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FOOTBALL

Al Duhail edge Al Sadd to enter Amir Cup final

Almoez Ali scores lone goal in yet another victory for Belmadi's men over Sadd

By Sahan Bidappa
 Doha

The Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system came back to haunt Al Sadd once again as they suffered a 0-1 loss to Al Duhail in the Amir Cup semi-final yesterday.

In the Qatar Cup final loss last month, Sadd were at the receiving end of VAR, when the referee struck to his contentious decision to award a penalty to Duhail.

Last night at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium, it was the other way around for Al Sadd as a penalty decision was overturned for them and then they were reduced to 10 men after Abdelkareem Hassan was sent off at the stroke of half-time. Both the decisions came through VAR, where the referee looks at the monitor placed near the pitch side to review his initial call.

To pile on the misery for Al Sadd, Almoez Ali struck the match's only goal in the 68th minute to send Duhail into the final, which will be held at the Khalifa International Stadium on May 19.

Djamel Belmadi's side, unbeaten so far in the season, are on the course for a historic treble to add their QNB Stars League and Qatar Cup trophies.

They were deserving winners on the night too, as Al Sadd despite controversial VAR decisions, wasted opportunities and looked ragged in the second-half.

Both the sides were coming off AFC Champions League victories. While Al Sadd had beaten Saudi's Al Ahli on Monday, Duhail had outplayed Al Ain on Tuesday and had one day less to recover.

With the return leg of Champions League to be played next week, Sadd and Duhail did not go in with a full strength. Sadd's Spanish midfielder star Xavi Hernandez and Hamroun Jugurtha were on the bench, while striker Baghdad Bounedjah watched from the stands as the Algerian was serving his second suspension which he received for showing dissent during the Qatar Cup final. For Duhail, Karim Bouaif, Ismail Mohamed and Murad Najj were on the bench.

Sadd started on a bright note and almost went ahead in the 12th minute only for Hamid Ismail's curling shot from the right to strike the post. Duhail also had the same fortune as Mohamed Muntari's header hit the top bar.

As the intensity of the game went up a notch, Sadd were awarded a penalty in the 28th minute. Referee Salman Falahi signalled for a spot-kick as he ruled Duhail defender Dami Traore had brought down Sadd captain Hassan al-Haydous in the box. But upon a review, Falahi rightly changed his decision, with the replays showing Traore had got to the ball first even as al-Haydous went down tamely.

In the 33rd minute, al-Haydous had a chance to put his team in front. The midfielder after playing 1-2 with Akram Afif hit straight to keeper Amine Lecomte. On the other end, Almoez Ali's left-footer just missed the target.

As the half-time approached, the match's turning point arrived too. After initially not making a decision on Abdulkarim's foul on Mohamed Moosa, the referee, upon watching the replays, showed a direct red card for a dangerous tackle. Sadd players protested in vain even as coach Jesualdo Ferreira was seething in anger on the touchline.

Despite being a man down, Sadd started the second-half positively. Boualem Khoukhi had a chance for equaliser but the forward failed to connect a volley.

Even as South Korean playmaker Nam Tae-hee pulled the strings for Duhail, Belmadi introduced QNB Stars League top-scorer Youssef El Arabi in place of Muntari.

The decisive goal came in the 68th minute after Morteza Mohammed's pass was intercepted in the midfield and Duhail launched a counter-attack.



Al Duhail's Almoez Ali (left) in action during the Amir Cup semi-final against Al Sadd at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha yesterday. PICTURES: Shemeer Rasheed and Jayan Orma



This combination picture shows Al Sadd coach Jesualdo Ferreira react during the Amir Cup semi-final against Al Duhail yesterday.

Tae-hee received the ball from the half-line and sped towards the box and expertly played a through ball to Ismael on the right, who then picked out incoming Almoez as the striker pounced on the ball to hit the target from four yards.

Duhail came close again through Luiz Martin, but the captain hit the post. The impressive Tae-hee troubled the Sadd defence whole evening as he showed little fatigue from his man-of-the-match performance against Al Ain on Tuesday.

The South Korean was the standout

player for Duhail again as hit the post twice and also drew a save from Sadd goalkeeper Sadd al-Dosari.

Post-match, Sadd coach Ferreira was frustrated with the result. The Portuguese was not happy with the decisions on Abdelkareem's being sent off and a penalty being overturned.

"If we did not have the VAR then we would not have a red card for that foul. We would also have a penalty kick for al-Haydous," he said.

Ferreira also pointed out that Ab-

delkareem's foul only warranted a yellow card.

"It is a very sad result for us. And it is because of two controversial decisions. This is happening to us for the second consecutive against Duhail and we are very unfortunate," he said.

"The referee has to take decision for what he saw and not because of the pressure from the players. The Qatari referees are good, but the pressure from players affects them. They must be free to make decisions on their own," he said.

Rayyan, Gharafa keen to make amends in semis clash today



Gharafa coach Bulent Uygun (left), Rayyan coach Michael Laudrup.

By Sports Reporter
 Doha

Al Rayyan will be seeking revenge when they face Al Gharafa in the Amir Cup semi-final today. Last time these two sides met, Rayyan were thrashed 1-6 by Gharafa in the QNB Stars League. And Rayyan, the last year's Amir Cup finalist, will be hoping they can settle the scores at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium. Both the teams had a bye into the quarter-finals stage of the competition. While Rayyan cruised to a 3-0 win over Al Arabi in the last-eight stage, Ahmed Alaaeldin saved Al Gharafa from the blushes after the substitute scored the winner in the 88th minute against second division side Mesaimeer. Gharafa are also under pressure coming into the prestigious tournament, having been outplayed 1-6 by Al Duhail in the Qatar Cup semi-finals. So both the teams have their own problems to deal with. Rayyan manager Michael Laudrup said his men are aware of the magnitude of the match and are keen to book their place in the final, which will be played at the Khalifa International Stadium on May 19.

"We are looking to qualify for the final. I am happy that the semi-final will be played at the Al Sadd Stadium because the stadium is air conditioned and makes playing better at this time," he said yesterday. Laudrup said his team's 1-6 loss to Gharafa in the league will have no bearing on today's match. "This match is completely different from the league meeting, because of the circumstances in which the game will be played. In the league, it's totally a different scenario. The players are motivated to reach the final game," the Dane said. Rayyan is coming to the Amir Cup after a heartbreaking 4-6

loss on penalties to Al Sadd in the Qatar Cup semi-final. The tie-breaker was forced after regular time. The teams were tied 2-2 after regular time.

Laudrup's men had many positive results to show for in the league's first phase, but they lost out on the title in the second phase. They were as inconsistent in a few matches as they were consistent in many. They will be without their top scorer Abderrazaq Hamdallah, who was ruled out for the rest of the season with an ankle injury. The Moroccan was the third-best scorer in the QNB Stars League with 18 goals. However, Al Rayyan have the likes of Rodrigo Tabata, Sebastian Soria, Mohamed Alaaeldin, Ahmed Yasser, Ahmed Abdelmaqsoud, Koh Myong-Jin, Mohsine Moutaouli and Daniel Goumou to deliver the goods. On the other hand, Gharafa coach Bulent Uygun is seeking to end his team's title drought. They last won the Amir Cup title in 2012. Gharafa finished fourth in the QNB Stars League and the Cheetahs are reaping rewards for making an overhaul in the January transfer window. Uygun took over from Frenchman Jean Fernandez, who guided them to the QSL Cup triumph, before the start of the second phase. They also strengthened their ranks by roping in Dutch attacking midfielder Wesley Sneijder, Iranian striker Mehdi Taremi and Assim Madibo. They have a good mix of experience and youth, and Uygun has succeeded in moulding them into a fighting unit.

The likes of captain Sneijder, Taremi and Brazilian midfielder Diogo Amado have gelled well with youngsters such as goalkeeper Yusuf Hassan, Amro Seraj, Ilyas Ahmed and Monkez Mohamed. They also have talented players such as Ahmed Alaaeldin, Hassan Fadli, Madibo and Othman al-Yahri.



EPL

United seal second spot with stalemate at West Ham

'We are just waiting to see if it's possible for him to be involved in the final'

AFP
London

Manchester United secured second place in the Premier League with a 0-0 draw at West Ham on Thursday, but there was precious little else to please manager Jose Mourinho as the visitors again struggled for inspiration in attacking areas.

In a game of precious few clear-cut chances, Luke Shaw hit the post and Paul Pogba headed wide with United's best opening. A third blank in their last five league games for United means local rivals Manchester City can seal another Premier League record by winning the league by at least 19 points if they win at Southampton on the last day of the season tomorrow.

In United's first game since legendary former manager Alex Ferguson had to have emergency surgery on a brain haemorrhage, the visiting fans showed their support to the 76-year-old Scot with persist chants of "we all love Alex Ferguson".

There was a more subdued atmosphere from the home fans at the end of another deeply frustrating campaign for the Hammers. Two years ago to the day, West Ham waved goodbye to Upton Park in a thrilling 3-2 win over United on a night of high emotion in East London.

That victory also helped secure European football, but the move to the London Stadium, sold to supporters as West Ham's chance to compete with the Premier League elite, has so far proved a false dawn. Survival was only mathematically secured last weekend and West Ham remain in lowly 15th place.

United manager Jose Mourinho reacted to Friday's meek 1-0 defeat at Brighton by making eight changes with Marcus Rashford and Anthony Martial relegated to the bench despite the continued absence of the injured Romelu Lukaku.

However, that failed to provoke an immediate response as West Ham posed the early threat.

Marko Arnautovic's goals have kept David Moyes's men up and the Austrian muscled his way into a good shooting position on six minutes but placed his shot too close to David de Gea.

Arnautovic then headed an-

Manchester United's Paul Pogba hugs West Ham United's Mark Noble after their English Premier League match in London on Thursday. (AFP)



other good opening over before United awakened from their slumber. Adrian has been restored in the West Ham goal for the past three games in place of England international Joe Hart, and showed why with a hat-trick of fine saves.

Jesse Lingard was first to be denied with a fiercely struck long-range effort before Adrian showed quick reflexes to save from Alexis Sanchez and then get back on his feet to turn Shaw's effort onto the post. Lingard stung the palms of Adrian

again early in the second period. A lacklustre United display was reflected in Pogba again failing to take control of the game.

The £89 million midfielder did have the visitors' best chance when he headed wide just after the hour mark from Antonio Valencia's pin-point cross.

