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NBA Page 6

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GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

Pujara torments Australia with third ton of series

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TENNIS/ QATAR EXXONMOBIL OPEN

Djokovic in semis after another comeback victory

'I knew that he's playing probably the tennis of his life in the past 10 months, and he's definitely one of the greatest hitters in the game'



Top seed and World No. 1 Novak Djokovic exults after beating Georgian Nikoloz Basilashvili in the quarter-finals of the Qatar ExxonMobil Open yesterday. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

By Sahar Bidappa
Doha

For the second successive day, Novak Djokovic was down a set as the centre court crowd anticipated an upset at the Qatar ExxonMobil Open. But once again, the Serb, with his back against the wall, found the motivation to scrape out of trouble. The Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex exploded in joy as the biggest draw of the tournament, World No. 1 Djokovic, eked out a comeback 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 win over spirited fifth-seeded Georgian Nikoloz Basilashvili.

Djokovic, bidding for his third Qatar Open title, will face seventh seed Spaniard Roberto Bautista Agut for a place in tomorrow's final. Bautista Agut had earlier knocked out three-time Grand Slam champion Stan Wawrinka 6-4, 6-4 to enter the semi-finals.

"I thought Basilashvili was playing terrific from the beginning. I expected him to," said a relieved Djokovic after the match. "I knew that he's playing probably the tennis of his life in the past 10 months, and he's definitely one of the greatest hitters in the game."

As against Hungary's Marton Fucsovics on Wednesday, Djokovic was slow to get off the blocks. The Serb had predicted



Roberto Bautista Agut of Spain (L) shakes hands with Stan Wawrinka of Switzerland after defeating him in the quarter-finals.

a tough match against in-form Basilashvili, a strong baseliner who gives the ball a mighty thwack and had who won his first two ATP Tour titles in 2018, both at ATP 500 events.

World No. 21 Basilashvili was the enforcer from the word go, breaking Djokovic in the very first game. The aggressive Georgian applied relentless pressure on the top seed for another break in the fifth game for a 4-1 lead. While Djokovic did pull a game back from Basilashvili's serve, the Serb had no answer to the latter's aggressive groundstrokes.

But Djokovic, as has been

his wont, was never the one to give up easily. The 31-year-old showed why he is the owner of 14 Grand Slam titles, bouncing back in the second set.

He raced to a 3-0 lead, while Basilashvili threatened to regroup, Djokovic closed out the set to take the match into the decider.

In the third set, the two players traded breaks in the first two games. Astonishingly, Djokovic showed higher physical energy than his opponent, despite playing his fifth match of the tournament - after having entered the doubles semis with his younger brother Marko.

He also had the crowd rooting for him throughout, even as unforced errors crept into Basilashvili's game. The all-important break for Djokovic came in the fifth game for a decisive 3-2 lead, as Basilashvili cracked under pressure. He then sealed the deal with three winners in the tenth game to come out on top of another slug fest, which lasted one hour and 56 minutes.

It was the sixth straight semi-final for the Serbian, who capped 2018 as the oldest year-end No. 1 in ATP history. Djokovic celebrated his surge orchestrating a whistling contest among fans.

Djokovic has now won 13 consecutive matches in Doha, and is 15-1 overall at the tournament. The World No. 1, owner of 72 tour-level titles, is attempting to lift a trophy for the 14th consecutive season. It is also the first time Djokovic has won back-to-back matches from a set down since Cincinnati in August last year, a tournament he went on to win.

Earlier, Bautista Agut put on a consistent performance to knock out Wawrinka. The two knew each other's game well, having practised together for years. And Agut put that to good use yesterday.

The 24th ranked Bautista Agut played mostly from the baseline and controlled the match throughout. He broke Wawrinka in the very first game

and never looked back to pocket the opening set. The second set too played out similar way as he sealed his win in one hour and 45 minutes.

"I think Stan is a really good player. He is really a tough opponent to beat and we knew each other very well and we used to practice a lot during the tournaments. Today I was very consistent and played with a lot of rhythm. I think I played a very complete match," said the Spaniard, who lifted the biggest title of his career at the ATP 500-level tournament in Dubai.

In another quarter-final, wild card Tomas Berdych cruised past Frenchman Pierre-Hughes Herbert 6-2, 6-4. The Czech is playing his first tournament since June last year and showed some impressive form in Doha.

He was awaiting the winner of the match between fourth-seeded Italian Marco Cecchinato and Dusan Lajovic of Serbia, who were playing a late match last night.

Results

Singles (Quarter-finals)
1-Novak Djokovic (SRB) bt 5-Nikoloz Basilashvili (Geo) 4-6, 6-3, 6-4
7-Roberto Bautista Agut (ESP) bt Stanislas Wawrinka (SUI) 6-4, 6-4
WC-Tomas Berdych (CZE) bt Pierre-Hughes Herbert (FRA) 6-2, 6-4
Doubles (Semi-final)
Robin Haase & Matwe Middelkoop (NED) bt Santiago Gonzalez (MEX) & Aisam-Ul-Haq Qureshi (Pak) 6-4, 6-1.

FOOTBALL

Bayern Munich have all on board for Qatar training camp

DPA
Munich

Bayern Munich's injured midfielders Corentin Tolisso and James Rodriguez are travelling with the squad for a training camp in Qatar from today.

Both are to work in Doha on their comebacks after serious injury setbacks this season.

France midfielder Tolisso has been missing since mid-September with a cruciate ligament tear while Colombian James suffered a partial knee ligament tear in November.

Winter newcomer, 18-year-old Canadian winger Alphonso Davies, is also with a 29-man party which includes the full first-team squad and several junior players.

Bayern are in Doha until January 10 before the Bundesliga resumes with a visit to Hoffenheim on January 18. Unlike previous years in Doha, Bayern have not scheduled a friendly match after what has been a relatively short winter break.

"We want to fine tune a lot of things in Doha, including fitness and technical-tactical elements," coach Niko Kovac said.

"And we have to begin preparing for our first opponent so we can get off to a good start at Hoffenheim."

Bayern are starting a second half of the season not at the top of the league for the first time in eight years.

The record German champions are in second place, six points behind leaders Borussia Dortmund.

Abdulrahman al-Mannai elected chairman of QMMF



The General Assembly of Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) elected Abdulrahman Abdullatif al-Mannai as the chairman of the Board of Directors of the federation for four years. The QMMF first General Assembly was held at its headquarters in Lusail on Wednesday. The meeting of the first general assembly to elect the board of directors of the QMMF was in accordance with the recent amendments to its statutes. It was held after having a full

quorum with the presence of representatives of clubs and sports bodies with membership of the QMMF, as well as a representative from the Ministry of Culture and Sports. The QMMF Board of Directors included Hassan Abdullrahman al-Ibrahim, Abdulrazzaq Khalaf al-Kuwari, Khalid Hassan al-Rumaihi, Salem Saeed al-Mohannadi and Mohamed Ghanim al-Kubaisi. The General Assembly was held based on amendments proposed for new statutes of the QMMF.

HANDBALL

Qatar beat Bosnia in friendly match

Doha: Qatar's handball team beat Bosnia 30-22 in a friendly match at Duhail Sports Arena yesterday.

The game was part of Qatar's preparations for the upcoming IHF 2019 World Men's Handball Championship scheduled from January 10-27 in Germany and Denmark.

The Qatar handball team also played two matches against Belarus. In the first one, Qatar drew 26-26, while they scored a 27-19 win in the second.

Qatar are in Group D along with Angola, Egypt, Hungary, Sweden and Argentina in the world championship.

World champions France are

in Group A which also includes Russia, Germany, Serbia, Brazil and South Korea. Group B comprises Spain, Croatia, Macedonia, Iceland, Bahrain and Japan while co-hosts Denmark spearhead Group C that also has Norway, Austria, Tunisia, Chile and Saudi Arabia.

Qatar will start their campaign against Angola on January 11 and will play against Egypt, two days later.

Al Anabi's next two matches are scheduled on January 14 and 16 against Hungary and Sweden respectively. Qatar will play their last preliminary round match against Argentina on January 17. (QNA)

BRISBANE INTERNATIONAL

Nishikori back to best in victory over Dimitrov

Japanese ace says his goal is to get back into the top 5 after an injury-hit 2018



Japan's Kei Nishikori hits a return against Bulgarian's Grigor Dimitrov during their men's singles match at the Brisbane International tennis tournament yesterday.

AFF
Brisbane

Kei Nishikori showed he was back to his best form as he downed Bulgaria's Grigor Dimitrov 7-5, 7-5 to reach the semi-finals of the Brisbane International yesterday.

Nishikori proved too consistent for the Bulgarian in a high-quality match, securing crucial breaks at 5-5 in both sets. Afterwards, the 29-year-old said his goal was to get back into the top five after seeing his ranking plummet to 39 in April last year due to persistent injuries.

"I'm trying to go top five, that's my next goal," Nishikori said. "The last couple of months of last year

I was playing great tennis and I think I'm doing that now, this week."

The match was a replay of the 2017 final, won by Dimitrov in three sets.

But Nishikori turned the tables this year by returning the Bulgarian's serve superbly throughout, putting Dimitrov under pressure at key moments and showing fight to come back from 1-4 down in the second set.

"I was expecting to go to a third set — he started playing better and I was down 4-1," Nishikori said.

"But I think the last couple of games I played very solid and I'm very happy."

He will now play Frenchman Jeremy Chardy for a place in Sunday's final and will go into the match as a firm favourite following Chardy's three-set struggle

over qualifier Yasutaka Uchiyama.

Uchiyama, 26, had only won one match on the main ATP Tour before this week and pulled off a massive upset when he beat third seed Kyle Edmund in the second round. Chardy was not as sharp as he was during his win over Nick Kyrgios on Wednesday and was forced to battle for over two hours before beating Uchiyama 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (7/4).

Jo-Wilfried Tsonga took advantage of Rafael Nadal's withdrawal with a straight sets win over Japanese lucky loser Taro Daniel.

The Frenchman underwent knee surgery in April 2018 and missed seven months of tennis, slipping to a world ranking of 239 at the year's end.

He was due to face Nadal in the second

round but when the Spaniard withdrew with a thigh strain, Daniel came in as a replacement.

Tsonga saw off the Japanese challenge to win 7-6 (7/5), 6-3 and record his first back-to-back victories since last February.

"It was, of course, one of my goals to be able to play two matches in a row," he said.

