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GULF TIMES SPORT



SPOTLIGHT

beIN Sports signs Mourinho for a 'Special' week of football

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FOOTBALL / AFC ASIAN CUP INTERVIEW

Qatar focusing on one game at a time, says Akram Afif

'We are playing our style, our performance and everything is how we have learned'

AFC
Al Ain

Akram Afif has insisted he and his Qatar teammates are focusing on one game at a time, not only during the current AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 but all the way through until the country hosts the FIFA World Cup in 2022.

Afif and his compatriots notched up a 2-0 win over Lebanon in Al Ain on Wednesday thanks to goals from Bassam al-Rawi and Almoze Ali as Qatar made a winning start to the continental championship for the first time in almost 40 years.

The victory ensures Felix Sanchez and his team joined Saudi Arabia at the top of the early standings in Group E and that the Qataris go into their next game against DPR Korea knowing victory will effectively seal their spot in the Round of 16.

But while Qatar are attempting to reach the knockout phase of the AFC Asian Cup for just the third time, the issue of the team's ongoing development in the lead-up to the FIFA World Cup lingers in the background.

The AFC Asian Cup forms part of Qatar's long-term plan to prepare for the tournament in four years' time, with the team also due to travel to Brazil in June to play in the Copa America. Afif, though, stresses he and his teammates are looking no further ahead than to the next game.

"For us there's no pressure and people are not saying that Qatar will win the Asian Cup," said the winger. "We are playing our style, our performance and everything is how we have learned."

"We will do our best in each game, even if we have in six months the Copa America in Brazil and there are a lot of other tournaments. We'll do our best."

"We have the World Cup in 2022 and the World Cup is



the highest competition in the world, but we're not focusing on the Copa America or the World Cup, we're focusing on DPR Korea."

"And when we finish against DPR Korea, we will go to the next one. We finish the next one, then we'll go to the next, all the way until the World Cup."

Qatar were given a stern test by the Lebanese in their tournament opener, with Sanchez's side forced to remain patient in their quest for a win that came after the introduction of AFC Player of the Year Abdelkarim

Hassan just after the hour mark.

Hassan injected greater urgency into the team and al-Rawi scored soon after with a curling free-kick before Ali netted the decisive second when he pounced from close range.

"The first half, it wasn't easy to create chances but we tried our best," said Afif. "We have to be patient. Lebanon played a great game, they defended very well and tried to play on the counter-attack and using throw-ins and free-kicks."

"In the second half I think they got tired, because you can't

defend for 90 minutes and you can't attack for 90 minutes. We tried our best and we scored the first goal."

"We tried to do that in the first half but we couldn't, we had to wait until the second half."

"They had to play with four at the back and that gave us some space and we scored the second goal. We tried to keep a clean sheet and we took the three points and we did our best."

The win was Qatar's first in an AFC Asian Cup opener since 1980 and sets them up to take on a DPR Korea team that lost 4-0

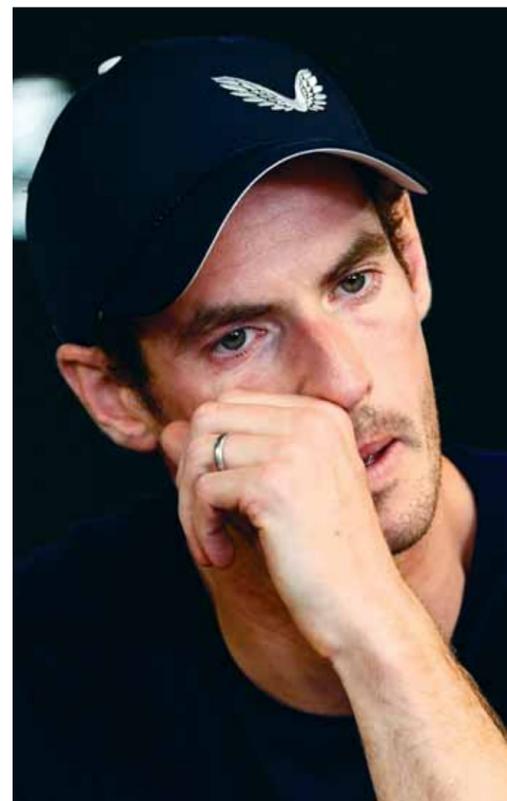
to Saudi Arabia in their opener after playing much of the game with only 10 men.

"I think it's important that we get these three points," said Afif. "But now we have to forget the Lebanon game and focus on the DPR Korea game."

"It's not that the Koreans lost 4-0 and that it will be an easy game. All the games will be hard for us, if we play the highest team or the lowest team in the ranking. All of them are the same and we will try to win the next game so it's easier for us to qualify."

TENNIS

Pained Murray says Australian Open could be his swansong



Andy Murray of Britain breaks down during a press conference in Melbourne yesterday where he announced his plans to retire later this year. See also page 7

Reuters
Melbourne

Andy Murray may retire after the Australian Open, with the severe pain from his troublesome right hip having become almost unbearable for him to play on, the former world number one said yesterday.

Overcome with emotion, the three-times Grand Slam champion wept at a media conference as he revealed that he had initially planned to quit after playing this year's Wimbledon tournament but now felt Melbourne Park might end up his swansong.

"There's a chance of that, for sure, because I'm not sure I'm able to play through the pain for another four or five months," the 31-year-old Briton, now ranked 230th in the world, said.

"The pain is too much, really, and I don't want to continue playing that way."

"The pain is not allowing me to enjoy competing or training or any of the stuff I love about tennis."

Five-times a runner up at Melbourne Park, Murray had surgery on the joint a year ago, having played with pain for a number of years. He came back last June but was forced to cut his 2018 season short.

While still struggling during a pre-season camp in December, Murray said he had told his team that he felt he could not go on for much longer.

"Just playing with no idea when the pain was going to stop, and I felt like making that decision," he said.

"I said to my team, 'Look, I think I can kind of get through this until Wimbledon.' That was where I'd like to stop - stop

playing. But I'm also not certain I'm able to do that."

Twice Wimbledon winner Murray, Britain's first men's champion since Fred Perry in 1936, left the door to an eventual comeback slightly ajar, saying he was mulling another round of major hip surgery.

He said he had been in touch with American doubles champion Bob Bryan, who returned to the court at the recent Brisbane International after having the surgery.

The twice Olympic champion added, though, that the operation would be more aimed at improving quality of life than prolonging his career.

"I have an option to have another operation which is a little bit more kind of severe than what I've had before, having my hip resurfaced which would allow me to have a better quality of life," he said.

"That's something I'm seriously considering right now."

"Bob Bryan had this operation post-Wimbledon last year and is obviously playing."

"But obviously there's a difference between singles and doubles in terms of the physicality and movement and stuff. Certainly, no guarantees there."

Murray said basic things in everyday life, like putting on socks and shoes, were causing him severe pain and he had grown weary of talking about his hip in every conversation.

Murray, who visibly struggled in a 6-1 4-1 practice match defeat to top seed Novak Djokovic at Melbourne Park on Thursday, has been drawn to play 22nd seeded Spaniard Roberto Bautista Agut in the first round on Monday.

"I'm going to play, I can still play to a level, not a level that I'm happy playing at," he said.

HANDBALL / WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

Chicola's last-gasp goal gives Angola 24-23 win over Qatar

By Sports Reporter
Copenhagen

Claudio Chicola's last-second goal - a 92km/hour thunderbolt - helped Angola clinch a thrilling 24-23 win over Qatar in their Group D opener in the Men's World Championship at Copenhagen Royal Arena yesterday.

There was precious little to choose

from between the teams but in the end Qatar paid the penalty for cutting it too close this time as the unfancied Angolans capitalised on a fast-break to nail the winner from the right flank.

The second half was a torrid affair with both teams neck and neck and not allowing any space for the other to play with.

Angola had led 12-8 after the first half, staying ahead all the time and making their intentions clear.

Qatar, however, had a reputation of

making strong comebacks, and sure enough they upped the ante in the second session.

Finding a nice rhythm, they clawed back into the game to level the scores at 17-all in the 45th minute, courtesy of a six-metre goal from Youssef Ali.

But less than three seconds later, Gabriel Teco restored Angola's lead with a 6-metre goal from the centre and then Edvaldo Ferreira nailed a penalty to give the Africans a two goal cushion (19-17).

The back-and-forth continued for 10 minutes during which the teams tied scores several times, but a fast-break goal from Alledine Berrached helped Qatar go ahead for the first time (23-22).

With less than five seconds to go, however, Rome Hebo slid the ball in from nine metres to equalise before Chicola came up with the winner to leave Qatar stunned.

Qatar's next match is against Egypt tomorrow.

ASIAN CUP

Sven cancels dinner as China beat Philippines

South Korea, runners-up in 2015, beat Kyrgyzstan 1-0 to advance to the knockout stage

AFP
Abu Dhabi

Swede Sven-Goran Eriksson scrapped dinner plans with old foe Marcello Lippi after China thrashed his Philippines side 3-0 yesterday to reach the last 16 of the Asian Cup. China's star striker Wu Lei fired a brilliant double against the Filipino 'Street Dogs' in Abu Dhabi as Lippi emerged victorious in a heavyweight coaching clash.

As is custom between the two elder statesmen of the game, the loser buys the other dinner, washed down with a vintage bottle of wine. But Eriksson had little stomach for the old pals' act when the septuagenarians embraced after the match. "No, no dinner plans," snapped the former England manager.

"I was not in a very good mood for a long discussion. I just wished (Lippi) good luck for the future. We forgot about Wu Lei - twice," grimaced Eriksson, who previously coached the match-winner at Chinese club Shanghai SIPG. "If you do that he will punish you and he did with two great goals. We paid a heavy price but we are not home yet. We still have hope - but small hope, probably?"

China, runners-up in 1984 and 2004, top Group C with a perfect six points from two games - ahead of South Korea on goal difference - after beating Kyrgyzstan 2-1 in their opening game. But they looked far sharper against the Philippines, like the former Soviet republic also appearing in their first Asian Cup.

"I'm very proud of my players," said Lippi, who led his native Italy to World Cup victory in 2006. "If we can continue to play like that we have nothing to fear from any team at this Asian Cup."

Lippi's side should have led after 32 minutes when Wu Xi headed wastefully wide from point-blank range. But Wu Lei provided the spark five minutes before half-time, turning on the edge of the box and whipping a right-foot shot



China's midfielder Zhi Zheng (centre) vies for the ball with Philippines' midfielder Kevin Ingreso during the 2019 AFC Asian Cup group C match in Abu Dhabi. (AFP)

into the far corner. His second was even better as he swivelled to slam a Hao Junmin free kick past goalkeeper Michael Falkesgaard on the volley after 66 minutes to effectively finish the tie. Substitute Yu Dabao added a third 10 minutes from time for China, who are looking to improve on their quarter-final finish in Australia four years ago.

Lippi waxed lyrical about the prolific Wu Lei, China's most coveted player and Shanghai's record goalscorer, who has been linked with a move to English Premier League side Wolves. "He looked very sharp and scored two goals," said the Italian. "But we are used to seeing that quality from him. It is no wonder teams in Europe are interested in him."

Pulverised 8-1 the last time the teams met in 2017, the Philippines gave China more of a fight this time, having lost 1-0 to South Korea earlier this week. Kevin Ingreso forced a fingertip save from China goalkeeper Yan Junling in first-half stoppage time, but Eriksson's players faded badly after the break. South Korea, runners-up in 2015, beat Kyrgyzstan 1-0

to advance to the knockout stage.

