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GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

Lacklustre Liverpool slip-up again as Klopp points to injuries

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FOCUS

AC Milan sent scouts to watch Almoez at Asian Cup

22-year-old Qatar forward was the standout player in the tournament, scoring a record nine goals

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Almoez Ali's Asian Cup heroics have caught the attention of Serie A giants AC Milan, who had their talent scouts watch the Qatar forward in action during the Continental championship in the UAE.

The 22-year-old Almoez Ali was the standout player in the tournament as his record nine goals, including a spectacular bicycle kick in the final, played a key role in Qatar clinching the Asian title for the first time. Almoez bettered the previous record of eight goals in a single tournament by Iran's Ali Daei, who had set the mark in 1996. He found the net in four of Qatar's six matches en route to the final, including a four-goal haul against North Korea in the group stage.

According to *La Repubblica*, Milan could well make a move for Almoez in the next transfer window. After the Asian Cup, the Al Duhail striker had said he would like to move to Europe to gain experience playing at the top leagues.

After his breakout tournament in the UAE, Almoez has received praise from all over the world, not the least from former Real Madrid and Manchester United manager Jose Mourinho. "Almoez Ali is an excellent player who can play abroad. I think Almoez is agile. He moves fast," told Mourinho told beIN Sports recently.

Mourinho watched Almoez in action at the Asian Cup when he was in Doha as a special guest expert for the beIN Sports. "Almoez has all it takes to be playing in another league so that he becomes more competitive. He is young and he needs to be playing in a better league if he wants to become a top player," Mourinho, who was sacked as Manchester United manager in



Qatar's forward Almoez Ali (right) celebrates after scoring a goal during the AFC Asian Cup final against Japan in Abu Dhabi on Friday. (AFP)

December, added.

Apart from his goal-scoring feats, Almoez was a tireless worker in the final third of the pitch during the Asian Cup, providing assists for his strike part-

ner Akram Afif.

Qatar head coach Felix Sanchez was effusive in his praise of his young forward. "It is true to say that Almoez is a very important player, be-

cause when we are under pressure he is our first (outlet) and he is someone who does a lot of work," Sanchez had said.

"When we have the ball, he is a player who is always making

runs to try and push and arrive in the box. He has been a very important player for us over the last few years, and (added to that) he now has great confidence in the final third."

SPOTLIGHT

Japan forward Nakajima joins Al Duhail

AFC
Kuala Lumpur

Japanese forward Shoya Nakajima has signed for Al Duhail as the Qatar club look to defend their league title and mount a strong challenge in the 2019 AFC Champions League.

The 24-year-old joins Al Duhail, who won the Qatar Stars League, Qatar Cup and Amir Cup in 2018, from Portuguese club Portimonense.

"I will be moving from Portimonense to Al Duhail," Nakajima wrote on his official blog.

"I'll continue to have fun playing football and work hard to get better at it! I had a wonderful time at Portimonense. I thank the club officials, the staff, and my teammates. I hope to enjoy my days at Al Duhail as much as possible!"

Nakajima was named last September's Primeira Liga player of the month following a run of outstanding performances with Portimonense, where he was primarily a left winger and an attacking midfielder.

The former FC Tokyo player had been linked with a move to

Wolverhampton Wanderers, but Portimonense reportedly rejected a bid from the English Premier League side.

After being left out of the squad for the 2018 FIFA World Cup, Nakajima has emerged as one of Japan's next generation of stars under new manager Hajime Moriyasu.

A calf injury forced him to pull out of the squad for the just-concluded AFC Asian Cup 2019.

Nakajima joined Portimonense on loan from J-League side FC Tokyo in the summer of 2017. He ended his impressive first season with 10 goals and 12 assists in 29 league games. This season, he has scored five goals and six assists in 13 games.

Nakajima, who was a member of the Japan U-23 squad for the 2016 Rio Olympics, has two goals in six international caps for Japan.

Al Duhail are currently second in the Qatari top flight — two points behind Al Sadd — with seven games left in the season.

For the 2019 AFC Champions League, Al Duhail, quarter-finalists last season, are in Group C with Al Hilal from Saudi Arabia, UAE side Al Ain and Islamic Republic of Iran's Esteghlal.



COPA DEL REY

Messi back in training but Valverde will not take risks

AFP
Barcelona

Lionel Messi returned to training yesterday ahead of Barcelona's Copa del Rey semi-final against Real Madrid but coach Ernesto Valverde insists he will not take any risks with his captain's fitness.

Messi is a doubt for the first leg at the Camp Nou today after feeling discomfort in his thigh during Sunday's draw with Valencia.

The Argentinian missed training on Monday but was back with the squad yesterday evening. During the 15 minutes open to the media, a smiling Messi was seen doing some light jogging and taking part in a relaxed keep-ball session.

Shortly before training, Valverde had said in a press conference: "I have not seen him yet and I don't have an answer. "There is a training session and we will

see how he is, whether he can do it and whether he is in the right condition. Then we will decide. If he is fit, he will play and if he is not, he will not play."

Valverde added: "It is true that sometimes we have had doubts with players and we have waited until the last moment, and it's the same with Messi."

Barca face a testing period of fixtures, including three Clasicos in the next month. The next two will come back-to-back, with the second leg of the Copa del Rey scheduled for February 27 before a La Liga fixture on March 2, both at the Santiago Bernabeu.

There will also be two Champions League matches against Lyon to negotiate, as well as tricky league trips to Athletic Bilbao and Sevilla.

VALVERDE CAUTIOUS OVER MESSI FITNESS

Valverde indicated he would be cau-

tious with Messi's fitness. "I am not very supportive of taking risks when there are so many games ahead," Valverde said. "If the league ended tomorrow, it would be a different question."

"But risking the fitness of any player — Messi or anyone else — I'm not really in favour of it because they inevitably play with some fear, and games like tomorrow cannot be played with fear."

Real Madrid coach Santiago Solari had said earlier yesterday that he hoped Messi would be available. "In football it's always best that the best players play in every game, that's just how it is," Solari said.

Ousmane Dembele is close to recovering from an ankle injury. Valverde said the Frenchman trained separately on Monday and was set to join the rest of the squad for Tuesday's session.

"We will see how he feels, he is on track," Valverde said. "The most important thing is the player tells you he

is ready. Then you have a decision to make and you have to weigh up the pros and cons."

Valverde admitted he might have to rotate his line-up given the number of important games coming up. "The calendar is very complicated," he said.

"It was already complicated in January but with this semi-final at a very high level, more league games, more games in the Champions League knock-out stages, we have to walk a fine line. We are in a decisive part of the season."

Madrid sit eight points adrift of Barcelona in La Liga but have won their last five games in a row in all competitions. They appear a team transformed since the 5-1 defeat by Barca in October.

"Real Madrid usually play well at the Camp Nou," Valverde said. "In October they were going through a delicate period but now they are better. We are expecting them at their best."



Barcelona's Lionel Messi takes part in a training session on the eve of their Copa del Rey match against Real Madrid in Barcelona yesterday. (Reuters)



SPOTLIGHT

Aguero still Man City's go-to goal getter

AFP
Liverpool

Much has changed at Manchester City in the three seasons since Pep Guardiola took charge tasked with turning the wealth of the club's Abu Dhabi backers into domination of English football. However, if Guardiola's men are to reel in Liverpool to become the first side in a decade to retain the Premier League, Sergio Aguero is likely to be the primary source of goals just as the Argentine has been for the past seven seasons.

Aguero was a City legend from the moment he won the club's first title in 44 years with virtually the last kick of the campaign in his debut season. But the 30-year-old is now staking a claim to be regarded as one of the Premier League's greatest ever imports, particularly if he spearheads a fourth title triumph in eight years in England.

Already firmly established as City's all-time leading scorer, Aguero's hat-trick in Sunday's 3-1 win over Arsenal was his 14th for the club, his 10th in the league – just one short of Alan Shearer's all-time record. It also took his Premier League tally to 157, eighth on the all-time list and just 18 goals behind the only overseas player on that list, Thierry Henry who stands in fifth.

The bare numbers underestimate Aguero's knack of scoring when it really matters. In 63 appearances against the big six rivals in the Premier League, the former Atletico Madrid striker has scored 40 goals, 19 more than any other player in the same period – Tottenham's Harry Kane.

Such a record would appear to make Aguero untouchable. Yet, that was very much not the case

in the early days of Guardiola's reign when the Catalan preferred the youthful energy of Gabriel Jesus as he demanded much more than just goals from his strikers.

Even at the latter stage of his career, rather than revolt, Aguero adapted and won over Guardiola during City's romp to the title. "I know my players when I work with them in the good moments, bad moments, how they react," said Guardiola after Aguero's latest goal glut against Arsenal.

"When people in the first year said I'm not friends with Sergio, sometimes I played Gabriel or Raz (Raheem Sterling) as a striker, they were my decisions but I was always delighted (with Aguero). Today, it wasn't just that he scored three goals but for how he tried, fought, and worked backwards. He gave absolutely everything for the team. Of course he doesn't have the energy of Gabriel or Bernardo (Silva) but every player has his own quality."

Even this season Aguero has played nearly 600 fewer minutes in the Premier League than Liverpool's Mohamed Salah – who leads the race for the golden boot. However, as City continue a huge week in their title challenge at Everton today, that early season rest could be key to the champions retaining the trophy that matters if Aguero is the fresher of the two for the title run in.

GUARDIOLA SURE OF PLENTY TWISTS TO COME

Meanwhile, Guardiola has played down the suggestion that City are now title favourites despite two stumbles in as many games by leaders Liverpool that cut the gap at the top to three points.

Klopp's side could have gone seven points clear by beating Leicester last week, but only drew 1-1 and were held by the same scoreline at West Ham on

Monday. Those two draws have allowed City back into the race.

However, after a topsy-turvy week that began with City falling to a shock 2-1 defeat at relegation-threatened Newcastle last Tuesday, Guardiola is sure there will be plenty more twists before the end of the season. "Three or four days ago, we were already done, and the champions were Liverpool. Now we are the favourites and maybe soon we can be leading. We try to be calm."

"There will be surprises and it will be tough for teams to win every game. What I'm more concerned about is that we never forget who we are as a team. Doing what we have to do, we are a strong team. That's what I want to watch every single day. After that, we see about the results, the table, the favourites and this kind of thing."

City won the title last season with record total of 100 points last season, but Guardiola sees that kind of dominance as an anomaly in English football. "I would say it's typical in England, this kind of situation," he said of this season's close fight.

"What's not common is what happened last season, where we win 18 games in a row, with 100 points and a lot of distance (to the team in second place)."

"Normal is what happens now, where every game is tough – and you can win or lose every single game, because every team is either involved in the title, or Europe, or in trying to stay in the Premier League."

Guardiola also suggested that it would be foolish to rule out Tottenham, Chelsea or even fifth-placed Manchester United in the title race. Spurs are two points behind City, in third, and five points off the lead, with Chelsea 12 points from top spot and United 14 points adrift.