"Now the new goal is going to be to win three matches in a row and be able to stay healthy.

"That's the most important for me. Of course, I'm really happy for the win, but also really happy to be able to play the next match, too."

He will play rising Australian star Alex de Minaur in the quarter-finals.

FOCUS

Osaka says US Open win has given her belief

AFF
Brisbane

Japanese star Naomi Osaka said her US Open victory in September had given her the self-belief to be able to come from behind and win tight matches.

Osaka was speaking after recovering from losing the first set of her Brisbane International quarter-final to Latvia's Anastasija Sevastova yesterday.

The world number five overhauled Sevastova to win 3-6, 6-0, 6-4 and reach the semi-finals of the season-opening tournament.

"I feel like right now I'm really confident in myself, and I feel like the off-season training that I've been doing is really paying off," she said.

"And I'm not sure if I would have had the same feeling six months ago. Six months ago I hadn't won the US Open."

Osaka's stunning victory over Serena Williams at New York's Flushing Meadows in September sent her profile into the stratosphere, although her breakthrough win was partially overshadowed by Williams' furious tirade against the umpire.

Osaka dropped her opening service game in Brisbane yesterday, and that was enough to surrender the first set to Sevastova.

But Osaka came storming

back to win the second with the loss of just five points.

Osaka then broke Sevastova's serve to start the deciding set and was able to hold the advantage, sealing victory with her 11th ace of the match.

The 21-year-old has enormous power but said she was tested by Sevastova, who favours angles and deception over brute force, and who defeated her twice last year.

"I just really wanted to play this match knowing that I would have long rallies and knowing that she would be hitting tricky shots," Osaka said.

"So for me, this match was really important because I think that I can handle power players pretty well, but for me it is always harder to hit against people like her, because I don't really know what's coming next. "So I think that this match was a good confidence booster."

Osaka will now play Lesia Tsurenko in the semi-finals after the Ukrainian beat Estonia's Anett Kontaveit 7-5, 6-3.

With the shock loss of defending champion Elina Svitolina on Wednesday, Osaka is now the firm favourite for the title.

"My main goal is to show consistency and I'm really happy with this tournament so far," she said.

"I (made) the semis or higher in my last four tournaments, so I think that's something that I'm going to keep trying to do."



Japan's Naomi Osaka in action during her match against Latvia's Anastasija Sevastova yesterday.

BOTTOMLINE

Federer takes Switzerland to Hopman Cup final

DPA
Sydney

Roger Federer triumphed over rising star Stefanos Tsitsipas in straight sets yesterday to book a place in the final of the Hopman Cup for defending champions Switzerland. The 20-year-old Greek pushed Federer to a tie-break in both sets at Perth's RAC Arena but ultimately succumbed to the 37-year-old veteran 7-6 (7-5), 7-6 (7-4).

Asked in a post-match interview how he felt about playing the next generation of tennis stars, Federer said: "I enjoy playing against the young guys to be honest; they bring something different, something I've never seen before and that was the case today."

Switzerland only needed to win one match in the Group B session to go through to tomorrow's final, having already beaten Britain 3-0 and the United States 2-1. Following the Federer-Tsitsipas match-up, Greece's Maria Sakkari defeated Switzerland's Belinda Bencic comfortably 6-3, 6-4.

"It didn't really count for us but I wanted to go out there and give everything I have," the 23-year-old said. "I think I



Roger Federer of Switzerland serves against Stefanos Tsitsipas of Greece in Perth yesterday.

played well, it was a high-level match."

Eight countries are competing in two groups in the round-robin, mixed team tournament, with the winners of each group facing off in the final tomorrow. Fa-

vourites to win the tournament are Germany's Angelique Kerber and Alexander Zverev, who lost out in last year's final to Federer and Bencic.

They are scheduled to play their final round-robin match in

Group A against Australia's Ash Barty and Matt Ebden today.

Earlier yesterday British newcomers Cameron Norrie and Katie Boulter pulled off a well-deserved 2-1 victory over Serena Williams and Frances Tiafoe of

the United States.

Though Williams won her singles match against Boulter, Norrie defeated Tiafoe 7-6 (7-4), 6-0. In the mixed doubles finale, Britain came from a set down to win 3-4 (2-5), 4-3 (5-4), 4-1. The British pair were jubilant to defeat a team that included one of the sport's greatest ever players.

"She [Williams] is a champion so to actually share the court with her is such a privilege and of course we're really happy to get the win," said 22-year-old Boulter, who only broke into the top 100 last year. In the second match of the day, Williams beat Boulter 6-1, 7-6 (7-2), taking the first set easily though the Brit put up more of a fight in the second.

Williams, who has won all of her singles matches at the tournament though not as comfortably as she may have hoped, said she was pleased to have had the match practice ahead of the Australian Open which begins on January 14.

"It [the sun] was actually perfect because it's just like that in Melbourne and it's the exact same sun and it gives me so many problems," said the 23-time grand slam champion. "The problem is after you serve you're blind for the next two balls so you're just kind of hitting blindly."

UPSET

Canadian teen knocks Wozniacki out of Auckland

AFF
Auckland

Top seed Caroline Wozniacki was bundled out of the WTA Auckland Classic in the second round yesterday, beaten in straight sets by 18-year-old Canadian Bianca Andreescu.

It was a blow for Wozniacki who was looking for as much court time as she could get in Auckland on her way to defending her Australian Open crown.

She was beaten 6-4, 6-4 by the Canadian teenager who is ranked 152nd in the world and had to play her way through the qualifying tournament to make the main draw.

"Honestly, I can't believe it," said Andreescu who was near speechless at having beaten Wozniacki to set up a quarter-final against Venus Williams who progressed to the final eight with a 6-4, 6-3 win over fellow American Lauren Davis.

"First I have to swallow this one and then I'll think about tomorrow. But I'm honestly really excited just being here.

"I've dreamt of playing on this stage against hard players and now I'm here I played against one of the best and I won so really, I don't know what to say.

"I managed to pull through. I've no idea how. I just fought to the end."

Andreescu played herself to a standstill, keeping rallies alive with a mix of well-angled strokes from the baseline and delicate drop shots until Wozniacki made mistakes.

Wozniacki did produce glimpses of her best and determinedly levelled at 4-4 in the first set when she took Andreescu's serve in a 12-minute, seven-deuce game.

But the Canadian teen immediately broke again and held serve for the set before breaking Wozniacki twice in the second set.

The result would have surprised Williams who had earlier spoken of how she expected to meet Wozniacki in the quarter-finals.

"That'll be a great match up. Finals worthy but it's the quarter-finals and we'll battle it out," Williams had said as she looked ahead after beating Davis.

FOURTH TEST

Pujara torments Australia with third century

'We would have liked to be three down but 300 for four after choosing to bat, I think we're in a great position'

Reuters
Sydney

Cheteshwar Pujara put Australia to the sword with an unbeaten 130 in India's 303 for four on the opening day of the fourth Test yesterday, keeping the tourists firmly on track for a historic breakthrough with his third century of the series.

The hosts, desperately scrapping to avoid being the first Australia team to lose a series to India on home soil, had their successes and managed to dislodge Mayank Agarwal after a bright 77, Virat Kohli for 23 and Ajinkya Rahane for 18.

Pujara, however, would just not budge and eked out his innings at a rate of little more than a run every other ball to take his series tally to 458 and add another century to those that helped India to wins in Adelaide and Melbourne.

Those victories to Australia's one win in Perth means India need only to avoid defeat in the final Test at Sydney Cricket Ground to secure their maiden Test series triumph Down Under.

Again India's rock, Pujara put together partnerships of 116 with Agarwal, 54 with Kohli, 48 with Rahane and finished the day with an unbroken stand of 75 with Hanuma Vihari, who will resume on day two on 39 not out.

"It's great to watch him from the other end, the way he grinds the bowlers," Agarwal said.

"We're very happy. We would have liked to be probably three down but 300 for four on the first day after choosing to bat, I think we're in a great position."

Australia's bowlers laboured manfully on a hot day but it was hard to avoid the conclusion that they were firmly behind the eight-ball from the moment Tim Paine lost the toss.

India have never lost a Test match when Kohli has won the toss – winning 18 and drawing



India's Cheteshwar Pujara plays a shot on the first day of the fourth Test against Australia in Sydney yesterday. (Reuters)

three – but more importantly the tourists had the opportunity to bat the Australians out of the game as they did in Melbourne.

Josh Hazlewood struck early on a wicket with a greenish tinge to remove KL Rahul for nine but that only brought Pujara to the crease to join Agarwal, the senior man initially happy to let the opener take the scoring load.

Agarwal faced some hostile short bowling from the Australian pacemen, brushing off blows to his elbow and helmet as Mitchell Starc, in particular, gave him a thorough going over.

After adding a second half century to add to his first on debut in Melbourne, the 27-year-

INDIA 1st inn		Extras	(lb2, w5) 7
M. Agarwal c Starc b Lyon	77	Total	(four wickets, 90 overs) 303
K.L. Rahul c S.Marsh b Hazlewood	9	Fall of wickets:	1-10 (Rahul), 2-126 (Agarwal), 3-180 (Kohli), 4-228 (Rahane)
C. Pujara not out	130	Bowling:	Starc 18-0-75-1, Hazlewood 20-7-51-2, Cummins 19-3-62-0, Lyon 29-5-88-1, Labuschagne 4-0-25-0
V. Kohli c Paine b Hazlewood	23		
A. Rahane c Paine b Starc	18		
H. Vihari not out	39		

old opened up with a couple of sixes off Nathan Lyon only to hole out to Starc at long-on going for a third.

Kohli announced his arrival at the crease with a four punched through extra cover but fell

straight after tea when a Hazlewood delivery down the leg side caught his glove and flew to Paine behind the stumps.

Left-arm Starc has come under some criticism for his bowling in this series but there

was nothing wrong with the angled bouncer that accounted for Rahane, who also gloved behind to Paine.

Pujara, meanwhile, had no time for too many expansive strokes and it summed up his innings that his 18th Test century came up when he swatted the 199th ball he faced to fine-leg and it just about reached the boundary rope for his 13th four.

"He was classy, wasn't he? His time, his patience, he was just very good," said Australia batsman Marnus Labuschagne, whose part-time spin bowling took a bit of a battering from Pujara.

"That's what we're going to have to do and put a big score on the board."

