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**Bottas edges Vettel to set the pace in Shanghai**

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# GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

**Valverde considers resting Messi ahead of United return**

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SPOTLIGHT

## Former India captain Ancheri lauds Qatar

Former India skipper Jo Paul Ancheri has lauded Qatar's organisation and operational structure as the country prepares to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

The Kerala-born former footballer was highly impressed by the facilities on offer during his recent visit to Qatar's Supreme Committee's Legacy Pavilion in Doha, football portal goal.com reported.

Qatar holds a special place in Ancheri's heart given that the versatile player made his senior debut for India there during the 1994 Doha Independence Cup.

Looking back on his recent

visit to the SC Legacy Pavilion in Doha, Ancheri said, "It is a wonderful experience to be back in Qatar. I made my international debut here at the Khalifa Stadium (Doha) in 1994, and I have been able to come back to Qatar a couple of times after that.

"I am happy to see that Qatar has made a good beginning to finding the best approach towards football whether it be in operational matters such as the hosting of the 2022 World Cup or in technical elements, as seen from the emergence of the country as an Asian football power by winning the 2019 AFC Asian Cup."

Qatar has left no stone un-

turned for the successful organisation for the 2022 World Cup and their progress has not only reflected on the ground with respect to the stadia, but also on the field with the senior national team.

Qatar surprised one and all when their fairly young squad captured the country's maiden AFC (Asian Football Confederation) Asian Cup title in the 2019 edition held in the UAE.

"The Qatar Football Association have planned well and they worked hard for more than 12 years towards this success," said Ancheri.

"The Qatar national team now

has a good opportunity to give a good account of themselves at the 2022 World Cup thereby realising the Federation's long-term objectives. I hope the national team can give fans some good results," he added.

While Qatar's development across all age groups has been rapid, Ancheri feels India still has a long way to go to reach the same level.

The 43-year-old pointed to India's performance in the FIFA U17 World Cup held at home in 2017 where the team crashed out without a single point in the group stage.

"India has just taken the first

steps in grassroots football by starting baby leagues. It will take time to build upwards, the former skipper remarked.

"Our kids are not able to play matches even inside India. Only if they play in as many league matches as possible will they get the confidence.

"Practice alone counts for nothing if it is devoid of actual match experience. Kids need to play a lot of games in the grassroots leagues.

"Our national team played in the 2017 FIFA U17 WC, but it was evident that our boys lacked the match exposure from their formative years." (www.goal.com)



FOOTBALL/QNB STARS LEAGUE

## Al Sadd chase more records, Al Rayyan fight to stay in top-4

Ferreira has earned respect with his shrewdness and his penchant for speaking his mind

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

All 12 teams will be in action today as the curtain falls on the QNB Stars League which kicked off in August last year and produced some top quality football over a period spanning nine months.

Al Sadd, who won the title with a match to spare last week, will take on Umm Salal today hoping to finish the tournament with a flourish, while Al Sailiya, Al Rayyan and Al Ahli will be hoping to salvage at least a top-four finish which will give them a shot at the AFC Champions League next year.

Al Duhail, who were dethroned by Al Sadd this season, have already secured the second spot, and should have no problems seeing off Al Arabi in their final match.

Al Sadd have 54 points to their credit, having lost only once, to Al Ahli in the first leg. They also have the most number of victories (17) and are also comfortably ahead in goals scored and goal difference as well.

Their coach, Jesualdo Ferreira, gave his players the licence to go ahead and create more records for themselves and the team when they take the field today.

"This is our final match in this season's league competition. We are so happy to have already won the title, which was our goal from the start of the season," said Ferreira.

"We will enjoy the match against Umm Salal. It will not be a very important match from our point of view, but we want to win and move up in terms of points. Our players will also seek more records," he added.

Ferreira has earned a lot of respect in Qatar with his shrewdness and his penchant for speak-



Al Sadd coach Jesualdo Ferreira reacts after his side's match against Al Ahli last week.

ing his mind. Normally a serious person, he was smiling broadly throughout his press conference.

"This is my fifth league title in three countries and on three continents, and I am happy to have done so. It is very difficult to win the Falcon Shield. The Qatar league is very difficult and

I spent a lot of time preparing a strong team. I am happy with this team," he said.

Ferreira said he will forever cherish his stint with Al Sadd.

"My contract with the team will end at the end of the season. Al Sadd will stay in my heart. My family is happy to live in Qatar. We would also like to win the

Amir Cup.

"We, at Al Sadd, love to break records. We just returned from Uzbekistan after playing in the AFC Champions League against Pakhtakor. I will see the fitness of our players and decide the team to play against Umm Salal," he concluded.

Meanwhile, Umm Salal coach

Raul Caneda said his team will give their best, hoping to jump one spot from their ninth position.

"We are facing the new champions, so we will play with all our strength and abilities to get a positive result," said Caneda.

"We are not focusing on the Al Sadd team and my focus will be on my team. Our goal is to play for victory. We suffered a big loss against Al Shahania last week. The result of the previous game must have a positive impact on the players and we expect a positive reaction from them."

Al Rayyan, meanwhile are wary of dropping out of the top-4. They have 34 points but Al Sailiya and Al Ahli, who have 35 and 33 respectively, can still beat them to it.

Under-23 coach Gilson Souza spoke to the media ahead of their QNB Stars League Week 22 match against Qatar SC.

"We are through with our AFC Champions League third-round engagement and now we are fully focused on our QNB Stars League game against Qatar SC. We will try hard to win. Otherwise, we will make things difficult for ourselves as far as top-four finish is concerned," said Al Rayyan U23 coach Gilson Souza, who is also handling the senior side.

"We have some injury concerns, but we will prepare the players to face Qatar SC, who are going through a difficult situation. But that does not concern me. We will focus on achieving our target of finishing among the top four.

"Losing Tuesday's AFC Champions League game against the UAE's Al Wahda will have a negative impact on our players. But as professionals, they have to think high and bring out their best so that we stay in the top four with a good result," said Souza.

FOCUS

## Liverpool boss Klopp condemns 'disgusting' Salah abuse

AFP  
London

Jurgen Klopp has condemned "disgusting" racist abuse aimed at Mohamed Salah and called for lifetime bans for the Chelsea fans accused of taunting the Liverpool star.

A video circulated on social media ahead of Chelsea's Europa League match at Slavia Prague this week showed a group of six supporters chanting "Salah is a bomber" repeatedly.

Egypt forward Salah, who played for Chelsea before joining Roma in 2016, is a practising Muslim and has previously faced abuse about his religion.

Chelsea's security staff identified three people in the widely shared video and denied that trio entry to Thursday's clash in Prague.

It is understood that the remaining three people in the video did not attempt to enter Slavia's Sinobo Stadium for Chelsea's 1-0 quarter-final first-leg victory.

Liverpool said the video showed "vile discriminatory chants" and was "dangerous and disturbing", while Chelsea issued a statement pledging to use all available punishments against those involved. The incident is especially sensitive as Liverpool host Chelsea tomorrow in a match with huge implications in the Premier League title race and the battle to finish in the top four.

Asked about the latest incident of racism in football this season, Klopp made it clear the behaviour should not be tolerated.

"It's disgusting. Another example of something which should not happen. We should not see it as a Chelsea or Liverpool thing," Klopp told reporters yesterday.

"If you do something like that you should not be able to enter a stadium again, from my point of view, for life," he added.

Four Chelsea supporters were



suspended by the club for allegedly abusing Raheem Sterling during Manchester City's defeat at Stamford Bridge on December 8.

Chelsea also criticised anti-Semitic chanting by Blues fans during the club's 2-2 Europa League draw at Hungarian side MOL Vidi on December 13.

Klopp believes life bans from stadiums are the only appropriate punishment for anyone found guilty of racism.

"The stronger the reaction from all of us, the more it will help to avoid things like this in the future," he said.

The German manager believes football authorities, clubs and players must unite with one voice to condemn such actions and make a stand together.

"It is a complete misunderstanding of how life should be - all parts of racism are that some people think they are more worthy or valuable than others and that's the biggest misunderstanding in the world out there," he said.

"Football is the best example of how people from different races can work together brilliantly.

"Go into any dressing room in the world and you see players sitting next to each other, and nobody cares where you come from or who your parents are.

"Because football is very public we talk a lot about this so I think we pretty much have a strong voice and we have to use that strong voice and say altogether things like this are not allowed to happen again."



PREMIER LEAGUE

# Danger looms for City, Liverpool in titanic title race

Guardiola's men travel to Crystal Palace, but with Spurs, United and Burnley in sight

AFP  
London

Manchester City and Liverpool resume their epic battle for the Premier League title tomorrow after a mid-week of contrasting Champions League fortunes, with both sides facing perilous fixtures.

City travel to Crystal Palace trailing Jurgen Klopp's men by two points, but still with the title in their hands thanks to a game in hand.

However, the visit to Selhurst Park kicks off a tough run of fixtures in which Pep Guardiola's men host Tottenham twice, play Manchester United at Old Trafford and face a tricky trip to Burnley.

The 1-0 defeat at Spurs in Tuesday's first leg of their Champions League quarter-final snapped a 14-game winning streak and means Guardiola has huge calls to make with his team selection this weekend.

If he has one eye on Wednesday's second leg on home soil, Palace could hurt City and hand Liverpool a title boost.

Roy Hodgson's men inflicted City's only home defeat of the campaign in December and also ended the champions' record 18-game winning run in the Premier League last season.

**GERRARD'S SLIP**

Victory for City to go back on top would flip the pressure onto Liverpool's shoulders just minutes before they kick off against Chelsea at Anfield.

The Londoners' visit evokes memories of the last time Liverpool, who took a big step to-



Manchester City's Sergio Aguero (right) shakes hands with manager Pep Guardiola as he comes off the field during the UEFA Champions League first leg quarter-final match against Tottenham Hotspur in London on Tuesday. (Reuters)

wards the Champions League semi-finals by beating Porto 2-0 at home in midweek, went close to ending their long wait for a league title.