Hertha hoping to heap more Berlin misery on Bayern

Berlin: Hertha Berlin captain Vedad Ibisevic sees today's German Cup clash against Bayern Munich as a "mini final" with the hosts hoping to topple the Bavarian giants again. Ibisevic scored when Hertha shocked Bayern 2-0 in the Bundesliga last September and the last-16 tie at the Olympic Stadium offers a chance to deal last season's finalists Bayern an early exit.

Ibisevic, 34, is out of contract in June, but the veteran striker has netted 10 goals this season and took heart from seeing Bayern suffer their fourth league defeat of the campaign at Bayer Leverkusen last Saturday.

"This feels like a mini final for us," said Ibisevic. "You can see that they have lost points this year that they normally wouldn't. It gives us hope that they could slip up again, so we know what's possible."

Bayern hope to have Germany goalkeeper Manuel Neuer back between the posts, but playing with a plastic cast on his right hand after damaging his thumb in training last week. Berlin's Olympic Stadium has been an unhappy hunting ground for Bayern on their most recent visits, losing last May's German Cup final 3-1 to Eintracht Frankfurt before the defeat by Hertha.

Ibisevic firmly sees his team as the underdogs even though Berlin last lost to Bayern in September 2016. "We don't need to talk about being the favourites here, they are an opponent who are one of the top teams in Europe."

Bundesliga leaders Borussia Dortmund were playing last night at home to Werder Bremen.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Lacklustre Liverpool slip-up again as Klopp points to injuries

'The preparation for the game was far from being perfect and we still got a point'



Liverpool's players react after West Ham scored during the Premier League match at the London Stadium on Monday night. (Reuters)

AFP
London

Jürgen Klopp pinpointed a mounting injury list as the explanation for Liverpool's sub-par performance in a 1-1 draw at West Ham on Monday night that leaves the league leaders just three points clear of Manchester City. Less than a week after missing the opportunity to go seven points clear of City with a 1-1 draw against Leicester, Liverpool again let a lead slip as Michail Antonio quickly cancelled out Sadio Mane's 22nd minute opener. Victory over Everton tonight will now take City to the top of the table, while Tottenham are just five points off the top in third.

It could have been even worse for Liverpool had Declan Rice and Mark Noble not failed to hit the target with huge chances to claim all three points for West Ham. Klopp was without the injured Jordan Henderson, Georginio Wijnaldum and Trent Alexander-Arnold meaning

James Milner started in an unfamiliar role at right-back, while the German was forced to name an experimental midfield three of Fabinho, Naby Keita and Adam Lallana. "Last night we trained and after we had to change three positions," said Klopp. "It's just a fact, it's not an excuse. The preparation for the game was far from being perfect and we still got a point."

After posting a perfect record against opposition outside the top six in their first 23 league games, Liverpool have now slipped twice in as many matches to mount the tension in their chase for a first title in 29 years.

However, Klopp played down suggestions it is the pressure and the weight of history that has dragged his players down over the past week. "It's not about pressure, it's about enjoying the situation you are in," added Klopp.

"We have 62 points, have lost one game in the whole season so far which is very positive. I think from your faces already you (the media) feel sorry for us. We are fine. Tonight was just a tough game."

Hammers boss Manuel Pellegrini claimed it was "impossible to play worse" after his side's 3-0 capitulation to Wolves last week that followed a deeply disappointing FA Cup exit to League One AFC Wimbledon.

Even without the injured Marko Arnautovic, Pellegrini got the response he wanted in West Ham's performance if not their end product and the Chilean was angered that Liverpool's opener was allowed to stand despite Milner clearly being offside when he crossed for Mane to score his 12th goal of the season.

"They have two clear chances, one that is one-and-a-half metres offside where they score a goal, and one in the last minute with (Divock) Origi in front of the linesman again one metre offside. Of course, you must be disappointed," said Pellegrini, who recalled a series of controversial calls that went in favour of Klopp's Borussia Dortmund when they beat Pellegrini's Malaga in the 2012/13 Champions League quarter-finals.

"Klopp is used to win with offside

goals. He beat me against Malaga with Borussia Dortmund with a goal seven metres offside, so he can't complain about nothing."

Liverpool's lead lasted just six minutes as the visitors switched off from a well-worked free-kick and Antonio drilled Felipe Anderson's pass in off the far post. More lax set-piece defending should have cost Liverpool again three minutes before the break when Rice headed wide another wicked Anderson free-kick delivery wide when completely unmarked 10 yards out.

Anderson continued to create problems in the second period and another positive break from the Brazilian should have created the winner when Noble fired over. Origi replaced the ineffective Roberto Firmino 15 minutes from time and the Belgian had a huge chance to make himself a hero as he did with a last gasp Merseyside derby winner against Everton in December.

This time, though, Origi shot meekly into Lukasz Fabianski's grateful arms with the final action of the match.

FOCUS

Crash investigators planning 'operation' on Sala's plane

AFP
London

British crash investigators yesterday launched an underwater operation to recover a body from the wreckage of the plane carrying Argentine footballer Emiliano Sala in the Channel. "We are attempting to recover the body. If we are successful, we will consider the feasibility of recovering the aircraft wreckage," an Air Accidents Investigation Branch (AIB) spokesperson said.

The light aircraft carrying the 28-year-old footballer and pilot David Ibbotson to his new Premier League team Cardiff City disappeared near the British island of Guernsey on January 21. The shipwreck hunter hired by Sala's family with the help of funds donated by football stars such as Lionel Messi found the plane wreckage on Sunday.

The AAIB has since taken over operations. It revealed on Monday that an unidentified body had been found at the site. But it warned yesterday that strong tides "mean we can only use the remotely operated vehicle (ROV) for limited periods each day". "Regardless of the results, we will not be making a further statement until the families have been informed," it said.

Shipwreck hunter David Mearns had earlier warned that "time is of the essence" in an underwater operation like the

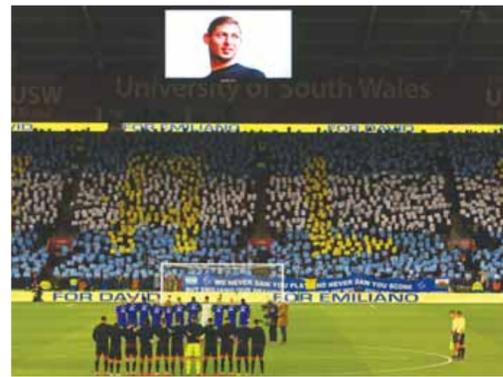
one being launched by Britain off France's northern coast. "As tragic as the loss is, it's made much, much worse if the body is never recovered or (the family) never get an answer to what happened," Mearns said. "Finding it is just the starting point. The AAIB has got to investigate it."

Sala was flying to join up with Cardiff from his old French team Nantes. His signing was the most expensive in the Welsh club's history and marked what fans had hoped would be a turning point in its bid to avoid relegation from England's top division.

Mearns said his discovery of two seat cushions on the French coast last week revealed that the plane had broken up. "It's in one area (on the seabed), it's all one mass, but some bits may not be connected. So what you don't want to do is to disturb the body in a way that you lose it," he said.

Sala's family raised more than 370,000 euros (\$422,000) in an online campaign to pay for the private search. "Had that not happened, I don't think anybody would have searched for the plane," Mearns said. "We were told by the AAIB that they didn't feel that there was much to be gained," he said.

The AAIB ended up chartering a ship to join Mearns on Sunday. He said recovery was now "technically possible – the water depth isn't an issue really, and the weather can be managed with the right ship". "It's a matter of will to do it," he added.



Cardiff and Bournemouth players observe a moment's silence to honour Cardiff's Argentinian striker Emiliano Sala, whose flight disappeared from radar over the English Channel north of Guernsey, before the Premier League football match on Saturday. (AFP)

SERIE A

Juventus are well clear, albeit with mounting sense of concern

Italian champs have dropped six points in 22 games, but have not been playing well for some time

By Paolo Bandini
The Guardian

Nine points clear at the top of Serie A, Juventus are on the cusp of a crisis. Well, that's what the papers say. Even La Repubblica, typically a sober voice in Italian sports coverage, applied the 'c' word to the Bianconeri on Sunday's front page. Hyperbole? Certainly. But Juventus had conceded six times in the space of four days. A 3-0 defeat to Atalanta in the Coppa Italia was followed by a 3-3 draw at home to Parma in Serie A. Worse, they let a two-goal lead slip inside the last 20 minutes against the Ducale.

There were mitigating circumstances. Giorgio Chiellini limped out of the Atalanta match with a calf strain, while fellow centre-backs Leonardo Bonucci and Andrea Barzagli were already out injured. Juventus's match-day squad to face Parma was their first since 2011 not to feature any of the famous BBC. (Though, you don't have to go back quite so far to find a game when none of them got on the pitch.)

The sale of Mehdi Benatia to Qatar side Al Duhail trimmed the champions' options further. Martin Cáceres was selected to start alongside Daniele Rugani at centre-back. The Uruguayan only rejoined Juventus on loan last week after the best part of three years away, during which he played sporadically for Southampton, Verona and Lazio. Cáceres looked as rusty as you might expect. It ought not to have mattered. Juventus had this game in hand by the 62nd minute, when Rugani volleyed home their second goal at the back post after Cristiano Ronaldo flicked on Mario Mandzukic's cross from the left. The Portuguese forward had opened the scoring midway through the first half.

Parma, with less than 30% possession, were having a hard time getting on the ball, let alone creating chances. But in the 64th minute, Juraj Kucka was given all the time he wanted to swing a cross in from deep on the left. Antonino Barilla met it with a thumping header beyond Mattia Perin. Several Juventus players were exposed on the goal, but most glaringly Sami Khedira - too slow to track Barilla's run - and Joao Cancelo - too lazy to offer support. Still, the league leaders had a quick response: Ronaldo rising to meet a Mandzukic cross moments later, restoring their advantage at 3-1. There was little sense of jeopardy here.

And perhaps that was the problem. For a team that had lost so emphatically in midweek, Juventus were inexcusably presumptuous. Rugani ought to have been marking Gervinho far



Juventus' Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo (left) is dejected as Parma players celebrate after scoring a last second equaliser during the Serie A match. (AFP)

more tightly in the 74th minute, when the Ivorian darted to the front post and met another Kucka cross with a heel flick that deflected off the defender and snuck in at the near post.

The worst was yet to come. Two minutes into injury-time, Juventus had Mario Mandzukic in possession down by his own corner flag. If he had simply booted the ball into touch, they likely would have been fine. Inexplicably, he chose to pivot and chip a pass back towards teammates on the edge of the box. The ball deflected off one opponent and fell to another - Luca Siligardi - who volleyed it on for Roberto Inglese. He resisted a weak challenge from Rugani and squared for Gervinho, whose close-range shot Perin could only palm on to the underside of the bar. It bounced down across the line for an improbable equaliser.

Never in Massimiliano Allegri's tenure had Juventus conceded six goals

in the space of two games. You could say that they were unlucky on Saturday, an unfamiliar defence punished severely for its missteps. Leonardo Spinazzola, making his first league start for Juventus, played as a wing-back for his former club, Atalanta, but was thrown in here on the left of a back four. Khedira also hit the woodwork twice at the other end. And yet these results have not come out of nowhere. It feels like an absurd thing to say of a team that has dropped just six points in 22 Serie A games, but Juventus have not been playing well for some time.

