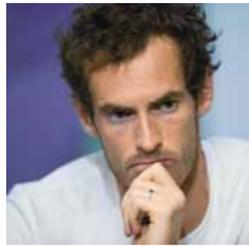


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# GULF TIMES SPORT



**CRICKET**

**Philander takes six as South Africa blast India aside in first Test**

Page 2

# Al-Attiyah storms to 3rd stage Dakar win



**AFP**  
 San Juan de Marcona, Peru

**T**wo-time champion Nasser al-Attiyah blew the field wide open at the Dakar Rally yesterday, powering his Toyota home four minutes faster than Stephane Peterhansel, although the Frenchman took the overall lead. Run over 500km of dirt and sand tracks through imposing Peruvian canyons from Pisco to San Juan de Marcona, the Qatari set

the early pace opening a lead of two minutes after only 80km. Al-Attiyah won the opening stage on Saturday, but suffered badly on Sunday when his co-driver fell sick after just 15km. The Toyota driver, also an Olympic shooting medallist, won the Dakar in 2011 and 2015 and laid down a solid marker here as the Peugeot struggled to follow him home. Dakar specialist Peterhansel enjoyed a solid day and climbs top of the overall standings by 03min 11sec from Sunday's stage winner

Cyril Despres, who lost almost eight minutes but avoided disaster and is second while al-Attiyah storms up to third. It was a better day for Carlos Sainz, who suffered engine failure on day one. He finished third, 6min 07sec adrift. As ever there were mishaps aplenty, with Nani Roma supplying the spectators with a spectacular roll just a kilometre from home and Argentine duo Alicia Reina and Carlos Pelayo escaping uninjured when their Toyota was engulfed in flames.

Defending champion Sam Sunderland rode his KTM to a second stage victory from three in the motorbike section. The 28-year-old Briton covered the course in 3hr 20min 43sec, more than three minutes ahead of his two closest rivals – Honda's Argentine Kevin Benavides and his fellow KTM rider Toby Price of Australia. The feat saw Sunderland climb top of the overall standings, Sunday's stage winner Joan Barreda of Spain starting well but getting lost.

Barreda came in nearly half an hour off Sunderland's mark after losing his way. "I didn't find a way-point and I had to go back for 15 kilometres to the way point before, and go back almost 30 kilometres more," the Spaniard said, explaining he got lost because he was in the lead with no-one to follow. "I cannot make any more mistakes," he said. Today's fourth of 14 stages is a mass start at the San Juan de Marcona beach but again over half of the 330km is sand, with dirt tracks through the steep hills behind it.

**FOOTBALL**

# Sneijder: I am very happy I chose Al Gharafa

**By Sahan Bidappa**  
 Doha

**W**esley Sneijder has an impressive resume, having played for top football clubs like Ajax, Real Madrid and Inter Milan in his stellar career. That Al Gharafa managed to sign the Dutch star is a coup of sorts for the QNB Stars League side.

Yesterday, Sneijder was unveiled as the Gharafa player as the 33-year-old embarked on a new chapter of his life. It was a grand welcome for the midfielder, with Gharafa's top officials and past players present to welcome their new and biggest addition.

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

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

The most capped Dutch footballer with 133 matches under his belt, Sneijder, has played in three World Cups and also won Champions League with



The Netherlands' ambassador to Qatar Dr Bahya Tahzib-Lie (third from left) helps Dutch star Wesley Sneijder (sixth from left) and Gharafa officials cut a cake at the Four Seasons Hotel in Doha yesterday. Sneijder has signed an 18-month contract with QNB Stars League side Al Gharafa. **PICTURE:**Noushad Thekkayil

Inter Milan in 2010. Sneijder confirmed that he has signed an 18-month contract with Gharafa, who will be hoping he can change their fortunes with the

club occupying seventh place in the standings at the halfway stage of the QNB Stars League.

Mahmoud al-Ghazal, Al Gharafa's Football Head revealed it was not the first time they had tried to sign Sneijder. "We are very happy that today amongst us we have a great player. We tried to sign him four years ago in 2014 but couldn't. We are glad we have finally signed him. He will be a great asset to our team and inspire youngsters. He is a great player and will be the captain of the team," al-Ghazal said.

For Sneijder, it didn't need much of convincing to move to Qatar. He spoke to Dutch midfielder of Moroccan-origin Anouar Diba, who plays for rivals Al Kharaitiyat. And he only had good things to say about Qatar and Al Gharafa. The Dutch star played four games during a spell with French club Nice this season having been released by Turkish side Galatasaray in July. He received many offers from around the world, including US, China, Mexico and Brazil, but chose to go with the advice of Diba.

"I had an opportunity to talk a friend here, Anouar Diba, who has played in Qatar for 10-11 seasons. He told me about the league and also about the club. So I had enough information about everything here, about the club and league. I am very happy to have made this choice and I can't wait to start," Sneijder said

"To be honest, my choice to come here was to play football. There was speculation about me going to the US, about going to China or others, but I never read about 'he will go to Qatar'. Of course, there were more offers and they came from everywhere. "I had a couple of days to think about it, spoke to different people and then I made this choice. I feel very welcome here and I am happy that I chose Al Gharafa. To be honest, I can't wait to start training tomorrow and to help the team," he added.

Gharafa will take on Al Ahli on Friday after winter break and Sneijder could feature in the playing XI, but the midfielder left it to club's new coach Bulent Uygun to make that decision.

Sneijder said he had not spoken to Xavi Hernandez, the former Barcelona legend who plays for Al Sadd, but added he will reach out to the Spaniard soon.

Meanwhile, Iran striker Mehdi Taremi is to join Al Gharafa. Mehdi, who had an outstanding career with defending Iranian league champions Persepolis since 2014, is expected to strengthen Gharafa's attack along with Dutch superstar Wesley Sneijder.

Hailing from the city of Bushehr, 25-year-old Taremi started his senior career with home side Shahin Busehr. He was later brought to Persepolis by Iranian legend Ali Daei. Mehdi has represented Iran 22 times, scoring 10 goals.

SPOTLIGHT

# South Africa blast India aside in Cape Town Test

Philander takes career-best 6-42 as India bowled out for 135; 18 wickets fell in 64 overs on day four

AFP  
Cape Town

Eighteen wickets fell in a day as South Africa beat India in the first of three battles between Test Cricket's two leading teams at Newlands yesterday with both captains hailing the pitch's contribution to the batting carnage.

"The pitch was outstanding," said Indian captain Virat Kohli after South Africa won the first Test by 72 runs with a day to spare.

"It was great for Test Cricket. Both teams were in the game at different stages. As a team we really enjoyed being part of this Test match."

"This was as good as it gets in Test Cricket," said South African captain Faf du Plessis. "It was fantastic to be part of it. It definitely ranks as one of my favourite Test matches."

India were bowled out for 135 after being set to make 208 to win. Man of the match Vernon Philander led the South African attack, which was missing the injured Dale Steyn, taking six for 42.

India had earlier bowled South Africa out for 130 in their second innings. Eighteen wickets fell during the day while 200 runs were scored on a pitch which had plenty of life after being under covers for all of the third day, which was rained off.

Kohli was disappointed with the batting of his number one-ranked team - but felt they had shown they could compete with their nearest challengers in pace-friendly conditions. He said India were looking forward to taking the South Africans head-on in the second Test starting at Centurion on Saturday.

"We needed someone to go out there and score 75 or 80 and we need to sit down and talk about stringing together partnerships. You can't afford to lose three or four wickets quickly as we did today."

Kohli gave credit to South Africa's pace bowling attack. "Their bowlers create relentless pressure. They force you to play good cricket in every over."

The Indian captain suggested the Indian batsmen might need to show more of the aggressive intent epitomised by Hardik Pandya, who hit 93 off 95 balls in the first innings.

"Hardik showed a lot of character. We need to make their bowlers come back for second or third spells."

Du Plessis admitted that he was nervous about defending a low target after South Africa lost their last



South Africa bowler Vernon Philander (3rd right) celebrates dismissing India batsman Jasprit Bumrah during day four of the first Test in Cape Town yesterday. (AFP)

eight wickets for 65 runs before lunch. "The new ball was crucial but I knew that we have got fantastic seam bowlers."

The South African captain said that losing Steyn, who has been ruled out of the rest of the series with a left heel injury, was a big blow. But he praised the character of the injured bowler, who came out to bat with nine wickets down in an effort to shepherd top-scorer AB de Villiers to a bigger score.

"We didn't want Dale to bat unless AB was still there because we didn't want him to make his injury worse. But he wanted to do it," said Du Plessis. With Steyn unable to run, De Villiers needed to hit boundaries. Kohli placed eight fielders on the boundary and one of them caught De Villiers without adding to his 35 runs. "We didn't get the runs but it was the mindset that counts," said Du Plessis.

It was a match that was full of

drama from the first morning when South Africa crashed to 12 for three after choosing to bat on a seaming pitch.

"We're a team that is prepared to take risk to try to win matches," said Du Plessis. "We knew the pitch would speed up. We were surprised how quick it was on the first day but today was very difficult for batsmen."

Counter-attacking batting by De Villiers and Du Plessis enabled South Africa to make a competitive 286, leading Kohli to regret that India had not taken their chances to bowl them out for a lower total.

But he said the bowlers had rectified their mistakes in the second innings, giving him confidence that they could push South Africa hard at Centurion.

"We need the batsmen to apply themselves and show more character. But if we get a lively wicket our bowlers can exploit their batting again."