Pogba then sent an audacious effort from the halfway line well over Adrian's crossbar to sum up United's lack of ideas in attacking areas. However, the Frenchman did come a lot closer with his final strike that curled just

past the post from a narrow angle. Pogba's frustration then spilled over when he was lucky to escape with just a yellow card after grappling with West Ham captain Mark Noble as tempers flared in the latter stages.

Meanwhile Mourinho says Romelu Lukaku could start the FA Cup final on the bench as the striker battles to recover from an ankle injury in time for the Wembley showdown with Chelsea.

Lukaku hasn't featured for United since suffering his an-

kle problem against Arsenal last month and is set to miss the last game of the Premier League season against Watford tomorrow.

"We hope he can play the final," Mourinho said after Thursday's 0-0 draw at West Ham.

"He's in Belgium having his treatment and there is communication between the doctors in Belgium and our medical department.

"We are just waiting to see if it's possible for him to be involved in the final, if not starting at least he can be on the bench."

GOAL

Neymar aims to regain fitness by World Cup but PSG future unclear

Reuters
Madrid

Brazil forward Neymar is focusing on getting fully fit in time for next month's World Cup following foot surgery but his future at Paris St Germain looks increasingly uncertain.

He was absent from PSG's Ligue 1 title celebrations in April although he was at the Stade de France on Tuesday to watch his side beat third-tier Les Herbiers 2-0 in the French Cup final to complete a domestic treble.

Reports in French and Spanish media say Neymar, who joined the Ligue 1 club from Barcelona for a record 222 million euros (\$265.18 million) last August, has told PSG directors he wants to quit the club after only one season.

Pressed on the topic by reporters in his pre-Ligue 1 match news conference yesterday, PSG coach Unai Emery

said: "(Sports director) Antero Henrique is not far from here and he could come and answer, or why not even Neymar himself."

The latest media reports say the Brazilian now wants to move to Real Madrid, who tried to sign him in 2013 before he opted to join Barcelona from Santos.

Spanish newspaper Marca reported yesterday that the player's father and agent, Neymar Sr, has told PSG his son wants to leave immediately.

It said his father met Real directors in December on the day Cristiano Ronaldo received the Ballon d'Or in Paris. The 26-year-old Neymar has been out of action since spraining his ankle and fracturing his fifth metatarsal on February 25, which led him to undergo surgery in Brazil.

He had chalked up 28 goals and 16 assists in 30 appearances in all competitions for PSG before his injury.



SETBACK

Brazil's Alves ruled out of World Cup

AFP
Rio de Janeiro

Brazil right-back Dani Alves was ruled out of the World Cup on Friday after suffering a knee injury playing for French champions Paris Saint-Germain, the Brazilian football federation (CBF) said.

"All possibilities for his recovery being exhausted, it will be impossible to select Daniel Alves... for the World Cup," said the CBF in a statement.

The 35-year-old suffered the injury playing in Tuesday's French Cup final against Les Herbiers, coming off four minutes from the end as PSG beat the minnows 2-0.

The World Cup, where Bra-

zil are aiming for a sixth title, starts in Russia on June 14.

Brazilian legend and three-time World Cup-winner Pele tweeted: "I am so sad to hear this. Footballers hate missing games but I know first-hand that missing #WorldCup games is the worst feeling."

The injury to Alves is the second major blow for Brazil who are still sweating on the recovery from foot surgery of star striker Neymar who hasn't played since March.

Alves has played 107 times for Brazil since making his debut in 2006 and looked a certain starter for Tite's team at the World Cup finals in Russia where Brazil are grouped with Switzerland, Costa Rica and Serbia. Tite is due to name his squad on Monday.

Salah promises Liverpool fans: this is 'just the start'

AFP
London

Mohamed Salah has reassured Liverpool fans his stunning first season is "just the beginning" of his time at the club despite speculation over interest from Real Madrid.

The Egyptian collected awards in Liverpool on Thursday after being voted player of the season by both the club's fans and his teammates before boarding a flight to collect the Football Writers' Association's award in London. The 25-year-old has scored 43 goals in all competitions since arriving from Roma last summer, a return that has seen him heavily linked with Spanish giants Real Madrid, who face Liverpool in the Champions League later this month.

But Salah, who needs just one more goal to become the outright record-holder for the most strikes in a 38-match season in the Premier League, appears content with life at the club.

"I'm very happy here, everything is fine," he said. "Of course



Liverpool Football Club supporters Emily and David Farley carry a cardboard cut out of Liverpool player Mohamed Salah outside their house which has been decorated ahead of the club's Champions League final appearance against Real Madrid, in Liverpool. (Reuters)

I have got ambitions for the future with Liverpool. As you can see we had a great season, now we are in the Champions League final and everyone is excited.

"It is just the start. This is my first year here and it is the same for some other players. It is just the beginning."

Liverpool cannot focus all of their energies on Real just yet, with the battle for a place in next season's Champions League still

not settled. A point in their final match, at home to Brighton on Sunday, will be enough to secure a top-four finish, after which all eyes turn to Kiev.

Salah, who was last month crowned Professional Footballers' Association players' player of the year, won the writers' award ahead of Kevin De Bruyne and Harry Kane. Speaking in London, he said: "I was here four years ago (with Chelsea)

and a lot of people were saying he couldn't play in the Premier League. I left Chelsea but it was always in my mind to come back to make them wrong. So I make them wrong.

"I'm not the same player. I improved a lot in Rome but I can't say everything is me. The teammates are maybe different. The coach is tough and they always help me inside and outside the pitch."

FOCUS

Pep hopes Aguero stays at City

AFP
Manchester, United Kingdom

Pep Guardiola does not want Sergio Aguero to leave Manchester City and has told the Argentina striker he can remain with the Premier League champions for as long as he wants.

Reports from Spain suggest Aguero's former club Atletico Madrid are keen to re-sign him before next season. Aguero's relationship with Guardiola has been the subject of some debate after reports of clashes between the pair in the past. But the City manager will offer Atletico no encouragement, as long as Aguero - who turns 30 next month - wishes to stay with the team for whom he has scored a club-record 199 goals.

"I think it's not going to happen. My desire is it will not happen, but I don't know," said Guardiola of Atletico's reported interest. "It's happened many times in these press conferences and I said maybe a thousand times - Sergio is going to stay until he decides his time is over."

"I said it last season and this season many times and I say it today. That's why I say it isn't going to happen, but in football you never know."

City signed Aguero from Atletico in 2011 and he has been one of the key components of the club's successes, which now include three Premier League titles. Although sidelined with a knee injury, Aguero is poised to return to fitness in time for the World Cup and is under contract with City until 2020.

He has publicly stated he intends to return to Argentina and play for boyhood club Independiente once his time with City is up.

Sterling talks

Guardiola, who travels to Southampton for the champions' final game of the season on Sunday,

was also relaxed about reports that England forward Raheem Sterling has decided to delay contract negotiations with the club until after the World Cup. "The club, the chairman and myself, we all want him to stay a long time, renew his contract," said Guardiola. "But we are going on holiday in a few days. We all want him to stay as long as possible."

Meanwhile, Guardiola predicts a low-key summer of transfer activity, with veteran midfielder Yaya Toure the only player who is confirmed as a definite departure. Apart from signing Toure's replacement, and potentially also a new big-name forward, Guardiola may not add any more talent to a squad that won the title so comfortably.

"I say not too much, maybe players want to play more and want to leave, but not too many," he added. "We had a high investment last season, it was an old team, 10 or 11 players more than 31, and we needed to change it. We did that and now we'll make some details - Yaya is leaving. So, one or maybe two. I don't know!"

Guardiola also branded Premier League rules that require a player to have made five appearances to qualify for a winner's medal as ridiculous, with young midfielders Phil Foden and Brahim Diaz currently one short of that target.

And Guardiola admits he may put the duo on the field at some stage just to make sure they qualify for the honours.

"I didn't know that but, with all respect, it looks ridiculous to me. All respect," he said. "If they want my medal I will give them medal. They are champions. They worked from day one to the last one, training with us, in the locker room, training."

"They didn't play because of my decisions, but it's the same thing. It doesn't matter they don't have medals. Maybe it's so expensive to give three, four, five medals for the young guys!"

SERIE A

Juventus on verge of title as Roma look to gatecrash party

'The Scudetto's not ours yet, but we're on the right track. We're close'

AFP
Milan

Juventus aim to claim a seventh consecutive league title at the Stadio Olimpico tomorrow but opponents Roma will be determined to gatecrash the party and secure a spot in the Champions League.

All-conquering Juventus claimed a fourth consecutive Italian Cup with a 4-0 win over AC Milan in Rome midweek, and need just a point to add

the Scudetto to complete the double for the fourth year in a row.

"The Scudetto's not ours yet, but we're on the right track. We're close," warned goalkeeping legend Gianluigi Buffon who reached the milestone of 300 clean sheets for Juventus in 655 appearances on Wednesday.

Roma, in third place, need just a point to ensure top European football next season as they hold a four-point advantage on fifth-place Inter Milan in the race for the top four with two games to play.

"Playing for a draw isn't in my make-up," said Roma coach Eusebio Di Francesco. "You go out onto the pitch to win."

"The game could always end in a draw, but I don't like talking about permutations."

"I can assure you that I will try to convince my players that we need all three points."

However, if fifth-placed Inter Milan lose today at home to Sassuolo then the top four will be confirmed for Roma, Lazio, in fourth two points behind Roma, travel to Crotona, who are hovering two points above the drop zone.

'Something unimaginable'

In any case, Di Francesco's aim is to postpone the Juventus party for a week sending the multiple champions back home to Turin to complete the double in their final game against already-relegated Verona.

That game in Turin could also be the swansong for 40-year-old Buffon who has said he will retire at the end of the season.

"I'm very proud because we've done in seven years what only men with a capital M can do," Buffon told *Juventus TV*.

"It's incredible. At one point in the season, we said, 'if we want to be monsters, we have to win the Scudetto again, try to win the Italian Cup and the Champions League."

