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NBA | Page 5

Warriors take the Heat, Embiid leads 76ers over LA Lakers

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GULF TIMES SPORT



CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Di Maria has point to prove on return to Old Trafford

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TENNIS/QATAR TOTAL OPEN

Czech star Pliskova takes tough schedule in her stride

Pliskova had a great Australian Open where she ousted Serena Williams in the last eight before falling to Naomi Osaka

By Anil John
Doha

Karolina Pliskova took on Simona Halep in the Fed Cup in Ostrava on Sunday night. She lost in three sets, packed her gear and headed to the Qatar Total Open via Vienna, arriving in Doha yesterday morning.

At 3.30pm, however, she was at the Khalifa International Stadium after struggling to get a few hours' sleep, having decided that it was better to hit a few balls on the tennis court and field questions from the media.

A jet-setting lifestyle is not always what it seems. It's worth all the envy, of course, but it also has a few downsides - and catching two or three flights a day can be one of it.

"Not much. Can you see it?" Pliskova, the second seed at the Qatar Total Open, replied with a smile while pointing to her face when asked how many hours of sleep she had after landing in Doha. She admitted she was feeling a "little tired today" but that didn't stop her from taking each question sportingly and giving lengthy answers.

"The weekend was not only physically but mentally tough, too," she said of the Fed Cup in which Halep's Romania defeated Pliskova's Czech Republic. "That's always with the Fed Cup," she said of the tournament's punishing schedule. "But, you know, I think I play Wednesday (in Doha), so there is one more day tomorrow. So I think I will be ready."

The top four seeds in Doha have been given byes into the second round, and with many players still to arrive after the weekend's Fed Cup in different parts of the world, only one main draw match - between the Czech Republic's Barbora Strycova and Oman's wildcard Fatma al-Nabhani - was scheduled yesterday, the Qatar event's official first day.

That ensured most of the focus was on Pliskova, the 2017 winner in Doha, who, like Halep is also targeting her second title here, with the duo scheduled to meet in the final if they don't crash out



Karolina Pliskova arrived in Doha yesterday after completing her country's Fed Cup engagements against Romania on Sunday night.

earlier. Pliskova had a great Australian Open where she ousted Serena Williams in the last eight before falling to eventual winner Naomi Osaka of Japan in the semi-finals.

Osaka's second straight Grand Slam title - she had won the US Open last year - catapulted her to the top of the world rankings at the expense of Halep, and Pliskova had only good things to say

about the latest tennis sensation. "I think she's gonna do well, because she won two Grand Slams in a row, so she can be confident enough and for sure she is. There is no reason why she

should panic. I know how it's not gonna be easy, because in Japan, for sure, it's huge," said the Czech star.

She added that she herself had to get used to her World No 1 status when she achieved that in 2017.

"Well, I felt strange the first, you know, match or two, but then I think you can get used to it as all the other feelings, like if you are top 10 first time. So everything obviously takes time."

Pliskova has had several tough matches already this year, but is pleased with her success so far.

"It's not an easy start of the year by playing so many good players already. It's only second month, and I have played I think four, five, six Grand Slam winners. But pleased with that that I have a good start, and I feel like I can build on these matches what I have played.

"Now coming from the Fed Cup, also good two matches: one I won, one I lost, obviously, with Simona. But it's always tough, but I think it was a good match so I'm not that negative about that."

Pliskova, who is ranked fifth in the world, says she has no specific target for 2019.

"I have my goals, but it's no different compared to the last year. Just want to play well. So far I'm doing what I want, and I just did everything what I did in practice, so that's good. Still, it can happen that you lose to good players. I just lost two times so far and two times was Grand Slam winners, so if it continues like this, I'm happy."

She also added that she was not too worried about the prospect of meeting Halep in the final.

"Well, to play Simona I have to win four more matches, so this is very far. So I'm not thinking about this at all. Obviously I won a title here, so there is some different feeling always in the tournament where you win the title, so you believe that you can do it again.

"And I like these conditions here, so I don't see any reason why I should not play good tennis here. Obviously I had a lot of tennis in the past days, but I think if I survive the first couple days here, I'll be fine."

Children as journalists: a Ons in a lifetime chance



Tunisian tennis star Ons Jabeur (in pink outfit) poses with young players at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex yesterday.

The Qatar Tennis Federation is known to come up with unique concepts. Yesterday they organised a press conference with Tunisian tennis player Ons Jabeur ranked 56th in the world. But it was not journalists who were asking questions but wide-eyed children, mostly young tennis players affiliated to the federation. The questions they asked, however, were not childish by any stretch of imagination. We reproduce excerpts Jabeur's Q&A with kids here.

Q. Which surface is your favourite and why?

A: Good question. I like grass because it goes good with my dropshots and slices and drive people crazy, so I like it (smiling).

Q. What is your formula to be a successful and top tennis player? And what is your best advice to young tennis players?

A: I'm very proud to represent my country and all Arabic countries in my sport. My advice is to trust yourself and pursue your dream. Never get tired and do hard work to reach your dreams.

Q. How often do you practice?

A: Per day, like, around five to six hours. Every day till probably Saturday. I take some time

off on Saturday afternoon and Sunday off. I'm allowed, right (smiling)?

Q. What is your favourite song?

A: Hmm. Now? My favourite song? Let me check my phone. It's actually a French song from Soul King. Do you know Soul King? No, you don't know probably. Do you speak French? So you listen to it. It's good.

Q. As you come every year to Qatar, what is your favourite place in Doha?

A: Favourite place? I like Souq Waqif. It's good there.

Q. If you were not a tennis player, what would you like to be?

A: Well, before, I wanted to be a doctor, but then I know how much work they do. Now, I don't know, I still want to be doctor, but I still have to put a lot of effort in that.

Q. In case your kids are talented in tennis, are you going to lead them to pursue tennis?

A: I don't know. Maybe. I'm going to let them do whatever they want. I'm not going to pressure them to do anything. And if they want to be professional, I'm going to tell them it's going to be a little bit hard, but I'm going to try to push them and help them as much as I can.



Fans at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex yesterday. PICTURE: Jayan Orma

TODAY'S ORDER OF PLAY

Centre Court Starts 2pm

(WC) Ons Jabeur (TUN) vs Carla Suarez-Navarro (ESP)

Followed by Caroline Garcia (FRA) vs Lesia Tsurenko (UKR)

Followed by (WC) 6-Caroline Wozniacki (DEN) vs Qualifier

Followed by 5-Kiki Bertens (NED) vs Camila Giorgi (ITA)

Not before 8pm

9-Julia Georges (GER) vs Qualifier

Court 1 Starts 2pm

7-Anastasija Sevastova (LAT) vs Qualifier

Followed by Anett Kontaveit (EST) vs Qualifier

Not before 5pm

Mihaela Buzarnescu (ROU) vs Jelena Ostapenko (LAT)

Not before 7pm

(WC) Fatma Al Nabhani (OMA) & Mubarak Al Naimi (QAT) vs Abigail Spears (USA) & Zhaoxuan Yang (CHN)

Court 2 Starts 2pm

Aliaksandra Sasnovich (BLR) vs Su-Wei Hsieh (TPE)

Not before 5pm

Elise Mertens (BEL) vs Kat-erina Siniakova (CZE)

Not before 7pm

Hao-Ching Chan (TPE) & Iatisha Chan (TPE) vs Shuko Aoyama (JPN) & Lidziya Marozava (BLR)

Rain stops play at Qatar Total Open

Rain affected the first day's play in the Qatar Total Open yesterday at the Khalifa International Tennis & Squash Complex.

The only main draw match yesterday between Barbara Strycova of the Czech Republic and Oman's Fatma al-Nabhani couldn't start on time. It was scheduled for 8pm but at the time of going to the press was yet to start.

When play resumed at 10pm, Anna Blinkova of Russia was leading 7-6, 2-3 in the qualifier against Australian Samantha Stosur, a match which had been interrupted twice by the rain.

Earlier, two qualifiers out of the total four were spotted with Ajla Tomljanovic of Australia and Karolina Muchova of Czech Republic progressing to the main draw.

TENNIS

Romania stun champions Czech Republic in Fed Cup

'I am happy to have won against such a tough opponent. It was my best and biggest win in Fed Cup'



Romanian Irina-Camelia Begu (left) and Monica Niculescu celebrate after defeating the Czech Republic in their Fed Cup match in Ostrava. (AFP)

AFP
Paris

Romania reached the Fed Cup semi-finals for the first time on Sunday with a 3-2 win over defending champions Czech Republic as Irina-Camelia Begu and Monica Niculescu stunned Wimbledon and French Open winners Barbora Krejčíková and Katerina Siniakova in a marathon doubles decider. Begu and Niculescu triumphed 6-7 (2/7), 6-4, 6-4 in a thrilling rubber in Ostrava which lasted just seven minutes short of three hours. Krejčíková and Siniakova, the world's leading pair, trailed a break early in the final set before

hitting back to 4-4. But the Romanian pair broke straight back for 5-4 before Begu, ranked at 35 in doubles, served out the tie. The result ended the 10-time champions Czechs' hopes of making the Fed Cup semi-finals for an 11th successive year and represented their first home defeat in a decade. Earlier, Simona Halep won the battle of the former world number ones with an epic 6-4, 5-7, 6-4 triumph over Karolína Plíšková, the Czechs' highest-ranked player in the absence of world number three Petra Kvitová. "I am happy to have won against such a tough opponent," said Halep after winning her second singles of the weekend. "It was my best and biggest win in the Fed Cup." Siniakova, who won both her

singles rubbers in the 2018 final triumph over the United States, pulled the Czechs level by seeing off Mihaela Buzărnescu 6-4, 6-2. French Open champion Halep had said that winning a first Fed Cup for Romania was now the top priority on her "bucket list" having finally broken her Grand Slam drought in Paris last year. Romania will now travel to France in April's semi-finals while the other last-four clash sees Belarus up against Australia. In Liege, Caroline Garcia crowned her comeback from a two-year Fed Cup exile by leading France past Belgium and into a fourth semi-final in five years. French number one Garcia brushed aside Belgium's top player Elise Mertens 6-2, 6-3 to

follow her opening day three-set win over Alison Van Uytvanck. Her win gave two-time champions France an unassailable 3-0 lead in the tie before Belgium grabbed a consolation point in the dead doubles rubber. "Two years is not that long in a tennis career," said Garcia who opted out of the Fed Cup in 2017 following an ugly public spat with her teammates. "But I always said that I would come back and that it was important to me." **AUSSIES EDGE USA** At Asheville, North Carolina, won in both singles and doubles as Australia edged the 18-time champion United States 3-2 in a tie that came down to the wire. Barty notched up a 10th successive win in the tournament by

seeing off Madison Keys 6-4, 6-1 to give Australia a 2-1 lead. Danielle Collins levelled the tie when the Australian Open semi-finalist, making her Fed Cup debut, saw off Daria Gavrilova 6-1, 3-6, 6-2. Barty then teamed with Priscilla Hon to beat Collins and Nicole Melichar 6-4, 7-5 in the decisive doubles. Belarus coasted into the semi-finals when world number nine Aryna Sabalenka defeated Laura Siegemund 6-1, 6-1 for an unassailable 3-0 lead over Germany in Braunschweig. "I am so happy and our team is so happy. It's unbelievable to win," said the 20-year-old Sabalenka who dropped just five games in four sets all weekend. The semi-finals take place on the weekend of April 20-21.