RESULTS

Group B: Australia 3 (Maclaren 18, Mabil 20, Giannou 90) Palestine 0

Group C: China 3 (Wu Lei 49, 66, Yu Dabao 80) Philippines 0; South Korea 1 (Kim Min-jae 41) Kyrgyzstan 0

Syria dump coach Stange after Asian Cup defeat

Al-Ain, UAE: Syria axed their coach Bernd Stange late on Thursday after defeat to Jordan in the Asian Cup, making him the tournament's second managerial casualty just six days into the competition.

The 70-year-old German had faced criticism immediately after the 2-0 derby loss, which followed a 0-0 draw with Palestine and badly damaged their hopes of qualifying from Group B. "The Syrian Arab Football Federation has decided to dismiss coach Bernd Stange," said a statement on the organisation's Facebook page.

It added that former national coach Fajr Ibrahim would take charge of Syria's final group game against Australia on Tuesday. Stange's dismissal comes after Thailand sacked their coach Milovan Rajevac following their 4-1 defeat to India. The Thais recovered to beat Bahrain 1-0 on Thursday.

Media rounded on Stange after the reverse to neighbours Jordan in Al Ain, questioning why he couldn't repeat the form of 2017 when Syria reached the World Cup playoffs. "Coaches are always responsible for the performance of this team," said Stange. "We're extremely disappointed because we wanted to get into the next round for the first time. Today was a big disappointment but I will never blame one player or group of players. Of course the coach is responsible."



QSL CUP

Shahania, Ahli win, Al Khor hold Al Rayyan

Al Shahania defeated Al Saliya 1-0, Al Khor played out a 2-2 draw with Al Rayyan and Al Ahli blanked Al Sadd 3-0 in the QSL Cup fifth round Group B matches yesterday. Rayyan, Al Khor, Al Ahli and Al Sadd had already reached the quarter-finals after the Round 4 action.

Rayyan thus topped the group with 13 points, followed by Al Khor (11), Al Ahli (nine), Al Sadd (five), Al Shahania (three) and Al Saliya (one).

The first-four teams from each group advanced to the quarter-finals, where the winners of Group A face fourth-placed team of Group B. The other quarter-finals will be second-placed team of Group A vs third-placed team of Group B, third-placed team of Group A vs second-placed team of Group B and fourth-placed team of Group A vs winners of Group B.

AL SAILIYA 0 AL SHAHANIA 1

Al Shahania stole the points with a toughly-fought 1-0 victory away to Al Saliya at the Al Duhail Stadium. The goal was scored by Ayoub Mansour in the 72nd minute. This was a game of very few chances as both teams battled for possession and influence throughout the match. Al Saliya came close as Meshaal al-Shammari drove forward before unleashing a powerful shot from 30 yards which missed the goal by a fraction, with the goalkeeper stranded.

The deadlock was broken when Ayoub converted Abdulrahman al-Jael's layoff following a period of intense pressure.

Al Saliya nearly got an immediate reply as Mohamed Rajab struck another long-range effort that once again missed the target by the narrowest of margins.

AL KHOR 2 AL RAYYAN 2

Al Rayyan grabbed a late equaliser to share the spoils with Al Khor in an entertaining 2-2 draw at the Al Ahli Stadium. Al Khor's goals came through Ahmed al-Mohannadi in the 26th and 69th minutes, while Sebastian Soria (44th) and Lucca Borges (88th minutes) scored for Al Rayyan. The first goal came after a blistering start in which Al Rayyan had a couple of good chances, but it was Al Khor who broke the deadlock. Al-Mohannadi raced on to a defence-splitting through ball and confidently planted his shot past goalkeeper Fahad Baker.

With the half coming to an end, Soria got Al Rayyan on the score sheet when he tapped home from Lucca's athletically-diverted pass from the left by-line.

Al-Mohannadi was on hand again later



Al Rayyan grabbed a late equaliser to share the spoils with Al Khor in an entertaining 2-2 draw at the QSL Cup.

on as he reacted quickest to a ball that dropped in the box and struck home with his second touch. With the game drawing to a close and Al Khor set for all three points, a lovely team move was enough to help secure a point for Al Rayyan. Abdulrahman al-Harazi played a neat exchange with Lucca whose fierce shot was too good for the goalkeeper to save.

AL AHLI 3 AL SADD 0

Al Ahli dominated possession right throughout and secured a convincing 3-0 victory over Al Sadd at the Al Ahli Stadium. Mohsine al-Yazidi (14th minute), Mohammed Muntari (26th) and Ali Ferydoon (90th) were on target for Al Ahli, who had 62 per cent ball possession. Al Ahli forced seven corner kicks against Al Sadd's one. Al Sadd had a good chance to pull one back in the second half, but three attempts by their players in one go went in vain. First, goalkeeper Ivanildo

Rodrigues blocked Saoud Ibrahim's shot. Then, Rami Sohail struck the rebound against the right upright. Meshaal Ibrahim attempted again, but Ivanildo had regained his position by then and came to his team's rescue.

QATAR SC 2 AL DUHAIL 1

Qatar SC registered a 2-1 win over Al Duhail in the Group A match at the Al Gharafa Stadium. Ali Said (eighth minute) and Khalid Mahmoudi (42nd) scored the goals for Qatar SC. Paolo Edmilson pulled one back for Al Duhail in the 84th minute.

The match was originally scheduled for Thursday, but was rescheduled for yesterday at the request of Al Duhail and with the approval of Qatar SC because of the pressure on Under-23 players as well as the presence of a large number of players in the Qatar national team and Olympic team.

Qatar SC (11 points), Al Gharafa (nine),

Al Duhail (eight) and Al Kharaitiyat (six) progressed to the quarter-finals from the group. Umm Salal and Al Arabi finished with five and one points respectively.

The first-four teams from each group advanced to the quarter-finals, where the winners of Group A face fourth-placed team of Group B.

The other quarter-finals will be second-placed team of Group A vs third-placed team of Group B, third-placed team of Group A vs second-placed team of Group B and fourth-placed team of Group A vs winners of Group B. It was Qatar SC's third victory in the tournament, the most number of wins in Group A. They took the half-time break with a two-goal cushion.

The game looked like ending with the same scoreline until substitute Brazilian striker Edmilson, who replaced Moroccan spearhead Yousef El Arabi at the start of second half, scored late.

FOCUS

beIN Sports sign Mourinho as pundit

Jose Mourinho will join beIN Sports, the global sports broadcaster, this week as part of the AFC Asian Cup 2019 and English Premier League coverage, which viewers across the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) enjoy exclusively on the leading sports channel.

In his first TV appearance since being sacked by Manchester United in December, the former Chelsea, Real Madrid, Inter Milan and Porto manager will be part of a panel of expert analysts based in beIN Sports' studios exclusively covering two of the most watched products in the Mena region.

Mourinho will be providing his forthright opinions during the English Premier League match between Arsenal and Chelsea on Saturday 19th January - a competition which he won three times with Chelsea. The Portuguese will also be on air for the AFC Asian Cup 2019 group stage fixture between Qatar vs Saudi Arabia on Thursday 17th January.

Widely acknowledged as one of the most successful managers of all time, Mourinho will join a long list of names from the footballing hall of fame who have appeared as part of beIN Sports'

premium football coverage in recent months, including Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Paul Scholes, Ruud Gullit, Arsene Wenger, Marcel Desailly, Yaya Toure, Nemanja Vidic, Wesley Sneijder and Graeme Souness.

Jonathan Whitehead of beIN Sports, said: "We're delighted to welcome Jose Mourinho to beIN Sports and having him as part of our exclusive AFC Asian Cup 2019 and English Premier League coverage in Mena will be a special moment for our network."

"Jose is one of the greatest football managers of all time, and we hope that his expert analysis and charismatic personality will be enjoyed by our millions of viewers. It's a clear example of the premium content and world class punditry that we provide to sports fans globally on a daily basis."

beIN Sports is part of beIN Media Group, one of the world's leading sports, entertainment and media groups - and also the owner of MIRAMAX film studio - distributing an unrivalled array of entertainment, live sport action, and major international events across 5 continents, in 43 countries, and in 7 different languages spanning Europe, North America, Asia, Australia and the Middle East and North Africa.



Jose Mourinho will make his first TV appearance since being sacked by Manchester United in December.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Liverpool's lighter schedule is not title advantage: Klopp

Liverpool lost to Wolves in the FA Cup last week and are also out of League Cup

AFP
London

Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp denied yesterday that his Premier League leaders will have the upper hand over Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur in the title race despite a lighter schedule after crashing out of both domestic cup competitions.

City trail Klopp's men by four points, with Tottenham two points further back, but both of Liverpool's rivals are still involved in four competitions. Klopp meanwhile made nine changes for Monday's 2-1 defeat at Wolves in the FA Cup, with his focus on ending the Reds' 29-year wait to win the title, and his team were knocked out of the League Cup by Chelsea back in September.

"There's no advantage. If you have all your players available, it's brilliant that you can always play them, it's really good," said Klopp ahead of today's trip to Brighton.

"We have to use the time. You can do a lot of wrong things when you have a week to train, that's possible. We have to use the time and really be, week in and week out, in the best shape we can be."

Dejan Lovren was one of only two players Klopp retained against Wolves from a 2-1 defeat to City in their last Premier League outing, but the Croatian picked up a hamstring injury after just six minutes at Molineux. Klopp now has a defensive crisis on his hands. Joe Gomez and Joel Matip have also been sidelined in recent weeks, but Matip may be fit in time to return against Brighton. "It's quite special if you would bet on having three centre-halves injured in the same moment - you could win a lot of money for that because usually it doesn't happen. Here it happened, it was a bit of bad luck. That makes it quite a bit tricky."

Klopp reiterated his belief that Lovren's injury is a justification for why he was right to rest players such as Virgil van Dijk, Mohamed Salah and Roberto



Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool lead Premier League by four points over Manchester City. (AFP)

Firmino against Wolves after a hectic fixture list over the festive season.

"We had to make changes for the Wolves game. The players we didn't line up in that game were either a little bit injured, or injured, or played all the games in December, plus the City game at the beginning of January. Bringing them again in that moment, as you saw with Dejan, who played pretty much all these games as well, is a risk - it's a proper risk."

Defeat at City on January 3 was Liverpool's first in the league this season

and Firmino stressed the importance of bouncing back immediately at Brighton to not give champions City another chance to cut the gap when they host Wolves on Monday.

"That's what the Premier League is all about - it's intensely competitive. If the team at the top stutters, the second place will overtake them," the Brazilian told Liverpool's website. "We know we can't go to sleep and lose silly points. We must maintain our focus until the end of the season."

FIXTURES (ALL TIMES 1500GMT UNLESS STATED)

Today: West Ham v Arsenal (1230), Brighton v Liverpool, Burnley v Fulham, Cardiff v Huddersfield, Crystal Palace v Watford, Leicester v Southampton, Chelsea v Newcastle (1730)

Tomorrow: Everton v Bournemouth (1415), Tottenham v Manchester United (1630)

On Monday: Manchester City v Wolves (2000)

LIGUE 1

Fabregas completes move from Chelsea to Monaco, reunites with Henry

AFP
Monaco

Cesc Fabregas has completed his move to from Chelsea to Ligue 1 strugglers Monaco, a source close to the deal confirmed yesterday. Fabregas put pen to paper on a three-and-a-half-year deal at the Stade Louis II after passing a medical earlier in the day, as he teams up with former Arsenal teammate Thierry Henry on the Mediterranean coast.

A source said that Chelsea will only receive payments related to Fabregas' performance on the Mediterranean coast, contrasting with media reports that Monaco had already agreed to pay Chelsea 10mn euros (\$11.5mn) for the player who could now make his debut for his new club in tomorrow's Ligue 1 game away at Marseille. Fabregas played with Henry at Arsenal at the start of his career, between 2003 and 2007, and the two share the same agent in Darren Dein. Now 31, Fabregas eventually made the same move as Henry when he left the Emirates Stadium for Barcelona, but he returned to English football with Chelsea in 2014.