"We didn't succeed in the Champions League, but we still

Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon reacts during the Italian Tim Cup final against AC Milan at the Olympic stadium in Rome. (AFP)



Buffon charged by UEFA after referee rant

Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon was charged by UEFA yesterday over his comments about referee Michael Oliver after the Italian side's dramatic Champions League quarter-final loss to Real Madrid last month. The 40-year-old has been charged both with breaching UEFA's "general principles of conduct" over his outburst and also for his red card for dissent. European football's governing body said the case will be dealt with on May 31. The last-eight clash between holders Real and

Juventus was decided by a last-gasp Cristiano Ronaldo penalty after the Serie A champions had staged a remarkable comeback to wipe out a 3-0 first-leg deficit at the Santiago Bernabeu. But Buffon, who was sent off in the aftermath of the penalty decision, lashed out at Oliver's decision to award the spot-kick, saying the English official had a "rubbish bin for a heart". "You have to be a murderer to make the last two decisions the referee made," Juve captain Buffon said. "You cannot

ruin the dreams of a team. I could've told the referee anything at that moment, but he had to understand the degree of the disaster he was creating. If you can't handle the pressure and have the courage to make a decision, then you should just sit in the stands and eat your crisps." The 2006 World Cup winner is set to retire at the end of the current season, so any potential ban from European football may not affect his future. Buffon later defended his comments, saying the drama made him

"feel alive". Although the goalkeeper was widely criticised for his comments, referee Oliver and his wife Lucy were both targeted on social media in the days after the game and were offered police support. Buffon has never won the Champions League in his illustrious 23-year career. He could win a fourth straight Serie A and Italian Cup double this weekend as his Juventus side look to clinch the league title when they play Roma on Sunday, having thrashed AC Milan 4-0 in Wednesday's Cup final.

Fixtures (all times GMT)

Today: Benevento v Genoa (1400GMT), Inter Milan v Sassuolo (1845)
Tomorrow: Crotona v Lazio, Verona v Udinese, Fiorentina v Cagliari, Torino v SPAL, Bologna v Chievo (all 1300), Atalanta v AC Milan (1400), Roma v Juventus (1845), Sampdoria v Napoli (1845)

did something unimaginable."

Second-placed Napoli travel to Sampdoria with their ambitions now a club points record for the season after practically handing Juventus the title last week with a 2-2 draw against Torino. Below the leading group, three teams are involved in a battle for the final Europa League spot.

AC Milan, in sixth, had been hoping for a Cup win which would have guaranteed them a place in the Europa League group phase.

Instead Gennaro Gattuso's side face a direct clash at European rivals Atalanta as they recover from their blunders which handed Juventus the Cup.

"We weren't good, we weren't

up to it, the rest doesn't really matter. Now for 180 minutes we have to be Milan, all together," said Spanish midfielder Suso.

Atalanta are a point behind Milan in seventh, with Fiorentina, who will play Gattuso's side on the final day of the season, a further two points behind hosting relegation-threatened Cagliari.

PREVIEW

Clock ticking on giants Hamburg's Bundesliga future

AFP
Hamburg

Fallen German giants Hamburg could be relegated from the Bundesliga's top-flight for the first time in their history today.

A clock in their Volksparkstadion proudly displays how long Hamburg have been in the Bundesliga - they are the only ever-present since the division was founded in 1963. The now mighty Bayern Munich were only a second-division club back then.

But Hamburg's proud record is now in serious danger.

Lying second from bottom after taking just 28 points from 33 games, the club must beat Borussia Moenchengladbach at home on the final day of the season and hope Wolfsburg, who are one place and two points above them, lose at home to already-relegated Cologne.

"In mathematical terms, the chance is low, but in football, an awful lot is possible," Hamburg coach Christian Titz said defiantly.

"Lots of people in Hamburg will be Cologne fans on Saturday. The problem is, we could do our homework, get the win and still it might not be enough."

So desperate are Hamburg fans to get the right results today that barrels of beer are being pledged, via Twitter, to Cologne should they beat Wolfsburg. The goal is to finish 16th, which would mean for the third time in five years Hamburg would face the ordeal of a relegation playoff, this time against Holstein Kiel, who finished third in Germany's second tier.

'Like a funeral'

To sweeten the bitter taste of regular defeats, the squad handed out free scoops of ice cream to long-suffering Hamburg fans at training on Tuesday.

The current plight is a far cry from the glory days.

England star Kevin Keegan, with his permed locks, moved to Hamburg from Liverpool for a then-record 500,000 pounds in 1977, becoming the Bundesliga's first foreign superstar.

Keegan thrived in the bustling northern German port and was voted European player of the year in both 1978 and 1979. He scored 17 goals as Hamburg won the Bundesliga title for the first time in 1978-79.

Then in the 1980s, legendary Austrian coach Ernst Happel

steered Hamburg to triumph in the 1983 European Cup, when Felix Magath scored in a 1-0 win over Juventus in Athens.

Hamburg also won the German title in the 1981-82 and 1982-83 seasons. But no significant silverware has come the club's way since they lifted the German Cup back in 1987.

Since Angela Merkel became German chancellor in 2005, 18 different coaches have failed to bring success, or even stability.

"Economically speaking, Hamburg football club is the worst investment decision of my life," said German billionaire Klaus-Michael Kuehne, who has pumped millions of euros into the club since 2010.

This season has been a disaster, with three coaches since January.

Markus Gisdol was sacked in January after taking just 15 points from 19 games.

Former player Bernd Hollerbach took over, but was gone by March after failing to win any of his seven games.

Titz, 47, the former reserve team coach, has coaxed 10 points from his seven games to reignite long-lost hope.

"I think they'll do it, they have to stay up it'll be like a funeral in the city if they go down," one supporter told AFP.

Even legendary West Germany striker Uwe Seeler, an eternal optimist who scored 404 goals in 476 games for Hamburg, is considering what most fans dread.

"Without being a pessimist, I think it's too late," said the 81-year-old after Hamburg managed to beat Schalke last month.

"It will be important to put together a good team in preparation for the second league, because the second league is also strong."

Should the unthinkable happen, a clear-out of the squad is highly likely. In total, eight players are out of contract, including captain Gotoku Sakai, a Japanese international, plus Aaron Hunt, Lewis Holtby and Nicolai Mueller, who have played for Germany.

One of the eight, right-back Dennis Diekmeyer, has been involved in nerve-wracking relegation play-offs four times in his career, with Nuremberg in 2009 and 2010, then Hamburg in 2014 and 2015 - always with the winning club.

"Some guys are relaxed, some are tense, but we should look forward to the game," said Diekmeyer.

Dominguez re-elected as CONMEBOL boss

Paraguayan Alejandro Dominguez was re-elected president of the South American Football Confederation (CONMEBOL) yesterday with a renewed promise to make the scandal-hit organisation more transparent and accountable. Dominguez took power in 2016 after his countryman Juan Angel Napout was arrested in Switzerland as part of the FIFA corruption scandal. Napout's two predecessors were also detained and accused of taking bribes in return for guaranteed TV and publicity contracts. Dominguez has sought to restore the image of an institution discredited by the arrests and notorious for its lack of accountability and openness. "I promise that all monies generated by this administration are going to be transparent and are going to be transferred to football where they should have always gone," Dominguez, who was elected for a four-year term, told delegates.

LA LIGA

Barca visit Levante with unbeaten season on the line

AFP
Madrid

Barcelona may have navigated their way past Real Madrid and Villarreal this week but their first ever unbeaten La Liga season is not quite over the line yet.

Ernesto Valverde's side visit Levante tomorrow, whose lowly position of 16th betrays a late surge in form, which has included four consecutive victories and only one defeat in their last 10 games.

Barca are clear favourites. They held on for a 2-2 draw at home to Real on Sunday, even after Sergi Roberto was sent off at the end of the first half, before thrashing sixth-placed Villarreal 5-1 on Wednesday.

But if those two games have caused any fatigue, or even complacency, among Spain's league and cup winners, Levante could be primed to take advantage.

When Paco Lopez replaced

Juan Ramon Lopez Muniz as coach at the start of March, Levante had won only one of their last 22 games. Since he took charge, only Atletico Madrid have played them and tasted victory.

"It was important to change the dynamics but I don't know what changed so much," Lopez said. "What we have is attitude and commitment and that has been the key."

Valverde has downplayed the importance of his team finishing the campaign as invincibles but after already winning a domestic double, it would represent something of a cherry on top.

No team has ever finished a 38-game La Liga season without losing and Barca would be the first in any format since Real Madrid managed it across an 18-match schedule in 1932.

With Real standing on the brink of a third consecutive Champions League triumph, their Catalan rivals need to claim every accolade they can get.

"In this club you are expected

to win everything," Valverde said. "We have not won everything but it is also true we had difficulties at the start of the season and we have exceeded many expectations."

"We had a terrible day in Rome in the Champions League and that has hung over us. But still, it has been a great season."

Zinedine Zidane has paid lip-service to the idea of a strong finish in the league, not least to maintain momentum ahead of their season-defining Champions League final against Liverpool in Kiev.

But a heavily-rotated Real side's 3-2 defeat to Sevilla on Wednesday, when they trailed 3-0 in the 86th minute, offered a more accurate indication of the Frenchman's priorities.

Real host Celta Vigo on Saturday, when it is almost certain that Cristiano Ronaldo, still recovering from a sprained ankle, will be absent.

If Zidane recalls other key players it will be to prevent rust

rather than to preserve hopes of beating Atletico Madrid to second. Vigo's own ambitions of sealing a place in the Europa League have extinguished but there remains a three-way battle for two spots between Villarreal, Sevilla and Getafe.

Real Betis, in fifth, cannot drop out although they could still sink to seventh, which would involve playing an awkward qualification play-off in July.

They host the current incumbents Sevilla today.

SCHEDULE

Today
Real Sociedad v Leganes (1415), Girona v Valencia (1630), Alaves v Athletic Bilbao (1630), Deportivo La Coruna v Villarreal (1630), Getafe v Atletico Madrid (1630), Real Betis v Sevilla (1630), Eibar v Las Palmas (1630), Real Madrid v Celta Vigo (1845)

Tomorrow
Espanyol v Malaga (1415), Levante v Barcelona (1845)



Barcelona's Ousmane Dembele celebrates with Lionel Messi (left), Yerry Mina (second right) and Luis Suarez (right) after scoring their fifth goal against Villarreal during their La Liga match. (Reuters)

FOCUS

Irish hopes intact as bad weather derails Test debut

'I've dreamed of being a Test cricketer for as long as I can remember. I must have dreamt the dream 100,000 times'

AFP
Dublin

When you've waited as long as Ireland have to play your first Test match, a few more hours' delay may not seem that significant.

Yet there was no denying the disappointment at a wet and windy Malahide ground in Dublin as rain meant no play was possible before lunch on yesterday's opening day of Ireland's landmark fixture.