They should have lost to Lazio in their previous league match, when they failed to record a first-half shot for the first time since Opta started tracking such data in 2004-05. Narrow wins over Torino and Inter before Christmas were decided by individual moments - Simone Zaza's reckless backpass and Roberto Gagliardini's

shot against a post - more than any manifest superiority. Only Cristiano Ronaldo's individual talent had rescued a point in the league fixture at Atalanta. Not even he could save them on Wednesday, when Atalanta simply played them off the park. The Bergamo club are in fine fettle at present, but Juventus have not lost by such a margin to any domestic rival since Allegri took charge. Injuries and suspensions are a part of this picture. It is not only in defence that Juventus have been short-staffed. Miralem Pjanic missed the game against Lazio, and Emre Can was catastrophically poor as his replacement. Mandzukic was sorely missed - by Ronaldo especially - during the five games that he missed with a muscle strain before returning on Saturday. A team with Juventus's resources, however, cannot expect much sympathy. Paulo Dybala and Alex Sandro were among the unused substi-

tutes this weekend.

Taken in isolation, the draw with Parma is no catastrophe. Juventus are hardly in danger of losing first place as things stand. The crisis talk in papers such as La Repubblica relates not to Serie A, but the club's ambitions of winning the Champions League.

The club's president, Andrea Agnelli, was unabashed in telling players before this season began that their ambition ought to be to win every competition that they participated in. Defeat to Atalanta means that they have already failed. This will be the first time under Allegri that Juventus fail to win a domestic double.

A Champions League last-16 clash with Atletico looms larger than ever on the horizon. There is not truly a crisis in Turin, but with neither of Bonucci or Barzagli expected to make it back in time for the first leg, there is at least a mounting sense of concern.

Neymar celebrates birthday on crutches

Neymar celebrated his 27th birthday with a glittering party in Paris on Monday evening joined by family, Paris Saint-Germain teammates and a smattering of celebrities. DJ Bob Sinclair, Brazilian singer Wesley Safadão and world surf champion Gabriel Medina were among the 200 guests at the fashionable Pavillon Gabriel near the Champs-Élysées. The world's most expensive footballer, nursing a right foot injury, greeted his guests leaning on distinctive red crutches in keeping with the colour theme for the 'Nuit Rouge (Red Night)'. Among his club colleagues in attendance were captain Thiago Silva and goalkeeper Alphonse Areola.

Atalanta close in on Champions League places

Atalanta moved within one point of the Champions League places by beating Cagliari 1-0 in Serie A on Monday. Hans Hateboer headed in Timothy Castagne's cross five minutes after halftime to give his team, who have never qualified for the Champions League, their fifth win in six matches in all competitions. Atalanta, who handed Juventus their first domestic defeat of the season when they won 3-0 in the Coppa Italia last Wednesday, have 35 points, level with AS Roma and Lazio and one behind Milan who occupy the lowest of the four Champions League slots.

Atletico Madrid's Isacio Calleja dies aged 82

Isacio Calleja who won two league titles with Atletico Madrid and the 1964 European championships with Spain died on Monday aged 82, his former club announced. Born in 1936 Calleja joined Atletico in 1958 and the defender remained with the club until his retirement 425 matches later in 1972. "Today is a sad day for the rojiblanca. Atletico Madrid is in mourning after the death of our ex player Isacio Calleja" the club announced on their website.

Man Utd open talks with Rashford over new deal

Manchester United have opened talks with Marcus Rashford over a new and improved contract following the forward's impressive run of form under caretaker manager Ole Gunnar Solskjær. The 21-year-old scored his 10th goal of the season in Sunday's 1-0 win at Leicester, becoming the second-youngest player to reach 100 Premier League appearances for United after Ryan Giggs. Rashford's contract expires next year and while United have the option to extend it until 2021, negotiations are understood to have started over a fresh agreement.

Injury delays Fellaini debut for China's Shandong

Marouane Fellaini's debut at Chinese club Shandong Luneng has been delayed to allow the former Manchester United midfielder treatment for a calf injury, his new coach said. The 31-year-old arrived in Hong Kong on Sunday to meet with teammates and sign autographs for fans, but missed training and flew home to Belgium that night for treatment. Fellaini had been expected to make his first appearance with the club at Hong Kong's annual Lunar New Year Cup invitational yesterday. "Of course we are very happy that he is joining the club," Shandong coach Li Xiaopeng told reporters.

SPOTLIGHT

Ceferin set to guide UEFA through key period for European football

Reuters
Zurich

European football boss Aleksander Ceferin is set to be re-elected unopposed at a UEFA Congress in Rome tomorrow, putting him in charge for four years which could see fundamental changes to club football on the continent.

The Slovenian lawyer will face a delicate balancing act as he attempts to find a middle ground between Europe's big clubs and the rest, who fear being left behind by their richer peers. Europe's biggest teams are pushing for drastic changes to the region's club competitions, including the flagship Champions League, so they can play each other more often. UEFA is already looking ahead to the cycle beginning in 2024, and the European Club Association (ECA) has said it wants a model that will increase the number of clubs participating and guarantee more matches for all. ECA chairman Andrea Agnelli, the president of Italian champions Juventus, and Ceferin have agreed to work together, although they have not given any more details on their



plans. Agnelli suggested in an interview with Britain's Guardian newspaper last year that the 32-team group stage in UEFA's Champions League could be arranged into four groups of eight rather than eight groups of four. Such a model would leave less space for domestic matches, but Agnelli suggested that teams playing in the Champions League be allowed to field a number of under-21 or under-23 players in their home leagues. He added that he was just "brainstorming", but it nevertheless gave an insight into how the big clubs may be thinking.

UEFA currently enjoys a near-monopoly on competitions involving top European clubs, but that position is also under threat: FIFA president Gianni Infantino

wants to introduce a four-yearly 24-team Club World Cup and says his plans are backed by an investment consortium willing to put in \$25bn over 12 years in return for 49% ownership of such a competition. The FIFA Council agreed in October to set up a task force and lengthen the consultation process after solid opposition from UEFA and Europe's domestic leagues put Infantino's plans on hold. Meanwhile, the pre-season friendly tournament organised by US-based Relevant Sports and involving top European clubs continues to grow.

After starting out with eight teams in 2013, last year's edition featured 18 sides and saw matches played in the US, Singapore and various European venues. Each team played three matches and all were then ranked in a single league table based on their results. Ceferin was elected in September 2016 to replace Michel Platini who was banned for ethics violations. Platini has denied any wrongdoing. Since then, Ceferin has argued that closing the financial gap between a handful of top clubs and the rest - the so-called "competitive balance" - is the biggest challenge facing European football.

TAX FRAUD

Mourinho avoids jail but is hit by fine

AFP
Madrid

Ex-Manchester United manager Jose Mourinho has avoided jail for tax fraud as part of a deal with Spanish prosecutors revealed yesterday but will pay a fine of close to two million euros. The 56-year-old is accused of committing tax fraud in 2011 and 2012 when he coached Spanish giants Real Madrid. According to the agreement, Mourinho accepted a one-year jail sentence immediately commuted to a fine of 182,500 euros. The Portuguese coach will also have to pay an additional penalty of 1.98mn euros (\$2.3mn).

Mourinho already paid 1.14mn euros in 2015 as an administrative penalty and the deal stipulates that prosecutors won't oppose that this amount be deducted from the overall fine. The agreement still has to be validated by a judge. Mourinho, sacked by Manchester United in December following a string of disappointing performances, is the latest high-profile football figure to be judged over his tax affairs in Spain. Spanish prosecutors accuse Mourinho, who coached Real Madrid between 2010 and 2013, of failing to declare income of 1.6mn euros in 2011 and 1.7mn euros in 2012.

The grounds for the case, as with a series of others involving football stars based in Spain, is how income from Mourinho's image rights was managed and declared. Prosecutors believe by ceding his image rights to a series of companies based in tax havens, Mourinho committed fraud by not declaring the income those companies made from



Portuguese football manager Jose Mourinho (centre) falls as he drops the puck to start a Continental hockey league match between Avangard Omsk and SKA Saint Petersburg in Balashikha outside Moscow on Monday. (AFP)

the rights. Cristiano Ronaldo, now of Juventus, was also found guilty of tax fraud when at Real Madrid. He was accused of having avoided paying millions in taxes due on his image rights between 2011 and 2014. He too avoided jail but was ordered by a Spanish court last month to pay more than 3.5mn euros, part of a broader 18.8-million-euro payout agreed between his lawyers and Spain's taxman.

Ronaldo received a two-year jail sentence immediately commuted to a fine of 365,000 euros and another penalty of 3.2mn euros, according to the sentence. Barcelona's Lionel Messi, once Ronaldo's big La Liga rival,

paid a two-million-euro fine in 2016 in his own tax wrangle and received a 21-month jail term. The prison sentence was later commuted to a further fine of 252,000 euros, equivalent to 400 euros per day of the original term.

Messi and his father Jorge Horacio Messi were found guilty of using companies in Belize, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Uruguay to avoid paying taxes on 4.16mn euros of Messi's income earned from his image rights. Barcelona defender Javier Mascherano also agreed a one-year suspended sentence with authorities for tax fraud in 2016.

RUGBY

Hansen mocks 'Mickey Mouse' Wallabies rival



AFP
Wellington

All Blacks coach Steve Hansen has reportedly kicked off his World Cup sledging campaign early by likening under-fire Wallabies mentor Michael Cheika to Mickey Mouse.

Hansen, whose team defeated Cheika's Australia in the 2015 World Cup final, also said the Wallabies coach was vulnerable to mind games because he had trouble controlling his emotions, news website Stuff reported yesterday.

It said Hansen made the remarks after being questioned about Australian great Mark Ella's comment in 2016 that "Mickey Mouse could coach the All Blacks to victory" given the quality of

New Zealand's players. "They've got Mickey Mouse coaching Aussie," Hansen told a ticket-only charity function in Wellington on Monday night, Stuff reported.

Hansen, who will step down after the World Cup in Japan this year, said it was possible to distract Cheika by using niggling ploys like refusing to use his name before matches.

"The plan was not to call him by his name but just say he's the Australian coach. Then he went on a tirade about not respecting him," Hansen said.

"I guess what we're trying to do there is take his mind off the job and while I say he's not a bad bloke, he's got to control his emotions.

"I think he's got a good side, he does a good job of the coaching, but sometimes he just lets

himself down there."

Hansen also claimed he had a psychological edge over Warren Gatland when his fellow Kiwi coached the touring British and Irish Lions in 2017.

But he said he backed off when a New Zealand newspaper went too far and published a cartoon of Gatland as a clown.

Gatland, who also coaches Wales, managed to get under Hansen's skin during that drawn series when he accused the New Zealanders of dangerous play, prompting the All Blacks boss to make an angry phone call to talk-back radio defending his tactics.