After winning two Premier League titles with the Blues, he has fallen out of favour at Stamford Bridge this season under new coach Maurizio Sarri. Fabregas made a tearful farewell to Chelsea fans in Saturday's 2-0

FA Cup win at home against Nottingham Forest, where he had a penalty saved.

Having enjoyed a glittering career, capped by winning the World Cup with Spain in 2010, Fabregas arrives at a club who were French champions just 18 months ago but are currently in crisis. France legend Henry was appointed coach in October after Monaco started the season poorly under Leonardo Jardim.

However, they have won just twice in nine league games since Henry's arrival and currently languish in the relegation zone, five points from safety before the weekend's matches. Nevertheless, Monaco have already progressed in both domestic cup competitions since the turn of the year, and the arrival of Fabregas takes the number of signings made by Monaco in the January window to three already.

Veteran defender Naldo was the first to join from German club Schalke 04, and on Thursday Monaco announced the signing of France under-21 left-back Fode Ballo-Toure from Lille for 11 mn euros plus bonuses.

One player who will not now be signing on at the Stade Louis II, though, is the midfielder William Vainqueur. The former Marseille and Roma player was expected to put pen to paper on a move from Turkish club Antalyaspor, but Monaco announced earlier yesterday that he had failed a medical due to a calf problem.



Cesc Fabregas has signed a three-and-a-half-year deal at Monaco.

PSG'S NEYMAR DOUBTFUL FOR AMIENS GAME

Paris: Neymar is a major doubt for Paris St Germain's Ligue 1 trip to Amiens today after the Brazilian skipped training yesterday.

The Brazilian forward, who scored PSG's goal in their shock 2-1 League Cup quarter-final defeat by En Avant Guingamp on Wednesday, is "very tired", like Kylian Mbappe, PSG coach Thomas Tuchel said yesterday.

France striker Mbappe did take part in training. PSG lead the standings with 47 points from 17 games, 13 above second-placed Lille who have two games in hand.

PSG FINED BY UEFA FOR CROWD TROUBLE

Meanwhile, PSG have escaped with a fine from European football's governing body UEFA following crowd trouble at their Champions League home game against Red Star Belgrade in October. The French giants ran the risk of being forced to play their

next home European match - against Manchester United in the Champions League last 16 second leg in March - behind closed doors.

Trouble erupted outside the Parc des Princes after the game, but the only punishment for the crowd disturbances and "illicit chants" from their supporters was a fine of 35,000 euros. Red Star, who lost the game 6-1, were also fined 25,000 euros for chants from their supporters.

Meanwhile, Olympiakos were fined 90,000 euros and handed a suspended one-game stadium ban after their fans set off fireworks and invaded the pitch when the Greek club beat AC Milan 3-1 in the Europa League last month. Milan were fined 5,000 euros, while Ajax were fined 20,000 euros and Bayern Munich 8,000 euros for the throwing of objects and setting off fireworks in their 3-3 Champions League draw in December.

SPOTLIGHT

Sarri blasts Bayern over Hudson-Odoi interest

AFP
London

Maurizio Sarri has lashed out at Bayern Munich for their "un-professional" behaviour after the Bundesliga club publicly expressed their interest in Chelsea starlet Callum Hudson-Odoi. Chelsea boss Sarri is furious that Bayern sporting director Hasan Salihamidzic said this week that they "definitely" want to sign Hudson-Odoi during the January transfer window as he "has the qualities which would fit very well" with the German champions.

Chelsea have reportedly turned down a £35mn (\$45mn) bid from Bayern for the 18-year-old, who has less than 18 months to run on his current contract and has so far refused to sign a new five-year deal, and Sarri is unhappy with Bayern's public approach.

"I think that it's not professional, because they are talking about a player under contract with Chelsea.

So they didn't respect our club, I think," Sarri told reporters. Sarri has handed Hudson-Odoi a place in his starting



line-up for Chelsea's past two matches - Tuesday's League Cup semi-final loss to Tottenham Hotspur and the 2-0 FA Cup win over Nottingham Forest last weekend in which the teenager set up both of Alvaro Morata's goals.

But, having helped England win the Under-17 World Cup, Hudson-Odoi could follow the same path taken by his international teammate Jadon Sancho, who has impressed for Borussia Dortmund since leaving Manchester City for Germany.

Regardless of Hudson-Odoi's future, Sarri has recommended Chelsea sign two new players to bolster his squad.

"As you know very well I am not involved in the market. I spoke with the club and the club knows very well my opinion. In my opinion we need two players," he said. "Then it depends on the club decision. I don't know anything about the market day by day or minute by minute."

Sarri refused to comment on talk of a Chelsea swoop for his former Napoli striker Gonzalo Higuain, who is on loan at AC Milan from Italian champions Juventus. But he did admit Chelsea would need to find a replacement if out-of-form Spain striker Morata leaves, with Sevilla and Atletico Madrid reportedly interested in signing him on loan.

"Of course, if Morata will go to another club we need a replacement, it's normal," Sarri said. "At the moment Morata is here, so I think he has to think only to play."

Meanwhile Sarri also shot down rumours this week that winger Willian could move to Barcelona.

"Willian for us is really very important. I think it's impossible to lose him in January," he said.

PSV beat Club Brugge in friendly



PSV earned their first victory in 2019, after goals from Piroe and Pereiro helped Mark van Bommel's team to a 2-1 victory against Belgian side Club Brugge in a friendly encounter at Aspire Zone in Doha yesterday. The match was divided into three halves each of 30 minutes. PSV's travelling party will fly back home today after their training stint in Doha. They will return to Eredivisie action on January 20, when they face an away tie with FC Emmen.

FOCUS

Guardiola happy to miss out on winter getaway

AFP
Manchester, United Kingdom

Pep Guardiola insisted yesterday he will be happy if Manchester City have no time for a mid-season break, because it will mean they are still competing for every trophy. City's rivals Manchester United took the opportunity this week for a warm-weather training trip to Dubai, allowing boss Ole Gunnar Solskjaer time to work on his squad's fitness. Guardiola did take his players to Abu Dhabi last March, after their surprise FA Cup fifth round defeat at Wigan left them with a free week. The City boss will consider a similar trip this time round if an early FA Cup exit leaves a gap in their match schedule.

But he acknowledges that it may be difficult to fit in such a break if City remain in the hunt for all four major prizes. "Hopefully not, because

that means we continue in the FA Cup and especially in the Champions League. We will see. If not, then we will have this time in summer time," Guardiola told a press conference. "Last season, it was quite similar. But then after Wigan beat us in the FA Cup, we went there."

City are still in contention for a quadruple of Premier League, Champions League, FA Cup and League Cup titles, something that has never been achieved in the English game. They took a significant step towards winning one of those trophies on Wednesday, thrashing their tier Burton Albion 9-0 in the first leg of their League Cup semi-final.

It means that, barring something extraordinary in the second leg on January 23, City will feature in the final at Wembley on February 24. That creates another barrier to a potential winter vacation as their league fixture at Everton, scheduled for the previous day, would have to be rearranged. "Did you see the schedule this

morning? I saw the schedule, and the Everton game will be fixed for another week, so we don't have many (spaces in the schedule for a warm-weather break), so we'll see," Guardiola said.

City, having taken a step towards a cup final, resume their attempt to catch leaders Liverpool in the Premier League title race on Monday, when they host Wolves. Guardiola's side, in second place, are four points behind Liverpool after beating them 2-1 at the Etihad Stadium on January 3. It was Liverpool's first league defeat of the season, and may have increased the pressure on a team trying to become champions of England for the first time since 1990. But Guardiola rejected the suggestion that he is happier chasing than leading. "I prefer to be in Liverpool's position," he said. Guardiola hopes to have Sergio Aguero back for the Wolves match, with the striker having missed City's past two matches because of illness, while Vincent Kompany is close to recovering from a muscle problem.

LA LIGA

Madrid face Champions League qualification fight

Madrid head to the Benito Villamarin on the back of a defeat against Real Sociedad and a draw with Villarreal

AFP
Madrid

There might have been two clubs toasting Athletic Bilbao signing Ibai Gomez from Alaves on Thursday – Athletic for one, but also Real Madrid. Few would expect the team that has won the Champions League three times in a row to be buoyed by a star player leaving Alaves, whose stadium holds just over 19,000 and who, five years ago, finished 18th in the second tier.

But currently it is Alaves who stand between Madrid and La Liga's top four. Real missing out seems unthinkable, and for now it remains unlikely, but as their title hopes fade, priorities will adjust too. The expectation is Alaves' remarkable form will at some point drift, particularly now Gomez has gone, his departure to a team placed 17th suggesting he too believed the surge may not last.

This, however, is where Real are now, fifth in the table, 10 points behind Barcelona, playing catch-up not just for first place but fourth. And there is a possibility the gap could widen through a run of tricky fixtures this month.

First, a trip tomorrow to Betis, who sit one place lower in sixth and have ambitions of their own to claim a European position. Then come third-placed Sevilla, eighth-placed Espanyol and Alaves. Santiago Solari would

have been encouraged by the 3-0 win over Leganes in the Copa del Rey on Wednesday, when Vinicius Junior, in particular, shone.

The 18-year-old's sumptuous volley was a demonstration of the sort of youthful exuberance a struggling team can rally around. "He is taking big steps," Solari said afterwards. "We were angry and we let loose," added Nacho.

But in La Liga, Madrid head to the Benito Villamarin on the back of a defeat against Real Sociedad and a draw with Villarreal. Fewer than nine weeks on from his appointment, Solari has already fielded questions about his future and Jose Mourinho's availability adds an extra layer of intrigue.

Fall further away from the top four and those questions will become more frequent. There is still plenty of time for recovery. Twelve months ago, the knives were sharpening for Zinedine Zidane too after Madrid lost to Leganes in the Copa del Rey. Success in Europe made up for everything, even finishing 17 points worse off in the league than champions Barcelona. The coach has changed twice since, but the team has largely remained, save for the departure of Cristiano Ronaldo and his La Liga average of 34.5 goals per season.

Gareth Bale was expected to step up, only for injuries, again, to disrupt his rhythm. Isco has been sidelined by Solari, failing even to make it into a rotated line-up against Leganes. "The situation is complicated," said Sergio Ramos

on Wednesday.

Marcelo has been woefully out of sorts. Thibaut Courtois, Marco Asensio and Toni Kroos are injured. It will take guts, and perhaps a run in the side for Vinicius, to spark Madrid into life, with the unpredictable Betis offering no guarantees – this season, they have beaten two of the top three and lost to two of the bottom three as well.

Meanwhile, Sevilla travel to Bilbao, where Gomez is likely to make his debut tomorrow, and leaders Barcelona host Eibar. Barca endured a surprise 2-1 defeat by Levante in the cup on Thursday but Philippe Coutinho's late penalty leaves them in touch heading into the second leg at home. A much-changed line-up that excluded Lionel Messi, Luis Suarez and Marc Andre ter Stegen means confidence is unlikely to have been knocked. Levante now face Atletico Madrid, who are five points behind the league leaders. For now, they are their closest challengers.

