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NBA Page 5

**Pistons nail down final playoff spot by beating Knicks**

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Friday, April 12, 2019  
Sha'baan 7, 1440 AH

# GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

**Atletico to appeal eight-match ban for Diego Costa**

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GOLF/THE MASTERS

# Tiger sinks 25-foot birdie putt to share lead at Masters

EARLIER, HARDING FIRED A THREE-UNDER PAR 69 TO SEIZE THE CLUBHOUSE LEAD

AFP  
Augusta

**T**iger Woods sank a 25-foot birdie putt at the par-4 14th hole to grab a share of the lead in yesterday's opening round of the 83rd Masters.

Woods was on three-under par with three holes to play and atop the leaderboard with Spanish playing partner Jon Rahm, South African Justin Harding in the clubhouse and fellow American Patton Kizzire.

The 43-year-old superstar, a 14-time major winner seeking his fifth Masters green jacket, missed some short putts on the front nine but sank a five-footer for birdie at the ninth.

He two-putted the par-5 13th from 53 feet for birdie and sank his dramatic long effort at 14 to evoke a roar from the crowd that lined every hole he played at Augusta National. Woods, who hasn't won a major since the 2008 US Open, came back from spinal fusion surgery last year and contended in the British Open and PGA Championship before winning his 80th career US PGA title at the Tour Championship.

Earlier, Harding fired a three-under par 69 to seize the clubhouse lead.

Also on the course at three-under were American Patton Kizzire and Denmark's Lucas Bjerregaard.

Harding, 33, was among the last players to qualify for the Masters, reaching the world rankings top 50 after a win at Qatar and runner-up effort in Kenya last month in European Tour events.

Harding opened with a birdie from 10 feet and added another at the third, landing his approach two feet from the cup. He took a bogey at the fifth, missing the green on his approach and a 12-foot par putt, but answered with a four-foot birdie putt at the par-3 sixth.

Meanwhile, Golf legends Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player backed Rory McIlroy as a solid pick to win the Masters after making ceremonial tee shots yesterday to open the year's first major tournament.

Four-time major winner McIlroy needs only to win the Masters green jacket to



Tiger Woods of the US holds his ball after putting on the second green during first round play of the 2019 Masters golf tournament at Augusta National Golf Club in Augusta, Georgia, yesterday.

complete a career Grand Slam and arrived after seven top-10 finishes to start the year, including a win at last month's Players Championship.

"I think that Rory is playing probably better than anybody is playing right now," Nicklaus said. "If I were in Rory's position, I would be looking at trying to win the Masters, not trying to finish a Grand Slam. To win the Masters, that's enough to worry about." McIlroy could become only the sixth player to complete the career Slam, joining a group that includes Player, Nicklaus, Tiger

Woods, Ben Hogan and Gene Sarazen.

"It will be fantastic for him to win," Player said. "If I had to pick somebody I would like to see win, Rory, because it would join the five of us and it would give golf a big boost. Whether he wins or not this week, he has the best swing in the field without a question." Nicklaus says extra focus from sports and golf television and social media has made the task of completing a career Slam harder than in his day.

"When I won the British Open in '66, I don't even recall anybody even mentioning

it," Nicklaus said, noting his wife Barbara would often toss the newspaper before he could read about himself.

Player was among those cheering on 14-time major winner Woods, a contender at last year's British Open and PGA Championship in his return campaign after spinal fusion surgery.

"Everybody wants to see Tiger Woods win more majors because he moves the needle like nobody playing golf today," Player said. "Everybody likes to see a man make a great comeback."

SPOTLIGHT

# Tickets go on sale for Asian athletics

QNA  
Doha

**O**nline ticket sales for the 23rd Asian Athletics Championships have started, the Qatar Athletics Federation said. The tickets are available for purchase on the online on the competition's official website. (<https://athleticsasian-championships2019.ticketmaster.gr/asianathletics-ww/showProductList.html>)

The competition takes place at the air-conditioned Khalifa International Stadium from 21-24 April and brings together nearly 700 athletes and over 400 officials and coaching staff from 43 countries, who will compete for top honours in the world's most populous continent.

Starting at an affordable QR30, tickets provide a wide array of options for the public, whether athletics fans or those looking to learn about the game. Among the ticket options on sale are a group of unique selections, including traditional Arab majlis seats, "follow your champion" and finish-line tickets, with all the innovative types allowing an exclusive way of watching the event.

Up to 7,000 tickets will be available for purchase per

each day of the competition, including a family deal that allows for two adults and two children to secure tickets with a 15% discount. People with disabilities and one accompanying person will enter for free.

"Ticket options mirror those on offer at the 17th IAAF World Athletics Championships, which Doha hosts in September for the first time in the Middle East. The Asian Athletics Championships serve as an official test event for the World Championships, and the LOC will trial all major operations, including the venue, transport and accommodation, to ensure a smooth and spotless experience during the global showpiece in less than six months.

"Today marks yet another milestone in the journey of welcoming the world of athletics to Doha. In less than three weeks, we will show the world how ready our world-class facilities and infrastructure are to host the biggest of athletics events. Asian Athletics Championship is the biggest IAAF event in the continent, and we are ready to pleasantly surprise our guests," said Dahlan al-Hamad, President of the Asian Athletics Association and Vice President of the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF).

FOOTBALL FRIENDLY

# Qatar to clash with Brazil at the Maracana



The historic Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**A**sian champions Qatar will play Brazil in international friendly at the historic Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro on June 5, the Qatar Football Association (QFA) said.

The match will allow Qatar match practice ahead of this year's Copa America in which Qatar is one of the participating teams. Brazil will host the Copa America from June 14 to July 7, 2019.

The Maracana stadium in Rio de Janeiro can accommodate nearly 80,000 spec-

tators. The same venue will also host the final of the Copa America.

"The match is an ideal opportunity for Al Annabi to get match practice before it commences its participation in the Copa America," the QFA said.

Qatar will play against Argentina, Colombia and Paraguay in one of the two groups of 2019 Copa America.

Copa America is the oldest international continental football competition. The competition determines the continental champion of South America. Since the 1990s, teams from North America and Asia have also been invited to participate.

## AL SHAMAL ADVANCE



Glimpses from the opening HH The Amir Cup match between second division clubs Mesaimeer and Al Shamal yesterday. Al Shamal beat Mesaimeer 2-1 to progress to the second round of the prestigious event. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil





## UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

# Pique praises Barca's defensive steel in win over United

Luke Shaw own goal gave Barca their first victory at Old Trafford in five attempts

Reuters  
Manchester

Barcelona defender Gerard Pique praised his side for shutting out Manchester United in Wednesday's 1-0 win at Old Trafford as the Catalans seized the advantage in their Champions League quarter-final tie.

An early own goal by Luke Shaw, who deflected in a header from Luis Suarez, decided a tight first leg and gave Barca their first victory at Old Trafford in five attempts in European competition.

"We put in an excellent performance defensively, we're in our best form in defence of the season. The early goal relaxed us and we knew how to cope with the situation, the fact we didn't concede helps us a lot," Pique told reporters.

"It's very difficult to come here, it's an historical ground, there's a sensational atmosphere and you get put under a lot of pressure."

The only goal of the game came from a clever cross by Lionel Messi although Barca's captain was kept unusually quiet for the remainder, after being left with a bloodied face from a clash with United's Chris Smalling.

"Messi felt very uncomfortable after the blow to the head, we'll have to examine him tomorrow to see how he is, it was a strong blow, he has a large bruise," said Barca coach Ernesto Valverde.

Midfielder Sergio Busquets added: "It was a big blow, he has a scar and he bled a lot, it was



Barcelona's Gerard Pique (right) blocks Manchester United's Anthony Martial (centre) during the UEFA Champions league first leg quarter-final at Old Trafford in Manchester, England, on Wednesday. (AFP)

obviously uncomfortable for him but he put on a brave face and played as best as he could, as he always does."

United had far more attempts than the runaway La Liga leaders but they could not muster a single shot on target, and visiting goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen was never tested.

"We leave here with a good sensation but we know they will give everything away from home," added Valverde.

Barca have failed to reach the Champions League semi-finals since 2015 yet the win at Old Trafford sets them up well for next Tuesday's second leg at the Nou Camp, where they are un-

beaten in their last 30 matches in Europe's elite competition.

Pique, however, said Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's side could not be written off after their remarkable turnaround against Paris Saint-Germain in the last-16, in which they overturned a 2-0 first-leg deficit by winning 3-1 in the French capital.

"After seeing what they did against PSG there's no reason at all to believe the tie is over," Pique said.

"PSG were the clear favourites then, they played far better and look what happened. Anything can happen in football so we'll have to focus very hard."

## Lukaku calls for Man Utd 'arrogance' against Barcelona

AFP  
Manchester, United Kingdom

Romelu Lukaku called on Manchester United to play with "arrogance and confidence" against Barcelona as they seek to overturn a 1-0 defeat in the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's side face an uphill battle at the Camp Nou next week after Luke Shaw's own goal gave Barca a 1-0 win in Wednesday's match at Old Trafford.

United rallied after that early setback and unsettled Ernesto Valverde's side,

giving Lukaku and his teammates confidence of a memorable turnaround in Spain next Tuesday.

"We have to believe and have the desire and more quality than today," said the Belgian striker. "Be better on the ball and then you never know what can happen in football."

"I don't think we played with the same arrogance and confidence on the ball (early on). Second half we tried and the first 20 minutes of the second half we were there."

"It's something we have to do for the whole 90 minutes over there and not concede a goal and score early." That approach worked well at Paris

Saint-Germain last month as United made Champions League history by becoming the first side to progress after losing the first leg at home by two or more goals.

The Parc des Princes triumph was the highlight of a topsy-turvy campaign for the Old Trafford giants, but even during the difficult Jose Mourinho era they managed to seal a last-gasp 2-1 comeback win at Juventus.

