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FOOTBALL | Page 6

## Emery seeks Europa win to salvage season

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Monday, May 27, 2019  
 Ramadan 22, 1440 AH

# GULF TIMES SPORT

**CRICKET**

## Old warhorse Malinga keeps Lanka dreaming

Page 3

### FOOTBALL/ U-20 WORLD CUP

# Qatar facing crucial test against Ukraine

By Sports Reporter  
 Tychy, Poland

**Q**atar will have to bounce back from their defeat against Nigeria if they are to keep their chances alive in the FIFA Under-20 World Cup in Poland. Bruno Miguel's boys face Ukraine in Tychy today and a loss today will mean Qatar's destiny won't be in their hands going into the final Group D match against USA. Ukraine beat USA in their opener and will seal their spot in the last 16 if they win. Nigeria, who face USA today, will also be gunning for a victory and a place in the round of 16. Even a defeat does not mean the end



Qatar's Yousif Abdurasaq.

of the road for the Qatar; the tournament's 24-team format allows the four best third-placed countries from the groups to also progress. Qatar forward Yousif Abdurasaq urged his teammates to avoid mis-

takes they made in their clash against Nigeria last Friday. The Maroons were second best throughout the game as the Africans scored four goals to ease to an easy victory. "Our start was not successful, said Abdurasaq. "We played against a strong side but that doesn't mean we won't compete well. We were caught up in mistakes and I urge my teammates that we don't commit the same mistakes," he said yesterday, after a training session. This Qatar team is capable of making a comeback as they did in the AFC U-19 Championship last year, where they booked their ticket to Poland. Having lost their opener to United Arab Emirates in Indonesia, Qatar

topped their group thanks to wins over hosts and Chinese Taipei. They defeated Thailand 7-3 in the quarter-finals after extra-time to secure their U-20 World Cup spot before losing to South Korea in the semis. Abdurasaq was hoping for a similar turnaround this time. "I know we will fight in our remaining group matches. Our coaching staff is trying their best to work with the boys ahead of the next two matches. We want to reach the next round of the tournament and for that to happen, we must be win the next two matches," the centre forward added. Qatar, who were runners-up in the 1981 edition of the event, will be hoping forward for Hashim Ali to fire against

the Ukrainians. Coach Miguel is a firm believer in the ability of Ali to spearhead his side to success over the next few weeks. And not without good reason, following the forward's five-goal haul at the Asian Cup, an impressive return that has Qatar pinning their hopes on the young striker. After the match against Nigeria, Miguel said Qatar players fought well against 'one of the best teams in the world! "We played against Nigeria who are one of the best teams in the World Cup. The physical fitness was difference between the two sides. I have to say the pitch was not at the required level. We still have two matches to go," Miguel said.

### FORMULA 1

# This is for Niki: Hamilton wins emotional Monaco GP

The result extended Mercedes' run of season-opening wins to six, but brought an end to their sequence of one-two triumphs

AFP  
 Monaco

**L**ewis Hamilton resisted intense race-long pressure yesterday to secure a narrow, dramatic and emotional victory for Mercedes at the Monaco Grand Prix. The defending five-time world champion and current series leader, who came home less than a second ahead of Red Bull's Max Verstappen, said he survived the Dutchman's late attacks by "fighting with the spirit of Niki (Lauda)". He lifted his red helmet in tribute to the three-time champion Austrian and non-executive chairman of Mercedes who died last Monday. Verstappen, who was involved in a pit-lane collision with Valtteri Bottas during the race, was classified fourth after taking a five seconds penalty. This elevated four-time champion Sebastian Vettel to second for Ferrari and lifted the luckless Bottas to third in the second Mercedes. Both joined Hamilton in donning red 'Niki' hats in tribute to Lauda for the podium ceremonies. "Lewis, it's James... Incredible drive," said Mercedes' strategist James Vowles before team boss Toto Wolff told him: "That was for Niki." "That was the hardest race I think I've had," said Hamilton. "I was fighting with the spirit of Niki. He's been truly an influential person in our team and we miss him." Verstappen's Red Bull teammate Pierre Gasly came home fifth ahead of Carlos Sainz of McLaren, Daniil Kvyat and his Toro Rosso teammate Alex Albon. Daniel Ricciardo, last year's winner for Red Bull, was ninth for Renault ahead of Romain Grosjean of Haas. It was Hamilton's third win in Monaco and the 77th win of his career opening up a clear lead in the title race. The result extended Mercedes' run of season-opening wins to six, but brought an end to their sequence of one-two triumphs, buoying up Ferrari despite another mixed weekend that saw local hero Charles Leclerc, who started 15th, retire in the opening stages.



Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton points at the name of late Formula One legend Niki Lauda on his helmet after winning the Monaco Formula 1 Grand Prix at the Monaco street circuit yesterday.

At the start, Hamilton led Bottas through Sainte Devote and up the hill, the pair maintaining a Silver Arrows one-two ahead of Verstappen into Casino Square. Sporting a new red helmet in tribute to Lauda, Hamilton raced with all the élan shown in securing his 85th pole on Saturday while his team wore black armbands and, like many others, carried messages on their cars, a poignant sight after a pre-race minute's silence had created a sombre mood. Leclerc, near the back of the grid following Ferrari's qualifying bungles, was 13th after two laps and 12th on lap eight when he swept

inside Grosjean at Rascasse. As rain fell, his Monegasque fans leapt in celebration. But a lap later, trying to pass Nico Hulkenberg's Renault, he made contact and spun, puncturing his right rear tyre against the barriers. Leclerc limped back to the Ferrari pits as a safety car was deployed. "The tyres are starting to fall apart," warned Hamilton, before Mercedes double-stacked his pit stop with Bottas. Verstappen came in with them and was released alongside Bottas, forcing the Finn into the barriers as he stole second place. The stewards gave Verstappen

a five-second penalty, announced on lap 22. By then, Leclerc's cameo was done, the showman retiring with his "terrible" car. Verstappen's collision with Bottas had caused a puncture for the Finn who had to pit again for new hard tyres. He re-joined fourth behind Vettel as Hamilton led the rampant Dutchman. Verstappen pushed Hamilton, who complained his front left was "opening up", to maximum concentration. By lap 42, Hamilton led him by six-tenths with Vettel third, 1.7 seconds adrift, ahead of Bottas. "I feel like I have the wrong tyre on," said Hamilton, running on mediums.

"No, it's all fine," replied Mercedes. "I think I'm in big trouble guys," Hamilton repeated, on lap 50, to be told Mercedes had no intention of pitting again. Lapping back markers had slowed him, allowing the top four to close within four seconds. Hamilton's dramas intensified, but engineer Pete Bonnington stayed calm. "These tyres are dead. We're going to lose this race Bono," he radioed again. Yet he stayed half a second ahead and resisted a lunge from the Dutchman on lap 76. They touched, but continued, Hamilton cutting the chicane to retain the initiative and win.

### RESULTS AND STANDINGS

#### RACE

- Lewis Hamilton (GBR/Mercedes) 1hr 43min 28.437sec.
- Sebastian Vettel (GER/Ferrari) at 2.602.
- Valtteri Bottas (FIN/Mercedes) 3.162.
- Max Verstappen (NED/Red Bull-Honda) 5.537.
- Pierre Gasly (FRA/Red Bull-Honda) 9.946.
- Carlos Sainz Jr (ESP/McLaren-Renault) 53.454.
- Daniil Kvyat (RUS/Toro Rosso-Honda), 54.574
- Alexander Albon (THA/Toro Rosso-Honda) 55.200.
- Daniel Ricciardo (AUS/Renault) 1:00.894.
- Romain Grosjean (FRA/Haas-Ferrari) 1:01.034.
- Lando Norris (GBR/McLaren-Renault) 1:06.801.
- Kevin Magnussen (DEN/Haas-Ferrari) 1 lap.
- Sergio Perez (MEX/Racing Point-Mercedes) 1 lap.
- Nico Hulkenberg (GER/Renault) 1 lap.
- George Russell (GBR/Williams-Mercedes) 1 lap.
- Lance Stroll (CAN/Racing Point-Mercedes) 1 lap.
- Kimi Raikkonen (FIN/Alfa Romeo Racing-Ferrari) 1 lap.
- Robert Kubica (POL/Williams-Mercedes) 1 lap

**Fastest lap:** Pierre Gasly (FRA/Red Bull-Honda) 1:14.279 on the 72nd lap

#### DRIVERS CHAMPIONSHIP

- Lewis Hamilton (GBR) 137 points.
- Valtteri Bottas (FIN) 120.
- Sebastian Vettel (GER) 82.
- Max Verstappen (NED) 78.
- Charles Leclerc (MON) 57.
- Pierre Gasly (FRA) 32.
- Carlos Sainz Jr (ESP) 18.
- Kevin Magnussen (DEN) 14.
- Sergio Perez (MEX) 13.
- Kimi Raikkonen (FIN) 13.
- Lando Norris (GBR) 12.
- Daniil Kvyat (RUS) 9.
- Daniel Ricciardo (AUS) 8.
- Alexander Albon (THA) 7.
- Nico Hulkenberg (GER) 6.
- Lance Stroll (CAN) 4.
- Romain Grosjean (FRA) 2

#### CONSTRUCTORS

- Mercedes 257.
- Ferrari 139.
- Red Bull-Honda 110.
- McLaren-Renault 30.
- Racing Point-Mercedes 17.
- Haas-Ferrari 16.
- Toro Rosso Honda 16.
- Renault 12.
- Alfa Romeo Racing-Ferrari 13



Second placed Ferrari's German driver Sebastian Vettel smiles as he is presented his trophy by Princess Charlene of Monaco.



## GOLF

# Na takes two-shot lead into final round at Colonial

Na seized the lead at 10-under par with back-to-back birdies at the first and second holes

AFP  
Los Angeles

Kevin Na fired a one-under par 69 to take a two-shot lead in the US PGA Tour Charles Schwab Challenge, where three-time major winner Jordan Spieth was among those in hot pursuit.

Na, in search of a fourth US PGA Tour title, started the day one off the lead of Sweden's Jonas Blixt — who slid down the leaderboard with a four-over 74.

Na seized the lead at 10-under par with back-to-back birdies at the first and second holes at Colonial Country Club.

An unlucky double-bogey at the par-five 11th cost him the lead, but he steadied himself with a birdie at 13 to finish with a nine-under par total of 201.

