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Leonard, Raptors rally, move within one win of Finals

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GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

Liverpool defeat has ruined Barca's season, says Messi

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TENNIS

Djoko ready to fire at Roland Garros as landmark beckons

'This is the tournament I was preparing for, so to say, for last couple of months I wanted to peak in this tournament'

Reuters
Paris

World number one Novak Djokovic believes he is peaking at the perfect moment to win four successive Grand Slam titles for the second time in his career by capturing the French Open.

The Serb became the first man since Rod Laver in 1969 to hold all four Grand Slams simultaneously when he won the French Open for the first time in 2016.

Now he stands on the cusp of doing it again, less than a year after many predicted his best days were behind him after his struggle to recover from elbow surgery.

After a dip in form following his Australian Open triumph this year, the 15-times Grand Slam winner has impressed on the European claycourts, winning the Madrid title and reaching the final in Rome where he was beaten by French Open holder Rafael Nadal.

He arrived at Roland Garros in peak condition and high on confidence.

"This is the tournament I was preparing for, so to say, for last couple of months I wanted to peak in this tournament and this is where I want to play my best tennis," Djokovic told reporters yesterday.

"I'm sure I'm not the only one, but there's extra motivation and incentive to win Roland Garros because of the opportunity to hold all four slams, something I did three years ago, and that gives me enough reason to believe I can do it again."

Last year in Paris Djokovic showed glimpses of his best form before falling to Italian Marco



Rafael Nadal (left) of Spain is congratulated by Novak Djokovic of Serbia after winning during their ATP Masters tournament in Rome on Sunday. Djokovic has said that Nadal is the favourite to win the tournament at Roland Garros. (AFP)

Cecchinato in the quarter-finals — then angrily walking into a press conference saying he was considering skipping Wimbledon.

Instead he regrouped and took the title a few weeks later on the London lawns, before winning the US Open and this year's Melbourne title to reach 15 Grand Slam titles — five behind the mark of Roger Federer.

The 32-year-old said he had tweaked his strategy in recent months to peak at the Grand Slams. "Because at this stage of my career, those are the ones that matter the most for me," Djokovic added.

"Those are the tournaments where I want to play my best. So we try to obviously set up a training schedule that would allow me

to reach the top of my potential physically, emotionally, mentally for the Grand Slam."

Djokovic said Nadal was the favourite to claim a record-extending 12th title in Paris.

"I think it wouldn't be fair to pick anybody else but him as the main favourite, because he has won this tournament so many times," he added.

"He's lost, what, two times in his career on Parisian clay? So lots of respect for him. We had a good match in Rome. He was a better player. Was just too strong."

Djokovic faces a tricky opener against Poland's 43rd-ranked Hubert Hurkacz with a possible second-round against Sam Querrey, the American who beat him at Wimbledon three years ago.

Federer admits he's stepping into the unknown in Paris

Reuters
Paris

Having won 20 grand slam titles during a glittering career, one might think that Roger Federer has seen it all.

Yet the 37-year-old Swiss admits he is stepping into the unknown as he returns to the French Open after a three-year hiatus. The former world number one won his only Roland Garros title back in 2009, and he wanted to give it another go after skipping the last three editions of the claycourt major.

Asked if he thought he could lift the Musketeers' Cup on June 9, Federer replied: "I don't know. A bit of a question mark for me. Some ways I feel similar to maybe the Australian Open in 2017. A bit of the unknown," Federer told reporters yesterday referring to his comeback to the season's first major in 2017 after being out of action for six months.

"I feel like I'm playing good tennis but... is it enough against the absolute top guys when it really comes to the crunch? I'm not sure if it's in my racket."

"But I hope I can get myself in that position deep down in the tournament against the top guys. But first I need to get there and I know that's a challenge in itself. Yeah, it's definitely going to be an exciting tournament mentally to go through."

Federer will kick off his campaign against Italian Lorenzo Sonego and has a relatively easy path until the quarter-finals, where he could meet Greek Stefanos Tsitsipas before a potential semi-final against 11-time champion Rafael Nadal, whom he has never beaten at the French Open.

Federer won the title in 2009 after Nadal had been beaten by Swede Robin Soderling midway through the event. Federer then defeated Soderling in the final to complete his career slam.



CRICKET

Pakistan's Azam primed to thrive under World Cup spotlight

Reuters
Bengaluru

Comparisons with Virat Kohli have been a stumbling block for many batsmen in world cricket but Pakistan's Babar Azam has embraced the challenge wholeheartedly and will carry his country's hopes at the World Cup.

Pakistan head coach Mickey Arthur first mentioned Azam, the world's top-ranked Twenty20 international batsman, in the same breath as Indian skipper Kohli early last year, based on the 24-year-old's potential across formats.

Azam's international career is just over 100 matches old, but his prowess with the bat has already broken several records.

He is the fastest batsman to reach 1,000 T20I runs, taking 26 innings to get there and dethroning Kohli in the process.

He also reached 1,000 ODI runs in 21 innings, a record he shared with an elite group of players, including West Indies great Viv Richards and England power-hitter Kevin Pietersen, until his Pakistan teammate Fa-



Pakistan's Babar Azam scored a century in the 2019 Cricket World Cup warm-up match against Afghanistan in Bristol, England, yesterday. (AFP)

khar Zaman broke it last year.

Azam's classy stroke-making has provided the platform for his record-breaking run spree, and he often single-handedly drives Pakistan to competitive totals in

sluggish conditions in the United Arab Emirates, the national team's adopted home.

"We have some serious batsmen in our team but he has the ability to be as good as anyone

in the world," Arthur said of the right-handed batsman. "If he's getting us a 100, we're comfortable we have the batsmen around him to get 300-320.

"Over the last two years, his

England's Morgan injures finger in practice

Reuters
Bengaluru

England captain Eoin Morgan has sustained a small flake fracture on his finger but the injury will not affect his participation in the World Cup starting on May 30, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) said yesterday. Morgan picked up the injury to his left index finger during training at the Hampshire Bowl ahead of today's warm-up match against world champions Australia and was sent to a hospital to have a precautionary X-ray.

"England captain Eoin Morgan has sustained a small flake fracture to his left index finger," ECB said in a statement.

"Morgan picked up the injury during catching practice... he will not take part in the match (against Australia)... but is expected to make a full recovery and be available for England's opening World Cup match against South Africa." The ECB did not say if Morgan would play in another warm-up clash against Afghanistan on Monday. Favourites England begin their World Cup campaign against South Africa on the opening day of the tournament.



strike rate is around 80 and he knows he needs to increase that, as do some of the other batsmen and we've spoken about that."

Pakistan have come up short since the start of 2019, beaten by South Africa, Australia and England. Some impressive totals on small grounds against England this month do not disguise the

fact that the team needs more runs in the middle overs.

That again encourages comparisons with Kohli, who has often had to hold a thin Indian middle order together and use every opportunity to score in the powerplays.

Azam is confident he can switch gears if the situation de-

mands more aggression.

"If I can be number one in the world without power hitting, then I don't need power hitting," he said. "But when I need to, I utilise it well."

"My individual role is to take the innings as deep as I can and perform in a way that benefits the team most."

ROUND-UP

Afghanistan, SA pick up warm-up wins

Azam ton in vain as Afghanistan defeat Pakistan by three wickets; Proteas beat Lanka

Reuters
Cardiff

Afghanistan batsman Hashmatullah Shahidi hit an unbeaten 74 as they stunned former champions Pakistan to win by three wickets with two balls to spare in a thrilling warm-up match in Bristol yesterday.

Chasing a modest 263 for victory, Afghanistan's opening batsmen Mohamed Shahzad and Hazratullah Zazai got them off to a blistering start before Shahidi took charge to help them cross the finish line in the final over.

Pakistan batsman Babar Azam, who shone in their 4-0 series defeat by England this month, continued his excellent form with the bat ahead of the World Cup scoring 112 off 108 balls but his team were restricted to a below-par 262 in 47.5 overs.

Afghanistan spinners Mohamed Nabi (3-46) and Rashid Khan (2-27) then choked the Pakistan batsmen to lay the foundation for a famous win while pacer Dawlat Zadran claimed two wickets, including that of the dangerous Azam.

At Sophia Gardens, South Africa captain Faf du Plessis struck a fluent 88 as his side eased to an 87-run victory over Sri Lanka.



Afghanistan's Hashmatullah Shahidi celebrates their victory over Pakistan in the 2019 ICC World Cup warm-up match in Bristol, England, yesterday. (Reuters)

South Africa were sent in to bat in the training match, which did not hold official One-Day International status, and posted 338 for seven, before bowling their opponents out for 251 in 42.3 overs.

The Proteas were without fast

bowler Dale Steyn, who is not fit after a re-occurrence of his shoulder problem, but were carried to the win by seamer Lungi Ngidi (2-12 in six overs) and all-rounder Andile Phehlukwayo (4-36 in 7 overs).

Ngidi reduced Sri Lanka to

10 for two but excellent half centuries from captain Dimuth Karunaratne (87 from 92 balls) and Angelo Mathews (64 from 66 balls) kept the sub-continent side in the contest.

The run-rate kept rising, though, and both batsmen were

caught in the deep trying to accelerate the innings, with the guile of Phehlukwayo in particular stifling the chase.

South Africa will be relieved with runs at the top of the order for opener Hashim Amla as he reached 65 from 61 balls before being bowled by leg-break bowler Jeevan Mendis.

That may earn him the nod ahead of Aiden Markram (21) for South Africa's World Cup opener against England on Thursday, with the pair vying for a place alongside Quinton de Kock, who did not bat yesterday.

Du Plessis looked in superb touch for his 88 from 69 balls, which included four sixes before he skied a delivery from Dhananjaya de Silva and was caught.

Several the other South African batsmen got starts but no one else posted a half-century, though Rassie van der Dussen (40) and Phehlukwayo (35) enjoyed their visits to the crease.

BRIEF SCORES

■ **Pakistan 262 all out** (Babar 112; Nabi 3-46) **lost to Afghanistan 263 for 7** (Hashmatullah 74; Wahab 3-46) **by three wickets**
■ **South Africa 338 for 7** (Du Plessis 88, Amla 65; Lakmal 2-63) **beat Sri Lanka 251 all out** (Karunaratne 87, Mathews 64; Phehlukwayo 4-36, Ngidi 2-12) **by 87 runs**

SPOTLIGHT

Windies bank on Gayle storm to blow away rivals

Reuters
Cary, North Carolina

Chris Gayle's recent form promises batting fireworks from the swashbuckling opener in his fifth and final World Cup and offers plenty of hope to a West Indies team finally showing signs of a resurgence.