SPOTLIGHT

I'm back to 100 percent: Nishikori after knee setback

AFP
Rotterdam, Netherlands

Japan's Kei Nishikori insisted on Sunday he is back to '100 percent' as he returns to action after a right knee injury forced a painful exit at the Australian Open last month. The 29-year-old is top seed in Rotterdam where he is looking for a second title of 2019 following a season-opening triumph in Brisbane. World number seven Nishikori, who is no stranger to injury, saw his pursuit of a first Grand Slam title stall when he was forced to quit his Australian Open quarter-final at 6-4, 4-1 down to eventual champion Novak Djokovic in January. "I am feeling well. It took maybe one week and a little bit to get 100 per cent, but now physically I am going well. I practised well last week in Florida," said Nishikori. "It's going to be an interest-

ing challenge this week. It's a strong tournament and many good players are playing, so it will be tough. "I used to play (this week) in Memphis and last year in New York, but I like indoors and that's why I chose to come here." The Asian number one starts his Rotterdam campaign against France's Pierre-Hugues Herbert who was runner-up to Jo-Wilfried Tsonga in Montpellier on Sunday. Seeded second is last November's Paris Bercy champion Karen Khachanov of Russia with Greek breakthrough star Stefanos Tsitsipas, who beat Roger Federer on his way to the Australian Open semi-finals, taking the third seeding. Number four seed is Canada's Milos Raonic, a quarter-finalist in Melbourne. The field also features Canadian youngster Denis Shapovalov, with 2015 Rotterdam champion - and three-time major winner - Stan Wawrinka also in the draw.



Kei Nishikori.

German Olympic rowing champion dies aged 30 while skiing

German Olympic rowing champion Maximilian Reineit died on Sunday aged 30 while skiing in St. Moritz, Switzerland, the German rowing team said in a statement yesterday. The cause of death is not yet known. He was Olympic champion with the eights in London in 2012, and took silver in 2016 in Rio de Janeiro. He retired from rowing after those Games to continue working as a doctor. "Even after his retirement, he was very committed to rowing. His shock and much too early death makes me infinitely sad," said Siegfried Kaidel, president of the German rowing federation. Next week, Reineit planned to accompany the German under-23 team as a doctor to a training camp in Spain.

FOCUS

Pedder wins QGL golf tournament



Winner Cherezhade Pedder (third from left) poses with the other winners, Education City Golf Course and Qatar Golf Lovers officials at the Education City Golf Course.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Cherezhade Pedder emerged victorious in the golf tournament organised by Qatar Golf Lovers at the Education City

Golf Course over the weekend. About 40 golfers participated in the tournament which was played on a Strokeplay format. Qatar Golf Lovers also became the first golf society to organise a tournament at the magnificent Education City Golf Course. Andrea Smilski was declared

first runner-up while Surinder Bhagat won the third prize. Sanjay Jain won the 'closest to pin' award, Mrityunjay Dhawal won the 'longest putt' award and Nathaniel Hayes won the 'closest to pin on second shot' award. Naem Nanji won a special surprise prize.

QGL hosted a prize distribution dinner for all golfers which was attended by Rhys Beecher, director golf operations and Nico-James Visser, manager golf operations of Education City Golf Course who donated and gave away prizes to all the winners.

Meanwhile, QGL bid farewell to Jean-Dominique Lucas who has been an active member of QGL for nine years. On behalf of all members, QGL captain PK Mathew presented a memento to Lucas and wished him all the best for his future endeavours back home in France.

MOTORSPORT

Toro Rosso look for improvement with new lineup

Reuters
Rome

Toro Rosso expressed confidence in engine partner Honda and a new driver line-up yesterday as they became the second Formula One team to pull the covers off their 2019 car. The Italy-based team, who finished ninth out of 10 last year, presented the STR14 online with no predictions about its performance once the racing starts in Australia on March 17. "As is always the case before the start of a season, it's too early to say and we don't want to set a specific target, at least not now," commented team principal Franz Tost in a statement. "The quality of the synergies with Red Bull Technology, the belief in our very high level of in-house technical knowledge, the impressive development trajectory Honda has shown so far, and the couple of strong young drivers we have available make me feel confident," he added. Red Bull-owned Toro Rosso

act as a feeder team to former champions Red Bull Racing, both of whose drivers Max Verstappen and Pierre Gasly graduated from Tost's outfit. Both teams will have Honda engines after Red Bull Racing ended their partnership with Renault at the end of 2018, with Toro Rosso using some non-listed parts designed for last year's race-winning Red Bull. Toro Rosso's new lineup will be experienced Russian Daniil Kvyat, who was both promoted and dropped by the team before securing a comeback seat, and British-born Thai newcomer Alexander Albon. Albon, who raced in Formula Two last year, said he would be taking the season step by step and not setting any long-term goals either. "If you start setting long-term goals, you just put unnecessary pressure on yourself. I'm just focused on myself and let's see how it all goes," he said. The blue, silver and red car, whose unveiling came after Haas F1's livery launch last week, reflected new aerodynamic restrictions with a simpler front wing and barge-board arrangement.



SPOTLIGHT

Joint venture between SC and FIFA will ensure an ideal 2022 World Cup, says al-Khater

QNA
Doha

CEO of FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 LLC Nasser al-Khater has said that the newly-established joint venture will help in increasing efficiency in the operational aspects for the tournament.

On February 5 in Doha, the joint venture was unveiled as the body responsible for delivering the first FIFA World Cup in the Arab world after the management board met for the first time. The new delivery model will capitalise on the planning expertise the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC) has built up since winning the right to host the tournament in 2010. Combined with FIFA's extensive tournament expertise, this innovative model of delivering world football's premier event aims to ensure an optimum World Cup experience for fans, players and officials in 2022.

While the joint venture focuses on tournament delivery, the SC will continue to manage the development of event infrastructure, along with the various legacy programmes. The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 LLC will be responsible for the teams, officials, housing, transportation, and organisation, he pointed out.

Al-Khater, who is also the SC's Chief of Tournament Readiness & Experience Group, revealed that the new partnership was reached after two years of discussions as both parties discussed the best mechanism to be adopted in order to organise an ideal tournament.

"Since Gianni Infantino took over the presidency of FIFA, the need for greater harmony between FIFA and the organising



Nasser al-Khater, CEO of FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 LLC and SC's Chief of Tournament Readiness & Experience Group.

committee was stressed. In the new model, FIFA will be responsible for the organisation of the upcoming tournaments, especially as it will make the management of the tournaments easier, and increases the expertise of each party," he explained.

Al-Khater revealed that SC has 41 training grounds for the participating teams of the 2022 World Cup. He said that the Wakrah Stadium will be inaugurated in May on the sidelines of the final of the HH the Amir Cup, which is scheduled for May 16. The third stadium to be inaugurated will be Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor City, scheduled for completion by the end of 2019.

On increasing the number of World Cup teams to 48, instead of 32, CEO of FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 LLC said: "The feasibility study for such a proposal is still

underway by the FIFA, which is supposed to report on the matter before next March. The number of teams will not be determined categorically until next June, but so far the plan is that the number of teams 32," al-Khater said.

The venues for the 2022 FIFA World Cup fan zones has been identified and is currently being studied by SC with FIFA. Al-Khater predicted that around one million fans will visit Qatar for the historic tournament with 175,000 rooms required to house them. He confirmed that SC has benefited greatly from the last year's World Cup in Russia, where the delegates from SC and Qatar Football Association gained first-hand experience about the organisation. He revealed that SC will also send delegates to the Copa America tournament in Brazil in June.

FOCUS

Dreama welcomes Qatar's Asian Cup heroes



QFA President Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, Qatar players and coach Felix Sanchez cut a cake at Dreama, where teachers and young kids celebrated Al Annabi's historic football triumph at the Asian Cup.

Orphan Care Centre, Dreama, on Sunday welcomed the newly crowned Asian Cup champions at a special gathering. Qatar beat Japan 3-1 in the final of the Asian Cup on Feb 1 at Zayed Sports City Stadium.

QFA President Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani was joined by the Qatar national team players and coach Felix Sanchez at Dreama where teachers and young kids applauded Al Annabi's historic football triumph in the UAE. The QFA delegation was received by Amal bint Abdul Latif al-Mannai, Executive Director

of Qatar Foundation for Social Work, and Professor Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad, Executive Director of Dreama. The welcoming ceremony began with a speech from the Executive Director, Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser al-Misnad. She thanked the President of the QFA, the players and the technical and administrative staff for visiting Dreama. She also welcomed the presence Amal bint Abdul Latif al-Mannai, CEO of Qatar Foundation for Social Work.

A cake was cut in the presence of those present at Dreama Centre. A special painting was also

presented to the visiting delegation. At the end of the ceremony, there were group photographs taken by the group of children and their teachers. The Dreama children also took photographs with the Asian Cup trophy.

"The achievement of our national football team by winning the Asian Cup was the result of sound planning and national will," al-Misnad said. "It was a team triumph and we enjoyed watching the matches."

She pointed out that winning the Asian Cup was also linked to the youth development programme at Aspire Academy.