Hansen reportedly revealed he takes a less abrasive approach with England's Eddie Jones — "He likes to be praised, so we praise him" — and Ireland's Joe Schmidt, who he called "a good coach and a mate".

'The plan was not to call him by his name but just say he's the Australian coach. Then he went on a tirade'

All Blacks Williams hints 2019 could be last year with the Blues

Reuters
Wellington

All Blacks centre Sonny Bill Williams has indicated that this year could be his last at the Auckland Blues. Williams, a two-times Rugby World Cup winner, is out of contract following the global showpiece in Japan later this year and turns 34 in August. He had previously hinted that he might look to return to rugby league or seek out a coaching career at the end of his contract and said yesterday at training with the Auckland Blues that it could be his last with his hometown side.

"It could be, bro, it could be," he told the *New Zealand Herald* when asked if it could be his final season at the Blues. "If I did finish at the end of the year, as long as I competed every day and put my best foot forward as a person and a player I'll be happy."

Williams is a certainty for Steve Hansen's Rugby World Cup squad, pending any injuries, something he recognised had blighted him, over the last two seasons. Williams tore his Achilles while playing rugby sevens at the Rio Olympics in 2016 and has battled with wrist, knee, hand and shoulder injuries since. The inside centre, however, said that he was now back at

full fitness and was hoping to get through 2019 injury free. "For the last two years I've been so methodical with my planning and preparation," he said. "Every off-season: 'A, B, C, D and I'm going to get to E.' "It starts here with the Blues. I want us to have a successful year. I want the boys to succeed."

Williams added he would be available for selection for the Blues for their opening Super Rugby match with the Canterbury Crusaders at Eden Park on Feb. 16.

He was also relishing the competition for places at the Blues, with fellow World Cup winning centre Ma'a Nonu back in New Zealand rugby with the Auckland-based franchise after three seasons in France following the 2015 tournament victory.

Both prefer to play in the number 12 jersey, but Williams said they were quite comfortable in the same midfield if required.

"We've always had a good friendship. It's no secret that we've always competed for the same position, we're out here competing as you can see but we're laughing and bringing out the best in each other as well," he added. "I feel like some of the best games we've played for the All Blacks have been together. I don't think that will be an issue."



RUGBY / SIX NATIONS

England hope to have injured Itoje back for title push



England's Maro Itoje leaves the pitch after sustaining an injury on Saturday. (Reuters)

AFP
London

England hope Maro Itoje will return for the end of their Six Nations campaign after he suffered a knee injury in his side's dramatic opening victory against Ireland.

Itoje will miss the matches against France and Wales but if his rehabilitation progresses well, the British and Irish Lions lock could be back for the last two rounds against Italy and Scotland.

Offsetting the news of his absence is the return to fitness of flanker Brad Shields, centre Ben Te'o and wing Joe Cokanasiga,

who missed the stunning start to the championship in Dublin through injury.

"Maro had the scan and saw a specialist yesterday (Monday). It's ligament damage to his knee," said forwards coach Steve Borthwick.

"We anticipate him being able to play at the latter part of the tournament. Hopefully he'll heal fast and we'll have him back ASAP."

Itoje's Saracens team-mate Nick Isiekwe has been called into England's 35-man training squad ahead of Sunday's match against France at Twickenham.

Courtney Lawes, who was a second-half replacement against Ireland, and Joe Launchbury are competing to fill the vacancy in

the second row alongside George Kruis.

"Maro's a fantastic player and a great personality around the squad," said Borthwick. "Clearly it's significant that he's out, but we have a lot of brilliant players in his position."

Itoje sustained the injury to his right knee in the second half of England's 32-20 win at the Aviva Stadium in Dublin when being cleared out of a ruck by Ireland flanker Peter O'Mahony.

He was also ruled out for five weeks after suffering a chipped patella to the same knee in the build-up to the autumn series, but played throughout England's four November internationals until the nature of the injury was discovered.

TENNIS / ATP SOFIA OPEN

Wawrinka suffers first-round defeat

Reuters
Sofia

Three-times grand slam champion Stan Wawrinka fell at the first hurdle in the Sofia Open on Monday, beaten 3-6, 7-6 (5), 6-4 by Romanian Marius Copil.

The Swiss, who has fallen to 57 in the rankings, strolled to the first set in just 23 minutes after breaking Copil in the sixth game, but the Romanian became more and more comfortable as the match went on and bagged the second set after a tiebreak.

Copil, who reached the tournament's final last year, put up stubborn resistance from the baseline in the third set, wrapping up his first career victory over the 33-year-old Wawrinka, whose trademark backhand failed to fire.

"It's great to start with a win against Wawrinka," said world number 56 Copil. "I made a few mistakes at the beginning. I had to change things, I knew I had to stay in the game after losing the first set.

"I served well today," added the Romanian. "The serve has always been my main weapon."

Next up for Copil is the winner of the first-round clash between sixth seed Fernando Verdasco of Spain and Bulgarian qualifier Alex-



andar Lazarov, who defeated Italy's Luca Vanni 7-6 (6), 3-6, 7-5 on Monday.

Top seed Karen Khachanov of Russia will kick off his campaign in the second round against the winner of the match between Uzbekistan's Denis Istomin and Italian Matteo Berrettini.

Greek second seed Stefanos Tsitsipas, who reached the Australian Open semi-finals last month, will play against Germany's Jan-Lennard Struff or Italy's Stefano Travaglia.

TENNIS

Injury forces world No. 1 Osaka out of Qatar Total Open



By Sports Reporter
Doha

World number one and 2019 Australian Open champion Naomi Osaka has been forced to pull out of the Qatar Total Open due to a back injury, the event organisers announced yesterday.

The Premier WTA Tour tournament will be held at the Khalifa International Tennis & Squash Complex in Doha from February 11 to 16.

Osaka said, "I am sorry to have to withdraw from Doha this year as I was looking forward to playing and seeing my fans there. I wish everyone a great week and hope to see everyone next year."

The Japanese superstar made her debut in Doha at the 2018 edition where she entered the main draw after successfully navigating the qualifiers. She, however, suffered a second round loss (6-4, 6-1) to Anas-

tasija Sevastova of Latvia.

With her withdrawal, world No. 3 and 2014 champion Simona Halep of Romania is now the top seed. The former world No. 1 will be joined by other superstars including Angelique Kerber, a three-time Grand Slam champion and 2014 finalist, and Karolina Pliskova, the 2017 champion, among others.

"Osaka will surely be missed at this year's tournament. Tennis fans in Doha were definitely looking forward to see the newly-crowned Australian Open champion in action at the regional home of tennis but we understand that her health and fitness comes first. We wish her the best as she recovers from the injury while we hope to welcome her next year," said tournament director Saad Saleh al-Mohannadi.

Al-Mohannadi noted that all the arrangements are in place to ensure a very successful tournament and that the 2019 Qatar Total Open will be top-notch and exciting like never before.

Kvitova describes knife attack in court

Czech tennis player Petra Kvitova has described a knife attack in court yesterday more than two years after being assaulted in her home. "I have screamed, there was blood everywhere," the 28-year-old was quoted by the Czech agency CTK. Kvitova appeared by video link from a room beside the court in Brno so as not to face her alleged attacker in person. The Wimbledon champion from 2011 and 2014 described waiting for a doping control when the accused, claiming to be plumber, obtained entry to her house in Prostějov in December 2016. Kvitova said she was asked to run the hot water in the bathroom when "suddenly I had a knife to my throat from behind". Kvitova suffered injuries to her left hand in the subsequent tussle. The 33-year-old defendant denies the charges, saying he was working at a construction site when the incident occurred. If convicted he faces up to 12 years in prison.

Halep appoints Belgian Van Cleemput as new coach

Former world number one Simona Halep has appointed Thierry Van Cleemput as her new coach and will officially begin working with the Belgian at next week's Qatar Total Open. Halep had planned to fly solo for the first few months of 2019 after former coach Darren Cahill left to spend more time with his family in Australia. French Open champion Halep began speaking with Van Cleemput at last month's Australian Open after he split with world number 21 David Goffin midway through the tournament, according to a report on the WTA website. Van Cleemput had worked with his compatriot for the last five years, overseeing Goffin's rise to the top-10. World number three Halep, whose pre-season was shortened due to a back issue, made the fourth round at Melbourne Park where she lost to American Serena Williams in three sets. Halep will represent Romania in their Fed Cup tie against Czech Republic in Ostrava this weekend before tournaments in Doha and Dubai.

Davis Cup champions Croatia among six seeded nations

Davis Cup champions Croatia have been seeded second for the revamped 18-team finals week that will take place in Madrid in November. Last year's runners-up France were named top seeds on Monday while Belgium and the United States were also seeded alongside wildcards Britain and Argentina. The six nations will occupy the first slots across Groups A-F when the draw for the finals week is made in Madrid on Feb. 14. The seedings are based on the current Davis Cup Nations Ranking, with teams ranked seven to 12 — Spain, Serbia, Australia, Italy, Germany and Kazakhstan — set to be drawn into the second slot in the groups. The remaining nations ranked from 13 to 18 — Canada, Japan, Colombia, Netherlands, Russia and Chile — will be drawn into the third slot in the groups. The winners of each group will advance to the knockout phase along with the two second-placed teams with the best percentage of sets, games and points won. The 12 losing nations from last weekend's qualifiers will be part of the Zone Group competition draw today.

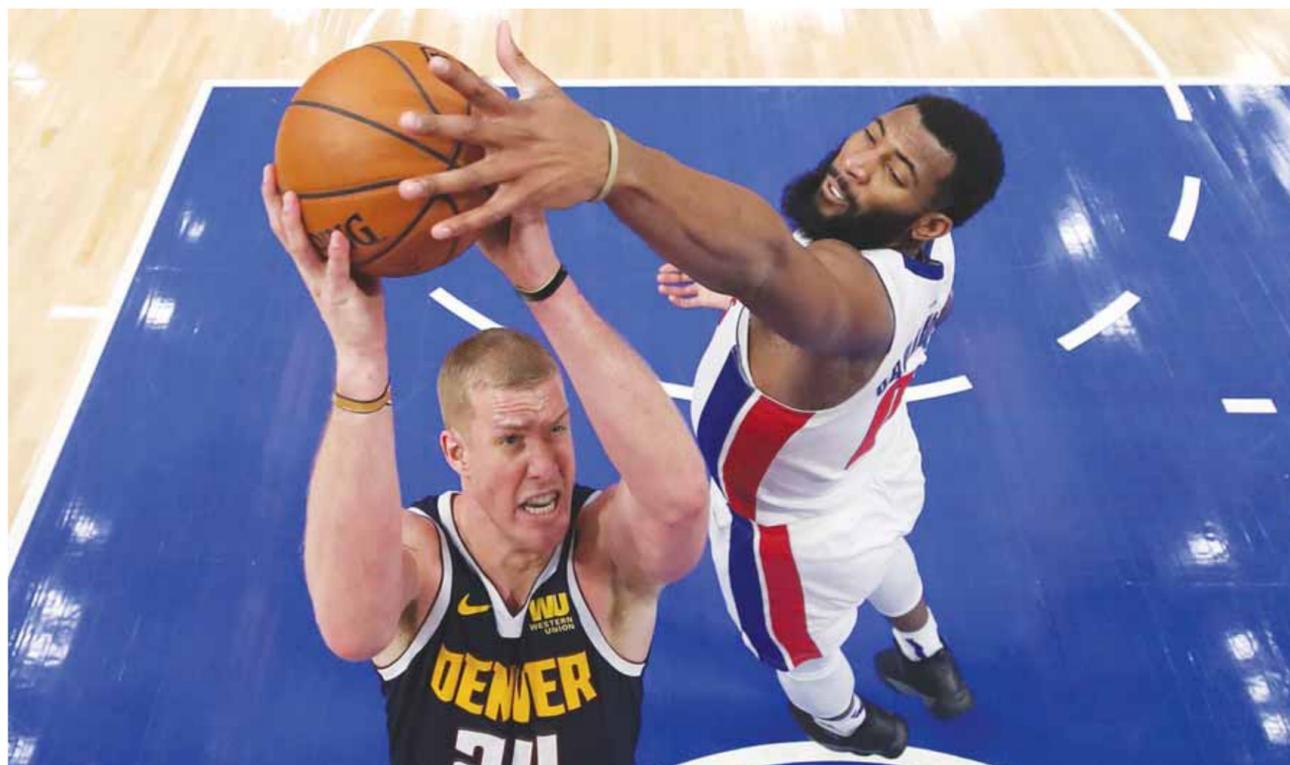
World Rugby approves new five-a-side competition: report

