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Blues edge Stars in overtime to advance in playoffs

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GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

Drop anyone but get Archer in team, says Flintoff

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FOOTBALL

Liverpool bask in glory of sensational Anfield victory

The nature of their win was compared to the 2005 final in Istanbul when they came back from 3-0 down to beat Milan



Liverpool's Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Salah (2L), German manager Jurgen Klopp (C) and Dutch defender Virgil van Dijk celebrate after winning the UEFA Champions league semi-final second leg football match against Barcelona at Anfield in Liverpool on Tuesday.

AFP
Liverpool

Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said his team had the "mentality of giants" after they pulled off one of the most remarkable turnarounds in Champions League history, thrashing Lionel Messi's Barcelona 4-0 to reach the final for the second year running.

Stand-in striker Divock Origi and substitute Georginio Wijnaldum both scored twice as Lionel

Messi's side threw away a 3-0 first leg lead and crashed out at a frenzied Anfield.

The nature of Liverpool's victory was quickly compared to the 2005 Champions League final in Istanbul when they came back from 3-0 down to beat AC Milan on penalties.

A season that threatened to end with Liverpool being pipped to the Premier League title by Manchester City this weekend and exiting the Champions League at the semi-final stage will now culminate in a final against either

Ajax or Tottenham in Madrid on June 1 when they could become kings of Europe for a sixth time.

For Barcelona, the crushing defeat was the second consecutive year they had surrendered a commanding first-leg lead in this competition – and the scale of the capitulation leaves coach Ernesto Valverde facing the sack.

Liverpool went into the match deprived of two of their most potent attacking weapons in Mohamed Salah and Roberto Firmino due to injury.

However, Origi and Wijnaldum

stepped up magnificently, leaving Klopp to marvel at his players in a joyous outburst.

"It's 10 past 10, most of your children are probably in bed but these boys are talented giants. It's unbelievable," he told BT Sport.

"The whole game was too much. Winning is difficult but with a clean sheet, I don't know how they did it.

"It means so much to all of us. There are more important things in the world. But creating this emotional atmosphere together is so special. It's all about the players.

"It shows what's possible in football. It's so nice."

Wijnaldum admitted he had been smarting at being forced to start on the bench and felt he had a point to prove.

"Once again we showed that everything is possible in football," the Dutchman said. "I was really angry at the manager that he put me on the bench but I had to do something to help the team when I came on.

"We believe it from the start. People from outside (the club), they thought it was not possible,

UEFA considering Champions League with promotion/relegation

Nyon, Switzerland: UEFA has drafted a controversial plan to introduce promotion and relegation to the Champions League at a meeting at its Swiss headquarters in Nyon, sources told AFP yesterday.

There would be four groups of eight teams from 2024 if the proposal is put into action it would significantly increase the number of European matches and favour bigger clubs.

But UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin played down the plan, saying: "What is important to remember, is that, despite a lot of talk in the media, no decisions have been made. At the moment we have only ideas and opinions." The revamped tournament would not see games played at weekends, which would have sparked uproar among the domestic leagues. The top five teams in each group would be automatically

qualified for the next edition, effectively making the Champions League far harder for clubs from smaller countries to play in. There would be 14 match-days in the group stage instead of six, with teams continuing to play opponents home and away. That would necessitate drastic changes to domestic schedules, with league and cup matches currently also being played in midweek. Change to European club tournaments has become a controversial issue after Andrea Agnelli, the president of the European Club Association (ECA), outlined proposals for a "pan-European league system" that would greatly reduce the number of teams qualifying from domestic competitions. The UEFA drafts suggest a move in that direction, although the number of clubs in the Champions League would remain at 32.

but we still managed to do this."

Origi would almost certainly not have started the match had Salah – the Premier League's top scorer this season with 22 goals – and Firmino been fit.

But the 24-year-old Belgian has made a habit of scoring important goals in Liverpool's challenge for a first Premier League title in 29 years and he notched his first ever in the Champions League on seven minutes, pouncing on the rebound after Marc-Andre ter Stegen had denied Jordan Henderson's initial effort.

Messi, who had dominated the first leg with two goals, had quickly and uncharacteristically been rattled by Liverpool defender Andy Robertson, wagging his finger in the Scotsman's face.

Liverpool were seemingly dealt another injury blow as Robertson could not continue after half-time. But his replacement, Wijnaldum, was to have a dramatic impact.

Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson Becker made an important save

from Luis Suarez before Wijnaldum sent Anfield into raptures twice in a matter of minutes.

Firstly, the Dutch midfielder was found by Trent Alexander-Arnold's low cross and drilled under Ter Stegen.

And from Liverpool's next attack, Xherdan Shaqiri picked out Wijnaldum to head home at the Kop end.

Valverde desperately tried to salvage the match, replacing former Liverpool player Philippe Coutinho with Nelson Semedo.

The change briefly had an impact, but a sluggish Barca were made to look foolish when they were caught napping by a quickly-taken Alexander-Arnold corner that picked out Origi completely unmarked to fire high into the net, sparking extraordinary celebrations.

"There have been glorious, entirely improbable games in Liverpool's European history, including the mind-bending highs of Istanbul," the *Guardian* newspaper said. "But this was something else, an effort of will that, frankly, took the breath away!"

BOTTOMLINE

Tarek delighted with Al Sadd's Asian progress

AFC
Doha

Al Sadd defender Tarek Salman commended his side for earning a hard-fought 2-1 victory over Al Ahli which sent the Qatari side to the 2019 AFC Champions League Round of 16 on Monday.

Ali Asad and Akram Afif scored inside the opening 15 minutes and Omar al-Somah pulled one back for Al Ahli in the second half in Doha as the hosts sealed the three points to book their place in the knock-out stage with a game to spare.

With qualification confirmed, the 2011 AFC

Champions League winners can now take a breather following a busy season in which they lifted the Qatar Stars League title for the first time in six years and reached the Amir Cup semi-final just four days ahead of their win over Al Ahli. "We had a busy calendar this season," said Salman. "We were a bit tired, especially as this is the first day of Ramadan and many of the players were fasting.

"Fatigue impacted us, especially in the second half, but the players fought hard and we got the all-important three points, so we are extremely delighted with that." Top scorer with 13 goals in the 2018 AFC Champions League, Al Sadd striker Baghdad Bounedjah endured a frustrating evening at Jassim bin Hamad Stadium, missing several chances to a combination of profligacy and some impressive goalkeeping by Al Ahli's Mohamed al-Owais.

"The first half was straightforward. We had more than five chances, but we missed more than we should. Fortunately, we scored two of those chances and that was crucial."

"In the second half, we made some defensive mistakes and conceded a penalty. But we were in control of the rhythm of the match and succeeded in holding until the end to win."

Al Sadd travel to Tehran in two weeks' time to face already-eliminated Persepolis in a repeat of last year's semi-final. Jesualdo Ferreira's men will look to get a result to end the group stage as group winners.



Al Sadd coach Jesualdo Ferreira congratulates Xavi after the match.

'Biggest embarrassment of all time': Spanish press dig knife into Barca

Barcelona: The Spanish and Catalan press were in unforgiving mood after Barcelona's 4-0 surrender to Liverpool in the Champions League semi-finals denied them a place in the final by wiping out a 3-0 advantage from the first leg.

"The biggest embarrassment of all time," said the front cover of Barcelona-based newspaper *Sport* on top of a black canvas after the 4-3 aggregate defeat, adding "Barca write the darkest page in their history".

"A historic failure," said *Marca*, listing all the factors in Barca's favour before the game which deepened the scale of their defeat and denied Lionel Messi the chance to lift the trophy he had clearly targetted at the start of the season.

"They were 3-0 up, Liverpool's stars were injured, the league was won, the final is in Madrid, Real Madrid were already out and they had the best player in the world." Parallels were drawn with Barca's eerily similar capitulation in last season's competition to AS Roma in the quarter-finals, when they crashed out on away goals following a 3-0 defeat in Italy after leading the tie 4-1.

Catalan newspaper *Mundo Deportivo* also talked of an embarrassment and slammed Ernesto Valverde's side

for switching off for the fourth goal, scored by Divock Origi but set up by the quick thinking of Trent Alexander-Arnold.

"A ridiculous goal conceded from a corner will be the epitaph of this team, which repeated the mistakes of Rome," said the newspaper's cover.

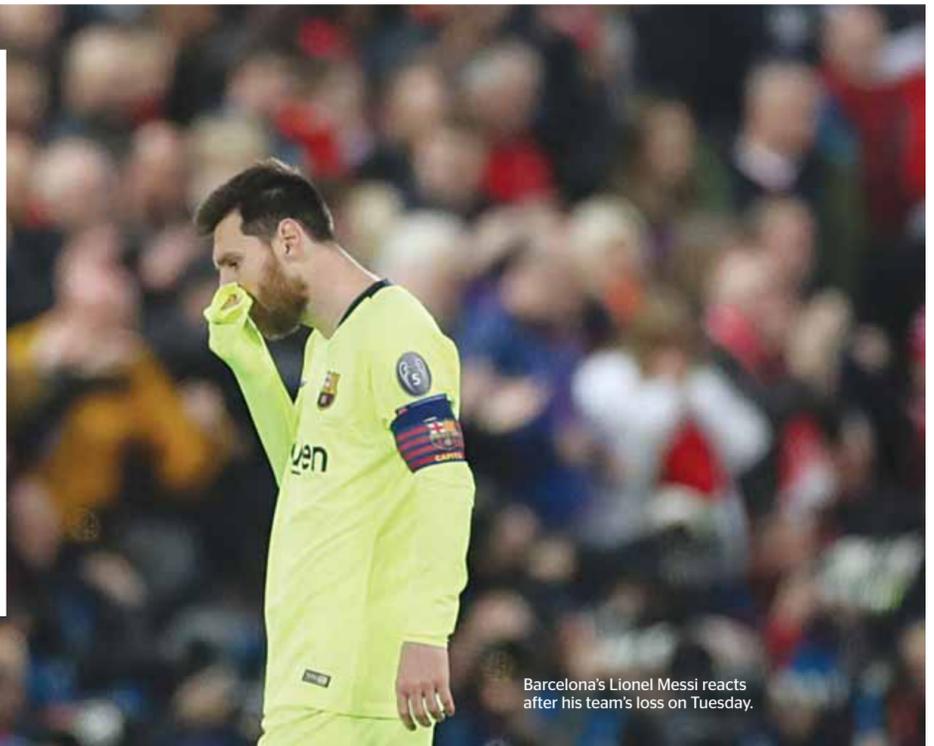
Barca's Luis Suarez and Sergio Busquets apologised to fans after the game, as did Valverde, and there is a feeling that the coach is unlikely to survive this latest European failure despite overseeing the team's domestic dominance.

