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Schauffele roars back to win Tournament of Champions

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Tuesday, January 8, 2019
Jumada I 2, 1440 AH

GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

Bayern Munich's Robben 'very proud' of Inter interest

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FOOTBALL

Improving Qatar aim to lay marker for 2022 W Cup

Sanchez has plenty of experience with the players, having worked at Aspire for seven years from 2006 before coaching the U19 and U23 teams



Qatar coach Felix Sanchez during a team training session in Abu Dhabi yesterday.

DPA

Abu Dhabi

Qatar coach Felix Sanchez leads his side into the Asian Cup against Lebanon tomorrow with their politically-charged appearance in the United Arab Emirates another test en route to 2022.

In three years and 10 months the World Cup will begin in Qatar. Only South Africa, in 2010, have been eliminated as World Cup hosts before the knock-out stage and Qatar intend to avoid that fate.

"It's a very important year for us as we are competing in the Asian Cup as well as the Copa America," Hassan al-Haydos said.

"Then we have the World Cup coming up in four years. These tournaments are part of our preparations for the FIFA World Cup."

Qatar have been only a modest regional power with quarter-final appearances in 2000 and 2011 their best

showings at the Asian Cup.

They were eliminated with three losses out of three four years ago in Australia.

But under boss Felix Sanchez, in charge since July 2017, things have improved considerably. A win over Switzerland and draw with Iceland, albeit in friendlies, were noteworthy results achieved as the money pumped into Doha's Aspire academy finally seems to be paying dividend.

Crucially Sanchez has plenty of experience with the players, having worked at Aspire for seven years from 2006 before coaching the under-19, U20 and U23s before taking the senior post.

Striker Akram Afif – scorer of the winner against the Swiss – joined Spanish side Villarreal, although he is currently back on loan at Al Sadd, while defender Abdulkarim Hassan was Asian player of the year in 2018.

"Every team goes into any competition eyeing the title," said Sanchez. "The Qatari team's goal is no different.

"I know Qatari fans have big hopes from the current batch of players and I hope we can deliver.

Having said that we are in a tough group, and all the teams deserve the respect."

Favourites in Group E will be Saudi Arabia, looking to bounce back from a poor World Cup, while North Korea will also feel capable of reaching the knock-outs.

The meeting with Saudi Arabia, on January 17 in Abu Dhabi, will be eagerly anticipated around the world with onlookers anxious to see how the teams react given the political situation between the countries.

FIFA president Gianni Infantino, who attended the tournament opening game on Saturday, backs a sudden expansion of the 2022 World Cup from 32 to 48 teams – an idea viable only by using Qatar's neighbours as co-hosts.

"There are tensions in this particular region and it's up to their respective leaders to deal with that but maybe it's easier to talk about a joint foot-

ball project than more complicated things," Infantino said at a recent conference in Dubai.

"If it can help all the people in the Gulf and all the countries in the world develop football and bring a positive message to the world about football, then you should give it a try."

Whether Infantino gets his expansion wish early – the increase will definitely happen at the 2026 edition – or not is of little real concern to them.

"If we see that it's in the benefit of football, the World Cup itself, and we feel like it's going to add, we would be all for it,"

Nasser al-Khater, assistant secretary-general of the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, said last year.

"If we feel that it's not in favour of us or of football, we won't go for it."

In 2022 the football world will turn to Qatar whatever happens.

And their team may even be competitive to boot.

ASIAN CUP

Goalie howler as China and South Korea survive scares



South Korea forward Hwang Ui-jo (L) and midfielder Lee Chung-yong celebrate after winning their team's match against the Philippines in Dubai yesterday.

AFP

Al Ain, United Arab Emirates

Favourites South Korea scraped past the Philippines and China needed a spectacular goalkeeping gaffe to spark their comeback against lowly Kyrgyzstan as lesser teams continued to trouble bigger sides at the Asian Cup on Monday.

A day after defending champions Australia were rocked 1-0 by Jordan, South Korea, still awaiting the arrival of star forward Son Heung-min, left it late before beating the Philippines by the same scoreline.

Fellow debutants Kyrgyzstan led China 1-0 at half-time but they were left to rue a costly error by goalkeeper Pavel Matias, whose embarrassing own goal put the Chinese on course for a 2-1 win.

After hosts UAE were held by Bahrain, and Syria were kept to a goalless draw by Palestine, it provided more evidence that the gap has narrowed between Asian teams.

Separately, Thailand's Serbian coach Milovan Rajevac paid the price for yet another shock result when he was given his marching orders following Sunday's 4-1 defeat to India.

Kyrgyzstan looked capable of pulling off an almighty upset against China when Akhliidin Israilov smashed home the opening goal just before half-time in Al Ain.

But China profited from the howler of the tournament so far when Matias, attempting to claw a defensive header over the bar, batted it over the line instead.

A Chinese winner looked inevitable and it was Yu who completed the turnaround, rounding Matias and scoring from a tight angle 12 minutes from time.

Lippi, who is expected to leave his post at the end of the Asian Cup, said he was "enormously unhappy" at China's first half performance, but proud of their revival.

"During the first half we weren't

playing well, and I thought if we keep playing like that we're going to lose the match," said the 2006 World Cup-winning coach.

"After the reaction from my players in the second half, I'm happy that we won the three points."

Later in Dubai, prolific goal poacher Hwang Ui-jo snatched a second-half winner as South Korea beat Sven-Goran Eriksson's Philippines, who impressed on their tournament debut.

The Koreans, looking to end 59 years of hurt after failing to win the title since 1960, soaked up considerable pressure in their opening Group C fixture before Hwang broke the deadlock after 67 minutes.

Meanwhile, Mehdi Taremi scored twice as Iran crushed Yemen 5-0 in the war-torn country's Asian Cup debut yesterday to send a message to their title rivals. Looking to end a 43-year title drought since last winning Asian football's most coveted prize, Iran ruthlessly dispatched the Group D minnows in Abu Dhabi.

Joint favourites with South Korea, Iran took just 12 minutes to take the lead as Taremi finished clinically from close range after a shot from Sardar Azmoun was fumbled by Yemen keeper Saud Alsowadi.

Captain Ashkan Dejagah doubled his side's lead in the 23rd minute with a low free kick which cannoned in off the post and the hapless Alsowadi before Taremi powered home a header moments later.

Azmoun tapped in a fourth goal seven minutes into the second half, by which time Iran were playing some champagne football, pulling off extravagant flicks and back-heels that left Yemen's players chasing shadows.

RESULTS

Group D: Iran 5 (Taremi 12, 25, Saud Alsowadi 23-og, Azmoun 53, Ghodso 78) Yemen 0. HT: 3-0

Group C: China 2 (Matias 50-og, Yu Dabao 78) Kyrgyzstan 1 (Israilov 42) HT: 0-1; South Korea 1 (Hwang Ui-jo 67) Philippines 0. HT: 0-0

BOTTOMLINE

England women's football team to train in Qatar

AFP

Doha

England's women football team will hold a winter training camp in World Cup 2022 host Qatar this month, officials in the Gulf and the English Football Association confirmed yesterday.

The team will train at Doha's Aspire Zone from January 14-22, said officials in Qatar, as they continue preparations

for the World Cup later this year and ahead of taking part in the SheBelieves Cup, a four-team tournament in the United States in February and March.

"The training camp in Qatar is crucial for our SheBelieves Cup preparation and an ideal opportunity for us to work as a group as we begin an important year," said England coach Phil Neville.

It is the first time the English women's team has trained in Qatar, although the men's side played – and lost – a

friendly in Doha against Brazil in November 2009. Twenty eight players will make the journey from the UK to the Gulf, with the squad expected to be announced today.

The women's World Cup takes place in France in June and July.

England's women's team is joining a host of other sides – domestic and international – currently training in Qatar.

Bayern Munich and PSV Eindhoven are already in Doha, with Qatari-

owned French champions Paris Saint-Germain flying in on January 13.

At least seven other club sides will train in Aspire during this month.

Among the national teams in Qatar are Sweden and Finland, who will play each other in a friendly today.

In February last year, the Qatari and English Football Associations signed a "memorandum of understanding" in Doha to "share resources and expertise, develop knowledge (and) understanding" of football issues.

SPOTLIGHT

Bayern Munich's Robben 'very proud' of Inter interest

'I'm very proud and happy to have received offers. The last few weeks have been quite busy'

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Bayern Munich winger Arjen Robben says he is 'very proud' of Inter Milan's interest and that he will decide his future before the end of the season. The Dutch star was speaking to reporters on the sidelines of Bundesliga champion's winter training camp at Aspire Zone in Doha. According to reports, Inter are hoping to pull off a double swoop for Diego Godin and Robben, both of whom have expiring contracts with Atletico Madrid and Bayern respectively.

"Really?" joked the Dutchman, who turns 35 later this month, in response to a question about the Nerazzurri. "I'm very proud and happy to have received offers. The last few weeks have been quite busy, especially for my father, who is my agent, but it's nice to hear that clubs are interested. "For me, the future is still open, I'm still waiting. I want to wait and focus on getting fit, getting back into the team and playing my football. I don't know when, but of course I have to make a decision. I won't wait until the end of the season because I have a family and I have to plan ahead a little bit. But I repeat, I'm privileged and I feel grateful that clubs are showing interest."

Robben said Bayern is now fully focused on narrowing the six-point gap with Borussia Dortmund in the Bundesliga. He said: "We have a big challenge ahead. At the moment, we are six points behind, so we have to chase

Dortmund. We proved ourselves in the last few games before the winter break. And, if we can continue like that and chase them, hopefully with the right amount of pressure, we can win the title. The thing we have to focus on is winning games."

On his team's much-anticipated encounter with Liverpool in the UEFA Champions League last 16 match, Robben said: "They are doing a great job this season. They reached the Champions League final last year, and they are still performing well this season. It will be a tough challenge. So, we must concentrate on our own game, work hard and try to improve as much as possible. If we have a good day and we play the way we want to play, I think we can make it a very difficult game for them."

Robben also had the opportunity yesterday to visit Dutch side PSV Eindhoven who were also training on the pitches at Aspire Zone. Commenting on his former Dutch team-mate Wesley Sneijder's performances with Qatar side Al Gharafa and how he thinks Sneijder represents a positive role model for younger generations, he said: "He is a good friend of mine and one of the best players I've ever played with. We have a lot of great memories of playing together since we were in the U-16 national team. He is a good friend on and off the pitch and I think very highly of him. He has great experience and can bring something special to a game. He also sets a really good example for young players in terms of what you can achieve in your career if you believe in yourself and you



Bayern Munich's Dutch forward Arjen Robben speaks at a press conference during their winter training camp at the Aspire Academy in Doha yesterday.

are prepared to work hard." Robben said the 2022 FIFA World Cup to be held in Qatar will be a great tour-

nament. "It will be a great tournament hopefully. When a tournament is assigned to a country, everybody is hoping

that it is going to be a great tournament. I believe that in the end, all previous World Cup tournaments were a big suc-

cess. And I am confident that the FIFA World Cup Qatar will be the same as the others," the 35-year-old said.

