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**Raptors, Nuggets grab narrow wins as Warriors cruise**

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# GULF TIMES SPORT



TENNIS

**Magnificent seven beckons for Federer and Djokovic**

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FOOTBALL / AFC ASIAN CUP

# Qatar open campaign with 2-0 victory over Lebanon

Second half goals by Bassam al-Rawi and Almoez Ali earn Qatar all three points from their Group E match



Qatar's Bassam al-Rawi (right) in action against Lebanon during their AFC Asian Cup group E match in Al Ain yesterday.

AFC  
Al Ain, United Arab Emirates

**Q**atar showed patience and maturity to pick up a 2-0 win over a determined and well-organised Lebanon at Hazza bin Zayed Stadium as Felix Sanchez's side notched up an opening victory in Group E of the AFC Asian Cup 2019 yesterday.

Second-half goals from Bassam al-Rawi and Almoez Ali gave the 2022 FIFA World Cup hosts all three points at the end of a challenging encounter to move Sanchez's team level on three points with Saudi Arabia at the top of the early standings.

Recently crowned AFC Player of the Year Abdelkarim Hassan was left on the bench by Sanchez as the Spaniard started al-Rawi at left-back, but the 25-year-old



Qatar's Almoez Ali (centre) in action against Lebanon during their AFC Asian Cup match yesterday.



Qatar coach Felix Sanchez.

was to make an impact later in the game.

The two teams fought out a tight and absorbing opening quarter of the game, with few

opportunities as the defences dominated. Indeed, it took until the 37th minute for fans of either side to have anything to cheer for when the Lebanese thought they

had taken the lead. Ali Hamam raced off to celebrate with his teammates after slotting Hassan Maatouk's corner into the Qatari goal, only for the sound of the Lebanese fans to drown out referee Ma Ning's whistle with the Chinese official blowing for a foul on Tarek Salman.

In an opening period of few chances, it was Lebanon who looked more likely to score, with Maatouk pulling the trigger on an effort of his own just before halftime, but his scissor kick flew high over the bar.

Two minutes after the hour mark, Hassan was finally introduced from the bench for Abdulkareem al-Ali and within three minutes the Qataris had taken the lead when al-Rawi struck.

## Japan survive scare to overcome Turkmenistan

DPA  
Abu Dhabi

**R**ecord winners Japan were given a fright by Turkmenistan but fought back from a goal down to start the Asian Cup with a 3-2 win in Abu Dhabi yesterday. Werder Bremen forward Yuya Osako struck a four-minute second half double and Doan Ritsu sealed the points after Turkmen captain Arslan Amanov opened the scoring with a long-range rocket before the break. Ahmet Atayev converted a consolation penalty. History was made in the other Group F game as Uzbek goalkeeper Ignatyi Nesterov played in a 2-1 win over Oman in Sharjah to become the first to appear at five Asian Cups. Substitute Eldor Shomurodov scored the late winner for 10-man Uzbekistan after captain Odil Ahmedov's opener was cancelled by Muhsen al-Ghassani. Japan struggled initially and were slightly fortunate not to be further behind when they

took the half-time counsel of coach Hajime Moriyasu. "I told them the basic things about the transition, the battle around the ball and reading the game," Moriyasu said of his team talk. He also encouraged his players to "approach more so we could use the space behind the lines."

A fresh side emerged and instantly pegged Turkmenistan deep in their own half, levelling in 56 minutes when Osako took a pass from Bundesliga colleague Genki Haraguchi and twisted inside his marker to score.

Just four minutes later Osako struck again, tapping into an empty net from Yuto Nagatomo's pass after a mix-up between keeper Mammet Orazmuhammedov and defender Mekan Saparov. Turkmenistan kept their shape but were unable to threaten an equalizer before Ritsu, with a slight deflection, added third in the 71st. Altymyrat Annadurdyev won a penalty from Japan keeper Shuichi Gonda which Atayev scored to set up an intriguing last 11 minutes but Japan held on.

Referee Ma awarded two free-kicks in succession, with Maatouk booked for handling the ball at the first, and Miodrag Radulovic's team was made to pay a heavy price as al-Rawi sent a dipping curling right-footed effort over the wall and beyond the outstretched hand of Mehdi Kahlil.

With Hassan giving Qatar added thrust down the flanks and Abdelaziz Hatem bringing tenacity to midfield when he replaced

Karim Boudiaf, Sanchez's side carried the greater threat as the game wore on.

So it was no surprise when they added a second with 11 minutes remaining. Hassan's driving run created space for Akram Afif and, when the winger received the ball, his centre found Hatem, whose shot was saved by Kahlil. But Ali was on hand to roll the ball into the empty net to ensure a winning start to the campaign for Qatar.

SPOTLIGHT

# French champions PSG to visit Qatar next week

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**A** delegation from Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), made up of all the first team players plus the club's business managers, will travel to Doha on Sunday to take part in the traditional winter tour stopover in Qatar.

Over four days, the French champions will make use of the outstanding training facilities at the Aspire Zone and benefit from the country's ideal weather conditions.

The Qatar Tour is an opportunity for the club to showcase Qatar as a tourist destination and make the team's players available for various events with Qatari

sponsors such as QNB. It's also an opportunity to have some of the biggest Parisian stars take back pictures and memories from some of the most iconic spots in the country.

This trip will also be an opportunity for the club to meet its local supporters. Plenty of entertainment will be organised to treat PSG supporters in Qatar to some memorable experiences. In what is expected to be one of the high points of the tour, spectators will be invited to watch the players train on Tuesday at 5pm at the Khalifa International Stadium, one of the venues for the 2022 World Cup.

This tour will also be an opportunity to inaugurate the brand new Paris Saint-Germain Academy in Doha, which will be

run year-round on the pitches of Qatar Foundation.

PSG chairman and CEO Nasser al-Khelaifi said, "Qatar offers the ideal conditions to allow our team to prepare for the important fixtures that await in 2019. Our momentum has been very positive since the beginning of the season, and the start of the new year is an important time to bring the players and staff together so that they keep strengthening their bond."

"The club is increasingly popular in the region. We are delighted to come here to meet and chat with our supporters. "Many of our players will be back in Qatar in four years' time to play in the World Cup. The preparations are well underway. Aspire has become a major

international sports venue in a very short space of time, and the facilities currently being built will make Qatar the must-visit destination for all performance-orientated professional athletes."

Since 2012, the Qatar National Tourism Council (QNTC) and PSG have formed a strategic partnership to promote sports and leisure tourism in Qatar. QNTC has organised several tours for Paris Saint-Germain's teams, including the 2014 and 2015 Qatar Handball Tour, the 2015 Qatar Ladies Tour, and the 2013 and 2015 Qatar Tour.

Within the framework of this partnership, QNTC benefits from a constant presence at the Parc des Princes, where thousands of football fans can get a taste of Qatari culture and hospitality.

## Nordic FA delegations visit 2022 WC stadium



Representatives from five Nordic football associations – Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and the Faroe Islands – visited Education City Stadium to discover more about preparations for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy tweeted yesterday.



## SPOTLIGHT

# Spurs shed 'soft touch' image as Pochettino leaves his mark

Tuesday's hard-fought 1-0 win over Chelsea in the League Cup semi-final first leg suggested Pochettino's efforts have not been in vain

AFP  
London

Tottenham have been derided as a soft touch for decades, but the sight of Eden Hazard being hounded into submission showed Mauricio Pochettino's side are finally shedding their nice-guy image. The perception of Tottenham as entertaining but ultimately flawed under-achievers has haunted a succession of managers at the north London club.

But Pochettino has worked tirelessly to imbue his squad with a more ruthless streak and Tuesday's hard-fought 1-0 win over Chelsea in the League Cup semi-final first leg suggested his efforts have not been in vain.

Tangible evidence of Tottenham's new-found steely side could be seen in the way Hazard trudged wearily down the Wembley tunnel at full-time. In a bid to subdue Chelsea's influential playmaker, Hazard was subjected to 90 minutes of intense tackling from Tottenham, who fouled the Belgian seven times – more than any other team this season.

While Tottenham were aggressive in their approach, it was hardly the work of a group of hatchet men intent on kicking an opponent into submission. Pochettino wanted Hazard to realise nothing would come easily for him, that Tottenham players would be hassling him at every turn.

It was the kind of shrewd game-plan that teams from Pochettino's native Argentina have often used successfully and it worked to perfection against

Chelsea. Hazard, already hampered by Chelsea manager Maurizio Sarri's decision to use him as a centre forward, found it difficult to find the space to flourish as Tottenham crowded him out time and again.

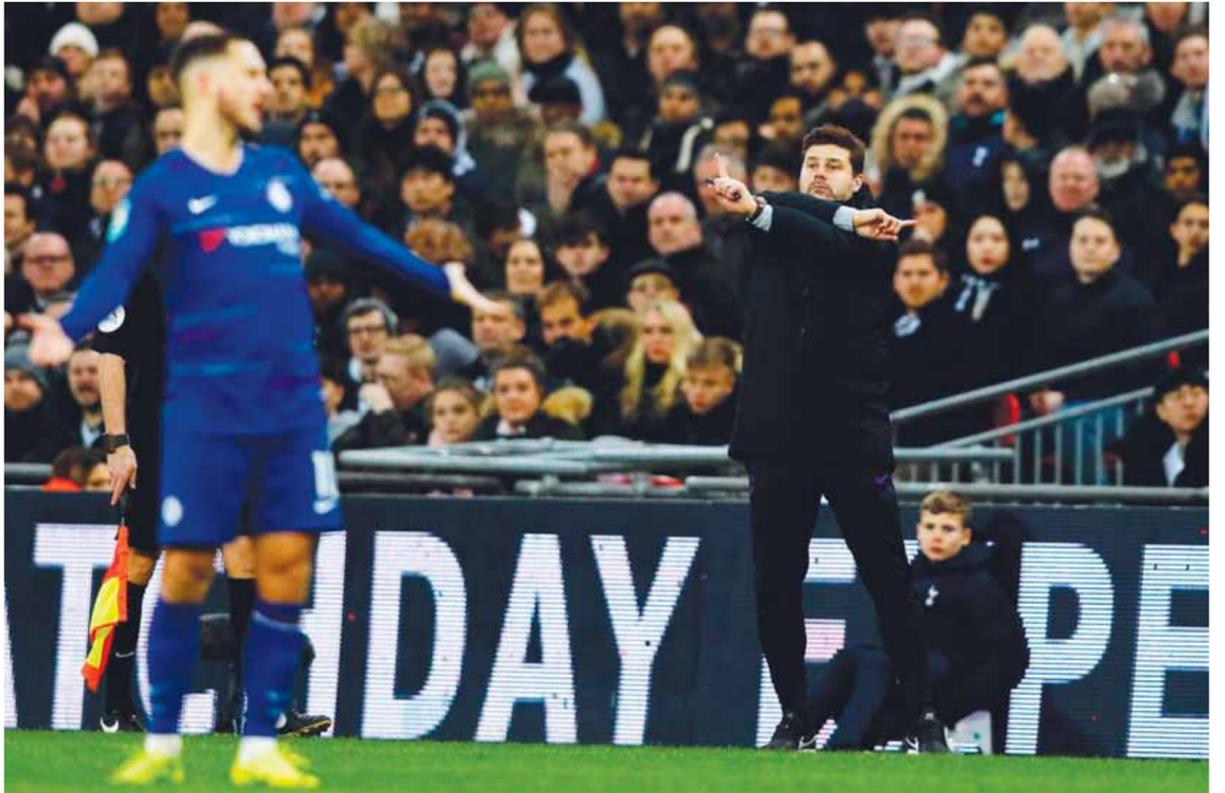
The Spurs boss would not go into detail when asked about his team's treatment of Hazard, but he did acknowledge he was the man to stop. "He has unbelievable quality. He was involved in the game a lot," Pochettino said. "It is so difficult to stop him. We are talking about a player on the same level as Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi."

