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CRICKET

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FOOTBALL

Brazil trip 'significant step' for Qatar ahead of 2022 WC

'You have to always focus on your overriding goal. The State of Qatar is heading towards a historic event'

AFP
Doha

First-timers Qatar go into the Copa America with the young team riding high following their triumph in the Asian Cup but humbled by "higher calibre" competition than they encountered in the Emirates.

Head coach Felix Sanchez also said that the tournament would be a "significant step in our journey towards the World Cup" which Qatar will host in 2022.

"We'll play against experienced teams that are certainly of a higher calibre than what we saw at the Asian tournament," he said in an interview with FIFA ahead of the Brazil tournament.

"Our group includes Argentina, whose abilities are well known, and Colombia, who are exceptionally good performers, whether at World Cups or the Copa America. Paraguay also boast a pedigreed history."

The South American continental championship gets underway on June 14 with the hosts Brazil looking for their first title since 2007.

"So, I believe these matches will serve as an important staging post for me and the players. They'll tell us where we currently stand and what we need to do in the next phase," added Sanchez.

Qatar got off to a cautious start in a friendly against Brazil who won 2-0, although the visitors' credible performance was overshadowed by Neymar's travails.

The forward sprained his ankle and was forced to limp off the pitch on crutches, ruling him out of the tournament.

"It was a great game for us. (But) we should learn from our mistakes," said a Qatar team official. "In the second half we played better."

The side, which with Japan was invited to make up the required 12 teams, has struck a cautious tone ahead of their highest profile

Qatar win warm-up game against Brazilian club Madureira



Action from the match between Qatar national team (in maroon) and Brazilian club Madureira (in yellow) in their final Copa America tune-up game in Rio de Janeiro on Sunday. Qatar scored a 2-1 win. After losing to five-time World Champions Brazil in an international friendly on Wednesday, Felix Sanchez's men put up a good show against Madureira, which was played behind closed doors. Qatar and Japan are the two guest teams at the Copa America, which will be held in Brazil from this Friday till July 7. Qatar are in Group B and will open their campaign against Paraguay on June 16 at the prestigious Maracana stadium in Rio de Janeiro. They then face Colombia on June 19, before taking on Lionel Messi's Argentina on June 23. Qatar has never played in the Copa America before and will be using the experience of the tournament to get used to a higher standard of football ahead of their hosting of the 2022 World Cup. Chile are the two-time defending champions, having won the 2015 and 2016 editions of the tournament, though host nation Brazil will be eager to win their first major title since 2013 on home turf.

outing since the Asian Cup.

Qatar's inclusion in the Copa America initially raised eyebrows but both they and Japan reached the Asian Cup final in Abu Dhabi.

Qatar triumphed in that tournament going from zero points at the last Asian Cup to their first continental title in record-breaking style, beating Japan 3-1.

Forward Almoez Ali's bicycle kick helped bring home the trophy and broke Ali Daei's 23-year-old mark for goals at a single Asian Cup.

Ali said the Copa was all about learning for Qatar, continuing the methodical approach which has already paid dividends.

'IT WON'T BE EASY'

"We're not expecting to win, but just to learn because after the World Cup, the Copa America is the biggest competition in the world," Ali said following the Asian Cup win.

"The weakest teams are in Asia, Asia is the weakest continent for football so in the Copa America we will learn more."

The team source acknowledged to AFP that "it won't be easy".

Qatar also has one eye clearly fixed on the 2022 World Cup.

"You have to always focus on your overriding goal. The state of Qatar is heading towards a historic event: hosting the 2022 World Cup," said Sanchez who was given a mandate last month to lead Qatar into the global soccer spectacle when his contract was extended to 2022.

"We need to make sure the squad are in top form and up to the nation's expectations. This means that we'll not be participating just for its own sake, but that we're determined to leave our mark on World Cup history, especially since this will be Qatar's first World Cup."

"Our participation in the 2019 Copa America can be seen as a significant step in our journey towards the World Cup, a journey that we started some time ago," Sanchez said that above all the tournament would be a proving ground for his side's young stars.

After spending many millions of dollars on their world-class Aspire Academy, and scouring the world for top coaches, Qatar are beginning to recoup their investment.

"Since our squad has many young players, we look forward to gaining as much experience as possible in this high-profile tournament," said Sanchez.

"Specifically, that means experiencing the Latin American style of play and taking part in a major tournament in front of many fans. It will also allow us to address important details on and off the pitch."

"I want the team to perform in a proper and honourable way and demonstrate that they've progressed. That's not just measured in accumulating points and progressing to the next round, but if that happens, it would of course be great."

Qatar's Copa America campaign will begin on June 16 against Paraguay.

2019 ICC CRICKET WORLD CUP

Winning matters more to Mashrafe than respect

AFP
Bristol, United Kingdom

Bangladesh captain Mashrafe Mortaza can live without the respect of his opponents so long as his side are winning matches at the World Cup.

The Tigers launched their campaign with an impressive win over South Africa but afterwards Mashrafe was annoyed by suggestions the result constituted an upset.

"Do you think this was a surprise?" he asked pointedly. "If we can deliver our best we knew what we could do. I'm sure some people don't think well of our cricket. We are concentrating on our game and letting other people talk."

Since then Bangladesh have



Bangladesh's captain Mashrafe Mortaza (second from right) celebrates with teammates after taking a catch to dismiss England's Jason Roy (not pictured) during the match in Cardiff, Wales, on Saturday. (AFP)

suffered an agonising two-wicket loss to New Zealand before being on the wrong end of a 106-run thrashing by tournament hosts and favourites England in Cardiff last weekend.

Those defeats make Bangladesh's match against a struggling Sri Lanka in Bristol today all the more important.

"I'm not worried about who is respecting us, I'm more worried about our performance," Mashrafe told reporters in Bristol yesterday.

"Winning matches is more important for us. I don't think respect is going to work in the 22 yards (of a pitch). It all depends on how we react on the ground."

"If we can win two points, this is more important than respect at the moment," added the 35-year-old veteran paceman.

Bangladesh knocked England out of the group stage on the way to reaching the quarter-finals of the 2015 World Cup.

But this year's format is different, with 10 teams taking part in a round-robin group stage that will see the top four qualify for the semi-finals.

"If you are asking all 10 captains this question, they will look to the semis, which is an honest call," said Mashrafe as he answered a query about Bangladesh's ambitions for this World Cup.

"Obviously we would like to be in the semis but right now, the calculation is difficult."

"But again I'd say it's very much possible. We have to make sure we come back onto the winning track."

Sri Lanka were overwhelmed by champions Australia and then suffered a batting collapse before just doing enough to beat outsiders Afghanistan.

But Mashrafe insisted he felt no extra pressure with Bangladesh being regarded as favourites to beat Sri Lanka.

"Even the New Zealand match, even the England match, I'm not sure what other people were thinking, but we were expecting to win," he said.

"I think the pressure will be there every match. I don't want to say there's no pressure - 100 percent pressure will be there."

"But at the same time we have to cope with that pressure and make sure we deliver."

Forecast rain in Bristol, however, could scupper the hopes of both sides for a morale-boosting win.

"I hope that we'll play a full match tomorrow," said Mashrafe. "The boys are really hungry to win matches."



FAREWELL

India World Cup hero Yuvraj ends roller-coaster

AFP
Mumbai

Yuvraj Singh, a winner of two World Cup titles who overcame cancer and a drop in form to fight his way back into India's national side, announced yesterday that he is retiring from cricket.

"It was a great roller coaster ride and beautiful story but it has to come to an end. It was the right time to go," the 37-year-old left-hand batsman told a press conference in Mumbai.

At his peak, Yuvraj was a rip-roaring batsman. He hit 14 centuries in one-

day internationals and bludgeoned England's Stuart Broad for six sixes in one over at the 2007 World Twenty20.

"I have been playing international cricket on and off for 17 years. Now it is time to say goodbye," he said, at times fighting back tears as he made the announcement.

"Cricket has given me everything and that's why I am standing here," he said.

"It's been a love-hate relationship. It taught me how to fall, how to fight, how to get up again.

"I am proud of what I have achieved on and off the field."

One of the cleanest strikers of the

ball and a middle-order lynchpin, Singh played the last of his 304 one-day internationals two years ago.

He played a key role in India's World Twenty20 triumph in 2007 and was player-of-the-tournament – scoring four fifties and a century – when India won the 50-over World Cup in 2011.

A few weeks later, Singh was diagnosed with a rare lung cancer.

"It was a harsh reality... (but) I was not going to let that disease defeat me," said Singh.

Although he fought back to play again, he was not able to match his high-scoring skills.

He suffered a new blow when India

reached the World T20 final against Sri Lanka in 2014 and he was later dropped from the one-day side after playing poorly.

"I scored 11 off 21 balls. It was so shattering that I felt my career was over."

Again Singh did not give up.

He was recalled for a home series against England in 2017 to bring stability to the middle order.

Singh posted a career-best ODI score of 150 in the series and was included in India's squad for Champions Trophy the same year but his form dipped again.

He scored 8,701 runs from 304

ODIs, including 14 centuries. A handy bowler, he also took 111 wickets to underline his all-round talent.

Singh's stats in Test cricket were less flattering. He collected 1,900 runs from 40 games at an average of under 34.

"My life has been like a roller coaster ride. Winning the World Cup (in 2011) and being named the man of the series was like a dream," Singh said as his mother and wife – Bollywood actress Hazel Keech – sat among the audience.

Singh had been with the Mumbai Indians in the Indian Premier League this year.



FOCUS

Batting coach backs Mendis, Mathews to come good

There was nothing about his form to suggest there's anything to worry about'

AFP
Bristol, United Kingdom

Sri Lanka batting coach Jon Lewis believes it is just a matter of time before Kusal Mendis and Angelo Mathews hit form at the World Cup.

Experienced all-rounder Mathews has yet to open his account after ducks against both New Zealand and Afghanistan while Mendis has scarcely been more productive with a nought in the defeat by the Black Caps followed by just two runs in a tense win over the Afghans.

Sri Lanka, whose last match against Pakistan was abandoned without a ball bowled, face Bangladesh in Bristol today.

"We have some experienced players in the middle with Kusal Mendis and Angelo Mathews," Lewis said yesterday.