FOCUS

Bayern captain Neuer says he is ready for second half of the season

By fcbayern.com
Doha

After missing the training camp last season through a foot injury Bayern Munich captain Manuel Neuer is back this year. "I'm obviously happy to prepare for the second half of the season with the team," said the 32-year-old after the training session in Doha yesterday. "The aim is to prepare myself so that I'm ready for the start of the second half."

Bayern have a lot ahead of them in the season's second half. "We have to make amends and catch up and we're highly motivated," said the goalkeeper on going into the second half in the unusual role of hunters not hunted.

"I would gladly swap places," said Neuer, but he has by no means given up hope on catching up to league leaders Borussia Dortmund. Over the course of the season every team has a bad patch and "we will see whether this happens to Dortmund."

Now it's up to Bayern to continue their most recent performances into the New Year. "Obviously we want to win our games and do our homework. That will be difficult enough," urged the Bayern captain, for whom the last five wins in the league have given confidence, the last four without conceding. "It was very positive that we managed to go on a run of not conceding and we've started the training camp with this feeling," added the keeper.

This is especially true given that Neuer had to pick the ball out of the back of the net more frequently than he's been used to in previous years in the first half of the season (18 goals conceded). "Naturally it wasn't an easy first half because not everything went my way," admitted the four-time world goalkeeper of the year.

Bayern are still active in three competitions as well as the DFB Cup last 16 game at Hertha Berlin in February, Neuer and his



Bayern Munich captain and goalkeeper Manuel Neuer speaks at a press conference during the winter training camp at the Aspire Academy yesterday. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

men also have the prospect of two games against Liverpool in the Champions League last 16 ahead of them. Neuer estimates the chances of FCB progressing as "fifty-fifty."

"Liverpool are a classy team, strong defensively and on the counter-attack. But we've also seen that they're vulnerable," said Neuer adding that the opponents hold the utmost respect for the German record champions. "I think Liverpool don't really want to play against FC Bayern now."

Meanwhile, Bayern players spent their free morning in very different ways yesterday. Robert Lewandowski, Leon Goretzka and Mats Hummels enjoyed the sun on the terrace at the team hotel, Corentin Tolisso worked hard on his rehabilitation, while others preferred to spend the time in their rooms.

Neuer used the free morning to watch a Club Bruges training session with goalkeeper coach Toni Tapalovic on a neighbouring pitch. The Belgians are also completing their winter training at the Aspire Zone facility.

However, nobody in Niko Kovac's team wanted to leave the site. At the half-way point of the training camp the men from Munich know exactly what they have ahead of them - and therefore they're enjoying a bit of rest. Neuer revealed how best to deal with the exertions: "When you've done one or two training camps before, you know what you've got to deal with" explained the 32-year-old. The key is to be diligent beforehand. "If you go into the training camp unprepared, it becomes harder and harder to get up in the morning or complete the second session of the day."

ASIAN CUP

Constantine tells India to stay grounded after Thai high

Reuters
Al Ain

India made a storming start to their Asian Cup campaign with a 4-1 thumping of Thailand in Abu Dhabi yesterday, but coach Stephen Constantine has urged his team to temper celebrations and focus on qualifying for the knockout stages.

Constantine's men marked their return to the continental showcase event after an eight-year hiatus with a brilliant second half display to secure a surprise triumph against the more-fancied War Elephants to move top of Group A.

"We try to win every match that we play in," the English coach told reporters after India, who were fortunate to go into the break locked at 1-1, registered a first victory at the tournament in 55 years. "We don't go into a match expecting to win 4-1 or 5-1. However, we are not trying to get carried away with the emotion. We still have two games left and we still need another two points to qualify from the group stages. After we have qualified, we can get a little bit excited, but our primary job is still to qualify out of the group stages."

Constantine attributed his team's slow start to "nervousness" and took heart from their second half display when they scored three times without reply to add to a contentious first-half penalty. "It was important to not concede a goal in those minutes and that is what we did," the 56-year-old, currently in his second stint with India, added. "The main thing was to make the



India's coach Stephen Constantine gives his instructions during his team's AFC Asian Cup match against Thailand in Abu Dhabi. (AFP)

most of our chances and that we did. I am happy that we are converting from the chances that we are making."

Talismanic striker Sunil Chhetri, who scored twice, was already looking ahead to Thursday's match against hosts United Arab Emirates. "I can think about my goals some 10 years later," said the lone surviving member of the 2011 team who lost all three group games in Qatar. "At

the moment, we need to focus. The goals need to come and it just doesn't matter who scores."

Chhetri said the group, which also includes Bahrain, was "tough" but India were confident of matching their opponents. "All the others are more experienced and better than us. But the manner the boys fought, it shows a lot of character. I have said this before, we are a very difficult team to play against," he said.

THAILAND AXE COACH RAJEVAC AFTER ASIAN CUP HORROR SHOW

Abu Dhabi: Thailand have fired coach Milovan Rajevac following a humiliating 4-1 thrashing by India in their opening Asian Cup game at the weekend. The 65-year-old Serb, who took charge of Thailand in 2017, paid the price after the War Elephants conceded three second-half goals to slump to a shock defeat in Abu Dhabi on Sunday.

Thai football chiefs took a dim view of their Group A flop and acted swiftly to remove Rajevac the morning after. "The result is not what is expected of the Thai national team and that our supporters deserve," Thailand's FA

president Somyot Poompanmoung said. "Like all Thai football fans across the country, I am also disappointed with the result. But as president of the football association, I cannot stand still with this problem."

Former assistant coach Sirisak Yodyardthai will assume control of the team when they face Bahrain and hosts United Arab Emirates, Thai officials added. Rajevac, who has had spells in charge of Algeria and Qatar, famously steered Ghana to the quarter-finals of the 2010 World Cup where they were beaten on penalties by Uruguay. But he was left shell-shocked

by Thailand's horror show against underdogs India, whose veteran striker Sunil Chhetri scored twice, overtaking Lionel Messi's 65 international goals in the process. Lamenting his side's abject display, Rajevac admitted that India were worthy winners.

"They were phenomenal - they ran more, were more aggressive and wanted it more," he said. "They absolutely deserved to win. But we underperformed, especially in the second half."

Rajevac has been criticised for his defensive style but the Serb clearly felt otherwise after watching Thailand

over-run by a hungry India side. "It's not always about technical ability and skill on the ball," he said. "We lacked power, strength and aggression. We need to put more pressure on the ball and show more passion."

Thailand, appearing for the first time since co-hosting the Asian Cup in 2007, have now won just one of 21 games at the continent's showcase competition. Cricket-mad India find themselves as unlikely leaders of Group A thanks to their first Asian Cup win in 55 years. The Emiratis were held 1-1 by Bahrain in Saturday's curtain-raiser.



LA LIGA

Madrid slip 10 points behind Barcelona

Real Madrid suffer a shock 2-0 home defeat to struggling Real Sociedad



Real Sociedad's Ruben Pardo Gutierrez (left) scores past Real Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois during the La Liga match in Madrid. (AFP)

AFP
Madrid

Real Madrid may not even challenge for the title let alone win it as a shock 2-0 defeat at home to Real Sociedad on Sunday night left them 10 points behind Barcelona in La Liga. Barca took their advantage over their fiercest rivals into double figures by beating Getafe 2-1 while Atletico Madrid and Sevilla also gained on the European champions, despite earlier sharing a 1-1 draw.

Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez's goals were enough for Barca, for whom the weekend could hardly have gone better. Antoine Griezmann's stunning free-kick earned Atletico a point at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan.

Madrid played with 10 men for half an hour after Lucas Vazquez was sent off but by then they already trailed to William Jose's early penalty. Ruben Pardo wrapped up a brilliant victory for La Real, who had won this fixture only

once in their last 22 attempts. This was their first victory at the Santiago Bernabeu since 2004 and then, Madrid fired coach Carlos Queiroz a day later. Santiago Solari is not there yet, even if he was asked afterwards if he deserved to keep his job. "We fight to win the next game," he said.

The honeymoon period Solari enjoyed in November though after replacing Julen Lopetegui is well and truly over. This loss, coming after the draw away to Villarreal on Wednesday, means Madrid sit fifth, outside even the Champions League places. "Everything went against us today," Solari said. "We did everything we could but the ball just would not go in."

A stoney-faced Florentino Perez was among the 53,412 watching on, the club's second lowest attendance of the season. "We will try to get them back," Solari said, before making a swift exit. Barcelona have won seven out of the last 10 La Liga titles and now own a five-point cushion. If they are to slip up in 2019, Atletico or Sevilla would seem the ones

able to take advantage. Gareth Bale was missing with a calf injury but it was the 18-year-old Vinicius Junior that came in, not Isco, who is yet to start a league game under Solari.

La Real's penalty was awarded after 75 seconds and converted after 150. Mikel Merino ghosted past Sergio Ramos and inside Marcelo. Casemiro tried to cover but bundled Merino to the ground. William Jose went high and down the middle.

Karim Benzema spurned the best of Madrid's chances before the break, lashing wide with only Geronimo Rulli to beat. Rulli was not needed then but he would be, many times. He denied Vinicius, Benzema and Luka Modric in quick succession. Ramos wanted a penalty for a push in his back but the appeal was desperate. Vazquez clipped the post with a looping cross but that was not enough to hush the angry whistles at the end of the half. The second period was frantic, with chances at both ends.

La Real could have sealed it when Mikel Oyarzabal fired over and the weaving

Januzaj twice went close. Isco replaced Casemiro in the 57th minute and in the 61st Vazquez was sent off. A rash sliding challenge had earned a yellow card towards the end of the first half and even if the chip at Merino's heels seemed harmless, he was foolish to take the risk.

Down to 10, Madrid still pushed and had a more convincing penalty appeal when Vinicius tumbled over the arm of Rulli. Referee Jose Munuera stood firm. The decision was "scandalous", Ramos said later. Januzaj should have wrapped it up when his shot was saved by the legs of Thibaut Courtois but Pardo did, heading in a cross from William Jose, who could even have made it three in injury time.