Such a smart yet cynical approach would, in the past, have been anathema to a club raised on the legendary Danny Blanchflower's famous claim that "the game is about glory, it is about doing things in style and with a flourish".

Yet Pochettino has no qualms about his desire to make Tottenham more streetwise.

"If you think about how we can improve our squad, it's not only about adding quality players, but sometimes you need to be a little bit naughty," Pochettino said this week. "We are so nice and in that game we showed that we can be a little naughty."

While Harry Kane, whose penalty winner made him Tottenham's fourth highest all-time scorer, remains Pochettino's most valuable asset, it was the tenacity of a well-drilled defence that emerged as the key to victory against Chelsea. With Tottenham searching for their first trophy since 2008, maintaining that hard-nosed style will be essential if Pochettino is at last to win the first silverware of his



Tottenham Hotspur's coach Mauricio Pochettino (right) gestures as Chelsea's midfielder Eden Hazard reacts during the League Cup semi-final in London. (AFP)

managerial career.

There have been too many moments in Pochettino's reign when Tottenham have shrunk in the spotlight.

A second-half capitulation at Chelsea handed Leicester the 2016 title,

while defeats to Chelsea in the 2015 League Cup final and the 2017 FA Cup semi-final were also painful. Most damning of all was the limp loss to Manchester United in last season's FA Cup semi-final.

But, having seen Hazard stifled so effectively, Pochettino expects Tottenham to rise to the big occasion more successfully in future. "It's a huge experience for us to be more mature," he said, with his team third in the Premier

League and through to the Champions League knockout stages. "The season we are doing is fantastic. The effort is amazing, how we run, how we compete. Whether we win titles or not I'm so proud of this squad."

## ASIAN CUP

## Buoyant India take on hosts UAE

AFC  
Abu Dhabi

Both United Arab Emirates and India know a win today for either side will mean inching ever closer to the knockout stage of the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019.

That sets the stage for an exciting battle as the UAE, expected to be backed by a capacity crowd at the Zayed Sports City Stadium, look to bounce back with a win after being held to a 1-1 draw by Bahrain in their Group A opener on Saturday. For India, another three points would surely mean a place in the Round of 16 after their impressive 4-1 victory over Thailand on Matchday One.

UAE head coach Alberto Zaccheroni described his team's mission as a make or break game. "We had a meeting with the players after the Bahrain game and discussed our strengths and weaknesses. What I saw from the players has made me very confident that they will play very well," he said. "This is a make or break game for us and we will start the match against India with the intention of winning. We will do our best even though I know we will face difficulties."

India's win over Thailand, said Zaccheroni, proves just how much Asian football has developed. "Eight years ago, there were maybe eight Asian teams ranked in the top 100. Now we have 17 teams. The opening round of the AFC Asian Cup has also showed us that there were no easy games."

"India are a very compact team and we know they will look to play on the counter-attack. They did so well against Thailand and I am sure they will be confident when facing us. However, I can assure you that there will be a lot of passion and desire to win in my team, more than what was shown in the match against Bahrain," declared the Italian who led Japan to the



Indian players celebrate during their win over Thailand in the AFC Asian Cup Group A match in Abu Dhabi last Sunday. (AFP)

2011 AFC Asian Cup title.

Passion and desire will also be in abundance in the Indian team, who ended a 55-year wait for a win at the AFC Asian Cup by defeating Thailand. It is a win that has excited their fans, and head coach Stephen Constantine said his team was looking forward to the UAE match.

"It is going to be a better, for sure. UAE will aim to win but so will we. We did well against Thailand and the boys are highly motivated to do the same again," ex-

plained Constantine, who had confidently claimed going into the tournament that India's wait for a win would end in UAE 2019.

Constantine said progressing to the knockout stage is something Indian football must expect. "When I was told that we had not won in 55 years at the AFC Asian Cup, my reaction was this is not right. When I took over as coach of India in 2015, I said we would qualify for the AFC Asian Cup. "Now we have done that

and our next target must be advancing to the knockout stage."

The three points against Thailand puts India at an advantage – with 16 teams advancing to the knockout stage – but Constantine said he is looking for nothing but a win against the UAE. "I would love nine points but six should take us through, maybe even three but that is not what we are looking at. We are looking to win."

In other matches today, Bahrain take on Thailand, while Jordan face Syria.

## LA LIGA

## Real Madrid woes deepen with injury to Courtois

Reuters  
Madrid

Real Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois has been sidelined with a hip problem, leaving the stuttering European champions without a total of seven players due to injury and suspension. Madrid said in a statement yesterday that the Belgian had a grade one injury in his left hip muscle, without stating for how long he would be ruled out.

Spanish media reports said Courtois would be out for around 10 days, ruling him out of Sunday's trip to Real Betis in La Liga as well as both Copa del Rey games against Leganes. The Belgian was expected to be on the bench for last night's first-leg match and the return leg on Jan. 16, with Keylor Navas playing instead. Courtois's injury setback comes one day after Germany midfielder Toni Kroos was diagnosed with a thigh problem, ruling him out for between three to four weeks and meaning he will miss a crunch league game against high-flying Sevilla on Jan. 19.

Real winger Lucas Vazquez is suspended for Sunday's visit to Real Betis after being sent off in last week's 2-0 defeat to Real Sociedad, which left Santiago Solari's side fifth in La Liga and 10 points behind leaders Barcelona.

Record signing Gareth Bale is currently sidelined with a groin



strain and is not due back until the end of the month, while fellow forwards Marco Asensio, Mariano Diaz as well as midfield anchor Marcos Llorente are also unavailable due to injury.

### VALVERDE LEAVES DOOR OPEN TO BARCA SIGNING A STRIKER

Barcelona coach Ernesto Valverde admitted yesterday the club could look to sign a new striker in January. Valverde confirmed the Spanish-Moroccan forward Munir El-Haddadi would likely be sold this month, leaving Barca short of cover up front. Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez already have 28 goals between them this season but both will need to be rested. Neither are expected to face Levante in the Copa del Rey today and Valverde refused to rule out the possibility of bolstering his options.

## HIGUAIN POISED TO END AC MILAN LOAN AND COMPLETE CHELSEA MOVE

Milan: AC Milan striker Gonzalo Higuain has "agreed terms" and is set for an imminent move to Premier League club Chelsea, Italian sports daily *Gazzetta Dello Sport* reported yesterday. Higuain joined Milan on a season-long loan from Juventus in July with an option to make the deal permanent, but he has struggled to settle at San Siro, scoring eight goals in all competitions.

"Chelsea have an agreement with

Higuain to take him immediately," *Gazzetta* reported. The 31-year-old Argentina international reportedly wants to join his former Napoli coach Maurizio Sarri at the English club, who would take over Milan's option to eventually make the deal permanent.

Milan paid 18m euros (\$20.75m) to sign him on loan, with a clause to make the deal permanent for a further 36m euros. Higuain had his most successful season under Sarri, breaking the Serie

A goalscoring record with 36 goals in the 2015/16 campaign.

He scored 91 goals during his three years at the club before moving to Juventus in 2016 when the Turin club activated his 90 million-euro buyout clause. He scored 40 league goals in two seasons for them, but left for Milan in the last close season after Cristiano Ronaldo's arrival in Turin.

Higuain previously spent six years at Real Madrid after starting his career

at River Plate in Argentina. He was hampered by a back injury earlier in the season but broke a two-month goal drought just before the winter break.

However, Milan sporting director Leonardo warned on Tuesday he had to get down to work. "He had a tough moment, he has to put it behind him and get to work," said Leonardo. "A goal can change things, but if he is to continue here, he needs to take on responsibility."

Brazilian Leonardo added: "There's no point following rumours and gossip. He is here right now. Seeing as he is here, he needs to get down and actually do something for this team."

Brazilian Leonardo also confirmed there have been no formal offers for Italian forward Fabio Borini or Croatian midfielder Alen Halilovic who have been linked to Chinese club Shenzhen and Turkish outfit Besiktas respectively. Leonardo was speaking during

the presentation of new Brazilian signing Lucas Paqueta, who arrived from Flamengo on a four-and-a-half year deal worth 35 million euros (\$40m, £31.56m).

"Milan is the right place for me," said Paqueta, describing himself as "a technical player with a good physique". The 21-year-old could make his debut in the Italian Cup against Sampdoria on Saturday or next week's Italian Super Cup match against Juventus.

HONOUR

# Salah retains African Player of the Year award

'I have dreamt of winning this award since I was a child and now I have done so twice in a row'

AFP  
Dakar

Mohamed Salah completed a memorable day for Egyptian football by retaining his African Player of the Year award in Senegal on Tuesday night. The 26-year-old Liverpool star finished first with club-mate Senegalese Sadio Mane and Arsenal and Gabon striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang the other finalists.

"I have dreamt of winning this award since I was a child and now I have done so twice in a row," Salah said soon after receiving his trophy in Dakar. "My thanks go to my family, my teammates and my fans and I dedicate this trophy to my homeland, Egypt."

It was an identical outcome to last year when Salah became only the second Egyptian after 1983 winner Mahmoud al-Khatib to be voted the best footballer in Africa. Egypt crushed sole rivals South Africa 16-1 earlier on Tuesday in a CAF executive committee vote in Dakar to decide which country succeeded Cameroon as 2019 Cup of Nations hosts.

Delays to preparations and concerns about security resulted in the central African nation being replaced as hosts, and they will stage the 2021 tournament instead. While the 15-vote winning margin for Egypt was unexpected, the success of Salah was anticipated as he continues to score regularly for the English Premier League leaders.

Salah netted 44 goals in all competitions for Liverpool last season – his first with the Anfield club – and has bagged 13 Premier League goals so far this season. Ironically, Aubameyang has scored one league goal more than Salah, topping the charts with Tottenham Hotspur and England star Harry Kane on 14.

Salah was born in a northern Egyptian town Nagrig and used to make eight-hour return trips on buses to train with Cairo-based El Mokawloon (Arab Contractors). Spotted by scouts from Swiss club Basel, he moved there in 2012 before joining Premier League giants Chelsea two years later.

Salah found scoring difficult early in his professional career and was nicknamed "chancetod" (chance killer) by the Swiss media. Later, playing for

Chelsea in a League Cup tie, the Egyptian was so off-target with a goal attempt that the ball trickled over the touchline for a throw-in.

Unhappy with his two-goal return, Chelsea lent Salah to Italian outfits Fiorentina and Roma, then sold him to the latter club. Salah blossomed in Rome, averaging close to a goal every two matches, and Liverpool paid almost 37mn pounds to sign him two years ago.

The Egyptian had his share of setbacks last year, too, with an injury in the Champions League final loss to Real Madrid also keeping him out of a World Cup defeat by Uruguay. He returned to score against hosts Russia and Saudi Arabia, but the Pharaohs exited their first appearance at the global showpiece in 28 years without securing even one point.