As ground staff did their best to dry out the square and outfield ahead of the one-off match against Pakistan, a few hardy spectators at a ground where temporary stands had increased the capacity to 6,000 continued to brave the elements.

A howling wind did not help, with umpire Richard Illingworth struggling to keep hold of his umbrella when he and his fellow English official Nigel Llong made an inspection before taking the predictable decision to abandon the first session without a ball bowled.

But despite the great skies, there was also a sense it would take a lot more than some bad weather to dampen the pride felt by so many within Irish cricket as their side stood on the brink of becoming just the 11th nation to play Test cricket.

That this match had captured the attention of an Irish public used to Gaelic sports, racing and rugby holding sway, could be seen from the fact that a preview of the match was the main item on Thursday's evening television news bulletin on RTE, Ireland's national state broadcaster.

It was all a far cry from the time when Ed Joyce, arguably the country's greatest batsman and set to play in this match, was physically attacked as a boy just for carrying a cricket bat.

'Momentous'

Yesterday's Irish Times proclaimed: "Truly historic sporting occasions don't come around too often but today, for 11 men wearing white sweaters embossed with shamrocks, what

Umpires Nigel Llong (left) and Richard Illingworth check the pitch as groundsmen work on the wet pitch at Malahide cricket club on the first day of the Ireland's debut Test against Pakistan in Dublin yesterday. (AFP)

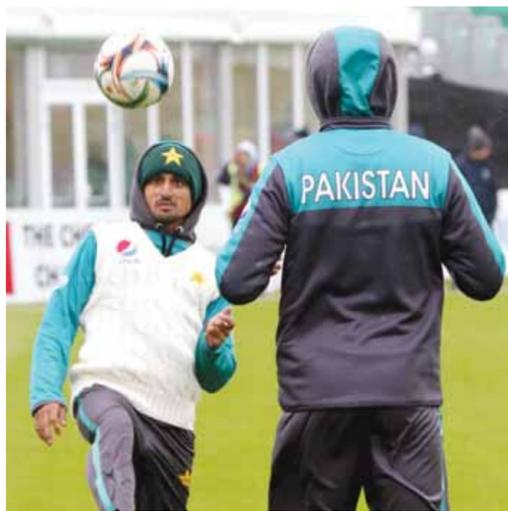


unfolds at Malahide will be truly momentous."

"I've dreamed of being a Test cricketer for as long as I can remember. I must have dreamt the dream 100,000 times," Ireland wicket-keeper Niall O'Brien wrote in an accompanying column. Yet while many Irish sports fans are starting to get acquainted with cricket, the sport has deep roots in the "Emerald Isle".

There are records of cricket being played in Ireland as early as 1731. But the sport's reputation suffered from being seen as the creation of English "colonisers". Ireland first made the rest of the cricket world sit up and take notice when they skittled out the touring West Indies, reputed to have enjoyed some typically generous Irish hospitality the night before, for just 25 on their way to a win at Sion Mills in 1969.

They made an even bigger global splash when they knocked Pakistan out of the 2007 one-day international World Cup tournament with a stunning St Patrick's Day win at Sabina Park in Kingston, Jamaica. But the joy in defeating Pakistan - as well as Bangladesh - in 2007 was eclipsed four years later, when England were beaten in a World Cup match in Bangalore. That success redoubled Irish ambitions to play five-day Test cricket, still regarded as the sport's supreme format. If conditions in Malahide remain cold and overcast they could yet favour Ireland, although neither side will relish batting first under cloudy skies. "We've always got a chance, it's sport," said Ireland captain William Porterfield on Thursday. "Are we favourites? No. But we've as much chance as anyone if we do the basics right, in our own conditions we will give ourselves a very good chance," he added.



Pakistan player Saad Ali (left) plays football with a teammate at Malahide cricket club in Dublin yesterday. (AFP)

COMMENT

Langer: I would have tampered with the ball if told to

Reuters
Sydney

New Australia coach Justin Langer understands how Cameron Bancroft became embroiled in the ball-tampering scandal and said he would have cheated too if instructed to by senior players when he first played Test cricket.

The former top order batsman, who made his Test debut against West Indies in 1993, said the difference was that in his

era the idea would never have been countenanced by captain Allan Border or coach Bob Simpson. "If Allan Border had asked me to tamper with the ball I would've," Langer told Australia's Channel Nine.

"I would've because I would be too scared not to. The difference is Allan Border would never have asked me and Bobby Simpson would've killed me.

"He would've killed anyone who brought the game into disrepute. What I can't believe is that Cameron Bancroft walked into the Australian cricket team and he was in a position where he made that decision."

Bancroft was handed a nine-month ban from international and state cricket for his part in the scandal which erupted in the third Test in South Africa in March and quickly engulfed Australian cricket.

The 25-year-old, who was

playing in his eighth Test, was cast as the misled junior in the Cricket Australia report which followed and got off lightly compared to captain Steve Smith and vice captain David Warner, who were both banned for a year. Langer said his own experience had taught him that it was up to everybody in the team set-up to ensure the standards of behaviour expected of Test cricketers.

Langer reiterated his opinion that all three players caught up in the scandal deserved a chance to work their way back into the team after having served their bans

"I walked into this Australian cricket changeroom with Allan Border, Steve Waugh, David Boon and Ian Healy and Bobby Simpson leading it," he recalled. "You couldn't help but become a better person and a better cricketer - because mate, that was a serious changeroom."

Langer, Bancroft's former coach at Western Australia, reiterated his opinion that all three players caught up in the scandal deserved a chance to work their way back into the team after having served their bans.

"If we can keep mentoring them and helping them, and they want to keep getting better and meet the standards of the Australian cricket team, then, of course, they'll be welcome back," he said.

Bangladesh 'really disappointed' at Australia tour cancellation

The Bangladesh Cricket Board said it was "really disappointed" that a test tour of Australia had been scrubbed for financial reasons.

Bangladesh had been scheduled to play two tests and three one day internationals Down Under later this year but there was no mention of it when Australia's schedule for the 2018-19 home season was published at the end of last month.

"They have told us this series is not financially viable due to the off-season," chief executive Nizam Uddin Chowdhury told Reuters.

"This is really disappointing. All the series we hosted were not always profitable. If we can conduct them, we would expect the other cricket boards, especially bigger ones like Cricket Australia, to do the same.

"We have proposed a shorter version as an alternative. But it looks like they are not continuing. So, this series is not going to happen."

In the ICC's Future Tours Programme, Bangladesh's tour was pencilled in for the Australian winter, when football codes occupy the main cricket stadiums and dominate sports broadcasting.

Bangladesh's last test tour of Australia was in 2003 when they suffered innings losses in the tropical northern cities of Darwin and Cairns and it is likely such venues would have been considered if the 2018 tour had gone ahead.

Australia drew 1-1 with Bangladesh in a two-test series last year, their first tour of the country since 2011 after Cricket Australia cancelled a trip in 2015 citing security concerns.

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Buttler leads Rajasthan to exciting victory

IAN S
Jaipur

Rajasthan Royals rode a heroic batting effort by Jos Buttler to edge out Chennai Super Kings (CSK) by four wickets in a nail-biting Indian Premier League (IPL) encounter at the Sawai Mansingh Stadium yesterday.

Buttler batted through the innings to help Rajasthan overhaul a stiff 177-run target with just one ball to go.

Having opened the Rajasthan innings along with England star Ben Stokes, Buttler continued to defy the CSK bowlers even as wickets fell at the other end. He remained unbeaten on 95 runs off just 60 balls, hitting 11 boundaries and a couple of sixes along the way.

Despite the defeat, CSK continue to hold on to the second spot with 14 points from 11 matches. They trail league leaders Sunrisers Hyderabad by four points. Rajasthan are eighth in the 10-team table with 10 points from 11 matches.

In an edge-of-the-seat affair that went right down to the wire, it was Buttler who gave the Rajasthan innings a powerful start by hitting David Willey for consecutive boundaries off the opening three balls. He hit Harbhajan Singh for two boundaries and a six in the next over.

Ben Stokes was also in good touch at the other end and seemed set to end his run of lean form when he hit Harbhajan Singh for a six over mid-wicket in the fourth over.

But the veteran off-spinner had his revenge in the very next ball when the Englishman went for another big hit but the incoming delivery managed to find the gap between bat and pad to disturb the stumps.

Ravindra Jadeja then dismissed Rajasthan captain Ajinkya Rahane in the next over to put Chennai in the driver's seat. Buttler and Sanju Samson then tried to steady the innings, adding

45 runs between them off the next seven overs before the latter was run out following a horrible mix-up.

Prashant Chopra then handed an easy catch to Dwayne Bravo at short mid-wicket off a rather ordinary delivery from Shardul Thakur as Chennai gradually started to gain the upper hand.

Stuart Binny also failed to last long as Chennai seemed destined for another win.

With 28 runs needed off 12 deliveries, it was Krishnappa Gowtham who gave the chase some much needed momentum with a power packed innings that produced 13 runs off just four balls. All those runs came in the penultimate over as he smashed Willey for two sixes.

But a careless shot saw him hand an easy top edge to Mahendra Singh Dhoni behind the stumps off the last ball of the over as the visitors seemed to take the upper hand once again going into the final over. All that changed in the nail biting last over. Fittingly, it was Buttler who hit the winning runs.

With 10 runs needed off the last four deliveries, the visitors missed a great chance when Buttler tried to hit Dwayne Bravo for a six but the ball skied up off the toe end of the bat.

But there was no one in position to take the catch as Buttler ran for two runs. The England star punished the visitors for that dropped chance with a six into the stands beyond the mid-wicket boundary.

An overthrow in the next ball allowed him to complete the victory as the Rajasthan dugout erupted in celebration.

Earlier, a decent batting effort helped CSK post a fighting total of 176/4.

It was a fine knock by Suresh Raina (52 off 35 balls), followed by skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni's unbeaten 33 and opener Shane Watson's 39 runs which took the yellow brigade to a good total against the hosts.

Opting to bat first, the visitors were off to a quick start as openers Ambati Rayudu and

Watson accumulated 19 runs from the first two overs.

However, the decent start was short-lived as Jofra Archer drew the first blood for the hosts, when a short-ball from him took an inside edge to shatter Rayudu's (12 off 9 balls) stumps in the third over.

The opener's fall saw Raina joining Watson in the middle and the duo helped Chennai recover from the early blow taking their side past the 50-run mark in 5.1 overs. Both batsmen further played sensibly and shared an 81-run partnership to help the yellow brigade cross 100-run mark in 11.1 overs.

