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GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

Humbled Warner set to march into World Cup cauldron

Page 7

FIFA U-20 WORLD CUP QATAR VS NIGERIA (7PM)

Asian Cup champions inspire Qatar U-20 players: al-Minhali

'Over the last two years, we've increased our number of training camps. But all our efforts have paid off'

Qatar pulled off an unprecedented triumph at the AFC Asian Cup 2019. Felix Sanchez's side were more than a match for the traditional big guns in the United Arab Emirates, and they got their reward by lifting the trophy for the first time.

That remarkable success did not come out of the blue. For the last few years, Qatari football officials have overseen an in-depth effort to raise standards, most notably through the Aspire Academy, which has already produced several players for the country's international teams - including the squad now in Poland for the FIFA U-20 World Cup.

Qatar kick off their bid against Nigeria today, and their youngsters do not have to look far for inspiration.

They will have their senior colleagues at the forefront of their minds, left-back Ahmed al-Minhali said.

"Thanks to the achievements of our first team, we're more convinced than ever that nothing is impossible in football," he said.

"Nobody was betting on them, but they won the trophy by putting in great performances in every match. They never wilted under the pressure, which has obviously been more intense since our country was chosen to host the 2022 World Cup."

Al-Minhali and Co have already caught the eye themselves, booking their ticket to Poland through the AFC U-19 Championship in 2018.

There, Qatar topped their group thanks to wins over Indonesia and Chinese Taipei, having lost their opener to United Arab Emirates.



The best was yet to come as they then defeated Thailand 7-3 after extra-time to secure their U-20 World Cup spot.

"We worked hard to get to Poland," said al-Minhali. "Over the last two years, we've increased our number of training camps, getting together two or three times a month. But all our efforts have paid off, and that's the most important thing."

"Our qualification came down to the match against Thailand, and the pressure on us was something a lot of the players had never experienced. We started well and went in 2-0 up at half-time, but our opponents were able to come back and take the lead in the second half. Luckily for us, we managed to equalise before the end and take the game into extra-time. Our superior fitness levels took care of the rest."

READY FOR BATTLE

The company of two-time finalists Nigeria, Ukraine and USA means Qatar won't have it easy in Group D.

"We did two training camps in Slovakia and France, each lasting ten days each, and we were all together for 25 days overall," al-Minhali said. "Every national team here in Poland has to be taken seriously - there are no more small teams, everyone has genuine ambitions."

"Nigeria have played in finals and even won trophies. Ukraine are serious customers. All our opponents have their own style of play. We will try to capitalise upon our opponents' weak points to achieve our goals." (FIFA)



Qatar players in action during a practice session ahead of their FIFA U-20 World Cup opener today.

TENNIS

Federer, Nadal threaten Djokovic bid for historic Slam

AFP
Paris

Novak Djokovic can become only the second man in history to have twice held all four Grand Slam titles at the same time with victory at the French Open.

However, a returning Roger Federer and rejuvenated Rafael Nadal will once again stand in his way.

World number one Djokovic completed his first private stranglehold of all four Slams with victory at Roland Garros in 2016.

Having clinched the 2018 Wimbledon and US Open titles and then a seventh Australian Open crown in January this year, the Serb is tantalisingly close to another 'Djoko Slam'.

Federer and Nadal, with 20 and 17 career Grand Slam titles each respectively, may be ahead of 15-time major winner Djokovic in total hauls and have also completed career Slams.

However, not even Federer or Nadal have managed to hold all four of the sport's greatest prizes at the same time.

It is such a rare feat that only Don Budge (1938) and Rod Laver (1962 and 1969) - all calendar Grand Slams - have pulled off the sweep in the sport's history.

Djokovic, who turned 32 on Wednesday, is playing down his potential date with destiny even if it would put him halfway to a 2019 calendar Slam of his own.

After losing to Nadal in the Italian Open final last weekend, the Serb was in no doubt that it was the Spaniard who would likely be celebrating a 12th Roland Garros title in a little over two weeks' time.

"Nadal, number one favourite, without a doubt - then everyone else," he said.

Djokovic, who will be top seed in draw, could be forgiven his caution.

At Roland Garros in 2018, he was shocked by Italian journeyman Marco Cecchinato in the quarter-finals, a defeat which was such a crushing bodyblow that he even contemplated skipping Wimbledon.

Federer is returning to Roland Garros for the first time since 2015 having turned his back on clay court tennis to focus on Wimbledon.

10TH ANNIVERSARY

This year marks the 10th anniversary of his one and only Paris triumph and should the 37-year-old defy the odds and clinch the 2019 title he would become the oldest Grand Slam champion of all time.

Age hasn't dimmed his ability with Federer saving match points to beat Gael Monfils in Madrid and in Rome against Borna Coric as he found his feet again on European red clay.

"It's been interesting and fun, but not so challenging, to be honest," said Federer despite his Rome campaign being cut short by a leg injury.

Nadal, whose record at Roland Garros stands at a staggering 11 titles and a win-loss record of 86-2, claimed a ninth Italian Open title and a record 34th Masters on Sunday.

His three-set win over Djokovic was timely as it was his first title of 2019 and had followed three successive semi-final losses at Monte Carlo, Barcelona and Madrid.

The last two of those were against Dominic Thiem and Stefanos Tsitsipas, both of whom play with a one-handed back-

hand, just like Federer.

Thiem, the 2018 runner-up to Nadal at Roland Garros, has defeated the Spaniard four times on clay.

"There is a new wave coming through with the one-handed backhand that can counter some of Rafa's spins and lefty play," said Federer, a four-time runner-up in Paris.

Outside of Djokovic and Federer, world number four Thiem and sixth-ranked Tsitsipas are the most likely candidates to dethrone Nadal.

The same cannot be said for Germany's Alexander Zverev, for so long touted as the brightest star of the so-called 'Next Gen'.

The German's run to the quarter-finals last year remains his best Slam performance while he has yet to get beyond the last eight at any of the European clay events in the run-up to Paris.

"He has lost his self-confidence, he gets very angry, gets down and destroys himself," said compatriot Tommy Haas, a former world number two.

"What he urgently needs is a success"



Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates with the Madrid Open trophy earlier this month. (Reuters)



FRENCH OPEN

Uncertainty over Serena fitness, Osaka form

'I actually haven't been able to train or practice a lot. I was out much longer than I expected'

AFP
Paris

Serena Williams heads into this year's French Open as an outsider for a Grand Slam title for possibly the first time in 20 years, with questions surrounding her fitness after a poor start to the season, while Naomi Osaka needs to rediscover her best form to solidify her position at the top of the women's game with a third straight major crown.

The 37-year-old Williams is still waiting for a record-equaling 24th Grand Slam triumph, with her last victory coming at the 2017 Australian Open shortly before taking a break from the sport due to pregnancy.

She impressed initially after returning, but last year twice fell just short of drawing level with Margaret Court's mark, losing in the Wimbledon final to Angelique Kerber before her infamous meltdown en route to another final defeat by Osaka at Flushing Meadows.

Williams' 2019 campaign has not gone to plan so far, with a series of injuries seeing her manage just four matches since her Australian Open quarter-final exit to Karolina Pliskova.

But she is confident her work off the court can help her find her best game in the biggest tournaments.

"I actually haven't been able to train or practice a lot. I was out much longer than I expected," admitted the three-time French Open champion last week in Rome, before pulling out of the tournament ahead of a second-round tie with sister Venus.

"But I did everything I could to stay fit. I knew that I love the clay season and I wanted to be a part of it."

"It's not about today or tomorrow. For me obviously it's about playing well at all the big moments... Obviously the Slams, etc, just getting ready for those events."

OSAKA CONFIDENT
World number one Osaka has



In this September 9, 2018, picture, Naomi Osaka of Japan kisses the US Open women's singles winner's trophy after beating Serena Williams of the US. (AFP)

not been overly struggling since surprisingly splitting with coach Sascha Bajin in the wake of her Australian Open title.

But the Japanese star has not won a title since, and like Williams, withdrew from the Italian Open through injury before her quarter-final against Kiki Bertens.

It has still been the 21-year-old's best-ever clay-court campaign, having also reached the last eight in Madrid and the semi-finals in Stuttgart, and she feels her big-hitting game is now ready for the red dirt.

"I'm kind of comfortable with it now. It's just like I randomly slip. I feel like if I can get that under control, I'll be good," Osaka, who has never reached the second week in Paris, said.

She also does not feel that her lack of a title since Melbourne will have a large bearing on her

Roland Garros prospects.

"I can't necessarily say it's been ups and downs because if I think about it, it's definitely been going up," she said.

"Every match that I've played, I've learned a lot. I've tried to take what I've learned into the next match. I think I've done that well."

HALEP THE FAVOURITE

Reigning champion Simona Halep will enter the tournament somewhat under the radar with much of the focus on Williams and Osaka, but the Romanian remains the world's most consistent player on clay.

The three-time French Open finalist is the bookmakers' favourite for the title, despite having lost both her finals so far this year and being knocked out in her first match in Rome by Czech youngster Marketa Vondrousova.

But she will be the third seed in Paris and a name everyone will want to avoid in the draw.

"I can't expect anything because to be a defending champion in Grand Slam is for (the) first time for me, so it's something new," said Halep, who won her maiden major title 12 months ago in her fourth final. "I will be more relaxed. I will try to enjoy (it) more."

The women's game remains far more open than the men's, with a host of other players holding serious hopes of lifting the trophy, like Italian Open champion and second seed Pliskova and the in-form Petra Kvitova.

Anything can happen in the French capital, as shown by unheralded Latvian Jelena Ostapenko's shock victory only two years ago.

Draw hands Federer smooth start on French Open return

Roger Federer was handed a comfortable-looking start in the French Open draw yesterday as the 20-times Grand Slam champion makes his return to the tournament after a three-year hiatus.

The third-seeded Swiss will open his quest for a second Musketeers Cup against Italian Lorenzo Sonego, the world number 73, but faces a potentially tricky quarter-final against young Greek Stefanos Tsitsipas who beat him at this year's Australian Open.

Former world number one Federer, 37, is in the same half of the draw as claycourt master Rafa Nadal and could meet the Spaniard in the semis.