Then under Brendan Rodgers, the Reds were three games away from glory in 2014 until captain Steven Gerrard's now infamous slip allowed Demba Ba to score the opening goal in a gutting 2-0 Chelsea victory.

Chelsea are the only visiting side to have won at Anfield this season thanks to a wonderful Eden Hazard solo goal that sealed a 2-1 victory in the League Cup back in September.

Ominously for Liverpool, the Belgian was back to his best on

Monday, scoring both goals — including another incredible individual effort — in a 2-0 win over West Ham that lifted Chelsea into third.

**SPURS LOOK TO SON**

Chelsea are likely to be back down in fourth spot by the time they kick off, as Tottenham host already relegated Huddersfield on Saturday.

Mauricio Pochettino's men have to be wary of a Champions League hangover and need to prepare for another period without striker Harry Kane as they aim to qualify for next season's edition of Europe's top competition.

The England captain is expected to miss the rest of the season after injuring the same left ankle that forced him to miss seven matches earlier this year in the win over City on Tuesday.

Son Heung-min helped fill the void left by Kane back then and scored the winner against City in midweek.

Four of Tottenham's remaining six games are at their new stadium, but much will depend on the South Korean as the club attempt to ensure Champions League football next season.

**MAN UTD SEARCH FOR FORM**  
Manchester United are just as desperate to be in the top

four but defeats to Arsenal and Wolves during a run of four losses in five games in all competitions have seen Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men slip back down to sixth.

They have also been knocked out of the FA Cup and are on the brink of Champions League elimination after losing 1-0 to Barcelona at Old Trafford on Wednesday.

A reaction at home to mid-table West Ham on Saturday is an absolute must if they are to remain in contention for the top four, with a tough run of Everton, City and Chelsea to come in their following three Premier League games.

**CARDIFF ON THE BRINK**

Cardiff's trip to Burnley could have huge implications. The Welsh side seem set to join Fulham and Huddersfield in the Championship next season as they are five points adrift of safety and have Liverpool and United to come in their remaining six games.

A third straight victory for Burnley would realistically seal their survival and give Southampton, Brighton and Newcastle extra breathing space.

**FIXTURES**

- Today**
- Tottenham v Huddersfield
  - Brighton v Bournemouth
  - Burnley v Cardiff
  - Fulham v Everton
  - Southampton v Wolves
  - Manchester United v West Ham
- Tomorrow**
- Crystal Palace v Manchester City
  - Liverpool v Chelsea
- Monday**
- Watford v Arsenal

FOCUS

## Valverde considers resting Messi ahead of United return

AFP  
Barcelona

Lionel Messi could be among a number of players rested by Barcelona today as Ernesto Valverde keeps one eye on their Champions League second leg against Manchester United.

Valverde said yesterday that Messi may be spared the trip to Huesca, who sit bottom of La Liga, after a collision with United's Chris Smalling on Wednesday left the Argentinian with a bruised nose and cheek.

"It's possible," said Valverde, when asked about the chance of Messi sitting out this weekend.

"He's fine but it was a big hit. He was affected the day after and during the match, it was like being hit by a truck. We will analyse him later but it is a possibility."

Luke Shaw's own-goal meant Barca took a 1-0 victory away from Old Trafford and they can afford to rotate ahead of the return, given they sit 11 points clear at the top of La Liga.

Kevin Prince-Boateng and

Jeison Murillo, who have hardly featured since joining in January, could be given rare outings while Ousmane Dembele is likely to make his first appearance in a month after recovering from a hamstring injury.

"There will be changes tomorrow because the calendar is very congested," Valverde said.

"Another intense match is waiting for us tomorrow and then again on Tuesday, so we will make changes."

If Dembele comes through the game against Huesca unscathed, the Frenchman could be in line to start against United at Camp Nou.

"Tomorrow's game is important for Dembele but not because of United, because of tomorrow," Valverde said.

"We must make an effort to focus on the three points because we need them. We can't forget that we need ten points to be champions, no matter how much we think that we might be there already."

"We are not far away. We have to win three games and draw another and that has to start tomorrow."



Barcelona's Lionel Messi (left) is checked by medical staff during the UEFA Champions League first leg quarter-final match against Manchester United in Manchester, England, on Wednesday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

## Spurs' Alli should face City, doubt for Huddersfield

Reuters  
London

Tottenham Hotspur midfielder **Dele Alli** is a big doubt for their Premier League game at home to relegated Huddersfield Town today after breaking his hand but should be available to face Manchester City in the Champions League next week.

Manager Mauricio Pochettino told reporters yesterday that the England international saw a specialist on Thursday after damaging his hand when he fell heavily in their 1-0 win over City in the first leg of their quarter-final clash on Tuesday.

"We need to assess him this afternoon and I'm not too optimistic about him playing tomorrow. He broke his hand in two parts and it's so painful. I'm more optimistic about him being available for Manchester City in the second leg," he said.

Pochettino added that he would rotate his squad against Huddersfield due to injury and fatigue but stressed the importance of picking up three points as Spurs battle to finish in the top four and secure a Champions League spot.

They are two points behind third-placed Chelsea, who have played a game more, and a point above fellow London rivals Ar-

senal, with Manchester United a further two points back in sixth and only six games left in the season.

"Tomorrow is not a game to rest players but we have a lot of players who played 90 minutes (against City) who maybe aren't in condition to play for different reasons."

"We have to make sure the players on the pitch have full energy. We need to provide fresh legs and make sure we get the three points. It's not about resting player for Manchester City," he added ahead of the return leg on Wednesday.

As well as the injury to Alli, Tottenham have lost their England talisman Harry Kane, who suffered what the club described as significant ligament damage to his left ankle against City in a challenge with Fabian Delph.

"He was so upset after the match," said Pochettino. "It was a difficult moment for him. We feel so disappointed and it was difficult to accept the situation. He had a scan yesterday. He will see the specialist this week and we will see."

Asked if Kane, who has a history of ankle problems, would play again this term, he replied: "There's only four weeks until the end of the season. We'll see. It was an accident. It's a lot of coincidence. Nothing to do with what he's (had) in the past."



## Man United can finish in top three with 15 more points: Solskjaer

Reuters  
London

Manchester United can secure a top-three finish in the Premier League if they get 15 points from their remaining six games, manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer said yesterday. United, lying sixth with 61 points after a poor run of results, are locked in a battle for third with Chelsea (66 points), Tottenham Hotspur (64) and Arsenal (63). Third place would guarantee United qualification for the Champions League

— which by Solskjaer's calculation would mean beating at least one out of second-placed Manchester City and Chelsea, who they host in consecutive games at Old Trafford this month.

"We need as many points as possible and I think if we get 15 we'll be (in the) top three because in those games hopefully we'll beat Chelsea," Solskjaer told reporters ahead of West Ham's visit today.

"We want top three. Top four is also an aim...but we should aim for 15 points. But now it's about West Ham and focusing on (that)."

After losing only once in Solskjaer's first 17 games in charge, United have lost four of their last five in all competitions. The Norwegian pinned that decline on a lack of ruthlessness in front of goal, and United failed to register a single shot on target in their 1-0 Champions League quarter-final first leg defeat at home to Barcelona on Wednesday.

"We've been fantastic but lately we haven't been ruthless or clinical enough in front of goal," Solskjaer said.

"...We should have won the league games against Wolves and Arsenal with the amount of chances we had. We've

been practising out here and, as a striker, I know how important that little bit of belief and trust in yourself is."

Solskjaer said forward Alexis Sanchez was fit but unlikely to play against West Ham. "I'm not sure if he's going to be available. He's injury free but not 100 percent sure for tomorrow, maybe more likely for the Barcelona game (next week)." With midfielders Ander Herrera and Nemanja Matic sidelined with injury and full backs Luke Shaw and Ashley Young both suspended, Solskjaer said Matteo Darmian and Marcos Rojo could play a part today.

BUNDESLIGA

## East Berlin club eyes promotion with suspicion

AFP  
Berlin

Before every home game, fans of Union Berlin belt out their team's anthem, by East German punk rock legend Nina Hagen.

One line at the end of the first verse is sung with particular gusto: "Who will never be bought by the West?!" scream the "Unioners". Berlin's second biggest club, behind top-tier Hertha Berlin, has a rebellious streak dating back to the days of communist rule in East Germany.

With the club third in the second division, bidding for a first promotion to the Bundesliga, Unioners rail against the commercialism of modern football.

Nestled in the woods of the East Berlin suburb of Koepenick, Union's fiercely local fanbase is growing, as young newcomers to the city fall in love with the club's identity. "Union is a mixture of extremely different people who have chosen the same club," Union fan Christoph Arend, 53, tells AFP in the stadium's local pub — 'Abseitsfalle' (Offside trap).

**'DOWN WITH THE WALL'**  
A red-and-white scarf around



FC Union Berlin players wave as supporters display their scarves prior to a second division match in Berlin last month. (AFP)

his neck, Christoph remembers the "slightly anarchic" atmosphere around the club when he first became a fan as an 11-year-old in the 1970s.

Founded in 1966, Union were conceived as a "civilians' club", as opposed to the official army club Vorwaerts Berlin, and the club of the secret police Dynamo Berlin.

They came to be seen as a plucky, likeable alternative to Dynamo, who dominated East German football.

"There was a saying back then: 'Not all Union fans are in the opposition, but everyone in the opposition supports Union,'" laughs Christoph.

He remembers how fans would shout "down with the wall!" when players formed a wall to defend a free-kick.

"Everyone in the stadium knew which wall they were talking about," he smiles.

While the once mighty Dynamo have sunk to Germany's fourth tier, Union are one of the few clubs from the former communist East who have enjoyed success in reunified Germany.

**A STADIUM BUILT BY FANS**  
Union's "Alte Forsterei" stadium remains refuge from the hyper-commercialism of modern football.

There is minimal advertising and the club has ruled out selling the stadium's name to a sponsor.

"The match is not a circus event or a television show," explains Union's head of communications and stadium announcer Christian Arbeit.

The club works to keep its fans and members on side, partly in recognition of all they have done for it in the past.

In 2004, with Union on the brink of bankruptcy, many fans gave blood at their local medical centre and donated their donor's fees to the club.