Salah netted twice and missed two penalties three months later in a 6-0 Cup of Nations rout of Niger and snatched the late winner in a 3-2 victory over Tunisia in the same competition. Having defended his Player of the Year title, his next goal will be to match the four straight wins in the competition by former Manchester City and Ivory Coast star Yaya Toure.

The other male awards went to France-born Morocco coach Herve Renard, the Mauritania national team, and Moroccan Achraf Hakimi in the youth category. South African Chrestinah Kgatlana was voted Women's Player of the Year and South Africa coach Desiree Ellis and the Nigeria national team were the other female winners. The Goal of the Year award also went to Kgatlana.

**MOHAMED SALAH FACT FILE**

**Full name:** Mohamed Salah Hamed Mahrous Ghaly

**Birthdate:** June 15 1992 (aged 26)

**Birthplace:** Nagrig, northern Egypt

**Playing position:** Forward

**Professional clubs:** 2010 – El Mokawloon (Arab Contractors); 2012 – Basel (SUI); 2014 – Chelsea (ENG); 2015 – Fiorentina (ITA), loan; 2015 – Roma, loan; 2016 – Roma; 2017 – Liverpool (ENG)

**National teams:** 2010 – Egypt U-20, 2011 – Egypt U23, Egypt



Liverpool's Egyptian forward Mohamed Salah poses with the 2018 African Footballer of the Year award. (AFP)

**Inter accept 2-match San Siro closure for racist chants**

Inter Milan will not appeal their two-match stadium closure imposed after racist chanting directed towards Napoli defender Kalidou Koulibaly. Inter were ordered to play two domestic matches behind closed doors for the abuse of Koulibaly during their Serie A clash on December 26. The club said they would not appeal the Lega Serie A decision, and have asked the Italian football federation if they can invite local schoolchildren to the match against Sassuolo on Jan 19. The stadium will be closed for Sunday's Italian Cup tie against Benevento. Koulibaly was subjected to monkey noises from the crowd several times during Inter's 1-0 win.

**Spurs postpone move to new stadium**

Tottenham announced yesterday they will stay at Wembley until at least the end of February as their frustrating wait to move into their new stadium goes on. The Premier League home games against Watford, Newcastle and Leicester will all be at the national stadium as the finishing touches are put on their new 62,000-seater home.

The Champions League last-16 home leg with Borussia Dortmund on February 13 will also be played at Wembley. Chairman Daniel Levy has apologised to supporters and hopes to provide a further update in the next few weeks.

**French game moved because of more protests**

This weekend's French Ligue 1 game between Dijon and Montpellier has been put back by 24 hours as local authorities prepare for more disruptive "yellow vest" protests. The game, originally scheduled for Saturday evening, will now be played on Sunday following a request from police in the Burgundy city. The move comes after second-placed Lille's trip to Caen in Normandy was brought forward from Saturday to tomorrow evening. Dijon's home match against champions Paris Saint-Germain was one of a number of Ligue 1 games to be postponed in December as authorities struggled to deal with the protest movement.

**Stoke appoint Jones in bid to spark promotion push**

Stoke City named Nathan Jones as their new manager to replace the sacked Gary Rowett after he impressed during a spell at Luton Town. The 45-year-old Welshman guided Luton to promotion from the fourth tier of the English game, League Two, last season and they are now challenging strongly for a further promotion to the Championship. Jones's task is to reboot Stoke's battle for an immediate return to the Premier League – their challenge has faltered despite spending heavily in the close season. Rowett was sacked on Tuesday, with the club lying eight points adrift of the play-off places.

FOCUS

## Bayern eager to complete signing of Chelsea teenager Hudson-Odoi

AFP  
Doha

Bayern Munich, who are targeting young talent in the current transfer window, have confirmed their strong interest in English teenager Callum Hudson-Odoi amid reports the defending German champions have agreed a fee with Chelsea. "We definitely want to sign him – he has the qualities which would fit very well into our team," Bayern's director of sport Hasan Salihamidzic said yesterday at their winter training camp in Doha. "He is very fast and good at dribbling."

According to Sky, Bayern and Chelsea have agreed a transfer of 39mn euros (35mn pounds, \$44.6mn), but it is unclear whether Hudson-Odoi would move in the current Bundesliga transfer window, which closes at 1700 GMT on January 31, or in July.

It was reportedly the fourth bid Bayern

have tabled for the talented Hudson-Odoi, who has made just one Premier League appearance this season. If he moves to Munich, he will become the third English teenager currently in the Bundesliga alongside Jadon Sancho, 18, who left Manchester City for Borussia Dortmund in 2017, and Riess Nelson, 19, on loan from Arsenal at Hoffenheim until July.

The 18-year-old Hudson-Odoi, who can play as a winger or forward, played 79 minutes of Chelsea's 1-0 defeat to Tottenham Hotspur on Tuesday night in the English League Cup semi-final. His sole Premier League appearance so far this season was as an injury replacement in a 2-1 win at Watford on December 26.

The England Under-19 international is set to face more competition next season at Stamford Bridge with the arrival of US winger Christian Pulisic from Borussia Dortmund in July. On Wednesday, Bayern also confirmed the signing of French World

Cup-winning defender Benjamin Pavard, 22, on a five-year contract from July 1 for 35mn euros. Despite winning the Bundesliga title for each of the last six seasons, Bayern will resume the 2018/19 campaign on January 18 trailing current leaders Dortmund by six points. They are looking for more youthful recruits to boost their ageing squad with RB Leipzig striker Timo Werner, and Atletico Madrid defender Lucas Hernandez, both 22, also targeted.

"He is a very interesting player," said Salihamidzic of Hernandez, who can play at left-back or as a central defender, but is under contract in Madrid until 2024 with a buy-out clause worth 80mn euros. Werner, who has scored nine goals in 23 appearances for Germany, has been offered an extension to his current contract, which runs until 2020, by Leipzig. Should he reject the offer, he is likely to transfer out of Leipzig at the end of this season, RB's director Oliver Mintziass has confirmed.



Bayern Munich players train during their winter camp at the Aspire Zone in Doha yesterday. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

SPOTLIGHT

## Asian Communities Football Tournament from today



Asian Communities Football Tournament will be held at the Doha Stadium and Al Markhiya Sports Club.

The 7th Asian Communities Football Tournament (ACFT) will kick-off from today at Al Markhiya Sports Club. The hugely popular tournament – organised by the Qatar Football Association (QFA) – will see ten teams competing for the championship title.

The 28-match event will commence with Japan taking on the Philippines at 8pm, followed by the second match in which Jordan will take on India at 9:30pm. The teams were divided into two groups of five. The first group includes Japan, the Philippines, defending champions Lebanon, Palestine and Bangladesh. The second group includes teams representing Jordan, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

Each side will play four matches before the top two sides from each group qualify to the quarter-finals. The winners in the four quarter-final fixtures

will contest the semi-finals. The tournament will begin on Thursday, January 10, and the group stage matches will continue until February 8, 2019, which will be held in five stages.

The quarter-finals will be played on Thursday and Friday 14-15 February. There will be a match for the third place between the two losing teams in the semi-finals on Friday, with the winners of the same round of the championship in the final on Friday, March 1st. The matches will be held at the Doha Stadium and Al Markhiya Sports Club. The tournament remains popular among the football loving communities living in Qatar, thanks to QFA's outreach programmes.

The event is expected to draw huge crowds like it did in previous years, as the tournament has been a major success in all its previous versions with a steady increase to the number of teams participating in the annual tour-

namment. After the first edition that saw the participation of 6 teams, Indonesia won the inaugural edition in 2013.

The second edition saw the number of participating teams double to 12, Jordan emerged champions after defeating Indonesia 5-0 in the final. The following years Jordan, Indonesia, India and Lebanon communities won the event respectively.

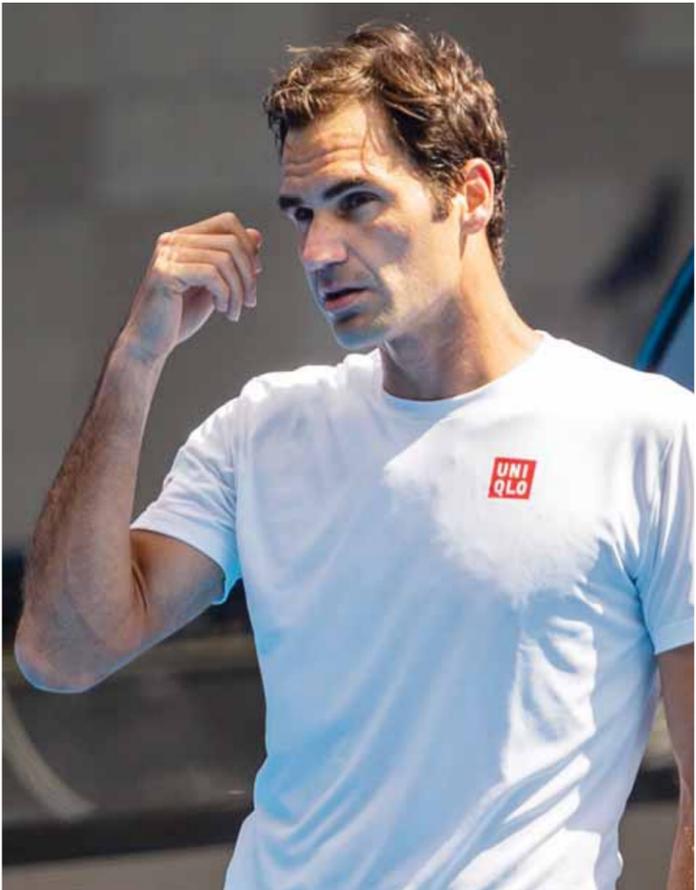
The ACFT was launched in sports season 2012-2013 and saw the participation of six teams. In its' first edition, the tournament saw huge success and as a result, the following editions witnessed a steady increase in the number of participating teams as more communities expressed huge interest in being part of this exciting community tournament.

The ACFT is sponsored by the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy as the official strategic partner and Nike as the official supplier.

## AUSTRALIAN OPEN

# Magnificent seven beckons for Federer, Djokovic

'I played super well in Australia again. So obviously I can't wait to go back there. I'm very proud that at 37 I'm still so competitive'



Switzerland's Roger Federer and Serbia's Novak Djokovic (right) during their practice sessions in Melbourne yesterday. (Reuters)

AFF  
Melbourne

Thirtysomethings Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic share the Australian Open record with six wins, but either could make history with a magnificent seventh when the first Grand Slam of the year begins in Melbourne on Monday.

The pair face a stern challenge from youthful force Alexander Zverev, looking for a first major as the torch-bearer for the next generation. But there are question marks over the fitness of Rafael Nadal and Andy Murray, meaning it remains to be seen if all members of the "Big Four" will again prove a force to be reckoned with.

Twelve months ago Federer rolled back the years once more at the Rod Laver Arena to beat Marin Cilic in five pulsating sets and lift an emotional 20th Grand Slam.

It put him on a par with other

six-time Australian Open winners Djokovic and Roy Emerson - but the Australian great's victories all came before the Open era.

By contrast, the 31-year-old Djokovic endured a miserable early Melbourne exit, followed by elbow surgery and a string of disappointing results that saw him drop outside the top 20.

