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Neymar back for Brazil after injury and transfer drama



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GULF TIMES SPORT

TENNIS
Favourite Nadal storms into semis of US Open
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Qatar's coach Felix Sanchez directs his players during their Qatar 2022 World Cup and China 2023 Asian Cup joint qualifier at the Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Stadium yesterday.



Qatar's forward Almoez Ali scores against Afghanistan at the Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Stadium in Doha yesterday.

SPOTLIGHT
Belotti shines as Italy beat Armenia

AFP
Yerevan

Andrea Belotti bagged a brace as Italy saw off 10-man Armenia 3-1 to extend their perfect start to Euro 2020 qualifying with a fifth straight win yesterday. Roberto Mancini's side had trailed after 11 minutes in Yerevan when Aleksandre Karapetyan got just the second goal past Gianluigi Donnarumma in the Italy goal in five qualifying games. But the forward, who plays for Russian club Sochi, went from hero to villain when he was sent off for a second yellow card just before the break leaving his side a man down. Torino captain Belotti got it aly back level on 28 minutes and added a second 10 minutes from time after substitute Lorenzo Pellegrini scored his first Italy goal. Four-time world champions Italy have put their failure to qualify for last year's World Cup behind them and are top of Group J with maximum 15 points, and on course for the Euro 2020 opening match at home in Rome next June. Armenia are third in the group with six points from five games, behind Finland who have nine points from four games. "I said that this was a difficult game, and so it was," said Mancini. This increases the value of our victory. "Paradoxically the red card put us in difficulty because they focused more on defending and reduced the spaces further. "Physically they were much ahead of us, we had difficulties at the start but then we settled down." Mancini dropped young guns Moise Kean and Nicolo Zaniolo as punishment for being regularly late during the Under-21 European Championships at home in June. Belotti was joined up front in an attacking trident by Juventus forward Federico Bernardeschi and Fiorentina's Federico Chiesa. Juventus defender Giorgio Chiellini, 35, was missing as he recovers from surgery on a cruciate ligament knee injury. And the Armenians piled the pressure on for the first 10 minutes with a slip-up by Inter Milan defender Nicolo Barella allowing Karapetyan to break through for the opener. Belotti got the Azzurri back on track after 28 minutes following good work by Chelsea defender Emerson Palmieri following a corner with Belotti meeting the curling cross to prod into the net. Bernardeschi hit the post just after with Belotti also missing a chance before the break as he failed to connect with a Chiesa cross. But Italy got off the hook when Karapetyan received a second yellow card for a high elbow on defender Leonardo Bonucci.

FOOTBALL

Almoez hits hat-trick as Qatar rout Afghans 6-0

Coach Sanchez had made it clear that he would be fielding his strongest possible line-up

Agencies
Doha

Almoez Ali grabbed a hat-trick as Qatar started their build-up to the 2022 World Cup and the 2023 Asian Cup in emphatic fashion, routing minnows Afghanistan 6-0 in a joint qualifying Group E clash in Doha yesterday. Qatar's group also includes India, Bangladesh and Oman, with the top-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, if Qatar 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. Qatar's Spanish coach Felix Sanchez had made it clear a day before the match that he would be fielding his strongest possible line-up despite Afghanistan's lowly status, saying being the Asian Cup champions and World Cup hosts a strong start was important to send out a message. Consequently, the gulf between the Asian Cup champions and Afghanistan was more than evident yesterday at the Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Stadium where the hosts stamped their authority early in the match with star forward Almoez Ali finding the target twice early to put Qatar on course to victory. Ali, the top scorer in this year's Asian Cup, first struck with a powerful header in the fourth minute and then applied the finishing touch to a fine string of passes in the 11th, Akram Afif being the provider. Captain Hassan al-Haydos then made it 3-0 in the 13th minute off



Qatar players celebrate one of their goals against Afghanistan yesterday. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil and agencies

an Afif pass and Abdelkarim Hassan scored from a solo effort in the 34th to ensure Qatar took a whopping 4-0 advantage into the second half. There was no respite for the Afghan goalkeeper Ovays Azizi after resumption as Ali grabbed his third goal of the evening in the 51st minute and Boualem Khoukhi tapped in from close in the 67th which proved the last goal of the match as the hosts eased up later. Also in Group E, Gulf Cup champi-

ons Oman avoided a shock defeat when they scored twice late in the match to edge past India 2-1 in the north-eastern Indian city of Guwahati. India captain Sunil Chhetri, who has scored more goals for his country than Lionel Messi has for Argentina and is only behind Portugal's Ronaldo among still active players, took his personal tally in international matches to 73 with a 24th minute strike at the Indira Gandhi Athletic Stadium. However, India ran out of steam

in the latter stages of the matches as Oman equalised through Rabia Alwai al-Mandhar in the 82nd minute, and the 24-year-old found the mark again in the 90th to give his team a last-gasp victory. Elsewhere, Syria thrashed Philippines 5-2, North Korea beat Lebanon 2-0, Palestine shocked Uzbekistan 2-0, Bahrain drew Iraq 1-1, Malaysia edged out Indonesia 3-2, Turkmenistan prevailed over Sri Lanka 2-0 and Vietnam held Thailand 0-0.

Kuwait record 7-0 win over Nepal

Kuwait City: Kuwait scored an emphatic 7-0 victory over Nepal in their opening match of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and AFC Asian Cup China 2023 Asian Qualifiers at Kuwait Sports Club Stadium yesterday. The 1980 AFC Asian Cup winners were returning to the qualifiers after five years, having missed out on the 2019 qualifying campaign following their suspension by FIFA. The hosts needed less than six minutes to take the lead. Abdullah al-Mutairi advanced down the right and squared for Yousef Naser who buried the ball into the roof of the net. Fahad al-Hajeri doubled Kuwait's advantage 12 minutes in. The centre-back rose highest at the far post to head Faisal al-Harbi's in-swinging corner just over the line, making it 2-0. Al-Mutairi and Naser combined again four minutes after the restart to compound Nepal's struggles. Again, it was the winger who delivered the cross from the right and Naser guided his free header into the back of the net for his second of the night and his side's third. The victory puts Kuwait at the top of Group B, ahead of Jordan who had earlier beaten Chinese Taipei 2-1.



PREVIEW

Germany shrug off Sane absence for Dutch derby

'Leroy creates a lot of space and is very important for the team, but we have a lot of quality to replace him'

AFP
Berlin

Joachim Loew's resurgent Germany face their first test without Manchester City winger **Leroy Sane** when they renew their rivalry with neighbours the Netherlands in today's Euro 2020 qualifier in Hamburg.

Sane, 23, is one of several German players missing through injury after he tore knee ligaments during City's Community Shield win over Liverpool last month.

The twinkle-toed winger has been a key part of the national team's recovery from their World Cup debacle last year, scoring in five of Germany's last

six games.

Two of those goals have come against today's opponents the Netherlands, who Germany have faced three times since last October in a resumption of one of international football's biggest rivalries.

Yet Sane's teammates insisted this week that they would be able to compensate for his absence.

"Leroy creates a lot of space and is very important for the team, but we have a lot of quality to replace him," said Borussia Dortmund player Marco Reus on Wednesday.

Sane is expected to be replaced by in-form RB Leipzig striker Timo Werner, who is hoping to fight his way back into

the Germany first team.

"Leroy's unfortunate injury means there is a space in attack. I believe I can show the same performances here as I have for my club," said Werner, who has scored five goals in three games for Leipzig this season.

Aside from the Manchester City star, coach Loew is also without Chelsea defender Antonio Rudiger, Bayern Munich midfielder Leon Goretzka and Paris Saint-Germain's Thilo Kehrer and Julian Draxler.

"It's a shame because, for a young team, it is important to play regularly together in the same formation," said Loew yesterday.

Having twice failed to beat the Dutch in the Nations League

last year, Germany's 3-2 win in Amsterdam in March marked a change in fortunes and left them six points clear of their rivals in qualifying Group C.

Victory in Hamburg would therefore represent a huge step towards qualification, adding further spice to the cross-border derby.

"Games against the Netherlands are always big, iconic games. You stand on the pitch and think: 'awesome,'" said Reus.

For the Dutch in particular, the location today's match is a fateful one.

It was in Hamburg that Marco Van Basten fired a late winner past West Germany to send the Netherlands into the final of the 1988 European Championships,

where they won their only major title to date.

Now 31 years later, the Dutch are under pressure after picking up just three points from their first two games.