LA LIGA

Barcelona give fresh hope to rivals after Bilbao stalemate

The draw makes it three games without a win for La Liga's leaders

AFP
Bilbao, Spain

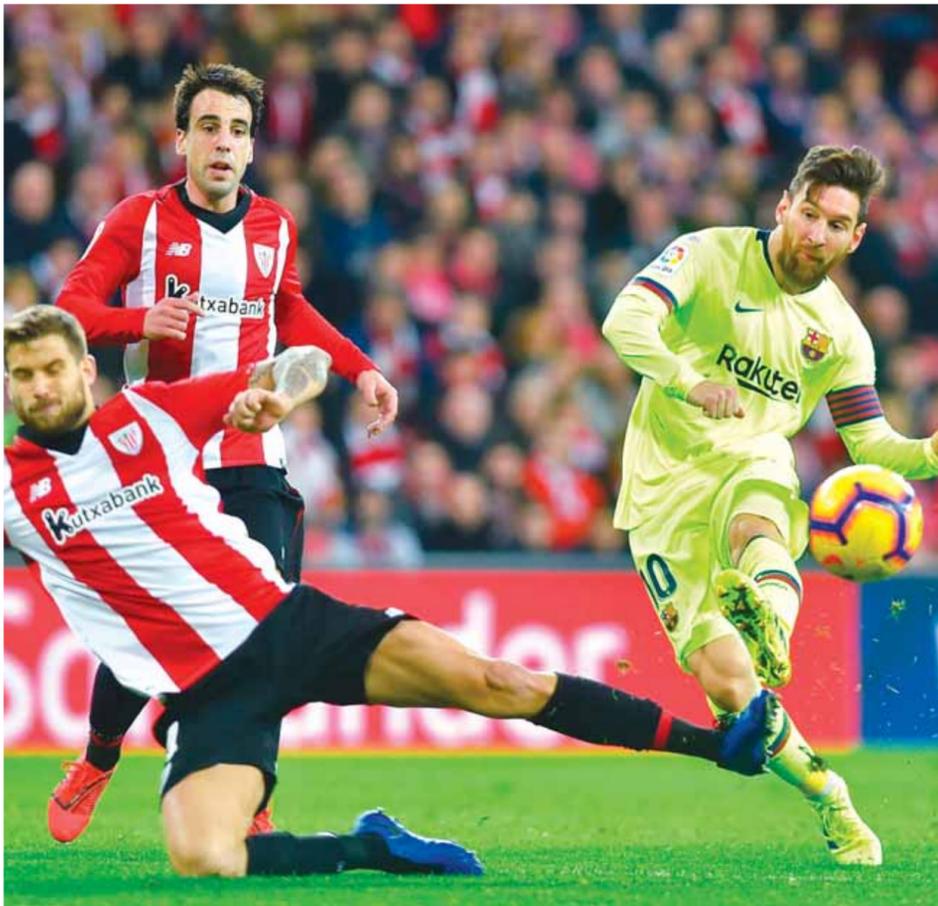
Lionel Messi was short of fitness and Barcelona lacked spark as a goalless draw away to Athletic Bilbao on Sunday night offered fresh hope to their rivals in the title race. A thigh injury had limited Messi to 27 minutes against Real Madrid on Wednesday and while he played the full match at San Mames, Barca's assistant coach Jon Aspiazu had admitted before kick-off he was not yet 100 per cent.

In all likelihood, he stayed on because his team needed him but Messi was not at his best and neither were Barcelona, who would even have lost had it not been for Marc Andre ter Stegen's stunning late save to deny Inaki Williams. "He saved us," coach Ernesto Valverde said. "It was a great stop." The draw makes it three games without a win for La Liga's leaders, whose advantage is still six points but now with Real Madrid their closest challengers, after they beat Atletico on Saturday. "We were first last week and we are still first, and if my maths is right, we will be again next week," Valverde said.

But Real's victory at the Wanda Metropolitano was their fifth on the bounce and just as they have gained momentum, Barca appear to be losing theirs, at a crucial juncture, with more stern tests to come. After Real Valladolid at home next weekend, Valverde's side travel to Lyon in the Champions League and Sevilla in the league. They then face two Clasicos in four days, one in the Copa del Rey, and both at the Santiago Bernabeu. "We are playing a lot of games at the moment and that shows," Luis Suarez said. "We also lacked communication today - it is the little details that make a difference."

Injuries have not helped either. Messi was picked but not fully recovered while Ousmane Dembele was fit enough only for the bench, having shaken off an ankle injury. The struggling Philippe Coutinho retained his place alongside Suarez and Messi up front but Arturo Vidal came in for the injured Arthur Melo and Nelson Semedo started at left back, with Jordi Alba suspended.

Bilbao had the better of the early stages as Yuri Berchiche flashed just wide after a poor pass from Vidal while Markel Susaeta's drive forced the leaping Ter Stegen into an acrobatic save. Barcelona settled into the game but were never in control.



Barcelona's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi (right) shoots past Athletic Bilbao's Spanish defender Inigo Martinez during the La Liga match at the San Mames stadium in Bilbao on Sunday night. (AFP)

Still, they twice should have scored, with Messi and Suarez both guilty of missing. First, Suarez peeled free at the back post but glanced wide from Messi's cross and then Messi hit the crossbar, the goal gaping after Iago Herrerin had rushed out to intercept Nelson Semedo.

The game was frantic and Bilbao were more than holding their own. Raul Gar-

cia's finish was blocked and Mikel San Jose's effort whistled inches outside of the post. In between, Barca had enjoyed their best spell at the start of the second half but the goals always seemed to close around the penalty area and they struggled to find a way through.

Dembele replaced Coutinho with just over 10 minutes left but Bilbao had

the best chance to win it. Iker Muniain squared for Williams, who looked certain to score after wriggling free of Gerard Pique. Instead, Ter Stegen shot out his right hand, somehow denying the striker from eight yards. De Marcos received a second yellow card in injury-time for a handball but there was no time for Barca to feel the benefit.

SERIE A

Ronaldo keeps scoring as Juventus soar 11 points clear

AFP
Milan

Cristiano Ronaldo headed in his 18th league goal this season as Juventus bounced back from last week's stalemate to soar to an 11-point lead in Serie A on Sunday night with a 3-0 win at Sassuolo. Ronaldo proved decisive, scoring after 70 minutes as Sami Khedira found the net first in Modena with fellow German Emre Can slotting in the third four minutes from time. The Serie A champions had been held by Parma last week despite the Portuguese forward's double.

Now they have left second-placed Napoli trailing after Carlo Ancelotti's side were held to a goalless draw at Fiorentina on Saturday. Paulo Dybala again started on the bench coming on late for the champions, to help set up the third goal, with coach Massimiliano Allegri saying he needed to find the right balance.

"Ronaldo and Dybala can certainly play together and they will do, but we need everyone to work hard in order to keep the team balanced," said Allegri. "It all depends on who you are playing against. Sassuolo have a strong midfield, so I had to balance my team that way today. Players are disappointed, but every now and then sitting on the bench is necessary to recharge batteries and rediscover the right mental toughness."

Juventus had started slowly with goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny saving twice in the opening minutes as the champions were without injured defenders Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini. The pair are fighting to be fit for Juventus's European

Champions League last 16 trip to Atletico Madrid in 10 days' time.

Juventus broke through after Sassuolo goalkeeper Andrea Consigli rushed out to parry a Ronaldo shot leaving the way clear for Khedira to turn in the rebound after 23 minutes. It was the German international's second league goal of his injury-hit campaign, after scoring the opening goal of the Serie A season against Chievo on August 18.

Consigli denied Federico Bernardeschi just before the break with a Khedira header flying wide. But Portuguese star Ronaldo jumped highest after 70 minutes to meet Pjanic's corner for his fourth goal in his last three league games to bring his tally to 20 goals for Juventus in all competitions. The 34-year-old celebrated by mimicking Dybala's 'mask' goal celebration. Argentine Dybala came off the bench seven minutes from time along with Can and was involved in the buildup for the final goal with Ronaldo proving the assist.

Inter Milan are third - 20 points behind Juventus - after beating Parma 1-0 on Saturday, for their first league win of 2019. But city rivals AC Milan are just four points behind Inter in fourth after beat struggling Cagliari 3-0, with new signings Lucas Paqueta and Krzysztof Piatek both scoring.

Cagliari defender Luca Cuperelli gave the hosts their first with an unfortunate own goal after 12 minutes. Brazilian Paqueta volleyed in the second after 22 minutes with Polish forward Piatek again finding the net after 62 for his fourth goal in all competitions. The battle for elite European football remains tight with Atalanta, Roma and Lazio all just a point behind AC Milan.



(From left) Juventus players Mattia De Sciglio, Mario Mandzukic, Cristiano Ronaldo, Daniele Rugani and Wojciech Szczesny celebrate after their win over Sassuolo on Sunday night. (AFP)

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Di Maria with point to prove on return to Old Trafford

Argentine is in his fourth season in Paris and has extended his contract to 2021

AFP
Paris

An expensive flop who lasted just a single season at Manchester United, Angel di Maria might be keen to prove a point when he goes back to Old Trafford as a Paris Saint-Germain player today.

The Argentine, who turns 31 later this week, has a vital role to play for PSG in their crunch Champions League last 16, first leg against a resurgent United with Neymar and Edinson Cavani out injured. Those absences will place even more of an onus on Di Maria to show why PSG were prepared to make him their super-star signing in the summer of 2015, two years before Neymar and Kylian Mbappe arrived in the French capital.

The former Benfica and Real Madrid man cost United a British record transfer fee of just under £60m (almost 75m euros at the time) in 2014, but he was an unmitigated failure in England. Di Maria scored only three times in 27 Premier League appearances in 2014/15 for a United side who finished fourth, a long way behind champions Chelsea.

His time in England was also marred by an attempted burglary on his family's home outside Manchester that reportedly left his wife and daughter terrified, and keen to get away. His manager that year, Louis van Gaal, had hailed Di Maria as "world class" on his arrival, but their relationship quickly turned sour, with the player blaming the Dutchman for playing him out of position.

"I only stayed one year. It wasn't the best period of my career, or they didn't let me have my best time there," Di Maria said in a recent interview with radio station France Bleu. "There were problems with the coach at the time. But thanks to God, I was able to come to PSG and be myself again."

United made a loss when they sold Di Maria for 63m euros (£44.3m at the time), but it was very much PSG's gain. Nicknamed 'El Fideo' (The Noodle) in Spain for his slender frame, Di Maria is in his fourth season in Paris and recently extended his contract to 2021.

He has scored or created more than 70 goals in Ligue 1 for PSG, although he was signed chiefly to win big Champions League games and has been unable to prevent his side being knocked out in the last 16 in each of the last two seasons.

Nevertheless, if Di Maria's days in Paris seemed numbered after Neymar and Mbappe signed in mega-bucks deals at the start of last season, he ended up being one of his team's most consistent performers in the last campaign.