"The Champions League is too big for Valverde," said an editorial in *Sport*.

"Without doubt Valverde holds a lot of responsibility for this disaster, because when the moment of truth arrived he made the same mistakes as last year."

The players did not escape blame either. *Marca's* ratings, which judge individual performances by awarding players between one and three stars, gave seven of Barca's starting 11 no stars at all.

Sport's player ratings meanwhile gave no player more than three marks out of 10, while midfielders Ivan Rakitic and Philippe Coutinho were each given a rating of zero.



Barcelona's Lionel Messi reacts after his team's loss on Tuesday.

SPOTLIGHT

British media hail Liverpool's 'Miracle of Anfield'

British newspapers celebrate team spirit and Klopp's 'Germanic charm'

Reuters
London

Liverpool's stunning 4-0 Champions League demolition of Barcelona naturally dominated the front and back pages of British newspapers yesterday with most going on a similar theme to the *Daily Mail's* splash: "Miracle of Anfield".

"An Anfield miracle transcribed from the pages of pure fantasy," read the headline of the match report in *The Independent*, while *The Guardian* led with "Out of this world".

The Merseyside club's sensational victory over what some pundits described as one of the best sides of the modern era allowed them to overturn a 3-0 deficit from the first leg of their semi-final.

There were some suggestions that Liverpool had topped the 'Miracle of Istanbul', when the club similarly overturned a three-goal deficit to beat AC Milan in the 2005 Champions League final to win their fifth European title.

European fixtures at Anfield have had a special atmosphere going back a lot further than that and some suggested the noise generated by a packed house combined with Jurgen Klopp's aggressive side had unsettled the Spanish champions.

"This is Liverpool's gift: to rip up what you thought you knew about football and footballers, to take you — mentally and physically — to a place you don't know and never wanted to go," Jonathan Liew wrote in *The Independent*.



Liverpool manager Juergen Klopp applauds the fans after the match.

There was plenty of praise for the spirit and self belief that Klopp has fostered in his team, the German even forgiven for using an expletive when praising his players after the match.

"Jurgen Klopp makes Liverpool believe they can do the impossible," wrote Matt Dickinson in *The Times*. "No one minded when Juergen Klopp dropped the

f-bomb live on television.

"After this, he could have stripped off and run around Anfield with his pants down and it would all have seemed part of his manic Germanic charm. With that grin and this football, he can get away with anything."

There was plenty of praise as well for Trent Alexander-Arnold's quick-think-

ing from a corner that caught the Barcelona defence napping and set up the decisive fourth goal for stand-in striker Divock Origi.

"With 79 minutes gone, the most celebrated team of the modern age had been reduced to bunch of mooching, stumbling yellow-shirted spectators," Barney Ronay wrote in *The Guardian*.

"A Champions League season that had seemed to be zeroing in on another coronation for Lionel Messi had been wrenched, gleefully, the other way. It will instead be Liverpool in Madrid on the first day of June for another shot at the ultimate."

The website of Spanish sports daily *AS* led with a quote from Argentine forward Messi in their headline "It was a horror movie," while rival publication *Marca's* edition splashed "Barcelona fail epically at Anfield".

After Klopp and his players had stood, some in tears, in front of The Kop to celebrate the win with a rendition of the club anthem 'You'll Never Walk Alone,' it was left to *The Daily Mail's* Martin Samuel to point out that the job was not yet done.

"One had the feeling this was the moment he had been working towards since the day he set foot on Merseyside," he wrote of Klopp.

"This spirit. This togetherness. This performance. This passion, this emotion: it was all here, every last drop of what he wanted to achieve."

"And yet, there is still such a long way to go." Liverpool face either Tottenham Hotspur or Ajax Amsterdam in the final on June 1.

FOCUS

Quick corner was 'instinct', says Liverpool's Alexander-Arnold

Reuters
Liverpool

Trent Alexander-Arnold said the quickly-taken corner that led to Liverpool's decisive fourth goal in their incredible 4-0 victory over Barcelona in the Champions League semi-final on Tuesday was pure instinct.

The 20-year-old right back had already helped set up Liverpool's second goal with a pass for Georginio Wijnaldum when, with the aggregate score tied at 3-3, the ball went out behind the Barcelona goal in the 79th minute.

Alexander-Arnold, seeing the Spanish club's defenders still getting organised, feigned to walk away from the corner before racing back to whip the ball to the unmarked Divock Origi, who clipped it past Marc-Andre Stegen.

"I think it was just instinctive," Alexander-Arnold told BT Sport. "It was just one of those moments where you see the opportunity and obviously Div was switched on to finish it off."

"It probably came at him a bit fast but he's a top player, scored two goals for us tonight and I think it's one of them where everyone will remember this moment."

Belgian striker Origi, starting the match as part of a makeshift attack in the absence of the injured Mohamed Salah and Roberto Firmino, had triggered the Liverpool fightback with his first goal in the seventh minute.

With substitute Wijnaldum adding the other two goals inside two second half minutes, Origi said the performance had been about the collective rather than the individual.

"I think it was more about the team," he said. "We did so well,



we fought and we knew it was going to be a special night. We wanted to also fight for the injured players.

"It's just special. It's hard to describe with words. You can feel it, you can hear it. Unbelievable."

Wijnaldum, who admitted to being furious at manager Juergen Klopp for being omitted from the starting line-up, came on at halftime for injured left back Andy Robertson.

"We fought so hard," Origi added. "Robbo's a fighter and we knew it could have an impact on the players. Even me at the end, I had some cramps. We did it."

"It shows we have a good mix of talent and hard work. It's special for us because we go to the final this time."

Robertson sustained his injury in a collision with Barcelona forward Luis Suarez and will have scans on his calf on Wednesday.

Liverpool's 4-3 aggregate victory earned them a spot in the June 1 Champions League final against Ajax or Tottenham Hotspur, who play their semi-final, second leg in Amsterdam on Wednesday with the Dutch side leading 1-0 on aggregate.

BOTTOMLINE

Reds' legends salute fightback for the ages

AFP
Liverpool

Liverpool legends Robbie Fowler and Michael Owen hailed their former club's stunning Champions League semi-final fightback against Barcelona as Anfield's greatest ever European night.

Jurgen Klopp's side recovered from a 3-0 first leg deficit to reach the final with a pulsating 4-0 victory over the Spanish champions on Tuesday.

The historic escape act was one of the finest in Champions League history and Fowler believes it should be ranked as the best of Liverpool's European triumphs at their famous old stadium.

The striker placed Liverpool's dismantling of Lionel Messi and company above their dramatic 1977 European Cup quarter-final win over St Etienne, widely regarded as the previous pinnacle in the competition at Anfield.

"You know when you talk about the great nights, this is the best ever. It's absolutely in-

credible," Liverpool-born Fowler told BT Sport. "Before the game, we were talking about all the superlatives we can about Messi. We can run out of superlatives for Liverpool."

"It was deserved as well and that's the best thing about it."

"I'm so proud and so delighted to be part of Liverpool. Everything about Liverpool tonight was brilliant."

Fowler's fellow former Reds striker Owen praised Klopp's men for their incredible season, which could yet culminate in Champions League glory for the first time since 2005.

Liverpool also have an outside chance of winning the Premier League as they trail leaders Manchester City by one point heading into the final round of fixtures on Sunday.

"It's only football that can do this. What an incredible season we've had and it's not over yet," Owen said.

"This place has seen some of the most amazing nights, European nights, of football and it's right up there with them. Possibly the best."

Former Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand joined in the praise for Liverpool's performance.

"You cannot fail to have respect for this stadium when you come here," he said.

"The emotions that this place evokes on nights like these, there hasn't been a better night than this."

"They took it out of Barcelona's hands — the spirit, the heart shown by this squad, and that all starts from the top. That starts from Klopp."

"What they've produced here is breathtaking and you can do nothing but respect the team, the management, and the way this club have conducted themselves, especially on a night like tonight."

Former Liverpool winger Luis Garcia joined the chorus of approval for his old team's heroics.

"I have seen this move too!" Garcia tweeted, referring to his part in Liverpool's 'Miracle of Istanbul' comeback against AC Milan in 2005, when they recovered from three goals down to win the Champions League final on penalties.



Liverpool fans celebrate alongside a flare outside the stadium on Tuesday.

IPL

Delhi eliminate Hyderabad after Shaw, Pant heroics

The Capitals will meet Chennai tomorrow to decide who face Mumbai in the final

IAN S
Visakhapatnam

In yet another Indian Premier League contest which went down the wire, opener Prithvi Shaw's valiant half-century (56 off 38) followed by Rishabh Pant's heroics (49 off 21) helped Delhi Capitals register a thrilling two-wicket win over Sunrisers Hyderabad in the Eliminator of the tournament here yesterday.

Despite the duo's valuable contribution, Delhi hobbled towards the death over. However, it was Keemo Paul's stunning boundary off Khaleel Ahmed's delivery on the second last delivery of their innings which helped Delhi pull a nail-biting victory and advance to the second Qualifier of the league, where they will now face-off three-time champions Chennai Super Kings tomorrow.

For Hyderabad, Khaleel, Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Rashid Khan bagged couple of wickets each.

Chasing the 163-run target, Shaw and Shikhar Dhawan took Delhi to a desired start as they added 25 runs in just three overs. The Delhi openers then notched up their 50-run stand in 5.4 overs as the Hyderabad bowlers struggled to get the early breakthrough.

Deepak Hooda gave Hyderabad a much needed respite as he finally broke the opening 66-run partnership after dismissing Dhawan (17 off 16) in the eighth over. Khaleel then stepped up to send Delhi skipper Shreyas Iyer (8 off 10) back to the dug-out before he struck again to bring back Hyderabad in the contest as he soon accounted for the wicket of a well-settled Shaw in the 11th over, leaving Delhi at 87/3.

