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FOOTBALL | Page 3

Zidane risks reputation with second stint at Real Madrid

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GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

Wagner's five-for seals innings win for New Zealand

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Al Sadd players celebrate after beating Persepolis in their AFC Champions League match in Doha yesterday. **PICTURE:** Noushad Thekkayil

FOOTBALL / AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Boundedjah hero as Al Sadd win thriller against Persepolis

Duhail defeated 3-1 by Al Hilal, who top Group C with six points

AFC
Doha

Baghdad Boundedjah netted a dramatic late winner to give Al Sadd a 1-0 win over Iran's Persepolis in their Group D clash on Matchday Two of the 2019 AFC Champions League yesterday.

Both sides were looking for their first win of the competition, and that attacking intent resulted in end-to-end action early on. Persepolis were unlucky not to score in the ninth minute after somehow failing to tap the ball in during a goal-mouth scramble.

Al Sadd's Akram Afif then saw his curling effort take a deflection and miss the goal by inches. Over at the other end, Al Sadd goalkeeper Saad al-Sheeb produced a stunning reflex save to deny Ahmed Noorollahi.

In the 35th minute, Boundedjah had a give-and-go with Afif but failed to direct his header away from the hands of Persepolis custodian Alireza Beiranvand. Ali Alipour then stole the ball off Pedro Miguel and had a go at goal but saw his shot go wide.

At the stroke of half-time, Al Sadd had the ball in the net after Boundedjah nodded in from close range but the assistant referee ruled the effort out for offside.

The hosts upped the tempo as the second half kicked off, producing a flurry of chances to keep Beiranvand busy. The Iranian international came up with two



Al Hilal's Bafetimbi Gomis (L) kicks the ball during their AFC champions league Group C match against Qatar's Al Duhail in Riyadh yesterday.

excellent saves to keep out Boundedjah in the 50th and 58th minutes.

In the 78th minute, right after Al Sadd had a penalty appeal waved away, Persepolis broke away on the counter which ended in Al Sheeb keeping out Bashar Resan's shot.

Just as the match seemed to be heading towards a stalemate, Boundedjah struck the winner for Al Sadd after nodding in Hassan's headed pass across the goal-mouth.

Al Sadd will now travel to Tashkent to face Pakhtakor on Matchday Three while

Persepolis lock horns with Al Ahli in Dubai.

Meanwhile, a three-minute double-salvo late into the second half secured a 3-1 win for Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal over Al Duhail in Group C.

Both sides had started their campaigns with a win, Al Hilal overcoming Al Ain 1-0 and Al Duhail putting three past Esteghlal in their respective group openers.

Sebastian Giovinco and Eduardo were a constant nuisance to the Qatari defence throughout. The pair combined as early as the fifth minute with the Italian cross-

ing for Eduardo whose effort went inches above the crossbar.

The partnership delivered Al Hilal's first goal in the 25th minute after Bassam al-Rawi misplaced his pass and was duly punished.

Mohamed Kanno intercepted the ball and fed Giovinco who controlled and sent Eduardo one-on-one with the goalkeeper. The Al Hilal captain kept his composure and applied the finish from inside the box to open the scoring.

Shoya Nakajima drew Al Duhail level 15 minutes before the end of the first half. The Japanese international pounced on a poor headed clearance by Mohamed Jahfali to control and drill home the equaliser with his left.

Al Hilal responded instantly, winning a corner kick straight after play was restarted. Giovinco delivered an in-swinging cross into the far post that was chested over the line by defender Ali Al Bulayhi.

Before Rui Faria's men could regroup after going behind again, they were hit with the final blow in the 79th minute.

Bafetimbi Gomis won possession deep in Al Duhail's half and supplied Salem Al Dawsari out wide. The winger then squared to substitute Nasser Al Dawsari whose intelligent dummy drew al-Rawi away from Gomis.

The French striker still had some work to do, rounding the goalkeeper and firing into the roof of the net to secure Al Hilal's victory and get his Continental account up and running.

SPOTLIGHT

Edgar double as China's Evergrande suffer rare defeat

AFP
Seoul

It was the first group-stage defeat in nearly three years for Evergrande, coached by Italian World Cup great Fabio Cannavaro

Brazilian striker Edgar scored a first-half double as newcomers Daegu FC stunned two-time former winners Guangzhou Evergrande 3-1 in the AFC Champions League yesterday.

Edgar's brace sent Daegu on their way before China's Evergrande, Asian champions in 2013 and 2015, threatened a comeback when Anderson Talisca pulled one back eight minutes after half-time. But Kim Dae-won maintained the Korean side's 100% start in Group F when he rifled home their third goal from a tight angle with nine minutes to go.

It was the first group-stage defeat in nearly three years for Evergrande, coached by Italian World Cup great Fabio Cannavaro, who also lost their seven-year grip on the Chinese Super League title last season.

Elsewhere in Group F, Keisuke Honda's second-half strike couldn't prevent Melbourne Victory going down 2-1 to Sanfrecce Hiroshima for their second straight defeat.

Earlier, former Italy striker Graziano Pelle struck twice to earn Marouane Fellaini's Shandong Luneng a 2-2 draw with holders Kashima Antlers.

Former Manchester United star Fellaini had a quiet game in midfield for the hosts, who had Pelle — another Premier League import — to thank for rescuing a point.

It was the 33-year-old Pelle's second brace in as many Champions League matches, having scored twice at South Korea's Gyeongnam FC last week.

J-League side Kashima had looked set to run away with it, forward Sho Ito twice finishing slick team moves in the 10th and 14th minutes to stun Shandong.

But the imposing Pelle, who joined the Chinese Super League side from Southampton for about \$17 mn in July 2016, single-handedly dragged Shandong back into the match.

He buried the penalty on 20 minutes after Kento Misao handled in the box, and then arched the ball into the top corner four minutes before the break on the half-volley.

The entertaining stalemate leaves Kashima top of Group E with four points from two games. Shandong are second with two points after successive 2-2 draws.

Neymar treated at Aspetar



Brazil and Paris Saint-Germain superstar Neymar had a 'complete assessment' at Doha's Aspetar hospital as he recovers from a foot injury. The 27-year-old damaged the fifth metatarsal in his right foot in a French Cup win over Strasbourg on January 23 and was ruled out for 10 weeks. He left Doha after a three-day stay.



SPOTLIGHT

Spotlight on Salah to rediscover Champions League shine

AFP
London

Liverpool travel to German champions Bayern Munich today hoping to complete a clean sweep for English Premier League sides in the Champions League last 16. But with the tie poised at 0-0 after a tense first-leg at Anfield three weeks ago, much will depend on Liverpool's front three of Mohamed Salah, Roberto Firmino and Sadio Mane rediscovering their scoring form on the road in Europe.

Tottenham drew first blood for English sides in three Anglo-Bundesliga battles with an impressive 4-0 aggregate victory over Borussia Dortmund, while Manchester City were expected to comfortably see off struggling Schalke with a 3-2 first leg lead to take home in last night's second leg.

However, Bayern, so consistently the cream of the crop in Germany, pose an all-together different challenge for Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp on his return to his homeland. For once a raucous atmosphere was not enough to help the Reds build a first leg lead on home soil three weeks ago, meaning Liverpool must end a run of five straight defeats in the Champions League away from Anfield to progress to the last eight.

Last season Salah, Firmino and Mane scored 10 Champions League goals each as Liverpool's firepower carried them to the final. Seven games into this European campaign, that same trio have combined for just six goals – four

of which came in a routine home win over Red Star Belgrade.

Indeed, the only goal Liverpool managed at all in three group stage defeats on the road to Napoli, Red Star and Paris Saint-Germain came via a James Milner penalty in the French capital. Mane and Firmino at least warmed up for the trip to Munich by each scoring twice in a 4-2 win over Burnley on Sunday as Liverpool remained in the Premier League title race, just a point behind pace setters City.

Salah, by contrast, has struck just once in his last eight games, although he did make a positive impact as a provider against Burnley and in the recent 5-0 thrashing of Watford.

"For me Mo Salah was the best player on the pitch and he did not score," said Klopp on Sunday. "I'm not sure that you will see that in a lot of ratings, because he's a striker and didn't score so then you make of it what you want. But we have no problem with confidence."

The spotlight on Salah all season has been intense after an incredible 44-goal debut campaign at Anfield that saw him challenge for the Ballon d'Or. And his lack of impact away from home is a worrying trend that has now prolonged for months rather than weeks.

The Egyptian's last goal from open play on the road was on December 21. He was substituted after an anonymous 79 minutes in a 0-0 draw at Manchester United and missed two glaring opportunities in another goalless draw in the Merseyside derby with Everton.

"I know he scored in February but, for me, since Christmas, he's been strugg-

ling. The worst thing is his touch, his touch has deserted him," former Liverpool defender Steve Nicol, a European Cup winner with the Reds said.

"This is the business time of the season so it needs to be sorted out pretty quickly"

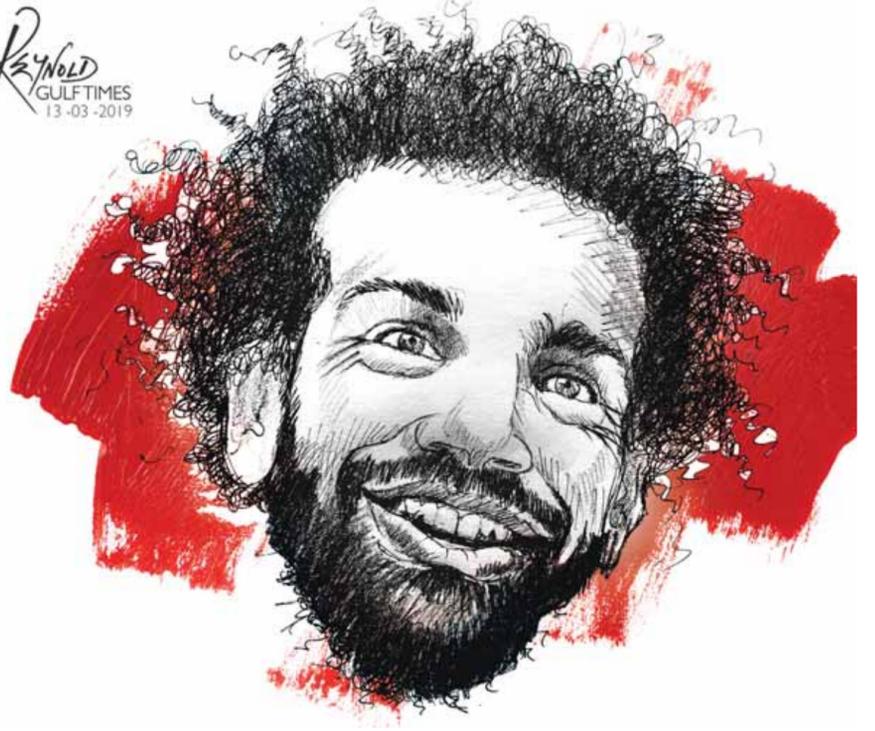
However, unlike United and Everton's more cautious tactics in recent weeks, to blunt the Liverpool counter-attack, Bayern's need to score could favour the visitors' pace on the break. "They'll need to come out a bit more, their fans will demand they try to create," said Liverpool left-back Andy Robertson. "It's all about trying to keep them out first and foremost and then hopefully we can take the chances we get." There would be no better way for Salah to silence his doubters than landing a knockout blow to one of European football's heavyweights.