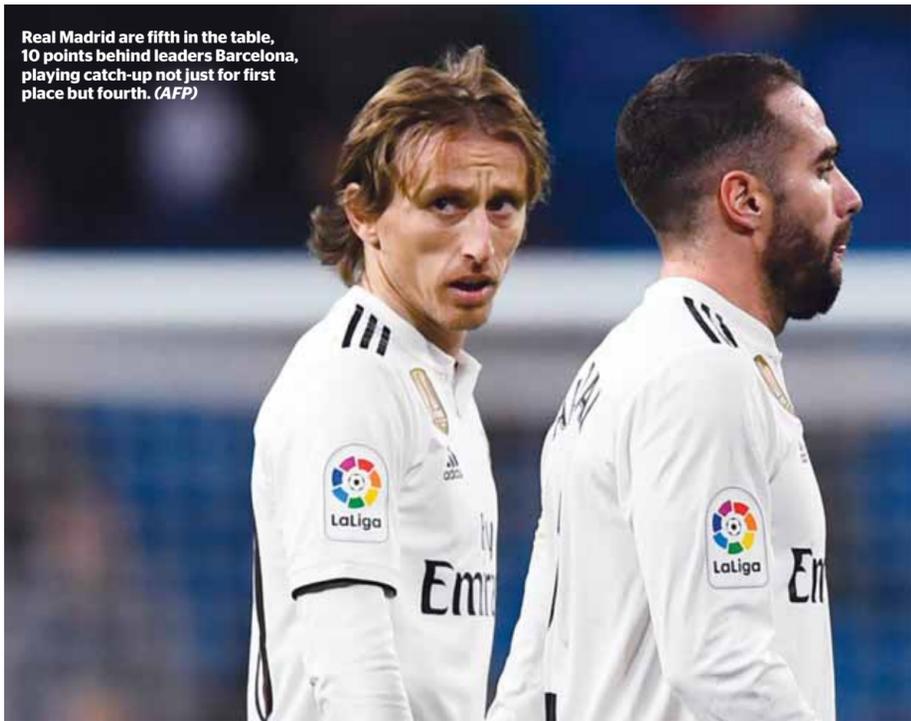
FIXTURES (ALL TIMES GMT)

Today: Leganes v Huesca (1200), Valencia v Real Valladolid (1515), Girona v Alaves (1730), Villarreal v Getafe (1945)

Tomorrow: Atletico Madrid v Levante (1100), Athletic Bilbao v Sevilla (1515), Barcelona v Eibar (1730), Real Betis v Real Madrid (1945)

On Monday: Real Sociedad v Espanyol (2000)

Real Madrid are fifth in the table, 10 points behind leaders Barcelona, playing catch-up not just for first place but fourth. (AFP)



FOCUS

Ronaldo joins Juventus' Cup quest

AFP
Milan

Cristiano Ronaldo prepares to make his Coppa Italia debut as Juventus open their quest for a fifth consecutive trophy today with a last 16 clash against Bologna as Italian football returns to the pitch after a chaotic start to the year. Ronaldo will be looking to pick up where he left off after scoring twice against Sampdoria before the winter break, to lead the Serie A scoring chart with 14 goals. He has also scored once for the Turin giants in the Champions League.

The 33-year-old will now chase his first Italian Cup goal. Ronaldo's strike partner Mario Mandzukic – who has scored nine goals this season – has been sidelined with a thigh problem that could also rule the Croatian World Cup runner-up out of next

week's Italian Super Cup. The Italian league is still on its winter break but Juventus and AC Milan are warming up for the Super Cup final in Saudi Arabia. Juventus – the record 13-time Italian Cup winners – last year became the first Italian team to complete the double for four years in a row, beating AC Milan 4-0 in the final.

Former five-time winners AC Milan are away to Sampdoria, who last won the Cup 25 years ago. Violence involving fans in Milan and Rome over the last two weeks have led to calls for tougher government measures to deal with football hooliganism.

Inter Milan take on Serie B side Benevento in a closed San Siro, as they serve the first of a two-match stadium closure after racist chanting against Napoli defender Kalidou Koulibaly on December 26. There were also violent clashes before the game during which an Inter supporter was killed after being hit by a car.

City rivals Roma and Lazio both host two third division sides at the Stadio Olimpico days after their fans ran amok in the capital. Roma supporters distributed anti-Semitic leaflets in the north of the city to coincide with Lazio's 117th anniversary celebrations.

Ten police were injured as the Lazio celebrations turned nasty. Carlo Ancelotti's Napoli host Sassuolo tomorrow, with Torino hosting Fiorentina in another tie between two top flight sides.

ITALIAN CUP LAST-16 FIXTURES (ALL TIMES GMT)

Today: Lazio v Novara (1400), Sampdoria v AC Milan (1700), Bologna v Juventus (1945)

Tomorrow: Torino v Fiorentina (1400), Inter Milan v Benevento (1700), Napoli v Sassuolo (1945)

On Monday: Cagliari v Atalanta (1630), AS Roma v Virtus Entella (2000)

COPA DEL REY

Coutinho penalty gives Barca hope despite defeat to Levante

AFP
Madrid

Philippe Coutinho scored a crucial away goal but Barcelona have work to do to avoid a surprise exit from the Copa del Rey after losing 2-1 to Levante on Thursday in the first leg of the last 16.

Lionel Messi, Luis Suarez and Marc Andre ter Stegen were among several key players rested at the City of Valencia Stadium, where Levante took advantage as Erick Cabaco and Borja Mayoral gave them a two-goal cushion.

Coutinho, however, making his first start in almost a month, converted an 85th-minute penalty to leave Barca in touch heading into next week's second leg. After missing much of November through injury, Coutinho has struggled to regain his place in Ernesto Valverde's preferred starting line-up but 90 minutes, and a goal, will have done his confidence no harm.

Valverde was blamed last season for Barca's shock Champions League exit, the theory being that he failed to rest key players in the Copa del Rey and La Liga, both of which they won. He seems keener to adjust this term as a much-changed line-up included a debut for central defender Jeison Murillo, a January loan signing from Valencia, as well as youngsters like Chumi Brandariz, Juan Miranda and Carles Alena. This was a difficult introduction, however, with Murillo beaten for Levante's second goal while Miranda was



Levante's Erick Cabaco (right) celebrates after scoring against Barcelona in the Copa del Rey last 16 first leg match. (Reuters)

replaced at half-time and Chumi followed 13 minutes later.

The front three were more established, as Ousmane Dembele, Malcom and Coutinho aimed to make up for the absence of a recognised striker. Instead, Levante took the lead after just 185 seconds as Ruben Rochina's in-swinging cross from the left met the head of Cabaco, who climbed above Sergio Busquets and headed in. Barca were struggling to cope with the aggression of their opponents and in the 18th minute they were two down.

Emmanuel Boateng's reverse pass set Borja free, who nipped between Murillo and Chumi. Murillo tried to make the block but Borja's shot beat both him and Jasper Cillessen, before nes-

ting in the far corner. Valverde had turned to his bench as Sergi Roberto and Clement Lenglet came on for Miranda and Chumi while Denis Suarez, linked with a move away from the club this month. He did the job, a weaving run inside from the right drawing a clumsy challenge from Coke. Coutinho made no mistake.

Earlier, Sevilla put one foot in the quarter-finals after winning 3-1 away to Athletic Bilbao.

COPA DEL REY RESULTS

Last 16, first leg: Athletic Bilbao 1 (Dominguez 48) Sevilla 3 (Nolito 5, Silva 52, Ben Yedder 76); Real Betis 0 Real Sociedad 0; Levante 2 (Cabaco 3, Mayoral 17) Barcelona 1 (Coutinho 85-pen)

SPOTLIGHT

Al-Rumaihi and al-Ghazali star at Hathab



Medium Tour winner Mubarak Youssef al-Rumaihi (top centre), runner-up Said Nasser al-Qadi and third-placed Khalid Mohammed al-Emadi pose with the officials during the sixth round of Hathab series.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Mubarak Youssef al-Rumaihi won Medium Tour class on the first day of the round six of the Hathab series. Al-Rumaihi finished the round in 26.6 seconds with Vivaldi K to take QR5000 in prize money.

Said Nasser al-Qadi (Daydreamer EC) and Khalid Mohammed al-Emadi (Fiji) claimed second and third place respectively. In the team event, Al Salam took the top honours, followed by

QNB and Lusail.

In the Small Tour, Mohammed Jassim al-Ghazali astride Michael Jackson emerged triumphant, with the pair completing their round in 25.91 seconds. Achraf Oualla (Dino BB Z) came second, while Ghanim Nasser al-Qadi took third spot.

Hathab series is co-organised by the Qatar Equestrian Federation and Al Shaqab. In its second season, the 12-leg series was a runaway success in the first season. Hathab is an initiative by Qatar Olympic Committee President HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani.



Mohammed Jassim al-Ghazali astride Michael Jackson won in the Small Tour.

DNA request made in Ronaldo rape case

Los Angeles: Las Vegas police have asked football star Cristiano Ronaldo to submit a DNA sample as part of their investigation into rape allegations made against him. The five-time world player of the year – who plays for Italian league champions Juventus – has vehemently denied the accusations, and his lawyer Peter Christiansen said the request was standard procedure.

"Mr Ronaldo has always maintained, as he does today, that what occurred in Las Vegas in 2009 was consensual in nature, so it is not surprising that DNA would be present, nor that the police would make this very standard request as part of their investigation," he said in a

statement.

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department said it had made an official request to Italian authorities, adding it is "taking the same steps in this case as in any other sexual assault to facilitate the collection of DNA evidence". Former model Kathryn Mayorga, 34, of Las Vegas, made the accusations against the now 33-year-old Ronaldo in a complaint filed last year in the state of Nevada.

She claims after meeting the footballer at a Las Vegas nightclub, he raped her at his hotel suite on June 13, 2009 – just before he joined Real Madrid from Manchester United for a then-world record 94m euros (\$108m). Mayorga's lawyers

have said previously she immediately reported the alleged rape to the Las Vegas police and underwent a medical examination.

A private mediation was organised with representatives of Ronaldo, Mayorga and their lawyers, where she alleges she was paid \$375,000 to keep quiet. Ronaldo's lawyers have said that the non-disclosure agreement signed with the former model was "by no means a confession of guilt".

Mayorga's attorney has said the model agreed to an out-of-court settlement to keep her name from going public, but was inspired to speak out by the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment.

NBA

Aldridge scores 56 in Spurs win over Thunder

San Antonio beat Oklahoma City 154-147 in double overtime

AFP
Los Angeles

LaMarcus Aldridge tallied a career-high 56 points as the San Antonio Spurs overcame Russell Westbrook's triple double by outgunning the Oklahoma City Thunder 154-147 in a double overtime thriller on Thursday.

Aldridge's epic performance saw him surpass his previous career high of 45 points which he set against Utah last March.

He rattled off seven points in the second overtime as the Spurs outlasted the Thunder one day after having one of their worst shooting performances of the season in a 96-86 loss to Memphis.

"I was trying to be dominant," Aldridge said. "I got going early in third and it felt good. I was trying to get to the rim."

"We had to stay calm and get it done down the stretch, and we did."

Westbrook also delivered a monster game for the Thunder, finishing with 24 points, 24 rebounds and 13 assists.

The Spurs have won six of seven and 14 of 18 to close within a game of the Thunder for third place in the Western Conference.

This was their first meeting of the season and Oklahoma City will get a chance for revenge on Saturday when they host the Spurs.

Spurs coach Gregg Popovich recorded his 1,222 win, surpassing Jerry Sloan to move to third place on the all-time list.

Paul George finished with 30 points and Jerami Grant had 25 points and 12 rebounds for the Thunder, who lost their seventh consecutive game in San Antonio.

DeMar DeRozan scored 16 points and 11 assists but shot just seven of 22 from the floor and missed potential game-deciding shots at the end of regulation and the end of the first overtime.