SCOREBOARD

South Africa, first innings, 286

India, first innings, 209

South Africa, second innings (overnight 65-2)

A. Markram c Kumar b Pandya	34
D. Elgar c Saha b Pandya	25
K. Rabada c Kohli b Mohamed Shami	5
H. Amla c Sharma b Mohamed Shami	4
A. de Villiers c Kumar b Bumrah	35
F. du Plessis c Saha b Bumrah	0
Q. de Kock c Saha b Bumrah	8
V. Philander lbw b Mohamed Shami	0
K. Maharaj c Saha b Kumar	15
M. Morkel c Saha b Kumar	2
D. Steyn not out	0
Extras (w2)	2
<b>Total (41.2 overs)</b>	<b>130</b>

Fall of wickets: 1-52 (Markram), 2-59 (Elgar), 3-66 (Amla), 4-73 (Rabada), 5-82 (Du Plessis), 6-92 (De Kock), 7-95 (Philander), 8-122 (Maharaj), 9-130 (Morkel)

Bowling: Kumar 11-5-33-2 (2w), Bumrah 11-21-39-3, Mohamed Shami 12-3-28-2, Pandya 6-0-27-2, Ashwin 1-0-3-0

India, second innings

M. Vijay c De Villiers b Philander	13
S. Dhawan c sub (Morris) b Morkel	16
C. Pujara c De Kock b Morkel	4
V. Kohli lbw b Philander	28
R. Sharma b Philander	10
W. Saha lbw b Rabada	8
H. Pandya c De Villiers b Rabada	1
R. Ashwin c De Kock b Philander	37
B. Kumar not out	13
Mohamed Shami c Du Plessis b Philander	4
J. Bumrah c Du Plessis b Philander	0
Extras (lb1)	1
<b>Total (42.4 overs) 135</b>	

Fall of wickets: 1-30 (Dhawan), 2-30 (Vijay), 3-39 (Pujara), 4-71 (Kohli), 5-76 (Sharma), 6-77 (Pandya), 7-82 (Saha), 8-131 (Ashwin), 9-135 (Shami)

Bowling: Philander 15.4-4-42-6, Morkel 11-1-39-2, Rabada 12-2-41-2, Maharaj 4-1-12-0

Result: South Africa won by 72 runs

Series: South Africa lead the three-match series 1-0.

SELECTION

## Ben Stokes included in England T20 squad for tri-series

Reuters  
Sydney

Ben Stokes was named in England's Twenty20 squad for a tri-series against Australia and New Zealand yesterday, his participation dependent on whether he is charged for his involvement in an altercation outside a nightclub in September.

All-rounder Moeen Ali, who has been short of form on the Ashes tour, and wicketkeeper Jonny Bairstow have been rested for the tournament, which starts in Sydney on February 3 and concludes with the final in Auckland on February 21.

Test skipper Joe Root and Dawid Malan were also included with seamer Mark Wood and batsmen James Vince and Sam Billings brought back into the squad after missing England's last Twenty20 against West Indies in September.

All-rounder Stokes was also named in the England squad for the Ashes and the one-day series against Australia that follows but withdrawn in the absence of a decision by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).

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

England begin the tri-series against Australia in Hobart on February 7.

Squad: Eoin Morgan (captain), Sam Billings, Jos Buttler, Tom Curran, Liam Dawson, Alex Hales, Chris Jordan, Dawid Malan, Liam Plunkett, Adil Rashid, Joe Root, Jason Roy, Ben Stokes, James Vince, David Willey, Mark Wood.

Australia's Lynn out of England ODI series

Big-hitting Australian batsman Chris Lynn has been ruled out of this month's one-day international series against England with a calf problem, Cricket Australia said yesterday.

Lynn suffered the injury to his right calf fielding in the Brisbane Heat's Big Bash League match against the Perth Scorchers on Friday.

It is expected the injury will sideline him for three to four weeks with selectors to announce a replacement shortly. The opening match of the five-game series takes place at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Sunday.

SYDNEY TEST

# Australia romp to victory and 4-0 Ashes triumph

Reuters  
Sydney

Australia romped to an innings and 123-run victory over England after dismissing the tourists for 180 on the final day of the fifth Test yesterday to complete a 4-0 Ashes triumph that fell short of a whitewash but was little less emphatic.

England captain Joe Root raced from his hospital bed, where he had been treated overnight for gastroenteritis, to try to rescue a face-saving draw but when he failed to reappear after lunch the die was cast for the tourists.

Australia's bowling attack - the potency of which has been one of the main points of difference between the two sides - mopped up the last four batsmen at the cost of just 36 runs after the break at Sydney Cricket Ground.

"The cricket we have played has been outstanding," said Australia captain Steve Smith, whose batting was another major factor in the triumph.

"This team has been magnificent in this series, the cricket we've played has been great so I think the more we play together the more we are going to get better as a group. We have just got to keep getting better and improving as a team."

All four of Australia's main bowlers took more than 20 wickets over the series, with quick Pat Cummins coming out top with 23 after removing Jonny Bairstow (38), Stuart Broad (4) and Mason Crane (2) yesterday.



Captain Steve Smith holds a replica Ashes urn as Australia players celebrate their victory in the fifth Test in Sydney yesterday. (Reuters)

Cummins was named man of the match for his total haul of 8-119 while Josh Hazlewood performed the coup de grace when he had James Anderson caught behind for two.

Nathan Lyon (3-54) had taken the only wicket of the opening session as he continued his dominance of Moeen Ali (13), who has fallen seven times in nine innings to the off spinner in the series.

Australia's batsmen also played a full part in the return of the coveted urn, with Mitchell Marsh, his brother Shaun and Usman

Khawaja all getting into three figures as the hosts made 649 declared in their reply to England's first innings 346.

"Everyone's had an impact and that's what has been so special about it, it hasn't just been one or two guys stepping up and doing the job," Smith added.

Despite Smith's determination to share the credit, he was the inevitable selection as player of the series after scoring 687 runs at an average of 137.4, backing up his status as the world's top batsman.

"I am really proud of the way that I have played in the series and led from the front," he said.

"My mind is probably in as good a space as it has been with my batting"

KEY MOMENTS

England managed only three centuries to Australia's nine over the series, with Smith alone matching their tally.

Anderson, who stood in for the ailing Root in the presentation ceremony, thought that the Ashes had been decided by a few key

moments and there was no need for an overhaul of the side.

"We've not played well enough and they've deserved to win. They're well within their rights to be over the moon with that win," he said.

"But I do think it's been closer than 4-0. We've been on top in some games, if not all the games at some stage. They've just played those pressurised moments better than us."

The tourists will also take pride from refusing to buckle despite being outclassed in four of the five tests and Root's determination to bat on Monday typified their fighting spirit.

The 27-year-old was 42 not out with England 93 for four at close of play on day four but he experienced diarrhoea and vomiting overnight and was taken to hospital for treatment.

Root received an ovation when he came out to resume his innings and had soon secured his 37th test half century with three runs to fine leg.

He suffered a recurrence of the symptoms during the lunch break, though, and Tom Curran came out to bat in his place, leaving Root retired hurt for 58 and sleeping in the dressing room when Australia paraded the tiny trophy.

"We've known for a few weeks they're going to lift the urn, but seeing them do it in person is tough to watch," said Anderson.

"All the guys in the dressing room are hurting. That feeling that you get should make you determined to win the Ashes back in 2019."

Scorecard



England first innings 346 (J. Root 83, D. Malan 62; P. Cummins 4-80)

Australia first innings 649 for 7 declared (U. Khawaja 171, S. Marsh 156, M. Marsh 101; M. Ali 2-170)

England second innings (overnight 93 for 4)

A. Cook b Lyon	10
M. Stoneman lbw b Starc	0
J. Vince c Smith b Cummins	18
J. Root retired ill	58
D. Malan lbw b Lyon	5
J. Bairstow lbw b Cummins	38
M. Ali lbw b Lyon	13
T. Curran not out	23
S. Broad c Paine b Cummins	4
M. Crane c Paine b Cummins	2
J. Anderson c Paine b Hazlewood	2
Extras (lb2, pen5)	7
<b>Total (all out; 88.1 overs)</b>	<b>180</b>

Fall of wickets: 1-5 (Stoneman), 2-15 (Cook), 3-43 (Vince), 4-68 (Malan), 5-121 (Ali), 6-144 (Bairstow), 7-148 (Broad), 8-156 (Crane), 9-180 (Anderson)

Bowling: Starc 16-4-38-1, Hazlewood 17-1-6-36-1, Lyon 35-12-54-3, Cummins 17-4-39-4, Smith 2-0-6-0, M. Marsh 1-1-0-0

Result: Australia won by an innings and 123 runs

Series: Australia 4-0

Man-of-the-match: Pat Cummins (AUS)

Man-of-the-series: Steve Smith (AUS)

LA LIGA

# Real fall 16 points behind Barca after draw with Celta

Reuters  
Barcelona

Real Madrid's faltering title defence continued as they were held to a thrilling 2-2 draw at Celta Vigo on Sunday which saw them fall 16 points behind runaway leaders Barcelona, who beat Levante 3-0 to stay nine points clear at the top of La Liga.

Real looked to be heading for a second successive league defeat after their 3-0 loss to Barca in their last outing when Daniel Wass lobbed over Keylor Navas to put Celta ahead in the 33rd minute.

Gareth Bale instantly responded by scoring twice in three minutes to put the stuttering champions in front before halftime but Celta came right back at Zinedine Zidane's side, with Iago Aspas squandering a penalty before Maxi Gomez levelled with a header in the 82nd minute.

Aspas was denied another penalty late in the game while down at the other end Real's Lucas Vazquez hammered the ball straight at Celta goalkeeper Ruben Blanco, while Cristiano Ronaldo fired wide of the near post.

Real stay fourth in the standings on 32 points while Barca have 48 although they have

played one game more.

Real travelled to Vigo without Dani Carvajal, striker Karim Benzema and captain Sergio Ramos while Celta, who knocked Real out of the King's Cup last season, were emboldened after drawing 1-1 with Barca in the Cup on Thursday.

Bale made his first start in the league since Sept. 20 after finally recovering from persistent muscle problems and pulled Real level after Wass's strike with a slick first-time finish before giving them the lead by knocking a pass from Isco in with his back heel.

Celta appealed for Navas to be sent off when he felled Aspas and was only shown a yellow card while the Costa Rican was also let off when he stepped off his line before diving to his right to palm away the striker's spot-kick.

"We made a lot of errors, we gave the ball away a lot, something we don't normally do and we did it at important moments in the game, when we could have caused them more damage," Real coach Zinedine Zidane told reporters.

"We have to stop making these errors and be more consistent."

Barcelona had seen their lead over nearest challengers Atletico Madrid reduced to six points on Saturday but restored the gap to nine after Lionel Messi, Luis

Suarez and Paulinho scored in a routine win over Levante.

