffered the injury on Thursday in a training session for players who were not selected for the first leg against second-division Numancia which Real won 3-0. The injury adds to Zinedine Zidane's problems for the league game in Vigo tomorrow. The Real coach

is already without another defender Dani Carvajal, suspended for a red card in El Clasico in December.

CHINESE TARGET ROMA BAD BOY NAINGGOLAN

Chinese club Guangzhou Evergrande are reported to be targeting troublesome AS Roma midfielder Radja Nainggolan, who was dropped from Serie A action this weekend in punishment for his rowdy New Year's Eve celebrations. The 29-year-old Belgian international received a hefty fine and will sit out today's game against Atalanta after posting a video of himself smoking, drinking and swearing on New Year's Eve. *Gazzetta dello Sport* reported Friday that Fabio Cannavaro's Guangzhou Evergrande are ready to offer 40 million euros (\$46 million) to bring the talented midfielder to the Chinese Super League.

The Belgian has in the past rejected moves away from the Italian capital to clubs including Chelsea and Juventus. Roma are said to want at least 50 million euros for the player who has become one of the best central midfielders in Italy since his move from Cagliari.

NBA

Warriors down Rockets in clash of Western powers

Draymond Green becomes Golden State's leader in triple-doubles with 21

AFP
Los Angeles

Stephen Curry's 29 points and a record-setting triple-double from Draymond Green propelled the Golden State Warriors to a 124-114 NBA victory over the Houston Rockets on Thursday.

In a clash of the two highest-scoring teams in the NBA, the reigning champion Warriors shrugged off the absence of forward Kevin Durant, with Andre Iguodala stepping into the starter's role and contributing 10 points and seven assists.

Green's 17 points, 14 rebounds and 10 assists made him the franchise's leader in triple-doubles with 21.

He passed Tom Gola, who played with the team from 1955 to 1962.

"That's a hell of an accomplishment," said Warriors coach Steve Kerr. "Tom Gola is a Hall of Famer. It was an amazing night from Draymond — he did everything for us."

Amazing, perhaps, but for Kerr, not unexpected.

"This is who he is," Kerr said of Green. "He's a guy who fills up the stat sheet and controls the game defensively and just does everything."

Klay Thompson added 28 points for the Warriors, who trailed by a point at half-time.

The lead changed hands seven times in the third quarter before the Warriors fashioned an 8-0 scoring run to close the period. They never trailed in the fourth, pushing their lead to as many as 14 points.

The Warriors notched their second win in as many nights, and their ninth straight road victory after a 125-122 triumph over the Mavericks in Dallas on Wednesday.

They improved their league-leading record to 31-8.

Houston played their second straight game without NBA leading scorer James Harden, who is out for at least a fortnight with a hamstring injury.

In his absence, Eric Gordon led the Rockets with 30 points. Gerald Green came off the bench to score 29, matching his career high with eight three-pointers.

However, the Rockets fell to 27-10 — three games behind the Warriors atop the Western Conference as Golden State avenged a shock loss to Houston on the opening night of the season.

"It's a long season, there's a lot of ups and downs," Curry said. "But when you have a chance to beat a great team, chase that number one seed, that's huge. We want to have that home court advantage, and these games are meaningful."

THUNDER ROLL PAST CLIPPERS
Russell Westbrook's triple-double and 31



Golden State Warriors guard Stephen Curry (left) in action against the Houston Rockets during their NBA game at Toyota Center in Houston, Texas, on Thursday. (USA TODAY Sports)

points from Paul George fuelled the Oklahoma City Thunder's 127-117 victory over the Clippers in Los Angeles.

Reigning NBA Most Valuable Player Westbrook scored 29 points, pulled down 12 rebounds and handed out 11 assists for the Thunder, who notched their second win in as many nights in Los Angeles after a 133-96 rout of the Lakers on Wednesday.

It was another satisfying night's work for George, a Los Angeles native who connected on 12 of 16 shots from the floor.

His five three-pointers included one from the right wing that stretched the Thunder's lead to 12 points with 2:07 remaining.

"I thought down the stretch we just got quality looks," George said.

The Thunder have won eight of their last 10 with a free-flowing offense in which pre-season acquisitions George and Carmelo Anthony have clicked with Westbrook.

"We're just comfortable," George said. "Whoever has the ball, we give him that space, that chance, that opportunity to make plays, to be special. We don't care who's got it and who's scoring, who's shooting. We passed that stage — we're out there having fun."

Anthony added 22 points, connecting on nine of 12 shots from the floor.

DeAndre Jordan scored 26 points with 17 rebounds for the Clippers and Lou Williams scored 13 of his 26 points off the bench in the fourth quarter.

But the Thunder, trailing by three going into the final period, opened the fourth on a 12-0 scoring run to seize control.

Jordan went scoreless in the fourth and Blake Griffin's 24 points included just five in the final frame as the Clippers saw their four-game winning streak end.

RESULTS
LA Clippers.....117 Oklahoma City.....127
Houston.....114 Golden State.....124

SPOTLIGHT

Antetokounmpo leads All-Star balloting

AFP
New York

The Milwaukee Bucks' Giannis Antetokounmpo is the leading vote-getter in the first fan returns of NBA All-Star voting released on Thursday.

Greece's Antetokounmpo, who earned his first All-Star nod last season, received 863,416 votes to edge the Cleveland Cavaliers' four-time NBA Most Valuable Player LeBron James (856,080) by 7,336 votes for the top spot in the Eastern Conference and overall after the first 12 days of fan voting.

Antetokounmpo, 23, has enjoyed a stellar start to the 2017-18 campaign. He is the league's second in scoring, averaging 29.1 points per game, and ranks in the top 20 in blocks, steals and rebounds.

Four-time All-Star Kyrie Irving of the Boston Celtics leads among East guards with 802,834 votes — putting him third overall in the voting.

In the Western Conference,

the Golden State Warriors' Kevin Durant leads with 767,402 votes and teammate Stephen Curry is next with 735,115 — putting them fourth and fifth overall.

The 67th NBA All-Star Game will take place on Sunday, February 18 at Staples Center in Los Angeles.

Under a new All-Star Game format that replaces the traditional matchup between the Eastern Conference and the Western Conference, the team rosters will be chosen by two captains from the pool of starters and reserves.