San Antonio made its first 14 three-pointers to set a franchise record. After their initial success from beyond the arc, the Spurs switched gears and got the ball down low to Aldridge with the game on the line.

"We try to play inside out and it worked tonight," Aldridge said.

Elsewhere, Dwyane Wade came off the bench to score 19 points and Justise Winslow had 13 points and a career-high 11 assists as the Miami Heat hammered the Boston Celtics 115-99.

The Heat, who led by as many as 26 points, used a balanced attack to beat the Celtics as a half dozen players scored in double figures in front of a crowd of 19,600 — their 400th straight sellout at Miami's American Airlines Arena.

BENCH DUTY

Minus a bona fide superstar, the Heat are



San Antonio Spurs' LaMarcus Aldridge (second from right) shoots the ball during the game against Oklahoma City Thunder on Thursday. (USA TODAY Sports)

RESULTS		
San Antonio	154-147	Oklahoma City
Sacramento	112-102	Detroit
Denver	121-100	LA Clippers
Miami	115-99	Boston

getting consistent performances from a cast of hardworking youngsters and crafty veterans like Wade, who has been demoted to bench duty in his final NBA season.

"We had a comfortable lead, but you know they are going to make a run," the 36-year-old Wade said. "I got a couple of shots to fall."

Wade turned back the clock against the Celtics on Thursday, shooting eight-of-12 from the floor and three-of-five from the beyond the arc. The Heat drained a season-high 18 threes.

"We are starting to figure out how to win against good teams on our home floor," Wade said.

Josh Richardson tallied 18 points and Derrick Jones scored 14 for the Heat, who ended a two-game skid and improved to 20-20 on the season.

Point guard Kyrie Irving scored a team-high 22 points and Marcus Smart had 18 for the Celtics, who had their four-game win streak snapped.

Heat guard Dion Waiters, who returned earlier this month from ankle surgery which caused him to miss 32 games, finished with eight points.

In Denver, Nikola Jokic finished with 18 points, 14 rebounds and 10 assists for his 21st career triple-double to help the Western Conference-leading Denver Nuggets stretch their home winning streak to 11 by routing the Los Angeles Clippers 121-100.

Jamal Murray scored 23 points and Mason Plumlee added a season-high 17 points to go with 12 rebounds for the Nuggets. They're now 17-3 at home.

Lou Williams led the Clippers with 19 points, and Danilo Gallinari tallied 18 against his former team.

Concussions force Nash to retire from NHL after 15 seasons

AFP
New York

Rick Nash, a two-time Olympic ice hockey champion for Canada, retired from the NHL yesterday, forced to end his career after 15 seasons due to concussion-related issues.

The 34-year-old left wing from suburban Toronto, the top 2002 NHL Draft selection by Columbus, spent nine seasons with the Blue Jackets and most of six more with the New York Rangers before playing his final 11 games with Boston last season.

He was with the Bruins last March when he was struck in the head by Tampa Bay's Cedric Paquette, the last of several concussions Nash suffered in his career, including one that forced him out for 17 games in the 2013-14 campaign.

"Due to unresolved issues/symptoms from the concussion sustained last March, Rick Nash will be forced to retire from the game of hockey," said a statement from Top Shelf Hockey, Nash's agents. "Under the advice of his medical team, the risk of further brain injury is far too great if Rick returns to play."

"Rick would like to thank everyone who has supported him during this difficult period."

Nash, who also played for Swiss side Davos during NHL lockouts in 2004-05 and 2012-13, helped Canada capture Olympic gold at the 2010 Vancouver and 2014 Sochi Winter Games as well as a world title in 2007.

Nash finished with 437 goals and 368 assists in 1,060 NHL games as well as 18 goals and 28 assists in 89 playoff contests. After last season, Nash ranked third among active NHL goal scorers, trailing only Russian star Alex Ovechkin of the Stanley Cup champion Washington Capitals and Patrick Marleau of the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Nash remains the all-time Blue Jackets leader with 289 goals, 258 assists and 674 games played and won the Rocket Richard Trophy as the NHL's top goal scorer with 41 in the 2003-04 season.

NHL

Binnington and Blues shut down Canadiens

Reuters
New York

Oskar Sundqvist and Ryan O'Reilly each had two points, and rookie Jordan Binnington made 28 saves in the St. Louis Blues' 4-1 victory over the visiting Montreal Canadiens on Thursday.

After shutting out the Philadelphia Flyers on January 7 in his first NHL start, Binnington turned in another strong outing against Montreal. He came up particularly big early in the third period, first with a save to rob Victor Mete on a two-on-one chance, and then on a pair of stops on Nicolas Deslauriers within a three-second flurry.

Binnington now has a 1.59 goals against average over 188 minutes played this season. As St. Louis fights to get back into the playoff race, Binnington's hot streak gives him a strong argument for more playing time over the team's regular starter, Jake Allen, who is 14-14-4 with a 3.07 GAA.

Sundqvist recorded an assist and also notched his eighth goal of the season, coming while the Blues were short-handed 16:24 into the first period. After the Canadiens had a bad faceoff draw in the St. Louis end, Sundqvist and O'Reilly were sprung for a two-on-one, with Sundqvist taking the pass for the score.

More special teams success had led to the Blues' first goal, as Robert Thomas scored on a power play just 1:56 into the game.

Midway through the first period, Thomas took an awkward fall into the boards while chasing the puck, and he didn't return

to the game. The Blues later announced that Thomas sustained an upper-body injury.

Jay Bouwmeester and Sammy Blais also scored for St. Louis. For Blais, it was his first goal in 18 games this season and his second in 29 career NHL games.

David Perron recorded an assist on Bouwmeester's goal, extending his career-best point streak to nine games. Perron has four goals and eight assists over that stretch.

Brendan Gallagher accounted for Montreal's lone goal, banking a shot off St. Louis captain Alex Pietrangolo and into the net at 9:02 of the second period.

Gallagher's goal snapped an 0-for-14 drought on the power play for the Canadiens. Montreal entered the game last among all 31 teams in power-play percentage this season.

The lack of power-play scoring has been just one aspect of Montreal's recent offensive slump. The Canadiens have just seven goals over their past five games, going 2-3-0 in that span.

RESULTS

Washington	4-2	Boston
Toronto	4-2	New Jersey
NY Islanders	4-3	NY Rangers
Philadelphia	2-1	Dallas
Columbus	4-3	Nashville
Tampa Bay	3-1	Carolina
St. Louis	4-1	Montreal
Minnesota	3-2	Winnipeg
Edmonton	4-3	Florida
Arizona	4-3	Vancouver
San Jose	3-2	Las Vegas
Ottawa	4-1	Los Angeles



St. Louis Blues' Oskar Sundqvist (right) is congratulated by teammate Sammy Blais after scoring against the Montreal Canadiens in St. Louis, Missouri, on Thursday. (USA TODAY Sports)

SPOTLIGHT

Will the Raptors end Toronto's difficult relationship with winning?

By Eoin O'Callaghan
The Guardian

In Toronto, it's the hope that kills you.

It's a sports-mad place boasting competitive teams across a multitude of codes but lots of chaos and a dearth of success. And even when the city's franchises manage to get a taste of it, the fizz is fleeting.

Baseball's Blue Jays claimed back-to-back World Series titles in 1992 and 1993, and then didn't reach the playoffs for 21 years. The Maple Leafs have won more Stanley Cups than all but two NHL clubs, but none in more than 50 years. As recently as 2012, they were voted the most embarrassing team to support.

Toronto FC bounced from one humiliating episode to the next before their MLS Cup triumph in 2017. But following the pattern of self-destruction, the joy was short-lived and they failed to qualify for the postseason earlier this year.

Canada's largest city has a difficult relationship with winning. It doesn't happen very often and on the rare occasions when it does, it doesn't really know what to do with it.

And that's why there remains an unshakable spectre overhanging the Toronto Raptors this season. After a seismic summer defined

by splashy transactions, the team has transitioned impressively and remains well in contention to finish at the top of the Eastern Conference for the second successive year. The Raptors are not a side accustomed to drama and conflict so, considering the offseason saw the firing of long-time coach Dwane Casey and the trade of the legendary DeMar DeRozan, that's no small feat.

The recriminations and finger-pointing still linger but going by the performances so far this term, there's no scar tissue. The players seem invested in Nick Nurse, who was brought on by Casey as an assistant back in 2013 before sliding into the lead role in June. And despite the trauma of the DeRozan trade, the gamble of bringing in Kawhi Leonard as his replacement has worked a treat.

Many wondered which Leonard would show up in Toronto. He'd been immense for San Antonio and was voted MVP when the Spurs beat Miami in the 2014 finals. There were back-to-back All-NBA first team appearances in 2016 and 2017, too. But things ended bitterly last season when a quad injury led to a prolonged absence and tension regarding best treatment. His relationship with Gregg Popovich broke down and he looked for a way out.

But, when Toronto was first mooted as a possible destination,



Kawhi Leonard (in white) has delivered on his promise since joining the Raptors from the Spurs. (USA TODAY Sports)

it was claimed that Leonard was underwhelmed, had 'no desire' in going there and much preferred a switch to his hometown of Los Angeles.

Still, with some pressure on his shoulders, he's smiled, stepped up and, most importantly, delivered in the big games. He's poured in 30 or more points on 13 occasions, including a career-high 45-point haul against Utah on New Year's Day.

And when he was mercifully booed and kept quiet on his much-vaunted return to San Antonio two days later, there was no moodiness. When he stepped to the free throw line during the second quarter and thousands of home fans screamed "traitor" relentlessly, there was no reaction. And when the game was done, there was a laugh, a joke and warm embrace with Popovich. Of course, it hasn't all been

about him.

Kyle Lowry, Danny Green and Pascal Siakam have excelled and, quite rightly, much has been made of the roster's depth. With the Eastern Conference seldom as wide open, it's not outlandish to look at the Raptors as favourites to reach their first NBA finals and genuine championship contenders.

However, you can't shake the past: Toronto have been here very recently.

There was last season's record-breaking campaign: 59 wins and the conference's No 1 seed entering the playoffs for the first time in club history. Then it all came crashing down when they were whitewashed by LeBron James and the Cavaliers for a second straight year.

It was a humiliating end to a season that had been bursting with promise. In 2017, team president Masai Ujiri spoke of a 'culture reset'. Alas, nothing had changed. Despite all the talk, all the hype, all of those Atlantic Division titles, there was still a valley of emptiness when it mattered most.

For Ujiri, it seemed that mindset was a big problem under Casey, who had performed small miracles to transform the Raptors from persistent punchline to Eastern Conference heavyweights. Though they had clearly blossomed throughout Casey's

seven years in charge, there seemed little belief within the team as they headed into high-profile matchups against LeBron.

So Ujiri rolled the dice.

"It's the hardest thing I've done in my life," he later told reporters of his decision to fire Casey, who was voted Coach of the Year by his peers two days earlier and who'd go on to be named NBA Coach of the Year too. But, Ujiri made sure to add that it was a 'very difficult but necessary step'.

When the DeRozan trade followed in mid-summer, it was representative of the Raptors' new era: ruthless, business-oriented and cold-blooded.

Moving on the team's biggest star and bringing in Leonard was a bold decision. Again, certainly not what the Raptors were known for. Pushing out both Casey and DeRozan — seven- and nine-year veterans of the organisation, respectively — was hardly coincidental. Gone was that cliché Canadian niceness.

But it has been tough for fans to properly park the nostalgia and embrace the new version of the side. Casey's future had been a frequent sports-bar discussion ever since the 2018 playoff series with the Cavs took a familiar turn. He contributed so much to the team's development and immersed himself in the city. Leonard becomes a free agent

at the end of the season and Ujiri would do well to persuade him to stick around. But will supporters care too much if he helps the Raptors land the conference title ... or better?

