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**GULF TIMES SPORT**

**TENNIS**

**Dimitrov stuns Federer to reach US Open semi-finals**

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2022 WORLD CUP AND 2023 ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS | SHEIKH JASSIM BIN HAMAD STADIUM, 7:30PM

# Qatar not taking minnows Afghanistan lightly

Felix Sanchez's men also have India, Bangladesh and Oman for company in Group E

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Afghanistan's status as football's unknowns will have no bearing on Qatar's approach as they clash in an Asian Group E joint qualifier for the 2022 FIFA World Cup and the 2023 Asian Cup at the Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Stadium today.

Qatar's group also includes India, Bangladesh and Oman, with the toppers along with the seven other group winners and four best runners-up advancing to the Asian Cup in China and the final round of qualifying for the 2022 World Cup.

However, should Qatar – who have qualified for the 2022 FIFA World Cup as hosts – win their group, the seven other group winners and five best second-placed sides will advance to the final round of qualifying for the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

The gulf between Qatar and Afghanistan is however enormous in more ways than one and doesn't need elaboration, but that is something which Qatar's battle-hardened coach Felix Sanchez dismissed in his typical matter-of-fact manner when asked if he would be taking the match lightly as Qatar are much stronger "on paper".

"If all the results go according to team's strengths on paper football would be a very boring sport," Sanchez said at his pre-match press conference yesterday.

The Spaniard, who last week was also given charge of the country's under-23 squad, knows the importance of making a strong start to any campaign.

"We are happy to start the qualifying campaign with a match at home, in front of our own fans. That is why it's all the more important that we make a big impact. We are looking for-



Qatar national team players take part in a training session on the eve of their 2022 FIFA World Cup and the 2023 Asian Cup qualifying match against Afghanistan yesterday. PICTURES: Noushad Thekkayil

ward to a good game," the Spaniard added.

Today's match marks the first time Qatar will be playing on home soil after their Asian Cup triumph on February 1 in Dubai.

After the domestic season ended in May, the national team embarked on their first-ever Copa American campaign in Brazil where they acquitted themselves well, drawing 2-2 with Paraguay and falling to narrow defeats against Argentina (2-0) and Colombia (1-0).

The seriousness with which Sanchez takes international

matches can be gauged from the fact that he and his support team made a thorough "study" of the Afghanistan team, despite them being ranked a lowly 149th in the FIFA world rankings.

"As I said no team can be taken lightly. We have studied them, as they must have studied us," Sanchez insisted.

Sanchez also praised the spectacular launch of the emblem for the 2022 World Cup.

"It shows us we are really getting close to the World Cup. It's another milestone in Qatar's journey towards the tournament

and also a great motivation for the team," said Sanchez.

Qatar player Aasim Madibo also echoed the same view. "It's good for us as players. The World Cup is really close. In fact tomorrow is the start of the World Cup."

Also in Qatar's group, India will look to new head coach Igor Stimac to guide them to their first victory in five meetings with Oman at the Indira Gandhi Athletic Stadium in Guwahati.

Elsewhere, Philippines will be banking on home advantage when they face-off against a determined Syrian side in Bacolod

City in Group A.

Another intriguing encounter awaits in Group B as Kuwait host a Nepal side, who return to this stage of the qualifiers after more than eight years, at the Stadium of Kuwait SC in the country's capital.

Group C also promises a thrilling opener between two West Asian rivals as Bahrain host Iraq. The home side will be inspired by their narrow 1-0 victory over the Iraqis in the WAFF Championship final last month, but the Lions of Mesopotamia have proven their mettle against some



Qatar coach Felix Sanchez is happy that the qualifying campaign for the team is starting at home.

of Asia's best, setting up a scintillating battle in Manama.

In Group D, Hector Cuper's Uzbekistan will be on a mission to replicate their last qualification campaign which saw them sail into the final stages, as they travel to Palestine, who will be just as eager to build on their best-ever AFC Asian Cup performance in front of their home fans.

Kyrgyz Republic face a tricky trip to Central Zone rivals Tajikistan in what is expected to be an exciting Group F clash while Mongolia aim to continue

their historic run when they host Myanmar in Ulaanbaatar.

Asean rivalry is the focus in Group G when UAE 2019 surprise packages, Vietnam, travel to Thailand while Indonesia and Malaysia face-off in what promises to be an exhilarating atmosphere at a sold-out Gelora Bung Karno Stadium.

Group H will see DPR Korea revisit their UAE 2019 group rivals, Lebanon, at the Kim II Sung Stadium in Pyongyang as Sri Lanka go up against Turkmenistan at the Colombo Race Course Ground.

TENNIS / US OPEN

# Serena plots Olympic revenge as Svitolina blocks path

AFP  
New York, United States

Serena Williams will look to avenge a 2016 defeat at the Rio Olympic Games in today's US Open semi-final against Elna Svitolina as the American targets a record-equaling 24th Grand Slam singles title.

A run to the last four in New York, bookended by crushing routes of long-time foe Maria Sharapova and China's Wang Qiang, brought up a century of US Open wins for Williams, chasing her first Slam crown since the 2017 Australian Open.

Williams, who turns 38 later this month, holds a 4-1 career advantage over Svitolina, but the Ukrainian triumphed in their most recent encounter – a third-round clash at the Olympics in Rio.

"That was a tough Olympics for me. Oh, man. Lost in doubles

for the first time. Just really devastated about that doubles loss. Then obviously singles shortly after," Williams recalled after her 6-1, 6-0 quarter-final demolition of Wang in just 44 minutes.

Williams, who is seeking a 24th major title to match Margaret Court's all-time record, will likely face a far tougher proposition in fifth seed Svitolina.

The 24-year-old Odessa native has yet to drop a set at Flushing Meadows while taking out two-time former champion Venus Williams and 2017 runner-up Madison Keys.

"She is obviously a fighter. She gets a lot of balls back. She doesn't make a lot of mistakes. She's one of those players that does everything really well. So I have to do everything well, too," Williams said.

Svitolina retains fond memories of her 6-4, 6-3 victory over defending Olympic champion Williams in Brazil, a watershed moment which came scarcely

two months after she was throttled 6-1, 6-1 by the American at Roland Garros.

"It was unbelievable atmosphere. I played actually a great match. I was very young. Not very young, but I was kind of young at the time. I didn't have big wins at that time. For me, it gave me lots of confidence," Svitolina said.

"It gave me the confidence to actually let me believe that I can play consistent against the top players."

**SINGAPORE BOOST**

Svitolina has backed up her Wimbledon semi-final showing in July, where she lost to eventual champion Simona Halep, with another deep run at Flushing Meadows.

She is attempting to become just the second Ukrainian to play in a Grand Slam singles final – after Andrei Medvedev, who lost in five sets to Andre Agassi at the 1999 French Open.

Svitolina cites last year's WTA Finals title in Singapore as a key factor behind her breakthrough Slam performances this season.

"I think I'm generally stronger. Mentally I'm handling the pressure points better. Sometimes it's possible that you're not there on that day, not playing your best. But you try to find your own path, your own way how to handle those kind of moments," she said.

Williams blasted 25 winners in her rout of Wang, who failed to hit a single one, and Svitolina is fully aware of what to expect from an opponent hunting a seventh US Open title.

"I have to react quickly and try to take my chances when I have them," Svitolina said.

"I think I have to run a lot, like all other matches. That's normal. And try to react – I played some big hitters in this tournament, a lot, and I have to just react quickly with my feet and with my shots, as well. Then when I have the opportunity, go for it."



## PREVIEW

# Euros resume with a reshuffled all-star cast

France will be without four members of their World Cup-winning squad



France's head coach Didier Deschamps (L) shares a laugh with forward Antoine Griezmann during a training session in Clairefontaine-en-Yvelines as part of the team's preparations for the upcoming Euro-2020 qualifiers.

AFF  
Paris

**E**uro 2020 qualifying resumes today with several of the biggest teams such as world champions France sporting a changed look for the new season, in some cases not by choice.

Less than a month into the new European season, France have been particularly hard hit by injuries ahead of home matches against Albania on Saturday and Andorra next Tuesday in Group H.

They will be without four members of their 2018 World Cup-winning squad — Paul Pogba, N'Golo Kante, Kylian Mbappe and Ousmane Dembele — as well as emerging stars Aymeric Laporte and Tanguy Ndombele.

Coach Didier Deschamps

blamed football's "crazy schedules", saying he always expects to lose players, but this was exceptional.

"At one time it is one of them, at another time it is another," Deschamps said, before adding: "Now I'm not hiding from you that I have a lot of them at the same time and I could have done without that."

While Group H is one of the tightest, with France, Turkey and Iceland level at the top in the pursuit of one of two qualifying berths, Deschamps faces Albania and then Andorra at home. The real test will come in October when France travel to Iceland and then host Turkey, who beat Les Bleus 2-0 in Konya in June.

The heavyweight clash in this batch of games pits Germany against the Netherlands in Hamburg on Friday in Group C.

It will be the third meeting of the old rivals in less than a year.

The Dutch thrashed the Germans 3-0 in the Nations League in Amsterdam last October, with Virgil van Dijk scoring once. In Schalke in November, the Liverpool defender's 90th minute equaliser put the Dutch through to the finals of that competition in Portugal.

Back in Amsterdam in March, Germany won a Euro qualifying match 3-2, with a 90th minute goal. This time Germany will be without Leroy Sane, who scored in the last two encounters.

Yet absences create opportunities. "There's a space free in attack now because of Leroy Sane's unfortunate injury," said Timo Werner, a scorer against the Dutch last November.

The 1.93 metre (6ft 3ins) Van Dijk, recently voted European male player of the year, looms large.

"If I stand next to him, it gets dark pretty quickly," said Werner, who is 1.80m.

Victory would put Germany, who have won all three of their games, nine points clear of the Dutch. But there is another perfect team in the group. Surprising Northern Ireland, who have won all four of their games, host Germany in Belfast on Monday.

Most teams will pass the halfway point in their schedules over the next week. Poland, Belgium, Italy and Spain, all in six-nation groups, are also perfect after four matches. England, in a five-team group, have won the two games they have played.

For Spain, the change is at coach, with Roberto Moreno, a career assistant, confirmed as head coach. He took over on an interim basis when Luis Enrique quit in March because his daughter Xana was ill. She died, aged nine, last week.

Spain, another team to have won all four games, take on Romania in Bucharest in Group F on Thursday. Moreno said he was worried his players "might think we are superior."

England also have a perfect record after four games and are at home to Bulgaria on Saturday and minnows Kosovo on Tuesday with coach Gareth Southgate focused on building squad depth.