Four years later, more than 2,500 fans volunteered to help renovate the stadium so it would meet second-division requirements. The club later erected a monument to the volunteers.

Union can now look back on a decade of stability in the second tier.

Plans to add around 15,000 places to the 22,000-capacity stadium were announced in 2017, and the team are regular promotion candidates.

Yet former stadium announcer Andre Rolle worries that promotion may harm the club's unique identity.

"I don't want the club to go up because I am convinced that,

little by little, they would then have to sacrifice their values," he tells AFP.

He is not alone. In 2017, when Union came within a few games of promotion, fans held up a banner reading: "Shit! We're going up!"

**SCANDAL**

More recently, Union fans have made national headlines for the wrong reasons.

During last month's 2-0 home win over Ingolstadt, an apparent Union supporter launched an anti-Semitic Twitter tirade against Ingolstadt's Israeli captain Almog Cohen. The tweet was immediately condemned by the club, and was the subject of a police investigation.

For Florian Schubert, author of a book called *Antisemitism in Football*, this was an "isolated case".

Andre Rolle, meanwhile, believes that "a good number" of Union supporters vote for the far-right AfD party, but points out that the leading ultra fan groups tend to be more left-wing.

"Unlike other places, like Chemnitz or Cottbus, the extremists don't get to decide which flags are displayed or which songs are sung," insists Rolle.

FOCUS

# Arsenal, Chelsea put one foot in Europa semis

Arsenal saw off Napoli 2-0, Alonso's late winner gives Blues 1-0 win at Prague

AFP  
Paris

Arsenal and Chelsea closed in on the Europa League last four on Thursday after the Gunners saw off highly-fancied Napoli 2-0 at the Emirates, while Marco Alonso's late header earned Maurizio Sarri's side a hard-fought win at Slavia Prague.

Unai Emery's Arsenal hold a healthy advantage going into next week's second leg thanks to a fine early strike from Juventus-bound Aaron Ramsey and an unfortunate Kalidou Koulibaly own goal midway through the first half, and can rue missed chances that would have put the tie completely beyond the Italians' reach.

"To keep a clean sheet and score a couple of goals is a lovely way to start the first leg. We're delighted with that," said Ramsey, who should have added the third when he blazed over with nine minutes left, to BT Sport.

"We can go into the second leg with a little bit of a cushion, but we know it will be a difficult place to go... They are a quality team."

Chelsea meanwhile escaped from Eden Arena after a bitty display that saw Kepa Arrizabalaga have to make some fine saves to keep the Czechs out before Alonso nodded home Willian's pinpoint cross four minutes from time to seal a 1-0 win.

The Blues remain unbeaten in the Europa League, keeping eight clean sheets in the competition this season, and it was that solidity that saw them through on a tricky evening in Prague.

The Premier League pair remain on a collision course for the final in Baku, with both sides set to avoid each other if they make it through next week's second legs.

Arsenal were all over Napoli from the kick-off and got their deserved opener with 14 minutes on the clock, Ramsey waltzing in at the end of



Chelsea's Marcos Alonso (left) celebrates with teammates Olivier Giroud (centre) and Antonio Rudiger after scoring the winner against SK Slavia Prague in their Europa League first leg quarter-final match in Prague, Czech Republic, on Thursday. (Reuters)

a beautiful passing move to calmly stroke home Ainsley Maitland-Niles's neat lay-off.

Napoli were completely out of sorts, barely able to get the ball out of their own half at times, and 10 minutes later the Gunners doubled their lead.

Former Sampdoria midfielder Lucas Torreira won possession in midfield and charged towards goal before letting off a weak shot that flicked off Koulibaly and flew past a bamboozled Alex Meret in the Napoli goal.

Arsenal should have made more of their first-half dominance over Carlo Ancelotti's slipshod side, but were not punished by the Serie A outfit,

who through Piotr Zielinski should have bagged an away goal to take back to Naples in the second half.

"I was surprised by the lack of courage and personality from my players at the start," Carlo Ancelotti told Sky Sport.

"Turning this around will be difficult now, but we'll be home at the San Paolo, and our supporters will help us."

**RECORD-BREAKING FELIX** Arsenal will almost certainly take on Valencia should they hold on at what will be an intimidating Stadio San Paolo after the La Liga side scored twice in stoppage time to win 3-1 at fellow Spaniards Villarreal.

Goncalo Guedes scored twice, including what could be the decisive third three minutes into added time, as Marcelino's side struck with two clinical breakaway goals to give them a great chance of making the semis.

Chelsea meanwhile will likely play Benfica should they go through after 19-year-old Joao Felix became the youngest ever player to score a Europa League hat-trick and set up the other goal in 4-2 win over Eintracht Frankfurt that leaves the Bundesliga side, who had to play with 10 men for 70 minutes, with an uphill task to make the last four in Germany next week.

Felix, a revelation in his

first season in the Benfica first team, got the ball rolling from the spot in the 21st minute after Evan N'Dicka was sent off for shoving over goal-bound Gedson Fernandes.

He put the hosts back in front just before the break after Luka Jovic — on loan from Benfica — scored a shock leveller against his parent club in the 40th minute.

Ruben Dias made it three when he headed in Felix's flick-on from a corner, and the 19-year-old side-footed home Alex Grimaldo's cross to complete his treble nine minutes into the second half, before Goncalo Paciencia pulled one back with his head from a corner to keep the tie alive.

COMMENT

## Europa triumph would be best way to end career, says Cech

Reuters  
London

Arsenal goalkeeper Petr Cech hopes to finish his silverware-laden career in the best possible way by adding a final Europa League trophy before he hangs up his boots at the end of the season but may have to beat his old side Chelsea to do it.

Some key Cech saves helped Arsenal secure a 2-0 first leg home win in their quarter-final tie against Napoli on Thursday. They will travel to southern Italy next week knowing they face a tougher test but Cech is hoping they can progress.

"I would love to retire with a trophy in my hands," he told reporters after Arsenal's victory at The Emirates Stadium. "It would be the best possible ending for me and be a fantastic achievement for the club."

Cech won the trophy in 2013 with Chelsea, who are on the other side of the draw and beat Czech side Slavia Prague 1-0 away on Thursday meaning Arsenal could face them in the final.

## Neymar wants to stay at PSG, says father



Brazilian star Neymar wants to stay at Paris Saint-Germain, where he is under contract until 2022, according to his father and agent, Neymar senior. "We have a contract, we're not even halfway through that contract," Neymar senior told RMC Sport. Neymar arrived at PSG from Barcelona in 2017, but has been at the centre of rumours linking him with a move to Real Madrid. "These rumours of leaving will always exist, you can't have a player like Neymar without people or clubs dreaming of having him," said Neymar senior. PSG fans, he continued, "can rest easy: Neymar today doesn't want to leave PSG, he wants to continue at PSG, get back on the pitch first up, to be able to help the club claim titles and win". Neymar has been out with an injured right foot sustained on January 23, but the 27-year-old was back in training on Thursday and PSG will be hoping he is fully fit for the April 27 French cup final against Rennes.

## Arsenal to investigate racist abuse of Napoli's Koulibaly



Arsenal have launched an investigation into the racist abuse suffered by Napoli defender Kalidou Koulibaly during their 2-0 Europa League quarter-final first leg victory on Thursday. A Snapchat video emerged on social media after the match where a fan at the Emirates Stadium can be heard using a racist term towards the Senegalese. "We utterly condemn the use of any racist language and have launched an investigation to identify the culprit," an Arsenal spokesman said. "We operate a zero tolerance approach and anyone behaving like this is not welcome at Arsenal and will be banned from matches. We have an extremely diverse community of fans who are all part of the Arsenal family and such incidents are rare at Emirates Stadium." Koulibaly has become a symbol of the battle against racism in Italian soccer since being subjected to racist insults from some Inter Milan fans during a Serie A match in December.

## Kovac confirms Lewandowski, Coman bust-up in Bayern training

Bayern Munich coach Niko Kovac yesterday confirmed reports Robert Lewandowski and Kingsley Coman were involved in a fist-fight during training, but ruled out any sanctions. Kovac admitted the forwards traded blows following an argument at a training session behind closed doors on Thursday while preparing for tomorrow's league game away to Fortuna Dusseldorf. "The three of us talked about it, the players are sorry and have apologised for their behaviour, there will be no financial penalties and the matter has been resolved," said Kovac in a press conference. Lewandowski, 30, reportedly chastised Coman, 22, during a training exercise, and the exchange of words quickly escalated. The two players were reportedly separated by defenders Niklas Sule and Jerome Boateng, but Kovac was evasive about the cause of the strife, saying simply "emotions" had run high in a heated training session.

SPOTLIGHT

# Ronaldo's Juve ready to seal Serie A before Ajax decider

AFP  
Milan

Cristiano Ronaldo's Juventus head to SPAL today needing just a point to wrap up an eighth consecutive Serie A title in record time before their crucial Champions League decider against Ajax in Turin next week.

Ronaldo returned from injury to score a precious away goal for Juventus in their 1-1 Champions League quarter-final, first leg draw in Amsterdam on Wednesday, and the 34-year-old can claim his first Italian league title to add to his two in Spain with Real Madrid and three with Manchester United.

It would be a 28th trophy in four countries for the five-time Ballon d'Or winner, a haul which includes five Champions League, and the Euro 2016 title with Portugal.

Juventus have a 20-point advantage on second-placed Napoli and a draw would seal their 35th 'Scudetto' with six games to spare — the earliest any team has ever sealed Serie A — thanks to their superior head-to-head record over Carlo Ancelotti's side.

SPAL, 16th and just four points above the drop zone, had eased their relegation fears with three consecutive wins that included victories over Champions League-chasing Lazio and Roma, but lost last weekend at Cagliari.

Leonardo Semplici dogged side also have history against them, as they have beaten Juve in record time before their crucial Champions League decider against Ajax in Turin next week.

Given the relative weakness of the weekend's opposition, coach Massimiliano Allegri may not want to risk Ronaldo ahead of Tuesday's Champions League decider and could rotate his side.