Nurse is a rookie NBA coach, plucked from the Rio Grande Valley Vipers of the NBA's developmental G League and previously a two-time coach of the year in the British Basketball League. But, crucially, his players like him. Last month, he was fined \$15,000 after criticising officials for not protecting Leonard enough during a loss in Denver. The support wasn't lost on Leonard, who spoke afterwards about Nurse having his back. And the coach's passion wasn't lost on fans either.

And while the regular season has been a big success, the playoffs will offer plenty of nerves, particularly with LeBron not around to get in their heads this time. On paper, they're in a much stronger position than last year. But considering the investment in the short term, there seems immense pressure on the team doing something special in 2019. If that doesn't happen, and Leonard walks in the summer while Ujiri is faced with starting over again, will it have all been worth it?

Then again, perhaps the newer Raptors, who are intent on looking to the future rather than the past, won't care too much.

GOLF

Rookie Svensson snatches lead

Putnam one stroke behind in second, Kuchar is third

AFP
Los Angeles

Canadian rookie Adam Svensson fired seven birdies and an eagle in a nine-under par 61 to seize the first-round lead on Thursday in the US PGA Tour Sony Open in Hawaii by one stroke from Andrew Putnam.

Svensson's capped his round at Waialae Country Club in Honolulu with a birdie at the par-five 18th to nip past early pace-setter Putnam, who had nine birdies and a bogey in his eight-under par 62.

Veteran Matt Kuchar was alone in third in the tour's first full-field event of 2019 after a bogey-free seven-under par 63.

Svensson, a 25-year-old graduate of the developmental Web.com Tour, was four-under through nine holes after birdies at the fifth and sixth and an eagle at the ninth.

A 53-foot birdie putt at the 11th launched a string of four straight birdies that pulled him level with Putnam.

He grabbed the lead at the last with a 10-foot birdie.

"My putting," he said when asked the key to his round.

"That arm-lock helped me out a lot today," he added of the putting technique he's been using for about five months.

"My speed was great," he said noting that hitting 16 of 18 greens in regulation didn't hurt. "I gave myself a lot of opportunities."

Putnam set an early target, his eight-under round standing as the lead for most of the day.

Putnam needed just 23 putts, making 12 of 12 from 10 feet and rolling in birdie putts of 27, 21 and 28 feet during his round.

"The putter was hot," said Putnam, a 29-year-old who claimed his first US PGA Tour ti-



Adam Svensson of Canada plays his shot from the 17th tee during the first round of the Sony Open in Honolulu, Hawaii, on Thursday. (AFP)

tle at the Barracuda Championship in August. "I don't know how many feet I made of putts, but it was getting a little ridiculous.

"The hole was very large, and the ball was going in."

Putnam said putting wasn't the only key — the rest of his game was pretty good, too.

"I had a few mistakes here and there but hit my irons great," he said. "I left myself in pretty good spots."

As Putnam was burning up the course, former world number one Spieth slogged his

way to a three-over 73.

"I went through a couple of different swings today," said Spieth, who said before the tournament that he was hoping to knock a little rust off his game after a late-year layoff. "I'm over the ball and not comfortable."

Spieth, who endured a disappointing 2018 without a victory, said he remained confident he could get back on track.

"As long as I don't let it get to me like I did last year at times," Spieth said.

Shugo Imahira, who received

a special invitation this week to play in this year's Masters at Augusta National, led a seven-strong Japanese contingent with a 65 that put him tied for fourth with Americans Chez Reavie and Hudson Swafford.

LEADING FIRST ROUND SCORES

61 — Adam Svensson (CAN)
62 — Andrew Putnam (USA)
63 — Matt Kuchar (USA)
65 — Chez Reavie (USA), Hudson Swafford (USA), Shugo Imahira (JPN)

66 — Brandt Snedeker (USA), Jason Dufner (USA), John Chin (USA), Brian Stuard (USA), Michael Thompson (USA), Ted Potter (USA), Cameron Smith (AUS), Jim Knous (USA), José de Jesús Rodríguez (MEX), Rikuya Hoshino (JPN)

67 — Matt Jones (AUS), Sam Ryder (USA), Joel Dahmen (USA), Patton Kizzire (USA), Brian Gay (USA), Davis Love (USA), Marc Leishman (AUS), Justin Thomas (USA), Wes Roach (USA), Eric Dugas (USA), Julián Etulain (ARG), Dylan Fritelli (RSA)

SPOTLIGHT

Russia should be suspended until tests completed: USADA

Reuters
Toronto

Russia should be declared non-compliant until testing is completed even if they do hand over doping data after missing WADA's hard deadline, the head of the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) said on Thursday.

After much stalling and feet dragging Russian authorities finally on Wednesday allowed a World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) inspection team into a tainted Moscow laboratory to retrieve data it had earlier been denied.

Access to the lab and data before a December 31 deadline had been a condition of WADA's September decision to reinstate the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA).

A five-member inspection team was sent home from Moscow last month without the extracted data after Russian authorities said the team's equipment was not certified under Russian law.

Once WADA is in possession of the data Russian authorities must also ensure that any re-analysis of samples is completed by no later than June 30, 2019.

"Until that is done and the actual urine samples contained in the Moscow laboratory are seized by WADA as agreed, WADA should declare the Russians non-compliant for missing the hard deadline of December 31," said USADA chief Travis Tygart said.

"And to be reinstated they

should be at a minimum required to cooperate with the dozens of international sport federations which have the responsibility to prosecute the thousands of individual cases," he added in a statement.

Even if Russia does turn over all the required data, WADA will proceed with a meeting at its Montreal headquarters on Monday and Tuesday where the Compliance Review Committee (CRC) will hear from inspection team.

The CRC will then submit a report to the WADA executive committee recommending whether RUSADA has met its obligations and confirm its conditional compliance or be ruled non-compliant and face new sanctions.

RUSADA was suspended in 2015 after a WADA-commissioned report outlined evidence of state-backed, systematic doping in Russian athletics, allegations Moscow has denied.

"Of course if accurate, it is a good thing that the signals emerging from WADA are that its group has been allowed into the Moscow laboratory to retrieve the evidence of Russia's massive state-sponsored doping scheme," said Tygart.

"We remain vigilant to ensure a full public disclosure and accounting that the evidence obtained on the approximately 9,000 presumptive positive drug tests which exists in the laboratory is authentic and valid and that justice is served for clean athletes in each and every case.

"It is in the clear public interest that WADA does this openly and transparently."

MOTORSPORT

Mandatory two stops not the solution, says Pirelli F1 boss

Reuters
Birmingham, England

Formula One should be wary of forcing drivers to make more pitstops as part of future efforts to make races more exciting, according to tyre supplier Pirelli's motor racing head Mario Isola.

The idea of having two mandatory pitstops in a grand prix, rather than just one at present, has been around for some years and remains under discussion as the sport plans a major rules revamp after 2020.

"There was a lot of talk about imposing two stops by regulation," Isola told Reuters in an interview at the Autosport International show.

"I'm not sure that is the right solution because you have the risk of all the cars stopping on the same lap," added the Italian.

The suggestion was discussed last year, but nothing was changed for 2019, as the sport looked at how to encourage more varied team strategies amid concern about the number of one stop races.

Isola said removing the obligation for the top 10 to start the race on tyres used in the second phase of qualifying was also still 'on the table'.

Pirelli have simplified their colour-coded range of tyres for 2019 from seven to three (soft, medium and hard), making it easier for the casual fan to know what is being used.

Isola said the tyres should also be more consistent, allowing drivers to push slightly harder.

"We want to be a bit more conservative because if we have one stop races anyway, at this point it's much better that we give drivers a bit more consistent tyres and they can push more and maybe we have a better show on track," he added.

He warned, however, that making tyres less susceptible to over-heating remained a problem.

"We made some improvement on the product itself, we've different compounds in order to reduce the over-heating. But the over-heating is not avoidable when you follow another car and you lose a lot of downforce," he said.

MAJOR CHALLENGE
Formula One has already an-

nounced that the tyres will change from 13 inch (33.02cm) wheel rims to 18 inch ones in 2021, when tyre warmers — used to raise temperatures before the race for better grip and performance — will be banned.

Isola said the combined changes posed a major challenge for Pirelli, who last November won a tender to remain as sole supplier until the end of the 2023 season.

The bigger tyres will have to be safe at temperatures ranging from 20 degrees Celsius when leaving the garage to 120 during the race, with a corresponding increase in pressure.

The 2021 technical regulations, aiming to facilitate overtaking by allowing cars to follow more closely, have yet to be finalised, however, and time is pressing.

"We already started to design the new tyres because we cannot wait. The deadline was already in the past," said Isola.

"What we can do is adapt the tyres, the design, to the new rules when they are available. But we need to know at least 80-90% of the expected performance of the cars as soon as possible... without that information it is really a challenge.

I'm not sure that is the right solution because you have the risk of all the cars stopping on the same lap

— Mario Isola,
Pirelli's motor racing head

"We have two years in front of us before using the 18 inch tyres so it's important that we use this time in a good way. We cannot lose time but I believe we can do something good if we have the right process."

The Italian said Pirelli would devote the first part of 2019 to developing next year's tyres and then switch their full focus to 2021.

"We don't want to stop the development of the 2019 product because there is something more we can do and we know that," he said. "But for sure, the second half of 2019 will be dedicated to 18 inch tyres.

"I would say six months for 2020 and then we switch to 18 inches and dedicate 100% of the people to the new size and new challenge."

Wilder vs Fury rematch possible early this year: Warren

Reuters
London

World heavyweight title rematch between Britain's Tyson Fury and WBC champion Deontay Wilder could take place in the United States in the first half of this year, promoter Frank Warren said yesterday.

Undefeated former champion Fury fought to a thrilling, but controversial, split decision draw with American Wilder in Los Angeles last month.

"We're trying to make that fight at the moment, everyone wants the fight and most importantly the fighters want



Deontay Wilder (left) and Tyson Fury.

it," Warren told ESPN.

"The venue is looking like the US, that's where the money is. Tyson was disappointed

with the judging with the last fight, as I was, so a lot of things need to be sorted but the US is where they want it, probably in

the second quarter." Warren said Las Vegas would be an option but appeared to rule out a return to Los Angeles.

"I wouldn't want to go back to California, I didn't like working with the Californian commission and there were a lot of things we didn't like there," he said.

Fury's bout with Wilder was only his third since a two-and-a-half year absence from the sport following mental health issues and a failed drug test. Compatriot Anthony Joshua is the undefeated holder of the WBA, IBF, WBO and IBO heavyweight belts and a unification bout with Wilder would be a blockbuster draw.

Warren indicated that Joshua's

promoter Eddie Hearn was in no hurry for that to happen, however.

"Joshua will fight Dillian Whyte, or Jarrell Miller next. We all know that," he said. "We're not complicated, Tyson is the most uncomplicated person you will meet, and he will fight anyone. He went to Germany to fight Wladimir Klitschko and he went to America to fight Wilder. It's Barry and Eddie Hearn's agenda that complicates it. Joshua is their cash cow and they want to keep milking it," he said of the prospects of a Fury-Joshua fight. Joshua is due to fight next at Wembley Stadium on April 13 against an as-yet unnamed opponent.

BOXING

Pacquiao takes jab at Mayweather over New Year's Eve cakewalk

Reuters
Toronto

Manny Pacquiao has been fully focused on next weekend's fight with Adrien Broner but on Thursday the Filipino eight-division world champion still found time to take a subtle jab at Floyd Mayweather.