But since winning a fourth Wimbledon in July the Serb rose inexorably back to number one by losing only three further matches - one of which was to Zverev at the ATP Finals.

Djokovic won his third US Open in September to put him on 14 Grand Slams - three behind Nadal and six behind Federer.

Ageless Swiss master Federer, now 37, will remain a chief threat to the Serb but the other two members of the Big Four look to be struggling after an injury-plagued 2018. Second-ranked Nadal, 32, pulled out of his Brisbane warm-up tournament with a thigh strain

although he returned for an exhibition in Sydney and insisted he was healthy. Murray, 31, looked way below his best in a second-round straight-sets Brisbane defeat to Daniil Medvedev.

#### NEXTGEN 'ALREADY THERE'

"I think if we are healthy and playing well, the four guys still have probably the best chance to always win Slams," said Djokovic.

The Serb warned however that "the next generation is already there" and picked young guns Zverev of Germany, Borna Coric of Croatia, Karen Khachanov of Russia and Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas as key threats to the Big Four, who have won a staggering 49 of the last 56 Grand Slams stretching back to 2004.

"It's just a matter of time when we will see some of them competing in the last stages of Grand Slams," said Djokovic.

Zverev, 21, starts the Australian Open full of confidence after

an impressive warm-up in Perth's mixed teams Hopman Cup, despite his terrible record at Grand Slams. The German has never got beyond the third round in Melbourne. Last year, seeded four, he crashed out in the last 32 to South Korea's Chung Hyeon and has only reached one quarter-final in his 14 major appearances.

Federer seems to thrive at the start of the year and begins his campaign on the back of winning the Hopman Cup. He is hunting a third successive Australian Open after last year becoming the oldest world number one in the 45-year history of the ATP rankings.

#### COMPETITIVE AT 37

"(Pete) Sampras once upon a time said, 'If you win a Slam, it's a good season'," said Federer, now ranked three, who skipped Roland Garros and had disappointing exits at Wimbledon and the US Open.

"I played super well in Australia again. So obviously I can't wait to

go back there. I'm very proud that at 37 I'm still so competitive."

Murray's hip surgery meant he played just six events in 2018, and Nadal's truncated 2018 campaign was bookended by injuries that forced to him to retire in both the Australian and US Opens. But the Spanish king of clay still managed to win five titles including a record-extending 11th French Open.

World number five Argentine Juan Martin del Potro, beaten by Djokovic in the US Open final, will miss Melbourne after fracturing his patella in Shanghai in October.

And Cilic, who pushed Federer all the way in the final last year, heads into the tournament after pulling out of a warm-up event in India last week with an injured knee.

Home fans will look to Alex de Minaur and Nick Kyrgios, but the latter is searching for form after a troubled 2018 and tumbled out of the Brisbane warm-up, where he was defending champion, in the second round.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Halep falls to Barty in Sydney second round

Reuters  
Sydney

World number one Simona Halep crashed to a straight-sets defeat against unseeded Ashleigh Barty in the second round of the Sydney International yesterday.

Halep, playing in her first tournament since a back injury cut short her 2018 season in September, lost 6-4, 6-4 in 87 minutes with the result dealing a blow to her Australian Open preparations. Australian Barty, who is ranked 15th in the world, fired 26 winners and won four out of seven break points as she recorded her first victory over a reigning world number one.

"I finally learned my lesson," said Barty, who had suffered two straight-sets defeats by Halep last year.

"She gave me a belting in Montreal. I learnt a little bit more in Cincinnati, but today I knuckled down and really thought about it and really gave myself a chance.

"The biggest thing, I believed that I could win. Just very happy I was able to come out and execute."

The 22-year-old Barty was rewarded with a quarter-final clash against Belgian Elise Mertens, who raced past Estonia's Anett Kontaveit 6-3, 6-1. Kazakh qualifier Yulia Putintseva came back from a set and a break down to beat fourth seed Sloane Stephens 3-6, 7-6(4), 6-0 in a roller-coaster second round encounter. It was Putintseva's sixth career top 10 victory, and second consecutive win over Stephens following an equally dramatic three-set triumph in Nuremberg last year.

Men's top seed Stefanos Tsitsipas eased past Argentine Guido Andreozzi 6-3, 6-4 to earn his first Tour-level win over the new season. Greek youngster Tsitsipas, who won the ATP Next Gen Finals in Milan last year, broke his opponent three times and held off a late comeback to move into the quarter-finals. The world number 15 will next face Italian Andreas Seppi, who beat Slovakia's Martin Klizan 7-6(2), 6-2. Home favourite Alex de Minaur was at his ruthless best to dismiss American qualifier Reilly Opelka 6-4, 7-6(5), while third seed Diego Schwartzman broke Spaniard Guillermo Garcia-Lopez's serve five times en route to a 6-2, 6-3 win.

## AUCKLAND CLASSIC

## Seeds tumble in Auckland as brave Ferrer limps out

AFF  
Wellington

Top seed John Isner crashed out of the Auckland Classic yesterday while a calf injury dashed four-time champion David Ferrer's hopes of a fairytale final appearance in New Zealand. Isner was sent

packing after fellow American Taylor Fritz held his nerve in two tie-breaks to win 7-6 (7/3), 7-6 (7/5), while compatriot Tennys Sandgren brushed aside third seed Marco Cecchinato of Italy 6-3, 6-3. Second seed Fabio Fognini narrowly avoided the same fate, with Peter Gojowczyk taking the match to a third-set tie-break before the Italian prevailed 6-2, 3-6, 7-6 (7/5). The draw - already weakened by the withdrawal of defending champion Roberto Bautista Agut, Tomas Berdych and Gael Monfils - now has only two seeds remaining in Fognini and Pablo Carreno Busta of Spain.

Carreno Busta had an armchair ride into the quarter-finals when Ferrer succumbed to injury just three games into their match. Former world number three Ferrer has retired from Grand Slams but is making a few appearances at his favourite ATP tournaments in 2019, with Auckland first on the list. The 36-year-old looked sharp against his fellow Spaniard and they were one game apiece before Ferrer twisted his leg while hitting a cross-court forehand.

He tried to continue with strapping on his calf, managing to win a point on serve before reluctantly calling it quits. Ferrer received a standing ovation at the tournament he described as "a second home" and said he was sorry his dream of winning a record fifth title was over.

Elsewhere, Philipp Kohlschreiber defeated Ugo Humbert of France 6-4, 6-4 to set up a quarter-final against Fognini. Britain's Cameron Norrie beat Joao Sousa of Portugal 7-6 (7/5), 6-4 and Leonardo Meyer came from behind to down Matteo Berrettini 5-7, 7-6 (7/5), 6-3.

## FOCUS

## McEnroe predicts change of guard

Reuters  
Melbourne

The landscape at the top of men's tennis has remained virtually unchanged for more than a decade with Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic and to a lesser extent Andy Murray and Stan Wawrinka snaffling the big prizes.

Change might be afoot though, according to American great John McEnroe, with a queue of young guns led by Germany's Alexander Zverev being tipped to make a long-overdue mark at the Australian Open in Melbourne starting on Monday.

"I believe this year will be the year that you are going to see one of these young kids break through," seven-time Grand Slam champion McEnroe, who will be working as analyst for Eurosport, said as excitement grows for the start of the tournament won last year by a 36-year-old Federer.

Despite all being written off

as fading forces at various times in the past few years, last year's Grand Slams were shared out between Federer, Nadal and Djokovic - all in their 30s.

When Djokovic won the US Open to move to 14 career Grand Slam titles, behind only Nadal (17) and Federer (20) on the all-time list, it meant the so-called "big three" had won 51 of the 62 Grand Slams since the 2003 Wimbledon championships. Add in the three of Britain's Murray and three of Federer's fellow Swiss Wawrinka it does not leave much room for anyone else.

Croatian Marin Cilic won the 2014 US Open, the currently injured Juan Martin del Potro triumphed in New York in 2009 while Marat Safin (Australia 2005) and Gaston Gaudio (French 2004) are the only other major winners in that time.

There is a feeling, though, that a new block of fearless big-hitters, who have not suffered the battle scars sustained by the likes of Kei Nishikori, Grigor Dimitrov and Cilic, are about to

start writing a new chapter. The 21-year-old Zverev, now ranked four in the world after winning the ATP Finals title in November, is the regarded as the man most likely to in Melbourne, even if he has reached only one Grand Slam quarter-final in 14 attempts.

Then there are Greek Stefanos Tsitsipas (ranked 15), Russian duo Karen Khachanov (11) and Daniil Medvedev (16), Croatia's Borna Coric (12) and Canada's Denis Shapovalov (27) - all of whom are aged 22 or younger.

"The door is open, if you look at the rankings, you have a lot of players positioned to make a big breakthrough," McEnroe said. "I believe there will be a changing of the guard this year. Whether it's Zverev, or one of the others like Khachanov or Tsitsipas, you're going to see them do something big."

McEnroe knows that it would be foolish to dismiss the prospect of Djokovic, Federer or Nadal standing triumphant on Rod Laver Arena in a couple of weeks time having again defied the passing years to continue adding

to their collections.

In addition, he says the game has become so physical that it is now much tougher for younger players to survive seven, best-of-five-set matches throughout a Grand Slam fortnight.

"Djokovic has had great success in Australia, he's won it six times, and the way he finished last year it's hard not to say it'll be him," McEnroe said. "Federer has positioned himself to have a good run. It's hard to pick."

"The game has become more physical and the ball has become struck faster - it's just become more difficult for a young kid to be able to stand up to that for seven matches. It takes time to not only develop your skills but also develop your body."

"I think Zverev has the best team around him, he has dealt with the most amount of pressure compared with the other younger players," McEnroe added. "If he is able to make that next step, then he can win a major - but it doesn't always work that way."



Germany's Alexander Zverev celebrates with the ATP Finals trophy at The O2 in London on November 18, 2018. (Reuters)

NBA

# Raptors, Nuggets grab narrow wins as Warriors cruise

'We pulled one out. We were trying to get away from them and we never could'



Toronto Raptors forward Pascal Siakam shoots for a basket over Atlanta Hawks forwards Justin Anderson and Vince Carter in the second-half of their NBA game at Scotiabank Arena. **PICTURE:** USA TODAY Sports

AFP  
Los Angeles

The Toronto Raptors kept the pressure on in the NBA East race Tuesday as Serge Ibaka's late dunk made the difference in a scrappy 104-101 victory over the Atlanta Hawks. There was late drama also for Western Conference leaders Denver in Miami, where Nuggets star Nikola Jokic capped another triple-double with a go-ahead floater in the waning seconds in the visitors' 103-99 victory. And it was close in Oklahoma City, where the Minnesota Timberwolves edged the Thunder 119-117 in Ryan Saunders' first game as Minnesota's interim coach after Tom Thibodeau was abruptly fired on Sunday. Toronto coach Nick Nurse, whose Raptors improved to a league-leading 31-12 -

one game in front of Milwaukee in the East - admitted it was tough going in a game in which the Raptors and Hawks combined for 46 turnovers. "We pulled one out," Nurse said. "We were trying to get away from them and we never could. We were down late there and had to make a couple stops and a couple scores and we did both of those things - so, pretty good." Kawhi Leonard led Toronto with 31 points. His sixth steal of the night led to Ibaka's dunk with 17.1 seconds left, which put the Raptors up 102-101. A rebound by Ibaka on Atlanta's next possession led to a dunk by OG Anunoby for the final margin. In Miami, the Heat led by six with 5:27 to play, but Jokic's 29 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists for Denver were ultimately too much for the hosts to overcome. He drove through traffic to swish in the basket that put the Nuggets up 101-99 with

RESULTS

Golden State	122-95	New York
Clippers	128-109	Charlotte
Denver	103-99	Miami
Toronto	104-101	Atlanta
Phoenix	115-111	Sacramento
Minnesota	119-117	Oklahoma
Indiana	123-115	Cleveland
Philadelphia	132-115	Washington

Klay Thompson's 43 points included seven three-pointers. Stephen Curry chipped in 14 points and 14 assists and Kevin Durant had 24 points, six assists and six rebounds as the Warriors snapped a three-game home skid.