Since then, the appointment of Thomas Tuchel has coach has only helped a player



Angel di Maria has a vital role to play for PSG in their Champions League last 16, first leg against a resurgent Manchester United.

who can perform in central midfield as well as on the wing. And if Tuchel's side are to overcome their injury problems and come away from Old Trafford in a strong position before next month's second leg in Paris, they will need Di Maria to show

the United fans what they are missing.

"He was one of my favourite players when I used to watch him on television," Tuchel said at the start of this season after making it clear that Di Maria was just as important to him as the 'MCN' front

three of Mbappe, Neymar and Edinson Cavani.

"He is a gift for me. Everything is very easy with him because he is a top professional. He has extraordinary quality and works so hard for the team."

FOCUS

Perfect time for confident United to play PSG: Solskjaer

AFP
Manchester

Manchester United's return to Champions League action against Paris Saint-Germain today has come at the perfect time for the in-form team, according to caretaker manager **Ole Gunnar Solskjaer**. When the two sides were paired together in December's draw, PSG were strong favourites to make the last eight, with United mired in the final days of Jose Mourinho's troublesome tenure.

However, the mood around Old Trafford is transformed two months on, with Solskjaer overturning an 11-point deficit to break into the top four of the Premier League and beating Arsenal away to reach the fifth round of the FA Cup.

"We've given ourselves the best possible opportunity with the way we've gone into this game because we are confident," said the Norwegian, buoyed by 10 wins and one draw since he took charge. "I've found out what kind of team we have. We are playing like a team, we are agreeing on how we should approach games. If there was ever a time to go into big games like this it is now."

It may also be the perfect time to run into an injury-ravaged PSG, with the world's most expensive player Neymar, Edinson Cavani and Thomas Meunier all sidelined by injury. "Of course any team that are missing players like Neymar, Cavani and Meunier will feel the effect," added Solskjaer, who is still wary of the pace of Kylian Mbappe.

"It makes them maybe more unpredictable for us who they are going to play. When you see that front three over the whole season you know what to expect. We are guessing a little bit how they will approach this game."

Should United emerge victorious over the two legs it will be the first time in five years the three-time European champions have reached the quarter-finals. And Solskjaer admitted it has been too long since a memorable Champions League night at Old Trafford. "Yes, it has been (too long)," said Solskjaer. "It's

both the players and supporters who have been looking forward to some of these nights because they are special."

Anthony Martial is just one of a number of United players transformed since the change in management.

The Frenchman scored a brilliant solo goal in Saturday's 3-0 win at Fulham and believes the attacking freedom given to the players under Solskjaer is more conducive to getting the best from them than Mourinho's more conservative approach.

"We've got a coach with a different approach and we are trying to do what he's asking us," said Martial. "Perhaps it is easier for us to play this style of football compared to the previous style of football we were asked to play."

PSG's visit is the first of three huge games across three different competitions in 13 days for United. Solskjaer's men visit Chelsea in the FA Cup next Monday before Liverpool visit Old Trafford in a huge match for their Premier League title ambitions on February 24. However, Solskjaer insisted even winning all three matches would not guarantee him the job as United boss on a permanent basis. "That's too simple," he said. "There is still a few more months left of this season for me to do whatever I can for this club."



Al Gharafa sign Brazilian defender Mendes from Duhail

Doha: Al Gharafa has signed former Al Duhail Brazilian defender Lucas Mendes to strengthen the team for the rest of the QNB Stars League season and also for the AFC Champions League.

Al Gharafa decided to sign the Brazilian keeping in mind Dutch football star Wesley Sneijder is currently recovering

from injury. Gharafa is looking to improve their performance in the next edition of the AFC Champions League. They are scheduled to play a qualifying match, a victory where would give them a place in the group stages. Gharafa are also seeking to improve their ranking in the QNB Stars league.

SPOTLIGHT

No excuses as VAR set for CL debut

AFP
Rome

UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin has warned that there will be no more excuses as Video Assistant Referees (VAR) make their debut in the Champions League starting this week. Manchester United host Paris Saint-Germain at Old Trafford today while Roma play Porto at the Stadio Olimpico as the last 16, first legs get under way.

The system which was used during last year's FIFA World Cup, and is now widely called upon in most of Europe's leading leagues, was initially set to be rolled out in the Champions League from the start of next season. However, it will now make its debut six months earlier than anticipated. "If we can do it before, why not?" pondered Ceferin of an initiative which had been opposed by his predecessor, Michel Platini. The decision to bring forward its use follows lobbying from top clubs including Juventus, whose chairman, Andrea Agnelli, is also president of the powerful European Club Association (ECA), a union of the

continent's biggest teams.

The Italian was furious after the Turin giants were dumped out of the Champions League last season by a late Real Madrid penalty. "We cannot go back, we want VAR to be adopted in UEFA competitions as soon as possible," demanded Agnelli. Other top European coaches have also welcomed its arrival, with Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola saying: "Welcome... I'm so delighted". That is despite the Premier League being the only one of Europe's major domestic competitions to not use VAR. "The Premier League is the last one, so sooner or later also here in England, it's going to happen" said Guardiola, who recalled how his team had benefited from "a ridiculous penalty" awarded against Shakhtar Donetsk in the group stage. "The referees want to do a good job...they will be helped."

Bayern Munich chief Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said he was convinced it would make "football fairer and more serious at the international level". However, Tottenham Hotspur manager Mauricio Pochettino believes "no one is happy to watch European matches with VAR".

LIGUE 1

Roma need to show ambition against Porto: Di Francesco

AFP
Rome

Roma coach Eusebio Di Francesco called on his side to show ambition against Porto in today's Champions League last 16, first-leg tie at the Stadio Olimpico to rekindle enthusiasm after recent knocks. Roma crashed out of the Coppa Italia with a 7-1 thrashing by Fiorentina but are now unbeaten in their last six Serie A games to sit one point off the Champions League berths. "This game is a great chance to produce a big performance and bring back some enthusiasm," said Di Francesco. "There are only two Italian sides left in the competition, we are proud to be



one of them. We have to aim high."

Roma reached the semi-finals last season before falling to Liverpool, but have never beaten Porto who have won the

competition twice, most recently in 2004 under Jose Mourinho. Sergio Conceicao's side last reached the quarter-finals in 2015, and beat Roma 4-1 on aggregate in the 2016-2017 playoffs. Roma will be without forward Patrik Schick who picked up a muscular problem, but defender Kostas Manolas has returned to training although goalkeeper Robin Olsen remains a doubt. Porto, meanwhile, will be without suspended winger Jesus Corona with top-scorer Moussa Marega injured.

Porto are leading their domestic league but recently crashed out of the Portuguese Cup on penalties and have dropped points in successive league games. "Sergio Conceicao is doing a great job," said Di Francesco. "He's given Porto a clear identity, they are more effective now.

Despite their injuries, they are a compact, organised side. It'll be a physically demanding game. We need to be strong defensively tomorrow. It's vital that we don't concede, although we can't allow that desire to compromise our identity and the way we want to play." Captain Daniele De Rossi returned from injury to help Roma secure a draw against AC Milan and win over Chievo in their last two games. "Teammates and the coach talk about my importance, but perhaps they don't realise how important they've been to me. I want to thank them for that," said the 35-year-old. Roma's best run in the competition was reaching the 1984 final before losing on penalties to Liverpool at the Stadio Olimpico. The second leg will take place in Portugal on March 6.

LIGUE 1

United great Scholes appointed manager of Oldham

AFP
London

Former Manchester United and England midfielder Paul Scholes has been appointed manager of Oldham Athletic, the club announced yesterday. Scholes, 44, is taking on his first managerial role, signing a contract with the club he supported as a boy after spending his entire playing ca-

reer at Old Trafford. The former Premier League club are languishing in mid-table in League Two, the fourth tier of the English game. "Oldham Athletic are delighted to announce footballing legend Paul Scholes as the new first-team manager on a one-and-a-half-year-deal," the club said. "I couldn't be any happier at the minute," Scholes said. "It's been a while. Obviously there's been talk of it when I finished my (playing) career. It wasn't something I was quite ready to do and

there's obviously been three or four times over the last six years where it could have happened and I've not been quite ready."

Scholes, a member of Manchester United's famed "Class of '92" alongside David Beckham and Ryan Giggs, said he wanted to entertain Oldham's fans. "I want my team to be aggressive and focused on winning first and foremost," he said. "I know it's not going to happen every week, but I go into every game expecting to win."

Scholes, who owns a stake in non-league Salford, will step down from his role as director of the National League club, who could be in competition with Oldham next season if they win promotion from the fifth tier.

The English Football League gave Scholes the go-ahead to join Oldham last week, ruling that there was no conflict of interest. He will take charge of his first match against Yeovil at Oldham's Boundary Park ground today.

NBA

Warriors take the Heat, Embiid leads 76ers over Lakers

'They came out and hit us in the mouth early, but I like how we withstood the storm'

AFP
Los Angeles

Kevin Durant scored a game-high 39 points as the NBA champion Golden State Warriors rallied from an early 19-point deficit to edge the Miami Heat 120-118 yesterday.

DeMarcus Cousins sank two free throws with 5.4 seconds left to play to help the Warriors hold off the Heat, who fell eight behind in the fourth quarter but took a 118-115 lead with 51.5 seconds left after back-to-back steals and baskets from Josh Richardson and Dwyane Wade.

Durant responded with his first three-pointer of the contest — after six misses from beyond the arc — to tie the game and Cousins made his free throws to seal the Warriors' 15th win in their last 16 games.

"We knew it was going to be a game they came out and played hard on both ends of the court," Durant said.

"They came out and hit us in the mouth early, but I like how we withstood the storm and kept fighting."

Durant said there was no mystery to the Warriors' comeback, fueled by a 12-0 scoring run early in the third quarter.

"We were just locked in, playing our brand," he said. "We moved the ball, we made shots after a while — it took us a while to wake up on Sunday."

Klay Thompson scored 29 points for the Warriors and Stephen Curry, after a rocky first quarter with just three points, finished with 25.

Josh Richardson led the Heat with 37 points. Veteran Dwyane Wade added 10 off the bench, two days after a frightening fall in Sacramento.

"He's built like Captain America," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said.

Joel Embiid scored 37 points and grabbed 14 rebounds to power the Philadelphia 76ers over the visiting Los Angeles Lakers 143-120 in a matchup of high-profile NBA clubs.