Defending champion Nadal, seeded second, will open up against a qualifier as he aims for a record-extending 12th title at Roland Garros. World No. 1 Novak Djokovic, who is looking to hold all four majors for the second time in his career, will take on Hubert Hurkacz with a possible quarter-final against German Alexander Zverev.

In the women's draw, world number one Naomi Osaka will kick off her bid for a maiden French Open title against Slovak Anna Karolina Schmiedlova. Defending champion Simona Halep of Romania, the third seed, will take on Australian Ajla Tomljanovic after being drawn in the same half as Osaka.

Serena Williams will face Vitalia Diatchenko in only her second match on clay this season after she retired from the Italian Open ahead of a second-round match against her sister Venus due to a knee injury.

SPOTLIGHT

The Kyrgios one-man circus rolls into Paris

Reuters
Melbourne

With two completed matches on clay, a petulant tournament default in Rome and character assassinations of some of the game's leading players, **Nick Kyrgios'** French Open build-up has been more or less normal by his unorthodox standards.

It may be a little frosty in the locker room Roland Garros after the Australian described 11-times champion Rafael Nadal as a sore loser and Novak Djokovic as obsessed with being liked in an explosive podcast interview last week.

The Parisian crowd may also be a little scornful after he said the French Open "absolutely sucks" compared to Wimbledon in a video he shot himself and posted on social media.

By his own admission, Kyrgios has virtually no chance of winning the tournament on a surface he "hates", with the odds on him taking out any of the other three Grand Slams not significantly higher.

And yet, few players will be that keen to see his name bracketed with theirs in the draw, for all the likelihood the lanky world number 36 will spontaneously combust mid-match and ease their passage into the next round. Kyrgios might never have been past the quarter-finals of a Grand Slam, but he has shown he has the tools to topple any one of the titans of the game.

The 24-year-old boasts a 2-0 record over Djokovic, is 3-3 in his sometimes heated rivalry with Nadal and beat Roger Federer on clay in their first match in 2015.

In one sparkling week in Acapulco in March, Kyrgios downed Nadal, Stan Wawrinka, John Isner and Alexander Zverev to claim the Mexican Open title, all while partying every night at the coastal resort.

"I'm taking the piss out of the sport," he said in the 'No Challenges Remaining' podcast.

"I'm lucky to be able to practice for, like, 45 minutes without something going wrong."

For all his boasts of being "a bit of a genius" on court, Kyrgios' fitness is dire compared to the tour's hard workers and his mental game has all the fortitude of puff pastry.

His lack of commitment means regular losses to honest tour battlers, like German world number 49 Jan-Lennard Struff who weeks ago dumped him from the first round in Madrid after Kyrgios turned up with a backpack and only one spare racket.

World number 63 Casper Ruud was dragged into the spotlight at the Italian Open last week when Kyrgios threw a chair on the court and stormed off after the unheralded Norwegian had broken him early in the deciding third set.

FEARFUL FRONT?

Goodwill has dwindled to a low ebb at home in Australia, where one TV chat show panellist described him last week as a "brat" who needs a "slap".

His casual attitude toward the game is seen as only a front, to hide the fear of what failure would mean if he buckled down and tried his hardest.

It's a view that holds some currency with Kyrgios – but not one he tends to dwell on for too long.

"I don't like waking up every day and (reading) 'this guy's a waste of talent! There's a limit to this stuff that I can take,' he said in the podcast.

"Deep down I've had conversations with myself, like, 'is it a front?' But winning a Grand Slam... winning tennis matches for me, they don't make me happy."

Despite that, Kyrgios figures he will keep playing for at least another four or five years, adding to the \$7.24m he has already won in prize money – less the regular deductions for code of conduct breaches.

The trick-shots, underarm serves and tirades at spectators are all part of the theatre, and the 'what will he do next?' lure puts bums on seats, in much the same way John Daly still draws a crowd in golf.

Yet Daly, for all his faults and battles with addiction, did actually win two major titles.

Kyrgios has yet to win anything of significance but is convinced he could – if only he had the work-rate.

"I think that's a talent in itself just to show up every day and be the best you can be," he said.

"If I had that, Jesus, I'd probably have a couple of Grand Slams already."

BOTTOMLINE

Greenhouse effect: Roland Garros unveils new look after years of legal wrangles

AFP
Paris

After years of legal battles and threats to quit its historic home, Roland Garros will show off its new look next week, with a nod to the Eiffel Tower and a Second World War resistance fighter while boasting enough plants and greenery to make even the most demanding environmentalist drool.

Ninety years after it was built, the French Open's showpiece Court Philippe Chatrier was demolished soon after the 2018 event finished.

Fast forward 12 months and it has been almost completely rebuilt to accommodate the necessary strengthening required to support the retractable roof which will be in place for the 2020 edition of the sport's only clay court Grand Slam.

The metal superstructure weighs half that of the Eiffel Tower, around 3,700 tonnes, said the French Tennis Federation's director-general Jean-François Vilotte.

The roof will eventually allow for night sessions to be played even if Roland Garros still lags behind similar developments at the other three Slams.

The Australian Open has



This March 21, 2019, picture, shows the new Simonne Mathieu tennis court after its inauguration ceremony at Roland Garros in Paris. (AFP)

three covered courts already while Wimbledon and the US Open boast two retractable roofs apiece.

The 15,000-capacity Chatrier has expanded its shape and size, adding wooden seats to replace its ageing green plastic.

Only the famous red clay of the court itself – where the likes of Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic,

Roger Federer, Serena Williams, Naomi Osaka and Simona Halep will star from this weekend – has remained unchanged.

"We protected it, we put a concrete slab on it all the winter during the work," said Gilles Jourdan, the head of the modernisation project which is believed to cost an overall 350mn euros.

"But the sweat of Mr Lacoste is still there," he added in reference to one of France's greatest tennis icons, a three-time winner in Paris during the 1920s.

This year's tournament will also see the debut of Court Simonne-Mathieu, a 5,000-seat arena named in honour of a WWII resistance hero and a former Roland Garros champion.

The semi-sunken arena was a controversial development inside the nearby Jardin des Serres d'Auteuil, one of the capital's most beloved green spaces.

It was only last May that the French federation emerged successful after five bruising years of bitter legal battles with environmentalists and well-connected local residents worried over the impact such construction would have over the gardens' 19th century greenhouses.

At one stage, exasperated Roland Garros chiefs toyed with the idea of upping sticks out of Paris to start afresh in the suburbs.

But the court has been built, enclosed by four greenhouses housing "the only plant ecosystem of its kind", say organisers of hosting collections from South America, Africa, South-East Asia and Australia.

The 10,000-seater Court Suzanne Lenglen remains although Roland Garros' Court One 'bullring' is earmarked for demolition once the 2019 tournament ends.

In other changes this year, the west of Suzanne Lenglen has also undergone a radical transformation with six new courts built to supplement Court 14 which was a fresh addition in 2018.



LIGUE 1

All eyes on Mbappe as PSG's rivals prepare for summer of change

Forward Mbappe looks to add to his 32 league goals for the season



Paris Saint-Germain's Edinson Cavani (left) and Kylian Mbappe attend a training session at Camp des Loges training ground in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, near Paris. (AFP)

AFP
Paris

Could Kylian Mbappe really be about to play his final game for Paris Saint-Germain? And how are the French champions' main domestic rivals shaping up for what looks set to be a summer of transition? Here is a look at the main talking points in France ahead of the final night of the Ligue 1 season today.

MBAPPE GOING NOWHERE?

Kylian Mbappe has dominated the headlines and the discussions on television and radio in France this week following his shock remarks at an awards ceremony in Paris on Sunday. The 20-year-old World Cup winner used his victory speech after being named as France's player and young player of the year to drop a bombshell and suggest he could be ready to leave PSG after just two seasons. "I have discovered so many things here, and I feel that maybe it is the time to take on more responsibility.

Maybe at Paris Saint-Germain — with pleasure — or in a new project elsewhere," Mbappe said. PSG responded by insisting their star man would be going nowhere this summer, but his remarks have increased speculation that Real Madrid could come back in for a player they tried to sign from Monaco in 2017.

So it still seems far fetched that PSG's match at Reims on Friday could be Mbappe's last for the club, as he looks to add to his 32 league goals for the season without the support of Neymar. The Brazilian is again suspended.

LYON'S BRAZILIAN REVOLUTION

Lille will join PSG in the Champions League group stage after a superb run to second place in Ligue 1. Their game at Rennes today will be the last for the club for Nicolas Pepe, the Ivorian who has scored 22 goals in a brilliant campaign.

He will be sold for big money in the summer. Lyon have third place wrapped up and are now crossing their fingers in the hope that Chelsea win the Europa League final against Arsenal. Only if that

happens will OL be guaranteed a place in the group stage of next season's Champions League. That would be a huge boost for the club just as they prepare to usher in a new management team.

Bruno Genesio will depart after three and a half years as coach, with club legend Juninho Pernambucano set to come in as sporting director and his fellow Brazilian Sylvinho as head coach. "Sylvinho does not have great experience as a coach in his own right but, without wishing to compare him to (Zinedine) Zidane, we have seen that great players can come on board with ambitious projects and do well," said Lyon president Jean-Michel Aulas.

ALL CHANGE AT MARSEILLE

Saint-Etienne celebrated qualifying for Europe last weekend but were immediately hit by the news that veteran coach Jean-Louis Gasset would be standing down after today's match at Angers. Meanwhile, the announcement that Rudi Garcia would be leaving his job as coach of Marseille came as no surprise at all.

The former Champions League win-

ners can no longer finish higher than fifth and will not qualify for Europe. Garcia called it "the worst season of my career", and the names being linked with the job at the Velodrome include former player Gabriel Heinze, Claude Puel, Rafael Benitez and Porto coach Sergio Conceicao.

Whoever comes in faces a huge rebuilding job. It has been a turbulent season too for Monaco, but the principal club will not go down on the final day barring a dramatic set of results. Dijon have to win against Toulouse to stand any chance of avoiding going down automatically along with Guingamp.

Caen currently occupy the relegation play-off place but are just two points behind Amiens and are hoping to stay up on the final day for the third season running.

