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GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

Solskjaer makes Man Utd comeback kings again

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COMMERCIAL BANK QATAR MASTERS

Arnaus has 'fun' as he takes share of lead with Walters

'I gave myself good birdie chances and I was able to take advantage of some of them, so I'm pleased'

By Yash Mudgal
Doha

Spain's Adri Arnaus had "a lot of fun" in windy conditions as he carded a first-round 67 that gave him a share of the lead at the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters yesterday.

Arnaus, in his first full season on the European Tour after graduating from the Challenge Tour, set the clubhouse target of five-under after he opened his round with a birdie on the tenth hole at the Doha Golf Club and then reached the turn four-under with a birdie on the 16th and an eagle on the 18th.

"It was a lot of fun," said Arnaus, who finished second on the Challenge Tour Rankings to graduate to the European Tour.

"The wind picked up early but I kept the ball in play most of the time, I gave myself good birdie chances and I was able to take advantage of some of them, so I'm pleased," the 2017 Spanish Amateur champion said.

Arnaus has made a better start to 2019. He's made five of seven cuts, with a best place finish of tied ninth in the Alfred Dunhill Championship. He's 51st on the European Tour money list.

"It was good getting into contention last year, and then at the end being able to close it out at the Challenge Tour Grand Final gave me the belief that I could go on and do it on a bigger stage. Tomorrow is a new day, so I'll just need to continue doing the same things."

South Africa's Justin Walters, who is sharing the lead with Arnaus, was "ecstatic" after his five-under on a windswept opening day.

Walters, who is waiting for his first European Tour win since turning pro in 2003, defied the testing conditions to fire five birdies in a flawless round on the Peter Harradine-designed course.

"Warming up today in the wind I thought any score under par would be great, so to shoot five-under I'm ecstatic," Walters said.

Walters hasn't started the 2019 campaign with the sort of form he showed in the opening round in Qatar. Despite making four of seven cuts, he is 90th on the money list and his best finish was a tied 34th in Oman.

"I putted really well and my short game was really good today. I haven't played that well, even in calmer conditions, in a while so it's surprising and very welcome. I wouldn't want to play another three days with a wind like this, especially after a relentless spell of wind in Oman last week," he said.

"Hopefully, as the conditions improve over the next few days I can continue to play the way I've played today."

South Africans George Coetzee, a former runner-up in Doha, and Justin Harding are among seven golfers, who share third place at four-under.

As many as 19 golfers are tied one stroke further down, including last week's Oman Open



South Africa's Justin Walters (left) and Spain's Adri Arnaus (right) in action on the first day of the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters at Doha Golf Club yesterday.

Bhullar cards 69 in quest for second European title

By Yash Mudgal
Doha

Gaganjeet Bhullar was within striking distance for his second European Tour title, carding a three-under in the opening round for the \$1.75mn Commercial Bank Qatar Masters yesterday.

The 30-year-old held his own and shot a 69 in difficult conditions to stay tied 10th with 18 others after a windswept first round.

Starting on back nine yesterday, Bhullar looked like he was going to emulate his opening day 67 from his 2014 Qatar debut, when he went five-under after the first 10 holes. However, a double bogey on the 11th set him back.

"I was slow out of the blocks, but I hit the ball pretty good and putted pretty well. It's tricky with the wind and the dust. It's a golf course that makes me play wearing sunglasses, so I'm glad

Five years ago, Bhullar was unable to reproduce the same form, battling his way to aggregate a nine-under for tied 22nd place, while Spanish star Sergio Garcia claimed the title with 16-under.

"It was a good opening day. I started off well from the 10th and I was minus five in the first 10 holes. Then I was a bit unlucky and had a double bogey, losing an odd ball. That was the only blemish I had today and off the remaining holes I parred to finish with three-under," Bhullar told *Gulf Times*.

Bhullar is the most successful Indian golfer on the Asian Tour after winning the co-sanctioned Fiji International last year. The 30-year-old broke the tie with Jyoti Randhawa, Jeev Milkha Singh and Arjun Atwal, who have

eight titles on the continental circuit. Talking about his first round scores, he said: "It is a decent score, I would say. I feel it is a good start to the tournament. The course played in good shape - fairways, greens and bunkers. The greens are firm but a little bit dry and you have to hit the ball a little high to stop it," he said.

"The conditions were tough. Right from the morning, it was windy. It wasn't calm. We guys teed off at 7:45 and the wind picked up and turned into gusts around 8:30 or 9. It is supposed to be like this for the rest of the day."

The other Indian in the fray, SSP Chowrasia, finished the round tied 82nd with one-over.

I've got them. I like this golf course. It suits my eye. I enjoy playing it and I see the shots I'm playing more than I do on a lot of other tracks. Everything feels pretty solid."

Two-time champion and former Open champion Paul Lawrie had a poor start as he finished the day at eight-over.

Rooyen (RSA), I Cantero Gutierrez (Esp), P Waring (Eng), R Karlsson (Swe), S Fernandez (Esp), G Forrest (Sco), E Molinari (Ita), M Kawamura (Jpn), N Cullen (Aus), K Kitayama (USA), M Kieffer (Ger), Y Miyazato (Jpn), R Fisher (Eng), G Bhullar (Ind), R Macintyre (Sco), O Wilson (Eng)

70: D Lawson (Aus), A Chesters (Eng), T Pieters (Bel), S Kjeldsen (Den), A Sullivan (Eng), B Evans (Bel), J Johansen (Den), T Detry (Bel), N Johansson (Swe)

71: A Otaegui (Esp), B Stone (RSA), T Jaidee (Tha), J Smith (Eng), J Kruyswijk (RSA), N Elvira (Esp), G Green (Mas), D Horsey (Eng), K Samooja (Fin), G Moynihan (Irl), K



winner Kurt Kitayama, India's Gaganjeet Bhullar, former champion Robert Karlsson and Ryder Cup players Ross Fisher, Oliver Wilson and Edoardo Molinari.

Australia's Lucas Herbert was also in that group but darkness brought an end to the day's play, while his group was playing their final hole. The trio will return to finish early today. Pre-tournament favourite Thomas Pieters of Belgium is a shot further back alongside his World Cup-winning partner Thomas Detry.

Scotland's Richie Ramsay began on the back nine, shooting an eagle on par-five tenth. He then joined Arnaus on five-under with



Robert Karlsson of Sweden carded three-under. PICTURE: Jayaram

Broberg (Swe), R Gouveia (Por), A Cañizares (Esp), H Tanihara (Jpn), T Aiken (RSA)

72: M Warren (Sco), D Drysdale (Sco), M Schwab (Aut), J Choi (Kor), J Dantorp (Swe), A Karlsson (Swe), T Pulkkanen (Fin), D Howell (Eng), D Lipsky (USA), M Southgate (Eng), T Bjorn (Den), B Wiesberger (Aut), M Kinhult (Swe), R Rock (Eng), J Campillo (Esp), R Jacquelin (Fra), F Zanotti (Par), S Soderberg (Swe), J McLeod (Aus), L Johnston (Sco), A Saddler (Fra), S Brazel (Aus), C Sordet (Fra), A Meronk (Pol), D Gavins (Eng), Z Lombard (RSA), C Bezuidenhout (RSA), M Korhonen (Fin), S Gregory (Eng)

73: J Singh Brar (Eng), S Chawrasia (Ind), B Ritthammer (Ger), D Law (Sco), L Gagli (Ita), S Jamie-

son (Sco), J Hansen (Den), A Björk (Swe), K Kolivu (Fin), M Schmitt (Ger), O Fisher (Eng), G Fdez-Castaño (Esp), P Figueiredo (Por), J Van Zyl (RSA), C Saxon (USA), H Park (Kor), H Porteous (RSA), S Brown (Eng), V Dubuisson (Fra)

74: J Lagergren (Swe), C Paisley (Eng), F Bergamaschi (Ita), S Locke (Sco), P Langfors (Swe), B Hebert (Fra), R Wattel (Fra), A Rai (Eng), P Larrazabal (Esp), M Waite (Eng)

75: S Crocker (USA), D Burmester (RSA), M Lee (Aus), N Lemke (Swe), C Wood (Eng), R McEvoy (Eng), W Nienaber (RSA)

76: K Reitan (Nor), N Bertasio (Ita), S Hend (Aus), P Hanson (Swe), K Johannessen (Nor), A Pavan (Ita), J Wang (Kor), D Fichardt (RSA), S Gallacher (Sco), A Quiros (Esp)



UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Solskjaer makes Man Utd comeback kings again

Lukaku, Rashford score vs PSG as United go through despite first leg 2-0 loss at home

AFP
London

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's name is inseparable from Manchester United's history of late drama in the Champions League and his latest astonishing feat against Paris Saint-Germain will surely secure him the permanent manager's job at Old Trafford.

No team in the history of the European Cup had gone through after losing the first leg 2-0 at home.

Yet United under Solskjaer are no ordinary team, even when short of the talismanic Paul Pogba through suspension and nine other first-team players due to injury.

Romelu Lukaku's first-half double laid the foundations for a famous 3-1 win against Paris Saint-Germain at the Parc des Princes on Wednesday as United progressed to the quarter-finals on away goals.

But Pogba's absence meant it was left to 21-year-old Marcus Rashford to land the decisive blow from the penalty spot to complete the comeback deep into stoppage time – 20 years after Solskjaer won the Champions League for United against Bayern Munich in Barcelona.

"There was pressure on the boy but there were no nerves whatsoever. Fearless," said Solskjaer of his prodigy.

"With this club, this is what we do. That's just Man United."

In the whirlwind three months since the Norwegian was drafted in after Jose Mourinho's sacking to oversee the Red Devils until the end of the season, it is easy to forget that this is not what Manchester United have done in the six years since Solskjaer's mentor, Alex Ferguson, retired.

Inflicting another year of Champions League pain on a star-laden PSG is all the more remarkable as United had won just one knockout game in the competition since 2011.

The aggressive, attack-minded, ambitious football that Solskjaer played under Ferguson and has tried to instil in his own side was not on show.

Instead, given the circumstances, with so many key players missing, the rookie manager showed an adaptability and tactical acumen that proved he is more than just a cheerleader.

"We had a game plan before the game and every man knew what he was doing," said United captain Ashley Young.

"At times we had to give up possession, I think we frustrated them."



Manchester United's manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer (left, also above) shakes hand with Paris Saint-Germain's Kylian Mbappe at the end of the UEFA Champions League match in Paris on Wednesday. (AFP)

United also had fortune on their side.

Lukaku pounced on errors by Thilo Kehrer and 41-year-old goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon to twice give his side the lead before half-time and VAR was needed to award the controversial stoppage-time penalty against Presnel Kimpembe for handball.

FAITH IN YOUTH

There was, however, a United trait of old as Solskjaer showed

his faith in youth.

As well as Rashford, another academy graduate, Scott McTominay, 22, starred in midfield, while three teenagers, Diogo Dalot, Tahith Chong and Mason Greenwood, were summoned from the bench in search of the goal to win the tie.