Gayle will turn 40 in September but remains a dangerous batsman capable of single-handedly destroying any bowling attack with his trademark power-hitting which makes him one of the sought-after players in Twenty20 leagues across the cricketing world.

Though not exactly lightning-quick between the wickets, or in the field, Gayle's eye appears as sharp as ever, judging by the way he bludgeoned England's bowlers in the drawn ODI series earlier this year.

He smashed two magnificent centuries in four innings against England, scoring 424 runs at an average of 106 to walk away with the Man-of-the-Series award.

His 135 off 129 balls in the first match in Bridgetown included 12 sixes but was a mere appetiser for what was to follow seven days later in St George's.

There on the island of Grenada he took just 97 balls to smash 162, including 14 sixes, mostly on the leg side, several clearing the ground altogether.

He now brings his bat to England, where some of the bounda-

ries might be a little longer, but will nevertheless be well within his reach.

"There's nothing to go out there and prove, the only thing that would be nice is to win the World Cup," Gayle told cricket.com.au.

The left-hander is coming off another strong season in the Indian Premier League (IPL), smashing 490 runs in 13 innings, his 34 sixes only second to compatriot Andre Russell's 52.

Gayle's 326 sixes in 11 seasons is the highest by any batsman in the most popular Twenty20 league.

"The fans are always asking you for more sixes. Those things give you that extra drive," said Gayle, the most experienced West Indies player in the squad with 10,151 runs in 289 ODIs.

His reflexes may have slowed down in recent times but the self-styled 'Universal Boss' believes bowlers are still terrified of his power-hitting even in his 20th year in international cricket.

"Youngsters coming at my head - it's not as easy as it was like one time before," Gayle said. "I was quicker then."

"But they'll be weary. They know what the Universe Boss is capable of. I'm sure they will have it in the back of their mind, 'Hey, this is the most dangerous batsman they've ever seen in cricket!'"

Two-time champions West Indies begin their campaign against 1992 winners Pakistan on May 31 at Trent Bridge.



COMMENT

India's Rahul inspired by memories of 2011 World Cup glory

AFP
London

KL Rahul knows exactly what it would mean to win this year's World Cup in England, having seen for himself what a 2011 triumph on home soil meant to his fellow Indians.

Eight years ago, Rahul was a teenager watching television in a Bangalore bar as Gautam Gambhir's 97 and then-captain MS Dhoni's 91 not out saw India beat Sri Lanka in the World Cup final in Mumbai.

"When the game was over it was absolute chaos. The roads were blocked, everybody left their homes and was on the road celebrating," Rahul said yesterday as he recalled the aftermath of India's second World Cup triumph.

"It was an unbelievable experience to see so many people forgetting about their worries. Whatever they had going on in their lives, they were just so, so happy India had won the World Cup."

"It was even bigger because we won it at home in India - it brought billions of people together and brought so much joy."

Rahul was already a first-class cricketer but said watching the match made him want to focus more.

"I knew what a World Cup could do to the country, how big it is and how valuable it is to be part of a World Cup dream," he said.

"To be here after eight years representing my country means the world to me. I'm looking forward to hopefully inspiring billions of people again and to win



the World Cup would be the icing on the cake."

Now the 27-year-old Rahul finds himself in the same side as Dhoni and fellow 2011 winner Virat Kohli, the star batsman who has succeeded the wicket-keeper as India captain.

And he said the current side had the talent to equal the achievement of Kapil Dev's celebrated team in 1983 by winning a World Cup in England.

"To be part of this team is incredible," Rahul said. "It's not just MS and Virat, there are so many other talented individuals - Rohit (Sharma) and Shikhar (Dhawan) and Jasprit (Bumrah), who is the most feared bowler in world cricket right now."

"Hopefully the hard work we have put in over the past two or three years means we can go out there, enjoy ourselves and win the World Cup."

FOCUS

ICC warns off 'corruptors' from World Cup

AFP
London

The head of the International Cricket Council's anti-corruption unit said yesterday he had been in direct contact with around 12 "corruptors" to warn them off the World Cup.

Match fixing or spot fixing, where gamblers try to influence specific incidents in a game, remains one of the biggest problems facing cricket, particularly in countries such as India, the sport's financial powerhouse, where betting is unregulated.

An education video urging players to "recognise, reject and report" any corrupt approaches has been shown to all 10 competing World Cup teams.

The film also contains names and imagery of potential fixers, although their identities were obscured when the tape was shown yesterday during



ICC's Anti-Corruption Unit head Alex Marshall.

a media briefing at the Oval - where the World Cup starts with a match between England and South Africa on May 30.

"It's around a dozen people who have had the 'disinvite' to the Cricket World Cup and who we will keep away," Alex Marshall, the head of the ICC Anti-Corruption Unit, told reporters.

"If any more pop up, we will be speaking to them as well. They are people who live all

over the world but the majority of the corruption we deal with has its origins in the sub-continent, unregulated betting markets."

WARNINGS

Marshall said while he could not stop anyone travelling to England, he had been in direct contact with potential fixers to make it clear what would happen if they tried to disrupt the tournament.

"I have either written, called or WhatsApped all the corruptors featured there (in the video) and the other main corruptors we know operating around the world to tell them not to come anywhere near the World Cup," explained Marshall.

"So far they have all promised me they are not coming. But sometimes with corruptors you find they don't always tell the truth. So we will be very proactive in keeping them away from the tournament."

"We have shared their details with law enforcement and

BOTTOMLINE

World Cup the perfect stage for Shakib

Reuters
Mumbai

Any lesser mortal in Bangladesh might have been censured for being absent for the team's World Cup photo shoot but such is the stature of Shakib Al Hasan enjoys that the board merely regretted his no-show and moved on.

The 32-year-old was also given permission to miss the preparatory camp for the World Cup to play in the Indian Premier League (IPL).

Bangladesh Cricket Board chief Nazmul Hassan dismissed as merely "disappointing" his departure from the ground before his teammates gathered for the official picture and there was no punishment for the cricketer.

Shakib has always had a hot-and-cold relationship with the media, who have criticised him for a lack of control over his temper and accused him of letting his achievements go to his head.

He was banned in 2014 for three matches for making an indecent gesture during a match and the same year handed a six-month suspension, later



reduced, for a 'severe attitude problem'.

Those achievements on the pitch, however, have made him all but untouchable.

Shakib has played close to 200 one-day internationals and

tops the world rankings for all-rounders. He was also the sole representative from his country in the 2019 edition of the IPL.

An attacking middle-order batsman and miserly left-arm spinner, Shakib is second on the

lists of runs made and wickets taken for his country and there is not one iota of doubt that he is the best cricketer Bangladesh has ever produced.

He is only the third man alongside cricketers Im-

SPOTLIGHT

Liverpool defeat has ruined Barca's season, says Messi

'The first half wasn't all that bad but in the second we didn't even compete'



Barcelona's Lionel Messi (left) and Gerard Pique hold a press conference in Barcelona yesterday on the eve of their Copa del Rey final against Valencia (AFP)

Reuters
Barcelona

Lionel Messi has said Barcelona's shock 4-0 defeat by Liverpool which sent them crashing out of the Champions League has ruined their season as they look to complete a domestic double when they face Valencia in the Copa del Rey final today.

In his first news conference in over four years and his first media appearance since this month's 4-3 semi-final aggregate reverse, the usually tight-lipped Messi did not hold back in his criticism of Barca's display at Anfield.

"The first half wasn't all that bad but in the second we didn't even compete, there was only one team on the pitch and that was the biggest mistake we could have made," Messi said. "The worst thing we could do, and what we cannot forgive ourselves for, is the fact that we did not compete. We let them walk all over us."

Barca's all-time top scorer became club captain for the first time this season but, despite the Catalans retaining the Liga title with three games to spare, Messi cannot shake off the bad memories of the loss to Liverpool.

"I've had a spectacular season as cap-

tain, we won the league, we've reached the cup final, I think it's been a good year if you take out the Liverpool match, which has regrettably ruined the great season we were having until then," he said.

Messi's first act was to tell supporters of his determination to win the Champions League for the first time since 2015, saying he would "do everything to bring that beautiful and desired trophy back here to the Nou Camp". That now infamous phrase has been frequently repeated since Barca failed to reach the Champions League final in Madrid due to their defeat by Liverpool, which came after a 3-0 victory over Jurgen Klopp's side in the first leg at the Nou Camp.

"I don't regret it, I didn't promise to bring it back, I promised to do everything to try and bring it back although we didn't do that and we should say sorry to our fans for that because we didn't even compete," he said.

Messi likened the defeat to the 1-0 extra-time loss to Germany he suffered as Argentina captain in the 2014 World Cup final in Brazil. "They are two different things. A World Cup final is the biggest thing there is and it's a huge disappointment but to have a 3-0 lead and then lose the (Liverpool) tie... they are both huge disappointments," he said.

He called on his team to try and forget the galling defeat by Liverpool when Barca take on Valencia in this weekend's Spanish Cup final, weakened by injuries to his fellow forwards Uruguayan Luis Suarez and Frenchman Ousmane Dembele.

"It's a final so we have to play it for what it is and not think about anything else. Valencia are a very difficult team, we know each other well, it's going to be very equal. If we don't go out with the right attitude we could suffer," he said. "No-one should beat us for attitude, we're going to try and compete like we have done in every game this season, apart from against Liverpool," Messi added.

Meanwhile, defender Gerard Pique said Barcelona suffered from a mental block during the defeat to Liverpool, having been scarred by the memory of a similar collapse to AS Roma last year, defender Gerard Pique has said.

Pique, who has won Europe's elite competition with Barca three times but not since 2015, described the semi-final second leg defeat win as "a nightmare", saying it would take years to get over.

"You could see that the team just wasn't functioning, they were putting us under pressure and what had happened last year (against Roma) was very present in our minds," Pique told *El Pais*.

"I'm sure it was a mental block, but we also didn't play good football. We lacked everything. They pressed us very high, they were very intense, and Anfield also played its role. We just couldn't cope, sometimes it happens."

Pique said his teammates had a sense of *deja vu* during the game at Anfield, which unfolded in a remarkably similar way to events at the Stadio Olimpico last year. "I think on a mental level some of us were affected by what had happened in Rome, it was so recent. The first goal came very quickly, and suddenly the image of Rome appeared," Pique said, recalling Sadio Mane's goal in the 15th minute at Anfield.

"Then they scored two more goals in quick succession and it starts to look too similar to what happened a year ago. It was very tough, it has been very difficult to pull ourselves back up because the days go by and you can't forget this defeat. It's a slip up which is going to last a long time, but we need to take a step forward," Pique added.

"We cannot keep torturing ourselves. It was a nightmare and we have to deal with it because it could happen again."

"But we have to understand why it happened and let it help us in the future because we want to lift the Champions League again."