TODAY'S FIXTURES (1905GMT)

Amiens v Guingamp, Angers v Saint-Etienne, Caen v Bordeaux, Dijon v Toulouse, Marseille v Montpellier, Nantes v Strasbourg, Nice v Monaco, Nimes v Lyon, Reims v Paris Saint-Germain, Rennes v Lille

SPOTLIGHT

Ronaldo included in Portugal squad for Nations League

AFP
Oeiras, Portugal

Star captain Cristiano Ronaldo was included in Portugal's squad for next month's Nations League semi-final against Switzerland, head coach Fernando Santos announced yesterday.

Ronaldo, 34, a five-time Ballon d'Or winner missed the group stages preferring to try and adapt to life in Juventus since moving from Real Madrid. The Euro 2016 champions welcome the Swiss on June 5 in Porto and the Netherlands play England in Guimarães a day later before a third place play-off and a final on June 9. He lifted the Serie A title with his Italian club this season but failed to clinch a third straight Champions League after losing to Ajax in the quarter-finals.

Head coach Fernando Santos has chosen not to call up veterans Adrien Silva, Nani and Ricardo Quaresma and Sevilla forward Andre Silva misses out with a knee injury. Highly-tipped Benfica uncapped youngster Joao Felix is also included alongside three other club teammates. Santos acknowledged that such a short tournament would be a different experience for his squad.

"For the players, it's always important to have the chance to win a title," he said. "The players have great passion to play for their country and this is no different. There is a title at stake and of course we want to win."

"It's a different sort of test. There is no group stage with points and qualification... this is do-or-die from the start."

PORTUGAL SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Beto (Goztepe/



TUR, Jose Sa (Olympiakos/GRE), Rui Patricio (Wolves/ENG)

Defenders: Joao Cancelo (Juventus/ITA), Jose Fonte (Lille/FRA), Pepe (Porto/POR), Mario Rui (Naples/ITA), Nelson Semedo (Barcelona/ESP), Raphael Guerreiro (Borussia Dortmund/GER), Ruben Dias (Benfica/POR)

Midfielders: Bruno Fernandes (Sporting Lisbon/POR), Danilo Pereira (Porto/POR), Joao Moutinho (Wolves/ENG), Pizzi (Benfica/POR), Ruben Neves (Wolves/ENG), William Carvalho (Real Betis/ESP), Joao Felix (Benfica/POR)

Forwards: Bernardo Silva (Manchester City/ENG), Goncalo Guedes (Valencia/ESP), Rafa Silva (Benfica/POR), Dyeogo Sousa (Sporting Braga/POR), Diogo Jota (Wolves/ENG), Cristiano Ronaldo (Juventus/ITA)

Bayern president Hoeness confirms Sane interest

Berlin: Bayern Munich president Uli Hoeness confirmed yesterday that the newly-crowned Bundesliga champions are considering a summer move for Manchester City winger Leroy Sane.

Kicker magazine reported earlier this week that Sane, 23, was "a candidate" for Bayern's major transfer offensive this close season, and Hoeness confirmed the club's interest to Munich-based newspaper Sueddeutsche Zeitung.

"We are looking into the player (Sane)," he told the newspaper yesterday. The German winger was linked to Bayern before joining City from Schalke for 50 million euros (\$55m) in 2016.

According to the Sueddeutsche Zeitung report, City coach Pep Guardiola, who was at

Bayern before, is keen to keep Sane, but the club are looking to sell him. The German international is reportedly unhappy with a lack of game time, having started in just three of City's last 10 league games.

If Bayern were to sign him, he would be the first attacking player to arrive in what Hoeness has called "the biggest investment programme in our club's history". Bayern are making major changes to their squad as veteran players such as Arjen Robben, Franck Ribery and Rafinha leave the club this summer.

They have already signed Stuttgart defender Benjamin Pavard for 35 million euros (\$39m) and fellow French World Cup winner Lucas Hernandez for a club record 80 million euros (\$89.4m).

ROUND-UP

Brazil squad begins preparations for Copa America

AFP
Teropolis, Brazil

Copa America hosts Brazil began preparations for the tournament at their training centre in Teropolis on Wednesday, despite missing most of their team. Only seven players are expected at the Granja Comary football complex near Rio de Janeiro for the first week of training.

Neymar, the world's most expensive player, is due to appear on May 28 along with PSG teammates Daniel Alves, Thiago Silva and Marquinhos. Everton winger Richarlison was the first to arrive Wednesday. Richarlison was joined by Ajax Amsterdam's David Neres, another 22-year-old striker.

Fernandinho, Gabriel Jesus and Casemiro were expected to arrive late last night, while Eder and Filipe Luis were due today. Alisson and Roberto Firmino, who will play the Champions League final on June 1 with Liverpool, will be the last to arrive.

Coach Tite made a brief appearance near the field where workers were still painting the lines. Eight-time winners Brazil face Bolivia, Venezuela and Peru in the group stage, which start on June 14, after two friendlies against Qatar and Honduras.

UEFA DISMISSES MONTENEGRO'S APPEAL AGAINST RACISM RAP

Montenegro will have to play one match behind closed doors after UEFA rejected yesterday their appeal against punishment for racist abuse directed at black England players during a Euro 2020 qualifier. European football's governing body had hit Montenegro with the fan ban last month after Raheem Sterling, Danny Rose and Callum Hudson-Odoi were targeted with monkey chants in Podgorica during a 5-1 win for Gareth Southgate's side in March.

The ruling means Montenegro will play their Euro 2020 qualifier against Kosovo on June 7 in an empty stadium. They were also fined 20,000 euros (\$22,353).

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Liverpool's Keita, Firmino making good progress

Reuters
London

Liverpool's Naby Keita is recovering faster than expected from a thigh injury and will be given every chance to prove his fitness ahead of next week's Champions League final against Tottenham Hotspur, manager Jurgen Klopp said.

Guinea midfielder Keita sustained an adductor injury in Liverpool's 3-0 semi-final first leg defeat at Barcelona this month and was ruled out for two months, meaning he would likely miss the African Cup of Nations in June. However, Klopp said that the 24-year-old was making steady progress in Liverpool's training camp in Marbella despite having only a slim chance of being ready for the Champions League final in Madrid on June 1.

"Naby is... a bit ahead of schedule, but that doesn't mean anything for the final. He's now doing straight runs... he feels comfortable with 50% intensity... but there's still a way to go," Klopp told Liverpool's website.

"I know about issues with Guinea... we don't want to keep a player out if he can play — maybe they think it's like this, but it's not like this. If he's not 100% fit, he cannot play. That's how it is. It's not important whether you play for your country or your club. That's what we try to make sure. It looks good, very positive and we'll see if there is a chance."

Brazil forward Roberto Firmino, who



Liverpool players at a training camp in Marbella, Spain, yesterday.

returned to training on Tuesday following a muscle strain, is also stepping up his recovery with staggered sessions. "Bobby looks really good, he's now part of training. It wasn't too long out, but of course we're still careful and want to make sure nothing happens," Klopp added.

"We have a few days still and want to use them, that's why he's in, out, in, out. Yesterday, he was only playing as a joker (in the small-sided games) but it's good for him, the first step to play football again."

"Today he was in around 70% of the session. Tomorrow he'll probably be in

completely, we'll see, then hopefully it'll be fine."

Liverpool are planning a friendly at their Marbella training camp this weekend as Klopp steps up preparations for the Champions League final. The Liverpool manager wants his players back in match action before the Madrid final on 1 June as it will be a fortnight on Sunday since their last competitive outing against Wolves. Liverpool's opponents have still to be confirmed, with the end of domestic seasons and international commitments complicating the search, but Klopp's team will face an under-23s or academy

side if a friendly with senior opposition cannot be arranged.

Klopp is particularly keen to give Roberto a run-out as the striker has missed Liverpool's past three matches with a groin problem. Sheyi Ojo, meanwhile, is set to sign a new five-year contract with Liverpool before going out on loan again. The 21-year-old winger has spent this season on loan at Stade de Reims but will not be returning to the French club.

Steven Gerrard is an admirer of Ojo from his work at Liverpool's academy and Rangers are expected to be among the interested clubs.

SPOTLIGHT

Al Sadd will bounce back, says forward Afif

AFC
Tehran

The effects of a long season caught up with Qatar Stars League champions Al Sadd as they fell to a 2-0 defeat to Persepolis in their final 2019 AFC Champions League Group D match on Monday. The defeat, with Mahdi Torabi and Ali Alipour scoring for 2018 finalists Persepolis, came just four days after Al Sadd had lost the Qatar Amir Cup final to Al Duhail.

It was not the farewell Al Sadd wanted to give retiring Spanish legend Xavi Hernandez, brought an end to great career, but forward Akram Afif admitted that Al Sadd had not been at their best in both matches.

"I would like to congratulate the Persepolis fans but at the same time, I must say it has been tough for our fans. This match was difficult for us as we are in the fasting month and it has been a very long season for us," said Afif, who played an integral role in Qatar winning the AFC Asian

Cup UAE 2019 title in February.

He was also equally crucial in Al Sadd winning the Qatar Stars League title for the first time since the 2012-13 season but the Doha-based club have shown signs of fatigue over the last few weeks.

"We started this season in August 2018, and we still have one month to go before the season ends. Some people think that the season is over for us, but it is not, as those with the Qatar national team still have one month to play, as we will compete in the Copa America next month."

Afif, however, said he wasn't too worried about Al Sadd's recent form.

"What is important for us is that we qualified for the AFC Champions League Round of 16 and we are confident of doing well in the knockout stage."

Losing to Persepolis didn't cost Al Sadd dearly as they still emerged group winners but what it did was set up a mouth-watering Round of 16 meeting with domestic rivals Al Duhail for which Afif is sure Al Sadd will be back at their very best.



Al Sadd forward Akram Afif (right).

Benitez wants owner Ashley to change Newcastle's transfer policy



London: After seven days of negotiations Rafael Benitez and Mike Ashley are still attempting to reach a deal to extend the Spaniard's contract as Newcastle United's manager. A face-to-face meeting between Benitez and the club's owner in London last Thursday has been followed by further discussions between the manager and Lee Charnley, Newcastle's managing director, mainly by telephone and email.