It was from Dalot's shot that Kimpembe was adjudged to have handled to give Rashford his moment of glory.

"This was the real Manchester United," wrote Henry Winter in



Manchester United's Romelu Lukaku (left) and teammate Marcus Rashford celebrate their win over PSG in Paris on Wednesday. (AFP)

The Times. "Playing with belief, youth, commitment. Playing for one another, playing for the shirt. Making light of absences, refusing to be overawed by famous opponents. Never, ever giving up. And winning."

Solskjaer's record is now 14 wins from 17 matches in charge with his solitary defeat in the first leg of this tie now long forgotten.

Even better could still be to come as United take their place in a wide-open quarter-final

draw alongside Tottenham, Porto and Ajax, who ended holders Real Madrid's three-year reign as European champions.

"Of course we fancy ourselves. We can go all the way," said a confident Solskjaer, who will have Pogba and Anthony Martial, Jesse Lingard and Nemanja Matic back for the last eight.

More importantly, as the visiting fans sang amid wild celebrations at the final whistle "United are back" as a contender on the European stage.

SPOTLIGHT

Ranieri lined up as Roma sack Di Francesco after loss to Porto

AFP
Milan

Eusebio Di Francesco was sacked as Roma coach after the team crashed out of the Champions League, the Italian club confirmed yesterday, with former boss Claudio Ranieri tipped to replace him.

Roma had taken a 2-1 advantage to Porto for the second leg of their last-16 tie on Wednesday but fell 4-3 on aggregate after a controversial VAR-awarded penalty deep into extra time.

"AS Roma can confirm head coach Eusebio Di Francesco has left the club with immediate effect," the team said in a statement.

"The club would like to thank Eusebio for his work during his time at AS Roma and wish him success in the future."

An urgent meeting had been called on Thursday in Rome between the club's top officials to discuss Di Francesco's future.

Club president Jim Pallotta later said: "On behalf of myself and everyone at AS Roma, I'd like to thank Eusebio for his work and his commitment."

"Since returning to the club, Eusebio has always acted professionally and put the club's needs ahead of his own. We all wish him

well for the future."

Roma are fifth in Serie A, three points off the Champions League berths for next season, after falling 3-0 last weekend to bitter city rivals Lazio.

Di Francesco took over as Roma coach in June 2017.

The 49-year-old had received the backing of the players after the defeat to Porto, having led Roma to the Champions League semi-finals last season for the first time since 1984.

"I hope we'll continue with him," said captain Daniele De Rossi.

"Di Francesco will remain the coach who took Roma to the Champions League semi-finals after who knows how many years and he deserves credit for that. I know this isn't our best season and the job of a coach will always be tied to results."

Former Roma midfielder Di Francesco helped the team to their last Serie A title as a player in 2001.

Ranieri, who memorably guided Leicester City to the 2016 Premier League title before being sacked the following season, coached Roma from September 2009 and February 2011.

The 67-year-old Italian's brief spell as manager of Premier League strugglers Fulham ended last month after only four months in charge.



'Angry' Mueller questions Loew decision after Germany axe

Germany coach Joachim Loew's decision to end Thomas Mueller's international career has left the Bayern Munich midfielder "angry" and struggling to come to terms with the manner in which he received the news.

Loew said on Tuesday that the 29-year-old Mueller and his Bayern teammates, Mats Hummels and Jerome Boateng, both 30, were no longer part of Germany's plans as they look to move on from their group stage exit from last year's World Cup. The trio were part of the Germany squad that won the World Cup in 2014 and Mueller said the sudden nature of the announce-

ment had left a bitter taste. "The more I think about it, the more the way it was done makes me angry," Mueller said in a video on Instagram. "The coach's decision left me puzzled. A coach must make sporting decisions, I don't have a problem with that. But it's mostly the character of the decision that I don't understand. Mats, Jerome and I are still able to play at the highest level. The press releases of the German football federation and its president (Reinhard Grindel), prepared in advance, were from my point of view in bad taste and showed a lack of consideration."

BOTTOMLINE

Did VAR get big calls right? Debate rages on after drama

AFP
Paris

Neymar called the decision that led to Paris Saint-Germain being dumped out of the Champions League a "disgrace", while elsewhere on Wednesday Roma were left raging – both clubs are out of Europe and both feel cheated by controversial VAR calls.

"It's a disgrace. They get four guys who don't understand football to watch a slow-motion replay in front of the TV," the injured Neymar wrote on Instagram after watching PSG's shock elimination against Manchester United.

PSG were wobbling and trailing 2-1 at the Parc des Princes when Slovenian referee Damir Skomina gave a penalty after reviewing the images when Presnel Kimpembe blocked an apparently wayward Diogo Dalot shot with his arm.

Marcus Rashford duly scored the penalty that dumped PSG out on away goals. But should such a



PSG forward Neymar (left) looks on during the Champions League match against Manchester United in Paris on Wednesday. (AFP)

crucial decision have been given? "I am a big supporter of VAR and I stay a big supporter of VAR," said PSG coach Thomas Tuchel, before admitting: "It was a big decision, a cruel decision."

'THE LAW IS WRONG'

In England, amid euphoria about the manner in which a depleted

United side had gone through, even former players of the Old Trafford club said the penalty should not have been given.

"I don't care what any referee tells me, that just isn't handball," ex-United defender Rio Ferdinand said on BT Sport.

"I love it that it is handball but I don't get it. The law is wrong."



PSG's Presnel Kimpembe (left) was judged to have blocked a Diogo Dalot (centre) shot in the match against Manchester United. (AFP)

On the same channel, Michael Owen, another ex-United player, said: "I know there'll be people who will say it's a penalty but for me it's not one in a million years."

UEFA bowed to pressure by bringing forward the introduction of Video Assistant Referees into the Champions League from this season's knockout rounds.

Back in September, they had announced it would come in from next season, but it was widely seen as a success at the World Cup and is now used in many domestic leagues, including the top flights in Spain, Italy, Germany and France.

However, at the very least there remain teething problems from it comes to the interpretation of

handball – only last weekend changes were announced to the law from next season, saying it will no longer have to be "deliberate".

ROMA DENOUNCE 'ROBBERY'

In the meantime, there remained widespread disagreement over Wednesday's crucial calls.

"What we're finding with VAR is every ex-footballer thinks something is not a penalty but every referee thinks it is. There's a huge disconnect and that is the worrying thing," added Owen.

A year ago, Gianluigi Buffon was in goal for Juventus when they were knocked out by Real Madrid after a debatable, late penalty.

The Italians demanded the introduction of VAR on the back of that, but Buffon, now at PSG, will wish it had not been in place as he was beaten by Rashford's kick.

Meanwhile, Roma were left with the same bitter taste as they went out in extra time to Porto, losing 3-1 on the night, and 4-3 on aggregate.

The tie hinged on a decision by

Turkish referee Cüneyt Çakır to point to the spot late in extra time upon reviewing an incident in which Alessandro Florenzi hauled back the Porto player Fernando.

Alex Telles converted the spot-kick, and Roma were then denied a penalty at the other end following a review, after Patrik Schick tumbled to the ground.

"Last year we asked for VAR in the Champions League because we got s***** in the semi-final and tonight, they've got VAR and we still get robbed," raged Roma president James Pallotta.

"Patrik Schick was clearly clipped in the box, VAR shows it, and nothing is given. I'm tired of this crap. I give up."

Back in Italy, newspaper headlines talked of "a disgrace", and said Roma had been "robbed". Contrast that with the view in Portugal, as Porto advanced to the quarter-finals.

"Blessed be the VAR that detected a penalty that was barely visible on the field but was very real," said sports daily *A Bola*.

TOP OF THE LINE

Jordi Cruyff impressed by Qatar's commitment to legacy work



Jordi Cruyff (left), manager of China's Chongqing Dangdai Lifan, visited the SC's Legacy Pavilion recently.

The plans and programmes being delivered by the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC) show a commitment to hosting an incredible FIFA World Cup and ensuring a lasting and far-reaching legacy of the tournament, according to Jordi Cruyff.

The former Manchester United and FC Barcelona winger – now manager of Chinese Super League side Chongqing Dangdai Lifan – was recently in Doha for a winter training camp, during which he took time out to visit the Aspire Academy and the SC's Legacy Pavilion.

Since retiring he has carved out a successful and widely respected career as a director of football within the professional game in Europe. And as well as a stellar 16-year playing career – spent primarily in La Liga – Jordi, son of Johan, also carries one of the most famous surnames in football. It is a name synony-

mous with legacy – and through organisations such as the Cruyff Foundation, the subject of affecting positive social change through the power of sport is one close to his heart.

“The main question that many people ask themselves is what happens the day after the tournament,” Cruyff said. “Today all my questions were answered, with a lot of thoughts in place with regard to what to do with the stadiums, how to continue the sport in Qatar, to use the facilities, to make the best out of each area that is completely rebuilt and prepare themselves for the World Cup. I think it's super important, but also interesting for the people that stay and that sport continues to dominate their lives.”

Besides touring Aspire Academy in the morning, Cruyff was also provided with an overview of Generation Amazing – the SC's flagship corporate social development programme – and Josoor

Institute, which was set up to help train a generation of graduates with the technical, leadership and business skills required to build a sustainable industry in sports and event management. And they were legacy commitments that impressed Cruyff.

He said: “I think it's important to have organisations like Generation Amazing to help a lot of kids, girls and boys, to help them with social integration and to give them the opportunities to fulfil the dreams that they have,” he explained. “A lot of people need help to give them the platform where they can evolve, socialise, enjoy and learn education – everything that comes with being young and fulfilling your dreams.”

On Josoor Institute, he added: “It's important to bring ideas from all over the region and the world – and to put them together to have the best possible tournament, but also for the day after to take care that sport remains or-

ganised and for everything to be taken care of. It's a responsibility to not only ensure everyone enjoys the tournament, but also for the day after.”

Cruyff, who plays an active role in the legacy work being carried out in his father's name, concluded by emphasising the responsibility global events such as the FIFA World Cup have on affecting positive development in the regions it visits.

“Sport influences a lot of lives, and reaches a lot of cultures,” he said. “The World Cup is the biggest sports event, because football is the most popular sport. This event can change a lot of lives, and a lot of regions.”

“From everything I've seen on this trip – from the first to the last moment – from the Aspire Academy, the city, the metro, the stadiums and the facilities...I've been really amazed and positively surprised by everything I've seen so far.” (SC.qa)

SERIE A

Tense Juve prep for Atletico battle with Udinese warm-up

‘The Madrid match has left us with motivation that has helped us in these 15 days’

AFP
Milan

Tensions are running high in Turin as Juventus get ready to take on lowly Udinese in Serie A today just days ahead of their must-win Champions League clash against Atletico Madrid.

Massimiliano Allegri's unbeaten champions put one hand on an eighth consecutive Serie A title last weekend by seeing off Scudetto rivals Napoli 2-1 to open up a huge 16-point lead in the Italian league.

But the pressure is on the Juventus coach amid reports of a falling out with club chairman Andrea Agnelli after the club's first-leg 2-0 defeat in Spain two weeks ago.