SPANISH LA LIGA RESULTS

Eibar 0 Villarreal 0; Sevilla 1 (Ben Yedder 37) Atletico Madrid 1 (Griezmann 45); Real Madrid 0 Real Sociedad 2 (William Jose 3-pen, Pardo Gutierrez 83); Getafe 1 (Mata 43) Barcelona 2 (Messi 20, Suarez 39)

LEAGUE CUP

Spurs ready to end 11-year trophy drought, says Alli

AFP
London

Dele Alli has pledged to end Tottenham's 11-year wait for a major trophy as his side head into an explosive League Cup semi-final showdown with Chelsea today.

Tottenham haven't won a leading competition since they beat Chelsea in the 2008 League Cup final. But Tottenham midfielder Alli is convinced the north London club will finally add to their trophy cabinet this season.

Tottenham are still in the Champions League and FA Cup, and also have an outside chance in the Premier League title race. But it is the League Cup that presents their first opportunity to end the silverware drought, starting with their last four first leg clash against bitter rivals Chelsea at Wembley.

While the League Cup is often written off as an after-thought for the top clubs, England star Alli is adamant Mauricio Pochettino's team must use the tournament as the catalyst to kick-start a successful period.

League Cup glory would also secure a first major prize for Pochettino, who is widely regarded as one of Europe's brightest young coaches but has yet to win a single trophy in his managerial career with Tottenham, Southampton and Espanyol.

"I think every game, every competition, you want to win it," Alli said. "As players you want to get as far in the cup as we can, hopefully win it. We want to win trophies, that's our aim and we've been playing well. We've been getting quite far in recent years without quite having the finishing product at the end and not getting over the line."

Tottenham crushed fourth tier minnows Tranmere 7-0 in the FA Cup third round on Friday as Pochettino used only three first-team regulars in a bid to keep his key men fresh for the Chelsea tie. Alli was one of the trio who featured in the rout at Prenton Park and he expects Pochettino's plan to pay dividends against the Blues.

"Some people maybe expect you to prioritise different things, but I believe we've got a strong squad," Alli said. "Players work hard in the gym and on the training field to make sure we're fully fit and the manager makes



changes. I think he's very good at that and as players we want to play every game anyway.

"We've just got to make sure everyone is on it and keep up the consistency because that's the big thing. When you're going into different competitions, you can't take your foot off the gas. You've got to be consistent and keep up your top level."

Tottenham lost the 2015 League Cup final against Chelsea, but have won their last two meetings, including a swaggering 3-1 success in the league at Wembley in November. Maurizio Sarri's side, who host the semi-final second leg on January 22, will give late fitness tests to Olivier Giroud (ankle) and winger Pedro (hamstring).

Blues boss Sarri is looking for his first trophy in his maiden season in charge. The spotlight won't just be on the managers however, amid fears vile anti-Semitic chants could overshadow the tie. Last month, Chelsea fans were criticised by the club's chairman Bruce Buck and investigated by UEFA after an offensive song about Tottenham's Jewish fanbase was heard during a Europa League fixture.

The issue is complicated because many Tottenham fans use the offensive word themselves in celebratory chants about their Jewish links. There have been other worrying incidents involving Chelsea supporters this season after a man was fined £965 and banned from football for three years after being found guilty of homophobic chants at Brighton. Another Blues fan was accused of racially abusing Manchester City's Raheem Sterling.

Sarri demands replacement for Monaco-bound Fabregas

London: Maurizio Sarri insisted yesterday that Chelsea must replace Cesc Fabregas as the veteran midfielder looks set to leave the Premier League outfit for Thierry Henry's Monaco.

The 31-year-old's contract expires at the end of this season and he appeared to say goodbye after Saturday's 2-0 FA Cup win over Nottingham Forest, where he applauded all sides of Stamford Bridge.

The Blues boss said Fabregas had a "free day" on Sunday, refusing to confirm or deny reports the playmaker had travelled to France to meet with Monaco, but demanded that the Blues supply him with reinforcements should he join his former Arsenal teammate Henry in Ligue 1.

"If Cesc will go, of course we need a replacement," Sarri said to reporters ahead of today's League Cup semi-final first leg against Tottenham at Wembley. "Now, with the midfielders we are in trouble, I think.

Without Cesc we have only five, so we are in trouble. We need a replacement."

With Chelsea offering one-

year contracts for players aged over 30, Sarri added that Fabregas, whose opportunities have been limited this season, should accept a two-year deal on the table from Monaco for the good of his career.

"In my opinion, he needs to go," said Sarri. "You know very well the situation. You know very well in this club there is a rule — the renewal of players over 30 is usually one year. He has an offer for two years. I don't want a very important player as Cesc unhappy."

Callum Hudson-Odoi provided both goals for Alvaro Morata in their win against Forest and the 18-year-old has also been linked with a move away from Stamford Bridge to German giants Bayern Munich.

Speaking about Hudson-Odoi, Sarri said: "I know only that for me he's a very important player. He's very young, but now he's improving. I think to stay here is better for him. He's an English player. He's very young. He has the future. And I think he has a very great future here, in England, with the national team and with Chelsea."



SPOTLIGHT

QFA president receives Nordic FA's chiefs

Qatar Football Association (QFA) president Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani received the presidents and vice presidents of five Nordic Football Associations yesterday at QFA's headquarters in Al Bidda Tower.

Attending the meeting from Nordic Football Association were president of the Football Association of Norway, Terje Svendsen, president of the Danish Football Association, Jesper Moller, vice president of Swedish Football Association, Jorgen Eriksson, general secretary of Swedish Football Association, Hakan Sjostrand, president of the Football Association of Finland, Ari Lahti, and vice president of the Faroe Islands Football Association, Roin OJ Schroter.

From QFA's side, the QFA General Secretary Mansoor al-Ansari, Executive Director of the QFA President office Ali Dawood, and QFA Executive Director of Strategy and Institutional Development Mushtaq al-Waeli also attended the meeting.

The Nordic Football Association's delegation is in the Qatari capital Doha as a



Qatar Football Association (QFA) president Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani with Football Association of Finland president Ari Lahti.

number of Scandinavian national teams which includes Sweden, Finland, Iceland,

and Estonia will be conducting their winter training camps in Qatar.

The four national teams are also set to play friendly matches against one another during their visit to Qatar tomorrow and on January 11 and 15. The friendly matches will be held at Al Sadd Stadium and Khalifa International Stadium.

During the meeting, the parties discussed the bilateral relations concerning football in Qatar and Scandinavia and ways of enhancing them. They also discussed matters of mutual interest and the importance of developing them in the coming period in Qatar and the Nordic nations, while continuing to enhance the cooperation between these associations.

At the end of the meeting, the parties stressed on the importance of building on their relationship and on further developing them in the future to help impact football in a positive way.

The Nordic Football Association's delegation will also be given an exclusive tour of Al Bidda Tower's 'Legacy Pavilion' — which brings to life the plans for the 2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar. The delegation is also planned to make a stop at Education City Stadium to witness its latest developments.

PSV Eindhoven train at Aspire



Dutch club PSV Eindhoven's players train at Aspire yesterday. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

FOCUS

Diaz vows to give all after Real Madrid move

Madrid: New Real Madrid winger Brahim Diaz vowed yesterday to give his all after completing a "dream" move to the Spanish giants from Premier League champions Manchester City. "This is the most important day in my life. I have joined the club which I have dreamed of playing at since I was a child," the 19-year-old said after being officially unveiled at Real's Santiago Bernabeu stadium.

"When I decided it was time

to leave Manchester City I only considered joining Real Madrid. I didn't want to go anywhere else. I promise to give 100% from the first day." Real announced that Diaz had agreed to a six-and-a-half-year contract with the European champions. Madrid have reportedly agreed to pay 17m euros up front for Diaz, whose deal at Manchester City was set to expire in June, with a further seven million euros due depending on performance. (AFP)

ROUND-UP

Bertens grinds down Pera, faces Muguruza next

Two-time Grand Slam winner Muguruza eases past fellow Spaniard Carla Suarez Navarro 6-3, 6-4

Reuters
Sydney

World number nine Kiki Bertens overcame a sluggish start to beat American lucky loser Bernarda Pera 7-5, 6-4 and reach the second round of the Sydney International yesterday. Pera, who benefited from Briton Johanna Konta's withdrawal, started on the front foot by breaking her Dutch opponent in the opening game.

The 24-year-old more than held her own and earned an opportunity to close out the first set at 5-4, before Bertens switched gears to draw level. Another break in the 12th game saw Bertens clinch the opening set. Bertens let two match points go at 5-4 in the second but she would not be denied as Pera served a double fault to concede the match after an hour and 45 minutes.

Seventh seed Bertens, who has never progressed beyond third round in six Australian Open appearances, will look to step up her preparations for next week's Grand Slam at Melbourne Park with a second round meeting with Garbine Muguruza. Two-time Grand Slam winner Muguruza eased past fellow Spaniard Carla Suarez Navarro 6-3, 6-4.

In the men's draw, local favourite Alex de Minaur, who reached his first Tour final in Sydney last year, made a winning return to Ken Rosewall Arena, beating Serbia's Dusan Lajovic 6-4, 6-3. The Australian number one said it would be a dream to lift his first career title this week in his hometown.

"Honestly it would be like a dream come true, but we are still far away from that," he said. De Minaur will meet American qualifier Reilly Opelka for a place in the quarter-finals. Opelka powered past Spain's Albert Ramos-Vinolas 6-3, 6-4, firing 16 aces and dropping just eight points on serve.



Yulia Putintseva of Kazakhstan hits a forehand return against Daria Gavrilova of Australia during the first round match at the Sydney International tournament. (AFP)

RESULTS (X DENOTES SEED):
1st round Men: Sam Querrey (USA) bt Malek Jaziri (TUN) 6-1, 4-1 ret; Reilly Opelka (USA) bt Albert Ramos (ESP) 6-3, 6-4; Alex De Minaur (AUS x5) bt Dusan Lajovic (SRB) 6-4, 6-3; Guido Andreozzi (ARG) bt Matthew Ebden (AUS) 3-6, 6-3, 6-4

1st round Women: Kiki Bertens (NED x7) bt Bernarda Pera (USA) 7-5, 6-4; Camila Giorgi (ITA) bt Ajla Tomljanovic (AUS) 6-3, 6-3; Yulia Putintseva (KAZ) bt Daria Gavrilova (AUS) 6-1, 7-6 (7/4); Timea Bacinszky (SUI) bt Anastasija Sevastova (LAT x9) 6-7 (3/7), 6-4, 6-4; Samantha Stosur

(AUS) bt Dominika Cibulkova (SVK) 3-6, 6-3, 6-4

MONFILS PULLS OUT, SHAPOVALOV BEATEN IN AUCKLAND
Gael Monfils became the third big name to pull out of the ATP Auckland Clas-

sic yesterday sidelined by injury while seventh seed Denis Shapovalov was bundled out in three sets. Monfils, the eighth seed, said he was hampered by a nagging pain in the leg.

