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Warriors' title defence gets tricky after Durant injury

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GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

Kane hopes to be fit for Spurs' Final against Liverpool

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Lucas puts Spurs on the brink of glory

AFP
London

Lucas Moura came to Europe dreaming of winning the Champions League but few could imagine the Brazilian's chance to fulfil his ambition would arrive with Tottenham after he was discarded by Paris Saint-Germain.

Spurs will go to Madrid on June 1 to face Liverpool thanks to Lucas's second half hat-trick that turned around a 3-0 aggregate deficit against Ajax as the club reached the final for the first time in their history.

"The Champions League final is a dream for me. Since I was a child I dreamed of this moment and now I live this moment," said an emotional Lucas.

"We need to enjoy it. Look at me — it's the best moment in my life, my career."

Ajax's wonder kids had wowed the continent with their dazzling talent in eliminating Real Madrid and Juventus and seemed set to add the scalp of a jaded Tottenham to that list after 135 minutes of the tie.

In different circumstances Lucas would likely not even have been on the pitch. Harry Kane watched on from the sidelines due to ankle ligament damage, the latest injury to have ravaged Mauricio Pochettino's over-worked squad — Spurs have not signed a single player since Lucas's arrival in January 2018.

Yet after a season of ups and downs, Spurs will travel to the Spanish capital knowing they could be on the brink of the greatest night in the club's history.

"Without Harry Kane many people were talking about Son (Heung-min), but today it was Lucas Moura who scored three goals," said Pochettino, who broke down in tears after the match in Amsterdam.

"That showed that the team is more important than any name. When one does not play, another plays."

Lucas's former employers PSG would do well to remember that piece of advice as their star-studded approach to try and buy

European glory continues to fail. The world-record signing of Neymar for 222mn euros (\$248mn) saw Lucas jet-tisoned from Paris for a fraction of that fee, yet in the course of 40 minutes in Amsterdam he scored as many Champions League semi-final goals as Neymar has in his career.

"All the credit goes to Lucas because he has made history for the club. He deserves it because he just has an incredible mentality and I think it's a nice story of revenge for him," said Tottenham and France captain Hugo Lloris.

"He showed this evening that if you score a hat-trick in these circumstances you don't do so just by chance.

"He has the quality and the mentality and he can flourish with us, which is all the better for us."

Pochettino branded Lucas a "superhero" but must also take much of the credit for the transformation of the club over five years and his team over 45 minutes.

When the Argentine arrived in north London in 2014, just qualifying for the Champions League was the target.

Barring a final day collapse in the Premier League, next season will involve a fourth consecutive campaign dining at Europe's top table and they could even win it in just over three weeks' time.

Pochettino's half-time change to throw on the physical presence of Fernando Llorente up front unsettled Ajax and the visitors' preyed on that weak spot, with an aerial bombardment.

With 95 minutes come and gone, so seemed Spurs' hopes, but one last long ball up to the Spaniard was flicked on and found its way to Lucas to launch a dagger into Ajax hearts.

"It was not simply Lucas Moura's nervelessness when it counted most, and his pace, skill and clinical finishing," wrote *The Times*.

"It was Moura's utter determination to run at Ajax defenders, including the revered captain (Matthijs) De Ligt, that gave Spurs hope."

Hope that has carried the 26-year-old and his team all the way to Madrid.



Tottenham's Lucas Moura celebrates scoring their third goal to complete his hat-trick with Dele Alli (R) on Wednesday.

BOTTOMLINE

Mick Schumacher says his 'extraordinary' father remains his greatest inspiration

By Giles Richards
The Guardian

Mick Schumacher has said his father Michael remains his greatest inspiration as he attempts to emulate the career of the seven-time Formula One world champion.

Schumacher, 20, will be racing in the Formula 2 series at this weekend's Spanish Grand Prix after joining the Ferrari driver academy this year — the team for whom his father won five of his world championships — as he pursues his ambi-



tion of competing in Formula One.

When asked which drivers he looked up to on the current grid, the 20-year-old was open minded and instead chose to specifically reference his father, who remains in recovery after a skiing accident in 2013. "I can learn from everyone," he said. "There is no one person I will go to and talk to and try to be as him, the one person I would want to be is my dad."

He added that while it was difficult to watch his father's races, they were motivational. "It's never easy," he said. "What my dad did was extraordinary. I appreciate it more every day."

Michael Schumacher won five con-

secutive championships for Ferrari between 2000 and 2004 and Mick revealed his father's close involvement in his racing began when he was a child. "I was three years old. I had a go-kart that my dad had on a leash so I would not go too quick."

Schumacher Jr began karting in 2008, graduated to single-seaters in German Formula 4 in 2015 and has since made steady progress. He spent two seasons in F3, winning the title last year before signing to the Ferrari driver academy in January. Speaking in Barcelona it was clear that he shared his father's love of, and commitment to, the sport. "It is a passion; we love doing it; we love the competition; we

want to see who is the best at it," he said.

"Trying to find the limit of yourself and the limit of the car and sometimes to exceed it and see the real limit. If you find that sweet spot and are able to repeat it, it is one of the best feelings. If you do a good lap you know it is a good lap, if you get that feeling it is addictive, you want more and more." Schumacher, is racing for the Prema team in F2 this season. He finished eighth and sixth in the opening two races in Bahrain but had a more difficult meeting in Baku, spinning out of the first race.

"It was a mistake that was going to happen someday," he said. "I have learned from it. It won't happen again hopefully and I will

take that as a lesson and try and grow from that." He is currently ninth in the championship and is eager to use every possible avenue open to him to improve. He revealed that he enjoyed watching races from previous years to ascertain the best strategies and overtaking possibilities, an attention to detail for which his father was famous.

He is also using his Ferrari connection to the best effect.

"We have very close communication with engineers and the drivers are very helpful too," he said, "Seb [Vettel] and Charles [Leclerc] for example, they talk with us and give us tips."

SPOTLIGHT

'All worth it' – Pochettino after years of pain

In England, the phrase to do a Spurs' was never a good thing, but that has changed



Tottenham manager Mauricio Pochettino, Ben Davies, Fernando Llorente and Erik Lamela celebrate after the match on Wednesday.

AFP
Amsterdam

Seemingly already down and out of the Champions League back in October, and at risk of missing out on next season's competition during a recent slump in results, now Mauricio Pochettino and Tottenham Hotspur find themselves, improbably, through to the final.

"No pain, no gain" was the phrase an emotional Pochettino used after Wednesday's stirring comeback to beat Ajax 3-2 in the second leg of their semi-final in Amsterdam, a Lucas Moura hat-trick taking Spurs through on away goals.

But, he added, reverting to Spanish, "it was all worth it" with an all-English showdown against Liverpool to come in the biggest club game of all in Madrid on June 1, just two months after the opening of a new stadium which Spurs had been hoping

would propel them to the next level.

When Pochettino spoke of "pain", he was not simply referring to this season, but to the five years since he arrived in north London from Southampton, a period in which he has fought to establish Spurs as a top-four force in the Premier League and regulars in the Champions League.

In England, the phrase "to do a Spurs" was never a good thing, but that has changed.

"To have brought the club to the final of the Champions League is very close to a miracle," Pochettino said at the Johan Cruyff Arena on Wednesday.

"No-one believed in us at the beginning of the season, we are so close, almost in the top four and the 1st of June in Madrid playing the final against Liverpool.

"I think this amazing season in our new home and this chapter that we are going to close now – to close the chapter playing a fi-

nal, and if we win, it would be an amazing book."

Doubts were raised about Tottenham's capacity to maintain a challenge at home, never mind abroad, after they failed to make any new signings last summer while so many of their leading players had been involved at the World Cup to the end.

Indeed, Lucas remains their last new signing, bought from Paris Saint-Germain in January 2018.

They lost their first two Champions League group games and, after a 2-2 draw at PSV Eindhoven left them with one point from nine, they seemed dead and buried. However, they scraped through, then ousted Borussia Dortmund, edged out Manchester City in an epic quarter-final, and now they have beaten Ajax, coming back from 3-0 down on aggregate and with their talisman, Harry Kane, out injured.

"This year has been crazy – and not just for us – but already after three matches in the group

stage we were practically eliminated and now we find ourselves in the final," said goalkeeper Hugo Lloris.

Spurs' achievement has certainly come against the odds, but at the same time it is a confirmation of their new status as one of the game's leading powers.

They climbed into the top 10 of the most recent Deloitte Football Money League, just behind bitter rivals Arsenal, with revenue of 428.3m euros (£369m, \$479m) last year.

They recently announced a world-record net profit of £113m, although the cost of their new, 62,062-seat stadium rose above £1bn. The possibilities for the future are endless.

Tottenham's recent Premier League form has been poor, but their advantage over fifth-placed Arsenal heading into Sunday's final round of matches is such that they will surely finish in the top four again.

It will be a fourth straight top-four finish after just two in the

previous 25 years.

This is their third consecutive Champions League campaign. Previously, they had enjoyed just one, reaching the last eight in 2010-11, along with an appearance in the European Cup semi-finals in 1961-62.

They are now through to their fifth European final, their first since winning the UEFA Cup in 1984.

Since lifting the FA Cup in 1991, the day Paul Gascoigne shattered his knee in a reckless challenge, Spurs' only success has come in the League Cup.

Now Liverpool stand between them and Champions League glory. Tottenham have won just one of their last 14 matches against the Anfield side.

"Leave me to relax a little bit. There will be time to talk about Liverpool," said Pochettino.

"They are heroes too, and of course it's going to be an amazing final between two English teams that for sure we are going to enjoy a lot."

REACTION

'The fairytale ends': Dutch mourn Ajax loss

AFP
The Hague

Dutch media yesterday lamented the "insane ending" to Ajax's improbable Champions League campaign after Tottenham's last minute semi-final win.

Newspapers sought the positives in the Amsterdam team's return to the front rank of European football after wins over giants Juventus and Real Madrid, but were overwhelmed by the heartbreak of the loss.