Although both sides are reluctant to part company there have been significant sticking points and the haggling could now stretch into next week. Any finalisation of an agreement is expected to be prefaced by Ashley meeting Benitez in person for a second time and providing written guarantees of all promises.

While the owner is prepared to offer his manager a sizeable transfer budget - £50m plus any cash raised from player sales next season has been mentioned - Benitez would like increased freedom to sign players aged over 25 in addition to flexibility over the wage bill.

The 59-year-old, whose contract expires on 30 June, is keen to challenge for European places and domestic cups. Among other experienced players, he is desperate to secure the permanent signing of Salomon Rondon, who scored 12 goals on loan from West Brom. The forward turns 30 in September.

Benitez has also been linked with a move for Manchester United's Juan Mata - a playmaker, now 31, that he managed at Chelsea - but Ashley has preferred to invest in more youthful players with potentially high resale value.

Manchester United's interest in Newcastle's young midfielder Sean Longstaff - something the St James' Park hierarchy are determined to resist - highlights the need for the managerial situation to be resolved soon.

Benitez had hoped to persuade Ashley to embark on a major overhaul of Newcastle's training ground but seems prepared to compromise and postpone such a revamp.

COPA DEL REY

Barca, haunted by Anfield nightmares, eye Cup title

Valverde's side is ravaged by injuries with their form dipping in the last month



Barcelona's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi (second right) celebrates with teammates after scoring a goal against Eibar during the La Liga match in Eibar on Sunday. (AFP)

Reuters
Barcelona

Barcelona can ease the lingering pain of their Champions League elimination by cementing their domestic dominance and winning a second successive league and Cup double when they take on Valencia in tomorrow's Copa del Rey final.

But with Ernesto Valverde's side ravaged by injuries and their form dipping in the last month while Valencia are on an upward curve, the Cup holders are set for a far tougher test to retain the trophy than in recent years. Second-top scorer Luis Suarez is recovering from knee surgery and 105-million-euro forward Ousmane Dembele is unlikely to make it back from a hamstring injury, depriving captain Lionel Messi of his usual attacking partners.

Record signing Philippe Coutinho is expected to come back from injury in time for the game, although his woeful form means his return does not necessarily boost Barca's chances of winning a record-extending fifth consecutive Copa del Rey. Jasper Cillessen - the team's designated goalkeeper in Cup games - is in shaky form after making two costly errors in the 2-2 draw at Eibar last week and first choice Marc-Andre ter Stegen is injured. The Catalans' scrappy performance against Eibar was the latest episode of a haggard final stretch of the season which hit a nadir

with the 4-0 loss to Liverpool at Anfield that wrecked Barca's hopes of reaching the Champions League final.

According to midfielder Ivan Rakitic, the cloud of the 4-3 aggregate defeat, after a 3-0 win in the semi-final first leg, is still hanging over the La Liga champions. "To a degree we are still affected by it, no one felt worse about the defeat than we did but now is the time to move on," Rakitic said.

"I wish I could explain what happened at Anfield, but sometimes in sport things happen which you can't explain. It's no use saying we should learn from it, but we have to make sure it brings us together. Football has given us another tough lesson but we must put it behind us and prepare for the Cup final and next season."

Valencia have drawn both games against Barca this season and overcame a rusty first half of the campaign to sneak into the top four in La Liga and earn a Champions League berth by winning seven of their final 10 matches. Now they are targeting a first major trophy since 2008 to celebrate their centenary year. "It has not been easy, we've overcome many difficult situations this season to qualify for the Champions League and now it's a weight off our backs and we're motivated for the final," said Valencia winger Goncalo Guedes.

"We will study Barcelona's weak points, they don't have many, but they have some, and we're going to try and make the most of them."

SERIE A

Atalanta play away at home in final Champions League push

Reuters
Milan

Atalanta, facing one of the biggest matches in the club's 112-year history, will be playing away at home on Sunday as they bid to pip one of the two Milan teams to a place in next season's Champions League. The Bergamo team's own stadium began rebuilding work this month and they are playing their final home matches of the season at the Mapei ground in Reggio Emilia - which happens to be the home of Sassuolo, their opponents on Sunday.

Around 18,000 fans are expected to make the 240-kilometre trip from Bergamo for what could be an historic evening for their team who have never previously played in the Champions League, or its predecessor the European Cup. The remaining 4,000 places will be reserved for Sassuolo fans - in the away sector. Atalanta are among four teams chasing the remaining two Champions League places on the final day of the Serie A season while, at the other end of the table, Fiorentina are among three sides trying to avoid the last of the three relegation spots.

Atalanta, Serie A's topscorers with 74 goals, are third with 66 points from their 37 games ahead of Inter Milan on

their head-to-head record, with AC Milan fifth on 65 and AS Roma sixth on 63. Juventus won the title with five matches to spare and Napoli have guaranteed second place.

"Our confidence is now sky high and that is going to be crucial," said Atalanta coach Gian Piero Gasperini after his team held Juventus 1-1 away last Sunday to extend their unbeaten league run to 12 matches. "The Champions League would be extraordinary, but we mustn't think that it's already in our grasp."

Inter Milan's confidence, on the other hand, is at a low ebb after they were thrashed 4-1 at Napoli last Sunday. They now face an Empoli side who are themselves battling to avoid the drop and have three successive wins behind them. Inter's erratic form has led to speculation over the future of coach Luciano Spalletti amid widespread media reports that former Juventus, Chelsea and Italy coach Antonio Conte is being lined up to replace him.

AC Milan coach Gennaro Gattuso is a similar position as his team prepare to visit SPAL. Milan set the Champions League as their clear target their season and Gattuso could be fired even if they qualify. At the bottom, Genoa are in the relegation zone with 37 points with Empoli above them on 38 and Udinese and Fiorentina on 40, although there is no combination of results which can



Atalanta's Jospil Illicic celebrates after scoring against Juventus in Serie A football on Sunday. (AFP)

relegate Udinese. Fiorentina, who returned to the top flight in 2004 after recovering from bankruptcy and have been ever-present since, host Genoa and defeat will condemn them to the second tier if Udinese avoid losing.

Vincenzo Montella's side have lost their last six games in all competitions, are scoreless in their last four and winless in their last 13. "Everything is going wrong at the moment, but we mustn't think of ourselves as victims," said

Montella after they lost 1-0 at Parma last Sunday. "We mustn't waste energy, or think everything has been thrown away. We must go onto the pitch without fear."

Beside the handful of crucial games,

the closing act will see several veterans bid farewell to football, or leave their long-time clubs. Roma's Daniele De Rossi learnt last week that the club would not renew his contract after 18 seasons, to the dismay of Giallorossi fans, who are expected to pack the Stadio Olimpico on Sunday.

Banners honouring 35-year-old midfielder were shown last weekend during the games of Roma's arch-rivals Juventus and Lazio as Inter are said to be pondering an offer as De Rossi said he will continue playing. Andrea Barzagli, 38, saluted Juve's home crowd last Sunday and may have last appearance against Sampdoria as he ends a career that peaked with the world championship won with De Rossi in 2006. There were also tributes at Juve's Allianz Stadium for departing coach Massimiliano Allegri after five successful seasons.

Milan defender Ignazio Abate, 32, and Chievo striker Sergio Pellissier, 40, were honoured from home fans last weekend and defender Emiliano Moretti, 37, readies for his adieu as Torino welcome Lazio on Sunday.

Pellissier and Moretti are set to enter their club's staff, while Abate is likely to seek a new team. Pellissier will captain Chievo at Frosinone in a game between relegated sides, before Bologna welcome Napoli. Cagliari v Udinese completes the Sunday programme.

MLB

Torres, Yankees down Orioles again

Shortstop Torres now has 12 homers this season, with 10 off Orioles pitching



New York Yankees shortstop Thairo Estrada (left) hits a two-run home run during the game against the Baltimore Orioles in Baltimore on Wednesday. (USA TODAY Sports)

Reuters
New York

Gleyber Torres continued his homer barrage against Baltimore with two more on Wednesday night, and the visiting New York Yankees finished with five long balls in a 7-5 victory over the Orioles.

Torres now has 12 homers this season, with 10 off Orioles pitching. Gary Sanchez, Thairo Estrada and DJ LeMahieu also homered for the Yankees, who have hit 11 round-trippers while winning each of the first three games of the four-game series.

Nine of Sanchez's 15 homers have come against the Orioles this season, including blasts in each of the first three games of this series. New York now has banged out 34 homers as a team against Baltimore in 2019.

The Yankees hit three or more homers in six straight games at Camden Yards. According to STATS, that the longest streak by any team in any major league stadium — ever.

The Baltimore pitching staff now has allowed 105 homers this season. The Orioles on Tuesday became the fastest to allow 100 in a year.

CC Sabathia (3-1) went five innings and got the win despite giving up three runs in the fifth inning and five overall (four

RESULTS

Oakland	7-2	Cleveland
Milwaukee	11-9	Cincinnati
Kansas City	8-2	St. Louis
Texas	2-1	Seattle
San Diego	5-2	Arizona
Colorado	9-3	Pittsburgh
NY Yankees	7-5	Baltimore
Boston	6-5	Toronto
Tampa Bay	8-1	LA Dodgers
Miami	6-3	Detroit
NY Mets	6-1	Washington
St. Louis	10-3	Kansas City
Chicago Cubs	8-4	Philadelphia
C White Sox	9-4	Houston
Atlanta	9-2	San Francisco



New York Yankees' Gleyber Torres.

earned). The veteran left-hander struck out seven and walked two but did allow two homers and six hits.

Aroldis Chapman closed it in the ninth to earn his 13th save.

Dan Straily (1-4) gave the Orioles an ineffectual start. He allowed six runs on eight hits in just four innings — and all of the runs came on four homers. Straily struck out two and walked three.

The Yankees started everything with four runs in the second inning thanks to

two-run homers from Estrada and LeMahieu. Torres then hit his first homer in the third, giving New York a 5-0 lead.

Baltimore got one back on a Hanser Alberto RBI double in the third, but Sanchez's solo shot in the fourth made it 6-1. A throwing error gave the Orioles a run in the fourth before Torres struck again with a solo homer in the fifth.

The Orioles then cut the margin to 7-5 after Richie Martin's first major league homer in the fifth, a solo shot, and Ren-

ato Nunez's two-run homer later in the frame.