Forwards Paulo Dybala and Douglas Costa came off the bench at Ajax ahead of highly-rated teenager Moise Kean, who had scored five goals in as many games for Juventus.

All three could start against SPAL.

Leonardo Bonucci looks set to work overtime with defenders Giorgio Chiellini, Andrea Barzagli and Martin Caceres all out injured. "Let's close down the championship on Saturday," urged Bonucci.

Second-placed Napoli travel to bottom club Chievo looking for a boost after their demoralising 2-0 Europa League quarter-final, first leg defeat at Arsenal.

Carlo Ancelotti's side are



Juventus' Cristiano Ronaldo (right) celebrates with teammates after scoring a goal during the UEFA Champions League first leg quarter-final match against Ajax in Amsterdam on Wednesday. (AFP)

without a win in three games and next week host Arsenal in their Stadio San Paolo hoping for a miracle.

### CHAMPIONS LEAGUE HUNT HEATS UP

Inter Milan, seven points behind Napoli, can consolidate third place at second-from-bottom Frosinone after last

weekend's draw against fellow Europe-chasers Atalanta.

Inter are five points ahead of both Atalanta and fourth-placed city rivals AC Milan who occupy the final Champions League berth but have taken just one point from their last four games.

Genaro Gattuso's Milan also have Roma, Torino and

### FIXTURES Today

- SPAL v Juventus
- Roma v Udinese
- AC Milan v Lazio

### Tomorrow

- Torino v Cagliari
- Fiorentina v Bologna
- Sampdoria v Genoa
- Sassuolo v Parma
- Chievo v Napoli
- Frosinone v Inter Milan

### Monday

- Atalanta v Empoli

## INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

# Dhawan masterclass helps Delhi Capitals beat Knight Riders

'We were just talking about taking the match deep and that both of us should remain till the end'



Delhi Capitals' Shikhar Dhawan plays a shot as Kolkata Knight Riders' Dinesh Karthik (right) looks on during their Indian Premier League match at the Eden Gardens Cricket Stadium in Kolkata yesterday. (AFP)

IAN S  
Kolkata

Shikhar Dhawan made sure that Sourav Ganguly had the last laugh in his own backyard with an unbeaten 97 as Delhi Capitals (DC) did a double on Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) by scripting a seven-wicket victory in their reverse Indian Premier League (IPL) fixture at the Eden Gardens yesterday.

DC had won the one-over eliminator against KKR in the first leg played in Delhi on March 30. With Friday's win, DC moved to the fourth position in the points tally with 8 points from 7 matches, while KKR remained at the second spot with equal number of points but a superior net run-rate.

A 'visitor' at the Eden Gardens, DC advisor Ganguly watched Dhawan miss out on a maiden T20 hundred from the

dugout as the southpaw (97\*; 63 balls, 4x11, 6x2) roared back to form just three days ahead of India's World Cup team selection.

Rishabh Pant too showed maturity at the other end with a 31-ball 46 (4x4, 6x2) as the capital side won with seven balls to spare. Delhi posted 180/3 in 18.5 overs with Colin Ingram (14 not out) hitting a six off Piyush Chawla to seal the issue.

Pant and Dhawan combined for a 105-run third wicket stand off 69 balls after DC were 57/2 chasing 179 for victory.

KKR had posted a competitive 178/7 riding on Shubman Gill (65; 39 balls, 4x7, 6x2) and Andre Russell's (45; 21 balls, 4x3, 6x4) knocks on a wicket which had a greenish tinge on it.

In reply, Delhi lost Prithvi Shaw (14) early with Dinesh Karthik snaffling a stunning catch flying to his right off Prasidh Krishna.

Skipper Shreyas Iyer (6) too did not last long with Karthik

taking another catch behind the stumps off Russell in the 6th over.

From then on, it was a Dhawan and Pant show as the former returned to form with some crisp cover drives while his junior partner showed composure before holing out to Kuldeep Yadav at long on off Nitish Rana.

Earlier, Gill struck his maiden half-century of the season to set the platform before Russell hit Kagiso Rabada, who had dismissed him in the first leg with a toe-crushing yorker in the Super Over, for three sixes and a four.

The hosts scored 106 runs in the last 10 overs after being asked to bat by DC skipper Iyer. KKR were 72/2 at the halfway stage. For DC, Rabada (2/42) was expensive but picked up two wickets while Chris Morris (2/38) and Keemo Paul (2/46) also chipped in.

Russell came in to bat when KKR were 93/3 after 12.4 overs, needing to up the ante. Soon

compatriot Carlos Brathwaite (6) joined him at the crease, and the big-hitting pair combined for a 19-ball 39-run stand for the sixth wicket in which Brathwaite's contribution was just 6.

Russell took sweet revenge on Rabada by taking him apart in the 18th over, smashing two maximums as the South Africa pace ace leaked 16 runs.

Morris got the better of Russell in the penultimate over with a full toss outside off which the Caribbean all-rounder hit straight down Rabada's throat at third-man.

Paul was given the last over in which he got the wicket of Brathwaite, giving away 10 runs.

Opener Gill, who never got to bat up the order for KKR earlier, made the most of the opportunity by playing some delectable shots to give KKR a solid start.

Gill and Robin Uthappa (28) joined hands to stitch together a 63-run stand for the second wicket after debutant Joe Denly

(0), Nitish Rana (11) and skipper Dinesh Karthik (2) failed with the bat. Gill was dismissed giving a catch to Axar Patel at short fine-leg while trying to flick Paul through that area in the 15th over.

In the end, some lusty blows from Russell helped the team post a competitive total.

"I just try to keep my head clear. The plan was to take the game deep. When you're chasing 180, you need to pace the innings in a way that you complete the match in 18-19 overs. We were just talking about taking the match deep and that both of us should remain there till the end," Rishabh Pant said.

#### BRIEF SCORES

**Kolkata Knight Riders** 178/7 in 20 overs (Shubman Gill 65, Andre Russell 45; Kagiso Rabada 2/42, Chris Morris 2/38, Keemo Paul (2/46) lost to **Delhi Capitals** 180/3 (Shikhar Dhawan 97, Rishabh Pant 46) by seven wickets.

## DEVELOPMENT

## West Indies name Reifer as interim coach ahead of WC

Reuters  
Antigua, Guatemala

West Indies appointed Floyd Reifer as their new interim head coach on Thursday, replacing Richard Pybus as part of a series of administrative changes less than two months before the World Cup.

Pybus's contract ran beyond the World Cup in England and Wales, but new Cricket West Indies (CWI) president Ricky Skerritt said changes were necessary and a "calculated strategic move" to reignite the passion for cricket in the region.

Barbados-born Reifer played six tests, eight one-day internationals and one Twenty20 for West Indies between 1997 and 2009 before moving into coaching.

"Up to the end of 2018 Floyd Reifer had been identified as the outstanding emerging local coach," Skerritt told a news conference in Antigua.

"He displayed this by leading the West Indies A team successfully, including victories against the England Lions, and ended the past year by coaching the Senior men's team to a T20 series win in Bangladesh."

England's Pybus replaced Australian Stuart Law in January. He guided the team to a test series win over England, while the ODI series against the top-ranked side ended 2-2.

Among other changes, Skerritt overhauled the selection panel, with Robert Haynes replacing Courtney Browne as interim head of selectors.

"We have found it necessary to immediately adjust our selection policy to become more open, inclusive, and player-centric," he said.

"I am therefore pleased to confirm that we have terminated the old embedded selection policy which secretly, but actively, victimised some players and banished them from selection consideration."

As part of the old selection policy, availability for domestic tournaments was a requirement to be picked for West Indies squads, but Skerritt said selectors would be allowed to pick all players who make themselves available.

Contractual disputes between players and CWI have weakened the team for several years, but Thursday's announcement could pave the way for players such as Keiron Pollard to return to the ODI fold for the first time since 2016. "Participating in a World Cup is a career defining experience for West Indian players and coaching staff," Skerritt said.

"We therefore believe it is strategically more beneficial for a West Indian coach with the proven skill sets to have this exposure at CWI's expense - rather than a foreign coach."

Twice winners West Indies open their World Cup campaign against Pakistan in Nottingham on May 31.



A file photo of Floyd Reifer. (Reuters)

### Bangalore rope in Steyn for injured Coulter-Nile in IPL

South Africa paceman Dale Steyn will replace injured Nathan Coulter-Nile of Australia at Royal Challengers Bangalore for the rest of the Indian Premier League season, the franchise announced Friday. The 35-year-old Steyn, who went unsold in the 2018 and 2019 auctions of the Twenty20 tournament, last played for the now defunct franchise Gujarat Lions in 2016. He had played 28 IPL matches for Bangalore between 2008 and 2010, claiming 27 wickets,

and is set bolster the flagging fortunes of the Virat Kohli-led side which has lost all their six games so far.

Steyn is expected to be available for selection from Bangalore's ninth league match against Kolkata Knight Riders on April 19. Coulter-Nile, who is suffering from a stiff back, had not joined the Bangalore team. Bangalore - placed bottom of the eight-team table - will take on Kings XI Punjab on Saturday.

## FOCUS

## 'Captain Cool' Dhoni fined for confronting umpires

Reuters  
Jaipur

Mahendra Singh Dhoni's uncharacteristic outburst against a controversial umpiring decision led to the Chennai Super Kings captain being fined 50 percent of his match fee in Thursday night's Indian Premier League (IPL) match in Jaipur.

Hailed as 'Captain Cool' during his trophy-laden years as India skipper, an unusually fired-up Dhoni stepped onto the field to remonstrate with umpire over a contentious no-ball call in a dramatic final over against Rajasthan Royals.

"MS Dhoni, the Chennai Super Kings captain, was fined 50 percent of his match fees for breaching the Indian Premier League's Code of Conduct during his team's match against Rajasthan Royals at Jaipur," the

league said in a statement. Confusion reigned in the last over after umpire Ulhas Gandhe signalled Ben Stokes' waist-high delivery a no ball but the decision was overruled by square-leg umpire Bruce Oxenford, prompting Dhoni to enter the field and confront the umpires.