His withdrawal followed the absence of top seeds Tomas Berdych and Rober-

to Bautista-Agut, who both pulled out after contesting the Qatar Open final on Saturday which Bautista Agut won 6-4, 3-6, 6-3. The flamboyant Monfils said his injury flared Saturday and had not responded to treatment.

"I have had a pain for two days with

my quadriceps and unfortunately I am not able to play the tournament," he said. "So I'm disappointed about the situation I've put myself and the tournament through, because obviously this year is tough because they've had a couple of retirements."

Shapovalov, the 19-year-old Canadian and only seed in action on day one, romped through the first set against Portugal's Joao Sousa, but went off the boil for most of the second set.

The third set went with serve until 3-3 when Sousa made the vital break and then held on to win the error-filled match.

"The first tournament of the year is not easy," Sousa said of the below par performance. For sure it was not his best day, me neither, but this is tennis, you try your best with what you have and I made it."

In the reshuffled draw, John Isner takes over as top seed and goes straight through to the second round to play fellow American Taylor Fritz. Fritz, who opened with a 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 win over Romanian Marius Copil 4-6, 6-3, 6-4, has lost his two previous matches against Isner.

Germany's Philipp Kohlschreiber continued his phenomenal run in Auckland when the 35-year-old defeated American Bradley Klahn 6-4, 7-6 (7/2) to move through to the second round for the 11th time in 12 years. In other action, German Jan-Lennard Struff won his first set 7-6 (7/5) against Laslo Djere and led 2-0 in the second when the Serbian retired. Tennys Sandgren raced through his opening singles 6-3, 6-4 against qualifier Mackenzie McDonald and will face third seed Marco Cecchinato in round two.

RESULTS

1st round: Philipp Kohlschreiber (GER) bt Bradley Klahn (USA) 6-4, 7-6 (7/2); Cameron Norrie (GBR) bt Benoit Paire (FRA) 6-3, 6-2; Joao Sousa (POR) bt Denis Shapovalov (CAN x7) 4-6, 6-4, 6-4; Taylor Fritz (USA) bt Marius Copil (ROU) 4-6, 6-3, 6-4; Jan-Lennard Struff (GER) bt Laslo Djere (SRB) 7-6 (7/5), 2-0 rtd; Tennys Sandgren (USA) bt Maximilian Marterer (GER) 6-3, 6-4; Matteo Berrettini (ITA) bt Mackenzie McDonald (USA) 6-3, 6-4

FOCUS

Sydney to host finals of new ATP World Team Cup

AFP
Sydney

Sydney will host the finals of the new innovative ATP World Team Cup, organisers announced yesterday, while Brisbane and one other city will feature round-robin games in a revamp of the season-opening tennis calendar. The Association of Tennis Professionals, which runs the men's game, voted in London earlier this year to award the tournament to Australia. It will be played from January 3 over 10 days in the lead-up to the Australian Open, the first Grand Slam of the year, starting in 2020.

Sydney will host the final of the 24-team event at the Ken Rosewall Arena, which will get a new roof, along with some round-robin matches. There will be group action in Brisbane along with another city, reportedly Adelaide.

The existing Brisbane International will continue as a women-only event. Perth was widely seen to be in the running, but the ongoing success of the mixed-teams Hopman Cup, spearheaded this year by Roger Federer and Serena Williams, has thrown that into doubt.

"The ATP Cup fits perfectly with our strategy to innovate and look towards the future," said ATP chief Chris Kermode. "We know from our extensive discussions with the players that the ATP Cup will provide a great way for them to open their season. It will bring together the world's best

for a major team event that compliments existing scheduling, provides highly-coveted ATP ranking points and clearly links to the Australian Open."

The event, supported by the likes of Federer and Novak Djokovic, is returning to the global calendar for the first time since taking place in Dusseldorf from 1978 to 2012, and will feature US\$15mn in prize money, along with rankings points.

It will see nations split into six groups, with eight teams emerging from the round-robin stage to compete in the knockout phase until one team is left standing. There will be up to five players in each team, with ties comprising two singles matches and one doubles, and player eligibility determined by ATP rankings.

Tennis Australia chief Craig Tiley said "the timing is right for expansion".

"We want more players rewarded, more opportunities for them, more opportunities for fans to get to see them, more global exposure for the sport," he said. "A major step toward achieving that vision is to deliver world-class tennis to cities across Australia which is what the ATP Cup will do. It is the next piece in a vision that will ultimately grow tennis and provide inspiration for future generations."

The new competition will be held on the back of a revamped Davis Cup tournament, run by the International Tennis Federation, which will take place from November 2019, bringing together 18 nations in one place for a week at the end of the season.

SPOTLIGHT

Halep and Kerber headline star cast at Qatar Total Open 2019

Simona Halep, the World No 1 and 2014 champion, is leading an array of stars set to feature at the Qatar Total Open 2019, a WTA Tour event, to be held from February 11 to 16 at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex in Doha. Now in its 17th edition, this year's event will parade five of the world's top ten players including World No 2 Angelique Kerber; a three-time Grand Slam champion and 2014 finalist, 2018 US Open champion Naomi Osaka of Japan - who is currently ranked fifth, World No 8 and 2017 champion Karolina Pliskova of Czech Republic and Netherland's Kiki Bertens, the World No 9.

Other players to watch out for include 2016 champion Carla Suarez Navarro of Spain, World No 11 Anastasija Sevastova, 2017 US Open finalist Madison Keys as well as Latvia's Jelena Ostapenko, the 2016 finalist.

A total of \$851,031 cash prizes are up for grabs in the 32-competitor singles draw and 16-pair



Angelique Kerber and Simona Halep (right).



doubles draw event "We are happy to host the Qatar Total Open once again. It has always been a pleasure to bring the world's best players to Doha, the hub of global sports, every year. Qatar Total Open has grown to become one of the most sought-after event in Qatar's sporting calendar and we are really proud of what we've been able to achieve over the years. This year's edition promises to be greater and better than

the previous and fans are assured of having the best of fun as they watch their favourite stars play," said Tournament Director Saad Saleh al-Mohannadi.

"In continuation of our tradition as a family-oriented event, Qatar Total Open 2019 brings to the whole family a week-long incomparable level of sports entertainment activities at the home of tennis in Qatar - the Khalifa International Tennis & Squash

Complex. No one can afford to miss this," he added.

Held since 2001, the Qatar Total Open has grown to become one of the biggest WTA Tour events in the region and it has consistently featured the world's top ten players on a regular basis. The last edition was won by Czech Republic's Petra Kvitova who recorded her 13th consecutive victory by beating Spaniard Garbine Muguruza in the final.

BOTTOMLINE

Australia bad-boy showdown to highlight Kooyong Classic

AFP
Melbourne

Nick Kyrgios will face off against Bernard Tomic for the first time as Australia's most combustible pair battle for last-minute Grand Slam form at the Kooyong Classic from today.

The three-day event, at the private club which served as the home of the Australian Open until 1988, is famed as

a relatively stress-free preparation for the opening major of the year next week at Melbourne Park.

Kyrgios and Tomic will both count on lifting their games, with each suffering in his own way from burnout and lack of motivation. Controversial Tomic could not even qualify for the Australian Open 12 months ago following a car-crash season, and faced a backlash after later boasting "I just count my millions".

His ranking is now back up to 51st.

Kyrgios, infamous for petulant behaviour and outbursts on court, ended his season early after arguing with an umpire at Shanghai then picking up an elbow injury in Moscow.

While Australia's notorious pair will not clash until Wednesday, organisers have lined up a tasty programme, leaving gaps for any late requests in case other top players want match practice under competitive conditions.

In 2018, both Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal played in one-off exhibi-

tion matches. The opening day line-up announced yesterday includes American Jack Sock playing Tomic, Serb Filip Krajinovic taking on Damir Dzumhur of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Australian Jason Kubler playing Janko Tipsarevic of Serbia.

The event once again features women's matches, which were reintroduced in 2017 after more than two decades. Day one sees rising American teenager Amanda Anisimova face Britain's Katie Boulter, fresh from the Hopman Cup

last week.

In addition a new format - as used last week at the Hopman Cup - will see matches played as best of two sets with a third set, if necessary, a 10-point tiebreak. The field is headed by top 10 players Marin Cilic and Wimbledon finalist Kevin Anderson.

World number seven Cilic did not play last week as he works to heal a knee problem while Anderson, ranked six, began 2019 with a title in Pune, India. "The 2018 highlight for me was

achieving some of the goals I had set for myself, specifically making London year-end finals, winning more than one tournament in the year, winning a 500 (series event), and of course making another Grand Slam final," Anderson said, who finished runner-up to Novak Djokovic at last year's Wimbledon.

"In 2019, I hope to continue pushing the boundaries. A big goal of mine is winning the Masters series, being in the finals there, and giving myself a shot at another Grand Slam."

NBA

Raptors down Pacers in Lowry's return

'Good to be out there with my guys. It felt good to be able to help them get a win'

AFP
Los Angeles

Norman Powell scored 23 points and Kyle Lowry returned from injury to tally 12 as the Toronto Raptors snapped the Indiana Pacer's six-game NBA win streak with a 121-105 victory on Sunday.

Pascal Siakam finished with 12 points and 10 rebounds and Serge Ibaka scored 18 as the Raptors won - despite missing Kawhi Leonard, who sat out to get some rest.

The four-time all-star Lowry also dished out eight assists after missing the last 10 of 11 games due to back and thigh problems. He played 32 minutes and shot four-of-10, going two-for-six from beyond the arc in front of a crowd of 19,800 at Scotiabank Arena.

"Good to be out there with my guys," Lowry said. "It felt good to be able to help them get a win."

Danny Green scored 15 points and equalled his season high with five three pointers as Toronto returned from a victory in Milwaukee on Saturday to win their fifth consecutive contest at home.

The Raptors nailed 17 of 33 from three-point range, one shy of their season best.

"He's a big piece of what we're trying to do here," Powell said of Lowry. "It seemed like he hasn't missed a beat."

Bojan Bogdanovic scored 21 points, Domantas Sabonis had 16 points and 11 rebounds, and Victor Oladipo scored 16 points for Indiana, who have lost 14 of their last 16 against Toronto. The Pacers last win in Toronto was in 2013.