They currently sit in Group C's play-off spot, nine points behind leaders Northern Ireland, albeit with two games in hand.

Yet at a press conference Monday manager Ronald Koeman dismissed the notion that the match against Germany was a case of do-or-die for his team.

"The game against Germany is not crucial," said Koeman, who played in the 1988 semi-final and famously pretended to wipe his backside with a German shirt after the match.

SPOTLIGHT

Neymar back for Brazil after injury and transfer drama

DPA
Buenos Aires

Recently **Neymar's** headlines have been generated for his actions off the field rather than on it. Weeks of transfer speculation, however, ultimately came to nothing and he is now back in the Brazil squad still a Paris Saint-Germain player.

Beyond that, he is battling injury, defended himself against rape allegations and took a guest role in a Netflix series. Finally, however, it is time to get back to what he does best in a Brazil friendly against Colombia late Friday in Miami and against Peru, in Los Angeles four days later.

Neymar looked relaxed while meeting his teammates for training in Miami. The 27-year-old greeted his colleagues and coach Tite with a smile, posed for pictures with fans and joked with friend Dani Alves. Later he played sharp passes in the training hall and on Instagram posted a picture laughing with teammates simply captioned "Happiness."

Neymar has not played since the beginning of June. An ankle injury ruled him out of the home Copa America and he sat in the stands as Brazil won without him. Team work brought success as the team superstar was forced to look on.

After the long break it is not yet clear how fit Neymar actually is. He also needs to show he can still fit into the team and take

his position in attack without question or if he must win back his starting jersey. Youngster Vinicius Junior of Real Madrid has been called into the squad and will challenge Neymar for his spot, even if he still looks up to his elder.

"It is hard to believe that I here at 19, beside the best players, beside my idol Neymar," Vinicius said. Neymar showed talent in front of cameras in a different sense with a recent role in Money Heist, revealing himself as a character behind a mask.

"I could make my dream real and be a part of my favourite series," he wrote on social media. And after weeks of speculation, rumours and negotiations, his professional future — at least as a footballer — has been settled.

The striker wanted to return to Barcelona but will remain instead, at least for the season, at PSG. The demands of the French champions in a potential transfer were too high even for the Spanish giants regardless of Neymar's preferences.

Legally Neymar also has nothing to fear after prosecutors dropped an investigation sparked by a Brazilian model alleging rape in a Paris hotel. There was a lack of evidence against him, prosecutors said. It is not a declaration of innocence as the investigation could be reopened should evidence emerge in the future. But it means Neymar can return to the national team with a clear head and can try to start proving why he is the most expensive footballer in the world.

Forestieri banned after losing racism appeal

Sheffield: Sheffield Wednesday striker Fernando Forestieri will serve a six-match suspension after he lost an appeal against a Football Association (FA) charge of using racist language. The FA's independent regulatory commission found Forestieri guilty of racist abuse towards Krystian Pearce in a pre-season friendly against Mansfield Town in July 2018.

The 29-year-old was also fined 25,000 pounds (\$31,000), warned as to his future conduct and must attend face-to-face FA education. Despite being acquitted at Mansfield Magistrates Court of racially abusing Pearce in March, the FA charged Forestieri in June, deeming

there was evidence to fine the Italian under breach of its own regulations.

"The club and the player remain extremely disappointed with the findings of the regulatory commission and the appeal board when Fernando was acquitted in relation to the same incident in a court of law earlier this year," Sheffield Wednesday said in a statement.

"Both parties will be making no further comment at this time." Forestieri begins his six-game ban with immediate effect and will be next available for first-team duty after the next international break when Sheffield Wednesday travel to Cardiff City in the Championship (second-tier) on Oct. 18.

'Solskjaer responsible if United do not compete'

Manchester: Out-of-favour Manchester United midfielder Nemanja Matic says manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer will have to hold himself responsible if the club are not in the running for the Premier League title this season.

Serbian Matic, a fixture in United's midfield since his move from Chelsea in 2017, has played only 22 minutes this season after making one appearance as a substitute. United, who last won the league title in 2013, are currently eighth in the table after four games and trail league leaders Liverpool by seven points. "The coach must opt for the team that will fight for the title and if he does not win, he bears the responsibility," Matic told reporters ahead of Serbia's Euro qualifier against Portugal tomorrow.

"I have been in football for a long time, I have played almost all the games for all the clubs in the last 10 years. In order for me to play, one had to sit on the bench and accept that fact, and so do I now."

Solskjaer has picked 22-year-old Scott McTominay to partner Paul Pogba in central midfield in their first four games, from which they have one win, one loss and two draws. Matic said he respected the decision but was determined to prove to the Norwegian manager that he belonged in the starting line-up. "In the first two or three games he picked the team without me," Matic, 31, added. "I work as hard as I can. We respect the decision, it's up to me to show him that he was wrong and to bring me back to where I belong."

BOTTOMLINE

Premier League dominates FIFPro World XI nominations

Reuters
London

The Premier League have the most number of players on the 2019 FIFA FIFPro men's World XI shortlist for the first time in 10 years, the global players' union said yesterday.

Twenty one of the 55 nominees play in the English top-flight, as the Premier League ended La Liga's reign at the top.

Seven players from Liverpool's Champions League winning squad feature on the shortlist, although Spanish giants Real Madrid (11) and Barcelona (nine) still lead the way in terms of club representation.

Among the 17 players to make their debut on the list are Liverpool quartet of Trent Alexander-Arnold, Andy Robertson, Roberto Firmino and Alisson Becker.

After another impressive sea-



son with Tottenham Hotspur, South Korea's Son Heung-min became the first Asian player to feature on the list, while his club teammate Christian Eriksen is the first Danish footballer to make the cut.

The World XI will be revealed at the Best FIFA Football Awards in Milan on Sept. 23.

Goalkeepers (5): Alisson Becker (Brazil, Liverpool FC), David De Gea (Spain, Manchester United), Ederson Moraes (Brazil, Manchester City), Jan Oblak (Slovenia, Atletico

Madrid), Marc-Andre ter Stegen (Germany, FC Barcelona)

Defenders (20): Jordi Alba (Spain, FC Barcelona), Trent Alexander-Arnold (England, Liverpool FC), Daniel Alves (Brazil, Paris Saint-Germain/Sao Paulo), Joao Cancelo (Portugal, Juventus/Manchester City), Daniel Carvajal (Spain, Real Madrid), Giorgio Chiellini (Italy, Juventus), Virgil van Dijk (The Netherlands, Liverpool FC), Diego Godin (Uruguay, Atletico/Internazionale), Joshua Kimmich (Germany, Bayern Munich), Kalidou Koulibaly (Senegal,

SSC Napoli), Aymeric Laporte (France, Manchester City), Matthijs de Ligt (The Netherlands, Ajax/Juventus), Gerard Pique (Spain, FC Barcelona), Sergio Ramos (Spain, Real Madrid), Andrew Robertson (Scotland, Liverpool FC), Alex Sandro (Brazil, Juventus), Thiago Silva (Brazil, Paris Saint-Germain), Raphael Varane (France, Real Madrid), Marcelo Vieira (Brazil, Real Madrid), Kyle Walker (England, Manchester City)

Midfielders (15): Sergio Busquets (Spain, FC Barcelona), Casemiro (Brazil, Real Madrid), Kevin De Bruyne (Belgium, Manchester City), Christian Eriksen (Denmark, Tottenham Hotspur), Frenkie de Jong (The Netherlands, Ajax/FC Barcelona), Eden Hazard (Belgium, Chelsea/Real Madrid), N'Golo Kante (France, Chelsea), Toni Kroos (Germany, Real Madrid), Arthur Melo (Brazil, FC Barcelona), Luka Modric (Croatia, Real Madrid), Paul Pogba

(France, Manchester United), Ivan Rakitic (Croatia, FC Barcelona), Bernardo Silva (Portugal, Manchester City), Dusan Tadic (Serbia, Ajax), Arturo Vidal (Chile, FC Barcelona)

Forwards (15): Sergio Aguero (Argentina, Manchester City), Karim Benzema (France, Real Madrid), Roberto Firmino (Brazil, Liverpool FC), Antoine Griezmann (France, Atletico/FC Barcelona), Harry Kane (England, Tottenham Hotspur), Robert Lewandowski (Poland, Bayern Munich), Sadio Mane (Senegal, Liverpool FC), Kylian Mbappe (France, Paris Saint-Germain), Lionel Messi (Argentina, FC Barcelona), Neymar (Brazil, Paris Saint-Germain), Cristiano Ronaldo (Portugal, Juventus), Mohamed Salah (Egypt, Liverpool FC), Son Heung-min (South-Korea, Tottenham Hotspur), Raheem Sterling (England, Manchester City), Luis Suarez (Uruguay, FC Barcelona).