“We have to win to prepare for the match on Tuesday, regardless of the advantage that we have (in the league),” Allegri told a pre-match press conference yesterday.

“We still need six victories (to win the title). The Madrid match has left us with motivation that has helped us in these 15 days. We will be ready on Tuesday and we will have a great game.”

The Juventus coach confirmed he had also met with Agnelli to discuss his future.

“I met with the chairman yesterday for dinner, we are two intelligent people who have built something important in these five years together,” said Allegri.

“We decided to talk about the renewal of the contract after the season.”



Coach Massimiliano Allegri (right) speaks with Juventus forward Paulo Dybala during the Serie A match against Napoli in Naples on Sunday. (AFP)

The pressure has also been mounting on Portuguese superstar Cristiano Ronaldo to make the difference as the club's major objective of the season hangs by a thread in Turin next Tuesday.

The top scorer in the Champions League for the last six seasons, Ronaldo was signed for 100mn euros (\$112mn) last summer from Real Madrid.

But the 34-year-old Portuguese superstar has scored just one goal in this year's competition as Juventus target a first European title since 1996.

Ronaldo has also failed to

score in his last two league games since the Madrid defeat and has been joined at the top of the Serie A scorers chart by Sampdoria veteran Fabio Quagliarella, 36, who has also scored 19 goals.

Allegri confirmed that Ronaldo is available, but will start from the bench so as to be fully primed for what promises to be an epic struggle against the dogged Madrid outfit.

Defenders Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini will not play on Friday either.

Udinese are 15th in Serie A but have moved away from the drop

zone after winning their last two Serie A games against relegation candidates Chievo and Bologna.

The side from northeastern Italy also have a game in hand after their trip to Lazio was postponed.

Carlo Ancelotti's Napoli travel to mid-table Sassuolo on Sunday looking to get back winning after last week's home defeat to Juventus.

AC Milan, a further eight points behind in third, are targeting a fifth straight league win against bottom club Chievo.

Gennaro Gattuso's side are a

point above city rivals Inter, who lost 2-1 at Cagliari amid a public contract dispute with absent star striker Mauro Icardi.

There are reports of “a thaw” between the Argentina striker, who has been stripped of the captain's armband, and club bosses after a meeting this week.

Roma, meanwhile, turn their focus back to qualifying for next year's Champions League after crashing out 4-3 on aggregate after extra time amid VAR controversy at Porto midweek.

Eusebio Di Francesco's side are fifth, three points behind Inter Milan who occupy the final Champions League berth, after falling 3-0 to city rivals Lazio last weekend.

Last year's Champions League semi-finalists have a chance to pick themselves up against Empoli, who are three points above the drop zone, on Monday.

“Going out like this hurts,” said Roma captain Daniele Di Rossi. “Our focus is now on preparing for Empoli and then SPAL.”

FIXTURES

- Today
 - Juventus v Udinese
- Tomorrow
 - Parma v Genoa
 - Chievo v AC Milan
- Sunday
 - Bologna v Cagliari
 - Sampdoria v Atalanta
 - Frosinone v Torino
 - Inter Milan v SPAL
 - Sassuolo v Napoli
 - Fiorentina v Lazio
- Monday
 - AS Roma v Empoli

SPOTLIGHT

Messi is back for Argentina after eight-month absence

AFP
Buenos Aires

Lionel Messi was named in the Argentina squad yesterday for the first time since the World Cup, ending a self-imposed eight month exile.

Interim coach Lionel Scaloni named the five-time world player of the year in his squad for this month's friendlies against Venezuela and Morocco.

The 31-year-old Barcelona star hasn't pulled on the light blue and white national team jersey since Argentina were dumped out of the World Cup last June by eventual winners France.

Another long-term absentee, PSG's Angel Di Maria, also makes the squad, but there is no place for other veterans Sergio Aguero – despite his sparkling form for Manchester City – Chelsea's Gonzalo Higuain or Mauro Icardi of Inter.

“The World Cup was a big disappointment for everyone, for him even more so,” Scaloni told reporters at Argentina's Ezeiza training center outside Buenos Aires.

“And then in the friendlies he saw us play, he liked it, and he wants to try again, and he's welcome.”

Scaloni said “Messi prefers to come than to rest,” despite the demands of a heavy fixture list for his club.

“Leo is being called up now, and then we'll see if he plays a match or two – or none. I don't know. That's a decision I'll take.”

In all, Messi has missed six



friendlies since the World Cup in Russia but many believe he will be an essential part of the team that travels to Brazil for the Copa America, which kicks off June 14.

Whilst he's built up an almost unprecedented collection of trophies with his club, Messi is running out of time to taste major international success with Argentina.

He was on the losing side in major finals three years running from 2014-16, first to Germany in the World Cup in Brazil, then twice to Chile on penalties in the Copa America, including the one-off Centenary edition of the competition.

With 65 goals in 128 appearances, Messi is Argentina's all-time top goalscorer. He's also Barca's top marksman ever with more than twice the number of goals as the next best.

But he's never managed to match his club form when operating on the international stage.

Argentina play Venezuela in Madrid on March 22 and then travel to Tangier four days later to tackle hosts Morocco.

FOCUS

Pochettino could appeal against touchline ban

AFP
London

Tottenham manager Mauricio Pochettino says he could appeal against the two-game touchline ban he received for his furious blast at the referee in last month's defeat at Burnley.

Pochettino accepted a Football Association charge of improper conduct and apologised for the incident that followed Tottenham's controversial 2-1 loss on February 23.

Infringed by Burnley's first goal coming from a corner that he believed shouldn't have been given, the Argentine stormed onto the pitch to confront Mike Dean at the final whistle.

But Pochettino was shocked



at the extent of a punishment, which also included a £10,000 fine and would leave him in the stands for both Saturday's fixture at his former club Southampton and against Liverpool on March 31.

He is still waiting for the FA's explanation and is considering his options, partly because he believes the indiscretion to be his first in English football.

“It wasn't the idea to appeal. Because in my mind it wasn't a

big deal and it wasn't the best way to complain or talk with the referee, but I never expected this type of situation,” Pochettino told reporters yesterday.

“Now I need to think. I need to see the reasons why and then we'll see what happens.”

“I am a little bit in shock because it is completely unfair. It's my seventh season in England and you can see my behaviour from day one.”

“It is my first time here that I'm maybe not completely right in my behaviour but I feel this is too much. I feel a little bit sad and disappointed. It's unbelievable, no?”

Tottenham could be strengthened for Saturday's fixture by the return to fitness of England midfielder Dele Alli, who has trained following a hamstring

injury and faces a late fitness test.

Harry Winks will be assessed because of a potential groin problem before Pochettino selects his starting line-up.

Pochettino's impressive spell as Southampton's manager led the Argentine to be recruited by Spurs, and he revealed the headache that followed his move from St Mary's.

“Of course a lot aren't going to forgive me, but I still love them,” he said. “I love Southampton. The time I spent there was a great experience; I enjoyed it a lot.”

“I cried a lot when I left. My family, too. It was one of the most important periods of my life with my family, that I enjoyed the most, which is why it was so tough.”

England's Lionesses take pride in team spirit ahead of World Cup

Every member of England women's squad is made to feel valued and the sense of togetherness will stand the Lionesses in good stead at the World Cup later this year, defender Leah Williamson has said. England beat eighth-ranked Japan 3-0 in the SheBelieves Cup on Tuesday to pip hosts and defending world champions United States to the title and boost their hopes ahead of the June 7-July 7 World Cup in France. “We call ourselves The Finishers. We're not The Bench, we're there to back up anything that's going on the pitch and have a positive impact,” Williamson was quoted as saying by the Guardian newspaper. “There's people that are going to go to a major tournament and not be involved, and that's a reality and part of being a footballer. We work really hard on the team.”

'Razor-slashing' footballer banned for life in Turkey

A Turkish footballer was banned for life yesterday after being accused of slashing rival players with a razor blade during a third division match last week. The attacks which have shocked football-mad Turkey were carried out by Mansur Calar of Amedspor, based in the Kurdish-majority city of Diyarbakir, with four men lodging complaints after claiming they suffered cuts. Video footage from the game purportedly shows the footballer holding what appears to be a razor blade, filmed when the teams lined up ahead of Saturday's match. One of them, Ferhat Yazgan, posted pictures of his scarred neck on his Instagram account.

FIFA Council member banned over resale of World Cup tickets

A member of the decision-making FIFA Council has been banned for three months and fined 20,000 Swiss francs (\$19,906) for breaching rules on the resale of World Cup tickets, the global soccer body said yesterday. FIFA said that Lee Harmon, president of the Cook Islands Football Association (CIFA), had “mutually agreed” the sanction with its ethics committee in a plea bargain following an investigation which began in July, shortly after the World Cup in Russia. FIFA said the investigation concerned the resale of tickets for the tournament but did not give further details.

FOCUS

Family will remain priority after my retirement: Federer

'I know I can't please everybody and if that's my goal, I will forever be unhappy'

Reuters
Indian Wells

Roger Federer is looking forward to having more freedom and more time with his family when he eventually leaves behind the sport he has dominated, the Swiss master said yesterday.

The evergreen veteran won his landmark 100th career title in Dubai during the weekend but told reporters that while he is not yet ready to hang up the racquet, he can see himself enjoying his post-career life.

"I want to keep it as flexible as possible when it is all said and done," the 37-year-old Swiss said at a press conference at the BNP Paribas Open in Indian Wells.

"My priority will always be, as it is now, my family, my kids and my wife. I just want to have enough flexibility in our lives to decide how much is too much, how much is not enough, and how much is good for everybody."

He said his wife Mirka has kept up ties with some close friends amid his hectic travel schedule and he plans to engage more fully with that group after quitting playing.

"From that standpoint I'm really looking forward to that moment when it comes about," he said.

Another post-career priority will be his foundation, which supports children's education programs around the world.

"The foundation will only continue to grow in terms of time that I am going to be putting into it but then again, how much more time remains to be seen," he said.

"But I cannot sit still. I always want to travel and I always want to do stuff but there's a way to go about it and to prioritize."

Federer acknowledged that he is the face of the sport and said while he tries to be the best ambassador for it, he also needs to think about himself sometimes.

"If I can make the game more popular, if the fans can enjoy the sport more through me and you guys like to talk to me, that's great," the 20-times Grand Slam singles champion told reporters.

"In the end I want to be happy and please people. But I know I can't please everybody and if that's my goal, I will forever be unhappy."

Federer, who is a five-time champion at Indian Wells and made the final last year, will face either Peter Gojowczyk or Andreas Seppi in his first match of the tournament today.



Roger Federer of Switzerland fields questions from the media at the ATP Media Day during the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden in Indian Wells, California.

Kvitova says meeting with Seles was key after attack

Indian Wells: Petra Kvitova says a meeting with former world number one Monica Seles at Wimbledon last year, where they discussed returning to the sport after a knife attack, had been one of the most important of her life. Kvitova suffered cuts to her left hand while defending herself during a home invasion in 2016, while Seles was stabbed in the back during a match in Hamburg in 1993 which kept her off the court for more than two years.