That put him two strokes clear of Spieth, fellow Americans Jim Furyk and Tony Finau, Taiwan's Pan Cheng-tsung and Canadian MacKenzie Hughes, who shared second on 203.

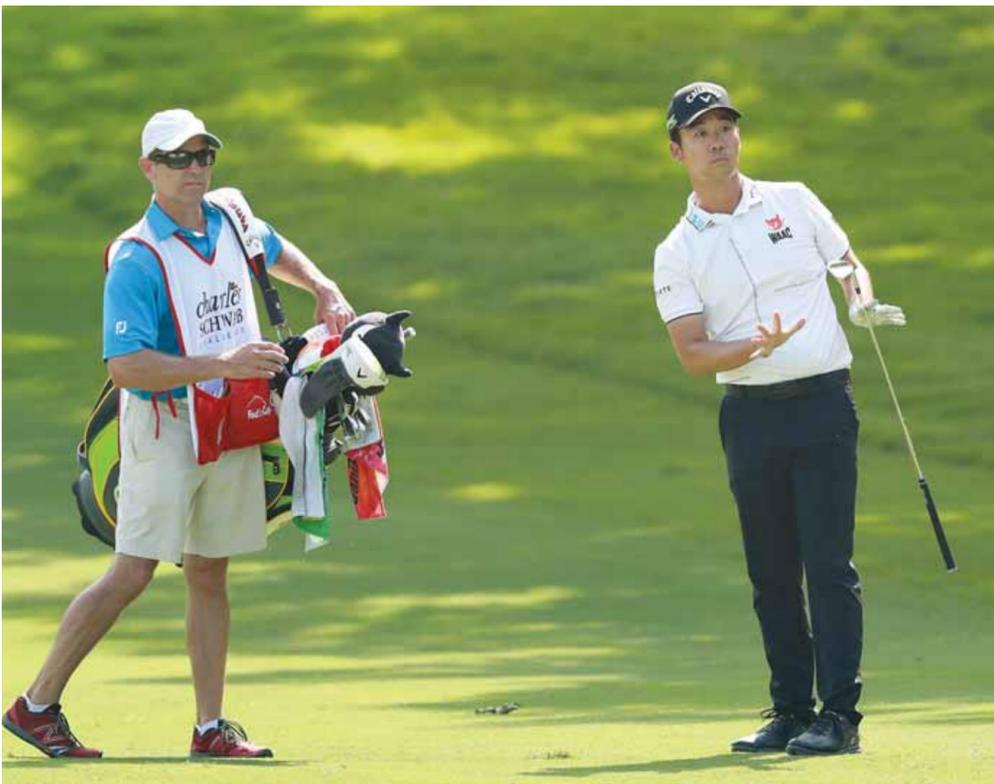
"After the double-bogey I hit a bad tee shot at the next hole and it looked like the wheels could fall off," Na said. "But I stayed positive, tried to put the next one in play."

The Californian, who carded a 62 on Friday, believes Colonial is one of a handful of courses used on the PGA Tour that gives him a good chance at a title.

"Over the years I've had some good rounds (at Colonial) and it's a golf course you don't have to overpower," he said. "You have to keep it in play."

"From fairway in I'm a pretty good player, so I think it plays right into my game."

Hughes posted a bogey-free 65, hitting his second shot at the 18th to four feet for his fifth birdie of the day.



Kevin Na of the United States reacts after playing a shot on the 18th hole during the third round of the Charles Schwab Challenge at the Colonial Country Club in Fort Worth, Texas.

Pan, a month removed from his first PGA title at the Heritage in Hilton Head, South Carolina, had four birdies in his first 10 holes and briefly held the lead, but closed with back-to-back bogeys at 17 and 18 in a 68. Furyk and Spieth also carded two-under rounds while Finau signed for a one-

over 71. Pan said that after his Heritage victory he knows what he needs to do on Sunday to come away with another trophy. "It's only a month ago, so I'm quite familiar with that," he said. "You've just got to hit really good shots."

He wasn't too discouraged by his bogey-bogey finish,

noting that the narrow fairways left little room for error.

"Seventeen, you only have probably 10 yards wide fairway. If you miss it you will get blocked by a tree," he said. "Eighteen, same thing. Obviously the last two holes weren't my best, but that's OK."

Spieth, seeking his first vic-

tory since the 2017 British Open, opened his round with back-to-back birdies — rolling in putts of 30 and 21 feet as his mastery of Colonial's greens continued.

He drained another long one for a birdie at seven, although that would prove to be his last birdie of the day.

## FORMULA 1

# Mercedes to keep permanent red star for legend Lauda

Reuters  
Monte Carlo

Mercedes will keep a red star on their Formula One cars as a permanent remembrance of triple world champion Niki Lauda, the team's non-executive chairman who died last Monday.

A red three-pointed star on the engine cover was one of several on-car tributes to the Austrian at yesterday's Monaco Grand Prix, with the 'halo' head protection device painted red as a reference to Lauda's familiar red cap.

"Niki we miss you," is written on top of the halo, while the nose of the car bears Lauda's signature.

The Austrian, who was 70, wore a red cap to cover the burns sustained in a fiery 1976 crash at the Nuerburgring which almost cost him his life.

The then-Ferrari driver, a two-times Monaco Grand Prix winner, returned within weeks and battled James Hunt for the championship, losing out that year but winning again in 1977 and 1984.

"I'm really happy how we started off this weekend with the red halo, and the little star — which is going to stay on the car forever — and the signature," said team principal Toto Wolff. "It was nicely done."

Mercedes have both their cars on the front row of the



Winner Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton (L) takes off his helmet next to second placed Ferrari's German driver Sebastian Vettel after the Monaco Formula 1 Grand Prix yesterday.

grid for the showcase race, with five-times world champion and overall leader Lewis Hamilton on pole position.

That pole position was also a record for Hamilton as his 59th for a single team, beating Michael Schumacher's 58 with Ferrari.

"To beat those records is something that makes me very proud, very proud for the team," said Wolff. "But as Niki would say it's all not worth anything if you don't win the championship."

Mercedes have won the first five races of the season one-two

and look set to celebrate their sixth successive top-two finish this season.

Hamilton paid a moving tribute to Lauda after qualifying on Saturday, highlighting the role he had played in his 2013 move from McLaren to Mercedes.

"He was part of the process

of changing my life," said the Briton.

"If I hadn't had the call all that time ago, I would be a one time World Champion now and probably 22 wins... and I sit here a five-time world champion and I definitely feel like I owe him a lot."

## LPGA

# Hataoka and Law share Kingsmill lead

AFP  
Washington

Japan's Nasa Hataoka eagled the par-five 15th in a six-under par 65 Saturday to grab a share of the 54-hole lead with Bronte Law at the LPGA Pure Silk Championship in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Hataoka, who earned her third LPGA title at the Kia Classic in Carlsbad, California, in March, had five birdies in her first 12 holes at Kingsmill Resort and bounced back from her lone bogey at the par-four 14th with an eagle at 15.

"I wasn't thinking about where I was going to get a bogey or anything like that, so when it came, it came," Hataoka said. "Then I just cleared it."

She was in the clubhouse on 13-under 200 when Law, who shared the overnight lead with Americans Jennifer Song and Jacqui Concolino, birdied the 18th to join her.

"I've led from the start and I kind of wanted to continue that

so that was huge to keep that going," said Law, who finished with six birdies and two bogeys in her four-under 67. "That was really my goal when I teed up on 18."

The leading pair were one stroke in front of Song, who carded a 68 to drop out of the leading group for the first time all week, and Canadian Brooke Henderson, who had eight birdies in her seven-under 64.

It was a further shot back to Spain's Carlota Ciganda, who carded a 68 for 202.

Song said unpredictable winds made for a challenging day. "The wind was just switching here and there," she said. "It was kind of hard to make decisions with my club."

Whatever the conditions Sunday, Law said, she'll have to stay aggressive if she is to have a shot at a first LPGA title after six top-10 finishes.

"I think you have to keep pushing, you can't sit on anything," Law said. "At no point can you stop making birdies, and you've just got to limit those mistakes."



Nasa Hataoka of Japan watches her second shot on the third hole during the third round of the Pure Silk Championship on the River Course at Kingsmill Resort in Williamsburg, Virginia.

## BOXING

# China's Xu Can stops Kubo to retain featherweight title



Xu Can of China celebrates after winning his WBA featherweight boxing title bout against Shun Kubo of Japan in Fuzhou, China, yesterday.

AFP  
Shanghai

Chinese boxer Xu Can successfully defended his WBA featherweight title at the first attempt by stopping Japanese challenger Shun Kubo in round six yesterday.

The 25-year-old Xu is just the third Chinese in history to hold a boxing world title, along with WBC minimumweight titlist Xiong Zhaozhong and WBO flyweight champion Zou Shiming.

Xu, who improves to 17-2 (3 KOs), holds the lesser version of the WBA's two featherweight titles, but the ease of his victory is more evidence that he is a force to be reckoned with in the weight class. The Chinese scored a stunning upset of Puerto Rico's Jesus Rojas with a 12-round unanimous decision victory in January in Houston.

But he was on home soil for his first defence and with the close-knit arena in Fuzhou, southeastern China, firmly on his side, Xu enjoyed success as early as the second round.

He rattled Kubo, back in the ring after more than a year out because of an eye problem, towards the end of the round and appeared to have more power and pace in his punches.

The 29-year-old Kubo targeted the home boxer's body, but Xu was the aggressor and caught the Japanese flush once more towards the end of the third round.

Wearing red trunks with yellow trim — the colours of China — Xu began the fifth in style, rocking Kubo and piling in on him.

Kubo was in trouble and hit the canvas with 23 seconds left in the round following a pinpoint Xu left hook.

Kubo beat the count and just about survived to the bell, but it was just a matter of time.

SPOTLIGHT

# Old warhorse Malinga keeps Lanka dreaming

Pacer reminded the world of his qualities when he took 16 wickets for Mumbai in IPL

AFP  
Colombo

**L**asith Malinga will be one of the World Cup's oldest players but the Sri Lanka pacer shows no signs of slowing down as he bids to prove his critics wrong.

Malinga was stripped of the Sri Lanka one-day international captaincy in April after losing all eight matches in a troubled reign that lasted just four months.

Sri Lanka's selectors, led by former fast bowler Ashantha de Mel, said Malinga was unable to unite the team, while he was also accused of falling out with other senior players.

That hammer blow reportedly prompted Malinga to consider retirement, but he opted to stay on after being named in the World Cup squad.