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Liverpool's Alisson ready for biggest test of his life

AFP
London

Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson Becker rates next week's Champions League final against Tottenham as the biggest game of his life. Alisson will be making his first appearance in the final of Europe's elite club competition when the Reds face their Premier League rivals in Madrid on June 1.

The Brazil international reached the Champions League semi-finals last season, only for Liverpool to beat his Roma team prior to his move to Anfield. Alisson has enjoyed a memorable first season with Liverpool, but their frustrating Premier League title failure — they finished one point behind champions Manchester City — means they will end the season with no silverware unless they beat Tottenham.

Success in Spain would bring Liverpool their sixth European Cup and first since 2005. It is challenge Alisson believes ranks as the most significant of his career. "Once we finished the Premier League, there were 20 days to prepare the final," Alisson told Liverpool's website. "I can't wait. I'm looking forward to playing this big game. It's maybe the biggest game in my life."

Jurgen Klopp's squad are coming to the end of a week-long training camp in Marbella, with the players going through a mini pre-season programme in order to retain their sharpness with a three-week spell between competitive matches. Klopp did a similar move last year ahead of their Champions League final defeat to Real Madrid and Alisson believes it is the best option. "It's



good for preparation, it's good for us to keep our minds free from external things," he added.

"Coming here is special for us, we can have more time together and speak more — that's important for a team that wants to achieve great things. It's nice weather — perfect weather to work. It's a bit hot compared to what we are used to for training but it's the weather we'll find in Madrid, so it's good for us."

Alisson's first season on Merseyside has featured 26 clean sheets, with 21 of those coming in the Premier League to earn him the Golden Glove award.

"It was such an honour, such a big award in the world of football," he said. "The award is not just mine, it's an award for my teammates also, who work hard to keep clean sheets in the game. It's a target for everyone."

Arsenal, Chelsea return unsold Europa League final tickets

London: Arsenal and Chelsea have returned over half of their combined allocation of 12,000 tickets for next week's Europa League final due to the difficulty and great expense for fans travelling to Azerbaijan.

A lack of direct flights between London and Baku means supporters face costs of over £1,000 (\$1,300) just to make the 5,000-mile round trip before tickets and accommodation are taken into account. Arsenal had initially complained over their small allocation, but confirmed that they have returned 2,200 tickets for the Gunners' first European final in 13 years. Chelsea have sold just 2,000 of their 6,000 allocation.

UEFA denied reports that sponsors had also returned tickets and said they were confident that local fans will snap up the spare tickets to ensure there is a capacity crowd at the 68,000 Olympic Stadium. "The majority of these tickets have already been sold to local fans in Azerbaijan and we are confident that the remaining ones will also be sold as demand is very high," UEFA said in a statement.

The CST also complained about the cost of charter flights put on by Chelsea and that the club has not extended the time for season ticket renewals in order to help fans' cash flow.

Arsenal midfielder Henrikh Mkhitaryan will also not travel to the final due to safety fears. Mkhitaryan's native Armenia and Azerbaijan have feuded over Nagorno Karabakh since Armenian separatists seized the territory in a war that claimed about 30,000 lives in the early 1990s.

UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin has defended the decision to host the Europa League final in Baku. Ceferin, 51, told *Der Spiegel* that the human rights situation in Azerbaijan was a "problem", but that this was true of other European nations as well.

The UEFA president said that the decision was Mkhitaryan's to make, and drew a parallel with the decision to host Euro 2016 in France. "If football allows itself to be stopped by such tensions, then we will not be able to organise anything in future," said Ceferin. "We managed to organise a safe European Championships in France when the country was a target of terrorist attacks."

Ceferin also said that he was in no rush to reform the UEFA Champions League. "If you ask me, there is no need to change anything," he said. The 51-year-old said that UEFA were in discussions over reforms proposed earlier this year by the European Club Association.

FOCUS

Real reject Pochettino's claim Spurs asked to sleep at club's training ground

AFP
Madrid

Real Madrid have reacted angrily to Mauricio Pochettino suggesting they turned down a request from Tottenham to stay at their training ground next week ahead of the Champions League final against Liverpool.

Spurs will train at Valdebebas next Thursday and Friday before the game on Saturday and Pochettino, in an interview with Spanish radio station *Cadena Cope*, said the club had asked Madrid if they could also sleep on the site.

In a light-hearted part of the interview, Pochettino was asked if Tottenham's players would also stay at Valdebebas. Pochettino replied: "No we will stay in an hotel near there. We have asked eh? We have asked but Florentino (Perez) didn't want to allow us."

A laughing Pochettino then added:

"He would say, 'the day you coach Madrid is when you can sleep there! This is the subliminal message no?'"

Real Madrid released a statement, insisting they had received no such request from Tottenham. "All requests submitted to Real Madrid have referred only and exclusively to the use of the training pitches of the Ciudad de Real Madrid and its changing rooms. And all of them have been granted by our club."

The statement added: "Real Madrid also wants to emphasise the accommodation of the Champions League finalists are assigned by UEFA depending on organisation and security. And that at no time has our club been asked to accommodate them in the facilities of the Ciudad de Real Madrid."

Liverpool will also use Real Madrid's training ground on the morning of the final, which will be played at Atletico Madrid's stadium, the Wanda Metropolitano. Pochettino was heavily linked with the vacant position of Real Madrid



coach last season when Julen Lopetegui and then Santiago Solari were sacked. Asked about taking charge of Madrid in the future, Pochettino said: "I have no other goals than to coach Tottenham, I don't allow myself to think about the

long-term." Meanwhile, Pochettino said he is motivated to stay at Tottenham so he can transform the London side into one of the best teams in the world, the manager said days after suggesting he could

leave in the close season.

The Argentine had hinted this month that the match against Liverpool could be his last at Spurs if the club, who did not sign a single player in successive transfer windows, was not ambitious enough to shake off their underdog tag.

"There's still a lot of work to do, but of course I am so motivated to stay... and provide Tottenham with what they deserve," Pochettino said.

"Today Tottenham is, for me, the best club in the world when we talk about facilities. This training ground and the new stadium, which is the best in the world, there is no better club. It's in London, there's no better city. It's England, it's the Premier League — the toughest and most exciting league. We need to make that step and... continue in this process and we can put Tottenham with the best teams in the world."

Pochettino is currently focused on the all-English Champions League final 1 and he is optimistic that striker Harry

Kane, who sustained an ankle ligament injury last month in the quarter-finals, will be fit to play in Madrid.

"(Kane) is training and has entered the final stage of his recovery," the Argentine said. "We're hoping he'll be able to give us a hand, either from the start, from the bench, or if not, then by giving us moral support in the dressing room. But we're optimistic he'll be able to help us on the pitch."

Pochettino said his team had defied expectations by reaching the final, which he expects to be an emotionally charged affair. "Everyone's expecting a tactical battle, but I think the emotional side will be decisive, that will dictate how the game develops," he added. "(Liverpool) have invested in their squad to be able to compete for the Champions League but we are there too and on our own merit. Nobody expected Tottenham to be in the final... We have the chance to make history. We're preparing to win it!"

GERMAN CUP

RB Leipzig out to mark tenth anniversary with first trophy

'To win our first title on our 10-year anniversary against Bayern would make it an extraordinary season'

AFP
Berlin

For RB Leipzig coach Ralf Rangnick, winning today's German Cup final against Bayern Munich would mean more than just silverware. Rangnick, who took over as sporting director at Leipzig in 2012 and has since had two spells doubling up as head coach, is the brains behind the club's rapid rise from the lower leagues to the very top of German football since the club's founding in 2009.

He has described his seven-year association with controversial outfit Leipzig, who hope to win a first major title in their short history at Berlin's Olympic Stadium today, as "a sort of life's work". "When I look back at the seven years I have been here, it seems much longer," he told *Kicker* magazine earlier this month.

Leipzig's success has challenged the recent duopoly of Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund, but has also been bitterly divisive, with fans across the country protesting against the club's controversial business model. Love them or loathe them, though, they are now an established power at the top of the German game, and hope to confirm that status by winning the cup today.

"To win our first title on our 10-year anniversary against Bayern Munich would crown on an extraordinary season" Rangnick said.

Leipzig were founded by energy drinks company Red Bull in 2009, and immediately soared up the league pyramid, rising from the fifth tier to the top flight by 2016.

For their critics, the club are a commercial blight on the traditions and fan-focused principles of German football. Their open affiliation with the global beverage brand and the lack of voting rights for their fans continue to outrage supporters across Germany, who consider them an inauthentic club.

When Leipzig hosted Bayern in the league earlier this month, the visiting fans held up foul-mouthed banners expressing their distaste for what critics sneeringly call "the RB Leipzig construct". The club's proponents, how-



From left: RB Leipzig's head coach Ralf Rangnick, defender Willi Orban, Bayern Munich's goalkeeper Manuel Neuer and head coach Niko Kovac pose with the trophy after a press conference yesterday on the eve of the German Cup final at the Olympic Stadium in Berlin. (AFP)

ever, point to the fact that Leipzig have brought success to a football-starved and economically struggling region of Germany.

After most of the grand old clubs from the former communist East Germany hit hard times following reunification, Leipzig have brought top-level football back to the area. "If a young kid wanted to support a Bundesliga team around here, there weren't many options before," Rangnick said.

"Now kids are proudly walking around in RB shirts. The cup has never been won by an Eastern team... I think that more people than ever will be wanting us to win on Saturday."

Many fans in the region may disagree with that sentiment, but there is little doubt that Leipzig's model has been successful. "Nobody expected them to become a top club so quickly," Bayern midfielder Joshua Kimmich, who played for Leipzig between 2013 and 2015, said.

Rather than big-money transfers, the club have built their growth on steady squad-building and investment in high-class facilities.

Of the squad which takes on Bayern in Berlin, nine players have been with the club since they were in the second division and two of those, Yussuf Poulsen and Diego Demme, also played for Leipzig in the third tier.

This season, with a team built around star striker Timo Werner, they have

lit up the Bundesliga, losing just two games in 2019 and securing third place behind Dortmund. With celebrated young coach Julian Nagelsmann set to take the reins as the club return to the Champions League next season, there is now much to look forward at the Red Bull Arena.

The journey to today's cup final may have felt like a lifetime for Ralf Rangnick, but Leipzig's rise to power may only be just beginning.

Bayern captain Neuer to return for cup final

Berlin: Bayern Munich's goalkeeper and captain Manuel Neuer will play in this weekend's German Cup final against RB Leipzig, coach Niko Kovac revealed yesterday. Neuer, 33, has been out injured since mid-April after sustaining a calf injury in a Bundesliga game against Fortuna Dusseldorf.

