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CRICKET | Page 3

Thisara's 140 in vain as Kiwis snatch ODI series

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GULF TIMES SPORT



TENNIS

Federer powers Swiss to another Hopman Cup win

Page 2

TENNIS/QATAR EXXONMOBIL OPEN

Bautista Agut supreme in Doha with win over Berdych

'It was a great start to the season, of course. The best thing is I felt good physically and mentally this week'



Spain's Roberto Bautista Agut poses with the Qatar ExxonMobil Open trophy yesterday after defeating Germany's Tomas Berdych 6-4, 3-6, 6-3 in the final at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex. Picture on the right shows, winner Bautista Agut (fourth from left), posing with runner-up Berdych (third from left), Alistair Routledge, president and general manager of ExxonMobil Qatar (L), Andrew P Swiger, senior vice president of Exxon Mobil Corporation (second from left), Nasser al-Kheleifi, president of Qatar Tennis Federation (second from right) and Karim Alami, the Tournament Director. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil

By **Sahan Bidappa**
Doha

After stunning World No 1 Novak Djokovic in the semi-finals, Roberto Bautista Agut recorded one of his biggest wins on the ATP Tour when he won the Qatar ExxonMobil Open. At the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex, seventh seed Bautista Agut beat wild card Tomas Berdych in a closely fought final 6-4, 3-6, 6-3

for his ninth Tour title.

For Berdych, it was yet another loss in the final in Doha. The Czech was runner-up in 2015, after losing to Spain's David Ferrer. But looking back, Berdych would have been proud of his achievements this week, considering the 33-year-old was making a comeback to tennis after six months out from injury.

It was dream week for Bautista Agut though. The World No 24, apart from his shock win over Djokovic, had also beaten former top five player Stan Wawrinka en

route to the title.

"It was a great start to the season, of course. The best thing is I felt good physically and mentally this week. And if I can continue like this, I think I can get better in the rankings and be closer to top ten," said Bautista Agut, who collected 250 ATP ranking points and \$219,755 in prize money.

"Well, it's always a very tough draw, very tough tournament with a lot of good players in the draw. And when I started the week, I was feeling good with the ball. I was enjoying practising. I was playing

match by match. And since the first moment of the tournament until the last point, I felt really good on the court," he added.

This was the fourth successive time where Bautista Agut has started the season with a title, a success he attributed to his off-season preparation.

"Well, it's a good time for me after being fresh and having spent two months at home. I did my preparation well and worked really hard. And I think also the conditions and the surface suited me here. It is good for my tennis and

I think this is one of the reasons," he said.

The World No 24, still fresh from the emotional high of victory over Djokovic, was a bit edgy to begin with against Berdych. He struggled with his first two service games, and had to save a break point in the fourth game. But having held on, the Spaniard converted his first break point in the seventh game for a 4-3 lead, before serving solidly to grab the first set in 41 minutes.

In the second set, Berdych upped the ante, serving well and jumped into the lead after a break in the fourth game. At 5-3, he then served out the set firing three winners to take the match to a decider.

In the final set, Bautista Agut built a 4-1 lead. Berdych threatened to break back but squandered two points in the seventh game. He missed an easy forehand approach shot, which clipped the net and agonisingly fell out, and that was the last chance the Czech would have.

Bautista Agut then went on to

Tennis chief praises Amir, Father Amir

Qatar Tennis, Squash and Badminton Federation president Nasser bin Ghanim al-Kheleifi thanked His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and His Highness the Father Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani for attending yesterday's final showing their support for the tournament. "It was an honour to have His Highness the Amir and His Highness the Father Amir

in the final and it makes our tournament a huge success," al-Kheleifi said.

"And also the crowd for the tournament - even for the quarter-final, semi-final and final - was very good. The level of tennis was really high so we are very pleased and happy with the organisation so I would like to thank everybody including ExxonMobil for sponsoring and their support."

serve out the match to love with a forehand winner giving him his first win against Berdych since 2014. This was their seventh meeting, the first in three years, with Bautista Agut having lost the last three matches.

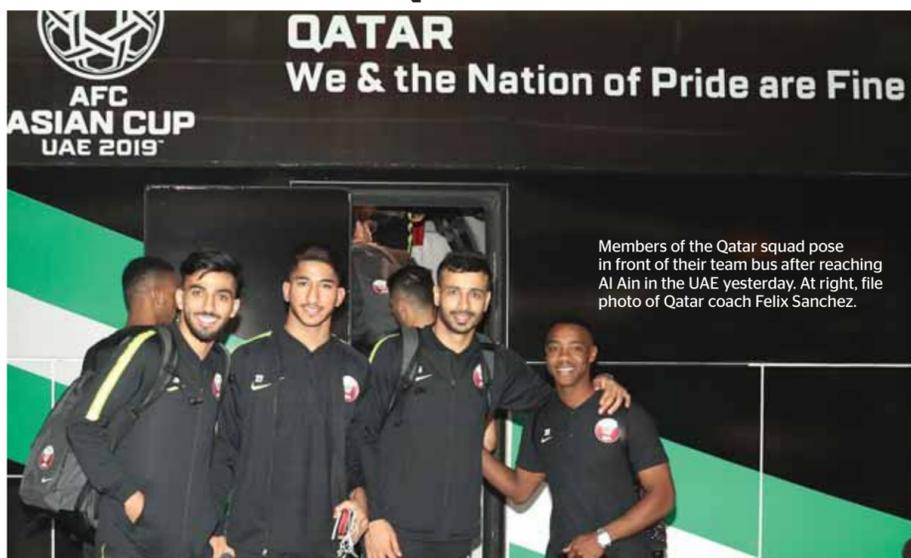
Berdych, who was seeking his first title since Shenzhen in 2016, rued the missed opportunity in the third set. "I think it was overall a very good match and I think the biggest difference was one game in the third set where I lost badly

my serve where I hit two double faults in one game," said the 33-year-old, who walked away with 150 points and \$118,320 in prize money.

But the former World No 4, currently at 71 after missing six months' action due to back injury, looked at the positives from the tournament. "I think it was a great week overall. I mean, coming after six months of not playing, my expectations were completely on a different level."

FOOTBALL

Confident Qatar reach UAE for Asian Cup campaign



Members of the Qatar squad pose in front of their team bus after reaching Al Ain in the UAE yesterday. At right, file photo of Qatar coach Felix Sanchez.

Agencies
Doha

A 23-man Qatar football squad for the Asian Cup arrived last night in the UAE, hoping to make a mark in a tournament traditionally dominated by Japan and Australia and Saudi Arabia

Under coach Felix Sanchez, Qatar are confident of improving on their previous best performance of four quarter-final appearances, especially since they are hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2022. "I think we can go beyond the quarter-finals in the UAE," al-Haydos told *Gulf Times* earlier. "We have very talented players and an excellent coach who has been with the team for one-and-a-half years.

"On top of that we have a very supportive national federation who are in sync with the team's requirements"

The confidence of Felix Sanchez's men of advancing deep into the tournament has also been boosted by two impressive displays in international friendlies last November when they beat Switzerland 1-0 and five days later earned a 2-2 draw against 2016 Euro-



pean quarter-finalists Iceland. "There is no pressure on us (because of raised expectations). In fact the recent results have only motivated us," the Al Sadd striker said.

"We are satisfied with our preparations. We hope to continue with our strong performance in the Asian Cup. We feel comfortable, we enjoy the game."

Qatar have also won two more recent warm-up matches against Jordan and Kyrgyzstan before losing narrowly to Algeria and Carlos Queiroz-coached Iran, the top side in the continent. Qatar's participation in Asia's biggest football tournament comes at a highly

sensitive time in Gulf relations, as host UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have imposed a political and economic boycott on Doha since June 2017.

Officials and players have vowed to put politics to one side during the almost month-long tournament.

"In the end this is football," Qatar's goalkeeper Saad al-Sheeb told AFP. "We just control ourselves and play football," he said.

Five Qatar-based journalists were not allowed into the UAE to cover the tournament, after being kept waiting at Dubai airport for 13 hours before returning to Doha.



MAKING HISTORY

Federer wins third Hopman Cup in dramatic fashion

For the second year in a row, the Swiss beat the German pairing of Alexander Zverev and Angelique Kerber by claiming a deciding mixed doubles rubber which was loaded with drama

AFP
Perth

Roger Federer became the most successful player in Hopman Cup history when he led Switzerland to a 2-1 win in an enthralling final of the mixed teams tournament in Perth yesterday.

In what is tipped to be the final edition of the unique tournament, the best was saved for last as Federer became the first player to win three Hopman Cups, teaming with Belinda Bencic to make it successive titles in Perth.

For the second year in a row, the Swiss beat the German pairing of Alexander Zverev and Angelique Kerber by claiming a deciding mixed doubles rubber which was loaded with drama.

It was Switzerland's fourth title overall, behind only the United States with six, and Federer first won the Hopman Cup back in 2001 when he teamed with Martina Hingis.

The 37-year-old gave the Swiss the early ascendancy with a straight sets win against Zverev, before Kerber squared the tie by beating a dogged Bencic to set up the mixed doubles decider.

Federer was a dominant figure in an extraordinary doubles match as the Swiss claimed the abbreviated format 4-0, 1-4, 4-3 (5/4) to clinch the title despite Germany having two match points.

Fittingly, it was Federer who served out the match in the third set tie-break, having been unable to do so earlier in the set.

The tournament came down to a single point at 4-4 in the third set tie-break, with both teams holding match point and after an extended rally Zverev dumped a backhand into the net to hand the Swiss victory.

Federer also became the first player to win successive Hopman Cups and said the records were a nice bonus for winning the title.

"I am very happy for these records, although I didn't come here for that," he said. "Winning it back-to-back years, what a thrill it was, not just the match point but the whole week."

Zverev and Kerber were despondent after the loss and the former said it was a tough pill to swallow.

"We really wanted to win as a team," Zverev said. "We came so close - we were one shot away."

In the men's singles, Federer bounced back from a November loss to Zverev in London to beat the big-serving German 6-4, 6-2 and make it a clean sweep of his singles matches in Perth for the second year running, less than two weeks before he defends his Australian Open title.