The 35-year-old recently reminded the world of his enduring qualities when he claimed 16 wickets for the Mumbai Indians in the Indian Premier League.

He produced a sensational final over in the Twenty20 final against Chennai Super Kings to hand Mumbai a record fourth IPL title. Malinga frequently hits speeds of over 86 miles-per-hour (138kph), while his devastating slower balls were in evidence during the IPL, a welcome sign for embattled Sri Lanka ahead of the World Cup in England and Wales, which starts on May 30.

With several inexperienced bowlers in Sri Lanka's squad, Malinga, with 322 ODI wickets to his name, is expected to be the cutting edge to the team's attack. Once he got over the shock of losing the captaincy, Malinga's appetite for the game returned as he shuttled between Sri Lanka and India to play in the domestic tournament and fulfil his IPL commitments.

Malinga was Sri Lanka's captain when they won the 2014 World T20 title with a host of stalwarts by his side including Mahela Jayawardene, Kumar

*Keyhole*  
GULFTIMES  
27-05-2019



## World Cup warm-ups abandoned due to rain

World Cup warm-up matches between South Africa and West Indies and Pakistan and Bangladesh were both abandoned due to rain yesterday. In Bristol, South Africa had reached 55-0 before play was halted for the first time as rain began to fall. Although there were two more brief interludes when play was able to resume, the match was eventually called off just after 1500 GMT. South Africa had scored 95-0 in 12.4 overs, with

Hashim Amla making 51 and Quinton de Kock 37. In the other warm-up game, Pakistan against Bangladesh in Cardiff was abandoned without a ball being bowled. The bad weather was frustrating for South Africa, who are scheduled to play hosts England in the World Cup's opening match at the Oval on Thursday. West Indies begin their campaign against Pakistan at Trent Bridge on Friday. Bangladesh's first match is against South Africa at the Oval on June 2.

Sangakkara and Tillakaratne Dilshan.

But following the retirement of Sri Lanka's big guns, a new crop of players made their way into the side, a group selector

De Mel believes did not fully back the quick bowler as skipper. New captain Dimuth Karunaratne's first major goal will be to bring a hurting Malinga back into the fold to ensure the team

get the best out of the old warhorse.

Some of Malinga's most memorable performances have come at the World Cup, where the bowler frequently raises his

game. Malinga first burst into global prominence after claiming four wickets in four balls against South Africa at the 2007 World Cup.

In the 2011 edition, Malinga grabbed another hat-trick against Kenya, and went on to bowl a memorable new-ball spell in the final against India, when he grabbed the prized scalps of Sachin Tendulkar and Virender Sehwag in quick succession.

If Sri Lanka are to have any chance of repeating their 1996 magic, when they won the tournament under Arjuna Ranatunga, they need Malinga fit and firing in what is likely to be his final World Cup.

WORLD CUP

## Kohli sees positives in lower order despite NZ drubbing

Reuters  
London

**I**ndia skipper Virat Kohli preferred to highlight the positives from their six-wicket defeat to New Zealand in a Cricket World Cup warm-up on Saturday and was particularly pleased with the performance of the lower order.

Twice champions India slumped to 39-4 in the 11th over before all-rounders Hardik Pandya (30) and Ravindra Jadeja (54) offered some resistance. All out for 179 in the 40th over, India were then unable to contain New Zealand's batsmen and a 114-run stand from skipper Kane Williamson (67) and Ross Taylor (71) helped them to victory with nearly 13 overs to spare.

"The one thing we spoke about in a tournament like the World Cup is, you could easily have your top order out for not too many, so the lower order has to look forward to that and I think Hardik batted really well," Kohli said.

"MS (Dhoni) absorbs the pressure really well and Jadeja got a few runs as well, so I think from that point of view, we got a lot out of this game, which is what we wanted to. The lower order getting some runs that was the biggest positive."

Kohli said The Oval surface got easier to bat on as the game



progressed. "It's going to be very different when batting second and we saw that in the later half of our innings as well," said Kohli, who made 18 before losing his stump to Colin de Grandhomme.

Jadeja said they were not worried despite the batting collapse. "The wicket was soft in the first 15-20 overs but it got better and better," said the left-hander.

"Coming from India where you play on flat, low-bounce wickets, suddenly you're in England and batting first on a spongy wicket.

"It was difficult... but nothing to worry, we'll do whatever little bit of tuning is needed."

India began their bid for a third World Cup title against South Africa in Southampton on June 5.

## Win over India means little for World Cup, says NZ's Taylor

New Zealand have moved to temper expectations ahead of the Cricket World Cup after their six-wicket victory over India in a warmup match on Saturday, with conditions likely to be more conducive to batting during the tournament. New Zealand skittled India out for 179 in the 40th over at Ross Taylor top scored with 71 as the 2015 finalists coasted to 180-4 in 38 overs.

The 35-year-old Taylor, however, said New Zealand had the benefit of exploiting a green-topped pitch early on, which saw them reduce Virat Kohli's side to 39-4 in the 11th over. "It is a warm-up and you have to take what you want out of it," Taylor told reporters.

"Time out in the middle for most of the batters is crucial." Taylor added that familiarity with conditions should benefit tournament hosts England, with New Zealand experiencing a similar boost in 2015 when they played all of their pool matches,

quarter-final and semi-final at home before the final in Melbourne, which they lost by seven wickets to Australia. "I think that's what makes England the favourites," Taylor said.

"They know these conditions very well. "But there is a lot of cricket and some good cricket needing to be played before we even think about semi-finals and finals. If you get off to a good start and get onto a bit of a roll and make the semi-finals then you're only two wins away from lifting the trophy."

Opening bowler Trent Boult, who took 4-33 off 6.2 overs against India, added that pitches around England and Wales were already starting to look dry, which would aid batters as the tournament progressed.

"It was nice to see it swinging around a little bit and I would like to see that everywhere but there are some good wickets around the country... (and) I think the other wickets look quite dry," Boult said.

FOCUS

# Smith blocks out jeers and warns of more runs to come

Reuters  
London

**C**hants of "cheat" accompanied Steve Smith as he came out to bat against England on Saturday but the Australian batsman was unfazed by the hostile reception and says he is focused firmly on maintaining his form ahead of the Cricket World Cup.

Smith, who was stripped of the captaincy and served a 12-month ban for ball-tampering, scored a century in Australia's 12-run win over England in a warm-up game in Southampton, continuing his run of good form since returning to the side.

The 29-year-old scored 89 not out and 91 not out against New Zealand in warm-up games in Brisbane earlier this month before scoring 116 from 102 balls on Saturday.

Prior to his ban for his role in a ball-tampering scandal during a Test series against South Africa, Smith had scored 383 runs in 15 one-day internationals innings at an average of 29.46, well below his career average of 41.84. "I was actually a little bit disappointed with my one day form (before the ban)," Smith told reporters.

"So it was nice to spend a bit of time in the middle.

"But I'm not reading too much into it. They are just practice games but hopefully I can keep up the form as we head into the real stuff. "I am feeling com-

posed and calm at the crease and hitting the balls I want to, to the boundary. Hopefully I can keep it up."

Smith's composure did not slip even when the home crowd heckled him over the ball-tampering scandal.

"I heard a few things when I went out to bat but it didn't get to me," Smith said.

"I guess everyone is entitled to their opinion in how they want to treat people but it's just water off a duck's back to me. I was just trying to keep my head down, move straight ahead and do my job."

Smith, who played mostly in domestic Twenty20 tournaments around the world and some club cricket in Sydney before his ban ended in late March, had elbow surgery earlier this year and he said it was still on the mend.

"The elbow is coming along pretty well," Smith said. "I haven't really had to test it yet throwing-wise.

"I'd say I'm about 80 percent throwing-wise but I'm hoping it can progress a little bit more in the week leading up to the World Cup."

Smith added that the injury would not affect him bowling his legspinners if required during the tournament in England and Wales. Five-times champions Australia face Sri Lanka in their final warm-up match in Southampton on Monday before their World Cup opener against Afghanistan in Bristol on June 1.



Australia's Steve Smith bats during the 2019 Cricket World Cup warm up match between England and Australia at the Rose Bowl in Southampton. (AFP)

## Australia expected 'ruthless' England fans, says Lyon

Australia spinner Nathan Lyon insists his team were prepared for the "ruthless" reaction from England fans to Steve Smith and David Warner. Australia duo Smith and Warner were given a torrid time by the Southampton crowd during their World Cup warm-up victory over England on Saturday.

It was the shamed pair's first appearance against the English since the end of one-year bans for their role in the sandpaper ball-tampering scandal in South Africa that plunged Australian cricket into crisis in 2018.

There were audible boos, jeers and chants of "cheat", a soundtrack that Warner and Smith will need to get used to as the World Cup progresses and then gives way to the Ashes series against England. But neither man seemed to fret over the welcome, Smith with a match-winning 116 and Warner making 43, and Lyon was far from shocked by what he heard.

"It was as expected - they're ruthless over here," he said. "I've had two Ashes tours and a one-day series over here and haven't experienced anything else. They're ruthless and there's not much love. They haven't changed their lines in the last 12 months."

England cricketers going back several generations might be surprised at Lyon's characterisation, particularly given the heckling that takes place in Australia. Lyon played the provocateur in 2017 when he talked of ending English careers and rounded on former wicketkeeper Matt Prior.

"I'm very competitive and I don't think I'm going to change very much," he said. "I will play the cricket I've always played and make sure I wear my heart on my sleeve. I will be competing against whoever we're playing."



## RAMADAN CRICKET

## QS Tec beat Serandib to claim Division II title

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

**Q**S Tec defeated Serandib by three runs in the Division II final of 25th Gulf Incon Metabo Ramadan Cricket Tournament.

Batting first after winning the toss, QS Tec made 103 for loss of three wickets in their allotted 12 overs. Fouzan scored 20 runs in four balls, Farhan Senior made 17 and Farhan Jr scored 15.

Serandib started with 19 runs in the first over, but despite that, they could only make 100 for the loss of six wickets in 12 overs. Chanaka top scored with 17 runs while Mafaz and Nifros made 15 each. Haleem of QS Tec took four wickets for 16 runs and bagged the man-of-the-match award.

Irshad of Al Fardan was adjudged best batsman of the tournament, while Firdous of Alliance was declared best bowler. Best all-rounder award went to Farhan Junior of QS Tec and Mafaz of Serandib received best wicket-keeper award.