Pacquiao, who has been repeatedly asked about a possible rematch with Mayweather, pulled no punches when commenting on his former foe's one-sided New Year's Eve exhibition victory over a Japanese kickboxer that lasted two minutes.

"It's my first time to see an exhibition where you knock your opponent out," WBA welterweight champion Pacquiao, 40, told a conference call to promote his January 19 fight against American Broner.

"Supposedly an exhibition is

just to entertain people, nothing serious, for three rounds. But that's what I understand about exhibitions."

It was the second time in as many weeks that Pacquiao has taken a shot at Mayweather — who said he earned \$9mn for fighting Tenshin Nasukawa — with the Filipino having also tweeted after the fight that his New Year's resolution would be to "only fight experienced opponents who are my size or bigger."

There has been speculation about a Mayweather-Pacquiao rematch ever since the American scored a unanimous decision in their 2015 bout that was dubbed "The Fight of the Century" but never lived up to its billing.

Some pundits have even suggested that Pacquiao's WBA welterweight title defence against Broner is an ideal tune-up for such a rematch since the 29-year-old American has a defensive style that many experts feel is similar to

Mayweather. "Let me clarify, Adrien Broner is not a tune-up fight. He is a former champion. He is fast and he's a good boxer," said Pacquiao. "That's why I don't want to talk about my next fight until I finish this business against Adrien Broner."

Mayweather, 41, retired in 2017 with a 50-0 record and said on Instagram in September that a rematch of the much-hyped 2015 fight with Pacquiao would take place. The post included a video of the pair talking to each other at a Tokyo music festival.

Pacquiao may be eyeing a lucrative rematch with Mayweather but he refused to show his cards and said such talk would have to wait until after next week's welterweight title defence.

"I have no problem fighting anybody as long as there is no problems with the negotiations," said Pacquiao. "My plan is just one at a time."



REACTION

Disbelief at Murray's impending retirement

AFP
Melbourne

Tennis ace Andy Murray's tearful announcement that he'll be forced to retire this year prompted a volley of tributes to the man, fond recollections of a historic career and encouragement to serve up a fitting farewell.

American star Andy Roddick led the tributes to the former world number one, describing his 11-time opponent as an "absolute legend" who is on the "short list of best tacticians" in the history of the sport.

"Unreal results in a brutal era.

Nothing but respect here. I hope he can finish strong and healthy," he said.

Murray's failure to recover from a long-term hip injury has put his dream to win next week's Australian Open almost beyond reach.

Such is the level of pain that there is speculation he may not be able to go the distance, much less set up a dream farewell at Wimbledon this July.

Argentina's Juan Martin del Potro — who fell short against Murray in a memorable 2016 Olympic gold medal game — urged him not to throw in the towel.

"Andy, just watched your conference. Please don't stop trying. Keep fighting," he wrote.



In this file photo taken on July 10, 2016 Britain's Andy Murray poses with the trophy after winning the Wimbledon title.

"I can imagine your pain and sadness. I hope you can overcome this. You deserve to retire on your own terms, whenever that happens. We love you @andy_murray and we want to see you happy and doing well."

The sentiment was echoed by tennis' women stars, who Murray championed — famously rebuking a journalist for glossing over American greats like Serena Williams arguing for equal billing on the centre courts.

Indian star Sania Mirza dubbed him her "forever favourite" and a "#foreverchampion".

Legend Billie Jean King declared him a "champion on and off the court".

"Your greatest impact on the world may be yet to come. Your voice for equality will inspire future generations."

That sentiment was echoed by Belgian four-time major winner Kim Clijsters, who like many could not help but be moved by Murray's emotional announcement.

"My heart breaks listening to @andy_murray during his press conference" she tweeted.

It is in his native Britain that the announcement will be perhaps most keenly felt.

Many hoped he can muster the strength and fitness to return to the All England Club — where he twice won in fairytale fashion — for a career finale.

"He deserves his moment to say goodbye at Wimbledon. He's too important to Great Britain and Wimbledon history to not have it," said Roddick.

"He just needs to play any match for the goodbye he deserves."

US Davis Cup captain Mardy Fish pointed to Murray's famous determination, which helped him compete against stronger and more skilled players.

"The @andy_murray that I know will absolutely make it to Wimbledon to play his final tournament," he tweeted. "Not many with more heart, effort in the history of the game. Was always a pleasure to share the court pal."

PREVIEW

Djokovic favourite to win Aussie Open

The Serb brings a wiser, harder edge after overcoming physical anguish and doubt



File photo of Serbia's Novak Djokovic.

Reuters
Melbourne

The sun may be setting on a golden era of men's tennis but Novak Djokovic's star still burns bright as he returns to Melbourne Park in search of a record seventh Australian Open title.

The doubt-stricken player with a dodgy elbow, who exited early from the last two Melbourne tournaments, has since been replaced by the world-beating Djokovic of old.

Yet the Serb also brings a wiser, harder edge after coming through a period of personal and physical anguish, and breaking a two-year drought at the Grand Slams last

year.

The same cannot be said for his "Big Four" cohorts, who have become progressively worn down by injuries and time after dominating the majors for much of the past decade.

A teary-eyed Andy Murray signalled the Australian Open could be his last professional tournament yesterday, with the pain of his right hip proving unbearable.

Grave fitness fears also shadow 32-year-old Rafa Nadal, the 17-times Grand Slam champion, who pulled out of the Brisbane International warm-up with a thigh strain and had his 2018 season cut short by a string of various injuries.

The struggles of Murray and Nadal make the longevity of dou-

ble-defending champion Roger Federer all the more miraculous, and even at 37, he may still be the best equipped player to derail the Djokovic train.

Yet, with respect to the Swiss master, 20-times Grand Slam champion Federer swiped the last two Melbourne titles while Djokovic was in the doldrums.

Following his wins at Wimbledon and the US Open, the top seeded Serb is heavily favoured to seal a third successive Grand Slam title, and reclaim a tournament he has virtually owned throughout his career.

Djokovic was only 21 when he upset the defending champion Federer in the 2008 semi-finals, then beat Frenchman Jo-Wilfried Tsonga in four sets to muscle

into a Grand Slam club that had become a duopoly between the Swiss and Nadal.

He has hoisted the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup five times since, including a hat-trick of titles from 2011-13, all roared on by Melbourne's big Serbian community.

The world number one suffered a small hiccup in his preparations, upset by Spain's Roberto Bautista Agut in the semi-finals at the Qatar Open.

But he has the luxury of easing into Melbourne against a qualifier before a possible rematch of the 2008 final against French wildcard Tsonga.

On the other side of the draw, sentimentalists will hope third seed Federer and world number

two Nadal can grind it out to the semi-finals and reignite the sport's most cherished rivalry.

Others will hope for a long-awaited breakthrough from the next generation, after Federer, Nadal and Djokovic hogged all the Grand Slams last year.

Fourth seed Alexander Zverev might seem the man most likely, having again proved the better of the game's titans with his victory at the season-ending ATP Tour Finals.

However, the 21-year-old talent's quarter-final appearance at the French Open last year is his sole appearance in the last eight at a Grand Slam and he has yet to convince he has the grit and temperament to go the distance in seven matches.

SPOTLIGHT

Federer names Wimbledon as potential future farewell venue

Reuters
Melbourne

Swiss maestro Roger Federer has revealed that Wimbledon, where he won his first Grand Slam title, could be the ideal place for a farewell tournament when he decides to call time on his illustrious career.

Federer's comments arrive at a time when the tennis world is celebrating the achievements of his long-time rival Andy Murray, who said next week's Australian Open could be his last as he struggles to recover from a hip injury.

Two-time Australian Open defending champion Federer said he does not have a "fairytale ending" to his own career in mind but he would like to leave the court in good health.

"I have a lot of places that are very special to me, thankfully," Federer told CNN. "I've been very fortunate. But yeah, sure, like a Wimbledon stands out as maybe a place.

"I don't have the fairytale ending in my head saying it has to be another title somewhere and then I have to announce it big, I don't have to have it that way."

Federer, who turned professional in 1998, has collected an incredible 99 career singles titles, 20 of which have been Grand Slams.

He is not expected to hang up his racket before the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, where he will look to add an individual gold alongside his doubles triumph at Beijing 2008.

"I think there is expectation from the media (that) it all has to end so perfectly. I've given up on that a long time ago," Federer added.

"As long as I'm healthy and I'm enjoying myself, I know it's going to be emotional anyway... it should be a happy celebration day, not like a sad funeral type of day."

Federer will begin his Australian Open campaign against unseeded Uzbek Denis Istomin on Monday.



File photo of Switzerland's Roger Federer posing with the Wimbledon trophy on July 16, 2017.

FOCUS

USTA head Smith to retire at end of 2019

Reuters
New York

United States Tennis Association (USTA) Chief Executive Gordon Smith, who oversaw the transformation of the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, will retire at the end of the year, the organisation said yesterday.

Smith, who played competitively as a junior and captained a University of Georgia team that swept four straight Southeastern Conference titles from 1971 through 1975, assumed his position in 2007 and is the longest-tenured USTA chief executive.

"I never dreamed I would have a 12-year second career in the game that I love so much," Smith said in a statement. "It has been a great run and I look forward to the next phase of my life."

Smith stewarded the five-year \$600mm transformation of New

York's Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, home of the US Open, a project which included a retractable roof superstructure over Arthur Ashe Stadium.

According to the USTA, gross revenue from the US Open nearly doubled during Smith's tenure while attendance at the year's last Grand Slam is at an all-time high.

The USTA also said it will begin a search for a new chief executive by first identifying a search firm by March and that Smith has been asked to assist in the process of selecting his successor.

"We couldn't have asked for a finer leader and a more passionate advocate for the sport of tennis than Gordon Smith," said USTA Chairman of the Board and President Patrick Galbraith.

"He has brought our sport to new levels, he has represented American tennis with class and dignity around the world, and his act will be hard to follow."

Kvitova thumps Sasnovich to set up Sydney final with Barty

Reuters
Sydney

Fifth seed Petra Kvitova raced past Belarusian Aliaksandra Sasnovich 6-1 6-2 in a rain-delayed encounter at the Sydney International yesterday to set up a title showdown with home favourite Ashleigh Barty. Two-time Wimbledon champion Kvitova had suffered a shock opening round defeat by Sasnovich at the All England Club six months ago. But the Czech was at her ruthless best in preventing a repeat, striking 22 winners to ensure her progress to a second Sydney final after winning the title in 2015.

"It was worth the wait, definitely. I'm really glad that we were able to get back on the court and play," said Kvitova after heavy rain had prevented the match from starting until almost midnight local time.

Kvitova, who is yet to drop a set this week, will take on last year's runner-up Barty in the final today.

"I don't think (the crowd will be) on my side but it's fine," Kvitova added.

"I think she's really in good form, she's playing so well here in the tournament as well. I can just play aggressive, and that's what I'm playing." Barty, who stunned world number one Simona Halep in the opening round this week,

gave the local crowd plenty to cheer as she rallied from a set down to beat Kiki Bertens 6-7(4) 6-4 7-5.

The 22-year-old led the tiebreak 4-1 only for her Dutch opponent to reel off six straight points to claim the opening set.

But she responded impressively, converting three of the four break point opportunities to seal victory. Kvitova has won both her previous meetings with Barty, the most recent being a three set triumph in the final at Birmingham in 2017.

Hobart: Big-hitting American youngster Sofia Kenin reached her first WTA final when she stunned sixth seed Alize Cornet 6-2 6-4 at the Hobart

International. In windy conditions, unseeded Kenin kept her composure to land 77% of her first-serve in play and broke her French opponent four times en route to a convincing victory. Cornet was Kenin's third seeded victim of the tournament after recording upsets of top seed Caroline Garcia in the opening round and seventh seed Kirsten Flipkens in the quarter-finals.