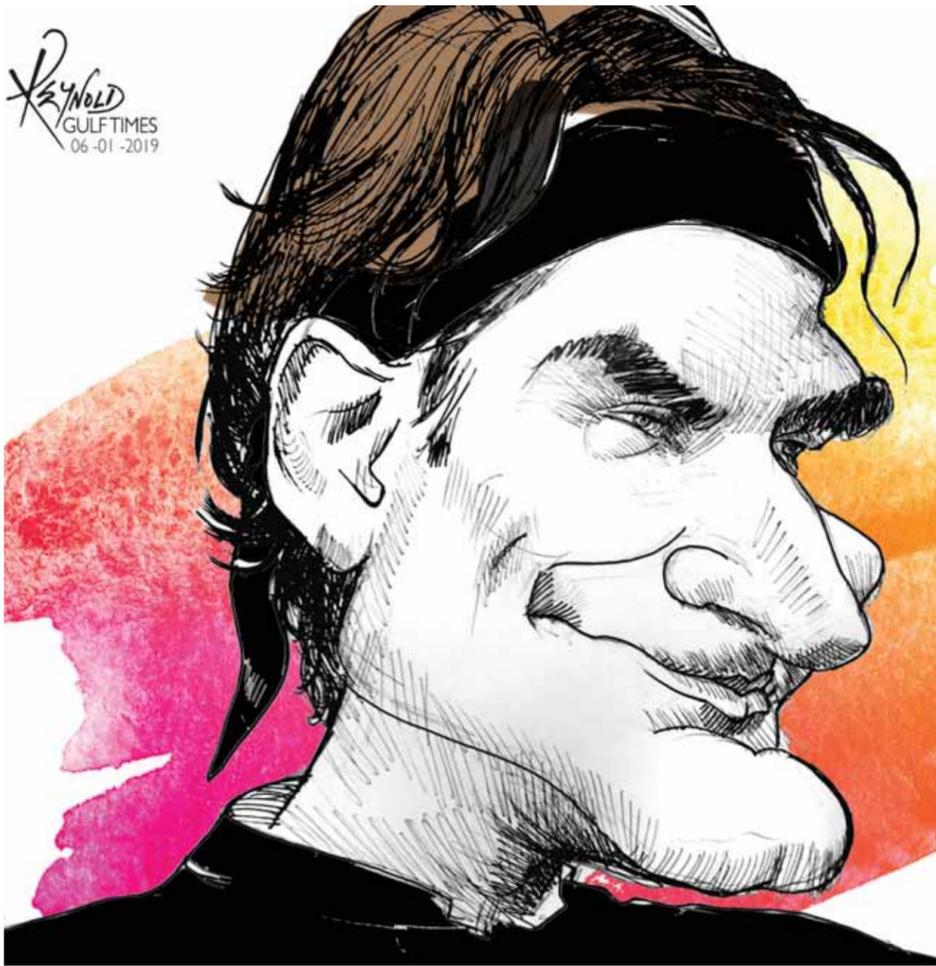
It was a high-octane match, with plenty of big serves and clean winners, but Federer was able to answer everything the 21-year-old threw at him.

He broke Zverev in the 10th game of the first set and then tightened the noose on the German, with two more breaks in the second set.

Federer, who also beat Zverev in three sets in last year's Hopman final, clinched the match with a typically crisp forehand volley.

He was pleased to maintain his unbeaten singles record during the week, during which he never dropped his serve.

World number two Kerber appeared set for an easy win in her singles match against Bencic, taking the first set and

REYNOLD
GULFTIMES
06-01-2019

Roger Federer and his mixed doubles partner Belinda Bencic of Switzerland with the Hopman Cup after defeating runners-up Alexander Zverev and Angelique Kerber of Germany in the final in Perth yesterday.

then claiming an early break in the second.

The German served for the match at 5-4, but the match took a dramatic twist as Bencic broke back, only for Kerber to

immediately break again.

For a second time Kerber was unable to serve out the match, as Bencic forced it to a tie-break.

Kerber had two match points at 6-4 in

the tie-break, but Bencic again hung on grimly and won the next two points.

It was not until Kerber's third match point that a backhand winner secured the 6-4, 7-6 (8/6) win.

FOCUS

Anderson wins battle of giants with Pune ATP title

AFP
Pune

World number six Kevin Anderson of South Africa won the battle of giants against 2.11 metres (6 feet 11 inches) tall Ivo Karlovic to clinch the Maharashtra Open title in Pune yesterday.

Anderson, who stands at 2.03m (6'8"), edged out the veteran Croat 7-6, 6-7, 7-6 in the tallest ATP final in the Open Era.

Anderson prevailed in the big serving duel despite the 39-year-old Karlovic, the oldest ATP finalist in more than four decades,



South Africa's Kevin Anderson (R) poses with the winner's trophy along with runner-up Croatian Ivo Karlovic (L) in Pune yesterday.

hitting 36 aces.

The 32-year-old Anderson, who improved on his runners-up showing in the last edition to clinch his sixth tour-level title, praised his "inspirational" opponent. "Firstly want to congratulate Ivo for a great week. What you are doing is truly inspirational... Great to see you playing this kind of tennis," Anderson said of Karlovic.

"It was really close, it could have gone either way. Obviously very, very pleased to have gone one step further than last year," added the two-time Grand Slam finalist. As the oldest player to reach a tour-level final since a 43-year-old Ken Rosewall de-

feated Tom Gorman to win 1977 Hong Kong, Karlovic saved two championship points in the final set to take it to a third tie-breaker.

But Anderson held his nerve to lift the trophy a year after he lost the 2018 final to Gilles Simon of France. Anderson had beaten Simon in the semi-final on Friday. "It was unlucky but I would like to congratulate Kevin for an unbelievable last year and this week also," Karlovic said in praise of his top-seeded opponent.

"I was down but was able to rise a little bit. It was an excellent week and hopefully I would be able to continue at this level," said Karlovic, who came into the tournament ranked 100.

BRISBANE INTERNATIONAL

Tsurenko stuns Osaka to book Pliskova title clash

Reuters
Brisbane

Japan's Naomi Osaka lamented her poor attitude following a straight sets thrashing by Lesia Tsurenko in the Brisbane International semi-finals yesterday but the US Open winner said defeat came with a valuable lesson.

World number five Osaka was beaten 6-2 6-4 in 65 minutes by Latvia's Tsurenko, who comfortably broke her opponent's serve four times en route to the biggest final of her career.

Tsurenko faces 2017 champion and former world number one Karolina Pliskova, who thumped Donna Vekic 6-3 6-4.

"If I'm being really frank, I just feel like I had the worst attitude today. I feel like I didn't really know how to cope with not playing well," Osaka said.

"I was sulking a bit and there are moments that I tried not to do that. But then the ball wouldn't go in and then I would go back to being childish. So I think that was my main problem."

"Last year I did a lot of that and I'm trying to change it more, and I think I have, towards the end of last year. So hopefully this isn't a recurring thing."

Osaka, who withdrew from next week's Sydney International, said Saturday's experience was better than winning in Brisbane as she gears up for the Australian Open later this month.

"This helpless feeling I have, I think today I learned what I have to do to, not fix it, but what I can do to improve the situation so there aren't many moments that I feel like that," the Japanese added. Osaka's compatriot Kei Nishikori closed in on his first ATP title in nearly three years, beating Frenchman Jeremy Chardy 6-2 6-2 to move into the title clash.

"Nothing better than this today," Nishikori, who last won a trophy in Memphis in Feb 2016, said. "I felt like I was too fast on the court today... Tomorrow I will go for a trophy."

Standing in his way is Russia's Daniil Medvedev who powered past Jo-Wilfried Tsonga 7-6(6) 6-2.



Lesia Tsurenko of Ukraine serves against Japan's Naomi Osaka during their women's semi-final match at the Brisbane International tennis tournament in Brisbane yesterday.

UNSTOPPABLE

Andreescu to face Goerges in Auckland final

AFP
Auckland

Canadian teen Bianca Andreescu continued her fairy-tale run through the WTA Classic yesterday, stunning third seed Hsieh Su-Wei to set up a final against defending champion Julia Goerges.

The 18-year-old qualifier's 6-3, 6-3 semi-final triumph followed victories over two former world number ones, the now number three Caroline Wozniacki and seven-time Grand Slam champion Venus Williams.

In contrast, second-seed Goerges who beat Slovakian Viktoria Kuzmova 6-1, 7-6 (8/6) in her semi-final has not faced one seeded player all week.

For the unflappable Andreescu, ranked 152nd in the world, it is the first final of her fledgling career after arriving in Auckland with the simple aim of getting through the qualifying tournament.

She has surprised even herself with the way her baseline power, drop shot finesse and all round athleticism have come together.

"I guess Auckland brings out the best in me. I don't know

what's going on really," she said after defeating Hsieh.

"What's really important for me is to stay in the present moment and I've been doing that all week and I'm beyond grateful right now."

With a place booked in the final, Andreescu is also eyeing a qualifying spot in the Australian Open main draw because her ranking is not high enough for direct entry.

Goerges was in near perfect form as she raced through the first set in under 30 minutes with a power game that forced Kuzmova well behind the baseline.

But the second set took twice as long as Kuzmova found the 30-year-old German's weak spot.

"In the first set I didn't give her any chance to get her rhythm and I was very aggressive," Goerges said.

"In the second she pushed me back, which I don't like actually but that happens sometimes, and I'm very happy that I pulled it out at the end."

"You never know where you're at coming into the first tournament of the year but obviously I'm very happy to be in the final again."

Sabalenka fights back to win Shenzhen Open

Beijing: Top seed Aryna Sabalenka won the Shenzhen Open yesterday after a nail-biting clash against three-time finalist Alison Riske. Sabalenka lost the first set to her American opponent, before coming back to win the match 4-6, 7-6, 6-3.

The Shenzhen open was the Belarusian's fifth WTA final in the last ten months and her first international trophy. The world number 13 had a breakthrough season last year when she won titles at Wuhan and New Haven. "It was a tough day for us, especially to come back after the first set. She (Riske) played

unbelievable, an incredible match," Sabalenka said.

"To start the season with a title, it gives you more belief in yourself, and hopefully I can do well at the Australian Open."

A quarterfinalist on her debut in Shenzhen last year, Sabalenka lost to eventual champion Simona Halep. Sabalenka cruised past home favourite Wang Yafan, 6-2, 6-1, while Riske beat former world number two and two-time major finalist Vera Zvonareva in the semi-finals yesterday morning, after rain washed out much of Thursday's play and set the schedule behind by a day.

FOURTH TEST

Struggling Aussies throw wickets away in big run chase

Spinners Yadav and Jadeja shared five wickets as hosts end day on 236 for six

AFP
Sydney

Australia blew a strong start with yet another top order batting collapse in Sydney yesterday, leaving themselves a mountain to climb to stay in the fourth and final Test against India.

When play was abandoned half an hour early due to rain, they were 236 for six, still 386 behind with Peter Handscomb (28) and Pat Cummins (25) fighting a rearguard action after some soft dismissals plunged the hosts into deep trouble.

Australia went to lunch at 122 for one but meekly surrendered soon afterwards, losing three wickets for 24 runs, with spinners Ravindra Jadeja and Kuldeep Yadav doing the damage. Yadav ended with 3-71 and Jadeja 2-62.

While aggressive rookie opener Marcus Harris blazed a career-best 79, senior players Usman Khawaja, Shaun Marsh and skipper Tim Paine all failed to deliver when needed most.

"I got a start and a few of us got a start but none of us went on to get a big score so it's pretty simple to work out what went wrong," said Harris.

"We're a young group and we're trying to work it out and think on our feet but we're playing against the number one side in the world, so it's not like it's an easy thing to do."

Despite the task ahead, Harris remained optimistic.

"Obviously 600 is a big score to chase down or get a close deficit, but I think the more time we can occupy the crease, you never know what can happen."

India took a stranglehold on the match over the opening two days, compiling a huge 622 for seven declared on the back of centuries from irrepressible Cheteshwar Pujara and livewire Rishabh Pant.

They lead 2-1 after victories in Adelaide and Melbourne and are fast closing in on a historic first-ever series win since they first toured Australia in 1947-48.

Yadav said India's fielding and catching practice was paying off.