The 24-year-old Cameroon 7-footer (2.13m) was supported by 22 points from Tobias Harris and 21 more from JJ Redick in a romp over LeBron James and the Lakers, who fell to 28-28.

At 36-20, the 76ers pulled within 5.5 games of Eastern Conference leader Milwaukee as Embiid pondered the team's title hopes.

"We've got a chance, especially this year. We've got to keep working," he said. "I plan on being here for a long time. This is my city."



Philadelphia 76ers center Joel Embiid (21) dunks against the Los Angeles Lakers during the first quarter of their game on Sunday.
PICTURE: Bill Streicher-USA TODAY Sports

A trade with the Los Angeles Clippers added Harris to the lineup and Embiid likes the move even though new players must adjust to the 76ers in mid-season.

"I think we got better," Embiid said. "These new guys, we've got to teach them the new system, but I think we're going to be great." Every Embiid rebound came on the defensive boards, with the African star already seeing himself as the NBA's top defender.

"I feel like defensively I'm the best in the league and that's

where it starts," Embiid said. "When I can carry the load defensively I'm going to do so."

James had 18 points, 10 rebounds and nine assists in a losing cause.

In Dallas, Slovenian 19-year-old swingman Luka Doncic scored 28 points, including what proved to be the game-winning 3-point play, as the Dallas Mavericks edged visiting Portland 102-101.

Doncic, who also had nine rebounds and six assists, boosted Dallas ahead 102-99 with 88 seconds remaining but

Portland's CJ McCollum hit a jumper to create the final margin.

Doncic played the entire fourth quarter, scoring 13 points in the period as the Mavs outscored Portland 24-9 in the final frame to rally from a 15-point deficit.

"I love the fact that he loves carrying the load," Mavericks coach Rick Carlisle said of his young star. "He's one of those dynamic young players that has the charisma to give his teammates confidence."

Doncic, meanwhile, was dis-

appointed at missing two shots in the final 45 seconds.

"I should have made those shots down the stretch, which I'm not happy about," he said. "But I'm glad we got the win."

Doncic's miss with 13.1 seconds left gave Portland a final chance, but Damian Lillard missed a jumper.

RESULTS

Atlanta.....	108	Orlando.....	124
Golden State.....	120	Miami.....	118
Philadelphia.....	143	LA Lakers.....	120
Sacramento.....	117	Phoenix.....	104
Dallas.....	102	Portland.....	101

SPOTLIGHT

Durant expected LeBron James to pick him first



Golden State Warriors forward Kevin Durant (35) shoots the ball against Miami Heat center Bam Adebayo (13) during the third quarter of their game at Oracle Arena on Sunday.
PICTURE: Kelley L Cox-USA TODAY Sports

DPA
Los Angeles

Kevin Durant did not sound grateful for the honour. It sounded like he expected it.

As the captain for his respective All-Star team for the second consecutive season, LeBron James selected Durant first for his team. To which Durant says... "What else is he supposed to do?" Durant asked, rhetorically. Fair enough. Durant has won two NBA championships and two Finals MVPs in consecutive seasons. In his 12th NBA season, the 30-year-old is ranked Number 36 on the league's all-time scoring list and counting (22,366 points).

Durant has also averaged 27.3 points on 50.8 per cent shooting, 7.1 rebounds and 6.0 assists, numbers that mostly mirror his career averages.

Milwaukee Bucks guard Giannis Antetokounmpo selected Stephen Curry first. After that, James chose Kyrie Irving, Kawhi Leonard, James Harden, Anthony Davis and Klay Thompson. Of those players, Durant, Irving, Leonard, Davis and Thompson could join James with the Lakers this summer.

Meanwhile, Antetokounmpo went with Joel Embiid, Paul George and Kemba Walker to round out the starting lineup. "Giannis is not from here," Durant joked referring to the Greek native. "So I understand. Next year we'll be better. Look at who we got on the team."

Look at who Antetokounmpo has on his team, though. "Matching the teams up, they're basically giving them the crown already," Curry said. "I like us being underdogs right now."

And with that comes a few adjustments. Curry might have become used to facing off against Durant when he played with the Oklahoma City Thunder and when Durant played with James in last year's All-Star game. But what about Thompson?

The Splash Brothers always played NBA games together. Said Curry: "It'll be like training camp, I've been on the second team every once in a while. It'll be fun. I'll probably have to guard him at some point."

"I know his moves, but he's so good at what he does. It'll be hard to stop him. It'll be a shootout. I'm excited," Thompson added.

The other reason for the game to be exciting? Both teams are playing for money. As part of the NBA's hope to add spice to an All-Star game that often featured highlight reels and no offense, the league made some changes last year. Instead of the game featuring All-Stars from the Eastern and Western Conference, the game features a captain from each conference that take turns picking all available players.

Every player on the winning team also makes an extra 100,000 dollars and the league will donate 500,000 dollars to charities determined by James and Antetokounmpo.

NBA Pacers sign guard Matthews

Washington: Wesley Matthews, a veteran guard in his 10th NBA campaign, signed a contract with the Indiana Pacers on Sunday, three days after being released by the New York Knicks. The 32-year-old son of Wes Matthews, a two-time NBA champion with the Los Angeles Lakers in the 1980s, has averaged 12.8 points, 2.3 rebounds and 2.3 assists over 45 appearances this season for the Knicks and Dallas Mavericks. After one season with Utah and five more at Portland, Matthews signed a four-year deal with Dallas before the Mavericks traded him to New York a week before the Knicks dropped him. "He's a solid professional who we feel strongly will help us the remainder of the season and into the playoffs," said team president of basketball operations Kevin Pritchard. "When we looked at possible players to bring in, he fit in well with what we are trying to accomplish here on the court, in the locker room and off the court."

NHL

Georgiev shines as Rangers beat Maple Leafs

Agencies
Miami

Alexandar Georgiev celebrated his 23rd birthday with a career-high 55-save performance and the New York Rangers beat the visiting Toronto Maple Leafs 4-1 on Sunday night.

Georgiev became the seventh Ranger to make at least 50 saves in a game since the NHL began tracking the statistic in 1955-56. He joined teammate Henrik Lundqvist (March 2, 2018) as the second goaltender to make at least 50 saves on his birthday and finished four shy of the team record for saves set by Mike Richter in 1999.

According to Hockey-Reference's game finder, it was the seventh time in 32 regular-season games that the Rangers allowed at least 50 shots and the first time they allowed 50 shots in a home win since Jan. 13, 1993, against Washington.

Georgiev did some of his finest work during four Toronto power plays, when he made 23 saves. Seven were during the first man advantage early in the opening period when he made three point-blank stops on John Tavares.



Alexandar Georgiev (40) of the New York Rangers makes the second period save on Nazem Kadri of the Toronto Maple Leafs at Madison Square Garden on February 10.

Georgiev made 12 saves on Nazem Kadri and eight on Tavares in a game the Rangers never trailed.

Mika Zibanejad and Jimmy Vesey scored in the first period for the Rangers, who snapped a four-game losing streak to Toronto. Defenseman Adam McQuaid added insurance in the third period, and Kevin Hayes scored into empty net.

Kasperii Kapanen scored the lone goal for the Maple Leafs, who were unable to match a season high with their fifth straight win.

According to Hockey-Reference, it was the 41st regular-season game Toronto had at least 50 shots and the third time against the Rangers.

The Rangers scored 28 seconds in thanks to a strong effort by their top line. Chris Kreider forced a turnover by Morgan Rielly and dished to Mats Zuccarello, whose two point-blank shots were stopped, before Zibanejad smothered the rebound and lifted a wrist shot from the left circle into the net for his 11th goal in 10 games.

Toronto registered 12 straight shots after falling behind and tied the game when Kapanen intercepted a cross-ice pass by Tony DeAngelo near the blue line in the Rangers offensive zone. Upon gaining possession, he beat DeAngelo and

scored his first goal in 10 games on a breakaway with a wrist shot over the right arm at the 10:35 mark.

New York took a 2-1 lead with 5:55 left in the first period when Kreider emerged from the penalty box and made a cross-ice pass to Vesey, who timed the puck over the right shoulder of Toronto goalie Garret Sparks.

BLACKHAWKS 5, RED WINGS 2

Dominik Kahun had two goals and an assist and host Chicago extended its winning streak to seven games by topping Detroit.

Dylan Strome supplied a goal and two assists for the Blackhawks, who have climbed to 23-24-9 to reinvigorate their playoff hopes. Patrick Kane stretched his point streak to 14 games with a third-period goal and added an assist. Jonathan Toews also had a goal and an assist. Cam Ward made 43 saves.

Christoffer Ehn and Gustav Nyquist scored for Detroit, which has dropped three straight. Jonathan Bernier made 31 saves.

BLUES 5, PREDATORS 4 (OT)

Vladimir Tarasenko recorded a hat trick, including the game-winner 16 seconds into over-

time, as visiting St. Louis won its sixth straight game and its second over Nashville in 24 hours.

Alex Pietrangolo and Tyler Bozak also scored goals, and Ryan O'Reilly and Jay Bouwmeester each had two assists for the Blues, who broke a six-game losing streak in Nashville.

Viktor Arvidsson tallied a pair of goals, Roman Josi had a goal and an assist, and Filip Forsberg scored for Nashville. Ryan Ellis and Ryan Johansen each had two assists. Blues goalie Jake Allen got the nod in net for the first time since Jan. 17 and made 40 saves, while Juuse Saros stopped 24 shots for the Predators.

JETS 3, SABRES 1

Blake Wheeler scored the go-ahead goal at 16:05 of the third period as Winnipeg snapped a season-worst three-game losing streak by beating host Buffalo.

Andrew Copp also scored and Mark Scheifele added an empty-netter for the Jets, who salvaged the finale of their three-game trip. Winnipeg had been outscored 13-6 during its skid, including a 5-2 defeat Saturday at Ottawa.

Wheeler and Scheifele each had a goal and an assist and goaltender Connor Hellebuyck made 35 saves.

RUGBY

England boss Jones ready for 'greatest Welsh side ever'

England thrashed France 44-8 on Sunday, with Jonny May's hat-trick providing three of their six tries

AFP
Twickenham

Eddie Jones said England would have to be at their "absolute best" to defeat the "greatest Welsh side ever" in what looms as a Six Nations title-decider later this month.

England thrashed France 44-8 at Twickenham on Sunday, with Jonny May's hat-trick in the opening half-hour providing three of their six tries. Victory meant England had won both their opening two matches this Six Nations following a 32-20 success away to reigning champions Ireland last weekend.