"We have got a depth of talent now because we have approached it slightly differently to look at younger players," said Southgate, after adding youngsters James Maddison, Mason Mount and Aaron Wan-Bissaka to his squad.

"We can't stand still and there are young players coming through," Southgate said. "We need to start integrating them."

Southgate's plans hit an injury bump on Tuesday when Manchester United defender Wan-Bissaka had to drop out.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Inter fans tell Lukaku monkey chants are 'not racist'



AFF  
Milan

**A** group of hardcore Inter Milan supporters have written an open letter to Romelu Lukaku telling the Belgian striker that fans making monkey noises during a football match was not a sign of racism.

Lukaku — Inter Milan's new 65 mn euros (\$73 mn) recruit from Manchester United — was targeted by monkey chants from a section of the home crowd during Sunday's Serie A game at Cagliari.

The abuse lasted for several seconds as the 26-year-old was preparing to take the winning penalty in Inter's 2-1 Serie A triumph at Cagliari.

But Inter's fan group 'L'Urlo della Nord' told the forward in an open letter published on their Facebook page that he was seeing racism where there was none.

"Hi Romelu. We are really sorry you thought that what happened in Cagliari was racist," the fans wrote.

"You have to understand that Italy is not like many other north European countries where racism is a REAL problem.

"We understand that it could have seemed racist to you, but it is not like that.

"In Italy we use some 'ways' only to 'help our teams' and to try to make our opponents nervous, not for racism but to mess them up.

"We are a multi-ethnic fans organisation and we have always welcomed players from everywhere.

"However, we have always used that 'way' with other teams' players in the past and we probably will in the future.

"We are not racist and so are not the Cagliari fans," continued the letter from the "Curva Nord" group — which has no official affiliation with Inter.

The group is a section of the club's hardcore support that sit in the north stand of Inter's San Siro stadium.

On Sunday, monkey sounds could be heard in the stadium as Lukaku was trying to take a penalty.

The Belgian international an-

grily looked towards the stands before confidently converting his second goal in as many games.

Lukaku was quickly surrounded by his teammates as Inter won their second from two league matches to sit ahead of champions Juventus.

The Sardinian club on Monday moved to "strongly distance" themselves "from the isolated but nevertheless reprehensible events that took place in the Sardegna Arena".

On Monday, Lukaku called on players, clubs and federations to unite and take a stand.

"Ladies and gentlemen it's 2019, instead of going forward we're going backwards and I think as players we need to unify and make a statement on this matter to keep this game clean and enjoyable for everyone."

But Inter's hardcore fans said Lukaku was seeing racism where there was none.

"Please consider this attitude of Italian fans as a form of respect for the fact they are afraid of you for the goals you might score against their teams and not because they hate you or they are racist," the letter read.

"You have to understand that in all Italian stadiums people cheer for their teams but at the same time they jeer opponents not for racism but to 'help' their own team.

"True racism is a completely different story and all Italian football fans know it very well.

"When you declare that racism is a problem to be fought in Italy you just help the repression against all football fans including us and you contribute to create a problem that is not really there, not in the way that is perceived in other countries.

"Please help us to clarify what racism really is and that Italian fans are not racist."

Racist chanting has dogged Italian stadia in recent years, with Italy striker Moise Kean also the victim of similar abuse — alongside teammate Blaise Matuidi — at Cagliari after he scored a goal there for his former team Juventus last April.

Kalidou Koulibaly was showered with monkey chants last season by Lukaku's new fans at the San Siro, while several other black players have been targeted.

## BOTTOMLINE

## Injured Hazard brothers ruled out of Belgian qualifiers

Agencies  
Brussels

**E**den Hazard and his brother Thorgan will miss Belgium's Euro 2020 qualifiers against San Marino and Scotland through injuries, the Belgian football association said.

The pair reported to the team camp in Tubize on Tuesday for medical checks which confirmed Eden is suffering from a muscle strain while his younger brother has a rib injury.

Eden has yet to make his league debut for Real Madrid since his move to Chelsea because of the injury.

No replacements have been named by coach Roberto Martinez.

Belgium, who have won their open-

ing four qualifiers in Group I, play in San Marino on Friday and then Scotland at Hampden Park on Monday. (Reporting by Mark Gleeson in Cape Town; Editing by Amlan Chakraborty)

### CHIellini OUT FOR SIX MONTHS

Juventus captain Giorgio Chiellini has been ruled out for around six months after undergoing surgery on a torn knee ligament, the Italian Serie A champions have said. Centre back Chiellini, 35, sustained the injury during a training session last Friday, with new signing Matthijs de Ligt replacing him in the Juventus lineup in their 4-3 win over Napoli last weekend.

"Giorgio Chiellini underwent surgery to reconstruct the anterior cruciate ligament of the right knee," Juventus said in a

statement on Tuesday.

"The intervention, performed at the Hochrum clinic in Innsbruck by professor Christian Fink in the presence of the Juventus club doctor, Dr. Tzouroudis, was perfectly successful.

"The expected recovery time is around 6 months."

Juve have won their opening two league matches of the season as they chase their ninth consecutive top-flight title but they must do so now without Chiellini for the majority of the campaign.

The Italy international is likely to return in March, meaning he could be fit for the Champions League quarter-finals, if Juventus make it that far.

**HAN COMPLETES JUVE MOVE**  
North Korea international striker Han

Kwang Song has completed his loan move to Italian champions Juventus from league rivals Cagliari, both teams have confirmed.

The 21-year-old — the first North Korean to play in Serie A — has spent the past two seasons on loan from Cagliari to Serie B side Perugia where he has scored 11 goals in 39 matches.

"Han Kwang Song is a new Juventus player! The North Korean striker arrives from Cagliari. Welcome," Juventus said on Twitter. New coach Maurizio Sarri has long been a fan of Han, who will spend this season playing for Juventus's Under-23 team, currently 18th in Serie C after two defeats in as many matches.

Cagliari said Han will join Juventus on a two-year loan deal with an obligation buy.

### City's Laporte undergoes surgery

**Manchester:** Manchester City defender Aymeric Laporte has had knee surgery after damaging his cartilage and lateral meniscus in their 4-0 victory over Brighton & Hove Albion last weekend, the Premier League champions said yesterday. The 25-year-old, who had been called up by France for their Euro 2020 qualifiers against Albania and Andorra, was carried off on a stretcher after pending Brighton's Adam Webster and coming off worse. "Aymeric Laporte has undergone surgery on his knee after damaging his cartilage and lateral meniscus during Saturday's win over Brighton," City said in a statement. "The surgery, carried out by Dr Ramon Cugat in Barcelona, was

successful and a more detailed prognosis will be provided in due course. Everyone at City wishes Aymeric a full and speedy recovery." Laporte established himself as a key player in manager Pep Guardiola's back line last season, playing 35 league matches and started all four of their matches in the current campaign.

The Frenchman's injury means that City only have Nicolas Otamendi and John Stones, who is battling a thigh issue, as their senior central defenders following the departure of Vincent Kompany in the close season.

City return to league action against promoted Norwich City on Sept. 14.

FOCUS

# Dimitrov stuns Federer to reach US Open semi-finals

'I was trying to stay in that game and make him stay on the court as much as possible'

AFP  
New York

Grigor Dimitrov rallied for a shocking upset of 20-time Grand Slam champion Roger Federer at the US Open on Tuesday, the lowest-ranked New York semi-finalist in 28 years advancing to face Daniil Medvedev.

The 78th-ranked Bulgarian, who had dropped all seven prior meetings with Federer, made a dramatic fightback to defeat the Swiss third seed 3-6, 6-4, 3-6, 6-4, 6-2 at Arthur Ashe Stadium and will face Russian fifth seed Medvedev in tomorrow's semis.

"I'm just happy," Dimitrov said. "The only thing I was telling myself was to stay in the match. Physically I was feeling pretty good. I was hitting some shots against him that were hard to hit."

Dimitrov reached his first US Open semi-final to match the deepest Slam runs of his career from Wimbledon in 2014 and the 2017 Australian Open.

Not since 174th-ranked Jimmy Connors reached the 1991 quarter-finals had New York seen so lowly a figure on the ATP ratings list reach the last four.

Dimitrov is also the lowest-ranked Slam semi-finalist since 94th-rated Rainer Schuettler of Germany at Wimbledon in 2008.

Federer, a five-time US Open champion who has not won at Flushing Meadows since 2008, breezed through the first set in 29 minutes and appeared to have withstood the danger until Dimitrov opened the fourth set with a break.

Federer was denied on five break points in the 10th game of the fourth set and Dimitrov held to force a fifth set.

"I was trying to stay in that game and make him stay on the court as much as possible. After that he started slowing down a little bit," Dimitrov said.

"It's a best of five sets. Anything can happen," Federer went off the court for a private medical timeout to treat his upper back near his neck.

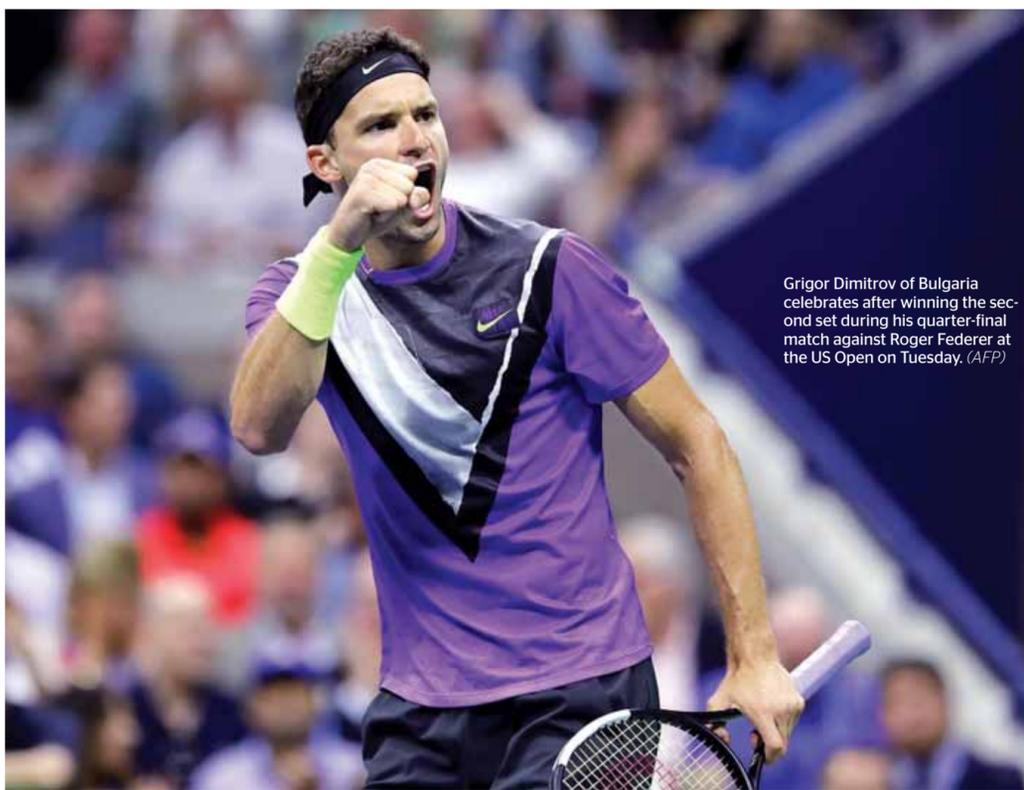
"This is Grigor's moment, not my body's moment," Federer said.