"I feel like we are the best side in the world now when it comes



India's Kuldeep Yadav (left) celebrates with teammates after dismissing Australia's captain Tim Paine (second from right) on the third day of the fourth Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground yesterday. (AFP)

Scorecard

INDIA 1st inn		T. Head c & b K. Yadav 20	
AUSTRALIA 1st inn (o/h 24-0)		P. Handscomb batting 28	
M. Harris b Jadeja 79	T. Paine b Yadav 5	Fall of wickets: 1-72 (Khawaja), 2-128 (Harris), 3-144 (S.Marsh), 4-152 (Labuschagne), 5-192 (Head), 6-198 (Paine)	
U. Khawaja c Pujara b K. Yadav 27	P. Cummins batting 25	Bowling: Shami 16-1-51-1, Bumrah 16-4-42-0, Jadeja 27-3-9-62-2, Yadav 24-6-71-3	
M. Labuschagne c Rahane b Shami 38	Extras (b4, lb2) 6		
S. Marsh c Rahane b Jadeja 8	Total (6 wickets, 83.3 overs) 236		

to fielding," he said.

Skipper Virat Kohli's declaration left Khawaja and Harris to face 10 nervous overs before stumps on Friday, when they crawled to 24 without loss.

Khawaja was dropped on nought but failed to make the most of his second life.

On a day when the Sydney Cricket Ground was a sea of pink to mark a breast cancer awareness initiative, he was dismissed for 27 after mistiming a shot off Yadav

with Pujara taking an easy catch.

STUCK IN TWO FIGURES

At the other end the diminutive Harris, who has shown flashes of brilliance in his short four-Test career, quickly found a groove with some crisp shots.

He survived a close call on 24 when a diving KL Rahul narrowly missed a catch and reached his second Test 50 with a single before smacking three fours in one Yadav over.

Harris went to lunch on 77 but added just two more before chopping a Jadeja delivery onto his stumps, blowing a glorious chance to press on and make Australia's first century of the series.

So far, none of Australia's batsmen have reached three figures over the four Tests, with Harris' 79 the highest anyone has scored. In contrast, India have had a field day, compiling five centuries.

Australia gambled by picking inexperienced allrounder Marcus Labuschagne to come in at number three and he settled in well, cracking seven boundaries in a stylish 38.

But he was sent packing by a blinding reflex catch from Ajinkya Rahane at mid-wicket off Mohammed Shami's bowling.

Marsh scored a century in Sydney against England this time last year, but was out for eight, tickling an edge to Rahane at slip from a turning Jadeja ball.

The day got worse when Travis Head was caught and bowled by Yadav just before tea for 20 and as storm clouds gathered overhead Yadav clean bowled Paine for five.

It was left to Handscomb, recalled as a specialist in tackling spin, and pacesman Cummins, who made a gutsy 63 in the third Melbourne Test, to try and repair the damage.

SECOND ODI

Thisara's 140 in vain as New Zealand snatch ODI series

AFP
Mount Maunganui, New Zealand

A rollicking maiden century by Sri Lanka's Thisara Perera was ultimately in vain as New Zealand wrapped up the one-day series with a 21-run victory in the second ODI at Mount Maunganui.

With Sri Lanka chasing New Zealand's 319 for seven, they were on the ropes at 128 for seven when Perera opened up.

He faced 74 deliveries and cracked 13 sixes and eight fours before he was the last wicket to fall and Sri Lanka were out for 298 with 22 balls remaining.

Sri Lanka reached 112 for two when Ish Sodhi captured the wicket of Kusal Mendis for 20 to trigger a collapse which saw five wickets fall in six overs.

But Perera refused to give up as he bludgeoned the New Zealand attack with brute force.

He made 58 in a 75-run stand with Lasith Malinga for the eighth wicket, and scored 45 of the 51 runs for the ninth wicket with Lakshan Sandakan.

But when an seemingly impossible victory seemed on the cards Matt Henry had Perera caught by Trent Boult at long-on.

Opener Danushka Gunathilaka played his part at the top of the order with 71 but elsewhere the Sri Lankan batsmen failed to fire.

It continued a dismal tour for Sri Lanka who also lost the Test series 1-0 and lost the first ODI by 45 runs.

When New Zealand won the toss and elected to bat, Sri Lanka had their tails up when they removed first-match centurion Martin Guptill and Kane Williamson cheaply to have New Zealand at 39 for two.

But Ross Taylor (90) and Colin Munro (87) swung momentum New Zealand's way with a 112-run stand for the third wicket, while all-rounder James Neesham lit up the tail with a whirlwind 64.

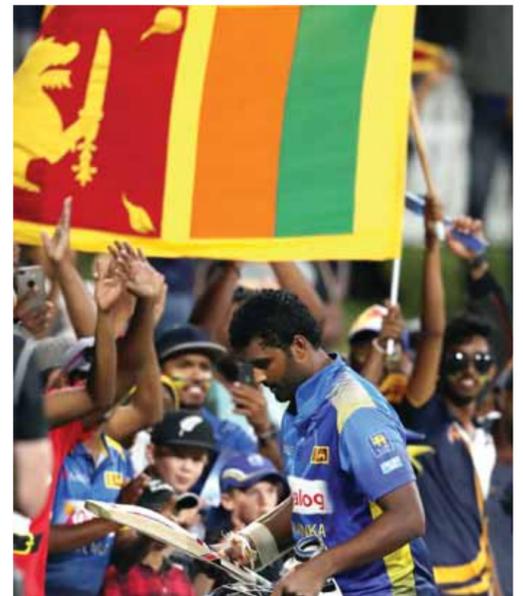
Lasith Malinga was the pick of Sri Lankan bowlers with two for 45 while bowling for New Zealand Sodhi took three for 55.

The final match in the series is in Nelson next Tuesday and the tour closes with a Twenty 20 match in Auckland on Friday.

Scorecard

NEW ZEALAND	
M. Guptill c Dickwella b Malinga 13	
C. Munro run out (K.Perera/Sandakan) 87	
K. Williamson c Sandakan b Pradeep 1	
R. Taylor run out (Sandakan/Dickwella) 90	
H. Nicholls c Dickwella b Malinga 32	
J. Neesham run out (Pradeep) 64	
T. Seifert run out (T.Perera) 22	
T. Southee not out 1	
Extras (b 4, lb 2, wd 3) 9	
Total (for 7 wickets, 50 overs) 319	
Fall of wickets: 1-34 (Guptill), 2-39 (Williamson), 3-151 (Munro), 4-208 (Nicholls), 5-262 (Taylor), 6-302 (Neesham), 7-319 (Seifert)	
Bowling: Malinga 10-0-45-2, Pradeep 9-0-59-1, Gunathilaka 1-0-10-0, T. Perera 7-0-69-0 (2w), Sandakan 10-0-56-0 (1w), Prasanna 5-0-34-0, Gunaratne 8-0-40-0	

SRI LANKA	
N. Dickwella b Southee 9	
D. Gunathilaka c Seifert b Neesham 71	
K. Perera c Boult b Henry 4	
K. Mendis c Seifert b Sodhi 20	
D. Chandimal b Sodhi 3	
D. Gunaratne run out (Neesham/Siefert) 6	
T. Perera c Boult b Henry 140	
S. Prasanna b Sodhi 0	
L. Malinga b Boult 17	
L. Sandakan c Taylor b Neesham 6	
N. Pradeep not out 3	
Extras (lb 6, wd 13) 19	
Total (all out, 46.2 overs) 298	
Fall of wickets: 1-28 (Dickwella), 2-63 (K. Perera), 3-112 (Mendis), 4-116 (Gunathilaka), 5-121 (Chandimal), 6-128 (Gunaratne), 7-128 (Prasanna), 8-203 (Malinga), 9-254 (Sandakan), 10-298 (T. Perera)	
Bowling: Boult 10-1-61-1 (3w), Southee 8-0-68-1 (4w), Henry 9.2-1-52-2 (2w), Williamson 2-0-8-0, Sodhi 10-1-55-3 (2w), Neesham 7-0-48-2 (2w)	
RESULT: New Zealand won by 21 runs	



Sri Lanka's Thisara Perera walks back after his dismissal yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

South Africa in 41-run Sunday chase for second Test



South Africa's Dale Steyn (centre) celebrates with teammates after taking the wicket of Pakistan's Shan Masood (not pictured) on third day of the second Test in Cape Town yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Cape Town

Half-centuries by Shan Masood, Asad Shafiq and Babar Azam enabled Pakistan to avoid an innings defeat and take the second Test against South Africa at Newlands into a fourth day.

Pakistan were bowled out in the last over of the third day for 294 yesterday, leaving South Africa 41 runs to win.

A provision for an extra half hour was not used because only 20 minutes or five overs of play

would have been possible. Masood hit a composed 61, and Shafiq and Azam both played aggressively to score 88 and 72 respectively.

Dale Steyn and Kagiso Rabada both took four wickets to get South Africa to the brink of victory.

Steyn drew level with Richard Hadlee of New Zealand in tenth place on 431 wickets on the all-time Test wicket-takers list.

Masood and Shafiq shared the most enterprising partnership of the match when they put on 132 in 132 minutes off 168 balls for the third wicket.

Steyn broke the stand when Masood was caught behind by wicketkeeper Quinton de Kock and Philander followed up having Shafiq caught behind after a sparkling innings in which he hit 12 fours and a six in facing 118 balls.

Shafiq had looked set to make his second century in successive appearances at Newlands after he made 111 in the 2012/13 fixture between the two countries.

A mini-collapse followed but Azam batted well with the tail in scoring 72 off 87 balls.

Azam was ninth out, caught at first slip off Rabada when Pakistan were only 16 runs ahead 15

Scorecard

PAKISTAN 1st inn		177 all out	
SOUTH AFRICA 1st inn (o/h 382-6)		Imam-ul-Haq c Elgar b Steyn 6	
A. Markram b Masood 78	S. Masood c De Kock b Steyn 61		
D. Elgar c Ahmed b Amir 20	A. Ali lbw b Rabada 6		
H. Amla b Abbas 24	A. Shafiq c De Kock b Philander 88		
T. de Bruyn c Azam b Afridi 13	B. Azam c Amla b Rabada 72		
F. du Plessis c Ahmed b Afridi 103	F. Zaman c and b Rabada 7		
T. Bavuma c Ahmed b Afridi 75	S. Ahmed lbw b Olivier 6		
Q. de Kock c Shafiq b Amir 59	M. Amir c De Kock b Steyn 0		
V. Philander b Amir 16	Y. Shah c sub (Hamza) b Steyn 5		
K. Rabada b Amir 11	M. Abbas not out 10		
D. Steyn c Zaman b Afridi 13	S. Afridi c Philander b Rabada 14		
D. Olivier not out 10	Extras (b5, lb1, nb3) 9		
Total (all out, 124.1 overs) 431	Total (all out, 70.4 overs) 294		
Fall of wickets: 1-10 (Imam), 2-27 (Ali), 3-159 (Masood), 4-194 (Shafiq), 5-201 (Zaman), 6-220 (Ahmed), 7-221 (Amir), 8-247 (Shah), 9-270 (Azam), 10-294 (Afridi)			
Bowling: Philander 19-6-51-1 (1nb), Steyn 19-2-85-4 (1nb), Olivier 16-3-84-1 (1nb, 1w), Rabada 16.4-2-61-4 (1nb, 1w)			

minutes before the scheduled close.

A second successive win for South Africa inside three days seemed likely when Mohamed Abbas was caught off Philander seven minutes and eight runs

later when the extra half hour would have been enough to finish the match.

But after checking a replay, Philander was no-balled, and Abbas and last man Shaheen Afridi took the game into a fourth day.

Pybus named Windies interim head coach as busy year looms

English-born Richard Pybus has been appointed interim head coach of West Indies cricket and will guide the team in a busy 2019 that includes the World Cup and a home series against England.

Cricketer West Indies (CWI) announced the news on Friday, less than two weeks before England arrive for a winter series in the Caribbean.