Metabo/Gulf Incon's Sajjad Ahmed Khan, Rajkumar Selvarajan, Ramesh Natarajan and Vincent Vimaldas were present at the prize distribution ceremony.

QCA national coach appointed by Asian Cricket Council Shahid Mehboob, QCA Head of Domestic Cricket Gul Khan, QCA Official Umpires and Qatar Veterans Cricket officials Tahir Mehmood and Naseem were the guests of honour.



QS Tec players and officials celebrate with the trophies.

## CYCLING

## Cataldo wins 15th stage of Giro d'Italia

'He could attack unexpectedly, up or down, in a key stage or on a transitional stage'

AFP  
Como, Italy

**A**stana's Dario Cataldo won the 15th stage of the Giro d'Italia yesterday outpacing the other survivor of a long breakaway, fellow Italian, Mattia Cattaneo in Como.

Richard Carapaz, the overall leader, finished 11 seconds behind with Simon Yates and Vincenzo Nibali, but Primoz Roglic, who came off his bike on the final descent, lost 40 seconds to the Ecuadorian.

While Cataldo and Cattaneo of Androni played cat and mouse up the final straight for the stage victory, the heavyweight contenders were fighting a desperate battle for seconds behind them at the end of the 232-kilometre stage.

Briton Yates, of Mitchelton Scott, Movistar's Carapaz and Italian Nibali of Bahrain Merida, along with a second Briton Hugh Carthy of Education First, managed to escape in the closing stages to finish just 11 seconds behind Cataldo. Yates snatched third to pick up a four-second bonus.

Nibali was greeted at the finish by the 36-year-old Alberto Contador, winner of seven Grand Tours. "I told him that he has al-



Team Astana rider Italy's Dario Cataldo celebrates on podium after winning the stage fifteen of the 102nd Giro d'Italia yesterday. (AFP)

ways been an inspiration," said the 34-year-old Sicilian, who has won four major tours. "He could attack unexpectedly, up or down, in a key stage or on a transitional stage."

"He didn't want to be second or third, he was just riding to win.

That's a champion's mindset.

"Nibali said Tour of Spain champion Yates had demonstrated better form."

"He is more than five minutes away," Nibali said, "but he has shown that his condition is improving."

Spaniard Mikel Landa, Movistar's team leader, was part of a quintet that finished 36 seconds behind the winners.

Slovenian Roglic, who started the day seven seconds behind Carapaz, rode into a barrier taking a corner too wide as the

contenders took terrifying risks on the final descent. He had to exchange bikes with a team mate and came in 51 seconds behind the winner in a trio that also contained Trek-Segafredo's Dutchman Bauke Mollema. Roglic remains second overall, but is now 47 seconds behind Carapaz and a minute ahead of Nibali.

## RESULTS

1. Dario Cataldo (ITA/Astana) 5hr 48min 15sec, 2. Mattia Cattaneo (ITA/AND) same time, 3. Simon Yates (GBR/MIT) at 11sec, 4. Hugh Carthy (GBR/EF1) s.t. 5. Richard Carapaz (ECU/MOV) s.t., 6. Vincenzo Nibali (ITA/BAH) s.t., 7. Miguel Angel Lopez (COL/AST) 36, 8. Rafal Majka (POL/BOR) s.t., 9. Domenico Pozzovivo (ITA/BAH) s.t., 10. Mikel Landa (ESP/MOV) s.t.

**OVERALL STANDINGS**  
1. Richard Carapaz (ECU/MOV) 64hr 24min 0sec, 2. Primoz Roglic (SLO/JUM) at 47sec, 3. Vincenzo Nibali (ITA/BAH) 1:47, 4. Rafal Majka (POL/BOR) 2:35, 5. Mikel Landa (ESP/MOV) 3:15, 6. Bauke Mollema (NED/TRE) 3:38, 7. Jan Polanc (SLO/UAE) 4:12, 8. Simon Yates (GBR/MIT) 5:24, 9. Pavel Sivakov (RUS/INE) 5:48, 10. Miguel Angel Lopez (COL/AST) 5:55

## BADMINTON/SUDIRMAN CUP

## Momota stunned as China win with Japan whitewash

AFP  
Nanning, China

**S**hi Yuqi stunned world champion Kento Momota as hosts China whitewashed Japan for an 11th Sudirman Cup title yesterday.

Japan have never won the badminton world mixed-team championship and their search goes on after they were well beaten 3-0 in the Chinese city of Nanning.

China's dominant victory over the top seeds is an ominous indication of the depth they possess in their ranks with next summer's Tokyo Olympics on the horizon.

China, the long-time pre-eminent power in the sport, reclaim the trophy that they lost to South Korea two years ago.

Roared on by a 4,600-strong crowd, Shi in the men's singles and Chen Yufei in the women's both impressively recovered from going a game behind.

China went 1-0 up through their men's doubles and then took a 2-0 lead overall after a captivating clash between Chen and Akane Yamaguchi.

Japan needed their talisman to beat Shi to keep the tie alive - but Momota buckled.

The world number one had defeated second-ranked Shi four times in five previous meetings, including last year's world championship final.

It looked like more of the

same when the 24-year-old Momota won the first game 21-15, but Shi suddenly found his rhythm and his Japanese rival caved spectacularly.

The 23-year-old Shi raced to the second game 21-5 and took that searing momentum into the decider, winning the third game - and with it the Sudirman Cup - 21-11.

Shi sealed the championship with a smash and was mobbed by his team-mates, who raced onto the court after his surprise win.

Momota said it had been "a painful lesson" and admitted that he had felt the pressure knowing he had to win to keep Japan in the final.

"I was surprised that Shi played this well," he added, also admitting that the rousing home support had affected him.

If the Shi-Momota showdown fizzled to a conclusion, the Chen-Yamaguchi match was a thriller, ending with the Chinese prevailing 17-21, 21-16, 21-17.

Both players finished the match on the court floor, Chen on her back in celebration and her opponent on her backside in desolation.

"I feel that I played a bit slow in the beginning, which caused me to waste a lot of energy," said 21-year-old Chen, explaining how she surged back from going a game down and also losing in the third.

"I couldn't keep up with her, but after a change in my game strategy, I took the lead."

## FOCUS

## QSL runs match analysis-course for Aspire's administrators

**I**n fulfilment of the collaboration between Aspire Academy's Football Administrations Department and the Football Development Department of the Qatar Stars League (QSL), a course titled "Introduction of Match Analysis" was held from May 19 to 22 at Aspire.

On initiative of QSL's Executive Director of Competitions & Football Development Ahmed Khelili Abbassi and Aspire Academy's Football Administration Manager Saeed al-Marri, this four-day-long course was tailor-made for the administrative staff of Aspire Academy's football program and focused on the importance of match analysis in the football industry.

"We have been working in this field since 2007 and we accumulated a lot of experience in terms of software and technologies. Now we have been trying to transfer these findings to the football administrative professionals at Aspire Academy with the aim to show that it is beneficial for administrators to have a deeper experience in match analysis in order to gain a better understanding of the needs of coaches and players," said Miguel

Heitor, Head of Football Development at the QSL, who oversaw the course that he ran with his colleagues Fahad Fakhroo, Football Development Officer at the QSL, and Samir Brikci, Performance Analyst at the QSL.

Besides the introduction of the main topic, they discussed the impact of match analysis in football players in connection with developing their mental skills. Furthermore, several available tools that are currently on the market for match analysis such as state-of-the-art technologies and software.

They also presented players' profiles, explained how the use the data effectively and how to be objective in the analysis. On the last day of the workshop, the milestones of the 'QSL Match Analysis-Project' that was launched in 2007 with a research phase before being implemented in the QSL clubs in 2010, were shown to the attendees.

"The things we learnt about match analysis are going to help to improve the working relationship between coaches, players and administrators. This course is a good example how we can benefit from the collaboration with QSL's Foot-

ball Development Department and we are definitely going to make the best possible use of it in the future", said Saeed al-Marri, Football Administration Manager at Aspire Academy.

"It was a pleasure for us to be here at Aspire Academy and we hope it gave the attendees a better understanding of what is important in match analysis. This was the first of probably many courses that we are going to have in the future as part of this cooperation between the QSL Football Development Department and Aspire Academy's Football Operations and it's beneficial for both of us to exchange knowledge as well as theoretical and practical experience", said Miguel Heitor, who also stressed to importance of this collaboration.

"This is a natural initiative. The football stakeholders in Qatar are like a family and everyone is working for the same goal, the same purpose and we all want the best possible football in Qatar. We just need to align the strategy and make sure that strengths of each entity join forces to get the best possible outcome for the good of the game."



Participants pose during the 'Introduction of Match Analysis' course at Aspire Academy.

NBA

# Raptors rally past Bucks for first Finals appearance

'We beat a really good team in Milwaukee. But I'm not satisfied yet'

Reuters  
Toronto

The Toronto Raptors made history the hard way Saturday night, reaching the NBA Finals for the first time after rallying past the Milwaukee Bucks 100-94 in Game 6.

Trailing by 15 points with 2:18 remaining in the third quarter, the Raptors scored the final 10 points of the frame. Then, with Kawhi Leonard on the bench for the first 3:30 of the fourth quarter, they took a two-point lead.

Leonard returned, and the game was in good hands. He finished with 27 points — seven in the fourth quarter — a career-best 17 rebounds and seven assists.

"Just one possession at a time," Leonard said, describing the comeback. "We kept fighting the whole game."

The Raptors, who lost the first two games of the Eastern Conference finals before winning four straight, will open the NBA Finals at home on Thursday night against the Golden State Warriors.

"It's still surreal to me right now," Leonard said. "But this is what we've been striving for all season. It's not over yet."

Pascal Siakam added 18 points, Kyle Lowry had 17 and Fred VanVleet scored 14 for the Raptors.

"Kawhi stays level-headed all the time," Lowry said. "He brought that pedigree with him." "He inspired us tonight with monster rebounds," Raptors coach Nick Nurse added. "It wasn't going well for us, it was kind of a frustrating night.... But we kept playing."

Lowry has been through many playoff failures in seven years with the Raptors.

"It means a lot to me," Lowry said. "We beat a really good team in Milwaukee. But I'm not satisfied yet. Our goal is to win the NBA championship."

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 21 points and 11 rebounds for the Bucks, who had the NBA's best record (60-22) during the regular season. Brook Lopez added 18 points with nine rebounds and three blocks, Khris Middleton had 14 points, Ersan Ilyasova 13, and Malcolm Brogdon and George Hill 10 each.