Dimitrov broke Federer twice on the way to a 4-0 lead in the final set and the 38-year-old Swiss star had no effective reply, foiled by 61 unforced errors in falling after three hours and 12 minutes.

"It's OK. It's how it goes," Federer said. "I tried my best. I fought with what I had and that's it."

Federer would have become the oldest Slam semi-finalist since Jimmy Connors at age 39 at the 1991 US Open.

Medvedev defeated three-time Grand Slam champion Stan Wawrinka 7-6 (8/6), 6-3, 3-6, 6-1 to reach his first major semi-final,



Grigor Dimitrov of Bulgaria celebrates after winning the second set during his quarter-final match against Roger Federer at the US Open on Tuesday. (AFP)

## Another heartbreak for Federer in bid for 21st grand slam title

Reuters  
New York

Fresh from a heart-breaking loss at the All-England Tennis Club, the abrupt end to Roger Federer's US Open on Tuesday raised questions whether the 38-year-old can deliver on a record-extending 21st Grand Slam title.

Federer had hoped to shake off the agony of his most recent Wimbledon final, where the top prize slipped through his fingers and into the arms of frequent rival Novak Djokovic after he failed to convert two championship points.

But unseeded Grigor Dimitrov thwarted the effort in Flushing Meadows in a five-set marathon, leaving a puzzled crowd to wonder

if the Swiss will ever again hoist a Grand Slam trophy.

"I don't have the crystal ball. Do you?" quipped the third seed, after a reporter asked if he expected to win another Grand Slam title at his age.

"We never know. I hope so, of course. I think still it's been a positive season. Disappointing now, but I'll get back up, I'll be all right."

He batted down suggestions that his Wimbledon performance this year played a role in his surprise US Open upset.

"I didn't think of it. If you move on, it's a thing of the past. I do remember playing good semis there, so it wasn't bad. If I think of that, I'm, like, really happy," he said.

For Federer, nothing is out of the question — and not without precedent: The oldest man to win the US Open title was Bill Larned, who

was 38 years, 8 months and 3 days old when he triumphed.

Of course, that was in 1911. And past precedent is likely little comfort for Federer, who laid out for reporters an aggressive schedule of future competition.

"Laver Cup, Shanghai, Basel, maybe Paris, London. That's the schedule for now. I don't know if the team have other ideas or not," said Federer. "I'm happy to get a bit of a break now, go back to practice, reassess and attack from there."

In four months, he'll renew his effort to add to his Grand Slam coffers at the Australian Open, where he collected his last title in 2018.

"(I have) got to take the losses. They're part of the game," said Federer. "Looking forward to family time and all that stuff, so... Life's all right."

shaking off a sore left quadriceps that made him contemplate quitting the match. Now he gets two days of rest.

"That's huge advantage regarding what happened to my leg," Medvedev said. "It should be OK." Medvedev took a medical timeout, had the area taped and took a painkiller.

"In the fourth set, I started feeling the painkiller and started moving better," he said. "For sure I hope

to be ready for the semis."

### MEDVEDEV'S HOT SUMMER

Medvedev has maintained momentum from a sizzling August in which he reached three ATP finals, winning a title at Cincinnati and finishing runner-up in Montreal and Washington.

Medvedev, 23, is the youngest US Open semi-finalist since Novak Djokovic in 2010 and Russia's first

Slam semi-finalist since Mikhail Youzhny at the 2010 US Open.

Dimitrov and Medvedev have split two prior matches, Dimitrov winning at Queen's in 2017 and Medvedev avenging the loss a few weeks later in Washington.

"He has been having a tremendous summer," Dimitrov said of Medvedev. "I know his game. I'm just going to try and recover and reassess the match first and prepare from then on for Daniil. He's a

tough player. He's tricky."

Wawrinka, foiled in a bid for his second US Open title in four seasons, said he did not think Medvedev would be holding the trophy on Sunday.

"He can, but I don't think he will. I think it's going to be really difficult," Wawrinka said. "Because he looks to start to be tired, and he has to beat some more tougher player in the semi-final and then in the final."

SPOTLIGHT

## Bencic advances to first Grand Slam semi-final

AFP  
New York

Swiss 13th seed Belinda Bencic advanced to her first Grand Slam semi-final yesterday at the US Open by defeating Croatia's Donna Vekic 7-6 (7/5), 6-3.

Bencic will play today against the winner of a later quarter-final between Canadian 15th seed Bianca Andreescu and Belgian 25th seed Elise Mertens.

One of them will become a first-time Grand Slam finalist in Saturday's championship match at Arthur Ashe Stadium, where first-time Slam winners have been crowned three of the past four years.

"I dreamed of this like a little kid so now that I'm here I'm really enjoying it," Bencic said.

Bencic ensured a return to the world rankings top-10 for the first time since June 2016 with the victory.

She sank as low as 328th after numerous injuries and 2017 left wrist surgery but the 22-year-old Swiss began the year 55th and has climbed from there, thanks in part to her third career WTA title in February at Dubai.

"Through the tough times it helped me to see a little different way the tennis when you can't always play," Bencic said. "For me this perspective changed

and I'm enjoying so much the tennis now."

Bencic, who has never faced Andreescu or Mertens, improved to 3-1 against her friend Vekic, who ousted her from this year's French Open.

"We're both professionals enough to be friends off the court and competitive on the court," Bencic said. "I think we did well. I'm sure off the court we are friends still."

Bencic, who enjoyed a third-round walkover, ousted top-ranked defending champion Naomi Osaka in the fourth round, assuring the Japanese star will be replaced atop the rankings on Monday by French Open champion Ashleigh Barty of Australia.

Vekic and Bencic exchanged baseline groundstrokes most of the match. They traded breaks in the ninth and 10th games of the first set and Vekic saved a break point in the 12th game with a forehand volley winner to hold into the tie-breaker.

Bencic went on a 5-1 tie-break run to seize a 6-3 edge and took the set after an hour when Vekic swatted a forehand beyond the baseline.

Vekic netted a backhand to surrender a break and hand Bencic a 4-3 edge in the second set. Bencic held and broke again to close out the match after one hour 41 minutes when Vekic hit a forehand wide, the last of her 28 unforced errors.



Belinda Bencic of Switzerland reacts after beating Donna Vekic of Croatia in a quarter-final match at the US Open yesterday.

## Medvedev qualifies for ATP Finals with strong US Open run

DPA  
New York

In-form Russian Daniil Medvedev has qualified for the season-ending ATP Finals for the first time in his young career thanks to his strong run at the US Open.

The men's tennis body ATP said that his quarter-final win Tuesday against Stan Wawrinka has given him enough points for the year to secure his place in the elite eight-player field.

Medvedev, 23, joins the Big Three of Novak Djokovic, Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer as

assured qualifiers for the November 10-17 finale in London.

"It's amazing. That shows what a great year I'm having, that the work I've been doing is paying off. But I don't want to stop. Hopefully I can be there as one of the favourites," Medvedev said.

Medvedev has a tour-leading 49 match wins over the year, has won the Sofia and Cincinnati titles and reached four further finals. He is 19-2 in the North American swing which started last month and the ATP

has also said he will climb to a career-high number four ranking next week.

BOTTOMLINE

# Serena sweeps into semis, chalks up 100th US Open win

Reuters  
New York

Serena Williams claimed her 100th win at the US Open in style on Tuesday, dismantling her quarter-final opponent Wang Qiang 6-1 6-0 in a blistering 44-minute performance that ended any questions over a twisted ankle from the previous round.

"I never thought that I would get to 100," Williams said after the match, reflecting on the two decades she's spent playing at Flushing Meadows. "It's so special. I never want to let it go."

The eighth-seeded American joins Chris Evert as the only two players to log at least 100 victo-

ries at the tournament. Williams is now only one behind Evert's mark.

The 37-year-old Williams was dominant from the start, firing off 25 winners, compared to zero from 18th-seed Wang, and winning 90% of her first serve points.

During her fourth-round match on Sunday, Williams slipped and fell while running to the net and twisted her right ankle but said on Tuesday she was feeling "great".

"It feels good," Williams said of her performance. "This is how hard I've been working. It feels like... hard work pays off when that happens."

Williams pumped her fist in celebration after firing off a forehand winner in front of a roaring

crowd to end the contest.

"I am who I am. I've always been the person that goes out there and roars and screams and complains and cries and fights," Williams said.

"I'm extremely passionate about what I do. Most people that love their jobs are passionate about what they do. That's just me."

She also praised the progress made in women's tennis over her career, calling it the "premier sport for women".

"It's the best work in the world that a woman can do, in my mind. I'm a little biased obviously," said the 37-year-old.

"I feel like we fought so hard for so many years for so many different things. I feel like we still obviously have a ways to go, but a

lot of that fighting through decades has come through."

Wang, who had not faced Williams before, was unable to save any of the five break point opportunities against her and said she simply could not stand up to the power from the 23-times Grand Slam champion.

"I cannot handle it. Just too much for me," said Wang.

Williams faces fifth-seed Elena Svitolina, who she leads 4-1 in head-to-head, in the semi-finals.

"She doesn't make a lot of mistakes," said Williams when asked about the upcoming matchup. "She's one of those players that does everything really well."

"So I have to do everything well, too."



Serena Williams of the United States celebrates after winning her quarter-final match against Qiang Wang of China at the US Open on Tuesday. (AFP)



## PREVIEW

# Fearless Japan relish rematch against vengeful SA

Japan had stunned South Africa in the opening game of the 2015 World Cup

AFP  
Tokyo

Coach Jamie Joseph insisted that World Cup hosts Japan will have no fear going into their final warm-up against revenge-seeking South Africa after naming a strong team yesterday.