"This is a tough place to play," said Pacers coach Nate McMillan. "We haven't had success here in a number of years. We never really established that we could stop them."

Thaddeus Young scored 14 points and Darren Collison had 11 in the loss.

Toronto made six of nine three pointers to take a 37-35 lead at the end of the first quarter. Powell scored 10 points in the second and Toronto led 70-63 at halftime.

Ibaka delivered 10 in the third as the Raptors took a 96-84 lead into the fourth.

Elswhere, Bradley Beal scored 25 points as the Washington Wizards thumped the Oklahoma City Thunder 116-98 despite a triple-double from Russell Westbrook.

Otto Porter had 20 points, six rebounds and five assists, Jeff Green scored 16 points and Tomas Satoransky added 15 for the Wizards in the win.

"It has to be up there, there's no question," said Wizards coach Scott Brooks.

"We battled. We played against one of the best teams in basketball. They've got a lot of talent. They've got three all-stars on the floor and I think we battled them and did a lot of things well."

Westbrook finished with 22 points, 15 rebounds and 13 assists for his 12th triple-double of the season and the 116th of his career. Paul George scored 20 points and Jerami Grant added 17 for the Thunder, who had their modest three-game winning streak halted.

The Wizards went on a 15-2 run in the third to take a 80-69 point lead late in the quarter.



Toronto Raptors forward Serge Ibaka (left) drives to the basket over Indiana Pacers forward Domantas Sabonis during the third quarter at Scotiabank Arena. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

Sam Dekker's reverse dunk put the Wizards up 96-81 with about 10 minutes left and later Green stretched the lead to 20 points with another three pointer.

In Minneapolis, the Timberwolves manhandled the Los Angeles Lakers 108-86 but it wasn't enough for head coach Tom Thibodeau to keep his job.

Kemba Walker scored 29 points, including 18 in the final 4:26, and the visiting Charlotte Hornets snapped a two-game losing streak with a 119-113 victory over the Phoenix Suns on Sunday night.

Walker scored 18 of the last 19 points scored by the Hornets, who didn't take the lead for good until a free throw by Walker with 1:00 remaining gave them a 112-111 edge. Walker then also hit a clutch jumper with 21.7 seconds remaining to up the lead to 114-111.

The Hornets avoided matching their longest losing streak this season.

Tony Parker and Willy Hernangomez

RESULTS

Toronto	121-105	Indiana
Atlanta	106-82	Miami
Charlotte	119-113	Phoenix
Washington	116-98	Oklahoma
Brooklyn	117-100	Chicago
Minnesota	108-86	Lakers
Clippers	106-96	Orlando

came off the bench to spark the Hornets, with Parker scoring 20 and Hernangomez adding 19 points and nine rebounds. The Hornets also got 16 points from Marvin Williams.

They were without Cody Zeller and Jeremy Lamb due to injuries.

The Suns lost their sixth straight, all at home to start a seven-game homestand.

T.J. Warren led the Suns with 23 points.

Josh Jackson scored 22, Deandre Ayton 19 and Jamal Crawford 16. Crawford and Warren both missed jumpers in the final minute that turned out to be pivotal.

The Suns played the second half without leading scorer, Devin Booker.

The guard left the game early in the second quarter because of back spasms, and he watched the final period in street clothes. He finished with seven points in 12 minutes.

Phoenix led 30-29 after one quarter and 60-57 at halftime.

The Hornets were on top 85-81 after three quarters. The Hornets seemed to be in control when they went on an 8-0 run midway through the fourth, but this one was destined to go to the final minute.

The Suns conclude their homestand with a visit from the Sacramento Kings on Tuesday. The Hornets will face the Clippers in Los Angeles on Tuesday, the third stop on a six-game road trip.

SPOTLIGHT

Timberwolves fire head coach Thibodeau

AFP
Los Angeles

The Minnesota Timberwolves have fired head coach Tom Thibodeau, who is one of the winningest coaches in franchise history but has watched his team struggle this season.

Thibodeau was notified of the decision following the Timberwolves 108-86 blowout win over the Los Angeles Lakers on Sunday. In a brief statement the club said he was relieved of his duties both as coach and president of basketball operations.

"These decisions are never easy to make, but we felt them necessary to move our organization forward," Timberwolves owner Glen Taylor said.

Taylor told the Minneapolis Star-Tribune that he didn't think the team had performed up to its abilities.

"I said let's let it go and see how things worked and I think now, we've gone halfway through the season and I don't think we're where we thought we would be or where we think we should be," Taylor said.

"I'm just looking at the results. The results are that I don't think we should've lost against Phoenix or Detroit or New Orleans or Atlanta. Maybe one of those games. We just lost against a bunch of teams that we're a better team."

The club said Scott Layden would remain in his role as General Manager and run the day-to-day operations of the basketball department and assistant Coach Ryan Saunders will assume the role of interim head coach for the remainder of the 2018-19 season.

"Ryan has been around now quite a few years," Taylor said. "He knows the players. The players know him. I think he was probably the best candidate to move ahead."

Thibodeau finishes his time in Minneapolis with 97 career wins which ties him for the second-most in club history with Rick Adelman. Thibodeau also has 107 career losses. The Timberwolves are missing two key players with injuries, including Derrick Rose who is out with a sprained ankle. Robert Covington is also on the injured list with a bruised knee. The Timberwolves are 11th in the Western Conference standings with a record of 19-21.



Sharks reward F Radil with 1-year extension

Rookie forward Lukas Radil signed a one-year extension with the San Jose Sharks, the club announced Sunday. The deal keeps Radil under club control through the 2019-20 season.

Though the 28-year-old Radil has only nine points (six goals, three assists) in 18 games in his first season in the NHL, the club is 11-4-3 with Radil in the lineup. What's more, his plus-10 rating is third on the team.

"He has seized the opportunity that he has been given and earned his place on our team," general manager Doug Wilson said in a statement released by the team. "His love for the game is apparent as is his character and maturity to how he plays the game. We feel that his game will continue to grow."

Radil began the season with the San Jose Barracuda of the American Hockey League, netting six points (one goal, five assists) in 11 games.

The Sharks originally signed Radil as a free agent last April. He posted 38 points (16 goals, 22 assists) and a plus-11 rating in 51 games with Spartak (Moscow) of the Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) last season, leading the club in plus-minus. He also skated for the Czech Republic at the 2018 Winter Olympics, going scoreless and registering four penalty minutes in six games.

San Jose is third in the Pacific Division but just three points behind conference-leading Calgary for the Western Conference's best record.

NHL

Strome, Blackhawks snap Penguins' win streak

Reuters
Chicago

Dylan Strome scored a tie-breaking, third-period goal Sunday for the visiting Chicago Blackhawks in a 5-3 win that snapped their two-game losing streak and quashed the Pittsburgh Penguins' eight-game winning streak.

Strome and Patrick Kane, who had three assists, worked a back-door play, with Strome finishing it off to give Chicago its first lead, 4-3, at 1:48 of the third, just after a Blackhawks power play ran out. Jonathan Toews added an empty-net goal with 27 seconds remaining.

The Blackhawks, who erased an early two-goal deficit as well as a later one-goal hole, have won 10 straight games against the Penguins, and five in a row in Pittsburgh. Alex DeBrincat, former Penguin Chris Kunitz and Duncan Keith also scored for Chicago. Goaltender Cam Ward stopped 31 of 34 Pittsburgh shots. Patric Hornqvist, Jake Guentzel and Derick Brassard scored for the Penguins. Casey DeSmith made 26 saves. Pittsburgh took a 1-0 lead at 2:43 of the first on Hornqvist's blast from the right point that sailed over Ward's right shoulder.

Guentzel upped it to 2-0 at 4:33 of the first when he tapped a rebound of a shot by Kris Letang under Ward's pads.

Chicago began its first comeback at 16:23 of the first. DeBrincat tallied his eighth point in as many games when he scored on a one-timer from Kane on a

RESULTS

Carolina	5-4	Ottawa
Las Vegas	3-2	New Jersey
Arizona	5-0	Rangers
Winnipeg	5-1	Dallas
Washington	3-2	Detroit
Edmonton	4-0	Anaheim
Chicago	5-3	Pittsburgh

back-door play.

The Blackhawks tied it 2-2 at 6:46 of the second when Kunitz - who was part of three Stanley Cup teams in Pittsburgh, including the 2009 team that was feted before the game - picked up his first goal of the season on a shot from the top of the slot that went between the skates of Penguins defenseman Marcus Pettersson and past DeSmith's glove. Brassard gave Pittsburgh a 3-2 lead at 9:49 of the second from a sharp angle from near the right corner on a one-timer from Phil Kessel.

Keith became the second Chicago player to pick up his first goal of the season when he scored on a blast from the left point at 16:59, one second after a Blackhawks power play expired, to force a 3-3 tie entering the third.

Meanwhile Conor Garland scored twice, and Alex Galchenyuk had a goal and two assists as the Arizona Coyotes snapped a three-game losing streak with a resounding 5-0 victory against the New York Rangers on Sunday afternoon in Glendale, Ariz.

Coyotes goaltender Darcy Kuemper

made 23 saves in posting his first shut-out of the season. His best stop came on a Chris Kreider breakout midway through the second period. Clayton Keller and Mario Kempe also scored for the Coyotes. Arizona's Rick Tocchet got his 100th career NHL coaching victory. Rangers goalie Henrik Lundqvist was pulled at 16:38 of the second period after allowing five goals on 32 shots. It was the second consecutive start that Lundqvist has not finished.

The Rangers lost their third in a row, all by five-goal margins. They lost 7-2 at home Wednesday to Pittsburgh before opening a three-game trip Friday with a 6-1 defeat at Colorado.

Garland opened the scoring with a power-play goal at 7:19 of the first period, tipping a shot from the point by Oliver Ekman-Larsson past Lundqvist.

Kempe made it 2-0 just two minutes later as the Coyotes forced a turnover in the Rangers' zone, and a shot from Lawson Crouse deflected off a defenseman's skate and right to Kempe in the high slot. Kempe put a one-timer into the upper left corner of the net. That gave Arizona its first multi-goal lead since December 22.

The Coyotes poured it on in the second period, scoring three more times to end Lundqvist's afternoon.

Garland scored his second at 6:34. The Coyotes entered the zone on a three-on-two break, and Nick Cousins took a shot from the top of the faceoff circles that deflected off Garland, who was skating toward the front of the net, and past Lundqvist.