World Rugby has given its approval for a new five-a-side version of the sport with an international tournament likely to be held in London this year, according to a report in the *Times*. The sport's world governing body is hopeful the shortened version — Rugby X — can improve the game's finances and boost its international appeal much like Twenty20 did for cricket, the report said. Five more tournaments have been planned around the world for next year, with broadcaster ITV in talks to acquire rights to show the initial event to be held in London's O2 Arena, it added. The world's major rugby sevens nations including England, Australia, Wales, Fiji and France are potential participants.

NBA

Pistons bounce back, Harden fuels Rockets victory

'I like the way our guys responded. Enthusiasm and togetherness'



Andre Drummond (right) of the Detroit Pistons blocks the shot of Mason Plumlee of the Denver Nuggets during the second-half of their NBA game at Little Caesars Arena. (AFP)

AFP
Los Angeles

Andre Drummond scored a season-high 27 points as the Detroit Pistons rebounded from a crushing defeat with a 129-103 victory over the Denver Nuggets.

The Pistons were coming off a devastating loss to the Los Angeles Clippers on Saturday in which Detroit surrendered a 23-point third-quarter lead.

There was no sign of a late-game let-down on Monday as the Pistons turned a 14-point lead going into the fourth quarter into a 26-point win.

They never trailed in the second half, leading by as many as 29 points. Drummond's sparkling effort included 12 rebounds, three assists and three blocked shots.

Stanley Johnson scored 21 points and Blake Griffin added 17.

The Pistons reserves, out-scored 80-17 in the loss to the Clippers, came through with 60 points against the Nuggets, De-

troit's bench players expanding the lead to start both the second and fourth quarters.

They helped make the difference on a night when all five Denver starters scored in double figures, led by Monte Morris's 18 points. Nevertheless, Denver saw their six-game win streak snapped and dropped out of a tie with the Golden State Warriors for first place in the Western Conference.

"I like the way our guys responded," Pistons coach Dwane Casey said. "Enthusiasm and togetherness."

HARDEN STREAKS ON

NBA Most Valuable Player James Harden scored 14 of his 44 points in the fourth quarter - notching his 20th 40-point game of the season in the Houston Rockets' 118-110 victory over the lowly Phoenix Suns.

Harden, who pulled down eight rebounds and handed out six assists, extended his streak of games with 30 or more points to 27.

The Suns, who dropped their 11th straight, trailed by as many as 20 in the third quarter but cut the deficit to single

RESULTS

Milwaukee	113-94	Brooklyn
Sacramento	127-112	San Antonio
Houston	118-110	Phoenix
Indiana	109-107	New Orleans
Detroit	129-103	Denver
Atlanta	137-129	Washington

digits in the fourth. Harden produced 11 points in a four-minute span - including a 31-foot three-pointer that pushed the Rockets lead to 15 points with 3:06 remaining - as Houston sealed the win.

The Milwaukee Bucks pushed their league-leading record to 39-13 with a 113-94 victory over the Nets in Brooklyn.

Bucks star Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 30 points, pulled down 15 rebounds and handed out nine assists for Milwaukee, who won their fourth straight.

The crowd at the Barclays Center included former US President Bill Clinton and three-time major golf champion Brooks Koepka.

Clinton and his wife, Hillary, have a home in suburban New York and he said he tries to take on a couple of games in Brooklyn each season.

But he was invited to the game by Bucks co-owner Marc Lasry and enjoyed the chance to watch Antetokounmpo.

"He's unbelievable," Clinton said of Milwaukee's Most Valuable Player candidate. "He's really come into his own this year."

Malcolm Brogdon added 16 points and Eric Bledsoe scored 15 for the Bucks, who have won 10 of their last 11 games.

The injury-depleted Nets offered little resistance, connecting on just 32.4 percent of their shots from the field - including making just five of 37 attempted three-pointers.

Indiana guard Darren Collison starred in the Pacers' 109-107 victory over the Pelicans in New Orleans.

Collison scored 11 of his team-high 22 points in the fourth quarter, draining a three-pointer, a jump shot and a free throw in the last two minutes as the Pacers held on for the win.

SPOTLIGHT

Warriors, Durant keep cool as others look to future

Reuters
Los Angeles

With all the hub-bub surrounding Kevin Durant possibly getting ready to move on via free agency, Golden State Warriors general manager Bob Myers and head coach Steve Kerr don't seem to be too concerned.

In fact, Myers thinks his All-Star forward will be back along with the foundation that has helped turn Golden State into an NBA dynasty that is favoured to win the championship for the fourth time in five years.

"I feel like all our players are happy and want to stay with us and continue with us," Myers said Monday after practice when asked about Durant's future. "That's how I feel. But again, I've only worked in the NBA as an agent and in this capacity..."

"I feel like we've got a great environment. I get it that people want to know the answers to these questions, but what I would re-convey is it's hard to win a basketball game in the NBA. It's hard to win a playoff game. It's hard to win a championship. That has to be our focus, and I think that is our focus."

So don't expect the Warriors - with other stars such as Stephen Curry, Klay Thompson, Draymond Green and DeMarcus Cousins - to be in the mix before the trade deadline on Thursday.

"I don't sense we're in a position this year where anybody is worried. Nor should they," Kerr said. "I think the sense of it here is that's everybody else's problem."

Durant has said he wants to be "transparent" about his next move this summer, but recently has tried to take the conversation elsewhere. Whether he stays or goes might be out of the Warriors' hands.

"I don't think you can honestly answer anything," Myers said. "That goes for players,

too, until the season is over."

Using the loss to the Cleveland Cavaliers in the 2016 NBA Finals as an example, the season in which the Warriors set a league record with 73 regular-season wins, Myers added, "You can ask anybody in the organisation and say, 'What kind of season are you having?' They'll say, 'Ask me when the season is over.' I don't know. It's hard to say."

All the recent chatter about Durant's future won't negatively affect the Warriors, according to Myers.

"I don't necessarily feel that in the locker room personally," Myers said. "I don't feel like it's become part of our fabric. I think maybe that comes from being a team that's been scrutinized for the last three or four years, that's used to a lot of coverage, which they've earned and deserve."

"You've got players that have been in a spotlight position, and Steve, who's got great experience as a player, playing with some high-level guys, coaching our team. He really is kind of the steward of that ship as far as keeping our locker room intact and in a good place, but it's not easy. It's a hard thing to do. But I don't sense any of that creeping in from my perspective."

While Durant hasn't made any public statements in recent days about his pending free agency, Myers reiterated that all is calm as far as the Warriors are concerned. Even if there's still talk long after the dust settled from an earlier dustup between Durant and Green.

"Just decent people going through issues in life," Myers said. "They're really good, high-character people. And that allows you to persevere in situations like we all face in any work environment or life when things get difficult. And who rises above it and how you navigate those things. I attribute it to Steve and his leadership and our players. They've been through a lot together, a lot of these guys."



NHL

Stars outscore Coyotes in wild 3rd period, hang on

Reuters
Dallas

Tyler Seguin scored with 7:32 remaining in a wild third period to lift the Dallas Stars to a 5-4 win over the visiting Arizona Coyotes on Monday for their season-high fifth consecutive win.

The Coyotes led 2-1 entering the third period, but the first eight minutes were an offensive spectacle, with Dallas scoring three times in the first 3:39 to take a 4-2 lead before Arizona responded with a pair of scores over a 1:01 span to square things at 4-4.

That scoring set up Seguin's game-winning goal, when he took a pass from behind the net from Jamie Benn and beat Arizona goaltender Darcy Kuemper high to the stick side. Alexander Radulov also got a workman-like assist on the goal.

Dallas goaltender Ben Bishop had to survive a late Arizona power play, including almost two full minutes of the Coyotes' six-on-four attack when Kuemper left the net, to earn the victory. The Stars' win streak matches their longest since they won six straight games from March 2-13, 2012.

Arizona jumped to the lead at the 8:39 mark of the first period as Oliver Ekman-Larsson took Nick Cousins' feed and ripped a shot past Bishop, with Clayton Keller garnering the secondary assist on the tally. It was Ekman-Larsson's 109th career goal, moving him past Teppo Numminen to the top of the team's list for goals scored by a defenseman. The Stars answered 3:36 into the second

RESULTS

Toronto	6-1	Anaheim
Los Angeles	4-3	Rangers
Philadelphia	2-1	Vancouver
Dallas	5-4	Arizona

period with Roope Hintz cutting into the slot and tipping a perfect pass from Jason Spezza past Kuemper for a power-play goal. MiRO Heiskanen also got an assist.

The Coyotes regained the lead about 6 1/2 minutes later as Kevin Connauton scored his first goal of the season, firing a shot from the point that deflected off the stick of Dallas defenseman Roman Polak and past Bishop. Ilya Lyubushkin and Josh Archibald earned assists. Then came the breathless third period.

The Stars' first goal in the torrid first four minutes came from John Klingberg, an assist from Seguin and Benn, at the 2:28 mark while on a four-on-three power play.

Next, Radek Faksa scored on assists from Heiskanen and Denis Gurianov just 36 seconds later with a five-on-four advantage. Finally, Mattias Janmark found the net, helped by Jason Dickinson and Blake Comeau, 35 seconds hence.

Arizona swung right back as Vinnie Hinostroza scored at the 6:49 mark off assists from Lawson Crouse and Jordan Oesterle. The Coyotes tied the game on Alex Galchenyuk's goal with 7:50 elapsed in the period, with Cousins and Keller making assists.