The captains will be the All-Star starter from each conference who receives the most fan votes in his conference, but they can choose their players without respect to conference affiliation.

The All-Star Game starters will be revealed on January 18.

For the second consecutive year, NBA players and basketball media will join fans in selecting the starters.

Fan balloting accounts for 50 percent of the vote, while all current players and a media panel will account for 25 percent each.

FOCUS

Mavericks adopt new Chinese name — Lone Ranger Heroes

AFP
New York

The Dallas Mavericks, who signed the first Chinese player in NBA history, have adopted a new Chinese-language nickname, the Lone Ranger Heroes, after nearly 20 years of being translated as "Little Cows".

And more NBA clubs might follow the Mavericks lead.

The Mavericks, working with Chinese media platform Tencent Sports, completed a process started last September when team owner Mark Cuban posted a video on Weibo, a Chinese version of Twitter, asking Chinese-speaking fans to submit better ideas for translations of the Mavericks moniker.

After receiving more than 50,000 responses in only two weeks, the team selected three finalists — Fierce Colts and Wild Horses plus Lone Ranger Heroes — and after more than 100,000 votes the winner was announced Thursday in China at half-time of a Tencent game telecast against defending NBA champion Golden State.

The Mavericks, who made

Wang Zhizhi the first Chinese player in an NBA game in 2001, will leave behind Little Cows and be the Lone Ranger Heroes (DuXingXia) in all Chinese-speaking parts of the world.

"This is the beginning of a new chapter in the Mavericks' long legacy in China," Cuban said. "With this Chinese name change, we've made history by giving our Chinese-speaking fans the opportunity to redefine our identity. I think that fans will be proud of this new name."

The Mavericks also had Chinese swingman Ding Yanyu-hang play for their 2017 Summer League squad in Orlando and Las Vegas.

Other NBA clubs might follow the Mavericks example, Tencent Sports director Shi Yankui told ESPN.

"Making the Mavericks' Chinese name accurate means a lot," Shi said. "It's a historical change in NBA's development in China. It also shows that the Chinese fans have begun to embrace and take ownership of the NBA in new ways."

"This is just the beginning. We're going to try to help more teams fix and perfect their Chinese names in the future."

NHL

Canadiens edge Lightning in shootout, snap 5-game skid

Reuters
Montreal, Canada

Paul Byron scored in a shootout Thursday night as the Montreal Canadiens snapped a five-game losing streak with a 2-1 win over the visiting Tampa Bay Lightning at Bell Centre.

Byron opened the shootout with the only goal of the session. Goalie Carey Price stopped all three Lightning shots he faced to preserve the victory.

Max Pacioretty scored in the second period for the Canadiens (17-20-4), who scored two goals or fewer for the sixth consecutive game. Price recorded 44 saves in regulation and overtime.

Nikita Kucherov scored in the second period for the NHL-leading Lightning (29-8-3), who lost for just the third time in 15 games (12-2-1) since Dec. 1. Goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy recorded 37 saves in regulation and overtime.

With the win, the Canadiens evened the season series between the teams at a game apiece with two games to play.

After a scoreless first period, the teams traded goals in the first 64 seconds of the second.

A turnover deep in the Lightning zone led to Pacioretty's goal just 20 seconds into the period. Tampa Bay defenseman Mikhail Sergachev tried

to make a no-look clearing pass, but Pacioretty swooped in for the interception, descended upon Vasilevskiy and fired a shot into the net as Lightning defenseman Anton Stralman tried to slide into the path of the puck.

An impressive individual effort by Kucherov tied the game just 44 seconds later. Kucherov outraced teammate Steven Stamkos and Canadiens defenseman Karl Alzner to a loose puck along the boards to the left of the Canadiens' net. He then skated to the top of the faceoff circles and fired a shot that threaded a gaggle of players in front of the net and sailed under the legs of Price.

The Lightning had a 5-2 shot advantage in overtime but couldn't beat Price.

The Canadiens continue a five-game homestand Sunday when they host the Vancouver Canucks. The Lightning play the fourth game of a five-game road trip Saturday when they visit the Ottawa Senators.

OILERS TRIP DUCKS IN SHOOTOUT
Ryan Nugent-Hopkins scored the decisive shootout goal as the Edmonton Oilers edged the visiting Anaheim Ducks 2-1 on Thursday night.

Kris Russell scored in regulation for the Oilers, who posted their second consecutive win.

Ryan Kesler tallied for the Ducks, who saw their three-game winning

streak end. Edmonton goaltender Cam Talbot and Anaheim counterpart John Gibson were both credited with 33 saves, and they each faced 34 shots.

The Oilers (18-20-3) outshot the Ducks 13-2 in the first period but could not beat Gibson, who returned between the pipes after getting a night off Tuesday when Anaheim won in Vancouver.

Russell opened the scoring on a power play at 11:58 of the second frame. He converted a pass from Connor McDavid during a three-on-two rush following a quick breakout from the Edmonton zone. With the assist, McDavid ended his pointless drought at three games.

Kesler created a 1-1 tie only 18 seconds into the third period on a double-deflection. He knocked in the puck after teammate Jakob Silfverberg also got his stick on defenseman Cam Fowler's shot. The goal was the first of the season for Kesler, who only resumed playing recently after recuperating from offseason hip injury.

Gibson withstood some severe pressure from the Oilers late in the third period to force overtime.

The Oilers got a power play early in overtime after the Ducks' Antoine Vermette was penalized for high-sticking McDavid late in the third period, but Gibson remained stellar again. Edmonton received another

power play with 22 seconds left in the extra session as Fowler was sent off for slashing Darnell Nurse.

Before Nugent-Hopkins netted the winner, Anaheim's Rickard Rakell and Edmonton's Michael Cammalleri traded goals in the shootout. However, the shootout tally did not prevent Rakell's goals streak from ending at six games.

The Oilers played without winger Patrick Maroon, who served the first of a two-game suspension for a high hit on Los Angeles Kings defenseman Drew Doughty. Winger Corey Perry missed his 11th consecutive game with a knee injury for the Ducks (19-14-9).

During the game, the Oilers acquired goaltender Al Montoya from the Montreal Canadiens in return for a conditional 2018 fourth-round draft choice.