"This hurts," Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said. "But what they did in the playoffs tonight against a really good Toronto Raptors team, and to get to the Eastern Conference finals, the regular season, a special sea-



Kyle Lowry (centre) of the Toronto Raptors walks off the court with the Eastern Conference Finals trophy after defeating the Milwaukee Bucks in game six of the NBA Eastern Conference Finals in Toronto, Canada, on Saturday. (AFP)

son for us. We feel like we're just getting started."

"We have to get better as a team and get better as individuals," Antetokounmpo said. "This is the beginning of a long journey for us."

"We had a great season, we just fell short of our goals," Middleton said.

Antetokounmpo was asked about Leonard's playoff experience.

"You can tell from the way he plays," Antetokounmpo said of the 2014 Finals MVP. "He has so much patience, he knows what we want to do, he has faith in himself and he has been in the Finals before."

Serge Ibaka's dunk tied the game at 78 with 10:31 to play in the game, and Siakam's jumper and VanVleet's 3-pointer capped a 10-0 run to give Toronto a five-point lead.

A key play was Lowry's steal and his handoff to Leonard, who dunked to increase the lead to eight with 6:46 remaining.

The Bucks came back with a 7-0 run to pull within one point on Antetokounmpo's layup with 5:19 to play.

Marc Gasol's 3-pointer had Toronto ahead by four, but

Lopez reduced it to two with a layup at 3:29. The Raptors went up by five on Siakam's tip-in with 2:06 to play.

Lopez made two free throws with 29.6 seconds to play, cutting the lead to three, but Milwaukee never had the ball within one possession in the closing minutes. Siakam and Leonard finished the game off with free throws.

The Bucks were 6-for-9 from 3-point range to earn a 31-18 lead after one quarter.

Ilyasova's 3-pointer with 7:48 to play in the first half put the Bucks ahead 38-23.

VanVleet's 3-pointer with 2:28 to play in the half cut the lead to seven.

Ibaka's dunk with 1:32 left had the Raptors within five points, and VanVleet's jumper reduced the lead to three with 1:07 left.

The Bucks scored the final four points of the half to lead 50-43.

Middleton's second 3-pointer in three minutes had the lead at 14 with 3:46 left in the third. The Bucks worked the lead to 15 before the Raptors went on a 10-0 run, with Leonard scoring eight. The Bucks led 76-71 after three quarters.



Toronto Raptors' Kawhi Leonard (centre) handles the ball during the game against Milwaukee Bucks in Toronto on Saturday. (AFP)

MLB

# Mets' Nido hits walk-off in 13th to beat Tigers



New York Mets catcher Wilson Ramos hits an RB single during the fourth inning of the MLB game against Detroit Tigers in New York City, United States, on Saturday. (USA TODAY Sports)

Reuters  
New York

Thomas Nido homered leading off the bottom of the 13th inning Saturday night as the New York Mets finally outlasted the Detroit Tigers, 5-4.

The Mets are 5-1 on a seven-game homestand. The Tigers have dropped 10 of 11.

The Mets loaded the bases with one out and failed to score in the bottom of the 11th before the Tigers did the same thing in the top of the 12th. Nido, who was the last player on the Mets' bench when he entered in the 11th inning, capped a four-hour and 11-minute duel when he hit his first walk-off homer off Buck Farmer (3-4).

Hector Santiago (1-0) tossed two innings for the Mets, who received two homers and four RBIs from catcher Wilson Ramos, who left for a pinch-runner in the 11th and was replaced by Nido. The two-homer game was the eighth of Ramos' career and his first since last June 25.

Dawel Lugo had a career-high four hits for the Tigers while JaCoby Jones had two hits, an RBI and two stolen bases.

Nicholas Castellanos lofted a sacrifice fly in the first inning for the Tigers. Ramos homered leading off the second. The Mets went ahead in the fourth, when J.D. Davis reached on an error by Lugo, took second and third base on consecutive balks by Detroit starting pitcher Ryan Carpenter and scored on Ramos' one-out single.

Brandon Dixon's two-run pinch-hit homer — his first career pinch-hit blast — put the Tigers ahead 3-2 in the sixth, but Ramos hit a two-run homer with two outs in the sixth to give the

Mets a 4-3 lead. The Tigers tied the game in the eighth, when Josh Harrison doubled with one out, went to third on a groundout by Grayson Greiner and scored on Jones' single against Mets closer Edwin Diaz, who was pitching in the eighth inning for the first time this season.

Both teams received surprisingly strong performances from their starting pitchers.

Carpenter, who was recalled from Triple-A Toledo prior to the game and entered Saturday with an 8.90 ERA in eight big league appearances, allowed two runs (one earned) on two hits and no walks while striking out five over five innings.

Mets left-hander Jason Vargas, who hadn't pitched in the bigs since suffering a left hamstring injury May 5, allowed one run on five hits and three walks while striking out three over five innings. Vargas lowered his ERA from 5.92 to 5.22.

RESULTS			
Minnesota	8-1	C White Sox	
NY Yankees	7-3	Kansas City	
Chicago Cubs	8-6	Cincinnati	
San Diego	19-4	Toronto	
Arizona	10-4	San Francisco	
Washington	5-0	Miami	
Oakland	6-5	Seattle	
Tampa Bay	6-2	Cleveland	
NY Mets	5-4	Detroit	
Philadelphia	7-2	Milwaukee	
LA Dodgers	7-2	Pittsburgh	
Houston	4-3	Boston	
St. Louis	6-3	Atlanta	
NY Yankees	6-5	Kansas City	
Baltimore	9-6	Colorado	
LA Angels	3-2	Texas	

NHL

# Blues march to first final since 1970, rested Bruins open at home

AFP  
Los Angeles

The St. Louis Blues are enjoying a storybook turnaround, going from the worst team at the start of the season to facing Boston in their first Stanley Cup final since losing to the same Bruins in 1970.

It has been 49 years since the Blues were swept by Boston in a series that culminated with Bobby Orr's iconic overtime game winning goal.

St. Louis won three straight games to eliminate the San Jose Sharks and reach the final which begins with game one tonight in Boston.

They ousted a weary and banged up Sharks' team with a 5-1 victory in game six of the NHL's Western Conference final, part of an improbable run from last in the league on January 3 to the championship series.

The reverse came after Craig Berube replaced Mike Yeo as head coach in November and goaltender Jordan Binnington took over the starting role in January.

St. Louis finished the regular season on a 28-8-5 run and carried that mo-

mentum through the Western Conference playoffs.

"We were trying to get on the right track," Berube said. "Once we got going in January and February, I knew we had a good hockey team. Once you get into the playoffs anything can happen, and it did."

Said Blues general manager Doug Armstrong, "They turned it around and just haven't stopped going."

The Blues were 300-1 long shots to win the Stanley Cup early in the season and despite their turnaround they still enter the finals as underdogs against the Bruins.

The Bruins will have had a 10-day break after sweeping Carolina in four straight in the Eastern Conference final.

"It's the Stanley Cup final, game one," said Bruins defenceman Charlie McAvoy. "Just the emotion and the excitement in the city and the feeling in the building is going to be contagious."

HEAVY HITTERS

Sharks coach Peter DeBoer said it will be a hard-hitting, physical, grinding series.

"The two hardest, heaviest teams



Jerseys of St Louis Blues and Boston Bruins are on display prior to Media Day ahead of the 2019 NHL Stanley Cup Final in Boston, United States, yesterday. (AFP)

are in the final," DeBoer said. "Everyone talks about skill and all the small players, and there is room for that, but I don't think it's an accident."

"They're (Blues) heavy, hard and organized. There wasn't any room out

there for our guys."

The Bruins are in the final for the third time in the past 10 years and the 20th time in their franchise history.

Should they win, Boston will be the first city in 83 years to simultane-

ously hold the championships of Major League Baseball, the NFL and the NHL.

A statue outside the Boston Garden pays tribute to Orr's high-flying goal and while they don't have a defenceman of Orr's stature in their lineup they are expected to get back captain Zdeno Chara for game one.

Boston are led at forward by veteran Patrice Bergeron who helped lead the Bruins to a Stanley Cup title in 2011. The two-time all-star Bergeron has a strong all around game and has eight goals and 13 points in 17 playoff games.

For the Blues, forward Brayden Schenn is looking to play a bigger offensive role in the final. Schenn is one of the best two-way players in the league. He was in a playoff scoring slump until he finally potted a goal in the series-clinching game six against the Sharks.

In order for Schenn to continue to capitalise on scoring chances, he is going to have to make that extra move around the net instead of just hammering away at the puck.

"I'm a guy that gets put in offensive situations, whether it's power play or playing with the top players on this team," Schenn said. "I did it through-

out the regular season but playoffs, it's tough."

Unheralded forward Jaden Schwartz has helped make up for Schenn's offensive struggles by scoring 12 goals in the playoffs so far, one more than he scored all regular season.

One of the more interesting finals matchups is the goaltending battle between Boston's red-hot netminder Tuukka Rask and the Blues' Binnington.

Finland's Rask gives the Bruins the decided edge, leading all goalies in the playoffs with a 1.84 goals against average.

The Bruins know Canada's Binnington better than any other team in the league as he spent last season on loan with their Providence farm team in the AHL after refusing the Blues request to go down to the lower division ECHL farm league.

STANLEY CUP FINAL SCHEDULE

- May 27: St. Louis at Boston
- May 29: St. Louis at Boston
- June 1: Boston at St. Louis
- June 3: Boston at St. Louis
- June 6: St. Louis at Boston (if needed)
- June 9: Boston at St. Louis (if needed)
- June 12: St. Louis at Boston (if needed)

## SPOTLIGHT

# Emery seeks Europa success to salvage Arsenal's season

Emery won the competition three years in a row at Sevilla from 2014 and 2016



Arsenal's head coach Unai Emery (right) talks to a player during a training session at London Colney training centre in St. Albans. (AFP)

AFP  
London

Unai Emery's first season at Arsenal will be judged a success or failure depending on the outcome of a single game – the Europa League final against Chelsea – but the Spaniard has a habit of saving his best for Europe's second-tier competition.

Emery won the Europa League three years in a row between 2014 and 2016 when at Sevilla and would become the most decorated coach in the competition's history with another victory in Baku. However, it is not only a first European trophy for 25 years at stake for Arsenal, but also a much-needed return to the riches of the Champions League after a two-season absence that will make or break the impression of Emery's debut campaign.

