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**GULF TIMES**

**SPORT**

**CRICKET**

**Pant joins Pujara in Sydney run feast as Australia suffer**

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**TENNIS / QATAR EXXONMOBIL OPEN**

# Bautista Agut fights back to outlast Djokovic in semi

Spanish seventh seed, aiming for his ninth ATP title, will take on Czech wildcard Tomas Berdych in today's final

By **Sahan Bidappa**  
Doha

**T**here was no coming back from this one for Novak Djokovic. While the world No 1 had found a way to bounce back from being a set down in his two previous matches, it was a reversal in performance and fortune for the Serbian yesterday.

In fact, Djokovic got off to a flyer in his semi-final match against Spaniard Roberto Bautista Agut by clinching the first set in 39 minutes. But a resilient Bautista Agut turned things spectacularly to knock the two-time champion out of the Qatar ExxonMobil Open.

Bautista Agut will face Czech world No 71 Tomas Berdych in today's final. Berdych beat Italian fourth seed Marco Cecchinato 7-6 (6), 6-3 in the other semi-final yesterday.

"I will remember this match all my life. It was an unbelievable atmosphere," said Bautista Agut after his 3-6, 7-6 (6), 6-4 victory on the centre court at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex.

"I work very hard to play tennis like this. I cannot be happier. I wanted to be there in the final. I wanted to fight until the last ball. Novak was up and playing very solid. We both played tough. I know it's difficult to play at this level. That's why Novak is No 1 in the world. I want to thank the fans who supported us. I hope they get to see another match like this and then they also enjoy good tennis," the world No 24 said.

The 30-year-old will be bidding for his ninth ATP title today, where he takes on wild card Berdych.

Bautista Agut was 1-7 in head-to-head against Djokovic going to yesterday's match. And their



Spain's Roberto Bautista Agut celebrates his victory over Serbia's Novak Djokovic in the Qatar ExxonMobil Open semi-final yesterday. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil

ninth meeting appeared to go Djokovic's way as the 14-time Grand Slam champion won the first set comfortably and was up 4-3 in the second set with a break.

But the flat-hitting Bautista Agut struck back immediately to break Djokovic's serve and level

at 4-4. Djokovic was so incensed with the loss of serve that he took it on the racquet, smashing the poor thing into floor multiple times. The top seed was forced to clean up the mess with a towel before play could continue.

While Djokovic's focus wavered, Bautista Agut had nothing

to lose and he went all out on attack even as the majority crowd rooted for his opponent. The seventh seed then held his serve to make it 5-4 to put pressure on Djokovic and the latter almost cracked. However, he failed to convert two set points as the set went to tie-breaker.



Djokovic smashed his racquet during the match yesterday.



Tomas Berdych beat Marco Cecchinato in the other semi-final.

the biggest victory of his career when he came out on top in Dubai.

"Finally I could turn the second set. Novak was up and it was really tough. He was very solid and I had to play very good tennis. I had to play a lot of lines and serve very well. I did everything well today," added the Spaniard, who had beaten three-time Grand Slam champion Stan Wawrinka in the quarters.

For Djokovic, it was an end of 13-match unbeaten run in Doha, which saw him win the title in 2016 and 2017. He was trying to emulate Swiss great Roger Federer, who has three titles in Qatar.

While Djokovic paid tribute to Bautista Agut for the victory, he had without a doubt played too many matches. Having also entered the doubles draw with his younger brother Marko, with the duo losing in the semis on Thursday, Djokovic was playing his third consecutive three-setter in singles. The fatigue and his opponent's steely resolve finally caught up with him.

"I wasn't the freshest. This is what I was looking forward to, to get from this tournament. I wanted to play as many matches as possible, to get ready for the Australian Open. Obviously, I'm not pleased that I lost the match today, but I lost to a better player in the end and I have to turn the next page," said Djokovic.

"He managed to turn things around, obviously at the end of the second set. I thought I was pretty much in control of the match, set and a break, serving 4-3. He played a good game. I missed some easy balls and that's what you get as a result of losing the focus in the most important moments and it happens. I want to congratulate him. Especially in the third set he played well. I thought he was hitting the ball very clean and not making a lot of errors," he said.

**SPOTLIGHT**

# Reunited friends Goffin and Herbert lift doubles title

By **Sports Reporter**  
Doha

**L**ongtime friends David Goffin and Pierre-Hugues Herbert won the doubles title at the Qatar ExxonMobil Open yesterday. The pair, who came together after 11 years since they last played together on the junior circuit, came back from a set down to beat Robin Haase and Matwe Middelkoop 5-7, 6-4, 10-4 in the final at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex.

Goffin and Herbert had thrown away a 4-1 lead in the first set, but played consistently in the second set and match tie-break to walk away with 250 ATP doubles ranking points and a share of \$74,720 in prize money. Dutchmen Haase and Middelkoop earned 150 points to their tally and split \$38,070. In the semi-finals, Goffin and

Herbert had beaten Novak Djokovic and his younger brother Marko 6-1, 3-6, 15-13, with the Belgium pair needing to save three match points to win a thriller on Thursday night.

"It's a little bit like a dream come true. To win four matches in the same week, it is something unusual," Goffin said. "But thanks to Pierre-Hugues for the week. He helped me a lot this week to win the title. It is really something special this week."

For Herbert, who is a regular in the ATP doubles circuit, it was his 14th victory, 12 of those coming with compatriot Nicolas Mahut. "It's for sure something special. We played our last final in 2008 juniors in Brazil," Herbert said. "We were lucky enough to play again a final here and to share it with a friend, it's always something special."

Meanwhile, Djokovic brothers' dream of winning a title together will have to wait. The Serbian siblings had entered

the draw in Qatar having lost all five of their previous doubles matches together. But the brothers put together an impressive run in Doha, and were a point away from reaching their first final.

"We just got off the court, so it's really tough. We both wanted to win badly and it hurts, this kind of loss," said Djokovic, the No 1 singles player.

"David and Herbert are fantastic players. They blew us off the court in the first set and we managed to come back and to play at such a high level for us. It was amazing. It was a great feeling. Obviously, it is disappointing to be so close and not to be able to win, but again at the same time it was an amazing experience. I'm very grateful to live it with my brother."

Djokovic has captured only one ATP Tour doubles title in his career, lifting the trophy at the Fever-Tree Championships in 2010 with Jonathan Erlich.



Qatar ExxonMobil Open doubles champions David Goffin (third from left) and Pierre-Hugues Herbert (third from right) pose with Qatar Tennis, Squash and Badminton Federation (QTSBF) president Nasser bin Ghanim al-Khelaifi (second from right), ExxonMobil Qatar president and general manager Alistair Routledge (left) and QTSBF secretary-general Tariq Darwish Zainal (right) yesterday. **PICTURE:** Noushad Thekkayil



## FOCUS

# Tsonga's comeback gathers pace with win over de Minaur

Tsonga will play fourth seeded Russian Medvedev for a place in tomorrow's final

AFP  
Brisbane, Australia

Jo-Wilfried Tsonga's comeback from injury gathered pace when he overcame seventh seeded Australian Alex de Minaur in a high quality Brisbane International quarter-final yesterday.

The former world number four, who missed seven months of 2018 after knee surgery, looked like he'd never been away during his 6-4, 7-6 (2) win over the rising Australian star.

The Frenchman was in superb touch against an opponent who fought hard but was unable to make any inroads into Tsonga's game.

The aggressive Tsonga had too much firepower for the counter punching style of de Minaur.

"I expected something like this before the match - I'd seen him play a couple of times and I knew it would be tough," Tsonga said.

"We have completely different games. It was good tennis and I'm just really happy with the way I played."

Tsonga said he knew he had to attack during the tiebreak.

"I was a bit more aggressive than him and it made the difference," he said.

Tsonga will play fourth seeded Russian Daniil Medvedev for a place in tomorrow's final.

Medvedev withstood the huge serving of Canadian Milos Raonic to win a brutal match 6-7 (2), 6-3, 6-4.

The 22-year-old Russian saved eight break points throughout the match and broke Raonic twice to move into the final four.

Raonic has one of the biggest serves in the game and fired down 29 aces in the quarter-final.

After winning the first set in a tiebreak the Canadian looked in control.

But he played two loose service games in the second and third sets and Medvedev, who saved eight break points on his own serve throughout the match, took full advantage.

"The way he's serving, I'm just going to try to be present



Jo-Wilfried Tsonga of France celebrates his victory over Alex de Minaur (not pictured) of Australia during their Brisbane International men's singles quarter-final match yesterday. (AFP)

and if he have my chances, I needed to take it," Medvedev said.

"I took two out of four (break point chances), which is a good result.

"And despite many chances that he had, I managed to hold my serves."

Medvedev, the world number 16, said the tactic when playing a big server like Raonic was to pay attention to his own serve first.

"The key is just to think about my serve first, to try to win my serve, and then if I have the chance on his serve, then I will try to get it," he said.

## Pliskova sets up semi-final showdown with Vekic

Reuters  
Brisbane, Australia

Former world number one Karolina Pliskova lost her way midway through a "strange" encounter with Ajla Tomljanovic yesterday, before recovering to blaze past the Australian 6-1, 1-6, 6-1 and into the Brisbane International semi-finals.

After easing through the open-

ing set in 26 minutes, Pliskova appeared to switch off as world number 46 Tomljanovic switched gears to win five games without reply before levelling the contest at one set apiece.

Pliskova was jolted back to life in the decider and showed the poise that has accompanied her rise up the rankings, as the world number eight raced to a 5-0 lead before sealing victory.

"It was a strange match today,

but the beginning of the sets was important. I've never had a match like this, but I'm happy I'm back in the semis," Pliskova, who fired 14 aces and 27 winners, said.

Standing between Pliskova and a second Brisbane final in three seasons is Croatian Donna Vekic, who she last beat in the Pan Pacific Open semis last September. Vekic earlier dismantled last year's finalist Aliaksandra Sasnovich 6-2, 6-0.