Shaw's knock was decorated with six boundaries and couple of hits into the stands.

Newcomer Pant and Colin Munro (14 off 13) then tried to put things back in control but could only manage to put 24 runs together before Rashid came with a breakthrough to claim Munro's wicket in the 15th over. The Afghan spinner then put Delhi in deep trouble as just in the very next delivery, he also sent back incoming batsman Axar Ptael, who failed to open his account.

Despite the jolts, Pant kept on clobbering the Hyderabad bowlers to help his side cross the 150-run mark in 17.5 overs. Bhuvneshwar then brought some twist in the story as he dismissed Sherfane Rutherford (9 off 12) and a dangerous Pant in the second last over, leaving Delhi five



Delhi Capitals batsman Rishabh Pant plays a shot against Sunrisers Hyderabad at the Dr. Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy ACA-VDCA Cricket Stadium in Visakhapatnam yesterday. At bottom, the Capitals celebrate after the match.



runs away from victory with three wickets in hand.

Pant's blistering innings was laced with two boundaries and five massive sixes.

With the game going down the wire, Delhi's Amit Mishra (1 off 2) also departed with three balls left and two runs still needed. While trying to take a quick single, Mishra ran completely in

the middle of the wicket and the throw by Khaleel hit him after which Hyderabad went up for a caught-behind call and then for obstructing the field after which he was given out. When it seemed Hyderabad would somehow restrict the Delhi side from a victory, their tailender Paul hammered Khaleel for a boundary on the penultimate delivery

to help his team reach home in time. Earlier, a collective batting effort had helped Hyderabad post a fighting 162/8.

Delhi bowlers did a good job to restrict their opponents at a modest total, thanks to Paul and Ishant Sharma, who bagged three and two wickets, respectively.

Put into bat, last year's runners-up Hyderabad were off to a decent start as their scorecard read 31 for no loss in the first three overs with opener Martin Guptill (36 off 19) hammering Trent Boult for 15 runs in the third over.

However, Ishant drew the first blood in the next over, dismissing opener Wriddhiman Saha (8) who holed out to Iyer at mid-off.

Manish Pandey (30 off 36) then added 25 runs with Guptill to take their side past the 50-run mark. However, the partnership didn't last long as leggie Mishra struck to send back a dangerous looking Guptill in the seventh

over. Hyderabad skipper Kane Williamson and Pandey then tried to anchor the innings but their slow stand saw their side placed at 71/2 after 10 overs. The duo added 34 runs before Paul came up with a breakthrough, accounting for Pandey.

Ishant then castled Williamson, leaving Hyderabad struggling at 111/4 in 15.5 overs. Vijay Shankar and Mohammad Nabi then chipped in with valuable knocks of 25 and 20, respectively, to take Hyderabad to 147 runs before the former fell in the 19th over. Nabi and Shankar hit some lusty blows towards the end to help Hyderabad post a fighting total.

Brief scores: Delhi Capitals 165/8 in 19.5 overs (Prithvi Shaw 56, Rishabh Pant 49; Rashid Khan 2/15) beat **Sunrisers Hyderabad** 162/8 in 20 overs (Martin Guptill 36, Manish Pandey 30; Keemo Paul 3/32) by 2 wickets

SPOTLIGHT

Archer stars again before rain washes out Oval ODI

AFF
London

Joe Archer continued his bid to earn a place in England's World Cup squad with a hostile opening spell against Pakistan before rain meant there was no result in yesterday's first one-day international at The Oval.

Archer conceded just six runs in four overs in a wicket-taking spell after England captain Eoin Morgan won the toss.

The Sussex fast bowler's display was a rare highlight for a patient crowd who endured several rain interruptions in a mere 19 overs' cricket in south London before the umpires finally called this day/night fixture off at 7:11 pm (18:11 GMT) local time.

Pakistan were 80 for two, with Imam-ul-Haq 42 not out and Haris Sohail unbeaten on 14.

Barbados-born Archer was not included in tournament hosts' England's preliminary squad for the World Cup but has a chance to force his way into their final 15.

He showed glimpses of his ability while making ODI and Twenty20 international debuts against Ireland and Pakistan last week. On Tuesday, former

England all-rounder Andrew Flintoff say "anyone" should be dropped to make sure Archer had a place in the World Cup squad.

And Archer seized his latest chance in Wednesday's opening contest of a five-match ODI series with Pakistan after England captain Eoin Morgan won the toss.

Archer started with a superb maiden over to Imam, generating movement off the pitch at sharp pace.

And it was not long before he had Fakhar Zaman — the century-making star of Pakistan's 2017 Champions Trophy final win over arch-rivals India at The Oval — edging on three to Test skipper Joe Root in the slips.

New batsman Babar Azam (16) struck three stylish boundaries before he edged Liam Plunkett to wicket-keeper Jos Buttler, with Pakistan now 45 for two.

What turned out to be the last ball of the day saw Buttler miss a chance to stump Haris off leg-spinner Adil Rashid, with the batsman stranded down the pitch.

Imam recovered his composure after Archer's fine start, the opener facing 68 balls, including five fours.

The series continues at Southampton on Saturday.



Fans take shelter under their umbrellas as the players leave the pitch due to rain at The Oval yesterday.

OPINION

India among favourites to win World Cup: Kapil



AFF
New Delhi

Former captain Kapil Dev yesterday pegged India as one of the top three favourites to win the World Cup, which starts later this month, saying their pace bowling would come good in seaming English conditions.

India open their campaign against South Africa on June 5 in Southampton with an eye on clinching their third title in the 50-over showpiece event.

"Winning team looks like India, England and Australia and surprise package can be New Zealand," the Indian World Cup-winning skipper told reporters at a promotional event in New Delhi.

"India has the combination of youth and experience. They have the right balance in four fast bowlers, three spinners and two big names in Virat Kohli and (MS) Dhoni," he said. India's pace battery is led by Jasprit Bumrah, the world's top bowler in the one-day format, and includes Mohammed Shami, Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Hardik Pandya.

Bumrah has been hailed for his ability to bowl yorkers at the death, while Shami and Kumar have also impressed.

"They are fantastic, very good. English conditions will help them. They can swing the ball," said Dev, known as "Haryana Hurricane" during his playing days for his pace.

"They have Bumrah and Shami who can bowl 145 (kmph) plus. So we have swing, we have pace. That's a very good combination to have."

Dev, who led India to their maiden World Cup in 1983 when his side beat two-time champions West Indies to take the trophy at Lord's, said it was the "belief" which separated winners from the rest.

Dev slammed comparisons between him and star all-rounder Pandya who has impressed with his power hitting in the team's middle order and skills as a medium-pace bowler.

The 25-year-old Pandya, who is set to play his first 50-over World Cup, has earned his place in the Indian XI with 731 runs and 44 wickets in 45 ODIs since making his debut in 2016.

"He is an upcoming player... Please do not pressure him. He is a young talent, let him play his cricket with his own free mind," said Dev.

When quizzed about the on-field chemistry between former captain Dhoni and Kohli, Dev said both the players were crucial to India's World Cup hopes.

PRACTICE MATCH

Young shines with 130 as New Zealand beat Australia

AFF
Brisbane

Will Young stroked a masterful 130 to steer an under-strength New Zealand to a seven-wicket win over Australia in a World Cup practice match yesterday, outshining a classy unbeaten 89 from Steve Smith.

The visitors chased down their 278 target with 10 balls to spare, inflicting the first one-day defeat on Australia in 10 games, although this was not counted as a full international.

Young, who is uncapped and not part of New Zealand's World Cup squad, was eventually run out after smacking 11



New Zealand's Will Young plays a shot during the second of three warm-up cricket matches between New Zealand and Australia in Brisbane yesterday.

fours and two sixes in his 132-ball knock. George Worker (56) and Tom

Latham (69 not out) were also among the runs as New Zealand, missing Kane Williamson,

Martin Guptill and Trent Boult, made 283 for three in reply to Australia's 277 for six.

Australian pace spearhead Mitchell Starc made his long-awaited return from injury and was the pick of a lacklustre bowling attack, taking 2-14 off five overs with trademark yorkers before being withdrawn from the action.

It was his first match back since tearing a muscle three months ago.

Earlier, former skipper Smith was the star attraction with his 89, including four big sixes, in only his second game in Australian colours since his one-year ban for ball-tampering expired.

He came to the crease when Shaun Marsh was out for 28

and was in fine touch in a major boost for Australia ahead of their World Cup defence in England.

Usman Khawaja and Glenn Maxwell were also in form, scoring 56 and 52 respectively.

But David Warner, who made 39 on his return from the "Sandpapergate" scandal in the first of the three unofficial matches in Brisbane on Monday, did not fare so well.

He opened the innings with Aaron Finch, rather than Khawaja, but was soon back on the sidelines after spooning a catch to cover without scoring, last-ting just six balls.

Australia won the first match by one wicket, with the final game at Allan Border Field tomorrow.

ADVICE

Drop anyone but get Archer, says England's Flintoff

'I found it so frustrating that a bloke can bowl so fast with what looks like so little effort'

AFP
London

Andrew Flintoff has urged England to drop "anyone" in order to make sure Jofra Archer has a place in their World Cup squad.

The past week has seen Barbados-born pacer Archer show glimpses of his talent while making one-day international and Twenty20 debuts for England after completing a three-year residency period.

His ability to bowl 90-mile-per-hour (145kmh) yorkers, as well as deceptive slower balls, has caught the eye. Archer is set to have further chances to make a case for a World Cup spot during England's one-day international series against Pakistan which started yesterday.

Former England fast bowler all-rounder Flintoff is a fan of the "unbelievable" Archer.

"I was watching him bowl the other day and I found it so frustrating that a bloke can bowl so fast with what looks like so little effort," Flintoff told reporters in London on Tuesday.

Following a miserable first-round exit at the 2015 edition in Australia and New Zealand, World Cup hosts England have risen to number one in the ODI rankings, without Archer.

But Flintoff said loyalty to existing players was no reason to ignore the 24-year-old's claims for a place in England's final 15 for the World Cup.

"You ask who I would get rid of? Anyone," he added at an event to publicise the official World Cup song, *Stand By* by Loryn and Rudimental.