"They obviously haven't quite fired yet but Afghanistan let us get away with that. I'm confident players of that quality will definitely come to the party soon."

"With Angelo you have to have faith in a guy who has done as much as he has over a long period of time and he tells me he is in a good place and good headspace."

"I have no reason to doubt that the runs will come from him," added Lewis of the 32-year-old all-rounder, who has scored two

one-day international hundreds and 37 fifties.

Mendis has just one ODI hundred from 65 matches, although it did come against Bangladesh in Dambulla two years ago.

This is in marked contrast to the 24-year-old's Test record of six centuries in 38 matches.

Lewis, asked to explain the difference, said: "Mendis could do with a little bit of a confidence boost. I think for him it's a case of just getting through those first 20 balls."

"In the build-up to the World Cup, he played well against Scotland and the two warm-up games he looked in good form even though he only got 20s and 30s, which was a downer."

"Those would have been a good opportunity to get a big score, but there was nothing about his form in either of those two games to suggest there's anything to worry about."

"He's had two low scores and of course it would be good if he had more runs behind him, but I think he's probably only 20 balls from being really away."

Lewis, former coach of English county side Durham, confirmed Sri Lanka would be without Nuwan Pradeep, who took four for 31 against Afghanistan, after the paceman suffered a finger injury during training on Sunday. Suranga Lakmal is set to be brought in as a like-for-like replacement.



Sri Lanka's player Kusal Mendis (right) bats in the nets in Bristol, England, on Sunday. (AFP)

BOTTOMLINE

India and Australia captains call for action over 'unfair' bails

AFP
London

India captain Virat Kohli and Australia skipper Aaron Finch joined forces to condemn the "unfair" bail controversy that threatens to ruin the ongoing World Cup.

Australia opener David Warner avoided being bowled early in his side's unsuccessful run-chase at the Oval on Sunday when he deflected Jasprit Bumrah's delivery onto the wicket via his boot.

Not for the first time in this tournament, the ball struck the stumps but failed to dislodge the bails, meaning Warner earned an unexpected reprieve.

It was the fifth incident in the tournament of the 'zing' bails, which contain lights that flash when the ball hits the wicket, failing to come off when hit.

In the West Indies' game against Australia on Thursday, Chris Gayle was saved when the bails stayed on despite his stump being clipped by a 91mph (146kph) Mitchell Starc delivery.

Other high-profile instances included South Africa's Quinton de Kock being reprieved against



Australia's David Warner (left) and India's Mahendra Singh Dhoni look on after a Jasprit Bumrah delivery touched the former's stumps but did not dislodge the bails during the match on Sunday. (AFP)

England in the tournament's opening game and Sri Lanka's Dimuth Karunaratne surviving against New Zealand.

The International Cricket Council (ICC) have defended using the 'zing' bails, claiming they are lighter than the standard wooden ones normally used at all levels of cricket.

But Warner, who was on one

at the time of his escape, went on to score 56, and the issue is becoming a huge talking point, with former England captains Michael Vaughan and Nasser Hussain calling on the ICC to do something about the issue.

Although India won the match by 36 runs, Warner's escape could have been a turning point and Kohli made it clear the

situation was unacceptable.

"Definitely. This is not something you expect at international level," he told reporters. "The technology is great. It's very precise when you make something happen with the stumps."

"But you literally have to smash the stumps really hard to knock them out. That's me as a batsman saying that."

"These are fast bowlers, these are not medium-pace bowlers."

"We checked and the stump was not knocked in very hard so I don't know what's going on. Is the stump too thick or too rigid?"

"No team will like to see that, if you bowl a good ball and you don't get a guy out. I haven't seen that happen so many times in the past."

Finch's team were beneficiaries of the latest bail incident, but that did not stop the Australia captain from also voicing his concerns.

Asked if it was wrong the bails could effectively decide a major match, Finch said: "Yeah, I think so. We were on the right end of it today, but I think going forward it is a bit unfair at times. It hit the stumps pretty hard. It does seem to be happening more and

more, which is unfortunate."

"I'm not sure what they can do. I don't know how much lighter they can make the bails."

"You would hate to see something like that happen in a World Cup semi-final or final when you have done the hard work to set up the batsman."

BALL-TAMPERING

Finch had to defuse another potential controversy after Australia spinner Adam Zampa faced allegations of ball-tampering.

Zampa was pictured during the match putting his hand into his pocket and then rubbing the ball several times.

The incident came just a year after Australia stars Warner and Steve Smith, as well as teammate Cameron Bancroft were banned for their roles in a ball-tampering scheme during a Test in South Africa.

On this occasion, Finch insisted Zampa was using hand-warmers he had put in his pocket, as he apparently does for every match. "I haven't seen the photos, so I can't comment on them. I know for a fact he has hand warmers in his pocket. He has them in every single game he plays," Finch said.

UPDATE

South Africa v West Indies tie rained off

AFP
Southampton, United Kingdom

The World Cup match between South Africa and the West Indies was abandoned yesterday after persistent heavy rain in Southampton, with both sides earning a point each.

Earlier, West Indies paceman Sheldon Cottrell reduced Faf du Plessis's team to 29 for two before rain stopped play.

"Very disappointing, but you can't control the weather. We didn't get close to a game," Du Plessis said.

The West Indies are back in Southampton on Friday to play England and skipper Jason Holder hopes all-rounder Andre Russell will be fit to face the hosts after missing yesterday's game with a knee injury.

"We are hoping he pulls up alright. I guess it is a blessing this game is over and we can look forward to the game against England," Holder said.

South Africa, desperately needing a win after defeats in their first three matches of the tournament in England and Wales, lost the toss and were put in to bat under threatening skies.

They were quickly in trouble, with Hashim Amla edging Cottrell to Chris Gayle at slip for just six, sparking the bowler's trademark celebration featuring a short march and salute.

That brought Aiden Markram to the wicket but he had only made five when he tickled a Cottrell delivery down the legside and wicketkeeper Shai Hope completed the catch to leave South Africa in deep trouble at 28-2 in the seventh over.

In the following over, delivered by Oshane Thomas, rain stopped play and the covers came on.

The West Indies are fifth in the World Cup table with three points after three matches, while South Africa are second from bottom after four games, leaving their hopes of making the semi-finals hanging by a thread.

South Africa face Afghanistan at Cardiff on Saturday and Du Plessis admitted his team were in need of a morale-boosting win against the minnows.

"Everyone should be fit for the next game. We are in a bad position but it's our own fault," he said.

"We haven't played our best cricket so far and we need a solid performance to get the team's confidence up."

SPOTLIGHT

Kohli comes to booed Smith's defence



India's captain Virat Kohli (left) speaks with Australia's David Warner during the match at The Oval in London on Sunday. (AFP)

Reuters
London

Virat Kohli won a match with the bat and hearts with his sportsmanship after silencing Indian fans who booed Australia's Steve Smith in Sunday's World Cup contest at the Oval.

Smith and teammate David Warner have faced hostile crowds since returning from year-long bans for their roles in a ball-tampering scandal in South Africa early last year.

A section of the predominantly Indian crowd at the Oval booed Smith when the Australian was stationed at third man and Kohli noticed.

The India captain, who went on to score a typically fluent 82, raised his hand to draw the crowd's attention, gestured for them to clap the Australian instead, and shook his head before resuming batting.

The International Cricket Council shared the video on its Twitter handle calling it "absolute class".

"I think what's happened has happened long back. The guy is back, he's trying to play well for his side... it's not good to see

someone down like that, to be honest," Kohli told reporters.

"We've had issues in the past. We've had a few arguments on the field. But you don't want to see a guy feeling that heat every time he goes out to play."

"What's happened has happened. Everyone has known that. He's come back. He's worked hard. He's playing well for his side now."

Smith's 69 was the highest score in Australia's unsuccessful chase against India who won the high-scoring contest by 36 runs.

Kohli said he apologised to Smith for the behaviour of the India fans.

"There's so many Indian fans here, I just didn't want them to set a bad example, because he didn't do anything to be booed in my opinion," added Kohli.

"He was just standing there, and I felt bad because if I was in a position where something had happened with me and I had apologised, I accepted it and I came back and still I would get booed, I wouldn't like it."

"So I just felt for him, and I told him, 'I'm sorry on behalf of the crowd; because I've seen that happen in a few earlier games as well and in my opinion that's not acceptable.'"

FOCUS

Pakistan have no need to fear Australia: Hafeez

'England were playing top cricket and people thought it would be hard to beat them'

AFP
Taunton, United Kingdom

Veteran batsman Mohamed Hafeez has urged his side to take the confidence from their win over hosts England in their next World Cup match against champions Australia. The 38-year-old was Pakistan's saviour in their sensational 14-run win over England in Nottingham, riding his luck on the way to a match-turning 84 off 62 balls. That helped Pakistan post a challenging total of 348-8 and set up a confidence-boosting win after they flopped badly in their opening seven-wicket defeat by the West Indies. "I think all 10 teams are beatable," Hafeez told AFP on Sunday. "If you look at England they were playing top cricket and people were thinking it would be hard to beat them." Hafeez, speaking before Australia suffered a 36-run loss to India at the Oval on Sunday, added: "But all teams are beatable... if you talk of our next opponent (Australia) they are also playing very good cricket but they too can be defeated." Pakistan, who face the title-holders at Taunton tomorrow, have a dismal recent record against Australia - they've won just one of the last 14 one-day



Mohamed Hafeez's 62-ball 84 had helped Pakistan pick up a sensational 14-run win over hosts and favourites England in Nottingham last week. (AFP)

internationals between the teams dating back to October 2014. Australia - who have won four of the last five World Cups - completed a 5-0 whitewash of Pakistan in the United Arab Emirates in March, albeit Pakistan

rested seven of their top players.

'MOMENTUM'

"Yes, we don't have a very good record against Australia because they play tough cricket but every day is a new day," said Hafeez.

"This is a World Cup and we now have momentum after our win over England."

Pakistan were left to rue persistent rain in Bristol on Friday, which led to a no-result wash-out in their match against Sri

Lanka with both teams receiving a point.

"Yes, that was frustrating but you cannot do much about the weather and now we have moved on. But I am sure when we play again we will put up the same game that we played against England," Hafeez promised.