Wales are the only other side with a played two, won two record after a 25-15 victory over Italy in Rome on Saturday.

It was Wales' 11th successive victory, matching their record winning streak set between 1907 and 1910.

Now all eyes will be on Cardiff for Wales' match against England when the Championship resumes on February 23.

"We're playing the greatest Welsh side ever," said England coach Jones.

"We're going to have to be at our absolute best. Preparation starts on Wednesday."

Warren Gatland will stand down as Wales coach after this year's World Cup in Japan and Jones praised the New Zealander by saying: "You know you're playing against a Warren Gatland side."

"He's been at the top of the tree in European rugby for the last 15 years, through his club and country and the (British and Irish) Lions," the Australian added.

"You're playing against a tough, physical team. They contest hard at the breakdown. You've got to earn every point against them."

But the former Australia and Japan coach added: "We're looking forward to going down there. Should be fun."

May dotted down for his opening try in just



File photo of England's rugby coach Eddie Jones.

the second minute, the first of several scores created by kicks behind the French defence. The Leicester flyer has now scored 22 tries in

42 Tests and Jones said: "Jonny May is one of the hardest working guys in our team. His improvement is all due to his desire to be the best

and be part of a team that wants to be the best." Jones, who highlighted the astute tactical kicking of England captain Owen Farrell and

full-back Elliot Daly, added: "Your kicks are only as good as your chases. Some of the chasing today was outstanding."

"Jonny May's like when you go to the park and you see someone with a tennis ball and they throw it, the dog runs 100 mph and chases it and brings it back. He does that pretty well."

But a modest May said: "I was lucky today to get on the end of some really good team play."

"My job is to put the ball down over the line, it is probably the easiest job when the guys inside me are doing a brilliant job."

France wing Damian Penaud had a torrid match, despite scoring the visitors' lone try, as May surged past him time and again.

Meanwhile Yoann Huget — played out of position at full-back — was substituted at half-time by France coach Jacques Brunel.

When centre Henry Slade ended the first half by scoring England's fourth try, Jones' men — who are now two points clear of Wales — had a bonus-point score with 40 minutes still to play. England were 30-8 up at half-time but Jones said: "The second half I thought our performance was even better — our focus and our discipline to keep France scoreless was outstanding."

France are in England's pool at the World Cup but Brunel insisted: "Lots of things can happen in the meantime. The conditions (in Japan) will not be the same."

This was France's second defeat of the tournament after they squandered a 16-0 half-time lead in a 24-19 loss to Wales in Paris last week.

"I'm very disappointed of course, especially in our first half" said Brunel following France's 10th loss in 13 Tests. "Today the English were stronger than us."

France captain Guilhem Guirado, whose side next play Scotland in Paris, said this latest reverse had been particularly damaging.

"It's very painful conceding try after try," the hooker said. "Tonight is a lesson, but still, it hurts a lot compared to last week."

CYCLING

Froome faces battle with altitude on season debut in Colombia



British cyclist Chris Froome from team Sky greets the crowd during the presentation of the Tour Colombia 2.1, at the Atanasio Girardot stadium in Medellin on Sunday.

AFP
Medellin, Colombia

Four-time Tour de France winner Chris Froome will have his work cut out dealing with the altitude when he tackles the Tour Colombia starting today, his rivals and team-mate said.

"Having Froome will be interesting because, apart from the rivalry, we'll see how these riders go at altitude, how they feel, what they think," Colombian Nairo Quintana, who has twice finished runner-up to Froome at the Tour de France, told sports daily Marca.

Altitude will be an important feature of July's Tour with seven climbs rising above 2,000-meters including the Col

de l'Iseran, the highest paved mountain in Europe at 2,770m.

While Quintana raced in last week's Tour of San Juan in Argentina, 33-year-old Froome will be competing in his first race this season.

But with four of the six stages taking place over 2,000m, Tour Colombia is going to be good preparation for what the riders will face in France in five months time.

Froome's 22-year-old Colombian team-mate Egan Bernal won the inaugural Tour Colombia last year, but he says his illustrious Team Sky leader won't be taking a back seat in the Andes.

"He wants to ride the Tour Colombia well. At the time and during the race we'll see who

the leader is, if it's him or me," said Bernal, 22.

Another rival, Rigoberto Uran, a former Froome team-mate at Sky and runner-up to the Briton at the 2017 Tour when riding for his current outfit Education First Drapac, can't see the Kenyan-born rider winning in Colombia.

"It's hard to see a foreigner winning the race," said the 32-year-old Colombian.

"The issue of altitude will undoubtedly weigh heavily."

The race begins in Medellin today with a 14km team time-trial.

There will then be four flat street-circuit stages, all in the Antioquia region before Sunday's decisive finale, a 174km ride from El Retiro to the steep summit finish at Alto de Palmas.

"It's a race that ends on a mountain and it will be spectacular," said Movistar leader Quintana, 29, the runner-up to Bernal last year.

While he has won cycling's other two Grand Tours — The Vuelta a Espana in 2016 and Giro d'Italia in 2017 — Quintana has never won the Tour de France, which will be his main goal this season.

But so too will it be for Froome and his Sky team-mate and reigning champion Geraint Thomas, who decided to start his season at the Tour of Valencia, which ended on Sunday.

Other top riders expected on the Colombia start line are local sprinter Fernando Gaviria and young climber Miguel Angel Lopez, as well as French star Julian Alaphilippe.

SPOTLIGHT

Donald set for Super Rugby return

AFP
Wellington

Fly-half Stephen Donald will return to Super Rugby at the grand old age of 35, more than seven years after he gained cult status by kicking New Zealand to victory in the 2011 World Cup final, the Waikato Chiefs announced yesterday.

Donald, nicknamed Beaver, was a late addition to the Chiefs squad after young pivot Tiaan Falcon ruptured an Achilles tendon, coach Colin Cooper said.

"He is a good conductor of the game and will deliver for the team when provided the opportunity," Cooper said of Donald, who was New Zealand's fourth-choice fly-half in 2011 but became an unlikely hero.

Donald was on the outer with the All Blacks before the 2011 World Cup after being blamed for a loss to Australia the previous year, and decided to go fishing rather than watch the tournament.

But after injuries to Dan Carter and Colin Slade he received a late call-up, which he initially ignored believing it was a prank.

When Aaron Cruden limped off early in the final against France, Donald took to the field, bursting out of a spare shirt belonging to the diminutive Cruden because he had none of his own. He kicked a wobbly penalty early in the second half which was enough to give New Zealand a tense 8-7 victory and end a 24-year drought for the host nation.

However, Donald, who has since had stints with three clubs in Japan, will not be the oldest player to take the field in Super Rugby if he does get a game in his latest comeback with the Chiefs.

That honour belongs to tough-as-teak lock Brad Thorn, now coaching the Queensland Reds, who was still playing regularly for Otago Highlanders at 39.

GOLF

Mickelson holds off Casey to win Pebble Beach Pro-Am

AFP
San Francisco

Phil Mickelson captured his 50th career world-wide title yesterday, finishing off the last two holes of his darkness-halted final round to win the US PGA Pebble Beach Pro-Am tournament.

The 48-year-old American closed with a six-foot birdie putt at the par-5 18th hole to complete a bogey-free final round of seven-under par 65 and conclude 72 holes on 19-under 268, defeating England's Paul Casey by three strokes.

Casey, who also birdied 18 to finish a six-foot putt at the par-5 18th hole to complete a bogey-free final round, and Mickelson were the only players stopped by darkness in Sunday's hail-delayed final round, Mickelson with two holes remaining and a three-stroke edge over Casey, who resumed by making a three-foot par putt at 16.

It was the fifth career PGA victory at Pebble Beach for Mickelson, who matched the all-time record set by fellow American Mark O'Meara. He also became the oldest-ever PGA winner at the famed California coastal layout. "It has been a special week for me," Mickelson said. "This is a special place for me. Every time I come here I have special feelings."

It's the course where his grandfather worked as a caddy and where he began his pro career. Mickelson claimed his 44th US PGA Tour title and has also won three European Tour titles, the 2004 Grand Slam of golf and 2004 Skins Game and a 1993 Challenge Tour event in Paris.

Mickelson had not won on US soil since the 2013 Phoenix Open. Five-time major champion Mickelson will try to complete a career Grand Slam at Pebble Beach in June at the US Open, an event where he has finished second a record six times, most recently in 2013.

And while he enjoyed the victory, Mickelson didn't consider it meaningful in any way for the US Open.



Phil Mickelson poses with trophy after his victory in the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am at Pebble Beach Golf Links, California. (Getty Images/AFP)

"(It means) absolutely nothing because it's nothing like the course we'll see," Mickelson said. "The rough will be so deep and the greens will be so fast it will be a totally different course."

Scott Stallings, the American who held the clubhouse lead at nightfall Sunday on 15-under, was on hand in case he might be involved in a playoff but settled for third.

Joining Casey and Mickelson on the course Monday was Don Collieran, a FedEx executive who with Casey led the two-man Pro-Am competition by one stroke at 33-under par. Casey's closing birdie ensured their triumph.

Casey decided to stop ahead of his putt on 16 Sunday even as Mickelson pushed to start the par-3 17th hole. "I thank Paul for having us come back out here this morning," Mickelson said. "I get sometimes in my own little bubble and I don't see the big picture. He protected both of us."

When they did tee off Monday morning in cold conditions at 17, Mickelson and Casey each drove the ball about eight feet from the cup, missed a birdie putt and tapped in for par.

At 18, Mickelson put the ball in the fairway twice and dropped his approach six feet from the cup to set up his final birdie putt.

THIRD TEST

England consolidate lead against West Indies on day three

England have an overall lead of 231 runs with eight wickets in hand



England batsman Joe Denly in action on the third day of the third Test against West Indies at the Darren Sammy National Cricket Stadium in St Lucia. (Reuters)

AFP
Gros Islet, Saint Lucia

England made the most of a morning of errors and misadventures to extend their second innings to 108 for two at lunch on the third day of the third and final Test against the West Indies at the Darren Sammy Stadium in St Lucia yesterday.

After the combination of Mark Wood's pace and Moeen Ali's spin earned them a healthy first innings advantage of 123 runs on an eventful second day, the tourists now have an overall lead of 231 runs with eight wickets in hand going into the afternoon session as they pursue a consolation victory having already surrendered the series and the Wisden Trophy after massive defeats in the first two Tests in Barbados and Antigua.