NOEL HURT IN THUNDER LOSS

In Oklahoma City, Minnesota's Andrew Wiggins scored a season-high 40 points and pulled down 10 rebounds to lead the

Timberwolves to victory in a game marred by a frightening fall for Thunder center Nerlens Noel. Noel took an elbow to the face as he defended a driving Wiggins and crashed to the court, appearing to smack his head on the hardwood. As he lay motionless, medical personnel were called and his teammates watched in worry as he was strapped to a stretcher and wheeled away. Thunder coach Billy Donovan said after the game that Noel had been hospitalized but gave no details on the player's condition. Amid the tension that followed Noel's fall, Russell Westbrook gave the Thunder a 115-114 lead with 1:14 left to play. But Josh Okogie's three-pointer with 26.8 seconds left put Minnesota up 119-115 and Westbrook missed two three-point attempts in the waning seconds that would have put Oklahoma City in front.

SPOTLIGHT

## NBA investigating Patrick McCaw's deal with Cavaliers

TCA/DPA  
San Jose, California

The NBA has launched a formal review into Cleveland signing former Warriors guard Patrick McCaw to a two-year, 6 million dollar deal and subsequently waiving him before his contract would become guaranteed, sources confirmed to Bay Area News Group. The *New York Times* first reported the news. The NBA immediately had suspicions that McCaw and the Cavaliers reached an agreement to waive him so he could become an unrestricted free agent, sources said. McCaw's representatives say that is not the case. Cleveland may have found the terms enticing so they could evaluate a young wing player without any risk. The Cavaliers then waived McCaw on Sunday to sign free-agent guard Cameron Payne to a 10-day contract. Regardless, the NBA plans to interview various parties to determine otherwise. The Warriors declined to comment on the incident, and if they asked the league to investigate. Under the terms of the league's Collective Bargaining Agreement, the NBA forbids teams and players to make any "unauthorised agreements" that involve making any deals "express or implied, oral or written, or promises, undertakings, representations, commitments, inducements, assurances of intent, or understandings of any kind" that are "concerning any future Renegotiation, Extension, or

other amendment of an existing Player Contract." The Cavaliers could face punishments if the NBA finds any wrongdoing. Fines could range anywhere between 3 to 6 million dollars as well as the loss of future first-round draft picks. The Warriors would not receive anything in return, per terms of the NBA's labour deal. But if the NBA voided McCaw's contract, he could become a restricted free agent again. That would give the Warriors an asset in a potential trade since they would have the ability to match any offer McCaw receives. The Warriors declined to match McCaw's offer sheet nearly seven months after rejecting their 1.7 million dollar qualifying offer and two-year, 5.2 million dollar deal, which included a non-guaranteed deal his second year. They wanted to keep Alfonzo McKinnie, whose contract became guaranteed on Monday as well as keep their 15th roster spot open to acquire another center. The Warriors also had no interest in paying an additional 11 million dollars in luxury taxes to retain McCaw, who had averaged only 4.0 points on 40.9 percent shooting in 16.9 minutes through 57 games in his second season with the Warriors. McCaw also suffered a spinal contusion on March 31 in Sacramento that sidelined him for six regular-season games and 15 playoff appearances. The Warriors selected McCaw at number 38 overall out of UNLV in the 2016 NBA draft after paying 2.2 million dollars to the Milwaukee Bucks for their pick.



Patrick McCaw.

NHL

# Knights stay hot, drop struggling Rangers

Reuters  
Las Vegas

Marc-Andre Fleury stopped 27 shots to pick up his league-leading 25th victory, and Brandon Pirri scored his seventh goal in eight games to lead the Vegas Golden Knights to their seventh straight victory 4-2 over the New York Rangers on Tuesday night in Las Vegas. Cody Eakin, Jonathan Marchessault and Ryan Carpenter also scored goals for Vegas, which moved into a tie with idol Calgary for first place in the Pacific Division with 58 points. The Flames have two games in hand. Fleury also extended his consecutive starts streak without a regulation loss to 12 games (9-0-3). The seven-game winning streak is the second longest in team history for Vegas, which won eight in a row en route to the Western Conference championship last season. Mika Zibanejad scored his 12th goal of the season and Jesper Fast netted his sixth for New York. Alexander Georgiev had 27 saves for the Rangers, who lost their fourth straight game, getting outscored 22-5 during that span. Eakin gave Vegas a 1-0 lead at the 16:02 mark of the first period with his 13th goal of the season. He broke in alone at the blue line after taking a no-look backhand pass from Alex Tuch, and he fired a wrist shot past Georgiev's blocker side. Pirri, recalled from Chicago on Monday where he was leading the AHL in scoring, made it 2-0 early in the second period with his 10th in 10 career games with Vegas. Max Pacioretty one-timed a shot from the right circle that caromed off the far post and Pirri

RESULTS

Boston	4-0	Minnesota
Buffalo	5-1	New Jersey
Carolina	4-3	Islanders
Pittsburgh	5-1	Florida
Washington	5-3	Philadelphia
Montreal	3-2	Detroit
Tampa Bay	4-0	Columbus
Dallas	3-1	St.Louis
Winnipeg	7-4	Colorado
Las Vegas	4-2	Rangers
San Jose	7-2	Edmonton

then tapped in the rebound, snapping an 0-for-17 drought for the Golden Knights on the power play. Seconds after Fleury made a pair of point-blank saves on Cody McLeod, Marchessault increased the Vegas lead to 3-0 with his 14th goal of the season at 18:53 of the middle period. Marchessault scooped up a loose puck near center ice and then broke in and beat Georgiev with a wrist shot to his blocker side. Zibanejad cut it to 3-1 midway through the third period, putting in a crossing pass from Mats Zuccarello into a wide-open left side of the net. The Rangers pulled Georgiev with 2:30 remaining, and Carpenter then sealed the win with an empty-netter with 1:20 to go. Fast scored with 23 seconds left. **JETS WIN, CONTINUE HOME DOMINANCE OVER AVS** Blake Wheeler had a goal and three assists, and Mark Scheifele and Jacob Trouba each

had a goal and two assists as the host Winnipeg Jets beat the Colorado Avalanche 7-4 on Tuesday night. Mathieu Perreault, Kyle Connor, Bryan Little and Andrew Copp also had goals for the Jets, who won their sixth straight home game against the Avalanche. Connor Hellebuyck stopped 36 shots to improve to 6-1-2 all-time against Colorado. It was the second straight game in which Winnipeg scored five-plus goals after netting one or fewer in four of its previous five games. Gabe Landeskog scored twice, Carl Soderberg had a goal and an assist, and Ryan Graves also scored for the Avalanche. Philipp Grubauer made 14 saves for Colorado, which has gone 1-5-2 in its past eight games. The Jets took a three-goal lead in the second period when Wheeler scored on a penalty kill at 3:22 and Little had a power-play goal just 3:10 later. It was the second straight game Little scored after going through an 11-game goal drought. The 4-1 lead seemed safe, but the Avalanche rallied to make it a game. Soderberg made it 4-2 when he poked the puck away from Jets defenseman Dmitry Kulikov at the Winnipeg blue line and went in alone on Hellebuyck. He flipped it over the goaltender's pads for his 12th goal of the season at 16:10 of the middle period. Graves, who scored his first NHL goal in a win over the New York Rangers on Friday, got his second 1:33 later to make it 4-3 heading into the third period. Copp gave the Jets some breathing room when he slipped the puck through Grubauer 3:59 into the third. Scheifele made it 6-3 midway through the period with his 23rd of the season.



Vegas Golden Knights goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury makes a third period save against the New York Rangers at T-Mobile Arena. **PICTURE:** USA TODAY Sports

NFL

# Chiefs and Mahomes primed for shootout with Colts, Luck

'That's also something that we can't focus on. We can't get into all that'

Reuters  
New York

The Kansas City Chiefs were not students of history this week.

Reminders, however, were frequent and could not be silenced, no matter how hard the Chiefs tried while preparing for a divisional home game on Saturday against the Indianapolis Colts in the AFC playoffs.

"We definitely see how (fans) feel, what they're expecting and things like that," said Chiefs cornerback Kendall Fuller. "That's also something that we can't focus on. We can't get into all that."

The Chiefs seemingly earned a nice reward, home-field advantage, with the top seed they secured by going 12-4 and winning their third straight AFC West title. Yet the franchise has lost six straight playoff games in Arrowhead Stadium, 11 of its last 12 playoff games overall and won only twice at home in the postseason all-time despite appearing in two of the first four Super Bowls.

By contrast, the Colts own two playoff wins in Kansas City and are 4-0 against the Chiefs in the postseason.

"Obviously there are a couple of us that played probably in the last one, but most of those (were) a long time ago," said Colts kicker Adam Vinatieri. "Obviously they are a great team and the number one seed. They have won a lot of games. They've got a very explosive offense. They've got probably the best returner in the National Football League with number 10 (Tyreek) Hill." Hill also set a Chiefs receiving record with 1,479 yards and tight end Travis Kelce set a Chiefs record with 103 receptions. They did so largely because of a quarterback who gives Kansas City a different postseason outlook, Patrick Mahomes.

In his debut season as a starter, Mahomes captivated the league by passing for 5,097 yards and 50 touchdowns as the Chiefs led the NFL in yards per game (425.6), scoring (35.3) and yards per play (6.84).

Enough that at the end of the final regular-season home game, a 35-3 win over Oakland, Chiefs fans were chanting, "MVP!"

"I am pretty sure it won't be the last time with that guy," said linebacker Justin Houston.

Yet Mahomes is aware of how the playoffs carry a different feel. He learned that a year ago, watching from the sideline when the Chiefs suffered another inexplicable home defeat, blowing



In his debut season, Patrick Mahomes captivated the league by passing for 5,097 yards and 50 touchdowns as the Chiefs led in yards per game.

## Packers confirm LaFleur as new head coach

The Green Bay Packers confirmed they have hired Matt LaFleur as the 15th coach of the NFL team. "We are very excited to welcome Matt as the next head coach of the Green Bay Packers," club president Mark Murphy said in a statement a day after the hiring was widely reported. "We found a coach with the background and experience that we think will get us back to playing winning football."