Several papers carried the iconic image of Ajax players in their red and white jerseys stretched out in despair on the grass after Spurs' Lucas Moura sealed a last-gasp hat-trick to win 3-2 on the night. That put Spurs through on away goals following a 3-3 aggregate result.

De Telegraaf newspaper screamed the front-page headline "Disappointment" while Volkskrant newspaper said "Just No" with both running photos of Moroccan player Hakim Ziyech.

"After the heyday in the seventies and nineties, Ajax is surfing on a new wave of success," Daniel Dwarswaard wrote in the Algemeen Dagblad newspaper.

"But the crown on the work is not there. It will feel like an extremely missed opportunity forever, and scar for years," he added. "An insane ending ruined everything."

Many newspapers used the same language to describe the "buttock-clenching" tension as Ajax let their lead slip away.

Bart Vlietstra in Volkskrant said that "the fairytale ended for Ajax in sight of the final", blaming a "tsunami of attack

waves" by Tottenham.

However he said that "Ajax can look back on a great European campaign, one of the most awesome in the club's history" – and one that could scarcely have been dreamed about at the start of the season.

"There was nothing good about Ajax, just a year ago," wrote Vlietstra, with the team having to go through qualifying to play in the Champions League, the Dutch Eredivisie having lost its automatic spot.

The NRC newspaper said that the "dream exploded in the final minutes" but said that the result should be put into a "broader context".

Writer Bart Hinke said that assumptions that a Dutch club had nothing to expect from the Champions League "even with the outcome that followed Wednesday evening, can be put into the trash."

"Johan Cruyff should have experienced this," he wrote, referring to the legendary player and coach whose name the Ajax stadium now bears.

The question now is what becomes of a squad that, created with a successful youth academy and clever recruitment, is now set to lose key players to giants like Barcelona over the summer.

Dutch papers also worried that the Ajax campaign may be a false dawn, noting the gulf with lower placed teams including PSV Eindhoven and Feyenoord, and the shame of the national side's failure to make the 2016 Euros and 2018 World Cup.

"The question then is: has the Dutch football crisis now been tackled? That seems a somewhat premature conclusion," wrote Jan-Cees Butter in Trouw newspaper.

FOCUS

Beckham banned from driving

AFP
London

Former England footballer David Beckham was yesterday disqualified from driving for six months after using his phone while behind the wheel.

The 44-year-old had previously admitted the offence after being spotted by a member of the public as he drove his Bentley in London on November 21.

At Bromley Magistrates Court, south of London, Beckham was given six penalty points on his licence, fined £750 (868 euros, \$975), and ordered to pay £100 to prosecution costs and a £75 surcharge fee.

District Judge Catherine Moore said he already had six points on his licence for previous speeding matters, meaning he reached the 12-point limit which triggers a disqualifi-

cation. The ex-Manchester United and Real Madrid player was present in court. Wearing a dark grey suit and tie, he spoke to give his full name, date of birth and address.

Prosecuting lawyer Matthew Spratt said he had been photographed by a member of the public as he held his phone while driving in "slowly moving traffic".

Defence lawyer Gerrard Tyrrell said Beckham was travelling slowly and has "no recollection of the day in question or this particular incident".

He added: "There is no excuse for what took place but his view is as he cannot remember... he's going to plead guilty and that's what he's done."

Last year, Beckham drew criticism after avoiding a charge of speeding because of a technicality.

He accepted he drove at 59 miles (95 kilometres) per hour in a 40mph zone in London in January 2018.

BOTTOMLINE

Kane hopes to be fit for Tottenham's final

AFP
Amsterdam

Harry Kane says he is on course to be fit for Tottenham's Champions League final clash with Liverpool after the England captain joined his team's celebrations following their astonishing victory over Ajax.

Kane is recovering from an ankle ligament injury, but he was watching from the stands in the Johan Cruyff Arena as Tottenham recovered from 2-0 down to win 3-2 in the semi-final second leg on Wednesday.

The incredible comeback sent Tottenham through to their first Champions League final and Kane is confident he will be ready to feature when Mauricio Pochettino's men face Liverpool in Madrid on June 1.

"We'll see. So far so good, so if it carries on as it should I would hope to be. There's still a few weeks to go," Kane told



Tottenham's Harry Kane celebrates after the match on Wednesday.

BT Sport. "Rehab is going well. I start straight line running this week which is why I was OK to run on at the end.

"We beat Man City and Ajax so I have to start training even harder to prove myself to the gaffer."

Kane has been sidelined since sustaining his latest ankle injury in a challenge on Manchester City's Fabian Delph in the quarter-final first leg on April 9.

But Pochettino did not want to comment when asked about Kane's fitness with the last question of his post-match press conference, throwing his arms in the air as he left the room.

Tottenham's Premier League form has dipped without their leading scorer, although they should still secure a top-four finish in their last domestic game of the season against Everton on Sunday. Pochettino's team have reserved their best performances without Kane for the Champions League, much to the delight of the 25-year-old.

Kane, who has 24 goals this season,

sprinted on the pitch at full-time in Amsterdam, hugging Pochettino and embracing his teammates as they cavorted in front of the jubilant Tottenham fans high in the stands.

Revealing Tottenham's fightback was inspired by strong words at half-time, Kane said: "It was amazing. It was a disappointing first half and we let them play. I went into the dressing room at half-time and we knew it wasn't good enough.

"We said we had 45 minutes to give everything. When Lucas Moura scored the two you thought we would get another but then Jan Vertonghen hit the crossbar and we thought it might not be our day.

"I'm a fan first and foremost and I know how much it means to the club. The lads dug deep and showed passion and that is all you can ask for.

"We had to wait to get the third in the last minute and we found a way. That is what football is about and we have the final to come."

SPOTLIGHT

Man City on brink of title as epic race nears climax

It is possible they could get by with a draw, or even an unlikely defeat, as they will start their final game one point ahead – but Pep Guardiola's side know better than to expect gifts from Merseyside

Reuters
London

Having absorbed everything Liverpool could throw at them in a titanic title battle, Manchester City will retain their crown with victory at Brighton and Hove Albion on Sunday.

It is possible they could get by with a draw, or even an unlikely defeat, as they will start their final game one point ahead – but Pep Guardiola's side know better than to expect gifts from Merseyside.

In all likelihood City will rack up a 14th successive Premier League win and Liverpool will beat Wolverhampton Wanderers to make it nine in a row and City will take the honours with 98 points to Liverpool's 97.

To put that into perspective those totals would be the second and third highest in the history of the Premier League – behind only City's record-breaking 100-point haul last season when Guardiola delivered his first title.

If there was ever a case to share the trophy it is this season, such has been the excellence of both clubs.

Juergen Klopp's Liverpool finished 25 points behind City last year, but rose to the challenge and have bridged that gap playing football that at times has surpassed even the dazzling standards of Guardiola's side.

Liverpool have lost just once

Liverpool to lift replica if they win Premier League

Liverpool: If Liverpool upset the odds and pip Manchester City to the Premier League title on Sunday, the silver trophy they lift for the first time will not be the original but a replica. The Times reported yesterday, Liverpool trail Manchester City by a point ahead of the final day of the season, when they host Wolverhampton Wanderers while the league leaders travel to Brighton and Hove Albion knowing a win will make them champions.

gen Klopp's side win the title. The replica is used by the Premier League and often on display in television studios and on promotional tours. The original, which has been at City's Etihad Stadium since they won it last year, will be shipped to Brighton for Sunday's game. League winner's medals will also be made available at both stadiums and any player who has made at least five appearances this season will receive one. That is currently 21 players at City, 19 at Liverpool. Liverpool have been English league champions 18 times but their last title came in 1990 before the Premier League was formed.

to City's four defeats and were briefly seven points in front in January, but in the run-in they have found that as well as the style that is Guardiola's blueprint, his team also have core of steel.

That manifested itself perfectly on Monday when, with Leicester City holding out at the Etihad Stadium, captain marvel Vincent Kompany thumped home a 30-metre screamer to send his side into the final day with their fate in their hands.

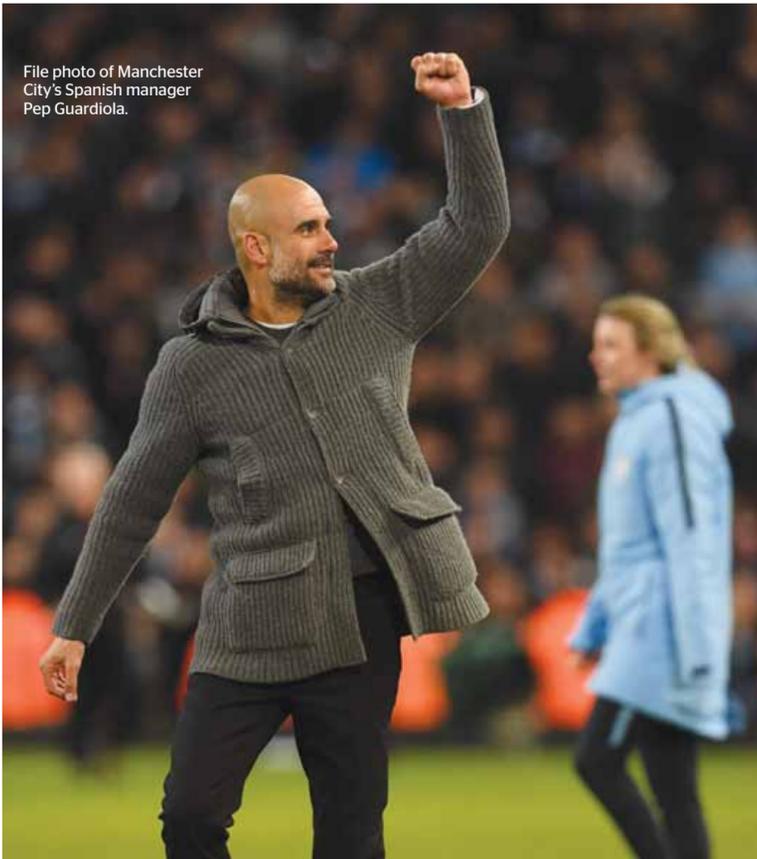
It was their third 1-0 victory in four games and, say what you like about Liverpool's armour-plated defence, City have conceded only three times in their last 13 games as they relentlessly went about becoming the first club to re-

tain the Premier League title since Manchester United 10 years ago.