## WTA AUCKLAND CLASSIC

## Giantkiller Andreescu sends Williams packing

AFP  
Auckland, New Zealand

Canadian teen Bianca Andreescu stunned Venus Williams in the WTA Auckland Classic quarter-finals to continue her giant-killing run yesterday, while defending champion Julia Goerges survived a match-point scare.

The 18-year-old Andreescu, ranked 152nd in the world, beat Williams, 20 years her senior and a seven-time Grand-Slam winner, 6-7 (1), 6-1, 6-3.

The tournament qualifier amazed even herself with the come-from-behind victory a day after she eliminated top seed and world number three Caroline Wozniacki.

"My goal was only to qualify and maybe get a couple of rounds in, but now I've beaten a couple of top players," the surprised teen said.

"I believe that everything is possible and tonight I think I did the impossible."

Andreescu broke Williams eight times as she slugged it out from the baseline and mixed in smart drop shots which the 38-year-old American struggled to reach.

Williams, who had been a professional for six years before Andreescu was born, took the first set and broke Andreescu at the start of the second.

From there the young Canadian reeled off 11 games in a row

before a Williams rally briefly prolonged the deciding set.

Andreescu will meet Hsieh Su-Wei in the semi-finals after the third seed, who has not dropped a set all week, beat Spain's Sara Sorribes Tormo 6-3, 6-2.

Defending champion Goerges, who will play Viktoriya Kuzmova in the other semi, fought back from facing match point to overpower Canadian Eugenie Bouchard in the three-set cliffhanger 3-6, 6-3, 7-6 (6).

Despite the distraction of a blustery wind, Bouchard seemed headed for an upset over the tournament second seed when she won the first set.

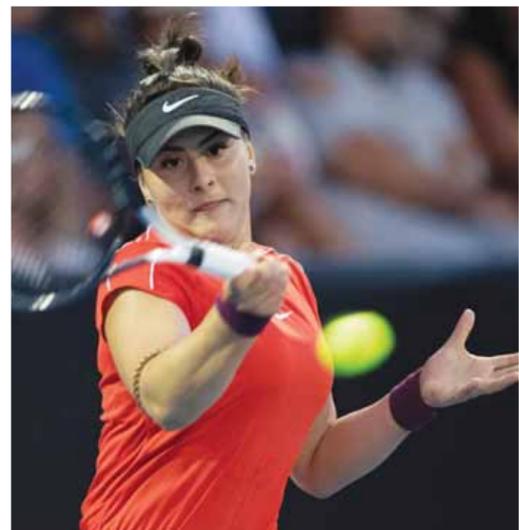
But Goerges refused to give up and rallied from 0-3 in the third set and also faced match point at 5-6 before winning the deciding tie-break.

"It's the biggest part I've learned in the last two or three years when I got up the rankings," Goerges said.

"So for me it's not about giving up, it's about finding solutions and trying to find a way to get a winner."

In the clash of the rising stars, 20-year-old Kuzmova outlasted 17-year-old Amanda Anisimova 6-3, 2-6, 6-4.

Anisimova, the wildcard in the draw, had stunned fifth-seed Barbora Strycova in the second round and was up a break early in the third set but could not maintain consistency in the windy conditions.



Bianca Andreescu of Canada hits a return against Venus Williams (not pictured) of the US during their Auckland Classic quarter-final match yesterday. (AFP)

## Sharapova suffers injury blow ahead of Australian Open

Reuters  
Shenzhen, China

Former world number one Maria Sharapova's Australian Open preparations suffered a blow after a thigh injury forced her to retire from the Shenzhen Open quarter-final clash against Aryna Sabalenka yesterday.

Sharapova struggled to move on court and conceded the opening set 6-1, with coach Thomas Hogstedt urging the Russian to take her game to the next level or call for a medical timeout.

"If you feel more like you did on the first point, then you just stop. Or you take a medical now," he said. "But the shots are there... you have to get it up to another gear."

After receiving treatment off-court between sets, Sharapova sprinted out of the blocks to record a service hold and then pushed Sabalenka in the next

game, creating three break point opportunities.

Sabalenka, however, turned things around to move 4-2 ahead before her Russian opponent found herself unable to continue and retired from the match.

Sharapova, who won the Australian Open in 2008, tasted Tianjin Open success in 2017 after a 15-month doping suspension but has endured a difficult run at the Grand Slams.

A quarter-final appearance at the French Open last year gave reasons for optimism but early exits at Wimbledon and the US Open showed her game lacked the sharpness to compete at the highest level.

World number 13 Sabalenka will face the winner between Romanian qualifier Monica Niculescu and China's Wang Yafan for a spot in the Shenzhen final.

The Australian Open begins in Melbourne on January 14.



Maria Sharapova (left) of Russia shakes hands with Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus after she retired from their Shenzhen Open quarter-final match yesterday. (AFP)

## SPOTLIGHT

## Germany to face Switzerland in Hopman final

AFP  
Perth, Australia

Germany's Angelique Kerber and Alexander Zverev earned the chance to avenge their defeat in last year's Hopman Cup final by defeating Australia 2-1 at the mixed teams tournament yesterday.

The winner of the final round robin tie would advance to today's final against Swiss defending champions Roger Federer and Belinda Bencic, and it was the Germans who prevailed by claiming both singles matches.

World number two Kerber was too good for the 15th-ranked Barty in the opening match, winning 6-4, 6-4.

Zverev, ranked fourth and playing in his fourth successive Hopman Cup, then secured the tie for the Germans with a 6-4, 6-3 win over Matthew Ebden.

That means the final will feature the same four players as last year, a first for the tournament in what is expected to be its final instalment.

Switzerland claimed their country's third Hopman Cup last year, with Federer, who first won the title in 2001 with Martina Hingis, and Kerber winning their respective singles and the Swiss taking the deciding mixed



Alexander Zverev of Germany hits a return against Matt Ebden (not pictured) of Australia during their Hopman Cup match in Perth, Australia, yesterday. (AFP)

doubles.

After overpowering a stubborn Ebden, Zverev said he and Kerber were motivated by last year's loss in the final.

"It's nice to be back in the final and play Switzerland, who we lost to in a very close match last year," he said.

"That is why me and Angie

decided after last year's match that we were going to come back to Perth. Hopefully I can give Roger a better match than last year. I hope it (final) is going to be just as exciting as last year, but just going the other way."

### TRICKY OPPONENT

Kerber had a little bit too much

class for Barty in their match, the German stretching her unbeaten singles run in Perth to seven matches with the straight sets win in 74 minutes.

"I served good and was moving well and Ash is always a tricky opponent," Kerber said.

Earlier, Spanish star Garbine Muguruza collected her first

singles win over the new season, but also picked up a thigh injury that forced her out of the mixed doubles as Spain beat France 2-1.

The dual Grand Slam champion and world number 18 had lost her two previous singles matches in Perth to Kerber and Barty.

However, she overcame the injury to beat Frenchwoman Alize Cornet, herself troubled by a back injury throughout the match, 6-1, 6-3.

Muguruza had treatment after the third game of the first set against Cornet, by which time she had two breaks of serve and a 3-0 lead, and returned to the court with her left thigh heavily strapped.

Muguruza said it was a confidence boosting win and while she didn't believe the injury was serious, she said the leg was causing significant discomfort.

"It (leg) is so sore, we have been playing a lot this week - I felt a little bit of pain in my quad," she said.

Muguruza is scheduled to continue her Australian Open preparation in Sydney next week.

In a see-sawing men's singles match, veteran David Ferrer was in early control but ultimately needed a third set tie-break to win 6-4, 6-7 (5), 7-6 (2) after a typically lengthy rally on match point.

FOURTH TEST

# Pant joins Pujara in Sydney run feast as Australia suffer

India declare at 622 for seven, while Australia end second day at 24 for no loss

AFP  
Sydney

A marathon century by Cheteshwar Pujara and a swashbuckling ton from Rishabh Pant all but ended Australia's hopes of saving the series yesterday as India built a massive 622 for seven declared in the final Sydney Test.

India began the second day at 303 for four and proceeded to twist the knife against a demoralised home team that toiled in hot conditions with little joy.

Unless Australia win, India will claim a first-ever series victory Down Under since they began touring here in 1947-48. They lead 2-1.

Despite the tall task ahead Australia skipper Tim Paine said they were not ready to throw in the towel.

"We certainly won't be doing that, we will be fighting as hard as we can for the next three days. Cricket's one of those games, if you keep doing that it can turn really quickly," he said.

"But you've got to tip your cap to India. They have worked extremely hard for three-and-a-half Tests to get us to where they want us today."

The methodical Pujara made a masterful 193 off 373 balls while Pant stroked his highest Test score in an entertaining 159 not out.

Ravindra Jadeja chipped in with a lively 81 in a 204-run stand with Pant — a record seventh wicket partnership at the Sydney Cricket Ground.

Skipper Virat Kohli finally declared when Jadeja was out, with the tireless Nathan Lyon taking 4-178 off 57.2 gruelling overs.

It left new-look Australian openers Marcus Harris (19) and Usman Khawaja (five) to negotiate 10 tricky overs before stumps after a torturous day in the field. They ended at 24 without loss.

"Every hundred I score is special for me because I have just started my career. But I don't really think about hundreds, I only think about what the team needs from me," said Pant, who expressed some sympathy for the Australian bowlers.

"Obviously when you bowl for two days the body gets tired, but their body language was really good, they were pushing themselves and trying their level best."