The 51-year-old Klopp has a modest record of nine wins, five draws and 16 defeats in 30 games against the Bavarians – as coach of either Liverpool or former clubs Mainz and Dortmund – dating back to 2004. However, in his seven seasons with Dortmund, between 2008 and 2015, Klopp managed an impressive four wins, plus a draw and four defeats, from nine games in Munich.

He tasted victory on his last visit to the Allianz Arena in April 2015 when Dortmund beat Bayern on penalties in the semi-final of the German Cup.

Klopp knows that his team must walk tall at Bayern's home. "It's a much more positive moment for Bayern. They are top of the table and winning games comfortably again," Klopp said.

REYNOLD
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13-03-2019



CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Another opportunity knocks for struggling Coutinho at Barca

Spanish giants to make late decision on the fitness of Dembele for Lyon match

AFP
Barcelona

Philippe Coutinho was always going to have a hard time filling the void left by Andres Iniesta but just over a year into his Barcelona contract, the Brazilian might not have expected this. Substituted during Barca's win over Rayo Vallecano at the Camp Nou on Saturday, Coutinho was whistled by a small section of his own fans as he trudged off, replaced by World Cup winner Ivan Rakitic.

The Brazil playmaker has fallen behind Ousmane Dembele in the pecking order and, even with the youngster struggling for fitness ahead of their Champions League second leg against Lyon today, Coutinho's place is not guaranteed.

Lyon took a goalless draw from the opening leg. Signed for 160m euros (\$180m) 14 months ago, Coutinho was supposed to become one of the drivers of this Barcelona team, an indispensable part of the starting line-up, not a back-up for an unpredictable, albeit supremely talented, 21-year-old.

When Dembele sprained his ankle in January, Coutinho was given a run in the side but his performances were largely underwhelming and when Dembele recovered, the French youngster returned to the side. "Philippe is having a good season," Gerard Pique said last weekend. "He obviously cost a lot and that means there are higher expectations but it is what it is. You have to accept the reaction of the fans because at the end of the day they're our fans. We all have to give him support because we need him at his best in the final stage of the season and I'm sure he will be."

Coach Ernesto Valverde is already being asked about Coutinho's future, with a move back to England regularly touted in the Spanish press. Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu has been forced to insist he is "not for sale".

In La Liga this season, Coutinho has started 16 of Barcelona's 27 matches and



Substituted during Barca's win over Rayo Vallecano at the Camp Nou on Saturday, Philippe Coutinho (left) was whistled by a small section of his own fans as he trudged off, replaced by World Cup winner Ivan Rakitic. (Reuters)

has come on as a substitute in nine. He has four goals and two assists, and has not completed 90 minutes since January. The problem has been, in part, not of his own making. He arrived six months before Iniesta waved goodbye and the theory went that his craft, vision and skill made him a natural successor to one of the club's greatest ever playmakers. But, despite trying him deeper in midfield, Valverde was unconvinced. Coutinho was pushed further forward, into the left of the front three, where his ability to cut inside and create, or shoot, seemed a better fit.

The trouble is that Lionel Messi likes to do the same from the right and, at times, the pair have seemed to be occupying the same spaces. If Coutinho submits

to Messi, the game passes him by. If he tries to match the Argentinian's output, the tendency has been to try too hard, with wild shots, complicated passes and weaving runs into busy areas of the pitch.

"We're at a club where there's an incredible demand to win," said Valverde after the win over Rayo. "We're always hoping our players can produce something but it doesn't always happen. Sometimes things come off, sometimes they don't. But his work rate is there for everyone to see."

There is a psychological element too. Those that know him well speak of Coutinho as a shy character, one that has always made an impact through performances rather than ego or self-belief.

At Liverpool, he said he watched videos of Steven Gerrard and after arriving at Barcelona, he pledged to do the same with Iniesta. But it would not be a surprise if Coutinho's price tag weighed heavy and the idea he could plug the gap left by Iniesta even heavier.

Valverde maintains, publicly at least, he is not concerned, but the opportunities at a club like Barcelona will not be endless. The game against Lyon is another chance.

"The thing with Philippe is he takes risks, he tries to make things happen," Valverde said last month. "He is being watched through a magnifying glass at the moment but we have faith. We believe he'll keep moving forward."

FOCUS

Bayern aim to use home advantage to snuff out Liverpool

AFP
Munich, Germany

Bayern Munich coach Niko Kovac and veteran keeper Manuel Neuer expect to make home advantage count in their Champions League last 16 return leg today to bring down Liverpool at a packed Allianz Arena.

After a goalless first leg draw at Anfield three weeks ago, Kovac expects both sides to go in search of goals and the Bayern coach rates Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool as one of the world's best counter-attacking sides. "I don't think it will end 0-0, but we will receive the kind of support in our stadium tomorrow the likes of which we haven't seen in a long time," said Kovac with a sellout crowd of around 70,000 expected.

"We have shown lots of spirit and creativity in the Bundesliga going forward," he added, as Bayern have won their last three league games, with a goal ratio of 12-1, since the first leg. "I'm in the mood to see us play even more effectively at home with the tailwind of our fans."

However, Kovac warned that if Liverpool's fleet-footed forwards Roberto Firmino, Sadio Mane or Mo Salah, "then it's already too late". Bayern are bidding to reach the quarter-finals for the eighth year in a row and Kovac has backed his experienced team against a Liverpool side bidding for their first Premier League title in 29 years.

"Of course, we have to push forward – that's important – but Liverpool are one of the best counter-attacking teams and we'll have to draw a fine line," said Kovac. "The closer we get

to the end of the season, the stronger mentally our players will become. That gives us some reassurance against Liverpool, but we have to find a balance. We must be able to score a goal, even at the end of 90 minutes."

Kovac expects "form on the day" to decide the result and said he had not put Bayern through additional penalty shoot-out practice as "you can either do it or you can't" when the pressure is on. Both winger Kingsley Coman and left-back David Alaba should be fit to return after injury, although Kovac is without the suspended Thomas Mueller.

Neuer, the captain of Bayern and Germany, is also expecting a gala European night at the Allianz Arena. Having lost at home to Real Madrid in the knock-out stages in each of the last two seasons, Neuer says it is high time Bayern beat a big European club at home.

"Tomorrow is a final for us, anything can happen when two top teams meet each other," said the 32-year-old goalkeeper. "The Allianz Arena will be on fire and it is time for us to once again beat a team of this calibre at home."

Liverpool striker Mo Salah has only scored once in his last eight games, but Neuer scoffed when asked if the Egyptian's dip in form could help Bayern's cause. "Liverpool will attack us as a unit and it doesn't matter if Salah has only scored one goal in eight games," said Neuer.

"We have already seen what Liverpool can do, it's also important that we also have the right players to safeguard from corners and free-kicks. It's important to cover the space at the back, always have the numbers to defend counter-attacks, but of course we want to take the lead."



Bayern Munich's head coach Niko Kovac (left) and midfielder Thiago Alcantara at training session in Munich yesterday. (AFP)

LYON HOPING FEKIR RISES TO THE OCCASION IN BARCELONA

Lyon: Lyon go to Barcelona for their Champions League last 16, second leg today hoping to pull off a shock result with the tie still open after a goalless draw in France last month. The odds appear stacked against the French club – it is nine years since they won a Champions League knockout-round tie, while Barcelona are unbeaten in their last 29 home games in the competition, winning

26 of those. Bruno Genesio's team could also be without their influential Brazilian centre-back Marcelo after he pulled up injured at the weekend, but they do have two potential match-winners further forward. Lyon's prospects of a top-three finish in France and a return to next season's Champions League were compromised in a 2-2 draw at Strasbourg on Saturday. Genesio rested a host of

key players and the move backfired as OL surrendered a two-goal lead in the second half.

Nabil Fekir was one of those who started the game on the bench, although he came on late as Lyon looked for the winner. The club captain is Lyon's main man, and one for the big occasion after featuring for France on their run to World Cup glory last year.

Scorer of 12 goals this season, the 25-year-old was missed in the first leg against Barcelona as he served a suspension but will be back in an attacking midfield role today. "When Nabil is on the field, we know what to expect, he's a great player who gives us reassurance."

He has already shown his importance on the European scene," said teammate Martin Terrier of Fekir.

SPOTLIGHT

Zidane risks reputation to usher in new era at Real

'I returned because the president called me. I love him and I love this club. We will change things for the years to come'

AFP
Madrid

Zinedine Zidane stood for 29 minutes fielding questions but all of them really came down to two: Why now? And, what next? In a packed auditorium in the belly of the Santiago Bernabeu on Monday night, Raul and Roberto Carlos took their seats in the front row while journalists squeezed up against the walls, an hour and a half after the official announcement.

Santiago Solari had been sacked as coach of Real Madrid and in his place Zidane would return, 284 days after he had left. On May 31 last year, sitting next to the club's president Florentino Perez, Zidane had said the team would not keep winning with him in charge.

They failed to win without him, first under Julen Lopetegui, the sacked Spain coach, and then Solari, the interim-turned-permanent coach, who watched on as Madrid's season went up in smoke in six days. Solari's exit was inevitable but the idea any suitable replacement would take over for 11 La Liga games, with nothing to preside over except the aftermath of a crisis, seemed fanciful.

"When the president called me the first thing I thought was: go," said Zidane. Which begs the question: what has changed? Rest may have refreshed motivation, particularly for Zidane, who said himself, "I have never been far away".

He has stayed in Madrid and attended a handful of matches, while three of his sons still play for the club at various levels. For him, the move back might have been less of a leap than it seems from the outside. Yet the greatest lure may be that the team has been failing.

For the best coaches, and players, there is always self-belief, a sense that no problem is too big to solve. Zidane knew he would return with more authority than ever, far more even than after he had hoisted a third consecutive



Real Madrid's newly appointed coach Zinedine Zidane poses with his wife Veronique after giving a press conference in Madrid on Monday night. (AFP)

Champions League trophy.