The Bayern number one had hoped to return to the first team two weeks ago, but was still out of action when Bayern wrapped up the league title in Munich last weekend. Kovac, though, said that his captain would be back on the pitch at the Berlin Olympic Stadium today evening. "Manuel will play tomorrow, because he is our captain and has played well this season," said the Bayern coach.

Neuer said that the cup final in Berlin was always "something special". "The coach knows that I have missed the last few weeks, but we have played some matches in training so I am well prepared."

Kovac also revealed that midfielder Leon Goretzka would not be fit for the final against Leipzig. Neuer, who missed last year's final due to injury, said he could sympathise with Goretzka. "It is an emotional game tomorrow. I feel for Leon, because he is injured and will miss his first ever cup final," said the Bayern keeper.

KOVAC'S BAYERN JOB NEVER IN QUESTION: CEO RUMMENIGGE

Meanwhile, Kovac will not be sacked at the end of the season, CEO Karl-Heinz Rummenigge revealed. "It was never in question that he would be our coach next season," Rummenigge said.

The 63-year-old has until now been considered one of Kovac's strongest critics in the Bayern boardroom. Speculation that Kovac was facing the sack had been growing in recent weeks, amid reports that both senior players and the club leadership are unhappy with his coaching style.

Rummenigge has always been particularly cool on Kovac. In April, a day after Bayern had beaten title rivals Borussia Dortmund 5-0, he went on to declare that "nobody had a job guarantee" at Bayern. Yet yesterday, he confirmed that Kovac would not be fired before next season, saying that he had "no problem" with the Croatian coach and dismissing rumours that Kovac's fate was dependent on the outcome of cup final.

FOCUS

Qatar go down to Nigeria in U-20 World Cup opener

Qatar lost to Nigeria 0-4 in their Group D opening match at the FIFA U-20 World Cup in Tychy, Poland yesterday. Nigeria, runners-up to a Joao Pinto-propelled Portugal in 1989 and a Lionel Messi-inspired Argentina in 2005, went 2-0 up inside 25 minutes - and both goals were indebted to their left-back.

Ikouem Utin duped his marker and unleashed a swerving shot, which Shehab Mamdouh could only push into the path of Maxwell Effiom, whose first-time volley broke the deadlock.

The Nigerian then somehow sprung four challenges down the left and cut the ball back to present Okechukwu Offia with a comfortable finish from close range.

Qatar did have their chances. Zulkifilu Rabi catapaulted himself across the Tychy turf to make an outstanding block from Yusuf Abdurisag, and Nigeria goalkeeper Olawale Oremade was alert to break up a three-on-one break from which the underdogs should have made more.

They were further punished when midfielder Tom Dele-Bashiru making it 3-0 before Aliu Salawudeen's completed the rout. The teams return to action on Monday, when Qatar face Ukraine and Nigeria encounter USA.

Meanwhile, New Zealand produced the nation's biggest win in FIFA U-20 World Cup history with a 5-0 rout of Honduras in a Group C match. Darwin Diego inadvertently steered the ball



Qatar's Nasir Peer (left) battles for possession with Okechukwu Offia of Nigeria during the FIFA U-20 World Cup group D match at Tychy Stadium in Poland. (FIFA)

into his own net just eight minutes into the match, and that unfortunate moment seemed to deflate Carlos Tabor's side. After that, New Zealand took full control of the match as Ben Waine had a brace to his name midway through the first half.

The second half continued in much a similar vein to the first. New Zealand maintained their dominance with Sarpreet Singh and Matt Conroy adding a fourth and fifth goal to ensure the Kiwis made history to commence their Poland 2019 campaign. (FIFA)

SPOTLIGHT

Neymar to arrive early in Brazil for Copa America

AFP
Teresopolis, Brazil

Star striker Neymar will join Brazil's Copa America squad for training today, three days ahead of schedule, an official said yesterday. "He will arrive tomorrow between 11:00am and noon," Brazil football federation press officer Vinicius Rodrigues told reporters at the Granja Comary complex in Teresopolis near Rio de Janeiro.

Neymar, the world's most expensive player, had been expected to arrive on May 28, six days after Brazil began preparations for the tournament. No explanation was provided for the change. Reporters were tipped off to Neymar's early arrival after he failed to show up to a PSG training session open to the media. His teammates Marquinhos and Thiago Silva, who are also part of the Brazilian squad, were there. When asked if Neymar had been released from training, coach Thomas Tuchel said "not by me."

Neymar had been sidelined for PSG's last two games of the domestic season and the French Champions Trophy after being handed a three-match suspension for lashing out at a spectator following PSG's shock defeat by Rennes in the French Cup final earlier this month.

His early arrival was welcomed by his Copa America teammates. "Neymar is our best player, it's good that he is here, he brings us his experience," said Manchester City goalkeeper Ederson.

Everton winger Richarlison said "we can do better training" with Neymar. 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.

'JAPANESE MESSI' KUBO NAMED IN COPA AMERICA SQUAD

Teenage sensation Takefusa Kubo won his first senior Japan call-up yesterday when he was named in coach Hajime Moriyasu's



Brazilian midfielder Richarlison talks to journalists in Teresopolis, Brazil, where the team is training ahead of the Copa America tournament. (AFP)

squad for next month's Copa America in Brazil. The FC Tokyo midfielder, who was invited to Barcelona's youth academy as a pint-sized nine-year-old where he earned the nickname the "Japanese Messi", is one of no fewer than 17 uncapped players as Japan look to build for next year's Tokyo Olympics.

Kubo, 17, will also be available for Japan's home warm-up games against Trinidad and Tobago on June 5 and El Salvador on June 9, Japanese officials said. "Teams like the hosts Brazil will definitely be serious about winning," Kubo told local media. "But even though we are playing as guests we will have to match the desire of our opponents when we get on the pitch."

Moriyasu left big-name players such as Keisuke Honda, Shinji Kagawa and Shinji Okazaki out of his Asian Cup squad earlier this year when the Blue Samurai were beaten 3-1 in the final by Qatar in Abu Dhabi. "Japan face Chile, Uruguay and Ecuador in Group C at the Copa America, which kicks off on June 14. Leicester forward Okazaki and Strasbourg goalkeeper Eiji Kawashima

were, however, retained by Moriyasu.

JAPAN SQUAD

Goalkeepers - Eiji Kawashima (Strasbourg), Ryosuke Kojima (Oita Trinita), Keisuke Osako (Sanfrecce Hiroshima)

Defenders - Naomichi Ueda (Cercle Brugge), Ko Itakura (Groningen), Tomoki Iwata (Oita Trinita), Yugo Tatsuta (Shimizu S-Pulse), Teruki Hara (Sagan Tosu), Daiki Sugioka (Shonan Bellmare), Daiki Suga (Consadole Sapporo), Takehiro Tomiyasu (Sint-Truiden)

Midfielders - Gaku Shibasaki (Getafe), Shoya Nakajima (Al-Duhail), Yuta Nakayama (PEC Zwolle), Koji Miyoshi (Yokohama F Marinos), Tatsuya Ito (Hamburger SV), Taishi Matsumoto (Sanfrecce Hiroshima), Kota Watanabe (Tokyo Verdy), Hiroki Abe (Kashima Antlers), Takefusa Kubo (FC Tokyo)

Forwards: Shinji Okazaki (Leicester City), Daizen Maeda (Matsumoto Yamaga), Ayase Ueda (Hosei University)

NBA

Leonard, Raptors rally, move within one win of Finals

'The game (Leonard) played tonight... pretty good. Big stage. On the road. Superstar'

Reuters
New York

The visiting Toronto Raptors withstood the early surge by the Milwaukee Bucks on Thursday night, shook it off, and then went on to grind out a 105-99 victory to take a 3-2 lead in the Eastern Conference finals.

The Bucks led by as many as 14 points in the first quarter.

"We wanted to come in and get the win, and we weathered the storm early," said Kawhi Leonard, who scored 15 of his 35 points in the fourth quarter.

Leonard added seven rebounds, nine assists and two steals.

"The game (Leonard) played tonight," guard Kyle Lowry said. "It was pretty good. Big stage. On the road. Superstar. Superstar."

The Raptors can advance to the NBA Finals for the first time in franchise history by winning Game 6 in Toronto on Saturday. Game 7, if necessary, would be played Monday in Milwaukee.

The two-time defending league champion Golden State Warriors will face the East champs in the Finals.

"There are a lot of fighters on this team," said Fred VanVleet, who added 21 points. "It's on the road, and you have to weather the storm and I think we did a good job of that tonight."

The Bucks led 32-22 after one quarter and 49-46 at halftime. During the third quarter, they led by as many as 12, but took a three-point lead into the fourth quarter before the Raptors took over.

"One of the themes at halftime was that we've done a pretty good job of creating good shots for the most part," Raptors coach Nick Nurse said. "We had to eliminate possessions where they weren't great. I thought we did a good job of creating good chances, and the guys stayed positive."

Lowry had 17 points, and Pascal Siakam finished with 14 points and 13 rebounds.

"They are the best team in the league and you have to play them hard," Siakam said.

The Raptors shot 36.9 percent from the field but were 41.9 percent from 3-point range. The Bucks shot 45.2 percent from the field and were 32.3 percent from 3-point range.

Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 24 points to lead the Bucks. Eric Bledsoe had 20 points, Malcolm Brogdon added 18 points and 11 rebounds, Brook Lopez scored 16 points, George Hill had 12 points, and Khris Middleton had six points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists.

"We've been a resilient team all year," Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said. "We're going to go to Toronto thinking about winning one game.... If we had a few more defensive rebounds from the three-, four-, five-minute mark on, the result might have been different."

He mentioned one play where Leonard missed a 3-pointer but was able to get his



Toronto Raptors forward Kawhi Leonard (second from left) shoots the ball during the fourth quarter against the Milwaukee Bucks in game five of the Eastern conference finals of the 2019 NBA Playoffs in Milwaukee, United States, on Thursday. (USA TODAY Sports)

own rebound, saying, "That's a critical play that can't happen."

Toronto took a one-point lead on VanVleet's 3-pointer with 8:57 left in the fourth quarter. Leonard's 3-pointer one minute later put the Raptors ahead by four.

Siakam's dunk pushed the Raptors into an eight-point lead with 6:20 to play. The Bucks pulled back within four on Lopez's driving layup with 5:31 left.

After Marc Gasol nailed the 3-pointer to make Toronto's lead seven, the Bucks

trimmed the deficit to two on Antetokounmpo's 3-pointer with 4:04 left.

Lopez tied the game with a 3-pointer with 2:44 to play, but the Raptors regained a 3-point lead seconds later when VanVleet sank a trey. Middleton's layup pulled the Bucks to within two with 59.7 seconds remaining.

The Raptors led by three after Gasol made one of two foul shots with 34 seconds to play. After a Milwaukee turnover, Siakam's dunk increased the lead to five.