"We met each other and decided we were looking to talk about what we'd been through," the Australian Open finalist told reporters at the BNP Paribas Open at Indian Wells on Wednesday. "It was nice to meet someone who has been through something very similar," she said.



"It was a big surprise that she wanted to talk with me and say nice words. It was one of the biggest things I've ever heard and from such a legend, to hear what happened to her."

Seles returned to the game after the attack and won the 1996 Australian Open but never fully regained the dominant form that saw her win nine majors as a teenager.

Kvitova completed her recovery, which required surgery, ahead of schedule but said she was not sure she would ever be able to completely put the attack behind her.

"With my experience, I am not sure if I am going to be 100% one day and I'm not sure if she is either," she said. "But hopefully she is happy and can enjoy her life as much as she can."

CRICKET

Kiwis look to win Test 'whatever way possible'

AFP
Wellington

New Zealand have pledged a win-at-all-costs approach to the second Test against Bangladesh, starting in Wellington on Friday, as they look to wrap up the series with a game to spare.

The wicket is green and tailor-made for the early seamers, with New Zealand promising to continue with their short-ball tactic when it flattens out.

"We're looking to win the Test match in whatever way possible. Whatever gives us the best chance that is what we will do," New Zealand opener Tom Latham declared yesterday.

Bangladesh, meanwhile, faced further injury concerns to an already fragile batting line-up with Tamim Iqbal under a cloud and Mushfiqur Rahim unlikely to be fit.

Captain Mahmudullah described Tamim's issue as "a slight niggle" and accepted that "injury is part of the game".

Although neither side has named their match XV, Mahmudullah indicated Bangladesh would make changes given the colour of the wicket and how expensive spinner Mehidy Hasan proved in the first Test.

"We are yet to decide but we are thinking of picking four pace bowlers, given the conditions," he said.

"If you remember, the 2017 wicket was greenish early on too. Batsmen will find it difficult on the first day. There'll be seam movement and swing."

In the Wellington Test two years ago, Bangladesh surprised after being sent into bat with a first innings of 595 for eight declared, only to eventually lose by seven wickets.

Latham, a century-maker in

that match, is enjoying another purple home patch with a Test average of more than 200 from three centuries, including an unbeaten 264 in the rain-affected Wellington Test against Sri Lanka.

Rain is again expected Friday morning, but with fine weather forecast for the remainder of the Test.

Despite the Basin Reserve's bowl-first reputation, Latham had confidence even if New Zealand lose the toss and are put into bat.

"It does look a little bit greener and with a little bit more grass on it (than previously) so, regardless of what the surface plays like it's about us trying to adapt to that surface as quick as possible," Latham said.

"If we are asked to bat it will be a challenge. We haven't batted first a huge amount this summer so if we do I'm certainly looking forward to doing that and taking that challenge on."

Although New Zealand won the first Test comprehensively, they did struggle to take a wicket for a long period in the second innings as Soumya Sarkar and Mahmudullah delayed the end with a courageous 235-run stand for the fifth wicket.

New Zealand bowling spearhead Trent Boult, who took 10 for 80 against the West Indies in Wellington six years ago, was determined that should not happen again.

"We need to find a way to take wickets and we feel we have the ability in the group to do it," he said, adding the short-ball barrage remained an effective tactic when there was no swing.

"You're not left with many other options. We have Wags (Neil Wagner) who is an expert at being able to execute that plan. It's been pretty effective for us so expect it will be more of the same."



File photo of New Zealand's Tom Latham in action.

TENNIS

Azarenka books Serena showdown at Indian Wells

AFP
Indian Wells

Two-time Indian Wells champion Victoria Azarenka shook off a slow start to beat Vera Lapko 6-2, 6-3 and set up a second-round meeting with long-time rival Serena Williams.

Azarenka, a former world number one now ranked 48th in the world, said she started a little too passive in dropping the first two games against her fellow Belarusian, but roared back to seal the win with ease.

She was looking forward to taking on 10th-seeded Williams, who like all the seeds in the combined WTA and ATP Masters event has a first-round bye.

The American has won 17 of their 21 prior encounters, but Azarenka won their most recent clash — in the 2016 Indian Wells final. "Of course it's going to be a very special match for us," she said of their first clash since both became mothers.

"We have such a big history, it's going to be really special. She motivates me, she inspires me, she pushes me to be better," Azarenka said of Williams.

The opening day of women's main draw play saw highly tout-

ed teenagers Bianca Andreescu and Amanda Ansimova reached the second round. Canada's Andreescu, 18, rallied from a set down to beat Romanian Irina-Camelia Begu 6-7 (3/7), 6-3, 6-3.

"For me, the ending is the most important, so I'm really glad I pulled through," said Andreescu, who has won 22 matches this season including qualifying and main draw. She has climbed steadily in the rankings, rising from 107th to start the year to 60th.

"Mentally... I was like, I might as well go for my shots, and see where that leads me and that's what I did, and it worked," said Andreescu, who booked a second-round meeting with 32nd seed Dominika Cibulkova.

American Ansimova, 17, lined up a meeting with 16th-seeded Elise Mertens of Belgium with a 6-0, 6-4 victory over Serbian Aleksandra Krunic.

Third-seeded Petra Kvitova, who will face either Venus Williams or Andrea Petkovic in the second round, said she wasn't surprised to see teenagers making such a strong showing.

"Every year we see some young generation coming," she said, noting that while still little known they can play "with no fear."

POLITICS AND SPORT

India boycott threat looms over cricket World Cup

AFP
New Delhi

Border tensions between India and Pakistan are casting a cloud over this year's cricket World Cup with the threat of a boycott hanging over their highly-anticipated clash in England.

There have been calls for India to forfeit their June 16 match against Pakistan after a suicide bomb attack in Indian-administered Kashmir claimed by a militant group based in Pakistan in which 40 Indian troops died.

Tit-for-tat air strikes and an aerial dogfight followed, igniting fears of an

all-out conflict, but the crisis appeared to ease when Pakistan returned an Indian pilot who was shot down and captured.

But doubts remain over the fate of the group stage match in Manchester.

The ball rests firmly with India's politicians, who are not likely to make any decision until nearer the match, after cricketers and sports officials said they will abide by any government call for a boycott. Vinod Rai, a senior official of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), told reporters after the Kashmir attack that they had written to the International Cricket Council (ICC) to demand tough security at the World Cup, which begins in England and Wales on May 30.

Rai confirmed a boycott decision would

only be made at a later date — and after consulting the government.

India captain Virat Kohli said the players would respect any instruction from the government or board.

"Our stand is simple: we stick by what the nation wants to do and what the BCCI decides to do," Kohli told reporters.

"That is basically our opinion. Whatever the government and the board decide, we will go by that and we will respect that."

ESPNcricinfo.com senior editor Sharda Ugra believes the ICC are unlikely to get involved and the next move rests with the Indian government.

"I think they won't be able to get the ICC to take on any stand on it and I don't

BOTTOMLINE

Lehmann makes coaching comeback after scandal

AFP
Sydney

Darren Lehmann was named coach of the Big Bash League's Brisbane Heat yesterday, his first cricket role since quitting the Australian team over the sandpaper cheating scandal.

Lehmann said returning to the Heat, the team he steered to a Big Bash title in 2013, was a chance to "come back to where it all started" after his bruising experience with the national team.

"I think you learn a lot about yourself during the dark times and for me it's all about enjoying the game," he told report-

"I think you learn a lot about yourself during the dark times and for me it's all about enjoying the game"

ers. "I've fallen in love with the game again, so I'm really looking forward to getting back working with some young guys with a lot of talent."

Lehmann was Australia coach in March last year when batsman Cameron Bancroft was caught trying to scuff the ball with sandpaper during the third Test against South Africa in Cape Town.

At the time captain Steve Smith and his deputy David Warner were directly im-

plicated in the cheating plot and all three received lengthy bans.

Lehmann later quit, along with much of Australia's senior management, accused of overseeing a toxic culture that allowed a win-at-all-costs mentality to flourish.

"That hurt a lot of people didn't it, all of us involved," he said when asked about the affair.

"Obviously it's time to move on though isn't it? That's the thing."

The 49-year-old was emphatic when asked if he had any desire to return to international coaching.

"No. I'm not travelling 300 days away a year again and I don't think my wife would let me," he said.



NBA

LeBron James passes Jordan for fourth on all-time points list

'A lot of stuff I've done in my career - this ranks right up there at the top with winning championship'

AFP
Los Angeles

LeBron James overtook his boyhood idol and inspiration, Michael Jordan, for fourth on the NBA's all-time scoring list Wednesday, making history with a driving layup for the Los Angeles Lakers in a home loss to Denver.

The 34-year-old superstar matched the Chicago Bulls legend's career total of 32,292 points with his first 12 of the game, then made history with 5:38 remaining in the second quarter and sank a free throw to complete a 3-point play. "A lot of stuff I've done in my career - this ranks right up there at the top with winning the championship," James said. "It's just crazy, to be honest. It's beyond crazy."

RESULTS

Miami	91-84	Charlotte
Washington	132-123	Dallas
Detroit	131-114	Minnesota
Brooklyn	113-107	Cleveland
San Antonio	111-104	Atlanta
Chicago	108-107	Philadelphia
Utah	114-104	New Orleans
Phoenix	107-96	New York
Boston	111-109	Sacramento
Denver	115-99	Lakers

During the next timeout, James went to the bench and buried his head in a towel, appearing to cry while a video tribute played on the scoreboard and he reflected upon the achievement of surpassing the icon he emulated. "It was very emotional. A lot of things were going on inside me at the time," he said. "I didn't want to show what was going on behind that towel."

Denver, led by Will Barton's 23 points, defeated the Lakers 115-99 to pull within a game of Golden State for the Western Conference lead. The Nuggets (43-21) closed with a 26-12 run to foil a Lakers rally. But the night belonged to James, who drew "Thank You MJ 23" on his shoes.

"For a kid from Akron, Ohio that needed inspiration and some type of positive influence, MJ was that guy for me. I watched him from afar, wanted to be like MJ," James said.

"Me and my friends, all we ever talked about was MJ. He was everything. You have no idea. Some days you don't even think you're going to make it to the next day because of the way things are going. "Hopefully I can inspire the next kid like myself."

Jordan and James are often compared as the best players in NBA history. James wears the same No 23 worn by Jordan and recalled being 15 when he first met his idol.

"It was like meeting Jesus. That's what meeting MJ was like, because I never thought I'd ever meet him," James said. "He was like lightning in a bottle for me."

"MJ had a lot to do with me making it



LeBron James of the Los Angeles Lakers celebrates after passing Michael Jordan and moving to fourth on the NBA's all-time scoring list during the second quarter against the Denver Nuggets at Staples Center in Los Angeles, California. (Getty Images/AFP)

out (of poverty) as well as my mother. But Mike had no idea what he was doing for a kid growing up a 45-minute flight from Chicago when he was doing all that work."