The suspicion then was that he was just a face, a popular manager to keep the ship steady while star players engineered their own success. As two coaches came and went, Zidane's stock rose with every chance missed, every

seat left empty and every point that Barcelona moved further away. "I returned because the president called me. I love him and I love this club," he said. "We will change things, for sure, for the years to come."

Zidane could have waited until the

summer but the job might not have been available. Jose Mourinho, speaking on his increasingly regular public appearances, seemed eager. Perez was under fire from all directions, from the fans, many of whom blamed the board more than Solari in the newspaper

polls, and from the players, led by Sergio Ramos.

"The problem is bad planning," Ramos reportedly shot back during a heated argument with Perez following last week's defeat to Ajax. A new coach could ease the pressure and one like Zi-

dane, remove it almost completely. "We need to start working on a new glorious era," said Perez. "That is why we welcome back Zinedine Zidane."

Zidane has three months to decide what needs changing. He arrives under no illusions. Madrid triumphed in Europe but in La Liga last season, Barcelona finished 17 points ahead. Now the gap is 12. "I don't forget what we won but I also don't forget the bad things we did all together last year," he said.

The temptation might be to discard a lot and spend even more, but the challenge for Zidane is to find the balance between reform and revolution. A fresh start could bring ousted players in from the cold while progress made by talented youngsters like Vinicius Junior, Sergio Reguilon and Marcos Llorente could quickly be lost.

Ronaldo has gone and, while it was unavoidable the team would miss him, others have struggled to fill the void. Gareth Bale and Zidane were barely speaking during the second half of last season and Bale is understood to be less than enthused by the Frenchman's return. A clean slate is possible but a parting appears more likely. Decisions will need to be made too on Marcelo and Isco, who have both endured torrid seasons, while Keylor Navas was once a favourite of Zidane's, which could spell trouble for Thibaut Courtois. Luka Modric, heavily linked with a move to Italy last summer, may feel it is time for something new.

Zidane's biggest gain is Vinicius, who may not take play again this season as he recovers from an ankle injury, but whose emergence has been Madrid's one shining light. The 18-year-old has flourished though on the left of a front three, which puts any move for Chelsea's Eden Hazard in a sticky spot.

Neymar or Kylian Mbappe of Paris Saint-Germain will again be touted. "I would like them both," Perez said on Monday. For now though, Real face Celta Vigo on Saturday, with a squad reunited and spirits lifted. It is like Zidane has never been away.

SERIE A

Ranieri off to winning start with Roma

AFP
Rome

Claudio Ranieri got off to a winning start as Roma coach with Stephan El Shaarawy and Patrik Schick's first-half goals enough to squeeze past lowly Empoli 2-1 on Monday night to keep in touch with the Champions League places. Eusebio Di Francesco was sacked after the team's elimination in the Champions League last-16 last week with Ranieri returning to the club he coached for 18 months until February 2011. The 67-year-old former Roma player was welcomed back to the Stadio Olimpico with a banner reading "Good luck Mister Ranieri".

"I thank the fans, as they gave us a big hand this evening," said Ranieri. "I didn't expect us to play better, because this was a tense team that was anxious and still dealing with recent events. Putting a team together when we didn't have many players, and without the bigger players, the leaders that give a sense of direction to the side, wasn't easy," added the former Leicester and Chelsea coach. "I knew it was going to be tough."

Captain Daniele De Rossi, Kostas Man-



olas, Lorenzo Pellegrini and Cengiz Under were all out injured with Edin Dzeko, Federico Fazio and Aleksandar Kolarov suspended. It was nervy debut against a side who are just one point above the relegation zone.

El Shaarawy turned in off a corner after nine minutes for his ninth league goal this season only for Empoli to level when Roma

defender Juan Jesus headed into his own net. The Romans nearly conceded another when Giovanni Di Lorenzo sent just wide before Schick put the hosts back on front after 33 minutes, jumping highest to nod in his third league goal this season.

Midfielder Nicolo Zaniolo hobbled off with a calf injury with Schick also coming off injured while captain Alessandro Florenzi was sent off for a second yellow card with ten minutes to go. El Shaarawy was then handed the captain's armband for the first time.

Empoli looked to have scored a late equaliser when Rade Krunic fired into the goal on 89 minutes but a VAR review disallowed it for a Dmitri Oberlin handball in the build-up. Slovenian forward Zan Celar, 19, got his first start after Schick came off as Ranieri's side held on in a nervy six minutes of injury time to get back winning after their 3-0 defeat to Lazio last time out.

Roma remain fifth, three points behind Inter Milan who occupy the final Champions League berth, and four adrift of third-placed AC Milan, with the city rivals going head-to-head on Sunday. Roma will be without Florenzi when they play SPAL next weekend.

FOCUS

Gattuso escapes ban after sending-off

Reuters
Milan

AC Milan coach Gennaro Gattuso escaped a ban from Sunday's derby against Inter Milan when he was let off with a fine and a warning after being sent off in his team's last match. Serie A's disciplinary tribunal said in a statement that Gattuso "left the technical area and made an intimidating remark to a player of the opposing team" during the 2-1 win at Chievo on Saturday.

Gattuso, ordered from the touchline, was fined 15,000 euros (\$16,932) and given a warning. Milan, third in Serie A, face fourth-placed Inter at San Siro on Sunday. Atalanta coach Gian Piero Gasperini, however, was banned for one game for pushing a Sampdoria official in the tunnel after being sent off in his team's 2-1 win on Sunday.

Gasperini, dismissed for angrily protesting a penalty, said after the game that he had merely "nudged aside" the official and that

Sampdoria had made a "song and dance" about it. However, on Monday, he apologised after a video of the incident was published on several websites.

POCHETTINO ACTED AGGRESSIVELY TOWARDS REFEREE DEAN - FA REPORT

Referee Mike Dean said Tottenham Hotspur manager Mauricio Pochettino's behaviour was "irresponsible and aggressive" following a 2-1 Premier League defeat at Burnley last month, which led to the Argentine receiving a two-match ban.

Pochettino confronted Dean after the defeat, which saw Spurs lose ground to Manchester City and Liverpool in the title race, and the Argentine was later banned and fined 10,000 pounds (\$13,085) by the Football Association (FA) for improper conduct.

Dean stated in his referee report, which was published by the FA as the body gave its written reasons for the ban, that Pochettino had repeatedly said "you know what you are" to the official during the confrontation. "Mr Pochettino acted in a very irrespon-

sible and aggressive manner," Dean wrote. "He wouldn't stop saying 'you know what you are, you know what you are'. I asked him to explain and he repeated 'you know what you are'."

"I then said... to go away at least 10 times and he wouldn't get out of my personal space and then aggressively pointed his finger just a few inches from my face again saying 'you know what you are'. When I reached the tunnel he was waiting at the top of the stairs again saying 'you know what you are' and had to be escorted to the dressing room by security staff from Burnley."

The FA report said that Dean's assistant referees had corroborated his account. Pochettino, who publicly apologised for his actions, said he was shocked by the ban, before Tottenham's 2-1 defeat by Southampton on Saturday.

He will not be in the dugout for the trip to Liverpool on March 31. Tottenham are third in the standings with 61 points from 30 games, 13 points behind leaders Manchester City.

ROUND-UP

Arsenal striker Lacazette free to face Rennes as ban reduced

Arsenal striker Alexandre Lacazette will be available for the Gunners' Europa League rescue mission against Rennes tomorrow after the French international's three-match European ban was reduced to two by UEFA on appeal.

Unai Emery's men trail 3-1 from the first leg of their last 16 tie against the French side. "The appeal lodged by Arsenal FC has been partially upheld. To suspend the Arsenal FC player Alexandre Lacazette for two (2) UEFA competition matches for which he would be otherwise eligible for serious rough play," UEFA's Control, Ethics and Disciplinary Body decided yesterday.

Lacazette was shown a straight red card as Arsenal were beaten 1-0 by BATE Borisov in the first leg of their last 32 tie. However, he has already served that two-game ban in the second leg against BATE, which Arsenal won 3-0, and the first leg against Rennes in his homeland last week.

FIFA EXTENDS BAN ON AFGHAN OFFICIAL ACCUSED OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

FIFA have extended the suspension of the Afghan Football Federation president who was charged with sexual assault against members of the national women's team, the governing body of world football said yesterday.

FIFA said they had added 90 days to Keramuddin Karim's ban, imposed on December 12, at the recommendation of the investigating arm of its ethics commission. "Mr Karim will continue to be banned from all football-related activities at both national and international level," FIFA said in a statement.

British newspaper the Guardian reported in December that one footballer Khalida Popal had collected accounts from former teammates that included sexual violence, death threats and



Striker Alexandre Lacazette was shown a straight red card as Arsenal were beaten 1-0 by BATE Borisov in the first leg of their Europa League last 32 tie. (AFP)

rapes. Afghan president Ashraf Ghani said he was "shocked" Karim "firmly denied" the accusations, denouncing a "conspiracy" "without evidence."

CLUBS SHOULD THINK AGAIN ABOUT SKIMPING ON SECURITY: POLICE CHIEF

Clubs could spend the same money they pay for an "average Premier League full-back" to have more police at stadia and prevent the disgraceful scenes witnessed at the weekend, according to Britain's leading football police officer.

Mark Roberts told the Daily Mail the clubs were suffering the consequences of more and more clubs preferring to cut costs by replacing police with stewards. Roberts' remarks come as debate over security rages following several unsavoury incidents last weekend in England and Scotland.

The most shocking was at Birmingham where fan Paul Mitchell ran onto the pitch and

punched Aston Villa's Jack Grealish, Mitchell for which he was jailed for 14 weeks on Monday. At the Emirates on Sunday, Manchester United defender Chris Smalling was confronted on the pitch Arsenal supporter Gary Cooper, who has been charged with common assault.

On Friday, Rangers captain James Tavernier was challenged by a pitch-invading Hibernian fan in a stormy Scottish Premiership draw. "Football paid agents £21million (\$279million) last year but they are gambling with their policing bill," Roberts told the newspaper. "For the cost of an average Premier League full back, the game could be made safer and not a drain on the public purse."

Bill Bush, the Premier League's director of policy, told the Daily Mail that uniformed police inside the stadium provided reassurance, not least because they have the power to arrest miscreants whereas stewards do not.

WELLINGTON TEST

Wagner's five-for seals innings win for New Zealand

'We were handling him well but then we gave it away'

AFP
Wellington

Short-ball specialist Neil Wagner engineered an innings victory over Bangladesh in what New Zealand called "an ideal two days" in the rain-shortened second Test to wrap up the series with a game to spare.