Dylan Strome (left) of the Chicago Blackhawks celebrates with team-mates after scoring a goal in the third period during their NHL game against the Pittsburgh Penguins at PPG PAINTS Arena in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (Getty Images/AFP)

NFL

Eagles edge Bears, Chargers oust Ravens in playoff thrillers

'It came down to the wire. We were just hoping for a miss'



Philadelphia Eagles wide receiver Golden Tate (No. 19) scores a touchdown against Chicago Bears defensive back Sherrick McManis in the fourth quarter of an NFC Wild Card playoff game at Soldier Field. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

AFP
Chicago

Defending Super Bowl champion Philadelphia edged the Chicago Bears and the Los Angeles Chargers ousted Baltimore from the championship chase in two NFL playoff thrillers Sunday.

Bears kicker Cody Parkey clanked a 43-yard field goal attempt off the left upright and crossbar with five seconds remaining as the Eagles sealed a 16-15 victory at Chicago.

"It came down to the wire. We were just hoping for a miss," said Eagles quarterback Nick Foles.

"The big thing is we saw some adversity in the first half with a couple turnovers but no one loses faith. We were able to rally behind our defense and we were able to get the win."

The Chargers seized a 20-point lead but needed a turnover in the final seconds to thwart a Ravens fightback and claim a 23-17 first-round triumph at Baltimore.

"Our defense was unbelievable," Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers said. "We couldn't get anything but field goals early on of-

fense but we finally got it done. It was a great team win."

The Eagles booked a trip to top seed New Orleans next Sunday with the other National Conference playoff matchup sending the Dallas Cowboys to the Los Angeles Rams on Saturday.

The Chargers have a second-round date next Sunday at New England while top seed Kansas City will entertain the Indianapolis Colts on Saturday in the other American Conference contest.

Mitch Trubisky drove Chicago 80 yards and connected with Allen Robinson on a 22-yard touchdown pass for a 15-10 Bears lead with 9:04 remaining, but Chicago failed on a 2-point conversion run.

Foles, last year's Super Bowl Most Valuable Player, drove the Eagles to Chicago's 2-yard line, where the NFL's stingiest defenders at allowing points denied two runs and a pass to set up a tension-packed fourth-down all-or-nothing play.

Foles hit Golden Tate with a 2-yard touchdown pass for a 16-15 Eagles lead with 56 seconds remaining but a 2-point conversion run failed, giving Chicago a final chance.

"I just waited on my opportu-

nity. I just tried to make a play and it worked out," Tate said. "A great collective effort. We found a way."

PARKEY'S MISERY MISS

But the drama wasn't over. Trubisky marched the Bears downfield where Parkey was foiled the first time when the Eagles called timeout just before the snap to negate a kick he booted down the middle between the uprights.

On the next attempt, Parkey struck an upright for the fifth time this season and saw the ball bounce off the crossbar before falling on the wrong side for the Bears. Jake Elliott's 43-yard field goal had put the Eagles ahead only 5:23 into the game but Parkey answered from 36 and 29 yards for a 6-3 Bears half-time lead.

Foles tossed a 10-yard touchdown pass to tight end Dallas Goedert with 5:20 remaining in the third quarter to put the Eagles in front 10-6.

The 83-yard, seven-play touchdown march was aided by two key penalties against Bears defenders, a third-down unnecessary roughness call on Adrian Amos sustaining the drive and a 33-yard pass interference call against Prince Amukamara, a cornerback of Ni-

gerian heritage, putting the ball at the Chicago 10-yard line. But the Bears rallied to reclaim the lead, starting with Parkey's 34-yard field goal with 14:13 remaining to pull Chicago within 10-9.

NWOSU MAKES BIG PLAY

At Baltimore, the Ravens fell behind 23-3 on rookie Mike Badgley's fifth field goal, a 47-yarder with 9:14 to play.

Baltimore rookie Lamar Jackson, who became the youngest quarterback in NFL playoff history on the eve of his 22nd birthday, threw touchdown passes of 7 and 31 yards to Michael Crabtree to pull the Ravens within the final margin.

Jackson got the ball back with 45 seconds remaining but Uchenna Nwosu, a Chargers linebacker of Nigerian descent, knocked loose a fumble from him and Melvin Ingram recovered for Los Angeles to secure the victory.

"We just come out and play assignment football. We have to come out and play together," Ingram said. "Any squad. Any place. We don't care."

The Ravens fumbled three times in their first eight plays from scrimmage, an Ingram recovery

setting up the first Badgley field goal from 21 yards. He added kicks of 53, 40 and 34 yards for a 12-0 Chargers half-time lead.

Baltimore's Justin Tucker kicked a 33-yard field goal but was wide right from 50 yards, his first career playoff miss after making nine in a row, and LA responded with a 60-yard touchdown drive capped by Melvin Gordon's 1-yard run and a 2-point conversion pass from Rivers to Mike Williams for a 20-3 Chargers lead.

RESULTS

First-round playoff games

American Conference

At Baltimore
Chargers 23 Ravens 17

National Conference

At Chicago
Eagles 16 Bears 15

Second-round fixtures

Saturday

Indianapolis Colts at Kansas City Chiefs

Dallas Cowboys at Los Angeles Rams

Sunday

Los Angeles Chargers at New England Patriots

Philadelphia Eagles at New Orleans Saints

FOCUS

Ravens' Harbaugh: Flacco will 'have a market'

Reuters
New York

Following the Baltimore Ravens' playoff loss Sunday, head coach John Harbaugh spoke frankly about the imminent end of the Joe Flacco era in Baltimore.

"Lamar (Jackson) is our quarterback moving forward, there's no question about that," Harbaugh told reporters, before indicating the Ravens will move on from Flacco this offseason.

"Joe Flacco is going to do really well in this league," Harbaugh said.

"Joe can still play. I think we saw that the first half of the season. Joe's going to have a market. A lot of teams are going to want Joe because they understand that and I'll be in Joe's corner wherever he's at. He's special.

"Joe Flacco is a great talent. He's an even better person. He's the best quarterback in the history of the Ravens, no question. That's not even just 'cause I'm biased; that's just a fact. ... He's going to do just fine."

Flacco, who turns 34 on Jan. 16, hurt his hip in Week 9 and never got his starting job back from Jackson. Harbaugh said he considered putting Flacco in on Sunday with the Ravens trailing the Los Angeles Chargers by three scores in the second half of Sunday's loss, but he ultimately decided not to. Flacco finished the season with 2,465 passing yards, 12 touchdowns and six interceptions in nine games, going 4-5 as a starter. His interception rate (1.6 percent) was a career best, but his completion percentage (61.2 percent) was his worst since 2013.

A first-round pick in 2008, Flacco went 96-67 in 11 years with the Ravens, becoming the franchise leader in all major passing categories with 38,245 yards, 212 touchdowns and 136 interceptions.

His playoff run after the 2012 season - when Flacco threw for 1,140 yards, 11 touchdowns and no interceptions in four games en route to Super Bowl MVP honours - remains one of the best ever by a quarterback.

Jackson was the 32nd overall pick in April's draft and became the youngest starting quarterback in NFL playoff history on Sunday, a day before his 22nd birthday.

He finished the regular season 99 of 170 (58.2 percent) for 1,201 yards, six touchdowns and three interceptions while rushing 147 times for 695 yards (4.7 average) and five scores.

Flacco is due \$18.5 million in base salary in 2019, though none is guaranteed. The Ravens would incur a \$16 million dead-money charge against the cap by trading or releasing him, though that would still represent a savings of \$10.5 million off his \$26.5 million cap number for 2019. If released with a post-June 1 designation, Flacco would count \$10.5 million against Baltimore's cap in 2019 and \$5.5 million in 2020.

Any team acquiring Flacco via trade would have him under contract for three years and \$63 million, with none of that figure guaranteed.

Former Cardinals safety Lassiter dies at 49

Former Arizona Cardinals safety Kwamie Lassiter died Sunday, the team announced. He was 49.

No cause of death was announced, but Arizona Sports 98.7 FM reports Lassiter suffered a heart attack while working out.

"We were all devastated to learn of Kwamie's passing today and our hearts go out to all of his family and friends," Cardinals president Michael Bidwill said in a statement. "Kwamie came to the Cardinals as an undrafted rookie free agent. He not only became a key contributor to our team for eight seasons but continued to make an impact on this community after his playing days ended. He will be missed greatly."

Lassiter played 115 games (71 starts) from 1995 to 2002 with the Cardinals, recording 24 interceptions. Most memorably, he tied the NFL single-game record - accomplished 11 times before him and two times since - with four interceptions in the 1998 regular-season finale, which secured a playoff berth for Arizona.

Lassiter had nine interceptions in 2001, when he was named a Pro Bowl alternate. He went on to play one year with the then-San Diego Chargers in 2003 and four games with the then-St. Louis Rams in 2004.

The 10-year NFL veteran played in college at Kansas, where his son, Kwamie Lassiter II, is entering his redshirt junior season as a wide receiver.

SPOTLIGHT

'Old man' Rivers will be younger QB against Pats

Reuters
Los Angeles

The LA Chargers take their road show to Massachusetts next Sunday for an NFL playoff game that will feature starting quarterbacks with a combined age of 78.

The Chargers, led by 37-year-old Philip Rivers, earned a place in the divisional round when they survived a late scare to best the Baltimore Ravens 23-17 in an AFC wildcard game on Sunday.

The result set up the first playoff game between the New England Patriots and Chargers since 2008.

The paths of New England quarterback Tom Brady, 41, and his LA counterpart Rivers could hardly have diverged more.

Brady has played in eight Super Bowls, five times on the winning side, while Rivers has yet to appear on the game's biggest stage and, considering his age, this

could be his last good chance.

The Patriots have won the AFC East 10 consecutive seasons, and are a formidable foe at home, but the Chargers will have few fears about traveling, beaten only once on the road all season, and that was against the LA Rams.

While the Chargers held on from the front on Sunday, the Philadelphia Eagles came from behind to beat the Chicago Bears 16-15 in a heart-stopping finish.

The result kept alive the Eagles' hopes of successfully defending their Super Bowl title, though not without an almighty scare when Bears' kicker Cody Parkey missed a field goal at the death by the narrowest of margins. Parkey's effort hit the upright, and then the crossbar for good measure.

Next up for the Eagles is a trip to the New Orleans Saints on Sunday, while the Dallas Cowboys will visit the LA Rams on Saturday in the other NFC game. Dallas beat the Seattle Sea-

hawks 24-22 on Saturday. The other divisional playoff game might be the most intriguing of all, as the Kansas City Chiefs host the Indianapolis Colts in an AFC game on Saturday.