Hafeez said Pakistan's remarkable turnaround in their first two games - they were bowled out for a paltry 105 by the West Indies in Nottingham - was down to acknowledging their mistakes.

"I think we realised that we played a very bad game and we gave confidence to each other and convinced each other that we can win and that positive thinking helped bringing the change," said Hafeez, a veteran of 212 ODIs.

Their win over England, who defeated them 4-0 shortly before the start of the World Cup, ended Pakistan's sequence of 11 consecutive defeats since losing the fifth and final one-dayer against South Africa in January.

"Yes, we had been losing but we were playing good cricket," Hafeez explained. "The best thing about the England win was that everyone contributed."

"Even Hasan Ali, who didn't get a wicket, but his last three overs were good and brought us back," said Hafeez. "When you play like that you get confidence and momentum."

UPDATE

England's Buttler 'responding well' after hip injury

AFP
London

England's Jos Buttler is "responding well" to treatment on a hip injury but the star batsman still has to prove his fitness in time for Friday's World Cup match against the West Indies.

Buttler suffered a heavily bruised right hip while hitting a six during England's 106-run win over Bangladesh on Saturday.

The 28-year-old, one of the World Cup's most destructive batsmen, was visibly hampered for the remainder of his innings of 64 in Cardiff.

Jonny Bairstow took over Buttler's wicket-keeping duties when he was unable to come out for the Bangladesh run-chase.

"Jos sustained heavy bruising on his right hip during the match against Bangladesh," a statement from the England and Wales Cricket Board said yesterday.

"He is responding well to

treatment and will be reassessed later this week."

The England squad reconvene tomorrow for two days of practice in Southampton, with Buttler hoping to take part to show he is ready for the hosts' fourth group game against the West Indies.

"We anticipate he will train with the rest of the squad at the Hampshire Bowl on Wednesday ahead of the match against West Indies on Friday," the statement said.

England captain Eoin Morgan suggested after the Bangladesh match that there would be no temptation to gamble with Buttler's fitness with so many matches still to play.

Tournament favourites England have won two of their first three group matches as the hosts bid to win the World Cup for the first time.

"We'll use every day as much as we can to try to get him back on the park, but if he is a risk going into the next game, it might not be worth it," Morgan said.



WAR OF WORDS

Shahzad cries foul, Afghan board CEO says keeper injured

IANIS
New Delhi

The Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) announced on June 6 that wicket-keeper and opening batsman Mohamed Shahzad would not be taking any further part in the 2019 World Cup in England and Wales. They cited an injury to Shahzad's knee as the reason behind them calling a replacement in Ikram Ali Khil.

But the 31-year-old has now revealed that while he did have a knee issue, he was fine after taking adequate rest.

He further added that it was only during training for the New Zealand game that he came to know of ACB's decision to rule him out of the World Cup citing injury. He said even his team-

mates were not aware of the decision. But CEO Asadullah Khan has claimed otherwise in media reports.

"What he is saying is completely wrong. A proper medical report to the ICC was submitted and then only his replacement was announced. The team could not have fielded an unfit player. I understand he is upset at not being part of World Cup anymore but the team could not have compromised on his fitness," he said.

Shahzad's failure to score runs and his misses while keeping hasn't gone down well with the management.

Afghanistan's next match in the tournament is against South Africa which will be played on June 15. They have lost all the matches they have played in the tournament thus far.



Pakistan's Imam relishes World Cup battle with Australia's Starc

AFP
Taunton, United Kingdom

Pakistan opener Imam-ul-Haq is relishing facing Australia pace spearhead Mitchell Starc when the two teams meet in the World Cup in Taunton tomorrow. The 23-year-old, a nephew of Pakistan great Inzamam-ul-Haq, said the confidence he had gained from facing England quicks Jofra Archer and Mark Wood would help him tame the Australia attack. "Starc isn't a threat," said Imam. "In fact I am excited over the prospect of facing him. Same was said about Archer and Wood but we played them with confidence." Imam scored a solid 44 in an

82-run opening stand against England in Nottingham, setting up Pakistan's second-highest total ever in a World Cup of 348 for eight in a match they won by 14 runs.

That came after he could only muster two runs in Pakistan's seven-wicket defeat against the West Indies in their opening game, when they were bowled for a paltry 105.

"I have played (Kagiso) Rabada and Dale Steyn in more difficult conditions in South Africa," said Imam, referring to Pakistan's tour of South Africa earlier this year. Imam was Pakistan's most successful batsman on that one-day international series with 271 runs, including a century, in the five matches.

"You can't say a bowler is threatening," he said. "I try

to prepare according to my strengths instead of bowlers' strengths. I don't think like that, because you need to beat top teams if you want to play the World Cup final."

Imam, who hit a century on his ODI debut against Sri Lanka in 2017, scored a brilliant 151 against England in the series before the World Cup.

He stressed the importance of giving Pakistan a platform in every game, with the help of opening partner Fakhar Zaman, as they prepare to face the defending champions, who will be smarting after a defeat to India. "If you analyse then you notice that teams have succeeded in the World Cup mostly when the top three players have done well," he said.



FOCUS

Windies ready for Archer test: Reifer

AFP
Southampton, United Kingdom

West Indies head coach Floyd Reifer insists his batsmen are up for the challenge of taming England's electric pace bowler Jofra Archer in their World Cup clash on Friday. Archer was born in Barbados to a British father and played for West Indies Under-19s before declaring his allegiance to England earlier this year.

The 24-year-old qualified for England in March and the match against the West Indies in Southampton will be just his seventh one-day international appearance.

In that short time, Archer has already established himself as one of the sport's most explosive bowlers, with three-wicket hauls against both South Africa and Bangladesh in the World Cup underlining his quality.

Finding a way to subdue Archer will be one of the West Indies' main tasks as they look to beat hosts England.

And Reifer, speaking after yesterday's match against South Africa was abandoned due to rain, is confident they have a game-plan to combat his threat.

"I'm sure Jofra will be chomping at the bit to come at us and we will be ready for him," Reifer told reporters.

"To be honest, we knew Jofra for a long time. He is from Barbados, where we are from. We knew him from the U15, U17, U19 so he is not new to us.

"Yes, he's bowling quickly, but there's nothing that we are not accustomed to. We are looking forward to the challenge. So we will see how it goes on Friday."

Asked if he was disappointed that Archer didn't chose to play for the West Indies, Reifer said pointedly: "He made his choice."

"I actually played club cricket against him as a young guy. So Jofra is a tremendous talent, we all know that. Like I said, we are looking forward to the game on Friday. He obviously had the pace."

He had a few injuries as a young guy. But I'm guessing though he's fully over those injuries and he is bowling very well for England."



England's Jofra Archer (right) celebrates taking the wicket of Bangladesh's Soumya Sarkar (not pictured) during the ICC Cricket World Cup match in Cardiff on Saturday. (Reuters)



TENNIS

'Bigger house, bigger TV'? Nadal cool on Slam record

At 33, Nadal is the best part of five years younger than Federer but with a career blighted by injuries, he refuses to target the all-time record

AFP
Paris

Rafael Nadal insists he is not obsessed with beating Roger Federer's record of 20 Grand Slams, claiming "you can't be frustrated all the time because your neighbour has a bigger house than you or a bigger TV or better garden."

Nadal swept to an historic 12th Roland Garros title with a 6-3, 5-7, 6-1, 6-1 victory over Austria's Dominic Thiem on Sunday.

That took him to 18 majors, just two behind Federer.

At 33, Nadal is the best part of five years younger than the Swiss veteran but with a career blighted by injuries, he refuses to target the all-time record.

"That's not the way that I see the life," said the Spaniard. "It's a motivation, yes, but it's not my obsession."

"It's not what makes me get up every morning or go and train and play."

Nadal's caution is well-founded.

By his own estimates, his career-long battles against knee and wrist injuries have cost him "around 15 or even more Grand Slams". In the aftermath of his latest Roland Garros triumph, he admitted that after an injury-hit start to 2019, he felt "down mentally and physically" and questioned his love for the sport.

"I was not enjoying it too much, I was worried about my health. I was down mentally and physically after Indian Wells," said Nadal.

"I was too negative. After Madrid and Barcelona, I was thinking about what I needed to do. I could stop for a while and recover or change my attitude and recover."

After a loss in the Australian Open final to Novak Djokovic, where he won just eight games, a second round exit in Acapulco was followed by a withdrawal from the semi-finals in Indian Wells, when a knee injury meant that an eagerly-awaited clash with Federer was shelved.

His return in the clay court season saw semi-finals losses in Monte Carlo, Barcelona and Ma-



Spain's Rafael Nadal poses with the Mousquetaires Cup (The Musketeers) after winning the French Open final against Austria's Dominic Thiem on Sunday.

drid before a much needed title triumph in Rome.

"In 2018, I played nine events

and finished just seven of them,"

Nadal added. "I had issues with my knee

and surgery on my foot, so many issues in the last 18 months that have made the last few weeks

very special."

Nadal revealed that in Barcelona, he had even locked himself away, questioning where his season was heading.

"Mentally, I lost a little bit of energy, because I had too many issues in a row. It is tough when you receive one after another, and then sometimes you are groggy," he explained.

"In Barcelona, I was able to stay alone for a couple of hours in the room and think about what's going on, what I need to do.

"One possibility was to stop for a while and recover my body. And the other was change drastically my attitude and my mentality to play the next couple of weeks.

"Thinking a lot, finally I think I was able to change and was able to fight back for every small improvement."

On Sunday, Nadal took his Roland Garros record to an astonishing 93 wins and just two losses having previously won the title in 2005-2008, 2010-2014, 2017 and 2018.

It also gave him an 82nd career title and 950th match win.

"All the things that I went through probably give me that extra passion when I am playing, because I know I will not be here forever.

"So I just try to be positive, to be intense, and to be passionate about what I am doing."

Next up for Nadal is his latest assault on Wimbledon, where he has twice been champion, in 2008 and 2010.

However, the All England Club has also been the site of some spectacular lows.

He lost four years in succession to players outside the top 100 - Lukas Rosol, Steve Darcis, Nick Kyrgios and Dustin Brown - from 2012-2015.

In 2017, he was knocked out in the last 16 by Gilles Muller, 15-13 in the final set.