With the Australian all-rounder inching towards his half-century, Archer struck again in the 12th over to pack back a good looking Watson on 39 runs and Chennai's scorecard reading 105/2.

On the other hand, Raina, who was then accompanied by skipper Dhoni, slammed his half century facing 32 balls however, the southpaw threw his wicket when he failed to read a googly by Ish Sodhi, giving an easy catch to Stuart Binny at short-fine leg.

With Chennai at 119/3 in 13 overs, Dhoni and Sam Billings (27 off 22) forged a 55-run partnership off 39 balls to put back things in control.

Billings departed in the final over while trying to take a single as wicket-keeper Jos Buttler's throw from behind demolished the Englishman's stump.

Dhoni remained unbeaten on 33 runs facing 23 balls, hitting a boundary and a six to help his side reach a fighting total of 176 runs.

For Rajasthan, Archer bagged couple of wickets but leaked 42 runs while Sodhi scalped one conceding 29 runs.

Brief Scores: Chennai Super Kings: 176/4 in 20 overs (Suresh Raina 52, Shane Watson 39; Jofra Archer 2/42) vs Rajasthan Royals: 177/6 in 19.5 overs (Jos Buttler 95 not out, Stuart Binny 22).



Rajasthan Royals' Jos Buttler looks on after playing a shot during the Indian Premier League match against Chennai Super Kings in Jaipur yesterday. (AFP)

MLB

Red Sox end Yankees' 8-game win streak

With his ninth homer, Martinez extends his hitting streak to 11 games

Reuters
New York

JD Martinez opened the top of the eighth inning with a tiebreaking homer as the visiting Boston Red Sox recovered from squandering a four-run lead to record a 5-4 victory over the New York Yankees on Thursday.

Shortly after Heath Hembree and Joe Kelly (2-0) combined to flush a 4-0 lead, Martinez hit Dellin Betances' 97 mph fastball into the first row of the right field seats. With his ninth homer, Martinez extended his hitting streak to 11 games.

The blast helped the Red Sox halt an eight-game winning streak by the Yankees. By salvaging the finale of a three-game series, Boston also ended an 11-game home winning streak by New York, the Yankees' longest since winning 12 straight at home in 1985. New York took just its second loss in the past 19 games.

ANGELS 7, TWINS 4

Home runs by Ian Kinsler, Justin Upton and Shohei Ohtani led Los Angeles to a victory over Minnesota in Anaheim, Calif., ending the Twins' five-game winning streak. Kinsler entered the game with just three hits in 31 at-bats, but he went 3-for-4, raising his season average from .191 to .214.

Ohtani hit a double to go with his home run, and he bumped his season average to .354. He has hit safely in 14 of the 16 games he has started as a non-pitcher.

NATIONALS 2, DIAMONDBACKS 1

Matt Adams singled home the tiebreaking run in the 11th inning, and Washington won for the 10th time in 12 games, posting a 2-1 victory over Arizona in Phoenix. Trea Turner singled and Anthony Rendon walked to open the 11th off Fernando Salas (3-4) before Andrew Chafin entered and gave up Adams' single.

David Peralta and Daniel Descalso had two hits apiece for the Diamondbacks. Brandon Kintzler (1-2) stranded runners on second and third in the 10th inning, and Sean Doolittle pitched around a one-out single in the 11th for his seventh save.

REDS 4, DODGERS 1

Tyler Mahle gave up only an unearned run over five innings Thursday, and Scooter Gennett drove in three runs with three hits as Cincinnati rallied for a victory at Los Angeles. Mahle, a Southern California native who was making his first start at Dodger Stadium, had to scramble early, leaving the bases loaded in the first two innings.

He stranded eight runners over the first three innings. The right-hander improved to 3-4 while giving up three hits with four walks and two strikeouts. Raisel Iglesias recorded the final four outs for his fifth save.

CARDINALS 2, PADRES 1

Tommy Pham scored both St. Louis runs, and Miles Mikolas improved to 5-0 by allowing one run over 6 2/3 innings as St. Louis won at San Diego. Pham came



Boston Red Sox's Hanley Ramirez hits an RBI single against the New York Yankees during the third inning at Yankee Stadium. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

home on a Jose Martinez sacrifice fly in the first inning.

The decisive blow was Pham's second home run of the season — a 371-foot drive to left on a full count off Padres starter Jordan Lyles in the fifth inning. Padres catcher Raffy Lopez halved the deficit with his second homer of the season on a full-count pitch from Mikolas in the seventh. Bud Norris picked up his eighth save with a perfect ninth inning.

BRAVES 9, MARLINS 2

Ozzie Albies hit his first career grand slam as part of a seven-run sixth inning, and Freddie Freeman posted a career-high five-hit game, leading Atlanta over host Miami. The Braves have won eight straight road games.

Albies' homer was his 11th this season, and he finished with five RBIs. Freeman hit a two-run homer in the sixth, his sixth of the season. Ender Inciarte added three hits for Atlanta.

MARINERS 9, BLUE JAYS 3

Kyle Seager hit two home runs, including

a grand slam, and had five RBIs as visiting Seattle defeated Toronto. Ryon Healy and Mike Zunino also homered for the Mariners in the rubber match of the three-game series.

Jean Segura had four hits, and Andrew Romine added three hits for the Mariners to lead a 17-hit attack. Russell Martin hit a two-run homer for Toronto, and Josh Donaldson added three hits.

BREWERS 5, ROCKIES 2

Jhoulys Chacin pitched 5 1/3 innings of two-run ball against his former team, and Milwaukee beat host Colorado. Travis Shaw broke out of a May slump with three hits, and Lorenzo Cain homered for the Brewers, who had 12 hits.

Trevor Story homered for the Rockies, who fell to 6-9 at home this season. The Rockies are 1-2 on their current six-game homestand and have scored just six runs in the three games.

ORIOLES 11, ROYALS 6

Adam Jones and Trey Mancini each went 3-for-5 with a homer and three runs to

help Baltimore roll past visiting Kansas City. Manny Machado also homered as the Orioles racked up 14 hits while winning their second straight contest on the heels of a seven-game slide.

Jones had a team-best three RBIs. Chance Sisco recorded the go-ahead, two-run double in the fourth inning for Baltimore, which was 6-for-7 with runners in scoring position. Miguel Castro (1-1) pitched 4 2/3 innings of scoreless relief for the win. Salvador Perez hit a grand slam for the Royals.

PHILLIES 6, GIANTS 3

Vince Velasquez pitched six solid innings, Carlos Santana homered, and Philadelphia completed a four-game sweep of visiting San Francisco. Velasquez (3-4) allowed five hits and three earned runs while striking out a career-high 12 batters. He also was 2-for-2 at the plate, raising his season average to .462. Odubel Herrera had three hits and Cesar Hernandez added two hits for the Phillies, who swept the Giants in a series for the first time since 1982.

NBA

Hornets name Borrego as head coach

Reuters
New York

James Borrego was named head coach of the Charlotte Hornets. The sides agreed to a three-year deal with a team option in the fourth year, according to multiple reports. Borrego, 40, spent the past three seasons as an assistant coach for the San Antonio Spurs and had a previous stint (2003-10) in the same role under Gregg Popovich.

Borrego becomes the 11th head coach in franchise history. "We are thrilled to have James join our franchise," Hornets president of basketball operations Mitch Kupchak said in a statement.

"He brings a wealth of experience and a strong track record of player development from his time as a coach in San Antonio, New Orleans and Orlando. He has been a part of teams that have ascended to the highest levels of success in our league and understands what it takes to win in the NBA. James is considered one of the NBA's most well-regarded assistant coaches and it's great to have him as part of our team. I look forward to working with him in the years to come."

Borrego met with Hornets owner Michael Jordan over the weekend after being a finalist for the job with Boston Celtics assistant Jay Larranaga. Borrego made a strong impression on Kupchak.

Borrego has 15 total seasons as an assistant coach in the NBA under his belt. He spent two

seasons as an assistant with the then-New Orleans Hornets (2010-12) and three with the Orlando Magic (2012-15).

"I'm very excited to serve as the head coach of the Charlotte Hornets," Borrego said on Thursday in a statement distributed by the Hornets. "I want to thank Michael Jordan, Mitch Kupchak and Buzz Peterson for this opportunity. I'm confident in the coaching foundation I've had the opportunity to develop during my time in San Antonio, Orlando and New Orleans, and I cannot wait to get to work in Charlotte."

Borrego was Orlando's interim head coach after Jacque Vaughn was fired during the 2014-15 campaign, going 10-20 for a team that finished 25-57 overall. Borrego interviewed for head coach openings with the Phoenix Suns and New York Knicks earlier this year and was expected to interview for the Milwaukee Bucks' vacancy.

He turned down an offer from the University of New Mexico, in his home state, last year with hopes of pursuing a head job in the NBA. The Hornets have finished 36-46 and missed the playoffs in consecutive seasons, prompting the firing of head coach Steve Clifford last month after five years with the team.

Clifford took the team to the postseason in 2013-14 (43 wins) and 2015-16 (48 wins), but the team went a combined 105-141 in his other three campaigns.

The franchise has yet to win a playoff series since returning to Charlotte as the expansion Bobcats in 2004.



James Borrego spent the past three seasons as an assistant coach for the San Antonio Spurs and had a previous stint (2003-10) in the same role under Gregg Popovich.

SPOTLIGHT

Jets pummel Predators to reach NHL West finals

AFP
Los Angeles

Paul Stastny and Mark Scheifele scored twice each as the Winnipeg Jets routed the Nashville Predators 5-1 in game seven to book a spot in the NHL Western Conference finals against the Vegas Golden Knights.

Scheifele scored his league-leading 11th goal of the post-season into an empty net and goaltender Connor Hellebuyck made 21 of his 37 stops in the third period for the Jets who reached the Conference finals for the first time since the franchise moved from Atlanta after the 2010-11 NHL season.

"We had to go through a little adversity early in the season and then we hit our stride and have been playing with confidence ever since," said Jets forward Blake Wheeler. "Our best games in this series were after tough losses. We knew if we came out and had a good start and take the crowd out of it, then we could make a game of it."

The Jets next face the red-hot expansion Golden Knights for a spot in the NHL Stanley Cup finals with game one of the best-of-seven series tonight. Wheeler had two assists on Thursday for the Jets, who jumped out to a 2-0 lead early which resulted in a rare first-period goaltending change for Predators in front of a crowd of 17,500 at Nashville's Bridgestone Arena.