CUSHIONED HEADER

Messi was back in the starting line-up after missing the King's Cup draw with Celta Vigo on Thursday and marked his 400th game in La Liga by opening the scoring in the 12th minute, volleying Jordi Alba's cushioned header into the net.

Suarez struck his fifth goal in four games running by controlling a cross from Sergi Roberto and slamming the ball high into the net in the 38th minute.

Brazilian international Paulinho added an extra shine to the win by tapping in as the game drew to a close.

"We wanted to continue our run of wins and although we were favourites we knew Levante were a strong side that hadn't lost away from home in the league since September," said Barca coach Ernesto Valverde.

"We were very good in the first half but the pace changed in the second half and Levante could have scored."

After the game club record signing Philippe Coutinho appeared at the Nou Camp to pose for photographs a day after completing his 142-million-pound (\$192.54-million) move from Liverpool to Barca.



Real Madrid's Gareth Bale (third from left) celebrates with teammates after scoring their second goal against Celta Vigo. (Reuters)

SPOTLIGHT

# Coutinho completes 'dream' Barca move

Coutinho's 'dream' Barcelona debut delayed by injury, ruled out for three weeks

AFF  
Barcelona

Philippe Coutinho officially completed his "dream" 160-million-euro (\$192 million) move from Liverpool to Barcelona yesterday, making him the third most expensive player in history.

Coutinho, 25, signed a five-year contract in a ceremony sitting alongside Barca president Josep Maria Bartomeu before posing on the Camp Nou pitch in a Barcelona shirt.

"I am very happy to be here. This is a dream come true and I hope to meet everyone's expectations on the pitch," Coutinho said.

Minutes before the Brazilian midfielder put pen to paper after a whirlwind few days, the club said a thigh injury would delay his debut until the end of January.

Barca's swoop for Coutinho is outranked only by Paris Saint-Germain's stunning world record 222-million-euro signing of Neymar from Barcelona last year, and the Paris club's capture of French striker Kylian Mbappe in a deal eventually worth 180 million euros.

His arrival will help Barcelona to move on from the humiliation of losing Neymar to Qatar-backed PSG, and his presence alongside Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez will help take the pressure off another of the club's stars, 33-year-old Andres Iniesta.

Bartomeu said the club had secured "one of the stars of world football" and admitted that Liverpool had put up a fight to keep the player.

"It was not easy and other clubs expressed an interest in him, but he was determined to come here," the president said.

Barcelona had made a bid for Coutinho in the summer, but Liverpool stood firm.

In the end, the lure of a huge profit on a player they paid just £8.5 million when he joined from Inter Milan in 2013 proved too strong for the English club.

A good fit

Coach Ernesto Valverde predicted Coutinho will comfortably fit into his star-studded team. He could now make his debut at home to Alaves on January 28.

Coutinho played with Suarez for 18 months at Liverpool before the Uruguayan made the same move to Spain in 2014.

"Everybody knows about his



FC Barcelona's new signing Philippe Coutinho and Barcelona vice-president Jordi Mestre pose with the club shirt yesterday. (Reuters)

## Barcelona claim Liverpool cut Coutinho price

Barcelona vice-president Jordi Mestre claimed Liverpool slashed their original asking price for Philippe Coutinho after the Brazilian playmaker completed his 160-million-euro (\$192 million) move to the Catalan giants. Coutinho signed a five-year contract to end a long-running transfer saga yesterday with Mestre revealing that Liverpool had originally asked for 200 million euros. The news will be poorly received on Merseyside, where fans were assured the Premier

League club had tried to keep hold of their star. "Due to a contractual issue and due to Liverpool's desire, we can not provide the exact data, but there has been a very significant reduction (in price)," the Barcelona director told a press conference at the Camp Nou. "This time the reduction in their price was enough for us to authorise the transfer."

"We didn't want to put the club's whole economy and heritage at risk," explained Mestre, a 55-year-old who was director of the youth academy before becoming vice-president

for sports at Barca. Mestre may have been referring to demands made for Coutinho in July when Barcelona tabled three solid offers for Coutinho in the wake of an aggressive transfer struggle that saw Paris Saint-Germain take Neymar from the Catalans for a world record 222 million euros. Barcelona then bought Ousmane Dembele from Borussia Dortmund for a deal that could reach 147 million euros and Mestre said the club had been reticent to put themselves at financial risk.

quality. He has been playing at the highest level for years now and that is important," Suarez said.

"Now we need to make sure he feels at home because we know that changing club is always difficult, but I think he is the type of player who will fit well into the team."

Valverde admitted that it would be a challenge shoehorning his new recruit into a squad already running away with the Spanish league title.

"Coutinho is a player who I think can bring a lot to us," said Valverde. "He's an important signing."

"I have seen him play in various positions - on the right, the left, in the middle, on the wings."

The timing of Barca's move for Coutinho has been questioned because he will not be able to play in the Champions League this season having already played in the competition for Liverpool.

But he is likely to be used to give Iniesta a rest, keeping the veteran midfielder fresh for the Champions League as Barcelona seek to wrest the trophy back from bitter rivals Real Madrid.

Rio-born Coutinho scored 54

goals for Liverpool in all competitions, although he won no silverware during his five-year stay at Anfield and he never made a secret of his desire to move to a club where Brazilians such as Ronaldinho and Romario have shone in the past.

His departure now is a blow to Liverpool as he had just returned to top form after an injury-hit start to the season, scoring seven goals in the last eight games of 2017 to put his side firmly in the Champions League places.

"It is no secret that Philippe has wanted this move to happen since July, when Barcelona first

made their interest known," Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said at the weekend.

"Philippe was insistent with me, the owners and even his teammates this was a move he was desperate to make happen."

Liverpool have been tipped to quickly reinvest their windfall from the Coutinho sale.

Despite already paying Southampton £75 million for defender Virgil van Dijk, Klopp will be chasing an attacker with Leicester City's Algerian winger Riyad Mahrez and Monaco midfielder Thomas Lemar already linked with a switch to Anfield.

FOCUS

# Misfiring Real at a loss to explain slump

Reuters  
Barcelona

Real Madrid are consistently misfiring and they don't know what to do about it.

The reigning Spanish and European champions, 16 points behind La Liga leaders Barcelona after a 2-2 draw at Celta Vigo on Sunday, are on the brink of crisis.

Fourth in the table and thrashed 3-0 by arch-rivals Barca before Christmas, Real have virtually no chance of retaining the league title and more trouble lies ahead.

Madrid's bid to win the Champions League for a third season running depends on overcoming big-spending Paris St Germain in the last 16, a tall order for a side playing as poorly as Zinedine Zidane's men.

Barcelona, meanwhile, have strengthened by signing Philippe Coutinho from Liverpool while Atletico have added Chelsea striker Diego Costa and Sevilla's Vitolo to their ranks.

Defender Marcelo believes Madrid are doing everything they can to turn their season around.

"We started the (Celta Vigo) match running and fighting, but that's football. We can't do any more than that," he told reporters.

"We're doing what we can, trying to play good football, score goals, but it is not working out. We have to face this, go out there and run. There's no other way."

Zidane acknowledged that his team are in trouble but cannot

put his finger on why.

"I have to detect the problem because I am responsible," the French coach said. "And I'll try and we will try."

Unusually for a club with such attacking riches, goals have been a major problem this season and no player has scored more than four in La Liga.

Cristiano Ronaldo has 15 netted goals in all competitions but has been a shadow of his former self.

Madrid's team is set up around providing the Portuguese forward with chances but in La Liga he has scored a modest four times in 13 appearances.

Gareth Bale has the same tally in seven games and the Welshman netted both Madrid goals against Celta Vigo on a sour night for the champions from which they were lucky to emerge with a point.

Based on performances there is an argument for Madrid's tactical approach to be structured around Bale, but Zidane cannot rely on the injury-prone winger to stay fit.

Real's squad was weakened in the summer by the departures of striker Alvaro Morata to Chelsea and midfielder James Rodriguez to Bayern Munich while the players brought in have not convinced.

Theo Hernandez and Dani Ceballos are two of the most promising young players in La Liga but Zidane appears unwilling to rely on them, preferring to stick with the tried and trusted.

Unfortunately for the coach, the experienced double-winning team of last season looks like it has run out of gas.



Real Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane. (Reuters)

## Bolt secures trial with Borussia Dortmund

Sprint legend Usain Bolt said on Sunday that he hopes to still see his dream of becoming a professional footballer come true when he undergoes a trial at German top-flight club Borussia Dortmund.

However, the multiple Olympic and world champion admitted that he would prefer to play for Manchester United, his favourite team.

"In March we're going to do a trial with Dortmund and that will determine what I do with that career, which way it goes," the 31-year-old world record holder told the *Sunday Express*. "If they say I'm good, and that I need a bit of training, I'll do it."

"It makes me nervous. I don't get nervous but this is different, this is football now. It'll take time to adjust but once I play a few times I'll get used to it." Bolt shares the same sponsor - Puma - as Dortmund and the trial with the Bundesliga team has been arranged by the sportswear company. "One of my biggest dreams is to sign for Manchester United. If Dortmund say I'm good enough, I'll crack on and train hard," said Bolt. "I've spoken to (former United manager) Alex Ferguson and I told him he needs to put in a good word. He told me if I get fit and ready, he will see what he can do."

SPOTLIGHT

# Neymar, PSG run riot in French Cup

Neymar, Mbappe and Di Maria combine to score a brilliant counter-attack goal against Rennes



Paris Saint-Germain's Neymar (left) celebrates scoring their second goal against Rennes with Dani Alves (centre) and Kylian Mbappe. (Reuters)

AFP  
Paris

Neymar, Kylian Mbappe and Angel Di Maria all scored twice as a rampant Paris Saint-Germain shrugged off the absence of Edinson Cavani to win 6-1 away to Ligue 1 rivals Rennes in the French Cup on Sunday.

PSG are bidding to win the trophy for the fourth season running, something no club has ever done before, and they showed Rennes no pity in Brittany.

Leading scorer Cavani was not involved after returning late from his Christmas and New Year break in Uruguay, so Di Maria came into the attack alongside Mbappe and Neymar.

Mbappe opened the scoring inside nine minutes, finishing

after being picked out by Thiago Silva's long ball over the top.

A brilliantly worked goal saw PSG double their lead, with Adrien Rabiot and Marco Verratti combining to tee up Neymar for the finish.