After Lowry opened the third quarter with a 3-pointer to tie the game, the Bucks pulled out to a 12-point lead on Antetokounmpo's dunk with 7:43 to go in the period.

The Raptors answered with a 9-0 run, cutting the margin to three.

The Bucks went ahead by six, but the Raptors cut the gap to one on Leonard's 3-pointer with 1:32 left in the quarter.

Milwaukee led 75-72 after three quarters.

SPOTLIGHT

Durant doubtful for Finals opener

Reuters
New York

The Golden State Warriors announced on Thursday it is unlikely forward Kevin Durant will be ready for the start of the NBA Finals, but they are hopeful he can return during the series.

The Finals begin on May 31, pitting the two-time defending champion Warriors against either Milwaukee or Toronto. The Raptors lead the best-of-seven Eastern Conference finals 3-2 after defeating the Bucks 105-99 Thursday night in Milwaukee.

Sidelined with a right calf strain, Durant has not been cleared to begin on-court activities but continues to make good progress with his rehabilitation, according to the team. He missed Game 6 against the Houston Rockets in the second round of the playoffs, then all of Golden State's sweep of the Portland Trail Blazers in the Western Conference finals.

The Warriors also provided an update about center DeMarcus Cousins, who hasn't played since April 16 because of a torn



left quadriceps muscle. Cousins practised with the team on Thursday for the first time since sustaining the injury, and he is expected to return at some point during the Finals.

NO SUPERMAX FOR THOMPSON

Golden State Warriors guard Klay Thompson wasn't selected to an All-NBA team, making him ineligible to sign a five-year, \$221mm supermax contract this summer in free agency.

The Collective Bargaining Agreement of 2017 allowed some veterans to earn supermax salaries, based on making an All-NBA team.

Thompson now will be eligible to ink a five-year deal worth \$191mm, about \$30mm less than he could have received had he made All-NBA. Warriors owner Joe Lacob said he is confident the team will be able to re-sign Thompson.

Jays to call up Biggio on Friday: Reports

The Toronto Blue Jays will call up second base prospect Cavan Biggio, son of Hall of Famer Craig Biggio, for the first time, multiple media outlets reported on Thursday night. Cavan Biggio, 24, is hitting .306 with six homers and 26 RBIs in 41 games with Triple-A Buffalo this season, easily his best campaign in three-plus years in the minor leagues since being drafted by Toronto in the fifth round in 2016. He will join fellow hot prospect and son of a Hall of Famer Vladimir Guerrero Jr. in Toronto, marking the first time a team will have multiple sons of Hall of Famers in the majors at once in MLB history, according to the Elias Sports Bureau. The Blue Jays host the San Diego Padres on Friday. Craig Biggio, 53, was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2015, after a 20-year career with the Houston Astros in which he made seven All-Star teams and won four Gold Gloves. In corresponding moves, the Jays will reportedly call up infielder Lourdes Gurriel Jr. and send outfielder Billy McKinney and infielder Richard Urena to Buffalo.

Ward breaks collarbone, out 8-12 weeks

San Francisco 49ers safety Jimmie Ward broke his collarbone diving for a ball Thursday during organized team activities and will miss eight to 12 weeks, the team announced. That would give Ward — who NFL Network reports will have surgery — a chance to return early in training camp, which begins in mid July, and a good shot at being ready for the Sept. 8 regular-season opener. A Northern Illinois product, Ward was the No. 30 overall pick of the 2014 NFL Draft by the 49ers. In both 2017 and 2018, his season ended in November because of a broken arm. The 49ers re-signed him to a one-year, \$4.5mm deal in March after he played out the fifth-year option of his rookie contract. Ward has appeared in 51 games (31 starts) over five seasons and has 186 tackles, two interceptions and 21 passes defended.

Antetokounmpo, Harden in NBA team of the year, but no LeBron

Giannis Antetokounmpo and James Harden led the voting for the NBA's First Team of the Year but LeBron James missed out on a spot for the first time since 2007, results showed Thursday. Milwaukee Bucks forward Antetokounmpo and Houston Rockets guard James Harden advanced to the NBA's Most Valuable Player award along with Oklahoma City Thunder's Paul George. The 24-year-old Antetokounmpo, Harden and George were joined in the NBA's team of the year by Golden State star Stephen Curry and Denver's Nikola Jokic. Antetokounmpo, who is nearly seven-foot tall and known as the 'Greek Freak', and Harden were both unanimous first-team selections. However there was no place in the first team selection for Los Angeles Lakers' James. James missed out on the NBA playoffs this year for the first time since 2005 after a disappointing, injury-hit first season with the Lakers.

MLB

Twins hammer eight homers in rout of Angels



Minnesota Twins' Jonathan Schoop hits a three-run home run during the second inning against the Los Angeles Angels in Anaheim, United States, on Thursday. (USA TODAY Sports)

Reuters
New York

The Minnesota Twins slammed eight home runs, including two each by Miguel Sano and Jonathan Schoop, on their way to a 16-7 rout over the Los Angeles Angels on Thursday afternoon in Anaheim completing a three-game sweep.

The game was originally scheduled to be played Wednesday, but a rainstorm made the field conditions unplayable. The wait was worth it for the Twins, whose eight home runs tied a single-game club record. It also tied an Angels record for most home runs allowed in a game.

The Twins have scored a major league-high 289 runs this season, and they battered Angels pitching Thursday for 17 hits and six walks. Former Angel C.J. Cron had five hits, including a home run and two doubles.

Besides Sano, Schoop and Cron, Max Kepler, Jorge Polanco and Eddie Rosario also homered.

BRAVES 5, GIANTS 4

Rookie Austin Riley continued his

RESULTS

NY Mets	6-4	Washington
Pittsburgh	14-6	Colorado
NY Yankees	6-5	Baltimore
Boston	8-2	Toronto
Miami	5-2	Detroit
Philadelphia	9-7	Chicago Cubs
Atlanta	5-4	San Francisco
Minnesota	16-7	LA Angels
Tampa Bay	7-2	Cleveland
C White Sox	4-0	Houston

hot major league start with a two-run homer and a go-ahead single in extra innings, allowing Atlanta to take three of four from host San Francisco.

Riley's game-winning hit came after Dansby Swanson led off the 13th with a single off the Giants' seventh pitcher, right-hander Reyes Moronta (1-4). Swanson stole second with one out before Riley came through with his third RBI of the day and 12th in just nine games.

Right-hander Luke Jackson (3-1) worked the final two innings, allowing one hit, for the win.

MARLINS 5, TIGERS 2

Garrett Cooper blasted a two-out grand slam to cap a five-run, ninth-inning rally, and Miami pushed its winning streak to six games by downing host Detroit.

Cooper, who hit his first career homer on Wednesday, powered a Shane Greene slider over the left field wall to stun the Tigers, who dropped all nine games of their homestand.

Tyler Kinley (1-0), who gave up an eighth-inning run, was credited with his first career win. Sergio Romo pitched the ninth for his ninth save.

METS 6, NATIONALS 4

Carlos Gomez hit a go-ahead three-run homer in the eighth inning for host New York, which took advantage of the struggling Washington bullpen to complete a four-game sweep.

The Mets, who endangered manager Mickey Callaway's job by getting swept by the Miami Marlins last weekend, swept a four-game series from the Nationals/Montreal Expos franchise for the first time since 1991.

The Nationals have lost five straight to fall 12 games under .500 for the first time since the 2010 season.

SPOTLIGHT

Cautious Leclerc testing home course limits at Monaco

'I am eager to race at home, for sure, as it is one of my favourite tracks'

AFP
Monaco

No driver on the grid at this weekend's Monaco Grand Prix can claim to know the bumps, corners and idiosyncrasies of the Mediterranean principality's famous streets as intimately as local hero Charles Leclerc. The Monegasque driver remembers watching the red Ferraris whizz through the familiar home streets as a toddler, who was later to travel to school on them by bus and as an adolescent dreamed of racing on the world's most iconic F1 course.

At 21, and approaching only his sixth race as a Ferrari Formula One driver, he has realised his and his greatest mentors' ambitions by coming home to race in front of family and friends in the distinctive overalls of the 'scarlet scuderia'.

His father Herve Leclerc, a one-time Formula Three driver who died in 2017, and his inspirational friend Jules Bianchi, who died in 2015 following a crash at the 2014 Japanese Grand Prix, share the personal space on his racing helmet this weekend, a division to reflect their importance to him.

"Without them, I would never have started driving or racing," he said.

His father, he added, had transmitted to him his passion for Ayrton Senna, the great Brazilian three-time champion who was killed 25 years ago at the 1994 San Marino Grand Prix. In the week of Niki Lauda's death, the memories, as displayed in the coloured graphics on his helmet, are important to the calm, determined and self-possessed Leclerc who replaced Kimi Raikkonen as teammate to four-time champion Sebastian Vettel this year.

"I am eager to race at home, for sure, as it is one of my favourite tracks, but I am trying to prepare as normally as possible," he said. "I try to make sure that the pressure does not affect me..."

He knows already that he is making history for his birthplace. Tomorrow, as one of only five men from Monaco to have raced in F1, he hopes to become the first to score points since Louis Chiron finished third in 1950.

Trailed by fans, stopped for 'selfies' and besieged by a French media almost desperate for a new champion, 26 years since Alain Prost clinched his fourth title, Leclerc has retained his air of coolness despite the hoopla all around him.

"I feel I am satisfied with my performances so far and I am learning from my mistakes," he said. "And I am ready to accept team orders up to a certain point — until now, they have been acceptable. It is now my job to end up in front of my teammate. Simple as that!"

His promotion from Sauber to Ferrari,



Ferrari's Charles Leclerc arrives at the fan zone at Monaco street circuit yesterday, ahead of the Monaco F1 Grand Prix. (AFP)

after one season, has brought him fame in the digital age. He has 1.2m followers on Instagram, 220,000 on Twitter and more than 120,000 on Facebook. His fans say his regular postings, with pictures, have proved he is more human than many drivers. He considers himself lucky to have been recruited by the Ferrari Academy, schooled by his mentors and given his chance. And he believes Ferrari this year are better than their results have suggested. "We were on top in Bahrain, and in good shape in Baku, when something happened... that we all know about," he said. "I don't believe the table reflects re-

ality for us."

For Leclerc, praise from defending five-time champion Lewis Hamilton — who said he was reminded of himself — has been welcomed gracefully. "Coming from Lewis, I really appreciate it. I am trying to focus on my career plan and just to keep improving."

His humility has made him popular in the same way that Senna held his place in the popular imagination of the sport. "I never met him, but my Dad talked a lot about him," said Leclerc. "Yes, he has been my inspiration..."