Nashville Predators right wing Craig Smith (right) and Winnipeg Jets left wing Nikolaj Ehlers battle for a puck during the seven of the second round of the 2018 Stanley Cup Playoffs in Nashville, USA, on Thursday night. (USA TODAY Sports)

Tyler Myers scored 8:41 into the first and then Stastny scored his first goal just two minutes later which chased the Predator's All-Star Pekka Rinne from

the net. Both goals were scored while the Jets players were standing partly below the goal line. Rinne, who finished with just five

saves on seven shots, was replaced by backup and fellow Finland native Juuse Saros. "Two terrible goals. It felt like the puck was just finding a way (past me)

but there are no excuses," said Rinne. "It is a huge disappointment. I feel responsible for the season ending. It is tough to swallow. I let my teammates down."

Scheifele also had one assist for a three point night for the Jets, who were playing in their first game seven since the move from Atlanta. Stastny has been a shining light for the Jets since being acquired from the St.

Louis Blues at the trading deadline. He has six goals in the playoffs and five in the last eight games. "There are very few teams I thought about waiving my no-trade clause for but Winnipeg was one of them," Stastny said.

Stastny said he is getting better at dealing with the pressure of playing in a winner-take-all showdowns. "I just tried to be calm," he said. "I played in a few game sevens early in my career and I was too nervous. I put too much pressure on myself. It is a lot of stress to play in a game seven. You've got to enjoy it."

PK Subban scored the only goal for the Predators, who finished a disappointing 1-3 at home in the series. "I don't think that is a better team than us over there, but it didn't go our way," said Subban.

Wheeler, of the US, said he is looking forward to continuing their play-off run in Winnipeg which has some of the most loyal and loudest fans in the league. "I haven't seen an empty seat in our building in seven years and we have only made the playoffs twice," Wheeler said.

FOCUS

Collison calls time on 15-year career

AFP
Los Angeles

Nick Collison, who spent his entire 15-year career with the Oklahoma City Thunder and Seattle SuperSonics franchises, is retiring from the NBA. "I've played with some incredible players, future Hall of Famers and had the unique experience of spending my entire career with one franchise but in two different cities," Collison said.

"I started in cold gyms in small towns in Iowa and ended up playing in more than 1,000 games over 15 years in the best league in the world."

The 37-year-old Collison was chosen 12th overall in 2003 by Seattle and moved with the team to Oklahoma City in 2008. He is the last remaining player with the Thunder that played games with the SuperSonics. Collison was part of the same draft class as LeBron James, Dwyane Wade.

GOLF

Johnson off to strong start at Players as six share lead

'I definitely want to keep the number one title, but I still have three more days of golf, and I'm going to have to play really well'

AFP
Ponte Vedra Beach, United States

Dustin Johnson got off to a strong start but still has work to do to hang on to his world number one ranking as six players shared the lead on Thursday at The Players Championship. Johnson headlined the leading pack on six-under par 66 – his lowest opening round PGA Tour score in 13 months.

Joining Johnson atop the leaderboard at TPC Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, were fellow US Open winner Webb Simpson, Chesson Hadley, Matt Kuchar, Patrick Cantlay and in-form Swede Alex Noren. Johnson, who has been world number one for 64 weeks, is under siege by those ranked from second through fifth, and he answered the challenge with a bogey-free round.

"I definitely want to keep the number one title, but I still have three more days of golf, and I'm going to have to play really well if I want to keep the number one spot," the 33-year-old said. Kuchar, fuelled by a birdie-eagle-birdie run at the 10th, 11th and 12th, moved to seven-under with birdies at 15 and 16, but a bogey at the last dropped him into the leading group.

A further six players, including defending champion Kim Si-woo of South Korea and were a stroke back on 67. Kim, the youngest winner of the Players, matched the lowest opening round by a defending champion established by Jack Nicklaus in 1977.

"I liked my score in the first round, but I can hit it better," Kim said. "I'm fine, good," he said, but added he wasn't yet thinking about a repeat title. "If I was to win again, I feel like it would be dreaming, as that's too hard. This is just the first round. I'm going to keep working hard."

Former Players and Masters champi-



Dustin Johnson of the United States plays a shot during the first round of The Players Championship in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. (AFP)

on Sergio Garcia was seven-under with two holes to play, thanks in part to a run of five straight birdies from the eighth through the 12th. Garcia then undid his then bogey-free round in hitting the

woodwork guarding the island green at the famed par-three 17th, his ball disappearing into the water.

A year ago, Garcia had the crowd roaring with delight on day one with

a hole-in-one at 17. On Thursday he walked off with a double-bogey five and then bogeyed the last to finish in a group of 14 players on 68 that also included third-ranked fellow Spaniard

Jon Rahm and world number five Justin Rose of England.

Tiger Woods's return to TPC Sawgrass included a 20-foot eagle at the par-five ninth.

Bu he undid a solid display in finding the water off the tee at the last on route to closing bogey and a level par 72. "I felt like today the way I was hitting the golf ball, especially toward the back nine, that I felt like I should have shot something in the 60s, but didn't do it," Woods said.

Jordan Spieth struggled in posting a shock three-over 75 that included a 12th hole eagle promptly followed by a double-bogey at the very next hole. Phil Mickelson, playing alongside Woods and Rickie Fowler, ended his round in shocking style.

The 47-year-old was even par after back-to-back birdies at the 11th and 12th, but proceeded to post a horror run from the 14th of a double-bogey, bogey and two further double-bogeys, including finding the water at 17, in an eventual seven-over par 79.

It was Mickelson's highest score since a similar first round 79 on route to missing the cut in last August's PGA Championship. Mickelson blamed fatigue after the strain of fighting his way to a share of fifth in last week's Wells Fargo Championship. "I knew this was going to be an issue," he said. "I said it Sunday at Wells Fargo, I was worried about energy this week, and I just kind of ran out at the end."

LEADING SCORES

(par-72, USA unless noted):
66 – Webb Simpson, Dustin Johnson, Alex Noren (SWE), Chesson Hadley, Matt Kuchar, Patrick Cantlay
67 – Steve Stricker, Jhonattan Vegas (VEN), Kim Si-woo (KOR), Keith Mitchell, Rory Sabbatini (RSA), Andrew Landry 68 – Sergio Garcia (ESP), Lucas Glover, Danny Lee (NZL), Charles Howell, Justin Rose (ENG), Bubba Watson, Cody Gribble, CT Pan (TPE), Ollie Schniederjans, Billy Horschel, Charl Schwartzel (RSA), Jon Rahm (ESP), Henrik Stenson (SWE), Xander Schauffele

RUGBY

Carter bids to quit European action with a bang

AFP
Bilbao, Spain

Dan Carter will be hoping to bow out with a winner's medal when he brings the curtain down on his European rugby adventure as his Racing 92 team take on Leinster in the Champions Cup final today.

Carter, now 36, racked up a world record 1,598 points in 112 Tests for the All Blacks, with a winning percentage of 88.4%. The former Crusader has two Rugby World Cups to his name and is an icon in world rugby, but humility remains his calling card, with Racing still in the hunt for the Top 14 title.

"You're never too experienced to practice the fundamentals of the game," Carter tweeted Thursday alongside a photo of him passing a ball in training. The Kiwi will hope to have a more successful run-out at Bilbao's San Mames stadium than he did for Racing in the 2016 final in Lyon won by Saracens.

Carter risked a calf injury for that match, a move that badly backfired as he limped off early in the second half having been outplayed by Owen Farrell. Carter is likely to start on the bench today, Springbok Pat Lambie having been given the nod for the No 10 shirt. "It's really nice to have him on the same side and

to have trained and played with him, seen how he does things and speak to him about the game and life outside rugby as well," Lambie said of a player who will head for a club career in Japan at the end of this season.

"These are his last games – there's a lot to play for. I know this is a huge desire of his to win the Champions Cup and I'm sure he wants to win the Top 14 again as well."

Lambie and Carter will be up against a strong Leinster team marshalled by Jonny Sexton, an influential game breaker who will no doubt be the target of some early 10-12 channel charges by Racing forwards.

Leinster are unbeaten in European competition this season, with eight wins from eight including an impressive 30-19 quarter-final victory over 2017 winners Saracens and a 38-16 defeat of Scarlets in the last four.

"We were pretty clinical [against Scarlets] but I like to think we have another gear in us," said Leinster flanker Dan Leavy. "We looked at each other in the changing room after the Scarlets match and thought we could go to the next level."

"Racing are a great team and are packed full of big names. The strength in depth is incredible and they have the best defence in the Top 14. If we are going to beat them, we will need to find that extra gear against them."



ATHLETICS

Olympic champ McLeod vows to do Shanghai hurdle hero Liu proud



Jamaica's Omar McLeod.

AFP
Shanghai

World and Olympic hurdles champion Omar McLeod wants to put on a blistering display in Shanghai today in homage to the Chinese city's athletics hero Liu Xiang. Liu is retired but the Shanghai native remains a Chinese sports icon because his 2004 Olympic hurdles gold medal was the country's first in men's track and field. Liu, now 34, was also a 2007 world champion, though his brilliant career petered out because of persistent injury and he retired in 2015. But Chinese spectators may see shades of Liu in McLeod during today's Diamond League meeting – the affable Jamaican certainly hopes so.

McLeod, who is chasing a third successive 110m victory in Shanghai, said yesterday: "They show a good appreciation for hurdles here and I want to go out there and show my appreciation for their appreciation of hurdles. "Liu Xiang was one of the reasons why I got into running in the streets and race and hurdle. He was just

an inspiration and I've heard that I hurdle just like him, so I draw a lot from him," said the 24-year-old McLeod, touted as a viable successor to Usain Bolt as the pre-eminent Jamaican athletics star.

There will meanwhile be home hope in the men's 100m in the form of reigning Shanghai champion Su Bingtian, the world indoor 60m silver medallist and China's fastest man, and Xie Zhenye. But they will have to upstage current world champion Justin Gatlin of the United States.

Also in a strong field is the Canadian speedster Andre De Grasse, who is working his way back from a nine-month hamstring injury layoff that ruled him out of last year's world championships. He could only finish sixth in the 200m in Doha last weekend at the opening Diamond League meet of the season.

In women's sprinting, two-time world champion Dafne Schippers of the Netherlands will be strong favourite in the 200m in the absence of the injured Jamaican star Elaine Thompson.