Pybus, 54, will hold the head coach role until September, when a replacement will take over, CWI said.

The head coach job became vacant when Australian Stuart Law resigned in September to take over at English county side Middlesex.

"Richard comes into the role

with previous international experience having worked with both Pakistan and Bangladesh," said CWI director of cricket Jimmy Adams.

"Due to his current and previous involvement in CWI, he possesses a good working knowledge of both players and coaches."

Pybus was West Indies director of cricket from 2013 to 2016 and returned as high performance director from last February.

England will play three Tests, five one-day internationals and one Twenty20 against West Indies starting with the first Test in Barbados from Jan. 23.

India will tour the Caribbean in July and August, shortly after the 50-over World Cup in England and Wales.

NBA

Red-hot Hayward powers Celtics past Mavericks

'They're great sports fans. It's a great sports town. They know the game and they appreciate the game'

AFP
Los Angeles

Gordon Hayward flirted with a triple-double as the Boston Celtics defeated the Dallas Mavericks 114-93 in what might have been Dirk Nowitzki's final appearance at the Boston Garden.

Hayward had 16 points, 11 rebounds and eight assists before heading to the bench halfway through the fourth quarter with the Celtics ahead by a comfortable 22 points. Hayward was coming off a season-high 35 points against Minnesota on Wednesday.

"It was fun," said Hayward. "I think when we have good spacing, we have talented players and it just makes the game easier. If you make the right read, everybody gets involved and it's fun."

RESULTS

Boston	114-93	Dallas
Miami	115-109	Washington
New York	119-112	Lakers
Oklahoma	111-109	Portland
Milwaukee	144-112	Atlanta
Utah	117-91	Cleveland
Clippers	121-111	Phoenix
Indiana	119-116	Chicago
Brooklyn	109-100	Memphis
Minnesota	120-103	Orlando

Jaylen Brown scored 21 points, Jayson Tatum added 18 points, and Al Horford had 10 points, eight rebounds and eight assists in the win.

The Celtics won easily despite playing their second straight game with star guard Kyrie Irving sidelined by a scratched cornea. Luka Doncic had 19 points and nine assists for Dallas. Harrison Barnes scored 20 points, and DeAndre Jordan had 12 points and 15 rebounds in front of the crowd of 18,600.

Germany's Nowitzki received two standing ovations and Boston fans chanted "Dirk, Dirk" in the final minute.

He finished with two rebounds and no points as he considers retiring at the end of the season.

Nowitzki said he hasn't officially made up his mind about a 22nd season, but was grateful to Boston's fans for their support.

"They're great sports fans. It's a great sports town. They know the game and they appreciate the game," Nowitzki said.

The Mavericks trimmed an 18-point first-half deficit to a point early in the third quarter, but could get no closer.



Luka Doncic (left) of the Dallas Mavericks takes a shot against Gordon Hayward 20 of the Boston Celtics during the first-half at TD Garden in Boston, Massachusetts. (AFP)

Elsewhere, Victor Oladipo made a long three-pointer with 0.3 seconds left in overtime to give the Indiana Pacers a 119-116 win over the Chicago Bulls.

"It felt great coming out of my hands, and it banked in," Oladipo said.

"It felt like I didn't bank it, it would have been a swish. I work on that shot all the

time." Oladipo had 36 points and seven rebounds, and Domantas Sabonis added 23 points and 12 rebounds for the Pacers who won their sixth consecutive game.

This was the first game of a five-game trip. Chicago's Zach LaVine hit a three-pointer, but after time had expired in the overtime.

Indiana's Thaddeus Young had 16 points to help the Pacers overcome an early 12-point deficit.

Lauri Markkanen had 27 points, and Kris Dunn had 16 points and 17 assists in the loss for the Bulls. Chicago's Zach LaVine hit a three-pointer, but after time had expired in the overtime.

SPOTLIGHT

Lakers' James expected to sit at least another week



By Broderick Turner and Dan Woike
Los Angeles Times

LeBron James walked through the tunnel at Staples Center to a huge ovation Friday night. He was back in the building. The fans were happy to see him.

And, again, he wasn't in uniform. James' day-to-day status got a little more clarity earlier in the day, with the Los Angeles Lakers announcing that he'd miss at least the next week while he recovers from a strained groin. He will not travel with the team for its next two games, today in Minnesota and tomorrow in Dallas.

He will be re-evaluated next Friday, meaning he'll miss Wednesday's game against Detroit and almost certainly next Friday's game in Utah.

"We got to get him healthy," coach Luke Walton said at shootaround.

"We talk all year. We need everyone on our team. You don't want anyone to ever get hurt, but that's how the NBA season plays out. We're down in bodies, and it's going to be a challenge, but our guys should be excited for that. We got to find a way to keep playing at a high level and try to finish some of these games out."

James hasn't played since injuring his groin in the second half of the Lakers' win at Golden State on Christmas night. Entering Friday's game with the New York Knicks, the Lakers had lost three of the four games James had missed.

Knicks coach David Fizdale, who was an assistant coach in Miami when James played for the Heat, joked that he was just fine with him missing the game.

"He is a beast. Last year was, to play 82 (regular-season games), to play in I think two seven-game (playoff) series where he played 48 minutes in the seventh game. I mean it's a testament to his work ethic, to his commitment to the game," Fizdale said. "But even a guy like that needs a few days off sometimes. I'm not moaning and groaning."

INJURED KUZMA OUT, BUT IMPROVING

Forward Kyle Kuzma, who injured his back in Wednesday's loss to Oklahoma City, didn't play Friday.

Walton said that even though Kuzma is improving, the team didn't want him to come to the arena Friday, instead telling him to stay home to continue treatment.

"The back is tough," Walton said, speaking from experience. "You can't really play through back pain. You get locked up, and you can't move."

Kuzma could travel with the team Saturday to Minneapolis. "We will evaluate that decision first thing in the morning," Walton said.

Kuzma is the Lakers' second-leading scorer, averaging 18.3 points in his second season.

BEASLEY BACK

Michael Beasley returned to the Lakers for the first time since the death of his mother, Fatima Smith, last month. Beasley was away from the team for weeks while she battled cancer. Beasley played in both halves Friday against a Knicks team he played for last season.

"He was just starting to play in the rotation before he had left for his family things he had to deal with and he was good in those games," Walton said.

"So I would expect as he gets his feet under him again, he helps us win games in the second half of the season."

NHL

Penguins' Murray silences Jets for third shutout

Reuters
New York

Goaltender Matt Murray stopped 33 shots Friday for his third shutout this season and the ninth of his career as the Pittsburgh Penguins won their eighth straight game, blanking the visiting Winnipeg Jets 4-0.

Murray also tied his career best with a seven-start winning streak. Olli Maatta and Matt Cullen scored 33 seconds apart in the first period, Dominik Simon added a second-period goal, and Kris Letang scored an empty-netter for the Penguins, who have received 11 goals from nine players over the past two games.

Cullen also added an assist. The Penguins, who have won 10 of their past 11 games, reached the mid-point of the season with 52 points. During their eight-game win streak, they have outscored opponents by a combined 32-9. Goaltender Connor Hellebuyck made 29 saves for Winnipeg, which has lost three of its past four games. The Jets played nearly all of the game without top-line winger Nikolaj Ehlers, who got an apparent left arm or hand injury during the first minute when he got checked by Pittsburgh's Sidney Crosby.

It was later in the first, at 14:19, when the Penguins opened the scoring on a power play. Maatta picked up his first goal of the season when his shot deflected off the stick of the Jets' Blake Wheeler and fluttered past Hellebuyck's glove. Cullen scored the hard way 33 seconds later for a 2-0 Pittsburgh lead. A shot by Zach Aston-Reese was deflected by Winnipeg's Patrik Laine

RESULTS

Pittsburgh	4-0	Winnipeg
Detroit	4-3	Nashville
Carolina	4-2	Columbus
Dallas	2-1	Washington
Colorado	6-1	Rangers
New Jersey	3-2	Arizona
Las Vegas	3-2	Anaheim

and went in off the ear of Cullen, who was driving to the net.

It took a review for the Penguins' third goal to count. Hellebuyck reached back to catch a backhanded shot by Simon. It was called no goal on the ice, but a look at the crossbar camera view showed that the puck crossed the goal line while in the netting of the goaltender's glove. That made it 3-0 at 14:39 of the second. Letang's empty-netter with 3:22 left extended his points streak to six games.

HURRICANES JUMP TO EARLY LEAD, BEAT BLUE JACKETS

Greg McKegg scored a goal and added an assist Friday night in his first game with the Carolina Hurricanes, a 4-2 victory over the Columbus Blue Jackets in Raleigh, NC. McKegg, a 26-year-old centre, was playing with his fifth NHL team. Micheal Ferland, Dougie Hamilton and Sebastian Aho also scored for the Hurricanes. Aho's empty-net goal was the only scoring in the third period. The Hurricanes have a three-game winning streak for only the second time since early October. Carolina goalie Curtis McElhinney stopped 22 shots. McElhinney notched his first victory with Carolina during the open-

ing week of the season at Columbus. Oliver Bjorkstrand and Artemi Panarin scored for the Blue Jackets, who failed to record a team point for only the second time in a 10-game span (7-2-1).

Carolina built a 3-0 lead before the Blue Jackets scored twice in a 25-second span late in the second period.

The Blue Jackets had four shots early in the third period, but ended up scoreless with only seven total shots in the final 20 minutes. Columbus goalie Sergei Bobrovsky allowed three goals on 16 shots and didn't last until the game's midway mark. After Carolina's third goal, including two that Bobrovsky got a glove on but failed to hold, Joonas Korpisalo was summoned.

Korpisalo had 14 saves.

Ferland's goal, which opened the scoring, came just after a Carolina power-play expired. The streak without converting on power plays at home stretched to 18 consecutive chances, but the Hurricanes were rewarded right afterward. It was Ferland's 12th goal of the season, but his first tally since Nov. 21 as he missed some time because of injuries.

Hamilton scored in his second game in a row for his fifth goal of the season, blasting a shot from the top of the left circle. Right winger Saku Maenalanen assisted on the goal for his first NHL point, coming in his third career game. McKegg also assisted on the play. McKegg's goal gave Carolina a 3-0 edge less than seven minutes into the second period. Then the Blue Jackets, who hadn't played since Monday, came to life with goals on consecutive shifts. Bjorkstrand has three goals in a five-game stretch, while Panarin has four goals in the last six games.