FIRST ODI

Guptill, Neesham show six appeal as New Zealand beat Sri Lanka

AFP
Tauranga, New Zealand

Jimmy Neesham made a dream return to international cricket yesterday, crushing Sri Lanka with bat and ball as New Zealand won the opening one-day international by 45 runs in Tauranga.

Neesham, recalled after 18 months in the wilderness as New Zealand look to trial all-rounder options before the World Cup, flayed the Sri Lankan bowling with an unbeaten 47 off just 13 deliveries.

He then took three for 38 to share the spotlight with man-of-the-match Martin Guptill who set the New Zealand innings alight with 138 off 139 deliveries.

On a placid wicket favouring the batsman and on a ground with short boundaries, Kusal Perera also reached three figures with 102 for Sri Lanka while Niroshan Dickwella added 76.

But in reply to New Zealand's 371 for seven, Sri Lanka were all out for 326 with six balls remaining.

Free-scoring Sri Lankan openers Dickwella and Danushka Gunathilaka had been on track to chase down the target when they reached 119 off 17 overs.

But when Neesham came into the attack he had Gunathilaka caught behind for 43 and Dickwella bowled in the space of four deliveries.

Kusal Mendis and Perera smacked 52 off 50 deliveries until an Ish Sodhi googly removed Mendis for 18.

Neesham returned for his second spell to dismiss Dinesh Chandimal for 10, before more success for spinner Sodhi who had Asela Gunaratne caught in



New Zealand's Martin Guptill

the deep for 11. Trent Boult eventually dismissed the stubborn Perera as Sri Lanka's last five wickets fell for 53 runs.

New Zealand had elected to bat first and after the early loss of Colin Munro, Guptill and Kane Williamson put on 163 for the second wicket.

Guptill cracked five sixes and 11 fours to celebrate his return to the New Zealand side with his 14th ODI century in his 160th match, becoming the ninth-fastest player to pass 6,000 runs in the format.

After Williamson was bowled by Nuwan Pradeep for 76, Ross Taylor added a quick 54 off 37 balls before Neesham's closing salvo.

On a day not made for bowlers, Pradeep returned the best figures for Sri Lanka with two for 72.

The second match in the three-match series is in Tauranga tomorrow.

Scorecard

NEW ZEALAND		SRI LANKA	
M. Guptill c Sandakan b Perera	138	D. Gunathilaka c Seifert b Neesham	43
C. Munro c Sandakan b Malinga	13	K. Perera c Seifert b Boult	102
K. Williamson b Pradeep	76	K. Mendis c Seifert b Sodhi	18
R. Taylor c Prasanna b Perera	54	D. Chandimal c Taylor b Neesham	10
H. Nicholls run out (Perera)	15	D. Gunaratne c Ferguson b Sodhi	11
T. Seifert c Perera b Malinga	11	T. Perera c Munro b Ferguson	4
J. Neesham not out	47	S. Prasanna c Seifert b Ferguson	16
M. Henry c Perera b Pradeep	6	L. Malinga b Henry	11
I. Sodhi not out	0	L. Sandakan b Boult	6
Extras	(lb 2, wd 5, nb 4) 11	N. Pradeep not out	6
Total	(for 7 wickets, 50 overs) 371	Extras	(b 1, lb 10, wd 11, nb 1) 23
Fall of wickets:	1-23 (Munro), 2-186 (Williamson), 3-274 (Guptill), 4-294 (Taylor), 5-316 (Nicholls), 6-317 (Seifert), 7-363 (Henry)	Total	(all out, 49 overs) 326
Bowling:	Malinga 10-0-78-2 (4w, 2nb), Pradeep 8-0-72-2 (1nb), Perera 10-0-80-2 (1w, 1nb), Prasanna 10-0-60-0, Sandakan 10-0-64-0, Gunaratne 1-0-5-0, Gunathilaka 1-0-10-0	Fall of wickets:	1-119 (Gunathilaka), 2-126 (Dickwella), 3-178 (Mendis), 4-211 (Chandimal), 5-267 (Gunaratne), 6-273 (T.Perera), 7-298 (K. Perera), 8-303 (Prasanna), 9-310 (Sandakan), 10-326 (Malinga)
		Bowling:	Boult 10-0-65-2 (3w), Henry 10-0-87-1 (1nb), Ferguson 10-0-65-2 (1w), Sodhi 10-0-53-2 (4w), Neesham 8-0-38-3 (3w), Munro 1-0-7-0
		RESULT:	New Zealand won by 45 runs

SECOND TEST

SA on top after Pakistan bowled out easily

Reuters
Cape Town

Opener Aiden Markram made a return to form as he scored 78 to help South Africa into a strong position on the opening day of the second Test against Pakistan at Newlands yesterday.

Markram's contribution put South Africa on 123 for two wickets at close, 54 runs behind after bowling out Pakistan for 177 at tea. South Africa, who won the first of the three-Test series by six wickets in Pretoria last week, will be confident of building a substantial first-innings lead after their four-man seam attack ripped through the Pakistan batting line-up.

The 24-year-old Markram, who struggled on tour in Sri Lanka in July and in the Boxing Day Test against Pakistan, was bowled on the last ball of the day by Shan Masood.

Hashim Amla, who is 24 not out, will resume today with captain Faf du Plessis, who went out for a pair in the first Test.

"We have to start well again and build those partnerships," said veteran bowler Dale Steyn after the close.

The solid home batting performance contrasted with Pakistan's opening innings as they were flayed with a constant barrage of pace.

"South Africa were pretty unrelenting with all their quicks (pace bowlers)," Pakistan coach Mickey Arthur said. "We have no option but to come in tomorrow and first look to control



South Africa's Aiden Markram (right) in action on Day One of the second Test against Pakistan at Newlands in Cape Town, South Africa, yesterday. (Reuters)

the run rate, hopefully building pressure and get wickets."

Duanne Olivier added to his 11 wickets in the first Test with four more as Du Plessis' decision to put Pakistan into bat, and go with a seam-only attack on a

quick wicket, was vindicated.

Pakistan were teetering at 75-5 at lunch and lost five more wickets before tea despite 56 from captain Sarfraz Ahmed, who went out to an injudicious uppercut shot just when a fight-

back looked on the cards.

Masood made 44 with Olivier's figures of 4-48 bookended by Steyn, who took the first wicket of the day and the last two of the Pakistan innings for 3-48.

Scorecard

PAKISTAN 1st inn		SOUTH AFRICA 1st inn	
Imam-ul-Haq lbw b Philander	8	A. Markram b Masood	78
F. Zaman c Bavuma b Steyn	1	D. Elgar c Ahmed b Amir	20
S. Masood c De Kock b Rabada	44	H. Amla not out	24
A. Ali c Amla b Olivier	2	Extras	(lb 1) 1
A. Shafiq c Elgar b Rabada	20	Total	(2 wks) 123
B. Azam c Du Plessis b Olivier	2	Fall of wickets:	1-56 (Elgar), 2-123 (Markram)
S. Ahmed c De Kock b Olivier	56	Bowling:	Amir 8-2-25-1, Abbas 9-0-45-0, Afridi 9-1-34-0, Shah 3-0-14-0, Masood 1-0-4-1
M. Amir not out	22		
Y. Shah c Du Plessis b Olivier	5		
M. Abbas c De Kock b Steyn	0		
S. Afridi c De Kock b Steyn	3		
Extras	(b 8, lb 2, nb 1, w 3) 14		
Total	(51 overs) 177		

SPOTLIGHT

Tendulkar honours boyhood coach

AFP
New Delhi

Indian cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar paid a glowing tribute yesterday to Ramakant Achrekar, his childhood coach and lifelong mentor who has died aged 87.

Achrekar, a club-level coach, discovered a 12-year-old Tendulkar's extraordinary talents in Mumbai and nurtured him on his way to becoming cricket's most prolific run-scorer of all time.

Achrekar died at his home in Mumbai on Wednesday.

"Cricket in heaven will be enriched by the presence of Achrekar Sir. Like many of his students I learnt the ABCD of cricket under Sir's guidance," Tendulkar said in a statement.

"His contribution to my life cannot be captured in words. He built the foundation that I stand on."

"Achrekar Sir taught us the virtues of playing straight and living straight. Thank you for

making us a part of your life and enriching us with your coaching manual. Well played Sir and may you coach many more," the 45-year-old Tendulkar added.

Tendulkar, who holds many batting records in his illustrious career including 100 centuries in Test and ODIs, retired in 2013 after scoring more than 34,000 international runs.

He attended Achrekar's funeral yesterday.

Besides Tendulkar, the top coach also trained other prominent Indian players including Vinod Kambli, Pravin Amre and Balwinder Singh Sandhu.

"The Board of Control for Cricket in India expressed its 'deepest sympathy'."

"Not only did he produce great cricketers, but also trained them to be fine human beings. His contribution to Indian Cricket has been immense," the BCCI wrote on Twitter.

The Indian cricket team wore black armbands yesterday during the Test against Australia in Sydney to pay their respects.



PREVIEW

Romance rationed as big clubs reluctantly embrace FA Cup

Premier League and Championship clubs join the lower league survivors over four days of action

Reuters
London

One of the traditional highlights of the British sporting year takes place this weekend when the big clubs join the FA Cup in the third round but, with every passing season, its famed "romance" appears the preserve of die-hard traditionalists.

Premier League and Championship clubs join the lower league survivors over four days of action, starting with Tranmere Rovers against Tottenham Hotspur today.

For most managers and owners, if not players and fans, the oldest football competition in the world has become little more than a distraction from their league aspirations and it is now routine to see reserve teams take to the field.

Southampton's triumph as a second division club in 1976 when they toppled Manchester United at Wembley remains the greatest day in the club's history.

Yet, battling against possible relegation from the Premier League, new coach Ralph Hasenhuetl would probably consider it a blessing if they were to lose at Championship side Derby County.

Crystal Palace against Grimsby has the look of a classic giant-killing but if the League Two side were to pull it off, Palace's owners and coach Roy Hodgson would no doubt get over the embarrassment quite quickly and be grateful that they could focus all their energies on staying up.

The same rationale applies to half the sides in the Championship, where the promised land of the Premier League remains tantalisingly close and where a run of Cup games, with potential replays, is absolutely the last thing they want in an already-gruelling campaign.

Spare a thought too for Brighton and Bournemouth, clubs who have spent most of their existence in the lower leagues highlighted with memorable Cup moments.