FOCUS/ US OPEN

Favourite Nadal into semi-finals; Berrettini wins thriller

'I'm so happy how I accepted the situation and challenge and kept going, point after point'

SPOTLIGHT

Tennis legend Laver calls for Kyrgios ban

AFP
New York

Tennis great Rod Laver has called for Nick Kyrgios to be suspended from the ATP Tour over bad behaviour, saying his fellow Australian appears not to be learning from his mistakes. The explosive and temperamental 24-year-old Kyrgios has a history of notorious outbursts and is being investigated for potential rule violations after calling the ATP Tour "corrupt" during the US Open last week. While he later backed away from the comment, it followed a record US\$113,000 fine issued to him by the ATP for his actions at the Cincinnati Masters in August. During that meltdown, he smashed two racquets and described an umpire as a "tool", with his sanction including fines for ball abuse, leaving the court without permission, an audible obscenity and unsportsmanlike conduct. Kyrgios was warned that he could also face suspension from the sport once a full investigation had taken place. Laver, an 11-time Grand Slam champion who is considered one of the sport's greatest players, said time away from tennis could be the answer. "Whatever they have done hasn't worked so far, so maybe a suspension is the only answer," he told The Sydney Morning Herald on Wednesday. "I'm not sure he's learned anything from any of the things that have gone on." The talented Kyrgios, who is due to play in an event named after Laver — the Laver Cup — in Geneva later this month, has been controversial for much of his career. In 2015, he was fined for making a sexually disparaging remark in Canada about the girlfriend of three-time major winner Stan Wawrinka. The following year, he was banned for eight weeks after being accused of not trying at the Shanghai Masters. "Nick is Nick, unfortunately," Laver said. "He could have been, or still could become, a world champion because of his serving ability, his game. "But his brain gets in the way. He doesn't want to adhere to the conditions or the umpire."

AFP
New York

Rafael Nadal will play Italy's Matteo Berrettini in the US Open semi-finals after the 18-time Grand Slam champion defeated Argentine 20th seed Diego Schwartzman 6-4, 7-5, 6-2.

Second seed Nadal — a winner at Flushing Meadows in 2010, 2013 and 2017 — beat a spirited Schwartzman for the eighth time in as many meetings in a nearly three-hour match that finished yesterday early morning.

Schwartzman put up firm resistance against Nadal and twice fought back from double-break deficits in the first two sets, but the Spaniard found another gear at crucial moments to secure an eighth semi-final berth in New York.

"Straight sets but big challenges especially after the first two sets, having 4-0 and 5-1 and losing both breaks in a row, but I know how good he is when he's confident," Nadal said.

"I'm so happy how I accepted the situation and challenge and kept going, point after point. Here I am in the semi-finals. I'm super happy, it means everything."

Nadal, who was forced to retire during last year's semi-final against Juan Martin del Potro, played down concerns over his left forearm as he received treatment early in the third set.

"Physically I am fine. Today was a very heavy day, big humidity out there. I'm this kind of player who sweats a little, but sometimes under these conditions it's tough," he said.

Nadal is the only former major champion left in the men's field following the elimination of Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic, leaving him as the clear front-runner in his pursuit of a 19th major title.

Schwartzman, who stands a mere 5ft 7in (1.70m), was bidding to become the shortest Grand Slam semi-finalist since 5-foot-6 Harold Solomon at Roland Garros in 1980.

"He's like a lion in the middle of the jungle. He's a fighter," Schwartzman said of Nadal.

"He knows how to play the important moments every single time. I played eight times, and every important moment he played better than me."

'GREAT FIGHT'

Berrettini, the 24th seed, became the first Italian man to reach the US Open semi-finals in 42 years.

He matched Corrado Barazzutti's run to the last four in 1977 after outlasting



Rafael Nadal of Spain reacts after winning against Diego Schwartzman of Argentina during their quarter-finals match at the US Open on Wednesday. (AFP)

13th-seeded Frenchman Gael Monfils 3-6, 6-3, 6-2, 3-6, 7-6 (7/5) in three hours and 57 minutes.

The 23-year-old Berrettini joined Barazzutti, 1976 Roland Garros champion Adriano Panatta and Marco Cecchinato as just the fourth Italian to advance to a men's Grand Slam semi-final in singles.

"What a great fight. I think it was one of the best matches I maybe ever saw — I was playing but I also saw. I'm really happy I don't know what to say," Ber-

rettini said. The first-time Slam quarter-finalist blew a 5-2 lead in the final set and four match points before finally seeing off Monfils in a thriller at Arthur Ashe Stadium.

"I was lucky I had match points and he didn't have it — it's better when you have them. I'm really proud of myself, I was always focusing on the next point."

A nervous Berrettini doubled-faulted on his first match point at 5-3 before a resolute Monfils fought off two more



Matteo Berrettini of Italy hits to Gael Monfils of France in the quarter-finals of the US Open on Wednesday.

on his serve to send the deciding set into a tie-break.

Monfils coughed up a costly pair of double faults in the breaker — and 17 in total — as Berrettini surged 5-2 ahead, the Frenchman rescuing a fourth match point before a booming serve from the Italian clinched a memorable win.

"Right now I don't remember any points, just the match point. I remember also my double fault I must be honest," Berrettini said.

Defeat for Monfils prolonged France's

lengthy wait for a first men's Grand Slam title since Yannick Noah won the French Open in 1983.

"I know how to bounce back, I've had some tough ones here before," said Monfils, who was beaten by Roger Federer in the 2014 quarter-finals after holding two match points.

"It was tough, I was just competing as much as I could but there was a big lack of serve today."

"I'm going to take the positive from these two weeks," he added.

BOTTOMLINE

Andreescu rallies to meet Bencic in semi-final

AFP
New York

Canadian Bianca Andreescu became the first teen US Open semi-finalist in a decade, rallying to defeat Belgium's Elise Mertens on Wednesday and advance to a last-four matchup with Belinda Bencic.

Andreescu, a 19-year-old from suburban Toronto, downed 25th seed Mertens 3-6, 6-2, 6-3 to book a clash against fellow Slam semi-final debutante Bencic, the Swiss 13th seed who beat Croatian 23rd seed Donna Vekic 7-6 (7/5), 6-3. "I'm honestly speechless," Andreescu said. "I need someone to pinch me right now. Is this real life?"

Either Bencic or Andreescu, who have never played each other, will reach her first Slam final tomorrow at Arthur Ashe Stadium, where first-time Slam winners have been crowned three of the past four years.

"Semi-final feels great right now," Bencic said. "I was dreaming about this day coming but you never know. I worked hard for this. Yeah, very nice feeling."

Andreescu, a winner this year at Indian Wells and Toronto, is the first teen in the US Open's last four since Caroline Wozniacki in 2009.

She credited being tested in her wins with giving her the poise to battle back after dropping the first set against a foe who had not dropped a set in the tournament.

"I think it's just the experience from playing these huge events this past year," she said. "All that experience is just catching up."

Andreescu could become the first teen to win a Grand Slam title since Maria Sharapova captured the 2006 US Open and she would be the youngest US Open champion since Russia's Svetlana Kuznetsova in 2004.

"This is honestly so crazy," said 15th seed Andreescu. "A year ago I was in the qualifying round. I remember I was suffering from a back injury."

Mertens had lost only 16 games in four matches, but Andreescu, her first seeded foe, hit 40 winners to 22 for Mertens.

Mertens broke for a 3-1 edge when Andreescu missed a backhand volley then held twice to claim the first set in 38 minutes.

"I was getting irritated because I wasn't playing my best tennis," said Andreescu.

Andreescu broke at love for a 4-2 lead and closed the second set by taking 16 of the last 20 points.

In the third, Andreescu smashed a backhand winner to

break for a 5-3 lead and another on match point.

"I've been working a lot on my fitness and mental strength," said Andreescu. "It's a result of all the hard work I've been putting in."

CALM IN BIG MOMENTS

Bencic knocked out 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.