"I think he's brilliant. I know there's a thing about him qualifying but we've done that for a number of years.

"When I was a kid we were watching Robin Smith (born in South Africa) and were waiting on Graeme Hick (born in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe) to play (for England). We've had KP (Kevin Pietersen, born in South Africa) so it's not a new thing," said the 41-year-old Flintoff.

"But watching the lad bowl," he said of Archer "For someone to bowl that quick so easily, with so much control, all the tricks – slower balls, bouncers, yorkers – he's got to be in hasn't he?"

Flintoff had little sympathy for those members of England's current pace attack who had expressed concerns about possible damage to team morale were Archer to play at the World Cup.

"I would make sure I would raise my game," Flintoff said. "It's international sport, competitive and it's a good position for Eng-



England's Jofra Archer celebrates the wicket of Pakistan's Fakhar Zaman (not in picture) during the rain-hit first One Day International (ODI) at The Oval in London yesterday. **Bottom:** Andrew Flintoff



land to be in that you can drop or leave out someone (else) so good." England have never won the men's World Cup, making the last of their three losing appearances in the final back in 1992.

All three of Flintoff's World Cup campaigns saw England make early exits.

"I played in three World Cups and didn't get through the group stages, even though they didn't pass without incident!" joked Flintoff, who at the 2007 World Cup in the Caribbean commanded a pedalo in St Lucia.

"It would be nice to see an England side do something now. Going into it you look at the sides and

Freddie backs Stokes to 'steal the show' for England

London: Andrew Flintoff believes Ben Stokes can "steal the show" for England in a home season featuring both the World Cup and the Ashes. For the first time since the inaugural men's World Cup in 1975, England are staging arguably the two biggest events in their calendar – the one-day showpiece and a Test series against arch-rivals Australia – in the same season.

Stokes, however, has yet to hit the heights he showed before being acquitted of affray by an English court last year following an incident outside a Bristol nightclub in the early hours of the morning. But Flintoff said that was partly a consequence of Stokes' willingness to take responsibility at key stages. "With Ben he's just different," Flintoff told reporters in London on Tuesday.

"As a batter he can bat three, he can bat four – his bowling's getting better all the time." "The World T20 probably knocked his confidence a little bit. That can happen, bowling at the death," added Flintoff. "He's always in the big moments of a game. He seems to be that lad who lifts the team." Former England captain Flintoff's career also featured its fair share of off-field controversy, with the 41-year-old saying this could take a toll on a player's form.

"I think since what happened the year before last, it's always hard sometimes," he said. "You've just got to find your feet again. You're playing for the team but you're also playing a little bit for acceptance as well – for the crowd, for the people coming to watch you."

"I think he has come through the other side and I think we're about to see the best of Ben Stokes. Or I hope so, because I genuinely love watching him."

"For years when I played it was 'Sri Lanka have won the World Cup with a pinch hitter let's get a (Sanath) Jayasuriya at the top of the order.' Australia were doing well with Adam Gilchrist, 'let's try and do what they do.' We were always chasing the game."

"I think now we've found the best England one-day team we've seen."

we're up there with the favourites aren't we?"

Asked what had changed in England's approach to ODI cricket since he retired in 2009, Flintoff cited the white-ball captain Eoin Morgan's "impressive" influence, before adding: "I think they've found their identity."

"For years when I played it was 'Sri Lanka have won the World Cup with a pinch hitter let's get a (Sanath) Jayasuriya at the top of the order.' Australia were doing well with Adam Gilchrist, 'let's try and do what they do.' We were always chasing the game."

"I think now we've found the best England one-day team we've seen."

DECISION

Recalled Afghan quick Hassan to quit ODIs after WC

Reuters
New Delhi

Recalled Afghanistan quick Hamid Hassan will quit one-day cricket after a last hurrah at the World Cup in England and Wales, the 31-year-old has said.

The Afghan selectors sprang a surprise last month when they recalled the right-arm pacer, who played the last of his 32 ODIs against Ireland in July 2016, to share new ball duty with Dawlat Zadran.

"When a player goes through so many injury and recovery processes, there are more chances of getting injured again," Hassan said in an interview on the Afghan board's Facebook page.

"Every player has to retire one day... I think it is better to retire when a player is performing well and before he be-

comes a burden for the team. "Therefore, I decided to step aside from ODI cricket and continue playing T20 cricket for a few more years."

Hassan, who underwent two knee surgeries in 2012, expressed his gratitude to the board and the team management for recalling him for the World Cup.

"I'd also like to tell fans that I have proven my fitness (to) earn my place, having worked hard for the last six months in various fitness and training camps.

"It's been a long gap... I hope I'll be able to perform well in the World Cup and repay the faith that fans and the board have shown in my ability."

Afghanistan will play ODIs against Scotland and Ireland before beginning their World Cup campaign on June 1 against holders Australia in Bristol.

SETBACK

Aussie pacer Richardson ruled out of World Cup



Reuters
Sydney

Australian pace bowler Jhye Richardson has been ruled out of his maiden Cricket World Cup by a shoulder injury and was withdrawn from the squad for the tournament in England and Wales yesterday.

The 22-year-old, who made his one-day international debut in January last year, will be replaced by namesake Kane Richardson after failing to recover from a shoulder dislocation he suffered playing against Pakistan in March.

"This is obviously very disappointing news for the team and for Jhye, who has been exceptional throughout his rehabilitation process," team physiotherapist David Beakley said in a Cricket Australia news release.

"After his most recent assessment and attempting to bowl in the nets, it was clear that Jhye was not progressing as fast as required and there-

fore, in consultation with selectors, we made the decision to withdraw him from the squad.

"Jhye will continue with his rehabilitation and we will look to resume bowling in the coming weeks," Beakley said.

Kane Richardson, who has taken 29 wickets in 20 ODIs, was already at the pre-World Cup training camp in Brisbane and got the nod over test pacer Josh Hazlewood, who is on the comeback trail after a back injury.

Hazlewood was a key member of the team that won the World Cup in 2015 but will also be vital to Australia's hopes of winning the Ashes series in England that follows the World Cup.

Revised squad: Aaron Finch (captain), Usman Khawaja, David Warner, Steve Smith, Shaun Marsh, Glenn Maxwell, Marcus Stoinis, Alex Carey, Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc, Kane Richardson, Nathan Coulter-Nile, Jason Behrendorff, Nathan Lyon, Adam Zampa.

BOTTOMLINE

England insist Ashes ball choice no stitch up

AFP
London

England will continue to use balls thought to favour their pace bowlers when they face Australia in a home Ashes series later this year.

Australia have not won an Ashes series in England since 2001, with their batsmen repeatedly struggling against the likes of James Anderson and Stuart Broad armed with the Dukes balls.

A new Dukes ball with a less pronounced seam that deviates less off the pitch and so, in theory, ought to make life easier for batsmen, has been in use in English county cricket this season.

But England and Wales Cricket Board managing director Ashley Giles said they had asked Dukes to make a batch of some 500-600 balls to the same specification as those used for Test cricket in England during the past two seasons.

Giles said the aim was to ensure a "fair contest" between bat and ball rather than have bowler-friendly "two-day Tests".

Responding to suggestions that England were simply trying to maximise home advantage, Giles told reporters at The Oval yesterday. "People will say that, but that's why we want to be on the front foot."

"We didn't want to appear as though we were doing this underhandedly."

The former England spinner added: "I've spoken to Cricket Australia, they were fine, and I've spoken to Cricket Ireland (who play at Lord's in July).

"It's not as though we're talking about playing against a bowling attack that isn't very good."

"The Aussies are quite handy themselves," he said of a fast-bowling line-up that could include Mitchell Starc, Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and James Pattinson.

"There are elements of risk in choosing to go with this other ball. But



Jimmy Anderson relishes tormenting the Aussies with the Dukes ball.

clearly Jimmy Anderson is one of our best weapons, one of the best bowlers who has ever played the game, and we want to bring him into the game.

"We just want to be up front and honest."

The balls used in this season's Championship are wound tighter at the seam and scores in English cricket's domestic first-class competition are considerably higher than at a comparable stage in 2018.

Cricket balls vary greatly between manufacturers, with the Kookaburra that has long been standard in Australia having a less pronounced seam.

Australia, in a bid to try to get used to English conditions, used the 2017/18 specification Dukes ball in second half of their recently concluded 2018/19 first-class Sheffield Shield tournament.

But with weather and pitch conditions also affecting the movement of the ball – grey skies and green-tinged pitches that are more common in Eng-

land than in the warmer climate of Australia tend to offer more movement to quicker bowlers – it remains to be seen how much this will help the tourists when the Ashes start at Birmingham's Edgbaston ground on August 1.

One consolation for the tourists is that there is no Ashes Test at Trent Bridge this year. Broad took eight for 15 as Australia were skittled out for just 60 on his Nottinghamshire home ground on the way to a defeat inside three days that saw England clinch the 2015 Ashes.

Officials at this year's five Ashes venues may well have concerns about maximising their income if a Test ends well inside five days.

"Test cricket has definitely sped up in the last few years but it's not about having a two-day game," said Giles.

"It's about having a fair contest. My concern was that this 2019 ball would make conditions too batter friendly on good Test wickets in the middle of summer."

NBA

Raptors crush Sixers, Nuggets rout Blazers to gain series edge

'In this series he's been phenomenal. He's impacted the game in so many ways: scoring, playmaking and rebounding, and I think he's playing some pretty good defense as well'

AFP
Los Angeles

The Toronto Raptors dismantled the Philadelphia 76ers and the Denver Nuggets dominated Portland Tuesday to take commanding leads in their NBA playoff series.

The Raptors overpowered the 76ers 125-89 to take a 3-2 lead in their best-of-seven Eastern Conference second-round series. With 76ers star center Joel Embiid ailing, Toronto took full advantage on their home floor and can book a place in the Eastern Conference finals with a victory in game six in Philadelphia on Thursday.

The Nuggets, led by Nikola Jokic's 25 points and 19 rebounds, defeated the Trail Blazers 124-98 for a 3-2 series lead and will also try to wrap up their Western Conference clash on the road on Thursday.

Six Nuggets players scored in double figures and four scored at least 16 points.