At Monte Carlo, he knows he has sup-

port, but understands also that he must build up his performance cautiously through the weekend. "Petit a petit," he said. "If not a crash is guaranteed. You have to find the limit, lap by lap."

As a child of four or five, he remembers watching past a grand here for the first time. "I would play with my little cars with my best friend and watch the F1 race go round the first corner from his balcony. Above all, I always watched the red cars!"

After finishing up 10th in Thursday's practice sessions, Leclerc has retained his serenity and has no fear of the rain forecast for qualifying today

F1

Hamilton hails Mercedes car as 'fantastic'

AFP
Monaco

Lewis Hamilton has hailed his mourning Mercedes team and says the performances of the car itself are 'fantastic' ahead of qualifying today for tomorrow's 77th Monaco Grand Prix.

The defending five-time world champion and his Silver Arrows teammate Valtteri Bottas were seven-tenths of a second clear of third-placed Sebastian Vettel of Ferrari after Thursday's opening sessions. "I'm surprised," he said. "I don't know where all the time has come from — I don't know if Max (Verstappen) maybe didn't get in a time or what, but the performance we have here is fantastic. We're constantly improving this car and understanding it and understanding the tyre. I guess that's why you're seeing the performance advantage we have."

A similar performance in today's qualifying session would give the team a near-perfect opportunity to extend their triumphant season-opening run to six one-two finishes. On an overcast morning on the traditional rest day at the classic 'blue ribbon' event, celebrating the 90th anniversary of its inaugural run in 1929, the paddock was busy as teams prepared for possible mixed weather conditions for today's critical qualifying.

Hamilton, a formidable street track racer, is aiming for a third Monaco win to boost his lead in drivers' championship in which he has 112 points, seven more than teammate Bottas on 105. In the week of Niki Lauda's death Mercedes want to honour the memory of their late non-executive chairman with a notable win.

Hamilton, who withdrew from Wednesday's pre-race news briefing because he felt too emo-

tional to attend, stayed focussed on his driving after Thursday's sessions. His team's chief race engineer Andrew Shovlin added a note of caution when he warned of concerns about how long it was taking for their cars to warm up their soft tyres for qualifying laps.

"Our number one concern is getting the soft tyre to work on the first lap," he explained. "Our headline times were good, but it took us a lot of laps to get there and qualifying is so important at this track."

He added that the team's reserve driver Esteban Ocon was working in a simulator to assist in finding a solution. "Monaco is unusual in that we have an extra day between the practice sessions so it gives us more time to look at data and understand the issues."

Hamilton added that, contrary to expectations, it was not always a pleasure to speed around Monte Carlo. "Every year, it gets faster — and it's that much faster you notice it when you're going past the barriers and touching them... But, honestly, I wouldn't say it's fun. It's incredibly intense. You have to be so focused, just the smallest mistake... When you look into Tabac, for example, the speed you're going towards that corner... and it's just a wall in front of you. Going up the hill to Casino it's the same thing. So it's no joke and whilst it's definitely always a great thing to drive the car, it's just so intense..."

He warned, too, that tomorrow's race is unlikely to be great entertainment because it is so difficult to overtake. "Unfortunately it's not a great racing track, but it's a great track to drive single laps on," said Hamilton. "We're just doing a long stint, where it's a one-stop for everyone — most likely a train. We know already that's going to be the case."



Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton leaves the fan zone on a motorbike ahead of the Monaco Grand Prix in Monte Carlo. (Reuters)

BADMINTON

Malaysia exit Sudirman Cup after freak injury to Teo

AFP
Nanning, China

Malaysian badminton player Teo Ee Yi was bloodied and shaken after his doubles partner accidentally smashed him in the face with his shin during their Sudirman Cup quarter-final defeat to Japan yesterday. The 26-year-old lay prone on the court floor for nearly 10 minutes with a gashed chin, blood pouring down his neck, with the men's doubles clash against top seeds Japan locked at 19-19 in the deciding game.

Teo suffered the injury after he and playing partner Ong Yew Sin both dived in an attempt to retrieve the same shot, and Ong's trailing left leg caught Teo in the face. Although Teo eventually climbed off the floor to continue with a large

bandage on his chin, the Malaysian duo appeared to have lost their edge. They saved a second match point against Takeshi Kamura and Keigo Sonoda, but could not ultimately prevent going down to a dramatic defeat spread over 95 thrilling minutes. Teo afterwards refused to blame the attritional three-game loss on the injury.

The painful defeat put Japan 1-0 up in the tie in the Chinese city of Nanning and on the way to a semi-finals meeting with Indonesia. Men's world number one Kento Momota and Nozomi Okuhara triumphed in their singles matches to give Japan — who have never won the Sudirman Cup — an unassailable 3-0 lead.

Indonesia booked their place in the last four with a narrow 3-2 win over Taiwan. Today's other semi-final is between the hosts China, who are the hot favourites to win the mixed-team world championship for an 11th time, and Thailand.



Malaysia's Ong Yew Sin (left) looks at doubles partner Teo Ee Yi's injury during their match against Japan's Takeshi Kamura and Keigo Sonoda in quarter-finals of the Sudirman Cup in Nanning. (AFP)

FOCUS

ICSS Insight briefs the French parliament on good governance in sport

With the aim of reforming and modernising the national sport structure, the French Government recently invited ICSS Insight to brief Parliament on sport integrity and existing best practice in the field of good governance in sport.

As part of a programme to collect input and data for the drafting of the new Bill of Law on 'Sport and Society', ICSS Insight was invited due to its work in the sector of sport-integrity policy. The ICSS Insight contributed its expertise to an audience of over 200 senior representatives of the French sport movement and Members of Parliament (MPs).

Speaking at the Parliament, ICSS Insight Senior Expert on Sport Integrity, Mallorie Trannois said: "More than ever, sport is a reflection of our society, involving multiple aspects and increasing challenges. It is therefore unsurprising that the questions relating to sport's governance have been shaking the international sports movement for some years now."

The preparation for the 2024 Olympic Games has been a catalyst for France to strengthen its efforts towards the development of the most advanced governance



ICSS Insight's senior expert on Sport Integrity Mallorie Trannois (centre) speaks during an event at the French parliament.

structure, one capable of meeting the growing challenges in the field of good governance in sport.

In a recent statement, the President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, underlined his willingness to "build a clearer and more effective governance of French sports federations in order to redefine the organisation of sports policy at national level".

The new Bill entitled 'Sport and Society' aims at building a new French sports model, grounded in good governance and democracy in sport. In this

context, ICSS Insight was invited to contribute to a high-level debate in light of the experience developed by the organisation in the field of sport integrity, specifically its work, conducted in collaboration with Unesco, UNODC, the European Union, the Council of Europe and the University of Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne.

During the briefing, ICSS Insight representative, Mallorie Trannois, invited the organisations involved in the Parliamentary briefing, to join SIGA, the

Sport Integrity Global Alliance which ICSS Insight is a founding member of and which was created to promote continuous reform in the sport integrity field. Insight CEO Massimiliano Montanari concluded: "We feel honoured to be involved in what is such an important step being undertaken by the French legislator. We are delighted to be able to share the international knowledge we have at the ICSS and to support the development of good governance and sport-integrity legislation at this national level!"

SPOTLIGHT

Tsitsipas' joie de vivre could carry him far in Paris

'I am satisfied with my results since Estoril. I had a lot of matches on clay'

Reuters
Paris

World number six Stefanos Tsitsipas has been shooting up the rankings this year and with two titles bagged in 2019, including his first on clay, the carefree young Greek is a force to be reckoned with at the French Open.

With a powerful one-handed backhand, an extremely versatile game and a determination to match, the 20-year-old with the surfer boy blond curls and looks has been a breath of much-needed fresh air on the tour in the past two years.

The Athenian has quickly established himself alongside German Alexander Zverev as one of the men most likely to succeed the likes of Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic at the very top of the game.

Zverev, 22, and Austrian Dominic Thiem, 25, have been established in the top 10 for a longer time but despite their strong tour presence they have yet to win a Grand Slam.

This has raised questions over their ability to deliver on the biggest tennis stage and the level of their drive to finally knock 30 somethings Federer, Nadal and Djokovic off their perch.

With a semi-final appearance in Australia this year Tsitsipas has achieved more than his rival Zverev, who has never progressed past the last eight of a Grand Slam.

And twice French Open runner-up Alex Corretja believes the Greek is the most likely bet to shake it up in Paris.

Speaking exclusively to Reuters, Eurosport tennis expert Corretja said: "Whoever wants to beat him will have to fight so much because he is physically strong, he knows how to play on clay, he mixes it up well."

"Maybe this year it's still a bit early to say he'll win the tournament but semi-finals? Yes. He is in very good form but this is the first time he arrives at a Grand Slam with people believing he can go far. Let's see how he deals with that."

Tsitsipas enjoyed a breakthrough season last year to jump from 91 to 15th in the rankings and currently sits at a career high sixth.



Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas with his trophy after losing the Madrid Open final against Serbia's Novak Djokovic on May 12, 2019. (Reuters)

Laver Cup becomes official ATP event

The Laver Cup team event between Europe and the rest of the world is to become an official part of the ATP Tour, the governing body of men's tennis said yesterday. While extremely popular in its first two editions staged in front of sell-out crowds in Prague and Chicago, the competition backed by Roger Federer was seen as something of an outlier. This year's tournament in Geneva in September will have no ranking points but Friday's announcement means it will have the same back-up and logistical support as other ATP Tour events. "The Laver Cup team is incredibly excited about this partnership with the ATP," Tony Godsick, President and CEO of Federer's management company TEAM8 and Laver Cup chairman, said. "It has always been our hope to build the Laver Cup in partnership

with the tennis world, and certification by the ATP after two editions is an overwhelming validation of our vision." The Laver Cup last year saw a European team captained by Bjorn Borg and including the likes of Federer, Novak Djokovic and Alexander Zverev take on John McEnroe's world team featuring Nick Kyrgios, Kevin Anderson and John Isner. Critics have suggested it crowds the calendar and uses a prime slot that could be occupied by the Davis Cup which has been revamped this year by the International Tennis Federation. Federer, who helped create the event to honour Australian great Rod Laver, was delighted with the news. "As I come closer to the end of my playing career, it's wonderful to know that the Laver Cup will be part of the tour that I've dedi-

cated more than 20 years of my life to," he said. World number one Djokovic described it as a "true celebration of tennis". "As President of the ATP Player Council I'm proud to support this collaboration," the Serb said. Chris Kermode, Executive Chairman and President of the ATP, said the popularity of the event had been a decisive factor in bringing it on board. "It has struck a chord with fans worldwide in a very short time," Kermode said. "This event has great potential to reach new fans around the world." Becoming an officially-sanctioned event means the Laver Cup will have access to all ATP services, including marketing and social media, as well as umpires and physios. This year's competition will take place from September 20-22.