Bencic, who reached the 2014 US Open quarter-finals, 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 went on a 5-1 tie-break run to seize a 6-3 edge and took the first set after an hour when Vekic swatted a



Bianca Andreescu of Canada hits to Elise Mertens of Belgium in their quarter-final match at the US Open on Wednesday.

forehand beyond the baseline. "I stayed calm in the important moments," Bencic said.

Vekic, who had 28 unforced errors, netted a backhand to surrender a break and hand Bencic a 4-3 edge in the sec-

ond set. Bencic held and broke again to close out the match.

"She was just playing better tennis," Vekic said. "I felt like I couldn't get three good points together. I didn't really have a lot of rhythm out there."

Love match continues after Monfils US Open loss

Reuters
New York

When it comes to tennis it seems love does not conquer all as Gael Monfils discovered on Wednesday when he failed to follow girlfriend Elina Svitolina into the semi-finals of the US Open.

Svitolina will go it alone into the last four at Flushing Meadows but boyfriend Monfils will be cheering from the players box when she faces local favourite Serena Williams, who is chasing a record equalling 24th career Grand Slam title.

"It's going to be definitely a tough match for her," said Monfils. "She has nothing to lose. She knows Serena well. She knows the crowd is going to be against her."

"It's going to be a tricky one at the beginning, I would say, for both."

"I think it is important for Serena to come out fast because if she should come in slow, I think Elina will be there."

Until Monfils's 3-6 6-3 6-2 3-6 7-6(5) quarter-final loss to Matteo Berrettini, the charismatic Frenchman and Svitolina had been putting a new spin on the Grand Slam love story penned when Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf won the French Open titles in 1999, although at the time their burgeoning relationship

was a secret. Svitolina and Monfils have been together for over a year but their romance has captivated even the most jaded New Yorkers during the US Open.

While they have not shouted their devotion from the top of the Empire State building neither have they tried to hide it and they routinely post photos on social media, including an Instagram account they share.

In contrast Agassi and Graf went to extremes to keep their relationship secret with the German watching Agassi from the bleachers at the US Open so as not to spark rumours.

While Monfils' and Svitolina's relationship has blossomed, so have their respective games. Svitolina, who trains with Monfils, has now made it to the semi-finals of the last two Grand Slams and credits the Frenchman for improving her ability to handle big shots and bigger expectations.

"He's hitting pretty strong and very heavy," said the fifth seeded Ukrainian. "So I think definitely it helps me to practice with him."

"I think hitting with him it's definitely helped me to improve my reaction and my footwork."

"I think I am more calm, if you want to describe it in few words. "I'm more open with my coach and also with Gael about the tennis and my feeling."

SPOTLIGHT

Leclerc hoping for Monza fizz after flat Spa

AFP
Monza, Italy

Charles Leclerc hopes he will be able to celebrate another win at Sunday's Italian Grand Prix after his maiden Formula One victory was overshadowed by the tragic death of Anthoine Hubert.

Leclerc claimed a win for Ferrari at last weekend's Belgian GP, a 'silent' triumph without the traditional champagne shower on the podium due to the passing of his close friend Hubert, who perished following a horror crash in a F2 race on Saturday.

However, with Ferrari heavily tipped for another win in their home GP, Leclerc is hoping for a more joyous occasion in Monza.

"I haven't done much to celebrate the win at all. There was no time and it was not that kind of weekend," he said.

"Hopefully, I will be able to celebrate after this one. There wasn't much time to celebrate anything in Belgium."

He was silent at Spa-Francorchamps, he said, because he drove without speaking to his Ferrari team on the normal radio communication.

"I don't know why I didn't speak. And the team thought the radio must be broken."

Leclerc managed to lead from pole, control the race with help from Ferrari teammate Sebastian Vettel and then resist late pressure from Lewis Hamilton of Mercedes.



Afterwards he performed a series of impressively controlled news media interviews and then began immediate preparations

for the Italian race weekend. "Until you get it, it feels very far away. Once you have it, it feels very, very good, and it gives you a bit of a confidence boost,"

the 21-year-old said of the win. "It's great. Now it's done I can focus on the future and hopefully, many more will come. I am very happy this first win is

done. "It's always difficult to do this first step, but once you do it, it takes quite a bit of weight out of your shoulders."

Leclerc reminds Montezemolo of young Lauda

Former Ferrari president Luca di Montezemolo says the Italian team's latest race winner Charles Leclerc reminds him of the Niki Lauda of the 1970s. The 21-year-old Monegasque took his first Formula One victory in Belgium last weekend, also becoming Ferrari's youngest ever winner, and has impressed with his calm under pressure and speed. Speaking to reporters at an event in Milan on Wednesday evening to mark Ferrari's 90th anniversary, Montezemolo said Leclerc was quick even last year in his debut season with uncompetitive Sauber. "With Ferrari of course it's different. He makes very few mistakes. Like Niki at the beginning, he was only conscious why he made the mistake (and how) not to repeat it," said Montezemolo.

"I think he is a very intelligent driver, very quick. Not only on one lap but also in the race. I think he can maybe be the best representative of a new generation of drivers. It's very important for Formula One." Austrian Lauda, who died in May at the age of 70, won his first two titles with Ferrari in 1975 - at the age of 26 - and then in 1977 after an astonishing 1976 comeback from a fiery near-fatal crash.

Montezemolo, who had joined as Enzo Ferrari's assistant, was team manager at the time and

had an instant rapport with the driver. Leclerc, in 13 races with Ferrari, has had three pole positions and is only 12 points behind team mate and four-times world champion Sebastian Vettel. The Monegasque has had six podium finishes, the same number as Vettel, and has stood out also for his mental strength and discipline. His win in Belgium came a day after French racer Anthoine Hubert, a friend and boyhood rival, was killed in a crash during the Formula Two feature race at Spa. Leclerc was a godson of the late French racer Jules Bianchi, who died in 2015 after a 2014 crash at the Japanese Grand Prix, and won the 2017 Formula Two season while mourning his own father Herve. Montezemolo left Ferrari in September 2014 before Vettel joined the team but he said the 32-year-old German remained a key member despite not having won a race now for more than a year. "Sebastian was crucial for the victory," he said of last Sunday's race at Spa-Francorchamps. "I think without Sebastian it was very difficult for Leclerc to win the race. Sebastian was able to hold back Hamilton for a few laps. Sebastian is still for me very, very good," added the Italian. "In life you have some difficult moments but I'm sure he has all the characteristics to come back. I hope very soon."

FORMULA 1

Ferrari and Monza celebrate as Italian GP secured

'For me, it's a very important day because I've been far from Ferrari in the last five years'

Reuters
Milan

Ferrari and Monza celebrated their 90th anniversaries in style on Wednesday with Formula One providing the icing on the cake with a new contract securing the Italian Grand Prix until at least 2024.

The announcement was made to a sea of Ferrari 'tifosi' flooding Milan's cathedral piazza for an event attended by world champions, team bosses past and present and future prospects including Michael Schumacher's son Mick. "We're very excited," said Formula One chairman Chase Carey after appearing on stage with Italian Automobile Club (ACI) president Angelo Sticchi Damiani and Monza circuit representatives.

"Monza's one of our defining races, our iconic races," added the American, who represents commercial rights holders Liberty Media. "The Italian fans are second to none, all you have to do is look at that crowd."

"It's a great part of the sport and we couldn't be more excited to have this race in place for the next five years."

Monza agreed a deal in principle back in April but the signing means all 22 races on what will be the biggest ever calendar next year now have firm contracts in place. Italy and Britain are the only countries to have hosted races in every year since the world championship started in 1950.

Next year will also see the debut of Vietnam and the return of the Dutch Grand Prix in Zandvoort, with Germany no longer featuring. Wednesday was as much a celebration of all things Ferrari as enduring testament to Monza's historic role as the 'Pista Magica', temple of Italian motorsport.

Fans unfurled a huge Ferrari flag in front of the majestic Gothic cathedral as drivers appeared on stage next to racing cars spanning the generations.

Current racers Charles Leclerc, fresh from winning last weekend's Belgian Grand Prix,



A picture shows a general view of Ferrari racing cars and Ferrari fans in Piazza Duomo in Milan on Wednesday for the presentation of cars and drivers for 90th anniversary of the founding of Scuderia Ferrari. (AFP)

Hamilton says Ferrari could be an option but loyalty is key

Lewis Hamilton emphasised his loyalty to Mercedes yesterday while leaving open the possibility that he might one day be tempted to race for Formula One glamour team Ferrari if circumstances change. The five-times world champion has a contract with the Silver Arrows until the end of next season, when the sport is due for a rules revolution. "I don't know if it's about being tempted, I think it's just whether or not it's a part of the game plan," he told reporters at Ferrari's home Italian Grand Prix when asked about any future switch.