The no ball was eventually deemed a legal delivery but Chennai, needing four runs off the last ball, managed to win with a last-ball six from Mitchell Santner. "MS was after some clarity and it didn't seem to be coming so he took the opportunity to go out and discuss it with the umpires. The rights and wrongs will be discussed by everybody," Chennai head coach Stephen Fleming told reporters.

"He was certainly fired up about the way the decision was handled and why it was overturned... and he wanted to get it clarified at a key moment?" Rajasthan's Jos Buttler was

not sure if Dhoni did the right thing in approaching the umpires. "Obviously tensions are running high in the IPL, every run counts and it was a big moment in the game," the Englishman said. "But whether stepping on to the pitch is right, no, probably not."

Former England captain Michael Vaughan was more outspoken in his criticism of Dhoni. "This is not a good look for the game," Vaughan tweeted. "No place at all for a captain to storm onto the pitch from the dugout."

The result took league leaders Chennai to 12 points from seven games, extending their lead over second-placed Kolkata Knight Riders to four points.

The IPL has continued to garner a larger audience with 345 million viewers in India tuning in over the first two weeks, a 14 percent increase from last year for the same period, broadcasters STAR Network said.



Chennai Super Kings cricketer and team captain MS Dhoni speaks with umpires during the IPL match against Rajasthan Royals at the Sawai Mansingh Stadium in Jaipur on Thursday. (AFP)

PREVIEW

# Mighty Warriors are gunning for more NBA playoff glory

'It is a good matchup geographically, but it is a hell of an opponent'

AFP  
Los Angeles

The top seeded Golden State Warriors face the first challenge in their quest for a NBA threepeat, which begins today against the Los Angeles Clippers.

The back-to-back league champions hope to use home court to their advantage when they open their first round playoff series against Clippers at Oracle Arena. Game two is Monday.

"This is what we have been waiting for and we know what is at stake," forward Klay Thompson said.

There is a sense among the Warriors they need to get the job done before Kevin Durant and Thompson's pending free agency this summer.

Golden State have a lot going for them - including winning the season series over the Clippers 3-1 and a 27-point blowout in their most recent contest.

The Warriors hardly broke a sweat in that game and it has been similar in the opening round where they have won 16 and lost just two games in the first round in the coach Steve Kerr era.

"It is a good matchup geographically, but it is a hell of an opponent," said Kerr.

Golden State finished the regular season with the top seed in the Western Conference after finishing with 57 wins and 25 losses.

The Warriors are making their seventh-straight playoff appearance, winning three NBA championships in the last four seasons (2015, 2017, 2018).

They have earned four consecutive NBA finals appearances since their return to the playoffs in 2013.

"I like where we are, I think everybody has their roles in place," said Durant.

"We established those in the last couple of weeks in the season."

"The last month of the season we really put our game into playoff preparation. We were thinking about it every game."

"We were trying to test the limits mentally to see how far we could take it in the regular season so we could get prepared for the playoffs."

The Warriors are a much different team than the one that



Golden State Warriors forward Kevin Durant passes the ball in front of Memphis Grizzlies forward Julian Washburn (right) in the first quarter of their NBA game at FedExForum on Wednesday. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

lost to the Clippers in the playoffs in 2014, the last time they failed to reach the finals.

Elsewhere, the Toronto Raptors are itching to exorcise some of their playoff demons when their path to a new playoff fate begins with the Orlando Magic.

When you think of the Raptors' recent playoff history what stands out the most is teams that failed to live up to expectations. They have two first round exits, two ousters in the league quarter-finals and one in the semis in the past five seasons.

The disappointing finishes resulted in coach Dwane Casey getting fired and led to the trade of DeMar DeRozan for Kawhi Leonard.

Leonard has proven to be an upgrade and new coach Nick

Nurse is looking better with a versatile and deeply talented team.

"They are playing very well. They are well coached," Casey said on Thursday of the Magic. "They don't turn the ball over. They don't give up rebounds. It is a good squad we are playing."

Leonard should be well rested having sat out 22 games in the regular season.

Forward Pascal Siakam has emerged as one of the league's most improved players and centre Marc Gasol was a key acquisition for Toronto from Memphis at the trade deadline.

The Magic head into the playoffs with plenty of confidence after an 11-2 surge to finish the season. They have

won 22 games and lost just nine since the beginning of February, which allowed them to vault past the Miami Heat and Detroit Pistons.

#### GRIZZLIES FIRE COACH BICKERSTAFF

The Memphis Grizzlies fired coach J Bickerstaff and demoted general manager Chris Wallace to a scouting position as part of a major management overhaul, the NBA team announced on Thursday.

"In order to put our team on the path to sustainable success, it was necessary to change our approach to basketball operations," chairman Robert Pera said in a statement.

"I look forward to a re-energized front office and fresh ap-

proach to Memphis Grizzlies basketball under new leadership, while retaining the identity and values that have distinguished our team."

Bickerstaff was promoted to interim head coach during the 2017-18 season after David Fizdale was fired and given the job permanently 11 months ago. The team went 15-48 under Bickerstaff in his first season and 33-49 this season.

Long-time GM Wallace and vice president of basketball operations John Hollinger were demoted to scouting and senior advisory roles.

Wallace had replaced Jerry West as Grizzlies general manager in 2007.

The Grizzlies also promoted Jason Wexler to president.

NHL

## Marner scores twice as Leafs surprise Bruins

AFP  
Los Angeles

Mitch Marner scored on a penalty shot in the second period as the Toronto Maple Leafs beat the mistake-prone Boston Bruins 4-1 in the opening game of their NHL playoff series on Thursday.

Marner, who finished with two goals, helped get the visiting Leafs playoff run off to a roaring start in the best-of-seven Eastern Conference series. "We know we got a quick team," said Marner. "We got pucks in their zone and made it hard on them. We tried to keep our game plan simple. We backchecked well made it hard for them to get to our net. They got a lot of firepower so we have to do it all game."

William Nylander and John Tavares also scored for the Maple Leafs, who lost in the first playoff round to Boston last season.

Patrice Bergeron scored the only goal for the Bruins, who couldn't get much offence from their top line of Bergeron, Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak.

Boston finished with the second-best record overall in the East but limped into the postseason by going 3-4 in their final seven games of the regular season. On Thursday they played sloppy defence, especially on offence in the Toronto zone by turning the puck over several times which led to a number of breakaways and odd-man rushes for the Leafs.

The Bruins took only 36 seconds to capitalise on the first power play of the game when Bergeron scored at 9:31 of the opening period but it was downhill from there.

Captain Zdeno Chara took his team's first penalty and allowed a puck to bounce off him for Marner's first goal.

Marner scored his second goal on a penalty shot at 2:47 of the second when he deked Boston goaltender Tuukka Rask. Boston's Jake DeBrusk mishandled the puck at the Toronto blue-line and Marner stole it for the breakaway.

But DeBrusk chased him down and tripped Marner at the last second which sent the Toronto forward crashing into the Boston goal and resulted in the penalty

shot. Toronto goaltender Frederik Andersen made 37 saves, while Rask stopped 29 shots for Boston.

#### CAPITALS STRIKE EARLY, HOLD OFF CANES' RALLY

Nicklas Backstrom scored two of Washington's three first-period goals, and the Capitals held off a late Carolina rally for a 4-2 victory over the visiting Hurricanes in Game 1 of their first-round Eastern Conference playoff series Thursday night.

The Capitals, who won the first Stanley Cup in franchise history last spring, took a 1-0 lead in the series with the victory. Game 2 is set for today afternoon in Washington.

Backstrom had multiple goals for the third time in his playoff career, coming just over three minutes apart in that opening period.

Alex Ovechkin also scored in the first period, and John Carlson notched a hat trick of assists, getting helpers on all three first-period goals.

That tied the NHL record for most assists in a period of a playoff game. Lars Eller added an empty-net goal, and goalie Braden Holtby finished with 27 saves. The Hurricanes outshot Washington 29-18.

The Capitals struggled on offense early, as Carolina slowed them through the neutral zone, but that eventually changed. Washington needed several minutes to get its first shot on goal.

Backstrom scored the first goal 9:58 into the period. He fired a long shot over the glove of goalie Petr Mrazek to give Washington a 1-0 lead.

Backstrom struck again on the power play just over three minutes later, thanks to a great pass from Evgeny Kuznetsov near the right boards. Backstrom took the pass, which made its way through traffic, and buried it from right in front.

Ovechkin then made it 3-0 with 1:55 left in the period, also on the power play. A loose puck got knocked around in front of the Carolina goal, bounced over to him, and he shot it past Mrazek.

#### RESULTS

Toronto 4-1 Boston  
Washington 4-2 Carolina  
Calgary 4-0 Colorado



Mitchell Marner of the Toronto Maple Leafs reacts after scoring a penalty against the Boston Bruins in the second period of their 2019 Stanley Cup playoffs game at TD Garden in Boston. (AFP)

MLB

# Cardinals crush Dodgers to complete sweep

Reuters  
Los Angeles

Jose Martinez had four hits and Matt Wieters drove in three runs as the St. Louis Cardinals completed a four-game sweep of the visiting Los Angeles Dodgers with an 11-7 victory Thursday afternoon. It was the Cardinals' first four-game sweep of the Dodgers in St. Louis since July 15-18, 2010.

Harrison Bader was hit by a pitch with the bases loaded twice in the game as the Cardinals reached their season high in runs scored without hitting a home run. It was just the fourth time since 1974 that a batter was hit by a pitch twice in a game with the bases loaded.

Enrique Hernandez hit a home run for the Dodgers, as did former Cardinals veteran David Freese and starting pitcher Walker Buehler, but Los Angeles twice gave up three-run leads. It was a far better day at the plate than on the mound for Buehler, who gave up five runs on five hits over four innings with two walks and five strikeouts.

Bader's two hit-by-pitch RBIs were not the Cardinals' only source of unconventional runs. He also scored from second base on a wild pitch in the second inning - following Jedd Gyorko, who was on the third and also scored on the play. Bader also scored a run in the fifth when Dodgers second baseman Max Muncy booted a routine ground ball.