RESULTS
Blues.....2 Golden Knights.....1
Wild.....6 Sabres.....2
Oilers.....2 Ducks.....1 (SO)
Coyotes.....3 Predators.....2 (OT)
Stars.....4 Devils.....3
Canadiens.....2 Lightning.....1 (SO)
Maple Leafs.....3 Sharks.....2 (SO)
Flyers.....6 Islanders.....4
Hurricanes.....4 Penguins.....0
Avalanche.....2 Blue Jackets.....0
Flames.....4 Kings.....3
Panthers at Bruins, postponed



Montreal Canadiens forward Paul Byron (right) scores the winning goal against Tampa Bay Lightning goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy (88) during the shootout period of their NHL game at the Bell Centre in Montreal, Canada, on Thursday. (USA TODAY Sports)

GOLF / TOURNAMENT OF CHAMPIONS

Aussie Leishman leads in Hawaii

Defending champ Thomas cards two-under; Spieth struggles to two-over par 75

AFP
Los Angeles

Australia's Marc Leishman fired eight birdies in a six-under par 67 on Thursday to seize a one-stroke lead in the US PGA Tour's Tournament of Champions in Hawaii.

Leishman strung together four birdies in a row from the seventh through the 10th holes on the par-73 Plantation Course at Kapalua on Maui.

He rolled in a 19-foot birdie putt at the 17th to take sole possession of the lead, with American Brian Harman and Venezuelan's Jhonattan Vegas sharing second on 68.

It was a further stroke back to world number one Dustin Johnson, Rickie Fowler and South Korean Kim Si-Woo on 69.

"Pretty solid," Leishman said of his round in the first USPGA Tour event of the calendar year, which features a 34-player field made up of last season's tournament winners.

"I played well, drove the ball pretty well — with the exception of a couple of drives — and the putter was really, really solid.

"So, happy with eight birdies," added Leishman after a day that saw strong winds buffet some of the bigger names in the field.

Defending champion Justin Thomas, whose victory here last year marked the start of a five-win season that included his first major title and the FedEx Cup playoff crown, carded a two-under par 71.

British Open champion Jordan Spieth struggled to a two-over par 75.

Fowler eagled the final hole as he bounced back from a double-bogey at the 13th, and Johnson birdied the par-five 18th to seize his share of fourth place.

Leishman got off to a crisp start, rolling in a five-foot birdie putt at the first hole.

He hit nine of 15 fairways on the day and 15 of 18 greens in regulation.

The 34-year-old Australian enjoyed



Marc Leishman of Australia plays his shot from the 11th tee during the first round of the Tournament of Champions at Kapalua Golf Club in Lahaina, Hawaii, on Thursday. (AFP)

his best PGA Tour season of his career last season, winning the Arnold Palmer Invitational and the BMW Championship.

In October, he was runner-up in a playoff to Thomas at the CJ Cup @ Nine Bridges in South Korea.

While Leishman said his recent strong results didn't mean he was "owed anything" in 2018, he said he was looking forward to the year with confidence.

"It's not a given I'm going to play well," he said. "I've got to keep working, but confidence certainly makes it easier to play well."

LEADING FIRST-ROUND SCORES

67 — Marc Leishman (AUS)
68 — Brian Harman, Jhonattan Vegas (VEN)
69 — Kim Si-Woo (KOR), Rickie Fowler (USA), Dustin Johnson (USA)
70 — Billy Horschel (USA), Patrick Cantlay (USA), Kyle Stanley (USA), Kevin Kisner (USA), Hideki Matsuyama (JPN)
71 — Ryan Armour (USA), Brendan Steele (USA), Jason Dufner (USA), Jon Rahm (ESP), Justin Thomas (USA)

72 — Patton Kizzire (USA), Chris Stroud (USA), Hudson Swafford (USA), Pat Perez (USA), Xander Schauffele (USA)
73 — Bryson DeChambeau (USA), Adam Hadwin (CAN), Daniel Berger (USA)
74 — Austin Cook (USA), Grayson Murray (USA), Wesley Bryan (USA), Kevin Chappell (USA), Russell Henley (USA)
75 — Cameron Smith (AUS), Jordan Spieth (USA)
76 — D.A. Points (USA)
77 — Jonas Blixt (SWE)
78 — Brooks Koepka (USA)

SPOTLIGHT

Excited Tiger set to play at Torrey Pines, Riviera

AFP
Los Angeles

Former world number one Tiger Woods announced Thursday he will play his first US PGA Tour event of 2018 in three weeks at Torrey Pines and another three weeks later at Riviera.

Woods, a 14-time major champion making his latest comeback from nagging back injuries, will have his 2018 debut from January 25-28 in the Farmers Insurance Open at Torrey Pines, where he has won seven PGA event titles and the 2008 US Open, his most recent major triumph.

Woods also said he will compete at the Genesis Open at Riviera in Los Angeles, his first appearance there since 2006. Woods will serve as host of the event, which benefits his charity foundation.

"Excited to start my season off in SoCal at @FarmersInsOpen and @genesisopen," Woods said in a Twitter posting.

The February 15-18 event is on the same Riviera layout where Woods played his first PGA event in 1992 as an amateur on a sponsor's exemption.

"I'm very excited to be back at Riviera," Woods said. "I haven't played at Riviera in a tournament in a very long time. To be able to play in an event that I used to come to as an amateur, as a junior and now as the tournament host, that is on one of the most historic sites in all of golf, it's a dream come true."

Woods, whose 79 US PGA titles are three shy of Sam Snead's all-time record, won PGA crowns at Torrey Pines in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2013 and is the event's all-time leading money winner with \$6,856,015.

"Tiger shares a rich history with Torrey Pines," said tourna-



ment director Peter Ripa. "We are excited to have him join our field once again.

"His legacy already cemented, we look forward to, together with our fans, watching as Tiger writes the latest chapter of his storied career."

Others committed to playing at Torrey Pines include Spain's Jon Rahm, Britain's Justin Rose and Americans Rickie Fowler and Phil Mickelson.

Woods, a 14-time major champion, missed the entire 2015-16 season with back issues and a comeback attempt was cut short by pain last February, leading to another back procedure last April.

Woods was sidelined nearly 10 months until last month's Hero World Challenge charity event in the Bahamas, where he shared ninth in a field of 18 and said he was finally playing without pain.