Liverpool captain Jordan Henderson admitted his side need a "miracle" to win the title now, but in a week in which they performed one to beat Barcelona 4-0, overhauling a three-goal deficit to reach the Champions League final, it would be folly to dismiss the notion of him raising the trophy aloft to end Liverpool's 29-year wait since they last reigned supreme.

"City are a great team, but so are we. We've competed right to the very end," Henderson said.

"Whoever gets it will deserve it. From our point of view, we couldn't have done any more."



File photo of Manchester City's Spanish manager Pep Guardiola.

FOCUS

Sixty percent of Amir Cup final tickets sold

Around 60 percent of the Amir Cup final tickets have been sold, Qatar Football Association (QFA) said yesterday. This was disclosed at a technical co-ordination meeting overseeing the Amir Cup semi-finals to be played tomorrow and on Sunday.

Khalid al-Kuwari, Marketing and Communications Director of QFA, said the meeting was called to confirm all preparations are in place ahead of the two semi-finals.

The meeting was attended by Ali Hassan al-Salat, Head of Communication Department, Ali Hammoud al-Nuaimi, Head of Competitions Department, as well as representatives of clubs Ahmed al-Ayidi, Jassim al-Ali, Ismail Ahmed, al-Marri and Ministry of Interior officials.

Al-Kuwari said 60 percent of the tickets for the Amir Cup final – to be played at Al Wakrah Stadium on May 16 – had been sold. The remaining tickets could be bought during the semifinals later this week, he added.

In the first semi-final, Al Sadd will host Al Rayyan at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium tomorrow while in the other last-four clash, Al Sailiyah face Al Duhail at the same venue the next day.

Officials at the meeting encouraged fans to turn up in large numbers to support their chosen teams. The officials also confirmed all media preparations have also been completed.

"The discussions we all had were very useful. Our detailed discussions reflect QFA's thorough readiness for the last three matches of the season," al-Kuwari said. "We wish all clubs the very best," he added.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Faria credits ground training Duhail's progress



Duhail's coach Rui Faria speaks to his players during the AFC Champions League group C football match against Iran's Esteghlal in Tehran on May 6.

AFC
Tehran

Al Duhail coach Rui Faria credited work on the training ground for his side's qualification to the 2019 AFC Champions League Round of 16 after a 1-1 draw against Esteghlal at Azadi Stadium on Monday.

The Qatari side needed a single point from their trip to Tehran to book their place in the next stage, and they got exactly that. Roozbeh Cheshmi put Esteghlal in front in the 53rd minute, but Al Duhail responded within two minutes thanks to Edmilson's maiden AFC Champions League goal.

"We worked hard in training in the build up to this match and it showed with our display on the pitch and the way we imposed our football on the opponents," said the 43-year-old. "We deserved to walk away with the three points, but we are satisfied with the result since it means we qualify to the next round."

Al Duhail's previous visit to Azadi Stadium saw them lose 3-1 to Esteghlal's arch-rivals, Persepolis. But the experience helped Faria's men prepare better this time around.

"We knew they would be backed by a huge, enthusiastic crowd at Azadi Stadium. We were fully aware it would be a difficult game. Every match in this group has been difficult. We studied Esteghlal well and put plans in place to counter the challenges their playing style poses, and I am pleased we were able to qualify," he said.

Last year, Al Duhail matched the AFC Champions League record of nine consecutive wins, before bowing out at the quarter-finals. And while a repeat of such a record is not possible this time around, Faria believes his side can move to another gear come the knock-out stages.

"We are looking forward to the next stage of the competition. I am optimistic that we can show a different side to our game as we continue to work hard and get the results we require," he said.

WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

Neville plots glory for England

AFP
London

England manager Phil Neville has hailed the ongoing revolution in the women's game as he fine-tunes his preparations for the World Cup in France.

The women's boss named his squad on Wednesday for the tournament that starts on June 7, with sports stars, musicians and even Football Association president Prince William announcing the 23-strong group player by player via social media.

Neville, whose team are grouped with Scotland, Argentina and Japan, said it was a "special period for women's football" as he talked about finding the balance between growing the game and winning matches.

"It's been a constant learning curve for me over the last 16 months because ultimately we're in a cut-throat win business and going to this World Cup wanting to win," he said.

"There is a development, a growth that we need to keep pushing," he added.

"I need to keep exposing my players to the things that we ask them to do in terms of social media stuff, the coaching in schools, the media stuff that they're doing at the moment."

"I can say from day one 'I don't want my players doing anything' but that's not going to help growth, that's not going to help get women's football visible so I've had to adapt my management."

The England boss said the best way to inspire the next generation of players would be to win in France and he believes he has a good mix of experience and youthful zest.



The younger players, in common with those in England's men's team, show a fearless streak in their approach to the game, added Neville, whose side open their campaign against Scotland in Nice on June 9.

"They get given a lot in terms of coaching, psychological help, technical, tactical, everything is there for them to help them perform on the field," Neville said.

"So I think what you're getting now is a more confident younger player."

He said older players had faced much tougher challenges.

"I remember sitting down with Fara (Williams, who is not in the squad), I think it was in Bosnia and she was telling me about some of the things she had to put up with," he said.

"Jill Scott tells the same things about having no balls, bibs, no pitches, being treated so badly."

Neville does not shy away from openly stating his ambitions for his team, ranked third in the world, and rejects the neces-

sity of playing down expectations.

"The big occasion, full house, Nice, Scotland, millions watching back home on the BBC," he said.

"You speak to those senior players. They will say 'this is what we dreamed about when we went to those park pitches, when we had no balls and we had no coaches'."

"We wanted to get to this stage in women's football and now we're here we can't be fearful of it, we can't be scared of it and we've just got to charge forward."

BOTTOMLINE

Draws for AFC U-19 and U-16 Qualifiers held

AFC
Kuala Lumpur

The draw for the AFC U-19 and U-16 Championship 2020 Qualifiers was held at the AFC House in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. In the U-19 tournament, 2014 winners and

2018 semi-finalists Qatar are slotted in Group B along with Sri Lanka, Turkmenistan and Yemen.

The teams were divided into two zones of West (West + South + Central) with 25 teams and East (East + ASEAN) with 21 teams.

Top spot in the respective groups will earn direct qualification, while the four

best second-placed teams will also advance to the 2020 Finals.

Should the yet to be determined host for the Finals finish either top of their group or among the best four second-placed teams, the next (5th) second-placed team in the ranking among all groups will qualify instead. The Qualifiers will be played on November 2-10, 2019.

For the U-16 Championship, Qatar, who were the hosts of the inaugural Finals in 1985, will welcome Yemen, Bangladesh and Bhutan in Group E. Groups with five teams will kick-off the 2020 Qualifiers on September 14, followed by the groups of four teams on September 18, with all ending on the 22nd.

CRICKET/ASHES

Vaughan will be 'staggered' if Archer misses out

Archer is only three games into an international career that started last week

AFP
London

Michael Vaughan says he will be "staggered" if rising star Jofra Archer plays no part in this season's Ashes series even though the fast bowler has yet to make his Test debut for England.

Barbados-born Archer is only three games into an international career that started last week, with just two one-day internationals and a Twenty20 in England colours to his credit.

But such has been the Sussex pacer's impact, particularly his ability to bowl at 90mph (145kmh) without apparent strain, that Vaughan is convinced he should feature in the Ashes, as well as the upcoming 50-over World Cup, even though the Test series does not start until August 1.

"I would be absolutely staggered if he's not taking part in the Ashes series as well as the World Cup," Vaughan told reporters in London yesterday at the launch of the 2019 NatWest No Boundaries campaign, which aims to increase access to cricket.

"He's just got a gift and when you get that kind of quality you have to get those players involved in all formats of the game," the former England captain added.

"He'll win England World Cup games, he'll win them T20 games and I'm very, very confident that he'll have a big say in winning Test matches this summer as well as down the years."

Joe Root, the current England Test captain, was understandably more guarded when asked about Archer's Test prospects. "When you watch him play in these games, you are always looking towards the Ashes," he said.

"It will be interesting to see how he develops throughout these games and how



England's Jofra Archer.

he handles everything but so far I think he's been fine." Vaughan acknowledged that Root, in his position as skipper, had to be more guarded as he thinks ahead to the five-match series against Australia.

"He's outstanding," said Vaughan. "He's different, he plays cricket in the way I wished I could have played the game in terms of mentality."

"You speak to any psychologist and they will say 'you've just got to play another game'. It's very difficult at the highest level, there's just too much going on

in people's minds," the former top-order batsman added.

"I see no reason, whether it's another game for the Hobart Hurricanes, the Rajasthan Royals to England in coloured clothes, to putting the whites on and playing Test match cricket — he bowls 90mph, he's got the skill levels."

"He (also) bats, he fields like a gun. He'll be playing Test cricket soon."

"I will drive personally to Sheffield and drag him (Root) out of bed if he (Archer) is not involved in some stage during the

Ashes." His words were endorsed by Test veteran Stuart Broad, whose new-ball partnership with James Anderson has long been the cornerstone of England's red-ball attack.

"He's quick, he's exciting," said Broad, whose 126 Tests have yielded 437 wickets at an average of under 30, of the 24-year-old Archer.

"His action is repeatable. He's got great rhythm to his run-up, he generates effortless pace, has got control and bounce. He's got all the attributes to succeed."

OPINION

England's Bairstow picks W Cup glory over Ashes victory

Reuters
London

England batsman Jonny Bairstow said he would rather win the 50-over World Cup than the Ashes series against Australia if he was given the chance to claim only one.

World Cup returns to England and Wales after 20 years and Bairstow said England deserved to win their maiden title after all the hard work they had put in over the past two years to become the number one ranked one-day team.

"I am going (to pick the) World Cup because it's been so long since we've had an opportunity to win one," Bairstow told Sky Sports.

"I think that the amount of work that has gone into this group of players over the last couple of years, building and building, I firmly believe we've put an amount of effort in that gives us the best chance."