Paul Millsap scored 12 of his 24 in the first quarter as Denver bolted to a 31-25 lead.

Jamal Murray scored 11 of his 18 in the second quarter, helping Denver break open the game with a burst of three straight baskets that pushed the Nuggets' lead to 61-43 and Denver, who never trailed, were away.

"In this series he's been phenomenal," Denver coach Mike Malone said of Murray. "He's impacted the game in so many ways: scoring, playmaking and rebounding, and I think he's playing some pretty good defense as well."

Damian Lillard scored 22 points for the Trail Blazers, who face an elimination game for the first time in this post-season.

Rodney Hood and Zach Collins scored 14 points each off the bench, but CJ McCollum was the only other Portland starter in double figures with 12 points.

Portland missed 12 straight shots in the third, connecting on just seven of 28 from the floor in the period to head into the fourth quarter trailing 93-65.

They couldn't get the deficit below 20 points in the final frame. In a hard-fought series between closely matched teams, Malone said, it was a notable achievement.

"For us to come out here tonight and build a 30-point lead and play the defense that we did for three and a half quarters was remarkable," he said.



Jamal Murray of the Denver Nuggets puts up a shot over CJ McCollum of the Portland Trail Blazers in the second quarter during game five of the Western Conference NBA Playoffs at the Pepsi Center in Denver, Colorado. (Getty Images/AFP)

In Toronto's big win, forward Pascal Siakam scored 25 points to lead six Raptors players in double figures.

Star forward Kawhi Leonard scored 21 points and grabbed 13 rebounds and was able to rest the majority of the fourth quarter as the Raptors dominated every phase of the contest.

The outcome was enough to make Philadelphia's center Embiid feel even worse than the upper respiratory infection that appeared to hinder him.

Embiid scored 13 points with six rebounds and also coughed up a game-high eight turno-

vers. With their star struggling, none of his teammates could fill the void. Toronto led 64-43 by halftime - thanks to a 37-17 second quarter.

The 76ers showed signs of life when they opened the second half on a 10-2 scoring run, but the challenge proved short-lived. Leonard, who punctuated the second quarter with a massive dunk, delivered another big jam to close out the third and send the Raptors into the final frame up 92-70.

Toronto would stretch the lead to 40 points - 123-83 - on Norman Powell's dunk with

2:24 to play.

"I was certainly not expecting that kind of game tonight," said Raptors coach Nick Nurse. "Obviously we're certainly happy with the result. We did a lot of good things."

Kyle Lowry scored 19 points, Danny Green had 17 and Spanish big man Marc Gasol contributed 11 for the Raptors, who can clinch the series on Thursday in Philadelphia.

Serge Ibaka scored 10 points for Toronto, despite needing stitches after taking an inadvertent elbow to the forehead from Leonard in the first quar-

ter. Jimmy Butler scored 22 points and handed out seven assists for the 76ers.

Sixers guard Ben Simmons connected on three-of-five shots from the field to finish with seven points and five turnovers.

RESULTS
Second round of the playoffs (best-of-seven):
Eastern Conference
Toronto 125 Philadelphia 89 (Toronto lead series 3-2)
Western Conference
Denver 124 Portland 98 (Denver lead series 3-2)

MLB

Athletics' Fiers no-hits Cincinnati Reds

Reuters
Oakland

Oakland Athletics right-hander Mike Fiers threw the major leagues' first no-hitter of the year Tuesday night, blanking the visiting Cincinnati Reds 2-0 in the opener of a three-game interleague series.

In recording the second no-hitter of his career, the A's ace threw 131 pitches and faced just two batters over the minimum, allowing two walks. A third Cincinnati batter also reached base on an error, but one of the Reds' baserunners was erased on a double play.

"Amazing, that's really all I can say," Fiers said. "I could be working a 9-to-5 (job) and doing so many other things. Playing this game, I'm blessed."

The no-hitter was the majors' first since James Paxton did the trick on the Toronto Blue Jays for the Seattle Mariners almost one year ago to the day, May 8, 2018. He became the 35th pitcher to record multiple no-hitters, counting the regular season and postseason.

It was the 300th no-hitter in major league history, counting the postseason.

Fiers' previous no-hitter was recorded on Aug. 21, 2015, for the Houston Astros in a 3-0 interleague victory over the Los Angeles Dodgers. He struck out 10 and walked three that day.

There had been just seven no-hitters since then, including two by Jake Arrieta, one against the Reds on April 21, 2016.

Another in that span was recorded by Oakland left-hander Sean Manaea against the Boston Red Sox on April 21, 2018.

The start of the historic game was delayed 1 hour, 38 minutes because of a malfunctioning light standard in left field.

"I'm just glad they got those lights working," Fiers said. "That could have been a bummer."

The late start was nothing new to the Reds, who were coming off a four-game home series in which they hit 15 home runs and scored 37 runs against the San Francisco Giants. The Sunday game in Cincinnati was delayed several minutes while a swarm of bees was removed from the home-plate area.

The inconvenience didn't seem to bother Fiers (3-3), who had started two combined shutouts among his four previous

home starts this inning.

The 33-year-old retired the first 11 Reds in order before an error on A's third baseman Matt Chapman allowed Cincinnati's first baserunner.

Unfazed, Fiers then set down the next seven before walking Eugenio Suarez to lead off the seventh inning. Fiers also walked Yasiel Puig two batters later, but in between got Jesse Winker to ground into a double play.

RESULTS

Athletics	2-0	Reds
Royals	12-2	Astros
Dodgers	9-0	Braves
Mets	7-6	Padres
Cubs	5-2	Marlins
Yankees	5-4	Mariners
Phillies	11-1	Cardinals
Rays	6-3	D'backs
Brewers	6-0	Nationals
Red Sox	8-5	Orioles
Angels	5-2	Tigers
Pirates	5-4	Rangers
White Sox	2-0	Indians
Twins	3-0	Blue Jays
Giants	14-4	Rockies

Puig was stranded when Fiers got Derek Dietrich to foul out.

A's manager Bob Melvin said that he told Fiers after the seventh inning that he would make a pitching change if another batter reached base. Fiers made sure Melvin didn't have to take that step.

The A's provided Fiers the only run he would need in the second inning Jurickson Profar's two-out double scored Stephen Piscotty from first base.

Reds starter Tyler Mahle (0-5) was pulled from a 1-0 game after six innings, having allowed just three hits. He walked one and struck out eight.

Profar added an insurance run in the seventh with his third home run of the season, off Reds reliever Robert Stephenson.

Fiers retired the side in order in the eighth and ninth innings, striking out Suarez on a 2-2 curveball in the dirt to finish it off. He began the night with a 6.81 ERA and lowered it to 5.48.

The A's made some dazzling defensive plays behind Fiers to keep his no-no intact.

In the top of the sixth, with the A's nursing a 1-0 lead, Votto hit a long fly ball to left-center field in spacious Oakland Coliseum that center fielder Ramon Laureano nabbed at the top of the fence, possibly saving a home run.



Oakland Athletics starting pitcher Mike Fiers is doused with ice water after pitching a no-hitter against the Cincinnati Reds at Oakland Coliseum. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

NHL

Blues edge Stars in overtime to advance in playoffs

AFP
Washington

Pat Maroon scored 5:50 into the second overtime Tuesday to give the St. Louis Blues a 2-1 victory over the Dallas Stars and a place in the NHL Western Conference final.

The home victory sealed a 4-3 win in the best-of-seven second round playoff series. They'll face either the San Jose Sharks or Colorado Avalanche for a place in the Stanley Cup final.

Tyler Bozak won an offensive-zone face-off for the Blues, Robert Thomas skated from the circle to the left of Stars goalie Ben Bishop, shot off the post, and Maroon tapped in the puck for the game-winner.

"I scored the goal, it still hasn't hit me, but what an exciting time in St. Louis," said Maroon, a native of the Missouri city.

Jamie Benn almost scored on a

wraparound for Dallas at 4:19 of the second overtime.

Vince Dunn also scored, and goalie Jordan Binnington made 29 saves for the Blues, who advanced to the conference final for the first time since 2016.

Bishop made an NHL career-high 52 saves for Dallas, who also lost a game seven to the Blues in the second round in 2016.

Bishop became the fifth goalie to stop 50 or more shots in a Game Seven since 1955-56. He kept the Stars alive through the second and third as St. Louis out-shot Dallas 31-4 in those two periods. Dunn scored his first goal of the playoffs to give St. Louis a 1-0 lead at 13:30 of the first period on a wrist shot from the left point that went off the right shoulder of Bishop.

Mats Zuccarello tied it 1-1 at 15:55 after a wild sequence that started when Binnington lost his stick in a tangle with the Stars' Tyler Seguin.

David Perron tried to clear the

puck but his attempt caromed off the referee and ricocheted off the side of the net to the slot and Zuccarello fired home a shot.

BRUINS' MCAVOY SUSPENDED FOR EASTERN FINALS OPENER

Boston Bruins defenseman Charlie McAvoy maintained that his hit on Columbus Blue Jackets right winger Josh Anderson on Monday was intended as nothing more than a hard hockey check.

While the on-ice officials for the Bruins' clinching Game 6 win in Columbus appeared to agree, issuing him only a two-minute minor for contact to the head, the NHL on Tuesday nonetheless suspended McAvoy for Game 1 of the Eastern Conference finals. The Bruins open the series against the Carolina Hurricanes on Thursday in Boston. After holding a hearing involving McAvoy, the league's Department of Player Safety on Tuesday backed up the player's

contention that he had no malicious intent in the check on Anderson, who left the ice after the second-period collision but returned later in the game.

The hit occurred after Anderson won control of the puck and was trying to move deeper into the attacking zone. His head appeared to take the brunt of McAvoy's hit. "I put my shoulder into him. It was a hockey play. I tried to finish my check in a legal manner," McAvoy said. "I was penalised two minutes and I served it."

However, the league said it issued the disciplinary measure because McAvoy could have made the check on Anderson without hitting him in the head.

In a video released by the department that talked about the suspension, the league said: "It's important to note that while Anderson's body and front shoulder do absorb some contact on this check, the main point of contact was the head."