James finished with 31 points, moving his fourth-best NBA career total to 32,311, and added seven rebounds and seven assists for the Lakers (30-35). James, the top scorer among active players, made his points in 1,190 games compared to 1,072 for Jordan. The next target for James would be retired Lakers star guard Kobe Bryant, who is third on the NBA career list with 33,643 points.

Lakers legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar holds the NBA points record with 38,387, with long-time Utah great Karl Malone ranked second on 36,928. On his current pace, James figures to pass Bryant next

season and could overtake Abdul-Jabbar by the end of his Lakers contract in the 2021-22 campaign if he stays healthy. James hit two 3-pointers in the first quarter but also went 0-4 from the free throw line. He added a lay-in and jumper to match Jordan early in the second quarter and then broke the record soon after. "It was a pretty awesome moment," Lakers coach Luke Walton said. "Knowing that moment was a few minutes ahead of him, I think that did something to him, nerve-wracking, that he doesn't feel normally at the start of a game."

LAVINE LEADS BULLS WIN

In other games, Zach LaVine scored 39 points, making the decisive layup with 1.6 seconds remaining, and host Chicago

edged Philadelphia 108-107. LaMarcus Aldridge scored 32 points to power San Antonio over host Atlanta 111-104 and Spencer Dinwiddie netted 28 to lead Brooklyn over Cleveland 113-107.

Gordon Hayward's jumper with two seconds remaining gave Boston a dramatic 111-109 victory at Sacramento while Bradley Beal scored 30 points to lead Washington over Dallas 132-123. Canada's Kelly Olynyk scored 22 points and grabbed 11 rebounds to lead Miami's 91-84 win at Charlotte while Andre Drummond scored 31 points to lead Detroit over Minnesota 131-114. Frenchman Rudy Gobert had 22 points and 13 rebounds to help visiting Utah over New Orleans 114-104 and Phoenix beat New York 107-96 in a duel of the NBA's worst clubs.

MLB

Wright suspended 80 games for PED violation

Reuters
New York

Boston Red Sox right-hander Steven Wright has been suspended 80 games without pay after testing positive for a performance-enhancing substance, Major League Baseball announced on Wednesday.

Wright tested positive for Growth Hormone Releasing Peptide 2 (GHRP-2), according to the league, a violation of MLB's Joint Drug Prevention and Treatment Program.

The suspension starts with the beginning of the 2019 regular season.

"The Boston Red Sox fully support Major League Baseball's Joint Drug Prevention and Treatment Program and its efforts to eliminate performance-enhancing substances from the game," the team wrote in a statement. While we are disappointed by the news of this violation, we will look to provide the appropriate support to Steven at this time. Going forward, the club will not comment further on the matter."

Wright, 34, was likely to fill a role for the Red Sox this season as a multi-inning reliever. The knuckleballer appeared in 20 games last season with four starts, and a 3-1 record and a 2.68 ERA in 53 2/3 innings.

He missed the start of last season after he accepted a 15-game suspension from MLB for violating the league's domestic violence policy.

He did not appear for the Red Sox during their postseason run to the World Series title, as he was replaced on the roster after Game 1 of the American League Division Series because of inflammation and a loose body in his left knee, which was surgically repaired in May 2017.

Wright has appeared in 75 games for Boston over the past

six seasons, earning All-Star status in 2016, when he finished 13-6 with a 3.33 ERA in 24 starts.

Wright has a career mark of 24-15 with a 3.77 ERA, striking out 266 and walking 128 in 341 1/3 innings.

New York Yankees manager Aaron Boone said Wednesday that he expects veteran left-hander CC Sabathia to start the season on the injured list.

Sabathia, 38, who is heading into 19th major league season, could miss as many as two starts at the start of the season, pushing his 2019 season debut to the middle of April. Boone told reporters that an off-season angioplasty and knee surgery have delayed Sabathia's preparation for the season.

"Everything is going pretty well," Boone said after the Yankees' 9-5 defeat to the St. Louis Cardinals on Wednesday. "He had his second (bullpen) that went well. I certainly don't expect him for the start of the season. It may be a couple of weeks in if everything keeps going according to plan."

Even after Sabathia is activated to the roster, he still has to serve a five-game suspension after hitting two Tampa Bay Rays batters in a Sept 27 game.

"I feel like once I'm facing hitters in (batting practice) or a simulated game, it's going to go pretty quick from there," Sabathia said, according to mlb.com. "I would assume (I will face hitters) maybe in the next couple of weeks. Everything's looking good; no setbacks. The arm, knee, heart - everything feels good. Just keep pushing."

Sabathia has already announced that this will be the final season of his career. He is 246-153 with a 3.70 ERA in 538 starts for the Cleveland Indians, Milwaukee Brewers and Yankees. He was 9-7 over 29 starts for the Yankees last season with a 3.65 ERA.

Bears sign former Pitt kicker Blewitt

The Chicago Bears signed former Pitt kicker Chris Blewitt on Wednesday. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, Blewitt set himself apart during a multi-player tryout that included ex-Tampa Bay Buccaneers kicker Patrick Murray.

Blewitt finished his college career after the 2016 season as Pitt's all-time leader in field goals (55), extra points (198) and kicker scoring (363 points), though he made just 69.6 percent of his career field-goal attempts and 58.8 percent as a senior. He spent the off-season with the Pittsburgh Steelers in 2017 but did not make the cut, and he has yet to play a game in the NFL.

The Bears are in the market for a kicker to replace Cody Parkey, whom general manager Ryan Pace said the team plans to release after the league year starts March 13. Parkey missed 10 kicks and hit the goal post multiple times last season, including an infamous "double-doink" miss on a kick that would have pushed the Bears past the Philadelphia Eagles in the playoffs. Less than a week later, Parkey went on NBC's "Today Show" to discuss the kick, which angered team officials.

The Bears also have ex-Tulsa kicker Redford Jones on the roster. Tight end Nick Boyle agreed to a three-year, \$18 million extension with the Baltimore Ravens. ESPN and NFL Network reported yesterday. Boyle will receive \$10 million in guarantees in the deal, Ian Rapoport reported, and the deal keeps him from becoming an unrestricted free agent next week.

NHL

Fleury prevails again as Knights top Flames

Reuters
Las Vegas

Defenseman Deryk Engelland scored the game-winning goal midway through the third period, and Marc-Andre Fleury made 33 saves to pick up his league-leading 33rd victory as the Vegas Golden Knights beat the Calgary Flames 2-1 on Wednesday night in Las Vegas.

The Golden Knights earned their fifth consecutive win. Fleury earned his 437th career victory to move into a tie for eighth place on the Jacques Plante on the NHL's all-time goalie wins list. Fleury has allowed just two goals total in his past four games.

Shea Theodore also scored a goal and William Karlsson had two assists for third-place Vegas, which moved to within seven points of second-place San Jose in the Pacific Division.

Travis Hamonic scored for Western Conference-leading Calgary, which has lost three consecutive regulation games for the first time this season. David Rittich stopped 36 shots. Vegas took a 1-0 lead midway through the first period on a power-play goal. Theodore slapped the rebound of a Mark Stone shot from the top of the left circle over Rittich's left shoulder for his 11th goal of the season.

The Flames appeared to tie it a few minutes later when Johnny Gaudreau backhanded in a rebound of a Rasmus Andersson shot from the slot. However, the Golden Knights challenged

RESULTS

Washington	5-3	Philadelphia
Vancouver	3-2	Toronto
St. Louis	5-4	Anaheim
Las Vegas	2-1	Calgary

for goaltender interference by Matthew Tkachuk, and after a lengthy video review, the NHL Situation Room in Toronto agreed and overturned the goal. Calgary tied it midway through the second period when Hamonic slapped a shot from the top of the right circle past Fleury's glove side. It snapped a career-best scoreless streak of 200 minutes and 41 seconds for the Vegas goaltender.

Engelland's first goal in 37 games and second of the season at 9:30 of the third period proved to be the game-winner. Engelland fired a wrist shot from the top of the slot past a screen by Jonathan Marchessault and into the top right corner of the net. Rittich was pulled for an extra attacker with 2:34 left, but the Flames managed just two shots on goal that Fleury easily saved.

BLEWITT SINKS DUCKS WITH TWO LATE GOALS

Alex Pietrangolo scored the go-ahead goal with 52 seconds remaining as the visiting St. Louis Blues used a late two-goal flurry to earn a 5-4 victory over the Anaheim Ducks. Pietrangolo took a shot that rebounded off

the skate of the Ducks' Adam Henrique and past goalie John Gibson for his 12th tally of the season. Robert Thomas scored two goals for the Blues, including the game-tying goal 12 seconds before Pietrangolo delivered his game-winner.

St. Louis' Brayden Schenn made an impact immediately upon his return from injury, contributing a goal and an assist. Ryan O'Reilly also scored for the Blues, who ended a two-game losing streak in the opener of a three-game trip through California.

Nick Ritchie, Rickard Rakell, Jaycob Megna and Henrique all scored for the Ducks, who saw a two-game winning streak against teams fighting for playoff eligibility come to an end. The Ducks defeated the Colorado Avalanche and Arizona Coyotes in recent days.

After missing the previous six games because of an upper-body injury, Schenn needed all of eight minutes to make his presence known, scoring his 12th goal of the season on the power play. The goal tied the score 1-1.

Schenn was at it again at 15:55 of the opening period when his screen out front on Gibson helped O'Reilly's shot from the right circle to find the top right corner of the net for a 2-1 lead.

When Schenn was injured Feb 19 against the Toronto Maple Leafs, it was the final game of the Blues' 11-game winning streak that moved them solidly into playoff contention. In the six games without him, they were just 2-3-1.



Vegas Golden Knights goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury makes a save in the second period against the Calgary Flames at T-Mobile Arena. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

RUGBY

England recall Te'o to play alongside Tuilagi against Italy

'We're able now to pick a big backline which can play a little bit differently'

AFP
Bagshot, United Kingdom

England coach Eddie Jones hopes a powerful centre pairing of Ben Te'o and Manu Tuilagi will make their presence felt during tomorrow's Six Nations international against Italy at Twickenham.

It will be the first time the duo, who both have Pacific Islands heritage, have started a Test together, although they were briefly in action as a duo for a few minutes at the conclusion of England's 37-18 win at home to Australia in November.

"We saw them at the end of the game against Australia. It's always something we wanted to look at in order to develop another option," Jones told reporters at England's training base in Bagshot, southwest of London, after announcing his team on Thursday. Henry Slade has been dropped to the bench to allow Te'o's inclusion at inside centre and Tuilagi's move to outside centre in one of several changes to the team beaten 21-13 by Wales last time out.

"We've been really happy with Henry Slade, but this just gives us another way of playing so we're looking forward to it," Jones added. England captain Owen Farrell insisted there was more to the new centre partnership's game than physical strength. "We got a bit of a taste of it against Australia. They're two lads who can do a lot of damage, but who also have some subtleties to their game as well," Farrell said.