Last year, he lost a marathon semi-final to Novak Djokovic by dropping the last set 10-8.

"I played a great event last year. I have been able to be very close to win another title there. As everybody knows, I love to play on grass," said Nadal who added he will not play a warm-up event before Wimbledon.

FORMULA 1

Ferrari to appeal Vettel penalty, say he is moral winner

Reuters
Montreal

Ferrari intend to appeal the time penalty that cost Sebastian Vettel victory in Sunday's Canadian Grand Prix, the Formula One team said.

Vettel was handed a five-second penalty for rejoining the track in an unsafe manner, the German's error forcing Mercedes rival Lewis Hamilton to take evasive action on lap 48.

Hamilton crossed the line second but was the winner after the penalty was applied.

The stewards' decision reminded Ferrari that they had the right to appeal, although technically the sporting regulations state that in-race penalties such as the one handed to Vettel cannot be protested.

Ferrari now have 96 hours to gather fresh evidence and decide whether to pursue the appeal. (Writing by Alan Baldwin in London, editing by Greg Stutchbury)

Meanwhile, Ferrari hailed Sebastian Vettel as the moral winner while the German raged at being robbed of victory by race stewards.

"They are stealing the race from us," the angry German exclaimed over the team radio as he was told he was under investigation after running off the track and into the path of Mercedes rival Lewis Hamilton.

Vettel was given a five-second penalty, finishing first but having to hand victory to Hamilton.

"No, no, no. Not like that. You have to be an absolute blind man, you go on the grass how are you supposed to control your car? This is the wrong world," the Ferrari driver yelled after being notified of the penalty.

"It's not making our sport popular is it? I mean, with these kind of decisions," he told Sky Sports television after the podium ceremony.

He had earlier parked up in the wrong place and stormed straight to the Ferrari hospitality before returning to the pitlane.

There he rearranged the numbers in front of the cars, switching the 'one' from Hamilton's

car to the space where his Ferrari should have been.

"People want to see us race and that was, I think, racing. I hope the people come back, that's the main thing obviously... it's just a shame when we have all these little funny decisions," he said.

Ferrari team boss Mattia Binotto said there was no doubt about the real winner.

"It's not down to us to decide and that's the sport. But certainly if you look at the crowd, everybody I think today believes that there was nothing Sebastian could have done," he said.

"I don't think he had any bad intention in what he was doing at all. He stayed ahead the entire race, he crossed the chequered flag first, for us he's the moral winner."

"We won today. I think honestly we have been the fastest on track today and that's important," he added.

Ferrari found considerable support from former champions who felt the regulations were at fault and that the stewards had come to the wrong decision.

Former Ferrari driver and 1992 world champion Nigel Mansell, who has also served as a steward, said on Twitter that the penalty was ridiculous.

"Very, very embarrassing. No joy in watching this race, two champions driving brilliantly, will end in a false result," he added.

Jenson Button, the 2009 champion commenting for Sky Sports, felt it was a sad outcome.

"It's always disappointing when there's a proper fight out on track between two greats, two multiple world champions, and then the stewards are able to come in and take that away from us really," he said.

"It's a shame. For me, it's a racing incident... it doesn't deserve a penalty."

American Mario Andretti, the 1978 world champion, also joined the criticism on Twitter, saying: "I think the function of the stewards is to penalise flagrantly unsafe moves not honest mistakes as result of hard racing. What happened at #CanadaGP is not acceptable at this level of our great sport."



Second placed Sebastian Vettel of Germany and Ferrari swaps the number boards at parc ferme in Montreal on Sunday.

SPOTLIGHT

Sharapova confirms return from injury

AFP
Madrid

Former world number one Maria Sharapova confirmed she will play at next week's Mallorca Open after more than three months out through injury.

Sharapova, 32, a five-time Grand Slam champion, has been sidelined since February after having surgery on a shoulder problem which has troubled her since 2008.

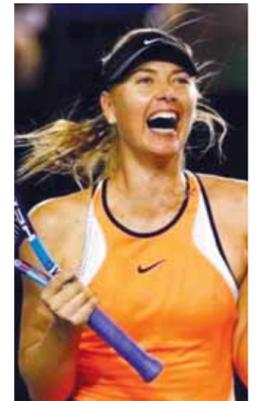
"I'm so happy to be able to announce that I'm going to accept a wildcard into the Mallorca Open," Sharapova said in a statement.

"I want to thank the tournament for the opportunity it's given me and for my incredible fans who have been supporting me these past months."

Sharapova has struggled for fitness since her 15-month doping ban that ended in 2017.

"After more than a week testing in Mallorca, Maria Sharapova has decided to accept the wildcard offered by the Mallorca Open," a statement from the Mallorca Open said.

Sharapova's last on-court ap-



pearance came at the St Petersburg Open in her native Russia in January after she had lost to eventual French Open winner Ashleigh Barty at the round of 16 of the Australian Open earlier in the month.

The competition at the WTA grass event in Mallorca begins on June 17 and Sharapova will be joined by reigning Wimbledon champion Angelique Kerber as well as fellow former world number one Victoria Azarenka.

International media hail Nadal after 12th French title

DPA
Paris

Rafael Nadal was praised by international media yesterday after winning the French Open for a 12th time to take his tally of majors titles to 18, only two short of the record held by Roger Federer.

"At 33, with 18 Slams, Rafael Nadal is a more complete player than ever," tennis.com wrote. In Nadal's home country Spain, *Marca* wrote: "Eternal legend of Roland Garros. There will never be anyone like Rafa again," while *AS* simply said, "Nadal is an alien."

Nadal became the first tennis player to win one grand slam a dozen times when he beat Dominic Thiem 6-3, 5-7, 6-1, 6-1 in Sunday's final.

"Impregnable Nadal: 12 wins at 12 finals in Roland Garros," *El Pais* wrote in France. *L'Equipe* sports daily headlined "Herculean" and said: "With the 12th victory of his career in Roland Garros, Rafael Nadal has confirmed that he is definitely the king of Porte d'Auteuil. Above all, however, he won his 18th Grand Slam title and is thus closer to Roger Federer and his 20 trophies. But can the Spaniard catch up with his big rival at the age of 33 or even surpass him?" Switzerland's *Neue Zuercher Zeitung* wrote: "He has adjusted his game somewhat. He acts more aggressively, with the aim of keeping the rallies shorter out of consideration for old age and his equally impressive and fragile



Spain's Rafael Nadal (R) holds the Mousquetaires Cup (The Musketeers) as he poses with Australian tennis legend Rod Laver in Paris on Sunday.

body. "But Nadal remains Nadal - and beating him on sand over three winning sets remains one of the biggest challenges across all sports," *Tages-Anzeiger* wrote: "It is impressive how many physical setbacks he has put behind him in his career. He never lets himself be discouraged, always finds his way back to his top level. And how he has developed his

game over the years, has become more aggressive and tactically more flexible." Britain's *Guardian* said: "Rafael Nadal, hair thinning, legs slowing imperceptibly but genius intact, remains unbeatable on the clay of Roland Garros."

The Independent wrote: "They have rebuilt the main stadium here at Roland Garros but in the new Court Philippe

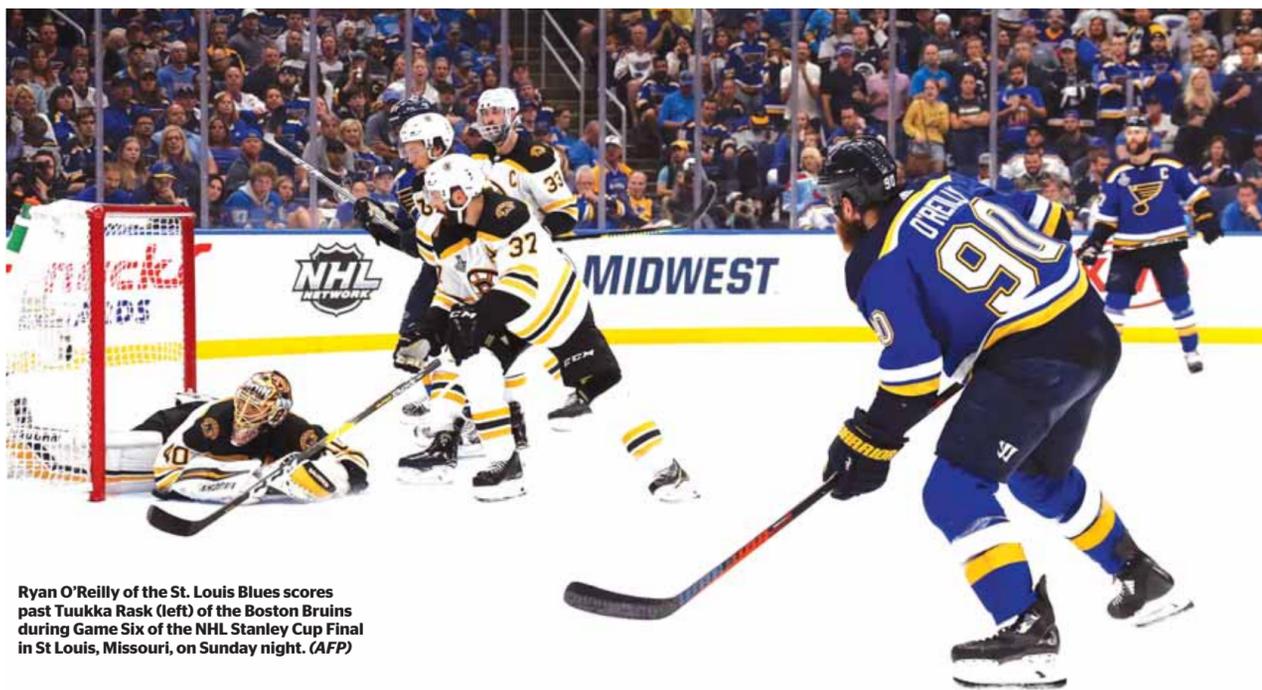
Chatrier the old champion once again reigned supreme."

The *New York Times* also referred to the changing look of Roland Garros over the years in its report of the final. "But for now, and for honestly who knows how much longer, Nadal, 33, remains a pillar of the place: more immovable, as it turns out, than many a stadium," it said.