Looming as a tasty battle in Shanghai will be a showdown between pole vaulters Sam Kendricks of the United States and his

French rival and world-record-holder Renaud Lavillenie. Like McLeod, Kendricks is pursuing a Shanghai treble after victories in 2016 and 2017.

Kendricks, 25, went on to land his first six-metre vault last June back home in the United States and then saw off Poland's Piotr Lisek and Lavillenie to win gold at the world championships. But Lavillenie, the older man at 31 and a former Olympic champion, beat Kendricks earlier this year for a third world indoor title.

Kendricks, who seduced the media in Shanghai with his laid-back charm, said he was anticipating "a dogfight". But he was full of respect for his French foe, saying: "It is always very special when I get to answer a question about Renaud."

"Because I have to say that he is the king, the world-record-holder and multiple Diamond League winner. I once made a joke that he could put his bed on top of his Diamond League trophies. Every time I compete with him I learn from him and that is only by his grace and the competitive rivalry that we have – and our friendship – that I have been able to get this far in this event."

Japan's Olympic golf venue admits first female members

Tokyo: Japan's golf venue for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics has granted full membership to women for the first time, after lifting a ban under pressure from Games authorities.

The upscale Kasumigasaki Country Club said it had upgraded three women to full membership after agreeing last year to admit female members, following criticism from the International Olympic Committee. "After the change of the rules, we asked members including men if they want to have full membership, and three women wanted to change their status to full membership," club general manager Hiroshi Imaizumi said.

The board of the club – where Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe played with US President Donald Trump in November – this week approved the requests after receiving no complaints or opposition from other members, he said.

Until last year, the private club in Japan's Saitama region had women on its roster but they were not allowed to become full members and could not play on certain Sundays – restrictions that did not apply to male members.

The club has around 200 female associate members who are either relatives of male full-fledged members, or "weekday members" who are barred from playing on Sundays. After being selected as a host venue for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the club came under pressure to change its rules, with IOC chief Thomas Bach threatening to take the golf competition elsewhere and asking the club to choose "non-discrimination". It came after Scotland's prestigious Muirfield golf club last year voted to allow women members, ditching a ban that had been in place for 273 years.

FORMULA 1

Hamilton on top with two Red Bulls close behind

'The day was pretty good, but it was a tricky one because it was so windy out there'

Reuters
Barcelona

Formula One world champion Lewis Hamilton returned to the top of the timesheets in second Spanish Grand Prix practice yesterday, with the charging Red Bulls of Daniel Ricciardo and Max Verstappen hot on his heels.

The Briton, who leads the championship by four points from Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel after four long-haul races, lapped the Circuit de Catalunya in one minute 18.259 seconds on the soft tyres.

Australian Ricciardo's car had some eye-catching aerodynamic upgrades for the start of the European season and ended 0.133 seconds slower after crashing in the morning, while Verstappen was third.

The two Red Bulls collided in Azerbaijan two weekends ago and are under close scrutiny by team bosses who could intervene if their rivalry risks overheating again in tomorrow's race.

Vettel, who will be chasing his fourth successive pole position today, was fourth and Hamilton's teammate Valtteri Bottas fifth.

Vettel's teammate Kimi Raikkonen suffered a power unit problem.

Bottas set the day's overall fastest lap in the opening session with a time of 1:18.148 seconds on the soft tyres, a remarkable 0.849 faster than Hamilton who won from pole in Spain last year.

Hamilton has not felt fully comfortable with his car and knows his championship advantage owes a lot to luck.

"The day was pretty good, but it was a tricky one because it was so windy out there," said the Briton, who was gifted a win in Baku two weeks ago when Bottas had a puncture in the closing laps while leading.

"Every driver was struggling with the changing direction of the wind. You're constantly arriving at each corner and the wind direction is never the same, so we saw lots of drivers going off.

"These conditions make it very difficult to define where the set-up needs to go."

LUCKY BOY

The virtual safety car was deployed in the morning when Ricciardo's car ran across the gravel and into the barriers.

"Thankfully, the damage is pretty light," team principal Christian Horner



Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton (also inset) takes part in the first practice session at Circuit de Catalunya in Montmelo on the outskirts of Barcelona ahead of the Spanish Grand Prix yesterday. (AFP)

told Sky Sports television. "It was the old front wing so he's a lucky boy."

Home hero Fernando Alonso started the weekend a morale-boosting sixth, behind Raikkonen, with his McLaren displaying a heavily-revised three-pronged nose — one of several conspicuous upgrades around the pit lane.

The Spaniard later slipped back to 12th. Ferrari meanwhile caught the eye with

wing mirrors mounted on the halo head protection device as an experiment.

Williams had another trying session as Polish reserve Robert Kubica took part in a race weekend for the first time since 2010, three months before he suffered serious injuries in a rally crash.

The former race winner was 19th, in 1:21.510, and faster than teenage Canadian teammate Lance Stroll, who was in

last place on the timesheets with a best of 1:22.756 after his car went off into the gravel.

Kubica's car had a newer floor than Stroll's, however.

"Unbelievable how bad the balance is," Stroll complained over the radio.

Kubica was replacing Russian rookie Sergey Sirotkin, who returned for second practice and was slowest in 1:22.060.

SPOTLIGHT

Spanish GP a painful reminder for home hero Alonso

Reuters
Barcelona

Fernando Alonso was a winner on his World Endurance Championship debut last weekend but the Spanish Grand Prix is a reminder of just how long it has been since he last tasted success in Formula One.

Today, will be the fifth anniversary of the double world champion's last grand prix victory, with Ferrari at the Circuit de Catalunya on May 12, 2013.

If Alonso is to win again, an unlikely scenario with once-dominant McLaren facing a hard road back from one of the toughest periods in their history, it is set to be unprecedented.

The longest gap between victories in Formula One history was set by Italian Riccardo Patrese, who went 99 races between his 1983 South African victory and 1990 San Marino triumph for Williams at Imola.

Alonso, still the only Spaniard to win a Formula One race, has now gone 93 and counting. But time has made him no less determined.

"I kept the motivation because I'm a competitive man. I love to win," the Spaniard told reporters after reporting for duty at his

home track on Thursday.

"Every time I go training, every time I go to bed, I have one dream in mind and that is to win a race in Formula One and to win a world championship... winning is in my mind all the time."

Alonso is combining Formula One with the World Endurance 'super season', the Le Mans 24 Hours race this year and next, and was in the winning Toyota at last Saturday's Six Hours of Spa.

That scratched a long-standing itch, as his first podium finish in any series since 2014, but that was all.

"The win last weekend in Spa will not change anything. I think it's two different series and two different worlds," said the driver.

"Every time that I will have a car that is close to victory, I will go for it. I did some better races in the last five years, even if the last victory was five years ago."

After three dismal years with Honda, McLaren are now with Renault — the engines that took the Spaniard to titles in 2005 and 2006 — but there was still a long way to go.

"At the same time we were here last year with zero points," said Alonso. "We (Alonso) are sixth in the World Championship and fourth in the constructors' championship, so it has been a very good start, in a way."



BADMINTON / AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Manu-Sumeeth in semis; Praneeth, Sameer ousted

IANS
Sydney

India's men's doubles duo of Manu Attri and B Sumeeth Reddy advanced to the semi-finals of the Australian Open badminton tournament while it was curtains for Sameer Verma and B. Sai Praneeth after losing their respective men's singles quarter-final matches here yesterday.

Second seed Praneeth fought hard for 43 minutes before going down in straight games 21-23, 13-21 to Hong Kong's Yiu Lee Cheuk at Court 1 of the Quay Centre Olympic Park here.

Earlier, No.4 seed Sameer failed to exert any pressure against unseeded Chinese Guangzu Lu, who comfortably pocketed the encounter in straight games 21-14, 21-6 in 34 minutes.

Meanwhile, the men's doubles match witnessed a brilliant comeback from Manu and Sumeeth against compatriots Arjun M.R. and Ramchandran Shlok in the 51-minute quarter-final.

After going down 17-21 in the opening game, Manu and Sumeeth kept their nerves to win the second game with a 21-19 margin before fending off the opponents in the decider with a close 21-18 margin.

Qatar's Saif qualifies for Asian snooker semi-finals

Qatar's snooker star Ahmed Saif booked place in the last-four stage of the prestigious Asian Snooker Championship 2018 in Tabriz, Iran, on Thursday. Saif led his respective group after defeating opponents from Afghanistan, India, Palestine and Syria. Saif continued his impressive run to reach the semi-finals after he outclassed Ali Hussain of Iraq in the last eight stage. The prestigious championship brings together 36 Asian players from Qatar, hosts Iran, Afghanistan, India, Palestine, Syria, Pakistan, Iraq, Thailand, Myanmar, and Hong Kong.



Qatar defeat Spain in FIVB World Tour in Switzerland

Qatar's beach volleyball team, comprising Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan, defeated their Spanish opponents 22-20, 21-16 in Lucerne, Switzerland on Thursday. The Qatar team will lock horns against USA team in its second match in the event. The Qatar duo are looking ambitiously to bring glory for the country in this international beach volleyball gathering.

CYCLING / GIRO D'ITALIA

Bennett edges Viviani to win 7th stage

AFP
Praia a Mare, Italy

Irishman Sam Bennett powered to victory in the seventh stage of the Giro d'Italia yesterday, beating favourite Elia Viviani in a sprint finish at Praia a Mare.

Bora-Hansgrohe rider Bennett latched onto Viviani's wheel at the end of the flat 159km ride from Pizzo to Calabria, before bursting past the Italian to grab his first-ever win on a Grand Tour.

Britain's Simon Yates maintained the overall lead after finishing safely in the peloton, having taken the pink jersey by finishing second in Thursday's sixth stage.

Yesterday's ride was always going to end in a bunch sprint, with Davide Balserini the last breakaway rider to be reeled in by the main group with 14km still to go.

Quick-Step's Viviani was widely expected to claim his second win of the Giro and looked in a good position heading into the final kilometre with a strong lead-out train.

But Bennett stuck to his rival and just pipped the home favourite to the line to become the first Irish winner of a Giro stage since Stephen Roche in 1987.

"We tried so hard in the other sprints but never got the timing right. The team did a fantastic job and I want to thank everyone who helped me get to this point," Bennett said.

"It's very hard to get Viviani's wheel, they all want it and I had to fight for it. I thought we had left it too late but the timing was right and I could use my power to get an advantage."

Niccolo Bonifazio edged out his fellow Italian Sacha Modolo to complete the podium.