After the first two days were washed out, the match finished in the first session of the final day in Wellington as New Zealand completed a fifth consecutive series win for the first time.

In the face of Wagner's relentless bouncer barrage, Bangladesh were all out for 209 to give New Zealand victory by an innings and 12 runs to go with their innings and 52-run win in the first Test.

"It was an ideal two days," said Tim Southee, who took over the New Zealand captain's armband after Kane Williamson left for treatment to an injured shoulder. "With the amount of time that was lost through rain, a lot of people thought it was going to be tough to win a Test inside three days but we knew there was always going to be a little bit of assistance in the wicket."

"The batters need a lot of credit for the way they put us in such a strong position yesterday that we only needed to bat once. I think that was the backbone of another Test win for us."

Of the 20 Bangladesh wickets to fall, Wagner took nine, including five for 45 in the second innings. After Ross Taylor's 200 steered New Zealand to 432 for six declared in their first innings, a lead of 221, Bangladesh resumed yesterday at 80 for three.

They advanced to 112 before Trent Boult removed Soumya Sarkar for 28 and Wagner made sure the remaining wickets fell quickly.

Only captain Mahmudullah Riyad and Mohamed Mithun, who scored 67 and 47 respectively, offered serious resistance.

"We didn't commit and back ourselves," said Mahmudullah, adding they had discussed "the Wagner factor" before arriving in New Zealand and he believed his batsmen "have the skill level" to handle the short-ball tactic.

"We were handling him well but then we gave it away. We have to bat with more guts for longer periods. A number of our batsmen are playing half-hearted shots, or we are not committed. We are in two minds whether to play a shot or not."

"You need to back yourself. If you want to attack, you should know how you want to cope with your bouncer theory."

The third and final Test starts in Christchurch on Saturday



New Zealand's Neil Wagner (centre) celebrates the wicket of Bangladesh's Taijul Islam with teammates during day five of the second cricket Test the Basin Reserve in Wellington yesterday. (AFP)

Injured Williamson in doubt for third Test, may delay IPL departure

Injured Kane Williamson could sit out the third Test against Bangladesh beginning Saturday in Christchurch and might have to delay his departure for the Indian Premier League (IPL), New Zealand said yesterday. Captain Williamson suffered a shoulder injury while fielding in Bangladesh's first innings of the second Test in Wellington, which New Zealand won yesterday by an innings and 12 runs. Coach Gary Stead said scans had detected a tear to Williamson's left pectoral minor muscle in his shoulder. "There's obviously irritation and a wee bit of bleeding, it's not a major injury," Stead said. "We're hopeful that he will recover quickly, and the thing for us is to make sure he doesn't aggravate it any more. He will come

to Christchurch and we will make an assessment there on whether he plays." With the series already won, Stead said New Zealand would take a "safety first" approach, particularly with this year's World Cup on the horizon. "No player wants to give up their spot in the Test team. But I think it's safe to say that we will probably err on the conservative side, and if there's any chance of risk then we're likely to pull him from that game." Williamson had suffered considerable discomfort while batting, although he managed to score 74. He did not take the field for Bangladesh's second innings with Tim Southee taking over the captaincy. Williamson is due to fly to India after the

Bangladesh series to join up with the Sunrisers Hyderabad in the money-spinning Twenty20 IPL. "If things progress as we hope, then still going to the IPL shouldn't be a problem to him," said Stead. "But he's also aware that if he's not quite 100 per cent, then we will potentially hold him back as well and make sure that he is right before he goes on that plane." Victory early on the fifth day after the first two days were lost to rain gave New Zealand an unbeatable 2-0 lead in the series and ensured they would end the season with an International Cricket Council cheque for \$500,000 as the second-ranked Test side behind India.

Scorecard

 BANGLADESH 1st innings	211	Mahmudullah c Boult b Wagner	67	Total	(all out; 56 overs) 209
 NEW ZEALAND 1st innings	432-6 decl	L. Das c Boult b Wagner	1	Fall of wickets:	1-4 (Tamim), 2-20 (Mominul), 3-55 (Shadman), 4-112 (Soumya), 5-152 (Mithun), 6-158 (Liton Das), 7-170 (Taijul), 8-203 (Mustafizur), 9-209 (Mahmudullah), 10-209 (Ebadat)
 BANGLADESH 2nd innings		T. Islam c Latham b Wagner	0	Bowlers:	Boult 16-5-52-4, Southee 12-1-57-0 (1w), Henry 9-3-40-1 (1w), de Grandhomme 5-0-11-0 (1w), Wagner 14-4-45-5.
T. Iqbal b Boult	4	A. Jayed not out	0		
S. Islam c Watling b Henry	29	E. Hossain b Wagner	0		
M. Haque c Southee b Boult	10	Extras	(lb 4, w 3) 7		
M. Mithun c Southee b Wagner	47				
S. Sarkar c Taylor b Boult	28				

ASSESSMENT

India count Vijay Shankar gain

Reuters
New Delhi

Regardless of the outcome of today's series decider against Australia, India are already counting Vijay Shankar's rise as a handy, nerveless all-rounder as one of their gains from the five-match series against the world champions.

The hosts approached their last ODI series before this year's World Cup more as an assessment of their preparedness for the showpiece event in England and Wales.

With Hardik Pandya, India's first choice pace-bowling all-rounder, recovering from a back injury, Shankar capitalised on his opportunity against Australia to catapult himself into World Cup contentions with some impressive performances.

The 28-year-old has proved he can float in the batting order and, with the ball, can hold his nerve in the death overs.

"Vijay has gained in confidence. He's batted brilliantly at any given position given to him," India's bowling coach Bharat Arun told reporters at Feroz Shah Kotla ahead of the fifth and final match of the series, currently level at 2-2.

"He batted at number four, six and seven, and he has done exceptionally well." He has been equally impres-

sive with the ball. Barely two months after his ODI debut in Melbourne, Shankar was at the thick of things in the second match against Australia when he was entrusted with the last over with the tourists needing 11 from it with two wickets in hand.

The right-arm seamer, who had contributed a breezy 46 with the bat at number five, responded by dismissing the in-form Marcus Stoinis and Adam Zampa in the space of three deliveries to secure India's narrow win.

"The confidence he has gained with his batting is rubbing onto his bowling as well," Arun said.

"The way he started, he was bowling at 120-125 (kph). Now he is touching 130s. He looks a lot more confident in his bowling. So yes, Vijay Shankar has been a huge positive for the team."

Arun would not disclose if Shankar was being considered at the number four position, a place captain Virat Kohli filled in the fourth ODI in Mohali.

"Those are not necessarily the combinations which will be in World Cup but we would like to know how people perform in different situations for us to pick up a balanced team for the World Cup," Arun said.

"We'll be extremely sure (of) what we want before going into a major tournament like World Cup."



India's Vijay Shankar (right) watches as Australia batsmen Usman Khawaja (left) and Peter Handscomb run between the wickets during the fourth ODI in Mohali. (AFP)

FOCUS

Amla sits out final two one-dayers for family reasons

AFP
Johannesburg

Hashim Amla was given compassionate leave yesterday to miss South Africa's last two one-day internationals against Sri Lanka, providing what could be a last-ditch opportunity for Reeza Hendricks to stake a claim for a place in the country's World Cup squad.

Proteas team manager Mohammed Moosa said batsman Amla had asked for leave because his father was critically ill with Hendricks replacing the 35-year-old.

Amla was not selected for the first three matches of the series, all won by South Africa, although selection convener

Linda Zondi said at the time he had not been dropped and the selectors wanted to examine all their options ahead of this year's World Cup.

Opening batsman Hendricks had scores of 1, 29 and 4 in the first three matches and his World Cup chances seemed to have disappeared when he was dropped for the last two games.

The 15-man squad appeared to be a likely choice for the global tournament held in England and Wales between May and July. Sri Lanka will be without Test match-winner Kusal Perera, who was ruled out of the last two matches with a hamstring injury suffered while fielding in the third international in Durban on Sunday.

The last two matches are in Port Elizabeth on Wednesday and Cape Town on Saturday.

PREVIEW

Australia confident of stunning ODI series win

AFP
New Delhi

Vice-captain Alex Carey said yesterday that Australia are confident of sealing what would be a stunning one-day international series victory in India after two wins on the trot.

Having been two down to the hosts, Australia bounced back to win the third and fourth ODIs to level the series, including with a record 359-run chase on Sunday.

"We were put under pressure early in the series. It is obviously really exciting going into tomorrow with the series on the line," Carey told reporters on the eve of the fifth ODI in New Delhi.

"Obviously (we are taking) some momentum from the last game. The boys are feeling confident," he said.

If Aaron Finch and company win, it would be the only Aussie team to win a five-match ODI series after losing the first two matches either at home or abroad.

Australia, who swept the two-match Twenty20 series to kick off their limited-overs tour of India on a strong note, have posted two 300-plus scores in their last two outings.

Ashley Turner was an unlikely hero in the previous match in Mohali when the middle-order batsman smashed an unbeaten 84 off 43 deliveries to lead Australia's highest-ever ODI chase.

Finch, Usman Khawaja and Peter Handscomb have also all contributed in a big way, and Carey believes it would be hard to name a standout performer in the series.

"I think if you look across the board everyone has performed

at times. For Usman Khawaja, to back up his hundred with a score of 90 (91) was impressive to see," the wicketkeeper-batsman said. "...I can go across the whole side and say that everyone's improving."

Carey said Australia's recent performances only add to their team plans which will take better shape when names like Steve Smith and David Warner join the side after their suspension.

The 12-month bans handed down to Smith and Warner by Cricket Australia for their role in the Cape Town ball-tampering incident end on March 28 and the duo are expected to play in the Indian Premier League (IPL) before the World Cup later this year.

"Those are definitely some big names that might come back into the line. It's only healthy for Australian Cricket that the guys

in the side are playing well and these guys that have done really well in the past have definitely put their hand up for selection when they are available," said Carey.

"We are really confident moving with the squad we take whoever that is to the World Cup that is going to perform. We have obviously got tomorrow to focus on," he added.

India's bowling coach Bharat Arun said the team is looking to get their combinations right in what will be their final ODI before the World Cup in England and Wales starting May 30.

"We would like to try out all our options before the World Cup," Arun said.

"Definitely there are certain areas we need to address both in bowling and batting. We have to stay positive whatever has happened," he added.