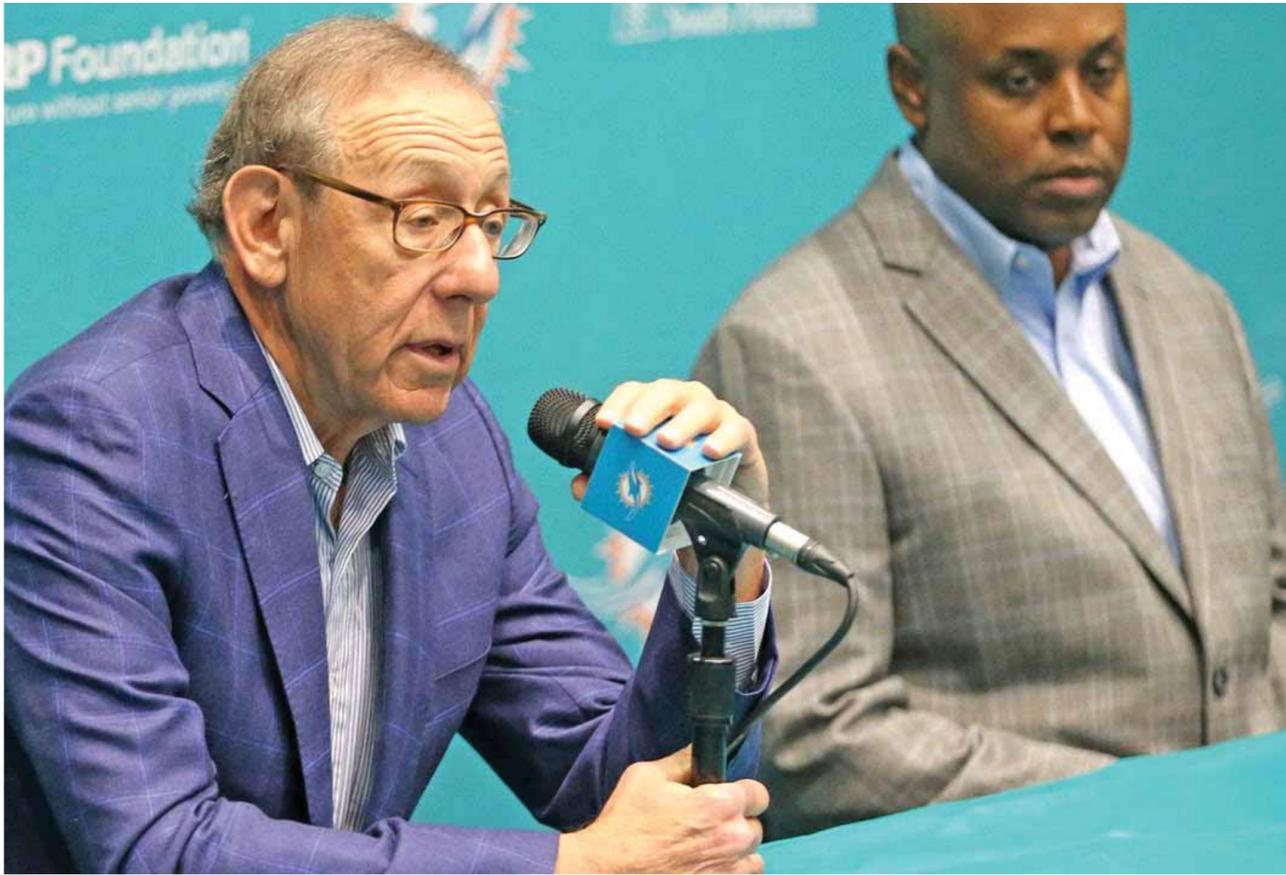


Pittsburgh Penguins goaltender Matt Murray defends a wrap around attempt by Winnipeg Jets left wing Brandon Tanev (right) during the second period at PPG Paints Arena. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

NFL

Dolphins' way to win shouldn't be losing

The big concern is that Ross is so lost after trying everything else that he has thrown up his hands in the air and said they might as well be bad enough to draft a top-ranked quarterback



Miami Dolphins owner Steve Ross (left) with general manager Chris Grier.

By Dave Hyde
Sun Sentinel

Either the Dolphins have been walking in the wilderness too long, or I've been getting too much sun following them all these lonely years, because some of what they're planning actually makes sense to me.

Some of it. Not all of it. The corporate flow chart going through one person. Smart. Ending this false premise that they're "close" and so will can quit finding stop-gap players. Smart. The realization after seven years to take the keys from quarterback Ryan Tannehill. Hey, they get no points for being smart by this time.

Finally, there's the suggested idea they need to tank a season or three - maybe finish 3-13, Dolphins owner Steve Ross said - to get a franchise quarterback and set up their roster in a manner that allows a sustained winner.

I'm not on board. This isn't the recipe to win in the NFL. A lost team will try anything, you see. That's why they're lost. The big concern is that Ross is so lost after trying everything else that he has thrown up his hands in the air and said they might as well be bad enough to draft a top-ranked quarterback.

Sure, that could work. Indianapolis, after all, lucked into drafted Andrew Luck with the No. 1 pick just as Peyton Manning, a previous first pick, was again. But to understand how losing doesn't beget greatness, understand Luck's Colts are in the playoffs for the first time in four years.

Equally telling to the Dolphins' new plan, only two quarterbacks drafted at No. 1 are in the playoffs this year. The other is the Los Angeles Rams' Jared Goff. But the Rams didn't tank for Goff's pick. They traded up from 15th to the top spot for Goff. They were bold and smart, in other words, not awful.

Let's take this further. The

only two quarterbacks drafted in the top 10 to win Super Bowls this millennium were the Manning brothers, Peyton and Eli (they won four combined). That's it. Two. In the top 10 picks.

You see, tanking purposely and drafting high isn't the model for winning in the NFL. Being smart is. Having a great front office is. Showing boldness and vision is. That's why the decision to promote Chris Grier to the football czar of the team is the biggest move they'll make for years - for better or worse.

The Dolphins don't need to Tank-for-Tua or Bomb-for-Fromme, no matter how many times we yuk it up with those descendants of Suck-for-Luck in the coming months. They need to Can't-Miss Chris in the draft room. He's been it that room for years, too. To spin that in a positive way, maybe after seeing all the mistakes he's educated what not to do. Grier's shopping list is daunting. Both lines are a mess. They need another cornerback and a top receiver. Their tight end

and middle linebacker are young questions. And then there's the issue of quarterback that's plagued this franchise for years.

Maybe tanking will deliver a great quarterback to the Dolphins. But, again, look at the data if you think that's the right way to go. Of the 12 quarterbacks in these playoffs, six (Luck, Goff, Phillip Rivers, Mitchell Trubisky, Deshaun Watson and Patrick Mahomes) were taken in the top 15 of the draft.

That's not the telling stat, though. Of those six, five were involved in trades. Luck was the only quarterback taken by the original team in the original draft slot. All the others were part of some bigger plan and bolder design. Again, smart teams win.

The other six quarterbacks in the draft tell another story. Lamar Jackson and Drew Brees were drafted 32nd overall. Russell Wilson and Nick Foles were third-round picks. Dak Prescott was a fourth-round pick, and Tom Brady was a sixth-round pick. So more than a top-shelf draft pick,

you need someone who recognizes talent. Grier probably will have to decide this draft whether Ohio State quarterback Dwayne Haskins is potentially better than anyone coming out in 2019. With the 13th pick, he'd have to move up to get Haskins. And outwit other teams.

That's a lot of big conclusions and moving parts to pull off in a draft. But that's how winning teams win. Not simply by losing. Not by being so bad they're first in the food line. If they're not smart enough to find a quarterback, they're not smart enough to assemble all the necessary other parts to win.

Yes, to the Dolphins realizing they aren't "close" and planning accordingly. Yes, to putting one person in charge of football operations. Yes, to finally realizing Tannehill isn't the right guy.

But winning by losing? Dumb teams will try anything. That's why they're dumb teams. Let's hope Grier has a better vision and smarter plan than just being awful.

FOCUS

Foles' Philly career could be ending today

Reuters
New York

For the last two years Nick Foles has stepped in to rescue Philadelphia but today in Chicago might be the last time the Super Bowl-winning quarterback pulls on an Eagles jersey.

The Chicago Bears, the biggest favorites of this weekend's wild card playoff games, are the odds-on choice to put the clamps on another Philadelphia run. With that would come hard decisions for the Eagles, who most likely will be trading Foles or sending him off to free agency.

Injured Carson Wentz, for whom Foles filled in during the 2018 Super Bowl run and the recent surge that got the Eagles in the playoff again, will be back calling signals.

Then there is the question of whether Philadelphia would be willing to pay Foles the \$20 million he is due if he stays or would he rather test free agency.

The Eagles made it clear last year after Foles led them to the Super Bowl win that Wentz was still their man.

After all, the 2016 first-round draft choice has all the qualities wanted in an NFL quarterback. As Les Bowen of the Philadelphia Inquirer pointed out, Wentz offers a strong arm, accuracy, the ability to make plays with his running and reigns as a recognized leader when healthy.

Yet there is Foles, who has the Eagles on a surprising three-game winning streak when their playoff hopes seemed marginal at best.

This despite the 29-year-old's softer throws, more limited mobility and a quieter personality.

"He's always positive," said Eagles tight end Zach Ertz.

"No matter how we're doing. No matter if everyone thinks they stink, he's going to say, 'Hey guys, I think we're really close to being good again!'"

Foles also has found a coach

in Doug Pederson whom he considers genuine.

"Sometimes people's title or role changes, and all of a sudden, they're a different person," Foles said.

"They puff out their chest a little bit more. That's something that I'm not drawn to." But will the relationship continue? There is a lot weighing on the Bears game for both Foles and the Eagles.

PACKERS REPORTEDLY TO INTERVIEW GASE

The Green Bay Packers have been active in trying to fill their head-coaching vacancy and plan to interview fired Miami Dolphins coach Adam Gase, according to a report Friday, though a time and place have not been finalized.

According to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, the team's brain trust of president/CEO Mark Murphy and general manager Brian Gutekunst are interested in Gase because of his prowess as an offensive play-caller who flourished as an assistant coach with Peyton Manning with the Denver Broncos. Like Manning, the Packers have another of the most accomplished passers in recent years, 35-year-old QB Aaron Rodgers.

The Journal Sentinel reports that Murphy and Gutekunst spent Friday interviewing both the offensive and defensive play-callers for the New England Patriots - offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels and linebackers coach Brian Flores. The Packers' duo will fly to New Orleans Saturday for a pair of interviews with Saints assistants: offensive co-ordinator Pete Carmichael and tight ends coach Dan Campbell.

The Dolphins fired Gase, 40, on New Year's Eve after Miami's second straight losing season at 7-9.

Gase led the Dolphins to a 10-6 mark in his first season, but went just 13-19 in his final two seasons. Gase interviewed with the New York Jets on Friday after talking to the Arizona Cardinals on Wednesday.



Philadelphia Eagles' quarterback Nick Foles.

MLB

Rays closing upper deck makes sense, unless it was your baseball home

By John Romano
Tampa Bay Times

Life looks different 10 years later. For Justin Pegg, there is a new job, a new home, a new son. He's traded in the sports car for a more family-friendly SUV, and his wife has started her own business.

And yet the one place where the view has remained constant is from Section 312 at Tropicana Field. Pegg, 38, has had the same partial season ticket package for the Tampa Bay Rays for almost a decade. He knows the ushers. He's friendly with a couple dozen fans. His five-year-old son James has grown up in those seats, and Pegg was asked to be the godfather of one-year-old sitting nearby.

And now that's all about to change.

The Rays are closing the upper deck at Tropicana Field, ostensibly to consolidate expenses while creating a more energetic atmosphere in the stadium. Season ticket holders in the 300 level are being told they can choose

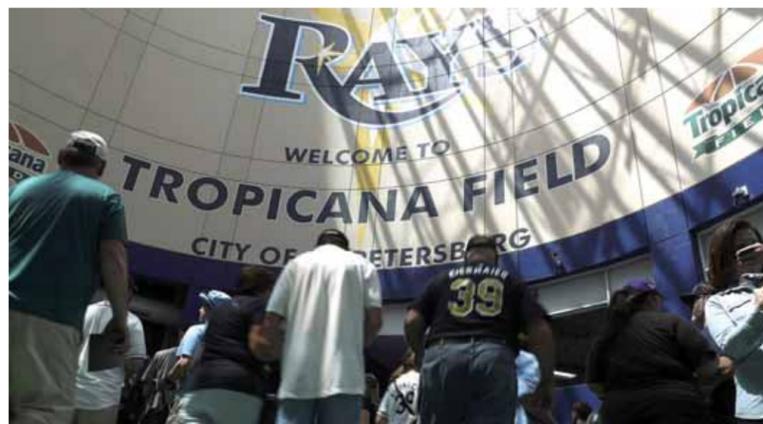
more expensive seats in the 200 level and the outfield for no additional charge.