Di Maria turned in a Yuri Berchiche cross from the left for the third goal midway through the first half and the pick of the bunch came as Neymar made it 4-0 two minutes from half-time.

PSG started the move in their own penalty box before Neymar broke downfield and eventually applied the finish from Mbappe's pass. Rennes did pull one back in the second half from a Benjamin Bourigeaud penalty after a Thiago Motta handball, but there was still time for Unai Emery's side to score twice more.

Mbappe set up Di Maria to make it five and the Argentine

## Round of 64 results

Marseille 1 (Amavi 103) Valenciennes 0  
Granville 2 (Martinet 90, Douniama 103-pen) Bordeaux 1 (Sankhare 37)  
Strasbourg 3 (Goncalves 59, Blayac 92, Da Costa 93) Dijon 2 (Djilobodji 65, Tavares 103)  
Saint-Etienne 2 (Beric 63, Bamba 68) Nimes 0  
Angers 0 Lorient 2 (Hamel 30, Bouanga 42)  
Dunkerque 2 (Marc Fachan 71, Damien Fachan 82) Metz 4 (Niane 44, 80, Riviere 52, Cafu 75)  
Still O Troyes 1 (Nivet 80)  
Sochaux 6 (Ruiz 24, Meite 30, Kalulu 36, Robinet 60, Berenguer 82, Daham 89) Amiens 0  
Senlis 0 Nantes 4 (Bammou 28, Rongier 35, Sala 81, 90)  
Rennes 1 (Bourigeaud 66-pen) Paris Saint-Germain 6 (Mbappe 9, 76, Neymar 17, 43, Di Maria 23, 74)

returned the favour with an assist for Mbappe to complete the rout. PSG have now won their last 34 consecutive domestic cup ties, a run they can extend further as they go to Amiens in the League Cup quarter-finals

on Wednesday. Ligue 1 clubs were entering the French Cup in their first outings of 2018 after a two-and-a-half-week winter break, and most of the leading sides made it through.

Guido Carrillo scored a hat-trick as Monaco won 5-2 at fourth-tier Yzeure on Saturday, while Maxwel Cornet's last-gasp free-kick saw Lyon win 3-2 at Ligue 2 side Nancy and a Jordan Amavi goal in extra time gave Marseille a 1-0 victory at home to second-tier Valenciennes.

With Mario Balotelli out and Wesley Sneijder allowed to leave to complete a move to Al Gharafa of Qatar, Nice were beaten 1-0 at Toulouse. The biggest shock came as Bordeaux went down 2-1 away to fourth-tier Granville in Normandy despite having taken the lead through Younesse Sankhare.

Last season's beaten finalists Angers were also eliminated, losing 2-0 at home to second-tier Lorient. The draw for the round of 32 will be held on Tuesday evening.

FOCUS

## Kane happy to stay at Tottenham but is hungry for trophies

AFP  
London

Harry Kane says he is happy at Tottenham Hotspur as long as the club start winning trophies as his manager Mauricio Pochettino warned Spurs cannot force their star striker to stay.

Real Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane hailed Kane as the "complete player" ahead of the clubs' first Champions League tie in October while Manchester United have also been credited with an interest in the 24-year-old.

Kane signed a new five-and-a-half-year contract in 2016 worth more than £100,000 (113,000 euros, \$135,000) a week but his wages are still modest in comparison with the world's leading players.

After scoring twice in Tottenham's 3-0 FA Cup third-round win over Wimbledon on Sunday, Kane was asked what the club need to do to secure his long-term future.

"I've always said, just keep progressing, keep getting better," Kane said. "We want to start winning trophies so that's the aim. As long as the club keeps doing that then I'm happy here."

Pochettino said Philippe Coutinho's move from Liverpool to Barcelona shows there can be no room for complacency, adding the situation would need to be managed carefully.

"Harry is so special," said Pochettino. "Because he loves Tottenham and he has always been at Tottenham."

"But we need to be clever how we manage him. The player needs to choose to stay here, you cannot force the player to stay here."

"Our job is to try to work together and try to achieve everything we want at the club and of course Harry is such a special player. I told him only a few special players can spend all their career in one club."

Kane was asked about players now having the power to dictate their own futures.

"If a player wants to go then why would you stop him?" Kane said. "He's not going to be in the club, he's not going to want to play every game, he's not going to put his heart on the line."

Tottenham are reportedly preparing a new deal for Kane worth £200,000 a week but the striker was not aware of any planned negotiations.

Pochettino said the Coutinho transfer showed how difficult it was even for a club the size of Liverpool to keep hold of their best players if they wanted to leave.

"With Coutinho, I think Liverpool wanted to keep him but it is difficult to keep him, and look what happened with Cristiano Ronaldo with Manchester (United), Zidane with Juventus, (Luis) Figo with Barcelona."

"It is a lot of examples that (show) it is so, so, so tough for everyone to keep your best player if the player in some moment turns their mind and says 'now I want to leave!'"

"That is why it is so important how you care (for) your players. That is why, how you need to anticipate things?"



Tottenham's Harry Kane applauds fans as he is substituted off during FA Cup match against AFC Wimbledon in London. (Reuters)

COMMENT

# City need trophies to be 'big club' - Guardiola

AFP  
London

Pep Guardiola says Manchester City must match Manchester United and Liverpool by winning trophies in order to become one of the game's giants - and dazzling football is not enough.

The runaway Premier League leaders maintained their relentless charge in four competitions by sweeping into the FA Cup fourth round at Burnley's expense on Saturday. They are now eyeing a place in the League Cup final as they host Championship side Bristol City in the first leg of their semi-final on Tuesday.

"A win helps to win more, then we are there, going to go to London to play the final," said the City manager.

"It's important (to win trophies). To become a big club like the teams I have faced, or teams like (Manchester) United or Liverpool, with a really big history, you have to win."

"Nobody can take away what we have lifted so far - the pleasures from this team of the last three or four months, they belong to us. In the process, when you live in good moments, I say to the players, 'Enjoy it! It is so complicated it may not happen again."



Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola. (Reuters)

"But after, of course, to give real value to what we have done so far, what we are going to do in the future, you have to lift the titles. Without that, it's OK, it's good, but not enough."

The former Barcelona and Bayern Munich boss was pleased

to see Leroy Sane back on the scoresheet in the 4-1 victory against Burnley.

The winger has been one of several standout City performers this season but the strike was the 21-year-old's first since October and Guardiola feels he still

has much to do to reach his full potential.

"He has a special talent," said Guardiola. "Of course it was important to score another goal. We need his goals, but also his assists, crosses, how he defends backwards."

"He made a lot of very good things but at 21, 22 years old - I met only one player in my life at that age who knew absolutely everything and he could do absolutely everything. The other guys have many, many things to improve, and Leroy especially."

## Conte backs Barkley for England World Cup role

Chelsea boss Antonio Conte wants to help new signing Ross Barkley claim a place in England's World Cup squad even though he has not played since May due to a hamstring injury. Barkley signed for Chelsea from Everton on Friday for a cut-price fee in the region of £15 million (\$20 million, 17 million euros) as his Toffees contract was due to expire this summer.

Conte does not know when the 24-year-old - who needed surgery - will return, but Chelsea's Italian manager hopes the midfielder can make Gareth Southgate's Russia 2018 squad. "We have five months to show he deserves a call with the national team for the World Cup," Conte said. "I hope (he gets one), because it means he will do very well with us." Barkley trained at Chelsea's Cobham base this weekend and is due to meet with Conte for the first time on Monday. The Blues boss is reluctant to put a timescale on when Barkley will be available before first assessing him. "It's important for me to see

him, to understand his physical condition," Conte added. "My hope is to have this player (available) very quickly."

Conte spoke of Barkley's versatility, but said it was important the Everton academy graduate understands his role tactically before he is selected.

"He can play in midfield, if we play with three midfielders, or number 10 if we play 3-4-3," Conte added.

"Before playing we must be sure that he is into our idea of football. Otherwise it's a problem for him and it's a problem for the rest of the team."



NBA

# Lakers Crush Hawks to snap losing streak

San Antonio and Oklahoma City both endured defeats on the road

Portland Trail Blazers' Shabazz Napier (right) shoots as San Antonio Spurs' Joffrey Lauvergne (left) and Davis Bertans try to block. (USA TODAY Sports)



AFP  
Los Angeles

The Los Angeles Lakers snapped a nine-game NBA losing streak on Sunday with a 132-113 victory over the Atlanta Hawks. Brandon Ingram scored 20 points to lead the Lakers, who hadn't won a game since a December 20 victory over the Houston Rockets. The victory quieted some of the noise growing around the embattled young team, including comments by outspoken basketball patriarch LaVar Ball — father of Lakers rookie Lonzo Ball — who said that coach Luke Walton had lost the confidence of his players.

"I would disagree with that," Walton said at shootaround on Sunday morning, telling reporters that even as the defeats piled up his players were playing hard. The difference against the Hawks, Walton said after the much-needed win, was a defensive commitment that set up the Lakers' transition offense.

"I think it triggered everything for us tonight," Walton said. "Once we got engaged and we were crashing back on the

glass and able to get out and run... it was good to see the guys get back to that mode where defense anchors what we do offensively."

Lonzo Ball, playing just his second game after missing six with a shoulder sprain, was under scrutiny after his father's latest remarks. He scored 13 points and pulled down 10 rebounds while handing out six assists. When he departed the game with 2:53 remaining, along with Kyle Kuzma, Larry Nance Jr. and Julius Randle they were cheered by fans — a turnaround from the boos heard during a loss to Charlotte on Friday.

At 12-27 the Lakers remain at the bottom of the Western Conference. But they avoided matching the longest losing streak in franchise history. Walton, while encouraged, said he wasn't expecting smooth sailing for his young players, but he said he insisted their growing pains wouldn't tear them apart. "The team's been fine," he said. "We've got guys and a group that are still figuring things out. It's nothing new when young teams that are trying to get better go through hard times."

Western Conference contenders San Antonio and Oklahoma City both en-

dured defeats on the road. In Portland, CJ McCollum flashed to the basket and floated in the game-winner with 5.9 seconds left as the Trail Blazers edged the San Antonio Spurs 111-110.