NHL

Rask spoils Blues' party as Bruins keep hopes alive

The winner-take-all game seven will be held tomorrow in Boston



Ryan O'Reilly of the St. Louis Blues scores past Tuukka Rask (left) of the Boston Bruins during Game Six of the NHL Stanley Cup Final in St. Louis, Missouri, on Sunday night. (AFP)

AFP
Los Angeles

Brad Marchand had a goal and an assist and Tuukka Rask stopped 28 shots as the Boston Bruins forced a game seven in the Stanley Cup finals with a 5-1 win over the St. Louis Blues on Sunday. Marchand scored on the powerplay and David Pastrnak also had a goal and an assist for the Bruins who levelled the best of seven series at 3-3.

The winner-take-all game seven tomorrow at Boston. "The whole hockey world loves a game seven.

May the best team win," Boston coach Bruce Cassidy said. Marchand's goal snapped a mini scoreless streak on the powerplay for the visiting Bruins, who spoiled the Blues' Stanley Cup party

plans to improve to 8-3 on the road in the postseason.

Game six was St. Louis' turn to struggle with the man advantage as they went zero-for-five in front of a sold out crowd of 18,800 at Enterprise Arena. The Bruins have been in this situation before. In the opening round against Toronto they were down 3-2 with game six on the road.

They rallied to win the series in seven games. A victory by the Blues Sunday night would have ended the longest wait in NHL history — 51 seasons — for a team to win its first championship. But they still stand on the cusp of history heading into game seven. They need one more win to complete an improbable turnaround after a season in which they were in last place in the NHL in early January.

The Blues playoff run has taken the city by storm. People who couldn't afford the \$2,000 for a scalper ticket started

lining up four hours before the opening puck drop on nearby Market Street for a watch party. "Listen, if you told me four months ago we would be in the finals in game seven, I think I would take it," said Blues coach Craig Berube. "We have been a good road team. We have won twice up there in this series so we are a confident group."

The excitement seemed to get the best of the team and the city earlier on Sunday, when the Blues mistakenly revealed some info on their victory parade plans in a letter that club owner Tom Stillman sent to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Stillman wrote the letter as part of a package of congratulatory advertisements and notices which were mistakenly posted on the newspaper website on Sunday before being taken down. In the letter Stillman said the victory parade would take place on Market Street.

Rask was Boston's best player on Sunday making several clutch saves, but none bigger than one he combined on with defenceman Charlie McAvoy in the second period.

With Boston holding a slim 1-0 lead, defenceman McAvoy prevented a goal by batting a fluttering puck out of mid air into the back of Rask, who reached behind to try to trap it in his jersey.

Rask then glided to the far right side of his crease so it didn't drop down into the goal. Brandon Carlo, Karson Kuhlman and Zdeno Chara also scored for the Bruins. Ryan O'Reilly, who is one of the frontrunners for the Stanley Cup MVP award if St. Louis win, scored the lone goal and rookie netminder Jordan Binnington made 27 saves.

"We're confident," said O'Reilly. "We are a great road team. Maybe that's our story, we have to get it done on the road."

SPOTLIGHT

Parker announces retirement after 18 seasons in NBA

AFP
Los Angeles

Former San Antonio Spurs star Tony Parker confirmed his retirement from basketball yesterday after 18 seasons in the NBA. The 37-year-old French international, who won four NBA titles with the Spurs between 2003 and 2014 announced his decision in a post on Twitter.

"It's with a lot of emotion that I retire from basketball, it was an incredible journey!" Parker wrote. "Even in my wildest dreams, I never thought I would live all those unbelievable moments with the NBA and the French National Team. Thank you for everything!"

Parker is one of the most successful foreign players ever to play in the NBA, and was a key figure in the Spurs teams which consistently challenged for championships during his time with the franchise. Injuries hampered his final years with the Spurs and he spent last season playing with the Charlotte Hornets, appearing in 56 games but not starting in any.

In an interview yesterday, six-time All-Star Parker said he was walking away from the sport after realising that he could no

longer compete at the very highest level. "A lot of different stuff ultimately led me to this decision," Parker said. "But, at the end of the day, I was like, if I can't be Tony Parker anymore and I can't play for a championship, I don't want to play basketball anymore."

Parker had previously spoken of his desire to play 20 seasons in the NBA, but said his view changed after playing in Charlotte, who finished outside the playoff standings. "I wanted to play 20 seasons and I still think I can play," he said.

"I had a good season with the Hornets, and I was healthy. But at the same time, now I don't see any reason to play 20 seasons. If I don't play for a championship, I feel like, why are we playing? And so that's why it was very different for me mentally to focus and get motivated to play a game that I love, because I want to win something."

Parker's retirement comes after Argentina's Manu Ginobili, another key member of the dominant Spurs teams of the past two decades, retired in August last year. Parker, the NBA Finals MVP in 2007, averaged 15.5 points and 5.6 assists per game in his career, which spanned more than 1,200 games, including 1,151 career starts.



Tony Parker won four NBA titles with San Antonio Spurs between 2003 and 2014. (AFP)

MLB

Nats club four straight home runs against Padres

Reuters
San Diego

Pinch hitter Howie Kendrick, Trea Turner, Adam Eaton and Anthony Rendon connected on four consecutive eighth-inning home runs off San Diego reliever Craig Stammen on Sunday afternoon to break a tie and lead the visiting Washington Nationals to a 5-2 victory over the Padres. The four homers came in a span of seven pitches with one out in the eighth. It was the second time in Nationals history that players had connected on four straight home runs, the first being on July 27, 2017, against Milwaukee.

Sunday marked the ninth time in major league history that a team hit four consecutive homers. The Nationals are the only team to do it twice. The Padres are the only team to twice give up four straight homers, also doing so against the Los Angeles Dodgers in 2006.

Kendrick's one-out drive to left snapped a 1-1 tie between Nationals starter Stephen Strasburg (7-3) and the Padres' game-long group of bullpen pitchers. Stammen (4-3) was the fourth of five relievers deployed by San Diego. Strasburg gave up one run in seven innings.

DODGERS 1, GIANTS 0

Max Muncy's first-inning home run was all starting pitcher Walker Buehler needed as Los Angeles earned a fiery victory at San Francisco.

Buehler (7-1) gave up five hits over seven scoreless innings with a walk and nine strikeouts as the Dodgers rallied to win the three-game series after a defeat on Friday. Giants starter Madison Bumgarner (3-6) was nearly as good as Buehler, giving up one run on four hits

over seven innings with a walk and five strikeouts.

Thinking Muncy took too long to go into his home run trot, Bumgarner shouted at the Dodgers' left-handed hitter before Muncy even reached first base. Muncy first reacted by brushing his hands toward Bumgarner as he approached first base, then appeared to invite the pitcher for a physical altercation as he jogged between first and second base. The two shouted at each other off and on until Muncy crossed the plate.

YANKEES 7, INDIANS 6

Aaron Hicks belted an RBI double with two outs in the 10th inning as visiting New York rebounded to top Cleveland after squandering a pair of leads.

New York scored five runs with two outs in the second inning and another in the ninth, only to see Cleveland rally to forge a tie on both occasions.

The Yankees claimed a 7-6 lead in the 10th after Cameron Maybin launched a double to deep centre off Oliver Perez (1-1) with one out before Hicks doubled to left-centre one out later. Aroldis Chapman (1-1) picked up the win after his bid for his 16th straight save went awry following an error by shortstop Didi Gregorius with two outs in the ninth.

RAYS 6, RED SOX 1

Brandon Lowe homered twice among three hits, while Yandy Diaz also went deep and had four hits as visiting Tampa Bay powered past Boston in the finale of a four-game series.

Tampa Bay hit four homers in the contest, all solo shots. Blake Snell (4-5) gave up one run on five hits and struck out seven in six innings as the Rays took three of four in the key division series.

CUBS 5, CARDINALS 1

Kyle Schwarber drove in two runs, Kyle Hendricks won his sixth consecutive decision, and Chicago pulled away to complete a three-game sweep of visiting St. Louis.

Carlos Gonzalez homered while Anthony Rizzo and David Bote also drove in one run apiece for the Cubs. Kolten Wong hit an RBI double for the Cardinals, who lost for the fourth time in

their past five games.

Hendricks (7-4) allowed one run on eight hits in seven innings, walking none and striking out three. Cardinals starter Adam Wainwright (5-6) exited the game after 4 1/3 innings because of left hamstring tightness. He allowed three runs on seven hits while walking one and striking out two.

BRAVES 7, MARLINS 6

Ronald Acuna Jr. tied the score with a three-run homer in the ninth, and Matt Joyce hit an RBI single in the 12th as the Atlanta won at Miami.

Closer Sergio Romo gave up four runs in the ninth — including Acuna's

homer — and fellow Marlins reliever Tyler Kinley gave up a run in the 10th before Adam Conley (1-6) took the loss in the 12th. Ozzie Albies sparked the winning rally by diving into third with a one-out triple. He scored on a single by Joyce, who went 3-for-4 from the No. 8 hole. Dan Winkler (3-1) got the win for Atlanta, and Josh Tomlin picked up his first career save in his 205th appearance.

TWINS 12, TIGERS 2

Nelson Cruz blasted one of Minnesota's four home runs among his three hits and drove in three runs as the Twins routed host Detroit. Eddie Rosario

supplied three hits, including a homer, scored two runs and knocked in two more while Byron Buxton ripped a two-run homer and scored twice. Miguel Sano also homered, C.J. Cron had two hits and two RBIs and Ehire Adrianza scored three runs.

Twins starter Jake Odorizzi (9-2) gave up one run on five hits in six innings and struck out eight. Detroit starter Ryan Carpenter (1-3) surrendered eight runs on 10 hits in 3 2/3 innings.

ASTROS 4, ORIOLES 0

Yordan Alvarez homered in his second career plate appearance to support a strong outing from veteran Wade Miley as Houston claimed the rubber match of its three-game series with Baltimore.

Alvarez, the Astros' third-ranked prospect according to MLB Pipeline, broke a scoreless tie with his two-run, opposite-field homer off Orioles starter Dylan Bundy (3-7) with two outs in the fourth inning. Miley (6-3) completed his afternoon having allowed six hits and two walks while recording five strikeouts over six 1/3 innings.