The last time the teams met, hitherto tournament no-hopers Japan stunned the Springboks 34-32 on the English south coast in their opening game of the 2015 World Cup – an upset of such seismic proportions a movie about it has just been released.

Adamant there will be no sequel, Joseph's opposite number, South Africa coach Rassie Erasmus, named a full-strength side for tomorrow's encounter in Kumagaya, north of Tokyo.

The return to the starting line-up of Springbok captain Siya Kolisi after injury is the only change to the team that drew 16-16 with the All Blacks in Wellington six weeks ago on the way to capturing their first Rugby Championship since 2009.

"We're elated that coach Erasmus has picked what I think is their strongest line-up," Joseph said after countering with a starting fifteen led by talismanic captain Michael Leitch, now recovered from a lengthy groin problem.

"It shows respect and it gives our players something to look forward to. I've faced a lot of questions this last week about if I think it's a risky game before the World Cup but unless we play the best teams, we'll never get a true measure of where we are."

Joseph, who took over from Eddie Jones after the last World Cup, has set a target of reaching the quarter-finals for the first time and the Brave Blossoms limbered up by winning the Pacific Nations Cup over the summer.

"Obviously this is a step up," said the former All Blacks, who has left out experienced



File photo of Japan's head coach Jamie Joseph taking part in a press conference in Tokyo.

hooker Shota Horie to give him time to recover from a neck issue, replacing him with Atsushi Sakate in a meaty front row also including Uwe Helu and Luke Thompson.

"It will be a physical World Cup," added Joseph, whose side kick things off against Russia in Tokyo on September 20 before further Pool A games against Ireland, Samoa and Scotland.

"That's part of the reason we wanted to play South Africa. It's the final page in our preparation, but it's not a must-win game – the next game (against Russia) is a must-win. It's

about performance." Just six players remain from the Japan team who topped the Boks four years ago, while the visitors are virtually unrecognisable from the last World Cup.

"Last time we played against South Africa, they were just so above us," said Leitch, who famously defied Jones by refusing a late penalty kick that would have drawn that game in Brighton to go for the game-winning try.

"But human against human, we're quick, we have power and we can create confidence to play against South Africa."

Joseph warned that the Springboks, the world's fifth-ranked team who face treble-chasing New Zealand in a blockbuster World Cup Pool B opener in Yokohama on September 21, would come out firing.

"We are under no illusions how tough it will be," he said. "We are playing probably the biggest lineout in world rugby and they're preparing to play the All Blacks."

"But Russia have a very big pack, Samoa have a strong scrum," added the 49-year-old, whose Japan side have become a

regular fixture in the world's top 10.

**Japan (15-1):** William Tupou; Kotaro Matsushima, Timothy Lafaee, Ryoto Nakamura, Kenki Fukuoka; Yu Tamura, Kaito Shigeno; Amanaki Mafi, Pieter Labuschagne, Michael Leitch (captain); Uwe Helu, Luke Thompson; Koo Ji-won, Atsushi Sakate. Keita Inagaki Replacements: Takuya Kitade, Isileli Nakajima, Asaeli Ai Valu, James Moore, Yoshitaka Tokunaga, Yutaka Nagare, Rikiya Matsuda, Ataata Moeakiola  
Coach: Jamie Joseph (NZL)

## BOTTOMLINE

## England pick World Cup reject Marchant for Italy warm-up

AFP  
London

England have selected from outside their World Cup squad for tomorrow's final warm-up match against Italy by naming **Joe Marchant** at outside centre in a "mix-and-match selection".

Marchant is not in the 31-man squad bound for Japan on September 8 but slots into the midfield alongside Piers Francis, with captain Owen Farrell starting the final warm-up fixture at fly-half.

Two further players not picked for Japan 2019 are present on the bench in lock Charlie Ewels and flanker Matt Kvesic.

Ruaridh McCloskey finally makes his debut on the right wing after two aborted attempts in the double header against Wales due to hip and hamstring injuries.

The Bath sevens specialist forms a rapid back three alongside Anthony Watson and Leicester flyer Jonny May.

Henry Slade has lost his battle with a knee injury and misses the last opportunity to get some game time before the World Cup and Ben Youngs is given another



run at scrum-half.

Star number eight Billy Vunipola will make his fourth start of the campaign. Mark Wilson makes his first start of the summer at openside flanker and Tom Curry is given another run at six.

"We have gone with a mix-and-match selection policy to develop our adaptability and the team's ability to cope with any situation," said England coach

Eddie Jones.

England have enjoyed a promising World Cup warm-up series, with a win against Wales at Twickenham and crushing victory over Ireland only slightly offset by a narrow defeat in Cardiff.

Italy complete the four fixtures in the nation's first outing at St James' Park, two days before the squad set off for a pre-

tournament training camp in Miyazaki.

"We have had a solid training week in Treviso with hot conditions so we are looking forward to testing ourselves against Italy on Friday night," said Jones. "Then we hop on the plane and are ready to go to Japan."

Italy coach Conor O'Shea has made 11 changes to the side who were thumped 47-17 by France in Paris last week, with flanker Jimmy Tuivaiti included despite not being in the World Cup squad.

Dean Budd gets the captain's armband with veteran Sergio Parisse rested for the Italians' final World Cup warm-up.

Braam Steyn, Simone Ferrari, Jayden Hayward and Mattia Bellini are the only players retained.

Kiwi-born Budd is joined by David Sisi in the second row with Sebastian Negri in the back row with Steyn and Tuivaiti.

Gloucester scrum-half Callum Braley will make his first Azzurri start at No 9 alongside Carlo Canna, with Tommaso Benvenuti and Giulio Bisegni in midfield.

"We'll face one of the strongest teams in the world in a match that represents a new step in our preparation for the Rugby World Cup," said coach Conor O'Shea.

Italy will play reigning world

champions New Zealand, former winners South Africa and Canada after starting their Pool B campaign against Namibia on September 22.

England feature in Pool C along with Argentina, France, USA and Tonga.

**England (15-1)**

Anthony Watson, Ruaridh McCloskey, Joe Marchant, Piers Francis, Jonny May, Owen Farrell, Ben Youngs, Billy Vunipola, Mark Wilson, Tom Curry, Courtney Lawes, Joe Launchbury, Dan Cole, Jamie George, Joe Marler

**Replacements:** Luke Cowan-Dickie, Ellis Genge, Kyle Sinckler, Charlie Ewels, Matt Kvesic, Willi Heinz, George Ford, Joe Cokanasiga  
**Coach:** Eddie Jones (AUS)

**Italy (15-1)**

Jayden Hayward, Mattia Bellini, Giulio Bisegni, Tommaso Benvenuti, Edoardo Padovani, Carlo Canna, Callum Braley, Jimmy Tuivaiti, Abraham Steyn, Sebastian Negri, Dean Budd (capt), David Sisi, Simone Ferrari, Olivero Fabiani, Nicola Quaglio

**Replacements:** Federico Zani, Andrea Lovotti, Marco Riccioni, Federico Ruzza, Alessandro Zanni, Maxime Mbanda, Guglielmo Palazzani, Tommaso Allan.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Polota-Nau to retire after Samoa match

Reuters  
Melbourne

Veteran Australia hooker **Tatafu Polota-Nau** will bow out of international rugby in front of home fans in Sydney on Saturday when the Wallabies play their final World Cup warm-up against Samoa.

The 34-year-old missed out on a place in Michael Cheika's World Cup squad but is expected to be granted a 90th cap and run off the bench against the Pacific islanders.

"It's a privilege, really, to get another opportunity to wear the gold jersey," Polota-Nau said from the Wallabies' training camp in New Caledonia.

"Most likely for the last time but in saying that, it's been a hell of a journey from my end, I've been very fortunate to wear the gold jersey every single time."

Polota-Nau's announcement follows long-serving prop Sekope Kepu's confirmation on Monday that he will bow out of internationals after the World Cup.

Like 105-cap Kepu, Polota-Nau has seen off several generations of Wallabies front-rowers and played a role in their 2011 and 2015 World Cup campaigns.

After starting last year as the

incumbent number two, however, he slipped down the pecking order as Cheika opted to try Tolu Latu and Folau Fainga'a during the season-ending tour of Europe. Polota-Nau has been packing down in the Wallabies scrum since 2005 but has been the stand-in man for much of his career, starting only 39 of his 89 tests while former skipper Stephen Moore racked up 129 international caps.

He had a difficult, injury-interrupted season with Leicester in the English Premiership before returning to the New South Wales Waratahs, his old Super Rugby club, for a short stint in March.

He may yet have another chance to shine for the Wallabies, being on injury standby for the World Cup behind squad players Latu, Fainga'a and young Melbourne Rebel Jordan Uelese.

"They are great – it's possibly the best combination you will get for preparation for a World Cup," said Polota-Nau, a powerful scrummager whose fearless approach to the game saw him repeatedly battle concussion through the middle of his career.

"Unfortunately my skill-set isn't as good as the rest of them but to be honest I couldn't be at a happier place and I have every confidence that they will do the job over in Japan."



## FOCUS

## Pocock back to captain Australia against Samoa

Reuters  
Melbourne

Flanker **David Pocock** will captain Australia on his return from injury in Saturday's final World Cup warm-up against Samoa in Sydney.

Pocock's return after a long lay-off due to a calf injury is a major boost for the Wallabies as they look to build confidence and work on combinations before their bid for a third Webb Ellis Cup in Japan.

The 31-year-old openside will start in the number seven jersey alongside number eight Jack Dempsey and blindside Lukhan Salakaia-Loto.

Cheika is resting a number of players from the side that were thrashed 36-0 by world champions New Zealand in their last start, including halfbacks Christian Lealiifano and Nic White, and regular captain and openside Michael Hooper.

Centre Samu Kerevi, fullback Kurtley Beale, locks Rory Arnold and Izack Rodda, and front row forwards Allan Alaalatoa, Tolu Latu and Folau Fainga'a, will also miss the match as Cheika takes a safety-first approach before Japan. Long-serving halves Will Genia and Bernard Foley will start against Samoa after being dropped for White and Lealiifano during the Bledisloe Cup tests against the All Blacks.

Matt Toomua and Adam Ashley-Cooper will play in the centres, with Dane Haylett-Petty on



the wing.

Tom Banks will start at full-back and scrumhalf Nick Phipps will play off the bench despite both missing out on a spot for Japan.

The match will double as a farewell to home fans for a number of retiring Wallabies.

Genia and prop Sekope Kepu have announced they will quit internationals after the World Cup, while veteran hooker Tatafu Polota-Nau is set to play his last test off the bench, having been omitted from Cheika's Japan squad.