"Honestly, when you are part of Mercedes you are part of a family for a lifetime, providing you stay with them, obviously," added the Briton. "You've got Stirling Moss, (the late Argentine Juan Manuel) Fangio is still honoured within the family, and you're part of the history and they look after you for the rest of your life. That's important to me. Loyalty is a very, very key part. "But if there's a point in my life where I decide I want to change, that could potentially be an option. But I don't know if that is at the moment," said Hamilton. The 34-year-old won at Monza

last year, after Ferrari swept the front row in qualifying, and drew boos when he stepped on the podium. Despite the reaction of the notoriously passionate local fans, Hamilton felt he was winning over an increasing number of them, with a mutual respect. "I'm very lucky that I do have a good Italian following. I think Germany's maybe the biggest area where my clothes sell but Italy is one of the bigger areas. Maybe it's because they are really into fashion and like good clothes," he said. "I think it's grown over the years but it takes a long time to shift perception,

you still come here and stand on top of the podium and 90+ percent is all Ferrari fans. "A lot of Ferrari fans ask me to come to Ferrari. And I get a lot of messages from Ferrari fans who say 'I am a Ferrari fan but I respect you'. I think it's growing slowly, but it will never be the same as if I was driving for a Ferrari team." Ferrari last won at Monza with Spaniard Fernando Alonso in 2010. Hamilton goes into the weekend with a 65-point lead over Finnish teammate Valtteri Bottas and eight races remaining.

and Sebastian Vettel revved up the crowd ahead of Sunday's grand prix in the former royal park outside Milan.

F1 great Mario Andretti, world champion with Lotus in 1978, enjoyed the applause of the

crowd and took selfies against a sea of red flags and shirts while French great Alain Prost surveyed the scene. Mechanics, some of them hired by the team's late founder Enzo Ferrari himself, recalled glory days of old.

Finland's Kimi Raikkonen, still the last Ferrari world champion after taking the title in 2007 and now racing for Ferrari-powered Alfa Romeo, received a huge roar of recognition as he stepped out. Former Ferrari president Luca

di Montezemolo, who presided over golden eras with the late Niki Lauda in the 1970s and Schumacher in the early 2000s, saluted the ever passionate supporters and threw caps into the crowd.

RUGBY

Springboks captain Kolisi seeks Japan payback before WC

AFP
Kumagaya, Japan

Inspirational South Africa captain Siya Kolisi has warned Japan that the Springboks will be looking for retribution when the teams clash in a World Cup warm-up in Kumagaya today. The only change to a South Africa side who drew 16-16 with the All Blacks in Wellington six weeks ago after recovering from injury, Kolisi admitted yesterday that the memory of their stunning upset by Japan at the 2015 World Cup was still very raw.

"We don't want to take emotion out of it," said Kolisi, reminded of that 34-32 humiliation on the English south coast. "What happened is in the past, but obviously we want to rectify that. There's still a lot of us that played in that game - I think seven or eight, who still have that memory. It was tough to take," he added. "It did make an impact on us losing that game. But it also made us stronger as a team."

Twice World Cup winners, South Africa face treble-chasing New Zealand in a blockbuster Pool B opener in Yokohama on September 21, a day after hosts Japan open the tournament against Russia in Tokyo. But Kolisi insisted the Springboks were not looking past Japan, who have become a regular fixture in rugby's top 10 since winning three games under Eddie Jones at the last World Cup.

"That game really put Japan on the map," said Kolisi of South Africa's shock defeat in Brighton. "They've been building from that and gone on to bigger things. They can turn up the heat at any time

and we will have to be on our toes. We're definitely not looking past this game at New Zealand."

After limbering up by winning the Pacific Nations Cup, Japan coach Jamie Joseph has set the Brave Blossoms a target of reaching the World Cup quarter-finals for the first time, where they could run into the Springboks again.

"I think they have a strong chance of making the knockout stage," said Kolisi, who praised the leadership qualities of opposite number Michael Leitch. "The World Cup is all about who wants it most on the day."

After becoming South Africa's first black captain last year, Kolisi is poised to mark another milestone by leading his country into the World Cup. "I'm really grateful to be the Springboks captain," said the 28-year-old, who returned to the line-up in last month's 24-18 victory over Argentina in a World Cup tune-up.

"It's something I would never have dreamed of in my wildest dreams. It really makes me happy to know where I came from. We all have different backgrounds in our team, but anyone from any walk of life can make it."

South Africa coach Rassie Erasmus has named a full-strength team to face the home side in Kumagaya, north of Tokyo, but Japan's attack coach Tony Brown predicted that lightning could strike again.

"We're not going out there to contain the score tomorrow," said the New Zealander.

"We're going out to play our game and put them under pressure. If we get everything right, who knows, we could get a repeat of four years ago."



South Africa's Pieter-Steph du Toit (left), captain Siya Kolisi (second left), Lukhanyo Am (centre), Steven Kitshoff (second right) and Willie Le Roux (right) take part in a training session a day before their friendly match against Japan yesterday. (AFP)

FOCUS

Jackson, Ravens visit reworked Dolphins for opener

Reuters
New York

The Baltimore Ravens have the guy they feel is their quarterback of the present and the future: Lamar Jackson.

The Miami Dolphins, by all accounts, have no idea what their future is at football's most important position.

Those two statements serve as the key backdrop for Sunday's NFL regular-season opener that matches the Ravens against the host Dolphins.

Jackson, drafted 32nd overall last year, was 6-1 as a starter as a rookie, using his electric speed and moves to rush for 695 yards, five touchdowns and a 4.7 average.

This year, he could potentially pass Michael Vick for the greatest rushing season by a quar-

terback in NFL history. Vick set the single-season QB-rushing record in 2006 with 1,039 yards.

Jackson's passing ability, however, is still in question. The former Louisville star completed just 58.2 percent of his passes last year, which would have ranked 31st out of 34 NFL quarterbacks if he had enough passing attempts to qualify.

Still, he has shown significant improvements in his mechanics in the offseason, and he appears to be confident on the eve of the new season.

"We're going to play ball," said Jackson, who has estimated he'll average 30 pass attempts per game after averaging 22.6 in seven starts last year. "I love it."

The Dolphins, meanwhile, will start 36-year-old veteran QB Ryan Fitzpatrick, who will be making his Miami debut. This is the eighth NFL team for "Fitz-magic," who has had his share of

highs and lows.

Fitzpatrick passed for 3,905 yards and 31 touchdowns - both career highs - with the New York Jets in 2015. But after winning five straight games, Fitzpatrick was intercepted three times in the season finale, a brutal 22-17 loss to the Buffalo Bills to miss the playoffs.

Last year, with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Fitzpatrick passed for more than 400 yards in each of his first three games and then less than 200 in his next two contests.

Now, Fitzpatrick serves as a block on the progress of Josh Rosen, 22, who was a first-round pick of the Arizona Cardinals last year. The Dolphins traded second- and fifth-round picks for Rosen after the Cardinals drafted QB Kyle Murray with this year's first overall pick.

Rosen will be available in relief on Sunday, if needed, but,

for now at least, the starting job belongs to Fitzpatrick.

"A case could be made that the younger guy (Rosen) is not ready," said Brian Flores, Miami's first-year head coach.

Both teams are fairly healthy going into the opener. For the Ravens, only backup cornerback Brandon Carr (hip) is on the injury report. He was limited during practice this week.

Miami's biggest concern may be electric wide receiver Albert Wilson, who also has a hip injury and was limited on Wednesday. Defensive end Charles Harris practised in full despite a wrist issue. The Ravens are a seven-point road favourite for Sunday's game, and that makes sense. They have won seven of their past eight games against Miami, outscoring the Dolphins by a total of 78-6 in their past two meetings.

Miami returns just 22 players

from last year's 53-man roster. The Dolphins traded standout left tackle Laremy Tunsil and wide receiver Kenny Stills to the Houston Texans last week in a package that returned two first-round picks and one second-round pick. That followed an offseason that saw the Dolphins dump QB Ryan Tannehill and choose not to re-sign standouts such as defensive end Cameron Wake and right tackle Ja'Wuan James.