NFL

Rams confident youth can offset Falcons' experience

Reuters
Los Angeles

About the only thing the Atlanta Falcons and Los Angeles Rams have in common entering their NFC playoff game today is both teams used victories in Seattle to propel them toward the postseason.

The Falcons (10-6) are still working to take the sting out of the meltdown in last year's Super Bowl loss to the New England Patriots. Veteran quarterback Matt Ryan leads a once-prolific offense that has struggled to find consistency under new coordinator Steve Sarkisian.

The Rams (11-5) are the new kids on the playoff block, led by 31-year-old coach Sean McVay, who turned second-year quarterback Jared Goff from a bust into a solid starting NFL quarterback over the course of one offseason. In fact, Los Angeles resembles the Atlanta attack of last season, as the Rams led the NFL with an average of 29.9 points per game during the regular season.

The juxtaposition of the two franchises makes for an interesting storyline as the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum is expecting 70,000 fans for the first NFL playoff game at the stadium in 40 years. Heightening the drama is the 8:15pm ET primetime start.

The Falcons have been answering questions about the 25-point blown lead against the Patriots for 11 months, but they nearly didn't get the opportunity to see the playoff stage for the second consecutive year.

Atlanta needed a victory against the



In this December 24, 2017, picture, coach Sean McVay (left) talks to LA Rams' Jared Goff during the game against Tennessee Titans in Nashville, Tennessee. (AFP)

Carolina Panthers last week to secure the final NFC playoff berth and officially knock the Seahawks out of contention. If not for an inconsequential missed field goal at the end of the Seahawks' game on Sunday, it would have been the Falcons' three-point victory in Seattle on Nov. 20 that would have proved the tiebreaker.

In some respects, the Falcons could now be seen as playing with house money. They were the third NFC South team to make the field, and they enter the playoffs with very modest expectations nationally — even as the only team in the conference to return to the postseason from last season.

"I love the resiliency and the toughness of this team," Falcons coach Dan Quinn said. "When you've been through some of

the fire together, you come out the other side stronger as a brotherhood."

The Rams have the youngest team in the league, which can be a Catch-22. Postseason experience can be invaluable during the pivotal moments of a playoff game, but Los Angeles is also not burdened by the ghosts of playoffs past.

The young Rams served notice of their immense potential with a 42-7 shellacking of the Seahawks — who had won the NFC West three of the previous four years — in Seattle two weeks ago. Atlanta enters Saturday with 141 combined games of playoff experience on its roster. Los Angeles? Just 21.

"I don't think it is a concern," McVay said. "When I say that, I have a whole lot of respect for experience and what that

does and the value that it provides. But I do think that we've got a confident group, a mature group for a young football team."

The Falcons have won the past four meetings, the most recent being a 42-14 victory in 2016. But these are two vastly different teams now.

Atlanta still has plenty of firepower on offense with running backs Devonta Freeman and Tevin Coleman and wide receiver Julio Jones, among others. But while the Falcons finished eighth in total yards during the regular season, they ranked just 15th in points per game (22.1). Ryan threw for 4,095 yards but just 20 touchdowns — his fewest since tossing 16 as a rookie in 2008.

He will need that ground game to get off to a strong start. The Rams boast a very talented defensive line and a unit that racked up 48 sacks during the regular season. Meanwhile, Ryan will be playing behind an offensive line that will have Ben Garland starting in place of injured left guard Andy Levitre.

Not an ideal situation with All-Pro defensive tackle Aaron Donald staring at him from across the line of scrimmage. The Rams would appear to have the edge in balance to go along with the home-field advantage. They also have an MVP candidate in running back Todd Gurley, who led the NFL with 19 touchdowns during the regular season.

The biggest X-factor remains youth. "They're obviously a very good team. But you only feel nerves, you only feel pressure and all that stuff if you don't prepare," Rams rookie wide receiver Cooper Kupp said.

MLB

Soria, Avilan to White Sox, Alexander to Dodgers in three-team deal

Reuters
Chicago

The Chicago White Sox landed relievers Joakim Soria and Luis Avilan, and the Los Angeles Dodgers received lefty reliever Scott Alexander in a three-team deal Thursday that returned prospects and payroll savings to the Kansas City Royals.

The Royals added a pair of minor leaguers in pitcher Trevor Oaks and infielder Erick Mejia while saving \$9mm of Soria's \$10mm 2018 salary.

The Dodgers also picked up minor league infielder Jake Peeter, while the White Sox received cash considerations.

Chicago comes away with two useful pieces in a bullpen that struggled in 2017, finishing with an ERA of 4.24 (18th in MLB).

"This deal provides us with additional late-inning options as we look to solidify our bullpen," White Sox general manager Rick Hahn said in a statement.

"Both Avilan and Soria provide us with veteran depth and enhanced flexibility moving forward."

Once one of the top closers in

baseball, the 33-year-old Soria, a right-hander, is a two-time All-Star who posted a 3.70 ERA across 56 innings for the Royals in 2017, allowing 49 hits and striking out 64. Avilan, a 28-year-old left-hander, posted an ERA of 2.93 with the Dodgers, slightly better than his career average, while striking out 52 and allowing 42 hits across 46 innings.

Alexander, 28, joins the Dodgers after a career season in his third year in MLB, allowing 19 earned runs in 69 innings (2.48 ERA) for the Royals with 59 strikeouts.

A seventh-round pick of the Dodgers in 2014, the 24-year-old Oaks posted a 3.64 ERA with 72 strikeouts in 16 Triple-A appearances (15 starts) in 2017.

Mejia, 23, played second base, third base and shortstop for Double-A Tulsa in the Dodgers organization in 2017, slashing .289/.357/.413 with seven home runs and 25 steals in 102 games with the Drillers.

Peter, 24, slashed .279/.344/.417 with 13 home runs and 11 steals in 120 games between Double-A Birmingham and Triple-A Charlotte in the White Sox organization last season.