LaMarcus Aldridge had chance to answer for the Spurs, but his mid-range jump shot bounced off the back rim at the buzzer. The Spurs were missing four regulars, including Tony Parker and All-Star Kawhi Leonard, who has a partial tear of a muscle in his left shoulder, according to San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich.

Portland were also short-handed, as point guard Damian Lillard was a late scratch with a calf injury. The close contest featured four lead changes in the final 2:48. Aldridge led the Spurs with 30 points and 40-year-old Argentinian veteran Manu Ginobili chipped in 26 to become the oldest player to score 20-plus points in back-to-back games.

In Phoenix, the Suns withstood a triple-double from NBA Most Valuable Player Russell Westbrook to beat the Oklahoma City Thunder 114-100. Devin Booker led the Suns with 26 points and forward TJ Warren added 23. Phoenix also got a key contribution

from 20-year-old Croatian Dragan Bender off the bench as he produced a career high of 20 points, including six three-pointers. Westbrook posted his 14th triple-double of the season with 26 points, 11 assists and 10 rebounds but the Thunder never led after the first quarter.

In Dallas, the New York Knicks thwarted a late surge by the Mavericks to triumph 100-96, snapping a three-game losing streak. Kristaps Porzingis led the Knicks with 29 points and Jarrett Jack's 12 included a floater with 31.2 seconds left that broke a 94-94 tie and put the New York ahead for good.

The Knicks had led by 13 with 4:49 left to play only for the Mavs to roar back, but New York held on to claim just their fourth road win of the season. "We weathered the storm," Jack said. "We had some hiccups throughout it, but for the most part we weathered the storm."

RESULTS

LA Lakers.....	132	Atlanta.....	113
Portland.....	111	San Antonio.....	110
Phoenix.....	114	Oklahoma City.....	100
Dallas.....	96	New York.....	100
Miami.....	103	Utah.....	102

NFL

# Saints and Jaguars win in play-offs

AFP  
Los Angeles

New Orleans downed Carolina for the third time this season to reach the second round of the NFL playoffs on Sunday while the Jacksonville Jaguars edged Buffalo to advance as well. Drew Brees threw for 376 yards and two touchdowns to lead the host Saints over Carolina 31-26, New Orleans holding off the Panthers with a late defensive stand to seal the victory.

"This win is special," Saints defensive end Cameron Jordan said. "They came back late in the fourth quarter, made this a game. We had to finish out the game. We put it on our defense and we responded the way we were supposed to. We wanted it more. We had to fight today to play next week."

The Saints will visit Minnesota next Sunday in a National Conference semi-final game with Atlanta at top seed Philadelphia next Saturday. Jacksonville's Blake Bortles threw for 87 yards and a touchdown and ran for a career-high 88 yards to lead the host Jaguars over Buffalo 10-3 in a defensively dominated American Conference first-round game. The Jaguars managed only 230 yards, 33 less than the Bills, in their first playoff game since 2007. It was the first post-season contest for Buffalo since 1999.

The Jaguars visit Pittsburgh next Sunday in an American Conference second-round matchup while the Tennessee Titans visit New England in next Saturday's other American Conference semi-final.

Jacksonville routed Pittsburgh 30-9 in early October on the Steelers' home field. "We've done it before so we know we can do it," Campbell said. "We just have to hunker down and get it done."

At New Orleans, Brees connected with Michael Thomas on a 46-yard pass play late in the fourth quarter to put the Saints on the doorstep of Carolina's end

zone and two plays later, Alvin Kamara scored on a 2-yard run as New Orleans jumped ahead 31-19.

Cam Newton answered with a 56-yard touchdown pass to Christian McCaffrey, the Panthers climbing within the final margin with 4:09 remaining, and after Mike Adams intercepted a fourth-down Brees pass, Carolina had one final chance at victory.

Newton guided the Panthers into Saints territory but two throws into the end zone fell incomplete and he was sacked on fourth down to end Carolina's hopes. Brees connected with Ted Ginn on an 80-yard touchdown pass to open the scoring. Carolina answered on a 27-yard Graham Gano field goal but Brees then marched New Orleans 75 yards in nine plays, completing the five-minute drive with a 9-yard touchdown pass to Josh Hill for a 14-3 Saints lead.

After Gano booted a 39-yard field goal to nudge the Panthers nearer, Brees guided the Saints on an eight-play, 75-yard trek capped by Zach Line's 1-yard touchdown run to put New Orleans ahead 21-6.

Gano hit field goals of 29 and 58 yards but Wil Lutz answered for the Saints with a 57-yard field goal to put the hosts ahead 24-12.

Carolina finally found the end zone with 12:47 remaining when Newton hit Greg Olsen on a 14-yard touchdown pass, the Panthers pulling within 24-19 to set up the late drama.

Buffalo's Stephen Hauschka kicked a 31-yard field goal and Jacksonville's Josh Lambo answered from 44 yards in the final two minutes of the second quarter to leave the clubs deadlocked 3-3 at half-time.

The winning points came on a tension-packed fourth-down play, Bortles flipping a 1-yard touchdown pass to Ben Koyack with only 42 seconds remaining in the third quarter. The dramatic score capped a 15-play, 86-yard march by the Jaguars that took nearly nine minutes.



Carolina Panthers' Greg Olsen (left) tries to score past New Orleans Saints' Rafael Bush during the fourth quarter of the NFC Wild Card playoff New Orleans on Sunday. (USA TODAY Sports)

NHL

# Golden Knights beat Rangers to cap epic first half

Reuters  
Las Vegas

The Vegas Golden Knights reached the midpoint of their first NHL season Sunday night at one extreme of the Western Conference standings. Just not the extreme everyone expected. The Golden Knights celebrated the 41-game mark with a 2-1 win over the New York Rangers on Sunday night before a season-high crowd of 18,234 at T-Mobile Arena.

Vegas (29-10-2) pushed its Western Conference-leading point total to 60 — 3 ahead of Central Division leader Winnipeg with two games in hand. William Karlsson scored his team-high 22nd goal at the 8:58 mark of the third period to break a 1-1 tie in the final game for both teams before their five-day breaks.

Vegas extended its home winning streak to seven games as James Neal contributed his 18th goal and Marc-Andre Fleury (9-2-1) posted 28 saves. Mika Zibanejad posted his 13th goal of the year for the Rangers (22-15-5) as backup goalie Ondrej Pavelec (3-5-1) made 32 saves in his first appearance since shutting out Washington on Dec. 27.

CAPITALS 4, BLUES 3 (OT)

Nicklas Backstrom scored on a breakaway at 4:17 of overtime as Washington downed St. Louis at Capital One Arena in Washington, DC The Capitals extended their Metropolitan Division lead over New Jersey to three points, while the Blues lost for the second time in as many days but picked up a point to edge ahead of Nashville



David Desharnais of the New York Rangers falls to the ice going after the puck as Vegas Golden Knights players look on during the NFL match in Las Vegas on Sunday. (AFP)

for second place in the Central Division.

BLUE JACKETS 3, PANTHERS 2 (SO)

Artemi Panarin, Jack Johnson and Josh Ander-

son scored in an eight-round shootout as host Columbus defeated Florida, 3-2. Aleksander Barkov and Mike Matheson scored for the Panthers in the shootout.

Barkov also scored with 1:34 left in the third period to help send the game to overtime.

BLACKHAWKS 4, OILERS 1

Chicago received goals from four different players and goaltender Anton Forsberg turned aside 32 shots to record just his second win of the season in a 4-1 victory over Edmonton at the United Center in Chicago.

Nick Schmaltz, Alex DeBrincat and Brandon Saad scored goals in the opening two periods and defenseman Jordan Oesterle scored against his former team to complete the win for the Blackhawks.

JETS 4, SHARKS 1

Mathieu Perreault scored twice while Matt Hendricks and Marko Dano both lit the lamp once to give Winnipeg a 4-1 victory over San Jose at the Bell MTS Place in Winnipeg, Manitoba. That offense was more than enough to combine with a 31-save outing from goalie Connor Hellebuyck for the Jets to strengthen their hold atop the National Hockey League's Central Division.

ISLANDERS 5, DEVILS 4 (SO)

Brock Nelson scored the only goal of the shootout Sunday as New York came back from a two-goal, third-period deficit to beat New Jersey, 5-4, in a shootout at Barclays Center in Brooklyn, NY. Nelson scored in the fifth round, as the Islanders snapped a five-game losing streak heading into their "bye week."

FLYERS 4, SABRES 1

Sean Couturier scored two goals and Shayne

Gostisbehere and Ivan Provorov each scored one goal, leading Philadelphia past Buffalo, 4-1, at the Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia.

Backup goaltender Michal Neuvirth started for the first time since Nov. 28 and earned the win with 30 saves on 31 shots on goal. Brian Elliott had started the previous 16 games.

CANADIENS 5, CANUCKS 2

Brendan Gallagher scored the winning goal and added an assist as Montreal beat Vancouver, 5-2, in Montreal. The Canadiens (18-20-4) earned their second straight win, while the Canucks (16-20-6) have lost four straight games and 12 of the past 14.

LIGHTNING 5, RED WINGS 2

Yanni Gourde had two goals, Nikita Kucherov scored his league-leading 27th goal and Tampa Bay snapped host Detroit's four-game winning streak. Louis Domingue made 34 saves in his Lightning (30-9-3) debut. Gustav Nyquist and Justin Abdelkader scored for the Red Wings (17-17-7).

PENGUINS 6, BRUINS 5 (OT)

Evgeni Malkin scored the game-winning goal 2:51 into overtime to help Pittsburgh edge Boston, 6-5, in a thriller at PPG Paints Arena in Pittsburgh. Malkin finished with two goals and has 17 on the season.

Jamie Oleksiak, Phil Kessel, Kris Letang and Riley Sheahan also scored for the Penguins 22-19-3. Boston (23-10-7) snapped a three-game winning streak but extended its points streak to 11 straight games (8-0-3).

## GOLF

# Johnson dominates in Tournament of Champions victory

World No. 1 cards 24-under 268 for his 17th US PGA Tour triumph

AFP  
Los Angeles

**W**orld number one Dustin Johnson powered to an eight-shot triumph at the US PGA Tour Tournament of Champions in Hawaii on Sunday. Johnson's masterful display off the tee at the par-73 Plantation Course at Kapalua included a near hole-in-one at the par-four 12th hole — where his drive left him a six-inch tap-in for eagle.