The general classification remained



Irish rider Sam Bennett celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the seventh stage of the 101th Giro d'Italia in Praia a Mare, Italy, yesterday. (AFP)

unchanged as the main contenders took a step back from the spotlight on a day for the sprinters, with Mitchelton-Scott's Yates still leading by 16 seconds from defending champion Tom Dumoulin.

Esteban Chaves is third, a further 10 seconds adrift, with Chris Froome a

minute and 10 seconds behind Yates after a difficult start to his bid for a third consecutive Grand Tour title.

"It was a nice day until the finale and sprint," Yates said. "The break went early and never really got a gap so it was a good day."

The overall favourites will face a far tougher assignment today as the race heads back into the mountains for the 209km eighth stage, with the final climb at Montevergine di Mercogliano 17km long with an average gradient of five per cent.

QOC President crowns winners of Qatar Challenge Festival



Qatar Olympic Committee president HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani (centre) crowned the winners of Qatar Challenge Festival for Camel Race (GCC nations) at Al Shahaniya camel racetrack on Thursday. Al Tayir, owned by Obeid Jarallah Salmeen, claimed the first place and silver dagger in Zamool race 8km, while Shashaa, owned by Obeid Jarallah Salmeen, clinched the first place and silver dagger in Thanaya Qadan race 8km. In the Thanaya Bakkar race 8km, Noof, owned by Naser Mohamed al-Shangel, won the first place and silver Shalfa.

VOLLEYBALL / AMIR CUP

Ahli, Rayyan aim for history in final

Ahli in their first Amir Cup final in 22 years, Rayyan aim for sixth title this season

By Sports Reporter
Doha

While Al Ahli will be hoping to make good of their first HH The Amir Cup final appearance in 22 years, an in-form Al Rayyan will be looking to make an unprecedented sweep by lifting the sixth title this season when the two teams meet at the Qatar Volleyball Association Indoor Hall court at 7pm today.

Rayyan have ruled the season, opening the season with a Super Cup win over Police, before grabbing three more domestic titles including the QVA League, the Qatar National Tournament and the Qatar Cup. They also emerged supreme in the prestigious Arab Clubs Championship. Despite celebrating so many wins, Rayyan coach Carlos Schwanke is keen on capping the season with a sweep.

"In every tournament, I set a target for the team. I'm very proud that my team has been able to match my expectations. The Amir Cup is also a very special event for us and we'll try to write a new history on Saturday," he said.

Ahli coach Igor Arbutina understands the tough job on his hand. Arbutina, who has coached Rayyan in the past, said, "I'm proud of my team and their efforts in the Amir Cup. We'll like to take our every possible chance to make the final difficult for Al Rayyan and maybe we can spring a surprise on Saturday."

Both the teams reached the final on the back of 2-0 victories, with Al Ahli beating Qatar SC and Al Rayyan getting the better of Al Arabi. With as many as 12 titles in the kitty and title-winning form on their side, Rayyan are the favourites.

Ahli captain Assam Ahmed Mahmoud spoke highly of his players and the coach. "This is the first Amir Cup final for us in



Qatar Volleyball Association (QVA) officials, Al Rayyan and Al Ahli coaches and players pose with the trophy at a press conference ahead of today's Amir Cup Volleyball final. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

22 years. All the players have contributed immensely and helped us reach the final. Also, coach Igor has prepared all of us well for each match. Congratulations to all for making it to the final.

"We've a difficult final against a champion team like Al Rayyan. We want to tell our fans that we're ready and we need their support in the final."

Pro players in the both the teams have played a crucial role in their run in the Amir Cup, and what's interesting is that both Tine Urnaut and Earvin N'Gapeth play for the same team - Modena Volley - in Italy. Slovenian star Urnaut, who is playing

for Ahli, said it was a "strange situation" for both the players.

"It's the first time that we are playing against each other as Modena teammates. It is a really strange situation," said Urnaut, who had played for Rayyan two seasons ago when they had lost the semi-finals to El Jaish.

"I'm happy to be playing for Al Ahli and the progress till now has been fantastic. I know that Al Rayyan are the best team in the season, having won everything. We're confident that we'll fight for each ball and point. Also we'll try to do everything that we can and make attempt to win the cup."

N'Gapeth, who is playing in Qatar for the first time, said, "I'm happy to be part of the Al Rayyan team and the event. I hope we win the final which will not only be a big achievement for Al Rayyan but also for Qatar volleyball."

"The presence of Urnaut and me in the final is also a victory for Modena. I feel that it is going to be a tough final as both teams are playing well."

The two teams have clashed thrice in a final of a tournament, with Rayyan winning the 1988-89 Amir Cup and the 1994-95 Heir Apparent Cup, which was changed to Qatar Cup a few season ago.

TENNIS

Nadal's magical clay court streak ended by Thiem in Madrid

AFP
Madrid

Rafael Nadal suffered his first clay-court defeat in almost a year when the world number one was shocked 7-5, 6-3 by Austria's Dominic Thiem (right) in the Madrid Masters quarter-finals yesterday.

Defending champion Nadal, who came into the tournament having won both Monte Carlo and Barcelona for an 11th time, also saw his record 50-set winning streak on clay ended by the fifth-seeded Thiem.

Thiem, the runner-up to the great Spaniard in the 2017 Madrid final, had been the last player to defeat Nadal on clay at the Italian Open in Rome almost 12 months ago.

The shock result yesterday also means that Roger Federer will reclaim the world number one ranking on Monday.

"I wasn't good enough with my forehand or my backhand to open to his forehand today," admitted Nadal.

Five-time Madrid winner Nadal, who will be bidding for an 11th French Open title in Paris later this month, had won his previous 21 matches on clay.

That run included him surpassing John McEnroe's 1984 record of 49 sets won in succession on the same surface during his last-16 duel with Diego Schwartzman on Thursday.

However, in their ninth career clash, Thiem put Nadal under pressure almost from the start yesterday and broke for a 4-3 lead in the first set.

A double fault and a long forehand allowed Nadal to retrieve the break at 5-5.

It was a brief reprieve as a lazy forehand volley gave Thiem a 6-5 advantage and the set came the Austrian's way in the 12th game off an ace.

Thiem, watched by his girlfriend - and WTA star - Kristina Mladenovic, turned the screw for a 3-1 lead in the second set but Nadal battled back to 3-3.

That was as good as it got for the Spaniard as Thiem broke again for 4-3, held to love for 5-3 and secured victory with another blistering forehand.

Thiem, who next faces South



Africa's Kevin Anderson for a place in Sunday's final, joins Novak Djokovic and Gaston Gaudio as just the third man to have beaten Nadal three times on clay.

World number eight Anderson battled into his first Masters semi-final with a 7-6 (3), 3-6, 6-3 win over Serbian qualifier Dusan Lajovic.

Anderson, the 31-year-old US Open runner-up last year, hit 15 aces and 35 winners.

BERTENS IN FINAL

Dutchwoman Kiki Bertens continued her remarkable run at the Madrid Open by thrashing French seventh seed Caroline Garcia to reach the womens' final.

The world number 20 will face either Petra Kvitova or Karolina Pliskova in the biggest match of her career today, after brushing aside Garcia 6-2, 6-2.

Bertens, who had already stunned world number two Caroline Wozniacki and five-time Grand Slam champion Maria Sharapova earlier in the week, started brightly and broke twice en route to the opening set.

Garcia struggled throughout and never even mustered a break-point opportunity, falling in the semi-finals for the second straight tournament after losing to CoCo Vandeweghe in Stuttgart.

Bertens, whose five previous WTA titles have all come on clay, was rock-solid in the second set as she wrapped up the win in only an hour and seven minutes.

Two-time Wimbledon champion Kvitova takes on her fellow Czech Pliskova in the second last-four clash.



Spain's Rafael Nadal reacts to his loss in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

FOOTBALL / AMIR CUP

Organisers confirm top-notch security arrangements for final



By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Amir Cup Trophy Tour made a stop at the Establishments and Authorities Security Department headquarters.

The Department of National Security at the Ministry of Interior laid out the plans for Qatar Football Association (QFA), confirming fool-proof arrangements for the Amir Cup final to be played on May 19 at the iconic Khalifa International Stadium.

The Amir Cup recently was announced as an event for the people of Qatar in a show of solidarity with the leadership of the country and the common man's love of football.

The QFA delegation was led by Khalid Mubarak al-Kuwari, Director of the Marketing and Communication

department, Fadala al-Fadallah, Abdulrahman Abdul Jabbar and Nabil Qaid as well as star players from Al Rayyan (Soud Farhan and Mousa Haroun), Al Gharafa (Ahmed Ala'a) and Al Duhail (Ismaeel Mohamed) football teams.

Amongst those who welcomed the QFA delegation were Brigadier Ali Khajim al-Adhbi, Director of Establishments and Authorities Security Department, Captain Mubarak Bilal al-Ali and Captain Burhan Saleh Turki from Stadia security.

Al-Kuwari presented a replica of the Amir Cup trophy to the Establishments and Authorities Security Department as a token of gratitude for the department's role in the success of the Amir Cup over the years.

"Fool-proof security is a must at all top international sports events and the Amir Cup final is one such event in Qatar," al-Kuwari said. "We are pleased that

we have the backing of the most competent security authorities in Qatar for the Amir Cup final."

The QFA officials and the Ministry of Interior delegation continued the discussions for a lengthy period before announcing the details.

Al-Kuwari said: "At the outset, I would like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to Brigadier Ali Khajim al-Adhbi for his team's continuous efforts to secure the high profile football clash."

He added: "Our common goal is to stage the event in a glorious manner and with all vistas of security fully in place. That's the objective when we talk of the Amir Cup final."

The QFA official further added: "Security at top events is no less a science nowadays. The QFA and the Ministry of Interior are on one page for this final."

Al-Kuwari said: "As the countdown to the Amir Cup final ap-

proaches, we are pleased to invite all citizens and residents to come to the Khalifa International Stadium and spend an extraordinary evening in a spectacular Ramadan atmosphere for the final on May 19. The Amir Cup final will impress the fans and the participation of families and children will add splendour to the occasion."

For his part, Brigadier Ali Khajim expressed his happiness over his team's co-operation ahead of the Amir Cup final.

"We are fully aware of the magnitude of this event," he said. "Ours is a highly skilled job that requires the greatest amount of tactical nuance and preparation. We feel proud to be associated with this event."

He added: "Stadium security means the protection of the public, the safety of sports facilities as well as the security of competing athletes and officials. We also provide security around the dignitaries who may attend various sports events."