The Patriots, Saints, Rams and Chiefs had byes this weekend.

The Colts' season looked all but done after starting 1-5 but have since won 10 of their last 11 behind the excellent play of quarterback Andrew Luck, including a 21-7 victory over the Houston Texans on Saturday.

The Chiefs are led by quarterback Patrick Mahomes, 23, who is likely to hoist the league MVP trophy after throwing 50 touchdowns and leading Kansas City to an AFC best 12-4 record in his second season.

His composure, however, will be put to the test in his first career playoff start on Saturday at Arrowhead Stadium.

It will be the first meeting this season between the Chiefs and Colts.



Los Angeles Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers celebrates while leaving the field after the Chargers' game against the Baltimore Ravens in an AFC Wild Card playoff game at M&T Bank Stadium. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

GOLF

Schauffele roars back to seize Tournament of Champions win

'I knew it was going to be a birdie-fest coming in. We kept our head down and tried to run for it'



Xander Schauffele (left) of the United States poses with the trophy and caddie Austin Kaiser after winning the Sentry Tournament of Champions at the Plantation Course at Kapalua Golf Club in Lahaina, Hawaii. (Getty Images/AFP)

AFP
Los Angeles

Xander Schauffele made two eagles in a remarkable 11-under par 62 on Sunday to seize victory in the US PGA Tour Tournament of Champions by one stroke from Gary Woodland. Schauffele started the day five shots off Woodland's lead and opened with a bogey on the par-73 Plantation course in Kapalua, Hawaii. He birdied four of his next five holes before chipping in for his first eagle of the day at the ninth. He holed out for an eagle from 107 yards out in the fairway at 12, birdied 14 and 15 and capped his round with back-to-back-birdies to edge his fellow American, who had led four-time major winner Rory McIlroy by three strokes coming into the final round. "Honestly, it was a crazy day," Schauffele said after signing for a 23-under total of 269. Woodland had five birdies in his 68 for 270. Northern Ireland's McIlroy, meanwhile, could get nothing going in the final round of his first appearance at the event, which is open only to winners of four events the

previous season. He carded a one-under par 72 that left him tied for fourth, eight shots off the pace. He finished on 277 alongside American Dustin Johnson and Australian Marc Leishman. Justin Thomas carded a 65 to finish alone in third on 274. While the expected duel between Woodland and McIlroy, playing together in the final group, never materialised, Schauffele provided plenty of drama. The 25-year-old admitted that even after birdies at the third, fifth, sixth and seventh holes he wasn't looking much at the leaderboard, since he started the day so far back. His chip-in for eagle at the ninth boosted him into second place, just one shot back. But Woodland made his second birdie of the day at the ninth to push the margin back to two, and gave himself more breathing room with a 30-foot birdie putt at the par-three 11th. Schauffele promptly eagled the 12th, regained a share of the lead with a birdie at 14 and took the solo lead for the first time with a birdie at 15. After Woodland birdied 15, too, Schauffele edged ahead again with a birdie at 17, where an aggressive second shot left him a nine-footer for the first birdie of the day on the hardest hole on the course.

'BIRDIE-FEST'
"I knew it was going to be a birdie-fest coming in," he said. "We kept our head down and tried to run for it." Woodland responded with an 11-foot birdie of his own at 17, but after Schauffele birdied the par-five finishing hole with two putts from 12 feet, Woodland couldn't make his own 10-foot birdie putt at 18 to force a playoff. "Obviously he was playing great," Woodland, who is now 0-for-7 when taking a lead into the fourth round of a PGA Tour stroke play event. "My goal today was to birdie the par-fives and make a couple more and see if that was enough. "Obviously I needed to birdie the last there, but, I'm playing great. Frustrated right now, but Xander played great. Hats off to him." Schauffele, the 2017 PGA Tour Rookie of the Year, has won all four of his titles in come-from-behind fashion. That included a storming playoff victory in the WGC-HS-BC Champions in Shanghai in October. "Got nothing to lose," he said of his approach to the final round. "Wind was down, the easier holes played easier and the tougher holes played harder, so we figured if we

could kind of sneak a few in on the tougher holes we might have a chance."
LEADING FINAL-ROUND SCORES
269-Xander Schauffele 72-67-68-62
270-Gary Woodland 67-67-68-68
274-Justin Thomas 67-72-70-65
277-Dustin Johnson 67-74-69-67, Marc Leishman (AUS) 68-70-68-71, Rory McIlroy (NIR) 69-68-68-72
278-Bryson DeChambeau 69-68-70-71
279-Webb Simpson 70-72-72-65, Jon Rahm (ESP) 70-71-69-69, Patton Kizzire 69-71-71-68
280-Cameron Champ 71-68-74-67, Kevin Tway 66-71-72-71
281-Jason Day (AUS) 69-71-75-66
282-Charles Howell 74-70-69-69, Andrew Putnam 69-73-70-70
283-Troy Merritt 73-71-69-70, Paul Casey (ENG) 73-71-68-71
284-Ian Poulter (ENG) 71-69-73-71
286-Brice Garnett 73-72-73-68, Scott Piercy 76-72-69-69,
Matt Kuchar 72-73-72-69
287-Brandt Snedeker 75-69-71-72, Andrew Landry 69-75-71-72
288-Brooks Koepka 76-70-73-69
290-Billy Horschel 72-75-71-72, Patrick Reed 70-75-72-73

SPOTLIGHT

Pound blasts WADA critics for acting like a lynch mob

AFP
London

The numerous critics attacking the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) over Russia's failure to meet a deadline to hand over data from its drug-tainted Moscow laboratory are acting like a "lynch mob", said former president Dick Pound. The 76-year-old Canadian lawyer - who was WADA's inaugural president from 1999-2007 and sits on its Foundation Board - wrote in his blog for influential sports politics website *InsideTheGames* that those demanding WADA be overhauled had their own personal agendas. The end-of-year deadline was set in September, when WADA lifted a ban on the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA), paving the way for Russian athletes to return to competition across all sports after a report which uncovered a state-sponsored doping programme in Russia. However, when WADA personnel travelled to Russia in December they were unable to extract all of the promised data. WADA said at the time its team could not complete its mission "due to an issue raised by the Russian authorities that the team's equipment to be used for the data extraction was required to be certified under Russian law". WADA's leadership has been strongly criticised by the likes of Travis Tygart, head of USADA, and NADO (National Anti-Doping Agencies) over its decision to lift Russia's suspension before obtaining access to the information sought from its Moscow laboratory. This information was expected to shed light on the extent of Russian cheating spanning several years and including multiple major championships. Pound, a former vice-president of the International Olympic Committee who ran unsuccessfully to replace Juan Antonio Samaranch as president in 2001, took aim at the critics with typical bluntness. "Lynch mobs are just that - unruly gangs having a single objective, murdering someone without any due process of justice," said Pound. "Much of the response to Russia's failure to provide access to the former Moscow Laboratory data by the deadline (31 December 2018) imposed by the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) Executive Committee in September 2018 has all the elements of a lynch mob. "Many of those making up the mob know or should know that they are out of line. What is their real end-game?" Pound, who is a long-standing friend to present under-fire WADA president Craig Reedie, said those demanding Russia be immediately declared non-compliant and the meeting of the WADA Compliance Review Committee (CRC) on January 14-15 be brought forward knew this was impossible. "This process is well-known to the entire anti-doping community" said Pound. "It is disturbing to see otherwise responsible and sophisticated organisations urge that the process be completely ignored and incite others to adopt a similar view. "I come from a country - Canada - that has a strong tradition of respect for the rule of law. That tradition is the direct opposite of mob rule." Pound, a former top-class swimmer who competed in the 1960 Olympics, questions the motives of those seeking to destabilise WADA and warns the previous state of "anarchy" which existed before its creation could return. "Perhaps the real agenda is that those who would destroy WADA do not want a robust and independent agency leading this fight for sporting integrity, unless they can insert themselves into positions of power," said Pound. "Think about it..."



WADA's inaugural president Dick Pound.

RUGBY

Mandela would not have backed Springbok racial quotas: Kolisi

AFP
Johannesburg

Springboks skipper Siya Kolisi has said he does not believe iconic former South African president Nelson Mandela would have backed racial quotas for the national team. Speaking to a Japanese news agency during a recent visit to that country, Kolisi said: "I don't think he (Mandela) would have supported that (quotas), but I don't know him. "I would not want to be picked because of my skin colour because that surely would not be good for the team, and the guys around you would know?" Mandela, who died in 2013, became a major supporter of South African rugby, despite it being dominated by white players and officials at the time, when he became president in 1994.

A movie "Invictus" was made about the backing Mandela gave the 1995 Rugby World Cup-winning Springboks, including wearing a replica jersey of captain Francois Pienaar at the final. The Springboks beat their greatest rivals, the New Zealand All Blacks, 15-12 after extra time in the title decider at a packed Ellis Park stadium in Johannesburg. Under an agreement between South African rugby officials and the government, half the Springboks team at the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan should be black. In 14 Tests last year, 67 blacks were chosen in the run-on teams - an average of less than five per international instead of the goal of at least seven. **CRITICS** Many South Africans reacted angrily on social media to the comments of Kolisi, who became captain last year and finished his



Springboks skipper Siya Kolisi

first season with a seven wins-seven losses record. One theme among critics was that Kolisi owed his place in the national team to the quotas system, which is largely supported by blacks and disliked by whites. Kolisi, a loose forward and the first black Test skipper of the Springboks, was in Japan promoting an electronics company. "You should not put a number

on stuff like that," Kolisi said in the interview, referring to the South African Rugby-government agreement for the next World Cup. "If you want to talk about (racial) transformation, you have got to start there (grassroots level). "Imagine if I had not gone to an English (high) school. I would not have eaten properly, I would not have grown properly.

"Maybe in the Currie Cup (domestic championship) you can try guys out and push people in and see how they do. "But you cannot just (pick someone in the Springboks side because of his colour). In South Africa it is tough because we want results and transformation." During apartheid, blacks were prevented from playing for the Springboks and the whites-only policy eventually led to the national team being barred from international competition. Progress toward a multi-racial team since South Africa were readmitted in 1992 has been slow with the 1995 and 2007 World Cup-winning teams having only one and two blacks respectively. In a tour of Europe last November, coach Rassie Erasmus chose four black starters against England, three against France and four each against Scotland and Wales.