Bills thank Bengals with 1,440 chicken wings

The Buffalo Bills are in the NFL's playoff party thanks to the Cincinnati Bengals. Now the Bengals can have a party of their own due to the Bills' thank-you gift. The Bills are shipping 1,440 chicken wings and accompanying side dishes to the Bengals' offices in appreciation of Cincinnati's result Sunday. The Bengals' 31-27 win over the Ravens, coupled with the Bills' 22-16 victory over the Miami Dolphins, sent Buffalo to the postseason at the expense of Baltimore. Duff's Famous Wings will be the restaurant handling the order. The appreciation from western New York to southwestern Ohio extended to the fans this week. Bills fans submitted a number of donations to the charitable foundation of Bengals quarterback Andy Dalton in thanks for Dalton's efforts in helping Buffalo end the NFL's longest drought without a playoff berth.

Steelers' Shazier has feeling in legs, dad says

Steelers linebacker Ryan Shazier, who suffered a severe spinal injury on December 4, has regained feeling in his legs, his father told a Pittsburgh television station on Thursday. Vernon Shazier told WPXI that his son is "making progress daily" from the injury suffered as he attempted to make a tackle in an NFL game against the Cincinnati Bengals. "He's a long ways from where he was (that) Monday night when he was laying on the field," said Vernon Shazier, who declined to answer whether he has seen his son walking. "He's much better, but we've agreed to keep his progress private until he's ready to share where he's at," the elder Shazier said. Ryan Shazier underwent spinal stabilization surgery two days after he was injured and remained in a University of Pittsburgh Medical Center facility for rehabilitation.

Cubs, Cardinals competing for Arrieta

Free agent Jake Arrieta has drawn interest from the St. Louis Cardinals, but the Chicago Cubs are not likely to let him leave without a fight. According to reports, Arrieta, 31, was on the radar of at least six teams, but ESPN reported Thursday the Cubs are making a renewed push to bring Arrieta back. Arrieta's agent, Scott Boras, is looking for a contract that puts the right-handed ace among the highest-paid players in baseball: six or seven years, \$200mm. The Texas Rangers, Philadelphia Phillies, Washington Nationals and Milwaukee Brewers also met with Boras, according to ESPN. Arrieta went 14-10 with a 3.53 ERA in 30 starts last season, when he made \$15.6mm with the Cubs. In five years in Chicago, he posted a 68-31 record with a 19.9 Wins Above Replacement (WAR) value.

Giants consider pitch for McCutchen

The San Francisco Giants' hunt for outfield power is prompting trade talks with the Pittsburgh Pirates about five-time All-Star Andrew McCutchen. MLB.com reported early Thursday. McCutchen, 31, is due to make \$14.75mm in 2018 after the Pirates picked up his option in early November. He will be a free agent after the upcoming season. The MLB.com report indicated that the Giants are reluctant to part with highly regarded prospects, as their December deal to acquire third baseman Evan Longoria from the Tampa Bay Rays forced them to part with young infielder Christian Arroyo. McCutchen belted 28 homers in 2017, a total he topped only once in his career, when he hit 31 in 2012, the year he captured the National League's Most Valuable Player Award.

NFL ratings take another step drop

NFL games remain among the most watched programming on television, but ratings took another significant dip during the 2017 regular season. The average audience was 14.9mm viewers per game, down 9.7 percent from 16.5mm viewers in the 2016 regular season, according to Nielsen. The 2016 viewership was down 8 percent from the previous year. The decline in ratings meant the networks had to offer make-goods to advertisers in order to compensate for the smaller audiences, a network executive told the *Los Angeles Times*. Despite the drop in viewership, 20 of the 30 highest-rated shows and 37 of 50 on television in 2017 were pro football games, and both NBC and ESPN had the most-watched shows every week of the season in terms of total audience and in all key male demographics.

CAPE TOWN TEST

Kohli falls cheaply as South Africa hit back

AFP
Cape Town

India started strongly on the first day of the first Test against South Africa at Newlands on Friday, but finished in disarray after a ferocious onslaught by the home team's fast bowlers.

India were 28 for three at the close – with skipper Virat Kohli amongst the victims – after bowling out the hosts for 286. It was a remarkable turnaround after South Africa had been reduced to 12 for three by Bhuvneshwar Kumar inside the first half hour.

Counter-attacking batting, led by aggressive half-centuries by AB de Villiers and captain Faf du Plessis, and some wayward bowling by India enabled South Africa to make a reasonable total on a lively pitch.

Then the South African fast bowlers struck.

Vernon Philander had Murali Vijay caught at gully and four balls later Dale Steyn, playing his first Test match in more than a year, caught Shikhar Dhawan off his own bowling when Dhawan's attempted pull steeped high into the air.

The biggest prize fell to Morne Morkel, who came on as first change and produced a sharply-lifting delivery which Indian captain Virat Kohli edged to wicketkeeper Quinton de Kock after making just five.

The biggest prize fell to Morne Morkel, who came on as first change and produced a sharply-lifting delivery which Kohli edged to wicketkeeper Quinton de Kock. Du Plessis

said batting first on a well-grassed pitch was a "tricky decision" and his side's start must have reinforced his misgivings.

Kumar gained appreciable movement off a well-grassed pitch to plunge the South African innings into deep trouble.

Dean Elgar, South Africa's leading batsman during 2017, edged the third ball of the match to be caught behind by Wriddhiman Saha for nought. His opening partner, Aiden Markram, fell in Kumar's next over, leg before wicket for five, before Hashim Amla, on three, edged an attempted back foot drive and gave Saha a second catch.

Saha finished with five catches behind the stumps.

De Villiers and Du Plessis started the recovery, putting on 114 for the fourth wicket, with De Villiers in sparkling form as he hit 65 off 84 balls with 11 fours. He showed intent from the start of his innings, hitting four fours off Kumar's fifth over.

De Villiers missed a drive against new cap Jasprit Bumrah and was bowled. Du Plessis went on to make 62 off 104 balls with 12 fours before he was caught behind off Hardik Pandya.

Quinton de Kock (43) and Vernon Philander (23) put on a rapid 60 for the sixth wicket before De Kock was caught behind by Kumar and Philander was bowled by Mohamed Shami.

There were useful contributions from the lower order batsmen before the innings ended, leaving the Indian batsmen with 51 minutes to bat against a four-man pace attack, including Steyn, who had not played at top level since suffering a fractured

shoulder against Australia in November 2016.

Dhawan hit two boundaries off Philander's first over but it didn't take long for the bowlers to find their range.