"We're also excited about the person - he is bright with a great work ethic and a perfect fit for Green Bay and the organization." LaFleur, 39, arrives in Green Bay after serving as offensive coordinator of the Tennessee Titans last season, calling plays for a Titans offense that finished seventh in the league in rushing (126.4 yards per game). Under his guidance quarterback

an 18-point halftime lead and falling 22-21 to the Tennessee Titans. "You have to find ways to keep battling on, keep pushing on and not just trying to get

Marcus Mariota set a club single-season record for completion percentage of 68.9 percent. In 2017 LaFleur was offensive coordinator for the Los Angeles Rams and for seven years before that he was quarterbacks coach for a series of teams. In Green Bay he'll unite with seasoned star quarterback Aaron Rodgers, who is just four years younger than his new head coach. Two-time NFL Most Valuable Player Rodgers led Green Bay to the 2011 Super Bowl title.

"Obviously there are a couple of us that played probably in the last one, but most of those (were) a long time ago," said Colts kicker Adam Vinatieri. "Obviously they are a great team and the number one seed. They have won a lot of games. They've got a very explosive offense. They've got probably the best returner in the National Football League with number 10 (Tyreek) Hill." Hill also set a Chiefs receiving record with 1,479 yards and tight end Travis Kelce set a Chiefs record with 103 receptions. They did so largely because of a quarterback who gives Kansas City a different postseason outlook, Patrick Mahomes.

**BUCCANEERS NAME BRUCE ARIANS HEAD COACH**  
The Tampa Bay Buccaneers announced Tuesday that former Arizona Cardinals coach Bruce Arians will come out of retirement to take over their head coaching job. The NFL club said it had agreed a four-year

through the game," said Mahomes, who, as a rookie, backed up Alex Smith. "You want to stay on the attack, you want to stay aggressive."

contract through 2022 with a fifth-year option in 2023 with the two-time coach of the year. Arians succeeds Dirk Koetter, who was sacked shortly after the Bucs completed a 5-11 season with a 34-23 loss to the Atlanta Falcons. "Bruce Arians is one of the NFL's most well-respected coaches over the past two decades and we are excited to have him leading our team," Buccaneers owner Bryan Glazer said in a press release. "Throughout this process, we focused on finding the right coach with a proven ability to elevate our players and lead our team forward. "Bruce has played a large role in the development and career success of some of our league's best players and we look forward to seeing him continue that work here with our franchise."

Several Colts missed practice to begin preparations for the Chiefs, including standout receiver TY Hilton (ankle). Safety Mike Mitchell (calf) appeared to come away with the most serious injury suffered in the Houston win.

Lon Mack set a franchise playoff record with 148 yards rushing as Indianapolis scored two first-quarter touchdowns and gained quick control against the Texans. Quarterback Andrew Luck has the capacity to duel favorably with Mahomes. Luck passed for 39 touchdowns, giving him and Mahomes the most TDs of any opposing quarterback combination in playoff history. Luck quarterbacked the Colts when they rallied from a 28-point deficit in the third quarter to edge the Chiefs 45-44 at Indianapolis in the 2013 playoffs.

He will go against a Chiefs defense featuring a strong pass rush but is weak elsewhere.

"In every game we go in, the goal is to run the football effectively," Luck said. "That makes everything simpler and in a sense easier!"

Several Colts missed practice to begin preparations for the Chiefs, including standout receiver TY Hilton (ankle). Safety Mike Mitchell (calf) appeared to come away with the most serious injury suffered in the Houston win.

SPOTLIGHT

## Reid not targeted for drug testing, say NFL and NFLPA

Reuters  
New York

Carolina Panthers safety Eric Reid was not targeted by the NFL's performance-enhancing drug testing programme, according to a statement released Wednesday by the NFL and the NFL Players Association.

The league and union asked John Lombardo, the longtime administrator of the performance-enhancing drug testing programme, to investigate after Reid said after the Panthers' game on December 17 that he'd undergone his seventh drug test since joining the team as a free agent in September.

Reid had suggested the tests weren't random and that he was tested repeatedly because of a collusion grievance he'd filed against the league.

A joint statement from the NFL and players association released yesterday said their investigation showed no evidence of his claims.

"We take any claim questioning the integrity of our collectively bargained performance enhancing drug policy seriously," the statement read.

"We asked the independent administrator of the policy to review and produce a report on the claims of targeting. A copy of this report, which con-

tains personal and confidential testing information, has been provided to Eric Reid. We will not breach any player's confidentiality, but can confirm that the report documents the dates he was randomly selected for testing and the actual dates of the drug tests.

"The report also demonstrates that Mr. Reid's tests were randomly generated via computer algorithm and that his selection for testing was normal when compared with the number of tests players were randomly selected for throughout the league during the time that he was on an active roster.

There is no evidence of targeting or any other impropriety with respect to his selection for testing."

The San Francisco 49ers selected Reid with the No. 18 overall pick of the 2013 NFL Draft. Reid, 27, became the first player to join his then-teammate, Colin Kaepernick, in kneeling during the national anthem to protest social injustice.

On Reid's behalf, the NFLPA in May filed a grievance, alleging team owners and the league conspired to keep Reid out of the league.

He was unemployed until he signed with Carolina in Week 4 but has not dropped the grievance, which is expected to be heard during the offseason.

FOCUS

## Kremlin blames 'logistics' for missed WADA deadline

AFP  
Moscow

The Kremlin yesterday said Moscow's failure to meet the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) deadline last week to hand over data from its anti-doping laboratory could be explained by logistical problems.

The remarks by President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov came as a WADA team was scheduled to visit Russia to obtain test data from the drug-tainted Moscow lab.

WADA will consider next steps at a January 14-15 meeting of its compliance committee.

Peskov told journalists that the data had been ready to be passed to the experts when they last came to Moscow in December but they left empty-handed after Russia raised issues with the certification of WADA equipment under Russian law.

"There were certain working disagreements tied to the nature of the how and on what (data) carriers this is handed over. In essence these were is-

substance," Peskov said.

"As far as we know... there is an understanding now with WADA representatives regarding how the work will be carried out in the future," he added, without elaborating.

WADA said in a statement on January 7 that the issue of equipment during the last visit "has since been resolved by the Russian authorities".

In September, WADA conditionally lifted a ban on the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA), after it was suspended for a state-sponsored doping operation.

This paved the way for Russian athletes to return to competition across all sports. But one of the conditions was data access by the end of 2018.

WADA's leadership has been strongly criticised over its decision to lift Russia's suspension before obtaining access to the Moscow lab information.

The IAAF, world governing body for athletics, said it would maintain Russia's ban. Russian athletics teams were barred from the 2016 Rio Olympics and 2017 World Championships in London.

GOLF

# Imahira receives special invitation to Masters

AFP  
Washington

Japan's Shugo Imahira, last year's Japan Golf Tour leading money winner, has accepted a special invitation to play in this year's Masters tournament, Augusta National chairman Fred Ridley said on Tuesday.

The 26-year-old from suburban Tokyo will make his Masters debut after missing the cut in all three prior major starts at the 2016 British Open, 2017 US Open and 2018 PGA Championship.

Imahira, ranked 53rd in the world, had 14 top-10 finishes last year and won his second career title at the Bridgestone Open, closing with three birdies for a one-stroke victory. His other Japan Tour title came at the 2017 Kansai Open.

"Bobby Jones and Clifford Roberts established the Masters as a global sporting event, so throughout our history special invitations for deserving international players have always been carefully considered," Ridley said. "We are pleased to continue this tradition by welcoming Shugo Imahira to our field

this year based on his impressive record during the past 12 months. We look forward to hosting him and all of our Masters competitors in April."

A field of 80 is set for the year's first major tournament April 11-14 with two ways remaining to crack the lineup for the 83rd edition of the golfing classic at Augusta National - win a full-points PGA event or finish in the world rankings top 50 in the week before the Masters.

## WIE EXPECTS TO RETURN IN TIME TO DEFEND SINGAPORE TITLE

Michelle Wie says she is likely to return from right wrist surgery in time to defend her LPGA title at next month's HSBC Women's World Championship in Singapore. The 29-year-old American has already resumed putting and chipping, posting photos and updates on her Instagram page, and appeared at a promotional event for equipment-maker Callaway last week.

"I cannot wait. I'm so excited to get back out there," Wie said in an LPGA website posting that said she would likely return by Singapore. "I've been doing my training, doing my workouts

every day. I'm just excited to be healthy again and give it my all."

Wie underwent wrist surgery in October to repair a small fracture, bone spurs and a pinched nerve. She played only 16 events last year, her fewest since the 2009 campaign. Last weekend on Instagram, she shared her delight at being able to putt and chip once more.

"Yesterday was the first time hitting putts longer than 4 ft and I have to say it felt REALLY good to make some clutch putts against @erikanderslang @brodiesmith21 in our little putting contest," Wie said.

"Let's just say...the competitive juices are reallllly starting to brew inside. Getting antsy to come back but I also realize that I need to be patient with my body."

She later posted a chip shot video, adding: "First day chipping!! Woohoooo! I still remember how to hit a chip shot!"

Wie has won five LPGA events, ending a four-year win drought since her 2014 US Women's Open title by capturing her 2018 season opener in Singapore, where she hopes to defend her crown starting February 28.



Shugo Imahira of Japan plays a shot during a practice round ahead of the Sony Open In Hawaii at Waialae Country Club on in Honolulu, Hawaii, on Tuesday. (Getty Images/AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

# Pucovski gets shock call-up as Marsh brothers dumped

Finch and Handscomb were axed from the 13-man squad for Sri Lanka Tests

AFP  
Sydney

Young batting prodigy Will Pucovski was parachuted into the Australia squad for two Tests against Sri Lanka in a shock call-up yesterday, with veteran Shaun Marsh and his brother Mitch dumped. Also axed from the 13-man squad after the humbling 2-1 series defeat to India were underperforming opener Aaron Finch and middle-order batsman Peter Handscomb.

In-form Joe Burns was recalled for the first time since the South Africa tour early last year and could open the innings with rookie Marcus Harris, who did enough against India to keep his place.

But they face competition from Matt Renshaw, who has been handed another opportunity despite misfiring in the domestic Sheffield Shield this season. Allrounder Marnus Labuschagne was retained from the team that played the rain-affected drawn Test in Sydney this week, as was Travis Head.

Selectors also kept faith with their pace attack of Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins, with veteran Peter Siddle also included.

National selector Trevor Hohns said "there is no doubt the India series produced some disappointing results" and change was needed, after four Tests characterised by the failure of any Australian batsmen to score a century.

"Ultimately Aaron, Peter, Shaun and Mitch have not produced the performances expected of them with the bat at the Test level," he said. "They have been given a good opportunity, but have not produced the scores we need." He added, however, that the door was not closed and they must now prove themselves again in domestic cricket and the one-day series against India this month.

Pucovski was the surprise call-up. The 20-year-old is one of the brightest batting talents in the country, scoring a double century for Victoria last year — the first Australian under 21 to do so since Ricky Ponting.

But he has only played eight first-class matches, and after that double ton took a break from cricket because of a mental

The 20-year-old Will Pucovski is one of the brightest batting talents in Australia. (Cricket Australia)



health issue. "Will Pucovski is an exciting young player who is making his mark in the Sheffield Shield. He is another player with a track record of making centuries," said Hohns.

Despite his relative inexperience, Pucovski said he was ready to step up. "It is every kid's dream. To think that in two weeks time there is a chance I would play for my country is amazing. I can't use words to describe it," he told reporters. "I can't wait to get up there and in amongst it."