He carded an eight-under par 65 for 24-under 268 and his 17th US PGA Tour triumph, seemingly impervious to the wind and intermittent rain throughout the round. "I knew I was playing well and it's a golf course that I'm really confident on," Johnson said. "I've really been driving the ball (well) this week," added the American, who has a new driver in his bag. "I knew as long as I could keep doing that I was going to play well."

Spain's Jon Rahm was second after a 69 for 276 and is projected to rise from number four to number three in the world thanks to his runner-up finish. Brian Harman, who started the day two shots behind Johnson atop the leaderboard, closed with a one-under 72 for sole possession of third place on 277.

It was a further stroke back to Japan's Hideki Matsuyama (66) and Americans Pat Perez (69) and Rickie Fowler (70). Matsuyama played his last seven holes in five-under par with the aid of an eagle on the par-five 15th, where he landed his approach shot 10 feet from the pin.

But Johnson had put himself out of reach of all pursuers in the elite 34-player event for 2017 tournament winners. He raced away from the field with four birdies on the front nine.

His only miscue of the day was at the par-three 11th, where he was in a bunker off the tee en route to a bogey. He responded in magnificent style with his monster drive setting up his eagle at the 12th, and he pedaled his lead with three straight birdies at 14, 15, and 16.

His eight-shot margin of victory was the biggest of his career. The win was especially satisfying after his final-round collapse at the HSBC Champions in Shanghai in October, when Johnson led by six through three rounds but stumbled to a closing 77 to finish tied for second behind Justin Rose.

"After China, where I struggled a little bit on Sunday, I didn't want to back down," Johnson said. "Even when I made the turn, I think I was 20-under I told myself to get it to 25. I kind of just kept

Dustin Johnson poses with the trophy after winning Tournament of Champions in Lahaina, Hawaii, on Sunday. (AFP)



the pedal down."

Johnson, who seized the world number one ranking last February, has now won at least one US tour title for 11 straight years. "Obviously I got off to a great start and I want to keep it going," Johnson said of his 2018 opener. "Things are going in the right direction."

#### LEADING FINAL ROUND SCORES (USA unless noted, par-73):

268 — Dustin Johnson 69-68-66-65  
276 — Jon Rahm (ESP) 71-70-66-69  
277 — Brian Harman 68-68-69-72

278 — Hideki Matsuyama (JPN) 70-70-72-66,  
Pat Perez 72-66-71-69, Rickie Fowler 69-71-68-70  
279 — Marc Leishman (AUS) 67-69-76-67,  
Jhonattan Vegas (VEN) 68-70-71-70  
280 — Jordan Spieth 75-66-70-69  
281 — Kim Si-Woo (KOR) 69-71-72-69  
282 — Daniel Berger 73-70-68-71, Billy Horschel 70-71-70-71, Chris Stroud 72-66-72-72, Jason Dufner 71-68-69-74  
283 — Patton Kizzire 72-72-69-70, Patrick Cantlay 70-70-72-71  
284 — Russell Henley 74-69-72-69, Cameron Smith (AUS) 75-70-68-71, Kevin Kisner 70-

70-72-72  
285 — Ryan Armour 71-73-70-71  
286 — Kevin Chappell 74-70-70-72  
288 — Justin Thomas 71-75-75-67, Austin Cook 74-74-70-70, Grayson Murray 74-74-69-71, Xander Schauffele 72-72-70-74  
289 — Bryson DeChambeau 73-73-71-72  
290 — Wesley Bryan 74-70-76-70, Hudson Swafford 72-72-76-70  
291 — Brendan Steele 71-74-74-72  
292 — Kyle Stanley 70-75-73-74  
293 — Jonas Blixt (SWE) 77-71-75-70  
294 — Adam Hadwin (CAN) 73-75-74-72  
299 — DA Points 76-76-74-73

## IOC extends North Korea deadline for Pyeongchang Games

**Berlin:** The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has extended the deadline for registration of North Korean athletes for the Pyeongchang winter Olympics and is planning more talks with all sides, it said yesterday.

The IOC, which is eager to have North Korean athletes at the Games, did not say until when the registration deadline had been extended until but most sports have completed their Olympic qualifying events.

Only a figure skating pair from North Korea has secured a spot in the Games in South Korea in February, although several other athletes could qualify through special places offered by the Olympic body. "We welcome the discussion which will take place on Wednesday between the governments of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)," an IOC spokesman said.

South Korea offered talks with North Korea this week, amid a tense standoff over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programmes, after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said in a New Year's Day speech that he was "open to dialogue" with Seoul.

President Donald Trump have exchanged fiery barbs in the last year and Trump has warned that the United States would have no choice but to "totally destroy" North Korea if forced to defend itself or its

allies.

"As far as the participation of athletes from the National Olympic Committee of DPRK in the Olympic Winter Games PyeongChang 2018 is concerned, the IOC has been having discussions with both sides for a long time," the spokesman said.

"In doing so we have kept the door open by extending the deadline for registration, and by offering support to North Korean athletes in the qualification process, whilst always respecting United Nations sanctions."

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said in his New Year's Day speech that he would consider sending a delegation to the Winter Olympics and North Korea last week reopened a long-closed border hotline with South Korea for talks.

"The IOC will at very short notice continue its talks with all the parties concerned so that we can take the necessary decisions about participation and the format of any participation in due time," the IOC spokesman said.

"The IOC's mission is always to ensure the participation of all qualified athletes, beyond all political tensions and divisions. With regard to the very particular situation on the Korean peninsula we need the political commitment from all parties concerned to make such a participation possible. Once this political commitment is clear the IOC will take the final decision."

## RUGBY

## Six Nations is France's primary goal: Brunel

Reuters  
Paris

**F**rance must concentrate on being contenders for the Six Nations title before even thinking of the 2019 World Cup in Japan, new coach Jacques Brunel said yesterday. Brunel took over from Guy Noves after the former Stade Toulousain boss was sacked after two years in the job last December. Under Noves, Les Bleus won only seven of 22 games and finished the Six Nations in fifth and third place. "France must be a contender for the title every year," former Italy coach Brunel, who led Perpignan to the French league title in 2009, told a news conference on Monday. With that in mind, the opening game

against Ireland is crucial."

France start their campaign at the Stade de France against Ireland on Feb. 3 with a potentially pivotal match against England at home in the penultimate round on March 10. France have never won the World Cup, but have finished as runners-up on three occasions, most recently in 2011.

However, Brunel insisted that the team needed to focus on short term objectives rather than obsess over the Webb Ellis Cup. "Let's not think too much about the World Cup for now, there are steps to climb before that," he said. A decent showing in the Six Nations will require a high level of fitness from the players, Brunel added. "High-level rugby is about intensity and speed and that's what we need to concentrate on," he said.

## FOCUS

# Formula 1's bobsleigh input helps make an ice runner

Reuters  
London

**T**here are plenty of reasons why the sport of bobsleigh is sometimes referred to as Formula One on ice but few as obvious as Italy's World Cup sleds. Resplendent in Ferrari red, and with a set of team sponsor Pirelli's P-Zero tyres painted on the sides, they are even liveried to look like racing cars.

Ferrari, Formula One's most glamorous and successful team, have worked with the Italian federation, whose sleds run without sponsor branding at the Olympics, since 2010 and in the run-up to next month's Pyeongchang Winter Games. Former rivals BMW, title sponsors of the World Cup, have long partnered the US bobsleigh team while McLaren teamed up with Britain's bob and skeleton athletes for the 2014 Sochi Games in Russia.

"There's always the link between the Formula One companies, or any motor company, and skeleton and bobsleigh," says Rachel Blackburn, the engineer who has been involved in Britain's skeleton programme since 2006 and who used to work for McLaren.

"There's the Ferrari sleds and the BMW sleds... when we were at McLaren it kind of made a good story," she said. That somewhat manufactured rivalry has died down in the years since Sochi, with McLaren no longer involved and Ferrari's presence distinctly low key. But the worlds of grand prix motor racing and sliding sports still have plenty in common.

Bobsleigh, luge and skeleton are among the fastest of Olympic sports, with bobsleds reaching speeds in excess of 150kph. Drivers are subjected to gut-wrenching G-forces, crashes can be fatal. And then there is the ongoing debate about cost controls, the direction of future rules, preserving a level playing field and obses-



Bobsleigh, luge and skeleton are among the fastest of Olympic sports, with bobsleds reaching speeds in excess of 150kph. (Reuters)

sive secrecy — all endlessly recurring themes in Formula One.

Blackburn said skeleton, where riders hit 130kph on what has glibly been compared to an oversized tea-tray, sits somewhere between

Americas Cup yachts and Formula One cars in terms of speed and aerodynamics.

"Applied engineering is far more interesting than the pure stuff, so when it's applied to something that's fun and exciting it does make it a

lot easier to solve problems," she said. "There is the Americas Cup, sailing, Formula One and the high speed ice sports as well. It's the same concept. In the skeleton we're still looking at chassis dynamics, it's not dissimilar."

FOCUS

# Nadal, Djokovic to test injuries at Kooyong Classic

Under the ad-hoc rules, late additions Nadal and Djokovic will be playing practice matches

AFP  
Melbourne

Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic will use the Kooyong Classic starting today as a convenient emergency stop to gain much-needed match practice as the pair return from injury in time for the Australian Open.

Not since the glory days of Andre Agassi and Pete Sampras nearly two decades ago and more recently Roger Federer, has the long-time exhibition event hosted as distinguished a field.

The upcoming edition will feature five of the world's top 10, including ATP Finals runner-up and two-time Kooyong champion David Goffin, Austrian Dominic Thiem, Croat Marin Cilic and Spain's Pablo Carreno Busta.

Under the ad-hoc rules, late additions Nadal and Djokovic will be playing practice matches.

World number one Nadal, who missed the warm-up Brisbane International last week with a knee injury, is set for just one appearance on Tuesday when he faces France's Richard Gasquet.

Djokovic, who hasn't played competitively since a right elbow problem forced him to quit Wimbledon in the quarter-finals in July, is due on court tomorrow to play Thiem.