SCOREBOARD

South Africa, first innings

D. Elgar c Saha b Kumar.....	0
A. Markram lbw b Kumar.....	5
H. Amla c Saha b Kumar.....	3
A. de Villiers b Bumrah.....	65
F. du Plessis c Saha b Pandya.....	62
Q. de Kock c Saha b Kumar.....	43
V. Philander b Mohammed Shami.....	23
K. Maharaj run out (Ashwin).....	35
K. Rabada c Saha b Ashwin.....	26
D. Steyn not out.....	16
M. Morkel lbw b Ashwin.....	2
Extras (b2, lb3, nb1).....	6
Total (73.1 overs).....	286

Fall of wickets: 1-0 (Elgar), 2-7 (Markram), 3-12 (Amla), 4-126 (De Kock), 5-142 (Du Plessis), 6-202 (De Kock), 7-221 (Philander), 8-258 (Maharaj), 9-280 (Rabada), 10-286 (Morkel)

Bowling: Kumar 19-4-87-4, Mohammed Shami 16-6-47-1, Bumrah 19-1-73-1, Pandya 12-1-53-1 (1nb), Ashwin 7-1-21-2

India, first innings

M. Vijay c Elgar b Philander.....	1
S. Dhawan c and b Steyn.....	16
C. Pujara not out.....	5
V. Kohli c De Kock b Morkel.....	5
R. Sharma not out.....	0
Extras (lb1).....	1
Total (3 wks, 11 overs).....	28

Fall of wickets: 1-16 (Vijay), 2-18 (Dhawan), 3-27 (Kohli)

Bowling: Philander 4-1-13-1, Steyn 4-1-13-1, Morkel 2-2-0-1, Rabada 1-0-1-0



South Africa bowler Morne Morkel (left) is congratulated by teammates after dismissing Indian captain Virat Kohli during the first day of the first Test at Newlands in Cape Town yesterday. (AFP)

ASHES

Smith, Khawaja frustrate England

Skipper Smith passes 6,000 Test runs in 111th innings; England 346 all out



Australia's batsmen Steve Smith (left) and Usman Khawaja in action on the second day of the fifth Ashes Test at the SCG in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Sydney

Australia captain Steve Smith continued to be England's Ashes nemesis yesterday as he passed 6,000 test runs in an unbeaten knock of 44 to help his team to 193 for two at close of play on the second day of the fifth Test.

The world's top ranked batsman and Usman Khawaja batted through the final session in a 107-run partnership after openers Cameron Bancroft and David Warner had departed earlier in Australia's reply to England's 346.

Khawaja notched a stylish 91 not out on the same ground where he made his test debut in the corresponding fixture seven years ago but it was the wicket of Smith that England most desperately wanted.

They were to be disappointed with only a couple of half chances presenting themselves as Smith sent a couple of early edges fizzing through the slips.

The 28-year-old was soon looking comfortable and unfuss-

ily swatted a single to backward square to pass the 6,000 career runs mark in his 111th Test innings. Only the great Donald Bradman reached the milestone in fewer knocks. Having started the day with a brilliant diving catch in the slips to dismiss Dawid Malan, Smith walked off his home ground in the brilliant afternoon sunshine with 648 runs to his name in the series so far.

"We're stoked that he's on our team so we don't have to bowl at him," Australia fast bowler Pat Cummins said of his captain.

"You lose a couple of wickets and he comes out to bat. He's just incredible, I think he's been the real difference between the two sides."

The tourists, 3-0 down in the series with the urn already relinquished, earlier posted a competitive tally in the face of some fearsome pace bowling on the back of a hard wagging tail and some poor Australian catching.

PACKED HOUSE

Australia came out after lunch to begin their innings in front of another packed house only for

Stuart Broad to clean bowl Bancroft for a duck in the second over. Warner scored a measured 56 by his standards in a 85-run stand with Khawaja before was caught behind when James Anderson got the ball to move away from him.

Broad's 31 had earlier been integral to a bright morning for the tourists after the hammer blow of losing two wickets in the last couple of overs of day one. Malan (62) lasted less than half an hour after they had resumed on 233 for five, Mitchell Starc eliciting an outside edge which Smith caught brilliantly to make some amends for three spills in his otherwise impeccable series.

His fast bowlers then proceeded to produce a couple of howlers with Cummins dropping Tom Curran on 21 off Nathan Lyon and, in the next over, Josh Hazlewood letting Moeen Ali off the hook with the all-rounder on 22. England's tail made the most of the reprieves with Curran hitting a confident 39 and Moeen 30 before both fell victim to the pace of Cummins (4-80).

Broad braved the short bowling almost until the scheduled

Scorecard

England first innings (overnight 233-5)	
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 c Smith b Starc.....	62
J. Bairstow c Paine b Hazlewood.....	5
M. Ali c Paine b Cummins.....	30
T. Curran c Bancroft b Cummins.....	39
S. Broad c Smith b Lyon.....	31
M. Crane run out (M.Marsh/Bancroft).....	4
J. Anderson not out.....	0
Extras (lb2, w2).....	4
Total (all out; 112.3 overs).....	346

Fall of wickets: 1-28 (Stoneman), 2-88 (Vince), 3-95 (Cook), 4-228 (Root), 5-233 (Bairstow), 6-251 (Malan), 7-294 (Ali), 8-335 (Curran), 9-346 (Broad), 10-346 (Crane)

Bowling: Starc 21-6-80-2, Hazlewood 23-4-65-2, Cummins 24-3-58-0-4 (2w), Lyon 37-5-86-1, M. Marsh 7-0-33-0

Australia first innings	
C. Bancroft b Broad.....	0
D. Warner c Bairstow b Anderson.....	56
U. Khawaja not out.....	91
S. Smith not out.....	44
Extras (b1, nb1).....	2
Total (2 wickets; 67 overs).....	193

Fall of wickets: 1-1 (Bancroft), 2-86 (Warner)

Bowling: Anderson 14-4-25-1, Broad 10-2-28-1, Ali 17-3-51-0, Curran 8-2-26-0, Crane 17-0-58-0 (1nb), Root 1-0-4-0

lunch break before becoming spinner Lyon's first victim of the match and the innings ended in a mix-up that resulted in Mason Crane being run out for four in his maiden Test innings. The leg spinner later made a reasonably solid start to his Test career with the ball, returning figures of 0-58.