Resuming at the overnight position of 19 without loss, England suffered an immediate setback when Rory Burns clipped the first delivery of the morning

to Alzarri Joseph at square-leg to give Keemo Paul immediate success.

However the young all-rounder, drafted into the final eleven for this match due to the suspension of regular captain Jason Holder for a slow over-rate offence in the previous match, left the field on a stretcher shortly after as he appeared to suffer a serious leg injury chasing a ball to the boundary.

West Indies did not help their increasingly difficult situation when Shimron Hetmyer put down a simple chance offered by new batsman Joe Denly off Shannon Gabriel. On 12 at the time, Denly has advanced to 45 at the interval as he continued to play his shots, stroking six boundaries in his 68-ball innings so far.

He lost the other opening batsman, Keaton Jennings, midway through the morning when the left-hander attempted to turn a delivery from Joseph to the leg-side and the ball ricocheted off his body onto the stumps to send him back to the pavilion for 23.

Joe Root joined Denly and the pair have continued to play positively with the England captain, who has endured a terrible campaign with the bat apart from his team's struggles before this match, contributing 18 to a third-wicket partnership so far worth 35 runs.

On the second day, Wood's raw speed unsettled the West Indies middle-order batsmen after Moeen Ali ended another half-century opening partnership by accounting for stand-in captain Kraigg Brathwaite and partner John Campbell off consecutive deliveries. Ali supported Wood's hostility at the other end with subtle variations to finish with figures of four for 36.

However it was the introduction of Wood, who came on as the fourth bowler in the England armoury, which had the greatest impact on an eventful day.

He dismissed Shai Hope and Roston Chase off successive deliveries, both taken at gully, in his opening over and added the scalp of Shimron Hetmyer, caught at the second attempt by

England captain Joe Root at first slip, off the final delivery of the afternoon session.

Darren Bravo perished shortly after the resumption to another Root slip catch and the delighted fast bowler returned after some resistance from Shane Dowrich (38) to polish off the innings and complete the five-wicket haul when he yorked last man Shannon Gabriel.

At the start of the day England's batsmen collapsed to the West Indian fast bowlers yet again, this time operating effectively with the second new ball, as the visitors lost six wickets for 45 runs to be dismissed just before lunch.

Wicketless on the first day when an unbroken fifth-wicket partnership of 124 between Jos Buttler and Ben Stokes lifted the tourists to 231 for four, Keemar Roach stole the spotlight in scything through the middle and lower order to finish with figures of four for 48. He now has 17 wickets in series.

It was Gabriel though who made the first strike of the

morning by bowling Jos Buttler on his overnight score of 67 with just one run added to the total.

That was the trigger for the slide and a reinvigorated Roach quickly got involved by dismissing Stokes for the innings topscore of 79 when the attacking left-hander miscued an attempted pull and wicketkeeper Dowrich sprinted 30 metres to backward square-leg in clinging on to a superb diving catch.

Jonny Bairstow laboured for 33 deliveries in managing just two runs before Roach breached the right-hander's defence while last man James Anderson proved easy prey for the rampant bowler, fending his second delivery into the waiting hands of Keemo Paul at third slip.

BRIEF SCORES AT LUNCH

England 277 (B. Stokes 79, J. Buttler 67; K. Roach 4-48, S. Gabriel 2-49) and 108-2 (J. Denly 45 not out; K. Paul 1-11)
West Indies 154 (J. Campbell 41, S. Dowrich 38; M. Wood 5-41, M. Ali 4-36).

FOCUS

Middlesex sign Afghan teen Rahman for T20 campaign

AFP
London

Afghan spin-bowling teenage sensation Mujeeb Ur Rahman will play for English county Middlesex in their T20 campaign next season, the club announced yesterday.

The 17-year-old - who has taken 54 international wickets in all formats since making his debut aged 16 - will hope to make the same impact his compatriot Rashid Khan did at Sussex last year.

Khan took 17 wickets at an average of 14.35 to play a major role in Sussex reaching the knockout stages for the first time since 2015 - although he was unable to play in the latter rounds due to international duty. Rahman has enjoyed a successful Big Bash campaign with Brisbane Heat, picking up 12 wickets and returning best figures of three for 16. "Middlesex Cricket is today delighted to announce the signing of Mujeeb Ur Rahman for this season's Blast campaign," the county said in a statement.

"The 17-year-old spinner becomes head coach Stuart Law's first signing of the summer and will be available for the entire Blast campaign.

"He will join up with the Middlesex squad in early July to prepare for the tournament ahead."

Law said Rahman, who

played for Hampshire in the competition last year, would add a unique style to the bowling attack. "It is with great pleasure to say that Mujeeb has agreed to play for Middlesex in the Blast," said Law.

"His unique style of spin has proven to be difficult to play against and his record is outstanding in this format."

"I'm sure the staff and players at Middlesex are looking forward to working with him this season," added the 50-year-old Australian, who stepped down from his role as West Indies coach last year.

CUMMINS WINS ALLAN BORDER MEDAL

Australian fast bowler Pat Cummins won the Allan Border Medal yesterday, the country's highest cricketing honour, after a tumultuous year for the sport that was rocked by the ball-tampering scandal. The award, presented in Melbourne, has been won by Steve Smith and David Warner two times each over the previous four years.

The two batsmen received a one year ban for their roles in the ball-tampering scandal in South Africa and will be eligible for international selection again at the end of March.

Cummins, 25, narrowly won the medal with 156 votes, beating Nathan Lyon with 150 and Aaron Finch with 146. Fellow players, the media and umpires vote for player of the year.

SPOTLIGHT

'Healthy headache' Pant in India's World Cup reckoning

Reuters
New Delhi

Rishabh Pant's form is a "healthy headache" for India who are contemplating playing the 21-year-old wicketkeeper as a specialist batsman at this year's World Cup, chief selector MSK Prasad has said.

The Twenty20 series in New Zealand illustrated India's problem of plenty behind the stumps with MS Dhoni keeping while fellow glovesmen Dinesh Karthik and Pant played as pure batsmen.

Even though his batting prowess has been on the wane, Dhoni's sharp glove work makes him India's first choice wicketkeeper in limited-overs cricket, while Karthik seems to have transformed himself into a fluent lower order batsman who can also float in the batting order.

Pant has played only three one-day internationals but his six-hitting prowess and stellar performance in India's breakthrough Test series victory in Australia make him difficult to ignore as India chase their third 50-overs World Cup title



Rishabh Pant

in England. "Undoubtedly he (Pant) is in contention," Prasad told ESPNcricinfo. "A healthy headache. The progression of Rishabh in the last year is phenomenal across the formats."

"What we actually felt is he needs a bit of maturity now, gain more experience. That is the reason we have included him in India A series wherever possible." All-rounder Vijay Shankar also gave a good account of himself both in the one-day and Twenty20 series in New Zealand to stake his claim to be part of the 20-player pool from which India would pick their final 15. "In whatever opportunities he has got, Vijay Shankar has shown the skillsets required at this level," Prasad said.

PREVIEW

Durban offers faint hope for beleaguered Lanka

AFP
Durban

The odds appear to be stacked against Sri Lanka in a two-Test series against South Africa, which starts at Kingsmead tomorrow, but the tourists can take heart from their previous record in Durban.

The away team head into the series following heavy defeats in New Zealand and Australia, and having unceremoniously dumped captain Dinesh Chandimal.

Sri Lanka have lost 11 of 13 Test matches in South Africa. The exceptions occurred at Kingsmead in the only two Tests Sri Lanka have played at the ground. In 2000/01 a rain-hit match was drawn - with South Africa in a strong position - and in 2011/12 Rangana Herath spun Sri Lanka to their only win in South Africa. The hosts have been beaten in six of their eight Test matches at Kingsmead since the start of the



Sri Lanka captain Dimuth Karunaratne

2008/09 season, against a single win. By contrast, at other home venues they have won 32 of their 44 Tests, with only six defeats.

Pitches in Durban have tended to negate outright pace, while offering help to spin bowlers. Herath took nine wickets in the 2011/12 match, while Muttiah Muralitharan had a ten-wicket haul in the drawn match 11 seasons earlier. Even so, South Africa's battery of fast bowlers are

likely to test their largely inexperienced opponents with a barrage of short-pitched deliveries, a formula which has helped South Africa win their most recent six Test matches at home.

It is unlikely, though, that South Africa will pick an all-seam attack, with left-arm spinner Keshav Maharaj set for a return on his home ground - where he bowled 24 of the 76 overs delivered on the first day of a losing

Test against Australia last season.

With spinners having played a key role for Sri Lanka in Durban, it seems surprising that off-spinner Dilruwan Perera was not selected for the current tour. Perera took 16 wickets at an average of 13.00 when Sri Lanka won both home Tests against South Africa as recently as last July.

Only six of the 12 players who beat South Africa comprehensively at home are in Sri Lanka's 17-man squad, while only eight have toured South Africa previously. Some of the selection changes are due to injuries, with three leading fast bowlers ruled out, while some of the discards, such as former skipper Chandimal, struggled during series in New Zealand and Australia in what has been a gruelling southern hemisphere summer.

Sri Lanka will be led by opening batsman Dimuth Karunaratne, who scored 356 runs at an average of 118.66 in the home series win against South Africa.

Smith, Warner bans to end during Pakistan ODI series

Steve Smith and David Warner could be in line for an immediate return to the Australian team when their bans expire midway through the upcoming one-day international (ODI) series against Pakistan in the United Arab Emirates.

The five match Pakistan series will be held from March 22-31, Pakistan's Cricket Board said. Smith and Warner, who were banned for their roles in last year's Cape Town ball-tampering scandal, are eligible for selection again on March 29, meaning they can be called up for the fourth ODI against Pakistan. Australia face Pakistan in the first ODI in Sharjah on March 22, with the second match scheduled for two days later at the same venue. The teams will then move to Abu Dhabi for the third match

on March 27, with the final two games in Dubai on March 29 and 31. The confirmation of dates for the Pakistan series also gives Australian players with lucrative Indian Premier League (IPL) contracts a measure of clarity, as players called up for the series will not be immediately released for the IPL. The 2019 season of the IPL is scheduled to begin late March, with Australian players selected for the Pakistan series expected to be unavailable until April 2 at the earliest.