DRIFTING SEASON

With both teams desperate to stay in the Premier League, they face each other in the FA Cup tomorrow.

While neither manager will admit to wanting to lose the game, they will almost certainly pick a team that will show they do not particularly want to win.



Tottenham's Son Heung-min with manager Mauricio Pochettino (left) during their Premier League match against Cardiff City at the Cardiff City Stadium on Tuesday. (Reuters)

For some clubs, however, the FA Cup already looks like not only their only chance of silverware but their only real focus to a drifting season.

Everton, who ended a 14-year barren spell by winning the Cup in 1984, are secure in the upper-mid table and look destined to stay there, neither pushing the top six but equally in no danger of relegation.

A good Cup run could really lift

the mood around Goodison Park – something that may yet be desperately needed should Liverpool go on to win the Premier League – but it would still be a surprise if coach Marco Silva put out his strongest side against League Two leaders Lincoln City.

Minor League Woking pulled off one of the all-time shocks when they beat West Bromwich Albion 4-2 away in 1991 when their hat-trick hero Tim Buzaglo was famously carried off the pitch

shoulder high - by the Albion fans. Would it feel the same if they beat a predominantly reserve Watford team this week?

Paradoxically though, despite its diminishing appeal since the establishment of the Premier League and Champions League, the Cup has become even more dominated by the big clubs than when it was something they threw everything at.

When Chelsea beat Manchester United at Wembley last May it

meant that they and Arsenal had featured in a remarkable 17 of the last 26 finals.

In that time, they have won the trophy 15 times between them, with Arsenal winning eight titles while Chelsea emerged victorious on seven occasions. With United, Liverpool, Everton and Manchester City also successful, the only "outsider" triumphs in the Premier League era have been Portsmouth in 2008 and Wigan in 2013.

COMMENT

Eriksen has right to consider future away from Spurs, says Pochettino

AFP
London

Tottenham manager Mauricio Pochettino says midfielder Christian Eriksen has the right to ponder a future away from the club even though he wants him to sign a new long-term deal.

Eriksen, 26, has been one of the star players for Spurs over the past few years as they have challenged at the top end of the Premier League but he is reported to be stalling on a new deal.

The Denmark international is out of contract in the summer of 2020 but if he does not sign a new deal by the end of this season, Spurs might be forced to listen to offers in order to get true value for him.

"I'm not a person that suffers too much in this type of situation because football is dynamic," a relaxed Pochettino said ahead of Friday's FA Cup third-round clash at Tranmere.

"Football is about interests that as managers or head coaches we sometimes cannot manage. It depends on many things in this business – different parties that have interests."

"It will be fantastic if Christian Eriksen is going to be committed with the club for a long term, and if not it's his right to do what he wants to do," he added.

The futures of several other players are likely to come under the microscope this month as a host of exits are expected.

Outcasts Fernando Llorente, Vincent Janssen and Georges-Kevin Nkoudou are likely to leave the club but established midfielder Mousa Dembele could also be on his way out.

The Belgium midfielder has only six months left on his current deal and with no new one on the horizon, Spurs could listen to offers in the January transfer window to get a fee for him, rather than lose him for free in the summer.

"There is still no news," Pochettino said. "No news, again like Christian Eriksen, a different situation, it is not only in our hands."

Boca appoint Alfaro as new coach

Argentine giants Boca Juniors named Gustavo Alfaro as their new coach on Wednesday, just hours after former boss Guillermo Barros Schelotto joined LA Galaxy. Barros Schelotto left the Buenos Aires club last month after their historic Copa Libertadores final defeat to arch rivals River Plate. Boca president Daniel Angelici, who had tried and failed to have River kicked out of the Libertadores final after the second leg was postponed following an attack on Boca's team bus by their rivals' fans, said Alfaro had the "ability and professionalism to take charge of" the club known as the "Dung Shovelers."

Alfaro, 56, who leaves another Buenos Aires outfit, Huracan, said he felt a "mixture of pride and challenge. It wasn't an easy decision because I was torn inside."

"But I feel that I'm delivering on a promise to my old man: I promised him I'd arrive at the biggest (club) in Argentine football." Boca had been linked with former Brazil and Chelsea coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, as well as former Argentina and Colombia boss Jose Pekerman. Barros Schelotto, 45, left the club despite having led them to back-to-back titles in his first two seasons before the disappointment of losing to River in South America's premier club competition, the final second leg of which was switched to Madrid - and won 3-1 by River - due to the fan violence.

BOLIVIA HIRE ESCOBAR AS COACH

Bolivian Football team The Strongest have hired Pablo Escobar as their coach, the new boss revealed yesterday. Despite sharing a name with the infamous Colombian drug kingpin gunned down by a special operations police unit in 1993, Escobar's appointment is unlikely to raise any eyebrows at his club. The Paraguayan-born 40-year-old, who was a Bolivian international after receiving nationality in 2008, spent most of his club career over two spells at The Strongest. Escobar, who retired from playing last year, said this move into coaching had been "planned six months ago" and that he would "work 24 hours" a day to ensure he's a success.

FOCUS

Tough draw for Banks and Financial Institutions League

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The draw of the 4th Banks and Financial Institutions League was held yesterday at Rotana City Center Hotel and revealed strong competition in the upcoming league.

The draw took place in the presence of Khalid Mubarak al-Kuwari, Qatar Football Association's (QFA) Director of Marketing and Communications, Salah Salman al-Mohannadi, Qatar Central Bank's (QCB) Head of Training and Development, and Tournament Director, Ali al-Ethba, Qatar Central Bank's Head of Government Relations.

The draw was also attended by representatives of the participating teams from the banking and financial sector and a number of media outlets.

The draw was conducted by Hussein al-Sharshani, the league's general supervisor and Ahmed al-Rumalhi, representative of the QFA's Competitions and Players Affairs Department, with the participation of former Qatari football stars Khalid Salman and Adel Khamis.

The QFA is organising the fourth edition of the league for

the first time as part of its' ongoing efforts in co-operating with government entities in the country and its' 2021 vision to organise various football activities for the different segments of the community. QFA's involvement in the league highlights the influential role of the banking and financial sector in the country and demonstrates QFA's objective to encourage greater community participation in football.

The league, which will be held on the training field of Al Gharafa Sports Club, will feature the participation of 24 teams and kick off on February 2 as part of QFA's activities for the National Sports Day.

The 7-a-side league will start with group stage matches in which the first and second place teams of each of the four groups will qualify to the quarter-finals which will be held on 16th February. The semi-finals will take place on February 18 while the final and third place match will be held on 20th February.

A press conference was held following the draw and was attended by Khalid Mubarak al-Kuwari, Qatar Football Association's (QFA) Director of Marketing and Communications



Officials during the 4th Banks and Financial Institutions Football League draw ceremony yesterday.

and Salah Salman al-Mohannadi, Qatar Central Bank's (QCB) Head of Training and Development, and Tournament Director in which they discussed the rules and regulations of the league in addition to the objectives both organisations wish to achieve through organising the league. Khalid Mubarak al-Kuwari,

Director of Marketing and Communications at the Qatar Football Association said: "We value the relationship and co-operation we have with the Qatar Central Bank to organise this tournament, which illustrates QFA's keenness in supporting football activities organised in the State. Organising this edition

for the first time is the beginning of a fruitful co-operation with a leading institution such as the Qatar Central Bank."

He added: "This league demonstrates our commitment to support community programs in the country by spreading football amongst all sectors of the community and government entities.

This is in accordance with the directives received by the President of the QFA, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, who sees social responsibility programmes and activities as extremely important."

Salah Salman al-Mohannadi, Qatar Central Bank's (QCB) Head of Training and Development, and Tournament Director, said: "We thank the Qatar Football Association for coming on board to organise the league and for all their efforts in ensuring the success of the competition. This year we have allocated cash prizes for the first, second, third and fourth place teams as well as cash prizes for the best player, top scorer, best goalkeeper and best coach."

He added: "We have started the first edition with 14 teams, and this year we have reached 24 teams representing banks, financial institutions and exchange companies in the country.

The increase in the number of teams demonstrates the huge development and success of the tournament, and the demand and keenness of the banking and financial sector to participate in a tournament which offers a great opportunity for the employees to gather outside the

work environment and allows them to learn about the importance of exercise."

THE DRAW RESULTS

- Group A**
1. Al Khaleej Takaful Group
 2. Al Ahli Bank
 3. Al Rayyan Bank
 4. Lulu Exchange Company
 5. First Finance Company
 6. Al Mana Exchange
- Group B**
1. Qatar National Bank (QNB)
 2. Al Khaleej Exchange
 3. Al Madina Exchange
 4. Al Zaman Exchange
 5. Travelex
 6. International Bank of Qatar (IBQ)
- Group C**
1. Qatar Central Bank
 2. Al Mirqab Exchange Company
 3. Aldar For Exchange Works
 4. Unimoni Exchange LLC
 5. HSBC Bank Middle East Limited - Qatar Branch
 6. Al Fardan Exchange
- Group D**
1. Doha Bank
 2. Qatar Development Bank (QDB)
 3. Qatar General Insurance and Reinsurance Company
 4. Doha Insurance Group
 5. Islamic Exchange Company
 6. General Takaful Company.

EPL

Solskjaer matches Busby as reborn United march on

Chelsea slip up in the race with Southampton draw, Huddersfield lose record 8th straight game



Manchester United's English striker Marcus Rashford (centre) celebrates scoring his team's second goal with striker Alexis Sanchez (left) and midfielder Paul Pogba (right) during the English Premier League match against Newcastle United in Newcastle. (AFP)

Reuters
London

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's dream start as Manchester United's interim boss continued at St James' Park on Wednesday as a 2-0 victory at Newcastle United saw him emulate an achievement set by the club's most legendary figure.

Matt Busby was the only other United manager to win his first four games in charge, way back in 1946, but the Norwegian, who has breathed fresh life into the team since Jose Mourinho's sacking, demonstrated his fresh-faced Midas touch again.

His second-half introduction of Romelu Lukaku saw the big Belgian score within 38 seconds

and when Marcus Rashford slotted home the second, it meant United have now scored 14 goals and earned maximum points from their four matches under Solskjaer.

"You'd be happy with four wins from four - and finally we kept a clean sheet too," said a delighted Solskjaer, who reiterated his desire to turn his temporary appointment into a full-time job. "We were slow in the first half but we controlled the game well, we concentrated and overall it was a very professional performance."