Pedro Severino tried to score in the fifth on a Joey Rickard single, but New York center fielder Brett Gardner threw him out, and neither team scored after that.

YANKEES PLACE SABATHIA ON INJURED LIST

New York Yankees left-hander CC Sabathia was placed on the injured list yesterday with right knee inflammation.

Sabathia signalled the move Wednesday, saying after the game he was likely to head back to New York to have his knee drained and receive an injection of cortisone.

"It's something I need to take care of," the 38-year-old said after a 7-5 Yankees win over the Orioles.

Sabathia (3-1) threw 88 pitches but said every time he lands, pain shoots through his right knee and makes it challenging to finish pitches.

Injuries have decked the Yankees this season, with nearly half of the 40-man roster having served stints on the 10-day injured list. Right-handed ace Luis Severino hasn't pitched this season, left-hander James Paxton missed time and right-hander Masahiro Tanaka left his most recent start Saturday screaming in pain with a shin injury that required X-rays. Tests were negative.

FOCUS

Australia name NBA star-studded Basketball World Cup squad

AFF
Sydney

Philadelphia 76ers star Ben Simmons headlines an NBA player-dominated preliminary Australia squad announced yesterday for this year's Basketball World Cup in China.

Nine US-based players form the core of the 17-man Boomers squad, including Andrew Bogut of NBA champions Golden State Warriors, Joe Ingles of the Utah Jazz, Patty Mills of the San Antonio Spurs and another 76er, Jonah Bolden.

The NBA has seen a record number of Australian players this year and the Boomers are being touted as the strongest from the country to play at a World Cup.

"No doubt, we have the opportunity to put a great team on the floor and that's exciting," head coach Andrej Lemanis said in a statement.

"The depth of talent in Australian basketball means that some tough decisions are made at this point and some very good players miss out," Lemanis added

after several hopefuls from Australia's national competition were overlooked.

Simmons' 76ers lost the Eastern Conference semi-finals after an incredible game seven buzzer-beater by the Toronto Raptors' Kawhi Leonard earlier this month.

The former NBA rookie of the year took to social media this week to let 76er fans know he was energised for next year after a "tough way to finish the season".

"I would also like to announce that I am going to be a Boomer for the upcoming events. So stay tuned," Simmons added in a video posted to Twitter.

Sudanese-Australian Thon Maker was pulled from the Boomers squad at the last minute, reportedly at the request of his NBA team the Detroit Pistons.

The final 12-man squad will be selected during team camp in August.

They will take on Canada and the USA in warm-up matches in Perth and Melbourne that month with their World Cup campaign beginning against the Canadians on September 1 in China.



In this May 7, 2019, picture, Philadelphia 76ers' Ben Simmons (left) shoots the ball in the game against Toronto Raptors in Toronto. (TNS)

BOTTOMLINE

Agent blasts Drake over trolling of Antetokounmpo

Reuters
New York

Recording artist Drake getting into the heads of the Milwaukee Bucks, especially star player Giannis Antetokounmpo?

The recording artist and Toronto Raptors fan might take credit for having something to do with the Eastern Conference finals being tied at 2-2 after the Bucks dropped Games 3 and 4 in Toronto.

On Wednesday, a tweet from a senior executive for Octagon, the agency representing Antetokounmpo, called out Drake for his repeated trolling of the Bucks in general and specifically their superstar power forward.

"Imagine a gig & an athlete on VIP seats, right next to the band, stands up on the stage just to show off during the entire game, knowing cameras are on him, occasionally even massaging the singer," wrote Georgios Dimitropoulos, Antetokounmpo's

former European agent before he was named senior director for Octagon Basketball Europe. "Security&him both allow it. Never seen anything as disrespectful as this before..."

The tweet subsequently was deleted.

Drake responded Wednesday night on Instagram. He posted a photo of himself cheering on the Raptors, adding emojis of a smiling face, a salt shaker and a person shrugging.

He then "liked" a post from a follower that read: "Sports media needs to accept the simple rule the Miami Hurricanes signed into law back in the 80s: if you don't want the opposing team to celebrate and dance, prevent them from scoring, winning, or achieving their objective. Get over it and keep it moving."

Sitting in his usual seat near the Raptors bench throughout Game 4 on Tuesday night when Toronto beat the Bucks 120-102, Drake made his presence felt. He laughed when free throws were

missed by Antetokounmpo, who hit only 6 of 10 (including an airball) but still scored 25 points.

In a double-overtime loss in Game 3, Antetokounmpo made 2 of 7 free throws and scored only 12 points.

On Wednesday, Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer spoke out about the so-called trolling.

"You can't help but occasionally see Drake just going into timeouts or in and out of timeouts, whether he's encouraging or cheering for Toronto," he said. "You know, trying to talk to referees. To say I don't see it at all would be inaccurate, but to say I give it much or any thought, you know, it's kind of 'same answer, same mantra!'"

"I just tend to ignore and focus on our team, focus on whatever it is we need to be doing."

How much Drake gets away with might depend on his celebrity status, according to the coach.

"I don't know how much he's on the court," Budenholzer

added. "It sounds like you guys are saying it's more than I realise. There's certainly no place for fans and, you know, whatever it is exactly that Drake is for the Toronto Raptors. You know, to be on the court, there's boundaries and lines for a reason, and like I said, the league is usually pretty good at being on top of stuff like that."

Bucks fans don't believe Drake is getting a bum rap, though. And neither does the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, with a headline that read: "Milwaukee totally hates Drake, somehow allowed to roam the court and troll Giannis."

Last year, the NBA reportedly warned the world-famous artist about "the use of bad language" after he traded barbs with Cleveland Cavaliers center Kendrick Perkins in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference semi-finals. The pair exchanged words as the Raptors and Cavaliers headed to the tunnels at halftime, and another harsh exchange followed at the end of the game.



Recording artist Drake reacts from the sideline during game four of the Eastern conference finals between Toronto Raptors and Milwaukee Bucks in Toronto, Canada, on Tuesday. (USA TODAY Sports)

SPOTLIGHT

Lauda remembered in tributes at Monaco

'It's not an easy situation to try to go back to racing especially not in Monaco'

AFF
Monaco

Poignant tributes to Niki Lauda, including a solitary red baseball cap left hanging on his earphones peg, were all around the Mercedes team motorhome and their cars yesterday morning as practice began for the Monaco Grand Prix.

On a dry and hazy morning in the Mediterranean principality, the cramped harbourside paddock was in sombre mood as Formula One honoured the Austrian, who died overnight on Monday aged 70.

Like Mercedes, where he was a larger-than-life figure on the pit-wall as the team's plain-speaking non-executive chairman, and Ferrari, with whom he won his first two championships, McLaren were also honouring the memory of the man and where he won his third drivers world title.

The Ferrari SF90 cars ran with a decal marking his time with them in the form of a replica graphic of his name as used on the side of the cars when he raced for the team from 1974 to 1977. It was underlined in black as a sign of mourning.

Sebastian Vettel, the four-time champion who is a keen historian of the sport and was close to Lauda, wore a special helmet livery reflecting the famous red one the Austrian used in his racing career.

Mercedes marked the passing of the man who was instrumental in persuading Lewis Hamilton to join from McLaren with a red star, Lauda's signature and a message of thanks 'Danke Niki' on their cars.

"As you can imagine, this is a very difficult time for the team, for all of us, and it is very difficult, most importantly, as a friend," said team boss and fellow-Austrian Toto Wolff.

"It's not an easy situation to try to go back to racing especially not in Monaco with so much media attention. I am trying to keep it together emotionally in speaking about a friend. This is what matters most and what hurts the most. It is one thing that the world and the F1 community has lost the biggest icon,



A message in memory of Niki Lauda on the car of Toro Rosso's Daniil Kvyat during practice at the Monaco Grand Prix in Monte Carlo. (Reuters)

but it is totally different, and more difficult, to have lost a friend."

Talking to reporters ahead of yesterday's practice, Wolff asked the news media to respect the team's emotions as they continued racing "as Niki would have wanted us to do nothing else".

"It's so hard to talk about Niki, the icon in F1 that he was," he added. "The biggest icon that we had. My emotions

are so overwhelming as a friend. The 48 hours have been terrible. I feel like a zombie — I keep looking at the pictures and find myself with tears in my eyes every half hour because he's not here anymore. This isn't easy. There's a huge black cloud and there is someone who is so dearly missed in this team and in F1. I feel we've lost the heart and soul of Formula One."

Vettel not only sported a near-replica

Lauda helmet, but revealed also that, after learning of his friend's lung transplant operation last year, he wrote a letter that he described as being "a great pleasure" and "full of fine words."

Other teams including Red Bull, Toro Rosso and Haas carried tributes on their cars as championship leader and defending five-time champion Lewis Hamilton set the pace. The Briton was excused from appearing at a routine

pre-event news conference on Wednesday due to his emotional condition following Lauda's death, his place being taken by Silver Arrows teammate Valtteri Bottas.

The pair swapped fastest laps to stay ahead of the chasing pack as Mercedes sought to extend their record breaking run of five one-two season opening triumphs to six at this weekend's classic blue riband street race.

F1

Hamilton fastest for mourning Mercedes

Reuters
Monaco

Formula One world champion Lewis Hamilton was fastest for mourning Mercedes in both Monaco Grand Prix practice sessions yesterday. The Briton, excused media duties following the death of Mercedes' non-executive chairman and triple world champion Niki Lauda, lapped the treacherous street circuit with a fastest time of one minute 11.118 seconds in the afternoon on soft tyres.

The five times world champion, seven points clear of teammate Valtteri Bottas at the top of the standings after five races, had set the pace on a dry morning with a time of 1:12.106. Red Bull's Max Verstappen was second fastest in the first session, just 0.059 slower than Hamilton, but sat out much of the afternoon with a suspected water leak.

Bottas ended the day in second place and 0.081 off the pace in a familiar Mercedes one-two. Between them, Hamilton and Bottas have won every race so far this year with five successive one-twins — the best ever start to a season — and are favourites for a sixth on Sunday.

Charles Leclerc, hoping to become the first Monegasque to stand on his home podium since Louis Chiron in 1950, was fourth fastest for Ferrari in the first session with four times champion teammate Sebastian Vettel fifth.