"Guys have worked day in, day out, taking their games to places that they weren't at 18 months,

two years ago. That's from the vision Morgs (England captain Eoin Morgan) has had and the way we are playing our one-day cricket."

Bairstow also credited the Indian Premier League (IPL) for sharpening his skills and improving his form ahead of the World Cup.

The 29-year-old scored 445 runs in 10 matches at an average of over 55 for the Sunrisers Hyderabad franchise, forming a formidable opening partnership with Australia's David Warner.

"You go to the IPL to develop your skills, to put them up against the best in the world," Bairstow, who smashed one century and two half-centuries during the tournament, said.

"We saw Jos (Buttler) coming back into the Test side last summer after a brilliant IPL. The competition over there can only improve your skills. I genuinely think I'm still learning and improving."

England begin their World Cup campaign on May 30 when they take on South Africa at The Oval in London. The first of five Ashes tests begins on Aug. 1.

CA hails players' post-scandal conduct

Sydney: Australian cricketers' once-notorious behaviour has significantly improved amid attempts to clean-up the game's culture after the ball-tampering scandal, Cricket Australia said yesterday. The men's national team had no conduct citations during 2018-19 season, the first clean sheet in seven years, and code of conduct charges at all levels dropped 74%, CA chairman Earl Eddings said.

"Everyone in Australian cricket is well aware that it's not just winning that counts, but how we play the game, and the players have certainly embraced that spirit," Eddings said.

He said umpires had also reported they were being accorded more respect from players as the new, less abrasive culture beds in.

CA's bid to shed the "ugly Australian" image comes after cricket's standing in the sports-mad nation reached its lowest ebb last year when players cheated by trying to alter the ball with sandpaper in a Test against South Af-

rica in Cape Town. In the fallout, three top players received lengthy bans, the national coach quit and numerous CA officials left the organisation. An independent review commissioned by CA, slammed cricket's "arrogant" culture, criticising both players and officials for chasing victory with no thought of morality or the spirit of the game.

Eddings said lessons had been learned and change was being implemented. "While there is always room for improvement, these are very good signs which demonstrate meaningful change and will have a positive and lasting impact on Australian cricket at all levels," he said.

The Australian Cricketers' Association (ACA) also praised the way players had worked for cultural change.

"At all levels, the players understand their role as ambassadors in growing the game and are to be congratulated for the way they are conducting themselves both on and off the field," ACA president Greg Dyer said.

FOCUS

First wave of Tokyo 2020 Olympic tickets up for grabs

AFP
Tokyo

The first tickets for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics went on sale yesterday, with Japanese residents able to enter a lottery to watch the sport of their choice.

Tickets for the 33 sports range from the cheapest general tickets at 2,500 yen (\$23) to an eye-watering 300,000 yen (\$2,730) for the best seats at the opening ceremony.

Those lucky enough to score the best seats for the showcase men's 100m final will pay 130,000 yen (\$1,200).

But half of all tickets will be priced at 8,000 yen (\$73) or less and special tickets priced at 2,020 yen (\$18) are available for families resident in Japan with children, senior citizens, and people with impairments.

Half of all tickets will be priced at 8,000 yen (\$73) or less and special tickets priced at 2,020 yen (\$18) are available for families resident in Japan with children, senior citizens, and people with impairments.

Prices for domestic residents are "about the same as London 2012 but a little higher than the 2016 Rio Games," Yuko Hayakawa, senior 2020 marketing official, told AFP.

The lottery — only for residents of Japan during an initial period — runs until May 28, with successful applicants notified on June 20 and payment due a fortnight later.

The website saw high demand upon opening with a queue system in place even though tickets are not sold on a first-come first-



served basis and everyone entering the lottery by May 28 having an equal chance of scooping tickets.

Overseas applicants will be able to snap up tickets from June 15 via special "Authorised Ticket Resellers" in each country. Organisers have not offered a precise number of tickets available as various stadium configurations are still being finalised with just less than 450 days to go until the opening ceremony.

But they said it would be roughly the same as the 7.8mn tickets they estimated when bidding for the right to host the Games.

Of these tickets, an estimated 70-80% would be allotted to Japanese residents with the rest going to overseas fans.

The Tokyo 2020 Olympics will run from July 24 to August 9.

Tickets for the Paralympics will become available this summer.

Boxing tickets are not available as the IOC has frozen preparations for the competition amid a spat with the governing body AIBA.

CYCLING

Nibali ready to fire on all cylinders

Reuters
Bologna

Vincenzo Nibali is ready to forget about his disappointing outings at last year's Tour de France and Vuelta races as he gets ready to hit peak form at the Giro d'Italia.

The 34-year-old, one of only two active riders to have won the three grand tours — the Tour, the Vuelta and the Giro — has not won a race since he prevailed in the Milan-Sanremo classic 14 months ago.

"I started my preparations later this year because I will be riding another grand tour (the Vuelta) this season," the Sicilian told a news conference yesterday, two days before the Giro starts with an individual time trial in Bologna.

"I come here in a very good condition, my goal is to win it."

The Bahrain-Merida rider, who crashed out of the Tour de France last year, has opted to skip the world's premier cycling race this year so that he can concentrate his energies on the two other grand tours.

The Italian, whose flamboyant style has allowed him to shine on both stage races and classics, won the Giro in 2013 and 2016.



Although Britons Chris Froome and Geraint Thomas, who between them have won the last four Tour de France titles, are sitting out the race, Nibali still faces stern competition.

"My main rivals will be Tom Dumoulin and Primoz Roglic, but also Simon Yates," said Nibali, whose tour of the Alps performances suggested he could be peaking just in time for the Giro.

Dumoulin, the 2017 Giro champion, has struggled this season but Nibali did not think that will have any bearing once the riders set off in Bologna tomorrow.

"As it happened before I arrive here without any results but I have been training for this Giro, the same goes

for Dumoulin, who is my main rival," said Nibali, who had an under-par Vuelta campaign in 2018.

"I think the work I've done is the right work."

Pundits have suggested that Nibali's team is not as strong as those of his rivals, but the Bahrain-Merida rider will not let such perceptions derail him as he prepares to ride the Giro with his young brother Antonio for the first time.

"I think that with Damiano Caruso and Domenico Pozzovivo, two top-10 finishers on the Giro, we are well armed, but if others are stronger, they will work harder to control the race and we can take advantage of this," he said with a smile.

FORMULA 1

Hamilton sees no repeat of Rosberg fall-out with teammate Bottas

AFP
Barcelona

Lewis Hamilton said that respect and a well-established team ethic will prevent any trouble between him and Mercedes teammate Valtteri Bottas this year if they are locked in a title duel.

The defending five-time champion told reporters yesterday that he did not expect to see any kind of degeneration

of his relationship with the Finn who, after four races, leads him by a point in the drivers' standings. The pair have two wins apiece in Mercedes' stunning and unprecedented run of four straight season-opening one-tuos and their rivalry has raised the spectre of the acrimony of 2016 when Nico Rosberg ignored team focus to beat Hamilton to take the title.

"What happened before (was that) an individual continued to go down that route, but that's not what we have here. We have a really great energy

in the team, the respect is there, we have agreed rules set out so that we do finish the races one-two and we play supporting roles either way.

"So, I truly believe it's the best pairing in terms of that respect, in terms of how we deliver each weekend more than any other team has ever had or currently has. And, yes, it's going to be close and tight between us and with tensions, but that's just there because there's always tension when you want to beat someone else.

SPOTLIGHT

Brailsford's 'babies' ready to have fun on the Giro

Bologna, Italy: Dave Brailsford's Team INEOS, well known for the ruthless approach that in their former incarnation helped them win eight grand tour titles since 2012, start the Giro d'Italia looking to have fun for a change with two ambitious youngsters at the helm.

With designated leader Egan Bernal out with a broken collarbone, Tao Geoghegan Hart, 24, and Pavel Sivakov, 21, will lead the charge when the three-week stage race starts in Bologna tomorrow.

Russian Sivakov, who also has French nationality and was born in Italy, geared up with an unexpected victory on the Tour of the Alps ahead of Briton Geoghegan Hart, suggesting INEOS — formerly Team Sky — might already have Tour de France champions Chris Froome and Geraint Thomas's successors in their ranks. Brailsford, however, knows it will be part of a learning curve for his young guns, who will be up against far more experienced top riders of the likes of Vincenzo Nibali, Primoz Roglic and Simon Yates.

"The expectation is to have fun," Brailsford told a news conference yesterday.

"Chris Froome has more grand tours than all the riders of the squad together."

"I feel a lot of their energy and of their enthusiasm," added Brailsford with a smile that he rarely shows on the Tour de France, where the stakes are much higher.

On this Giro, "we can be more flexible, we can make mistakes and try crazy things, it's a liberating approach to a race."

Sivakov and Geoghegan Hart and Sivakov have however laid down a big marker with last month's one-two on the mountainous Tour of the Alps, showing the climbing abilities and composure that are essential on the Giro.

"There's a quiet confidence even if a grand tour is a different ball game because there are big champions here," said Geoghegan Hart.

"But we can take (the Tour of the Alps) as a confirmation that we are both moving forward. I don't fix myself any limit," Sivakov, who won the Baby Giro — for under-27s — told Reuters.

"We are young and we arrive here without any pressure. We are a very young team, we are the future generation after Chris Froome and Geraint Thomas."

NBA

Warriors rally after injury to Durant to topple Houston

Milwaukee becomes the first team to reach the NBA's final four as the top-seeded Bucks beat the visiting Boston Celtics with a 116-91 series-clinching victory.



Stephen Curry (right) of the Golden State Warriors dribbles past Houston Rockets' James Harden during Game Five of the Western Conference semi-finals of the 2019 NBA Playoffs at in Oakland, California, on Wednesday. (AFP)

AFP
Los Angeles

Golden State pulled out a 104-99 victory over the Houston Rockets on Wednesday as the Warriors survived the loss of superstar Kevin Durant to grab a 3-2 lead in their second round NBA playoff series.