Manchester United were 11 points off the fourth Champions League spot when Solskjaer took over a fortnight ago but their gap behind Chelsea is now already down to six points.

While sixth-placed United

were celebrating the start of what promises to be a rather happier new year, Chelsea suffered a frustrating start to 2019, being held to a goalless draw at home by Southampton.

Chelsea had hoped to cap off a big day having earlier announced the signing of Christian Pulisic, who will join them next season from Borussia Dortmund for 64 million euros (\$73.2 million), making him the most expensive U.S. player of all-time. Instead, the Blues were held by Ralph Hasenhuetl's stubborn Saints and could only move on 44 points in fourth place, three behind Manchester City, four behind Tottenham Hotspur and now 10 behind leaders Liverpool.

"We did not move the ball very well and we need to improve," said Chelsea manager Maurizio

Sarri. "We have to play every three days so I cannot think of the next year, I have to think about the next match," he shrugged.

Unbeaten Liverpool will face champions Manchester City in what has all the feel of a pivotal top-of-the-table clash.

At the other end of the table, there was more misery for bottom club Huddersfield Town, who after taking the lead at home to Burnley through Steve Mounie's first goal since April tumbled to a 2-1 defeat with 10 men. It meant a club record of eight successive defeats as Christopher Schindler got sent off just before half-time and Burnley, who equalised through Chris Wood, came from behind to win with a second-half Ashley Barnes goal.

The loss left the Terriers eight points from safety on 10 points

- four adrift of 19th-placed Fulham - while Burnley burst out the bottom three into 16th on 18 points. Wolverhampton Wanderers' hopes of soaring as high as seventh plummeted at Molineux as Crystal Palace won 2-0 with two late goals from Jordan Ayew - his first for the club - and Luka Milivojevic.

On a night full of flat New Year performances, it was all rather different at the aptly-named Vitality Stadium as Bournemouth drew 3-3 with Watford, with all six goals coming in the first half, including five in the space of 13 mad minutes. West Ham United had Marko Arnautovic's three-minute double in the second half to thank for them coming from 2-0 down at the London Stadium to secure a 2-2 draw against Brighton & Hove Albion.

LA LIGA

Atletico must shake dismal away form to maintain title push

Reuters
Madrid

When Atletico Madrid left their beloved Vicente Calderon in 2017, their biggest fear was whether they would be able to replicate the fierce atmosphere for which their fans are renowned at their new stadium, the Wanda Metropolitano.

They needn't have worried, as they have earned the best home record in La Liga at their shiny new ground, but their title ambitions are being held back by their dismal away form.

In eight away visits this season, Diego Simeone's side have only managed to win twice,

a tally which, if they are to stay in touch with league leaders Barcelona, they need to improve when they travel to fellow title chasers Sevilla on Sunday.

Second-placed Atletico are three points behind Barca, while Sevilla are third, five points off the pace, making Sunday's game equally important to the Andalusians if they want to maintain their own title tilt.

Barca meanwhile are in action away to Getafe, with Real Madrid hosting Real Sociedad.

Atletico's memorable title triumph in 2013-14 was built from a galvanising 3-1 win at Sevilla on the opening day of the season, while they also

enjoyed vital away victories at Real Madrid, Valencia and Athletic Bilbao.

However, this season Simeone's side have dropped points at struggling teams such as Villarreal and Leganes and lost at Celta Vigo.

With Diego Costa constantly battling injury problems - the striker is currently recovering from knee surgery - Atletico have been lacking some aggression and steel in attack.

"We know that to stay in the fight for the title we need to win games away from home, we need to be strong at home and pick up points away," said captain Diego Godin last month after snapping a three-month wait for an away win by beating Real Valladolid 3-2.

Hopes of a successive away victory on Sunday in Seville lie in Croatian forward Nikola Kalinic continuing to improve his form in front of goal, having scored twice in his last three appearances after a slow start to his first season in Spain.

World Cup winning striker Antoine Griezmann, meanwhile, should be feeling fresher after the winter break following a gruelling 2018 which he conceded had taken its toll on his performances.

Atletico will certainly need to summon all of their energy against an exciting Sevilla side who thrashed Real Madrid 3-0 earlier this season, as anything less than victory will make their New Year's resolution of overhauling Barca even harder.

Australia add striker Giannou to Asian Cup squad

Australia named striker Apostolos Giannou as a replacement for injured winger Martin Boyle, with the Cyprus-based 28-year-old joining Graham Arnold's Asian Cup squad on Thursday. Boyle was ruled out of the tournament after suffering a left knee injury in Sunday's 5-0 friendly win over Oman and returned to club side Hibernian to continue his recovery. Giannou's registration was completed by the Asian Football Confederation on Wednesday, allowing the AEK Larnaca player to link up with the team in Al Ain ahead of their opening clash against Jordan on Jan. 6.

"Apostolos has been playing regularly in Cyprus with his club, as well as in the UEFA Europa League throughout 2018. He has arrived with the determination to impress and make the most of the opportunity," Arnold said in a statement. "Our group has welcomed 'Apo' back into the Socceroos family and having been with us in Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait earlier this year, Apo has a clear picture of how we work and the principles of play."

Champions Australia were already without midfielders Daniel Arzani and Aaron Mooy before Boyle's injury but Arnold said that Giannou had the necessary qualities to make up for the loss of the Scotland-born winger.

"Apo offers us something a little bit different in attack - he is a hard-working player who can press and has a sharp eye for goal," Arnold said. Giannou, who scored his first goal for Australia in a 4-0 win over Kuwait in October, completed a medical with the team ahead of his first major international tournament. "I'll be doing everything I can to impress in training and perform in matches here in the UAE. We have a great squad with a great culture and together I believe we will achieve our goals," he said.

SPOTLIGHT

100 percent Solskjaer wants more than caretaker role

Reuters
London

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer reiterated how he wants to be more than a caretaker manager at Manchester United after matching a venerable feat only ever performed at the club by its most revered patriarch - the late, great Matt Busby.

"Of course I won't, I don't want to," said the ever-smiling Norwegian on Wednesday, when asked after United's 2-0 win at Newcastle United whether he would want to leave Old Trafford in May at the end of his planned interim spell.

And after a startling opening to his reign following Jose Mourinho's sacking continued with a fourth successive win - something only Busby, in 1946, could boast among United managers - he is making a compelling application for the full-time role.

Sounding uncannily like his old insatiable United mentor Alex Ferguson, the former striker reckoned he had already consigned to history the idea of having emulated Busby, who went on to win a fifth consecutive game at the infancy of his epic reign.

"That will be in the books, but it's nothing that I'm thinking of,"

said Solskjaer. "I'm just thinking about the next game because if you win four, you can win another four at this club. That's the challenge and that's the standard that we're known for."

"The gaffer (Ferguson) used to challenge us on them and of course when we've won four, you can go onto the next four and think about them."

There has been much media speculation that United want Mourinho's permanent replacement next season to be Juventus's Massimiliano Allegri but if he carries on in his current vein, Solskjaer could make life very awkward for the club hierarchy.

For, with United looking reinvigorated and Solskjaer reprising the old Midas touch that famously saw him come off

the bench against Bayern Munich to win the Champions League for United in 1999, he must still know the impossible's possible.

On Wednesday, the one-time 'super sub' even showed he still had the knack of recognising exactly the time to strike when he brought on Romelu Lukaku at 0-0 and saw the Belgian score with his first touch within 38 seconds.

Asked if it gave him particular pleasure that Lukaku should strike, gobbling up the rebound after Marcus Rashford's free kick

had been spilled, he shrugged that it had not. "No, I just felt it was time to put Rom and Alexis (Sanchez) on (as substitutes) and of course it was a great hit by Marcus and Romelu does his job as a striker to be following in on the rebound."

Once again, he enthused about how much he was enjoying his role and said there would be space in his United revolution for both the rejuvenated Rashford, who scored the second, and Lukaku to shine.

"It's such a great bunch of players, a fantastic atmosphere, but it's 'the next game, it's the next game' and I'm doing my job as long as I'm here," he said.

If he is to make it five league wins on the trot, like Busby managed back in 1946, Solskjaer's first major test will come when United face Tottenham Hotspur at Wembley on January 13.

HERRERA NOT THINKING ABOUT TOP FOUR DESPITE MAN UTD CHARGE

Ander Herrera said he is not thinking about a top-four finish even after Manchester United racked up a fourth straight win in the Premier League to edge closer to the Champions League qualification spots.

Substitute Romelu Lukaku and the sparkling Marcus Rash-

ford did the damage in a 2-0 win at embattled Newcastle on Wednesday, enabling United to cut the gap to Chelsea in fourth place to just six points.

United were 11 points off the pace when Mourinho was fired but Herrera is not allowing his mind to wander too far ahead.

"When I saw we were maybe 12 points behind, I decided not to think about it, go game-by-game and that's what we did," the Spaniard told Britain's Press Association.

"That's what I did at least, and things are going well, so I don't want to change. I am not going to think about that."

"If we continue this run, we will be closer to the top four but it's not something that kills my mind right now?"

United's next match against Spurs at Wembley looks tough but United will head there on January 13 buoyed by just their third clean sheet of the Premier League campaign.

"Very important for (goalkeeper) David (de Gea)," said Herrera.

"We wanted to make David happy because he was a little bit disappointed the last games. I had to cope with him after the game, killing my mind, telling me that he wanted a clean sheet and I'm happy for him as well because he got a clean sheet."



Manchester United's Norwegian caretaker manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer celebrates following their win over Newcastle United at St James' Park. (AFP)

NBA

George ignores boo boys as Thunder sink Lakers 107-100

'He's feeling better day by day, and hasn't had any setbacks recently which is positive'

AFP
Los Angeles

Paul George shrugged off a chorus of boos to score 37 points and lead Oklahoma City Thunder to a 107-100 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers at the Staples Center on Wednesday.

George angered Lakers fans last year after ignoring the franchise in favour of a deal with Oklahoma City, a snub which came after long-running speculation he would move to Los Angeles.

On Wednesday, the Lakers fans unloaded on George at every opportunity, booing and whistling throughout whenever the 28-year-old touched the ball.

George, however, wound up having the last laugh, leading the scoring as OKC's all-round offense proved too much for the Lakers, who were once again without the injured LeBron James.