Arsenal's preparations for the final have been dogged by off-field issues over the awarding of the final to the Azerbaijani capital. Many fans have been priced out of making the near-5,000-mile (8,000-kilometre) round trip, while Emery's team selection has also been affected, with midfielder Henrikh Mkhitaryan deciding not to travel on safety grounds due to political tensions between his native Armenia and Azerbaijan.

However, Emery shrugged off suggestions Arsenal could even consider boycotting the match, and is determined that those distractions do not impact on his side by the time kick-off comes on Wednesday. "We have the chance to win a title and play in the Champions League next season," said Emery.

"All of this is much more important than where we are going to play the final. It's not possible with Mkhi, yes. It's not possible with the fans like we want, yes. But the final is very important."

Chelsea do not have the added pressure of Champions League qualification resting on the outcome of the final, having edged ahead of Emery's faltering side in the final weeks of the Premier League

season to finish third. Before a meaningless final-day win at Burnley, Arsenal had taken just one point from four games against Crystal Palace, Wolves, Leicester and Brighton. Emery had the difficult job of succeeding Arsene Wenger after the Frenchman's 22-year reign came to an end 12 months ago.

In a time of transition, the Basque coach has done a steady if unspectacular job. However, doubts remain over his ability to lead Arsenal back to the heights they reached under Wenger, particularly if they miss out on Champions League revenue once more.

Emery admitted in the January transfer window that the club could only afford to take players on loan. The same defensive issues that haunted Wenger's final years in charge have been repeated. Arsenal outscored both Chelsea and local rivals Tottenham in the Premier League but missed out on the top four by virtue of conceding 51 goals.

Emery has constantly changed personnel and formations to find the right

balance and even left one or other of his two star forwards Alexandre Lacazette and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang on the bench for much of the campaign.

However, Lacazette and Aubameyang have been united of late with spectacular success as once again an Emery team has come good in the Europa League. Even as they stuttered in the Premier League, Arsenal beat Napoli and Valencia home and away to book their long trip to Baku.

"Above all in football, coaches, players and supporters want to play to feel a special moment. And this is one special moment. Our focus is very clear for this match," said Emery.

Since Arsenal were last in a European final in 2006, the Gunners have won just three trophies – all FA Cups – compared with Chelsea's 13 in those years as the standards set early in Wenger's reign sharply declined towards the end. Getting one over on their London rivals this week will not only make Emery's first season a success, but allow Arsenal to look to the future with renewed optimism.

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## FOCUS

## Sarri's Chelsea future in spotlight as Europa final looms

AFP  
London

Maurizio Sarri faces an uncertain future as Chelsea manager even if the much-maligned Italian leads his side to victory in the Europa League final against Arsenal. Sarri has endured a traumatic first season at Stamford Bridge and he heads to Baku with little clarity over his prospects of staying in charge beyond Wednesday's final.

Despite guiding Chelsea into next season's Champions League, via a third-place finish in the Premier League, and reaching two cup finals, there remains a sense Sarri is on borrowed time whatever the result against Arsenal.

The 60-year-old has been linked with a move to Juventus or Roma, with reports saying Chelsea would not block his return to Serie A. Even if Sarri does not join the Italian champions, he could still be sacked if Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich and his coterie of advisors feel the former Napoli boss is not the man to guide them through a turbulent period.

With a damaging two-window transfer ban looming – pending an appeal by Chelsea to the Court of Arbitration for Sport – and star winger Eden Hazard set to get his wish to join Real Madrid, the next year promises to be a challenging spell for any manager, let alone one with the baggage Sarri has collected in his brief reign.

Sarri insists he is happy to stay, but admits there will be no talks over his future until after the final. "I'm very happy to stay in the Premier League. I will speak to the club as I want to see if they are happy with me or not," he said.

"We had a good season, with a lot of problems of course. We lost two or three matches very badly. If we are able to win the final then it will become a wonderful season. This group deserves to continue and to try to improve more."

It is believed Chelsea's senior decision-makers, including director Marina Granovskaia, will gauge the feelings of players before making a final decision on Sarri. There are concerns that his methods have caused so much

unrest within the squad he may not be able to fully command their respect.

That problem was laid bare by Kepa Arrizabalaga's astonishing mutiny during the League Cup final when the Chelsea goalkeeper refused to be substituted after suffering a cramp before the penalty shoot-out defeat against Manchester City.

Sarri had already publicly criticised his players after a series of bad results in January. His outburst came after reports some of the Chelsea squad held doubts about his rigid tactical approach, while many were said to find his training sessions monotonous.

Sticking with his former Napoli players Jorginho and Gonzalo Higuain despite their mediocre performances did little to erase Sarri's stubborn image. Adamant his style can still work with Chelsea, Sarri this week said: "In the last two years Manchester City won everything in England. The way of football of City is not the same as mine, but similar. I think we can play my football also in England."

Sarri's decision to exile club captain Gary Cahill also apparently angered players, with the defender accusing his manager of a "lack of respect". Chelsea sought counsel from their stars before Jose Mourinho was sacked in 2015, with then technical director Michael Emenalo citing a "palpable discord between manager and players".

Sarri's cause is not helped by his toxic relationship with the club's fans, who ridiculed his football philosophy several times. Rafael Benitez was allowed to leave his role as Chelsea's interim boss in 2013 despite finishing third and winning the Europa League, in large part because he was so disliked by Blues supporters. "I think for the fans we have to play better, we have to win more, there isn't another way," Sarri conceded.

Given the way Manchester United collapsed during their own discordant campaign, Sarri deserves credit for keeping Chelsea from completely imploding.

But, with Massimiliano Allegri linked with Chelsea after leaving Juventus, there is a potential replacement waiting in the wings as Sarri tries to finish his troubled season on a high note.



Chelsea's Italian head coach Maurizio Sarri. (AFP)

## BOTTOMLINE

## Race for Premier League riches causing chaos to Championship finances



Aston Villa and Derby face off today in the Championship play-off final. (Reuters)

AFP  
London

Aston Villa and Derby County face off for the biggest bounty in world football today with the riches of the Premier League guaranteeing around £200mn (\$253mn) for the winner of the Championship play-off final.

However, the lure of a Premier League windfall is seeing more clubs in England's second tier and further down the league ladder gambling by running at huge losses in the hope of making it to the moneybags top flight. The Premier League released figures for the near £2.5bn (\$3.2bn) distribution of television rights for the recently completed season on Thursday.

Despite winning just three league games all season, rock-bottom Huddersfield received £96.9mn, while relegated Fulham and Cardiff made more than £100mn. Villa or Derby will be able on similar television income next season, plus £75mn worth of parachute payments should they go straight back down, and additional revenue from sponsors and ticket sales.

Stay in the Premier League for just one season and they can expect to make around £300mn. "There is a new breed of ambitious domestic and overseas owners who see the bright lights of the Pre-

mier League no matter the cost," Kieran Maguire, a lecturer in football finance at the University of Liverpool, said.

However, while the top end of the game thrives, clubs lower down the food chain are struggling badly. The 20 Premier League clubs made a profit of £304mn in 2017/18, led by £100 million-plus surpluses for this season's Champions League finalists Liverpool and Tottenham. In the same season, the 72 teams in the three divisions below in the English Football League (EFL) made a combined loss of £388mn.

From 2014/15 to 2017/18, the 12 clubs promoted to the Premier League averaged an operating loss of £30mn in the year in which they were promoted. Rules governing the losses clubs can make, were "blown out of the water", according to Maguire, by booming parachute payments for clubs relegated from the Premier League.

In order to prevent those clubs who came down from gaining a huge financial advantage, teams are now allowed to make losses of up to £39mn over three years. However, parachute payments are still seen as what Maguire describes as a "necessary evil".

"Parachute payments help recruitment of players to the Premier League for the other 14 (outside the top six) ahead of overseas clubs in other leagues across Europe to enhance the overall quality of the

Premier League," added Maguire.

As clubs further down the ladder spend beyond their means, though, harsh consequences are already being felt. Bolton were unable to fulfil their fixtures at end the current Championship campaign as players went on strike in protest at unpaid wages.

The Wanderers will start next season with a 12-point deduction in League One after slipping into administration and a food bank has been set up for non-playing staff who have gone without pay. Birmingham were docked nine points this season for breaching profitability and sustainability rules by losing nearly £50mn between 2015 and 2018.

Bury, who were promoted to League One last month, face a winding-up order over an unpaid tax debt of £277,000, while the players' wages have not been paid in 12 weeks. And the financial future for whoever loses Monday's Wembley final is also bleak.

Middlesbrough chairman Steve Gibson has questioned how both clubs continue to live within the EFL's profitability and sustainability rules. Villa posted a £36mn loss after defeat in last season's play-off final to Fulham.

Derby announced pre-tax profits of £14.6mn last month, but only after selling the club's Pride Park stadium to owner Mel Morris for £80mn and then leasing it back.

SPOTLIGHT

# Cup loss leaves Barca with questions about identity and coach

Barcelona fall to another shock defeat as Valencia pull off a thrilling 2-1 victory to win Copa del Rey

AFP  
Seville, Spain

The backing from Barcelona's club president Josep Maria Bartomeu came but it was not as convincing as before. Last week he said coach Ernesto Valverde was "trusted completely" but as Valencia's players danced on the pitch at the Estadio Benito Villamarin, tossing the Copa del Rey between them, his support felt more reserved.

"Ernesto has a contract for next season," Bartomeu said. "He's the coach. I don't think this defeat is his fault."

When asked about Valverde's future on Friday, Lionel Messi indicated he wanted him to stay, the captain's approval perhaps even more significant than that of the president. "I honestly believe the boss has done an impressive job during his time in charge," said Messi. "I would like him to continue."

But that was before the 2-1 final defeat to Valencia on Saturday, which, despite a second-half surge, inspired by Messi and his goal 17 minutes before the end, leaves a title-winning season swamped in disappointment. Valverde has never been loved at Camp Nou, the question marks hanging over him to do with issues less tangible than results.

After all, in La Liga, they finished this season 19 points ahead of Real Madrid, whom they beat by an aggregate score of 10-2 over four matches, and 11 clear of Atletico. Instead, his sceptics complain about style, seen as overly-rigid, and suitability, a 55-year-old in charge of his sixth club, sensible and statesmanlike, but lacking the fizz for a coach of Barcelona.