Draymond Green and Klay Thompson nailed clutch three pointers late in the fourth quarter for the Warriors but the buzz after the game was not about the win but rather the health of Durant. The Warriors said he had suffered a right calf strain but Durant was expected to undergo an MRI scan last night to determine the full extent of the damage.

Warriors coach Steve Kerr sounded cautiously optimistic – hoping for the best but also preparing for something worse if it does turn out to be more serious like a ruptured Achilles. “We are all disappointed for him. Excited about the win but concern for Kevin. He had been

on this incredible playoff run. I am proud of the guys and the way they pulled out this win and we will see about Kevin tomorrow,” said Kerr.

Durant's injury occurred innocently enough after he hit a jumper from the right side with just over two minutes left in the third quarter. He took a step forward then grimaced in pain and looked down at his lower right leg. “He's done a lot for us. We got to have his back – that is what tonight was about,” said Warriors Stephen Curry.

Thompson finished with 27 points, Curry 25 and Durant 22 for the Warriors, who continued a run of home wins by the teams in the series. James Harden was the game's leading scorer with 31 points for the Rockets, who were outshot by the Warriors from the field 46% to 42%.

Elsewhere, Milwaukee became the first team to reach the NBA's final four as the top-seeded Bucks beat the visiting Boston Celtics with a 116-91 series-clinching victory. The Bucks used balanced scoring and a stingy defense to eliminate

the fourth-seeded Celtics in five games, avenging a seven-game first round loss to Boston last season.

“It's amazing. It was a team effort,” said Antetokounmpo. “We did not mess around with the game. We did our job. We defended. We moved the ball. That's how we were able to close the game.”

The Celtics had reached the NBA semi-finals against the Cleveland Cavaliers each of the last two seasons.

It marks the first time since 1983 that the Bucks have won a playoff series against the Celtics, who won the first game in this year's series before dropping four consecutive contests. Milwaukee advances to the Eastern Conference finals, where they will have the home-court advantage over the winner of the other East second round series between the Toronto Raptors and the Philadelphia 76ers.

They were meeting in game six in Philadelphia last night, with the second-seeded Raptors holding a 3-2 lead. Greek giant Giannis Antetokounmpo has had no trouble in this series delivering big points

for the Bucks, who will be making their first appearance in the final four since 2001. Antetokounmpo led seven players in double figures with 20 points and also tallied eight rebounds and a game-high eight assists. Khris Middleton (19 points), Eric Bledsoe (18), George Hill (16), Nikola Mirotic (10) and Ersan Ilyasova (10) also scored in double figures for the Bucks, who shot 44.7% overall.

Milwaukee also outscored the Celtics 45-21 from beyond the arc. Guard Malcolm Brogdon, returning from a heel injury that had sidelined him since March 15, scored 10 points in 17 minutes. Milwaukee has dominated games by throwing a blanket over Boston's Kyrie Irving, who shot one-for-seven from three-point range on Wednesday.

He was six-of-21 overall and finished with just one assist. Irving also shot eight-for-22 and seven-for-22 in the Celtics' two home losses on Friday and Monday. Irving may have played his final game with the Celtics as he can become a free agent in the off season.

SPOTLIGHT

Warriors' title defence gets tricky after Durant injury

Reuters
Houston

Golden State Warriors' title defence may now hobble along with their leader Kevin Durant who suffered a calf injury on Wednesday that makes him doubtful for the playoffs. Durant limped off the court with a non-contact right leg injury during the third quarter of his team's Game Five battle with Houston Rockets. His team announced that Durant had sustained a calf strain and was scheduled for an MRI last night.

Despite the Warriors pulling off a 104-99 triumph to take a 3-2 best-of-seven second round series edge, the mood is now one of concern for the two-time defending champions who know their path to another NBA Finals would be substantially tougher without Durant.

“We're excited about the win but concerned for Kevin,” Golden State coach Steve Kerr told reporters. “He's been on this incredible playoff run. I'm proud of our guys for pulling the game out, and we'll see how Kevin is doing (Thursday).”

A Finals MVP in each of the last two Golden State title runs, Durant entered Wednesday's game averaging 36 points in the first four games of the series and 35.4 points in this year's postseason. The Warriors have become even more reliant on him against the Rockets as sharpshooter Stephen Curry has gone cold and is connecting on just 26% of his three-pointer attempts. Curry fought through his struggles to score 12 fourth-quarter points that helped push the Warriors past Houston. “It's just next man up mentality. It's the perspective you have to have,” Curry said. “(Durant's) done a lot for us and we have to have his back. That's what tonight was about.”

If Durant cannot play today, when the series resumes with Game Six in Houston, the Warriors may need a vintage perform-

ance from three-time champion Curry. “If Kevin is out, what you saw in the fourth quarter is what you're going to have to see going forward,” Kerr said. “We're going to have to find a way.”

LUE, LAKERS END TALKS ON COACHING JOB

Negotiations between the Los Angeles Lakers and Tyronn Lue for the club's head coaching vacancy have collapsed, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on Wednesday. Former Cleveland Cavaliers coach Lue had been in talks with the Lakers for several days about the possibility of replacing the departed Luke Walton.

However the Times cited a person with knowledge of the negotiations on Wednesday as saying that the two sides had broken off discussions after failing to reach agreement on several stumbling blocks. The Times said Lue and the Lakers were unable to agree on the make-up of the coaching staff.

Lue was also seeking a five-year contract while the Lakers were only prepared to offer a three-year deal worth \$18mn.

Lue and Philadelphia assistant Monty Williams had both been interviewed twice for the position but Williams moved on after being hired by the Phoenix Suns. Lue was seen as the clear front-runner for the job due to his close links to Lakers star LeBron James.

James won an NBA championship with Cleveland under Lue's guidance in 2016. Lue, 42, also had a history with the Lakers, where he was a reserve point guard on the 2000 and 2001 championship-winning teams.

The Lakers have been in turmoil since a disappointing first season with James on the roster saw them miss the playoffs for a sixth straight season. The faded NBA powerhouse was then rocked by the shock departure of president of basketball operations Magic Johnson on April 9 in a move that stunned the NBA. Walton parted company with the team three days later.



Golden State Warriors' Kevin Durant (left) grabs his ankle after injuring himself against the Houston Rockets during the Western Conference semi-finals of the NBA Playoffs. (AFP)

NHL

Sharks' Pavelski returns, scores in Game 7 win over Avalanche



San Jose Sharks' Joe Pavelski (centre) celebrates with teammates Tomas Hertl (left) and Brent Burns after scoring a goal against the Colorado Avalanche during the 2019 NHL Stanley Cup Playoffs. (AFP)

Reuters
San Jose

Sharks captain Joe Pavelski was back in action Wednesday night for Game 7 of San Jose's Western Conference semi-final series against the visiting Colorado Avalanche, and he scored the game's first goal.

He then added the primary assist on the second goal, giving the Sharks a 2-0 lead less than 12 minutes into the game. San Jose went on to win 3-2, advancing to the Western Conference finals. “It's been incredible (to return to the lineup in Game 7),” Pavelski said. “To come out and score early... I felt a lot of emotion there for sure. Scored a few like those over the years. Got back and there were all smiles on the bench. It was Game 7, a big game.”

Pavelski, who hadn't played since sustaining an apparent head injury in Game 7 of San Jose's first-round series with the Vegas Golden Knights, started Wednesday. At 5:57 of the first

period, he tipped in a point shot from Brent Burns for his third goal of the postseason.

Just over five minutes later, Pavelski dished from behind the net to Tomas Hertl, who buried a one-timer to make it 2-0 at 11:35. Pavelski finished with 19:49 of ice time, less than a minute off his average this postseason (20:41) and above his regular-season average (19:03). He played throughout the final minutes, as the Sharks weathered a storm of Avalanche pressure with an extra attacker on the ice and their goaltender pulled.

“(The Avalanche) played a great game against us, scoring in the first minute of the third period to keep the pressure on,” Pavelski said. The Sharks had viewed Pavelski's status as uncertain earlier in the day, and they waited to see how he did in warmups to determine if he would play.

Coach Peter DeBoer said there was an awareness that Pavelski participating in warmups would pump up the crowd inside the SAP Center. Pavelski scored a team-high 38 goals and added 26

assists in the regular season.

He now has three goals and three assists in eight games this postseason. He was injured when his head hit the ice after a cross check by Vegas forward Cody Eakin on April 23. Eakin was assessed a major penalty for cross-checking, and the Sharks scored four times on the ensuing power play en route to a 5-4 overtime win. The NHL subsequently apologised for the call, ruling that Eakin shouldn't have been assessed a five-minute major. Pavelski also agreed that it shouldn't have been a major penalty. Pavelski got on the ice for the first time since the injury on Monday, said he is closer to returning. “It still really is day-to-day, I think, and go from there,” Pavelski said Monday. “I wish we had a set-in-stone answer: Go here, do this and be ready! We're just kind of taking everything into play.”

BRUINS, HURRICANES CLASH IN EASTERN FINALS
The Boston Bruins, riding a three-game winning streak and boosted by the resurgence of

goaltender Tuukka Rask, appear to have hit their stride heading into the Eastern Conference finals. Their opponent seems more than equipped to match that momentum. The Carolina Hurricanes carry a season-high six-game winning streak into Game 1 in Boston last night.

The Hurricanes rallied to win the last two games of their first-round series against the defending champion Washington Capitals before dominating the New York Islanders in a four-game sweep in the second round. Carolina has reached the conference finals in each of its past four playoff trips, advancing to the Stanley Cup Final twice.

“It is a whole different animal, as you can see, the nhl playoffs,” Hurricanes captain Justin Williams told reporters recently. “It's just go, go, go, and who's playing best right now, and obviously both teams are playing well to be here.” The Bruins came back from a 2-1 series deficit against the Columbus Blue Jackets on their way to advancing to a third conference final this decade.

MLB

Heyward's walk-off home run lifts Cubs past Marlins

It was Heyward's sixth homer of the season, only two shy of his total from all of 2018

Reuters
Chicago

Jason Heyward hit a walk-off solo home run in the 11th inning to lift the Chicago Cubs to a 3-2 win over the visiting Miami Marlins on Wednesday night. Heyward drove an outside pitch to the opposite field, and the ball landed in the basket atop the ivy-covered wall.