Asked if those two matches will play on Barcelona's mind, Lukaku said: "Yeah, but I don't think they will look at us. We have to look at ourselves, get a result and give our all, run as much as we can." Wednesday saw United fail to muster

a shot on target for the first time in a Champions League match since 2005, but there was some promising build-up play.

"Definitely (they are beatable)," Lukaku added. "On the day you can score from one chance and that's what they did today."

"There was a lack of concentration and they scored a goal and from that moment on we tried to control, but I think over there we have to do a better job and stay focused a bit more, we know they have players who make late runs."

"For us we have to go with the desire, be focused and when the chance comes, we have to score."

## FOCUS

## Fabregas eyes Champions League return with Monaco

AFP  
Monaco

Monaco midfielder Cesc Fabregas said on Wednesday his main aim is to take the Ligue 1 club back to the Champions League, a trophy he is yet to win in his illustrious career.

Fabregas joined the Principality outfit in January from Premier League outfit Chelsea but they will miss out on European competition altogether as they sit in a lowly 16th position in Ligue 1 with seven games to go.

"For next season the objective set by the club is clear, we are not here for a good time. We are here to take Monaco to the Champions League, it's my dream," he said.

The closest Fabregas has come to lifting European club foot-

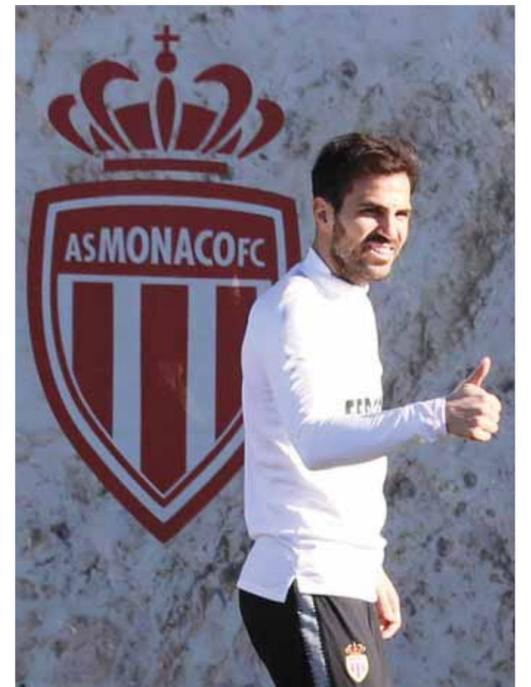
ball's most coveted prize was as a runner-up with Arsenal in 2006.

A World Cup winner with Spain in 2010, the 31-year-old said he left Stamford Bridge due to a decrease in playing time under new boss Maurizio Sarri, who signed midfielders such as Jorginho and Mateo Kovacic last summer.

"I could have extended my contract with Chelsea. A new coach came in with players like kids. It wasn't possible for me to play anymore," Fabregas said.

Fabregas arrived at Monaco to work with former teammate Thierry Henry as boss but he was sacked and replaced by the club's former head coach Leonardo Jardim after less than fourth months in charge.

"It's true, Thierry's departure was a shock, but it's in the past. I'm thinking about Monaco's future, its rescue and my future, which will be here," he said.



## Ajax, Tottenham charged by UEFA over crowd trouble

UEFA opened disciplinary proceedings against Ajax Amsterdam and Tottenham Hotspur yesterday after crowd trouble during their Champions League quarter-final matches this week. Ajax were charged by European soccer's governing body with crowd disturbances after a supporter ran towards Cristiano Ronaldo while the Juventus forward celebrated with his teammates after opening the scoring in the 45th minute. Charges against the Dutch side also included the throwing of objects by fans and blocked stairways during Wednesday's 1-1 draw in the first leg at the Johan Cruyff Arena. Tottenham were charged after a supporter invaded the pitch at their new stadium during their 1-0 first-leg win over fellow Premier League side Manchester City on Tuesday. Both cases will be dealt with by UEFA's control, ethics and disciplinary body on May 16.

## SPOTLIGHT

## 'Everything's gonna be alright' – dream still alive for Ajax vs Juve

AFP  
Amsterdam

There are still 90 minutes to come in Turin against the experience of Cristiano Ronaldo and Juventus, but Ajax head to Italy with hope intact after Wednesday's 1-1 draw in their Champions League quarter-final first leg.

"Ajax still standing" said the daily De Volkskrant, who described the youthful Amsterdam side as "courageous and free" after they came back from conceding to Ronaldo on the stroke of half-time.

Erik ten Hag's thrilling side earned a draw in this repeat of the 1973 and 1996 finals thanks to a brilliant David Neres goal just after the restart at a boisterous Johan Cruyff Arena.

Aptly, the Brazilian's strike came as the home fans were still singing their adopted anthem, Bob Marley's Three Little Birds, reminding their team that "every little thing's gonna be alright?"

Juventus do have the edge thanks to Ronaldo's 125th Champions League goal, which came from the Italian side's only shot on target. However, Ajax have now lost just once in five European matches this season against three continental giants: Bayern Munich, Real Madrid, and now the Italian champions.

It is little wonder they maintain hope



Ajax's David Neres (centre) celebrates after scoring the equaliser in the UEFA Champions League first leg quarter-final match against Juventus in Amsterdam, Netherlands, on Wednesday. (Reuters)

for the return leg next Tuesday. After all, they lost 2-1 at home to Real in the first leg of the last 16, before winning 4-1 in the return tie in Spain.

"If we play the way we did in Madrid, with a lot of courage, then we have a big chance of winning. We've done well

so far in the Champions League, and we're not done yet," said the midfielder Frenkie de Jong, who was outstanding.

### 'ALWAYS HAVE BELIEF'

When asked if the result against Real gave them the necessary hope for the



Juventus' Cristiano Ronaldo celebrates after scoring a goal against Ajax in Amsterdam on Wednesday. (AFP)

return, captain Matthijs de Ligt was unequivocal.

"Of course we have belief, we always have belief, but in the end it's all about the game in Turin," said the highly promising 19-year-old defender.

Neres stole the limelight with his

seventh goal in eight games, but De Jong was the outstanding player on the pitch, running the show in midfield.

The 21-year-old is on his way to Barcelona at the end of the season after a deal worth an initial 75m euros (\$84.5m) was agreed in January, but

that eye-watering fee will end up looking like a bargain if he keeps performing at this level.

Leading daily De Telegraaf wrote that he "drove Juventus to despair", while Juve coach Massimiliano Allegri described De Jong as "the real source of their game".

The hope is that Ajax can enjoy a glorious finish to the season before De Jong – and probably several others – leave in the summer.

If that is the case, with Ajax level with PSV Eindhoven at the top of the Dutch Eredivisie and into the Cup final, De Jong's photo will soon be hanging from the walls of the Johan Cruyff Arena along with so many other past greats, from Cruyff himself to Marco van Basten and Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

The biggest obstacle between Ajax and a first Champions League semi-final since 1997, though, might be Ronaldo.

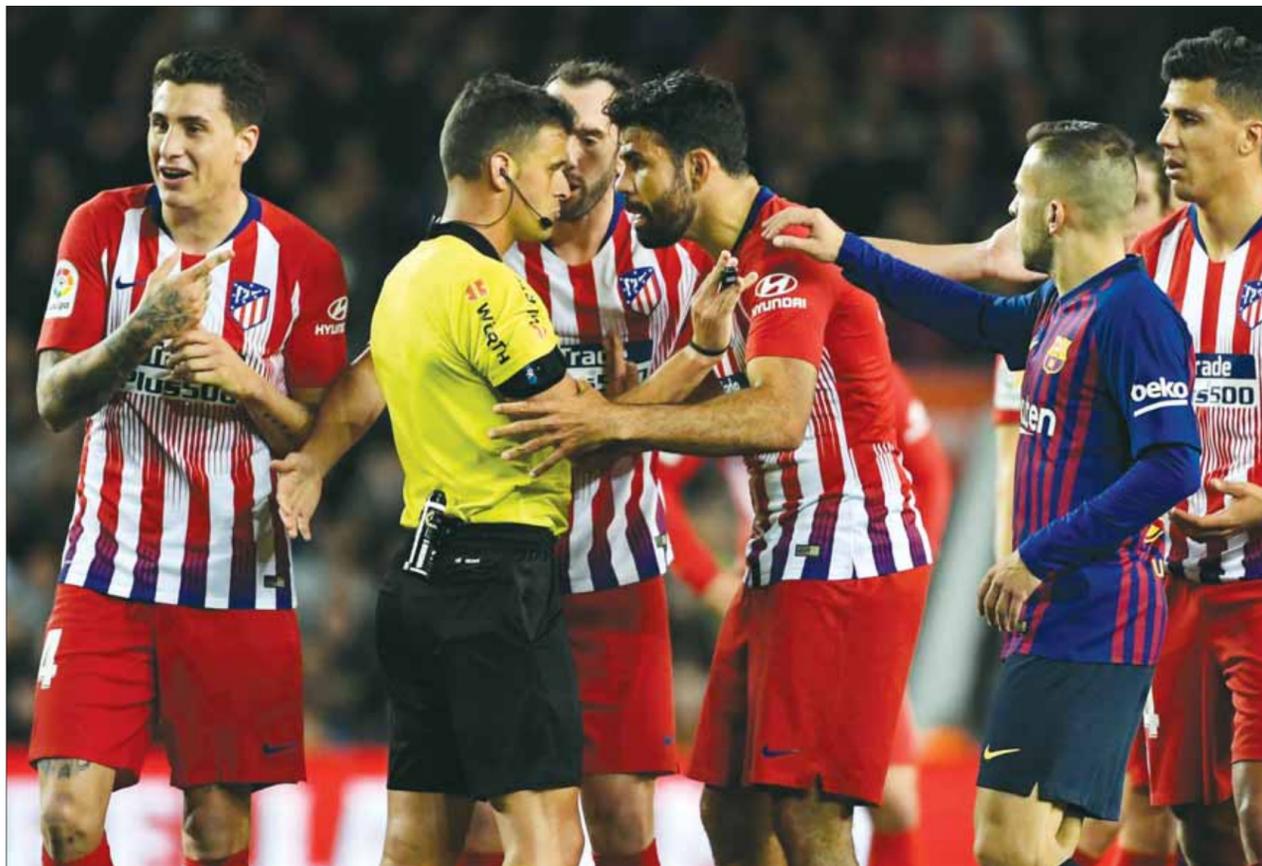
"When there is an important game, he is always there," said Juve full-back Alex Sandro of Ronaldo, who followed his hat-trick which dumped out Atletico Madrid in the last 16 by scoring against Ajax for the eighth time in his Champions League career.