Australian wicket-keeper Alex Carey dives to catch a ball during a practice session at the Feroz Shah Kotla stadium in New Delhi yesterday. (AFP)

NBA

Cavs rout Raptors, Williams makes history off bench

'That was a great win for us. Especially against a real good team at home. It was fun'



Cleveland Cavaliers guard Collin Sexton (right) drives against Toronto Raptors guard Jeremy Lin in the fourth quarter at Quicken Loans Arena. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

AFP
Los Angeles

Collin Sexton scored 28 points and Kevin Love tallied 16 points and 18 rebounds as the Cleveland Cavaliers used a balanced attack to upset the Toronto Raptors 126-101 on Monday. Cedi Osman scored 19 points and Ante Zizic had 17 for Cleveland, who had a half dozen players in double figure scoring. "That was a great win for us," Love said. "Especially against a real good team at home. It was fun."

Toronto's Kawhi Leonard returned from a one game absence to score 25 points on 11 of 19 shooting from the field for Toronto who have the second best record in the NBA. Kyle Lowry scored 14 points for the Raptors, who dropped to 48-20 on the season and trail Milwaukee by 2 1/2 games for the best record.

"They did a great job, they played well, and they made open shots," Leonard said.

"That's pretty much the way the game played out."

The Raptors said they wanted to rest Leonard in the last game because of the long season but they looked like a tired team against the Cavaliers and led only briefly in the first half.

Leonard hasn't appeared in more than two consecutive games since finishing up five straight in early February.

Cleveland led by as much as 27 points late in the game after seizing command early in the fourth. Toronto's Serge Ibaka and Cleveland's Marquese Chriss were ejected for a heated scuffle in the third quarter. Ibaka fell down and got up and immediately went after Chriss. Ibaka shoved Chriss from behind and grabbed his throat. A shoving match ensued and at one stage Ibaka tried to throw a punch but missed wildly. At that point Chriss was trying to break free and eventually did. One or both players could face a suspension. Love said the fight didn't last long. "I saw it out of the corner of my eye,"

RESULTS

Clippers	140-115	Boston
Brooklyn	103-75	Detroit
Cleveland	126-101	Toronto
Washington	121-115	Sacramento
Oklahoma City	98-89	Utah
Houston	118-106	Charlotte

Love said. "It happened so fast. Everybody almost wants to run out there and check what's going on. It was broken up quick. That's usually how it goes."

In Los Angeles, Lou Williams made history by becoming the most prolific scoring substitute in NBA history by passing Dell Curry in the Los Angeles Clippers 140-115 win over the Boston Celtics.

Williams finished with 34 points as the Clippers continued their push towards the playoffs. Williams now leads the NBA in points for a player coming off the bench with 11,154 in his career. Curry had 11,148

points as a reserve. It was Williams' eighth game of the season with at least 30 points.

Also, James Harden scored 28 points and Eric Gordon had 22 as the Houston Rockets overcame Kemba Walkers' 40 point performance with a 118-106 win.

Clint Capela tallied 19 points and 15 rebounds for the Rockets who won their ninth straight game. Chris Paul had 10 points and 10 rebounds, and Harden had 10 assists and six rebounds. Walker also had 10 rebounds and seven assists as the Hornets lost their second in a row.

Elsewhere, Spencer Dinwiddie scored 19 points and the Brooklyn Nets moved into sixth place in the Eastern Conference standings with a 103-75 win over the Detroit Pistons. Allen Crabbe finished with 14 points and 10 rebounds, Rodions Kurucs scored 13 points as the Nets took control early in the game and stayed in command. The Nets won their fourth straight and vaulted over Detroit into the No. 6 spot in their final game before leaving for a seven-game road trip.

FOCUS

Westbrook says fan provoked profane threat

Reuters
Los Angeles



Oklahoma City star Russell Westbrook said he was verbally provoked before directing a profanity-laced tirade at a fan during the Thunder's 98-89 win over the Utah Jazz on Monday in Salt Lake City.

A reporter from the Deseret News tweeted a video of Westbrook's comments to the fan.

"I promise you," Westbrook said to the fan. "You think I'm playing. I swear to God. I swear to God. I'll (expletive) you up; you and your wife. I'll (expletive) you up."

When another person appears to intervene, Westbrook says, "No, (expletive) that! (Expletive) that!"

Then apparently addressing the fan again, he said, "I promise you, everything I love. Everything I love (n-word), I promise you."

After the game, Westbrook gave his explanation: "How it started was, a young man and his wife in the stands told me 'to get down on my knees like you used to.' To me, that's just completely disrespectful, to me, I think it's racial, and I think it's inappropriate and insensitive...."

"If I had it to do over again, I would say the exact same thing. I truly will stand up for myself and my family...."

"As for beating up his wife, I've never put my hand on a woman. I never will. Never been in any domestic violence before. But once he said the comment, and his wife repeated the same thing as well. That's kind of how that started."

Salt Lake City NBC 5 iden-

tified the male fan involved in the exchange as Shane Keisel, a Jazz fan, and spoke with him.

Keisel said he was playfully bantering with Westbrook before Westbrook started cursing at him.

"I never said a single swear word to him, not one," Keisel told the TV station. "Initially, I was like, 'Oh, I'm talking with Westbrook, the guy is one of the greats. He's also classless...."

"He can threaten me all he wants. I was the one talking to him, but don't threaten a woman. She's 5 feet tall and 110 pounds, man. (She) never said a word to him."

Five fans at the game were issued "warning cards" citing the NBA's code of conduct after the incident, the Deseret News reported.

The NBA later issued a statement: "We are continuing to investigate the unfortunate exchange at tonight's game between Russell Westbrook and fans. Multiple warning cards were issued by arena security. Players and fans have a shared responsibility to create a safe and respectful environment. If it is determined that any fans violated the NBA Code of Conduct, appropriate action will be taken." Last year, Westbrook knocked the cell phone out of the hand of a fan in Salt Lake City after a Thunder playoff loss.

Bills sign veteran Gore, Kroft

Frank Gore is back for more in 2019. The NFL's oldest active running back, who turns 36 in May, agreed to a one-year, \$2 million contract with the Buffalo Bills on Monday, according to ESPN's Adam Schefter.

Gore, who rushed for 722 yards with the Miami Dolphins in 2018, needs 252 yards to become the fourth player in NFL history with 15,000 rushing yards. He needs 522 to pass Barry Sanders for third place all time. Gore joins a Buffalo backfield that already includes veterans LeSean McCoy and Chris Ivory, who are both turning 31 this offseason.

A five-time Pro Bowl selection and nine-time 1,000-yard rusher, Gore has rushed for 14,748 yards and 77 touchdowns in 210 games with the San Francisco 49ers (2005-14), Indianapolis Colts (2015-17) and Dolphins. Gore, a third-round pick out of Miami in 2005, also has 455 career receptions for 3,796 yards and 18 scores. Buffalo also will be adding free agent centre Mitch Morse, according to Schefter. Morse has started all 49 games in which he played for the Kansas City Chiefs in the past four seasons after being a second-round pick in the 2015 draft.

Morse started 11 games in the 2018 regular season and two more in the playoffs.

Meanwhile, former Cincinnati Bengals tight end Tyler Kroft is joining the Bills on a three-year deal, according to his agent, Mike McCartney. Per NFL Network, Kroft's deal will be worth \$18.75 million and up to \$21mn. Kroft, 26, missed 11 games due to injury last season, posting just four catches for 36 yards. However, he had 42 grabs for 404 yards and seven scores in 2017 while starting all 16 games. A third-round pick in 2015, Kroft has 67 career catches for 661 yards and eight touchdowns in 51 games (35 starts).

NHL

Sharks shut out Wild, grab 1st place in Pacific

Reuters
Saint Paul, USA

Martin Jones turned aside all 24 shots he faced as the San Jose Sharks moved into first place in the Pacific Division with a 3-0 victory over the Minnesota Wild on Monday in Saint Paul, Minn.

Fourth-liner Barclay Goodrow and Tomas Hertl each scored, and Logan Couture converted a penalty shot for the Sharks, who have won five in a row to move past the idle Calgary Flames atop the Pacific.

The shutout was Jones' third of the season and second against the Wild, as he made 26 saves in San Jose's 4-0 win at Minnesota on Dec. 18. The 29-year-old stopped 73 of 76 shots in a three-game season sweep of the Wild and 128 of 137 shots during his five-game winning streak.

Devan Dubnyk turned aside 26 shots for Minnesota, which began a season-high, five-game homestand by dropping its second straight contest following an eight-game point streak (6-0-2). Both teams saw their bids to snap a scoreless tie hit the post before San Jose cracked the scoresheet with 5:54 remaining in the second period.

Defenseman Marc-Edouard Vlasic's shot from along the left-wing boards deflected off Goodrow's stomach and into the net as the forward skated in front of Dubnyk. The goal

RESULTS

Tampa Bay	6-2	Toronto
Islanders	2-0	Columbus
Philadelphia	3-2	Ottawa
San Jose	3-0	Minnesota
Chicago	7-1	Arizona
Carolina	3-0	Colorado
Edmonton	3-2	Rangers

was Goodrow's sixth of the season was first since December 16. San Jose doubled the advantage when Hertl capped a three-on-one rush by tucking the puck inside the left post at 4:37 of the third period.

Minnesota defenseman Anthony Bitetto was whistled for hooking on Couture's partial breakaway midway into the third period, resulting in a penalty shot. Couture made the Wild pay by wristing a shot between Dubnyk's pads for his 24th goal of the season.

Wild coach Bruce Boudreau attempted to challenge the initial play, claiming that Couture was offside. Replays confirmed Boudreau's claim, but the officials announced that the play itself was not open to challenge since it resulted in a penalty - not an immediate goal. Minnesota drew iron on two attempts during a scoreless first period, as Zach Parise's deflection of defenseman Jonas Brodin's shot caromed off the right post at 4:52, and Pontus Aberg's bid caromed off

the crossbar with 4:48 remaining.

DRAISAITL'S OT GOAL POWERS OILERS PAST RANGERS

Leon Draisaitl's one-timer 35 seconds into overtime gave the Edmonton Oilers a 3-2 win over the visiting New York Rangers on Monday. After giving up an early 2-0 lead, the Oilers escaped with two points thanks to yet another big performance from Draisaitl, who also collected two assists. Draisaitl has 33 points (18 goals, 15 assists) over his past 21 games, and he has recorded at least one point in each of his past 14 games.

The victory brings Edmonton within five points of Minnesota for the final Western Conference wild-card spot. The Oilers are rounding into form for this final playoff push, with a 7-2-1 record over their past 10 games.

New York remain 10 points back of Columbus for the final Eastern Conference wild-card spot. The Rangers now lead all NHL teams with 13 overtime losses this season.

Connor McDavid assisted on Draisaitl's winner, and he also scored the game's opening goal on a first-period power play. McDavid extended his own points streak to nine games with his 34th goal of the season.