India's Rishabh Pant (left) celebrates scoring 150 runs with his teammate Ravindra Jadeja on second day of the fourth Test against Australia at the Sydney Cricket Ground yesterday. (Reuters)

Scorecard

<b>INDIA 1st inn (o/n 303-4)</b>		R. Jadeja b Lyon	81	4. Labuschagne 16-0-76-0, Head 4-0-20-0, Khawaja 1-0-4-0
M. Agarwal c Starc b Lyon	77	<b>Extras</b> (b2, lb13, w5)	20	
K.L. Rahul c S.Marsh b Hazlewood	9	<b>Total</b> (7 wkts dec, 167.2 overs)	622	
C. Pujara c & b Lyon	193	<b>Fall of wickets:</b> 1-10 (Rahul), 2-126 (Agarwal), 3-180 (Kohli), 4-228 (Rahane), 5-329 (Vihari), 6-418 (Pujara), 7-622 (Jadeja)		<b>AUSTRALIA 1st inn</b>
V. Kohli c Paine b Hazlewood	23	<b>Bowling:</b> Starc 26-0-123-1, Hazlewood 35-11-105-2, Cummins 28-5-101-0, Lyon 57-2-8-178-		M. Harris not out 19
A. Rahane c Paine b Starc	18			U. Khawaja not out 5
H. Vihari c Labuschagne b Lyon	42			<b>Total</b> (0 wickets, 10 overs) 24
R. Pant not out	159			<b>Bowling:</b> Shami 3-0-9-0, Bumrah 3-0-12-0, Jadeja 2-1-1-0, Yadav 2-1-2-0

Calm and collected number three Pujara started the day 130 not out and picked up where he left off.

He drove his second ball through the covers for three before once again dropping anchor, blocking and targeting only loose balls.

'OLD-SCHOOL' BATTING

Throughout his knock, he hardly played a false stroke in a demonstration of "old-school" Test

batting, soaking up the pressure and counter-attacking when he saw an opportunity.

Pujara brought up his 150 with a boundary and seemed destined for his fourth Test 200 before attempting to whip Lyon down the leg side. Instead, he lobbed the ball back into the spinner's hands.

Sri Lankan batting legend Kumar Sangakkara summed up his innings in a tweet.

"A great lesson to all batsmen

in the series and tests in general," he said. "@cheteshwar1 showing how trusting your strengths and being unashamedly dogged in technique and concentration brings great rewards."

At the other end chirpy wicketkeeper-batsman Pant plundered only his second Test century as he piled more pressure on a wilting Australian attack.

The 21-year-old, in only his ninth Test, smashed eight boundaries in his ton and quick-

ly passed his previous Test high of 114 against England last year, swinging his bat as he grew in confidence.

He was ably supported by allrounder Jadeja who raced to a 10th Test 50, unleashing his trademark celebration of twirling his bat like a samurai sword.

So desperate were Australia at this point that Khawaja was given a bowl — only the second time he has been called on in a Test.

Jadeja was finally undone by a weary Lyon who could barely muster a celebration as he knocked the stumps over and Kohli called it a day.

Earlier, Hanuma Vihari added only three to his overnight 39 before he misjudged a sweep off Lyon and the ball feathered his glove, with Marnus Labuschagne taking the catch.

From the moment the coin landed in Kohli's favour, the Test has taken on a predictable tone.

Whichever team has won the toss in the series has batted first and gone on to win the match.

REACTION

## Australia need a bit of help to deal with Pujara: Paine

Reuters  
Sydney

Australia captain Tim Paine was not looking for excuses despite a second miserable day in the field in the fourth Test yesterday but did say a wicket with a bit more life might help his bowlers deal with their Indian nemesis, Cheteshwar Pujara.

Batsman Pujara completed an innings of 193 yesterday as India scored 622 for seven declared to pretty much end Australia's hopes of the victory they need to save the series.

The 30-year-old rarely looked under any threat as he ground out his third century of the series on a track which offered virtually nothing for pace or spin to take took his tally to 521 runs over four Tests.

"It's one of those things we can't control, we just have to deal with it the best we can," Paine said of the wicket.

"What I do know is that the pitch here, and the pitch in Melbourne, didn't make us bowl and bat as poorly as badly as we have in this Test.

"We've just been outplayed and both teams have had similar conditions.

"I'd like to see a bit more bounce and a bit more pace but we've just got to play better on whatever wicket is served up wherever we play in the world."

Pujara only managed scores of

24 and four in the one Test that Australia won and Paine suggested that the drop-in wicket at the new Perth Stadium might have had something to do with it.

"In the form he's in at the moment, he's not missing too many," Paine said.

"When the wicket is like it is at the moment and you can't swing the ball, not many good players miss them. He's been really patient and disciplined around his off-stump.

"We've tried to bounce him, we've tried wide of the stumps, we've tried at the stumps, Nathan Lyon's been over and around... and he's been too good for us.

"Having said that, I thought in Perth, when we got some bounce in the wicket, we saw where we can get him out. Caught behind the wicket. Twice."

Paine admitted that the number of overs the Indian batsmen had forced them to bowl in Melbourne and Sydney had taken its toll on his attack and that paceman Mitchell Starc was struggling with confidence.

One thing that could not be doubted, though, was that the Australians were giving their all and that would continue when they resumed on 24 without loss today.

"The easiest thing to do is to throw in the towel but we won't be doing that," he said.

"We'll be turning up tomorrow and trying our guts out to get back into this game."



## Paine keeps sense of humour despite long day in the field

AFP  
Sydney

Australian skipper Tim Paine proved he still had a sense of humour despite a gruelling day in the field yesterday, gamely answering an AFP journalist's phone during a live press conference.

The wicketkeeper could have been forgiven for wanting to get out of the room as fast as possible after 167 overs behind the stumps against India in the fourth Test in Sydney.

And at the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne he suggested young Indian wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant could babysit for him and his wife.

"Fancy that. Pansy? Extend your little Aussie holiday. Can you babysit? I'll take the wife to the movies one night and you'll look after the kids."

"Ah Martin, he's in the middle of a press conference at the moment. Can I get him to call you back?"

"No worries, I'll tell him to check his emails. Thanks Katie, cheers."

Paine has proven before that he enjoys a laugh, engaging in some hilarious on-field banter during the four-Test series, including a cheeky sledge in the second Test in Perth to Murali Vijay about Indian captain Virat Kohli.

"I know he's your captain but you can't seriously like him as a bloke," he said.

And at the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne he suggested young Indian wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant could babysit for him and his wife.

"Tim Paine speaking," he said. "Who is it, sorry? It's Katie in Hong Kong. Who are you after?" he went on.

SECOND TEST

# Du Plessis century gives South Africa advantage

Reuters  
Cape Town, South Africa

Captain Faf du Plessis led from the front with a hard-earned century to give South Africa a commanding 205-run advantage at the end of the second day of the second test against Pakistan at Newlands yesterday.

Du Plessis failed to score in either innings in the first test in Pretoria last week, but made 103 in a 226-ball knock as South Africa piled up 382 for six in reply to Pakistan's 177 all out on the opening day.

Pakistan will be up against it on Saturday when South Africa resume with Quinton de Kock not out on 55 and Vernon Philander on six as they look to press home their advantage.

Du Plessis had to toil for his ninth test century on an uneven pitch, hitting some superb shots through extra cover but also surviving being dropped on 96 to an easy catch down leg that Pakistan wicketkeeper Sarfraz Ahmed spilt.

He was eventually out to a feint tinkle off teenager Shaheen Shah, who finished the day with



South Africa's Faf du Plessis (right) celebrates his century with teammate Temba Bavuma on Day Two of the second Test against Pakistan in Cape Town yesterday. (Reuters)

the best Pakistan figures of 3-112.

Temba Bavuma, who saw two reviews go his way, made 75 and it was his 156-run fifth wicket partnership with the skipper that enabled South Africa to take the game away from their opponents after losing two

wickets early in the day.

South Africa were on 123-2 overnight but Hashim Amla (24) and Theunis de Bruyn (13) departed in the morning session before Bavuma, having scored three, was reprieved by the third umpire after appearing to be caught in the slips.

It was decided that the catch had been taken off the turf.

He also survived a lbw decision with the review going his way to the exasperation of Pakistan.

Bavuma was eventually caught by Sarfraz off Shaheen, who then also bagged Du Plessis but only after another review,

Scorecard

<b>PAKISTAN 1st inn</b>		177 all out
<b>SOUTH AFRICA 1st inn (o/n 123-2)</b>		
A. Markram b Masood	78	
D. Elgar c Ahmed b Amir	20	
H. Amla b Abbas	24	
T. de Bruyn c Azam b Afridi	13	
F. du Plessis c Ahmed b Afridi	103	
T. Bavuma c Ahmed b Afridi	75	
Q. de Kock not out	55	
V. Philander not out	6	
<b>Extras</b> (b5, lb1, nb2)	8	
<b>Total</b> (6 wkts, 116 overs)	382	
<b>Fall of wickets:</b> 1-56 (Elgar), 2-123 (Markram), 3-126 (Amla), 4-149 (De Bruyn), 5-305 (Bavuma), 6-356 (Du Plessis)		
<b>Bowling:</b> Amir 29-9-69-1 (2nb), Abbas 31-8-81-1, Afridi 26-3-112-3, Shah 21-7-9-0, Masood 5-1-19-1, Shafiq 4-0-16-0		

which this time went Pakistan's way.

De Kock hit fours off his first two deliveries and never looked back as he raced to his half century off 59 balls.

SELECTION

## Southee to captain NZ Twenty20 side

AFP  
Wellington, New Zealand

Tim Southee was named yesterday to captain New Zealand in next week's one-off Twenty20 match against Sri Lanka.

Regular skipper Kane Williamson is to be rested along with Trent Boult and Colin de Grandhomme.

Southee, who has captained New Zealand twice before, admitted that leading a side in cricket's shortest form can be a bit of a gamble.

"It's about trying to stay a step ahead of the game and a little bit

of guessing," he said. "The way T20 cricket goes it's (about) trying to take a bit of a punt on what you think is going to happen."

All-rounder Jimmy Neesham and opener Martin Guptill, who starred when New Zealand won the first one-day international on Thursday, are also in the Twenty20 squad.

**SQUAD:** Tim Southee (capt), Lockie Ferguson, Martin Guptill, Scott Kuggeleijn, Colin Munro, Jimmy Neesham, Henry Nicholls, Glenn Phillips, Seth Rance, Mitchell Santner, Tim Seifert, Ish Sodhi, Ross Taylor.

## CRICKET

# BPL spends big to bash rival T20s

'They are not just here to watch me. I am just excited to be here and be a part of it'



Controversial Aussie stars David Warner and Steve Smith have been lured to play the Bangladesh Premier League starting today.

AFP  
Dhaka

The Bangladesh Premier League starts this weekend with bad boy Australians Steve Smith and David Warner among foreign stars tempted by top-notch salaries that have made the BPL a leading Twenty20 tournament.