George was one of six Thunder players to make double figures, with Russell Westbrook adding 14 points in a triple double display which also included 16 rebounds and 10 assists. New Zealander Steven Adams also had 14 points while starter Jerami Grant had 13 points.

Kentavious Caldwell-Pope had 25 points for the Lakers off the bench, while Brandon Ingram finished with 17 points.

Oklahoma City improved to 24-13 with the win to remain third in the Western Conference, with the Lakers in eighth spot at 21-17.

LEVEL 42 FOR EMBIID

In Phoenix, Cameroon international Joel Embiid led the way for the Philadelphia 76ers with a 42-point display in a high-scoring 132-127 victory over the Suns.

Embiid exploded for 30 points in the first half alone before eventually finishing with 18 rebounds and two assists.

Ben Simmons had 29 points while JJ Redick weighed in with 27 points as the Sixers were made to work hard for the win down the stretch after a determined Phoenix fightback.

Devin Booker led the Suns scoring with 37 points but Phoenix remain firmly rooted to the foot of the Western Conference with a 9-30 record.

Elsewhere Wednesday, Anthony Davis finished with 34 points and 26 rebounds but was unable to prevent New Orleans slipping to a 126-121 defeat against the Brooklyn Nets.

Davis, who missed the Pelicans' final game of 2018 after falling ill on Monday, produced a dazzling display to launch the New Year, but ultimately could not drag New Orleans over the line at the Barclays Center.

The Pelicans fell to 17-22 after the defeat and are one place off the bottom of the Western Conference standings.

'NUMBERS DON'T MATTER'



Paul George (left) of the Oklahoma City Thunder reacts to his alley-oop dunk during a 107-100 win over the Los Angeles Lakers at Staples Center in Los Angeles, California. (Getty Images/AFP)

Davis's haul of rebounds beat his own previous single-game record of 22 from January 2017, and was more than the rest of the Pelicans managed together (15). Davis brushed off discussion about his personal display following the defeat. "It doesn't matter about numbers. I was only worried about the win. We didn't get that tonight, so my numbers don't matter. We've got to do a better job on the defensive end," he said.

The loss was New Orleans' eighth defeat in 11 games and comes as Davis's future with the franchise is the subject of renewed speculation. The 25-year-old power forward has been strongly linked with a move to the Los Angeles Lakers, where LeBron James has recently spoken of his enthusiasm for forging a partnership with the Pelicans ace.

RESULTS

Dallas	122-84	Charlotte
Miami	117-92	Cleveland
Washington	114-98	Atlanta
Brooklyn	126-121	New Orleans
Boston	115-102	Minnesota
Orlando	112-84	Chicago
Detroit	101-94	Memphis
Philadelphia	132-127	Phoenix
Oklahoma	107-100	Lakers

Elsewhere Wednesday, Gordon Hayward delivered a season-high 35-point haul from the bench to give the Boston Celtics a 115-

102 win over the Minnesota Timberwolves at the TD Garden.

Hayward, who returned to fitness this season after missing most of the 2017-2018 campaign following a horrific leg injury, tormented Minnesota with a superb display of shooting in the second quarter and down the stretch to lead Boston to victory.

"He got back in the gym this morning, you could tell he was going to play very well," Celtics coach Brad Stevens said of Hayward. "He's feeling better day by day, and hasn't had any setbacks recently which is positive."

The Celtics, who were once again without Kyrie Irving (eye injury), also had big contributions from Terry Rozier, who finished with 16 points, Al Horford (15) and Marcus Morris (12).

NFL

Texans focus on pressuring Colts' Luck

Reuters
Houston

Taking into consideration all the Houston Texans accomplished while becoming just the second NFL team to win its division following an 0-3 start, their seemingly tenuous status as favourites tomorrow in the first wild-card game of the postseason offers a reflection of their opponent.

The Indianapolis Colts (10-6), who will face the Texans (11-5) at NRG Stadium, are a familiar foe whose strengths have overcome their weaknesses.

Indianapolis' Andrew Luck fully reclaimed his standing as one of the pre-eminent quarterbacks in the NFL by finishing fifth in passing yards (4,593) and second in passing touchdowns (39) while making 16 starts for the first time since the 2014 campaign, the last season in which he guided Indianapolis to the playoffs.

Luck sat out the entire 2017 season due to a shoulder injury. Protected by an offensive line that allowed the fewest sacks (18) in the NFL, Luck performed brilliantly as the Colts recovered from a 1-5 start to win nine of their last 10 games. In that stretch, he completed 69.5 percent of his attempts while tossing 23 touchdowns against seven interceptions and passing for 2,801 yards.

In two matchups against the AFC South champion Texans this season, Luck passed for 863 yards and six touchdowns with one interception. He was sacked six times as the teams split the meetings.

"I mean, (Luck) does a good job," said Texans defensive end JJ Watt, who recorded 16 sacks this season. "Obviously, (their) offensive line does a good job. I think as the years went on, especially, they've done a great job getting the ball out of his hands quick. He makes quick reads, he's a smart guy, he knows where he's going with the ball, tries not to put himself in too much danger. He does a great job, and like I said, those guys up front for him do a good job."

The Texans must generate enough pressure on Luck as to prevent him from having an opportunity to pick apart their 28th-ranked pass defense. That Luck benefited from the lowest sack rate (2.74 percent) of any quarterback in the league makes that particular task especially difficult.

"You have to mix it up. You don't want to get in one mode," Colts coach Frank Reich said of protecting Luck. "Great players like (Watt and Texans linebacker Jadeveon Clowney) you have to attack in multiple ways. You've got to be able to run the football, you don't want to get in just a pass mode. You've got to be able to chip some, you've got to be able to use play-action. You've got to be able to change some things up formationally to present different looks."

The Texans sit on the opposite end of the spectrum after surrendering an NFL-high 62 sacks of quarterback Deshaun Watson. Additionally, Houston struggled running the ball down the stretch, losing twice during a three-game span in which it totalled 198 yards on 61 rush attempts. Watson accounted for 110 of those yards while the running backs averaged 2.0 yards per carry.

Indianapolis sacked Watson 12 times during the two regular-season meetings. The Texans understand that providing Watson a clean pocket via pass protection plus an effective ground game is the best course of action for securing a win and an appearance in the divisional playoff round.

"Just everyone get on the same page," Watson said of the Texans lowering the sack total. "Get the ball out a little quicker, make quicker decisions, throw the ball away and try to protect myself as much as I can."



Indianapolis Colts' Andrew Luck.

NHL

Pettersson's 3 goals do the trick as Canucks beat Sens

Reuters
Ottawa

Elias Pettersson scored three goals, including the overtime winner, as the visiting Vancouver Canucks edged the Ottawa Senators 4-3 on Wednesday night.

Pettersson completed his first career hat trick at 1:38 of the extra session as he converted a pass from Brock Boeser. A 20-year-old Swedish rookie, Pettersson now has 11 multi-point games.

The Canucks posted their ninth win in 13 games, while the struggling Senators suffered their sixth straight loss (0-5-1).

Sven Baertschi recorded a goal and an assist, while Alex Edler collected three assists, and Boeser provided a pair.

Matt Duchene, Christian Wolanin and Mark Stone tallied for the Senators, who were outshot 45-33 but rallied from a 3-1, third-period deficit.

Vancouver goaltender Jacob Markstrom made 30 saves as he posted his ninth win in 10 games.

Ottawa rookie netminder Marcus Hogberg recorded 41 saves in only his third NHL game.

The Canucks scored on two of five power plays while the Senators were good on 1 of 3.

Baertschi opened the scoring on a power play at 8:48 of the second period as he put in a rebound after deflecting Edler's slap shot into Hogberg.

RESULTS

Vancouver	4-3	Ottawa
Calgary	5-3	Detroit
Pittsburgh	7-2	Rangers
Dallas	5-4	New Jersey
San Jose	5-4	Colorado
Edmonton	3-1	Arizona

Duchene created a 1-1 tie less than four minutes later, putting in Bobby Ryan's rebound as the Senators converted on a power play. Pettersson gave the Canucks a 2-1 lead at 15:26 of the middle frame as he put in a wrist shot to culminate a three-way scoring play that involved Boeser and Edler.

Pettersson's second goal on a one-timer off a pass from Edler came during a power play, putting the Canucks ahead 3-1 five minutes into the third period.

However, the Senators pulled back within a goal on Wolanin's unassisted power-play marker at 10:51 of the final frame.

Then Stone forced overtime as he converted a pass from Ryan Dzingel with 50 seconds left in regulation and Hogberg pulled in favor of an extra attacker.

Ironically, Vancouver's and Ottawa's backup goaltenders switched teams earlier in the day as they were included in a multi-player trade involving fringe players.

As a result, Anders Nilsson sat on the Ottawa bench after playing in Vancouver's previous game, a 4-0 loss in New Jersey, on Monday.

And Mike McKenna sported Canucks colors as he sat on the bench after walking over from the Senators dressing room earlier in the day while carrying a garbage bag with his belongings.

McKenna, a 35-year-old St. Louis native, has logged just 34 NHL career games. However, he has now donned the jerseys of 21 different pro teams in three leagues.

PENGUINS STREAK PAST RANGERS, WIN 7TH STRAIGHT

Zach Aston-Reese, Jake Guentzel and Kris Letang scored within a span of less than six minutes in the second period on Wednesday night for the Pittsburgh Penguins, who continued surging with a 7-2 win over the host New York Rangers.

Dominik Simon, Evgeni Malkin, Tanner Pearson and Sidney Crosby also scored for the Penguins, who have won seven straight to move into second place in the Metropolitan Division, a point ahead of the Columbus Blue Jackets and a point behind the Washington Capitals.

Matt Murray earned his sixth victory of the Penguins' winning streak by recording 28 saves.

Murray is unbeaten since returning to action Dec. 15 following a month-long stint on the shelf due to a lower-body injury.

Ryan Strome and Pavel Buchnevich scored for the Rangers, who had a two-

game winning streak snapped. Henrik Lundqvist took the loss after giving up six goals on just 18 shots before he was chased in the third period.

Alexandar Georgiev stopped six of seven shots in relief. The two teams played a scoreless first before the Penguins unloaded in the second.

Aston-Reese opened the scoring by taking a no-look pass from Matt Cullen, who was stationed behind the net, and firing a shot past Rangers defenseman Kevin Shattenkirk and under Lundqvist's arm 6:29 into the period.