**Australia:** 15-Tom Banks, 14-Dane Haylett-Petty, 13-Adam Ashley-Cooper, 12-Matt Toomua, 11-Marika Korobete, 10-Bernard Foley, 9-Will Genia, 8-Jack Dempsey, 7-David Pocock (capt), 6-Lukhan Salakaia-Loto, 5-Adam Coleman, 4-Rob Simmons, 3-Sekope Kepu, 2-Jordan Uelese, 1-James Slipper  
Reserves: 16-Tatafu Polota-Nau, 17-Scott Sio, 18-Taniela Tupou, 19-Luke Jones, 20-Liam Wright, 21-Rob Valetini, 22-Nick Phipps.

NFL

# Patriots chase history as NFL centenary kicks off

AFP  
Los Angeles

New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady is plotting another improbable chapter of his record-breaking career as the National Football League kicks off its 100th season today.

Almost 100 years after the Dayton Triangles defeated the Columbus Panhandles in what is regarded as the first meeting between two NFL teams, the Chicago Bears and Green Bay Packers will launch the 2019-2020 campaign in a blockbuster season-opener at Soldier Field.

Today's kick-off marks the 199th game between the two bitter NFC North rivals, who will play out the 200th instalment of their rivalry at Lambeau Field later in the season.

Brady and the Patriots meanwhile make their season bow in another eye-catching divisional clash on Sunday, when they

face Ben Roethlisberger and the Pittsburgh Steelers at Gillette Stadium.

The Patriots start the season as the team to beat, led by the age-defying 42-year-old Brady in what will be the quarterback's 20th season in the NFL.

Brady completed the 2018-2019 season by winning a record sixth Super Bowl crown as the Patriots shut down the free-scoring Los Angeles Rams in Atlanta. Once again, Brady will start the season looking over his shoulder at a crop of talented young rivals eager to knock the veteran quarterback and the Patriots off their perch.

**'UNIQUE SITUATION'**

If recent history is any guide, however, Brady will be relishing the challenge.

Last season Brady outduelled the Kansas City Chiefs' young prodigy Patrick Mahomes in the AFC Championship game, before nervelessly vanquishing Jared Goff and the Rams in a



New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady.

low-scoring Super Bowl. Brady, who signed a new contract with the Patriots last month, says his latest arm-wrestle with Father Time represents a journey into the unknown. "I'm ready to go this year and that's really what matters," Brady said.

"It's a unique situation I'm

in. I'm in my 20th year with the same team. I'm 42 years old, so pretty much uncharted territory, I think, for everybody."

After becoming the oldest quarterback to win the Super Bowl last season, Brady could become the second quarterback to reach four consecutive Super

Bowls this year. A successful defence of the NFL crown would make the Patriots only the second team in history to win back-to-back Super Bowls.

Brady, however, heads into the season missing one of his favourite receiving targets following the retirement of tight-end

Rob Gronkowski. However Patriots head coach Bill Belichick has proven time and again that he remains a master of roster manipulation, repeatedly building championship-winning teams despite retirement or departure of key figures.

Gronkowski's decision to quit the sport at the age of 29, meanwhile, and the stunning retirement of Indianapolis Colts quarterback Andrew Luck on August 24, were further reminders of the brutal demands that the NFL makes of its players. Gronkowski revealed he had known during the Super Bowl win over the Rams that he was probably playing his last win, describing being in tears on the night of the victory as he struggled with pain from a muscle injury.

**'UNCEASING' INJURY TOLL**

Luck meanwhile shocked the NFL with his retirement last month, saying he was weary from an "unceasing, unrelenting" cycle of injuries. "The only

way I see out is to no longer play football," the 29-year-old said.

Whether Luck and Gronkowski's early retirements are the first sign of a trend of players deciding to hang up their cleats earlier, or an outlier, remains to be seen. Either way, however, the NFL remains far and away the most watched professional sports league in the United States, even allowing for recent dips in viewing figures.

This season meanwhile may see the patience of fans put to the test, with the introduction of video reviews designed to correct particularly egregious refereeing blunders.

The use of video replay technology has been expanded to cover pass interference calls after a botched call in last year's NFC Championship game between the Rams and New Orleans Saints, which ultimately cost the Saints a certain victory.

Critics fear the expanded use of video replays will lead to more stoppages.

MLB

# Nationals shock Mets with 7-run 9th in 11-10 thriller

'The game is never over until it's over, we just try to put good at bats together, and this happens'

Reuters  
Washington

Kurt Suzuki's three-run walk-off home run capped a seven-run ninth inning and lifted the host Washington Nationals to a stunning 11-10 win over the New York Mets.

After the Mets scored five times in the top of the ninth to take a 10-4 lead, Trea Turner doubled home Victor Robles in the bottom of the inning to make it 10-5. Anthony Rendon's single made it 10-6 and, with the bases loaded, Ryan Zimmerman doubled to the wall in right centre off Edwin Diaz (1-7) to pull Washington within 10-8 to bring up Suzuki, whose 16th homer of the year capped the improbable comeback.

"The game is never over until it's over, we just try to put good at bats together, and this happens," Suzuki said.

"It's what you strive for every day," Suzuki added of the walk-off winner. "You want to help the team out any way you can. I don't know, it's a pretty cool moment right now."



Washington Nationals catcher Kurt Suzuki reacts after hitting walk off three run home run in the ninth inning against the New York Mets at Nationals Park. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

RESULTS		
Nats	11-10	Mets
Royals	6-5	Tigers
Yankees	10-1	Rangers
Dodgers	5-3	Rockies
D'backs	2-1	Padres
Twins	6-5	Red Sox
A's	7-5	Angels
Brewers	4-2	Astros
Phillies	6-2	Reds
Cubs	6-1	Mariners
Braves	7-2	Blue Jays
Cardinals	1-0	Giants
White Sox	6-5	Indians
Marlins	5-4	Pirates
Orioles	4-2	Rays
Rays	2-0	Orioles

Javy Guerra (3-1) got the win by getting the final out in the top of the ninth, a wild inning featuring a combined 12 runs on 11 hits, including three home runs.

Jeff McNeil homered for the second straight day and drove in three runs for New York. Joe Panik and Pete Alonso hit a two-run homers and Wilson Ramos extended his hitting streak to 26 games for the Mets, who are 3-2 on their current road trip.

Juan Soto's two-run homer, his 32nd, in the eighth inning pulled Washington to within 5-4 but Brandon Nimmo homered leading off the ninth for New York. Panik singled, then Todd Frazier walked after Matt Adams dropped his foul pop, eventually leading to McNeil's two-out, two-run single followed by Alonso's 44th home run.

Mets starting pitcher Jacob deGrom allowed four runs on eight hits in seven innings, leaving with a 4-2 lead. He struck out six and walked three. In his third and

longest outing since returning from the injured list, Max Scherzer gave up four runs on five hits in six innings. He walked one and struck out seven.

Washington has won five of its last six and 10 of 12, winning on the biggest comeback in the bottom of the ninth inning in franchise history. It also marked the biggest blown ninth-inning lead in Mets club history.

The Nationals broke on top in the first inning on Soto's RBI double.

The Mets were hitless until Alonso led off the fourth with a single. Michael Conforto singled, Ramos doubled in a run, and Nimmo's sacrifice fly tied it. Panik then sent Scherzer's first pitch just over the wall in left centre for a two-run homer, his first as a Met.

The Nationals got a run back in the sixth. With runners on first and second, Suzuki sent a shot to centre that Nimmo couldn't get as it bounced off the wall. Soto scored from second base, but Adams stopped at second, holding Suzuki to a

single. Gerardo Parra then grounded into a double play. McNeil's homer in the eighth made it 5-2.

**SOLER BREAKS KC HOMER RECORD IN WIN OVER TIGERS**

Jorge Soler broke the Kansas City single-season home run record with his 39th of the season, and Ryan O'Hearn hit a walk-off homer in the ninth inning to give the Royals a 6-5 win over the visiting Detroit Tigers on Tuesday night.

Soler hammered a three-run shot in the third inning, passing Mike Moustakas' previous club record set in 2017. O'Hearn won it with his first career walk-off home run, a one-out shot off Zac Reiner (0-1).

Kansas City's Ian Kennedy blew a save for the first time in 15 chances when he allowed an RBI single to Ronny Rodriguez in the top of the ninth. However, Alex Gordon's throw from left to the plate was in time to keep Willi Castro from scoring the go-ahead run on the play.

Kennedy (2-2) emerged with the win despite allowing a run on three hits in his lone inning.

The Tigers got a run in the third on an RBI single by Grayson Greiner, scoring Travis Demeritte. Victor Reyes then singled, setting up a potential big inning, but the Tigers' offence stalled.

The Royals answered with three in the third on Soler's blast, scoring Nick Dini and Whit Merrifield. Soler reached 100 RBIs on the season, the first Royal to reach that total since Eric Hosmer in 2016.

The Tigers drew within one in the seventh. Greiner stroked a two-out single, then scored on a double to the wall in left-centre by Reyes, the third of his four hits. Reyes now has five straight multi-hit games during which he is 13-for-22 (.591).

Detroit's Miguel Cabrera led off the eighth with a single over shortstop, and Gordon Beckham entered as a pinch runner. Jeimer Candelario then doubled off the glove of right fielder Merrifield, sending Beckham to third with one out.

FOCUS

## Report: Cowboys, Elliott agree to \$90mn deal

Reuters  
New York

Running back Ezekiel Elliott and the Dallas Cowboys agreed to a six-year, \$90mn contract that ends his five-week holdout and makes possible his presence in the starting lineup Sunday against the New York Giants.

ESPN reported Elliott is in line to receive \$50mn in guarantees, trumping the \$45mn Todd Gurley received from the Los Angeles Rams.

Elliott is expected at practice on Wednesday, not long after Cowboys owner Jerry Jones and his son and team vice president Stephen Jones rang the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange.

Elliott and his agent, Rocky Arceneaux, left his holdout headquarters in Cabo San Lucas on Monday with the expectation that a contract extension with the Cowboys would be finalized before the Week 1 home game against the team's NFC East rival.

Arceneaux told reporters at the DFW International Airport that a deal is "very close."

"I think Zeke is showing he's committed by coming

back to Dallas," Arceneaux said. "We didn't come here not to do a deal. We're talking. They're committed and we're committed. That's why we are here."

Elliott bolted for Mexico in July as the Cowboys boarded a team charter for Oxnard, Calif., site of their summertime training camp.