The two, who are serving 12 month international bans for ball tampering, will clash when Warner leads the Sylhet Sixers against Smith's Comilla Victorians in Dhaka tomorrow.

Warner said the BPL is now "amongst the best".

South African big hitter AB de Villiers with West Indies' Chris Gayle and England's Alex Hales will be playing for defending champions Rangpur Riders.

The league had feared an exodus to the rival Australian Big Bash League. Afghan leg-spin star Rashid Khan, New Zealand

batsman Brendon McCullum and England's Josh Buttler all played in the BPL last year but chose the Big Bash this time.

But de Villiers and Nepalese spinner Sandeep Lamichhane – who will be in Warner's team – are leaving the Big Bash to take part in the BPL. The Bangladesh tournament finishes February 8 which enables them to return to Australia if needed.

Gayle has become a BPL fixture in recent years, hitting a world record 18 sixes in his 69-ball 146 for Rangpur in last season's final. But with each team allowed nine foreigners, compared to two for the Big Bash, there is a huge migrant contingent. West Indians Sunil Narine, Kieron Pollard, Andre Russell, Carlos Brathwaite, Evin Lewis and Sheldon Cottrell, Pakistan's Shahid Afridi and Shoaib Malik and England's Ian Bell are among other top names appearing for the seven teams.

The salary cap for draft players is \$200,000 but most of the foreigners ne-

gotiated non-draft individual deals for which there is no limit. The Bangladesh Cricket Board has not given details of payments.

The winners of the event will get just \$240,000 in prize money, but much more in commercial fallout and prestige. So most of the teams have been spending big. The presence of Smith and Warner, banned from internationals and Australian domestic cricket after admitting ball tampering in the South Africa-Australia Test last March, has been a major draw however.

"You look at the names in some of the other teams. They are not just here to watch me. I am just excited to be here and be a part of it," said Warner.

"At the moment, the BPL is starting against the BBL, at home. After this you have the Pakistan Super League and Indian Premier League.

"Most players tell me that this is definitely up there with the best," he added. Former Sri Lankan batsman Mahela

Jayawardene, who will coach Khulna Titans echoed Warner.

"It is good for BPL to get all the good players. It is also good for the younger Bangladeshi players to play with those guys, to learn a lot," he said

High-profile coaches such as Australia's Tom Moody, Pakistan's Waqar Younis and South Africa's Lance Klusener have also been drawn. Moody and Waqar will coach Rangpur Riders and Sylhet Sixers respectively while Klusener will coach Rajshahi Kings. "It is great to have world-class players" in the BPL, said Moody.

Bangladesh batsman Mushfiqur Rahim said the presence of the foreign stars brought prestige to the nation but also helped develop young home players.

"It gives them the opportunity to learn," he said.

The BPL was dogged by match-fixing scandals and delayed pay for some foreign players after it started in 2011. After a one-year suspension in 2015 it has been staged without serious controversy.

## FOCUS

## IOC athletes' body indicates support for fresh action against Russia

Reuters  
London

The International Olympic Committee's athlete commission indicated yesterday it would support fresh sanctions on Russia by world anti-doping agency WADA after a missed doping data deadline.

A WADA Compliance Review Committee (CRC) will meet in Montreal on Jan. 14-15 to hear from an inspection team whose five members were not allowed to retrieve data from a Moscow laboratory by a Dec. 31 deadline.

The CRC will then submit a report to the WADA executive committee and could recommend that Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) once again be ruled non-compliant and face new sanctions.

The Athletes' Commission went out on a limb in supporting WADA's decision last September to conditionally reinstate RUSADA, which had been suspended since November 2015 over alleged state-backed doping.

Other athletes' groups and anti-doping organisations had spoken out strongly against RUSADA's reinstatement while the Russian athletics federation remains banned by the IAAF.

"As members of the IOC Athletes' Commission, we are extremely disappointed and concerned by the fact that RUSADA

has missed the deadline," the Athletes' Commission said in a statement.

"We expect the CRC in its meeting...to make the appropriate recommendations to the WADA Executive Committee in the light of its decision of September 2018. These recommendations should lead to immediate measures and actions."

While not spelling out the 'appropriate recommendations', the statement noted that support for RUSADA's provisional reinstatement had been made on the understanding that a missed deadline would lead to "stronger and more effective sanctions". A spokesman for the IOC President Thomas Bach told Reuters: "We have taken note of the statement of the IOC Athletes' Commission, which the IOC fully supports."

Athletes' Commission chair Kirsty Coventry, an Olympic swimming champion and now Zimbabwean Sports Minister, told Reuters in October that "if we don't get what we want then we must be strong in our reaction. If it is not done we will have to make some tough decisions," she added. The head of the US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) challenged WADA on Thursday to make a quick ruling.

"Let's see if a decision on January 14 happens but let's not forget that it's just a recommendation that has to go to the WADA executive committee," USADA chief Travis Tygart told Reuters.

## BADMINTON

## Lee back in training after cancer battle

AFP  
Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian badminton star Lee Chong Wei resumed his training yesterday, officials said, months after the sports great had to stop playing to fight cancer.

The former long-time world number one was seen to be in "high spirits" with plans to get back to court next week, Badminton Association of Malaysia secretary-general Ng Chin Chai told AFP.

"He was in the gym doing some cycling with the gym instructor," he said. "He plans to start the on-court training next week."

Lee stopped playing in the middle of last year after he discovered he had cancer in July, forcing him to pull out of regional games and world championships.

Diagnosed with early-stage

nose cancer, he told *The Star* newspaper in December that he had to go through 33 sessions of proton therapy treatment in Taiwan, calling it "a nightmare".

Despite his ordeal, the three-time Olympic silver medalist said he wasn't giving up on his dream of playing at the Tokyo 2020 Summer Games – his fifth entry if he were to qualify. The 36-year-old player has tried unsuccessfully to gain Malaysia's first ever Olympic gold medal at three consecutive Summer Games.

His last shot at the Olympic title was at the Rio 2016 Games when Lee lost to China's Chen Long in a gripping final.

Nose cancer is perhaps the biggest blow suffered by Lee, who was banned after testing positive for a proscribed anti-inflammatory at the 2014 world championships.

Lee returned to the sport in 2015, after authorities accepted he took the drug inadvertently.

## COMEBACK

## Khawaja, Siddle recalled to Australia one-day squad

AFP  
Sydney

Veterans Usman Khawaja, Peter Siddle, and Nathan Lyon were Friday recalled to a revamped Australian one-day squad to play India with an eye on the World Cup in England later this year.

After a poor run in the limited overs format, selectors ruthlessly axed Travis Head, Chris Lynn, D'Arcy Short, Ben McDermott and allrounder Ashton Agar.

Bowling spearheads Mitch Starc, Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins are missing after being ordered to rest and prepare for two upcoming Tests against Sri Lanka.

National selector Trevor Hohns said that after Australia lost to South Africa 2-1 at the start of the summer, a change was needed to turn things around.

"With this in mind and the World Cup looming, we've selected players we feel provide us with the flexibility to play a variety of roles at different stages of a match," he said.

"The upcoming three-match series against India and the ODI tours of India and the UAE are important windows to put this into practice and to build a squad to help defend our World Cup title."

Seamer Siddle's return was a surprise. He played his last one-day international in November 2010, but gets another chance with the country's top fast bowlers unavailable.

He will lead the attack alongside Jhye Richardson, Jason Behrendorff, and Billy Stanlake.

"It's wonderful to have Peter back in the squad for the first time since 2010," said Hohns.

"His white ball cricket has improved considerably the older he has got, and his selection is great reward for his professionalism and strong leadership qualities."

Khawaja returns after an almost two-year exile while Lyon replaces Agar after being overlooked for the recent South Africa series. Test players Mitch Marsh and Peter Handscomb were also included, with Aaron Finch the captain.

"With a focus on improving our ability to post competitive totals we've recalled Usman Khawaja, Peter Handscomb and Mitch Marsh to the squad," said Hohns.

"Usman is a batsman we know can put vital runs on the board at the top of the order, and Peter is not only a fine player of spin bowling, he's also a batsman we know can hold an innings together while keeping the scoreboard ticking over.

"Mitch gives us another all-round option with his ability with both bat and ball."

Australia play three one-dayers against India, starting in Sydney on January 12 before moving to Adelaide and Melbourne.

**Australia's 14-man squad:** Aaron Finch (capt), Usman Khawaja, Shaun Marsh, Peter Handscomb, Glenn Maxwell, Marcus Stoinis, Mitch Marsh, Alex Carey, Jhye Richardson, Billy Stanlake, Jason Behrendorff, Peter Siddle, Nathan Lyon, Adam Zampa

## SPOTLIGHT

## Olympic figure skater' Denis Ten's murder trial opens in Kazakhstan

AFP  
Almaty

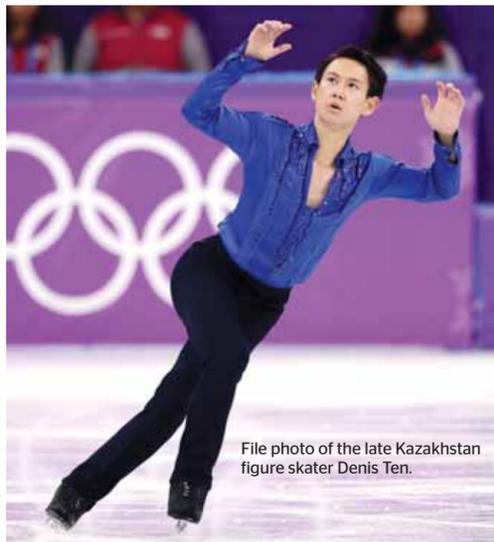
The trial of two men accused of murdering a male figure skater who won bronze at the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014 has begun in Kazakhstan, two local news agencies reported yesterday.

Both Arman Kudaibergenov and Nuraly Kiyasov pleaded not guilty to Denis Ten's murder at the first hearing in a court in Almaty, according to one private and one state-owned news agency.