Less than two minutes later, Matt Benning scored a goal from the point that was initially disallowed due to alleged goalie interference from Zack Kassian. A video review overturned the call, however, giving Benning his third goal of the season.



San Jose Sharks forward Tomas Hertl (centre) celebrates after scoring a goal in the third period against Minnesota Wild at Xcel Energy Center. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

TENNIS

Right Struff: Ailing Zverev toppled, Djoko rained out

'I think I just got unlucky, I got a virus somewhere and that's how it is'

AFP
Indian Wells, United States

Ailing world number three Alexander Zverev crashed out of the ATP Indian Wells Masters, where Novak Djokovic's third round match was suspended by rain with one game completed.

Jan-Lennard Struff, ranked 55th in the world, notched his first victory over Zverev in five tries, breaking him once in the first set and three times in the second for a 6-3, 6-1 victory.

"I've been sick for a week," said the 21-year-old Zverev, who lost the Acapulco final to Australian Nick Kyrgios the week before Indian Wells began. "That hasn't changed, unfortunately."

"I think I just got unlucky, I got a virus somewhere and that's how it is."

Zverev, the owner of three Masters 1000 titles who has never made it to the quarter-finals at Indian Wells, said he would now focus on recuperating and preparing for the Miami Masters, where he'll be hoping to improve on his runner-up finish to John Isner last year.

"Now it's about getting healthy and about recovering and preparing myself for Miami, because Miami is the tournament I do well in, history-wise," he said. "Here I have always struggled."

Despite the circumstances, Struff was delighted to get a first win over Zverev.

"Yeah, 6-3, 6-1, it's amazing," he said. "Played a good match. He was missing some shots today, but at the end of the day I'm very happy with that."

Struff next faces 13th-seeded Canadian Milos Raonic, who rallied from 4-1 down in the third set to beat US qualifier Marcos Giron 4-6, 6-4, 6-4.

Giron, 25, looked set to claim the biggest win of a career that has been hindered by two hip operations when he took a 4-1 lead in the third set.

But Raonic, runner-up at Indian Wells in 2016, called on all of his experience to turn things around against the American, who had never won two ATP Tour matches in a row until this



Jan-Lennard Struff of Germany in action during his third round match of the BNP Paribas Open against compatriot Alexander Zverev (not pictured) at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden. **PICTURE:** USA TODAY Sports

week. "He came up with the goods and definitely pushed me sort of to the brink there where I was getting a little bit frustrated," Raonic said.

"I just kept trying to plug away. There were two games that I had break chances to get back into the third, and I didn't make it count. Luckily I made the last two count."

"I'm proud of the way I competed today. That's what got me through," said Raonic, who fell to Struff in the first round at Dubai

last month.

DJOKOVIC ON HOLD

World number one Novak Djokovic, playing his first tournament since grabbing a record seventh Australian Open title in January, completed just one game against unseeded German Philipp Kohlschreiber before rain swept across the California desert.

The duo were sent to the locker room and with no break in the weather in sight organizers sus-

pended play for the night, with the match to resume.

The winner will face in-form Frenchman Gael Monfils, who rolled past Albert Ramos Vinolas 6-0, 6-3. Monfils won his eighth career title at Rotterdam in February, followed up that performance with a run to the semi-finals in Dubai.

In other early matches, 40-year-old Ivo Karlovic defeated India's Prajesh Gunneswaran 6-3, 7-6 (7/3).

The Croatian veteran will face

Austrian seventh seed Dominic Thiem, who beat France's Gilles Simon 6-3, 6-1.

Lucky loser Miomir Kecmanovic of Serbia continued to make the most of his unexpected opportunity, beating fellow Serbian Laslo Djere, the 30th seed, 6-2, 7-6 (7/3).

The 19-year-old will take on Japan's Yoshihito Nishioka, who rallied from a set down to beat 18-year-old Canadian Felix Auger-Aliassime 6-7 (2/7), 6-4, 7-6 (7/5).

OLYMPICS

Commemorative Tokyo 2020 stamps go on sale

Reuters
Tokyo

Stamps celebrating next year's Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games went on sale yesterday, 500 days before the start of the summer showpiece.

The stamps, released by Japan Post Co., feature the Olympic and Paralympic mascots Miraitowa and Someity as well as an image of the new Olympic Stadium, which is still under construction.

One million sheets of 10 stamps are on sale, priced at 920 yen (\$8.26), which includes a donation of 100 yen towards preparations for the Games. Dozens queued outside the main post office near Tokyo station to get their hands on the special stamps.

"Each stamp has 10 yen donation to operations for the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo 2020 so I would like to contribute to the Games even if a small amount," said 77-year-old Masaki Nakamura at Tokyo station.

"I like the mascots," said Yu Anami, who had come to the station early to get her hands on the stamps. "I think that there are few stamps with illustrated designs so this would be a good memorial item."

The designer of the stamps, Akira Tamaki, said he had tak-

en inspiration from the commemorative stamps made for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, when Japan last held the Summer Games.

"What we wish is to design and produce a stamp to be proud of as Japan-made because whole world is looking forward to it," Tamaki told Reuters before the stamps went on sale.

"I was inspired not by the (1964) stamp design itself but rather by the fact that it was a national project and people were all excited for it. I saw the power of the era and I believe that is something I should strongly sense and inherit."

In 1964, the Games provided the city with the opportunity to rebranding and shake off a war-ravaged reputation and show a modern face to the world. This time, the legacy is likely to be more intangible but Japan Post hope the stamps can further ramp up enthusiasm for the Games.

"This will be the second Olympics hosted by this country," said Shinoda Atsushi, the executive in charge of stamp production at Japan Post.

"I hope Japan will enjoy the enthusiasm through the second Olympic games. It would be great if our stamps become a part of creating such an enthusiastic atmosphere."

The Olympics begin in Tokyo on July 24 next year.



A sheet of commemorative stamps for Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, featuring the Olympic and Paralympic mascots Miraitowa and Someity as well as an image of the new Olympic Stadium, in Tokyo. **(REUTERS)**

British Olympic team set to have more women than men: BBC

Great Britain's team for Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games is on course to contain more women than men for the first time, chief of mission Mark England has told the BBC. The number of women in the British team could rise above 50 percent from 44 percent at Rio in 2016, he added.

"For the first time it looks like we might have more women than men in the Great Britain team for Tokyo as we see the fruition of some fabulous athletic talent," the BBC quoted England as saying. "We have seen some fantastic role models in multiple Olympic champions like Heather Stanning and Helen Glover,

Jade Jones and Nicola Adams. "Everybody also looks up to Jessica Ennis-Hill and they have clearly all had a great impact in terms of inspiring a new class of young female athletes which is now emerging." England also said Britain's Olympic Committee was hopeful its athletes could match the medal haul from Rio, where they finished second on the table behind the United States with 27 gold, 23 silver and 17 bronze. "We have tough shoes to fill from Rio," he said. "Typically, we don't set medal targets but we are hugely confident that the investment by UK Sport... will make Team GB as successful as it was in Rio."

FOCUS

Osaka keeps Indian Wells title defence on track

AFP
Indian Wells, United States

World number one and defending champion Naomi Osaka powered past American Danielle Collins 6-4, 6-2 on Monday to book a fourth-round meeting with resurgent Swiss Belinda Bencic at Indian Wells.

Japan's Osaka, whose second straight Grand Slam title at the Australian Open propelled her to the top of the rankings, traded breaks with Collins early in the first set.

But she got the decisive break in the ninth game, giving herself a break point with a backhand winner before pouncing on a short ball and belting a forehand winner to give herself a chance to serve for the set.

An increasingly confident Osaka broke Collins in love for a 2-1 lead in the second. She finished out the next game for a 3-1 lead and led 5-1 before Collins saved a match point to hold and make Osaka serve out the match.

Collins, trying to build on a breakout run to the Australian Open semi-finals, failed in her bid to avenge her 6-1, 6-0 loss to Osaka in their only prior meeting in Beijing last year.

And Osaka, whose first career title came at this prestigious WTA premier mandatory event

last year, advanced to a meeting with Bencic, the 23rd seed who defeated Russian Ekaterina Alexandrova 6-4, 6-2.

Bencic stunned two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova in the final at Dubai last month to capture her first WTA title in four years.

The 21-year-old stunned two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova in the final at Dubai last month to capture her first WTA title in four years.

She won the WTA title in Toronto in 2015 before a series of back and wrist injuries saw her slide down the rankings.

In other third-round action, three-time Grand Slam champion Angelique Kerber came from a set down to beat Russian qualifier Natalia Vikhlyantseva 3-6, 6-1, 6-3.

After dropping her serve in the first game of the second set, Kerber won seven games in a row to force a third set and take a 2-0 lead in the decider.

She was unable to convert four match points against Vikhlyantseva's serve at 5-1 and was broken at love when serving for the match at 5-2 before finally putting it away.

"I think it gives me confidence that I can turn around matches, that I can play also three sets, also in the close moments that I'm there, that I can trust myself," said Kerber, adding that it

was always difficult to face an opponent for the first time.

VENUS RISING

She'll be doing the same in the round of 16 against Aryna Sabalenka, the ninth seed from Belarus who defeated Lesia Tsurenko 6-2, 7-5.

Seven-time Grand Slam winner Venus Williams also found it tricky facing fellow American Christina McHale for the first time, but she pulled back early breaks in each set to win 6-2, 7-5.

"I never played her, so you're out there learning what they do well, what shots they select," Williams said, adding that it wasn't until the second set that she felt "OK, I understand."

"I felt comfortable with trying to control the point from there," said Williams, who fired 20 winners and converted seven of her nine break point chances.

She'll fight for a quarter-final berth against Mona Barthel, a 7-5, 1-6, 6-4 winner over Julia Goerges in an all-German contest.

Fifth-seeded Czech Karolina Pliskova relied on a solid service game in a 6-3, 6-2 victory over Belgian qualifier Ysaline Bonaventure.

She next faces Estonian Anett Kontaveit, who was leading 5-0 against 11th-seeded Anastasija Sevastova when the Latvian retired from their match.



Japan's Naomi Osaka plays Danielle Collins during the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden in Indian Wells, California. **(AFP)**

FORMULA 1

Vettel still has plenty to prove as Ferrari chase title

He enters the season with optimism, and a new teammate

DPA
Berlin

Five is the hopefully lucky number for **Sebastian Vettel**.

In his fifth year at Ferrari, he will be behind the wheel of car number 5 seeking to become Formula One world champion for a fifth time.

The Ferrari driver will be hoping to follow in the footsteps of record champion and fellow German Michael Schumacher, who also needed five attempts before he won his first title with the Italian F1 team. Four more titles then followed.