It was Heyward's sixth homer of the season, only two shy of his total from all of 2018. The Cubs were buoyed by right-hander Kyle Hendricks, who held the Marlins to one unearned run in eight innings. Hendricks lowered his ERA to 0.62 in four starts this season at Wrigley Field, where he has allowed only four runs (two earned) in 29 innings. Carl Edwards Jr. (1-1) earned the win in relief for Chicago, which won for the ninth time in 10 games.

AS 5, REDS 4 (13 INNINGS)

Stephen Piscotty lined a leadoff homer in the 13th inning to give Oakland a victory over visiting Cincinnati. Piscotty jumped all over a 2-1 fastball from Robert Stephenson (2-1), and the ball barely cleared the left field fence. The walk-off hit was the first of Piscotty's career.

He went 2-for-6 with two RBIs. Jurickson Profar hit a two-run homer for Oakland, and Ramon Laureano had three of the team's 11 hits. The Athletics have won two straight games after losing eight of their previous nine. Cincinnati had eight hits one night after being no-hit by Oakland's Mike Fiers. Jose Peraza and Nick Senzel each had two hits for the Reds, who lost for the fifth time in seven games.

INDIANS 5, WHITE SOX 3

Jose Ramirez belted a two-run homer with two outs in the ninth inning as Cleveland beat visiting Chicago. Francisco Lindor slapped a one-out single in the ninth inning off Jace Fry (1-1) and advanced to second following his second steal of the season.

Ramirez brought him home after depositing a 3-1 fastball from Kelvin Herrera over the wall in right field for his first walk-off homer of his career. Ramirez had been 1-for-10 lifetime against Herrera prior to recording his fourth career walk-off hit and first since Sept. 17, 2016 versus Detroit.

RED SOX 2, ORIOLES 1

Andrew Benintendi hit a solo homer with two outs in the top of the 12th inning to give visiting Boston a victory over Baltimore in the finale of a three-game series. Benintendi crushed a 2-1 fastball from Yefry Ramirez (0-1) into the seats in right-centre and snapped a 1-1 tie. The Orioles now have given up a major-league high 80 homers this season. Ryan Brasier (2-1) earned the victory by pitching the 11th. Centre fielder Jackie Bradley Jr. helped

the right-hander by making a leaping catch at the wall to rob Trey Mancini of a game-winning homer. Heath Hembree struck out the side in the 12th and picked up his first save.

DIAMONDBACKS 3, RAYS 2

Wilmer Flores hit a two-out RBI single in the 13th inning as Arizona avoided being swept for the first time this season with a win against Tampa Bay in St. Petersburg, Florida. Arizona starter Robbie Ray threw 5 2/3 scoreless innings, allowing four hits, striking out 11 and walking three.

Archie Bradley (2-3) threw three shutout innings of relief before Zack Godley pitched the 13th for his first career save. David Peralta had three hits, Nick Ahmed and Flores contributed two hits each and Jarrod Dyson scored two runs for Arizona, which had lost the first two of the three-game series.

RANGERS 9, PIRATES 6

Isiah Kiner-Falefa doubled in the tie-breaking run in the ninth inning, and Rougned Odor added a two-run homer to give visiting Texas a win over Pittsburgh. The game featured duelling two-run homers into the Allegheny River, one by Texas' Joey Gallo that bounced into the water, and Pittsburgh's Josh Bell's shot that got wet on the fly.

Hunter Pence hit a tying pinch-hit grand slam in the eighth for Texas, which avoided being swept in the two-game series as well as the four-game season series after Pittsburgh won both games last week in Arlington.

BREWERS 7, NATIONALS 3

Right-hander Brandon Woodruff allowed just one run in six innings and was backed by three homers, as host Milwaukee beat slumping Washington, completing a three-game sweep. The Nationals have lost four straight and 14 of their last 19 games, while the Brewers have won nine of their last 12.

Woodruff (5-1) fanned nine batters with no walks while throwing 103 pitches. Christian Yelich had three hits and smashed his 16th homer in the first, a solo shot. Eric Thames had an RBI double that may have hit the roof.

MARINERS 10, YANKEES 1

Yusei Kikuchi carried a no-hitter into the sixth inning and pitched a career-high 7 2/3 outstanding innings, as visiting Seattle cruised over New York. Kikuchi (2-1) allowed a run on three hits and retired 16 straight after opening the game with a walk to DJ LeMahieu.

He lost his no-hitter with one out in the sixth when Mike Tauchman hit a soft bloop double on a 94 mph fastball to short left field over third baseman Ryon Healy's head. Mitch Haniger, Edwin Encarnacion and Healy homered for Seattle, which upped its season total to 74. Healy also doubled three times and collected four hits as Seattle totalled 14 hits.



Chicago Cubs centre fielder Jason Heyward (centre) celebrates his walk off home run during the eleventh inning against the Miami Marlins. (USA TODAY Sports)

PHILLIES 5, CARDINALS 0

Cesar Hernandez homered, doubled and drove in three runs to lift visiting Philadelphia past St. Louis. Nick Williams added two hits for the Phillies, who used a four-run fifth inning to win their second in a row to capture the three-game series.

Phillies starter Jerad Eickhoff (2-1) pitched a stellar game, giving up three hits in eight innings. The shutout victory came hours after learning that longtime Phillies chairman David Montgomery died Wednesday morning at the age of 72.

TIGERS 10, ANGELS 3

Ronny Rodriguez had three hits and drove in four runs, JaCoby Jones hit a two-run homer, and Detroit rolled past visiting Los Angeles. Rodriguez finished a homer shy of the cycle.

John Hicks had two RBIs, and Nicholas Castellanos scored two runs and extended his hitting streak to 11 games. Tigers starter Matthew Boyd (4-2) lim-

ited the Angels to one run on three hits in six innings. He struck out six and walked none. Jonathan Lucroy hit a solo homer and an RBI double for the Angels. David Fletcher also homered, but Shohei Ohtani remained hitless in his second game this season. Ohtani, who is recovering from Tommy John surgery, went 0-for-3 and was hit by a pitch, leaving him 0-for-7 overall.

TWINS 9, BLUE JAYS 1

Jorge Polanco matched his career best with five hits, including a two-run home run, and Kyle Gibson set a career high with 11 strikeouts as visiting Minnesota defeated Toronto. CJ Cron, Jonathan Schoop and Eddie Rosario also hit two-run homers for the Twins, who swept the three-game series after losing three of four to the Blue Jays at Minnesota April 15-18.

Cron had four hits and Rosario had three RBIs for the Twins, who collected 18 hits, one short of their season best. The Blue Jays had two hits.

PADRES 3, METS 2

Hunter Renfroe greeted Mets reliever Tyler Bashlor with a tie-breaking homer leading off the seventh, and host San Diego defeated New York in the rubber match of a three-game series at Petco Park. Renfroe hit a high fly into the left field stands on Bashlor's second pitch. It was his ninth homer of the season — but his fifth in the last 12 games, all of which have given the Padres a lead.

Reliever Gerardo Reyes, who was recalled from Triple-A El Paso earlier Wednesday, had worked San Diego out of a jam in the top of the inning. He entered the seventh with Mets on second and third with one out and responded by striking out Tomas Nido and Todd Frazier on six pitches — all six swings-and-misses.

DODGERS 9, BRAVES 4

Enrique Hernandez, Max Muncy and Justin Turner hit home runs as Los Angeles earned a victory over visiting Atlanta to finish off a three-game sweep.

The win was the Dodgers' 10th consecutive at home.

Los Angeles has swept its last three series at Dodger Stadium and owns a major-league-best 15-4 home mark. The Dodgers have won five of the past six games overall and 10 of 13.

Ronald Acuna hit a home run for the Braves, who were swept one series after they swept the Marlins at Miami. The Braves were swept in a series for the third time this season and first time at Dodger Stadium since 2016.

GIANTS-ROCKIES POSTPONED

Inclement weather washed away the Colorado Rockies' scheduled game against the San Francisco Giants in Denver. The contest will be made up as part of a day-night doubleheader on July 15, when the teams had been scheduled to open a three-game series with a night game. San Francisco beat Colorado 14-4 on Tuesday, and the current series is scheduled to conclude with an afternoon game today.

GOLF

Jordan leads British Masters after record 63



England's Matthew Jordan tees off during the first round of the European Tour British Masters at the Hillside Golf Club in Southport, Britain, yesterday. (Reuters)

Faldo not thrilled Daly will be allowed to ride cart at PGA Championship

New York: Six-times major champion Nick Faldo questioned the decision to grant John Daly special dispensation to ride a cart at next week's PGA Championship in New York because the American suffers from arthritis in his right knee. The 53-year-old Daly, who won the tournament in 1991, has been given the all clear by the PGA of America to use a cart instead of walking at Bethpage Black under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"I think walking is an integral part of being a pro golfer," Englishman Faldo said during a conference call on Wednesday to promote CBS's coverage of the championship. "I'll leave it at that."

Daly was denied permission to ride a cart at last year's US Senior Open, but he regularly rides on the 50-and-over Champions Tour, where it is allowed. He will be the first player not to walk at a major since Casey Martin at the 2012 US Open. Martin, who has a painful birth defect that restricts circulation in the lower portion of his right leg, was famously denied permission to use a cart on the PGA Tour.

He sued the tour for the right to ride and the matter went all the way to the United States Supreme Court, which by a 7-2 margin ruled in Martin's favour in 2001. Then tour commissioner had Tim Finchem argued that the tour should have the right to make its own rules and regulations, and that walking was an integral part of the game.

Agencies
Southport, Britain

Matthew Jordan, a 23-year-old invitee, shot a stunning bogey-free 63 to open up a two-shot lead on the opening day at the British Masters yesterday. Tournament host Tommy Fleetwood, who won the pre-event Hero Challenge, also got off to a fine start with a 68, but was still five behind young Jordan, who is a member of nearby Links course, Royal Hoylake.