The Ravens - unlike the Dolphins - were much more aggressive, as evidenced by the signing of safety Earl Thomas to replace Eric Weddle.

Baltimore still has to show it has adequately replaced star inside linebacker C.J. Mosley, who signed with the New York Jets, and pass-rusher Terrell Suggs (Cardinals). But the remaining talent makes the Ravens the clear favourite on Sunday.



Baltimore Ravens' quarterback Lamar Jackson.

NFL

Bell ready to carry load for Jets against Buffalo Bills

"I've been waiting a long time for this moment. A lot of people are excited to see me play"

Reuters
New York

Le'Veon Bell hasn't played in an NFL game in nearly 20 months so his body feels fresh and he craves a heavy workload.

Bell has passed on the message to coach Adam Gase that he is ready to see a lot of the football when he makes his New York Jets' debut on Sunday against the visiting Buffalo Bills.

Bell's words to Gase were "don't hold back" and the 27-year-old expects the play caller to heed the advice in the opener.

"I can carry 50 (times) if you ask me," Bell told reporters after Wednesday's practice. "When I say, 'Don't hold back,' I mean literally that. I don't want to go out there and try to sprinkle me in or anything like that. I'm ready to play football."

"I've been waiting a long time for this moment. A lot of people are excited to see me play. Quadruple that, and that's how I feel."

Bell signed a four-year, \$52.5 million deal with the Jets in the offseason.

He refused to sign the franchise tender of \$14.5 million with Pittsburgh last season and ended up sitting out the entire season.

Bell rushed for 5,336 yards and 35 touchdowns and caught 312 passes for 2,660 yards and seven scores during five seasons with Pittsburgh.

"I'm not trying to prove anybody wrong," Bell said.

"I'm not trying to prove the Steelers wrong. Everybody is trying to format me with the Steelers. I'm not talking about the Steelers anymore. I'm done talking about the Steelers. I want to worry about the Bills, and I want to worry about the Jets. That's it."

Bell and first-year coach Gase are trying to ignite a Jets squad that went 4-12 last season and missed the playoffs for the eighth straight campaign.

Second-year quarterback Sam Darnold displayed promise last season by passing for 2,865 yards and 17 touchdowns. But he also tossed 15 interceptions, tied for second-most in the NFL.

Darnold is hoping to make strides this season under the tutelage of Gase.

"I think we're going to do some fun things out there with all the tempo and all the different things we can do," Darnold told reporters.

"It'll be fun. It will be fun to watch us and hopefully we are going to put up a lot of points."

The Bills, who went 6-10 last season, also have a second-year quarterback in Josh Allen and he was intercepted 12 times last season while passing for 2,074 yards and 10 touchdowns. Allen also rushed for eight scores.

"The smartest play is the best play," Allen said Wednesday. "The job of the quarterback is to get the ball to the playmakers and let them make plays."

The Bills' running back duties will be split up after the recent release of LeSean McCoy. Veteran Frank Gore, versatile T.J. Yeldon and third-round draft pick Devin Singletary will all be involved in the attack.

"Didn't really expect it," Singletary told reporters of the Bills cutting McCoy. "But that's part of the business and what



New York Jets' running back Le'Veon Bell.

Falcons, Vikings open season seeking redemption

After missing the playoffs last season, both the Minnesota Vikings and Atlanta Falcons are eager for the chance to bounce back in 2019. The quest to return to prominence in the NFC begins on Sunday, when the Vikings host the Falcons in Minneapolis.

Two seasons ago, Minnesota went 13-3 and memorably reached the NFC Championship Game. In 2016, Atlanta nearly won the Super Bowl before another postseason appearance in 2017. However, each took a step back in 2018, with the Vikings going 8-7-1 and the Falcons a dismal 7-9. Meaning, both teams should be amped to better those respective performances from last season. "It will be a good test," Vikings coach Mike Zimmer said at his Wednesday press conference. "I think Atlanta is a good football team and well coached. Hopefully, we are too. I think it's going to be a really good football game." A successful season for Minnesota could depend on how Year 2 in town for Kirk Cousins and the offense goes. Now, with full-time coordinator Kevin Stefanski's

zone-scheme system, with help from adviser Gary Kubiak, in place. Cousins became the first quarterback in league history last season to throw for at least 4,000 yards (4,298) and complete 70 percent of his passes (70.1) with at least 30 touchdowns and 10 or fewer interceptions (he hit the last two figures exactly). However, Minnesota's offense was inconsistent and held to 10 points or fewer four times.

Cousins still has arguably the best wide receiver tandem in the NFL in Adam Thielen and Stefon Diggs, who combined for 215 receptions, 2,394 yards and 18 touchdowns. Diggs, however, did not practice Wednesday due to a hamstring issue and will be monitored.

The overall key for Minnesota, though, could be running back Dalvin Cook, healthy again after playing just 15 games in his first two seasons - rushing for 969 yards. Defensively, the Vikings feature essentially the same faces from a unit that ranked fourth in the NFL allowing 309.7

yards per game. "Every year is a new year," Zimmer said. "I think you go in with everything the same. Hopefully, we approach things with a chip on our shoulder and out to prove something." Atlanta also has plenty of star power, beginning with quarterback Matt Ryan, who has thrown for at least 4,000 yards in eight straight seasons and had 35 touchdowns with seven interceptions in 2018. As Julio Jones (113 catches, 1,677 yards, eight TDs in 2018) nears a new contract, he's still Ryan's top option, with Calvin Ridley looking to build on a rookie season that featured a team-leading 10 TD catches. With Tevin Coleman now in San Francisco, the Falcons' backfield belongs to Devonta Freeman. He needs to stay healthy, however, after playing just two games in 2018 because of knee, foot and groin injuries, the last of which ended his season. Injuries also hindered an Atlanta defense that ranked 25th in average points allowed (26.4) and 28th in yards allowed (384.5) last season.

comes with it. It shows they believe in me, so now it's time to see how it turns out. They believe in me, I believe in myself, so the sky is the limit and we'll go from here."

The Buffalo defense should get a lift from rookie defensive tackle Ed Oliver, the ninth overall pick of the 2019 draft. Solid safety Jordan Poyer had four interceptions last season.

New York added linebacker C.J. Mosley to a defensive core led by standout safety Jamal Adams. The Jets also selected nose tackle Quinnen Williams with the third overall choice in the 2019 draft.

MLB

Dodgers break NL homer mark in win over Rockies

Reuters
Los Angeles

Joc Pederson hit two more home runs Wednesday, and the Los Angeles Dodgers set a National League record for homers in a season during a 7-3 victory that gave them a three-game sweep over the visiting Colorado Rockies.

It was the Dodgers' second sweep in their past three home series and third in their past five. Los Angeles earned its 92nd win, matching last year's total.

The Rockies saw their losing streak reach a season-high nine games, during which they have allowed 82 runs.

Dodgers starter Hyun-Jin Ryu lasted just 4 1/3 innings, the third straight outing in which he failed to pitch five innings. The NL starter in the All-Star Game gave up three runs on six hits with four walks and five strikeouts.

Pederson belted two home runs in a game for the second time in the series. He did not play Tuesday following a collision with the right field wall Monday that forced him out of the game after he already hit a pair of homers.

He also hit a game-winning, pinch-hit homer in the 11th inning Sunday at Arizona.

RESULTS		
Dodgers	7-3	Rockies
Mets	8-4	Nationals
Pirates	6-5	Marlins
Yankees	4-1	Rangers
Red Sox	6-2	Twins
Indians	8-6	White Sox
Giants	9-8	Cardinals
Reds	8-5	Phillies
Royals	5-4	Tigers

The Dodgers now have 250 home runs, eclipsing the 2000 Houston Astros, who previously held the NL record at 249. The Astros moved to the American League in 2013.

Pederson, who has 32 of Los Angeles' homers, extended a run of six hits in six at-bats. Five of those six hits were home runs, and the other

was a double. The 6-for-6 run ended with a strikeout in the sixth inning.

Rockies right-hander Antonio Senzatela (8-10) saw his struggles continue as he gave up five runs on four hits over three innings with one walk and one strikeout. He has a 16.55 ERA over his past six major league starts.

Pederson hit Senzatela's fourth pitch of the game into the Colorado bullpen in right field.

The Dodgers took control with four runs in the third inning, getting RBI singles from Corey Seager and Cody Bellinger as well as RBI fielder's-choice grounders from Justin Turner and Matt Beatty for a 5-0 lead.