A world championship with Ferrari would be the "ultimate," Vettel has said before the season-opening race in Melbourne on March 17.

With impressive best times in test drives, Ferrari go to Australia full of optimism at the start of another marathon season with 21 races as the team tries to challenge the dominance of Mercedes.

World champion Lewis Hamilton, who won his fifth drivers' title last season, is gearing up for an even stronger Ferrari challenge amid some uncertainty over the current strength of Mercedes.



"We have to climb a mountain, but we know how to do it," Hamilton said.

Last season, the Mercedes driver began slowly, with Vettel winning the opening two races of the season.

In the end, however, Hamilton was unstoppable, relentlessly exploiting the glitches and mistakes of his opponent.

It was probably one of the worst defeats for Vettel, who won his four world title trophies with Red Bull.

"There is a winner, the second is the first extra.

That's not always fair, but Formula 1 is not a children's birthday," Vettel told Germa-

ny's Sport Bild recently.

Only Schumacher and Niki Lauda have won more races for the Scuderia than Vettel.

But in order to really earn a place of honour in the ancestral gallery of the traditional marque from Maranello, Vettel must finally obtain a title.

The memory of Kimi Raikkonen's 2007 championship win, the last for Ferrari, is faded.

After much change and some setbacks, Vettel is certain that Ferrari has "all the ingredients together". Mattia Binotto, who has replaced team principal Maurizio Arrivabene, was involved in Schumacher's title series as an engineer and knows

the sensitive soul of F1's most famous racing team.

"We know what we have to do and how we have to do it," Vettel said.

In his 13th Formula One year, the four-time champion also has to face a new challenge internally.

His new team colleague Charles Leclerc, 21, from Monaco is considered a great talent and could already embody the future after Vettel, if the German does not finally fulfil the title aspirations of the tifosi.

Already in his last year at Red Bull, Vettel had in Daniel Ricciardo a youthful challeng-

er, who showed no respect.

It was the only season so far in which Vettel lost a duel with a stable-mate. Although Vettel retains internal status, he will have to sharpen his senses if he wants to conquer first Leclerc and then Hamilton.

Schumacher once showed what it takes.

The diligence, meticulousness and precision of the seven-time world champion was legendary, as was his unconditional loyalty to the team, but also his ruthlessness on the race track.

"Michael took Ferrari on his shoulders and led the team out of the crisis.

He was a leader," said former Formula 1 boss Bernie Ecclestone at the end of the pre-season training, adding: "Vettel is not like that."

Vettel will have to prove the opposite, so as not to end up as a failure in the Ferrari story.

At stake is also the Scuderia's record of six team titles in series from the years 1999 to 2004, which Mercedes could equal this year. Others may hope to be challenging.

Max Verstappen in Red Bull will, however, first have to see how the new engine partnership with Honda evolves.

And Ricciardo, now at Renault, and Kimi Raikkonen, who has moved from Ferrari to Alfa Romeo, are probably good for no more than the odd surprise.

It all points to another showdown between Hamilton and Vettel in a season in which Formula One will chalk up its 1,000th Grand Prix, in Shanghai on April 14.

FOCUS

'Almost impossible': Kubica's astonishing comeback to F1



AFP
Melbourne

Eight years ago, supremely talented Polish driver **Robert Kubica's** right arm was partially severed in a horror rallying accident that brought his Formula One career to a dramatic halt.

But racing is in his blood and he never gave up on his dream to compete again at the pinnacle of motor sport and on Sunday his astonishing comeback will be complete.

The 34-year-old will be on the grid in Melbourne for the opening Grand Prix of the year with a struggling Williams team in dire need of someone with such unshakeable determination to help reverse a worrying slump.

"It has been a challenging journey to make it back to the Formula One grid, but what seemed almost impossible is now beginning to feel possible," he said when he was announced as a Williams driver.

Before his accident, Kubica was touted as a future champion, with blistering natural speed and racing intelligence to rival his peers at the time Lewis Hamilton and Fernando Alonso.

He got his start with Sauber and won the Canadian Grand Prix in 2008 before moving to Renault.

But this is a new era and how he fares, and whether he still has the capacity to perform miracles with an underperforming car, remain to be seen.

His preparations have not been ideal, with Williams missing the first two days of pre-season testing in Barcelona last month. Although the Pole managed plenty of laps his time was well short of the front runners.

"Out of the runs that we did, we managed to learn some things, but it hasn't given me the level of confidence that I would have liked ahead of Australia," he admitted.

"But you have to take the positives out of these difficult situations," he added with trademark

optimism.

Kubica's dramatic crash at a low-level rally event in Italy in 2011, as he was coming off a strong Formula One season with Renault, would have been the end of the road for many.

He had multiple fractures to his right elbow, shoulder and leg, and his right forearm was partially severed with his chances of him returning to a normal life, let alone racing again, looking slim.

Kubica has explained in the past that the injury to his arm forced him to adapt the way he drives.

"After my accident, I discovered that to do a roundabout in the road car, you don't have to grab the steering wheel, you can use friction to turn," he said.

"F1 is not a road car, but I have been also in school where they give you a bird in the hand and you have to hold it (so) that it doesn't fly away but you cannot hold it too much that it gets scared.

"This is the way you have to hold the steering wheel."

He insists he would not have signed with Williams if not completely sure of being able to withstand the rigours of Formula One, putting himself through demanding training regimes to prepare his body.

Deputy team principal Claire Williams said Kubica earned the right to a seat on merit after spending last season as reserve driver.

"Of course there is a consideration there because you've got to do the right thing from a human perspective, you've got to know that someone is capable of driving one of these machines, not least a team like ours that have lost drivers," she told the official Formula One website.

"So I wanted to make sure I was 100% comfortable, and the engineering team were, and every report I had was he is eminently capable of driving an F1 car."

Kubica partners Britain's Formula Two champion George Russell, who will be making his Formula One debut.

'If in doubt, go flat out': Fearless new kids on the grid

AFP
Melbourne

Four drivers are embarking on their debut seasons in Formula One at the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne at the weekend. AFP Sport runs you through the paddock's bright young talents:

Lando Norris (McLaren)

Aged 19, British driver Norris will be the youngest in the sport. The exciting talent has been on McLaren's books for two years and was their test driver in 2018. He brings a wealth of experience of pole positions and hard-fought racing from his junior career and will not be fazed by what lies ahead.

Norris began his racing life at the age of seven and, supported by his wealthy investor father, won the world karting championship in 2013. He moved through the ranks all the way up to Formula Two last year where he finished runner-up to fellow rookie Briton George Russell.

Known for his modest charm away from the track, he has developed a loyal following on social media and knows he faces his biggest challenge so far at a team rebuilding after years of under-performance. "I've spent a lot of time over the winter to try and prepare myself in every way for this moment and for the races," said Lando.

"But there's some things you can't learn until you're on track and in that situation."

George Russell (Williams)

Another highly-rated and tenacious Briton, Russell held off Norris to clinch the Formula Two championship last year after storming to the GP3 crown in 2017.

His motto is "If in doubt, go flat out", a winning mentality that has earned him a crack at motorsport's pinnacle with a team desperately needing inspiration after a downward spiral. Russell's career began in humble beginnings in karting but his talent quickly became clear to see as he swooped to become British Open champion in 2009.

His potential to become one of the elite was spotted early by Mercedes who signed him to their junior programme in 2017, where he banked more experience with practice sessions for

Force India.

Alexander Albon (Toro Rosso)

The laid back Thai-British driver, 22, is a great friend of Russell's and has followed him and Norris into Formula One from feeder series Formula Two.

A stylish overtaker, he was a former teammate at ART of Charles Leclerc while in GP3, finishing second to the now Ferrari driver in the 2016 season. Born in London to a British father and Thai mother, he is only the second racer representing Thailand in Formula One history after Prince Birabongse Bhanudej Bhanubandh, or "B Bira", in the 1950s. He was signed to the Red Bull

junior team in 2012 aged just 12 and has gradually climbed the ladder, finishing third in Formula Two last year behind Russell and Norris. He replaces Pierre Gasly, who has stepped up to Red Bull.

Antonio Giovinazzi (Alfa Romeo)

The oldest of the rookie drivers at 25, Giovinazzi is not completely new to the grid: he replaced Pascal Wehrlein twice when he was injured at Sauber in 2017, earning a strong 12th place finish in Australia but crashing in both qualifying and the race in China. He showcased his natural racing acumen during a blistering 2016 Formula Two campaign where he finished a close runner-up to teammate Pierre Gasly, now at Red Bull.

GOLF

Big money but weather fears as golfers head to Players Championship

The world's best golfers will vie for the **Players Championship this week, which now includes the largest-ever purse in professional golf.**

DPA

Los Angeles

The world's top 50 golfers and dozens of other hopefuls will compete in this week's Players Championship in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida with the hope of grabbing the largest single-event purse in professional golf history.

The Players Championship is already considered golf's most

important tournament outside of the four majors, but this year's event —

complete with an increased 12.5mn dollar pot with 2.25mn going to the winner — has upped the ante.

Among the favourites are American Dustin Johnson, ranked number one in the world, coming off a win at the WGC-Mexico Championship, and the 6th-ranked Rory McIlroy from Northern Ireland.

Italian Francesco Molinari has also gained momentum coming into the Players after a spectacular putting performance nabbed him the Arnold Palmer Invitational last week.

But as usual all eyes are on 11th-ranked Tiger Woods, who has played the tournament 19 times and hoisted the trophy in 2001 and 2013.

With a win this week, Woods would tie Jack Nicklaus for the most Players victories.

Some concern surrounded Woods after he dropped out of the Arnold Palmer Invitational citing a neck strain, but he arrived with a confident strut at the TPC Sawgrass course on Monday.

"Everything is good," Woods told Golfweek. "I feel good. I needed last week off."

Woods will be grouped with last year's winner Webb Simpson and 2018 Masters champion Patrick Reed, teeing off for round one at 1:27pm EST (17Z GMT) tomorrow.

Simpson came in 18 under par after four rounds to win the Players last year.

He set the record for the largest lead after 36 holes, at five-under, and tied the record for most consecutive birdies with six.

All the players are going to have deal with the notoriously tricky TPC Sawgrass course, including the iconic 17th hole,

known as the Island Green, which claims dozens of balls each year to the water.

It is also the first time since 2006 that the Players is being held in March instead of May, heightening worries of adverse weather conditions hampering play on the already-difficult course.

According to the PGA, scoring averages for the Players Championship in March are nearly one stroke higher over May.

In order to adapt TPC Sawgrass to the weather conditions, the entire course was overseeded with ryegrass.

"The course here is in spectacular shape with very little rough, much like Augusta!" Phil Mickelson tweeted on Sunday.