Ajax are still dreaming of winning the European Cup for the fifth time, but Ronaldo remains on course to win the Champions League for the fourth season in a row.

SETBACK

# Atletico Madrid to appeal eight-match ban for Costa

'The natural thing is for us to appeal, ask for leniency and see what happens'



In this April 6, 2019, picture, Atletico Madrid's Diego Costa (third from right) argues with referee Gil Manzano (second from left) before receiving a red card during the Spanish La Liga match against Barcelona at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona. (AFP)

AFP  
Madrid

Atletico Madrid have indicated they will appeal an eight-match suspension handed to Diego Costa by the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) yesterday.

Costa was sent off in the first half of Atletico's 2-0 defeat to Barcelona on Saturday for directing a crude insult towards referee Gil Manzano. Manzano also reported that Costa had "grabbed" him by the arms during the incident.

The lengthy ban means Costa will not play again this season as Atletico have seven games left

in La Liga, having been knocked out of the Champions League and Copa del Rey.

Atletico president Enrique Cerezo suggested yesterday the club will appeal against the decision.

"It's bad news," Cerezo said yesterday. "The natural thing is for us to appeal, to ask for leniency and see what happens."

"There are players who are very temperamental. Insults should never happen on the football field but there are times when they do happen."

According to the match report submitted by Manzano, Costa insulted his mother in a foul-mouthed outburst before "grabbing me by the arms to prevent me showing cards to

numbers 24 and 2 respectively".

The RFEF ruled Costa should therefore be suspended for four matches for "clear insults and offensive expressions made by the player towards the referee" and another four, after "meeting the referee with mild violence, without aggressive spirit, but in a manner that is reflected in the act of grabbing".

The statement added: "Consequently, it is appropriate to sanction the player with a four-game suspension referring to article 94 (insults, verbal offences and insulting attitudes) and four more referring to article 96 (light violence towards the officials), both from the Federation's Disciplinary Code."

Costa's dismissal in the 28th minute at Camp Nou meant Atletico had to play for more than an hour with 10 men in a match coach Diego Simeone had said they had to win to keep their title hopes alive.

Instead, defeat leaves them 11 points adrift of Barca at the top of the table.

Costa has endured a difficult season, having scored only five goals in all competitions and missed almost two months at the start of the year due to a foot injury.

Atletico signed Alvaro Morata on loan from Chelsea in January and the 26-year-old is now likely to be given an extended run in the starting line-up.

Costa is no stranger to controversy. He moved to Atletico after falling out with Chelsea coach Antonio Conte in 2017, a dispute that saw the forward relocate to Brazil and refuse to play for his club.

He was also twice handed three-match suspensions by the Football Association in England, for stamping on Liverpool's Emre Can in January 2015 and kicking Arsenal defender Gabriel Paulista nine months later.

After Atletico's loss to Barca, Simeone said: "I asked the referee and he told me Costa said something to him. Other players have said things and not been sent off but that does not justify what Costa did."

FOCUS

## Tradition places Egypt, Cameroon among Cup of Nations top seeds

AFP  
Cairo

Egypt and Cameroon benefited from being hosts and title-holders respectively when the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations draw seedings were announced yesterday.

The draw in Cairo today will be based on the April FIFA rankings which, ordinarily, would have placed Cameroon (ranked 54) and Egypt (57) among the second seeds.

But it is a worldwide football tradition that hosts and title-holders are among the top seeds and the Confederation of African Football (CAF) executive committee followed suit.

Cameroon were the original 2019 hosts for the tournament, but delays in preparations and security concerns forced a switch to Egypt, who will stage the tournament a fifth time.

The other four top seeds are 2002 runners-up Senegal and three former champions, Tunisia, Nigeria and Morocco.

Democratic Republic of Congo and Ghana - who lost out on top seedings because of Egypt and Cameroon - Mali, Ivory Coast, Guinea and Algeria are the second seeds.

DR Congo (when called Zaire), Ghana, Ivory Coast and Algeria have won the competition and Mali and Guinea came

agonisingly close, finishing runners-up.

South Africa are the lone former champions among the third seeds, which also include Uganda, Benin, Mauritania, Madagascar and Kenya.

Uganda were runners-up to hosts Ghana in 1978, then failed to qualify for 39 years before securing a place at the 2017 Cup of Nations in Gabon.

Zimbabwe, Namibia, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Tanzania and Burundi are the fourth seeds and several appear capable of causing upsets, particularly the Zimbabweans.

This will be the first 24-team Cup of Nations - up from 16 - and the timing has changed from January/February to June/July to avoid European club-versus-country clashes.

The six group winners and six runners-up automatically qualify for the knockout second round and will be joined by the four best third-placed teams.

After the eight second-round fixtures, there will be the quarter-finals, semi-finals, a third-place play-off and the final.

Mohamed Salah-inspired Egypt are set to start as slight favourites to win the June 21-July 19 tournament given home advantage and passionate support.

Egypt have won the Cup of Nations a record seven times with Cameroon (five titles) and Ghana (four) the next most successful countries.

DECISION

## Barca target Jovic to stay at Frankfurt: father

AFP  
Berlin

The father of Eintracht Frankfurt star striker **Luka Jovic** has told German newspaper *Bild* that his son will snub Barcelona and stay at the Bundesliga club next season.

Serbian striker Jovic, 21, has been linked with several of Europe's top clubs after a breakthrough season in which he has scored 24 goals and fired Frankfurt into the last eight of the Europa League.

Ahead of Frankfurt's quarter-final first leg with Benfica on Thursday, Jovic's father said that, while Spanish giants Barcelona have made an approach, his son is more likely to stay at Frankfurt next season.

"Luka has had requests, including one from Barcelona, but is not interested," Milan Jovic told *Bild* yesterday.

"He doesn't know if he can play football there - he wants to get to the Champions League with Eintracht and stay there."

"He came to me a few days ago and said 'Dad, it's not about the money, I want to play football!'"

"He is very close friends with the other young players in the team."

Frankfurt are currently on course for a top four finish in the Bundesliga, which would see them qualify for the Champions League next season.



Jovic himself has said that he would be open to staying at Frankfurt if the team make it into Europe's top competition.

"I would like to play here next season. If we get to the Champions League, they will find it hard to get rid of me," he told *Bild* earlier this season.

Though Jovic is technically on loan from Benfica, Frankfurt confirmed in March that they have the option to buy him this summer for "less than seven million euros" (\$7.9m).

With clubs such as Barcelona reportedly prepared to pay much more, Frankfurt hope either to hold on to their star striker or sell him on at a substantial profit.

Yet Jovic's father told *Bild* that his son has always been grounded and turned down offers from Borussia Dortmund, Schalke and Arsenal as a boy.

COMMENT

## PSG should listen to me more, says Alves

Reuters  
Paris

Paris St Germain's experienced Brazil international defender **Dani Alves** said yesterday that the club should follow his recommendations to improve in the Champions League.

With three Champions League crowns, three Club World Cup titles and two UEFA Cup triumphs among his trophy haul the full back is the world's most decorated active player, but he feels his voice is not being heard at runaway Ligue 1 leaders PSG.

PSG have been knocked out of the Champions League in the last 16 for three years in a row, going out on away goals against Manchester United this season after winning the first leg 2-0 at Old Trafford.

"I know how to win," the 35-year-old, who joined PSG in

2017 from Juventus and has been negotiating a contract extension for next season, told RMC Sport.

"When I want to say something I would like to be followed. Not because I'm better than any other but because I've been there."

"When someone has been there maybe it's good to listen to them, to rely on their experience. Maybe it will work, maybe it won't. I would like that when I say something, one would listen more."

Alves, who spent six years at Sevilla and eight at Barcelona before moving to Italy in 2016, felt PSG should have been less complacent and more aware that history was against them.

"When you are up against a historical opponent in football, boxing, tennis, history will always be against you," he said.

PSG are on the brink of an eighth Ligue 1 title, which they can clinch on Sunday by avoiding defeat at second-placed Lille.



SPOTLIGHT

## England games showed Klopp I can play further forward: Henderson

Reuters  
Bengaluru

Liverpool captain Jordan Henderson says performing well in an advanced midfield position for England helped convince manager Jurgen Klopp he could play a more attacking role for his club.

Klopp has used Henderson mainly as a defensive midfielder since taking charge of Liverpool, asking the 28-year-old to curb his attacking instincts and shield the back four.

"I can do both positions and (Klopp) sees I can do both, it's basically what he wants and needs," Henderson told reporters. "I felt more comfortable... in (an advanced) position for England, creating chances and doing what I enjoy doing."

"I feel as though I can do more in a position further forward. Me and the gaffer had a conversation. Obviously he saw the England games... and it was something he said he'd think about."

Klopp deployed Henderson on the right of his midfield trio in Liverpool's last two games and the captain rewarded the manager with decisive contributions in each match.