Pederson added a two-run home run in the fourth off right-hander Wes Parsons.

Ryan McMahon, Drew Butera and Ian Desmond had RBI hits for the Rockies.

Dodgers left-hander Adam Kolarek (6-3) earned the victory after recording two outs in the fifth inning. The Dodgers are 13-3 against the Rockies this season, including a 6-0 mark at Dodger Stadium.



Los Angeles Dodgers left fielder Joc Pederson in action during their MLB game against the Colorado Rockies at Dodger Stadium. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

BASKETBALL WORLD CUP

Australia win Tokyo berth as United States crush Japan 98-45

Defending champions had five players in double scoring digits led by Brown with 20 points

Reuters
Beijing

Australia continued their impressive form in the basketball World Cup with an 87-82 win over Lithuania and secured a berth in the 2020 Olympic Games while holders United States cruised to a 98-45 rout of Japan yesterday.

The Czech Republic stunned Turkey 91-76 to secure a last-16 berth in the 32-nation tournament in China and Greece joined them after overcoming a strong challenge from New Zealand in a 103-97 victory over the Tall Blacks.

Having brushed aside Canada and Senegal in their opening two games, Australia took a 52-37 lead against the more fancied Lithuanians late in the first-half.

The Baltic nation shored up their defence after the break and nosed ahead 73-70 before the Boomers forced the final twist, with San Antonio Spurs playmaker Patty Mills nailing a crunch three-pointer with 32.9 seconds left.

Mills finished on a game-high 23 points and Phoenix Suns centre Aron Baynes capped an effervescent performance with 21 points and 13 rebounds as Australia lived up to the billing of the tournament's dark horses.

They booked a berth in next year's Olympics in Japan as the World Cup's best-placed nation from Oceania, having stormed into the last 16 while New Zealand dropped into the 17-32nd place playoffs after their defeat by Greece.

The Greeks won an entertaining dogfight for a spot in the second group stage, featuring four pools of four teams, after Giannis Antetokounmpo, last season's most valuable player in the NBA, racked up 24 points and 10 rebounds.

Having clawed victory from the jaws of defeat in a 93-92 overtime win against Turkey, the United States hit top gear from the start and never looked back after racing into a 13-0 lead against Japan.

It was an expected cat and mouse game as the lead grew steadily and the defending champions, chasing their third successive and sixth overall title, had five players in double scoring digits led by Jaylen Brown with 20 points.

Kemba Walker added 15 and Harrison Barnes chipped in with 14 for the Americans, who were



Australian players celebrates their win against Lithuania at the Basketball World Cup Group H game in Dongguan yesterday. (AFP)

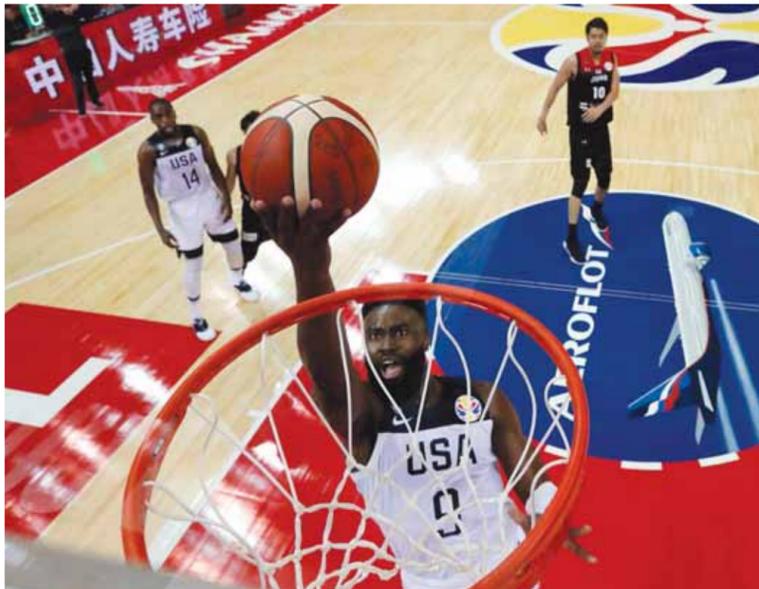
joined in the last 16 from their pool by the Czech Republic after they blew away the Turks. Looking flat after the exertions of their heart-breaking defeat by the US, Turkey trailed throughout against an inspired Czech side taking part in their first World Cup as an independent nation.

A valiant solo effort by Turkey's Cleveland Cavaliers guard Cedi Osman, the game's top scorer with 24 points, was cancelled out by a balanced Czech roster.

Brazil, one of the tournament's surprise packages, ended the preliminary group stage on a high with an 84-73 win over Montenegro and France also made it three wins out of three with a 90-56 defeat of the Dominican Republic.

The top two teams from each of the four pools in the second group stage will advance to the knockout rounds.

The tournament's top two teams from the Americas and Europe as well as one each from Asia, Oceania and Africa qualify automatically for the 2020 Olympics.



Jaylen Brown of the US tries to dunk during the Basketball World Cup Group E game against Japan in Shanghai yesterday. (AFP)

CYCLING

Gilbert claims Vuelta 12th stage, Roglic retains red

AFP
Bilbao, Spain

Belgian veteran Philippe Gilbert stamped his authority in Vuelta a Espana 12th stage yesterday as Slovenia's Primoz Roglic retained the leader's red jersey.

Former world champion Gilbert forged clear of a 15-man breakaway on the steep final third category climb to claim his sixth career Vuelta stage in the streets of Bilbao.

The 37-year-old winner of this season's Paris-Roubaix, who missed out on selection by his team for the Tour de France, came in clear of Spanish duo Alex Aranburu and Fernando Barcelo.

They were the only ones able to give chase to Gilbert, reducing the 19-second gap he'd established over the closing eight kilometres to three seconds.

"The atmosphere on the last climb was like at the classics, with all the flags. It was great, and boosted my motivation" said the stage winner.

"I've often ridden in the Basque country but I've never won here. It's a first and I'm thrilled as it's like Flanders here, they love their cycling,"

added Gilbert after his 10th Grand Tour stage success.

The Belgian, who is quitting Deuceninck-Quick Step for Lotto-Soudal this winter, appears to be coming to the boil at the right time for this month's world championships in Yorkshire.

Roglic meanwhile remains one minute 52 seconds ahead of Alejandro Valverde in the general classification ahead of today's 166.4-kilometre 13th stage with seven ascents including a fearsome final 'hors categorie' climb up Los Machucos.

"I'm not afraid of any stage especially as I've got a very strong team behind me," said Roglic, who finished with the other main contenders three minutes behind Gilbert.

He added: "It's an honour to wear the red jersey and I'll be the happiest of men if I've still got it in Madrid (on September 15)."

Placed third in the GC, 2mins 11sec adrift, is specialist climber Miguel Angel Lopez who said of Friday's stage: "Let's hope it's a great day".

"It's not all about Los Machucos," he noted, "there are lots of climbs before then. I'm hoping to have enough strength in the legs to do something good."

ATHLETICS

Lyles happy to see Coleman cleared over missed doping tests

AFP
Brussels

American Noah Lyles hailed Christian Coleman's exoneration from alleged doping violations as great news for the US team at the world championships that start later this month in Doha.

Coleman, the fastest man over 100m this year, had faced a potential two-year suspension after drug testers reported they were unable to locate him on three separate occasions in a 12-month period.

However the US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) dropped the case after determining that the time-frame exceeded the specified one-year period.

The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) which monitors anti-doping efforts said it would not appeal the decision as did the Athletics Integrity Unit, set up by the IAAF as an independent body to police doping in track and field.

"Well, I'm glad to see him running again. I don't wish ill upon anybody," Lyles said ahead of today's Diamond League final in Brussels.

"I'm happy that we can have a strong team going for the US in the 100m."

Lyles, 22, admitted that he relies on his mother to input his "whereabouts" details to USADA at the start of each quarter. "I started when I was 17, I swear I was one of the youngest on the USADA list, I wasn't even a pro," said the sprinter who became the fourth fastest of all time over 200m with his 19.50sec in Lausanne.

"The scariest thing on my mind was the fact that if I missed three I could be gone for a year and I absolutely didn't want that."

Lyles admitted, however, to having missed one home visit by anti-doping officials. "It was in 2017 when I put in p.m. instead of a.m.! So I'm expecting them in the morning, I went out with my friends for dinner and I came back and saw a mail saying I'd missed a test."