Guentzel doubled the lead with 8:49 left in the period, when his shot from just beyond the faceoff circle sailed past Lundqvist as the Rangers goalie tried closing his arms around the puck.

Letang swiped the puck deep in the Rangers' zone and went in untouched for an unassisted goal to give the Penguins a 3-0 lead just 69 seconds later.

The Rangers momentarily stemmed the tide when Strome redirected a shot by Brady Skjei a mere 22 seconds later.

But the Penguins again extended the lead to three goals when Malkin hit a streaking Simon in stride before Simon beat Lundqvist from point-blank range with 4:15 left in the period.

The teams traded goals within a 19-second span early in the third, when Malkin and Buchnevich scored at 1:03 and 1:22, respectively.

Pearson ended Lundqvist's night by scoring at 4:40. Crosby added an unassisted insurance goal with 6:04 left.



Vancouver Canucks' Sven Baertschi celebrates a goal scored by center Elias Pettersson (right) in the third period against the Ottawa Senators at the Canadian Tire Centre. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

SPOTLIGHT

Formula One pays tribute to Schumacher at 50

Schumacher now lives a sheltered existence at the family's mansion by the shores of Lake Geneva in the town of Gland



File photo of Ferrari Formula One driver Michael Schumacher of Germany lifting the trophy after winning the Italian Grand Prix at the Monza race track in northern Italy on September 10, 2006.

Reuters
London

Seven-time world champion Michael Schumacher turned 50 yesterday with Formula One and his fans paying tribute to the sport's most successful driver with a mixture of celebration and sorrow. The German great has not been seen

in public since he suffered severe brain injuries in a recreational skiing accident in the French Alps five years ago.

"Our champ turns 50 today. We're all with you Michael #KeepFighting," said Ferrari, celebrating a driver who won five titles in a row for the Italian team between 2000 and 2004.

"Michael, you've always been a fighter and you always will be," said former Ferrari boss Jean Todt, the

president of the sport's governing body the International Automobile Federation (FIA), on Twitter.

Schumacher now lives a sheltered existence at the family's mansion by the shores of Lake Geneva in the town of Gland, Switzerland, with his wife Corinna and children highly protective of his privacy.

"You can be sure that he is in the very best of hands and that we are

doing everything humanly possible to help him," the family said in a rare statement on Wednesday that also announced the launch of a Michael Schumacher app.

TREMENDOUS IMPACT

Yesterday's focus was on celebrating a champion who holds the records for most titles and wins (91), even if Britain's five-time champion Lewis Hamilton is closing in.

The Formula One website declared 'Schumacher Week', with stories and interviews looking back on the career of a man who retired in 2012 after a three-year comeback with Mercedes.

"Michael has had a tremendous impact on Formula One," said Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff in a statement.

"Not only did he set an incredible record – a record that is yet to be beaten – but he also shaped and changed the sport forever," added the Austrian of a driver whose Formula One debut with Jordan at Spa in 1991 was funded by Mercedes.

"As a driver, Michael took Formula One to a whole new level with his attention to detail and his technical knowledge.

"He did everything with great determination, from his engineering debriefs to his physical training, and was always searching for new ways to improve his on-track performance."

Formula One's managing director for motorsport Ross Brawn, a key player in Schumacher's career at Benetton and Ferrari and also as Mercedes boss before Wolff, spoke from the heart.

"I think one of the things I'd say about Michael from throughout his career is that people who worked with him never had a bad word to say about him," the Briton said in a Formula One podcast.

"Within the teams he worked in, he



File photo of Mercedes Formula One driver Michael Schumacher of Germany gesturing during a photo call before the Brazilian F1 Grand Prix at Interlagos circuit in Sao Paulo November 25, 2012.

always created a great impression and a great loyalty."

Schumacher spent 18 seasons, over a 21-year period, in Formula One and took at least one win in 15 successive campaigns (1992-2006). Hamilton has so far done that for 12 in a row.

The German's career was also clouded by controversy, his achievements countered by the feeling that he benefited from the best car and a subservient teammate throughout his Ferrari years.

But his talent was indisputable, particularly in wet conditions, and his

mind-management and ability to gel a team around him set him apart.

He was also a family man, fiercely guarding his privacy away from the track.

Son Mick, 19, is now set to debut in Formula Two, the rung below Formula One, this year after winning the European F3 title while 21-year-old daughter Gina-Marie is a rising equestrian talent.

"Happy Birthday to the best dad," she said in an Instagram post accompanying old photographs of her smiling father in racing overalls.

BOTTOMLINE

Down Syndrome competitor to make Dakar Rally history



Peruvian co-driver Lucas Barron, 25, poses for a picture at a mechanics workshop in Lima, where his car is being prepared to take part in the upcoming Rally Dakar.

AFP
Lima

Lucas Barron will make history on Sunday when he lines up on the Dakar 2019 starting line in Peru, becoming the first person with Down Syndrome to take part in the gruelling race.

The 25-year-old, who will be co-pilot for his father Jacques, will tackle the world's most demanding rally: a 5,000 kilometre (3,000 mile), 10-day marathon, 70% of which will be raced over sand.

"Our aim is to finish the race and achieve our goal," a beaming Barron told AFP.

"This race is brilliant for me. It will be easy because we know the route."

Barron, who has been training for a year and a half alongside his father, will ride on one of 500 vehicles taking part in the race. He will compete in the UTV category for off-road four-wheel drive buggies, a class that was added for the first time in 2017.

Born in Lima, Barron has always been a keen sportsman despite his disability, taking part in swimming, football, cycling, surfing and water-skiing.

He says he's "ready and able to overcome the desert dunes."

A fan of both rock and hip hop music, Barron says he will provide important mechanical assistance to his father.

"I'm going to help him look at the engine, the road and the tyres," said Barron. He is familiar with the Peruvian terrain that will host the entirety of the Dakar rally this year after Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Bolivia declined the opportunity due to austerity measures.

In September, he was co-pilot alongside his father in the Desafio Inca race that acted as preparation for the main event and took on the dunes of Ica, in the south of Peru.

The "Barron x 2" team finished seventh. While Down Syndrome can cause lifelong intellectual disability and development delays, those with the condition can still lead fulfilling lives.

Jacques Barron, a 55-year-old engineer, told AFP that Dakar organisers had no problem with his son taking part. The requirements were the same as for any other competitor: passing all the medical exams and supplying the necessary documentation.

"Lucas already has the International Automobile Fed-

eration licence to participate in the Dakar," Barron told AFP. He said his son is afraid of nothing and knows what to do if there is a problem.

"He knows how to look at the temperature of the belt, the oil and tyre pressure," said Barron, who has competed in the Dakar five times.

"Lucas's eyes will be the cars' eyes to avoid crashing into another car or any object."

"People with Down Syndrome can develop certain abilities: Lucas can play any sport."

The Dakar will be run from January 6-17, starting in Peru's capital Lima and traversing the southern regions of Ica, Arequipa, Moquegua and down to Tacna on the border with Chile.

The longest, and toughest stage will cover 370 kilometres from Arequipa to Tacna on January 10.

The Barron team's main aim is simply to finish the race.

Lucas Barron has the support of one of his idols, five-time motorbike winner Cyril Despres of France, a friend of his father's.

"Despres wrote to me on Facebook congratulating me," he said, adding that the Frenchman gave him a signed shirt in 2017 – a treasured possession.

GOLF

New rules to be tournament tested in Hawaii



Justin Thomas plays a shot during a practice round prior to the Sentry Tournament of Champions at Kapalua Golf Club Plantation in Lahaina, Hawaii.

Reuters
Maui, Hawaii

A new year kicks off on the PGA Tour in Hawaii at a tournament where the rules might get as much attention as the leaderboard.

A raft of changes came into effect on Jan. 1 in the biggest rewrite of the regulations in decades and will get their first professional test at the Kapalua Plantation course on the island of Maui.

Perhaps the most noticeable change is that players can now leave the pin in while putting, something that previously was not allowed.

Bryson DeChambeau, who majored in physics at university, turned some heads last year when he said his analysis had determined it was generally advantageous to leave the pin in.

The world number five has not changed his mind in the ensuing few months, though he said there would be one exception.

"It gets tricky when the flag's waving back and forth and I've got a five-footer and shadows," he told Golf Channel as he pre-

pared for the tournament. "That's the only time I would pull the flag out. Any time I've got a putt over 10 feet I'll probably be leaving it in, especially if it's uphill."

Follow American Justin Thomas, however, said he would not be putting with the flagstick in.

"If I've got an eight-footer to win, I can't take myself seriously if I have the pin in," the 2017 PGA Championship winner told reporters.

While the option of removing the pin is easy to understand, other rule changes are more complicated, and Thomas said he expected players would err on the side of caution at first.

"I think you'll see it across the field especially these first couple (of) months, everybody's going to be calling a rules official in as much possible," he said.

"But I've tried to study up... you would hate to get penalised just for making a mistake for something you've done your whole life, so it will be different."

The 34-man field in Hawaii is restricted to 2018 winners on the PGA Tour. Three players – Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson and Justin Rose – qualified but are not playing.

SPOTLIGHT

We will compete fiercely, says Qatar star Akram

Twenty-two-year-old Akram Afif is among the most talented players Qatar has produced in recent times. He is the first Qatari to have appeared in Spain's La Liga. He also helped Qatar clinch the Asian U-19 title in 2014 and book their place at the FIFA U-20 World Cup the following year. More recently, Afif turned heads with Al Sadd in the AFC Champions League last term and has impressed in the domestic league this season. In this chat with FIFA.com, Afif talks about his hopes and aspirations.

The 2019 AFC Asian Cup is almost ready for kick-off. How do you rate Qatar's chances in the competition?

Akram Afif: Everyone knows how difficult these tournaments are. Every team will try to win the title. We're not short of enthusiasm and the desire to compete fiercely. We want to go as far as possible. Our preparations have been more than excellent. We've played a number of impressive games against teams with various playing styles in the past few months. That's helped us build our experi-

ence, improve our physical fitness and understanding, and test a lot of tactical plans. I believe we're ready to translate all that on to the pitch.

You have been drawn in Group E with Lebanon, Korea DPR and Saudi Arabia. How do you expect those games to unfold?