"It sounds cheesy, but we became sort of like a family up there," said Pegg, a regional sales manager at Amazon. "Over the years, I thought about moving to other seats but it was affordable and we had so many friends that we kept renewing. But to be honest, the 300 level has become a ghost town the past couple of years. They didn't keep up the amenities as well as the lower level, and there were some games when there was only one concession stand open.

"It's kind of a shock and I'm a little concerned all of us won't be together in a new section, but I'm kind of excited about it too. If they're giving us upgraded seats, that's pretty cool."

This isn't exactly a radical idea. Oakland, another franchise with attendance problems, has similarly shut down its upper deck. The Rays, under previous owner Vince Naimoli, shut down the upper deck for most games during the 2002 season.

While the lack of attendance is clearly a factor, Rays presi-



Fans enter Tropicana Field through the rotunda for the Tampa Bay Rays' opening day on March 29, 2018. (Tampa Bay Times/TNS)

dent Matt Silverman says it is also about logistics and providing a better fan experience. Because fans have been scarce in the upper deck, the team has not invested as much money in upgrading restrooms and concessions in the 300 level. The team

had to deal with a fire on Opening Day last season when concessions were turned back on.

"At this point, it's just not a Major League experience on that level," Silverman said. "We've spent \$50 million upgrading this stadium in the past 10 years, but

the upper deck has fallen further and further behind because there wasn't the demand up there. There is no good business case to invest more money on that level."

While there will be fewer cheap tickets available with the upper deck closed, Silverman

said there would still be about 5,000 seats with 300-level pricing for every game.

So is this a good move for fans? That depends on your perspective.

If your main concern is the product on the field, it's probably the smart thing for the Rays to do. Closing the upper deck saves money in the long run, and lessens the dreary, mausoleum-like feel of the stadium.

Packing more fans in a smaller area should produce a more festive atmosphere, which is crucial to a stadium experience. And if the cost savings are redirected toward the payroll, that's a good thing, too.

But from a pure supply-and-demand standpoint, it's not a positive move. No customer wants fewer options. And artificially limiting the number of available tickets will, theoretically, lead to higher prices at some point.

"I understand what they're doing, and it makes sense in some ways," said Kay Schupay, a retired teacher from St Petersburg who has bought flex packs in the 300 level with friends. "I

just hope they're not discounting the loyalty of older fans who have been following them for years.

"I guess I'm just irritated with people who don't go to games. In our classrooms we used to say we were raising Rays fans as fast as we could. I guess there are just not enough yet."

The Rays have been contemplating this move for a couple of years, and decided to pull the trigger after hearing fan preferences during the planning process for the now-dormant Ybor City project.

The Ybor stadium would have had a capacity under 30,000 with a limited upper deck.

"If it's going to help the atmosphere, I guess this is a good opportunity," said St. Petersburg's Mike McGee, who has had a partial season ticket package in the 300 level for at least a half-dozen years. "But I do feel some sadness because we've gotten so close to so many people around us. I probably wouldn't have renewed my seats if not for the camaraderie in our section.

"But now maybe we can meet some new people in a new section."

NATIONAL SHOOTING AND ARCHERY CUP

Rashid, Reem win skeet titles; Dana sets new mark

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Rashid Saleh Hamad and Reem al-Sharshani won the men's and women's skeet titles at the National Shooting and Archery Team Cup at the Losail Ranges yesterday.

Hamad, a double Olympian and former Asia champion, shot 55 to hold off Hamad Menkhes (53) for the gold medal match. The bronze medal was pocketed by Masoud Hamad. Sharshani produced a fine performance in the finals to beat Fatma al-Muraikhi (44) by two shots to bag the women's gold medal. Hanan Haji hit 32 to claim the bronze.

Al Dana al-Mubarak created a new national record and won the 25m Pistol gold medal, overcoming the challenge of Nusra Mohamed Mahmoud. Mubarak, who qualified with 576 (19x), recorded 32 in the final, while Nusra followed her qualifying 556 with 22. Suad al-Khater collected the bronze medal with 12.

In the junior skeet events, Abdulla Rashdan al-Marri emerged the champion with a big margin. He hit 105, while the silver medallist Saud Hamad al-Marri managed only 76. Aisha al-Ansari overcame a tough competition and Galla al-Malki to bag the girl's crown. Ansari shot 55, while Galla had 52. Tournament Director Ibrahim al-Mohammadi and Alanoud al-Naimi, member of the national teams' committee, crowned the winners.



First-placed Al Dana al-Mubarak (centre), second-placed Nusra Mohamed Mahmoud (left) and third-placed Suad al-Khater celebrate on the 25m pistol podium yesterday. (Right top) First-placed Rashid Saleh Hamad (centre), second-placed Hamad Menkhes (left) and third-placed Masoud Hamad celebrate on the men's skeet podium. (Right bottom) First-placed Reem al-Sharshani (centre), second-placed Fatma al-Muraikhi (left) and Hanan Haji pose on the women's skeet podium.



CHESS

Carlsen retains world blitz title with dominant show

The Norwegian world No 1 went 21 games without defeat in St Petersburg while England's Gawain Jones failed to sustain a mid-tournament surge



Magnus Carlsen remained undefeated and earned a point more than last year.

By Leonard Barden
The Guardian

It was back to business as usual for Magnus Carlsen in last weekend's world blitz championship at St Petersburg. Norway's world No 1, 28, had earlier made a dreadful start of two losses in the 15-minute rapid championship, and his subsequent recovery fell half a point short of the young Russian Daniil Dubov.

But in the 21-round blitz, defined as three minutes per player for the entire game plus a two seconds per move increment, Carlsen was pushing from the start.

Admittedly he rode his luck on occasions, and in the very first round his opponent could have trivially drawn a bishop and pawns ending by non-committal moves but instead exchanged off

into a lost pawn ending.

The pivotal moment came on the first day in rounds seven and eight when Carlsen outclassed first Jan-Krzysztof Duda, the 20-year-old Polish No 1 who will soon be among the elite, and then Alireza Firouzja, 15.

He remained undefeated in the blitz tournament and earned a point more than last year.

The Iranian talent, who finished an impressive sixth in the rapid and was named in last week's column as a player to watch in the blitz, began brilliantly with victories over several eminent opponents and reached 6.5/7, ahead of Carlsen and others on 5.5. The world champion did what he had to do and trounced the teen, who could not recover and finished down the field.

In the final rounds Carlsen was chased all the way by Duda, who finished half a point behind.

Hikaru Nakamura, a speed specialist and the only top American to compete, won bronze, as he had done in the rapid.

England's only representative was Gawain Jones, fresh from his victory in the British knockout championship at Olympia whose format included classical, rapid and blitz.

Jones made no show in the rapid and began the blitz with 0/3, but then suddenly took off, scoring 10.5 from the next 12 rounds, zooming up the score table, and meeting Duda in round 16.

There the dream ended, as Jones missed a hidden R66 resource at move 20, Duda produced a knockout two moves later and the 31-year-old subsided in the final six rounds.

The event attracted several thousand spectators every day, a rarity when most chess viewing is now online.

The separate women's championships had main prizes totaling \$90,000, which attracted almost all the world's top players. China's Ju Wenjun won the rapid and Russia's Kateryna Lagno the blitz.

They were the form pair as finalists in the classical championship played in November, but the star in St Petersburg was Sara Khadem, 21, who won silver in both rapid and blitz.

The main championships were technically open but women entrants were absent, no surprise considering the large rewards available in the all-women events. It could have been different if the all-time Nos 1 and 2, Hungary's Judit Polgar and China's Hou Yifan, had been available.

Polgar, 42 and retired from competitive chess, played virtually only against men throughout her career while Hou, now concentrating on her Rhodes

Scholarship MSc degree at Oxford, prefers male opponents.

Carlsen enjoyed his win in round 13, the first on the second day of blitz, against his old nemesis Anish Giri.

There has long been needle between them, mostly conducted on Twitter, since Wijk aan Zee 2011 when the Dutchman won as Black in only 22 moves, and for years could boast of his plus score against the champion.

Carlsen could not equalise the totals until Bilbao 2016 and then had another bad experience at Wijk 2017, where he failed to find an obvious way to mate in three or win Giri's queen.

So after their blitz game, in which Giri fell into his opponent's trap and flagged with mate imminent, Carlsen told Norwegian television: "There are many who have fantasies as to what is the best way to start the day. This is mine."

GOLF

Woodland sizzles to lead Tournament of Champions, McIlroy in hunt

AFP
Kapalua, United States

Gary Woodland fired his second straight six-under 67 to grab a three-shot lead halfway through the 2019 Tournament of Champions as Rory McIlroy starts to make some noise in his Kapalua debut.

Woodland, who is seeking his fourth win on the PGA Tour, used a streak of five consecutive birdies, beginning at the No 11, to reach 12-under 134. World No 8 McIlroy, Bryson DeChambeau and first-round leader Kevin Tway are tied for second at nine under. "I have a little different mindset this week, playing a little more aggressive, trying to contend, and trying to win instead of just enjoying the views out here, which I've done in the past," said Woodland.

McIlroy, who shot 68, isn't the only former major winner still in the hunt as American Justin Thomas is tied for sixth after posting a one-under 72. Long-hitting rookie Cameron Champ (68) and Xander Schauffele (67) are keeping Thomas company at seven-under, five shots adrift of Woodland.

"I stayed patient," McIlroy said. "The front nine's the tough nine on this golf course, and I had a couple opportunities, but I just thought if I could get through that first nine under par, I would have a few chances on the back nine."

"And thankfully I was able to take advantage." Woodland, 34, went on a roll last summer finishing in the top 12 in six-out-of-seven worldwide starts. However the big knock on the American is

his inability to play with the lead as he has failed to convert each of his previous four 36-hole leads into victories. His last win came at the 2018 Phoenix Open.

McIlroy has impressed in his debut as he hopes to become the first since Daniel Chopra in 2008 to win in the tournament in his first start. "It's been a nice start to the year," he said. "The first two competitive rounds of year, nine-under par, only two bogeys, it's been nice. "It is something to build on going into the weekend."

The 29-year-old made birdie on four of his final seven holes in the second round to improve by a stroke over his Thursday score.

The same could not be said for Dustin Johnson who was slapped with a two-stroke penalty for playing the wrong ball and finished with a one-over 74. Johnson took the penalty on the fourth hole and went on to make double bogey. "I could see the logo on the side and so obviously I just assumed it was mine. That won't ever happen again I promise you that," said Johnson who is tied for 12th.