St. Louis Blues left wing Pat Maroon is congratulated by teammates after scoring the game-winning goal in double overtime in game seven of the second round of the 2019 Stanley Cup playoffs against the Dallas Stars at Enterprise Center. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

GOLF

Koepka uses visit to Big D to prepare for Big Apple

'I usually play the week before a major. It's worked for me'

Reuters
New York

Brooks Koepka does not sound too concerned about whether he wins the PGA Tour's Byron Nelson tournament this week as long as leaves the Big D for the Big Apple with his game in good shape.

Koepka is the best player in a relatively thin field at the PGA Tour event at Trinity Forest Golf Course in Dallas starting today. Most of the big boys are taking the week off to tune-up at home before heading to New York next week for the PGA Championship. But world number three Koepka, who will defend his title at Bethpage Black on Long Island, prefers to play his way into major championships.

"I usually play the week before a major. It's worked for me," the 29-year-old American told reporters on Tuesday.

"You don't need to play that great. I like building a little bit of rhythm, finding my game, figuring out how to score, how to manage my game."

Koepka has had the Wanamaker Trophy in his possession for only nine months since holding off Tiger Woods and Adam Scott to win the PGA Championship at Bellerive in St. Louis last August.

It was the final time the event would be played in the heat of summer before moving to the May date that makes it the second major championship of the year instead of the last. The Masters was held in April, while the US Open will be played in June and the British Open in July.

Koepka came close to making it three major wins in four starts when he finished only a stroke behind Woods at the Masters, despite a double-bogey at the par-three 12th at Augusta National in the final round.

Even with that near-miss, he still has three major titles to his name - the 2017 and 2018 U.S. Opens as well as last year's PGA. Another prominent player at the Byron Nelson this week is three-times major champion Jordan Spieth, a local hero who lately has fallen on lean times.

A tie for 21st at the Masters was his best result of the year and Spieth has slipped to 39th in the world, his lowest ranking since he burst onto the tour in 2013.

As popular as Spieth is in his home city, perhaps the biggest gallery this week will flock to watch Tony Romo, the retired former Dallas Cowboys quarterback who remains a beloved figure in north Texas.

Never mind that he is a 10,000-1 shot to take the title.



Brooks Koepka of USA plays a shot during practice prior to the start of the AT&T Byron Nelson in Irving, Texas. (Getty Images/AFP)

Kirk takes indefinite leave to deal with depression and alcohol abuse

Four-times PGA Tour winner **Chris Kirk** is taking an indefinite leave from professional golf to deal with depression and alcohol abuse. Kirk, whose last win came in 2015 at the Colonial tournament in Fort Worth, Texas, has struggled on the course for most of this year, with only one top-20 finish. "I have dealt with alcohol abuse and depression for some time now," he wrote on Twitter on Tuesday. "I thought I could control it, but after multiple relapses I have come to realise that I can't fix this on my own. "I will be taking an indefinite leave from the PGA Tour to deal with these issues. I don't know when I will be back." Kirk, who turns 34 on Wednesday, was ranked as high as 16th in the world in 2015. He is currently ranked 188th in the world.



RYDER CUP

European captain Harrington to reduce wild cards

AFF
London

European captain Pádraig Harrington has decided to cut his wild card selections from four to three for next year's Ryder Cup in the United States.

Nine of Harrington's players will qualify automatically for the 2020 Ryder Cup at Whistling Straits as a result of points earned on the European Tour - a process that will start with the 2019 PGA Championship at Wentworth, southwest of London and finish at the 2020 edition of the flagship tournament.

Harrington will then select three wild cards to complete his team for Europe's defence of the team golf trophy they won in commanding style in Paris last year.

"I have said on many occasions that one of the reasons for recent European success in the Ryder Cup is continuity,"

Harrington explained in a tour statement issued Wednesday.

"It is a theme that will be prevalent across my captaincy and I think you can see that in the overall qualification process for the 2020 team," the Irishman added. "Having said that, I am pleased that the (European Tour) tournament committee agreed to the change of wild card numbers."

"I have spoken to a number of people regarding the ninth player automatically qualifying for the team and in my experience, a player is more comfortable when he has qualified, hence my reasoning behind this change," the three-time major winner explained.

"I am also delighted to be starting and ending the process at the BMW PGA Championship at Wentworth."

"It is one of our most prestigious events, played at an iconic venue and the home of the European Tour itself, and will help give a real narrative to the qualification race," he said.



Pádraig Harrington of Ireland hits a shot on the driving range prior to the start of the AT&T Byron Nelson in Irving, Texas. (AFP)

Bucs' Pierre-Paul fractured neck, surgery possible

Tampa Bay Buccaneers defensive end Jason Pierre-Paul sustained a fractured neck in a single-car crash last week and could require surgery, multiple media outlets reported Tuesday.

The 30-year-old will visit neck specialists for opinions, and ESPN reported he will likely need an operation. NFL Network reported Pierre-Paul could indeed be headed for surgery - which would carry a recovery time of five to six months - but added there is hope the injury could heal on its own, and he could be ready for the start of the season. The Buccaneers issued a statement that did not acknowledge the specific injury but confirmed the evaluation process is ongoing.

"As we stated last week following the news of Jason's auto accident, our immediate concern was for both Jason and his passenger," general manager Jason Licht said in the statement.

"While Jason was treated and released in south Florida the same day of the accident, we wanted to ensure that our

medical team had an opportunity to perform a thorough evaluation here in Tampa, and that process is currently ongoing."

The accident occurred around 5am Thursday in Broward County, Fla., and Pierre-Paul was taken to the hospital and released later that day. NFL Network reported Tuesday that Pierre-Paul's car went off the road after it hydroplaned during a rain storm.

Pierre-Paul was not ticketed. He missed time due to an off-field injury in 2015, when he lost a finger and part of a second finger in a fireworks accident in Miami on July 4 of that year.

Pierre-Paul was traded from the New York Giants to the Buccaneers in March 2018, a year after signing a four-year, \$62 million extension. He had 12.5 sacks, 20 quarterback hits and 16 tackles for loss in 16 games in 2018, his highest marks since 2014.

Meanwhile free agent running back Bilal Powell has been cleared to play after a career-threatening neck injury and is looking for an employer.

RUGBY

Sponsor dumps Folau as Jones slams verdict

AFF
Sydney

Sportswear company ASICS dumped Israel Folau as a brand ambassador yesterday over homophobic comments, as former Wallabies coach Alan Jones slammed those punishing him as "sick".

The devoutly Christian player on Tuesday was found guilty of a "high-level" breach of the sport's code of conduct after posting an anti-gay statement on social media, leaving his career hanging in the balance.

He faces his lucrative four-year Rugby Australia contract being terminated, with the three-person code of conduct panel taking written submissions from his legal team and the governing body before deciding on his punishment.

Rugby Australia moved to sack

him after he posted a banner on Instagram last month that read: "Dunks, homosexuals, adulterers, liars, fornicators, thieves, atheists and idolators - Hell awaits you." It followed a similar tirade last year.

ASICS, which is also a leading Wallabies sponsor, severed ties with Folau, saying "we believe sport is for everyone and we champion inclusively and diversity."

"While Israel Folau is entitled to his personal views, some of those expressed in recent social media posts are not aligned with those of ASICS," it added in a Facebook statement. "As such, our partnership with Israel has become untenable and he will no longer represent ASICS as a brand ambassador."

Last year ASICS renewed its contract with Rugby Australia for a further six years.

Folau's case has proved complex and divisive, pitting his

right to free speech against the offence he has caused others and damage to rugby's reputation.

It has split opinion with several Pacific Island-origin players supporting him, while others, including within the Wallabies camp, have been critical.

'HOLD YOUR HEAD UP'

Jones, who coached the Wallabies during a golden era in the late 1980s, has been a frequent critic of Rugby Australia and one of the staunchest defenders of Folau's right to free speech.

Now an influential and outspoken radio broadcaster, known for his conservative views, he relayed a message Tuesday he said he received from the player.

"I've just had a note from Israel, he won't mind if I'm sharing it with you because I said to him, 'Hold your head up?' Jones said on his morning programme. "He said, 'Alan, I'm at peace, mate. My head is held high'"

Jones has previously railed against free speech being "completely corrupted" in Australia and he let rip again Tuesday.

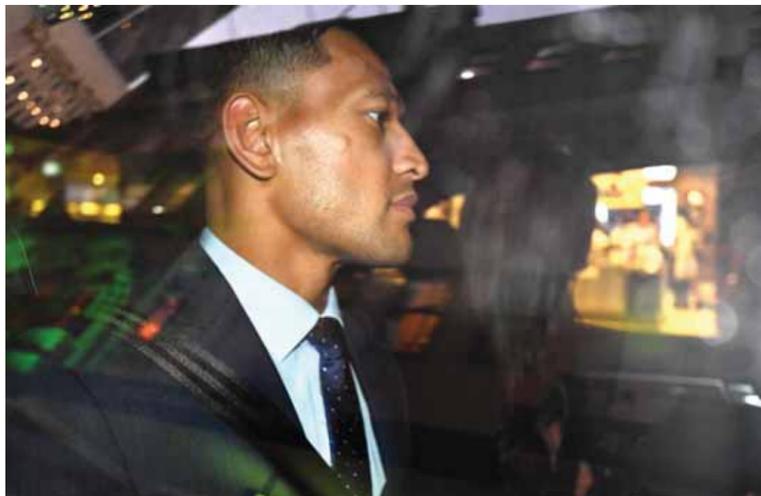
"Nothing wrong with Israel, it's the society and those who prosecute him who are sick," he said. Jones added that he was "ashamed" of the sport he loves and that "the battle has just begun."

"Israel Folau, with my support and the support of millions of Australians, will take this fight every inch of the way," he said.

"Rugby union preaches diversity - they really mean uniformity. They preach inclusion but they exclude Israel."

The code of conduct panel could decide to fire Folau, or issue fines or suspensions.

No timescale was given for its decision, with legal experts warning that whatever happens an appeal is likely, potentially followed by a drawn-out court battle.