MARINERS 9, ANGELS 3

Edwin Encarnacion hit two home runs, the latter the 400th of his major league career, as Seattle defeated Los Angeles.

Encarnacion is the 56th player to reach the 400-homer plateau and the third active player after Albert Pujols and Miguel Cabrera.

Tom Murphy also homered twice, and Daniel Vogelbach and Kyle Seager added solo shots for the Mariners, who took two of three games in the series. Wade LeBlanc (3-2) entered after an opener and went six innings, allowing two runs on six hits with one walk and eight strikeouts.



Washington Nationals' Howie Kendrick hits a solo home run against the San Diego Padres. (USA TODAY Sports)

GOLF

McIlroy captures Canadian Open with brilliant 61

'This will give me so much confidence. This is a huge tournament...'



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland poses for a photo with the trophy after winning the RBC Canadian Open at Hamilton Golf and Country Club in Hamilton, Canada.

AFP
Ottawa

Rory McIlroy blitzed the field at the Canadian Open on Sunday, firing a scintillating nine-under 61 to run away with the title by a massive seven strokes less than a week before the US Open.

McIlroy, who flirted with a 59, put on a golf clinic, rolling in nine birdies, one eagle and two bogeys for a 22-under 258 total and a dominating victory over runner-ups Shane Lowry of Ireland and American Webb Simpson.

"It was awesome," said McIlroy, who claimed his sixth ca-

reer national open title in his Canadian debut. "I said at the start that I wanted to be aggressive and play with freedom.

"This will give me so much confidence. This is a huge tournament and I am so proud of myself.

"I am going to take a lot from this and I am so excited for next week (US Open)."

The four-time major championship winner tied his career best when he shot a 61 in the third round of the Wells Fargo Championship in 2015. His previous best closing score to win a tournament was a 62 at the Quail Hollow Championship in 2010.

McIlroy, of Northern Ireland, began the day with a share

of the lead with Simpson and Matt Kuchar at 13-under at the Hamilton Golf and Country Club in Hamilton, Ontario.

He was making his Canadian Open debut and improved with each round, shooting 67, 66, 64, before opening the birdie floodgates on Sunday.

Lowry, who shot a closing round of 67, and Simpson, who shot a 68, finished at 15-under 265, two shots ahead of fourth place finishers Brandt Snedeker (69) and Matt Kuchar (70).

The four-time major winner McIlroy was part of a strong field at the Canadian Open, which this year serves as the final tune up before the US Open.

The win was also his second of 2019 — he captured

The Players Championship in March.

McIlroy bested the previous Canadian Open scoring record by five shots. The previous record of 263 was set by Johnny Palmer in 1952 and equalled in 2014 by Tim Clark.

McIlroy made four straight birdies on the back nine, starting at the par-four 11th, to put himself in contention to become just the sixth player in history to win a tournament with closing score of 59.

A bogey-eagle-bogey finish foiled his attempt, but made for a highly entertaining conclusion to his round.

His eagle on the par-five 17 started with a 341-yard drive off the tee to the centre of the fair-

way. His perfect approach shot set up an easy two-foot putt.

That left him needing a birdie on the par-four 18 to shoot a 59. It would have been his first birdie of the week on the hole.

But he found the bunker on the right of the green. Instead of holing out from the sand for 59, he came out too hot, putting his ball about eight feet past the pin.

Canadian Adam Hadwin carded a 70 to finish alone in sixth.

World number one Brooks Koepka shot an even-par 70 on Sunday to finish tied for 50th place.

Defending champion Dustin Johnson finished with a 69 for a tie for 20th at seven under.

SPOTLIGHT

Thompson wins Shoprite Classic with final-round 67



Lexi Thompson smiles as she walks off the green after making a putt for eagle on the 18th hole during the final round of the ShopRite LPGA Classic in Galloway, New Jersey.

AFP
New York

Lexi Thompson eagled her closing hole on Sunday for a four-under 67, coming from behind in the final round to capture the ShopRite Classic tournament by one stroke.

Thompson, who finished runner-up at last week's US Women's Open, carded at 12-under 201 total at the Seaview Golf Club in Galloway, New Jersey.

"It was all a matter of just trusting my shots, trusting the lines," said Thompson. "The bogeys on the back nine, they weren't bad shots or bad bogeys, so you just have to let them go."

She finished one shot in front of 36-hole leader Lee6 Jeongeun for her 11th LPGA title, and it came at the site of her first professional win nine years ago. "I knew coming into the day that it was going to play very difficult, just because this golf course can get so windy and it's a lot of crosswinds," said Thompson.

The win gives Thompson the longest win streak on the USLPGA Tour, with a victory in each of the past seven seasons. She

is also the 13th different winner this season.

She combatted three bogeys with five birdies and sealed the deal with an eagle.

The 24-year-old Florida native started the day two strokes behind second-round leader Lee, who stumbled on the back nine with three straight bogeys on holes 13-15.

Thompson took advantage of the par fives over the 54 hole tournament, going 11 under on those.

Lee shot a final round 70 to reach 11-under 202 and American Ally McDonald finished by herself in third place after shooting 70 for a nine-under total. Sweden's Anna Nordqvist fired a 69 to finish at seven under for fourth place, while a trio of players finished tied for fifth at six under, including Thailand's Ariya Jutanugarn (68), China's Liu Yu (72) and Mariah Stackhouse (74).

Tour rookie Lily He Muni of China had the best opening round of her brief career with a 64 on Friday but then stumbled to the finish with a 78 on Sunday. He, a 19-year-old who already has 220,000 Instagram followers, finished in a tie for 64th.

McDowell qualifies for British Open

London: Graeme McDowell achieved a season-long goal when he qualified for next month's British Open, which will be held in his home town of Portrush, when he tied for eighth at the Canadian Open in Ontario on Sunday.

Three qualifying spots for the British Open were available at Hamilton Golf & Country Club on Sunday and awarded to top-10 finishers who were not already exempt. Only one player who finished ahead of McDowell, Canadian Adam Hadwin, was not already exempt for the July 18-21 tournament in County Antrim in Northern Ireland. Both qualified although the third spot went unclaimed.

"The chase for the Open Cham-

pionship at Portrush, and getting my spot for that, it's been a journey," McDowell said after ensuring his spot by sinking a 30-foot birdie at the final hole.

"This week, with spots available, people have been reminding me all week. Every hole out there it was like 'hope you get to Portrush, hope you get in the Open' so there was no chance I was going to be able to shove that to the back of my mind.

"It was nice to play decent enough to get it done today." McDowell's next tournament is this week's US Open at Pebble Beach, the scene of his only major championship victory in 2010, when the tournament was last held at the famous California course.

BOTTOMLINE

Women boxers striking a blow for equality in Cuba

AFP
Havana

In the musty funk of a Havana boxing gym, Idameyls Moreno smacks a series of whomping right hooks into a heavy punching bag.

For the past four years, she has ripped it up in training to try to emulate dozens of Cuban men in winning Olympic boxing gold.

But she and other big-hitting women are punching not so much a glass ceiling as a glass wall: In Cuba, only men are allowed to compete in boxing tournaments.

"They haven't given us our chance," fumes Moreno, a muscular 27-year-old with burning ambition and a simmering frustration.

Ducking and feinting, her stance constantly shifts as she works her way around the swinging bag, the room resonating as her heavy blows dent its synthetic leather.

The island's boxing greats beam down from posters on the walls, among them three-time Olympic champion Teofilo Stevenson.

"She's a boxer with a lot of enthusiasm and enormous physical capacities, but she is nowhere near her full potential yet," said her coach Emilio Correa, who



Cuban boxer Idameyls Moreno (L) trains in a gym in Havana. Cuba is one of the world's leading power in boxing but deprives women of getting into a professional boxing ring.

won Olympic silver in 2008 and World Championship gold in 2005.

Cubans are rightly proud of their unique boxing tradition which has brought a haul of 37 Olympic golds and 76 World Championship winner's medals — all by men.

But featherweight Moreno — whose haymaking right fist has been honed by

sparring with men — pleads: "If they'd give us the opportunity, we can also build on the medal collection that the men have won."

Moreno is not the only woman working the bags.

Taking turns to spar with her are Yurria Pascual, a 26-year-old biologist, and Ana Gasquez, a French woman who says

she was drawn to Cuba by the mystique of its boxing tradition.

Ever ambitious, Moreno has set her sights on "a world and Olympic medal?" Pascual says: "If men can do it, why can't we?"

It's an ugly paradox for these women that since 2006 Cuba has been represented in the female programs in all

Olympic sports, including weightlifting and wrestling — but not in that last bastion of Cuban machismo, inside the ropes of a boxing ring.

It is generally accepted here that boxing is a man's sport, far too dangerous to accommodate women.

Elsewhere, gender equality in sports has evolved and boxing joined the ranks of women's Olympic events at the London Games in 2012.

Moreno dismisses the views of Cuban men that boxing is too dangerous for her, insisting body protection is more than adequate.

"All combat sports are dangerous. But we have protection for the chest, the head and mouth."

The official reluctance to recognise female boxing "will end up discouraging" young women who want to climb into the ring, says Moreno.

They have role models aplenty across the globe, including Ireland's undisputed lightweight world champion Katie Taylor, whose path to professional success began with Olympic gold at London 2012.

Ironically, women are welcome to train in countless boxing gyms across Cuba and Gasquez acknowledges the gesture from male counterparts at boxing's grassroots level.

"Boys help us, they don't discriminate

against us," she says. It's the officials in suits that draw their ire.

Women seemed primed for a breakthrough in 2016, when Cuban Boxing Federation President Alberto Puig announced the possibility of opening competition to females. But three years on, nothing has changed.

They continue to train, fueled by optimism that the Cuban Sports Institute may eventually give a green light to women's boxing ahead of the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo.

For these young boxers, it's impossible not to think of Namibia Flores, held up as an example to women boxers but who reached the age of 40 — the age ceiling for competition — without ever realising her dream of bringing a woman's gold medal to Cuba.

"I don't want the same thing happening us," vows Moreno.

Correa, the coach, says that if women's boxing is eventually sanctioned by Cuban authorities, the potential for the sport is "massive — because this is the island of boxing."