MCMILLAN TO QUIT AS NZ BATTING COACH AFTER WWC

Former international Craig McMillan announced yesterday he will step down as New Zealand batting coach after this year's World Cup in England and Wales. McMillan said the conclusion of the showpiece

tournament was the right time to move on after five years in the job, including helping New Zealand reach the final of the 2015 World Cup. "It's been a privilege to be able to work with the likes of Brendon McCullum, Kane Williamson and Ross Taylor day-in and day-out and to see the records they've accomplished has been very satisfying," he said. McMillan was given the role of batting mentor by former head coach Mike Hesson, who was replaced by Gary Stead last year. The 42-year-old said he would pursue other coaching opportunities after the World Cup but did not specify what they might be. The tournament runs from May 30 to July 14 and New Zealand Cricket said the replacement would be announced before the team depart for a tour of Sri Lanka in August.

SPOTLIGHT

Asian Cup champs celebrate historic triumph at Aspire

Aspire Zone CEO al-Suwaidi shed light on the strategic planning involved in developing the players from a young age



CEO of Aspire Zone Foundation Mohamed Khalifa al-Suwaidi, Director General at Aspire Academy Ivan Bravo, Deputy Director General of the Academy Ali Salem Afifah, Aspetar's Acting Director General Ali Salem Afifa, Director General Aspire Logistics Abdulla Nasser al-Naemi and national team coach Felix Sanchez cut a cake to celebrate Qatar's Asian Cup triumph yesterday.



Qatar Asian Cup heroes Almoez Ali (left) and Bassam al-Rawi receive bouquets from Aspire Academy athletes yesterday.

Aspire Zone Foundation (AZF) welcomed Qatar team football players including Almoez Ali, Abdul Karim Hassan, Bassam al-Rawi, Asim Madibo and Abdul Karim al-Ali as well as former national coach Saeed Saad al-Misned and current head coach Felix Sanchez yesterday, to celebrate the country's historic success during the 2019 AFC Asian Cup. The stars were welcomed by the CEO of Aspire Zone Foundation, Mohamed Khalifa al-Suwaidi, Director General at Aspire Academy Ivan Bravo, Deputy Director General of the Academy Ali Salem Afifah, Aspetar's Acting Director General, Ali Salem Afifa, Abdulla Nasser al-Naemi, Director General, Aspire Logistics and a large number of senior officials and employees from AZF who had all gathered especially to celebrate the team's victory.

Marking the occasion, al-Suwaidi said: "I would like to start by once again extending my sincere congratulations to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, and His Highness Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad al-Thani, the Personal Representative of His Highness the Amir, and to everyone in Qatar on this historic occasion."

Al-Suwaidi added: "It is very hard to put in to words the strength of my feelings. But the extent of our happiness at Aspire is abundantly clear given all that the team has achieved. We are extremely proud of the fact that the majority of the players in the national team are Aspire Academy graduates."

"As you all know, the success and achievement of our national team is the result of Qatar's wise and visionary leadership which has focused on building generations of talented athletes.

The team's numerous victories are testament to a carefully planned strategy and highlight the support and backing of the country's citizens for sports investment. Our whole organisation has worked to bring this dream to life. And with this victory, we have raised the bar in terms of what can be achieved when we support one another."

He continued: "We have closely followed our players' development over the years as we nurtured their talent and worked hard to ensure they achieve the best mental and physical condition to compete."

Al-Suwaidi shed light on the strategic planning involved in developing the players from a very young age, explaining: "We began our journey working with these talented young athletes from when they were about nine years old, right the way through to the present

day. Throughout, our focus has been on helping them develop into the footballing stars that they have become."

"What is obvious is the effort and contribution made by the Aspire family played a crucial role in this great achievement. In addition to the world-class facilities, advanced equipment and technology that the players have access to, many of our teachers and staff have invested their time in building up these young players."

Al-Suwaidi praised the team's spirit and commitment to fair play that was much on evidence throughout the championship. He said: "This success is drawn from all that we have instilled in the hearts of these young footballers at Aspire Academy, including a clear commitment to fair play and a spirit of competitiveness. They have set a shining example for future genera-

tions to follow." "Finally, I should like to add that this victory demonstrates the importance of having a clear philosophy and sticking to it. We do not need to shout about our achievements. The whole world is talking us now and is interested to hear how we managed it. This is a perfect example of what we aim to achieve at Aspire when we say that we will be the reference in sports excellence," al-Suwaidi concluded.

Ivan Bravo, Director General at Aspire Academy, said: "I'd like to thank the entire Aspire family for contributing to this historic achievement. Everyone has worked extremely hard in getting us to this point. I'd like to extend my congratulation to Mohammed Khalifa al-Suwaidi and all the members of the Aspire Zone for the incredible teamwork and collaboration amongst AZF's member organisations - Aspire Acad-

emy, Aspetar, and Aspire Logistics."

Bravo also paid special tribute to the coach Sanchez and his efforts in ensuring the team's success during these past few years. Aspire Academy graduates Moatiz Barshim and Abdullah al-Tamimi also attended the ceremony. Star player Almoez Ali said: "We are delighted to be back at Aspire Academy today. We promise you that the best is yet to come."

Bassam al-Rawi, said: "We're fortunate to have developed from a young age here at Aspire, which is amongst the very best academies in the world. We're honoured to be associated with this great institution." Abdul Karim Hassan expressed his happiness at being back home at Aspire and said: "We thank God for this achievement and hope to secure similar success in the near future."

FOCUS

'Strongest' Qatar Open Amateur Golf Championship from Thursday

By Sports Reporter
Doha

More than 100 players from 33 countries will take part in the 33rd edition of the Qatar Open Amateur Golf Championship, which will be held at the Doha Golf Club on February 14, organisers announced yesterday. The three-day Individual Stroke-play tournament has added importance as its winner, top three Qatari players and top three professionals will get to match their skills with some of the best players on the European Tour's Commercial Bank Qatar Masters, to be held from March 7. The local spotlight will be on 2017 runner-up Saleh al-Kaabi, Ali al-Shahrani and Jaham al-Kuwari. "Undoubtedly, this is the strongest amateur tournament in the Middle East. With the event having a WAGR status, the competitors will be keen to collect maximum points and improve their rankings so as to qualify for the big events," Qatar Golf Association (QGA) general secretary Fahad al-Naimi told a Press conference at the Doha

Golf Club yesterday.

"This is one of the oldest tournaments in the region and since last year, the tournament has seen the participation of some of the best international professionals, and we have decided to increase the competitiveness of the tournament. This year's tournament includes 22 professionals and 80 amateurs," he said.

Last year, Pakistani teenager Ahmed Baig registered a one-shot victory ahead of Morocco's Ayoub Omar. In the professional category, England's Joshua White won while two-time winner on the European Tour Simon Khan finished second as Jean-Michel Hall came third, in an all English sweep in the pro category.

This is the second time professionals are participating in the tournament with the organising committee awarding the best three results from the professionals a spot in the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters.

The four-day tournament will be held at the Doha Golf Club course with 138 top-ranked players in the world competing for the title in the 22nd edition of the tournament. Two-time Qatar Masters champion

Paul Lawrie's son Craig Lawrie will also be vying for the European Tour event slot.

The other professional players taking part in the tournament are Thomas Strandemo, Adrian Meronk, Guiraud Alexis, Mateusz Gradecki, Steven Troup, Niclas Johansson, Jordan Massey, Mike Elliott, David Moreland, Scott Puzey, Morgan Jackson, Rocco Sanjust, Victor Riu, Michael James Steyn, Darryl Gwilliam, Mike Toorop, Peter Erofejeff, Todd Clements, Anwar Ali, Jean-Michel Hall, Lucas Norman and Alfie Plant.

Qatari team players are coming into the championship with some good performances in the World, Asian, Arab and Gulf Championship. Talking about Qatar players' chances in the tournament, QGA general manager Gary McGlinchey said: "I think it is a great opportunity for the local players. Saleh al-Kaabi is 4-under par this week and he is hard to beat."

QGA executive director Mohamed Faisal al-Naimi and InterContinental Doha Hotel general manager Andreas Pfister were also present on the occasion. Royal Air Maroc, InterContinental Doha Hotel and AlKaliwe are the sponsors for the tournament.



Qatar Golf Association (QGA) general secretary Fahad al-Naimi (centre) and QGA event manager Mohamed Faisal al-Naimi (second right) pose with other officials at a press conference at the Doha Golf Club yesterday.

AL KASS INTERNATIONAL CUP

Roma enter last four, Kashiwa stun Real Madrid



Kashiwa Reysol players celebrate after scoring a goal against Real Madrid during quarter-final match at the under-17 Al Kass International Cup yesterday. PICTURE: Jayaram

Italian side Roma enhanced their position as tournament favourites when setting up a semi-final clash with Aspire Academy in the under-17 Al Kass International Cup.

Roma maintained the tournament's only 100% winning record when making light work of defeating Spartak Moscow. They stormed to a 3-0 victory over 10-man Spartak, who failed to find their best form on the day.

The first half saw a heavy downpour and also a headed goal from player of the match Edoardo Bove, who netted his third goal of the tournament when getting on the end of Andrea Astrologo's cross. The Russians had Yacheslav Prolov sent off during the second half and the Italians doubted their advantage when substitute Daniel Tuetto Fotsos headed home at the far post. Riccardo Ciervo added a third in the closing stages, thanks to VAR af-

ter his effort was initially ruled out for offside. The same player almost added a fourth moments later as the Italians booked their place in the semi-finals.

Fabrizio Piccareta, Head Coach of AS Roma said: "I am very happy for my players because it was not an easy game, but they managed to make it simple and I think to be honest we could have even got higher score. However, it is okay because 3-0 is a very good result against Spartak Moscow and I am very happy for the players. We always expect to win because otherwise we don't give them the right mentality. The team has to play for a win and of course we expect to win and we work hard to win. But we take nothing for granted."

The second quarters saw Kashiwa Reysol knock out 2017 champions Real Madrid for the second successive year. The teams have met in the tournament in each of

the last three years, with Kashiwa winning the last two. Kashiwa went ahead midway through the first half with a well-taken penalty by Naito Saito, and Yuki Shimizu finished off a fine move to give them a 2-0 half-time advantage. It remained that way as Kashiwa defended strongly and Real were unable to create many clear opportunities.

Shin Yamanaka, Head Coach of Kashiwa Reysol said: "Our team was very nervous. We were trying to keep the ball and keep attacking and thankfully we were rewarded with a win. In the semi-final we will try to keep up what we did today, keep the ball and attack."

"When Real had the ball, they were very strong and the match became very difficult for us. We always trying to keep the ball as much as possible to control the game, and I believe we will go on to win the competition."