Mickelson, who missed the cut during last week's Arnold Palmer, added, "If I remember correctly, the week before I won at Pebble I missed the cut. Just saying."



Francesco Molinari of Italy poses with the trophy after winning the Arnold Palmer Invitational Presented by Mastercard at the Bay Hill Club on March 10. He will be one of the players vying for the \$2.5mn top prize at the Players Championship.

MOTORSPORT

Al-Atya to race again on Qatar terrain after 22 years

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Veteran driver Nasser Khalifa al-Atya will make a comeback to rallying on Qatar's terrain for the first time in 22 years, when he lines up for this weekend's Manateq Qatar International Rally, round one of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship.

A former MERC series runner-up in 1993, al-Atya will participate in all the five rounds of the championship this year and will be sponsored by the Commercial Bank. Al-Atya is a former president of the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation and has also served as the vice-president of Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) and Fédération Internationale de Motocyclisme (FIM). He has started in over 50 rallies and has gone on to win many international rallies and is a five-time winner of the Qatar Rally Championship.

"I am excited to be taking part in the upcoming Middle East Rally Championship, which kicks off in Qatar this weekend. The Middle East Rally Championship is one of my favourite competitions and one of my greatest achievements in my sporting career. There is no greater feeling than being able to take part in the sport you love in your own country, and I'd like to thank Commercial Bank for their support in making this happen," said al-Atya yesterday at a press conference.

Al-Atya finished on the podium in Kuwait last season and will be return-

ing to action in Qatar at the wheel of a Ford Fiesta R5. He will partner with Italian co-driver Nicola Arena at the MERC championship and said he was hopeful of making a successful comeback on Qatar terrain.

"Italian Nicola Arena will be my co-driver. He has good experience and has also participated with me in Kuwait. We are getting to know each other well and exchanging notes. For the first time ever I am going to drive a R5 car and I need to study the car," he said.

"I was away from the Qatar terrain for 22 years. I have good experience here, but the terrain and the stages are different now. I will try to be very competitive in the rally and not really think too much about the result as I know the drivers here are very fast and young. They have been racing continuously and I on the other hand was away from it for many years. I will try to adapt to get a feel of the Qatar terrain and hopefully I can progress and reach my maximum level.

"I am training to focus on my target and reach my goals. It is not going to be easy to challenge other drivers. But I will be very competitive for sure and surprise the young drivers in the stages. We did a shakedown stage just to see my ability with the car and get to know the technical side of it like transmission, engine and programming of the car. It's not going to be easy but I will get down to business," he added.

Al-Atya said besides also wanting to enjoy the sport, the biggest motivating factor to make a comeback for him in Qatar was to create road safety

awareness in the country. "My motivation was to be part of the sport and compete with the other drivers. And I also want to enjoy racing. I want to do charity for the society here to avoid accident. This is what I have learnt from my experience worldwide and I wanted to give back my expertise to the society and to Commercial Bank, who are willing to be the leaders in Qatar to create an awareness on the road safety. I am glad to be Commercial Bank's ambassador for road safety awareness. This is the main goal for me to be honest, to help the society avoid accident," he said.

Hussein al-Abdullah, EGM, Chief Marketing Officer of the Commercial Bank, said: "At Commercial Bank, we are always proud to support influential individuals in the sports industry. Our sponsorship of the MERC rally forms part of our Corporate Social Responsibility vision, which is an integral part of our business as it forms part of the human development pillar of the Qatar National Vision 2030, which aims to promote a healthy population both physically and mentally. I encourage everyone to attend the rally this weekend, which is set to be one of the most exciting editions of the tournament to date. Our very own Nasser Khalifa al-Atya will be taking part, and that is something you do not want to miss!"

The MERC will begin in Qatar this weekend, with the next four round to be held in Jordan, Cyprus, Lebanon and Kuwait. Qatar's Dakar rally champion Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah is heading a strong 29-car entry in the championship.



Veteran rally driver Nasser Khalifa al-Atya (left) and Hussein al-Abdullah, EGM, Chief Marketing Officer of the Commercial Bank, pose after signing a sponsorship agreement yesterday.

SPOTLIGHT

Thrilling new stage set for Manateq Qatar International Rally

Souq Al Wakrah will be the venue for start and super special stage tomorrow evening

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Officials at the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) are putting the final touches to a ground-breaking new start to this weekend's Manateq Qatar International Rally, round one of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship.

A later than usual start is planned at Souq Al Wakrah to draw in spectators for an exciting new super special stage, where drivers will compete in pairs against each other tomorrow evening. The first national rally crews will take to the start line at 9.05pm and the international runners head into action from 9:25pm. The thrilling side-by-side action will be filmed live by Al Rayyan television.

Revisions to the rally timetable have now been issued by the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF). Tomorrow (March 14th) will be a hectic day at both the Lusail Sports Club and at Souq Al Wakrah later in the evening. After technical scrutineering at Lusail between 8am and 1pm, the event will move to Souq Al Wakrah for the remainder of the day.

Several of the leading competitors will attend the official pre-event press conference at 7:50pm and this precedes the ceremonial start from 8:15pm and the much anticipated new super special stage. To add that little extra spice to the opening ceremony and first day's time schedule, Batabit has organised a motorcade that will run from Doha to Al Wakrah and Manateq's CEO Fahad Rashed al-Kaabi is planning a run through the stage after all the competition cars have completed the special.

The largest fleet of cars taking part in this week's are being supported and managed on the event by the Lebanese-based RS-Team. Defending MERC 2 champion Meshari al-Thefiri will line up in his Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution alongside former MERC series runner-up Nasser Khalifa al-Attiyah, reigning MERC 3 champion Henry Kahy, Lebanon's Ahmad Khaled and the Qatari duo of Mohammed al-Meer and Rashid al-Mohannadi.

The RS-Team will also run a seventh vehicle in the Manateq Qatar National Rally for Nadim Ziade in his trusty little Renault Clio RS. The RS-Team also confirmed that three of those cars will make the trip to Jordan for the second round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship in April and his team will field an impressive eight cars in Lebanon. The meat of the action will take place over 10 gravel special stage to the north of Doha on Friday and Saturday.



Qatar's ace driver Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah checks out his new Volkswagen Polo GTI R5 at QMMF headquarters in Lusail.

Qatar's Dakar rally champion Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah heads a superb 29-car entry for the Manateq Qatar International Rally. The regional rally series has struggled in recent seasons to attract new teams, but sterling effort and hard work by the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) has seen a resurgence in interest in rallying in the region and the Qatar event has been rewarded with the largest entry seen for several years.

While al-Attiyah and his French navigator Matthieu Baumel start as clear favourites to give their Autotek Motorsport Volkswagen Polo GTI R5 a winning debut - just two weeks after winning the Manateq Qatar Cross-Country round of the FIA World Cup - there is strength in depth throughout the entry list.

Adel Abdulla was second overall at the event last November and also runs Ford Fiesta R5 for the second time, while former rally winner Abdulaziz al-Kuwari returns to action with a Skoda Fabia and regular Irish co-driver Killian Duffy. There are also R5 Ford Fiesta entries for the 1993 regional champion Sheikh



Defending MERC 2 champion Meshari al-Thefiri will line up alongside former MERC series runner-up Nasser Khalifa al-Attiyah, reigning MERC 3 champion Henry Kahy and Qatari duo of Mohammed al-Meer and Rashid al-Mohannadi.

Hamed bin Eid al-Thani and a returning Nasser Khalifa al-Attiyah. "We are delighted to be back in our customary slot at the start of the season and hosting the opening round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship," enthused QMMF President Abdulrahman al-Mannai. "Our goal is to continue the resurgence

of the regional rally championship and to see it develop and flourish in the future. The series has struggled for entries in recent seasons, but we have worked hard to attract teams and to make it possible for them to come to Qatar. I am delighted with the strength in depth of the entry we have received."

FOCUS

Grimalt cousins enter main draw of Katara Beach Volleyball Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Esteban and Marco Grimalt maintained their form as the FIVB Beach Volleyball World Tour Doha 4-Star Katara Cup, which began yesterday. The Katara Beach Cup is the fifth time that Qatar has hosted a World Tour tournament and it will run until March 16 at the Katara Cultural Village. The Chilean cousins won the Sydney 3-Star on Sunday and then flew 14 hours to reach the Qatari capital. They had a bye into the second qualification round and they duly reached the main draw with a 2-0 (21-16, 21-13) victory over Germany's Nils Ehlers and Lars Fluggen.

The Grimalts' victory in Sydney was their second World Tour victory in the past year following gold at the Tokyo 3-Star in July. Much of the turnaround is down to the influence of Brazilian coach Paulo Moreira de Costa, better known as Paulao. He has many years of experience coaching on the World Tour and is now bringing it to bear on a team who made their Tour debut in 2011.

The Grimalts were one of eight teams to reach pool play yesterday. Joining them there are Mart Tiisaar and Kusti Novlak, who won two from two in qualifying to progress. Like the Chileans they too travelled from Sydney. The Estonian duo began with a 2-1 (15-21, 21-19, 20-18) win over Austria's Tobias Winter and Julian Horl, and followed up by defeating Canada's Ben Saxton and Grant O'Gorman 2-0 (21-17, 21-18).

Today, Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan will be out to claim more hometown glory when they return to action. Qatar's leading pair are ranked ninth for the

tournament. In 2018 Cherif and Ahmed won their first World Tour medal with bronze. Later in 2018 they won bronze at the Vienna 5-Star and gold at the AVC Asian Beach Volleyball Championships. Qatar's 'B' team Thamer and Mahmoud would also be in action today.

The opening day saw qualification matches between 32 teams. Eight teams qualified for the main round, which will include 22 teams of elite players from all over the world.

Mohammed al-Kuwari, General Coordinator of Qatar Volleyball Federation, said that the players participating in the tournament are world's elite in the sport and that the competition between them is very strong to get the highest points to participate in the world championships.

Speaking about Qatar's level in volleyball, al-Kuwari noted that Qatar jumped from 22nd place to eighth place in the world last year, which is a huge achievement. "Despite the young age of Qatari players and their experience we were able to jump to the eighth rank in the world which gives the pair significant boost to participate in world championships," he said.

This year, Katara has added a number of activities that will allow the public to be a part of this exceptional sporting event.

The activities are designed to create a variety of sports, social and cultural aspects. In addition to the establishment of mini playgrounds where people can themselves play volleyball, in addition to the establishment of the festival on March 16, which will have a variety of events that will attract sports fans in an interactive and exciting way. A lot of gifts for the public would also be on offer.



Chile's Esteban (left) and Marco Grimalt made it into the Katara Beach Volleyball Cup main draw yesterday.