SECOND ROUND SCORES

134 - Gary Woodland 67-67
137 - Bryson DeChambeau 69-68, Rory McIlroy (NIR) 69-68, Kevin Tway 66-71
138 - Marc Leishman (AUS) 68-70
139 - Xander Schauffele 72-67, Cameron Champ 71-68, Justin Thomas 67-72
140 - Ian Poulter (ENG) 71-69, Jason Day (AUS) 69-71, Patton Kizzire 69-71
141 - Jon Rahm (ESP) 70-71, Dustin Johnson 67-74
142 - Webb Simpson 70-72, Andrew Putnam 69-73



Gary Woodland of the United States lines up a putt on the 18th green during the second round of the Sentry Tournament of Champions at the Plantation Course at Kapalua Golf Club in Lahaina, Hawaii. (Getty Images/AFP)

FOCUS

Ole's United make FA Cup progress

Morata scores brace in Chelsea's 2-0 win over Nottingham Forest

Reuters
London

Manchester United's Ole Gunnar Solskjaer enjoyed his fifth successive victory since being named interim manager as his much-changed side beat second-tier strugglers Reading 2-0 at home in the FA Cup third round yesterday.

Juan Mata's penalty and a well-taken effort in first-half stoppage time by Romelu Lukaku, given his first start since Solskjaer took over, sent United into the fourth round where they were joined by holders Chelsea who cruised to a 2-0 victory over second-tier Nottingham Forest.

It was a subdued performance by the 12-times FA Cup winners at Old Trafford, where Reading impressed, but maintained former United striker Solskjaer's dream start to life in the hot seat vacated last month by Jose Mourinho who was sacked.

"We have performed a lot better, but you can't ask for fantasy football every time and with the changes I made you can't expect it to have the same flow and rhythm," Solskjaer, who became the first United manager to begin his reign with five straight wins since Matt Busby, told reporters.

Alvaro Morata's second-half brace was enough for Chelsea, who beat United in last year's final, to move through.

Yet fellow Spaniard Cesc Fabregas, in almost certainly his last game for the club before he is expected to join Monaco, missed a penalty in an emotional farewell at Stamford Bridge.

Third-tier Gillingham grabbed the "giant-killer" award on a day lacking much of the traditional third-round drama as the Kent club beat Premier League Cardiff City 1-0 thanks to a late strike by Elliott List.

Accrington Stanley, also of the third tier, reached the fourth



Manchester United's Romelu Lukaku (left) scores his team's second goal past Reading goalkeeper Anssi Jaakkola during the FA Cup match at Old Trafford in Manchester yesterday. (Reuters)

round with a 1-0 win over former winners Ipswich Town who suffered a ninth successive third-round exit.

Premier League strugglers Burnley made hard work of a 1-0 win over third-tier Barnsley in a match notable for a bizarre intervention by the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) — the system being used in nine of the 32 third-round ties.

Burnley were awarded a penalty for a foul on Matej Vydra before the interval but just as he was running up to take the spot kick the referee Simon Hooper indicated that the decision had been reversed by VAR because of an offside in the build-up.

Manager Sean Dyeche was left fuming but his mood improved when Chris Wood eventually sealed victory from the penalty spot in the second minute of stoppage time.

NINE CHANGES
Solskjaer made nine changes

to the side that beat Newcastle United in midweek and there was a disjointed feel to his team's display as Reading matched their illustrious opponents.

Fred, another player to get a rare start, thought he had given United the lead midway through the first half but was flagged offside, although Mata was fouled in the build-up.

Referee Stuart Attwell, helped by VAR, brought play back to award a penalty which Spaniard Mata stroked home.

Reading had chances before and after that with Andy Yiadom and Danny Loader guilty of bad misses, and United were given breathing space when Lukaku latched onto a superb pass by Alexis Sanchez to round keeper Anssi Jaakkola and slot home.

The only moment of note in a dour second half, apart from a hamstring injury to Sanchez, was Solskjaer giving a debut to

19-year-old Dutch winger Tahith Chong.

In other ties West Ham United beat second-tier Birmingham City 2-0 at the London Stadium with Samir Nasri making his debut in his first game since completing an 18-month doping ban.

Austrian Marko Arnautovic put West Ham ahead early on but was later substituted because of injury. His replacement, Andy Carroll, struck West Ham's second in stoppage time.

Brighton & Hove Albion beat Bournemouth 3-1 away in an all-Premier League affair with Anthony Knockaert, Yves Bissouma and Florin Andone all on target.

Everton scored twice in the opening 14 minutes against League Two leaders Lincoln City but scraped home 2-1 while top-flight Southampton were held 2-2 by Frank Lampard's second-tier promotion chasers Derby County.

AFC ASIAN CUP

India and Thailand confident ahead of their opener

AFC
Abu Dhabi

Both India and Thailand are confident of taking all three points when they meet in their AFC Asian Cup Group A opener at the Al Nahyan Stadium in Abu Dhabi today.

The two teams are making a welcome return to the Continental showpiece, with India last appearing in 2011 and Thailand four years earlier.

Drawn in a group that also includes the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, a win for either India and Thailand will go a long way to boosting their hopes of advancing to the Round of 16, a fact not lost on the head coaches of both teams, who also accept that the opener is going to be far from easy.

"We are obviously expecting a tough game. Thailand are a very good side," said India's Stephen Constantine.

"However, we think we have prepared very well for Thailand and on Sunday we will find out. I don't think we are under pressure. What we do have is the pressure to win, which is every time as we want to win for India."

Constantine, who has been at the helm for four years, will guide the second youngest squad at the AFC Asian Cup 2019.

Since returning as head coach for a second stint, India have improved tremendously and enjoyed a relatively smooth journey in qualifying for the AFC Asian Cup 2019.

"We are feeling really motivated. Playing for the country is



India coach Stephen Constantine speaks to his players.

always special, we have worked very hard to be here and we are a difficult team to play against," said goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu.

"What we have done over the four years is work really hard, as the coach said, and we give everything when we step onto the pitch."

With Constantine saying his injury-free squad are fully aware of what the Thais have to offer, counterpart Milovan Rajevac has declared that his team will head into the tie fully prepared.

"The first match is always very important, especially in a big tournament. We respect India, they have improved over the last few years but we have prepared very well," said Rajevac.

"We want a good result and my team has been focusing on that as we will be taking it one match at a time."

The Thais come into the tour-

nament having being dethroned as champions of Southeast Asia, but Rajevac said that is something which is now well and truly behind them.

"The AFF Cup is behind us. Yes, we lost but we played with a team that was missing several regulars who were playing for clubs abroad. It is a completely different situation now. We have the best players available and we are determined to advance to the next round."

If they do progress, it will have been from a group where all the other teams are ranked higher than themselves.

Team captain Teerasil Dangda said Thailand are determined to deliver results for their fans.

"They have always supported the national team and with Thailand making the AFC Asian Cup for the first time in 12 years, we want it to be a tournament the fans will remember."

REPORT

Late penalty gives hosts UAE draw

AFP
Abu Dhabi

Hosts United Arab Emirates salvaged a controversial 1-1 draw in their Asian Cup curtain-raiser against Bahrain yesterday.

Substitute Ahmed Khalil smashed home a late penalty harshly awarded for a handball after Mohamed Alromaihi had given Bahrain a shock lead in Abu Dhabi.

UAE's Ismail Alhammadi fired tamely at goalkeeper Sayed Alawi after six minutes before Ali Mabkhout blazed over.

Bahrain went close just before halftime when Komail Alaswad fizzed a free kick just over the bar.

The home side's profligacy continued as Mabkhout lashed wide from point-blank range.

That wastefulness came back to haunt the UAE after 78 minutes when Alromaihi bundled home after his initial header appeared to have crossed the line.

Sami Alhusaini almost equalised five minutes from time, only for Alawi to pull off a stunning block.

But Jordanian referee Adham Makhadmeh pointed to the spot five minutes from time for what appeared to be an unintentional handball to offer the hosts a lifeline.

Khalil, appearing in his 100th international, stepped up to rifle the spot kick into the top corner and send a partisan crowd wild.

UAE coach Alberto Zaccheroni steered Japan to the continental title in 2011, but his Emirates side have flat-lined in the run-up to this year's competition, scoring just 10 goals in 18 games under the Italian.

His hopes of going deep into the tournament have not been helped by the loss of mop-top talisman Omar Abdulrahman through injury.

The Emiratis were beaten finalists the last time the country hosted the Asian Cup in 1996, losing on penalties to Saudi Arabia.

They take on India and Thailand in their next two Group A fixtures but will need to improve drastically if they have designs on emulating their run to the last four at the last tournament in Australia where they stunned holders Japan in the quarter-finals.

Thailand backed by members of cave-rescue football team

DPA
Abu Dhabi

Thailand will be backed in their Asian Cup opener against India today by members of the football team dramatically rescued from a cave in their country last year.

The governing AFC said yesterday that three players of the Wild Boars, along with an assistant coach, had been invited to attend the match in Abu Dhabi.

According to the AFC, the invite is part of a "larger two-year support programme" which will provide the club with technical assistance, training equipment and match balls.

In July 2018 the Wild Boars spent more than two weeks deep inside a cave, stranded after flash floods blocked their only exit. An international diving team ushered them to safety in a complicated and dangerous mission amidst a forecast of heavy rain which threatened to raise the water levels.

UPDATE

Injury misfortune for Real's Bale continues

Reuters
Madrid

Real Madrid forward Gareth Bale's rotten run of injuries has continued with the club confirming in a medical report yesterday that the Wales international had suffered a calf strain which is set to rule him out of action for up to a month.

The 29-year-old Bale, Real's record signing, sustained the injury during Madrid's 2-2 draw at Villarreal in La Liga on Thursday and asked to be substituted at halftime.

Real's statement on their website said Bale had a grade one injury but did not give details on when they expected him to return to action, although reports in the Spanish media said he would be out for between two

and four weeks.

The injury definitely rules Bale out of Madrid's Liga games against Real Sociedad and Real Betis in addition to the two Copa del Rey last-16 games against Leganes this month.

He also risks missing a crunch match on Jan 19 at home to high-flying Sevilla, who are two points above Real in the table.

Bale has enjoyed better for-

tune with injuries than in previous campaigns since joining Real from Tottenham Hotspur for a then world record fee of 100mn euros (\$113.93mn).

He has been widely criticised in the Spanish media for his meagre goal tally, though, with four strikes in 15 Liga games, and for failing to fill the void left in Madrid's attack by all-time top scorer Cristiano Ronaldo's departure to Juventus.

BOTTOMLINE

Syria take field in Asian Cup with fans divided by war

AFP
Damascus

Syria take the field this weekend for their first international football tournament in eight years of war, but not all fans are happy.

The Qasioun Eagles take on Palestine today in their first game of the Asian Cup group stage, hoping to make up for the heartbreak of narrowly missing out on the World Cup finals in Russia last year.

Their qualification has thrilled Syrians in government-held territory, but angered fans in rebel areas who accuse the national team of playing for a regime they detest.

After last year's disappointment, national team member Muayyad Ajaan said he was determined this time would be different.

"The pressures and the pains of war have had a positive impact on our spirits. We're determined to make the Syrian people happy," he told AFP. "Our qualification is a victory for everyone."

The team's participation in the Asian Cup has particular significance as Syria

remains banned from hosting international fixtures.

Maria Barud, 29, who works at a clothes store in Damascus, said she and others were in desperate need of some joy after gruelling years of war.

"I never thought a day would come when I remembered the name of a football player, but I've remembered all the names of players in the Syrian team," she said. "I follow what matches are when, and even bought the team shirt."

'DOESN'T REPRESENT ME'

After years of devastating conflict that has killed 360,000 people and displaced millions, the regime today is back in control of two-thirds of the country.