"The addition of both Novak and Rafa changes our schedule and the way we will run the four days but that's what Kooyong is all about, we are here to help the players get ready for the Open," said tournament director Peter Johnston.

The women's draw, now into a second season after being introduced in 2017, includes new Hopman Cup champion Belinda Bencic of Switzerland, German Andrea Petkovic, Aussie teen Destanee Aiava and young Chinese star Wang Xinyu.

Pat Cash, the 1987 Australian Open winner who now coaches American CoCo Vandeweghe, serves as official ambassador for the event and said it would be good preparation for Djokovic and Nadal.

"Everyone will be watching Rafa's legs and Novak's arm," he said.

"It can make for a very exciting week of tennis. Both guys had good preparation, they just suffered setbacks. But when those come within a couple of weeks from the Australian Open, it's a bit of a worry. They have to be absolutely ready, players can be quite anxious about it all."

The first day of play features four matches, with Nadal against Gasquet, Goffin facing Carreno Busta and wayward Australian Bernard Tomic taking on Japan's Yoshihito Nishioka.

Among the women, young Australian Aiava plays Petkovic.



World No 1 Rafael Nadal is suffering from a knee problem and will get just one appearance at Kooyong, against Richard Gasquet.

## Rafa tops ATP rankings ahead of Federer

Agencies, Melbourne

Rafael Nadal leads the way in the men's tennis rankings issued yesterday by the ATP, with the rankings' top 10 seeing no changes one week ahead of the Australian Open.

The Spaniard Nadal has 10,600 points to rank ahead of Roger Federer (9,605) and Bulgaria's Grigor Dimitrov (4,990).

Federer helped Switzerland win the Hopman Cup on Saturday while Nadal missed the Brisbane tournament for injury reasons and will test his fitness at this week's Kooyong exhibition tournament.

Federer beat Nadal for last year's Australian Open crown.

Meanwhile, Caroline Wozniacki climbed to number two in the WTA rankings published following a run to the final in Auckland last week. It is the 27-year-old's highest ranking in almost six years, when she lost the number one spot following a poor start to 2012. Ukraine's Elina Svitolina moved up to fourth on the back of victory in Brisbane while German Julia Georges, who stunned Wozniacki in the Auckland final, climbed two places to 12th. Romania's Simona Halep remains on top of the rankings ahead of the start of the Australian Open in Melbourne next week.

### Men's rankings

1. Rafael Nadal (SPA) 10,600 points
2. Roger Federer (SWI) 9,605

3. Grigor Dimitrov (BUL) 4,990
4. Alexander Zverev (GER) 4,610
5. Dominic Thiem (AUT) 4,060
6. Marin Cilic (CRO) 3,805
7. David Goffin (BEL) 3,775
8. Jack Sock (USA) 3,165
9. Stanislas Wawrinka (SWI) 3,060
10. Pablo Carreno-Busta (SPA) 2,615

### Women's rankings

1. Simona Halep (ROM) 6,425 points
2. Caroline Wozniacki (DEN) 6,095
3. Garbine Muguruza (ESP) 6,005
4. Elina Svitolina (UKR) 5,785
5. Venus Williams (USA) 5,567
6. Karolina Pliskova (CZE) 5,445
7. Jelena Ostapenko (LAT) 4,901
8. Caroline Garcia (FRA) 4,385
9. Johanna Konta (GBR) 3,600
10. Coco Vandeweghe (USA) 3,258

ROUND-UP

## Experience counts as Spain's Ferrer staves off Wu

AFP  
Auckland

Veteran David Ferrer needed all his experience to down Wu Yibing in the first round of the ATP Auckland Classic as the emerging stars went on display yesterday.

"It was really tough. The juniors are coming and it was not easy," said the 35-year-old former world number three, after taking nearly two hours to complete a 7-6 (9/7), 6-4 victory over a player 17 years his junior.

While Wu made an early exit, there was better fortune for another hot prospect, 18-year-old Canadian Denis Shapovalov, who took just 56 minutes to beat 33-year-old Brazilian Rogerio Dutra Silva 6-3, 6-2.

Wu, only a few months old when Ferrer turned professional in 2000, dropped his opening serve to love, but broke back to level at 3-3 and saved three break points at 5-5 before a double fault cost him the tie-break 9/7.

Spain's Ferrer, a four-time winner in Auckland and the tournament seventh seed, broke in the second set on an Anger double fault by the Hangzhou



Sloane Stephens of the US hits a return to Camila Giorgi of Italy in the women's singles first round match at the Sydney International tennis tournament in Sydney yesterday.

native to lead 4-2. Wu, who saved nine of 12 break points faced, displayed his fighting spirit by breaking back when Ferrer was serving for the match at 5-3, although it was a short-lived reprieve as he dropped his next serve.

"It was difficult. He's a young player with a lot of power in his shots," Ferrer said.

"Experience was the key. I have 18 more years than him so I

tried to play with my experience in the important moments."

Shapovalov, already ranked 51 in the world after a standout 2017 which included wins over Rafael Nadal and Juan Martin Del Potro, fired down nine aces as he raced past Dutra Silva to set up a second-round clash with Del Potro.

The only other seeded player in action on day one was Spaniard fifth-seed Roberto Bautista

Agut, who beat New Zealand and French Open doubles champion Michael Venus 6-2, 6-1.

Eighth seed Andrey Rublev, who lost the Doha final to Gael Monfils last week, has pulled out of the tournament citing an arm injury.

### STEPHENS OUT

US Open champion Sloane Stephens' preparations for the

Australian Open hit a speed bump yesterday when she was bundled out of the Sydney International first round by Italy's Camila Giorgi.

Stephens, who has not played since the Fed Cup final in November, looked rusty against the big-hitting Giorgi and made 35 unforced errors as she lost 6-3 6-0 to the 26-year-old in just over an hour.

World number 13 Stephens has not won a match since beating Madison Keys in the final at Flushing Meadows in September.

She lost both singles encounters in the Fed Cup against Belarus, lost twice in the WTA Elite Trophy event in Wuhai and suffered first-round losses in two tournaments in China. "I trained in Italy, my home, and felt so very good. I did six weeks of preparation. It was great. Very good," said Giorgi, who missed the back end of last season with an elbow injury.

"I made a few errors at the start but then I played my game and it was good after that."

Giorgi will next meet twice Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova, who went through when last year's surprise Australian Open semi-finalist Mirjana Lucic-Baroni retired after losing the first set 6-1.

SPOTLIGHT

## Murray announces hip surgery, eyes grasscourt season



AFP  
London

Andy Murray announced he had hip surgery in Australia yesterday and is hoping to return to competitive tennis in time for the grasscourt season midway through the year.

The 30-year-old Scot has not played competitively since being knocked out of the Wimbledon quarter-finals last year and last week withdrew from this month's Australian Open.

"Today I underwent successful right hip surgery at the St Vincent Hospital in Melbourne," the former world number one said on Facebook.

"I'd like to thank Dr John O'Donnell and all of the staff for looking after me. I look forward to returning to competitive tennis during the grasscourt season. Thanks to everyone for all the well wishes and support over the last few days. I'll come back from this."

The three-time Grand Slam champion, who dislodged Novak Djokovic from the top of the rankings towards the end of 2016, has slipped to 19th in the world due to his lengthy lay-off.

He first felt pain in his right hip during his French Open semi-final loss to Swiss Stan Wawrinka in June.

The grasscourt season starts after the French Open, with the first event taking place in Stuttgart, Germany, from June 11.

Murray is a two-time Wimbledon winner and has been champion at Queen's in London on five occasions, both of which

are played on grass courts. The BBC reported that he hopes to be hitting balls on court in about seven or eight weeks and has been given a timescale of 14 weeks as a guide for a return.

But Murray said he is not "interested in coming back for a specific tournament", in comments reported by the BBC.

"My plan is to be back playing around the grass-court season - potentially before then - but I'm certainly not going to rush anything," he said. "I want to know when I come back that I'm ready."

"The surgeon felt that my hip will be feeling better than it did a year ago," Murray added. "Obviously, I was still doing fine a year ago - I was ranked number one in the world."

"I'm certainly not going to be putting in the same amount of tournaments and effort to try to get to number one in the world. I'll be playing a reduced schedule, and then focusing more on trying to win major events and big tournaments rather than trying to achieve certain ranking goals."

A host of top names are battling to be fit for the first Grand Slam of the year, which starts in Melbourne on January 15.

Japan's Kei Nishikori has already pulled out and world number one Rafael Nadal and six-time Australian Open champion Novak Djokovic remain huge doubts, having yet to play a competitive match this year.

Former champion Stan Wawrinka and Canada's Milos Raonic are also returning from injuries but intend to play in Melbourne.

## Aspetar offers medical services at Qatar ExxonMobil Open

**Doha:** Aspetar, the world's leading specialised orthopaedic and sports medicine hospital, has provided its world-class comprehensive medical services to the participants at Qatar ExxonMobil Open 2018 for the seventh year in a row, as part of its on-going partnership with Qatar Tennis Federation (QTF). The tournament, held from January 1 to 6, featured some of the world's greatest tennis players, including World No 5 Dominic Thiem, 10th seed Pablo Carreno Busta, 9th seed Tomas Berdych, and Gael Monfils of France who won the title. Aspetar's team of experts includes sports medicine physicians, physiotherapists, massage therapists, emergency medical staff, and paramedics. Commenting on the occasion, Chief Medical Officer of Aspetar

Dr Scott Gillogly said that Aspetar is honoured to continue co-operation with QTF as the official and exclusive medical partner for Qatar ExxonMobil Open since 2011 under the partnership between the parties. "Our support for this tournament is part of our efforts to provide integrated medical care for all local and international championships in Qatar and to deal quickly and directly with any injuries suffered by players on the field," Dr Gillogly added. Held annually since 1993, Qatar ExxonMobil Open is a professional tennis tournament played on outdoor hard courts. It is one of the most successful tournaments of the ATP World Tour 250 series of the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) World Tour.

SETBACK

## Azarenka pulls out of Australian Open

AFP  
Melbourne

Former champion Victoria Azarenka, who has been locked in a custody battle over her young son, pulled out of the Australian Open yesterday.