Alcides Sagarra, considered by many as the father of Cuban boxing, believes it is only a matter of time before women take their place among the sport's icons.

"Cuban women cannot be denied their rights to participate in boxing competitions," said Sagarra, 82.



WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

Dogged Argentina hold Japan to goalless draw

Argentina earn their first point in a World Cup

AFP
Paris

Japan failed to break down a determined and well-organised Argentine defence in Paris yesterday in the first goalless draw of the women's World Cup. Japan, finalists in 2015 and winners in 2011, enjoyed almost two thirds of possession, but only forced two saves from goalkeeper Vanina Correa. Argentina's women, who have never won a match at the World Cup, managed three tame late strikes, none of which tested Ayaka Yamashita. The result, which earned Argentina's women their very first point in a World Cup, leaves both teams on one point in Group D, behind England who beat Scotland on Sunday.

Japan came closest to breaking the deadlock against a side quoted as 500-1 outsiders after losing all six of their previous World Cup matches in the second half but Yui Hasegawa's shot went wide.

When the whistle blew Argentina's substitutes jumped off the bench to join the players on the pitch at finally getting a point on the World Cup board at the seventh attempt. Later last night, Canada was slated to face Cameroon.



Argentina's midfielder Estefania Banani (second right) attempts to get past Japan's Risa Shimizu (second left) and Emi Nakajima (right) during the Women's World Cup Group D match at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

Iceland's reception of Turkey football team sparks controversy

Reykjavik: Turkish officials yesterday denounced the "disrespect" shown to the national football team when they arrived in Iceland for a Euro 2020 qualifier. The Turkish team was kept waiting for several hours at passport control at Reykjavik airport on Sunday and subjected to extensive security checks, according to accounts from the players carried by Turkish media.

Presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin took to Twitter to show his anger, slamming the "disrespect" shown to the national team and saying the treatment of the Turkish players was "unacceptable". Fahrettin Altun, communications director at the Turkish presidency, also said the treatment was "not in line with diplomatic courtesy or sportsmanlike conduct."

The foreign ministry issued a diplomatic protest note to Iceland via the Norwegian embassy. Icelandic officials confirmed that they had received the protest but did not provide further details. Isavia, the company who manages the airport, said the extended checks had been made for security reasons, since the airport the players originally departed from, Konya, is not party to the same security rules as airports within the EU or countries that have a related agreement.

The company said it was "under obligation to carry out a security search of all passengers coming from such airports," regardless of nationality. "As a rule, the security search does not take long. Last evening, however, the search took longer as a search had to be made for electronic devices and liquids in unusually many bags," the company said in a statement.

The Icelandic Football Federation's security team told the news website Visir that players from the Icelandic team had experienced similar checks when they returned from Turkey after a match two years ago. The incident comes right after Turkey defeated world champions France 2-0 in Konya in a Euro 2020 qualifier on Saturday.

SPOTLIGHT

Fearless Rapinoe leads United States on and off the field

AFP
Los Angeles

Fearless and ferocious, on and off the field, Megan Rapinoe will be one of the cornerstones of the United States dressing room as they chase a record fourth Women's World Cup crown. The 33-year-old attacking midfielder is one of the four co-captains of the American team, forming a brains trust alongside Carli Lloyd, Becky Sauerbrunn and Alex Morgan which has amassed around 750 caps between them.

Rapinoe, who will be playing in her third World Cup, is an unmistakable presence in the US ranks, her shock of cropped, blonde hair making her instantly recognisable. The veteran also stands out for her willingness to speak her mind, whether it's leading calls for greater gender equality in the women's game or supporting NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick's 2016 protests by kneeling during the national anthem in solidarity.

Rapinoe continues to speak out, even though those close to her, including her mother Denise, worry that she risks being penalised for her candour. That sense of combativeness has been a hallmark of

Rapinoe's career. The Seattle player has battled back from three serious knee injuries to earn 153 caps since making her international debut in 2006, scoring 44 goals in the process. In 2012, she came out as gay shortly before playing a key role in the US women's gold medal-winning campaign at the London Olympics, and has since fought tirelessly to promote the rights of the LGBT community. She is also one of the leaders of the US women's fight for pay equality.

The US women's team filed a lawsuit against the United States Soccer Federation in March accusing the organisation of gender discrimination. "In every as-

pect of life, the more we can tackle the inequality from a lot of different angles, perspectives, different lanes the quicker we can rectify the problem," Rapinoe said.

"The incremental change that we've seen is not enough. I would like to see a major paradigm shift, a major overhaul to realise that there's been such a lack of investment for all these years, such a lack of care and attention to the women's game."

Rapinoe's outspoken nature has, predictably, drawn criticism. When she knelt in solidarity with Kaepernick's protests against racial inequality in 2016, a stance she took while playing for both club and country, she was vilified relent-

lessly on social media, with calls for her to be dumped from the national team. The US Soccer Federation responded by introducing a rule making it mandatory for players to stand during the anthem. "That was a really good lesson for me: This is what it's going to take for things to change, norms to change, conventions to change," Rapinoe said.

Rapinoe however, has no plans to dial back her activism. She has already stated that she would not attend any White House reception for the US team hosted by President Donald Trump. "Absolutely not. I have no interest in extending our platform to (Trump)," Rapinoe said.

FRIENDLY

Brazil rout Honduras 7-0 in Copa America tune-up

AFP
Los Angeles

Philippe Coutinho helped Brazil prepare for a Copa America without Neymar after 10-man Honduras were comprehensively thrashed 7-0 in Porto Alegre on Sunday night. The Paris St. Germain superstar will miss the tournament on home soil which starts on Friday after injuring his ankle against Qatar last Wednesday.

But with Barcelona's Coutinho providing an assist and a penalty strike and the likes of Richarlison and Gabriel Jesus also impressing by getting on the scoresheet against the outclassed Hondurans, who had Romell Quioto red carded in the first half.

Jesus and Richarlison, who both scored against the Qatari's in Brasilia, were particularly lively once again along with the excellent Coutinho to prove the Selecao still have plenty of options in attack despite Neymar sitting on the sidelines.

Brazil made three changes from the side which beat Qatar - Ajax star David Neres was brought in to replace Neymar while Liverpool's Champions League winning keeper Alisson Becker and PSG's Thiago Silva also started. The five time world champions are unbeaten in nine games since reaching the World Cup quarter-finals in Russia last summer.

Honduras, meanwhile, head for the Gold Cup reborn under new manager Fabian Coito - since his arrival in February, the Central American side have managed draws against Ecuador and Paraguay. They fell behind, however, on six minutes



Brazil's Philippe Coutinho (right) celebrates with Richarlison after scoring against Honduras in a friendly match at the Beira Rio Stadium in Porto Alegre, on Sunday night. (AFP)

and were left chasing shadows for the remainder of a chastening 90 minutes. Brilliant work from Alves caused panic in the visitor's defence and Manchester City forward Jesus was on hand to head home. And just seven minutes later Coutinho curled in a dangerous corner which was expertly headed in by Silva.

Now the challenge for Brazil was to keep their foot on the accelerator rather than easing off as they did against Qatar. Injury woes, however, continued to frustrate when Arthur, the Barcelona midfielder, was forced off on 31 minutes following a poor, two footed challenge which saw Honduras midfielder Quioto receive a straight red.

Arthur was replaced by Napoli's Allan to win his fourth cap but with the Hondurans down to 10 men, the game was effectively

over as a contest. Richarlison, who impressed in the first-half, was brought down in the area on 36 minutes allowing Coutinho to make it three from the penalty spot with his 14th international goal before twice being denied by the post in the space of a few minutes.

Everton's Richarlison remained a menace in the second-half and headed across for Jesus to make it 4-0 just after the restart. Neres scored a wonderful individual goal on 56 minutes to open his own account for the national team before a cool finish from substitute Roberto Firmino made it six of the best for the Samba stars. Richarlison scored the goal his performance deserved with 20 minutes remaining. Brazil's Copa America campaign starts on June 14 against Bolivia.

FOCUS

Gnabry fuels Sane's Bayern rumours

AFP
Berlin

Bayern Munich winger Serge Gnabry said yesterday he would 'love' to see Germany teammate and Manchester City star Leroy Sane join him at Allianz Arena. "I would love to have him at Bayern. I am having fun playing with him and he would be an improvement for our team," Gnabry, 23, told reporters ahead of Germany's Euro 2020 qualifier with Estonia today.

Sane, also 23, has been heavily linked with a transfer to Bayern in recent weeks, having reportedly grown frustrated with a lack of game time under Pep Guardiola at City. Gnabry, who has struck up an effective partnership with Sane in the national team this year, said he had spoken to his fellow winger about the rumours.

His admission comes after several Germany players spoke out about the potential transfer for this week. Bayern and Germany defender Joshua Kimmich urged Bayern to sign Sane last week, telling Bild newspaper he would "suit the club perfectly".



Serge Gnabry (left) and Leroy Sane.

Midfielder Julian Draxler, meanwhile, joked last Tuesday he now greets Sane with Bayern's official club motto "Mia San Mia". Asked yesterday whether he does the same, Gnabry admitted he and Sane have a special handshake.

"It's hard to show you what the handshake looks like when it's only me," he laughed.

Sane has remained tight-lipped about his future in recent weeks, but he scored in Germany's 2-0 win over Belarus in Borisov on Saturday, and is expected to start alongside Gnabry once again against Estonia. After their annus horribilis in 2018, Germany have rediscovered their form this year, with Sane, Gnabry and Marco Reus leading the line in attack.

"The way the three of us rotate, with any one of us able to drop deep, makes it very difficult for teams to defend against us," said Gnabry. "It didn't work out last year, but this year we are looking better. We have known each other for longer now, which makes it easier."

Germany remain unbeaten in three games this year, yet both Gnabry and assistant coach Marcus Sorg admitted yesterday they could have scored more goals against Belarus. Sorg, who is standing in as head coach while Joachim Loew recovers from a recent accident, said his team wanted to "dominate" Estonia today.

"We will have to break them first. They are a team built on a good organisation and structure," he said.