"I no longer see it as just a rough boys' game. It's become a sensitive national topic," Barud said. "We dance when the team wins, and cry when it loses."

Syria reached an advanced stage in qualifications for the 2018 World Cup, only to be denied at the last hurdle with a defeat to Australia.

Syria will face the Socceroos again in the group stage of the Asian Cup, as



Syria's national team attends a training session on the eve of the match against Palestine in the 2019 AFC Asian Cup in Sharjah yesterday. (AFP)

well as vying with Palestine and Jordan for a place in the knock-out phase.

In late December, the national squad's last training session in Damascus drew thousands of fans.

In the stands, supporters held up

their mobile phones to film or snap pictures of the players, under posters of President Bashar al-Assad and his father Hafez.

But not all Syrians are so enthusiastic. In areas that escape regime control,

football fans are damning of a team they say only represents the government.

"The team doesn't represent me in any way whatsoever," said Rami Mohamed, a resident of the northern rebel-held town of Azaz.

"How am I supposed to cheer on players who support a murderer?" the 23-year-old asked.

After a series of Russia-backed regime victories around the country, many Syrians have fled their homes to territory still under opposition control in the north of the country.

'HUGE RESPONSIBILITY'

Yunes Shasho, who also lives in Azaz, says he could not support the national team.

There are "players still in regime jails, while their colleagues play under the picture of Bashar al-Assad," said the 31-year-old.

Throughout the conflict, several players have distanced themselves from the team — but some have since returned.

Assad met national players in October after the World Cup qualifiers, posing for photographs with them and signing their

red-and-white team shirts.

The squad included Firas al-Khatib, who had previously voiced support for the rebellion, although he will be absent from the Asian Cup due to an injury.

Syria's team for now will focus on surviving as long as possible in the newly expanded Asian Cup, which includes 24 instead of 16 teams this year.

The Qasioun Eagles, named after a mount overlooking Damascus, will face Palestine in their first game on Sunday. Goalkeeper Ibrahim Alma said he and his teammates were determined to do well.

"People need to come together" despite the war, he said.

Mohamed Barafi, a computer shop employee in Damascus, said he was excited.

"This team is the best Syria has produced, because it is born of the crisis and its sufferings," he said, referring to the war.

"For the players, the match will not just be a game," said the 24-year-old.

"They carry a huge responsibility... the responsibility of making the people happy."

MOTORSPORT

Al-Attiyah gets ready for Dakar as Sainz prepares for defence

It is the first time that the gruelling race will be hosted by a single country – Peru

Agencies
Lima, Peru

Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah will be looking to pick up his third Dakar Rally victory, even as Spain's Carlos Sainz heads a formidable Mini trio in a bid to defend his title when the 41st edition is flagged off in the Peruvian capital Lima today.

Al-Attiyah and his French navigator Mathieu Baumel will be looking to get the better of Sainz, and Frenchmen Stephane Peterhansel and Cyril Despres, in their Toyotas.

It is the first time that the gruelling 10-stage race will be hosted by a single country, and the total length of the rally is estimated at 5,603kms, with huge sand and desert sections.

The Mini trio have a remarkable 20 Dakar victories between them, Peterhansel having won six times on the motorbike and seven times in a car, while Despres is a five-time motorbike winner and Sainz also claimed victory in 2010.

Mini look set to be best tested by Toyota, with al-Attiyah, a double Dakar winner (2011, 2015), no doubt looking forward to the sand-heavy rally.

Attiyah finished second last year and will be bolstered by teammate Giniel De Villiers, the South African who claimed the Dakar title in 2009 and has had seven other podium finishes including third in 2018.

"Honestly, I haven't changed the way I prepare after winning last year," said the 56-year-old Sainz, also twice a World Rally champion (1990, 1992).

"Once you have won, all you want to do is come back and win again. You're still aware of what kind of race it'll be and you try and adapt to the car and its characteristics."

"The Dakar challenges you in every way both physically and mentally. It taxes all your strength and that of your team, so victory brings maximum satisfaction."

Nine-time World Rally champion Sebastien Loeb also returns for the fourth time, hoping to



In this January 20, 2018, picture, Qatar's Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (right) congratulates the then Peugeot driver Carlos Sainz (centre) of Spain after the latter won the Dakar Rally.

become the first privateer to win the Dakar Rally since Jean-Louis Schlesser back in 2000.

'SEVERAL TEAMS HAVE A SHOT'

Loeb, who will be driving a Peugeot 3008 prepared and fielded by the PH-Sport private team, has previously made his mark with a total of 10 stage victories and a second place finish in 2017.

"Several teams will have a shot at winning and I hope we

are one of them," said Loeb.

"I like the dunes. I haven't forgotten everything I've learned these past three years and I'm still hungry for success!"

Since the race switched from its original route from Paris to the Senegalese capital Dakar for security reasons in 2009, it has enjoyed multiple hosts in South America.

But this year Argentina, Chile and Bolivia all pulled out for economic reasons, leaving Peru as the

sole host of the 41st edition.

Race director Etienne Lavigne insisted it would not be a "cut price" race despite the reduction of the rally from 9,000 kilometres over 14 stages in 2018 – when it went through Peru, Argentina and Bolivia.

The shortened course has certainly not put off the competition with all the big names of the recent past among the 334 vehicles including 167 motorbike and quads, 96 cars, 30 SxS (bug-

gies) and 41 trucks registered for the race which ends in Lima on January 17.

Reigning motorbike champion Matthias Walkner of Austria heads a formidable trio of riders for the Red Bull KTM Factory Team including fellow Dakar winners Toby Price of Australia and Briton Sam Sunderland.

"The goal is to reach my full potential on the 2019 Dakar. The mission is clear: defend my title," said Walkner.

FOCUS

Liverpool now on City's level, insists Klopp despite defeat



Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp (right) and Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola gesture on the touchline during the Premier League match in Manchester on Thursday. (AFP)

AFP
London

Jurgen Klopp believes his Liverpool side are at last a genuine match for Manchester City despite this week's 2-1 loss to the Premier League champions.

Thursday's defeat was the first time Liverpool had lost in the league season, but they still remained four points clear at the top of the table from their title rivals.

The Reds beat City three times last term but Liverpool manager Klopp believes his side are a now much-improved outfit.

"From my point of view we were never on a level with City since I came in," said Klopp.

"We won games against them, especially since Pep, but in these games City were better."

The German added: "We only scored more goals, but the possession was at least 60:40 for them in all the games but we won them. Now it was 50:50."

"Last year the Champions League (quarter-final) game at home when we won 3-0 it was a brilliant game but we were under pressure in a lot of moments."

"I don't know if we had more than four shots on target but we were quite clinical that day."

"This game was different to all the other ones we have played so far. Away to City is the most difficult game you can imagine at the moment."

"Yes we lost 2-1 but no-one would have been surprised if it was a draw and with a little bit of luck we could have won the game," said Klopp, whose side face fellow Premier League club Wolves in the FA Cup third round today.

SPOTLIGHT

Umtiti close to Barca return: Valverde



Barcelona player Samuel Umtiti (right) began a programme to help his recovery from a knee injury at Aspetar, the orthopaedic and sports medicine hospital, in Doha.

AFP
Barcelona

Barcelona defender Samuel Umtiti could resume training this month, coach Ernesto Valverde said yesterday.

World cup winner Umtiti has struggled with a knee injury since the start of the season and, in December, began a programme in Qatar to help his recovery.

He has played only eight games this campaign, the last against Atletico Madrid on November 24.

Valverde, however, is hopeful the Frenchman could soon make a return. "We think that in a couple of weeks he can start training again with the team, we'll see how things are going," Valverde said at a press conference.

"I always try to be optimistic and I would like that to happen. I think he has positive feelings, let's see."

Umtiti's absence has left Barca short in central defence, with Thomas Vermaelen also injured for much of the season so far.

The club have signed Jeison Murillo on loan from Valencia to provide cover for Gerard Pique and Clement Lenglet, currently the only two fit centre-backs.

"Our idea was that Jeison would be available as soon as possible and he knows the league," Valverde said.

"He's going to have to play and we hope to see the best of him," he added.

VALVERDE'S FUTURE

Valverde's own future remains uncertain, despite Barcelona sitting top of La Liga, three points clear of Atletico Madrid.

His two-year contract expires in the summer and while there is an option to extend by another year, a decision has not yet been taken.

"It is true the contract was for two years plus one and at the end of the season it is necessary to decide," Valverde said.

"We will discuss it later, we are not even halfway through the season. There has always been a good relationship. If you lose one game, you are in trouble here but I have a contract with Barca."

Barcelona begin 2019 with a tough trip today to Getafe, who sit seventh in La Liga, boasting a defensive record bettered only by Atletico Madrid.

Real Madrid, meanwhile, are now seven points adrift of the top but Valverde refused to rule them out of the title race.

"We still consider Madrid a candidate for the title," Valverde said. "Sometimes the gaps seem great but they are not so much, just two and a half games, and we see them as one of our rivals."

"This year La Liga is tighter, everything is more compressed. But always it is better if we are first."

Barcelona confirmed yesterday that Sergi Roberto and Malcom are available again after recovering from hamstring and ankle injuries respectively. Umtiti, Vermaelen and Rafinha are out.

BOTTOMLINE

We need young players, says Bayern coach Kovac

AFP
Doha

Bayern Munich coach Niko Kovac admitted yesterday his team needed "young players", amid speculation the German champions have launched a 33-million-euro bid for Chelsea teenager Callum Hudson-Odoi.

Kovac, speaking at Bayern's annual winter training camp in Qatar, refused to confirm or deny the club's interest in the 18-year-old English star but conceded changes were needed.

"We always need young players," said Kovac.

"It is my job and the job of (Bayern Munich sporting director) Hasan Salihamidzic to change the team as the team does not get any younger."

He added: "If a player is good it doesn't matter how old he is. We are looking for younger talented players but also players who are ready because the young talented players need time to develop."

Chelsea assistant coach Gianfranco Zola has said Bayern are "very interested" in the teenager, whose has been with the Londoners since 2007 but is stalling on a new contract.

Hudson-Odoi is seen as a potential rising star of the English game and was a member of the England Under-17 team which won the World Cup in 2017.

But it is claimed he wants to play more – he has only played



Bayern Munich head coach Niko Kovac (third from right) oversees his players during one of the team's winter training camp sessions at the Aspire Zone in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

three times for Chelsea's first team – and may be persuaded by the example of another young English winger Jadon Sancho who is thriving at Bundesliga league leaders Dortmund since deciding to leave Manchester City.

Under-pressure Kovac needs to reinvigorate Bayern and replace many of the team's long-standing stars who are approaching the end of their careers.

Two of those players, veterans Arjen Robben and Franck Ribery, have announced they will finish their careers at the end of this season.

Bayern currently stand second in the Bundesliga, six points behind Dortmund.

However, Bayern, who have every Bundesliga championship since 2013 won all of their five league games in December to put

some pressure on their rivals.

Kovac said he was confident that the club would continue its recent good form into the new year, and sustain a title challenge.

"We have the players to deliver a very good second half of the season and beat Dortmund," he added.

Bayern will also meet English league leaders Liverpool in the last 16 of the Champions League

in February.

The club, which is sponsored by Qatar Airways, will be in the Gulf until January 10.

Bayern are one of 10 domestic teams from Europe and Asia which will hold a winter training camp in the World Cup 2022 host.

Others include PSV Eindhoven, Club Brugge, Persepolis and Qatar-owned French champions, Paris Saint-Germain.