Nevertheless, Jones's desire to have a dynamic and imposing backline was emphasised by the recall of powerhouse right wing Joe Cokanasiga was recalled on after Jack Nowell failed to recover from a shoulder injury.

Cokanasiga made his Six Nations debut when he came off the bench against Wales. His 18-stone presence adds to the strength of midfielders Te'o and Tuilagi, who weigh in at a combined 34 stone.

"It shows the difference in the team. I remember playing Australia three years ago and we were 8kgs per player lighter," former Wallaby and Japan boss Jones explained.

"We're able now to pick a big backline which can play a little bit differently. That gives us another option."

Jones has made a total of five personnel changes to the team beaten in Cardiff, with Joe Launchbury replacing Courtney



England's Ben Te'o during a training session in Bagshot, Britain. (Reuters)

Lawes (calf strain) at lock after Maro Itoje failed to recover in time from a knee injury.

Elsewhere in the pack, Brad Shiels starts at blindside flanker instead of Mark Wilson, with Ellis Genge displacing Ben Moon at loosehead prop.

Genge and fellow prop Kyle Sinckler were uncapped when Jones selected them for England's 2016 tour of Australia.

But even as international novices, the pair made their mark, as Jones recalled.

"I can remember having a session somewhere on the Gold Coast for the Australia tour and we took these two young props," he said.

"They wanted to fight with everyone and argue with everyone. For the whole session we just tried to keep those two calm."

"They're still learning their trade. We've got to understand that. Those guys are being asked to do the same things that back-

rows did 10 years ago - plus with guys treading on their toes and pulling their hair and all those sorts of things.

"They'll learn with each game and that's what we're seeing."

Defeat by Wales ended England's hopes of a Grand Slam this season. England, however, have never been defeated by Italy, with the Azzurri having lost their last 20 Six Nations matches.

Conor O'Shea, the Italy coach, is due to name his side later.

"Italy are a bit of an unknown quantity but when Conor allows them to play rugby they play well," insisted Jones.

"We expect Italy to throw the ball around a bit so we are going to have to defend very well against their unpredictability and when we have got the ball, we have to use it wisely."

TEAM ENGLAND (15-1)

Elliot Daly; Joe Cokanasiga, Manu Tuilagi, Ben Te'o, Jonny May; Owen Farrell (capt), Ben Youngs; Billy Vunipola, Tom Curry, Brad Shields; George Kruis, Joe Launchbury; Kyle Sinckler, Jamie George, Ellis Genge
Replacements: Luke Cowan-Dickie, Ben Moon, Dan Cole, Nathan Hughes, Mark Wilson, Dan Robson, George Ford, Henry Slade
Coach: Eddie Jones (AUS)

Parisse returns to captain Italy as O'Shea makes three changes

Number eight Sergio Parisse will return from a head injury to captain Italy against England as coach Conor O'Shea made three changes to his team for tomorrow's Six Nations clash at Twickenham. Sebastian Negri returns to the back row after recovering from an illness while hooker Luca Bigi is set to make his first start in the Championship, replacing Leonardo Ghiraldini who started in the 26-16 defeat by Ireland.

"We have trained well this week to build on the great work done before the Ireland game," O'Shea told reporters.

"The focus has to be on ourselves and on the things we can control, trying to play our best Rugby."

England coach Eddie Jones announced his team earlier on Thursday with winger Joe Cokanasiga and centre Ben Te'o set to start in a heavyweight England backline.

Italy, who are bottom of the standings, have never beaten England and have lost their last 20 matches in the competition.

TEAM: 15-Jayden Hayward, 14-Edoardo Padovani, 13-Michele Campagnaro, 12-Luca Morisi, 11-Angelo Esposito, 10-Tommaso Allan, 9-Tito Tebaldi, 8-Sergio Parisse (captain), 7-Abraham Steyn, 6-Sebastian Negri, 5-Dean Budd, 4-Federico Ruzza, 3-Simone Ferrari, 2-Luca Bigi, 1-Andrea Lovotti
REPLACEMENTS: 16-Leonardo Ghiraldini, 17-Cherif Traore, 18-Tiziano Pasquali, 19-David Sisi, 20-Jake Polledri, 21-Guglielmo Palazzani, 22-Ian McKinley, 23-Tommaso Castello.



INTERVIEW

Chopra has Olympics on his mind as he gears up for 2019

Reuters
Mumbai

Neeraj Chopra had a fruitful 2018 when he won javelin gold at the Commonwealth Games and the Asian Games but the Indian reckons this year is going to be even more crucial for him as he chases Olympic glory at Tokyo 2020.

Last year, the long-haired former world junior champion became only the third man to win an athletics gold for India at the Commonwealth Games after sprinter Milkha Singh in 1958 and discus thrower Vikas Gowda in 2014. A throw of 86.47 metres was enough to take the title on the Gold Coast and he followed that up with 87.43 metres at the Diamond League leg in Doha in May.

At the Asiad in Jakarta he threw even further at the Gelora Bung Karno Stadium, clearing a season's best distance of 88.06 metres for the title - placing him sixth on the IAAF top list for 2018.

"I believe 2019 is going to be even more important than 2018," Chopra, still only 21, told Reuters in an interview.

"In 2018 the Commonwealth Games, Asian Games were there, which were good."

"But this year there is world championships and more importantly this is the year just before the Olympics and if I want to get ready for the Olympics, I will have to perform well this year."

While India are credited with Norman Pritchard's hurdles silver medals from 1900 before it gained independence from Britain, the world's second most populous nation considers itself never to have won an athletics medal at an Olympics. Chopra, currently ranked fourth in the IAAF world rankings in javelin, knows that he is by far the best chance of ending that drought in Tokyo next year.

"It feels good that people have expectations from you,

that's a good feeling for me," Chopra, who is supported by diversified conglomerate JSW Group's Sports Excellence Programme, said from a training camp in Potchefstroom.

"But I have to do my work. Their expectations are a good thing but I need to continue to perform as I have put in lot of hard work..."

"Obviously there is some pressure that so many people are watching me, but I focus on staying positive and injury-free, and give my best performance, that's all."

Hailing from the Northern Indian state of Haryana, which is better known for producing wrestlers and kabaddi players, Chopra has traded home for an altitude training camp with his coach Uwe Hohn on the South African highveld.

He suffered a bit of a setback with an elbow injury he picked up late last year and has worked extensively on his core strengthening and flexibility with an eye on the World Championships in Doha, starting in September. "Training is going well, we came here in mid-January so it has been a month and a half already," he said.

"Training is starting to make a difference on strengthening, core, explosive power. It's going well overall."

"Next, we will put in a lot of work on the technical aspects. Overall I feel this year is going to be better than last year."

Chopra is also bringing change to his throwing technique after realising that he was falling more on his left side during the point of release, forcing his javelin to also veer left. He is aware of the tough competition that lies ahead and understands the need to produce his best throws throughout the season.

"My main task I believe is to be consistent. It's not that I can throw a 90 (metres) once and then start throwing 81-82 after that," he added. "If you are consistent then there are high chances that I can break my personal bests in competitions."



Neeraj Chopra of India celebrates after winning Asian Games javelin throw gold medal in Jakarta. (Reuters)

Kenyan athletics pioneer Daniel Rudisha dies

Daniel Rudisha, a member of Kenya's silver medal-winning relay quartet at the 1968 Mexico Olympics and father to 800m world record holder David Rudisha, has died, his family said yesterday. David said his 73-year-old father, a former teacher who retired to become an athletics coach, succumbed to cardiac

arrest in a hospital in Nakuru, northwest of Nairobi, on Wednesday night after a long illness.

"Our beloved father sadly left us last night. He appeared to be recovering well after he was rushed to hospital for kidney failure last week," the two-time Olympic and world champion told AFP.

FOCUS

Russell returns as Scotland bench Laidlaw

FP
Edinburgh

Finn Russell is set to make his Scotland return against Wales after being included in coach Gregor Townsend's starting XV for tomorrow's Six Nations international at Murrayfield.

But former Scotland playmaker Townsend has dropped regular captain Greig Laidlaw to the bench, with Ali Price taking over at scrum-half in a side now skippered by hooker Stuart McInally following the team's poor showing in a disappointing 27-10 loss away to France last time out.

Fly-half Russell was missed greatly by the Scots that match, having been ruled out with a head injury suffered while playing for Paris-based club side Racing 92. Russell has replaced Pete Horne in the No 10 shirt, with Horne moved to inside centre instead of Sam Johnson. Townsend has made four personnel changes in total to

the team beaten in Paris. In addition to the new half-back pairing, 21-year-old Edinburgh wing Darcy Graham is set for a first start after Sean Maitland was ruled out with a foot injury.

The only change to the pack sees tighthead prop Willem Nel, fit following a foot problem, come in to form an all-Edinburgh front row with McInally and loosehead Allan Dell. Tomorrow's match will see wing Tommy Seymour and second row Jonny Gray both winning their 50th caps for Scotland.

"Getting to 50 caps for your country is a milestone in a player's career and it underlines the consistency and quality both Tommy and Jonny have delivered for Scotland over the years," said Townsend. "Tommy has started all his games and has an impressive try-scoring record (19 in 49 Tests), which is a fundamental element of the game for a winger."

"As well as his finishing ability, his excellent work rate off-the-ball and outstanding aerial skills have been the key reasons why

he's reached a half century of appearances for Scotland."

Turning to the 24-year-old Gray, he added: "Jonny is an exceptional player who came through as a young man and, by becoming the second-youngest player to win 50 caps, shows just how well he's played in that relatively short time. He has a phenomenal work rate, is a very accurate tackler and takes real pride in helping the team prepare, as well as continually looking for ways to improve his own game."

Scotland are eager for a win after successive defeats this Six Nations by Ireland and France but they will be up against a Wales side going for a Grand Slam. But Townsend said his side had it in them to cause an upset, just as they had done in beating England 25-13 at Murrayfield last year.

"Wales have a very good record against us and are in excellent form," said Townsend.

"It's a similar challenge to the one we faced last year against England, who had also been on a very good run of results in their preced-

ing games. We rose to the challenge that day and found a way to win and I firmly believe we can reach that level of performance once again on Saturday."

Wales coach Warren Gatland named his side on Tuesday. But Wales' preparations have been overshadowed by the ongoing uncertainty caused by this week's bitter collapse of a move to merge the Ospreys and the Scarlets regional sides as part of an overall plan to restructure the Welsh professional club game.

TEAM

Scotland (15-1)
Blair Kinghorn; Tommy Seymour, Nick Grigg, Pete Horne, Darcy Graham; Finn Russell, Ali Price; Josh Strauss, Jamie Ritchie, Magnus Bradbury; Jonny Gray, Grant Gilchrist; Willem Nel, Stuart McInally (capt), Allan Dell
Replacements: Fraser Brown, Gordon Reid, Simon Berghan, Ben Toolis, Hamish Watson, Greig Laidlaw, Adam Hastings, Byron McGuigan.