A: None of those are easy teams since they've all made it to the finals. Our first game will be against Lebanon and usually the opening matches are tough as each side is trying to avoid defeat. But we'll insist on going for all three points because that's the key to further progress. In the second game, we'll be up against Korea DPR, a team with an east-Asian football style and we have an idea about how to play against them. The third game will be against Saudi Arabia, who featured at the World Cup last summer and acquired considerable experience. comes and play the 90 minutes of every match with a view to qualifying. Then we'll see what we do in the subsequent rounds.

This will be your first major tournament with the senior national



team. What are your personal ambitions?

I'm definitely excited about wearing the Qatar shirt and experiencing this great honour. From day one, I dreamed about taking part in tournaments like this. I remember being a supporter of the team during the 2011 finals in Qatar. Eight years later, my dream is coming true. I hope I can meet the expectations of the fans and give them the happiness they deserve. I'm not interested in personal accolades. I'm completely focused on serving my team so we can all achieve our ultimate goal of raising Qatar's football profile.

You have impressed this season with both the national team and Al Sadd. Do you feel any personal pressure and do you expect the other teams to single you out?

I've reached this level thanks to hard work and perseverance with both club and national team. But the credit mainly goes to the support of my teammates and how we've implemented the coach's instructions, as well as our teamwork and belief that the team must always come first. So, person-

ally, I don't fear pressure, and if there's pressure I'll turn it into a positive.

If I find myself under man-to-man pressure, that won't be a big deal as I'm not the only player in the team. My teammates are capable of compensating for that in their own positions. We know the coach has effective solutions to all these tactical issues. I'm fully convinced that no single player in the world can do the job of a whole team. Football is a game of teamwork.

You made history when you became the first Qatari to play in La Liga. How would you describe that experience?

After the U-20 World Cup in 2015, I received an offer from Eupen in Belgium. I had the ambition of playing in Europe because that's the normal route for development. I think I did well there, scoring eight goals in 26 appearances. The following season, I received an offer from Villarreal in Spain. I couldn't have turned down that opportunity. I moved there and started a new experience in my career. Everyone knows what La Liga means. For me, every training session there

was a new lesson. I was then loaned to Sporting Gijon, and I had a chance to feature in games. I was then loaned to Eupen again last season and after that, I received an offer from Al Sadd. I'm happy with what I'm doing here this season. I hope I'll be able to help the club regain the league title and other trophies, especially after we missed out on the Champions League title. I'm still a Villarreal player, and I'll see how things develop at the end of the season.

The national team is preparing for the 2022 World Cup. How do you see the next stage developing?

We're all very enthusiastic, and everyone wants to have the honour of playing in this historic World Cup for the Qataris and every Arab. We know that the Qatari Football Association will organise a series of training camps and international games over the next four years to raise our level so that we'll be fully ready. In the summer, we'll participate in the 2019 Copa America. That'll certainly be an exciting experience. Playing against historic teams and on Brazilian pitches will give us global experience, and from that point we'll build for the future.

HORSE RACING

Samjida runs away with Dukhan Cup victory

Champion trainer Jassim Mohamed Ghazali saddles three winners on the day

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Mohamed Jassim Ghazali-trained Samjida was an impressive winner in the Dukhan Cup, a 1700m race on dirt for Purebred Arabian fillies and mares, at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's (QREC) Al Rayyan Park yesterday.

The feature race saw JP Guillambert guide the eight-year-old out of Gate 1 and on the rails, holding a slight advantage going on to the back straight.

The Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari-owned mare pulled away going into the final bend and the gap was too much for the rest of the field to cover as Guillambert eased his mount to a comfortable victory with a little less than three lengths to spare at the post.

A chase by Umm Qarn's Dabaab put her in second spot under Mathieu Pelletan while Jassim, the winning trainer's father, had to settle for third with Celeste De Ghazal crossing the post with Harry Bentley in the saddle.

The victory was second on the day for the younger Ghazali, whose ward, Saa'd, topped the Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate event earlier in the day, and also for Guillambert.

The older Ghazali completed a treble when al-Kuwari's Astley Hall topped the five-furlong Class 2 Thoroughbreds sprint, the penultimate race of the day. Guillambert was astride the six-year-old gelding for the victory.

Champion trainer Ghazali and jockey Marco Casamento combined for two victories on the day – first with High Horse shedding his maiden status earlier in the day, and then with AJS Wathanan racing to an impressive four-length victory in the 1900m Purebred Arabian Handicap for horses rated 90 and below.

Julian Smart-schooled Woodkid registered his third career victory when Theo Bachelot, riding in the silks of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani, helmed the five-year-old colt to a comfortable two-length victory in the Thoroughbred Handicap for horses rated 85 and below.

Wasim al-Sahn-trained Al Asaa (Rashid Ali al-Marri), 2. Sharhan Azzam (Tomas Lukasek), 3. Sereen (JP Guillambert), 4. Adaam Bu Thaila (Gerald Avranché). Won by: Nk, 2, Time: 1:15.56. Owner: Al



Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC) Racing manager Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi (third from right) with the winners of the Dukhan Cup after Samjida won the race for Purebred Arabians at the Al Rayyan Park yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaime



JP Guillambert rides Samjida to a victory in the Dukhan Cup at the Al Rayyan Park yesterday.

rade In Arms, won a Thoroughbred novice plate event for his first victory in Qatar.

RESULTS

Race 1: 1. Al Asaa (Rashid Ali al-Marri), 2. Sharhan Azzam (Tomas Lukasek), 3. Sereen (JP Guillambert), 4. Adaam Bu Thaila (Gerald Avranché). Won by: Nk, 2, Time: 1:15.56. Owner: Al

Mugheerat Stud. Trainer: Wasim al-Sahn.

Race 2: 1. La Perla (Jimmy Quinn), 2. Nayer Bu Thaila (Eduardo Pedroza), 3. Charles De Gaulle (Theo Bachelot), 4. Black Forest (Adnan Hawa). Won by: 1 1/4, 1 1/2, 1. Time: 1:15.26. Owner: Sheikh Ahmed bin Jassim bin Thani al-Thani. Trainer: Ibrahim al-Malki.

Race 3: 1. High Horse (Marco Casamento), 2. Hittchslap (Rashid Ali al-Marri), 3. Al Hasnaa (JP Guillambert), 4. Hadeer (Meteb Ali al-Marri). Won by: 5 1/4, 2. Time: 1:12.15. Owner: Injaaz Stud. Trainer: Jassim Mohamed Ghazali.

Race 4: 1. Saa'd (Harry Bentley), 2. Ennab (Ryan Curatolo), 3. Alanoud (Jean Baptiste Hamel),

4. Diego Des Violettes (Gerald Avranché). Won by: Nk, 3/4, 1/2. Time: 2:00.41. Owner: Injaaz Stud. Trainer: Mohamed Jassim Ghazali.

Race 5: 1. Comrade In Arms (Saleem Golam), 2. Suprematism (Tomas Lukasek), 3. Tuff Rock (Theo Bachelot), 4. Ras Maejy (Jean Baptiste Hamel). Won by: 4 3/4, 3/4, 2 3/4. Time: 2:03.42. Owner: Hassan Ali al-Abdulmalik. Trainer: Ahmed Kobeissi.

Race 6: 1. Woodkid (Theo Bachelot), 2. Alizoom (Ryan Curatolo), 3. Take A Nap (JP Guillambert), 4. Crisscrossed (Stephan Ladjadj). Won by: 2, Shd, 1 1/2. Time: 1:49.29. Owner: His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani. Trainer: Julian Smart.

Race 7: 1. AJS Wathanan (Marco Casamento), 2. Baker De Saularie (Stephan Ladjadj), 3. Diese (Ronan Thomas), 4. Bsheer (Faleh Bughanaim). Won by: 4, 2 1/4, 2 1/2. Time: 2:14.69. Owner: Al Ghazali Stud. Trainer: Jassim Mohamed Ghazali.

Race 8: 1. Astley Hall (JP Guillambert), 2. Cristofano Allori (Stephan Ladjadj), 3. My Sharona (Ryan Curatolo), 4. Adham (Rashid Ali al-Marri). Won by: 2 1/2, 1/2, 2. Time: 00:58.14. Owner: Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari. Trainer: Jassim Mohamed Ghazali.

Race 9: 1. Samjida (JP Guillambert), 2. Dabaab (Mathieu Pelletan), 3. Celeste De Ghazal (Harry Bentley), 4. Ellianka (Tomas Lukasek). Won by: 2 3/4, 7 3/4, 13. Time: 1:58.10. Owner: Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari. Trainer: Mohamed Jassim Ghazali.

CRICKET

Ban helped me 'grow', allowed more family time: Warner

AFP
Dhaka

Australian cricketer David Warner said yesterday that his one-year suspension for ball-tampering allowed him to "grow as a human being" and spend more time with family.

"Life has been good for me. I have been spending time with the family. I wouldn't be able to do that if I wasn't sitting in the sidelines," Warner told reporters in Dhaka after he was unveiled as captain of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) franchise Sylhet Sixers.

"It is about getting the best out of myself and growing as a human being. My most important thing was being a father and husband at home.

"Now it is down to playing cricket again and making sure I get Sylhet Sixers on top of the table."

The former Test vice-captain of Australia is currently serving a 12-month ban from international and state cricket for his role in a ball-tampering scandal during the third Test in South Africa in March last year.

He was blamed as the instigator of an incident in which fielder Cameron Bancroft attempted to alter the ball with a piece of yellow sandpaper.

Warner and Steve Smith, the

then captain of the Australia team, were sent home in disgrace.

The scandal also cost Warner his lucrative contract in the Indian Premier League (IPL) last April, when he was expected to lead the Sunrisers Hyderabad franchise.

Warner returned to franchise-based cricket in June last year when he played in the inaugural Global T20 tournament in Canada before travelling to the West Indies to play in the Caribbean Premier League.

During this period he also played grade cricket, where he sometimes received a hostile reception from opponents.

In addition to the BPL, Warner is also expected to participate in this year's IPL and said he hoped his performance would encourage his selection in the national side for the 50-over World Cup in England this year.

"It is up to the selectors whether or not they want to pick me," he said.

"At the end of the day, all I can do is score runs in this tournament and the IPL, keep putting my hand up and making sure that I am the best person I can be," he added.

The BPL, which was hit by allegations of match-fixing in its early years, will run from January 5 to February 8.

The 50-over World Cup will be played in England from May 30-July 14.