Burns, who has played 14 Tests, has been knocking on the door this season with Queensland, while Renshaw has been unlucky not to get another call-up

until now, since his last appearance at Johannesburg in 2018. "We see him as a long-term prospect as a Test player and have confidence in his ability to bounce back following a string of low scores early in the Shield season," said Hohns of the 22-year-old.

Renshaw, who has a century and three 50s from his 11 Tests, said he wanted to emulate the exploits of India's rock-solid number three Cheteshwar Pujara. "Everyone talks about (Virat) Kohli and (Ajinkya) Rahane, but Pujara was unbelievable and showed how good he was mentally to bat for so long," he said.

Burns, Renshaw and Pucovski will all play for a Cricket Australia XI in a pink-

ball match against Sri Lanka ahead of the Tests in preparation for the day-nighter in Brisbane from January 24. The second Test is in Canberra from February 1.

**Australia squad:** Joe Burns, Pat Cummins, Marcus Harris, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Tim Paine (capt), Will Pucovski, Matt Renshaw, Mitchell Starc, Peter Siddle

**Cricket Australia XI:** Joe Burns (capt), Kurtis Patterson, Scott Boland, Jake Doran, Jon Holland, Marnus Labuschagne, Michael Neser, Will Pucovski, Jason Sangha, Matt Renshaw, Chris Tremain

FOCUS

## Elgar to captain South Africa in final Test against Pak

Agencies  
Johannesburg

Opening batsman Dean Elgar will captain South Africa in the third and final Test against Pakistan, starting at the Wanderers Stadium from tomorrow, Cricket South Africa announced yesterday.

Elgar, 31, will stand in for regular captain Faf du Plessis, who was suspended for one match after South Africa fell short of the required over rate during their nine-wicket win in the second Test at Newlands. It was the second offence under Du Plessis's leadership within a 12-month period. It will be the second time Elgar has captained the side. He led South Africa in the first Test against England at Lord's in 2017 when Du Plessis returned home for the birth of his first child.

South Africa have also called up uncapped Pieter Malan on standby for Elgar's opening batting partner, Aiden Markram, who will undergo a fitness test today.

Markram suffered a badly bruised right thigh while fielding during the second Test at Newlands and was unable to bat in the second innings. Malan, 29, has performed consistently as an opening batsman for the Cape Cobras franchise, scoring seven centuries during the past two seasons.

### HAMZA SET TO DEBUT AS SOUTH AFRICA EYE SERIES SWEEP

Meanwhile, South Africa are set to hand a debut to batsman Zubayr Hamza at the Wanderers as they seek a clean sweep of the series against a battered touring side. Hamza, 23, will be a replacement for du Plessis.

The loss of Du Plessis, a centurion at Newlands, is a significant blow for the home side, especially with Markram's potential absence, and fellow middle-order batsman Theunis de Bruyn out of form and averaging just 19.33 after eight Tests.

It could see a shuffle of the batting order with Temba Bavuma moving to number four, De Bruyn to five and Hamza taking his place at six. "It is disappointing losing Faf, he plays an immense role in the team both on and off the field," South Africa coach Ottis Gibson told report-



ers, adding the team was determined to sweep the series.

"Last year we had a mission within the team to win 3-0 against India to help us get back to number one (in the Test rankings), but then we got up to Johannesburg, changed the team and lost the Test match. We are aware of that, and we have a mission to not only win the next Test, but also the two against Sri Lanka (in February) as well. The squad is hungry to finish the series off on a high."

Pakistan showed signs of an improved batting performance in the second Test but are likely to face another lively wicket at the Wanderers that will be well-suited to South Africa's barrage of seamers.

Coach Mickey Arthur has suggested there will be changes to the side for the series finale, which is followed by five One-Day Internationals and three Twenty20 matches. One of these could see the return of 20-year-old all-rounder Shadab Khan, most likely for ineffective fellow leg-spinner Yasir Shah, who took just a single wicket in the opening two Tests.

"Shadab is a genuine all-rounder," Arthur said. "It allows us, like we did at Lord's (in 2018), to have him at seven, Faheem (Ashraf) at eight, and then three bowlers, which can be any of the quicks or even Yasir Shah if we think the pitch is going to turn. It gives us that flexibility."

AMBITION

## England cricket boss Giles targets World Cup and Ashes double

AFP  
London

England's new director of cricket Ashley Giles said yesterday he believes a World Cup and Ashes double is possible for his side this year. England are currently top of the global 50-over rankings and will head into a home World Cup that starts in May as one of the favourites to win a trophy they have never lifted.

After that tournament, they defend the Ashes in a five-Test series, also on home soil, against arch-rivals Australia. It will be the first time the two events have taken place in the same country in the same year since the inaugural 1975 men's World Cup in England.

Asked which he would rather win, Giles, most recently head of sport at Warwickshire — the county he represented during his career as an England left-arm spinner — told Sky Sports at Lord's: "I'll have both thanks. This year represents a great opportunity for us to do something really special but at the moment that's all it is."

"The train is moving at a hell of a pace down the tracks for the World Cup but my role is to make sure we stay on track and there's nothing there ahead of us that can derail us. We've probably never been in such a strong position to challenge for both," he added, with England second only to India in the Test standings.

Giles is filling a vacancy left by the departure of Andrew Strauss. The former England captain stood down after his wife, Ruth, was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer that eventually led to her death in December.

"Obviously, the circumstances of the position becoming available are not great at all. I honestly feel for Strauss and the family," said Giles. "But the opportunity for me was great heading into a really exciting year. Strauss has done a lot of good work. He redressed that balance between white ball (limited-overs) and red-ball cricket, which I think was important and of late we've started to see the Test team flourish as well."

Giles had an 18-month spell as England



England's new director of cricket Ashley Giles poses for a photograph at Lords cricket ground in London yesterday. (AFP)

limited-overs coach that ended in a humiliating defeat by minnows the Netherlands at the 2014 World Twenty20 in Bangladesh. But he was always confident of a return to the England and Wales Cricket Board set-up. "I think I actually said at the time, I'd come back and do this job, perhaps a bit flippanantly," Giles explained. "I've always been driven to work at the highest level and test myself as much as I can. I'm fully aware of the pressure that can come but 2014 was a long time ago."

One of Giles's main tasks will be to find a replacement for current England coach Trevor Bayliss, with the Australian stepping down at the end of the 2019 season. Giles said he remained open to the idea of having specialist Test and one-day coaches despite his own experience when he and Andy Flower split the jobs.

"The benefits of two coaches are clearly (sharing) the workload. The disadvantages

are two different voices," he explained. "I think we always imagined when Andy and I took the roles on that we'd see two different squads developing. We are actually seeing those squads come together now."

Giles said he was determined to clamp down on the kind of incidents that led to star all-rounder Ben Stokes facing an affray charge last year following a late-night drinking session in Bristol. Stokes was acquitted.

"I have a reputation for being a bit of disciplinarian but you also have to accept these guys are human and are going to make mistakes," said Giles. "Everyone needs boundaries, guys need to know where they stand and what's right and wrong. It's important to me, how we look to our supporters and how we are respected. It's almost as important as actually winning. A big part for me is us being the best and most respected team in the world."

ROUND-UP

## Pakistan recall Amir for South Africa ODI series

AFP  
Lahore

Pakistan selectors yesterday recalled fast bowler Mohamed Amir in a 16-man squad for the five-match series against South Africa starting later this month. The 26-year-old fast bowler failed to get a wicket in his last five one-day internationals, including three Asia Cup matches in September last year.

He was left out of Pakistan's last series against New Zealand, but was redrafted for the one-day side on the back of good form in the ongoing Test series in South Africa.

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) said there were five changes from the Test side, which is presently in Johannesburg preparing for the third and final Test starting on Friday. "Asad Shafiq, Azhar Ali, Haris Sohail, Mohammad Abbas and Yasir Shah have been replaced by Mohammad Hafeez, Shoaib Malik, Hussain Talat, Usman Shinwari and Imad Wasim, respectively," said a PCB release.

Chief selector Inzamam-ul-Haq said the squad was selected with the World Cup — to be held in England from May 30-July 14 this year — in mind. "While selecting the squad, we have tried to maintain consistency, taking into consideration player performances in white-ball cricket as well as looking ahead to the upcoming ODI challenges, including the World Cup," he said.

Amir's strong performance in the Test series made him an "automatic selection," said Inzamam. There were no places for all-rounder Haris Sohail — who returned from South Africa without featuring in the Tests due to a knee injury — and fast bowler Junaid Khan.

Batsman Shan Masood and all-rounder Hussain Talat earned maiden calls for one-day internationals. The five-match series starts in Port Elizabeth on January 19, followed by matches in Durban (January 22), Centurion (January 25), Johannesburg (January 27), and Cape Town (January 30).

**Squad:** Sarfaraz Ahmed (captain), Babar Azam, Faheem Ashraf, Fakhar Zaman, Hasan Ali, Hussain Talat, Imad Wasim, Imam-ul-Haq, Mohammad Amir, Mohammad Hafeez, Mohammad Rizwan, Shadab Khan, Shaheen Afridi, Shan Masood, Shoaib Malik, Usman Shinwari.



### SOUTH AFRICA'S ALBIE MORKEL ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT

Former South Africa international all-rounder Albie Morkel has decided to retire from all forms of cricket, ending a two-decade career that earned him a reputation as a clean striker of the ball and a bowler full of guile.

The 37-year-old, the older brother of fast bowler Morne Morkel, played a single test, 58 One-Day Internationals and 50 Twenty20 matches for South Africa over 11 years, having more influence with bat than ball as a "finisher" at the end of limited overs innings.

"Time has run out for me on the cricket field, and I would like to announce my retirement from the game," Morkel said in a statement. "There are some new opportunities on the horizon, and I'm looking forward to grow into those. I will be enjoying the game from the other side of the rope."

Morkel was one of the top buys at the inaugural Indian Premier League auction when he went to the Chennai Super Kings for \$675,000 in 2008, and later played for Delhi Daredevils, Rising Pune Supergiants and Royal Challengers Bangalore. He also had spells in English county cricket with Derbyshire, Durham and Somerset.

## TOP OF THE LINE

## Dutch legend Neeskens praises Qatar's WC plans

Two-time FIFA World Cup finalist **Johan Neeskens** praised Qatar's preparations for 2022 during a recent visit to Doha.

Neeskens, who starred for the Netherlands in both the 1974 and 1978 tournaments, took a tour of the Legacy Pavilion at Al Bidda Tower alongside Royal Dutch Football Association (KNVB) general secretary Gijs de Jong. The visit coincided with the KNVB signing a memorandum of understanding with the Qatar Football Association.

Famous for being the second 'Johan' alongside Johan Cruyff, Neeskens won three successive European Cups playing alongside Cruyff at Ajax, before the pair moved to Barcelona to claim further honours, including the European Cup Winners' Cup.

During this spell, the Dutch



national team developed its famous Total Football - a unique tactical style which involved any outfield player taking over the role of any other player in the

team. Total Football meant the Dutch became famous for their classy style, though it marginally failed to bring success, with the Netherlands losing succes-

sive World Cup finals to West Germany and Argentina respectively.

After hearing about Qatar's infrastructure projects and legacy programmes, Neeskens said, "You have four years to go but what you have already achieved - and what you're still planning - is very impressive."

Neeskens continued: "I think it is amazing how you want to show the world what you can achieve because the ideas are unbelievable - from the stadiums to the accommodation, such as the desert camps and cruise ships."