Between Jordan and Fleetwood, there was a bunch of players. Swede Marcus Kinhult, another good Links-playing youngster, shot 65 and three players, including the battle-scarred 46-year-old veteran Lee Westwood were at six-under each. Westwood had six more holes to play.

"I've known him for a long time, we all know what he's capable of," said Fleetwood. "That's a tremendous first round and I think it will be good for him now. I've seen some of his scores and he's not played as well as I know he wants to this year, but when you're first turning pro it's different and now the experience being at the top of the leader-

board for a few days will be really, really good."

Jordan, who had his first Top-10 finish as a pro two weeks ago in Turkey in the Challenge, has played well at Links courses like the Lytham and St Andrews, where he has amateur wins. Jordan started birdie-birdie and had five in first eight and then there were more on 10th, 11th, 13th and 15th, at which point he was nine-under with three to go. Just as a 60 appeared on the horizon birdies dried up.

"You never quite expect it," Jordan said. "I knew I had been playing quite well and just from the get-go it started perfectly and from then on I just kept it going. I just tried to shoot as low as I could because I thought the guys out there, they are good as well. You start to realise you're doing quite well because more people turn up and you see a couple of cameras. I was nervous maybe for a couple of holes, like around 11 and 12, and then I settled back into it which was strange."

Fleetwood played and won the Hero Challenge and then launched his Academy. Next week, he is also due to play the PGA at Bethpage as he searches for his maiden Major. Yesterday, he had an eagle on second, his 11th. He had three other birdies and one bogey on sixth.

SPOTLIGHT

Ferrari hope to reignite title fight as F1 returns to Europe

Spanish GP is an opportunity for the Scuderia to unlock their potential and challenge Mercedes with a host of upgrades

By Giles Richards
The Guardian

With the opening four races complete, Formula One's return to Europe heralds the opening of a crucial development battle at the front and rear of the grid.

The Spanish Grand Prix will see a host of upgrades rolled out and intriguingly a rerun of the phoney war in testing that should serve as a benchmark against which to judge the relative performance of Mercedes and Ferrari.

Mercedes have opened the season with a record four consecutive one-two finishes. With the exception of Bahrain, where a mechanical problem cost Ferrari's Charles Leclerc victory, they have deserved to take the flag in every case and have a 74-point lead over Ferrari in the constructors' championship.

Yet Toto Wolff has said the results flattered Mercedes. "There is no complacency about our situation because we know that it's not truly representative of the balance of power this season so far," the team principal said.

His cautious assessment is based on the pace Ferrari showed in pre-season testing at Barcelona. In Spain, as Wolff put it, Ferrari were "blisteringly quick", appearing to be as much as three-tenths a lap faster than Mercedes. But that pace did not carry over into the opening races.

The Scuderia will be desperate to replicate that pace in Barcelona on Sunday. They brought an aerodynamic upgrade to the last round at Baku, centred around the bargeboards and rear wing, but have more to come in Barcelona – which is seen in the F1 paddock as the start of the European leg of the season if Azerbaijan politically and geographically sits in Europe. An engine upgrade – planned for Canada – will be brought forward for this week's race.

It shows just how urgent it is their need to narrow the gap, as Ferrari's principal Mattia Binotto acknowledges. "We are behind in the championship and we have to catch up," he said. "Which we know means that our development work will be the key to this season."

The problem facing Ferrari does not seem to have been a lack of horses and their engine has been acknowledged as



Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel talks to the press in Barcelona. (Reuters)

perhaps the best on the grid. Rather it has been in understanding how to put their cars in the sweet spot of the Pirelli tyres' operating window and keeping them there, particularly through low-speed corners. Doing so is proving to be an intricate and testing task but when Ferrari have achieved it successfully, as Leclerc did in Bahrain, they were untouchable.

A new engine will not necessarily make this task any easier but because Mercedes will doubtless bring their first major upgrades of the season to Barcelona, so Ferrari must at least match them in the relentless search for improvement. They have reason for optimism, however.

Planted through the corners and exceptionally quick, with no apparent tyre-window weakness, in testing Ferrari looked every bit championship winners. Repeat that performance and compare it to the data from the four opening races, and the biggest single development Ferrari may enjoy in Spain will be understanding how to unlock their potential and reigniting the title fight. It has, after all, been a good week for comebacks.

Red Bull, who have been steadily de-



Ferrari driver Charles Leclerc arrives at the Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya in Barcelona yesterday ahead of the Spanish Formula One Grand Prix. (Reuters)

veloping their car's aerodynamics, will be making what principal Christian Horner calls "subtle" changes in Spain: evolution rather than revolution. Based on the front and rear wings, this incremental approach is likely to complement a competitive start to the season that saw the Red Bulls move closer to Mercedes and Ferrari in China and Azerbaijan. If Honda continue to improve their engine, upgraded once already, a couple of tenths will put Red Bull up with the front two.

Expect some strong steps forward also for Racing Point, already enjoying a positive start to the season. They are now able to make use of the financial largesse of their new owners to bring their car forward, with mechanical and aerodynamic upgrades expected, as do McLaren.

Firmly last on the grid, Williams return to Barcelona with cautious optimism. Their car was not ready to run in testing and since then has been way off the pace and a handful to drive. In Baku

they lost a chassis when a loose drain cover smashed into George Russell's car and then Robert Kubica crashed in qualifying. They have yet to score a point.

This week the deputy team principal Claire Williams said the team had finally cleared the backlog in manufacturing of parts which had consumed their time since the season began and were now ready to bring upgrades. The team are using Williams co-founder Patrick Head as a consultant and Russell be-

lieves they can make major advances.

The updates in Barcelona will help show where they now need to focus and if Williams can do anything to rescue their position. "Based on those results it will help us understand if we've got any hope for the remainder of the season or not," Russell said.

There will be no sudden surge forward but after suffering only defeat and retreat, Williams are entitled to hope this battle in the development war is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.

RUGBY

Folau takes a hit in the pocket as his wait continues

Reuters
Sydney

Israel Folau's protracted dismissal by Rugby Australia looked no closer to a conclusion yesterday but the 30-year-old was already being hit hard in the pocket for his decision to post a social media message many viewed as homophobic. While the panel that on Tuesday adjudged Folau had been guilty of a 'high level' breach of the code of conduct was still considering what sanction to dole out, global sports-wear brand Asics cut their ties with the Wallabies fullback.

"We believe sport is for everyone and we champion inclusivity and diversity," the company said in a statement. "While Israel Folau is entitled to his personal views, some of those expressed in recent social media posts are not aligned with those of Asics. As such, our partnership with Israel has become untenable and he will no longer represent Asics as a brand ambassador."

The player's legal fees are also racking up and, of course, the most likely conclusion of the disciplinary process is still that his A\$4mn (\$2.79mn), four-year contract with RA and the New South Wales Waratahs will be terminated. A return to take up a lucrative contract in rugby league, where Folau first made his name as a free-scoring winger, would also appear to have been ruled out. "The commission's already made a decision," Australian Rugby League Commission chairman Peter Beattie said in Brisbane on Wednesday.

"We believe in inclusiveness and that inclusiveness policy would prevent Israel Folau from



becoming a registered player in rugby league. That's final."

The post that says "drunks, homosexuals, adulterers, liars, fornicators, thieves, atheists, idolaters" were destined for "hell" and urging them to "repent" remains on Folau's Instagram feed, having attracted 55,000 "likes" and 50,000 comments. Wallabies great Nick Farr-Jones spoke to Folau before the hearing and said the player denied he had made a commitment to Rugby Australia not to post such material after he shared a similar message last year.

"When I first met with him... I was going to encourage him to say 'look, I apologise. I won't do it again and can I have another

chance?" Farr-Jones, a committed Christian like Folau, told local TV. "He doesn't believe he's done anything wrong. I did originally (think he should apologise) had he been told don't do this again – don't mention the word hell, for example, awaits these various groups of people. But he's saying he was never instructed that way."

Folau's case has triggered a wide debate in Australia about freedom of speech and the power of employers to control their employees away from the workplace. On Wednesday night it became election fodder with the issue raised in a debate between the two major party leaders ahead of the May 18 national poll.

F1

Williams' deputy principal confident insurance will pay out for Baku damage

Reuters
Barcelona

Williams are confident insurance will pay for the damage to George Russell's car caused by a loose drain cover in Azerbaijan two weeks ago, the Formula One team's deputy principal Claire Williams said yesterday.

Williams told reporters at the Spanish Grand Prix that she had discussed compensation with the race promoter in Baku after the April 26 incident. "They have been very accommodating and seem to be moving things pretty quickly forwards. So I'm pleased," she said.

"It will go through the (circuit) insurers; they understand it needs to move sooner rather than later. So we are in the process now of working out the cost of it to us and we need to file that and we'll go from there."

Williams could not give a financial estimate, which some commentators have speculated could be more than half a million dollars. "Our priority was to get the repair work done and then we'll go through the analysis to understand exactly how much of a cost there is," she said.

British rookie Russell ran over the loose manhole cover at speed in Friday practice, smashing the floor. "If that was 10-15mm higher, it was going straight into where I'm sat. It could have been much worse," the



Williams' British rookie George Russell ran over the loose manhole cover at speed in Friday practice, smashing the floor, during the Azerbaijan two weeks ago. (Reuters)

driver commented afterwards.

Polish teammate Robert Kubica also suffered a big accident in the first phase of qualifying. Williams said both chassis had been repaired and brought to Spain, along with a spare. She said the former champions, without a point and last in the standings with an uncompetitive car despite having the same engine as dominant Mercedes, had brought upgrades and test parts to the track.

"In our history we've never given up on a season," she declared. "Clearly we know where we are and that it will be incredibly difficult to make up the gap even to P9 (ninth place overall). We have a number of issues at the moment. There are a number, mechanical in particular, that we've understood," added the boss.

"So we have a particular issue with our brake system at the moment that we believe we've found a solution to."