Ten, a 25-year-old Kazakh ice-skating star, was fatally stabbed in July after apprehending men who had attempted to steal mirrors from his car in central Almaty.

The prosecution on Thursday told how one of the men held Ten, while another "stabbed Denis Ten twice in the femoral artery", according to private Kazakh news agency Tengri News.

While denying the murder charge, Kudaibergenov admitted to a charge of theft.



File photo of the late Kazakhstan figure skater Denis Ten.

Kiyasov, who the prosecution says is the one who stabbed Ten, pleaded innocent to both the murder and theft charges. Also in court was Zhanar

Tolybayeva, a woman charged by the prosecution as an accomplice to the theft and failing to report a crime. She pleaded not guilty to the charges and asked

to be acquitted.

"I did not know that my acquaintances had intentions of murder," Tolybayeva was quoted as saying in her court testimony by Kazinform, a state news agency. Ten's murder caused an outpouring of grief in Kazakhstan where he was celebrated as a national hero.

It also stirred anger towards police accused of protecting petty criminals and led to unsuccessful calls for the interior minister's resignation. Ten was of Korean origin and his great-grandfather was a Korean-born independence fighter, General Min Keung Ho.

He was trained by American skating coach Frank Carroll following a spell with Russia's most renowned coach, Tatiana Tarasova.

Ten won silver at the World Figure Skating Championships in 2013 and bronze in 2015. He won the 2015 Four Continents title in Seoul.

"I am ethnically Korean and I am virtually skating in my home country," he said at the time. At Sochi in 2014, he won bronze in the men's free skating final.

NBA

# Harden sinks Warriors, DeRozan posts triple-double

Rockets rally from a 20-point second half deficit to beat the two-time defending champion Warriors

AFP

San Antonio

James Harden showed once again that he is at the top of his game, rattling in the winning basket with two seconds left in overtime to lift the Houston Rockets to a 135-134 win over Golden State. The reigning NBA MVP drained the three pointer despite being double teamed as the Rockets rallied from a 20-point second half deficit to beat the two-time defending champion Warriors on Thursday.

"I had confidence it would go in. Even the ones I miss, they feel good," said Harden, who recorded his fifth straight 40-point performance. Harden finished with 44 points, 15 assists and 10 rebounds in a titanic struggle between the Western Conference powers who met in a seven-game NBA playoff semi-final last season that was won by Golden State. Harden also had a triple-double on Monday against Memphis of 43 points, 10 rebounds and 13 assists.

He has scored at least 30 points in 11 straight contests. "He made the impossible shot at the end," said Warriors coach Steve Kerr.

"Just an incredible performance. He is the master of isolation and the step-back three and drawing fouls."

Golden State's Kevin Durant launched a long three-pointer as the buzzer sounded but missed the rim.

Stephen Curry finished with 35 points for the Warriors, who have been struggling of late to find their form. Curry put the Warriors ahead with 23 seconds remaining in overtime but all it did was set the stage for Harden's heroics. Harden shimmied sideways and let fly with an army of Warriors in his face to score the game-winner. "I know my team needed me to make a shot or make a play. I am happy to come up with a big-time shot," Harden said.

He also hit two earlier three-pointers



Houston Rockets guard James Harden (right) shoots past Golden State Warriors forward Jonas Jerebko during the NBA game on Thursday. (USA TODAY Sports)

in the extra session in a game featuring dynamic plays throughout by some of the league's marquee players. Klay

Thompson made a go-ahead layup with 40 seconds left in overtime, then Harden tied it at 132-132 on a pair of

free throws with 33 seconds left. "He's been playing at a high level the last 11 games, so it is not surprising consider-

ing the roll he is on," said Curry. Elsewhere, DeMar DeRozan delivered his first career triple double as

the San Antonio Spurs routed the Toronto Raptors 125-107 to spoil the return of Kawhi Leonard to the Alamo City. DeRozan finished with 21 points, 14 rebounds and 11 assists as he dominated the battle against Leonard, who was making his first trip back since being traded to Toronto in the off-season. "I just wanted to go out and have fun," said DeRozan.

"I didn't want to put too much pressure on it. It was a great game."

LaMarcus Aldridge scored 23 points for San Antonio, who led by as many as 28 points and snapped the Raptors' three-game win streak. But DeRozan stole the thunder, becoming the first Spurs player since Tim Duncan in 2003 to record a triple double at home.

Leonard scored 21 points on eight-of-13 shooting, but was showered with boos and jeers throughout the contest.

At one stage Leonard had to take a step back from the foul line as chants of "Traitor! Traitor!" and "Quitter! Quitter!" rained down from the sold out crowd of 18,500 at the AT&T Center arena. Leonard played seven seasons with the Spurs before forcing his way out of San Antonio in a trade that brought DeRozan and Jakob Poeltl from Toronto. The boos from the San Antonio fans continued during a video tribute that the Spurs had put together to honour Leonard.

At the end of the game, Leonard hugged former coach Gregg Popovich, then walked over to the Spurs' bench to say hello to assistant coach Ettore Messina. "I felt badly about it. Kawhi is a high-character guy. We all make decisions in our lives, what we are going to do with our futures, and he has that same right as any of us. So I felt badly, honestly," Popovich said of the booing.

**RESULTS:** Golden State 134, Houston 135 (OT); Sacramento 113, Denver 117; San Antonio 125, Toronto 107

SPOTLIGHT

## Grizzlies acquire forward Justin Holiday from Bulls

Reuters

Chicago

MarShon Brooks, whose name accidentally came up in an aborted trade last month, was dealt by the Memphis Grizzlies to the Chicago Bulls in a multi-player transaction on Thursday. The Bulls sent small forward Justin Holiday to the Grizzlies in exchange for Brooks and fellow guard Wayne Selden Jr. plus 2019 and 2020 second-round draft picks, the teams announced.

In a related move, the Bulls also waived guard Cameron Payne. In mid-December, the Grizzlies thought they had a three-team deal in place that would have sent Brooks to the Suns. However, Phoenix believed it was acquiring Dillon Brooks from Memphis rather than MarShon Brooks, so the trade that also involved the Washington Wizards was reworked and ultimately was completed without either Brooks being included. MarShon Brooks, who turns 30 on Jan. 26, is averaging 6.6 points, 1.6 rebounds and 0.9 assists through 29 games this season. He is headed to his sixth franchise in five NBA seasons. Selden, 24, has averages of 5.4 points, 1.1 assists and 1.4 rebounds in 32 games.

Holiday, 29, is the brother of New Orleans Pelicans guard Jrue Holiday and Indiana Pacers guard Aaron Holiday. He is producing 11.6 points, 4.4 rebounds and 2.2 assists in 38 games. The latter two figures are career highs for the seventh-year veteran, while the points average trails only his 12.2 from last season, his first with the Bulls.

Payne, 24, was drafted 14th overall by the Oklahoma City Thunder in 2015 and was traded to the Bulls last February. He is averaging 5.7 points and

2.7 assists in 31 games (12 starts) this season after spending much of last year with Chicago's G League affiliate, the Windy City Bulls. The Bulls still have small forward Jabari Parker and center Robin Lopez on the trade market. Parker has fallen out of the playing rotation despite signing a two-year, \$40mn deal with the club in July.

### LEBRON LEADS PACK IN EARLY ALL-STAR VOTING

Los Angeles Lakers forward LeBron James and Milwaukee Bucks forward Giannis Antetokounmpo lead their respective conferences in the first tally of fan voting for the 2019 NBA All-Star Game. According to totals released by the league, James is the first player to get more than 1mn votes (1,083,363) for the Feb. 17 showcase in Charlotte. The other leading vote-getters in the West include Dallas Mavericks rookie Luka Doncic, Golden State Warriors teammates Stephen Curry and Kevin Durant, and Minnesota Timberwolves guard Derrick Rose.

Antetokounmpo (991,561) is second overall in the early returns. The rest of the top five in the East are Boston Celtics guard Kyrie Irving, Toronto Raptors forward Kawhi Leonard, Philadelphia 76ers center Joel Embiid and Miami Heat guard Dwyane Wade.

The fan voting accounts for 50% of the final determination of the 10 All-Star starters, with voting by current NBA players and a media panel each accounting for 25%. The top vote-getters from each conference will serve as team captains.

They will draft rosters from the players who are named as starters and reserves, regardless of conference affiliation. The All-Star draft will be televised for the first time this year, revealing the order in which players are picked after such information was kept quiet last year.



Forward Justin Holiday (left), 29, is the brother of New Orleans Pelicans guard Jrue Holiday and Indiana Pacers guard Aaron Holiday. (USA TODAY Sports)

NHL

## Price shuts out Canucks in return

Reuters

Montreal

Carey Price, returning from a three-game injury absence, stopped 33 shots for his second shutout of the season as the Montreal Canadiens blanked the visiting Vancouver Canucks 2-0 Thursday night. Price thrived in his return from an undisclosed lower-body injury that bothered him for several weeks. He has now won nine of his past 12 games.

Jordie Benn and Jonathan Drouin scored for the Canadiens in their first home game since Dec. 17. The Canadiens posted their fifth win in six games and 10th in the past 14. The Canucks suffered only their fifth loss in 14 outings. The Canucks lost rookie center Elias Pettersson, the club's top scorer, to an apparent leg injury 5:48 into the second period. Pettersson's right leg twisted awkwardly as he became entangled with Montreal rookie center Jesperi Kotkaniemi.

### BLUES 5, CAPITALS 2

Alex Pietrangolo finished with one goal and one assist as St. Louis defeated visiting Washington. The Blues snapped a two-game losing streak and ended Washington's five-game road winning streak.

Tyler Bozak, Colton Parayko, Oskar Sundqvist and Robert Thomas also scored for St. Louis, while Alex Ovechkin and Brett Connolly replied for the Capitals.

Ovechkin ended a six-game stretch without a goal by scoring in the first period. It was his 30th goal this season, and he joined former Capital Mike Gartner as the only NHL players to reach that mark in each of their first 14 seasons.

### LIGHTNING 6, KINGS 2

Nikita Kucherov and Brayden Point each scored goals on a two-man advantage less than two minutes apart in the first period as Tampa Bay extended its points streak to 16 games with a victory at Los Angeles.