Meanwhile Tyler Toffoli scored 25 seconds into overtime Monday night to cap a frantic

comeback by the Los Angeles Kings, who edged the host New York Rangers 4-3. The Kings, who never led in regulation, forced overtime when Adrian Kempe scored his second goal with 59.6 seconds left in the third period.

The Rangers nearly won on their first possession of overtime, when Mika Zibanejad's shot rang off the right post. Zibanejad actually raised his arms for a moment thinking the puck had gone in. Instead, the puck caromed close to center ice, where Toffoli picked it up and raced into the Rangers' zone.

Toffoli shuffled the puck for a few steps and deked New York defenseman Brady Skjei into thinking he was going to pass across the crease. Instead, Toffoli fired a shot that sailed over the pads of Henrik Lundqvist.

The Kings, who have the fewest points in the Western Conference, have alternated wins with losses in their last eight games. The Rangers have lost two straight and three of four. All three defeats have been by one goal. Kempe, who hadn't scored since December 11, recorded the second two-goal game of his career and his first since he collected a hat trick against the Montreal Canadiens on October 18, 2017.

Anze Kopitar also scored for Los Angeles. Goaltie Jonathan Quick made 24 saves.

Zibanejad, Chris Kreider and Adam McQuaid scored for the Rangers. Zibanejad recorded a point on 10 consecutive goals by the Rangers dating back to a power-play tally against the Boston Bruins on January 19. It was the longest such streak in team history, but it ended when McQuaid scored unassisted in the third period.



Dallas Stars center Tyler Seguin celebrates after scoring the game-winning goal against the Arizona Coyotes during the third period of their NHL game at the American Airlines Center. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

SPOTLIGHT

Dutch boxer who fought Ali still riding punches in Bulgaria

'I would live a normal life but I don't know if I can live in a house. I'm more like a camper'



Former Dutch boxer Rudi Lubbers hugs one of the stray dogs he and his partner were looking after in front of the van where they were living for the last eight months, near the village of Kosharitsa, Bulgaria. (Reuters)

Reuters
Kosharitsa, Bulgaria

Former Dutch boxing champion Rudi Lubbers, who lost to Muhammad Ali on points in a 12-round heavyweight fight in Jakarta four and a half decades ago, is back on his feet again after taking one of the heaviest punches of his life.

The 73-year-old and his partner Ria have been living in poverty in southeastern Bulgaria for the last two months, only to receive help after his story grabbed huge attention in the Netherlands following a TV documentary shown last Sunday.

They survived the freezing conditions in a broken-down van, lacking electricity, water and sanitary facilities, and looking after stray dogs, but Ria's health deteriorated suddenly and she was rushed to hospital on Friday in critical condition.

Lubbers said her condition had improved slightly but she would remain in hospital for a few more days at least.

"The most important (thing) now is that my girlfriend returns in good condition and can see the dogs again," Lubbers told Reuters just outside the dilapidated van in the countryside near the village of Kosharitsa.

"In Bulgaria it's impossible to live in a house with so many

dogs. It's possible if you have three or four dogs but at one moment I had 16 dogs with babies.

"I would live a normal life but I don't know if I can live in a house. I'm more like a camper."

Lubbers, who represented the Netherlands at the 1964 and 1968 Olympic Games before turning professional in 1970, said his fight with former world champion Ali, for which he earned \$125,000, made him mentally stronger.

"I've learned from the fight, so I could survive here," he said, adding that he and Ria had received food and clothes from local people as well as Bulgarian mastika (strong anise-flavoured drink) to keep them warm in the

freeze. Many in the Netherlands were shocked to see their boxing hero in such a desperate situation and more than 12,500 euros was collected after a crowd-funding campaign was launched.

Rudi's son Marco, who hasn't been in touch with his dad for two years, arrived in Bulgaria after watching the documentary while Dutch people, living in the Balkan country, arranged a temporary shelter for the dogs.

Lubbers worked at funfairs with Ria for several years after retiring but became homeless after she was declared bankrupt in 1999 and they lived in Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Portugal before arriving in Bulgaria a few

years ago. Lubbers said he had remained friends with Ali who fought him in 1973 as he prepared for a rematch with his great rival Joe Frazier.

"Years after the fight, he (Ali) came to Holland," said Lubbers who revealed that Ali had told him something he would remember forever. "Ali told me: 'Rudi, you're the only white man from whom I ever learned something.' Lubbers, never beaten by a Dutch opponent during his career, said he still watched boxing but was disappointed by modern techniques. "I love boxing but boxing has changed," said Lubbers, who has suffered from asthma all his life.

"It's more fighting now."

NFL

Rams assistant coach Taylor named head coach for Bengals

AFP
Atlanta

Zac Taylor, who helped guide the Los Angeles Rams into Super Bowl 53, was named the new head coach of the NFL's Cincinnati Bengals on Monday.

The 35-year-old assistant coach for seven NFL campaigns served as quarterbacks coach for the Rams this past season under head coach Sean McVay for a team that won 13 games and advanced to Sunday's Super Bowl, losing 13-3 to the New England Patriots.

"I am happy and fortunate to join the Cincinnati Bengals as head coach," Taylor said. "This is a great organisation with good people and a rich history and I am excited to get started."

"I am looking to add to that history by setting high standards and holding everyone here accountable to those standards. There is a lot of work to do and this is day one. We're going to attack every day with enthusiasm to get this team ready to go."

The Bengals fired coach Marvin Lewis after a 6-10 campaign, their worst showing since 2010. Cincinnati had reached the playoffs seven times in 16 seasons under Lewis, but lost every playoff game they played. Their most recent post-season triumph came after the 1990 campaign.

"Zac is a bright coach with an offensive mind and background, which is important to have in today's NFL," Bengals president Mike Brown said. "And he's young. He embraces new ideas and new ways to do things, which will be a good thing for us. I believe our team will be exciting and fun to watch with him at the helm."

Taylor began his NFL coaching career as an assistant quarterbacks coach with Miami in 2012 and spent the next two seasons as the Dolphins quarterbacks coach before adding offensive coordinator duties to his role. He left the Dolphins for the offensive coordinator post at the University of Cincinnati in 2016, then jumped back to the NFL with the Rams in 2017 as a receivers coach before working closely with Rams star signal caller Jared Goff and his understudies this season.

Taylor, the son-in-law of former Green Bay Packers coach Mike Sherman, was a rare find even as a youth. He grew up in college football-loving Norman, Oklahoma, the son of a former Sooners captain, only to play collegiately for their arch-rivals, the Nebraska Cornhuskers.

Dolphins name Patriots assistant Flores as new coach

Brian Flores, a member of the Super Bowl champion New England Patriots' coaching staff since 2004, was named as the new head coach of the NFL's Miami Dolphins on Monday. Flores replaces Adam Gase, who was fired in December after the Dolphins finished 7-9 but later hired as coach of the New York Jets. His hiring was confirmed a day after the Patriots defeated the Los Angeles Rams 13-3 in Super Bowl 53 in Atlanta. "To be a head coach in this league is a dream come true. To be head coach of the Miami Dolphins is a dream come true," Flores said.

"This is a great organization with a great history, with a great fan base, and I'm excited to be here," he added. The Dolphins have managed only one winning season in the past decade, have made the playoffs only twice since the 2001 season and haven't won a playoff game since December 2000.

Flores, 37, spent the past three seasons as linebackers coach for the Patriots after four seasons coaching safeties. Prior duties included serving as an assistant on offense, defense, scouting and special teams.

During his time with the franchise, the Patriots have won four Super Bowl titles, including three of the past five.

"Two things that stand out immediately when you meet Brian are his football intelligence and leadership skills," Dolphins general manager Chris Grier said.

"Brian is widely respected throughout the NFL. He paid his dues in New England working in personnel, on offense, defense and special teams, which helped him build a great understanding of what it takes to win."

It's that leadership the Dolphins will rely upon to reach the Super Bowl for the first time since 1984 as they seek their first NFL crown since 1973.

"If you talk with anyone who has played for him or worked with him, you will hear about his ability to lead and get the most out of people," Grier said.

"Brian sets a high standard for his players and coaches and we are completely aligned with our vision on how to build a successful organisation."

MOTORSPORT

Azerbaijan Grand Prix extends F1 contract to 2023

Reuters
Baku

The Azerbaijan Grand Prix in Baku will stay on the calendar until at least 2023 after Formula One announced a contract renewal yesterday.

The renewal follows contract extensions in Belgium, China, Japan, Germany and Singapore since Liberty Media took control of the sport at the start of 2017.

"We are very pleased to have renewed this agreement," F1 Chairman and CEO Chase Carey said in a statement. "In just a short space of time, this race has become one of the most popular of the season, always producing closely fought and spectacular racing."

Azerbaijan had said last year it wanted a reduction in its hosting fees after 2020 and more commercial benefits.

"This new agreement will allow our race to maximise its commercial revenues through increased fan-engagement activities and a new sponsorship approach," Azerbaijan's Sports Minister Azad Rahimov said.

"With these exciting opportunities in mind, extending our contract was never in question, and we are delighted to stay in this wonderful sport for another five years at least."

Five races on the 2019 calendar are out of contract this year, however, and the promoters' association (FOPA) last week issued a

statement voicing concern at Liberty's handling of the sport since they took over.

Britain's Silverstone circuit, Germany's Hockenheim which had a one-year extension to 2019, Italy's Monza, Spain's Circuit de Catalunya and Mexico City face an uncertain future.

Race hosting fees make up a major part of Formula One's revenues, and newer state-backed races such as Baku pay substantially more than those at historic European circuits like Silverstone.

The FOPA statement expressed concern about a reduction in free-to-air broadcasting, a "lack of clarity on new initiatives" and the risk of new races being introduced "to the detriment of existing events."

Carey told ESPN television that the criticism was strange. "The fact that a few of them wanted to find something to complain about, that's life," said the American.

"It's not going to change what we are doing, and by a large majority the promoters have been supportive and are excited about what we are doing."

Carey rejected the idea that Formula One, which has a debut race confirmed for Vietnam next year and is still in discussions with Miami, was pursuing new venues at the expense of existing ones.

"I think we certainly value our existing partners, and most of those relationships are long term and I expect most of them to continue," he said. "But I think it is important that where there is an opportunity to add something special, we can add a new race."

FOCUS

Edelman Super Bowl honour shines light on NFL doping policy

AFP
Atlanta

Julian Edelman's Super Bowl-winning display has shone a light on the NFL's anti-doping rules in the wake of the New England Patriots victory over the Los Angeles Rams.

Patriots wide receiver Edelman was named the Super Bowl 53 Most Valuable Player on Sunday after a series of decisive catches during a 13-3 win at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium. But as the Patriots star prepared to leave Atlanta on Monday for a post Super Bowl trip to Disney World, some commentators questioned whether Edelman should even have been allowed on the field.

Edelman, 32, started the season under the cloud of a doping case, serving a four-game suspension for failing a drugs test which remains shrouded in mystery. Because the NFL is not a signatory to the World Anti-Doping Agency, the league has its own set of rules for dealing with doping cases.