In the sixth inning, Martinez scored from

RESULTS		
Cardinals	11-7	Dodgers
Red Sox	7-6	Blue Jays
Mets	6-3	Braves
Cubs	2-0	Pirates
Indians	4-0	Tigers
A's	8-5	Orioles
Mariners	7-6	Royals
Reds	5-0	Marlins
Giants	1-0	Rockies
Padres	7-6	D'backs

second when a Yimi Garcia pitch got past Dodgers catcher Rocky Gale, who then threw the ball into left field as Martinez was advancing to third. Not only did the Dodgers' Buehler struggle, but so did Cardinals starter Michael Wacha, as an anticipated pitchers' duel fizzled. Wacha gave up seven runs on eight hits over 3 2/3 innings with a walk and three strikeouts.

Dodgers reliever Pedro Baez (0-1) allowed five of the first six batters he faced to reach base as the Cardinals took the lead for good with a four-run fifth inning.

The Cardinals' offensive eruption came without Marcell Ozuna, Yadier Molina and Matt Carpenter in the starting lineup. Dodgers shortstop Corey Seager left the game in the fourth inning after he was hit by a Giovanny Gallegos pitch. Seager has a left ham-

string contusion. Gallegos (1-0) recovered to strike out three over 1 1/3 scoreless innings to earn the win. The Cardinals bullpen retired 14 consecutive batters before Justin Turner singled with two outs in the ninth inning.

#### FORMER MAJOR LEAGUE PITCHER SANDERSON DIES AT 62

Former major league pitcher Scott Sanderson, who won 163 games for seven different teams over a 19-year career died Thursday. He was 62. Sanderson's death was confirmed through an official at Conway Farms Golf Club in suburban Chicago, according to multiple reports. Sanderson was a member at the club. The cause of death was not known.

A native of the Chicago area, Sanderson pitched for both the Chicago Cubs and Chicago White Sox in a career that began in 1978. The right-hander helped the Cubs reach the playoffs in both 1984 and 1989. He also reached the postseason with Montreal in 1981 and Oakland in 1990. Sanderson posted a career 3.84 ERA over 472 appearances (407 starts). He broke into the major leagues with the Expos and made 136 starts with the club, fashioning a 56-47 record over six seasons with a 3.33 ERA. He moved on to the Cubs in 1984, going 42-42 with a 3.81 ERA in six seasons (160 games, 116 starts) on the North Side. His lone All-Star season came in 1991 as a member of the New York Yankees, when he went 16-10 with a 3.81 ERA. He also spent time with the California Angels (three seasons in two stints) and the San Francisco Giants (one season).



St. Louis Cardinals' Tyler O'Neill (left), Harrison Bader (centre) and Jose Martinez celebrate after their teams victory over the Los Angeles Dodgers at Busch Stadium. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

## CYCLING/PARIS-ROUBAIX

# Slovak superstar Sagan leads trio into cobbled 'Hell'

'I love Paris-Roubaix. It has a special place in my career as it is the only 'Monument' I have won'



Slovakia's cyclist of Bora team Peter Sagan (centre) rides with his teammates on cobblestone in Haveluy, near Wallers, northern France, on Thursday, during a reconnaissance ride ahead of the Paris-Roubaix road race. (AFP)

AFP  
Paris

Known as the Hell of the North, and widely regarded as cycling's toughest one-day race, the Paris-Roubaix will be hotly contested tomorrow with Slovak superstar Peter Sagan heading a trio of former champions in contention.

Mud, dust, treacherous patches of moss and 54 kilometres of roughly cobbled former mining roads mark out the 'Queen of the classics' as a treacherous day's riding meaning a quarter of the riders will never make it to the iconic Roubaix Velodrome finish line.

Tour de France champion Geraint Thomas, who declined an invitation this year having fallen early in 2018, told AFP some sections of the old mining roads

"look like a pile of stones someone threw off the back of a van".

Despite illness and a heavy fall in spring preparation, defending champion Sagan has been in the mix for several one-day races this season. He remains capable of repeating the type of sensational long-distance attack that brought him glory in 2018.

Some dislike his nonchalant style, but Sagan is also just the type of blood-and-guts 'puncher' who can remain calm on the body-battering cobbled sections, such as the storied Arenberg Forest, and pounce when seeing rivals wither in the hand-numbing conditions.

"He hasn't been on top form yet, but it's coming," Sagan's sports director at Bora-Hansgrohe Jan Valach said after the Tour of Flanders last weekend.

#### BELGIAN MENACE

Sagan will be backed by his

brother Juraj and a powerful duo of rollers in Marcus Burghardt and Daniel Oss in their seven-man outfit.

As the race has been won by a Belgian 56 times in its 117 editions, 2017 champion Greg Van Avermaet cannot be counted out as the classics specialist and reigning Olympic champion is also a man on full form.

"I love Paris-Roubaix," Van Avermaet declared on Thursday.

"It has a special place in my career as it is the only 'Monument' I have won," he said in reference to the great one-day classics which also include Strade Bianchi, Milan-San Remo, Liege-Bastogne-Liege and the Tour of Flanders.

"You cannot compare this race to any other race though," the CCC team captain insisted, pointing out the cobbled sections have a colossal impact.

"Anything can happen any

time you enter one of the 29 sections," he said of the old roads which are given a star rating of one to five depending on their danger and difficulty.

Van Avermaet however is lacking the kind of back up a bevy of riders in the Deceuninck-Quick Step team can count on.

The Belgian outfit have dominated the classics these past two seasons. Their strength in depth means they can generally place riders in the decisive sections.

This season the team send out Czech former cyclo-cross champion Zdenek Stybar as the main man after wins in the Omloop Het Nieuwsblad and the E3 Classic, but he is just part of a quartet of potential contenders Quick Step will mobilise as they follow their "best man on the day" strategy.

Germany's John Degenkolb won the race in 2015 and also emerged from the epic Tour de

France ninth stage from Arras to Roubaix in 2018, outsprinting Van Avermaet.

"Everybody said I was done," he said at the finish line.

"Well now you can see I'm not done."

Many pundits also tip Norway's Alexander Kristoff, who claims to be in the form of his life and in the past month won the Gent-Wegele and was third at the Belgian cobbled Monument the Tour of Flanders.

"A fall blew his chances last season," Kristoff's boss at the UAE Emirates Joxean Matxin said on Thursday. "But given how strong our team is here we are very optimistic."

Homage will be given to fallen rider Michael Goolaerts tomorrow. The 23-year-old suffered heart failure during the 2018 edition. A plinth has been erected at the 88km point where he was found stricken by the roadside.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Buchmann snatches Basque lead with stage five victory

AFP  
Madrid

Germany's Emanuel Buchmann took the overall lead in the Tour of the Basque Country on Friday by winning the fifth stage in Arrate.

Bora-Hansgrohe's Buchmann attacked on the penultimate ascent and held on to see off the challenge of Ion Izagirre (Astana), Adam Yates (Mitchelton-Scott) and Jakob Fuglsang (Astana).

The victory means Buchmann moves ahead of his teammate Maximilian Schachmann, who drops to third. Izagirre sits in second place, 54 seconds off the lead.

"Today was a really hard race," Buchmann said. "It was really fast in the peloton all day. There were three or four riders and I felt good."

"I thought everyone was tired and I tried hard with 20 kilometres to go, I held to the finish and now I am the leader."

"It is nice to be in the lead and I will try to defend it tomorrow. To win it would be incredible."

The six-stage race concludes on Saturday with a 118km ride that takes the peloton into the mountains around Eibar.

#### OVERALL STANDINGS

1. Emanuel Buchmann (GER/Bora) 16hrs 23min 30sec, 2. Ion Izagirre (ESP/AST) at 54sec, 3. Maximilian Schachmann (GER/BOR) 1:04, 4. Daniel Martin (IRL/UAE) 1:32, 5. Jakob Fuglsang (DEN/AST) same time, 6. Patrick Konrad (AUT/BOR) 1:55, 7. Adam Yates (GBR/MIT) 1:56, 8. Daniel Martinez (COL/EF1) 2:11, 9. Mikel Landa (ESP/MOV) 2:25, 10. Tadej Pogacar (SLO/UAE) s.t.

## FOCUS

## Wallabies star Folau fights for career



Australia's Israel Folau. (Reuters)

AFP  
Sydney

Wallabies star Israel Folau fought to save his career yesterday as he met with Australian rugby chiefs over a homophobia row that left him facing the sack just months before the World Cup.

The deeply religious 30-year-old held talks with Rugby Australia boss Raelene Castle, a day after she said she intends to fire him - barring mitigating circumstances - for posting on Instagram that "Hell awaits" homosexuals.

But the meeting with the NSW Waratahs fullback, who was embroiled in a similar controversy last year, did nothing to alter the governing body's stance. "Our joint position regarding Israel Folau is unchanged," Rugby Australia and the NSW Rugby Union said in a statement, adding that the two bodies will now "consider the next steps".

The Sydney Daily Telegraph said Folau was told his contract would be terminated but he is entitled to go through a

code of conduct hearing first, a route he will take in a bid to keep playing. Folau, who became Super Rugby's record try-scorer last week, is a dual international who began his career in rugby league, and there was speculation the sport could offer him a lifeline if he is kicked out of rugby union. But Australian Rugby League Commission chairman Peter Beattie said he had failed the sport's character test and would not get a contract.

"Israel Folau fails the NRL's inclusiveness culture, which is a policy strongly supported by the ARLC," Beattie told reporters. "The ARLC therefore would not support his registration to play National Rugby League."

Beattie acted swiftly as rugby league works to rebuild its own reputation after the new season was overshadowed by a string of sex and alcohol scandals. Folau, who has played 73 Tests and was seen as crucial for the Wallabies at this year's World Cup in Japan, posted on Wednesday that "Drunks, homosexuals, adulterers, liars, fornicators, thieves, atheists and idolators - Hell awaits you."

## RUGBY

# French clubs vote against foreign coach for national team

AFP  
Paris

French rugby clubs have opposed the idea of having a foreign coach for the national team, according to the results of a referendum released yesterday.