The two arguments are linked and, until now, lacked evidence to give them weight. But perhaps doubts can be self-fulfilling and when Rodrigo headed in Valencia's second on Saturday night, the players may have begun to believe them too. "It has been a good year," said Gerard Pique. "But we expected to do a much better year. The taste is bitter-sweet."

Bartomeu must now decide if Valverde can take Barcelona where they desperately want to go, to victory in the Champions League, and if not, who could. There is a summer sale on super-coaches but none of Massimiliano Allegri, Jose Mourinho or Antonio Conte are proponents of the Barca DNA.



Valencia's players celebrate with the trophy after winning the Spanish Copa del Rey (King's Cup) final against Barcelona in Seville on Saturday night. (AFP)

At the other end of the spectrum is Quique Setien, a football purist regularly linked in the past, except he has just parted ways with Real Betis for failing to match style with results. Or former midfielder Xavi, with a sense of destiny and very real adoration of the fans. He has the trophies too but fewer days, let alone clubs, as a fully-fledged coach.

Any successor to Valverde would be charged with improvement, which could only mean winning the Cham-

pions League, a reassertion of identity and, now, rejuvenation. It would be unfair on Valencia's determined, gutsy performance to say this final was a game Barcelona never wanted to play.

But for 30 minutes before half-time, they were flat, disheartened by Kevin Gameiro's opener and, in the end, defeated by Rodrigo heading in again 13 minutes later. Each time, Valverde's players looked beaten, drained of the conviction that made them champions,

instead gazing into space and wallowing in self-pity.

"We're down, we can't hide it," said Valverde.

When Barcelona won the league with three games to spare last month, Bartomeu felt confident enough to declare: "We want the treble?" If it looked like he was putting pressure on his players, it was because they believed too.

They took a 3-0 lead over Liverpool, with a potential final to come against ei-

ther Ajax or Tottenham.

Beat a Valencia side still struggling even to make La Liga's top four and all three major trophies would be theirs.

It seemed within touching distance. Instead, 41 almost faultless weeks have been undone in less than three. When the final whistle blew, Valencia's staff and substitutes rushed on, past Barcelona's players, some of whom sank to their knees. Others just trudged off, eager for it all to be over.

FOCUS

## Bayern president confirms Kovac will stay

AFP  
Berlin

Bayern Munich president Uli Hoeness has confirmed once and for all that coach Niko Kovac will remain in his job next season. Speaking on Bavarian broadcaster BR, as Bayern celebrated their league and cup double in the centre of Munich yesterday, Hoeness said he was "one hundred percent" sure Kovac would stay. Croatian coach Kovac led Bayern to the league title and the German Cup in his first season at the club, despite facing constant speculation over his future. Hoeness' comments are the final confirmation the 47-year-old will not be sacked, after CEO Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, one of Kovac's biggest internal critics, had hinted as much in recent days.

In April, Rummenigge appeared on Sky TV the day after Bayern's 5-0 win over title rivals Borussia Dortmund to insist "nobody had a job guarantee".

"I said that after the 5-0, because I came into the dressing room and saw this incredible euphoria, but we were only one point ahead of Dortmund at that time," Rummenigge explained to BR yesterday. "I wanted to polarise a bit and bring the euphoria down a notch."

Kovac himself thanked the Bayern fans for their support during a turbulent season. "We would not have managed it without you. Always stay as you are, I love you," he said.

### BOATENG ON BRINK OF BAYERN EXIT

Disgruntled defender Jerome Boateng is on the verge of leaving Bayern Munich after president Hoeness told him to find a new club. Boateng, 30, has appeared increasingly unhappy at Bayern this season, after losing his place in the team to Niklas Sule.

Having remained on the bench as Bayern won the German Cup final on Saturday, Boateng immediately disappeared down the tunnel after the final whistle, and did not join his teammates' on-pitch celebrations. "I would advise him to leave the club. I think he needs a new challenge," Hoeness said. "He looks out of place. As a friend, I would advise him to find a new club."

The 2014 World Cup winner's contract at Bayern expires in two years, and has linked with a move to Inter Milan or PSG.

SERIE A

## Allegri's Juve era ends with a whimper

AFP  
Rome

Massimiliano Allegri ended his Juventus career in disappointing fashion yesterday after the champions were undone by two late strikes at Sampdoria to finish the Serie A season with a five-match winless streak.

A scuffed finish from Gregoire Defrel six minutes from the end and a superb stoppage-time free-kick from Gianluca Caprari sank Juve, who picked up just three points after securing their eighth straight league title late last month. However despite a poor final few weeks they still finished 11 points ahead of second-placed Napoli, who ended their underwhelming campaign beaten 3-2 defeat at Torino on Saturday thanks to an acrobatic Federico Santander header two minutes from the end.

Allegri rested a host of first-choice players, including star attacker Cristiano Ronaldo, for the meaningless fixture, which gave the league's leading scorer Fabio Quagliarella the chance to extend his lead at top of the scoring charts. The 36-year-old, who is strongly linked with a move back to Napoli, the club he supported as a boy, failed to add to his 26 goals but should still be assured his place as top scorer as he is four ahead of AC Milan young gun Krzysztof Piatek and Atalanta's Duvan Zapata. Earlier, Torino finished their exciting campaign in fine fashion with a 3-1 win over Lazio. Quickfire goals just after the break from Iago Falque and Sasa Lukic set Walter Mazzarri's side, who a few weeks ago were pushing for Champions League football, on their way.

Former Toro man Ciro Immobile pulled one back for Lazio with a super strike in the 66th minute, but with 10 minutes left Lorenzo De Silvestri clipped home on the rebound to seal the points and keep Torino



Sampdoria's Gianluca Caprari (left) celebrates with Jacopo Sala after scoring against Juventus in the Serie A in Genoa, Italy, yesterday. (AFP)

seventh, level on 63 points with Roma ahead of the capital club's match with Parma.

Atalanta, Inter Milan, AC Milan and Roma — who are also bidding farewell to captain and local hero Daniele De Rossi — will duke it out for the final two top-four positions, with Atalanta favourites to qualify for the Champions League for the first time in their history.

Meanwhile Serie A's head-to-head tie-breaker format means that 15th-placed Fiorentina are in real danger of being relegated. The Tuscan outfit are three points ahead of 18th-placed Genoa ahead of the pair's do-or-die clash in Florence — but have lost five straight in the league and haven't won a game in any competition since mid-February, despite the return of Vincenzo Montella as coach last month.

Should they lose to Genoa and Udinese, who are level on 40 points with Fiorentina, not lose to Cagliari and 17th-placed Em-

poli win at Inter, the 'Viola' would go down for the first time since bouncing back from bankruptcy in the early part of this century. They can also go down if Genoa beat them by two clear goals, Udinese lose to Cagliari and Empoli beat Inter, as they would be overtaken by Empoli and lose a three-way tie-break with Udinese and Genoa.

Fiorentina could join in Serie B already-relegated Chievo, who ended a miserable season in the worst possible fashion when they set an embarrassing points record thanks to a drab goalless draw at also-down Frosinone. Chievo, who had three points deducted for false accounting before the start of the season, ended the campaign with 17 points following Saturday's non-event at the Stadio Benito Stirpe.

That is the lowest in the three-points-for-a-win era since the league returned to 20 teams in 2004, with Pescara getting 18 in 2016/17.

## Dutch referee scores 'bizarre' goal, awards it

The Hague: Players for Dutch fourth-tier outfit Harkemase Boys reacted with fury and disbelief after a strange deflection saw a referee scoring against them in a game — and then awarding the goal. The incident happened as the Frisian amateur club faced southern visitors Hoek on Saturday. In a clip posted on Twitter shortly afterwards, the referee identified by Dutch media as Maurice Paarhuis, is seen running into the penalty box as the Harkemase Boys' defenders seem to have cleared

a ball from danger in the 66th minute of the match.

Hoek midfielder Rik Impens however takes another shot at goal from a tight angle, but the ball hits the front post before then glancing off the referee's shins and rolling across the goal line. Seconds later Paarhuis allows the goal, to the great consternation of Harkemase Boys who immediately surround him to protest, to no avail.

"The referee was a so-called 'dead element' and could not but allow the goal," the Dutch

daily tabloid *Algemeen Dagblad* reported, and described the effort to make it 3-2 to Harkemase Boys as "bizarre".

In any case, the goal turned out to have no impact on the full-time result as Harkemase Boys wrapped up their season with a 4-2 win against Hoek. The Dutch 'Derde Divisie' is three leagues below the elite Eredivisie in the Netherlands, with Harkemase Boys lying sixth in the table, two places below Hoek with one round of the season to play.

ROUND-UP

## Juventus deny Guardiola snoop

Juventus yesterday poured cold water over rumours in Italy that they were planning a dramatic pounce for Pep Guardiola, saying that they had never even spoken to the Manchester City boss. "It's a strange world, we've not had any contact with Guardiola and nor have we ever thought about it given that he's under contract," Juve's sporting director Fabio Paratici said.

Juve sealed their eighth straight Serie A title weeks ago and are on the hunt for a new boss after removing Massimiliano Allegri earlier this month, following a Champions League quarter-final exit to Ajax in April. Allegri had won the league five times in as many years but the club are without a Champi-

ons League title in over two decades despite signing Cristiano Ronaldo last summer.

Paratici added that Juve would wait until the end of the season to announce Allegri's successor. Chelsea coach Maurizio Sarri and Lazio boss Simone Inzaghi are among the favourites to take over at the Allianz Stadium.

### JADON IS NOT ON THE MARKET: DORTMUND

Borussia Dortmund CEO Hans-Joachim Watzke has categorically ruled out selling England starlet Jadon Sancho ahead of next season. Sancho, 19, has been linked with a number of Europe's top clubs after an explosive second season in Dortmund, but on Sunday, Dortmund boss Watzke said they would not

let the English winger leave.

"It is safe to assume that Jadon will not play for Dortmund for the next ten years," said Watzke. "But in terms of the present day, we have very clear agreements. Jadon is not on the market and he is guaranteed to be a Dortmund player next season."

Dortmund have repeatedly ruled out selling Sancho, but speculation resurfaced this week after the club signed two similar attacking players in Thorgan Hazard and Julian Brandt. The 19-year-old joined Dortmund from Manchester City for 7.8m euros in 2017, but his estimated value has skyrocketed in the past year. Sancho earned his first England call-up in October, and established himself as a regular starter at Dortmund.