Neeskens also believes Qatar's national team is on the right track after a string of positive results in recent months. He said: "I recently watched Qatar draw against Iceland and beat Switzerland - and they played very good football. Switzerland

then beat Belgium 5-2, so this shows how much Qatar has been improving."

"The World Cup can give so much - especially if the host nation is performing well - so I hope Qatar can keep it up. I also hope the Netherlands qualifies for 2022 and we finally win the tournament."

De Jong was also impressed with Qatar's preparations - particularly plans to donate stadium infrastructure to developing countries after the tournament.

"I've been very impressed by all the preparations," said de Jong. "The stadium models look good and the distances are so short between venues. The legacy part is also very important. It's a good idea to help other parts of the world and to get everyone involved in the tournament." (SC.qa)

## HORSE RACING

## Golam and Raqee race to thrilling Al Shaqab Cup win

Jockeys Bachelot and Hamel, and trainer Ghazali register two victories

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Saleem Golam rode Hassan al-Matwi's Raqee to a fantastic victory in the Al Shaqab Cup, holding off two wards of champion trainer Jassim Mohamed Ghazali at the post in a blanket finish at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Rayyan Park yesterday.

In the six-furlong feature for local Purebred Arabians on dirt, the five-year-old colt beat Rassan, running on the outside under Harry Bentley, by half-a-length, avenging his defeat in November's Doha Cup. JP Guillambert took a shot at victory on the rails astride Istibdad but had to settle for third by a head.

Theo Bachelot helmed his second winner of the day, after riding Murihk to his maiden victory in the first race of the day, when he was in the saddle of Take A Nap for the six-furlong Thoroughbred Handicap event for horses rated 85 and below. Ghazali's ward edged out Jimmy Quinn-riden Shaka Zulu by a quarter of a length, while Qatari jockeys Rashid Ali al-Marrri and Faleh Bughanaim helmed Adham and Tijan to third and fourth place finish respectively.

Ghazali's second winner of the day was Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari's Muraqabah, who registered her first victory in Qatar since April 2017. Champion jockey Bentley helmed the seven-year-old mare to a fine one length victory in the six-furlong Local Thoroughbred Handicap for horses rated 70-90, ahead of Ryan Curatolo-riden Khoud.

Zuhair Mohsen's ward, Al Mikdam, was the first career winner for Qatari jockey Abdulla Saleh al-Yafei, after the two combined for a comfortable two lengths and a quarter victory in the Thoroughbred Handicap event for horses rated 75 and below.

In the race open to Qatari riders only, Ali Khalid al-Mosallam and Abdulla Hozam al-Marrri finished second and third astride Ghazali-trained Captain Vancouver and Deborah Mountain-schooled Palmetto Dunes respectively.

Hamad Ahmed al-Malki al-Jehani's Lawless Louis had shown promise early on this season but plunged to forgettable runs last two times. Yesterday, with Jean Baptiste Hamel in the saddle, the five-year-old bounced back with a close victory over Yousef al-Hajri-riden Thorndyke in the six-furlong Thoroughbred Handicap event for horses rated 75 and below.



Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club Racing manager Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi (right) and Al Shaqab's Nasser al-Kuwari (third from right) pose with the winners of Al Shaqab Cup after Raqee won the race at the Al Rayyan Park yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim



Saleem Golam (left) rides Raqee to Al Shaqab Cup victory ahead of Rassan, ridden by Harry Bentley (right), and Istibdad, ridden by JP Guillambert (centre), yesterday.

Earlier in the day, Julian Smart-trained Murihk and Rashid Mohamed al-Jehani-saddled debutante Sarmad were among the Arabians to shed their maiden status, while after three winless seasons, Al Jasra Stud's Musaiter Bu Thaila registered his first career win, topping the Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate event.

## RESULTS

**Race 1:** 1. Murihk (Theo Bachelot), 2. Garraffah (Mathieu Pelletan), 3. Hathlool (Ryan Curatolo), 4. Wadha PY (Tomas Lukasek). Won by: 2 1/4, 2 1/4, 1 3/4. Time: 2:01.44. Owner: Sheikh Khalifa bin Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani. Trainer: Julian Smart.

**Race 2:** 1. Sarmad (Jean Baptiste Hamel), 2. Qatar Sun (Damien

Morin), 3. Al Samel (Rashid Ali al-Marrri), 4. Rajab (Theo Bachelot). Won by: 1, 2 1/4, 3. Time: 2:01.09. Owner: Mubarak bin Saeed al-Jafai al-Naimi. Trainer: Rashid Mohamed al-Jehani.

**Race 3:** 1. Musaiter Bu Thaila (Ivan Rossi), 2. Al Motanaa (JP Guillambert), 3. Sultan Bu Thaila (Gerald Avranche), 4. Insijam (Harry Bentley). Won by: 4 1/4, 2

3/4, 4 1/2. Time: 1:51.99. Owner: Al Jasra Stud. Trainer: Tareq Essa Abdulla.

**Race 4:** 1. Lawless Louis (Jean Baptiste Hamel), 2. Thorndyke (Yousef al-Hajri), 3. Tadeem (JP Guillambert), 4. Indaria (Eduardo Pedroza). Won by: 3/4, Nk, 3/4. Time: 1:12.84. Owner: Hamad Ahmed Hassan al-Malki al-Jehani. Trainer: Hamad Ahmed al-Malki al-Jehani.

**Race 5:** 1. Al Mikdam (Abdulla Saleh al-Yafei), 2. Captain Vancouver (Ali Khalid al-Mosallam), 3. Palmetto Dunes (Abdulla Hozam al-Marrri), 4. Istibdad (Abdulaziz Jaber Dharman). Won by: 2 1/4, 1 3/4, 1/2. Time: 2:02.96. Owner: Saeed Mohamed Shafi al-Shafi. Trainer: Zuhair Mohsen.

**Race 6:** 1. Take A Nap (Theo Bachelot), 2. Shaka Zulu (Jimmy Quinn), 3. Adham (Rashid Ali al-Marrri), 4. Tijan (Faleh Bughanaim). Won by: 1/4, 1 3/4, 1 1/2. Time: 1:12.13. Owner: Abdulla Mohamed al-Kuwari Sons. Trainer: Jassim Mohamed Ghazali.

**Race 7:** 1. Muraqabah (Harry Bentley), 2. Khoud (Ryan Curatolo), 3. Damsah (Eduardo Pedroza), 4. Akram (Shakir al-Balushi). Won by: 1, 1, 3/4. Time: 1:13.62. Owner: Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari. Trainer: Jassim Mohamed Ghazali.

**Race 8:** 1. Raqee (Saleem Golam), 2. Rassan (Harry Bentley), 3. Istibdad (JP Guillambert), 4. Saab (Gerald Avranche). Won by: 1/2, Hd, 1 1/4. Time: 1:18.76. Owner: Hassan al-Matwi. Trainer: Hassan al-Matwi.

## Qatar to open handball world championship campaign tomorrow

Qatar handball team is preparing to begin its campaign in the prestigious IHF World Men's Handball Championship 2019 in Germany and Denmark. The tournament kicks off today.

The participating teams are distributed into four groups, and Qatar is pooled in group

D alongside Sweden, Hungary, Argentina, Egypt and Angola. Qatar's first match will be held tomorrow against Angola in Copenhagen.

World Men's Handball Championship will be the 26th edition hosted by the International Handball Federation and will conclude on January 27.

## FOCUS

## QMMF announces route details for Manateq Qatar Cross-Country Rally

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Officials at the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) announced details of the challenging route that competitors will face at the Manateq Qatar Cross-Country Rally (QCCR), the opening round of the FIA World Cup for Cross-Country Rallies, on February 21-26, 2019.

The event gets underway with a ceremonial start at the Pearl on February 21. Timed action fires into life the next day, with a short desert stage of 102km and this will define the starting order for the first of the longer selective sections.

The following two days of competition across the length and breadth of the deserts of Qatar will run for 313km and 338km, respectively, with final stage distances subject to forthcoming route checks.

The fourth stage on February 24 will offer almost 350km of timed competition but this will be divided into two stages by a road liaison section of 56km. The FIA recommends that the last timed test is shorter than the rest and the QMMF have duly arranged 270 kilometres of competition to decide the outcome of the rally on February 26.

In a provisional route of 2,059km, competitors will tackle 1,367km of timed competition. The finishers will then be conveyed to the Pearl for the prize

giving ceremony.

Rally officials have also announced a generous prize fund for winners in all categories. The top five in the T1 category will receive generous cash awards, with \$10,000 USD for the winner, down to \$4,000 USD for fifth place.

The winner of the T2 category for series production cross-country vehicles will receive \$8,000 USD - with prize money paid down to fifth place - and the T3 winner will earn \$6,000 USD down to a prize of \$3,000 USD for third place.

The event has built a reputation as being one of the most demanding in the FIA calendar for both drivers and co-drivers. Last year's rally was won by Poland's Jakub Przygonski and his Belgian co-driver Tom Colsoul and they went on to win the FIA World Cup for the first time.

The duo are currently competing at the Dakar Rally in Peru, but Przygonski fondly recalls the challenges that he and Colsoul faced in Qatar last April. The Pole said: "It is a tough race with the navigation and a lot can happen. We know there are tough penalties for missing waypoints. You have to be really focused. One small mistake in navigation and you can lose all the time."

The Losail Sports Arena was used to host rally headquarters and the media centre at November's Manateq International Rally of Qatar and the facility will play host to the cross-country event for the first time with the bivouac located in the grounds of the stadium.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Tickets for 2019 Qatar Total Open to go on sale today



Germany's Angelique Kerber, the 2014 finalist, will return to Doha for the 2019 edition of Qatar Total Open.

By Sports Reporter

Doha

The online sales of tickets for the Qatar Total Open 2019 will go live today while purchases in select malls will commence on Saturday.

The tournament, which will be held from February 11 - 16 at the Khalifa International Tennis & Squash Complex, will feature some of the world's best WTA players including world No.1 and 2014 champion Simona Halep; No. 2, three-time Grand Slam champion and 2014 finalist Angelique Kerber; as well as 2018 US Open champion Naomi Osaka of Japan.

Fans can purchase tickets for the prestigious event online at www.qatartennis.org or at the tournament booths in Landmark, City Center and Villaggio malls. Tickets will also be available onsite at the Khalifa International Tennis & Squash Complex.

Meanwhile, employees of Total Qatar could avail themselves of a special exclusive sale of tick-

et starting yesterday.

"Qatar Total Open 2019 is here and this edition, which is the 17th, promises to be greater and better than before. We are extremely proud of our achievements over the years as the tournament keeps getting better and better. We are looking forward to welcoming the fans once again as they come to watch their favourite players slug it out at the Khalifa International Tennis & Squash Complex. This is a tournament for the whole family and it promises to be a weeklong fiesta of fun and entertainment," said tournament director Saad Saleh al-Mohannadi.

Managing Director of Total EP Golfe and Country Chair Laurent Wolffsheim said, "As title sponsor, we are extremely proud to be part of this new edition of Qatar Total Open. I would encourage everyone to book tickets and experience these 6 days of excitement and high level of sportsmanship. Thanks to the Qatar Tennis Federation, this tournament continues to grow each year and we look forward to seeing a great turnout to enjoy this prestigious event."