He came off the bench and scored the final goal in Liverpool's 3-1 win over Southampton in the Premier League on Friday and helped create the second in their 2-0 Champions League quarter-final first leg win over Porto on Tuesday.

The addition of defensive midfielder Fabinho at the start of the season helped make the decision to move Henderson further forward easier.

"In the last couple of years there hasn't really been a player like Fabinho in that role, so I've had to adapt," Henderson said. "I just thought that might give me a bit more licence to get forward more."

Liverpool, who lead the Premier League table by two points having played one game more than second-placed Manchester City, host third-placed Chelsea on Sunday.



Liverpool's Jordan Henderson (left) in action with FC Porto's Yacine Brahimi during their UEFA Champions League first leg quarter-final match in Liverpool, England, on Tuesday. (Reuters)

## SPOTLIGHT

## Pollard not giving up on Windies WC hopes


Reuters  
Mumbai

**K**ieron Pollard last turned out for West Indies in a one-day international in 2016 but the burly all-rounder has not given up hope of making the squad for this year's World Cup.

Contractual disputes between the players and Cricket West Indies have weakened the team for several years now with the frosty relations famously culminating in the 2014 tour of India being called off midway through the series.

There have been signs of a thaw recently, however, with a new leadership team in place at the board and former captain Chris Gayle returning to the ODI side for the recent series against England in a big boost ahead of the World Cup.

Pollard, like Gayle famed for his six-hitting prowess, returned to the West Indies fold after a year out to join the Twenty20 team for the three-match series in India last year.

"I am a cricketer, I am 31 years of age and I have lot of cricket left in me," Pollard told reporters after smashing 83 off 31 balls against Kings XI Punjab to lead the Mumbai Indians to a thrilling last-ball win on Wednesday.

"Every day I get the opportunity to play, I want to do my best. There has been a lot of turmoil in West Indies cricket over the last couple of years. But we have seen in the last couple of weeks there's a change.

"Pollard was one of the guys blacklisted. The most I can do every time I step on the cricket field is try to put runs on the board. There's people there who have the job to select and what-ever and we'll see how that goes.

"As I said, I'm 31, Chris Gayle is still playing, he's 39, and he's still whacking it all around."

Leading Mumbai in the absence of injured regular captain Rohit Sharma, Pollard helped his side to an unlikely win chasing Punjab's 197-4, which was built on an unbeaten 100 from KL Rahul and a typically punishing 63 from Gayle.

Pollard belted 10 sixes and

three fours in his knock for Mumbai's fourth win in six matches this season, after they needed 104 off the last eight overs.

West Indies have proved in this year's IPL that they have no shortage of short-form match-winners at their disposal in the likes of Pollard, Gayle, Sunil Narine and Andre Russell.

The twice world champions could therefore be a tough prospect for any opponent at the May 30-July 14 World Cup in England and Wales.

"We know what we can do and I think Chris batted superbly," Pollard said. "A fellow West Indian is (Andre) Russell... he's smacking the ball and it's great to see the way he's hitting the ball and (Sunil) Narine.

"These guys are having a good tournament and again it's just about enjoying cricket, when your mind is free, you just go out and enjoy cricket.

"You don't think about much because there are a lot of opinions, there are a lot of things, but it's people as close to you and what they think matters."



## IPL

## Super Kings beat Rajasthan Royals in last-ball thriller

'It was a little tough going. I'm happy I'm coming into the groove'



Chennai Super Kings' Ravindra Jadeja hugs his teammate Mitchell Santner (left) after winning their IPL match against Rajasthan Royals in Jaipur yesterday. (AFP)

IANS  
Jaipur

**D**espite some umpiring flaws, Chennai Super Kings held their nerves to clinch a nail-biting thriller against Rajasthan Royals as Mitchell Santner's last ball six sealed another win for the defending champions yesterday.

With Chennai reeling at 24/4, it was Mahendra Singh Dhoni and Ambati Rayudu who anchored their team's innings and took their side on the verge of victory before falling as Santner played a Dhoni to take the game away for the yellow brigade.

Chasing a modest 151-run target, Chennai were off to a worst possible start as they lost openers - Shane Watson (0) and Faf du Plessis (7) - and Suresh Raina (4) with just 15 runs on board.

Rajasthan's medium pacer Jofra Archer turned things ugly for the visitors as he packed back Kedhar Jadhav on just a run as Chennai looked helpless at 24/4 before Dhoni and Ambati Rayudu stepped in and denied any further onslaughts to the home side.

The duo not only completed their fifties but also took Chennai to another victory before Stokes dismissed the duo with 18 needed in the last over.

Even after some umpiring flaws, which saw a fuming Dhoni coming in the middle and explaining his views to the umpires, it was Santner who smashed a last ball six to seal the match for the yellow brigade.

Earlier, Chennai Super Kings rode on some disciplined bowling effort to restrict Rajasthan Royals to a modest 151/7.

Despite having some star batsmen in their line-up, Chennai bowlers jolted Rajasthan at regular intervals.

It was Shreyas Gopal's quick-fire seven-ball 19\* down the order that helped the hosts cross the 150-run mark. For Chennai, Deepak Chahar, Shardul Thakur

and Ravindra Jadeja picked up two wickets each while Mitchell Santner bagged one. Put into bat by the most successful IPL franchise, the home side lost skipper Ajinkya Rahane (14 off 11) in the third over.

His partner Jos Buttler (23 off 10) also departed in the next over with just 45 runs on the board. While Chahar was dismissed by Rahane, Buttler's stay was cut short by Thakur.

Sanju Samson (6) also couldn't show much fight, becoming a victim of Santner in the sixth over, as the Rajasthan middle-order collapsed with Steven Smith (15 off 22) and Rahul Tripathi (10 off 12) also fall-

ing in quick succession with just 78 runs on the board. Ben Stokes (28 off 26), Riyan Parag (16 off 14), Jofra Archer (13\* off 12) and Gopal then chipped in with valuable contributions to help Rajasthan post a somewhat respectable total.

"It was a little tough going. I'm happy I'm coming into the groove," Ambati Rayudu said.

## BRIEF SCORES

**Chennai Super Kings** 155/6 (MS Dhoni 58, Ambati Rayudu 57; Ben Stokes 2/39) beat **Rajasthan Royals** 151/7 (Ben Stokes 28, Shreyas Gopal 19 not out; Ravindra Jadeja 2/20, Deepak Chahar 2/33) by 4 wickets.

## FOCUS

## Nabi backs Afghan spinners to shine at World Cup

AFP  
New Delhi

**M**ohamed Nabi said Afghanistan's spinners would be a handful at the cricket World Cup after their experiences playing in England and in the cauldron of the Indian Premier League.

The 34-year-old batting all-rounder will form a potent spin attack with Rashid Khan and Mujeeb Ur Rahman at the World Cup, with all three currently contesting the high-pressure IPL. Nabi and Khan also played for Leicestershire Foxes and Sussex Sharks respectively in England's T20 Blast last year, while Rahman has been signed by Middlesex for the coming season.

"Ours is a good combination because Rashid and Mujeeb are wicket-taking bowlers and I am more defensive, bowling a lot of dot balls," Nabi, who plays for Sunrisers Hyderabad, told AFP in an interview.

"It was a great experience for us and was of big help," he said of last year's T20 Blast. "Rashid and I bowled really well and he also batted well.

"We will quickly get adjusted to the conditions there hopefully," added Nabi, who will represent Kent in this year's 20-over contest.

While most of the Afghan team are at a training camp in South Africa, the spinners are all warming up for the 50-over World Cup in the IPL. Both Nabi and Khan have starred in Hyderabad's campaign, and 18-year-old Rahman is playing for Kings XI Punjab.

But Nabi said the IPL, with its big crowds and tight games, was great preparation for the World Cup despite the differ-

ences between T20 and 50-over cricket. "The IPL helps a lot," Nabi said. "If you play these kind of pressure games before the World Cup it will help a lot in the tournament against top opposition teams."

"It is a white-ball format after all. Yes it is a change of format but you can adjust easily to the 50-over game," he added.

## BEATING THE ODDS

Nabi's seven wickets from less than 16 overs, conceding a parsimonious 87 runs, has made him one of the top 10 bowlers in this year's IPL. He will now hope to take that form into the World Cup, where Afghanistan face a daunting opener against defending champions Australia on June 1.

The strong middle-order batsman has been at the centre of Afghanistan's fairytale rise, captaining the side at their first World Cup in 2015.

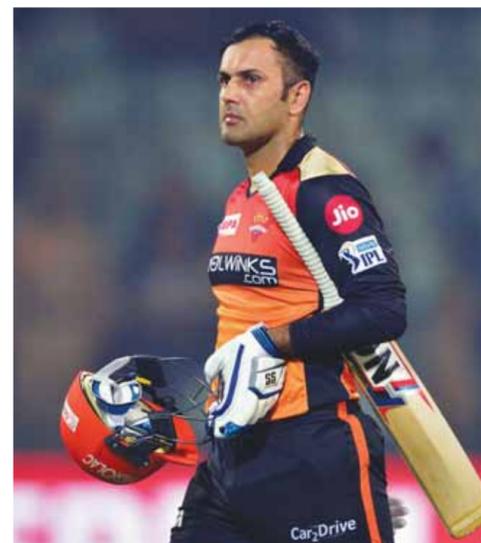
But while many Afghanistan players learned the game in refugee camps in Pakistan, Nabi hails from a wealthy Afghan family that lived in Pakistan during the Soviet invasion. Since beating the odds to compete at the 2010 World T20 in England, Afghanistan have qualified for all major international tournaments and won their first Test against Ireland last month.

"It was a historic occasion," Nabi said of the victory.

Now expectations are building for their second World Cup, where Afghanistan's cricketers will hope to bring further joy to their war-torn nation.