He has recorded wins over Federer and Nadal in 2019, including beating the Spaniard on his favourite clay in Madrid, while also winning the titles on the Marseille hard courts and Estoril's clay.

He also reached his first clay-court ATP Masters 1000 final in Madrid, falling to Djokovic. "I am satisfied with my results since Estoril. I had a lot of matches on clay. I think that's important coming into a tour-

name like the French Open," Tsitsipas said. With the best warm-up he could have hoped for ahead of the French Open, Tsitsipas has every right to dream big. "I think I learned a lot these

three weeks," he said. "It's good to come into a Grand Slam knowing what you did well, what you did wrong, trying to concentrate on those things in order to avoid the same mistakes in the big events."

TENNIS

Zverev warms up for French Open by reaching Geneva final

AFP
Geneva

World number five Alexander Zverev warmed up for the French Open by reaching only his second final of the season at the ATP event in Geneva with victory over Federico Delbonis yesterday. The 22-year-old German came through a close match 7-5, 6-7 (6/8), 6-3 in two hours and 40 minutes to set up today's final against Chile's Nicolas Jarry.

Zverev, who has never got past the quarter-finals of a Grand Slam tournament, will open his Roland Garros campaign against Australian John Millman next week.

He let a 5-1 lead slip in the opening set in Switzerland, but fought back to take it in the 12th game.

Argentinian world number 84 Delbonis again pulled back a break of serve in the second set to win a tie-break and level the semi-final, but Zverev broke twice in the decider and sealed victory on his first match point.

PUTINTSEVA TO PLAY ZIDANSEK IN TITLE CLASH
Kazakhstan's Yulia Putintseva overcame unseeded Sorana Cirstea 6-4 7-5 in the Nuremberg Cup semi-finals yesterday and will face Tamara Zidansek in the final today.

Putintseva won a three-hour, 21-minute marathon encounter against Anna-Lena Friedsam on Thursday - the longest women's match of the year so far - but showed little signs of fatigue as she kept alive hopes of a maiden WTA title. Zidansek later reached her first WTA singles final after the unseeded Slovenian converted five of her nine break points to upset second-seeded Czech Katerina Siniakova 7-6(4) 6-2.

Top seed Putintseva, who has lost in both of her WTA final appearances - St Petersburg in 2017

and Guangzhou last year - will be wary of Zidansek who defeated her in the pair's only previous meeting in Morocco earlier this season.

GARCIA SETS UP YASTREMSKA FINAL
France's Caroline Garcia defeated compatriot Chloe Paquet 6-3 6-4 in the Strasbourg International semi-finals on Friday to set up a title clash with fifth seed Dayana Yastremska.

Garcia, the 2016 champion, dominated the contest, firing 11 aces and 24 winners, and did not face a break point in the match as she advanced to her first career meeting with Yastremska.

Earlier, the Ukrainian teenager moved into her second title clash of the season by stunning big-hitting second seed Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus 6-4 6-4. After winning the opening set with a decisive break in the fifth game, 19-year-old Yastremska secured an early break in the second before sealing the contest on her fourth match point.

ALIASSEME SET FOR PAIRE SHOWDOWN IN FINAL
Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime rallied to beat top seed Nikoloz Basilashvili 2-6 7-6(3) 6-4 in the Lyon Open semi-finals yesterday to move into his second ATP final of the year.

The 18-year-old, who lost in the Rio Open final earlier this season, plays Benoit Paire for the first time in his career in today's final after the Frenchman cruised past Taylor Fritz 6-4 6-2.

After losing the opening set in 27 minutes, Auger-Aliassime found his rhythm in the second to drag the match into a decider. He saved two break points at 2-3 before switching gears to close out the match with an ace.

World number 51 Paire, who had no trouble beating American Fritz earlier in the day, is seeking his second title of the season and third overall following success in Marrakesh last month.



Germany's Alexander Zverev celebrates his victory in the Geneva Open ATP 250 semi-final against Federico Delbonis in Geneva yesterday. (AFP)

GOLF

Finau gets a grip with first round lead at Colonial

AFP
Los Angeles

Tony Finau set the first round pace at the Charles Schwab Challenge yesterday, reaping the rewards from a change of putting grip to card a blistering six-under-par 64 and claim the lead at Colonial Country Club in Texas.

The world number 15 took a one-shot lead after posting seven birdies and one bogey as he chases only his second PGA Tour victory. Finau, who managed a fifth place finish in the Masters last month but struggled in the PGA Championship, finishing tied in 64th, started slowly before making back-to-back birdies on the third and fourth holes.

His opening birdie on the third came after he rolled in a 19-foot putt, and he backed it up on the par-three fourth by sticking his tee shot to within three feet for a simple tap-in.

A bogey on the fifth threatened to check Finau's momentum, but he responded with back-to-back birdies on the 7th and 8th holes to reach the turn at three under.

A hat-trick of birdies on the 11th, 12th and 13th saw Finau vault up the leaderboard.

Once again, the 29-year-old relied on a red-hot putter to pick up shots, draining putts of 24 feet and 26 feet to bag his final two birdies of the day.

Finau, who also saved a par by making a 30-foot putt during his round, later revealed he had changed his putting grip after a disappointing showing in the PGA last week.

"I haven't been putting great I feel like, and standing over the ball the most important thing is, 'Do you feel like you're going to make the putt or not?'" Finau said.

"Outside of everything else, 'Do you believe you can make the putt or not?' So for me, I needed to switch something."

Jordan Spieth and Roger Sloan meanwhile were a shot back from Finau after both posting five-under-par 65s. Spieth, coming off a share of third place at the PGA Championship last week, had a wild round comprised of eight birdies, a double bogey and a bogey.

The 25-year-old Texan managed to finish with a flourish how-



Tony Finau of the United States plays his shot from the sixth tee during the first round of the Charles Schwab Challenge at Colonial Country Club in Fort Worth, Texas. (Getty Images/AFP)

ever, with a birdie on his final hole of the day. Spieth believes his recent form indicates a protracted slump may be over. "I know what I have needed to

work on and I knew it was going to take a lot of time," Spieth said. "It's nice to see some results off what I believe is the progress I've been making. At the same time,

it's one round. I've got to keep my head down and keep working." Spieth and Sloan are two ahead of nine players tied on three under.

LEADING SCORES
64 - Tony Finau (USA)
65 - Roger Sloan (CAN), Jordan Spieth (USA)
67 - Jonas Blixt (SWE), Ronald Henry (USA), Chesson Hadley (USA), Scott Brown (USA), Jason Dufner (USA), Jimmy Walker (USA), Peter Uihlein (USA), Trey Mullinax (USA), Nick Watney (USA)
68 - Mackenzie Hughes (CAN), Anirban Lahiri (IND), Abraham Ancer (MEX), Rory Sabbatini (SVK), Ryan Palmer (USA), Kevin Tway (USA), Josh Teater (USA), Cheng Tsung Pan (TPE)
69 - Emiliano Grillo (ARG), Nick Taylor (CAN), Benjamin Silverman (CAN), Corey Connors (CAN), An Byeong-Hun (KOR), Danny Lee (NZL), Tyrone Van Aswegen (RSA), Kevin Streelman (USA), Andrew Putnam (USA), Bill Haas (USA), Scott Langley (USA), Sam Burns (USA), Jim Furyk (USA), Brian Gay (USA), Nate Lashley (USA), Paul Casey (ENG), Matthew Fitzpatrick (ENG)

Woods to play Memorial ahead of US Open

Tiger Woods confirmed yesterday that he will play next week's Memorial Tournament as he aims to rediscover his best form ahead of next month's US Open, tournament organisers said.

Woods, who bagged a dramatic 15th major title at the Masters last month, was brought back down to earth with a bump last week after missing the cut at the US PGA Championship.

The tournament at Bethpage Black was the first competitive golf Woods had played since his emotional victory at Augusta - his first major title in 11 years - and the American said he had not practised enough leading into the tournament. "Just don't feel well and just not able to do it. But resting would be better, so I would have energy to play," he said. However he expressed optimism that he could rediscover his best form.

"There's no reason why I can't get up to speed again and crank it back up," he added. "I've got to start feeling a little bit better first before that happens. We'll do that first and then start cranking it back up again."

Woods has added the Memorial in Dublin, Ohio to his schedule in order to get more rounds in ahead of the US Open, which is being held between June 13-16 at Pebble Beach in California.

The 43-year-old will be making his 17th appearance the invitational tournament hosted by golf legend Jack Nicklaus at Muirfield Village Golf Club.

He most recently won the event in 2012, when he chipped in for birdie on the event's 70th hole to claim his 73rd PGA Tour victory.

FRENCH OPEN

'Happy' Halep feeling less pressure

'I am too happy to be in this position, I have to admit this. But it's nothing bad'

AFP
Paris

Reigning champion **Simona Halep** yesterday said that the pressure was off ahead of the start of her French Open title defence after ending her long wait for a Grand Slam trophy 12 months ago.

The Romanian beat Sloane Stephens in Paris last year to clinch her maiden major crown in her fourth final, and is the third seed for the 2019 edition which starts at Roland Garros on Sunday.

"(It's) much better and much easier, because I have the title already," said Halep, who is the bookmakers' favourite to win a second straight title.

"(It) doesn't matter anymore what is going to happen. Everything (that) comes now comes as a bonus. So I will try just to give my best and to see if I'm able to do it again."

The 27-year-old had faced consistent questions heading into the 2018 French Open about her ability to win the biggest tournaments despite holding the world-number-one ranking for long spells, but finally put those doubts to bed.

Now, she concedes that she is maybe "too happy" to have put herself in the position of defending champion, with a possible gruelling fortnight ahead.

"I am too happy to be in this position, I have to admit this. But it's nothing bad," she said. "I will try to do the things (I did) as a kid, enjoying the time. I wanted this badly, and I wanted (it) so much that now having it, I just want to be happy and to smile."

Halep has been in typically consistent form this season, al-



though is yet to win a tournament after final defeats in Doha and earlier this month on clay in Madrid, where she was beaten by in-form Dutchwoman Kiki Bertens.

A shock loss in her first match last week in Rome to Czech teenager Marketa Vondrousova

followed, but her confidence remains high of another run deep into the French Open draw.

"Going to Madrid... maybe my favourite tournament, because I won two times there and I played two finals, even if I didn't win the final, I felt that my level was very high. "I have confidence. I don't

count Rome this year. We leave it back. Coming here, practising, I felt really well."

Halep will face Australian Ajla Tomljanovic in the opening round, with sixth seed Petra Kvitova also in her quarter of the draw.