"It's awesome to be bowling to the best players in the world," the 20-year-old said.

"(Smith)'s a key player for them, if we can get him and two or three others, hopefully we can get a first innings lead."

Crane was encouraged by his first bowling stint in Test cricket and hoping for a better return than legendary Shane Warne's

unflattering Test debut. Crane, who took five wickets bowling for New South Wales in a domestic Sheffield Shield match at the Sydney Cricket Ground last year, takes encouragement from Warne's one for 150 on his Test debut against India at the SCG in 1992.

Warne went on to become the greatest Test leg-spinner with 708 wickets, second only to Sri Lankan world record holder Muttiah Muralitharan's 800.

"I'm hoping for slightly better figures (than Warne's)," Crane told reporters. "At the end of the day that's how it goes, he turned into a great bowler and I'm sure it was character building for him."

PREVIEW

New Zealand expecting tougher examination from Pakistan

AFP
Wellington

Having walloped the West Indies without raising a sweat, New Zealand are expecting a more rigorous workout when the one-day series against Pakistan begins in Wellington today.

Pakistan are on a nine-match winning streak, which includes winning the ICC Champions Trophy and in their one warm-up game they scored an impressive 341-9 against a New Zealand XI with unbeaten centuries to openers Fakhar Zaman and Azhar Ali.

They then rolled the New Zealand side for 221 with Shadab Khan taking four wickets.

New Zealand dominated the West Indies in every game of their tour, but coach Mike Hesson was wary of the Pakistan threat.

"They're as good a bowling attack as there is going around in world cricket at the moment. Certainly very varied. They've got wrist spinners, finger spinners, and left and right arm quicks," Hesson said.

"They've got some very good performers and from a batting point of view they're experienced."

But they will have to adjust to New Zealand conditions with overnight rain forecast and strong southerly winds during the day, which could pose problems for top-order batsmen Fakhar Zaman, Azhar Ali and Babar Azam.

Fakhar, who averages 44.44 from nine ODIs, "has had a great start to his international career but has never toured New Zealand, so there will be challenges adapting to different conditions," said New Zealand quick

Tim Southee. On the Basin Reserve wicket and with the prospect of inclement weather, New Zealand can be expected to unleash the short ball that proved a valuable tool against the West Indies.

But Hesson said they had to pick their moments. "Against any side you've got to use your bouncer wisely and if you bowl good ones then that helps," the coach said.

"It's certainly not a matter of a bouncer barrage, it's just a matter of using it wisely and what you follow it up with is equally important.

"Both sides have got some genuine quicks and I'm pretty sure there will be some good grass on (the wicket) with the forecast."

Pakistan's bowling ranks are limited without the injured Junaid Khan, Usman Shinwari and Imad Wasim.

But they do have the world's top-ranked ODI bowler Hasan Ali and captain Sarfraz Ahmed said morale was high after beating India by 180 runs in the Champions Trophy final.

"Our players got a boost. We've continued the same way since with just the odd changes, so it gives us a proper chance of having a decent team at the 2019 World Cup.

"People at home were happy and excited. It was a long time since we'd beaten India, so there were lots of congratulations from the Prime Minister down."

Pakistan have since swept a five-match series against Sri Lanka although their recent record against New Zealand is not that impressive.

Over the past three years they have been beaten 2-0 in two separate series and lost a home series to New Zealand in the United Arab Emirates 3-2.



Pakistan captain Sarfraz Ahmed.

OMAN BEAT UAE TO CLINCH GULF CUP TITLE



Oman players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Gulf Cup at the Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad Stadium in Kuwait City yesterday. Oman defeated the United Arab Emirates on 5-4 penalties after both teams failed to score in regular and extra time. Oman's midfielder Ahmed Mobarak named the best player in the tournament. (AFP)



Oman players are ecstatic after penalty shoot out triumph. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar's al-Attiyah aims for third title at Dakar Rally

Qatari ace al-Attiyah will be making his 14th appearance in the 40th edition of the endurance event

Agencies

Lima, Peru

Two-time former winner Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (2011 and 2015) of Toyota Gazoo Racing is once again a strong contender for the Dakar Rally. The 40th edition of the classic endurance event, the tenth to be held in South America since it was shifted from terror-hit sub-Saharan Africa, starts in the Peruvian capital of Lima today and ends in Argentina's second city of Cordoba on January 20.

Al-Attiyah will be making his 14th appearance in the queen of rally-raids. This time too all eyes will be on al-Attiyah, who is one of the most prominent drivers in the world of motorsports.

The Qatari veteran has claimed multiple global and regional titles throughout several cross-country rally categories. 2017 was a successful year for al-Attiyah, winning the FIA Cross-Country World Cup and the Middle East Rally Championship. Clinching the Dakar crown for third time will be his next target.

Al-Attiyah will be playing the role of the all-conquering challenger having once again become World Champion and having finished ahead of Sebastien Loeb several weeks ago in Morocco. In addition to his talent, he will also benefit from technical advantages.

"I think that the changes to the regulations made this year will make it possible to start the race on a more level playing field. Peugeot perhaps still has the best car, but we are not very far behind them at all and I'm very confident about it," al-Attiyah said.

Al-Attiyah had topped the opening

stage of the 2017 rally but crashed out of the rally early, and he would be hoping not to repeat that mistake.

Al-Attiyah was confident going into his 15th Dakar Rally of his career. "I literally love this race and it is a real pleasure to be at the start year-after-year. I will need to be smart and not focus on this or that or stage wins, but to finish as the winner. The first week promises to be crucial and the one who comes out with a good lead will already have taken a big step towards the win. But we are confident. We have won many rallies with the previous Hilux and this version is a little better for everything," the Qatari ace said.

Al-Attiyah's main rival will again be Peugeot's Stephane Peterhansel, who will target a 14th victory on the Dakar Rally, played out over 9,000km of gruelling terrain which includes criss-crossing the Andes and confronting the unique physical demands of Bolivia's thin air. Peterhansel has won on four-wheels seven times, including the last two for Peugeot, and scorched to six titles on a motorbike since his event debut in 1988.