After going 13-0-1 in December to become just the eighth team in the last 10 years to avoid a loss in regulation during a calendar month, the Lightning made it 1-0-0 in the new year. Only five other teams in the past 10 years have gone on points streaks of at least 16 games. Steven Stamkos added a goal and two assists while Kucherov also had three assists as Tampa Bay earned its seventh win in a row.

### ISLANDERS 3, BLACKHAWKS 2 (OT)

Devon Toews scored his first NHL goal 1:48 into overtime as surging New York edged Chicago in Uniondale, N.Y. Toews, who was playing in his fifth career game, put back the rebound of his own shot to give the Islanders



Montreal Canadiens goalie Carey Price makes a save against the Vancouver Canucks during the second period of the NHL game on Thursday. (USA TODAY Sports)

their fifth consecutive win.

New York is also 3-0-1 in four games at Nassau Coliseum, where it will play 16 more regular-season contests. Mathew Barzal scored both goals in regulation for the Islanders. Robin Lehner recorded 19 saves in winning his sixth straight decision. Dominik Kahun and Patrick Kane scored for the Blackhawks, who got 47 saves from Colin Delia.

### HURRICANES 5, FLYERS 3

Teuvo Teravainen had two goals and an assist, and Dougie Hamilton and Sebastian Aho had each two points as visiting Carolina held off Philadelphia. Hamilton, Justin Williams and Warren Foegele scored one goal each, and Aho recorded two assists for the Hurricanes.

Carolina goaltender Petr Mrazek, who was playing in his 200th career NHL game, stopped 34 shots. Wayne Simmonds, Sean Couturier and James van Riemsdyk each scored in the third period for the Flyers, who cut the deficit to 4-3 before dropping their fifth consecutive game. Claude Giroux and Jakub Voracek had two assists apiece.

### BRUINS 6, FLAMES 4

Jake DeBrusk and Brad Marchand each scored two goals, 11 different Boston players registered points, and the Bruins beat visiting Calgary. David Pastrnak had a goal and an assist, and John Moore also scored.

Torey Krug, David Krejci and Patrice Bergeron each added a pair of helpers for

the Bruins, who won their third straight. Jaroslav Halak stopped 33 of 37 shots and recorded his third assist this season on Pastrnak's tally.

Johnny Gaudreau had a goal and an assist, and Michael Frolik, Elias Lindholm and Mikael Backlund also scored for the Flames, whose two-game winning streak and four-game point streak came to an end.

### SABRES 4, PANTHERS 3

Jeff Skinner scored two goals, leading host Buffalo past Florida. Skinner's 28 goals rank second in the NHL behind Ovechkin's 30. He has already overshadowed his performance last season, when he had 24 goals in 82 games with the Hurricanes. The Sabres, who also got goals from Tage Thompson and Sam Reinhart, snapped a three-game winless streak (0-2-1). Buffalo's Linus Ullmark made 35 saves to improve his season record to 9-1-3. Frank Vatrano, Mike Hoffman and Aleksander Barkov scored for Florida. Roberto Luongo made 29 saves for the Panthers.

### WILD 4, MAPLE LEAFS 3

Zach Parise scored early in the third period, and Minnesota held on to earn a comeback win at Toronto. Jared Spurgeon notched a goal and two assists for the Wild, and Charlie Coyle had a goal and an assist.

Mikko Koivu added a goal, and Parise also had an assist. Mitch Marner scored twice for the Maple Leafs, who led 2-0 and 3-2. William Nylander also scored a goal and John Tavares added two assists for Toronto.

NFL

# Foles eyes Eagles repeat, Wilson plots Cowboys ambush

Eagles have rediscovered their touch in recent weeks, notching upsets over the Rams and Texans

AFP  
Los Angeles

The return of Nick Foles has got the Philadelphia Eagles dreaming of another improbable run to the Super Bowl as the NFL playoffs kick off this weekend with four finely balanced wild card games. After stumbling through an inconsistent regular season, the Eagles have rediscovered their touch in recent weeks, notching upsets over the Los Angeles Rams and Houston Texans before a 24-0 rout of Washington last Sunday.

The common thread in those three wins was the return of Foles, the hero of the Eagles' thrilling victory over the New England Patriots in last year's Super Bowl. For Eagles fans, there are uncanny parallels between Foles' fairytale run last year and his return to the team this season.

In 2017, Foles replaced injured starter Carson Wentz late in the campaign before coolly guiding the Eagles through the playoffs and past New England for the team's first-ever Super Bowl title. Foles' return this season has been similarly seamless, with the 29-year-old picking up where he left off last season after replacing the injured Wentz once more for the final three games of the campaign.

Tomorrow, however, Foles' comeback will face its sternest examination to date against the fearsome defence of the Chicago Bears at Soldier Field. The Bears boast the third-best defense in the league, conceding just over 18 points per game in the regular season. Foles, though, is undaunted by the challenge, pointing to the confidence coursing through the franchise despite their erratic season.

"The big thing is we're a confident team," Foles said. "We talk about it all the time. It's about the people inside this building that work together, and with that confidence and belief in one another, you can go out there and do great things. We've been able to do that the last several weeks. Those weeks don't mean anything right now because we're in a new week. We will continue to believe that way, continue to prepare that way." The Eagles' reward for victory tomorrow will be a trip to New Orleans to face the top-seeded Saints in the divisional round.

In the other NFC wild card game this weekend, the Seattle Seahawks travel to the Dallas Cowboys with quarterback Russell Wilson chasing a fourth straight win over the Texas giants. The Seahawks have already beaten the Cowboys once this season, winning 24-13 at CenturyLink Field in September.



Nick Foles' comeback will face its sternest examination to date against the fearsome defence of the Chicago Bears.

The Cowboys improved markedly since that defeat, however, winning seven of their final eight games to win the NFC East title. "We have a tough task. Dallas has been playing great," Wilson said. "Honestly, they've been one of the best teams in the NFL in the past however many weeks, six, seven, eight weeks, across the board. "It's going to be a battle, it's going to be a tough test, but we're ready for it."

In the AFC wild card games, Andrew Luck will aim to extend his comeback season as the Indianapolis Colts head to

the Houston Texans today.

Luck, who missed all of the 2017 campaign with a shoulder injury, has helped the Colts into the playoffs despite a 1-5 start to the season. The Texans, however, have their own quarterback ace in the shape of Deshaun Watson.

Watson missed most of the 2017 season after suffering a serious knee injury, but returned this year to post record-breaking figures in only his second campaign. The 23-year-old became the first player in NFL history to throw for over 4,000 yards with 25 touchdowns,

and also posted 500 rushing yards with five touchdowns.

A win for Watson and the Texans would see them into a meeting with the New England Patriots, who have a bye into the divisional round. The Colts would head to the Kansas City Chiefs with a win today.

The other AFC game sees the free-scoring Los Angeles Chargers head to Baltimore for a daunting tussle with the Ravens tomorrow. The Ravens have already handed the Chargers a reality check once this year, winning 22-10 in

California on December 22.

Chargers veteran quarterback Philip Rivers has been in scintillating form this year but bombed against the Ravens last month, failing to throw a touchdown pass for the only time in 2018 while tossing two interceptions. Rivers, though, is confident the Bolts can improve. "As good as they played, we were sloppier than we'd been (all year long)," Rivers said. "We've got to handle all their pressure. They brought the fight to us. We've got to do a better job of handling that."

MLB

## Mariners confirm Japanese star pitcher Kikuchi deal

AFP  
Los Angeles

Japanese star pitcher Yusei Kikuchi lived his dream on Thursday after being formally unveiled as a member of Major League Baseball's Seattle Mariners after seven seasons in Japan.

The 27-year-old left-hander, who spent seven seasons with the Seibu Lions, signed a four-year contract with the Mariners on Wednesday, just ahead of a deadline for a deal under the posting system allowing top Japanese talent to leave for North American clubs.

"I'm very happy to be here. Today is a very special day for my family and I," Kikuchi said. "Playing in the big leagues has been a dream of mine since I was 15 years old. Thank you, Seibu Lions, for letting me go and live my dream."

It could be even more special than he ever imagined. The Mariners open their season with games against Oakland at the Tokyo Dome on March 20-21 – the first MLB regular-season games in Japan since 2012 – and Kikuchi likely will be on the mound for the Mariners in one of them or in exhibition tuneups against Japanese clubs on March 17-18 in Tokyo.

"We get the chance today to add one of the premier pitchers in the world, a pitcher who has had a great deal of success in (Japan and) on the international stage," Mariners general manager Jerry Dipoto said. "We think the fit is just about as good as it could be."

Kikuchi, presented with a number 18 Mariners jersey, went 14-4 with a 3.08 earned-run average and 153 strikeouts for Seibu last season. Overall for the Lions he was 69-45 with a 2.69 ERA. MLB's website reported that Kikuchi's contract was for \$43m over three years with a \$13m player option for 2022 that the team could convert into a four-year extension worth \$66m that keeps him in Seattle through 2025.

"I feel this team needed me the most and I feel chemistry between us," said Kikuchi, who hopes to follow such prior Japanese stars for the Mariners as Ichiro Suzuki.

"Mr. Ichiro is a person in the sky, a legend – I don't know if he really exists," Kikuchi said. "I want to meet and talk with him first. When I do have the opportunity to step on the field with him, it will be a great moment."

Ichiro, a 45-year-old outfielder, will be on the Mariners roster for the games in Tokyo, team officials have said. He spent nine years in Japan before coming to Seattle in 2001. He has more than 4,300 hits in US and Japanese games, including an MLB-record 10 consecutive 200-hit seasons.

## Points galore in NFL, NBA as rule changes take effect

New York: Baskets and touchdowns are raining down on the NBA and NFL this season as a slew of rule changes designed to reward attacking play and boost the marketability of America's two biggest sports take hold. In the NFL, the final day of regular season competition witnessed the 1,371st touchdown during the Indianapolis Colts' defeat of the Tennessee Titans, a new record for touchdowns in a single season.

With teams combining for a total of 11,952 points, 2018 is also the second-most prolific scoring season in NFL history.