U-23

Qatar face Bahrain at Toulon Tournament

QNA
Paris

Qatar under-23 team will conclude their participation in Toulon International Football Tournament today by facing Bahrain in a ranking to determine the 11 and 12 position. The Qatari is aiming for a win after losing all three of their group matches against Brazil, France and Guatemala. The Qatari Olympic team lost their first match against France 2-0, and lost against Guatemala 2-0, and then lost to Brazil 5-0.

The tournament is a great opportunity to prepare Qatar Olympic team for the upcoming AFC U-23 World Cup in Thailand, scheduled next January, and qualifying for Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

Qatar under-23 players train in Toulon, Southern France yesterday.



WORLD CUP AND AFC ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS

Confident Pakistan take on Cambodia in Doha today

AFC
Doha

Pakistan have been hard at work since touching down in Doha for the second leg of their FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and AFC Asian Cup 2023 Preliminary Joint Qualification tie.

The South Asians will go into the return leg at the neutral venue of Al Ahli Club chasing a 2-0 deficit, after late goals by Sieng Chanthea and Kouch Sokumpheak gave Cambodia the advantage in last Thursday's first leg. Today's match will begin at 7pm.

Pakistan, however, are confident they can overturn the deficit, especially if they can finish the chances they create. Head coach Jose Antonio Nogueira lamented the missed chances in the first leg, especially as they came way before Cambodia scored their two goals.

The Brazilian would have undoubtedly worked on his team's finishing and Cambodia can expect a more potent Pakistan today. The match will be streamed by mycujoo.tv.

The Southeast Asians, however, know if they prevent Pakistan from scoring, they will take their place in the next round of the Asian Qualifi-

ers. They will be up for the challenge as head coach Felix G. Dalmas set his sights on the return leg immediately after the first leg ended. He promised that Cambodia will not be complacent despite their advantage and this sets the stage for an exciting match today.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh are confident of sealing their spot in the next round when they host Laos in the second leg of their FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and AFC Asian Cup 2023 Preliminary Joint Qualification tie in Dhaka today. Forward Rabiul Hasan came off the bench to score in last Thursday's first leg to give Bangladesh a vital win and with the return leg at the Bangabandhu National Stadium, the South Asians are optimistic of their chances of their place in the second round of the Asian Qualifiers.

Right-back Bishwanath Gosh, however, said how the Bangladesh defence performs will decide the outcome of the match. Head coach Jamie Day is likely to play the same defenders who started the first leg and Gosh said Bangladesh must be resolute at the back.

"We have to be more focused than we were in Laos because the visiting side will come all-out after losing their home match. If the defenders do really well and don't concede any goal,



Pakistan's coach Jose Antonio Nogueira (left) and midfielder Hassan Bashir address a press conference in Doha yesterday.

then we have a good opportunity to progress," said Gosh to local media.

Laos, however, look equally confident despite trailing by a goal. Head coach V Sundram Moorthy's charges

were in high spirits during training and the Singaporean said they are determined to overturn the deficit and advance. "The 90-minute match is now important for us and we believe

it is possible to overturn the result. We are confident and will go all out to win the game," Sundram said. "In the first match, we had a few chances but we could not capitalise and that's the

reason we're 1-0 down. Hopefully we will make use of our chances in Bangladesh's home match."

Meanwhile, Timor-Leste head coach Norio Tsukitate is hoping his charges will show a better performance against Malaysia in the second leg. A rampant Malaysia scored a 7-1 win to all but confirm their place in the next stage of the Asian Qualifiers but Tsukitate is looking at the bigger picture for his young Timor-Leste team. The Japanese coach opted for a young squad due to several factors and admitted that his players struggled to cope with the intensity of Malaysia's game.

"In the domestic league, they play better – more high level, more pressure and more good passes. But against Malaysia, they cannot play that way. I hope they have learned something in the match and will show a better performance in the second match," said Tsukitate.

Malaysia may have taken a hefty lead in the first leg but head coach Tan Cheng Hoe expects the same determination from his players today.

"We still have 90 minutes to play and I expect the players to perform with the same intensity," said Tan, who steered Malaysia to a runners-up finish in the 2018 AFF Cup.

SPOTLIGHT

Portugal's Nations League win is a statement of intent

Bernardo Silva, unsurprisingly, was behind much of the positive play from Portugal



Portugal captain Cristiano Ronaldo celebrates with teammates after winning the UEFA Nations League at the Estadio do Dragao in Porto, Portugal, on Sunday. (Reuters)

Reuters
Porto, Portugal

European champions Portugal won the inaugural Nations League with a 1-0 win over the Netherlands on Sunday night and on this evidence must surely be early candidates to challenge with France for next year's Euro 2020 title.

The narrow margin of the win did not express the gap in quality between the sides at the Dragao Stadium – the weakness of this Dutch team has always been their lack of real firepower and they paid heavily for that. But while the Netherlands were never out of the game, Portugal were superior in all departments.

The Dutch finished above France and Germany to reach the final four and then beat England in the semi-finals, but while there is no doubt that Ronald Koeman's side are on an upward trajectory, their limitations were exposed by Portugal.

For all the hype around the imagined confrontation between Cristiano Ro-

naldo and Europe's top defender Virgil van Dijk, it was other players who made the difference for the home side. Bernardo Silva, unsurprisingly, was behind so much of the positive play from Portugal.

Buzzing around the right flank, the Manchester City midfielder was alert, inventive and threatening. Bruno Fernandes provided much of the same from midfield, his clever touches, intelligent use of the ball and movement into space showing why he is the latest Portuguese player to be linked with a move to one of Europe's big clubs. The decisive goal came on the hour from Goncalo Guedes, the 22-year-old Valencia forward who amply justified his inclusion ahead of Joao Felix, with his link-up play and ability to stretch a Dutch defence already pre-occupied with Ronaldo.

Indeed, Ronaldo was relatively quiet – another indication that this Portugal side is continuing to improve, looking much less reliant on the 34-year-old who can now play as a pure striker given Bernardo Silva's ability to lead the counter-attacks. The status of the Nations League was

compared by Netherlands coach Ronald Koeman to a Super Cup at club level but, whatever the value of the new competition, Portugal in their two wins here and performances in qualifying showed they are arguably a better side than the team which triumphed at Euro 2016.

Three years ago in France, Portugal only progressed from the group stage in third place, behind Iceland and Hungary, having drawn all their games. They rarely shone in the knockout stage, winning the competition with just one solitary victory inside 90 minutes, but showing resilience and discipline in their 1-0 triumph over France after extra time in the final.

Those qualities remain important to Fernando Santos's side but this is a much more expressive and creative team, with the younger faces he has introduced turning Portugal into a formidable force. Put simply, there was no Bernardo Silva, Bruno Fernandes or Guedes at Euro 2016 and, with the 19-year-old Felix emerging as another attacking option, Santos will defend the title with a broad range of quality choices.

At centre-back Ruben Dias, the 22-year-old Benfica defender, was calm and authoritative, looking comfortable bringing the ball out of defence. The solid, physical, holding midfield pair of William Carvalho and Danilo show Santos is not getting carried away by the talent available to him and their simple but effective work gives the team crucial equilibrium.

World champions France must be favourites to win the pan-European tournament next year while England, despite their disappointment in defeat by the Dutch in the semi-final, will fancy their chances. The Netherlands, if they can find more firepower in attack, could be in contention and only a fool dismisses heavyweights Germany, Spain and Italy.

But there is a level of close understanding and teamwork about Santos's outfit that gives them more the appearance of a club side than a national team and that can be crucial. Unlike the side who were crowned European champions three years ago, this Portugal are a true pleasure to watch.

RONALDO STILL HUNGRY FOR MORE GLORY WITH PORTUGAL

Porto, Portugal: Cristiano Ronaldo insisted he has no immediate plans to retire from international football after helping Portugal lift the inaugural Nations League on Sunday.

Ronaldo, 34, was a peripheral figure as Goncalo Guedes's goal won an underwhelming final against the Netherlands 1-0 in Porto. But after sitting out the group stage of the Nations League on a hiatus from international football, Ronaldo played a huge part in getting his country to the final by scoring a hat-trick in Wednesday's semi-final against Switzerland.

And with a host of exciting young talent, led by Manchester City's Bernardo Silva, who picked up player of the tournament, Ronaldo is keen to hang around for the chance at more international glory as Portugal look to defend their European Championship title next year. "Portugal has won important

things like Euro 2016 and now the Nations League. It may seem like an easy job but it's hard, it takes a lot of dedication and willingness," Ronaldo said.

"As long as I have the strength and motivation, I will continue to represent the colours of Portugal. When I am with the national team I feel like at home."

Victory was especially sweet for Ronaldo as the only surviving member of the Portuguese side beaten on home soil by Greece in the final of Euro 2004. "I have been with the national team for 16 years and I still feel the same enthusiasm as when I was 18 years old," he added.

"I will always give my best and the Portuguese are always on my side so I thank them for their enthusiasm for me. I try to match that with good performances, goals, and help Portugal win trophies."

FOCUS

Netherlands' De Ligt laughs off Ronaldo's Juventus 'offer'

Reuters
Porto, Portugal

Netherlands defender Matthijs de Ligt, who is widely expected to leave Ajax Amsterdam in the coming weeks, said he was asked about a move to Italian champions Juventus by Cristiano Ronaldo at the end of Sunday's Nations League final.

Ronaldo's Portugal triumphed 1-0 in the showpiece match leaving the 19-year-old defender De Ligt, linked with several top European clubs, disappointed. But television images showed Juve forward Ronaldo having a chat with the centre-half at the end of the game and the Dutchman confirmed a possible move to the Italian side had been raised by

the five-times Ballon d'Or winner. "I didn't understand him at first. I was a little shocked, so I laughed. But I didn't say anything," De Ligt said. "So soon after the game you are not at all concerned with it. You are disappointed that you have lost and that is the only thing you are thinking about," he added.

De Ligt's impressive performances for Ajax in their run to the Champions League semi-finals have made him one of the most wanted signatures in the transfer window. But the defender said he had yet to make up his mind over his future and was in no hurry to do so.

"I don't mind that. The transfer period starts in a while, so I will first go on a nice vacation and rest. I will let it happen and then I will see," he said.



Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo (left) battles for the ball with Netherlands' Matthijs de Ligt during the UEFA Nations League final in Porto, Portugal on Sunday night. (Reuters)