"We will try our best at the World Cup and challenge every team that we play against," Nabi said.

"Inshallah (God-willing) in future we will challenge everybody in Test cricket."



Sunrisers Hyderabad's Mohammad Nabi. (AFP)

NBA

# Pistons nail down final playoff spot by defeating Knicks

Oklahoma City Thunder earn No. 6 seed in West with win over Milwaukee Bucks



Detroit Pistons guard Langston Galloway drives to the basket past New York Knicks guard John Jenkins (left) during the first-half at Madison Square Garden. **PICTURE:** USA TODAY Sports

Reuters  
New York

The Detroit Pistons wrapped up the NBA's final playoff berth Wednesday night as the regular season concluded.

The reward for the Pistons (41-41)? A first-round Eastern Conference playoff date with the league's best team, the Milwaukee Bucks.

Detroit qualified for the playoffs thanks to a 115-89 road win over the New York Knicks. The Pistons held off a challenge from the Charlotte Hornets, who finished 39-43 after losing 122-114 to the visiting Orlando Magic on Wednesday.

The Magic (42-40) wound up in seventh place in the East, and they will oppose the Toronto Raptors (58-24) in the first round of the playoffs. Orlando has the best current form of any team in the East, winning eight of its last 10 regular-season games.

The other Eastern Conference playoff matchups will see the third-seeded Philadelphia 76ers (51-31) oppose the sixth-seeded Brooklyn Nets (42-40), and the fourth-seeded Boston Celtics (49-33) meet the fifth-seeded Indiana Pacers (48-

34). The two-time defending NBA champion Golden State Warriors (57-25) hold the top seed for the Western Conference playoffs, and they will face the Los Angeles Clippers (48-34), who ended their regular season with a 143-137 overtime win over the Utah Jazz.

The San Antonio Spurs also finished 48-34 after their 105-94 win over the visiting Dallas Mavericks on Wednesday. The Spurs, however, won two of three against the Clippers this season to get the tiebreaker.

San Antonio will begin the postseason against the West's second seed, the Denver Nuggets (54-28).

The Portland Trail Blazers will have the home-court advantage in their first-round series against the Oklahoma City Thunder. Portland locked down the third seed with its 136-131 win over the Sacramento Kings.

The Blazers and Houston Rockets each finished 53-29, but Portland got the edge because of its head-to-head tiebreaker over the Rockets.

The Thunder's 127-116 win over the Bucks on Wednesday put Oklahoma City (49-33) alone in sixth place.

The other Western Conference series

RESULTS

Indiana	135-134	Atlanta
Brooklyn	113-94	Miami
Orlando	122-114	Charlotte
Detroit	115-89	New York
Philadelphia	125-109	Chicago
Memphis	132-117	Golden State
Oklahoma	127-116	Milwaukee
San Antonio	105-94	Dallas
Denver	99-95	Minnesota
Clippers	143-137	Utah
Portland	136-131	Sacramento

will have the fourth-seeded Rockets facing the fifth-seeded Utah Jazz (50-32).

Meanwhile Dennis Schroder scored 32 points to help the Oklahoma City Thunder earn the No. 6 seed in the Western Conference with a 127-116 win at the Milwaukee Bucks on Wednesday night.

The Bucks, who had already sealed the top seed in the Eastern Conference coming into the game, sat three starters - Giannis Antetokounmpo, Eric Bledsoe and Brook Lopez - to rest them for the playoffs. Milwaukee (60-22) will start the

playoffs against the eighth-seeded Detroit Pistons (41-41). The Thunder (49-33) will open the playoffs against the third-seeded Portland Trail Blazers (53-29).

While the Bucks had little to play for in the regular-season finale, the Thunder had plenty at stake coming into the game, with their playoff spot to be decided between the sixth, seventh and eighth seeds.

The Thunder took care of that, taking control of the game with 39 points in the second quarter and then maintaining that lead the rest of the way. That quarter included a 16-0 run that featured four 3-pointers.

Playing without Paul George, who hit a game-winning shot the night before against Houston, the Thunder leaned heavily on the 3-pointer with Schroder in the starting lineup in George's place and the Bucks spending much of the game in a zone defense.

Oklahoma City hit a franchise-high 23 3-pointers. Schroder hit a career-high eight 3-pointers, going 8 of 15 from long distance. While the Thunder did create much of their offense on the perimeter, they also relied heavily on ball movement. They set a franchise record with 40 assists.

MLB

# Angels sweep Brewers to win sixth consecutive

Reuters  
Anaheim, California

Mike Trout got the day off to recover from a strained right groin, and the Los Angeles Angels made the most of their five hits in a 4-2 win over the Milwaukee Brewers on Wednesday night at Anaheim, Calif., completing a three-game sweep.

It also was the Angels' sixth win in a row, putting them above .500 (7-6) for the first time this season.

Three of the Angels' five hits came in the third inning, when they scored all four of their runs. The big hit was Justin Bour's two-run single that snapped a 1-1 tie.

Brian Goodwin started in centre field in place of Trout, who is day-to-day, and made a Trout-like catch, robbing Yasmani Grandal of a potential home run in the second inning.

Angels starter Felix Pena gave up only an unearned run on three hits and two walks, but lasted only four innings and didn't qualify for the win after throwing 72 pitches. The victory went to Jaime Barria, called up from Triple-A Salt Lake earlier in the day. Barria (1-0) gave up one run over 2 2/3 innings and Hansel Robles pitched the ninth for his first save.

Brewers starter Brandon Woodruff (1-1) gave up four runs on four hits and one walk

in six innings. He struck out seven.

The Brewers took a 1-0 lead against Pena on Christian Yelich's RBI single in the third inning. The Brewers benefited earlier in the inning from an error by third baseman Taylor Ward, called up earlier in the day from Triple-A Salt Lake. The run against Pena was unearned.

The Angels, though, got the run back and then some in the bottom of the third against Woodruff.

RESULTS

Angels	4-2	Brewers
Mariners	6-5	Royals
Astros	8-6	Yankees
Cardinals	7-2	Dodgers
Pirates	5-2	Cubs
Nationals	15-1	Phillies
Mets	9-6	Twins
A's	10-3	Orioles
Reds	2-1	Marlins
Padres	3-1	Giants
Rays	9-1	White Sox
Tigers	4-1	Indians
Rangers	5-2	D'backs

Keven Smith was hit by a pitch to lead off the inning, David Fletcher walked and Kole Calhoun singled to load the bases with no out. Andrelton Simmons drove home the Angels' first run with a single, and Bour followed with a two-run single.

The fourth run of the inning scored when Albert Pujols grounded into a double play.

Yelich drove in the Brewers' second run in the game with an RBI single in the seventh.



Los Angeles Angels relief pitcher Hansel Robles (right) celebrates with catcher Jonathan Lucroy after defeating the Milwaukee Brewers at the Angel Stadium. **PICTURE:** USA TODAY Sports

NHL

# Jackets roar back to stun Lightning in Game 1

Reuters  
New York

Seth Jones' power-play goal late in the third period capped a thrilling rally, as the Columbus Blue Jackets erased a three-goal deficit and stunned the host Tampa Bay Lightning 4-3 on Wednesday in the opening round of the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Jones scored his second career playoff goal when he rang a shot off the crossbar with 5:55 to play. He took a slick pass from Artemi Panarin and roofed the power-play goal to complete a spree of four unanswered goals, three of which came in the third period.

Josh Anderson had a goal and an assist, and Nick Foligno and David Savard also tallied for the Blue Jackets, who lost all three regular-season meetings with the Lightning by a combined score of 17-3.

In a matchup of the two top goaltenders in games won this season, Columbus' Sergei Bobrovsky made 26 saves while Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 22 shots for Tampa Bay. The Lightning, who won the Presidents' Trophy and tied an NHL single-season record with 62 wins, led 3-0 after one period on goals by Alex Killorn, Anthony Cirelli and Yannick Gourde. The Lightning blitzed the Metropolitan Division club in the opening 20 minutes.

Tempers flared early when Tampa Bay's Dan Girardi blindsided Brandon Dubinsky

RESULTS

Columbus	4-3	Tampa Bay
Islanders	4-3	Pittsburgh
St. Louis	2-1	Winnipeg
Dallas	3-2	Nashville
San Jose	5-2	Las Vegas

at 2:55 of the first period. The two fought in the neutral zone, and Columbus' Scott Harrington grappled with Cedric Paquette, who ended up pinned to the ice by Harrington.

However, Tampa Bay struck first when Jones bobbled the puck at the blue line on the power play, and Killorn stole it, raced in on a breakaway and beat Bobrovsky for a short-handed goal at 4:12. Bobrovsky's weak pass around the boards from behind his goal allowed Erik Cernak to get off a long blast, and Cirelli, who scored 19 goals in his rookie season, flipped in the rebound at 11:01. Gourde tipped in a shot from the slot by Mikhail Sergachev at 17:50 for the three-goal advantage.

Foligno started the rally, beating Vasilevskiy on the blocker side off a breakaway for his seventh playoff marker at 9:15 of the second period to trim the deficit to 3-1. Savard's wrist on a quick rush at 7:56 of the third period cut it to 3-2.

Dubinsky's double-minor for high-sticking Paquette at 9:23 had the Blue Jackets playing defensively on the penalty kill, but Anderson tied it with a short-handed goal at

11:54, setting the stage for Jones' winner.

SHARKS STORM PAST KNIGHTS

Brent Burns, Evander Kane, Tomas Hertl and Marc-Edouard Vlasic each had goal and an assist, and Martin Jones finished with 24 saves to lead the host San Jose Sharks to a 5-2 victory over the Vegas Golden Knights in Game 1 of a first-round Western Conference playoff series on Wednesday night.

Joe Pavelski also scored a goal, and Erik Karlsson added two assists for the Sharks.