In the NBA, meanwhile, each of the league's 30 teams are averaging more than 100 points per game, with the free-scoring Milwaukee Bucks topping the table with 117 points per game and Chicago on the lowest rung with 100.4.

Even the bruising arena of ice hockey has joined in the fun, with the National Hockey League seeing goals flying in from all angles at a rate not seen for more than a decade. The various scoring sprees have been attributed to a confluence of factors, from the increasing willingness of teams to adopt attacking tactics to

rule changes which have offered more protection for star players. Boston Celtics legend Paul Pierce said the NBA's desire to improve "freedom of movement" had helped create a more attack-oriented game.

"The NBA has been preaching freedom of movement for the last 10-plus years so it's no surprise to me that they're gearing everything towards the offense because let's face it, offensive basketball is exciting to watch," Pierce said.

A similar ethos has prevailed in the NFL, where various scoring records have been torched by a phalanx of teams who have sorely tested the old adage that defense is the best form of attack. Nowhere was this more evident than in November's thrilling duel between the Kansas City Chiefs and the Los Angeles Rams, which finished with the Rams winning a classic 54-51. It was the first time in NFL history that two teams had scored more than 50 points in the same game. Michael Lewis, a professor of marketing at Emory University, believes the spike in scoring can be explained at least partially by NFL moves to offer greater protection to quarterbacks.

GOLF

## Tway seizes early lead, Johnson one stroke back

AFP  
Kapalua, United States

Kevin Tway got off to a roaring start in his Tournament of Champions debut, firing a bogey-free seven under 66 for one-shot lead in the PGA Tour's first round of 2019. Tway had seven birdies and no bogeys as the Tour winners from 2018 kicked off the new year on Thursday at the Plantation Course in Kapalua, Hawaii.

"When you're making a lot of birdies it makes everything better," Tway said. Tway led by one shot over Dustin Johnson and Justin Thomas and Gary Woodland, who sit at six under. Johnson and Thomas are the past two winners at Kapalua.

World number eight Rory McIlroy and No. 14 Jason Day are tied for sixth at four under. World number six Jon Rahm is tied for 11th at three under. Tway qualified for this winners-only field by capturing the Safeway Open for his first PGA Tour victory. "I was just trying to drink a lot of water. But I didn't think I was going to play that good, to be honest," he said. "I hit the ball well, kept the ball in play, made a few putts, controlled my ball in the wind. It's windy where I'm from in Oklahoma so it's kind of like I was at home. Each shot's difficult so you're just focused on the trajectory and where I need to land it and where I need to miss it."

The first round of the new year featured a hole-in-one by Patton Kizzire who is at four under. Kizzire aced the par-three



Kevin Tway of the US plays a shot during the first round of the Tournament of Champions in Lahala, Hawaii on Thursday. (AFP)

eighth hole for his first hole-in-one on the tour. "I was just trying to hit the green," he said.

Bryson DeChambeau gave the spectators the first example of the new rules when he made a par putt with the pin still in the cup. Kevin Na withdrew from the event before his scheduled tee time Thursday because of a fractured bone in his right pinkie finger. Na said he injured

the finger last week and estimated he would miss about a month. He qualified by winning the Greenbrier tournament in July.

### FIRST ROUND SCORES

(USA unless stated, par-73)

66 – Kevin Tway

67 – Gary Woodland, Justin Thomas,

Dustin Johnson

68 – Marc Leishman (AUS)

69 – Andrew Putnam, Andrew Landry, Patton Kizzire, Jason Day (AUS), Rory McIlroy (NIR), Bryson DeChambeau

70 – Patrick Reed, Jon Rahm (ESP), Bubba Watson, Webb Simpson

71 – Cameron Champ, Michael Kim, Ian Poulter (ENG)



## PREVIEW

# Son-spurred Korea face Japanese threat in Asian Cup

Iran, Asia's top-ranked side, also pose a threat, along with Australia, the holders



Tottenham star Son Heung-min will lead the South Korean charge at the Asian Cup.

AFP  
Abu Dhabi

While street-wise South Korea pack a harder punch, former Japan coach Philippe Troussier has tipped the Blue Samurai to push their fierce rivals all the way at the Asian Cup.

"Japan have one of the best teams in the competition on paper," the Frenchman told AFP before hosts United Arab Emirates meet Bahrain in today's opening match.

"Of course teams like South Korea, Iran and Saudi Arabia have the same ambition, but Japan has the potential to win the title."

A South Korea side led by free-scoring Tottenham forward Son Heung-min start as favourites to end more than 50 years of Asian Cup hurt.

Iran, Asia's top-ranked side, also pose a threat to Japan's hopes, along with holders Australia.

But a new-look Japan side are capable of springing an upset, as they proved by reaching the knockout stages of last year's World Cup in Russia after controversially sacking coach Vahid Halilhodzic in the run-up.

Only a stunning comeback by Belgium prevented Japan from reaching the quarter-finals under interim boss Akira Nishino, and veteran defender Yuto Nagatomo insists there is more to come.

"We have to believe we can win it," the Galatasaray full-back told local media. "But all the players need to be at it."

Meanwhile, Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu indulged in some early mind games by claiming his side were long shots to snaffle a record-extending fifth title.

"We're the challengers," said the former Japan midfielder, who has yet to lose since taking over from Nishino after the World Cup.

"Our job is to try and snatch the title back."

Troussier steered Japan to the 2000 Asian Cup, where his players trained on a bumpy pitch in Beirut surrounded by bombed-out houses used as hideouts by Hezbollah fighters while Israeli warplanes roared overhead.

The Frenchman sees parallels in the current Japan side's blend of youth and experience.

"The fact Japan got to the last 16 at the World Cup will also give them a lot of confidence," added Troussier. "It's also a good chance to prepare the younger generation for the next World Cup in 2022."

Meanwhile, Iran coach Carlos Queiroz has called on the country's football federation to protect his players as they chase a first Asian Cup since completing a hat-trick of titles in 1976.

"Iran football officials should learn from the past and must protect us from people who want to distract our concentration," said the former Real Madrid boss, currently being linked with the Colombia job.

"We must be protected from crocodiles."

On the pitch, Iran look settled: a narrow 1-0 defeat to Spain and 1-1 draw with Portugal at the World Cup has been followed by a six-match unbeaten streak.

South Korea's 59-year wait for a third Asian Cup is puzzling for a country that reached the 2002 World Cup semi-finals.

But while Australia, Iran and the Emirates are outside bets to win a tournament expanded from 16 to 24 teams, none will relish facing Paulo Bento's Koreans.

South Korea were runners-up to the Socceroos in 2015 and are unbeaten under Bento since exiting the World Cup following a stunning 2-0 victory over holders Germany.

Son sits out South Korea's first two Asian Cup games under a deal with his Premier League club, but the Taeguk

Warriors should still have too much firepower for the Philippines and Kyrgyzstan in their first two Group C fixtures.

Elsewhere, Australia appear to have gone backwards since lifting the trophy in Sydney four years ago.

New coach Graham Arnold has not been helped by record scorer Tim Cahill's retirement, while a serious knee injury has ruled playmaker Aaron Mooy out of the tournament.

The Emiratis, runners-up as hosts in 1996, have also lost the mercurial Omar Abdulrahman to injury but will also be buzzing after hosting the FIFA Club World Cup last month when local side Al Ain reached the final against Real Madrid.

Rivals Qatar will be desperate to make a statement before hosting the 2022 World Cup, despite being under economic blockade from their Gulf neighbours since June 2017.

The world's most populous countries – China and cricket-mad India – take part, China once again hoping to make an impact in what looks set to be Marcello Lippi's last outing as coach.

The likes of Kyrgyzstan, war-torn Yemen and Sven-Goran Eriksson's Philippines, meanwhile, are happy just to have qualified.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Back with a vengeance: Palestine aiming high

DPA  
Ramallah/Abu Dhabi

It's their second time competing in the Asian Cup, and Palestine fans have their eye on the prize in the United Arab Emirates.

The team opens the campaign against Syria in Sharjah today in Group B which also includes Jordan and reigning champions Australia.

Fans are confident having watched their team make leaps and bounds since their 2015 tournament debut in Australia, where the team lost all three games in the first round, scoring just once and conceding 11 goals.

Jibril Rajoub, head of the Palestinian Football Association (PFA), said the team's level is constantly improving.

Australia was a learning opportunity and the team has "professional players with great experience," he said on the association website while visiting the team training camp in Doha.

Back home, Palestinian fans have high hopes for their team.

Ahmad Bukhari, a sports enthusiast from Jerusalem who used to run a website called Palsport, told dpa: "There is [a] great leap forward in the last few years for the national football team."

"The PFA and its president Jibril Rajoub have done all they can to improve its standard: they brought a new coach, supported the team logistically, financially and with the players from all over the world."

"Today the best Palestinian players from the diaspora and at home are working together in one team to win."

There is great hope that this time our team is going to be much more successful than before," he continued.

Bukhari pointed to Palestine's 2-0 win in a friendly match against Pakistan in mid-December, and a draw with Iran – one of the tournament favourites – last week.

"These achievements are important and they signal the readiness of the team for inter-

national games," he remarked. Meanwhile, coach Nouredine Ali said: "Our team is facing a difficult task, especially in the group we are in."

Our first task is to qualify for the next level."

Ramallah resident Hiba al-Ghoul, a former stadium announcer in Palestine, is optimistic "I think we have a great chance of winning this time. We are playing in a strong group... three good teams but our guys are hungry and act like they are going into the battlefield," she said.

"They are fighters and they are called Fedayeen (commandos) and I have a strong feeling that they will do something good this time."

The team's fan base too, is growing, Bukhari noted.

This is partly due to the team's sponsorship by Jawwal, a Palestinian cellular phone company, which has helped the team's exposure with adverts it took out in the local papers and on billboards around the country.

"People now follow the team news because they know much more about it from the ads, the TV stations and the news," Bukhari said.

Al-Ghoul said restrictions by Israel on movement of players are always a problem, but the PFA asks governing body FIFA to intervene when problems arise.