Just 900 of the 1,742 amateur clubs in France opted to take part in the vote, and 59 percent voted against the proposal, the French rugby federation (FFR) said, despite a disappointing 2019 Six Nations tournament and low expectations for this year's World Cup in Japan.

"I will respect this choice," said federation head Bernard Laporte, who has made handing power back to the clubs the motif of his bid for re-election as FFR chief in 2020.

Current France coach Jacques Brunel will step down after the World Cup and Laporte was keen

to test the potential grassroots support for a foreigner taking up the reins.

Laporte opened the debate in the wake of France finishing a disappointing fourth in this season's Six Nations, saying at the time that he had not ruled out appointing a first-ever foreign coach to replace Brunel, with France to host the next World Cup in 2023.

Laporte did not name any possible replacements for the 65-year-old Brunel, who has been in charge since 2017, but said he had "gone to meet the five best coaches in the world to offer them the job".

Among the names bandied around as potential candidates to replace Brunel were New Zealand duo Warren Gatland - who led Wales to this season's Six Nations Grand Slam - and current Ireland coach Joe Schmidt, as well as Australian Eddie Jones, presently at the helm of England.

France is alone among Europe's

leading rugby union nations in never having employed a foreign head coach. In the southern hemisphere, the All Blacks have always had a Kiwi coach and the Springboks always a South African, while Australia had ex-All Black centre Robbie Deans at the helm between 2008-13.

Argentina have had largely home-based coaches apart from brief separate spells when Jon Hart and Alex Wyllie, both New Zealanders, shared coaching duties with locals.

World Cup hosts Japan currently have ex-All Black Jamie Joseph as head coach, having appointed Frenchman Jean-Pierre Elissalde as their first foreign coach in 2005.

The result of the club's referendum caps a traumatic week for the FFR, which was on Monday ordered by an industrial tribunal to pay one million euros in compensation to sacked national coach Guy Noves.

Noves became the first France

coach ever to be fired, in December 2017, after a meagre seven wins from 22 matches alongside 14 defeats and a humiliating home draw with Japan. Under Noves, France lost six consecutive games between June and November 2017, a string of results Laporte deemed unacceptable.

Noves, who had been appointed by Laporte's predecessor Pierre Camou, was replaced by former Italy coach Brunel in time for the 2018 Six Nations.

Brunel, however, has failed to turn France's fortunes around, with just five victories from 16 games he has overseen.

French hopes for a good showing at the World Cup - where they have been drawn with England, Argentina, the United States and Tonga in a tough-looking Pool C - rest on the likes of up-and-coming Romain Ntamack and Antoine Dupont, who have steered Toulouse into the semi-finals of the European Champions Cup.



French Rugby Federation (FFR) president Bernard Laporte. (AFP)

FORMULA 1

# Bottas edges Vettel to set the pace in China

'We made it to the top of the timesheets but it's always difficult to find a good balance through an entire lap on this track'



Mercedes' Finnish driver Valtteri Bottas looks out from the garage prior to a practice session in Shanghai yesterday.

Reuters  
Shanghai

Valtteri Bottas edged out Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel at the Chinese Grand Prix yesterday with the fastest lap in practice for Formula One's 1,000th world championship race.

The championship leader, a point clear of Mercedes teammate Lewis Hamilton after two races, set a benchmark time of one minute 33.330 seconds in the afternoon.

The Finn was just 0.027 seconds clear of Vettel, who was fastest in the morning by a 0.207-second margin ahead of Hamilton.

"We made it to the top of the

timesheets but it is always very difficult to find a good balance through an entire lap on this track," said Bottas.

"Ferrari still seem to be quicker than us on the straights, whereas we were better in most corners in FP2 (the second session)."

Red Bull's Max Verstappen was third fastest in the afternoon, 0.221 seconds off Bottas' best, but the 21-year-old struggled with shifting gears and clutch issues throughout the session.

His Honda-powered team won in China last year, when they used Renault engines, with Australian Daniel Ricciardo.

Hamilton, the most successful driver by far around the 5.4-km Shanghai International

Circuit with five wins to date, ended the day fourth.

Ferrari arrived in China as favourites after looking dominant in Bahrain, a race they would have won but for a late engine problem that hit Charles Leclerc's car while leading, and with plenty of straight line speed.

Vettel led the opening session, and was hot on Bottas' heels in the afternoon, while Leclerc had a difficult day.

Both the 21-year-old Monegasque and Vettel are running a new electronic control package as a precaution against a repeat of Leclerc's engine problem.

The youngster's session ended early as he parked up in the garage with some 20 minutes to go so that Ferrari could carry out

cooling checks.

"We had to stop for further checks on something on the oil," said Leclerc. "We will check it but no big issues."

"I think it will be very close, Mercedes and also Red Bull are actually quite close, so it will be an interesting battle."

Hamilton was second fastest in the morning but struggled in the afternoon.

"We're going to work hard tonight to find some tweaks and hopefully come back stronger tomorrow," said the five-times champion. "The car has the pace in it to compete at the front, we just need to find the right set-up."

Nico Hulkenberg was fifth fastest for Renault, ahead of Carlos Sainz in the McLaren.

McLaren rookie Lando Norris, fresh from having scored his first Formula One points in Bahrain, was eighth for McLaren ahead of Renault's Ricciardo.

Red Bull's Pierre Gasly rounded out the top 10.

Yesterday's two sessions were relatively trouble free apart from a few spins as the drivers explored the limits and got to grips with the track.

Hamilton and Bottas both spun during the second 90 minutes while Canadian Lance Stroll lost control of his Racing Point at the exit of the final corner in the morning.

The brakes on Alex Albon's Toro Rosso also caught fire at the end of the session with Ferrari mechanics standing close by and helping to douse it.

BADMINTON

## Axelsen survives Christie scare in Singapore Open

AFP  
Singapore

Viktor Axelsen saved two match points before winning 22-24 21-18 24-22 against Jonatan Christie in a classic Singapore Open men's singles quarter-final yesterday, the Dane staying consistent at key moments to edge out his opponent.

The pair started the match with a 45-shot rally to set the tone for a roller-coaster opener that Christie captured after both men had wasted game points.

The great Dane then dug deep to level the contest with a smash on his third game point.

The athletic Christie appeared to take control of the decider but Axelsen refused to buckle and twice staved off elimination.

He sent a smash past the world number eight on a third match point of his own to set up a last four encounter against Japanese top seed Kento Momota.

While Christie came up short, his fellow Indonesian Anthony Sinisuka Ginting caused a major upset earlier in the day when he manufactured a brilliant 21-8 21-19 victory over China's Rio Olympic and two-time world champion Chen Long.

Ginting got off to a fast start and never looked back, punishing a lethargic Chen with a string of brutal smashes to his forehand side as the world number nine raced through the opening game and survived a late fightback to secure victory.

Momota struggled before seeing off India's Srikanth Kidambi 21-18 19-21 21-9, while defending champion Chou Tien-chen of Taiwan eked out a 21-10 15-21 21-15 victory over Sameer Verma, also of India, to set up a meeting with Ginting.

In women's singles play, Nozomi Okuhara and Akane Yamaguchi ensured it was a perfect day for Japan as both progressed with routine victories over former world number ones.

Okuhara led a procession of the top four seeds into the semi-finals by crushing India's Saina Nehwal 21-8 21-13, while Yamaguchi used her resilient defence to overwhelm Thailand's Ratchanok Intanon 21-13 21-17 to set up a showdown with Taiwanese top seed Tai Tzu-ying.

Tai recovered from a mid-match wobble to edge South Korea's Sung Ji-hyun 21-11 17-21 21-16 as Indian fourth seed P.V. Sindhu outlasted China's Cai Yanyan 21-13 17-21 21-14 to book her match with Okuhara.



Denmark's Viktor Axelsen hits a return against Indonesia's Jonatan Christie during their men's singles match at the Singapore Open badminton tournament yesterday.

MOTORCYCLING

## Marquez targets magnificent seven in Texas

AFP  
Austin

Marc Marquez returns to one of his favourite hunting grounds this weekend, the MotoGP world champion intent on extending his perfect record at the Grand Prix of the Americas to seven from seven.

The Spaniard has won at Austin from pole every year since its arrival on the calendar in 2013.

He turns up for tomorrow's race after a crushing 10-second success over arch-rival Valentino Rossi in Argentina.

That "perfect day" at Termas de Rio Hondo pushed Marquez up to the head of the championship standings with a four-point lead over Andrea Dovizioso before this third leg of the season.

Marquez, chasing a sixth world title in the elite division, is relishing the chance of another Texas triumph.

Austin "is one of my favourite tracks", he told his Honda team's website. "These counter-clockwise circuits always seem to suit my style the best."

But he was wary of not allowing his accomplishments in Austin to lead to any complacency.

"Although we have achieved a lot of success here in the past, we will work as we always do from free practice one and remain focused."

"Every year when you go to a track there are new things to un-

derstand and adapt to."

Dovizioso has a best place runner-up finish to his name in 2015. "Our aim is to once again be on the podium which would be almost like a win," said Ducati's Italian rider who was victorious in Qatar, adding the circuit "is not the best for us".

Marquez's new teammate, three-time former world champion Jorge Lorenzo, has had a tricky time of it since switching from Ducati.

Lorenzo fractured his rib in practice at the season-opening race in Qatar, before trailing in 12th in Argentina.

Despite his marriage to Honda getting off to a bumpy start, Lorenzo predicts a rosier future for the relationship.

"After the disappointment in Argentina I am ready to get back out on track and ride again."

"The result didn't show it, but we made good progress last time and we are understanding the bike more and more."

"When the conditions offer grip, I feel very strong on the Honda - the team and I just need more time riding to understand how to have this strong feeling when the grip is less."

Yamaha's evergreen 40-year-old Rossi is basking from his podium in Argentina when he burst past Dovizioso on the final circuit to snatch second.

"Tricky, difficult and technical" is how the heavily-decorated motorcycling veteran describes Austin.