Elliott, 24, has two years remaining on his rookie contract and is scheduled to earn \$3,853,000 in 2019 and \$9,099,000 in 2020. The two-time NFL rushing champion is targeting a deal that would make him the highest-paid player at the position.

According to ESPN's Adam Schefter, Dallas' five-year contract extension with right tackle La'el Collins that was made official on Tuesday freed up almost \$6 million in salary-cap space. Some of that could be earmarked for Elliott, although the Cowboys have a queue of skill-position talent waiting to be paid.

Quarterback Dak Prescott, who did not hold out, is reportedly chasing a contract worth \$35mn or more per season. Wide receiver Amari Cooper is in the final year of his deal, and the receiver market continues to escalate.



**Falcons owner: Jones extension 'very, very close'**

Atlanta Falcons owner Arthur Blank told The Athletic on Tuesday that the team and wide receiver Julio Jones are "very, very close" to a new contract. "I'd be surprised and disappointed if we didn't get it done this week," Blank said, per The Athletic. "I think it's very reasonable to assume it will get done this week."

Jones is scheduled to meet the media on Thursday, and the Falcons open the regular season at the Minnesota Vikings on Sunday.

Blank told reporters last week he was hopeful the sides could reach an agreement before the regular season began, saying the process had taken "a little more time than we'd like."

Jones, 30, has two years remaining on his deal, which owes him \$9.6mn in 2019 and \$11.4mn in 2020. He signed a contract adjustment as training camp opened last July - giving him \$4.4 million, including \$2.9 million from his 2019 salary,

up front - and the team reportedly promised to do a full extension this offseason. That came after Jones missed the Falcons' entire offseason program and threatened to hold out into training camp. The 30-year-old again missed voluntary workouts this summer, but he showed for mandatory minicamp and has been present throughout the preseason.

He told reporters in April he isn't concerned with being the NFL's highest-paid wide receiver.

But general manager Thomas Dimitroff said the Falcons fully expect that to happen in light of the new deal for New Orleans Saints wide receiver Michael Thomas worth \$100 million. Entering his ninth season, Jones is coming off of his sixth Pro Bowl selection - fifth in a row - after catching 113 passes for a league-high 1,677 yards and eight touchdowns last season. He remains the NFL's all-time leader in career receiving yards per game (96.7).

## BASKETBALL WORLD CUP

# Serbia, Argentina and Spain maintain perfect starts

It's not easy to win three times against any team even if people say we're much better than them'



Bogdan Bogdanovic (right) of Serbia in action during their first round Group D match against Italy at the FIBA World Cup in Foshan, China, yesterday. (Reuters)

Reuters  
Beijing

Serbia celebrated their third successive basketball World Cup win after a majestic performance by guard Bogdan Bogdanovic helped them to a 92-77 win over Italy while Argentina overpowered Russia 69-61 yesterday.

Spain, the 2006 champions, made it three wins out of three with a laboured 73-65 win over Iran as did Poland after they beat Ivory Coast 80-63.

Puerto Rico booked their berth in the second group stage after edging Tunisia 67-64 and they were joined by surprise package Venezuela, who brushed aside

China 72-59 and knocked the host nation out of the 32-team tournament.

Sacramento Kings guard Bogdanovic scored 31 points and Denver Nuggets centre Nikola Jokic added 15 as Serbia pulled away in the third quarter after the Italians had slashed the deficit to 55-53.

Cool free throw shooting by captain Miroslav Raduljica, who nailed 12 of 13 shots from the foul line, allowed the Serbians to carve out an 92-67 lead in the closing stages while Bogdanovic was lethal from three-point range.

Oklahoma City Thunder forward Danilo Gallinari carried the Italian effort with 26 points and eight rebounds.

Serbia coach Aleksandar Djordjevic praised his team after their third successive win over Italy, having beaten them twice in the build-up to the World Cup.

"It's not easy to win three times against any team even if people say we're much better than them," Djordjevic told reporters.

"They have pride and quality, a great shooting team. We just struggled a bit to get into our flow but we never stopped defending.

"I'm not happy about some of our reactions to some physical fouls because that's not what we want. It's important our young players understand that."

Argentina stifled out the Russians for three quarters with

strong defence but looked in danger of throwing away a 13-point advantage in the final period.

With the score 63-61 to the South American side late in the game, their playmaker Facundo Campazzo scored twice in quick succession and then laid on an assist for Patricio Garino to seal the contest with a slam-dunk.

Campazzo finished as the game's top scorer with 21 points while 39-year-old forward Luis Scola and Marcos Delia chipped in with 13 each for Argentina.

Spain, who earlier secured their last-16 berth, trailed already eliminated Iran for much of the game before a late surge saw them turn the tide.

Tunisia were whisker away from a springing a major upset and progressing to the second group stage but ran out of steam in the home straight, as they failed to score in the last four minutes of a frantic contest against Puerto Rico.

Thursday's standout fixture features an intriguing clash between Lithuania and Australia, who both brushed aside Canada and eliminated them in the preliminary stage of the tournament.

Holders United States should have a straightforward task against Japan after Tuesday's dramatic 93-92 overtime win over Turkey while Greece face a dogfight against New Zealand for a last-16 berth.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Norwegian boxer Srour misses world championships over doping suspicion

DPA  
Oslo

Promising Norwegian boxer Hadi Srour said yesterday he has been tested positive for the blood booster EPO, but would contest the finding that stops him from boxing at the upcoming world championships.

The 23-year-old light welterweight said he was waiting for the results of a second sample analysis from the agency Anti-Doping Norway.

He told reporters in Oslo he had "no idea" how he had tested positive, noting that the substance could only be injected. The test was based on a urine sample he gave July 15 after his short summer break when he attended a music festival, he said.

"Thirty-three days later I was tested again in connection with a professional fight in Germany. I gave a urine and blood sample. Both were neg-

ative," he said. Srour has a 4-0 record as a professional and is contracted to a division of Team Sauerland of Germany.

"We have highly experienced investigators from the police who are objective in their role. They have no interests in this case," Britha Rokenes, attorney for Anti-Doping Norway said in a comment to news agency NTB in regard to Srour criticising the organisation.

The Norwegian Boxing Federation said Srour has been dropped from the upcoming world championships in Russia. He would have been the country's only representative at the September 7-21 event in Yekaterinburg.

But the federation backed Srour pending the results of the second sample, Boxing president Odd Hektor Slake said. The worlds would have offered Srour a shot at qualifying for next year's Olympics in Tokyo. Norway has not had a boxer at the Olympics since 1996.



Norwegian boxer Hadi Srour.

### Olympic medallist Ochoa found dead

The body of former Spanish alpine ski racer and Olympic medallist Blanca Fernandez Ochoa has been found in mountains near Madrid, the Spanish paper *El Pais* said yesterday citing police sources.

Ochoa, 56, was last seen two weeks ago in the Aravaca district of the Spanish capital and police asked for information on her whereabouts at the weekend.

Reportedly her body has now been found at the 1,945-metre high La Penota summit in the Sierra de Guadarrama national park.

The cause of death was not clear.

Ochoa's family reportedly said she had intended to hike for five days and authorities were contacted when she didn't return on time. Police, sniffer dogs and volunteers combined to form a massive search party with drones

being used over areas which could not be combed on foot.

On Sunday her car was found at the start of known hiking trails in the area.

Several leading politicians expressed their condolences over social media.

"She has written history in our sport and left us way too early," wrote Albert Rivera, chief of the liberal Ciudadanos party.

Ochoa was Spain's first female winter Olympic medallist, winning the bronze in the slalom in the 1992 games at Albertville, France.

It was Spain's second and so far last Olympic medal in alpine skiing.

Her brother, Francisco Fernandez Ochoa, was the first Spanish winter Olympic medallist when he won the slalom at the 1972 winter Olympics in Sapporo, Japan - his country's only winter Games gold.

## ATHLETICS

## Anti-doping agency will not appeal Coleman decision

Reuters  
London

The Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) said yesterday it would not appeal the decision by the US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) to withdraw a whereabouts charge against American sprinter Christian Coleman.

USADA had charged Coleman with three failures to properly file whereabouts information in a 12-month period, but withdrew it on Monday after receiving guidance from the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) on how to calculate the window.

The AIU, which oversees integrity issues in international athletics, including doping, had the right to appeal but said they would not exercise that option.

"Based on the facts of the case and clear advice about the interpretation of the current International Standard for Testing and Investigations (ISTI) received from WADA, the AIU has decided not to appeal the USADA decision regarding Coleman," AIU chairman David Howman said in a statement.

Coleman had been charged because athletes are required to notify anti-doping officials

where they can be reached for a certain period daily.

If testers cannot contact the athlete at the designated location three times inside a 12-month period, he is considered to have committed an anti-doping violation and subject to a ban of up to two years.

USADA said Coleman had whereabouts failures on June 6, 2018 and January 16 and

April 26, 2019, but under ISTI guidelines, the first failure is backdated to the first day of the quarter, which in Coleman's case would have been April 1, 2018.

His April 2019 failure, therefore, fell outside the 12-month window and was not considered an anti-doping violation.

The AIU said it would welcome changes to the rules to ensure filing failures are no longer backdated.

"We note that the ISTI is currently under review by WADA and we would support a change in the wording to ensure that in the future, filing failures are recognised when they occur and never backdated," Howman added.

Coleman is set to represent the United States in the 100 and 200 metres at the September 27-October 6 world championships in Doha.



### World champion Gatlin OK after hamstring scare



Reigning world 100m champion Justin Gatlin should be back training within the week after tests were negative for a possible hamstring injury, his manager told Reuters yesterday.

The American sprinter slowed noticeably about 65m into a race he was leading and began grabbing his left hamstring before finishing fourth in Zagreb on Tuesday.

"He said he started to feel something grabbing, so he immediately tried to protect against any potential injury occurring," Renaldo Nehemiah said in an e-mail.

Tests to Gatlin's hamstring "showed he still had 100% strength in the leg and there were no adhe-

sions or anything," Nehemiah added. It was the second time within a week the 37-year-old had slowed in a race while leading.

Gatlin finished fourth in the Zurich Diamond League final on August 29 after Nehemiah said he lost cadence after stumbling out of the blocks. Three days later the 2004 Olympic champion showed form, winning a 100 metres race in Switzerland in 9.97 seconds.

The Zagreb race, on a relatively cool evening, was Gatlin's last before defending his world title in Doha later this month. He is expected to resume training in Florida several days after returning home, Nehemiah said.

FOCUS

# Organising Committee organises media workshop ahead of Doha 2019 Worlds



Yousef Abdullah al-Mulla, Media and Broadcasting director at the Local Organising Committee, speaks at the media workshop at the Qatar Olympic Committee headquarters recently.