Mark Stone scored both goals for Vegas, his first career two-goal playoff game. Max Pacioretty finished with two assists while Marc-Andre Fleury made 28 saves. Game 2 of the best-of-seven set is Friday night in San Jose.

San Jose, which was blown out 7-0 in Game 1 of its six-game, second-round playoff loss to the Golden Knights last season, took a 1-0 lead in the first period on a power-play goal by Pavelski. Burns fired a wrist shot from the right point that caromed in off the face of Pavelski stationed in front of the net and over Fleury's right shoulder. A dazed Pavelski didn't celebrate after the score, skating straight to the locker room. He returned in the second period wearing a full face shield. The Sharks scored twice in the span of 45 seconds early in the second period to increase their lead to 3-0. Burns got the first, beating Fleury with a wrist shot from the left circle that banged in off the post on the goalie's glove side.



Seth Jones of the Columbus Blue Jackets celebrates his goal during the third period against the Tampa Bay Lightning in Game One of the Eastern Conference First Round during the 2019 NHL Stanley Cup Playoffs at Amalie Arena on April 10, 2019 in Tampa, Florida. **(Getty Images/AFP)**

## FOCUS

# Japan names new Olympics minister after gaffes

'I hope Mr Suzuki... will recover trust (among the public) and lead us towards a successful Olympic and Paralympic Games'



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe speaks to journalists one day after Japan's Olympic Minister Yoshitaka Sakurada resigned, at his official residence, in Tokyo yesterday. (AFP)



Newly appointed Japanese Minister in-charge of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games Shunichi Suzuki. (AFP)

AFP  
Tokyo

Japan yesterday appointed a new Olympics minister to replace a gaffe-prone politician forced to step down after the latest in a string of embarrassing mis-steps.

With less than 500 days to go until the opening ceremony, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told reporters he had re-appointed the "experienced" Shunichi Suzuki, who had already served as Olympics minister between 2017-2018. "I hope Mr Suzuki... will recover trust (among the public) and lead us towards a successful Olympic and Paralympic Games," Abe told reporters.

Suzuki's appointment came after his predecessor Yoshitaka Sakurada quit late Wednesday after comments seen as disrespectful to survivors of the 2011 tsunami. He reportedly told a political gathering that securing the re-election of a local lawmaker was more important than recovery in the area hit by the quake-triggered tsunami and nuclear meltdown that claimed more than 18,000 lives.

More than 50,000 people have not returned to their home towns following the disaster, and Japan has dubbed the 2020 Games the "Reconstruction Olympics" in a

## Russia moves to impose fines on drug cheats

Russia's parliament yesterday approved draft legislation that would impose fines of up to 50,000 roubles (\$775) on athletes found to have used banned performance-enhancing drugs. Russia has been rocked by several sporting bans in recent years after international investigations found evidence of widespread, state-sponsored doping in athletics and a string of other sports.

The amendments, which envisage fines of between 30,000 and 50,000 roubles for drug cheats, must still be approved by the upper chamber of parliament and signed by President Vladimir Putin before they become law. Russian legislation already con-

siders it a crime for coaches and medical staff to coerce athletes into doping, but there have so far not been any convictions under that law.

There is currently no law in Russia that punishes athletes themselves for doping. The Russian anti-doping agency RUSADA and Russia's athletics federation were suspended after a 2015 report commissioned by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) found evidence of state-sponsored doping in Russian athletics.

Russian authorities have denied state-sponsored doping but have accepted that senior officials were involved in providing banned substances to athletes,

interfering with anti-doping procedures or covering up positive tests.

RUSADA was reinstated last year by WADA, angering sports bodies and athletes around the world. Russia's athletics federation remains suspended by the International Association of Athletics Federations, the sport's global governing body.

Despite the federation's suspension, some Russian athletes - including twice world champion high jumper Maria Lasitskne and 2015 world champion hurdler Sergey Shubenkov - have been cleared to compete internationally after demonstrating they are training in a doping-free environment.

"When one person leads, she can boost the whole team. I am slightly worried that this type of excitement could wane," he said.

After a backlash, he sought to clarify his stance and admitted his comments had "lacked consideration." Sakurada's resignation also came only a month after the head of Japan's Olympic Committee, Tsunekazu Takeda announced he would step down from his position in June. Takeda is the subject of French investigations involving payments made before Tokyo was awarded the 2020 Summer Games.

He also stepped down from the International Olympic Committee, after French authorities said they believed they had evidence of corruption in the awarding of the 2020 Games. Takeda has denied any wrongdoing and said his decision to quit was related to a desire to pass the role on to a younger generation.

Japanese politicians are no strangers to foot-in-mouth gaffes. In 2013, now finance minister Taro Aso said Japan's elderly should be allowed to "hurry up and die" instead of being kept alive and costing the government money for end-of-life medical care. And in 2017, he was forced to retract comments in which he cited Adolf Hitler in a bizarre reference about leaving a legacy in politics.

ter he admitted he "does not use computers."

In February, he was forced to apologise after suggesting that the leukaemia diagnosis of star Japanese swimmer Rikako Ikee could dampen enthusiasm for the Games. The shock announcement of 18-year-old Ikee's diagnosis had prompted an outpouring of support in Japan, but Sakurada came under fire after responding to the news by saying: "She is a potential gold medalist... I'm really disappointed."

of helping to re-strengthen those areas," added organisers. Suzuki said Sakurada's comments were "inappropriate" and vowed to push forward with the reconstruction of disaster-hit areas.

## 'DOES NOT USE COMPUTERS'

Sakurada's comments were the latest in a series of controversial statements that raised questions about his suitability to steer the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. He also held the cybersecurity portfolio and became a laughing stock af-

ter he admitted he "does not use computers."

ter he admitted he "does not use computers."

## RUGBY

## Sonny Bill to have knee surgery, WC questions loom

Reuters  
Wellington

All Blacks centre **Sonny Bill Williams** is to have knee surgery that could keep him out of action for six weeks and raise question marks over his chances of making a third successive Rugby World Cup.

The 33-year-old, a member of the World Cup winning squads in 2011 and 2015, suffered the injury while playing for the Auckland Blues against the Stormers on March 30 and has been scheduled for arthroscopic surgery on Friday.

"It's a big blow," Blues coach Leon MacDonald told reporters yesterday. "I feel sorry for him and it's unfortunate for him. He obviously landed on it awkwardly and did some damage there."

Williams could be in a position to return towards the end of the Super Rugby season for the resurgent Blues, who are seeking a fifth successive win when they face the Waikato Chiefs in Hamilton tomorrow.

Whether All Blacks coach Steve Hansen will risk taking him to the global showpiece in Japan



later this year is another matter.

Williams tore his Achilles tendon while playing rugby sevens at the 2016 Rio Olympics and has since suffered foot, shoulder, knee, hand and wrist injuries that have restricted his appearances for both the Blues and the All Blacks.

He played just five tests last year and is in a tight tussle for the World Cup squad with Jack Goodhue, Ryan Crotty, Anton Lienert-Brown and Ngani Lau-mape also candidates for what are likely to be just four midfield positions.

MacDonald, however, said the former rugby league inter-

national was keen to make the World Cup squad and would be more than capable of getting back into shape in time for Hansen to select him for the Sept 20 - Nov 2 tournament.

"Whatever he decides to do and puts his mind to, he sort of makes happen," added MacDonald. "If he still wants to keep playing later on he's the sort of guy you would never write off."

"He's a pretty determined guy and this year he really wants to make the World Cup squad and be a part of that."

"So he's pretty driven to make sure he recovers well from this and gets back on the field."

## Rugby Australia intends to sack Folau

Rugby Australia said yesterday it would terminate the contract of Israel Folau, the country's best-known and best-paid player, if he cannot offer a good reason for a social media post that said gay people would go to "hell" if they did not "repent". The 30-year-old fullback, a fundamentalist Christian, posted similar comments last year but escaped sanction and signed a new deal with RA through 2022 in February.

That multi-million dollar contract looks certain to be torn up unless Folau can convince RA and the New South Wales Waratahs that there are "compelling mitigating factors" for sharing the post. A statement from RA Chief Executive Raelene Castle and her Waratahs equivalent Andrew Hore said they had made repeated attempts to contact Folau since he posted the comments on Wednesday.

"Whilst Israel is entitled to his religious beliefs, the way in which he has expressed these beliefs is inconsistent with the values of the sport," the statement added. "Israel has failed to

understand that the expectation of him as a Rugby Australia and NSW Waratahs employee is that he cannot share material on social media that condemns, vilifies or discriminates against people on the basis of their sexuality. "As a code we have made it clear to Israel formally and repeatedly that any social media posts or commentary that is in any way disrespectful to people because of their sexuality will result in disciplinary action. "In the absence of compelling mitigating factors, it is our intention to terminate his contract."

The unprecedented move will throw into disarray Australia coach Michael Cheika's plans for the Rugby World Cup in Japan later this year. Folau has been all but ever-present in the Wallabies number 15 shirt since switching to rugby union from Australian Rules in 2013 and scoring two tries on his test debut against the British and Irish Lions. He has scored 35 more tries in 72 Tests since and helped Australia to the final of the 2015 World Cup in England.

## CYCLING

## Schachmann retains Basque lead with stage four victory



AFP  
Madrid

Germany's **Maximilian Schachmann** consolidated his overall lead in the Tour of the Basque Country yesterday by claiming his third stage victory in four days.

The Bora-Hansgrohe rider broke away three kilometres from the finish with a group of four before edging out Tadej Pogacar (UAE-Emirates), Jakob Fuglsang (Astana) and Adam Yates (Mitchelton-Scott) in the sprint.

After falling in a nasty crash on Wednesday, Frenchman Julian Alaphilippe (Deceuninck-Quick Step) and the Spaniard Jonathan Castroviejo (Sky) were both unable to start.