FOCUS

French Rugby hit by fourth death

AFP
Dijon, France

French Rugby was left mourning the death of a 23-year-old student yesterday, the fourth young player to have died in eight months. Nathan Soyeux, who was not registered with the French Rugby federation (FFR), passed away in Dijon on Sunday, having been admitted to hospital after an adverse reaction to a tackle in a match at a tournament for engineering schools on November 24. Soyeux sustained the blow whilst being tackled by an opponent and was at first able to sit up before complaining of nausea and then losing consciousness. Taken to Dijon hospital, the player was put in an induced coma for two weeks, but his health deteriorated following efforts to bring him around, according to his engineering school, Estrem.

Soyeux becomes the fourth young French player since May to die after being injured during a match. In December, Stade Francais youth flanker Nicolas Chauvin, 18, died after breaking his neck. In August Louis Fajfrowski, 21, died following a heavy tackle playing for Aurillac and in May 17-year-old Adrien Descrulhes passed away a day after receiving a blow to the head playing for amateur club Billom. Chauvin's death prompted France's Sports Minister Roxana Maracineanu to call on Rugby authorities to make the game safer, with the former Olympic swimmer saying she would meet FFR president Bernard Laporte to discuss ways of preventing more deaths. The FFR confirmed in December it will put together a global forum alongside World Rugby, the sport's governing body, to discuss player health and the evolution of the game's laws in March 2019 in France.

HISTORIC

Dominant India win first-ever Test series in Australia

'The boys make the captain look good. By far, this is my biggest achievement. It's at the top of the pile. The series win will give us a different identity'

AFP
Sydney

Virat Kohli's dominant India reinforced their status as the world's number one team by winning a historic first-ever series in Australia yesterday in an achievement the skipper called the biggest of his storied career.

Australia were still 316 in arrears in Sydney when the match was called off due to rain on day five, leaving India with a 2-1 triumph after wins in Adelaide and Melbourne. Australia won in Perth.

It is the first time they have managed the feat since they began touring Australia in 1947-48.

"I want to say I've never been more proud of being part of a team, than this one right here," said an overjoyed Kohli, widely considered perhaps the greatest player of his generation.

"The boys make the captain look good. By far, this is my biggest achievement. It's at the top of the pile. The series win will give us a different identity."

India had ripped through the Australian tail in Sydney on a shortened day four, when bad light and rain allowed only around 100 minutes of play, bowling the hosts out for 300 in reply to their own ominous 622 for seven declared.

Australia then suffered the indignity of being forced to follow on at home for the first time in 30 years as Kohli twisted the knife.

Only four overs of their second innings were possible, with Marcus Harris not out two and Usman Khawaja unbeaten on four before the match was called off.

"Have to tip our hat to India, we know how tough it is to win in Australia so congrats to Virat and (coach) Ravi (Shastri) because it's a huge achievement," said Australian skipper Tim Paine.

"Disappointed, definitely over the last two Tests. We had our chances in Adelaide, in Perth I thought we played some good cricket, but in Melbourne and Sydney, we've been outplayed."

He added that there were "no illusions" about his team's shortcomings, particularly their batting.

"We need to keep working hard. But cricket's a funny game and it can turn very quickly."

India got the series off to the best possible start by winning the tight opening Test in Adelaide by 31 runs on the fifth day – their first Test win in Australia for a decade.



Indian players celebrate their series win over Australia on the fifth day of the fourth and final Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground yesterday. At bottom, Cheteshwar Pujara, the main architect of the victory.



The victory was built on Cheteshwar Pujara's first innings 123 and his second innings 71, while wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant took a world record-equaling 11 catches.

Australia bounced back in

Perth to level the series, winning by 146 runs.

It was a huge relief for the home side, having not won a Test since the ball-tampering "sandpapergate" scandal that rocked international cricket last March.

But another Pujara century in Melbourne set the visitors up for a big first innings total and when Australia capitulated in reply to 151 all out, the scene was set for India to take a stranglehold on the series coming into Sydney.

Aside from man-of-the-series Pujara, a big part of their success in Australia has been executing their bowling plans to deprive the Australian batsmen of playing their shots.

India's bowling coach Bharat Arun said the successful strategy stemmed from mistakes made last year in Tests against South Africa and England.

"I thought those two tours were a great experience for us and that has helped us immensely to come and do well in Australia," he said.

"We said that to be successful in Australia, we need to make sure that we need to take the cut and the pull out of the Australian batsmen and then focus the attack on our strengths, so that's exactly what we did."

While virtually all of Australia's leading batsmen got starts, none converted them into a big innings, underscoring how much they miss the banned Steve Smith and David Warner, who are free to return in late March.

Harris' 79 in Sydney was the highest any of their batsmen managed the entire series, making it the hosts' first four-Test home series without scoring a century in their history.

FOCUS

PM and stars praise India's victory

AFP
New Delhi

Praise and congratulations poured in for Virat Kohli's India yesterday after the tourists won their first-ever Test series in Australia, underlining their world number one ranking.

India clinched the series 2-1 after the fourth and final Test was called off due to rain in Sydney, confirming their first win in Australia since they began touring Down Under in 1947-48.

"A historic cricketing accomplishment in Australia!" Prime Minister Narendra Modi wrote on his official Twitter handle.

"Congratulations to the Indian Cricket Team for the hard-fought and richly deserved series victory."

"The series witnessed some memorable performances and solid teamwork. Best wishes for the various games ahead."

Batting legend Sachin Tendulkar called it "an amazing day for Indian cricket. #TeamIndia has made this a series to be cherished. Proud of the boys."

He singled out for praise Cheteshwar Pujara after his 521 runs in four matches – including 193 in Sydney – won him man of the series.

"Test match batting at its best

by Pujara. @cheteshwar1 has been the difference between the 2 teams for me. To be able to bat for such long periods of time is a testament to his concentration and understanding of the game," Tendulkar wrote on Twitter after Pujara's Sydney knock.

Paceman Jasprit Bumrah remained the highest wicket-taker with 21 wickets alongside Aussie spinner Nathan Lyon, and Kohli insisted the achievement was due to a complete team effort.

"So proud to be a part of this team, great feeling! This is not just a team this is a family. Onwards and upwards from here on," Kohli said on Twitter.

Former greats V V S Laxman and Virender Sehwag also lauded the win, crediting every member of the current squad.

Laxman said the win "gives such an immense sense of satisfaction and joy," while Sehwag felt "proud" of the team's achievement.

Former skipper Sunil Gavaskar rejected claims that India won because Australia was weakened by the absence of the suspended Steve Smith and David Warner.

"India played the opposition they were presented with and it's a great achievement for them," Gavaskar said during a post-match show on host broadcasters Sony Six.

SPOTLIGHT

'Team India' fans in party mode



India's fans led by Sudhir Chaudhary (R) cheer the team in Sydney.

AFP
Sydney

Singing, dancing and waving massive flags, India's cricket fans were in party mode as their team achieved a milestone – their first-ever Test series win in Australia.

The two nations are fierce cricketing rivals and India, the number one Test side, came to Australia looking to create history after seven decades of trying.

The self-described 12th man of the team, the vocal Indian fans were a constant presence at the four Tests, eager to witness what seemed like an impossible task in the past become a reality.

"I am very happy now that the time has come that after 71 years 'Team India' is going to win this Test trophy," renowned India fan Sudhir Chaudhary told AFP in Hindi via a translator outside the Sydney Cricket Ground.

Chaudhary – whose upper body and face is painted with the Indian tricolours of saffron, white and green and the name of his patron and favourite player, cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar – embodies the passion of the supporters.

Cricket is hugely popular in India and getting on top of Australia on home soil has been a key goal after 11 previous attempts.

Chaudhary, 37, has followed the Indian cricket team for al-

most two decades, and made sure he was a visible presence at the SCG as he waved a national flag and blew a conch.

Other faithful fans also travelled from far and wide to Australia to cheer on their star cricketers.

Long periods of rain at the Tests in Sydney and Melbourne did not deter them, with their singing and drumming bringing energy to the dismal sessions.

"It's a bit of an emotional rollercoaster," British-based Rakesh Patel, the founder of the supporters group Bharat Army, told AFP.

"After two very tough series (against South Africa and England), we're finally going to win a series away from home."

"Some of these guys here have travelled from all over the world to be here, to see India beat Australia for the first time."

With India sewing up the series 2-1 after drawing the rain-soaked final Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground and securing victories in Adelaide and Melbourne, the fans were planning a big bash.

"Our plan is to celebrate with the team. We are the 12th man of 'Team India', so we'll be celebrating with them, and then the party will go on," Rajul Sharma, who heads up the Australian branch of Bharat Army, told AFP.

"It's hard to say when it's going to stop... So yeah Sydney, watch out for Indian fans!"

BOTTOMLINE

India series win 12 months in making, says Kohli

AFP
Sydney

Superstar captain Virat Kohli yesterday called winning a series in Australia his proudest ever moment, capping a 12-month journey for his India team of hard graft, fixing mistakes and comradeship.

Their 2-1 triumph achieved what no other Indian side has managed since they started touring to Australia in 1947-48, with the foundations for success laid not in the first Test at Adelaide, but on their tour of South Africa last year.

It was there, and the subsequent tour of England, that he and coach Ravi Shastri identified the attacking brand of cricket that they wanted to play, all in preparation for Australia.

"We wanted to experiment with combinations and find out what suits the team best and take it forward from there," said coach Ravi Shastri.



India captain Virat Kohli kisses the Border-Gavaskar trophy in Sydney yesterday.

"So we learned a heck of a lot in South Africa, we learned a lot in England. We made mistakes, which we didn't make in these series. We learned from those mistakes."

India lost 2-1 in Tests to South Africa in January last year, and were then outplayed in England 4-1.

"So the most satisfying part of it (winning in Australia) was it was a team working towards this goal over the last 12 months," said Shastri.

While India's batting in Australia was a class above, anchored by Kohli and Cheteshwar Pujara, it was the consistency of the bowling that made the difference,

with no Australian batsmen scoring a century.

"The way the bowlers have dictated and dominated, not here but also in England and South Africa, it's something I haven't seen before," said Kohli.

"Hats off to them, the way they've prepared, their fitness levels, and their mindset!"

So important was the win that Kohli, the best batsmen in the world in all three formats, placed it above being part of the Indian team that won the 2011 World Cup.

"It's obviously a very proud moment. More so because for the last 12 months we understand what we have gone through as a team, we understand the kind of cricket we have been able to play," he said.

"The fact that the reward has come in the most historic series for Indian cricket is the cherry on top of the cake." And while accolades will inevitably fall on Kohli, he has consistently stressed through the series that it can never be about one person.

"It was a team effort through and through and that's what we strive for. We strive to play well as a team," he said.

"Single innings and single spells don't win games of Test cricket. We play to make the team win."