The two-time winner had been handed a wildcard into the opening Grand Slam of the year in Melbourne, starting on January 15, but will not be making the trip.

"It's unfortunate that Azarenka is unable to travel to Australia this year," tournament director Craig Tiley tweeted.

"The Australian Open is her favourite tournament and she's

looking forward to returning to Melbourne next year."

Azarenka returned from maternity leave in the middle of last year but skipped the US Open after a Los Angeles judge presiding in a custody case over her son Leo ruled she could not leave California until the matter had been settled.

She had been in doubt for Melbourne Park after pulling out of last week's Auckland Classic.

The Belarusian is the latest top name to withdraw from the Australian Open.

Serena Williams, herself a new mother, opted out last week, saying she was still not at the level needed for a major tournament after giving birth.

## FOOTBALL/ASIAN U23 CHAMPIONSHIP

# Akram Afif and Qatar out to make amends in China

Two years ago, the Qataris started brightly, before losing out to South Korea in the semis and then suffering an agonising defeat against Iraq in the play-off for third place



The Qatar team train in Changzhou ahead of today's match against Uzbekistan.

AFC  
Changzhou, Cina

Qatar ace Akram Afif believes his side's bitter disappointment at the 2016 AFC U23 Championship will only serve to make them an even greater force to be reckoned with when the tournament's latest edition gets underway in China today.

As hosts, the Qataris started the competition brightly two years ago, before losing out to Korea Republic in the semi-finals and then suffering an agonising extra-time defeat against Iraq in the play-off for third place.

Some 24 months later, Afif and his teammates have arrived in China eager to write a new and successful chapter in the rich history of Qatari football, starting with their opening day Group A clash against Uzbekistan.

"It is true that the last AFC U23 Championship in Qatar was a disappointing one for us," the 21-year-old midfielder told the AFC.com.

"Nevertheless, this time around we have almost the same squad as the one we had in 2016, and we hope that we have learned from our experiences in the last competition.

"There is no doubt that we are now



looking to achieve something here in China."

With host nation China and regional rivals Oman also standing between them and a place in the knockout phase, Qatar will begin their quest for silverware as one of the competition favourites.

However, although happy to be mentioned among those being tipped for success, Afif - who now plies his trade in

Belgium with Eupen - is adamant that the West Asians are not about to take anything for granted.

"Ahead of the tournament, myself and the team have noticed that there is a very good atmosphere here in China," he explained.

"Of course, as a team we want to be among the favourites to win this competition.

"But we know that we must take it step by step towards the final."

Having tasted success at the AFC U-19 Championship in 2014, and with spells at Spanish sides Villarreal and Sporting Gijon also under his belt, Afif already has a wealth of experience at the top level despite his tender years.

He is not about to rest on his laurels though, and insists that the AFC U23 Championship in China will provide an ideal opportunity to hone his skills even further.

"To be in such a tournament and to be able to compete against different countries with different playing styles is a definite plus for me and the rest of the side," Afif said.

"It will give us more experience and help us become better players. We are looking forward to it."

Qatar coach Felix Sanchez also added that Qatar's experience will stand the team in good stead.

"We expect the team to perform well at this competition, indeed there are some 10 players who played in Doha two years ago," he explained.

"Those players have, of course, gained more experience in the time that has passed since and we hope that can make a difference and make this competition a more successful one for us."

## SPOTLIGHT

## Qatar Airways and Qatar Duty Free congratulate Gael Monfils



Winner Monfils (2nd from right) and runner-up Rublev (third from right) with Qatar Airways staff.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Qatar Airways and Qatar Duty Free (QDF), the official airline and retail sponsor of the Qatar ExxonMobil Open 2018, have congratulated Gael Monfils, the winner of the ATP tournament held at Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex.

The new champion earned his title after defeating Andrey Rublev 6-2, 6-3 in the final. The highly-anticipated championship proved to be a great success among international and local fans alike, who came together to watch some of the world's best tennis players compete in Doha for the coveted prize and winning title.

Qatar Airways Senior Vice-President Marketing and Corporate Communications, Salam al-Shawa, said: "Qatar Airways is thrilled to congratulate Gael Monfils, winner of this year's ExxonMobil Open championship following matches which have showcased some of the best tennis in the world. Now that this exciting tournament has come to an end, we look forward to next month's Qatar Total Open, where Qatar Airways will welcome many of the world's best-known singles and doubles female players to

Doha.

"As a major sponsor of many sporting events around the world, Qatar Airways prides itself in supporting bringing people together through sports. 2018 promises to be an amazing year of sport with Qatar Airways leading the way as the Official Airline Partner of FIFA, with the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia taking place this summer."

Senior Vice President Qatar Duty Free, Luis Gasset, said: "Qatar Duty Free would like to congratulate Gael Monfils on his fantastic win at this year's ATP tournament. We also want to congratulate the four lucky winners who were awarded amazing prizes personally signed by the championship's top players after participating in our sponsor's village activities."

Qatar Tennis, Squash and Badminton Federation (QTSFB) President and Chairman of the Higher Organisation Committee, Nasser bin Ghanem al-Khelafin, said: "It was a great pleasure hosting another highly successful tournament. Qatar Tennis Federation's partnership with Qatar Airways and Qatar Duty Free has raised the level of tennis to greater heights in Qatar and we are delighted to be partners together. It is our desire to keep developing the sport and I believe the sky is not the limit, but the beginning of our success."

## COMMITMENT

## UK's Gemma Steel trains in Doha for Ooredoo Marathon

British elite athlete, Gemma Steel, has been training in Doha since December 30th 2017 for the Ooredoo Doha Marathon due to take place this weekend.

The 32-year-old athlete came late to the professional ranks, via an amateur running club background rather than an elite junior pathway. Last year, she won the Great Ireland Run, Great South Run, Virgin British 10K and came 6th at the Great North Run.

On her participation in the event, she commented, "I am delighted to be competing in the Ooredoo Doha Marathon in 2018. The half marathon event offers a great course, some quality competition and a fantastic location in which to train and race. The facilities are top class and the people of Qatar are very welcoming. The organisation has been great too. I shall run my heart out for you!"

The invitational elite half marathon is part of the Ooredoo Doha Marathon which includes a full marathon, half marathon, 10K and 5K events for adults and youth as well as 3K and 1K events for children.



Over the past five years, the Ooredoo Doha Marathon has steadily grown to become the largest mass participation event in Qatar attracting runners from all over the world. In this upcoming 2018 edition, 2,400 participants from 83 nationalities are expected to take part.

The elite athletes are competing for \$50,000 in prize money.

## BOTTOMLINE

## Battle lines drawn for second phase of QNB Stars League

QNA  
Doha

The battle lines have been drawn for the QNB Stars League's second and crucial phase. The tournament will resume this week following a month-long break.

The teams will be looking forward to success and glory as ever in the new year. All of them braced for the remaining part of the season in earnest by utilizing the winter break in the most effective way. The clubs intensified their preparations and most of them played friendlies either against each other or against top overseas sides in order to stay battle-ready.

The action will be non-stop in the QNB Stars League and the big question is whether Al Duhail continue their unbeaten run (they were the only team to do

so in the first phase) and go on to lift the coveted shield.

However, Al Sadd and Al Rayyan are close behind and the duo have the potential and resources to challenge Al Duhail. The fight for the fourth place will most probably be between Al Saliya, who occupy that spot presently, and Umm Salal.

Al Ahli complete the top half. The rivalry is intense in the bottom row too as only a thin line separates the six teams.

Some teams will be fighting to achieve top spots in the standings, while some others will battle it out to avoid relegation.

During the break, the semifinals and final of the QSL Cup were played. Al Gharafa ended their long title drought by winning the tournament, defeating Al Rayyan in the final.

The Cheetahs will embark on their second-phase campaign under Turkish coach Bulent Uygun, who replaced Jean

Fernandez.

Similarly, Al Ahli will play the remaining part of the season under the tutelage of their youth team coach George Jorge after fellow Spaniard Joaquin Caparros quit citing personal reasons.

In between, many players did duty for Qatar at the Gulf Cup in Kuwait, where Qatar's National Team (Al Annabi) made their exit in the group stage. And some others will miss a few matches due to their commitments to the country at the forthcoming Asian Under-23 Championship in China.

Much of the spotlight will be on Dutch star Wesley Sneijder, who has just been roped in by Al Gharafa. The attacking midfielder had an illustrious career with a number of big clubs in Europe, such as Ajax Amsterdam, Real Madrid and Galatasaray as well.

The 33-year-old is most noted for being a member of the UEFA Champions

League-winning Inter Milan side in 2010. Sneijder was also a part of the Netherlands team that lost to Spain in the 2010 FIFA World Cup final in South Africa.

The tournament's opening half witnessed 228 goals and Al Duhail's Youssef El Arabi emerged as the top scorer with 16 goals. The Moroccan striker is all set to end up as the leading goal-getter for a second successive season.

The much-awaited Qatar Clasico between Al Sadd and Al Rayyan will be fought in Week 16 on February 8. Al Duhail will host Al Rayyan in Week 14 on 27th January and Al Duhail will travel to Al Sadd in Week 19 on 1st march in some top draws.

In Week 12, the most focus is on Al Ahli's home fixture against Al Gharafa on Friday. Other games are Al Duhail vs Qatar SC, Al Sadd vs Al Markhiya, Al Rayyan vs Al Khor, Al Saliya vs Al Arabi and Al Kharaitiyat vs Umm Salal.

### Prize money announced for Emir Cup bowling

Doha: Qatar Bowling Federation has announced the prize money for the 17th edition of HH the Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani Cup, which will be held at Qatar Bowling Center from February 27 to March 5, 2018.

The Federation announced \$61,400 prize money for the winners from the first to the 32nd. The first winner will receive \$10,000, while winner of the second place will receive \$6,000, and the third and fourth

will receive \$3,500. Winners from the 5th to 8th will receive \$2,400, from the 9th to the 16th will get \$1,600, and from 17th to 32nd will get \$1,000.

Qatar's Jassim Mohamed al-Muraikhi won the Emir Cup 2017 against Francois Louw of South Africa in the title match. Al-Muraikhi took a slim two-pin lead after the first game, 258 to 256. He followed with a 247-217 win to capture the title and the \$10,000 top prize, 505-473. (QNA)