Schachmann's win means the 25-year-old extends his advantage in the overall standings to 51 seconds, with Patrick Konrad second and Ion Izagirre in third.

"I knew it was possible to win again but to do it is really special," Schachmann said. "It was very difficult during the climb and I had to dig really deep."

"In the downhill, it was Pogacar I think, he went so fast and I was at my limit. On two corners I really felt the tyres slipping but I handled it and in the end I was in the perfect position to launch a good sprint."

The event continues on Friday with the fifth stage, a 149.8km route between Arrigorriaga to Arrate.

## OVERALL STANDINGS

1. Maximilian Schachmann (GER/Bora) 12hrs 38min 16sec, 2. Patrick Konrad (AUT/BOR) at 51sec, 3. Ion Izagirre (ESP/AST) 52, 4. Daniel Martinez (COL/EF) 1:07, 5. Daniel Martin (IRL/UAE) 1:08, 6. Emanuel Buchmann (GER/BOR) 1:10, 7. Jakob Fuglsang (DEN/AST) 1:24, 8. Dylan Teuns (BEL/BAH) 1:30, 9. Mikel Landa (ESP/MOV) 1:35, 10. Sergio Henao (COL/UAE) 1:41.

## TOUR OF THE ALPS

## Froome to race for Team Sky

Reuters  
London

Chris Froome will lead Team Sky at the Tour of the Alps this month as he steps up preparations for the Tour de France, organisers said yesterday.

The four-times Tour de France winner has not raced since last month's Tour of Catalunya, where he finished 94th after crashing in the second stage.

The Tour of the Alps will be Team Sky's last stage race with their current sponsor, with the powerhouse cycling team to be taken over by chemicals multinational INEOS, owned by Britain's richest man Jim Ratcliffe, from May 1.

Froome will be joined by 2014 Tour de France champion and Bahrain-Merida rider Vincenzo Nibali for the five-day Tour of the Alps, which will be held from April 22-26.

"Nibali and Froome are the Tour of the Alps' top favourites as both achieved plenty of his-

torical Grand Tour wins," the race's general manager Maurizio Evangelista said.

The Tour de France begins in Brussels on July 6. (Reporting by Rohith Nair in Bengaluru; Editing by Simon Jennings)

Meanwhile six-time Olympic cycling champion Chris Hoy will race in a world rallycross event in Barcelona later this month, organisers announced yesterday.

The 43-year-old Scot will drive a Ford Fiesta in the Rallycross of Catalunya, the second race of the season, which starts on April 27.

"Driving a rallycross car has always been in my list, but competing against the best in the world will really be something special, and a great challenge," Hoy said in a statement.

"I will be testing next week... And I will learn as much as I can before my World RX debut in Spain."

Hoy, who won three Olympic gold medals in 2008, retired from competitive cycling six years ago.

## Chen tops short programme at World Team skate event

America's two-time reigning world champion Nathan Chen seized the lead after the men's short programme at the ISU World Team Trophy event in Japan yesterday. The 19-year-old Chen, who defended his crown in March with a world record free skate and total points score, scored 101.95 points. Chen was part of the bronze-medal US squad at last year's Pyeongchang Winter Olympics and the 2017 World Team Trophy.

Vincent Zhou of the US came second, earning 100.51 points followed by Shoma Uno, who took silver behind his illustrious countryman Yuzuru Hanyu at Pyeongchang last year, with 92.78 points.

Japan's medal hopeful Rika Kihira, 16, swept into the lead in the women's short programme, setting a new world record of 83.97 points. Kihira, who executed her opening triple axel, beat her own world record by more than one point.

"I did it! I'm glad," Kihira told reporters after the performance, according to *Nikkan Sports* daily. Russia's Elizaveta Tuktamysheva scored 80.54 points while Japan's Kaori Sakamoto earned 76.95 points. Teams from the USA, Canada, Japan, France, Italy and Russia are competing between April 11 and 14 in southern Fukuoka prefecture.

SPOTLIGHT

# 'The Bollettieri Experience' opens at St. Regis



Legendary tennis coach Nick Bollettieri (C) with Alfardan Group Vice President Ali Alfardan (L) and St. Regis Doha Hotel Manager Hichem BenAmor.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**S**taying true to its mission of being a trendsetter in the hospitality industry in Qatar, the finest address in Qatar, The St. Regis Doha has opened one of the most prestigious Tennis Centres in Doha "The Bollettieri Experience", in collaboration with tennis legend Nick Bollettieri.

The Bollettieri Experience Tennis Center aspires to become Doha's finest Tennis Center and the leading sporting centre for tennis programmes that specialises in developing local talents and boosting the image of Qatar's proficiency in tennis. The centre's unparalleled facilities and tennis programmes are designed to maximise the players' growth and efficiency under the supervision of world-class tennis coaches from USA. Bollettieri's tennis programmes will focus on young children who are looking to start their journey, juniors competing at international level, along with recreational tennis players. It promises to provide a world-class coaching in an exciting learning environment with challenging competitions, and a great social atmosphere.

The centre is founded in collaboration with Nick Bollettieri, one of the most influential people in the world of tennis and a legend who has transformed and tran-



A tennis court at St. Regis Doha.

sceded the sport. *The Wall Street Journal* called him 'arguably the most prolific tennis coach in the history of the game'. His Hall of Fame career is undoubtedly the most successful and broadly influential in the history of tennis.

With an incredible learning environment under the patronage of Nick Bollettieri and the sprawling facilities of The St. Regis Doha, this tennis centre is sure to impress and carry Qatar's flag high in

the world of tennis. Hichem BenAmor, The Hotel Manager of The St. Regis Doha, said: "we are honoured to collaborate with Nick Bollettieri, one of the biggest names in the world of tennis, to open our Tennis Center."

"We are very proud to continue raising the bar with our new facilities and offerings not only in Qatar but across the region and we are focused on taking The St. Regis Doha to new heights of excellence."

REPRIEVE

## IAAF ethics board closes Coe probe



Reuters  
London

**T**he world athletics governing body (IAAF) has closed an ethics investigation into its president Sebastian Coe after finding there was no basis on which "any disciplinary case could be established" that he had "intentionally misled" a British Parliamentary Committee in 2015.

"The investigation has therefore not identified evidence of a potential breach of the code of ethics by Lord Coe," it said.

Coe has denied throughout that he misled the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) select committee when he appeared before it in December 2015, four months after being elected IAAF president.

"I want to thank the ethics board for all the work they do," said Coe in a statement.

"When I became President of the IAAF, I promised greater transparency and integrity. I hope this demonstrates that no-one is above the rules and everyone in the sport is subject to the same scrutiny."

Coe, previously an IAAF vice-president, was questioned about what he knew about doping in Russian athletics before he took office. In its final report 'Combating doping in sport' in 2018, the committee criticised Coe's answers as misleading.

"It stretches credibility to believe that he was not aware, at least in general terms, of the main allegations," the report added.

The IAAF's ethics board then opened an investigation in September into whether Coe's conduct had violated its own regulations.

Coe, a double Olympic 1,500 metres gold medallist, insisted that he did not know the specific detail of an email sent to him by former London Marathon race director David Bedford in 2014.

FORMULA 1

# Leclerc steers clear of Ferrari 'number 1' talk

'I THINK THINGS ARE GOING VERY QUICK IN FORMULA ONE'



Ferrari's German driver Sebastian Vettel (R) and Ferrari's Monegasque driver Charles Leclerc (L) walk in the paddock ahead of the Formula One Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai. At bottom, Alfa Romeo's Kimi Raikkonen during a press conference yesterday.

Reuters  
Shanghai

**C**harles Leclerc steered clear of suggestions that he had become a potential Ferrari 'number one' after a near flawless performance by the 21-year-old two weeks ago in Bahrain.

Facing the media ahead of Sunday's Chinese Grand Prix, the Monegasque batted away questions with the same unflappable poise he had demonstrated under the floodlights while leading at Sakhir.

"I think things are going very quick in Formula One," said the Ferrari driver, who started on pole and set the fastest lap in Bahrain before being slowed by power unit problems and finishing third for his first podium.

"After the first race nobody sees me as a title contender and then after the second race everyone sees me as a title contender."

"I need to keep the focus on what I am doing in the car and trying to work as hard as possible and try to do the best job inside and outside of the car and then I am pretty sure the results will come."



Driving in only his second race for Ferrari, Leclerc was on course for an easy first win until engine trouble some 10 laps from the

end allowed champion Lewis Hamilton and Valtteri Bottas to sweep through for a Mercedes one-two.

Leclerc's performance struck a sharp contrast to four-time world champion Vettel's, who was unable to match his team mate's pace and whose race unravelled in a spin and a lost front wing.

"As I said we are only at the second race," said a bemused-looking Leclerc, who made his F1 debut for Sauber (now Alfa Romeo) last year, when asked if he should be Ferrari's main contender.

"Anyway, this question is more to be asked to (team principal) Mattia (Binotto)."

"I'm not making the decision on that," he said, before jokingly adding an "unfortunately" as Binotto looked on.

Vettel put his lacklustre performance down to not being comfortable with the car, an issue he hopes was ironed out in a test session after the Bahrain race, adding he was unfazed by being beaten by Leclerc.

"I have always shown respect when other people do well and so he did in Bahrain," said the 31-year-old.

"I know that I can do better and I know that we have lots of races to... prove that."

FOCUS

# Hamilton focused on Ferrari but still wary of Red Bull

Reuters  
Shanghai

**F**errari's straight line speed is a major concern but Lewis Hamilton is also wary of Red Bull as the Formula One champion eyes a sixth Chinese Grand Prix win on Sunday.