Whereas an athlete caught doping under the WADA code could face up to a four-year ban for a first violation, Edelman was free to play this season after serving a four-



New England Patriots' Julian Edelman celebrates with the Vince Lombardi trophy after winning the Super Bowl LIII in Atlanta. (Reuters)

game suspension at the start of the campaign. Nancy Armour, a columnist for the USA Today national newspaper, contrasted Edelman's treatment with the exclusion from the sport of Colin Kaepernick for protesting against racial injustice.

"The NFL has some warped priorities," Armour wrote. "Call attention to racism and discrimination, and your career is effectively over. Test positive for performance-enhancing drugs, and you can be the Super Bowl MVP."

Others noted the differences

between Major League Baseball and the NFL in how athletes sanctioned for drug offenses are dealt with. Although baseball, like the NFL, is not a signatory to WADA, the league has attempted to crack down on drug use following a series of doping scandals over the past two decades. As well as facing a multi-game ban, any baseball player testing positive for a banned substance would not be eligible to play in the league's post-season that year, heading off the possibility of having a drug cheat named

MVP in the World Series.

"Baseball drug cheats are met with pitchforks," the Washington Post's Adam Kilgore wrote on Monday. "(NFL) drug cheats are met with shrugs. They aren't even really considered cheats."

The circumstances surrounding Edelman's failed drug test remain unclear. The substance found in his system has never been publicly disclosed, and it was reportedly not on the NFL's list of banned substances. Edelman, whose appeal against his four-game suspension was rejected last year, had apologized for the failed test in a statement on his Instagram account.

"I am very sorry - I don't know what happened," Edelman wrote last June. "I've taken many, many tests obviously over the course of my career, and nothing like this has ever happened." What is not in dispute is the impact Edelman had on the Super Bowl, where he once again demonstrated his value to the Patriots with a magnificent display. Edelman, who missed the entire 2017 season after a suffering a knee ligament injury, finished with 10 receptions for 141 yards and added an eight-yard rush to earn the MVP trophy as well as his third Super Bowl ring.

FOCUS

Paine counts Ashes gains as Australia tick boxes

‘Every Australian cricketer can’t wait to go and play an Ashes series and particularly in England’

Reuters
Canberra

Tim Paine had a few wishes coming into the final Test of the home summer against Sri Lanka ahead of this year's Ashes and the Australia captain left Canberra with a fair idea of what the team should look like in England in August.

The 34-year-old wanted pace spearhead Mitchell Starc and batting mainstay Usman Khawaja to find form, his batsmen to end Australia's century drought and also change his own luck with the coin toss at Manuka Oval.

He wasted precious little time to tick one of the boxes and won only his second toss as Australia's captain, by flipping the coin with his left hand.

Joe Burns then scored the first century since Khawaja's 141 in the drawn Dubai Test against Pakistan last October and was soon matched by Travis Head and Kurtis Patterson.

It was then left to Starc and Khawaja and the duo did not disappoint either.

The fast bowler picked up a 10-wicket match haul while the left-handed batsman remained unbeaten after completing his eighth Test hundred.

With their Ashes rivals getting thumped in West Indies who have clinched the three-Test series with a match to spare, Paine could not wait to get to England for the five-match series beginning on Aug. 1.

“I’ve been dreaming about it actually. I’m happy now that we’ve got this out of the way I can put everything into it,” Paine told reporters after his first series win.

“Every Australian cricketer can’t wait to go and play an Ashes series and particularly in England, it’s something that I’ve certainly dreamed of as a kid, I didn’t think I’d be going over as the captain.

“In the back of my mind I’ve been thinking about it, I’ve been watching England, keeping a re-



Australia's Usman Khawaja celebrates reaching his century during the second Test against Sri Lanka in Canberra on Sunday. (AFP)

ally close eye on them, I can't wait to get over there.”

Paine's appointment was in difficult circumstances when captain Steve Smith and his deputy David Warner were handed year-long bans for their roles in the ball-tampering scandal in South Africa last March.

The scandal had wide-ranging ramifications as several sponsors withdrew, Cricket Australia heads rolled, and crick-

ets flayed the team culture.

“We spoke at the start of the summer about our main priority was to win back the respect of the Australian public and our cricket fans,” Paine said. “Sitting here now we’ve gone a long way toward doing that.

“It’s in difficult times you see the characters you’ve got in your group and it’s confirmed to us we’ve got some good characters, some strong characters

and some people we can build a really strong Australian cricket future on.”

Paine was pleased with the way his team played against Sri Lanka and felt they would have defeated any opposition in the world with those performances.

And Australia will look even stronger in the Ashes series with Smith and Warner back in the side, he said.

“I think everyone has, to a

degree, got to earn their stripes. Those two have plenty of runs in the bank,” Paine said.

“I see us going to the Ashes and them having a huge part in us winning the series. That’s how I see how important they are to this team.

“We know how good they are. Hopefully once their bans are up they’ll be welcomed back and they’ll win Test matches like they did beforehand.”

BACKING

Sarfraz to captain Pakistan at World Cup, says PCB chief

Reuters
Lahore

Sarfraz Ahmed will continue as Pakistan captain at the World Cup in May despite serving a suspension for breaching the anti-racism code, Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) Chairman Ehsan Mani said yesterday.

Sarfraz was suspended for four matches by the International Cricket Council (ICC) when an on-field taunt aimed at South Africa's Andile Phehlukwayo was caught by stump microphones. Sarfraz admitted the offence and apologised for his conduct.

“Sarfraz will remain Pakistan captain until the World Cup, I was always clear in my mind that Sarfraz would be the captain,” Mani told reporters in Lahore.

“He will remain so until any other decision is taken,” Mani added, saying Sarfraz's performance as captain would be evalu-

ated only after the World Cup.

The PCB had rallied in support of Sarfraz, saying they were disappointed by the ICC's decision to suspend him after the matter had been resolved, and Mani backed him to lead the team.

The 31-year-old wicketkeeper, who led Pakistan to the ICC Champions Trophy title in 2017, was thankful for the board's support. “The past few weeks have been extremely difficult for me as a person and professional, but I am delighted that the PCB has reassured its confidence and faith in me,” Sarfraz said.

“In the lead up to the World Cup, Pakistan will play five ODIs each against Australia and England, which will also allow us the opportunity to further fine-tune our preparations.”

Pakistan, who last won the World Cup in 1992, will begin their campaign against West Indies at Trent Bridge on May 31. The final of the 50-over tournament is scheduled for July 14.



SPOTLIGHT

Sri Lanka sacks skipper Chandimal after Test debacles

AFP
Colombo

Sri Lanka's skipper Dinesh Chandimal has been sacked and removed from the Test squad for the upcoming two-match series against South Africa, cricket authorities said yesterday.

Chandimal, 29, was replaced by Dimuth Karunaratne, Sri Lanka Cricket said, listing a 17-member squad that did not include the right-handed batsman.

National selectors said in a statement Chandimal was dismissed to help him “regain his form and be ready for future international tours”.

His sudden sacking came a day after he insisted his team could lift their game during their upcoming tour against South Africa, following a thrashing by Australia.

Under Chandimal, Sri Lanka lost the opening day-night Test in Brisbane by an innings and

40 runs inside three days and followed it up with a 366-run thrashing in the Canberra Test.

It extended a dire run of results for troubled Sri Lanka who have been hit by injuries and off-field scandals.

Besides the defeats in Australia, Sri Lanka also recently lost a home Test series to England 3-0 and suffered a 1-0 loss against New Zealand in an away series.

The first Test in South Africa starts on February 13, with the squad flying straight there from Australia this week in a gruelling overseas schedule.

“We are a young team and we are always learning how to play, especially in these tough conditions. We will bounce back in South Africa,” Chandimal said in Australia.

“South Africa is similar to these conditions and with very good bowlers. We know that as a team we have to play in tough conditions and we need to adjust to those conditions and step up as a team.”

Dhawan praises stumper Pant ahead of T20I series against New Zealand

IANIS
Wellington

Showering praise on young stumper Rishabh Pant, India opener Shikhar Dhawan yesterday termed Pant as “an asset” for the team. Pant, who wasn't part of the India ODI squad that hammered

New Zealand 4-1 recently, returns to the side for the T20I series, starting here today. Speaking on the eve of the first match, Dhawan said: “He is an aggressive batsman, an asset for the team, can take away games from the opposition in a very short time. I hope he grabs this opportunity (in T20s) with both hands.”

Dhawan also said it was important to end the tour on a high as the men-in-blue will then try to carry the winning momentum into the limited over series against Australia, starting in Visakhapatnam on February 24. “I do tennis ball drills mostly for bouncers, for my muscle memory as well. I feel, if I keep

hitting the same shot, I get better at it.”

“When facing bowlers or throw-downs, it is not possible to feed the ball in one place all times. Thus, tennis ball practice comes in handy,” the opener said on his tennis ball practising.

“But after you go back to facing the leather ball, it feels someone is throwing stones at

you. Today while we were doing the tennis ball drill, we were also doing it to counter swing,” Dhawan said.

Dhawan who plays fiercely during power plays said: “It is a change of mindset (more aggressive in power play) and also depends on the wicket. If I get a lot of shots and it goes in my favour.”

BOTTOMLINE

Windies boss slams ‘crippling’ Holder ban

AFP
St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda

Cricket West Indies president Dave Cameron yesterday criticised the ICC's “punitive” and “crippling” decision to ban captain Jason Holder for the third Test against England in St. Lucia.

The all-rounder was suspended and fined 40 percent of his match fee for a slow over-rate during the Caribbean side's famous 10-wicket thrashing of England in the second Test at Antigua.

Holder has scored 229 runs and taken seven wickets in the series so far as the Windies have shown signs of a revival in claiming an unassailable 2-0 lead.

“We will, of course, abide by the ICC ruling, but we have to wonder if such punitive action at a pivotal stage of the series is good for cricket,” said Cameron. “What a shame if the series is remembered not for the sparkling play of the reinvigorated West Indies players but for a



John Campbell (left) and Kraigg Brathwaite of West Indies celebrate after winning the second Test against England on Saturday. Brathwaite will skipper the side in the third Test in Jason Holder's absence.

crippling decision made by a rule that ought to be modified.”

The ICC said in a statement on Monday that the Windies were two overs short of their target for the match and also fined all of the hosts' other players 20 percent of

their match fees.

The 27-year-old Holder was also found guilty of a slow over-rate during his team's third Test defeat by Sri Lanka last June.

Opening batsman Kraigg Brathwaite will skipper the side

in Holder's absence, with seamer Keemo Paul called up to replace Holder in the squad.

Fast bowler Alzarri Joseph has been included, despite the death of his mother during the second Test.

Doha Fighters win Qatar Premier League 9



Doha Fighters players pose with the trophy after winning the ninth season of Qatar Premier League, an inter-corporate cricket championship. Doha Fighters put 227 runs on board in 15 overs before they restricted Mumbai XI to 169 runs, winning by 58 runs. Doha Fighters captain Ibrahim was adjudged Man of the Match after he scored 61 runs and also scalped two wickets.