Kenin, who has not dropped a set this week, will meet Anna Karolina Schmiedlova in today's final after the Slovakian outlasted Swiss Belinda Bencic 7-6(2) 4-6 6-2 in a 2-1/2 hour encounter.

The 24-year-old Schmiedlova fired 42 winners to move into

her fifth career WTA final, where she will be seeking her fourth title.

Auckland: British number two Cameron Norrie reached his first ATP Tour final after beating German Jan-Lennard Struff 7-5 4-6 6-3 at the ASB Classic in Auckland.

Norrie, who grew up in Auckland and represented New Zealand before switching allegiance to Britain in 2013, saved eight of 10 break points he faced in an intense semi-final against Struff, which lasted for nearly two hours.

The 23-year-old regrouped after conceding the second set and finished with 17 aces, sealing his place in today's title decider against American Tennyson Sandgren.

THIRD TEST

Pakistan bowlers fight back to defy hosts South Africa

Proteas lose seven wickets for 36 post tea on first day to post 262 in first innings

AFP

Johannesburg

Pakistan's bowlers changed the course of the third and final Test against South Africa when they engineered a dramatic collapse on the first day of the third and final Test yesterday.

From being in control on 226 for three at tea, South Africa were bowled out for 262 at the Wanderers Stadium.

Vernon Philander struck back for South Africa, taking two wickets off successive balls as Pakistan reached 17 for two at the close.

A polished innings of 90 by Aiden Markram, coupled with some wayward bowling by Pakistan, laid the foundation for some attacking batting by South Africa, who collectively hit 37 fours and a six before tea on what looked the best batting pitch of a series already won by the hosts.

But the runs dried up after the interval as South Africa were able to add only 36 for the loss of seven wickets in 19.4 overs, hitting only four more boundaries.

Mohamed Amir and Mohamed Abbas set the tone after tea, taking two and one wickets respectively. Both bowlers gained reverse swing and tightened up their lines to make run-scoring difficult.

ASHRAF TURNS THE SCREW Amir left the field four balls into his 16th over after falling in his delivery stride and appearing to twist his left ankle but Hasan Ali and Faheem Ashraf continued to put pressure on the batsmen.

Ashraf finished with three for 57, while Amir, Abbas and Hasan took two wickets each.

Markram hit 16 boundaries off 124 balls in an innings marked by crisply-struck drives and firm clips to leg.

It was the third time in his 15-Test career that he had been dismissed in the nineties.

Markram, who had to pass a fitness test after suffering a badly bruised right thigh while fielding in the second Test



Pakistan's Faheem Ashraf (second from right) celebrates the wicket of South Africa's Aiden Markram (not pictured) on the first day of the third Test at Wanderers cricket stadium in Johannesburg yesterday. (AFP)

Scorecard

SOUTH AFRICA 1st inn		PAKISTAN 1st inn	
A. Markram c Ahmed b Ashraf	90	Imam-ul-Haq	not out 10
D. Elgar c Ahmed b Abbas	5	S. Masood c De Kock b Philander	2
H. Amla c Shafiq b Khan	41	A. Ali c De Kock b Philander	0
T. de Bruyn lbw b Abbas	49	M. Abbas	not out 0
Zubayr Hamza c Ahmed b Amir	41	Extras	(lb5) 5
T. Bavuma c Ahmed b Amir	8	Total	(2 wkts, 9 overs) 17
Q. de Kock c Abbas b Ashraf	18	Fall of wickets: 1-6 (Masood),	2-6 (A. Ali)
V. Philander lbw b H. Ali	1	Bowling: Steyn 5-1-11-0, Philander	4-3-1-2
K. Rabada c Ahmed b H. Ali	0		
D. Steyn	not out 2		
D. Olivier c Abbas b Ashraf	0		
Extras	(lb2, nb4, w1) 7		
Total	(all out, 77.4 overs) 262		
Fall of wickets: 1-6 (Elgar), 2-132	(Markram), 3-154 (Amla), 4-229		
(De Bruyn), 5-238 (Bavuma),	6-244 (Hamza), 7-249 (Philander),		
8-257 (Rabada), 9-262 (De Kock)			
Bowling: Amir 15.4-2-36-2 (1nb),	Abbas 18-6-44-2, H. Ali 17-3-75-2		
(1w), Ashraf 15-2-57-3 (3nb), Khan	10-2-39-1, Shafiq 2-0-9-0		

in Cape Town, looked set for his fifth Test century until he glanced a ball from the medium-paced Faheem and wicketkeeper

Sarfraz Ahmed dived to his left to take a good catch.

Hashim Amla (41) helped Markram put on 126 for the sec-

ond wicket after stand-in captain Dean Elgar was caught behind off Mohamed Abbas for five in the second over.

Theunis de Bruyn (49) and new cap Zubayr Hamza (41) both batted brightly in a fourth wicket stand which was worth 72 off 92 balls at tea.

But De Bruyn was out in the third over after tea and Hamza, who scored 38 off 46 balls before tea, could add only three more runs off 22 deliveries before he was caught behind off Amir.

Left to negotiate a tricky 40 minutes before the close, Pakistan lost Shan Masood, their top scorer in the series, for two when a successful review by South Africa showed he had got a faint edge to a ball angled across him.

Azhar Ali received a superb first delivery which seemed way from him and found an edge for wicketkeeper Quinton de Kock to take a second catch.

TWENTY20

Bracewell, Kuggeleijn set up NZ victory

AFP

Auckland

The recalled **Doug Bracewell** and debutant **Scott Kuggeleijn** starred with bat and ball for New Zealand to beat Sri Lanka by 35 runs in the one-off Twenty20 match in Auckland yesterday.

It ended a dismal tour for the Sri Lankans with the drawn first Test followed by a succession of losses in the second Test, three one-dayers and the Twenty20.

New Zealand, sent into bat, recovered from 55 for five to finish on 179 for seven with Bracewell (44) and Kuggeleijn (35 not out) the key contributors.

Although the target was not daunting, and Sri Lanka easily kept up with the required run rate to be four for 118 after 12 overs.

But their last six wickets fell for the addition of only 26 more runs and the innings folded for 144 with 19 balls remaining.

Kuggeleijn and Bracewell both took wickets in their opening overs.

Kusal Perera, who raced to 22 off 12 deliveries was removed by Kuggeleijn's third delivery while Niroshan Dickwella, who smacked a four and a six from the first two balls of the innings, went for 18 with the first ball from Bracewell. Kuggeleijn and Bracewell also took the catches to dismiss Kusal Mendis (17) and Thisara Perera (43).

The first game all tour for

Sadeera Samarawickrama was a short-lived affair when he was bowled first ball by Lockie Ferguson.

Ferguson finished with figures of three for 21 while Ish Sodhi took three for 30.

Sri Lanka did with the toss and put New Zealand into bat with impressive early results.

With a more disciplined bowling attack than was seen in the ODIs, and with astute field placements, Sri Lanka ripped through the New Zealand top order to have them four for 27 midway through the fourth over.

Ross Taylor, who tormented Sri Lanka in the one-dayers, had to play a more circumspect role.

His first 11 runs were all singles from 22 deliveries before he first found the boundary on his way to 33 off 37.

Taylor's patience, however, had set the stage for the Bracewell and Kuggeleijn to hit out and give the total some respectability.

Bracewell clubbed 44 off 26 balls including five sixes and a four while Kuggeleijn only faced 15 deliveries to be not out 35 with four sixes and a four.

New Zealand now prepare to host India in a series of ODIs while Sri Lanka head to Australia.

BRIEF SCORES: New Zealand 179 for 7 (Doug Bracewell 44, Scott Kuggeleijn 35 not out, Kasun Rajitha 3-44) beat Sri Lanka 144 all out (Thisara Perera 43; Lockie Ferguson 3-21, Ish Sodhi 3-30) by 35 runs



INDIA'S TOUR OF AUSTRALIA

Carey to open for Australia with eye on World Cup

AFP

Sydney

Alex Carey has been promoted to opener while veteran Peter Siddle returns from the one-day wilderness in Australia's opening clash against India today in Sydney as they experiment ahead of the World Cup.

Wicketkeeper Carey has played six one-dayers and usually comes in well down the order, but with an eye on the World Cup later this year in England, skipper Aaron Finch said selectors wanted to see what he could do.

"It's just an opportunity to see Alex play in a position he's done quite bit of now in Big Bash and one-day cricket," fellow opener Finch told reporters yesterday.

"It's a position that he's performed really well with in the last couple of years. He'll get a good opportunity up there. We are starting to get a balanced side that we feel can adapt to a lot of different conditions."

Usman Khawaja will come in at number three with Test discards Shaun Marsh and Peter Handscomb following them. Marcus Stoinis and Glenn Maxwell round out the top of the order.

Seamer Siddle played his last one-day international in No-

vember 2010, but gets another chance to impress with the country's top fast bowlers being rested.

"I never thought I'd get the opportunity to play one-day cricket for Australia again," he admitted. "I'd probably forgotten about it really... I feel like a young kid getting his first opportunity."

He joins Jhye Richardson, Jason Behrendorff and Nathan Lyon as other specialist bowlers in the starting XI confirmed by Finch.

Usual spearheads Mitch Starc, Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins are absent for the three-game series ahead of two upcoming Tests against Sri Lanka.

Apart from the matches against India this month, Australia also play one-dayers in India and then against Pakistan in the United Arab Emirates ahead of the World Cup, which Finch said was enough time to pin down their best team.

"That's a very tough 13 games coming up and then the World Cup preparations are under way in the UK, so there's still games to get that right," he said.

"While it would have been great to have a settled side for the last 18 months or so I think it's still enough time to get it right and make sure that come the World Cup we are ready to go with a really well balanced and settled side."



Australian captain Aaron Finch (left) and his Indian counterpart Virat Kohli pose with the ICC Cricket World Cup trophy at the Sydney Cricket Ground in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)

Pandya, Rahul ordered back from Aussie tour over misconduct: BCCI

Agencies

New Delhi/Sydney

India yesterday suspended cricketers Hardik Pandya and Lokesh Rahul and ordered them to leave the tour of Australia amid an investigation into comments made about women on a TV celebrity show.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said the pair would be stopped "from playing any form of cricket after their comments on a TV show".

"The duo will now return to India and an enquiry and proceedings will be made against them for misconduct and indiscipline," the body said.

The announcement comes hours before the start of the first one-day international of a three-match series against Australia slated for today in Sydney.

Pandya bragged about his success with women and made other sexual remarks during an Indian celebrity chat show broadcast last Sunday just as India was celebrating its historic first Test series win in Australia.

Rahul was on the show at the same time and watched his teammate's bragging that sparked outrage on social media.

The 25-year-old Pandya and Rahul apologised for their conduct after the BCCI demanded an explanation but officials unanimously decided to go ahead with an inquiry.

The Indian selectors will soon name their replacements for the ODI series against Australia and the tour to New Zealand.

Skipper Virat Kohli distanced himself from the controversy earlier yesterday, saying the team does not support any "inappropriate" remarks.

"From the Indian cricket team point of view, any inappropriate comments that are made in that scenario are something that we definitely don't support," he said. Kohli added that the two players "have understood the magnitude of what's happened".

Kohli said he was not aware of any sanctions being handed down but the side would adapt if the pair were ruled out of the three-match series.

"From the combination and team balance point of view, yes, you'll have to think about the combination you'll need now," Kohli said. Kohli's side enter the one-day series on a high, having sealed their first Test series victory in Australia earlier this week when the fourth match ended in a draw.