Scotland's Finn Russell in action during their Six Nations Championship match against Ireland in Dublin on March 10, 2018. (Reuters)

SPOTLIGHT

Epaillard storms to feature victory in CHI Al Shaqab

'I am very happy. I saw Yuri Mansur in the lead and so tried to be faster. It worked and it is a fantastic day for me'

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Julien Epaillard continued his love affair with the Al Shaqab arena as the Frenchman bagged the feature class on the opening day of the CHI Al Shaqab equestrian championship. Epaillard had stunned the odds last Saturday when he clinched the Global Champions Tour Grand Prix Doha title. And the inform Epaillard picked up from where left, as he galloped with 10-year-old chestnut stallion Virtuoso Champeix to victory in CSI5* 1.50m speed class under lights yesterday.

The pair jumped for a flawless routine coming in 58.86 seconds, which gave the rider €23,375 in prize money. In second place was Brazilian Yuri Mansur on dark bay gelding Carlson in a time of 61.19secs, followed by another French rider Kevin Staut astride bay gelding Evert claimed in third spot in 61.64secs. Epaillard was delighted to extend his winning run. "I am very happy. I saw Yuri Mansur in the lead and so tried to be faster. It worked and it is a fantastic day for me. I took a risk and it worked. Al Shaqab has one of the best facilities for horses and riders and I enjoy competing here."

Jos Verlooy of Belgium jumped to first place in the CSI5* 1.45m class. Verlooy and his stallion, Caracas, completed the two phases with no faults, finishing in 33.77 seconds to win first place and prize money of €6,250. Geir Gulliksen of Norway came second on VDL Groep Quatro with a time of 34.93 seconds. Simon Delestre of France and Filou Carlo Zimequest finished third after coming home in 35.10 seconds.

Verlooy said: "It was great to win. My horse jumped super. He decided to go faster the first day - that was my plan, so that was good. Al Shaqab has an unbelievable stadium, the facilities are super for the riders and horses. It's my fourth time here and I really like to come here (to participate). I'm looking forward to the Grand Prix on Saturday."

Earlier, the opening day of the championship began with the para-dressage competition at Al Shaqab's indoor arena. Allowing for fair competition and to create the opportunity for riders of all skills to achieve their goals in equestrian sport, the competition was conducted in grades depending on the disability, according to FEI (International Equestrian Federation) standards.

Singapore's Laurentia Yen-Yi Tan topped the first competition with her 13-year-old bay gelding Florenzius S. The other competitions were won by Ju-



Julien Epaillard of France in action on way to winning the CHI Al Shaqab 2019 CSI5* 1.50m class at Al Shaqab yesterday.

lie Payne of Britain on Pandora, Annemarieke Roling-Nobel of the Netherlands on Doo Schuffro, Brazilian Rodolpho Riskalla on Don Henrico and Ciska Vermeulen of Belgium with horse Rohmeo.

Participants of the Al Shaqab Inter-nations Camp conducted by the center's Equine Education Department, had an intense day as the second and final round of qualifications were conducted. In the lead was Team Barzan - led by Qatari rider Ghanim Nasser al-Qadi with Oliver George Tuff from Great Britain and Abdulaziz Ghanim al-Nuaimi from Qatar also part of the team. In a fairly close second place was Zekreet, a team comprising Ali Mohamed al-Qadi of Qatar, Gautier Lenoir from France and Henning Josef Athens of Germany. The best individual timing was achieved by Fraser Hayden Reed, of Great Britain, who completed his course in 66.17 seconds with no faults.



CHI Al Shaqab 2019 Inter-Nations Camp competition podium finishers with Michalle al-Naimi, President Community Development Qatar Foundation.



Jos Verlooy of Belgium astride Caracas, winner of CHI Al Shaqab 2019 CSI5* 1.45m class receives his prize from Ali al-Rumaihi, Asst Secretary-General QEF and Event Director Hathab.

Hamad al-Attiyah re-elected President of Asian Equestrian Federation

Hamad bin Abdulrahman al-Attiyah was re-elected by acclamation as President of the Asian Equestrian Federation (QEF) for a second term, until 2023, at the meeting of General Assembly of the Federation currently on in Doha. Al-Attiyah expressed pleasure at his re-election, promising to do everything that will contribute to equestrian development of equestrian in the continent and to continue the work that he started with the General Assembly's members at the previous session. Al-Attiyah has been QEF's president since July 2017 and has completed the current session. He looks forward to completing the journey he started about 17 months ago to develop and promote the sport.

The attendance at the General Assembly's meeting this year was the highest in the history of the Asian Equestrian Federation, especially because al-Attiyah made many reforms and took decisions that contributed to the activation of the members' role.



RESULTS (TOP 3 ONLY)

CSI5* One Round Against the clock (238.2.1) 1.50m

1. Julien Epaillard (FRA); Virtuoso Champeix; 0; 58.86secs; €23,375
2. Yuri Mansur (BRA); Carlson; 0; 61.19secs; €18,700
3. Kevin Staut (FRA); Viking d'La Rousserie; 0; 61.43secs; €14,025

CSI5* Two Phases Against the clock (274.1.5.3) 1.45m

1. Jos Verlooy (BEL); Caracas; 0; 41.94secs; 0; 33.77secs; €6,250
2. Geir Gulliksen (BEL); VDL Groep Quatro; 0; 41.32secs; 0; 34.93secs; €5,000
3. Simon Delestre (FRA); Filou Carlo Zimequest; 0; 43.06secs; 0; 35.10secs; €3,750

Para-Dressage

Competition 1 - CPEDI3* Team I

1. Laurentia Yen-Yi Tan (SIN); Horse: Florenzius S; Total Points: 73.988; Prize: €330
2. Katja Karjalainen (FIN); Dr Doolittle; 72.262; €250
3. Ana Isabel Mota Veiga (Convicto); 64.345; €200

Competition 2 - CPEDI3* Team II

1. Julie Payne (GBR); Pandora; 67.783; €330
2. Nicole den Dulk (NED); Wallace N.O.P; 66.364; €250

Competition 3 - CPEDI3* Team III

1. Annemarieke Roling-Nobel (NED); Doo Schuffro; 68.235; €300
2. Kate Kerr-Horan (IRL); Serafina T; 68.186; €250
3. Barbara Minnici (BEL); Stuart; 67.843; €200

Competition 4 - CPEDI3* Team IV

1. Rodolpho Riskalla (BRA); Don Henrico; 72.167;

- €300
2. Manon Claeys (BEL); San Dior 2; 71.667; €250
3. Philippa Johnson-Dwyer (RSA); Lord Louis; 71.667; €250

Competition 5 - CPEDI3* Team V

1. Ciska Vermeulen (BEL); Rohmeo; 69.922; €330
2. Frank Hosmar (NED); Guetta; 68.062; €250
3. Kevin van Ham (BEL); ErosVan Ons Heem; 67.519; €200

Al Shaqab Inter-Nations Camp Jumping

1. Fraser Hayden Reed, Al Maida Club (GBR); Higgs; Faults: 0; Time: 66.17secs
2. Khalifa Abdulla al-Khalidi, Al Zubara Club (QAT); Charming Boy; 0; 69.73secs
3. Ali Mohamed al-Qadi, Barzan Club (QAT); Jaliency

Diamant Z; 0; 70.52secs

Hathab

Dressage Level 1

1. Jessica Waldon (GBR); Lusso Del Castegno; 68.621pts
2. Ali Mohamed al-Marri (QAT); Fernhill Friendly Touch; 66.724
3. Saeed Hamad al-Rashdi; Graffiti de Lully CH; 65.690

Dressage Level 2

1. Mohamed Salem al-Marri (QAT); Gin Tonic Van De Kranenburg; 68.214
2. Saoud Mohamed al-Kuwari; Special Edition 19; 67.857
3. Ghanim Nasser al-Qadi (QAT); Joie De Vivre; 67.143.

HORSE RACING

Alhazm caps double for Al Shaqab Racing

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The trainer-jockey combine of Alban de Mieuille and Ronan Thomas capped the race-day with a double for the famous colours of Al Shaqab Racing when Alhazm won the Loyalty Cup, the handicap race on turf, at Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Rayyan Park yesterday.

The 2,000m run for Thoroughbreds rated 75-95 saw the four-year-old pick up his second course-and-distance victory when he went past the post with two lengths to spare ahead of Jean Baptiste Hamel-ridden Rich History.

In the penultimate race of the day, it was Gtnah who registered her third victory this season and second over a mile, winning the race for Purebred Arabians with ease, ahead of Julian Smart-trained Annan, ridden by Ryan Curatolo.

Smart and Curatolo, however, had opened the day with a hat-trick of victories, with Qatar-bred filly Meera shedding her maiden status in the card-opener, and the notable Maxr showing class over a mile and a half to win the Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate



Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC) Racing manager Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi (third from right) with the winners of the Loyalty Cup after Al Shaqab Racing's Alhazm won the handicap feature at Al Rayyan Park yesterday.

PICTURES: Juhaim

ahead of stablemate Taish.

Off He Goes made it three in three for the colours of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani on the day when the gelding ran the longest distance of his career at 2,800m and held off Jimmy Quinn-ridden Severini and Tomas Lukasek-helmed Yvanli, both saddled by Ibrahim al-Malki, for

a victory in the Thoroughbred Handicap event for four-year-old and older horses rated 85 and below.

Al-Malki's wards came close to a victory in the handicap race for local Thoroughbreds but were denied by Lukasek-ridden Al Jeryan Stud filly Latamah, who was one of two winners on the day for Hadi Nasser al-Ramzani.



Ronan Thomas rides Alhazm to victory in the Loyalty Cup yesterday.

Nasser Owaida Salem al-Hajri's On The Front Line won his third race this season in the seven-furlong handicap race for Class 4 Thoroughbreds, edging out Harry Bentley-ridden Noble Masterpiece.

Champion jockey Bentley, however, bounced back for his only victory of the card with champion trainer Jassim Mohamed Ghazali's Hydroxide winning a mile-long handicap.