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The Local Organising Committee (LOC) of the IAAF World Athletics Championships Doha 2019 are expecting more than 2,000 media personnel from more than 500 media outlets across the world, including broadcasters and television personnel, when the track and field stars descend on the Qatari capital later this month.

The championships that will be held from September 27 to October 6 will see a participation of more than 2000 athletes

from around the world aiming glory at the state-of-the-art Khalifa International Stadium, with marathons and road walking events to be held at the iconic Corniche at night.

To ensure maximum coverage from some of the most prestigious media outlets locally and internationally, the LOC held a workshop at the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) headquarters recently to outline the facilities and details for the media.

Yousef Abdullah al-Mulla, Media and Broadcasting director at the LOC, said that the Media Committee is putting the final touches to ensure optimum media coverage, with some of

the biggest names in world media, including DPA, Reuters, AFP, Xinhua and BBC, expected to come to Doha.

"The preparations are well underway and I think we are finalising the requirements of the international media, whether through field coverage by equipping journalists and photographers or by preparing the huge media centre that will open its doors days before the start of the championships," he said.

The LOC has set up media centres near the Khalifa International Stadium and the Corniche, with top class facilities for journalists.

FORMULA 1

# Boos can be good news for Mercedes in Monza



Mercedes' Lewis Hamilton waves to the fans as he walks out to the podium after finishing second in the Belgian GP on Sunday. (Reuters)

Reuters  
Monza, Italy

their life pretty difficult," said the Finn, who was third last year. "I think that's where we got booed on the podium and everything. We try to do the same again."

The louder the booing, the more Formula One world champion Lewis Hamilton is likely to be smiling after the Mercedes driver's annual incursion into Ferrari's home territory on Sunday.

Last year, the Italian team locked out the front row at Monza with Kimi Raikkonen a popular pole sitter after the sport's fastest lap.

When Hamilton then won, equalling Ferrari great Michael Schumacher's record five Italian GP triumphs by delivering Mercedes's fifth successive win at the 'Pista Magica', some of the locals vented their anger at the podium.

"I welcome it, if they want to continue to do it, it just empowers me," he said then.

This time the massed 'tifosi' are again gearing up for a celebration, with the sport's oldest and most glamorous team returning triumphant from Belgium after Charles Leclerc's first victory.

Monza, whose former royal park on the outskirts of Milan is a place of devotion for Italian motorsport fans, is also marking Ferrari's 90th anniversary and the 90th edition of the Italian Grand Prix.

"It's all straights so... it's going to be a happy weekend for Ferrari, most likely," commented Hamilton after finishing second in Spa to stretch his championship lead over team mate Valtteri Bottas to 65 points with eight races remaining.

"We've got to make some drastic improvements to our straight speed, somehow. I don't know if that's possible. But if anyone can do it, it's our team."

Bottas, his place at Mercedes now secure for next season, agreed the Ferraris would be the team to beat but also felt Mercedes could again upset predictions.

"Last year they were quick as well, but we managed to make

**MIGHTY ON SATURDAY**  
Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff had no doubt Ferrari would go into the weekend, the last of the traditional European season, as favourites.

"We don't expect the Italian Grand Prix to be an easy weekend," said the Austrian.

"While we have had the fastest overall package on the grid this season, it's not ideal for a track where straight line speed is a key performance differentiator.

"However, we've also seen that the Ferraris look mighty at high-speed tracks on Saturdays, but don't look quite as strong on Sundays."

While Leclerc is hoping to win again in happier circumstances than Spa, with the death of French Formula Two racer Antoine Hubert casting a pall over the weekend, team mate Sebastian Vettel needs to hit the reset button.

The German has gone a year without winning but Monza, the scene of his first victory in 2008 with Toro Rosso, could see him become only the second man after British great Stirling Moss to win there with three different teams.

Ferrari, who last won in Monza with Fernando Alonso in 2010, hope an upgraded power unit introduced for this weekend will deliver the goods.

"There will be no room for error. Our home race is always important, but that is especially true this time, as we are celebrating 90 years of Scuderia Ferrari," said team boss Mattia Binotto.

"Racing in front of our home fans is always an extra boost and further motivation to do well.

"Apart from anything else, there is no podium quite like Monza and we think there is no better crowd than the Italian one."

CYCLING

# Iturria wins Vuelta stage in home region breakaway

'I have never won as a professional so to win here at Vuelta... is a dream come true'

AFP  
Madrid, Spain

Mikel Iturria dug deep to register his first ever professional win as a mass escape dominated stage 11 at the Vuelta a Espana yesterday.

Iturria (Euskadi-Murias) pulled clear of a group that came in 18 minutes ahead of the peloton in the final kilometres and the 27-year-old held on for an impressive win in the Pyrenees.

Another Spaniard Jonathan Lastra (Caja Rural) was second, with America's Lawson Craddock (Education First) coming in third, both part of a chasing pack that finished six seconds behind.

None of the 14 breakaway riders posed a threat to Primoz Roglic (Jumbo-Visma), the Slovenian who retains the overall leader's red jersey ahead of stage 12 on Thursday.

Roglic remains 1min 52sec ahead of Spain's Alejandro Valverde (Movistar) and 2 min 11sec in front of Colombian Miguel Angel Lopez (Astana) in the general standings, all of whom finished in the same time.

Iturria, whose hometown of Urnieta is around 50km from the finish, admitted he had to fight for his success.

"I am so happy," said Iturria. "I have never won as a professional so to win here at the Vuelta a Espana, so close to home, in a stage I used to come to see, is a dream come true.

"I attacked at full speed, with all I had, there were a lot of kilometres left and it was a bit of a gamble. I opened up a gap and from there to the finish line, it was just about holding on, holding on and holding on."

With more strenuous tests to come, the peloton saved their



Spain's Mikel Iturria crosses the finish line to win the 11th stage of the La Vuelta, Tour of Spain, in Urdax-Dantxarinea, Spain, yesterday. (AFP)

legs across the 180-kilometre route between Saint-Palais in France and Urdax-Dantxarinea in northern Spain.

The breakaway group was established after 40km, with Angel Madrazo (Burgos-BH), Ben O'Connor (Dimension Data), Alexander Aranburu (Caja Rural) and Gorka Izagirre (Astana), as well as Iturria, among those stretching the early lead to seven minutes.

Remi Cavagna (Deceuninck-Quick Step) and Lastra were

chasing while O'Connor and Madrazo were dropped, falling away on the third-category climb of Col de Otxondo.

With 16km left, Iturria was alone with a lead of 45 seconds over an 11-strong group, which itself was splintering and reforming until finally it was down to four.

But despite gaining ground, the chasers were unable to catch Iturria, who closed out his surprise victory, the peloton crossing the line 18min 35sec later.

A hilly stage 12 begins in Circuito de Navarra and consists of three category three climbs before a dramatic final descent into the city centre of Bilbao.

**STAGE 11 RESULTS (top 10)**

1. Mikel Iturria (EUS) 4:36:44
2. Jonathan Lastra (CJR) +00:06
3. Lawson Craddock (EFD)
4. Damien Howson (MTS)
5. Francois Bidard (ALM)
6. Amanuel Ghebreigzabbhier (TDD) +00:09
7. Benjamin Thomas (GFC) +00:12

8. Matteo Fabbro (TKA)
9. Gorka Izagirre (AST)
10. Remi Cavagna (DQT)

**OVERALL STANDINGS (top 10)**

1. Primoz Roglic (JUM) 36:05:29
2. Alejandro Valverde (MOV)+01:52
3. Miguel Angel Lopez (AST)+02:11
4. Nairo Quintana (MOV) +03:00
5. Tadej Pogacar (UAE) +03:05
6. Carl Fredrik Hagen (LOT)+04:59
7. Rafal Majka (BOR) +05:42
8. Nicolas Edet (COF) +05:49
9. Dylan Teuns (BAH) +06:07
10. Wilco Kelderman (SUN) +06:25

SPOTLIGHT

# Verstappen and Gasly to start at back of grid in Italy



Red Bull's Pierre Gasly (left) and Max Verstappen in action at the start of the Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai earlier this year. (Reuters)

Reuters  
Monza, Italy

Red Bull's Max Verstappen and Toro Rosso's Pierre Gasly will start Sunday's Italian Grand Prix at the back of the grid due to power unit changes, engine partners Honda said yesterday.

Both will use Honda's latest 'Spec 4' unit, taking them beyond their engine allocation for the season.

"For their first race with Spec 4, Gasly and Verstappen will therefore take grid penalties and start from the back of grid,

but we believe they can still race strongly on Sunday," said Honda's F1 technical director Toyoharu Tanabe in a statement.

By taking penalties at Monza, the fastest track on the calendar, Red Bull aim to give Verstappen a better chance in Singapore later in the month where grid position is more important and overtaking is difficult.

The Japanese Grand Prix, Honda's home race, is also coming up in October.

Verstappen, who turns 22 at the end of September, has won twice this season and is third in the Formula One championship. The Dutch youngster retired

on the opening lap last weekend in Belgium after a collision with Alfa Romeo's Kimi Raikkonen.

Verstappen's teammate Alexander Albon and Toro Rosso's Daniil Kvyat used the new power unit at Spa-Francorchamps, with similar penalties.

"I think it can be alright to overtake," Verstappen told reporters in Spa when asked about the likelihood of starting at the back in Monza. "Even if you start from the back I don't think it's a big deal.

"If you start from the back you probably won't catch the top four. Everything behind that I think it's possible to catch up with."

## Injured F2 driver Correa moved to hospital in Britain

Reuters  
London, United Kingdom

American-Ecuadorian Formula Two racer Juan Manuel Correa is being moved to intensive care in Britain after being injured in an accident that killed French driver Anthoine Hubert at Spa-Francorchamps in Belgium last weekend.

The 20-year-old suffered a spinal injury and fractures to his legs in Saturday's horrific crash during the support race for the Belgian Grand Prix.

"Juan Manuel Correa will be transferred today (to) a specialised ICU located in the United Kingdom," a statement issued by his media team said on Tuesday. "He will continue his recovery process in the care of a specialist team of physicians."

Correa, a development driver for the Alfa Romeo Formula One team and grandson of former Ecuadorian president Rodrigo Borja, underwent more than four hours of surgery in Liege after the accident. He remains in a stable condition.

## FOCUS

## Pakistan appoints Misbah head coach, chief selector

AFP

Lahore, Pakistan

Pakistan yesterday appointed former captain **Misbah-ul-Haq** as head coach and chief selector in a bid to lift the national team's performance.