## FRENCH OPEN

# 'On edge' Federer wins on Paris return, Kerber crashes

Potapova beats Kerber; Svitolina knocks Venus out

AFP  
Paris

Roger Federer marked his return to Roland Garros after a four-year absence with a straight sets win over Italy's Lorenzo Sonego yesterday, admitting he "felt on edge", as Angelique Kerber's hopes of completing a career Grand Slam suffered a quick kill.

Federer, a 20-time major winner, hadn't played the tournament since 2015 when he reached the quarter-finals.

However, yesterday, it was as if the 37-year-old had never been away as he swept to a 6-2, 6-4, 6-4 victory in one hour 41 minutes on a packed, rebuilt Court Philippe Chatrier.

It was his 60th successive first round win at a Grand Slam.

"I felt on edge at the start, my heart was beating crazily," said Federer, who hailed the new-look stadium which has been 90% rebuilt in readiness for the installation of a retractable roof for 2020.

"I felt great playing on this court. It looks very attractive, so congratulations to everyone involved."

"Hopefully I can play here again for my next match."

That match will be against German lucky loser Oscar Otte who won just his second match in eight years on the tour by seeing off Malek Jaziri of Tunisia 6-3, 6-1, 4-6, 6-0.

"I would be surprised if Roger knew my name," said Otte, the world number 145.

Federer broke serve five times and fired 36 winners past 24-year-old Sonego, the world number 73 who made the quarter-finals at the Monte Carlo Masters.

German fifth seed and reigning Wimbledon champion Kerber saw her hopes of a career Grand Slam ended by Russian teenager Anastasia Potapova.

Kerber slumped to a 6-4, 6-2 defeat to 18-year-old Potapova who was making her French Open debut.

"Kerber is actually one of my idols, and when I was young I was looking for her game," said the 81st-ranked Russian who hit 28 winners past her German opponent.

Kerber, 31, has now lost six times in the French Open first round.

The German left-hander had come into Roland Garros carrying a right ankle injury which forced her to pull out of the Italian Open and retire from her



Switzerland's Roger Federer plays a backhand during his French Open first round match against Italy's Lorenzo Sonego (not pictured) at Roland Garros in Paris yesterday. (Reuters)



Russia's Anastasia Potapova in action during her match against Germany's Angelique Kerber (not pictured) yesterday. (Reuters)

second round tie in Madrid.

"I didn't have many expectations coming in," said Kerber, who was broken six times in the match which brought the curtain up on the newlook Chatrier arena.

Potapova's first win over a top 10 player gives her a second round clash against 19-year-old Marketa Vondrousova of the

Czech Republic.

Greek sixth seed Stefanos Tsitsipas, who stunned Federer on his way to the Australian Open semi-finals and beat 11-time Roland Garros champion Rafael Nadal in Madrid, also made the second round.

The 20-year-old sixth seed brushed aside Germany's Maximilian Marterer 6-2, 6-2, 7-6 (4).

## NEW COURT UNVEILED

The new Court Simonne Mathieu, a 5,000-capacity semi-sunken arena enclosed by greenhouses, was officially unveiled on Sunday.

It forms part of the 350mn euro upgrade of the entire site which will also see the demolition of the Court 1 'bullring' after the 2018 tournament.

Spain's Garbine Muguruza, the 2016 champion, had the honour of opening proceedings against America's Taylor Townsend and the 19th seed marked the occasion with a 5-7, 6-2, 6-2 win. "It's cute," said the Spaniard. "It's not small, but it's, you know, cosy."

Other winners on the first day included Japanese seventh seed Kei Nishikori, a quarter-finalist in 2015, who eased past France's Quentin Halys 6-2, 6-3, 6-4.

However, Italian 16th seed Marco Cecchinato, the man who sent Novak Djokovic crashing out in the quarter-finals in 2018, fell at the first hurdle.

Cecchinato lost to 37-year-old Frenchman Nicolas Mahut — who has slipped to 253 in the world — 2-6, 6-7 (6), 6-4, 6-2, 6-4.

Canada teenager Felix Auger-Aliassime withdrew from the tournament with a thigh injury, just a day after finishing runner-up to Benoit Paire in Lyon.

The 18-year-old was seeded 25 and had been due to face Australia's Jordan Thompson in the first round on his maiden appearance in the main draw in Paris.

Auger-Aliassime's spot in the first round draw has been taken by Spanish lucky loser Alejandro Davidovich Fokina.

Second seed Karolina Pliskova closed play on Chatrier with a 6-2, 6-3 win over Madison Brengle of the United States.

Ninth seed Elina Svitolina knocked seven-time Grand Slam champion Venus Williams out with a comfortable first-round victory.

The Ukrainian, twice a quarter-finalist at Roland Garros, eased to a 6-3, 6-3 win on the new Court Simonne Mathieu over the 38-year-old American who made her debut at the tournament in 1997.

Svitolina will face compatriot Katerina Kozlova for a place in the third round.

## FOCUS

## 'It's a great package deal': Dimitrov hails Agassi as new coach

AFP  
Paris

Grigor Dimitrov described his coaching link-up with US legend Andre Agassi and mercurial Radek Stepanek as a "great package deal" yesterday.

Dimitrov said that the duo have injected some much-needed "positive enthusiasm" into his rollercoaster career after needing five sets to defeat Janko Tipsarevic in the first round of Roland Garros.

Agassi, the champion at the French Open in 1999, has linked up with Bulgarian Dimitrov for Roland Garros alongside former world number four Stepanek.

The American was previously coach of world number one Novak Djokovic before their nine-month partnership ended in an acrimonious split in March 2018.

"We have a pretty special relationship. We've known each other for a crazy amount of years," said 28-year-old Dimitrov after his 6-3, 6-0, 3-6, 6-7 (4), 6-4 win over Tipsarevic.



"We've started to speak a little bit more and potentially try to set up the exact weeks or how many weeks we can do, but all that is in the air now a little bit."

"Him and Radek are getting along so well. So it's a great package deal."

Dimitrov, a former world number three who is currently down at 47 in the world, won the last of his eight career titles at the ATP Finals in 2017.

His Grand Slam best performance remains a semi-final run at Wimbledon in 2014.

However, he has yet to reach the second week at Roland Garros.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Muguruza can win any tournament at her peak: Corretja

Reuters  
Bengaluru

Spain's Garbine Muguruza has the potential and talent to win any tournament in the world when she is at her peak despite her recent slide down the singles rankings, two-times French Open finalist Alex Corretja has said.

Muguruza, a 2016 winner at Roland Garros, is seeded 19th this year and has not been in the best of form this season, winning only one title at the Monterrey Open in April after her final opponent Victoria Azarenka retired with an injury.

From a career-high number one singles ranking in 2017, she has since slipped to 19th after a poor 2018 season and was stretched in the opening round on Sunday by American Taylor Townsend before eventually claiming a 5-7 6-2 6-2 victory.

"I've been watching her, she's practising hard, been in the gym a lot," Eurosport analyst Corretja told Reuters. "One thing about Muguruza is when she's in good shape she can win any tournament in the world."

"When she hits her peak she's so dangerous because she moves well. She knows the clay, she has already won there, so I think the first few rounds for her will be very important to build up her confidence."



Corretja also said that the 25-year-old two-times grand slam winner could go far by flying under the radar and maintaining her consistency over a season.

"Not too many people are going to talk about her at the beginning," the Spaniard added. "I think she will be able to go a long way without people talking about her... I think that might help her in this moment of her career."

"Maybe she's not as consistent as we wish — we always want them to be consistent for 25 weeks of the year — but she can win anywhere."

Muguruza plays Sweden's Johanna Larsson in the second round.

## COMMENT

## Second 'Nole Slam' would put Djokovic up with Federer, Nadal: Wilander



Novak Djokovic acknowledges the crowd during a training session ahead of his French Open campaign in Paris. (Reuters)

Reuters  
Paris

Novak Djokovic stands on the verge of holding all four Grand Slam titles for the second time in his career and should he do it by winning the French Open, it would surpass anything Rafael Nadal or Roger Federer have achieved, said Mats Wilander.

Three years ago Djokovic became the first man since Australian great Rod Laver in 1969 to hold all four Grand Slams simultaneously when he beat Andy Murray to win the French Open.

A career slump followed but the Serb rebounded last year to win Wimbledon and the US Open and this year took his Grand Slam total to 15 after holding aloft the Australian Open trophy for a seventh time.

Now he has the chance to win four in a row again and seven-time Grand Slam champion Wilander believes victory in Paris would pave the way to surpass both Federer (20) and Nadal (17) in Grand Slam titles.

"In the grand scheme of things Novak winning four in a row

again, it would be the most impressive thing we have ever seen," Eurosport analyst Wilander told Reuters in an interview.

The greatest of all time (GOAT) debate usually splits fans into the Federer and Nadal camps and Djokovic earns less adulation than those two.

"If Novak wins the French, suddenly then he has to be compared to the greatest players of all time," Wilander said.

"He will have 16 (slams) if he wins the French. Okay Roger will still have 20 but it would be comparable because he would have won the Nole Slam twice, I mean that's unbelievable."

"To me that's incredible, Novak winning here is a bigger deal than Rafa winning 12 (French Opens). But then if Rafa wins, he's on 18 majors so it's getting crowded at the top."

Wilander said the French Open was 'monumental' in terms of the longevity of Nadal's career, saying a failure to retain his crown could have knock-on effects for the Spaniard.

"I think the bigger picture for me is more long term," Wilander, part of Eurosport's daily 'Game Schett and Mats' review of the

action in Paris, said.

"If Rafa doesn't win the French, I kind of see him having a hard time winning Wimbledon or the US Open... then next year's French Open comes into doubt."

"If Novak wins I mean the door will be wide open to reach 20 Grand Slams. Then if he equals Roger's 20 he would be regarded as the greatest player of all time."

That said, Wilander says this year's men's tournament is more open than usual with a host of young players such as Greek Stefanos Tsitsipas, Austrian Dominic Thiem, Russians Karen Khachanov and Daniil Medvedev and Chilean Cristian Garin equipped to cause trouble.

"So many guys hit the ball so hard today," Wilander said. I'm not saying they will necessarily beat them but the worry for Novak or Rafa is how many matches will they be pushed to over the four hour mark in the first four rounds?"

"Rafa, Roger or Novak against (Grigor) Dimitrov or (Kei) Nishikori, they have great records against them, but if Rafa played Tsitsipas he would be nervous from the first point."

"The young guys have less respect for reputations."