Players depend on Israeli permits to move from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank via Israeli territory, or through Israeli-controlled border crossings.

Israel says these restrictions are necessary to foil attacks against it by Palestinian terrorists.

Al-Ghoul said that today, the situation is better than it was before.

While players from Gaza or abroad may sometimes be delayed by Israeli authorities when travelling to the West Bank, in the end, she said, "the players come together and play."

Rajoub described the team as "a national artistic piece that carries a national Palestinian message to the world through the international football fields."

## DEAL

## Liverpool's Solanke completes switch to Bournemouth

AFP  
London

Bournemouth completed the signing of Liverpool striker **Dominic Solanke** for a reported fee of £19m (\$24m).

Solanke's arrival was the first of two moves from Anfield to the Vitality Stadium on Friday, with Reds defender Nathaniel Clyne also joining on loan until the end of the season.

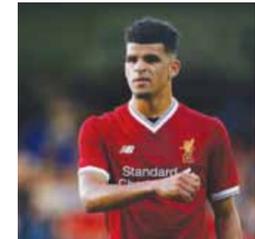
It is expected that Solanke's switch to the south-coast will pave the way for Bournemouth's veteran striker Jermain Defoe to join Rangers on an 18-month loan.

Solanke began his career at Chelsea, playing a season on loan at Dutch side Vitesse Arnhem before joining Liverpool in 2017.

He made 27 appearances for Liverpool in his first season but has not featured for Jurgen Klopp's side in the current campaign.

The 21-year-old is keen to play first-team football, having left Chelsea for that reason but had little chance of displacing the trio of Roberto Firmino, Sadio Mane or Mohamed Salah at Liverpool.

"I think the club (Bournemouth) is going somewhere," Solanke told afcbTV. "Over the past few years, they have been really good in the Premier League and had some good positional



finishes as well. I think it's a good club to be at, especially for someone of my age."

Bournemouth manager Eddie Howe said: "Dominic is technically gifted, very athletic and has the physical profile that will give us something different in our front line."

Clyne, 27, is in a similar position to Solanke having seen his first-team chances reduced due to the form of Liverpool defenders Trent Alexander-Arnold and Joe Gomez.

The right-back has played just five times this season and managed only a similar number in the previous campaign because of a back problem.

"I'm really excited by this opportunity. It's a great chance for me to come and play football," Clyne said.

"I've spoken to the manager and we've talked about what we can achieve for the remainder of the season. It's a great club with a great story. I can't wait to get going."

## FOCUS

## Marco Cecchinato holds tennis clinic for kids

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Children from the ExxonMobil Qatar community spent over an hour yesterday with Marco Cecchinato at a kids tennis clinic during the Qatar ExxonMobil Open 2019 taking place in Doha. QTF and ExxonMobil Qatar have been organising these clinics since 2013 to promote a love for tennis, and help children develop an interest in physical activities as part of leading a healthy lifestyle.

The informal session helped the children with racquet control, co-operation and movement, and Cecchinato helped ensure that they were using proper technique. He also reminded everyone there that tennis is always fun, always interesting, and never fails to put a smile on everyone's face.

Before heading onto the court to spend some valuable time with the tennis stars, the children visited the ExxonMobil Qatar stand in the Public Village with their families and had



an amazing interactive 3D virtual reality experience in a green cube that introduced them to the dugong – an endangered marine mammal that has lived in Qatar's waters for centuries. They enjoyed watching their parents and other adults trying out the exciting racing car simulator and competing for the fastest lap time.

"Today's kids clinic was an

unforgettable experience for our children," said Ryan Quinn, a parent from the ExxonMobil Qatar community. "I would like to thank ExxonMobil Qatar and the Qatar Tennis Federation for giving our children this opportunity to spend time with world renowned professional players."

"Marco Cecchinato gave them great advice and tips, he worked with them on their technique

and made sure they were engaged, motivated and enjoying themselves for the entire time the children were with him. Experiences like these can have a huge impact on young players – they can inspire them to follow their passion for sport and even motivate them to become athletic leaders."

ExxonMobil is committed to supporting the State of Qatar's

sustainable development goals, in line with the Qatar National Vision 2030. By partnering with like-minded local organisations, ExxonMobil Qatar invests in education and professional workforce development programs that nurture a highly skilled, motivated and productive workforce to contribute to Qatar's bright future, a company statement said.

## PREMIER LEAGUE

# City show steely side to roar back into title race

The presence of Kompany, whose appearances have been restricted by injury this season, set the tone for a City side who matched Liverpool for effort and aggression



Manchester City's Danilo shoots at goal as Liverpool's Fabinho attempts to block during their Premier League clash on Thursday night.

Reuters  
Manchester

Manchester City showed in their 2-1 win over Liverpool on Thursday that for all their famous technical ability and attractive passing, they can fight as hard as anyone when the stakes are high.

The presence of captain Vincent Kompany, whose appearances have been restricted by injury this season, set the tone for a City side who matched Liverpool for effort and aggression throughout a compelling match.

But while Kompany has long been a warrior-leader, there were other players who demonstrated they are not just pretty passers.

Portuguese midfielder Bernardo Silva, who has made such a valuable contribution this season with his precise passing and clever dribbling, constantly harassed the Liverpool backline.

Raheem Sterling, whose pace and directness troubled Liverpool, never tired of chasing back and limiting the effectiveness of Andrew Robertson's trademark forward surges.

And of course Brazilian Fernandinho, whose absence was sorely felt in City's recent poor run, was a rock in the centre of midfield, with his timely interceptions, physical confrontations and ability to break up Liverpool counter-attacks.

Those who witnessed City players around the dressing-room after their warm-up and

before taking the field, were certainly not surprised by the aggressive way they played.

Pep Guardiola's men thumped their chests and yelled at each other, clearly pumped up and ready for a battle.

"It came from our guts, a desire you can't describe. We are a better team when we play with emotions," said Kompany.

"I'm absolutely buzzing with a tremendous performance we went toe to toe with a very physical very aggressive team and we matched them if not more," he added.

"The 12th man is more than just the fans, it's a desire, something from within you can't describe and today it was there and it made us a better

team and we are a better team when we play with emotion".

If there was one player who seemed to be lifted by that emotion to a new level of competitiveness it was Bernardo Silva and his contribution was noticed by his manager.

"He did everything," he reflected.

"He won all the duels. He is the smallest one. He shows that to play football, it doesn't matter, you have to be good. Of course I would prefer to have a taller team or more physical but Bernardo is incredible.

"It is a long time since I see a performance like he did in all terms, he is precise, he is clean, he is clever, he even fought with (Virgil) Van Dijk," he said, referring to the way in which Liverpool's towering

Dutch defender had the Portuguese playmaker snapping at his heels. Sergio Aguero, whose stunning strike opened the scoring, showed a willingness to dart across the Liverpool back line in search of openings and to close down Juergen Klopp's side as they tried to play out from the back.

Guardiola rejected the idea his team had adopted a more direct style for the crunch match but acknowledged this was the kind of intensity City would need to show if they are to succeed at home – and in Europe.

"All credit to these incredible players," he said. "That is how we have to play in the Champions League. We had a lot of pressure but we were not scared, we had no fear".

## LA LIGA

# Real Madrid frustrated as Cazorla strikes twice



Villarreal's Spanish midfielder Santi Cazorla celebrates after scoring against Real Madrid CF at La Ceramica stadium in Vila-real on January 3.

Reuters  
Madrid

Real Madrid endured a frustrating start to the new year as they drew 2-2 at struggling Villarreal on Thursday and were left seven points behind La Liga leaders Barcelona.

Midfielder Santi Cazorla gave the home side the lead in the fourth minute of the game, which was rescheduled due to Real's participation in last month's Club World Cup, by bending a wonderful shot into the bottom corner.

But the European champions struck back three minutes later with a headed goal from Karim Benzema after a sweeping attacking move.

Raphael Varane gave the visitors the lead in the 20th with a header from a free kick but it was former Arsenal midfielder Cazorla, who has overcome a terrible run of injuries to resurrect his career in Spain, who had the final say.

The diminutive 34-year-old Spaniard ghosted into the box undetected to nod home at the back post in the 82nd minute and give his side a deserved point in new coach Luis Garcia Plaza's first home game in charge.

Real have not won their opening away game of a new year since 2014, and Cazorla's late strike prevented them from going level on points with Sevilla and kept them in fourth place, seven behind leaders Barcelona after 17 games.

Apart from conceding the early goal, Real produced an impres-

sive display in the first half but lost their grip on the game after Gareth Bale was substituted soon after the interval with a knock.

Ballon d'Or winner Luka Modric, who helped set up the equaliser, followed Bale off the pitch midway through the second half and Villarreal, spurred on by their supporters, showed more intensity and wrestled back control of the play.

Cazorla's leveller followed a spell of pressure from the home side but Real could still have snatched a winner when substitute Isco burst into the area but was denied by Villarreal goalkeeper Sergio Asenjo.

"It could be said the result was fair, we chased the victory and had it in our hands, we wanted to kill the game off and they put us under a lot of pressure as they were at home and they badly needed the points," Real coach Santiago Solari said.

"When Gareth came off we lost a bit of sharpness in attack, we still had the chance to score a couple but we needed to attack with more clarity."

Villarreal, who have reached the last 32 of the Europa League despite a dire domestic season, clawed their way out of the relegation zone to 17th in the standings, level on points with 18th-placed Athletic Bilbao.

"This result will give us strength," said Villarreal coach Garcia, who has taken two points from two games since succeeding the sacked Javi Calleja.

"I imagine that every game from now on will be a battle, a war to survive but hopefully we'll come through it, and this point gives us a big emotional boost."

## BAYERN MUNICH ARRIVE IN DOHA



Bayern Munich players pictured at the Hamad International Airport after they arrived in Doha for their week-long winter camp. In Doha, Bayern coach Niko Kocac is planning two training sessions a day in temperatures of around 25 degrees Celsius as his side attempts to make up a six-point gap on leaders Dortmund, with one eye also on a Champions League last-16 encounter with Liverpool next month. "We want to fine-tune a lot of things in Doha, including fitness and technical-tactical elements," Kovac said.