FOOTBALL

Rampant Sahel overpower Bayern at Alkass Cup

Former winners Real Madrid overcome a spirited display from Russia's Spartak Moscow to come out on top 3-2



Real Madrid and Spartak Moscow players vie for the ball during the under-17 Alkass International Cup at Aspire academy yesterday. **PICTURE: Jayaram Korambil**

Etoile Sportive du Sahel (ESS) recorded a memorable victory over an out-of-sorts Bayern Munich at the Under-17 Alkass International Cup football tournament. The Tunisians' powerful and authoritative display served notice of their tournament-winning potential.

The 3-2 scoreline flattered the Germans, who were second best throughout, and were reliant upon two face-saving goals in added time to prevent a 3-0 thumping. ESS set the tone for a dominant display from the kick-off, and almost took the lead inside two minutes when the ball fell to Oussama Abid, whose weak shot could not trouble Bayern keeper Manuel Kainz.

Unfortunately, Kainz was deeply troubled 20 minutes later, when his

astonishing gaffe gifted the opener to Sahel. There appeared to be little danger when a free kick was swung in from wide on the left, and the Bayern number one rose highest to claim a routine catch, only for the ball to somehow slip through his fingers. Tunisian defender Koussay Rejeb gleefully accepted the unexpected gift, slotting into an empty net from all of three yards.

It is often said that the mark of a top-class keeper is the ability to recover rapidly from adversity. If this is the case, then Kainz is surely destined for greatness. It soon became clear why he is team captain, as he showed great fortitude just minutes after his bizarre blunder to prevent the Tunisians from doubling their advantage. A corner swung in from the right was met firmly

by ESS midfielder Nassim Khadher, who planted a firm header that looked destined for the bottom corner, only for the German keeper to get down brilliantly and keep the effort out.

And, five minutes before the interval, Kainz was again the hero, getting strong hands to Mohamed Fallah's low drive after the Tunisian skipper had cut in from the left. The 1-0 deficit may have been the German keeper's fault, but his subsequent heroics ensured that Bayern were still in the game going into half time. But there was nothing he could do when, five minutes after the restart, Khalil Mahoudi latched onto a through ball down the inside right channel, hitting a first time shot past the despairing Kainz's dive. Just after the hour, the lively Tunisian should have doubled his

tally after intercepting a loose backpass and evading Kainz's challenge as the keeper desperately attempted to remedy the situation. The ball arced into the air and fell at the feet of the Tunisian forward, but he somehow shot wide of the open goal from 12 yards out.

With a two-goal deficit to rectify, Bayern made a double change on 70 minutes, but any hope of getting back into the game was soon extinguished, after Mahoudi once again escaped through the middle, skilfully evading challenges before cutting back to Montasar Ben Chabchoubi, who made no mistake. Amazingly Bayern almost found a way back after plundering two goals in added time. First, substitute Nemanja Motika got on the end of Grant Mamedova's inviting cross and



Etoile Sportive du Sahel players celebrate after scoring against Bayern Munich

dispatched a firm volley from 12 yards out. Then, with only seconds remaining, the referee pointed to the spot after judging - with the aid of VAR - that ESS keeper Ahmed Slimen had planted his studs into the back of Moritz Mosandl when claiming a high ball. The German midfielder recovered to tuck home the penalty, but it was too little too late, as the final whistle immediately sounded.

In another match, former winners Real Madrid held off a spirited display from Russians Spartak Moscow to come out on top 3-2. The two clubs produced a five-goal thriller although both sides could have scored more in an entertaining game.

Real, who won the tournament in 2017, twice opened up a two-goal advantage but Spartak - with skipper Ilya Golyatov proving a real handful - refused to give in and they pushed the Spaniards all the way.

Real made a lively start and Icelandic international Andri Gudjohnsen went close after just two minutes when put through by skipper Javier Lancho. But the Russians were presented with a glorious opportunity on nine minutes when Magomedemin Rabadanov went down under the challenge of Miguel Ramon but highly-rated Spanish Under

17 international keeper Lucas Conchello dived to his right to save Rabadanov's penalty. Within minutes Real were ahead with a fine right-foot effort from Carles Moscardo after Ramon's initial effort had been blocked. Real went 2-0 up on 20 minutes with a close-range tap-in from the lively Gudjohnsen and at that stage the Spaniards looked to be cruising to victory. Spartak had other ideas, however, and produced a lovely passing move that ended with Golyatov slotting home to make it 2-1.

Hopes of a comeback were thwarted immediately as Spanish youth international Pau Aran ended a fine passing move that left him in space and he beat Vladislav Pchelnikov with a minimum of fuss. Golyatov then tested Conchello with a high right-footed drive but the tall keeper was up to the task but the Spartak captain did net his second of the match early into the second half when tapping home Aslan Mutaliev's left-wing cross. Real almost restored their two-goal advantage soon after but Lancho's looping header hit the post. The longer the second went on the more dangerous Spartak became and for large periods they were camped in the Real half without being able to find a way past the imposing Conchello.

SWIMMING

QSA gets ready to host Doha Open Water Challenge

Qatar Swimming Association (QSA) is preparing for another spectacular edition of the Doha Open Water Challenge to be held on Doha's iconic Corniche, near Oryx the Oryx Statue on February 15.

The Doha Open Water Challenge, open to the public, will be organised on the sidelines of a high-profile FINA Marathon Swim World Series Doha. The Qatari capital, first of the eight stops in the prestigious series, will see top long-distance swimmers competing on February 16.

In the Doha Open Water Challenge, all the Qatari residents above 11 years old can participate. The competition is aimed at giving the public an opportunity to experience what it is like to be an elite athlete.

"The Open Water Challenge is a FINA competition organised one day earlier than the Marathon, inviting the amateur swimmers of the host country; of

all ages (11 and older) to race, experience, interact with the best swimmers of the sport and be inspired. A true legacy for the sport development," said Mr. Khaleel al-Jabir, President of QSA, and member of FINA Bureau in a statement.

The Organising Committee is making all-out efforts to ensure maximum participation and best arrangements for the event. The number of participants in this year's competition is expected to go higher due to an overwhelming response by the swimmers.

Meanwhile, preparations are in full swing for the FINA/HOSA Marathon Swim World Series Doha (QAT) 2019. There are over 200 swimmers and officials from 24 countries already confirming their participation for the spectacular event.

The top-ranked swimmers in women's line-up include 2016 Rio Olympic gold medalist, Sharon Van Rouwendaal (NED), Rio Olympic Silver Medalist Rachele

Bruni (ITA) and Arianna Bridi (ITA), the 2018 European Aquatics Championships Gold Medalist in the 25 km open water.

Overall FINA/HOSA series winner in 2016 and in the following year, Simone Ruffini (ITA), Gregorio Paltrinieri, who has several world and European records, and Kazan 2015 gold medalist, Jordan Matthew Willmovsky (USA) will be competing in the men's race alongside other big names.

A thrilling race is guaranteed as swimmers will look to give their best in the year's first race, eyeing an early lead in the FINA/HOSA Marathon Swim World Series 2019. Both the Doha Open Water Challenge and the FINA/HOSA Marathon Swim World Series Doha (QAT) 2019 will be free for the public to view from the Doha Corniche promenade. Further information regarding the events can be obtained from the QSA website (qatarswimming.com).

FOCUS

FIFA seminar for referees kicks off in Doha

QNA

Doha

Women's World Cup 2019 referees are undergoing training with VAR (video assistant referees) in Doha, hosted by the Qatar Football Association until February 15. Around 75 referees, including 27 match referees, 48 assistant referees, 13 VAR referees, including Qatari international referee Abdulrahman al-Jassim.

The seminar will be followed by three other referees' conferences, to be held in the coming period under the supervision of Chairman of FIFA's Referees Committee Pierluigi Collina and Swiss Head of FIFA Refereeing Massimo Busacca. Chairman of the Qatar Referees Committee and vice chairman of the FIFA Referees Committee Hani Bllan and the Executive Director of Qatar Football Federation's Arbitration Department Najj al-Juwaini will also take part in the seminars.

Al-Juwaini said that he was proud that Qatar is hosting FIFA's seminars for Women's World Cup 2019 and this affirms the confidence of the FIFA Referees Committee in the country's organisational capacity, especially as it is the fourth time that Qatar is conducting such seminars.

Al-Juwaini thanked FIFA for its continued support and confidence in Qatar, and was honoured to have hosted other suc-



Chairman of FIFA's Referees Committee Pierluigi Collina speaks during a seminar for the referees of the Women's World Cup 2019 in Doha.

cessful seminars in the past that have been highly acclaimed and praised by the football governing body. He stressed that Qatar's organisation and hosting of these seminars reinforces its international standing on the sport sector, especially before hosting the World Cup in 2022 and also establishes strong ties with FIFA.

Women's World Cup referees will be undergoing training with VARs over the next two weeks, paving the way for the FIFA council to approve the use of video reviews at the tournament in France this year.

FIFA has faced criticism for not announcing yet that video assistant referees will be used at the June 7-July 7 Women's World Cup just as they were for the men's tournament for the first time in Russia last year.

The VARs in seminars and matches in Qatar will ensure the 27 referees and 47 assistant referees will gain the necessary experience that allows FIFA executives at a meeting in Miami in March to approve the use of the technology for the World Cup. FIFA had previously said a decision about VAR will come only "in due time."

Third edition of Doha Triathlon to be held on Friday

Doha: The third edition of Doha Triathlon is set to take place this Friday, 8th February at MIA Park. Qatar Triathlon Federation is inviting Qatari nationals to join the Qatar National Championship event to form a stronger team and encourage individuals to compete abroad. The Qatar National Championship will be the first race to start in the morning at 6am with the standard/Sprint distance 750 m swim, 20 km cycling and 5 km run. It is a drafting race while all the other races in the morning are non-drafting. The event also comprises Sprint, Olympic and Super Sprint distances as well as a Kids Fun Duathlon. The swimming will be in the bay of the Museum of Islamic Park, with cycling alongside the Corniche,

before returning to the park for the final run in the park's green spaces. The prize ceremony will be near Richard Serra sculpture at the end of the Bay at 8.15 am and the public is invited to come and cheer the participants as they race and receive their medals at the prize ceremony.

One side of the Corniche road from the Museum of Islamic Art to Sheraton will be closed due to the races between 4:00 am and 10:30 am. Information for participants include timing for registration, transition, races and prize ceremony.

Doha Triathlon is one of the biggest triathlon events attracting international athletes from all over the world. This year there will be participants attending from

Oman, Kuwait, France, Romania, Spain, US and UK amongst other countries and more than 400 participants are expected to take part with the registration deadline extended till midnight February 5th.

Doha Triathlon is part of the Qatar National Series scoreboard system for local athletes. The series include five events located in five different locations: Katara, Al Ghariya, Doha, Losail and The Pearl-Qatar. The number of triathlon events has almost tripled since last year and triathlon is becoming a popular sport with young children entering through Duathlon competitions. One of the characteristics of triathlon is the swim in open waters which is ideal during winter in Qatar.



In the Doha Open Water Challenge, all the Qatari residents above 11 years old can participate.