The veteran 52-year-old led a podium sweep in the car race for the French manufacturer in 2017 and this year will be favourite again alongside teammates Carlos Sainz, a two-time world rally champion and 2010 winner at the Dakar, Cyril Despres and Sebastien Loeb, a nine-time world rally champion.

Loeb, meanwhile, was runner-up last year, 12 months after finishing ninth on his debut. "We will see," Loeb said when asked of his title prospects this year. "It's difficult to predict as there are so many variables on the Dakar. There are lots of factors which can swing it either way."



Toyota Gazoo Racing's Nasser al-Attiyah of Qatar is seen yesterday during a technical check-up ahead of the 2018 Dakar Rally, which starts in Lima, Peru today and ends in Argentina's second city of Cordoba on January 20. (AFP)

The two-week race will also see Portuguese football manager Andre Villas-Boas taking part. Villas-Boas, who coached Porto, Chelsea, Tottenham Hotspur, Zenit St Petersburg and Shanghai SIPG, will drive a Toyota Hilux as he revives a family link - his uncle Pedro Villas-Boas drove in the race in 1982 in a 4x4.

Villas-Boas, 40, said that he had originally thought of riding a motorcycle on the Dakar but then changed his mind after talking to one of the motorbike teams.

DAKAR RALLY SCHEDULE

Jan 6: Lima-Pisco (31km of stage)
Jan 7: Pisco-Pisco (267km)
Jan 8: Pisco-San Juan de Marcona (295km)
Jan 9: San Juan de Marcona-San Juan de Marcona (330km)
Jan 10: San Juan de Marcona-Arequipa

(267km of stage)
Jan 11: Arequipa-La Paz (313km)
Jan 12: rest day in La Paz
Jan 13: La Paz-Uyuni (425km)
Jan 14: Uyuni-Tupiza (498km)
Jan 15: Tupiza-Salta (242km)
Jan 16: Salta-Belen (372km)
Jan 17: Belen-Chilecito (280km)
Jan 18: Chilecito-San Juan (522km)
Jan 19: San Juan-Cordoba (368km)
Jan 20: Cordoba-Cordoba (119km)

FOCUS

Bayern Munich and Al Ahli to play friendly today

FC Bayern Munich will face QNB Stars League side Al Ahli SC in a friendly match at Aspire Zone Foundation's pitch 05 at 5:30pm on today. The Bundesliga giants will hold its morning training session at 10am. It marks another day of the Bayern Munich tour to Qatar, which has seen hundreds of local, regional and international fans flock to Aspire Zone every day to watch the German team's football stars in action. The team concludes their annual winter training camp tomorrow.

Defender Joshua Kimmich missed the team's training session due to cold. Goalkeeper Sven Ulreich has missed the last few sessions after sustaining a finger injury, but is expected to return to training soon. Striker Robert Lewandowski attended training session briefly and did a few exercises separately from the team in order to help with a kneecap injury that was sustained earlier this year. The training sessions attracted Qatari VIPs and German tennis player, Jan-Lennard Struff. The ambassador of Qatar to Germany, Sheikh Saoud bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, attended the



Bayern Munich players train at Aspire Zone yesterday.

team's training session on Thursday morning.

Sheikh Saoud said: "We're very happy to welcome FC Bayern Munich in

Qatar for the eighth year in a row. The world-class facilities that Qatar has worked tirelessly to build, especially in Aspire Zone and Aspire Academy, has



The ambassador of Qatar to Germany, Sheikh Saoud bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, attended the training session.

made hosting such elite training camp possible."

"Aspire Zone has become a sporting hub for various training camps that happen each year, attracting various teams from all over the world and Paris Saint-Germain concluded its training camp a few weeks ago. In addition to Bayern Munich, the Tunisia national football team is in Aspire for another

training camp. The winter weather is really special in Qatar and is one of many factors that makes coming to Qatar to train more attractive for international players."

Meanwhile speaking about Hamad International Airport's (HIA) official platinum sponsorship of the German team, HIA Vice-President Commercial, Abdulaziz al-Mass, said: "This new partnership with the German club stems from our vision and strategy to have partnerships with elite international sports clubs and a wide fanbase. FC Bayern Munich's matches have a viewership of more than 500 million people, so the partnership has economic benefits for Qatar, and builds on the country's efforts to invest in sports and attract investors to Qatar."

Whilst in Doha to participate at the Qatar ExxonMobil Open, German tennis player, world No 44, Jan-Lennard Struff attended the training session.

Former Borussia Dortmund and Bayer Leverkusen, Algerian player Ahmed Reda Madouni, also attended the training sessions and praised Aspire Zone Foundation's facilities.

Dutch star Snejder to join Gharafa

Doha: Former Real Madrid and Inter star Wesley Snejder is to sign for mid-table QNB Stars League side Al Gharafa, the club announced yesterday. A statement on the team's official social media said a deal was in place for the Dutch veteran, who most recently played in France's Ligue 1 with Nice.

"Breaking: We are delighted to announce that @snejder1010 will join Al Gharafa Sports Club," the team's Twitter page said. Snejder, 33, a midfielder, won La Liga with Real and Serie A and the 2010 Champions League with Inter.

He played 133 times for the Netherlands, making him the nation's most capped player, and appeared in the 2010 World Cup Final which the Dutch lost to Spain, 1-0. Snejder's signing is a coup for the Qatari league, especially for Al Gharafa who sit in mid-table with just 11 points from 11 games.

Snejder has confirmed he is leaving Nice after a short spell with the Ligue 1 club. Snejder, who joined Nice in August after being released from his Turkish club Galatasaray contract, has started only four league games this season.

And the QNB Stars League will be the next stop for Snejder, who has accepted an 18-month deal to move to Al Gharafa. "It's a nice adventure and a fun challenge," Snejder told RTL Boulevard. "I am really happy to go for it together with my family."

Snejder's first appearance may be on January 12, in a league game against Al Ahli, who sit just one place above Gharafa. Former Chile international Luis Jimenez and Slovakia's Vladimir Weiss will be among Snejder's new teammates at Gharafa.

The league's biggest star is former Barcelona great Xavi Hernandez, who plays for Al Sadd but is likely to retire at the end of the season. Other stars to have played in Qatar, the 2022 World Cup finals host, include Raul and Pep Guardiola, the current Manchester City coach.