Vettel moved up to third in the later session, 0.763 off Hamilton's pace, and just ahead of Red Bull's Pierre Gasly while Leclerc dropped to 10th. Mercedes, Ferrari and McLaren all carried tributes to Lauda on their cars with Mercedes team members also wearing black armbands.

Vettel wore a helmet modelled on one of Lauda's, with the Austrian's name on. Two of Lauda's three titles were won with the Italian team. Both sessions were free of crashes, although there were the inevitable near-misses on a tight and twisty circuit where cars skim the metal barriers and brush the unforgiving walls.

Gasly had a close escape at the exit to the first swimming pool chicane early on while Robert Kubica spun his Williams at the exit to Casino Square but came to a halt without serious damage. McLaren had a difficult first session with Carlos Sainz failing to set a lap time and Lando Norris only 15th, but recovered to 13th and 12th later on. Last year's winner Daniel Ricciardo, who has since moved from Red Bull to Renault, ended the day in 17th place and just behind German teammate Nico Hulkenberg. Williams were last and some four seconds off the pace.

SOUTH KOREA SCRAPS JOINT OLYMPIC HOCKEY TEAM WITH NORTH

Seoul: South Korea are dropping their plan for a joint women's field hockey team with the North at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, officials said yesterday, after Pyongyang failed to co-operate. Sporting ties triggered a rapid diplomatic thaw on and around the peninsula last year, but are stagnating with the process over the North's nuclear arsenal deadlocked. The two Koreas formed their first-ever unified Olympic team — a joint women's ice hockey squad — for

the 2018 Winter Games in the South, where they proved a media sensation despite losing all five of their matches by a combined scoreline of 28-2.

The two Koreas then formed several joint teams for the 2018 Asian Games in Indonesia and in February agreed to send unified basketball, judo, field hockey and rowing squads to Tokyo. But just weeks later a summit between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump col-

lapsed in disagreement over sanctions relief and what Pyongyang would be willing to give up in return. That left North-South relations in limbo, with Pyongyang not responding to offers of talks or implementing previous agreements. The International Olympic Committee has stipulated that, in team sports, any joint team Tokyo entries must have qualified as a single unit.

That means a joint women's team needed to enter the IHF Women's Hock-

ey Series Finals in Ireland from June 8 to 16. Yesterday was the deadline for submitting squads and, with the North not responding, the South decided to enter alone. "It will just be the South Korean team, not a unified team," an official at the Korea Hockey Federation in Seoul said. South Korea's sports minister Park Yang-woo held out hope of a change of heart by Pyongyang.

"We have repeatedly sent our request but there has been no response.

We will wait until the very last minute," he told reporters earlier this week. "If there is progress in talks for joint teams later, we will resume discussions but we have to prioritise the opinions of the athletes," he said. Pyongyang and Seoul have announced plans for a joint bid to host the 2032 Summer Games, but officials in the South Korean capital say there has not been any discussion on the project with their northern counterparts.

FOCUS

'Unprepared' Tokyo 2020 boxing boss vows to put athletes first

AFF
Tokyo

The Olympic official hastily put in charge of organising the Tokyo 2020 boxing competition admitted yesterday he was "totally unprepared" for his appointment, but vowed he would put athletes' interests first. The IOC tapped Morinari Watanabe from the Japanese Olympic Committee to run a special task force to organise the Tokyo 2020 boxing competition on Wednesday after stripping the world amateur governing body (AIBA) of the right following misconduct allegations.

The 60-year-old, currently head of the International Gymnastics Federation, told reporters at a news conference in Tokyo that the call had come out of the blue. "It was two days ago at night. I was having dinner and all of sudden, the (country code) 44 appeared on my phone. I was wondering who it was and it was (IOC) President (Thomas) Bach!" he said. "He told me to become chair of the task force. I was happy. I was aware of the challenges and issues and I knew there were athletes who are suffering and if there are athletes suffering, it is the obligation of an IOC member to go out and support them," he said, talking through an interpreter. He said he had always tried to put athletes first at the gymnastics federation, even revealing he had asked "to clean the bathrooms" on a recent trip, "because that's what the president should be doing".

"Getting the voice of the athletes is really important... I want to understand their concerns," he said. After months of dancing around each other, the IOC on Wednesday delivered a knock-



out blow to AIBA, removing its right to organise the Tokyo boxing competition but insisting that a tournament would nonetheless take place.

The IOC had frozen preparations for the boxing at Tokyo 2020 pending a months-long investigation into alleged serious mismanagement at the crisis-riddled association. The details have yet to be hammered out, but the IOC has said qualifications will take place between January and May 2020. Watanabe said there was "no choice" but to organise the tournament quickly despite the tight time-frame, and joked "I might not be getting much sleep."

Asked what his strategy was, he replied: "I was told just two days ago. This is something I was totally unprepared for. I wasn't expecting this."

He said he would be flying immediately to IOC headquarters in Switzerland to begin work, admitting: "At this point in time, so many things are still unclear. I need to conduct a thorough analysis to build a good way forward."

BOXING

Thurman says ready to defeat Pacquiao

AFF
Beverly Hills, United States

Keith Thurman vowed to retire Philippine boxing legend Manny Pacquiao on Wednesday as the two fighters traded verbal jabs ahead of the World Boxing Association battle for welterweight supremacy. The undefeated Thurman, 30, takes on Pacquiao in Las Vegas on July 20 in a contest that pits the WBA's "super world champion" against the body's secondary "world" champion.

Thurman (29-0, with 22 knockouts) returned from a near two-year layoff to retain his title with a 12-round majority decision over Joselito Lopez on January 26. Eight-division champion Pacquiao, who last fought in a one-sided demolition of Adrien Broner in January, is 10 years older than his American opponent.

And as the two men came face to face at a press conference in Beverly Hills on Wednesday, Thurman vowed to make the age difference count. "Pacquiao's last fight, Pacquiao's last fight," Thurman said, while pledging to "dismantle" the 40-year-old Filipino icon.

"I'm destroying the legend of Manny Pacquiao," Thurman said. "His legacy ends on July 20. He's had a wonderful career, and



Keith Thurman (right) speaks next to Manny Pacquiao during a press conference before their WBA Welterweight Championship fight in Beverly Hills, California. (AFP)

been an inspiration. We all love him and respect him. And I'm respectfully going to kick the shit out of him.

"This is a big fight as far as the stage. But it's a big fight against a little guy. I've dismantled veterans in the past, and throughout my career. I would have destroyed him five years ago. He's never fought a fighter like me with the lateral movement, speed, power. He's never fought anyone this young, strong and hungry and I'm coming for him. I know he likes to quote Bible verses so I'll let you know — he's getting crucified."

Pacquiao, who mixes a political career as a senator in the Philippines with professional boxing, laughed off Thurman's threats of annihilation. "All I can say is that most of my opponents say things before a fight," Pacquiao said. "That's what I hear from them — 'I'm easy to beat'. But when we get into the ring it changes. We'll see who's young in the ring on July 20. I don't like trash-talking before a fight. I'm going to let my fists do the talking."

Pacquiao plans to split his training camp between the Philippines and Los Angeles, wrapping up his preparations under

the watchful eye of long-time trainer Freddie Roach, who is back in his corner. "Manny Pacquiao is the best fighter in the world to work with," Roach said Wednesday. "His work ethic is unbelievable. We've studied Thurman and come up with a game plan. And we're going to destroy him."

Pacquiao meanwhile insisted that his advancing years had not diminished his enthusiasm or energy for boxing. "At age 40, I feel like I'm 29," he said. "This is fun. I'm enjoying it. I'm excited to go back to the Philippines and go straight back to the gym."

FOCUS

Humbled Warner set to march into World Cup cauldron

Lefthander will still have to perform in England to win back home fans

Reuters
Melbourne

Australia's hard-hitting opener David Warner will bring one of the game's biggest bats to the World Cup along with possibly a bigger chip on his shoulder as he bids for redemption in England after a year in the international wilderness.

Much more than a member of the ball-tampering trio that plunged Australian cricket into disgrace last year, former vice captain Warner was judged the instigator of the ham-fisted plot and bore the brunt of the shaming from an angry public.

Stripped of leadership roles for life, the father-of-two kept a low profile for much of his 12-month ban but was back in the spotlight at the Indian Premier League, smashing 692 runs for Sunrisers Hyderabad to top the T20 tournament's runs list.

The IPL fireworks cemented his place in Australia's World Cup squad as Aaron Finch's men bid for back-to-back titles. Warner will still have to perform in England to win back home fans, however, with many wary of the man seen as the architect of the Cape Town scandal.

Earlier this month, sections of a small Brisbane crowd jeered as he walked to the crease for an unofficial practice match against New Zealand, the 32-year-old's first in Australian colours for more than 13 months.

Many more fans were cheering, however, as he smashed a quickfire 39 at Allan Border Field. He can expect a frostier reception at the World Cup where local fans have struggled to warm to a confrontational player who once punched England's Joe Root during a night out in Birmingham.

Dressing room harmony may be a bigger factor in England, and Australia coach Justin Langer has been at pains to insist Warner has been welcomed back with open arms.