OPINION

## Mick Schumacher very like his father, says Binotto

Reuters  
Shanghai

Ferrari team boss Mattia Binotto says he can see similarities between Mick Schumacher's approach to his recent Formula One test and how seven times champion father Michael used to go about racing.

Schumacher, 20 and a member of Ferrari's driver academy after winning the European F3 title last year, made his test debut with the Italian team in Bahrain this month. The outing came 15 years after Michael won the first Grand Prix in the Middle East at the same circuit for then-dominant Ferrari.

"I don't think he's looking very similar to Michael but the way he's behaving is very similar," Binotto, who worked closely with the champion during a golden era at Ferrari that ended in 2006, told reporters at the Chinese Grand Prix on Friday.

"The way he approaches the exercise and the way he's interested in the car, discussing it with the technicians," he added. So even in Maranello, you are looking after him but he's always in the workshop looking at the car, speaking with the mechanics, and I think that's very similar to his father." Schumacher senior, now 50, has not been seen in public since he suffered severe head injuries in a 2013 skiing



accident in the French Alps.

Mick was second fastest in the test, albeit on softer and quicker tyres than anyone else, and said he felt at home in the garage. Binotto said it was hard to assess the test because of the poor weather conditions that day and because performance had never been the aim.

"It was his very first day on an F1 car; more important for him still in the learning phase, day-by-day, is facing a completely new challenge in his F2 season," he said.

"I think what was certainly positive was the way he approached the exercise, the approach to the day of testing, never pushing to the limit, trying to improve run-by-run, learning the car, learning the team."

"I think in that respect he did a very good job: very well focused, concentrated and tried to do the proper job and learn. I think that's the most you may expect on such a day."

SPOTLIGHT

## Jubilee in Chinese: F1 celebrates the past

DPA  
Shanghai

Silverstone and Shanghai are separated by over 9,000 kilometres as the crow flies - and several decades of Formula One tradition.

More than a few people wished that the elite class of motorsport would celebrate its 1,000th race at the English venue, where everything began nearly 70 years ago on May 13, 1950.

"It is such an important part of Formula One history," said Bernie Ecclestone, the former long-term chief of the sport. "It would have been nice to recognise that."

The wish went unfulfilled as Silverstone will host the British Grand Prix in July. The organisers there were unwilling to move from the traditional date in July to an earlier spot in the race calendar.

"The weather there is also not good right now," conceded British world champion Lewis Hamilton.

Therefore Formula One will celebrate the 1,000th race jubilee not at its traditional English home but Shanghai, a mega-city with more than 20m inhabitants.

"It is one of the most exciting places for the future of Formula One," said current chief executive Chase Carey yesterday. The American replaced Ecclestone, who has since turned 88, in January 2017.

## VOLLEYBALL

# Al Rayyan retain Qatar Cup for third title of the season

'We knew that we needed to perform at a high level to beat Police. That's exactly what we did'

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**A**l Rayyan overcame Police resistance to retain Qatar Cup Volleyball title yesterday.

At the Qatar Volleyball Association (QVA) Indoor Hall, Rayyan took 105 minutes to clinch their third title of the season with a 3-1 (25-20, 23-25, 25-22, 25-17) win. They had earlier won the season-opening Super Cup and the Arab Club Championships in Tunis.

"We knew that we needed to perform at a high level to beat Police. That's exactly what we did. We pushed a bit through our service and had a strong attack," Al Rayyan Club coach Carlos Schwanke said.

**• We lost a bit of attack during the second set that we lost but recovered well to win the title. We're strong and on the right path. The next target here is the Amir Cup**

— Carlos Schwanke,  
Al Rayyan coach

He added: "We tried to find our own rhythm and upset Police with good block and defence. We lost a bit of attack during the second set that we lost but recovered well to win the title. We're strong and on the right path. The next target here is the Amir Cup."

This was Rayyan's 10th title in 11 events. It started from 2016-17 Amir Cup. The only title they missed during this period was the recently concluded QVA League that was bagged by Police.

In the first set, with the help of some solid defence, the defending champions went six points clear (12-6). Police came back strong and reduced the gap to two points (16-18). However, Al Rayyan sealed the set with Belal's winner. Police saved one set-point through John Chigbo's spike but they could not prolong the opener when Marcus pushed the ball down with force to put Al Rayyan 1-0 up.

A determined Police regrouped

in the second set to take an initial lead and later thwarted Rayyan's repeated attempts to equalize, before Mikko Oivanen set up the set-point with a power-packed smash. Willner Rivas went in with a kill to win the set.

Al Rayyan broke away early in the third set before Police again recovered, threatening many times to equalize. A fine show by Marcus put Rayyan in the lead again.

In the fourth set, Rayyan were 6-8 down, but they bounced back to make it 8-8 and then took a commanding 13-8 advantage. This set them on the course for another title as they were leading 18-10. Belal rose from the middle to set up the match point (24-15) and they did not have to wait much as Rychlicki blasted the winner to clinch the title.

For Rayyan, Rychlicki scored a match-high 22 points, while Marcus scored 14, Belal 12, Fawe Bairama 10 and Vukasinovic nine. For Police, Rivas led the scoring with 19 points. Nadir Abubakar secured 13 and Chigbo contributed 10.

QVA president Ali Ghanim al-Kuwari said Al Rayyan deserved the title, adding that they are the best team this season. He expressed his satisfaction about the level of performance the two teams offered in the final match, noting that Al Rayyan had a great season but the tournament was generally of high level.

Winners Al Rayyan pocketed QR300,000, while Police received QR200,000 for their second successive runners-up finish.



Al Rayyan players lift the Qatar Cup trophy in the presence of Qatar Volleyball Association (QVA) president Ali Ghanim al-Kuwari, QVA Board member Mohamed Salem al-Kuwari and other officials yesterday. PICTURES: Othman Khalid



Police received QR200,000 for their runner-up effort.



Action from the Qatar Cup final between Al Rayyan (in black and red) and Police (in blue and white).

## GOLF

# Molinari and Poulter share lead at Augusta

AFP  
Augusta, United States

**R**eigning British Open champion Francesco Molinari of Italy charged into the lead yesterday at the Masters as Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy began their second rounds at Augusta National.

An afternoon drama was set to unfold with a fistful of contenders within two shots on one of golf's greatest stages, playing receptive after early rain but still confounding many of the sport's top shotmakers.

Sixth-ranked Bryson DeChambeau shared the 18-hole lead with fourth-ranked US countryman Brooks Koepka after opening 66s and stayed atop the field through his front nine thanks to birdies at the par-5 second and eighth holes against bogeys at the seventh and ninth, when his approaches went over the greens.

But DeChambeau, whose best major finish in 10 starts was a share of 15th at the 2016 US Open, was undone at the par-4 10th, when he chipped over the green, pitched to 19 feet and missed his bogey putt, stumbling back to four-under.

That turned the lead over to European stars Molinari, who birdied the par-3 12th, and England's Ian Poulter, who birdied 12 and the par-5 13th. But Poulter stumbled to a bogey at the 14th and that left Molinari alone at the top.

Molinari, who opened Thursday on 70, birdied the par-4 third and left the front nine with back-to-back birdies.

The 36-year-old from Turin



Italy's Francesco Molinari hits off the bunker during the second round of the Masters in Augusta, United States, yesterday. (Reuters)

won his first major title at last year's British Open and went on to be Europe's hero at last year's Ryder Cup, going 5-0 in a victory over the United States in France.

Seventh-ranked Molinari, never better than 19th at the Masters, won last month's Arnold Palmer Invitational and was third in the WGC Match Play.

Poulter, a long-time European Ryder Cup star seeking his first major title in his 60th career major start, had a bogey-birdie start then reeled off nine pars before

his back-to-back birdies and bogey leaving "Amen Corner."

That left him in a share of third on five-under with Australian Jason Day and Koepka.

## Johnson red-faced after practice swing gaffe

American Zach Johnson accidentally struck his ball during a practice swing on the 13th tee during the second round of the Masters yesterday, producing the kind of cringe-worthy moment every golfer dreads. Johnson, giving his club a forceful swing through the air, clunked the ball into the marker, proving that even major champions can make silly mistakes. Luckily, the 43-year-old emerged unscathed — pride not withstanding — as no penalty was applied and he went on to birdie the 13th hole. The 2007 Masters champion was in the middle of the pack as he wound his way through the back nine, after scoring a 74 in the opening round.

Day had been a question mark after aggravating a back injury on Thursday.

Fourth-ranked Koepka, last year's US Open and PGA Championship winner who missed the 2018 Masters with a left wrist injury, slid from the lead with a roller coaster start — birdies sandwiched around a double bogey at the second when he found left trees off the tee and needed three strokes to escape the pines.

Bogeys at the par-3 fourth and sixth followed but a birdie at eight kept him only one adrift.

**MICKELSON'S 100TH**  
US left-hander Phil Mickelson, who would become the oldest major champion in golf history

with a win this week at age 48, played the front nine in par in his 100th career Masters round but a bogey at 10 dropped him back to four-under.

Mickelson birdied the second and bogeyed the fifth, then found trees left and right of the fairway on the way to a bogey at the par-5 eighth — only to respond by sinking a 13-foot birdie putt at the ninth.

Mickelson, a five-time major winner, is a few months older than Julius Boros when he set the current mark by winning the 1968 PGA Championship.

## TIGER AND RORY START

Woods, a 14-time major winner seeking his first major title since the 2008 US Open, and four-time major champion McIlroy, seeking a green jacket to complete a career Grand Slam, went off in the final two groups.

Woods, a four-time Masters champion, returned from spinal fusion surgery last year and contended in the British Open and PGA Championship as well as snapping a five-year US PGA title drought by taking the Tour Championship title.

At 12th in the world, Woods is the highest-ranked player this week to have won a green jacket, this marking the first Masters since rankings began in 1986 where no one in the top 10 has won at Augusta National.

McIlroy struggled with a 73 to start while Woods opened on 70, just as he did in his first three Masters triumphs.

A McIlroy victory would put the Northern Ireland star in elite company with a win in every major, joining Woods, Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player, Gene Sarazen and Ben Hogan.