"It's going to be a very tough

match (against Tomljanovic)," added Halep, also a two-time French Open runner-up.

"She's powerful. She hits the ball strong. So I have to be ready. I have to focus on myself."

Tomljanovic reached the fourth round of Roland Garros in 2014.

EIGHT WOMEN TO WATCH ON THE ROLAND GARROS CLAY

SIMONA HALEP (Romania) The lionhearted Romanian finally landed a Grand Slam title in Paris last year after seasons of sweat and it will take a tough cookie to wrestle the crown from her grasp. Few players enjoy a scrap more than the 27-year-old but until she downed Sloane Stephens in last year's final there were nagging doubts about her ability to strike a knockout blow. That pressure has now been lifted and she will arrive happy and relaxed although wary of big-hitters like Kiki Bertens who got the better of her in the Madrid final.

NAOMI OSAKA (Japan) Talk about revelling on the big stage. The Japanese world number one has only won three titles but arrives in Paris having won the last two Grand Slams on offer.

The 21-year-old still gives off the impression that she is a little nonplussed by all the fuss, preferring to make statements with her aggressive brand of tennis. Clay is not her natural surface but she reached the quarter-finals in Madrid and again in

Rome where a thumb injury meant she had to withdraw. If she's fit she will be dangerous.

KAROLINA PLISKOVA (Czech Rep) The tall Czech owns one of the biggest serves in women's tennis and even on relatively slow Parisian clay it will give her every chance of claiming a first Grand Slam title. Pliskova is one of several players in the women's draw to have held the world number one ranking, but now appears to have harnessed her power to become a more consistent force. Never a lover of clay, with the help of Spanish coach Conchita Martinez she appears to have finally got to grips with the surface as she demonstrated by winning the Rome title - a feat she described as "a miracle".

KIKI BERTENS (Netherlands) The 27-year-old became the highest-ranked Dutchwoman ever when she won the Madrid title this month to climb to number four. She beat four Grand Slam champions in the process, culminating in downing French Open champion Halep.

Until she reached the French Open semi-finals out of nowhere in 2016, however, Bertens was struggling to make an impact.

Even then she toyed with quitting the sport in 2017 but her decision to continue has been fully vindicated and with a hefty serve and powerful baseline game she now looks comfortable in the highest echelons of women's tennis. Along with Petra Kvitova and Pliskova, she is one of only three players to win multiple titles this year.

PETRA KVI TOVA (Czech Rep) Roland Garros has never been a happy hunting ground for Kvitova with a semi-final run in 2012 still her best effort. A classic first-strike player, the 29-year-old is capable of overwhelming anyone on her day, especially on the Wimbledon lawns where she has twice claimed the title. Her career was interrupted by a horrific knife attack in Dec. 2016 but she is back to her best and after winning the claycourt title in Stuttgart will be full of confidence.

With few points to defend in France and Wimbledon the number one ranking could be possible for the first time.

GARBINE MUGURUZA (Spain) Inconsistency has seen her tumble down to 19th in the rankings heading to Paris but none of the top seeds will be happy to see her in their section of the draw. The powerful Venezuelan-born Spaniard can be unplayable when she is firing on all cylinders and is one of those who can be relied on to bring her best game to the biggest stages. She overwhelmed Serena Williams in the 2016 French Open final and did the same to Venus a year later at Wimbledon. Reached the semi-final in Paris last year and expect to see her in the second week again, as long as a left thigh injury sustained in Rome clears up in time.

SERENA WILLIAMS (US) Write off the American 23-times Grand Slam singles champion at your peril. The 37-year-old has played only a handful of matches since reaching the Australian Open quarter-final,

but she will not just be in Paris for a family outing. Three times Williams has swept to the title in Paris and last year, in only her third tournament back after giving birth, reached the last 16 before injury struck. No one doubts that she has the weapons and the court craft to make another title tilt and should she get on a roll in the first week her mere presence in the draw will start to sow some seeds of doubt into the heads of the favourites.

SLOANE STEPHENS (US) The cool as a cucumber American counter-puncher does not blast opponents off court, instead uses her incredible court coverage and unerring accuracy to wear them down. Last year's final against Halep was a battle of wills between two players with similar styles - Stephens eventually succumbing in a gripping three-set contest. Results this year have not been spectacular but a semi-final run in Madrid was a clear message that she is warming up nicely for a strong challenge over the next fortnight.

CYCLING

Zakarin wins Giro stage 13; bad day for Yates, Lopez

AFP
Pinerolo, Italy

Ilnur Zakarin of Katusha soloed to a snow-capped summit finish victory on a chaotic 13th stage of the Giro d'Italia yesterday that shook up the overall picture.

The Russian thereby climbs to third in the overall standings, which is where the now 29-year-old finished on the 2017 Giro.

Slovenia's Jan Polanc of Team UAE kept hold of the overall lead as favourites another Slovene Primoz Roglic and Italian Vincenzo Nibali crossed the line together 2min 57sec adrift, with Briton Simon Yates and Colombian Miguel Angel Lopez another two minutes back.

On this first summit reckoning in a mountain-packed second section of the Giro, the peloton climbed to 2,237m altitude, with Zakarin dropping Spain's Mikel Nieve in the final section and beating him by 35sec at the panoramic finishing post in the Gran Paradiso national park.

Movistar pair Mikel Landa and Richard Carapaz came third and fourth on a great day for the Spanish team as Dutchman Bauke Mollema climbed to fourth in the overall with his fifth place on the day. The two favourites, Roglic of Jumbo-Visma and two-time Giro winner Nibali of Bahrain, kept close tabs on each other all day with both men taking frequent turns to test each other.

Colombian hope Miguel Angel Lopez of Astana, who was third on last year's Giro, had been leading that pair until he suffered yet another mechanical cost him precious initiative.

But the day's biggest loser, over five minutes behind Zakarin, was Simon Yates, a Briton who rides for Mitchelton-

Scott, whose pre-race bravado will haunt him after declaring himself the man to beat.

British Team Ineos, formerly Sky, had a mixed day, losing 24-year-old climber Tao Geoghegan Hart to an early crash, but seeing their 21-year-old Russian climber Pavel Sivakov finish ninth to climb into the overall top 10 and shoot to the top of the young rider white jersey standings.

Today's stage looks even tougher with five climbs and 4,000m elevation on the menu. The penultimate climb, the Colle San Marco is 10.5km with an average gradient of 9.8 percent.

RESULTS

STAGE

1. Ilnur Zakarin (RUS/Katusha), 5hrs 34min 40sec, 2. Mikel Nieve (ESP/MIT) at 35sec, 3. Mikel Landa (ESP/MOV) 1:20, 4. Richard Carapaz (ECU/MOV) 1:38, 5. Bauke Mollema (NED/TRE) 1:45, 6. Rafal Majka (POL/BOR) 2:07, 7. Primoz Roglic (SLO/JUM) 2:57, 8. Vincenzo Nibali (ITA/BAH) 2:57, 9. Pavel Sivakov (RUS/INE) 3:34, 10. Davide Formolo (ITA/BOR) 3:50.

SELECTED:

11. Miguel Angel Lopez (COL/AST) 4:19, 15. Jan Polanc (SLO/UAE) 4:39, 17. Simon Yates (GBR/MIT) 5:00.

OVERALL

1. Jan Polanc (SLO/UAE Emirates) 54hr 28min 59sec, 2. Primoz Roglic (SLO/JUM) at 2:25, 3. Ilnur Zakarin (RUS/KAT) 2:56, 4. Bauke Mollema (NED/TRE) 3:06, 5. Vincenzo Nibali (ITA/BAH) 4:09, 6. Richard Carapaz (ECU/MOV) 4:22, 7. Rafal Majka (POL/BOR) 4:28, 8. Mikel Landa (ESP/MOV) 5:08, 9. Pavel Sivakov (RUS/INE) 7:13, 10. Miguel Angel Lopez (COL/AST) 7:48, 11. Tanel Kangert (EST/EFI) 7:52, 12. Simon Yates (GBR/MIT) 8:14.



Team Katusha rider Russia's Ilnur Zakarin reacts as he crosses the finish line to win stage thirteen of the 102nd Giro d'Italia yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Australian Kyrgios pulls out

Reuters
Paris

Australian maverick **Nick Kyrgios** withdrew from the French Open yesterday, according to tournament officials, robbing the Grand Slam event of some guaranteed fireworks.

No official reason was given although media reports stated the 24-year-old Kyrgios was suffering with an illness.

He had been due to face Britain's Cameron Norrie in the first round but his place will now be taken by a qualifier who will almost certainly bring less to the party, good or bad, than the so-called wild child of men's tennis.

The world number 36 divides opinion like no other in the sport, with his dazzling shot-making ability more often than not overshadowed by his behaviour and disdain for authority.

In the past he has been sanctioned for

making inappropriate remarks about an opponent's girlfriend, failing to try during matches and turning the air blue with bad language.

Only last week Kyrgios threw a chair across a court at the Italian Open before forfeiting his second-round match against Norwegian Casper Ruud. He then headed to London to train with Britain's Andy Murray on Wimbledon's grass, where he declared his contempt for the French Open in a live Instagram post.

"The fact I am here now and then have to go to Paris in a couple of days... French Open s**** compared to this place. S****," Kyrgios said.

"Get rid of the clay man, who likes the clay? It is so bad."

Kyrgios also pulled out of the French Open last year before the start with an elbow injury and has never progressed past the third round at the claycourt Grand Slam. Roland Garros officials told Reuters they did not know the reason for Kyrgios's withdrawal.



Nadal not bothered by change in surroundings

Rafa Nadal will have to get used to new surroundings as his favourite hunting ground, the court Philippe Chatrier, has been revamped ahead of the May 26-June 9 French Open. The Spaniard, chasing a record-extending 12th French Open title, has already practised on the new main court, which has been extended by 10 metres and features new seats before getting a retractable roof in 2020. But he is not bothered by the changes after court Philippe Chatrier was 80% rebuilt. "The feeling with the ball, the feeling with the court, personally I had the same feeling on court. No, no, I don't see a difference in terms of game experience," Nadal told reporters.

"I think the wind is going the same way, and the feeling on court is exactly the same. Then of course it is a different

court, and especially is a little bit different looking from behind the royal (officials') box. For me, that's the main difference." Nadal had reason to be concerned after failing to win clay court titles in Monte Carlo, Barcelona or Madrid, but he got back to winning ways just in time for Roland Garros when he prevailed at the Italian Open last week. He now heads into his first round against a qualifier with a positive mindset.

"I feel myself playing well, being honest, and my goal is just to keep playing at that level, because these things always that I can improve, small things, and just working on small things," the second seed explained.

"But in general terms, it is just about being healthy, main thing, and then just compete well and be fresh mentally and physically."