The lefthander has left it to others to judge, even if the other two parties in the ball-tampering debacle have made the public aware of their feelings about Newlands. Cameron Bancroft, who was caught with sandpaper in his trousers, threw Warner under a bus in a highly-criticised interview in Decem-



Khawaja given all clear after head knock

Australia opener Usman Khawaja was cleared of serious injury after taking a nasty blow to the head and being forced to retire hurt from a World Cup warmup against West Indies in Southampton on Wednesday. Khawaja underwent scans on his jaw after being struck by an Andre Russell bouncer in the second over of Australia's innings and escorted from the Rose Bowl's Nursery Ground. Australia went on to win the match by seven wickets. "It was very scary," Australia batsman Shaun Marsh, who scored 55 not out batting at number five, told reporters. "It copped him on the side of the cheekbone, I think. The main thing is he is okay and can bounce back pretty

quickly. "Obviously (he was) a bit shaken, as you are when you get hit on the head, but Uzzy's a tough cookie and he'll be ready to go." Marsh and returning former captain Steve Smith put on 109 for the third wicket as Australia chased down West Indies' tally of 229 inside 39 overs. Smith hit seven fours and two sixes in his 76 and Marsh said it was good to see him and former vice captain David Warner, who scored 12, back in the groove after the end of their one-year bans for the Newlands ball-tampering scandal. "(Smith) has just come back and just done what he's usually does and scored runs," Marsh added. "It's just fantastic

to have them both back in the team. They are both really valuable players for us." With Smith and Warner back, Marsh is not certain of a place in the side for the World Cup opener against Afghanistan in Bristol on June 1 but he thought his versatility might work in his favour. "I think I'm nice and flexible," Marsh said. "I've batted from one to six over my career so I'll just enjoy the last two warmup matches and we'll see." The defending champions' next warmup is against World Cup hosts England, who top the world rankings, at the main Rose Bowl ground on Saturday. "I think it's going to be a great challenge and we'll see where we're at," Marsh concluded.

rarely holds back, Warner has wisely let his bat do the talking and declined to respond to detractors that have questioned his place in the team.

He will pad up at the World Cup with the knowledge that he has rarely wanted for runs on the game's biggest stages, and was his team's second top scorer in the 2015 triumph on home soil.

Langer has said Warner will need to develop "humility" in the dressing room, yet few cricketers have experienced a greater humbling than the opener during his banishment.

"To endure what he and Smith and Bancroft have had to endure over 12 months, there has to be a lot of mental toughness, and having also a very positive mindset," said Tom Moody, Warner's coach at Sunrisers Hyderabad.

"Because you can very easily find yourself down for long periods of time."

ber, while casting himself as the naive rookie going along with the plan. Smith was also pillo-

ried for using his ball-tampering shame in a marketing campaign for a telecommunications

provider while simultaneously downplaying his role in the affair. Despite being a man who

SPOTLIGHT

De Kock carries South Africa's batting hopes

AFF
Cape Town

Quinton de Kock will seek to retain his golden form deep into the cricket World Cup as his runs at the top of the batting order will be crucial to any realistic South African title challenge in England and Wales.

Wicketkeeper-batsman De Kock, 26, has emerged as South Africa's most deadly attacking weapon in their top six, with his ability to clear the boundary ropes coupled with stylish left-handed drives and cuts against the new ball.

His form in the South African summer was eye-catching, passing 80 in four of his last six one-day international innings against Pakistan and Sri Lanka, including one century, and reaching 50 in another visit to the crease.

It has seen him rise to number four on the International Cricket Council's ODI batting rankings, behind only India's Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma and Ross Taylor from New Zealand.

It not just his weight of runs, but also the pace at which he scores. He has one gear. Fast.

Those 436 runs in his last six knocks came off 379 balls, with the only disappointment his inability to convert more of those

scores over 50 into three figures. That is because his career record is strong in that regard, with 21 half-centuries and 14 hundreds in 106 innings at a strike-rate that is a shade under 96. One of those centuries was a remarkable 178 from 113 balls against Australia in 2016, an innings in which he hit 16 fours and 11 sixes and was only ended as he chased a double century before the successful run chase came to a close.

De Kock was the third highest scorer in the recently completed Indian Premier League as he helped Mumbai Indians to the title, his 529 runs coming at a strike-rate of 132.91.

Without the acceleration in the middle-order of AB de Villiers, South Africa will rely heavily on De Kock's ability to launch the innings from the outset on what are expected to be batsmen-friendly wickets in England.

South Africa will be buoyed by De Kock's record against sub-continent teams, his ability to play spin key to that success, and an important factor in a batting line-up that has shown frailties against slow bowling.

He is also one of the leading wicketkeepers in the world and with no back-up in South Africa's World Cup squad, faces a busy six weeks with the bat and the gloves.



South Africa's Quinton de Kock in action during the fifth match of their ODI series against Sri Lanka in Colombo on August 12, 2018.

COMMENT

'No excuse' for balanced Pakistan, says Afridi

Reuters
Lahore

Former Pakistan captain Shahid Afridi says the side have injected the right amount of experience into their World Cup squad with the late inclusions of pacer Wahab Riaz and Mohamed Amir, and have no excuse for poor performance now.

Riaz's hostile spell to Australian Shane Watson was one of the highlights of the 2015 World Cup, but the 33-year-old has not played a one-day international since June 2017.

Fellow left-arm quick bowler Amir was also initially omitted from Pakistan's World Cup squad before being pencilled in on Monday.

"I think this team has the right combination," Afridi said in a video posted on the Pakistan Cricket Board's Twitter feed yesterday.

"The best thing is (that) batting used to be a constant worry for us but our batsmen are now in good form," the former all-rounder said.

Pakistan posted 340-plus scores in three of the four completed matches in this month's ODI series in England, even

though the hosts prevailed 4-0. In March they had been thrashed 5-0 by Australia in the United Arab Emirates.

"We did quite a few experiments with the side. We rested the seniors in the series against Australia, giving chance to youngsters," Afridi said. "Our bowling struggled before the World Cup I think because they lacked experience there."

"Now Wahab Riaz, (leg-spinner) Shadab Khan and Mohamad Amir are back and it's a well-balanced team. We should not have any excuse now."

Consistency has never been the strong point of an otherwise talented team, but Afridi reckoned a good start could take the 1992 champions all the way to the June 14 final at the Lord's.

"It's very important to win the first couple of matches to build a momentum... Our youngsters are capable of beating any team in the world."

"I see Pakistan as one of the teams in the semi-finals and, God willing, I'm confident they'll play the final too..."

"Pressure is inevitable in international cricket. It tests a player and his mental strength. But World Cup is also a great opportunity to become a hero with the whole world looking at you."

OPINION

Sangakkara optimistic Sri Lanka will stage England series despite attacks

AFF
London

Kumar Sangakkara believes Sri Lanka will stage England's scheduled tour of the island next year despite safety concerns caused by the Easter Sunday terror attacks.

More than 250 people were killed and nearly 500 wounded in a series of attacks claimed by Islamic State on churches and hotels in Sri Lanka on April 21.

England are due to play Tests in Colombo and Galle next March but the attacks have led to fears Sri Lanka could join Pakistan as a no-go area for major international sides.

Pakistan have been forced to play the bulk of their home games in the United Arab Emirates since 2009, when armed militants targeted Sri Lanka's team bus in Lahore.

Sri Lanka great Sangakkara, who will later this year become



the first non-British president of Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), lamented the fact some Pakistan players had never played a Test in their own country and hoped his own nation would not face a similar fate.

"I was in the bus in 2009 when the Sri Lanka team got attacked and I understand the reservations and the security concerns that come after such an incident or even as an observer looking from the outside in," Sangakkara told reporters at Lord's yesterday.

"We need a very open conversation with the necessary security aspects that are in place, make sure there are independent assessments done, that the boards connect openly and fully," he added.

"We always talk about Cricket transcending politics and that has to be the case with tours, as long as security and safety is assured, and there is an honest commitment from every country to put those security measures in place."

He said Sri Lanka, which endured a long and bloody civil war until 2009, had managed to host Cricket tours, including a World Cup "in very trying circumstances" in the past.

WORLD CUP TIPS

Sangakkara was speaking just a week from the start of the World Cup, with hosts England opening the tournament against South Africa on May 30.

One of the best batsmen of his generation and twice a losing World Cup finalist, Sangakkara has been impressed by the way Eoin Morgan's England side have climbed to the top of the one-day international rankings since their first-round exit in Australia four years ago.

"Since 2015 England have changed their mindset about how they play their Cricket and that has revolutionised their performances," Sangakkara said. "It's a strange kind of shift. When you're young in Sri Lanka the coaching methods are very

English, what you wear, how you conduct yourself... everything about the game is very much old school."

"Then the shift starts later on in your teen years when the Asian genes kick in - the supple wrists and experimentation, flamboyance, panache - not restricting that natural ability with too much technique. In England now you see that shift towards vibrancy and individuality. It's been great to see."

But Sangakkara, who also acknowledged the strength of India and Australia, highlighted the World Cup threat posed by the West Indies and Pakistan.

"The West Indies are an incredible T20 side and it's great to see they're more open to their best players representing them," he said. "A strong West Indies side means strong world Cricket. "Pakistan are always inconsistent but if they get to the playoffs, they can beat any side in the world."

SPOTLIGHT

Captain Kohli seeks WC stamp to emulate batsman Kohli

'... and I thought in the Australian Test series, tactically he outsmarted Australia'

Reuters
New Delhi

Virat Kohli had just turned 18 when his father passed away on a cold December morning in 2006. Within hours, the overnight batsman was back at the Feroz Shah Kotla Stadium to help Delhi avoid the follow-on in a Ranji Trophy match.

"I called my coach in the morning," he would later tell CNN. "I said I wanted to play because for me not completing a cricket game is a sin."

It is this all-consuming passion that fuels the high-octane game of the 30-year-old who marries aggression and aesthetics in his batting, solemnising it with a single-minded devotion to his craft.

Hailing from a city notorious for its bad air and brash youth, Kohli has evolved from a reckless talent to a modern great of the game after an avalanche of runs across all formats.

Endowed with a water-tight defence and a 360 degree shot-making ability, he has been most dominating in one-dayers though.

Of his 66 international centuries, 41 are in ODIs, more than half of it while chasing, earning him the 'chase master' moniker.

And a significant chunk of it came as captain of the world's most followed cricket team, a massive burden that reduced several of his predecessors to lesser batsmen.

He became the first player to win all three top honours at the ICC awards after his annus mirabilis last year.

Kohli the captain now wants to emulate Kohli the batsman.

The ambitious India captain

REYNOLD
GULFTIMES
24-05-2019



has talked about his desire to forge an all-time great team, one which would win across formats and irrespective of conditions, and he has had significant success in the longest format.

Under him, India have won eight consecutive test series and remained the top-ranked team in this format.

They are near-invincible at home and ended a seven-decade

drought in January with India's first ever test series victory in Australia.

A supreme athlete himself, Kohli has inspired a fitness revolution in Indian cricket that has percolated down to the Ranji level and even deeper.

The rich success notwithstanding, Kohli is still not ranked alongside former captains such as Mahendra Singh Dhoni or

Sourav Ganguly but coach Ravi Shastri is convinced he will get better.