FOCUS

England outcast Cipriani wins players' award

AFP
London

England exile Danny Cipriani was named the Rugby Players' Association player of the year for 2019 on Wednesday following an excellent debut season at Gloucester. The 31-year-old

fly-half topped a poll of his fellow professionals at English clubs, coming out at the head of a shortlist that included Exeter wing Santiago Cordero, Sale scrum-half Faf De Klerk, Northampton scrum-half Cobus Reinach and Exeter centre Henry Slade.

In the process Cipriani became only the third person after Jonny Wilkinson and Christian Wade, to win both this honour

and the equivalent young player award. Cipriani's award came nine months after he was fined for assault and resisting arrest at a Jersey nightclub during a pre-season tour.

Yet for all his sparkling play this term with the Cherry and Whites, the talented Cipriani has won just 16 England caps since making his debut back in 2008. Several England coaches have lacked faith in Cipriani.

MADRID OPEN

Federer saves two match points, Osaka crashes out

Top seed Novak Djokovic motors into the last eight after defeating Jeremy Chardy 6-1, 7-6 (7/2)

AFP
Madrid

Roger Federer saved two match points to defeat Gael Monfils and reach the Madrid Open quarter-finals yesterday but women's world number one and top seed Naomi Osaka was dumped out in a last-eight shock.

Federer, playing only his second match of a 2019 comeback to clay after three years away, needed two hours to defeat French showman Monfils 6-0, 4-6, 7-6 (7/3).

Osaka fell for the second time in two months to Federer's Swiss compatriot Belinda Bencic, exiting 3-6, 6-2, 7-5. Bencic also beat the double Grand Slam winner in March at Indian Wells. Men's top seed Novak Djokovic, however, motored into the last eight as he hammered Jeremy Chardy 6-1, 7-6 (7/2).

Federer admitted he struggled to get past the talented Monfils, seeded 15th, before recording his 1,200th career win. It took a comeback from 4-1 down in the final set after sweeping the first set in 18 minutes, combined with a dominating tiebreak for the Swiss fourth seed to advance. Federer said nothing was decided until the end of a match played in difficult swirling winds and challenging conditions. "I had a tough run of five losing games late in the second and into the third," said the 20-time Grand Slam champion who will face Austrian fifth seed and recent Barcelona champion Dominic Thiem for a place in the semi-finals.

"I just hung in there, saving two match points (to force a final-set tiebreaker). It was a very stressful situation. Now that I'm through it, I'm very excited with the win. This match gave me a lot of information, it showed how tricky clay can be with the wind and everything. But I tried to take the bad bounces and the rest and just play positive tennis."

Against an inspired Bencic, Osaka served for the match in the third set

leading 5-4, but could not touch a backhand return winner. "When you play against a good player, you have to expect that they are going to play great at times," Osaka said. "I feel like I was negative on myself, but I tried to fix it in the third set. But my service percentage was down."

Djokovic, who now boasts a staggering 66-2 record against French players, said he is slowly lifting his clay game. "I felt good on the court in general and played well," Djokovic said. "Coming into the match I had confidence knowing I'd never lost to my opponent."

The Madrid champion in 2011 and 2016 is searching for his top clay form as he begins the chase for a fourth straight Grand Slam title when Roland Garros starts in a little over two weeks. Djokovic next faces ninth seed Marin Cilic after the Croatian put out Laslo Djere 4-6, 6-3, 6-2, winning 11 of the last 13 games. Thiem, the 2018 runner-up, defeated Monte Carlo winner Fabio Fognini 6-4, 7-5 while Stan Wawrinka made it a Swiss hat-trick on the day, beating Japan's sixth seed Kei Nishikori 6-3, 7-6 (7/3).

Two-time women's champion Simona Halep overcame Ashleigh Barty 7-5, 7-5 to reach her fourth Madrid semi-final. Romania's third seed and former No. 1 will next play Bencic. Halep, who has been struggling with injury, took the opening set and went up a break in the second before losing it against the ninth-seeded Australian who won the Miami title in March. Halep regained control with a break for 6-5 as her opponent returned wide.

She wrapped up victory with an untouchable forehand to the corner. "It's not easy to keep winning here," Halep said after a victory in which she broke four times. "But I'm very motivated after reaching the semi-finals again. I will have another challenge tomorrow (Friday), so I'm not looking any further ahead than that. If I can play my best tennis, then we will see," added the player who advanced through her third-round match on Wednesday

Switzerland's Roger Federer plays a backhand during his round of 16 match against France's Gael Monfils at the Madrid Open yesterday. (AFP)



without the loss of a game. Former US Open winner Sloane Stephens downed Petra Martic of Croatia 6-4, 6-3 in her quarter-final.

RESULTS

Men's third rd: Novak Djokovic (SRB x1) bt Jeremy Chardy (FRA) 6-1, 7-6 (7/2); Marin Cilic (CRO x9) bt Laslo Djere (SRB)

4-6, 6-3, 6-2; Dominic Thiem (AUT x5) bt Fabio Fognini (ITA x10) 6-4, 7-5; Stan Wawrinka (SUI) bt Kei Nishikori (JPN x6) 6-3, 7-6 (7/3);

Women's Quarter-finals: Belinda Bencic (SUI) bt Naomi Osaka (JPN x1) 3-6, 6-2, 7-5; Simona Halep (ROM x3) bt Ashleigh Barty (AUS x9) 7-5, 7-5

SPOTLIGHT

Meet Thani al-Zarraa, the man behind Al Wakrah Stadium



Thani al-Zarraa was appointed to lead the team that would build the 40,000 capacity Al Wakrah stadium, that would eventually become the first stadium built from scratch for the FIFA World Cup 2022.

Thani al-Zarraa was a young engineer when first tasked with managing the construction of Al Wakrah Stadium. On that day, 33 months ago, he felt as any Qatari would: hugely honoured – while knowing he had been given massive responsibility.

A structural engineer by profession and a graduate from Griffith University in Australia, al-Zarraa joined the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC) in 2013 and soon started doing feasibility studies for the then proposed host venues for the first FIFA World Cup in the Arab world.

"We were looking for sustainable designs that represented Qatar and its culture," said al-Zarraa. "For Al Wakrah Stadium, we had various options from Zaha Hadid and chose the dhow boat representation because it was the most relevant to the city's seafaring past."

Shortly after the stadium design was selected and revealed to the world, al-Zarraa was appointed to lead the team that would build the 40,000 capacity venue that would

eventually become the first stadium built from scratch for the FIFA World Cup 2022.

"When you're first given a multi-million-dollar scope like this you feel it's a big responsibility and, at the same time, a huge honour. Of course, I didn't want to make any mistakes and worked daily with the guidance and follow-up of our senior management," he continued.

Throughout the project, al-Zarraa worked tirelessly with his team to deliver a one-of-a-kind venue that would also become the heart of the Al Wakrah municipality. "We worked closely with the community and built a masterplan area with cycling and running tracks, and a community market, to ensure the area would be used by residents long after the World Cup has ended," he said.

Since that day in 2015 when he first dove into the life of a project manager, al-Zarraa started to understand two things: that project management life "is not normal" and that teamwork is fundamental to the success of any project. "I'm very thankful to my team. They are hardworking, eager and

keen. Our time together has been both challenging and enjoyable," he said.

Fast forward almost four years to March 2019 and al-Zarraa oversaw the installation of the pitch at Al Wakrah Stadium in a world record time of just 9 hours 15 minutes. For anyone in the business, once a stadium under construction has a field of play, it becomes clear that the shift from construction into completion has begun.

"The day we laid the pitch I walked from goalpost to goalpost, or from where I imagined the goalposts would be, as they were not yet installed. I imagined the stadium packed with fans, two teams on the pitch, and in the presence of His Highness The Amir, and I got goose bumps," he said.

Al-Zarraa is still not sure what he will do when the crowds leave Al Wakrah Stadium after the final and the venue becomes silent again, but as a keen triathlete, cycling or running around the world-class stadium he has helped deliver may just do the trick until he has to go back to work. For al-Zarraa and us all, the road to 2022 continues. (SC.qa)

FOCUS

Aspire's Ramadan Sports Festival begins with three tournaments

On Wednesday evening, Aspire Zone Foundation (AZF) witnessed a strong start to its Aspire's Ramadan Sports Festival tournaments, as the Men's football and volleyball tournaments and the Ladies' handball competition commenced.

During the very first night of the events at the Ladies Sports Hall, the Ladies' handball competition saw Al-Adaam score 23 points against 2 for the hands up team. In addition, Al-Majed won against Al-Dana with a score of 44-14. On football pitch number 10, Baladna and Carthage Eagles ended the match 1-1. Janin Camp won against Al-Nashama with a score of 14-7. Finally, Delta and Football heroes also ended their game with a tie score of 2-2.

The men's volleyball competition saw successful results as Al-Sityar won with a score of 2-0 against Indian heroes. Medina Doha won against strikers with 2-0. Champions won against Kesci SC with a score of 2-0. Bench Pearls won against Volley Beast with a score of 2-0.

The men's volleyball and ladies handball tournaments will continue until the 12th of May. The men's football tournament is scheduled to end on the 13th of May. The fitness challenge for



Action from the the men's volleyball tournament.

boys and hockey for boys and girls will kick off on Thursday. AZF has also organised table tennis activities for the disabled in various categories for a one-day

event at the 12th of May.

This year, the Ramadan Sports Festival is sponsored by Saleh Al Hamad Al Mana Co, Aseel Water and EsQalor Sports.

HANDBALL

Qatar to start preparation for Olympic qualifiers in July

QNA
Doha

Qatar handball team will begin training on July 27 to prepare for the Asian qualifiers, which will be held in Doha from October 17 to 27, for the Olympic

Games in Tokyo 2020. The draw for the men's Asian qualifiers for the 2020 Olympic Games put the Qatari team in Group A along with the teams of Saudi Arabia, India, and Hong Kong, while the Group B included Bahrain, South Korea, Iran, and Kuwait.

The first-place winners qualify for the 2020 Olympic Games

in Tokyo, while the runners-up play a playoff.

It will be the second time in a row that Qatar has hosted the men's Asian handball qualifiers for the Olympic Games. In 2015, Qatar hosted the 2016 Rio Olympics qualifiers, where the Qatar qualified for the Olympics for the first time in the history.