The cricket-mad nation failed to reach the semi-finals of the 2019 World Cup in July, prompting the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) not to renew head coach Mickey Arthur's tenure.

Bowling coach Azhar Mahmood and batting coach Grant Flower were also shown the door.

The PCB said Misbah will be head coach for three years.

"Former captain Misbah is

confirmed as Pakistan men's national team head coach in all three formats on a three-year contract," said a statement.

"In line with the PCB's commitment to ensure transparency, accountability and role clarity at all levels, Misbah was also named as the chairman of selectors with head coaches of the six first-class cricket association sides as his fellow selectors."

Misbah will be Pakistan's 30th head coach — but it is the first time that the head coach will also be the chief selector, along the lines of the system in New Zealand.

Another former captain, legendary paceman Waqar Younis, was named as bowling coach for three years. He had two previous stints as head coach.

A five-man PCB committee also interviewed former Australian batsman Dean Jones and former Pakistan coach Mohsin Khan before deciding unanimously in Misbah's favour.

Misbah and Younis will start with a three one-day internationals and three Twenty20s at home against Sri Lanka from September 27 to October 9.

Pakistan travel to Australia in November for Tests in Brisbane and Adelaide.

Misbah is Pakistan's most successful Test captain with 26 wins in 56 Tests and 11 draws.

He played 75 Tests, 162 one-day internationals and 39 Twenty20 matches for Pakistan in a career which ended in 2017.

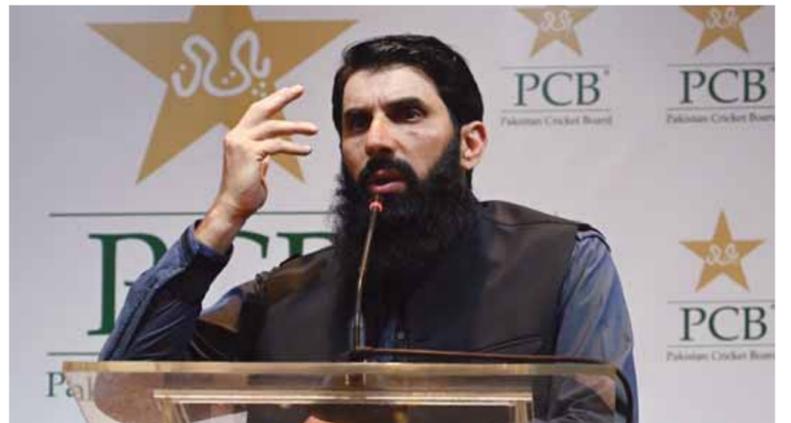
Misbah described the role as challenging.

"I know expectations are high, but I am absolutely ready and up for the task otherwise I would not have thrown my name in the hat for one of the most challenging and coveted roles in Pakistan cricket," he said in a press release.

"We have some of the most talented and exciting cricketers, and I will like to help them train and prepare in such a way that they can play intelligently, smartly and fearlessly."

"I am aware this will require a change in the dressing room culture but if we have to compete consistently at the highest level, we have to embrace these modern day requirements."

Pakistan are seventh in Test rankings, sixth in ODIs but are top ranked in Twenty20s.



## ASHES

## Smith in control as Australia end wet first day on 170-3

Smith and Marnus Labuschagne put on 116 for the third wicket in the fourth Test



Australia's Steve Smith (right) plays a shot on the first day of the fourth Ashes Test against England at Old Trafford in Manchester, United Kingdom, yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters

Manchester, United Kingdom

Steve Smith continued his outstanding Ashes form, striking an unbeaten 60 as Australia recovered from another failure by their openers to reach 170-3 at the close of the rain-affected first day of the fourth test against England at Old Trafford yesterday.

Rain caused a delay of over two hours after lunch but plans to extend play to regain that lost time were abandoned after rain came in again during the break for tea.

The afternoon delay did little to disrupt Smith, though, who returning from missing the last test due to concussion, made his eighth straight Ashes half-century.

The series is tied a 1-1 with two tests remaining and victory for the Australians would ensure they retain the urn.

Smith and Marnus Labuschagne put on 116 for the third wicket before the latter was bowled by a beautiful delivery from Craig Overton for 67.

It was a much-needed stand



England's Stuart Broad (left) celebrates after taking the wicket of Australia's David Warner yesterday. (Reuters)

after England, on a high after their remarkable comeback win at Headingley, made a great start, bringing their supporters to their feet with just the fourth ball of the day.

Stuart Broad claimed the wicket of David Warner for the fifth time in this series with the

left-hander caught behind as he made a belated decision to leave the ball but gave a thin outside edge to Jonny Bairstow.

Australia found themselves at 28-2 when Broad rapped the pads of Marcus Harris and, after some consideration, umpire Kumar Dharmasena raised his fin-

ger and his verdict was upheld by video review.

Australia's openers have averaged 15.14 — not since 1888 have their top two contributed less during an Ashes series.

The departure of Harris brought the returning Smith to the crease after 38 minutes of play, the world's number one-ranked batsman having missed the previous test due to concussion as a result of a bouncer from Jofra Archer.

To the delight of the crowd, Archer had the ball in hand and it took him three deliveries to attempt another bouncer.

But with England sensing a chance to eat into the Aussie middle order before lunch, Smith and Labuschagne quickly settled and set about upping the run-rate.

Labuschagne, retained in the side after replacing Smith as a substitute for the second innings at Lord's and at Headingley, went on to make his fourth straight half century.

Ominously for England, Smith, who has two centuries and a 92 to his name in the series, looked as if he had never been away as he calmly dealt with Joe Root's attack.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Rashid 'excited' to lead Afghans in Bangladesh Test

AFP

Chittagong, Bangladesh

Afghanistan's spin prodigy **Rashid Khan** faces a tough challenge as he captains his side for the first time against Bangladesh in only his war-torn country's third Test starting today.

Afghanistan obtained Test status in 2017. In their first outing in June 2018 India thrashed them inside two days, but in the second in March they beat fellow newcomers Ireland by seven wickets.

Leg-spinner Rashid was named skipper for all three formats after their dire World Cup campaign in England and Wales when they lost all nine matches and were dogged by several controversies.

The Indian Premier League (IPL) star will become the youngest ever Test captain at the age of 20 years 350 days when he steps out in the Test match at the Zahir Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong.

He will overtake Zimbabwe's Tatenda Taibu, who made his debut as Test captain just eight days older than Rashid against Sri Lanka at Harare in 2004.

"It's quite good to be leading the team at such young age I think. It's a big opportunity for me to learn something in a very young age," Rashid told reporters in Chittagong on Wednesday.

"Representing your team in Test matches is always a huge proud moment and a pleasure for me. But leading the team is something very special."

The Afghan side have been through turmoil in recent months.

In April 2019, the Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) named Rahmat Shah as Test captain, replacing Asghar Afghan, who led the side in their first two Test matches.

But Rashid's appointment as Test captain after the World Cup means Shah was removed before he took charge of a match.

## NO FEAR

They will be up against a side who have won five of their last 10 Tests at home, including one each against England and Australia.

Bangladesh are expected to field a spin-heavy attack against



the visitors for the one-off Test, but interim Afghan coach Andy Moles said they have no fear.

"We have massive respect for Bangladesh team. They are a level above us. (But) we are not scared of Bangladesh," Moles told reporters in Chittagong on Monday.

"We are under no illusion that this is going to be a tough examination of our skills. If we could show application and concentration, we are capable of doing something special over the next five days."

Bangladesh Test skipper Shakib Al Hasan said he was not bothered by criticism for their over reliance on spin.

Four spinners accounted for all 40 wickets as Bangladesh defeated West Indies 2-0 in the series. "I personally don't feel bothered. When we play in England and Australia, they play four seamers and no spinner. Do we criticise that?" Shakib said ahead of Afghanistan Test. "So I don't think there is anything to be worried about this," he said.

## SQUADS

**Bangladesh (from):** Shadman Islam, Mominul Haque, Soumya Sarkar, Shakib Al Hasan (capt), Mahmudullah Riyad, Mohamed Mithun, Mushfiqur Rahim, Liton Das, Taijul Islam, Mosaddek Hossain, Nayeem Hasan, Mehedi Hasan, Taskin Ahmed, Ebadat Hossain, Abu Jayed.

**Afghanistan (from):** Rashid Khan (capt), Ihsanullah Janat, Javid Ahmadi, Ibrahim Zadran, Rahmat Shah, Hashmatullah Shahidi, Asghar Afghan, Ikram Alikhil, Mohamed Nabi, Qais Ahmad, Sayed Ahmad Shirzad, Yamin Ahmadzai, Zahir Khan Pakteen, Afsar Zazai, Shapoor Zadran.

## Scorecard

AUSTRALIA 1st innings	
D. Warner c Bairstow b Broad	0
M. Harris lbw b Broad	13
M. Labuschagne b Overton	67
S. Smith not out	60
T. Head not out	18
Extras (b4, lb8)	12
<b>Total</b> (3 wks, 44 overs)	<b>170</b>
<b>Fall of wickets:</b> 1 (Warner), 2-28 (Harris), 3-144 (Labuschagne)	
<b>Bowling:</b> Broad 10-2-35-2; Archer 10-0-28-0; Stokes 8-0-36-0; Leach 6-2-18-0; Overton 10-0-41-1	

He brought up his fifty, lavishly driving Ben Stokes for four through cover but the Manchester weather prospect of a third ton in this series will have to wait until Thursday.

Travis Head was unbeaten on 18 at the close.

Australia captain Tim Paine had won the toss and chose to bat with fast bowler Mitchell Starc given his first appearance in the series after replacing Peter Siddle.

## Warriors, Tusker to clash in Qatar Airways Premier final

By Sports Reporter

Doha

Lots of sparks are bound to fly as Warriors Club and Tusker Club clash for the prestigious Premier Division title in the annual Qatar Airways Cricket Tournament at the Asia Town Stadium tomorrow.

Qatar Cricket Association (QCA) President Yousef Jeham al-Kuwari will be the chief guest at the final and give away the prizes.

The Qatar Airways-sponsored tournament started in January this year. Eighty teams contested in the Premier, A, B and

C Divisions.

Qatar Airways is proud to be the official sponsor of the annual tournament. As the country's national carrier, Qatar Airways continues to play a vital role in enhancing the already flourishing sports activities in Qatar and is a keen supporter for developing the next generation of cricket players in Qatar.

The final will be played in two sessions with the first one beginning at 5:30am, and the second one is scheduled from 3:30pm. Both teams are quite popular in Qatar and a sizeable crowd is expected to turn up at the venue to cheer their teams. Entry is free for fans.