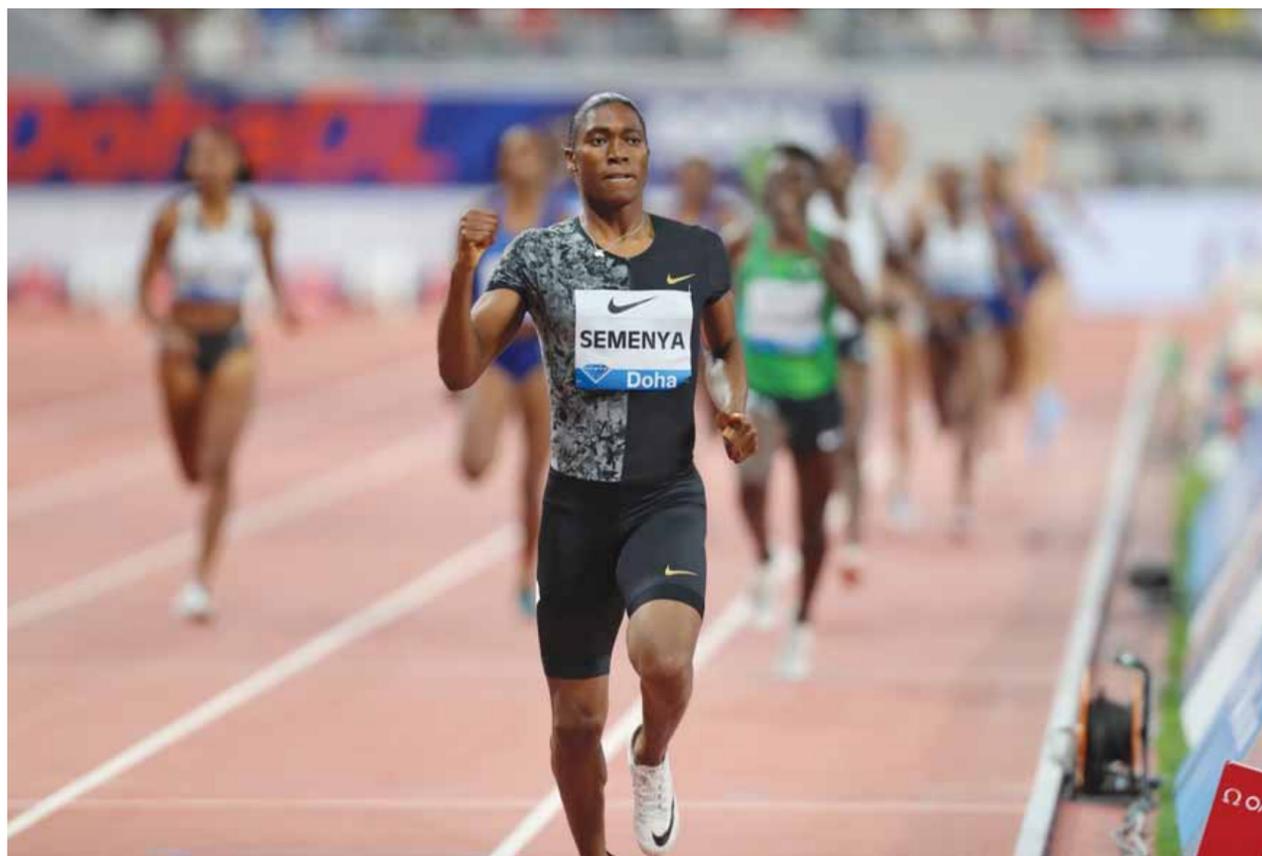


Australia's full-back Israel Folau leaves after a code of conduct hearing in Sydney yesterday. (AFP)

FOCUS

D-Day for DSD athletes hoping to compete at Worlds

'We have seen in a decade and more of research that approximately 7.1 in every 1,000 elite female athletes in our sport are DSD athletes with very high testosterone levels in the male range'



South Africa's Caster Semenya competes in the women's 800m during the IAAF Diamond League competition on May 3, 2019 in Doha. (AFP)

Reuters
Cape Town

Athletes with differences in sexual development (DSD) hoping to compete at the World Championships must submit to new rules curbing their levels of testosterone from yesterday but Caster Semenya appears ready to resist the regulations.

Athletics chiefs had set a Wednesday deadline for DSD athletes to submit blood samples to their medical team with a testosterone level below five nanomoles per litre, which they must maintain over the next four-and-a-half months.

But double 800ms Olympic champion Semenya posted a

picture of a clenched fist with the word 'resist' on Twitter yesterday morning, a signal she will not comply.

The International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) has been heavily criticised for the rules, with allegations that the science is flawed, regulations ethically dubious and potential medical side-effects unknown.

One of the most vocal have been the World Medical Association (WMA), who urged their member physicians in 114 countries not to assist in the implementation of the regulations.

But the global body has responded in a letter to the WMA, saying the rules have been developed after 'many scientific publications and ob-

servations from the field during the last 15 years.'

The IAAF clarified that the regulations only apply to DSD athletes who are legally female (or intersex), have male chromosomes (XY) not female chromosomes (XX), testes not ovaries, testosterone in the male range and the ability to make use of that testosterone circulating within their bodies.

"In 46XY DSD individuals, reducing serum testosterone to female levels by using a contraceptive pill (or other means) is the recognised standard of care for 46XY DSD athletes with a female gender identity. These medications are gender-affirming," the IAAF letter said.

The world governing body added that athletes who submit

to the regulations will be assured of privacy.

"We have seen in a decade and more of research that approximately 7.1 in every 1,000 elite female athletes in our sport are DSD athletes with very high testosterone levels in the male range," the IAAF said on its website (www.iaaf.org).

"The majority of those athletes compete in the restricted events covered by the regulations."

Semenya, who last month lost an appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) to halt the implementation of the regulations, which cover races from 400 metres to a mile, appears firm in her decision not to comply.

Along with Athletics South

Africa, she has 30 days from the CAS verdict on May 1 to launch an appeal to the Swiss Federal Tribunal, and repeated enquiries from Reuters over whether she would do so have not been answered.

"I will be here defending the world. I'm never going anywhere," a defiant Semenya told reporters after winning the 800 metres at the Doha Diamond League meeting last Friday.

"I believe in my legal team, they will do their best to get me back on the track."

But she also suggested that her return to Doha could see her compete over distances not covered by the regulations.

"I'm a power athlete, I can run from 100 metres to 5 km, so I can run any race I want."

DOPING

Middle distance runner Savina gets 12-year drugs ban

Reuters
Moscow

Russian middle distance runner Kseniya Savina has been suspended for 12 years after she was found to have taken a banned substance and then provided false medical documents to avoid sanctions, the Athletics Integrity Unit said on Wednesday.

The 29-year-old Savina, whose ban essentially ends her career, tested positive in an out-of-competition test for the banned blood-boosting hormone EPO last year and was provisionally suspended.

She claimed at the time it was her coach and husband Alexei Savin who had needed the medication to treat what she said was chronic renal failure, and that it must have been mixed up with her own back pain medication, the AIU said.

After Savina provided medical documents to support the claim that her husband had chronic renal failure, further investigation by the Russian anti-doping agency (RUSADA) for the AIU showed the documents had been forged.

"The Athlete failed to respond as required by the specified deadline of 17 April 2019

and she is therefore deemed... to have admitted the first and second anti-doping rule violations and to have acceded to the consequences specified in the notice of charge," the AIU said in a statement.

Savina's suspension period is 12 years and all her results since May 2018 are void, the AIU said.

Such lengthy bans are uncommon but the athlete's attempts to shift blame and avoid sanctions by providing false documentation added another anti-doping rule violation in her case.

Savin, her coach, received a four-year ban for violating anti-doping regulations, the AIU said in a separate statement.

Russia has been rocked by several sporting bans in recent years after international investigations found evidence of widespread, state-sponsored doping in athletics and a string of other sports.

Russian anti-doping agency RUSADA and Russia's athletics federation were suspended after a 2015 report commissioned by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) found evidence of state-sponsored doping in Russian athletics.

RUSADA was reinstated last year, while Russia's athletics federation remains suspended by the global athletics governing body IAAF.



Russia's Kseniya Savina.

Cofidis and three Spanish teams invited to Vuelta a Espana

French team Cofidis and Spanish teams Caja Rural-RGA, Burgos-BH and Euskadi-Murias have been named on the list for this year's Vuelta a Espana, the organisation announced on Tuesday. The 74th edition of the Vuelta will include 22 teams, with 18 of those earning their place through direct qualification. Spain's Jesus Herrada, who

wore the leader's red jersey for two days last year, will front the challenge of Cofidis while they also have French sprinter Nacer Bouhanni, who won a stage in 2018.

The Vuelta a Espana will start on August 24 in Torrevieja and finishes in Madrid on September 15, with 3,272 kilometres and 21 stages in between.

SPOTLIGHT

New mixed relay 'just what athletics needs'

AFP
Kawasaki, Japan

The new mixed 4x400m relay is just what athletics needs to inject more fun and excitement into competition, according to British star Perri Shakes-Drayton, although it has also thrown up some unforeseen difficulties.

The new race, with teams of two men and two women, is poised to make its Olympic debut at Tokyo 2020 as part of a drive by organisers to make the sport more inclusive.

And Shakes-Drayton, who won silver for Britain in the 4x400m World Championships on home soil in London in 2017, said the idea initially took some getting used to. "When I saw it was listed on the programme, I thought 'mixed? A mixed relay?' It took me by surprise," the 30-year-old told AFP in an interview yesterday.

"But it will be interesting and fun. I think that's what the sport needs. Something different and exciting," she enthused, as the British team trained for this weekend's World Relays in Yokohama near Tokyo.

She said one of the challenges had come in passing the baton between tall male athletes and their shorter female counterparts and hinted that a man would be more likely to run the anchor leg for this reason.

When the first trials took place at the Asian Games in Jakarta, teams which ran in

the order man-woman-woman-man appeared to do the best. However, China's Yang Lei described the event at the time as "chaos" after a gridlock emerged at the final baton handover. British 400m runner Rabah Yousif, a double Bronze-medal winner at World Championships in 2015 and 2017, told AFP the onus would still be down to the individual to run a strong leg.

"You have to perform on your leg because you can't be doing all four legs. When you do your best as an individual, it will help the team... It's still a 400m. It's just with other guys running or two girls and two guys," he said.

"I like the idea of a mixed relay because it's more fun and more excitement. You won't know the race is finished until the last leg and even on the last leg you won't know what's going to happen," as men could be chasing down women on the anchor leg.