"...Tactically, there is still room for plenty of improvement as captain," Shastri told www.cricbuzz.com after the series victory in Australia.

"He has gotten better and better ... and I thought in the Australian Test series, tactically he outsmarted Australia.

"I still see more room across formats for him to evolve. As a captain, Virat will evolve further."

Kohli led India to the Under-19 World Cup title in 2008 and was part of the team that won the 2011 title at home.

He now needs the stamp of a 50-over World Cup to build his own legacy as one of India's greatest captains.

COMMENT

Kohli honoured to be World Cup target for 'X-factor' Archer

Reuters
London

India captain Virat Kohli said yesterday it was a "big compliment" to be a target wicket for England newcomer Jofra Archer at the upcoming World Cup.

Barbados-born fast bowler Archer, who has impressed in the Indian Premier League, was included in England's 15-man squad for the tournament despite having played just three one-day internationals.

The 24-year-old Sussex quick, capable of bowling at 90 miles-an-hour (145 kmh), celebrated his inclusion by setting his sights on dismissing Kohli, long one of the world's leading batsmen, during the competition.

"I'd quite like to get Virat Kohli out because I wasn't able to in the IPL," Archer, who only qualified for England in March, told Sky Sports.

Kohli, who had been told of Archer's comments at a captains' press conference in London yesterday, said: "That's news to me, news to Morgs (England skipper Eoin Morgan) as well. I don't really focus on these things."

"I take a lot of pride in performing well for the team and making a big impact on each game I play, so if Jofra said that it's a big compliment as he himself is a world-class bowler."

'INTIMIDATING'

Kohli added: "And the way he has come through in the IPL over the last couple of years, I have seen him and he's played all

around the world and done well so there's a good reason why he's been fast-tracked into playing for England in a tournament like the World Cup.

"I think he's going to be the X-factor because he has all the skill-sets and he's very different from anyone else."

"He can generate a lot of pace, which can be intimidating, and you don't really expect that from his run-up."

England have climbed to the top of the ODI rankings since their humiliating group-stage exit at the 2015 World Cup and are threatening the smash the 500-run barrier, once considered all but impossible in 50 overs. But Kohli predicted that some World Cup matches would be low-scoring affairs.

"They (England) seem to be obsessed with getting to 500 before anyone else," he said. "They smash it from ball one and for the full 50 overs."

"It could be pretty high scoring, but 260-270 is going to be as difficult to get as chasing 370, 380 in a World Cup," he added.

"When you get closer to the knockout phase that is going to bring greater pressure and no-one is going to go gung-ho from ball one," he said.

"Generally teams will find a way but I see pressure playing a massive role."

England launch the World Cup against South Africa at The Oval on May 30.

With all 10 teams playing each other in the group phase, England are scheduled to play India at Edgbaston on June 30.

Dhoni best suited at No 5 for India, says Tendulkar

India need to space out their experienced batsmen at the World Cup in England and veteran Mahendra Singh Dhoni is best suited at number five, according to batting great Sachin Tendulkar.

Skipper Virat Kohli joins openers Shikhar Dhawan and Rohit Sharma to complete India's stable top three while all-rounder Vijay Shankar is set to bat at number four in the earlier games.

Having Dhoni, whose 341 ODI appearances makes him the most experienced player at this

year's World Cup, at number five would ensure the former India captain could nudge along before exploding in the final overs, believes Tendulkar. "My personal opinion is Dhoni should be batting (at) five," Tendulkar, part of the Dhoni-led squad who won the 2011 World Cup on home soil, told ESPNcricinfo.

"I still don't know what the team combination would be, but if you are going Rohit and Shikhar as openers, to Virat at No. 3 and whoever at No. 4 then Dhoni could be No. 5. Then Hardik Pan-

dia, an explosive player, follows them. "That way the experienced batsmen are well spaced out and Dhoni can stretch the game towards the end where he himself can be explosive along with Hardik."

"From No 5-8 you are looking at finishers, who stay till the end and soak in that pressure. I feel we are well equipped to do that." Dhawan is the lone left-hander in India's strong batting lineup and Tendulkar said the opener must bat deep into the matches to help dominate the bowlers,

especially the leg-spinners.

"A left-right combination always helps because that means the bowler has to adjust his line every now and then and the (bowling) captain has also to keep thinking," said Tendulkar, who remains the only cricketer with 100 international centuries against his name. "And if there is a partnership the job becomes even more tougher. So, yes, it is important for a left-hander to be there to put pressure on the legspinner or for that matter any bowler."

England's home series against Pakistan has convinced Tendulkar that it would be a high-scoring World Cup played on flat tracks and with two new balls which negate reverse swing.

"I believe if you have quality spinners to bowl in the middle overs they would end up picking wickets. It is all about bowling in partnerships - if quality bowlers could bowl in tandem and create pressure on the batting line-up, that is one way of countering all these factors (that) I feel are not in favour of the bowlers."

FOCUS

Hosts and favourites, the pressure is on England

Reuters
Manchester, England

Hosts of the World Cup for the fifth time, there is an air of optimism around England's team and a sense of belief that they can finally clinch the trophy that has eluded them in its 44-year history.

Top of the world rankings for One Day Internationals, the team skippered by Eoin Morgan is well-settled despite the recent focus on players who missed out on a place in the final 15-man squad.

The side has a good mix of stroke-playing batsmen, spin and seam bowling and enough all-rounders to provide depth in the batting department and options with the ball.

"For me as a captain, being more experienced, and having been through four years of being captain, our prep and planning has been excellent and the guys have responded to that by performing on a consistent basis," said Morgan.

There is plenty of power in the batting department with Jos Buttler and Ben Stokes capable of delivering devastating contributions in the mid-



England's Eoin Morgan during a press conference in London yesterday.

dle order. Joe Root, captain of the test team, provides some class higher up the order, whilst Morgan, Jonny Bairstow and Moeen Ali may not have the power of Buttler and Stokes but can score quickly.

Left-arm spinner Liam Dawson has returned from injury and offers some back-up to leg-spinner Adil Rashid who is the leading ODI wicket-taker since the last World Cup in 2015.

On surfaces that are expected to be

flat and benign, not offering much encouragement to seamers, Rashid's positive approach to wicket-taking could prove to be crucial.

The inclusion of Barbados-born, 24-year-old seamer Jofra Archer, who has played only three ODIs and only qualified for England in March, has caused some debate with David Willey, a regular in the seam attack, left out.

The big question mark is whether England can cope with the level of ex-

Morgan manages great expectations, Finch praises England

England captain Eoin Morgan believes the expectation on his side to win the Cricket World Cup for the first time is to be expected given their form, but said producing the goods when it really matters represents a very different challenge.

Ranked the number one one-day side in the world, England are firm favourites with British bookmakers to lift the trophy on home soil with the tournament getting under way at The Oval next week.

England's form coming into the tournament could be much better.

A 2-2 draw with the West Indies ended a run of nine straight ODI series wins, but they bounced straight back with a 4-0 thrashing of Pakistan this month. Morgan, though, warned that such a run does not guarantee World Cup glory. "Nobody is head and shoulders

above everyone else," Morgan told reporters at the World Cup captains' news conference yesterday. "It is going to be very difficult. Expectations do not come out of thin air. We have scored some quite high scores, especially at home, and that has brought a lot of confidence. The World Cup is a different kettle of fish. Everything we have done does contribute, but you still have to produce the goods. These are the 10 best teams in the world, so it is going to be extraordinarily competitive." Australia captain Aaron Finch said England's recent form cannot be overlooked.

"England have been in great form for a number of years and you have to say they are definitely favourites," Finch said. "If you look over the past couple of years, their scores have been going up and up."

pectation that surrounds them as favourites on home soil.

There's pressure and expectation but I think that's to be embraced, we can use that as a positive for the team," said Buttler.

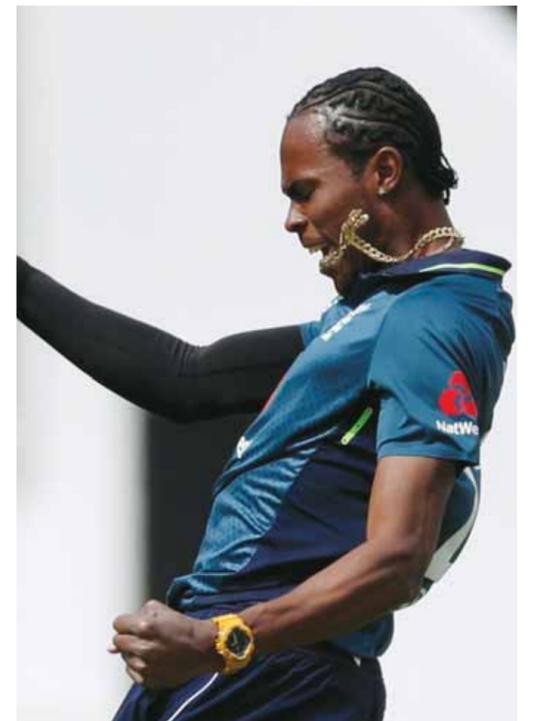
"We're playing in our own conditions, it allows us to get away from the tournament when the pressure gets ramped up, we can escape to friends and family as well."

"It's an amazing opportunity to be

Since the last World Cup England have passed 400 four times, setting the two highest scores in international history and nine of the 10 highest totals ever by England sides. However, India captain Virat Kohli does not believe it will be all about the batsmen. "They (England) seem to be obsessed with getting to 500 before anyone else," Kohli said. "They smash it from ball one and for the full 50 overs. 260/270 is going to be as difficult to get as chasing 370, 380 in a World Cup. "I don't see too much high scoring in later half of the tournament. Some teams might get on a roll, but you'll see 250 defended as well as because of the kind of pressure that comes with it. When you get closer to the knockout phases that is going to bring greater pressure and no-one is going to go gung-ho from ball one."

around at the right time and play in a home World Cup."

England get their campaign under way against South Africa at the Oval on May 30 in the opening match of the tournament.



England's Jofra Archer celebrates taking the wicket of Pakistan's Fakhar Zaman during the first match of their ODI series in London on May 8, 2019. (Reuters)