RESULTS

- Race 1: 1. Meera (Ryan Curatolo), 2. Al Motanaa (Ronan Thomas), 3. Insijam (Harry Bentley), 4. Ibn Elmalik (Ivan Ross). Won by: 1/4, 3/4, 1/4. Time: 1:38.57. Owner: His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani. Trainer: Julian Smart.
- Race 2: 1. Maxr (Ryan Curatolo), 2. Taish (Ali Khalid al-Mosallam), 3. Raza (Ronan Thomas), 4. Kaif Tara (JP Guillambert). Won by: 2 1/4, 2 1/2, 1. Time: 2:45.11. Owner: His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani. Trainer: Julian Smart.
- Race 3: 1. Off He Goes (Ryan Curatolo), 2. Severini (Jimmy Quinn), 3. Yvanliend (Tomas Lukasek), 4. Haloul (Ronan Thomas). Won by: 1 1/2, 1 1/4, Hd. Time: 3:04.98. Owner: His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani. Trainer: Julian Smart.
- Race 4: 1. Latamah (Tomas Lukasek), 2. Bab Al Rayyan (Eduardo Pedroza), 3. Damsah (Salem Golan), 4. Mister Lal (Jimmy Quinn). Won by: 1/2, Nk, 3. Time: 1:24.98. Owner: Al Jeryan Stud. Trainer: Hadi Nasser al-Ramzani.
- Race 5: 1. On The Front Line (Tomas Lukasek), 2. Noble Masterpiece (Harry Bentley), 3. French Encore (Ryan Curatolo), 4. Captain Vancouver (Ronan Thomas). Won by: 1/4, 1 1/4, 1 1/2. Time: 1:22.78. Owner: Nasser Owaida Salem al-Hajri. Trainer: Hadi Nasser al-Ramzani.
- Race 6: 1. Hydroxide (Harry Bentley), 2. Al Maftoon (JP Guillambert), 3. Oryx (Ronan Thomas), 4. Battle Of Jericho (Ryan Curatolo). Won by: 1, 1/2, No. Time: 1:35.15. Owner: Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari. Trainer: Jassim Mohamed Ghazali.
- Race 7: 1. Gtnah (Ronan Thomas), 2. Annan (Ryan Curatolo), 3. Wadha PY (Gerald Avranche), 4. Al Junood (Harry Bentley). Won by: 1 1/2, 4 1/2, Shd. Time: 1:43.98. Owner: Al Shaqab Racing. Trainer: Alban de Mieuille.
- Race 8: 1. Alhazm (Ronan Thomas), 2. Rich History (Jean Baptiste Hamel), 3. Perfect Storm (Eduardo Pedroza), 4. Saint Roch (Stephan Ladjad). Won by: 2, 3/4, Nk. Time: 2:02.38. Owner: Al Shaqab Racing. Trainer: Alban de Mieuille.

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar signs deal to host MotoGP until 2031

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar will stay on the MotoGP calendar until at least 2031 after promoters Dorna Sports and Losail Circuit Sports Club (LCSC) agreed a new five-year deal. The previous contract was to run until 2026. This latest five-year extension ensures Qatar will host at least another 12 races, and is the first race to be confirmed beyond the next decade.

The Losail Circuit has been a fixture on the MotoGP calendar since 2004 and from 2008 it has also held the unique distinction of being the sole night race. Qatar also holds exclusive rights to host MotoGP in the Middle East and will continue to do so.

The contract extension was announced by Khalid al-Remaihi, LCSC Vice President and General Manager and Dorna CEO Carmelo Ezpeleta in the presence of HE the Minister of Culture and Sports Salah bin Ghanem bin Nasser al-Ali and Qatar Motor and Motorcycling Federation (QMMF) President Abdulrahman al-Mannai.

Al-Remaihi revealed that the Losail circuit will go a makeover, with new facilities to be added in the next few years. "Qatar is about to invest a lot in the circuit and add enhancements to the facilities, whether it's the offices or infrastructure of the circuit. We would like to have their assurance, that based on that investment, that our contract with Dorna is extended further. So we know this in-



L to R: Khalid al-Remaihi, LCSC Vice President and General Manager, Dorna CEO Carmelo Ezpeleta, FIM President Jorge Viegas, HE the Minister of Culture and Sports Salah bin Ghanem bin Nasser al-Ali and Qatar Motor and Motorcycling Federation (QMMF) President Abdulrahman al-Mannai pose during the contract extension signing ceremony yesterday.

vestment will be for much longer time," al-Remaihi said.

"We have exclusive rights to host MotoGP in the region and we want to stay it that way. This extension till 2031 for us is just an opportunity to have MotoGP for a

longer period. We appreciate the acceptance from Dorna and we hope to continue the good work with them in the future. For Qatar, MotoGP is not just a business deal. It's a passion, it's been liked that since we hosted the event back in 2004.

It's the first race of the season, so it attracts lots of attention. There is a long and strategic relationship with Dorna and we appreciate all their support. This couldn't have been run without their support," he added.

HE the Minister of Culture and Sports Salah bin Ghanem bin Nasser al-Ali called the MotoGP as 'one of the most important events in the world of sport' and was pleased with the extension of contract.

"The MotoGP Championship is one of the most important events in the world of sport. Losail International Circuit is the venue for the season-opener this week. Over 300 million people will watch this race around the world. The MotoGP race weekend in Qatar will be excellent from all aspects. The company owning the rights of MotoGP was keen to continue to host the season-opener in Qatar," he said.

"The championship will be best from the point of view of safety as Losail International Circuit is one of the safest venues around the world. This venue is also one of the most beautiful race tracks in the world. Mr Carmelo Ezpeleta was here to witness the signing of the new contract. Qatar has advantage of exclusive rights to host the MotoGP races in the Middle East. The new deal is until 2031. We will have many new upgrades at the Losail International Circuit in the coming years," HE the minister added.

Dorna CEO Carmelo Ezpeleta said Qatar deserves to host MotoGP exclusively in the Middle East for a long time and called the extension as the longest in the sport's history.

"Qatar has been important part of the MotoGP. It has one of the safest tracks in the world. They are going to improve their facilities like drainage system by last year and we are very pleased with that. We are very happy to extend our contract with them till 2031 - which is the longest contract in our history. The way Qatar has been hosting the event they deserve to host the event for a long time," Ezpeleta said.

PREVIEW/ MOTOGP GRAND PRIX OF QATAR

A very wide open championship!

Rossi's longevity and passion continues to amaze and inspire in equal measure



ALL SET: MotoGP riders pose for a group photo ahead of the start of the new season at Losail International Circuit yesterday.

By Sahar Bidappa
Doha

If the predictions are to be believed, then 2019 is set to witness the closest and the most thrilling season in MotoGP. The season-opening race will be held at the Losail International Circuit this Sunday, but there is no clear favourite heading into the new championship.

Reigning five-time title winner Marc Marquez of Honda is still the man to beat but the recurring shoulder injury is major concern for the Spaniard. But if the 26-year-old can overcome his injury issues, then 2019 could be another glorious chapter in his burgeoning legend.

Having said that, Honda also boast triple champion Jorge Lorenzo, who is set to give his new team-mate a tough time. But despite having the best line-up, Honda doesn't seem to be in the best shape heading into this season, and Marquez will face his toughest campaign yet with Lorenzo as a teammate, as well as the other challengers around him.

Andrea Dovizioso of Ducati will fancy his chances, having come the closest to challenging Marquez in the previous years. If the Italian can repeat his form of the past few years this time round, he'll still be a strong contender.

Then there is Yamaha's Maverick

Andrea Dovizioso of Ducati will fancy his chances, having come the closest to challenging Marquez in the previous years. If the Italian can repeat his form of the past few years this time round, he'll still be a strong contender

Vinales, who has impressed in the pre-season testing. The Spaniard has changed some key pieces of his crew in order to find the balance this year and has out-paced his teammate and multiple world champion Valentino Rossi in testing.

Rossi, who turned 40 recently, could be in the mix as well but consistency has been an issue with the legendary Italian. Rossi's longevity, passion and dedication continues to amaze and inspire in equal measure but he is not the rider what he used to be, his reflexes having slowed down considerably.

Rossi himself is going by the popular opinion in the paddock and reckons this year's season could be the closest in the championship's history. He went on to say that there are 'seven or eight' possible title contenders on 'three or four' different types of bike.

Rossi said that Vinales, Ducati pair Dovizioso and Danilo Petrucci, Honda's Marquez and Lorenzo, Suzuki's Alex Rins and himself are contenders for the title.

"On paper, I don't think there's ever

been such an even championship, with seven or eight riders, and also three or four different bikes, that can fight for the title," said Rossi at the Losail Circuit yesterday.

"The factory riders are all really strong. The two works Ducati riders are going strongly, the two from Honda are a little bit behind, but surely they will arrive. The two Yamahas are going quite well, and also Suzuki, especially with Rins. It seems to me the factory bikes are all quite strong.

"Then we must not forget [Fabio] Quartararo, [Francesco] Bagnaia, [Cal] Crutchlow and [Franco] Morbidelli, who in the tests have been strong. Already there are 10 of us! Maybe in one race you are on the podium and in another you make a mistake and you are fighting for seventh place. It's difficult," he added.

Dovizioso agreed with his countryman's views. "I have seen many very competitive riders," said the Ducati rider. "All the top four bikes are quite strong, and close, with different characteristics. We could see a lot of riders fighting for wins, a much more competitive season than recent ones. This is the first season in which we start with so much uncertainty, at least since I've been in MotoGP. In the past in Qatar we've seen very different results in the race compared with the tests. But, more than just Qatar, there

This pre-season, it was interesting to see how Yamaha improved, Ducati improved, Suzuki improved with Rins and yeah, let's see how we start this season

is uncertainty for all the season. At the moment we need to focus day by day, then we will see," he added.

Marquez feels that all manufacturers have taken a step forward ahead of the new campaign, which he said make the season unpredictable.

"Since 2017 I'm looking at everybody. I'm looking at all my opponents in the same way because for example, in 2017, we were here and not a lot of people spoke about Dovizioso and he was the man to beat," the current champion said.

"This pre-season, it was interesting to see how Yamaha improved, Ducati improved, Suzuki improved with Rins and yeah, let's see how we start this season. But of course, we will be very fast because we tested here, but the season is 19 races and we must be focused on our work, focused on ourselves and try and do what we know. Then we will see at the end of the season," he added.

Today, the Moto3 class will get the ball rolling with Free Practice 1, followed by Moto2 practice session before the MotoGP riders head out at 3:40pm and again under lights.

FOCUS

Riders want Qatar MotoGP to start an hour early

AFP
Doha

Leading MotoGP riders yesterday urged safety officials at this year's traditional Qatar season-opener to move the race's start time forward an hour amid ongoing concerns over Doha weather conditions.

Defending champion Marc Marquez, challenger Jorge Lorenzo and Alex Rins are among those calling on a safety panel to push Sunday's race to 7pm (1600 GMT) to combat heat, humidity and wind in the desert state.

"Last year the race started at 7 and it was really good, it's less risk," said Marquez, speaking at a press conference.

He was backed by other riders, including fellow Spaniard Rins. "For me, if you race at 7, it's safer," said Rins, who crashed out of last

year's Qatar Grand Prix.

The argument to move the start time over trackside temperatures has been rumbling in the days before the season's curtain-raiser.

Lorenzo, widely considered to be the main challenger to Marquez who is his new Honda stablemate, is one of those who has raised concerns after crashing in pre-season testing, claiming it could be "dangerous" to keep it at 8pm (1700 GMT).

It is forecast to be a maximum of 24 degrees Celsius (75 Fahrenheit) in Doha on Sunday, though several degrees cooler by the evening.

There are also concerns over the gusty conditions especially on some exposed parts of the Losail track.

Whatever the conditions, the race should herald the beginning of one of the most competitive MotoGP seasons, which takes place over 19 races.



Yamaha MotoGP's Valentino Rossi of Italy (L) and Petronas Yamaha SRT's Fabio Quartararo attend a press conference at Losail International Circuit yesterday.



Repsol Honda's Marc Marquez of Spain attends a press conference at the Losail International Circuit yesterday.