Britain has a strong track record in the relay - with the men's 4x100m team winning gold at the World Championships in 2017 as Jamaican legend Usain Bolt pulled up with an injury. And Shakes-Drayton said the whole squad was looking strong as they ramp up preparations for the World Championships in Doha in September and then the Olympics in 2020.

The World Relays in Yokohama will see 790 athletes from 47 teams competing, including current world 100m sprint champion Justin Gatlin from the United States.



British athletes Anyika Onuora (left) and Perri Shakes-Drayton train with the new mixed 400m relay team at the Todoroki Stadium in Kawasaki yesterday. (AFP)

TENNIS/MADRID OPEN

Nadal makes light work of teenager Auger-Aliassime

'I feel like I'm having fun playing tennis again which is always a good thing for me'

AFP
Madrid

Rafael Nadal made the perfect start to his bid for a sixth Madrid Open title yesterday by beating Canadian teenager Felix Auger-Aliassime in straight sets.

Nadal has endured a turbulent few weeks after slipping to surprise defeats in both Monte Carlo and Barcelona last month before then being hit by a stomach bug on Sunday.

But there was never much sign of an upset in the Spanish capital, where the world number two began with a 6-3, 6-3 victory. The 18-year-old Auger-Aliassime is enjoying something of a breakthrough year after beating Borna Coric, Fabio Fognini and Stefanos Tsitsipas, as well as Denis Shapovalov here in the first round.

Aside from some late resistance, however, that saw a nervous Nadal broken when serving for the match, Auger-Aliassime struggled to cope with his opponent's power and spin on one of his favourite courts.

Nadal has not arrived in Madrid without winning in either Monte Carlo or Barcelona since 2015 and, after also pulling out of Indian Wells due to a knee injury in March, concern was growing ahead of the French Open later this month.

The 32-year-old, who will be chasing his 18th Grand Slam title at Roland Garros, will now face another young talent in America's Frances Tiafoe, with either Stan Wawrinka or Kei Nishikori waiting in the quarter-finals.

Nishikori and Wawrinka will meet in the third round today, an early showdown for two players that have reached 12 Grand Slam semi-finals between them.

It took Nishikori just over two hours to win 7-5, 7-5 against Bolivian qualifier Hugo Dellien, who saved seven set points during a fightback from 5-1 down in the opening set.

Wawrinka, meanwhile, beat Argentina's Guido Pella 6-3, 6-4, with a break in each set proving enough for the three-time Grand Slam champion.

The Swiss has won his last two matches against Nishikori, including a three-set victory in Rotterdam in February, when he went on to reach his first final since undergoing knee surgery in 2017. On Tuesday Roger Federer shook off a brief bout of pre-match jitters as he returned to play after a three-year absence, posting a 6-2, 6-3 win over Richard Gasquet.

OSAKA IN CONTROL

Juan Martin del Potro lost 6-3, 2-6, 7-5 to Serbia's Laslo Djere in his first match since February as the Argentine continues to work his way back from a knee



Spain's Rafael Nadal returns the ball to Canada's Felix Auger Aliassime during their Madrid Open match at the Caja Magica in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

injury. Nishikori's compatriot and world number one Naomi Osaka is through to the quarter-finals of the women's tournament for the first time after she eased past Belarusian Aliaksandra Sasnovich 6-2, 6-3.

Osaka pulled out of the semi-finals in Stuttgart last month with an abdominal injury but has said she is no longer feeling discomfort during matches.

"The ab injury was always sort of in the back of my mind, but that was more in the first round and now I feel fine, so

that's great," Osaka said. "I'm at a really good place right now. I feel like I'm having fun playing tennis again which is always a good thing for me. I always play well if I have that mentality."

In the last eight, the two-time major champion will face Switzerland's Belinda Bencic who beat Ukrainian qualifier Kateryna Kozlova 6-0, 6-2.

A potential semi-final foe for Osaka is world number three Simona Halep, who annihilated Slovakian Viktorija Kuzmova 6-0, 6-0 in 44 minutes.

RESULTS

Men's 2nd round

Jeremy Chardy (FRA) bt Diego Schwartzman (ARG) 6-1, 6-2
Laslo Djere (SRB) bt Juan Martin del Potro (ARG x7) 6-3, 2-6, 7-5
Gael Monfils (FRA x15) bt Marlon Fucsovics (HUN) 1-6, 6-4, 6-2
Fabio Fognini (ITA x10) bt John Millman (AUS) 6-2, 6-2
Kei Nishikori (JPN x6) bt Hugo Dellien (BOL) 7-5, 7-5
Stan Wawrinka (SUI) bt Guido Pella (ARG) 6-3, 6-4
Frances Tiafoe (USA) bt Philipp

Kohlschreiber (GER) 6-4, 3-6, 6-3

Rafael Nadal (ESP x2) bt Felix Auger-Aliassime (CAN) 6-3, 6-3

Women's 3rd round

Naomi Osaka (JPN x1) bt Aliaksandra Sasnovich (BLR) 6-2, 6-3
Belinda Bencic (SUI) bt Kateryna Kozlova (UKR) 6-0, 6-2
Simona Halep (ROU x3) bt Viktorija Kuzmova (SVK) 6-0, 6-0
Ashleigh Barty (AUS x9) bt Yulia Putintseva (KAZ) 4-6, 6-1, 6-2
Kiki Bertens (NED x7) bt Anastasiya Sevastova (LAT x12) 6-1, 6-2.

SPOTLIGHT

Leukaemia treatment proceeding smoothly, says Japan's Ikee

Reuters
Tokyo

Japanese swimmer Rikako Ikee, considered a medal contender for the Tokyo Olympics before being diagnosed with leukaemia in February, said yesterday her treatment is proceeding smoothly but sometimes she feels her "heart might break".

Ikee won six titles at last year's Asian Games and also picked up two relay silvers to become the first female athlete to be named the Most Valuable Player at an Asian Game.

Her rich haul in the Jakarta pool propelled her onto the world stage and Ikee was expected to lead a new generation of Japanese swimmers at their home Games next year.

While announcing her diagnosis, the 18-year-old Ikee said she 'couldn't believe it' and she has since been concentrating on treatment, although no details about her illness have been released.

In March, she said on Twitter: "This is dozens of times, hundreds of times, thousands of times harder than I thought. I've had many times where I haven't been able to eat for three days or more. But I won't give up."

Yesterday, using a newly-launched website, Ikee thanked fans for their numerous messages of support and said her treatment was proceeding smoothly but things were occasionally tough.



Japan's Rikako Ikee

"I look outside every day and think that the wind in this season must feel good, and that I'd like to feel the rain, but this has become something to look forward to once I'm released," she said in a hand-written statement posted on the site.

"It's going to be a long hospitalisation and long treatment, but I think of what I want to do when I get out and am staying positive," she said, adding she was spending her time doing puzzles, watching movies and other things she usually does not have time for.

"To be honest, sometimes it feels as if my heart might break, but all the things people have said help cheer me on, and builds up the feeling that I want to keep on fighting and won't give up."

Ikee's coach has held out hopes that she could still compete in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, which start in late July 2020, but she will miss the swimming world championships to be held in Gwangju in July.

FOCUS

Qatari triathletes gain exposure at ITU Multisport World Championships



Qatari athletes Eid al-Bordani and Abdulaziz al-Ali (left) with their coach Mat O'Halloran (right) during the ITU Multisport World Championships, in Pontevedra, Spain.

Qatari triathletes Eid al-Bordani and Abdulaziz al-Ali competed at the recently concluded ITU Multisport World Championships in Pontevedra (Spain), against some of the world's best.

Eid finished 17th in the 25-29 age group with a time of 2h34 in the standard distance duathlon (10km run + 40km bike + 5 KM run). Abdulaziz lined up against the top junior elite duathletes over a sprint distance duathlon (5km run + 20km bike + 2.5km run) in the world. He opened the 5km run leg with a new personal best of 18:35, but was unfortunately forced to withdraw dur-

ing the bike leg. The 18-year-old once again lined up against the top junior elite athletes in the world, this time in the sprint distance aquathlon (750m swim + 5km run).

Where he managed to finish a strong 14th position, outrunning some European athletes, in the closing 5km run.

"The Qataris showed a lot of courage in lining up at a World Championships, the hilly course, cold water, and rainy weather was an added challenge for them. In the end, we reached our objective of gaining experience, and exposure," said Qatar coach Mat O'Halloran.

ATHLETICS

Kipchoge to skip Doha worlds because of record tilt

AFP
Nairobi

In-form marathon great Eliud Kipchoge will skip the world championships in Doha as he prepares for another tilt at breaking the event's mythical two-hour barrier.

Geoffrey Kirui instead heads up the Kenyan men's quintet announced on Tuesday while two-time title holder Edna Kiplagat leads the women's quartet for the Doha worlds, scheduled for September 27-October 6.

However, newly-crowned London marathon women's winner Brigid Kosgei, the youngest ever to win the coveted title, was among the top names not included in the nine-runner squad announced by Athletics Kenya.

Kiplagat returns for her fifth-consecutive world championships. She has form at the world championships, having led an historic Kenyan clean sweep in the 2011 words in South Korea.

She returned two years later to defend her world title in Moscow, becoming the first woman ever to do so. But Kosgei is a surprise exclusion from the squad.

The in-form 25-year-old last month became the youngest London marathon winner in history. Vivian Cheruiyot, a double 5000m and 10000m world champion, was also a surprise omission from the women's lineup.

Men's Olympic champion Kipchoge had asked to be excluded because the Doha meet clashes with a special race in

which the Olympic champion will try and break the two-hour marathon barrier. Kipchoge went close to smashing the barrier when he came in 25 seconds off the mark in a staged race around Italy's Monza race circuit in 2017. He will make a second attempt in a special race to be held between late September and early October, likely in London.

Kenyan marathon squads for World Championships

Men: Geoffrey Kirui, Paul Lon-yangata, Amos Kipruto, Laban Korir, Ernest Ngeno
Women: Edna Kiplagat, Visline Jepkesho, Sally Kipyego, Ruth Chepngetich.

Kenya's marathon runner Eliud Kipchoge. (Reuters)