Australian Daniel Ricciardo won for Red Bull in Shanghai last year, from sixth on the starting grid, and while that team has switched from Renault to Honda power they remain competitive.

Ricciardo has moved on to Renault, but Max Verstappen was third in the season-opener in Australia and fourth in Bahrain two weeks ago.

"You definitely can't count them out," Hamilton told reporters yesterday at a cold and overcast Shanghai circuit.

"They've had a bit of a slower start but I think if you look at last year for example, they won the race here and they particularly finished strong."

"I anticipate it could be something similar."

Hamilton has had more success around the 5.4 km track than any other driver and champions Mercedes have enjoyed one-two finishes against the odds in the first two races of the season.

While the 34-year-old

would usually arrive as favourite for the win, especially in the V6 turbo-hybrid era with Mercedes having won all but one race in China since 2014, all bets are off this year.

"It's only the third race," said the five-times world champion.

"Obviously we didn't expect the performance we had at the first race, we didn't expect to see what we saw at the second race. I don't really know at the moment."

Pre-season favourites Ferrari were surprisingly off the pace at Melbourne's Albert Park.

They were then fastest in Bahrain but it was Hamilton who inherited the victory after an engine problem some 10 laps from the finish denied Charles Leclerc an easy maiden win.

"I hope that we don't have to rely on reliability, and I hope we have a much closer race," said Hamilton.

"This is a great track to have a real race, so the closer it is the better."

Ferrari's greatest strength in Bahrain was straight line speed, with Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff estimating their advantage at 0.5 seconds down the straights alone.

That could give the red cars an edge, with the Shanghai circuit's main straight over a kilometre long.



Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton (R) takes a selfie with Ferrari's German driver Sebastian Vettel (centre L) in Shanghai yesterday.

## QATAR VOLLEYBALL CUP

## Bragging rights at stake as Police face champs Rayyan

By Yash Mudgal  
Doha

Police, who have lost only three games this season, faces yet another big test in the Qatar Volleyball Cup final when they take on defending champions Al Rayyan at the Qatar Volleyball Association (QVA) Indoor Hall today.

The newly-crowned Qatar Volleyball League champions are high on confidence despite second-placed Rayyan being bolstered by two top-class professional players – Marko Vukosinovic and Kamil Rychlicki – for the match, a repeat of the last year's final.

"We have played superb volleyball throughout the year and we as a team are a confident lot going into the final," Police coach Damian Arrendondo told *Gulf Times* on the eve of the final.

This is the fifth clash of the season between the two teams, with Al Rayyan and Police clinching two wins apiece.

Police have suffered only three losses this season and two of

them have been against Rayyan. First, they lost the Super Cup to Rayyan, before yet another loss in the Arab Club Championships in Tunis. Al Wakrah handed Police their third loss in the second match of the best-of-three semi-finals in the ongoing competition.

"Yes, they are an experienced club and have a much stronger side now with the inclusion of two professionals, but we have ammunition to overcome them," Arrendondo said.

Police have defeated Rayyan in their both the league encounters.

On the other hand, two-time champions Rayyan are aiming for their second domestic title of the season having won the season-opening Super Cup.

Under their Brazilian coach Carlos Schwanke, who guided them to unprecedented six titles last year, Rayyan have a good chance to retain the Cup. Rayyan first won the Cup in 2016 defeating El Jaish but failed to retain after losing to Al Arabi the next year.

"Yes, they have the feeling of being there and done that, but

after winning the league, my boys are also upbeat and raring to go," Police coach said. John Chigbo will lead the Police team, which has the firepower of Mikko Oivanen and Willner Riva.

Both the finalists held off their respective rivals, winning the third of the best-of-three semi-finals on Tuesday. Police overpowered a gritty Al Wakrah Club 27-29, 25-18, 41-39, 25-19 in two hours and two minutes, while Rayyan defeated three-time champions Al Arabi 25-20, 23-25, 25-21, 25-21 in 110 minutes.

Rayyan will be without their regular captain Mubarak Dahi Waleed.

"We will be playing without Waleed as he is injured, but we have a very good chance of retaining the Cup," Schwanke said.

QVA board member Mohamed Salem al-Kuwari has announced the winners will get QR300,000 in prize-money, while runners-up will pocket QR200,000.

Al Rayyan and Police players, coaches and QVA officials pose with the Qatar Volleyball Cup trophy. **PICTURE:** Jayaram



## HORSE RACING

## Al-Marri registers first feature win with Darkanna

Treble for Lukasek; trainers al-Ramzani, al-Malki saddle two winners



Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club Racing manager Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi with the winners of the Al Mamoura Cup after Darkanna won the seven furlong feature at Al Rayyan Park yesterday. **PICTURES:** Juhaim

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Qatari jockey Rashid Ali al-Marri continued his impressive season yesterday when the apprentice rider rode Mohamed Hussain Afroz-trained Darkanna to his first feature win at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Rayyan Park.

With yesterday's win in the Al Mamoura Cup, al-Marri has registered 13 wins this season, his highest season haul with five victories last time round his previous best.

In the seven-furlong race for Class 2 Thoroughbreds, al-Marri, who was in the saddle donning Al Thumama Racing colours, guided the Dark Angel filly to a thrilling victory, as they held off Al Moatsem al-Balushi-ridden Anima Rock by half a length at the post.

Alban de Mieuille saddled two winners yesterday, including a maiden winner in Al Shaqab Racing's Meblish.

Later, in the penultimate race of the day, a conditions race for Arabians, the French trainer saddled Umm Qarn's Dabaab to her fourth victory this season, locking the top two spots in the miler. Mathieu Pelletan helmed the filly to a comfortable two length victory as another De Mieuille charge, Al Shaqab Racing's Al Naama finished runner-up under Faleh Bughanaim.

Qatari trainers Hadi Nasser al-Ramzani and Ibrahim al-Malki saddled two winners each yesterday.

While Tomas Lukasek rode both the Thoroughbred Handicap winners for al-Ramzani, he also helmed his third winner of the day with al-Malki.

The Class 4 run saw Supre-



Rashid Ali al-Marri rides Darkanna to victory yesterday.

matism holding off a threatening challenge by two al-Malki wards – Severini and Al Gazi. In a blanket finish, Anas al-Seyabi-ridden Anima Rock by half a length at the post.

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## ATHLETICS

## Barshim, Samba donate kits to IAAF Heritage Exhibition in Doha

Qatar's Mutaz Barshim and Abderrahman Samba have donated their respective kits to the IAAF Heritage Collection which will be on display at the IAAF Heritage World Athletics Championships Exhibition in a week's time at the City Center mall.

Barshim, the reigning world high jump champion, has donated his London 2012 Olympic Games competition vest and number, while Samba has given the bodysuit which he wore when winning the 2018 IAAF Continental Cup Ostrava 400m hurdles title.

At the exhibition opening ceremony on April 18, the Qatari stars, who are the second-best all-time performers in their respective events, will officially hand over their donations to IAAF president Sebastian Coe and Dahlan al-Hamad, IAAF vice-president and IAAF World Athletics Championships Doha 2019 Local Organising Committee director general.

"The opening of the exhibition, just three days before the Asian Championships begin, is a major step on the road to the start of the IAAF World Athletics Championships in September," said Barshim, the 2017 IAAF World Athlete of the Year. "I'm



In this August 7, 2012, picture, Qatar's Mutaz Barshim competes in the men's high jump final at the 2012 London Olympic Games.

really pleased that my London 2012 kit which I wore when taking my first Olympic medal will be on public show, helping to promote the excitement of athletics and the best of Qatari sport."

Samba, the 2018 Asian Games champion was equally excited. "The IAAF Continental Cup last summer was my first major global victory, so I'm delighted that the bodysuit from that race will be in the exhibition and will be preserved long term in the IAAF Heritage Collection. I hope its display will help inspire more Qataris to

take up sport and to turn out to support Qatar's national team at the World Championships," confirmed Samba.

Joining Barshim and Samba on stage at the opening ceremony will be three all-time greats – Britain's Liz McColgan, 1991 world 10,000m and 1992 world half marathon champion, Finland's four-time Olympic champion Lasse Viren and Poland's Anita Wlodarczyk, the two-time Olympic and three-time world hammer throw champion and world record holder. **(IAAF)**

## SPOTLIGHT

## ECGC to run first ever Golf and Health Week event in Qatar

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Education City Golf Club (ECGC) will participate in the first ever Golf and Health week which has been launched by the sport's governing body, the R&A (The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews).

It is a dedicated campaign to raise awareness of the health benefits of golf for people of all ages and abilities, and will be carried out globally.

The first ever Golf and Health Week will take place from April 15-19 and will aim to encourage golfers, non-golfers and lapsed golfers into taking part in the sport.

A number of health-related themes will be promoted during the week of the campaign, including, fitness, mental health, disability golf, golf for everyone and nutrition.

ECGC's head professional Anthony Cairn has designed a programme for the said week, which will cover all facets of the sport, including a free fitness screening to determine a fit-for-golf plan, mental health session, including yoga, aware-



Education City Golf Club professionals Rachel Choi (left) and Martin Steel (right) with head professional Anthony Cairn.

ness session about disability golf, driving range sessions with pro tips for beginners and a nutrition for golf seminar in collaboration with Sama Medical Care.

A collaborative campaign will run across digital and social media channels using #GolfHealthWeek and include content focused on highlighting the physical and mental health benefits of playing golf and projects being delivered by golf bodies and clubs.

Commenting on ECGC's ac-

tivities, Cairn said, "This whole campaign is brilliant to make everyone aware of the health and well-being benefits the game of golf brings. Health and well-being is at the forefront of what we are doing here at ECGC, so it is very appropriate for us to get involved in this worldwide campaign. We will lay on a complimentary session each day at the club to encourage as many people as possible to come down to the club to learn about golf, and the health and well-being benefits it brings."