Lyles' teammate Michael Norman, who has run 19.70 and 43.45sec in the 200 and 400m this season respectively and will race the 400m in Brussels and the Doha worlds, has never missed a test, saying: "You have to be conscious of where you're going."

SPOTLIGHT

Aspire, QFA sign agreement on 2019-20 Youth Calendar

Yesterday morning, an agreement on the 2019-20 Youth Calendar was signed between Aspire Academy and Qatar Football Association (QFA) represented by Ivan Bravo, Director General of Aspire Academy and Fahad Thani, Director of Football Development at Qatar Football Association.

In this agreement, that was signed in the presence of Ali Salem Afifa, Deputy Director General of Aspire Academy and Saeed al-Marri, Football Administration Manager of Aspire Academy, both parties confirmed the dates of games and tournaments for the 2019-20 season, that had been discussed between them and the clubs in a number of meetings before. The outcome is a calendar that helps all stakeholders to plan the season properly to achieve their set goals.

"This calendar is one of the most important tools for our youth development programme, because there are always a lot of things going on, such as training camps, friendlies, tournaments

and it's important to align the dates with the national teams and clubs as well as with the school exams, so our boys can have the maximum success in whatever they are doing. We are very thankful for the productive meetings and the agreement we signed today as we all want the best for the development of our young Qatari players," said Jonatan Cabanelas, Specific Training Football Coordinator at the Aspire Academy.

"At the Football Development Department at QFA we support the elite programmes run by Aspire Academy as they provide the foundation for future successes of players in national teams. It is a challenging process to align all the important dates of a season, that no changes will be necessary at a later stage and this calendar is guaranteeing all involved parties' stability throughout the year. We are happy that we were able to sign this agreement today and we wish Aspire success for all their teams and tournaments in this season," said Fahad Thani, Director of Football Development at Qatar Football Association.



FEATURE

WHEN A PICTURE REALLY STANDS FOR A LOT MORE

From the host country's culture and language to their achievements, World Cup emblems offer reflections aplenty

By Anthony Harwood
London

From the Jules Rimet trophy held up by the Three Lions to swooping curves representing the sand dunes of Qatar, the World Cup emblem has come in many different shapes and colours since England won the trophy in 1966.

Whether it reflects the host nation's national colours, as with Argentina, or its achievements in space exploration, as with Russia, each host country seeks to stamp its own identity on the logo.

Qatar is no different, with its emblem unveiled this week including the woollen shawl popular in the Arab world during the cooler months – when the tournament will be held in 2022.

Here is your guide to the 15 World Cup emblems since Bobby Moore famously lifted the trophy at Wembley 53 years ago:



1966 - England



This logo features a bold and bright Union Jack with the Three Lions badge worn on the players' shirts. It also includes the Jules Rimet trophy itself, which was replaced by the current design in 1974. As FIFA did not adopt an official logo for its tournaments until 1970, the host countries had more control over the image prior to then and these often contained a strong local identity.

1970 - Mexico



MEXICO 70

2022 - Qatar

The logo uses traditional woollen shawl with "swooping curves" representing desert dunes in the shape of the trophy, an infinity symbol and the number 8. A woollen shawl, which is normally worn in Arab area during the cooler months, reflects the fact that the World Cup is being played in winter. The infinity symbol represents the interconnected nature of the World Cup, with the figure of '8' representing the number of stadiums that will host matches. FIFA said the design "embodies the vision of an event that connects and engages the entire world, while also featuring striking elements of local and regional Arab culture and allusions to the beautiful game."

2018 - Russia



FIFA WORLD CUP
RUSSIA 2018

The logo reflects Russia's rich artistic tradition and the history of its bold innovation and achievement. Four-pointed stars in rounded blue portions of the trophy symbolise Russia's achievements in space exploration. The bold use of red, gold, black, and blue reflects common colours in Russian Art. Human figures in the logo reference "the exuberance of football players and excitement of fans as well as mankind's ambition to reach the stars". The upper part of the cup not only symbolises a football, but also pays homage to the cathedral in Moscow's Red Square, Fabergé eggs, and Sputnik.

1974 - West Germany

The logo continued with the single-colour design started by Mexico 70. It also represents industrial age graphic design with bold, simple forms evocative of a football. At first glance, the fact that Germany is the host country is unclear. However, the letters WM stands for Weltmeisterschaft, which means World Cup in German. This logo captures movement and energy of the ball.



WM 74

1978 - Argentina

This logo adopts the simple blue and white of Argentina's flag. Also, the vertical striping represents the colours of the host nation, a jersey, goal, and cupped hands. The logo is simple, clean, strong, and bold and Helvetica. This logo is said to be the perfect example of how to use negative space in the sport team logos.



Argentina 78

The logo uses simple positive and negative forms – light blue and white – to graphically depict a football. The inline typography was an extension of Lance Wyman's design on the 1968 Olympic identity. It was praised for being simple and stylish, albeit obvious. Many liked the use of font and the overall design.

2014 - Brazil



FIFA WORLD CUP
Brasil

The colours symbolise the ecology of the host nation as well as the colour of the Brazilian flag; tropics (green) and beaches (gold). The trophy is made out of clasping hands that symbolise how the World Cup can bring countries together in the name of sport. FIFA claimed: "The combination of the strong image, the contemporary typography and striking colours are extremely effective in depicting a modern and diverse host nation." However, this logo was criticised for depicting hands in the sport where you cannot use your hands and resembling a face palming.

2010 - South Africa



SOUTH AFRICA
2010
FIFA
WORLD CUP

The logo intended to show the world a new side of both the South African people and the continent as a whole as it can be understood from the slogan for the 2010 World Cup – 'Ke Nako (It's time). Celebrate Africa's Humanity'. 'Ke Nako' refers to the fact that it's time for Africa to be in the world's spotlight and for the world to recognise the continent's capability to host the world-class event. A black silhouette of a bicycle kick resembles African tribal art and the background colour represents African continents and the South African flag in a message of unity across the continent. The logo was criticised for the childish looking typography, lack of simplistic quality, and an overuse of shadows. Also, the integrated miniature version of 2002 logo was criticised as the symbol is placed in the corner, which makes it appear like a compulsory add-on.

1982 - Spain

The logo is simplified into two fundamental elements: the Spanish flag and a football. The Spanish flag is cleverly placed as a trail of the movement of the ball, suggesting energy and movement. This simplicity reflects the style of the era, where host nation designed a logo consisting primarily of nation colours and a football. The country chose to promote its own national identity through the World Cup logo.



ESPAÑA 82

1986 - Mexico

The logo contains three intersected circles made up of a football and two flat representations of the globe making the connection with the year's slogan 'The World United by Ball'. The graphic at the bottom 'Mexico 86' enhances the country's red and green colours against black and white. Some said that the two images of the globes on either side of the football seem slightly too literal. Note the symbolisation of integration of East and West through football.



MEXICO 86

2006 - Germany

This logo was named 'Celebrating faces of football' and the theme was joy and global friendship. Two faces form 0 and 6 to signify the year of 2006. Three faces represent "the joy on the faces of three friends as they spontaneously celebrate a perfect football moment". The backdrop shows a subtle German flag. The logo integrates its predecessor, the Korea/Japan 2002 World Cup logo for the first time. As the World Cup West German logo in 1974 was simple two-colour logo, modern unified Germany opted for more colourful and cheerful design. It was criticised for being childish and with an unclear use of colour (the use of orange/blue/green). Erik Spiekermann, one of the Germany's most respected designers, was openly critical of the design concept saying that the logo contained too much information and was badly presented. Also, it is said to be childlike for anyone who is not aware of the context.



FIFA WORLD CUP
GERMANY
2006

1990 - Italy

This logo is very simple and minimalistic, using only three colours from the national flag and black. Also, stencil typography creates a three-dimensional graphic field. The logo was praised for its simplicity and it is easy to recognise the host country from the national colours. However, the 3D effort was criticised for appearing blurred.



ITALIA '90

1994 - United States

The bold waving white and red stripes reflect the host nation and the movement of energy of the sport. From 1970-1998, the World Cup logo didn't change much. The emblems were kept simple and only included the host country's name, its national colours and a ball. This logo was popular as it had all the makings of a great logo, minimal colour palette, clean design and an image tying both the host country and football.



WorldCupUSA94

1998 - France

This logo came in French national colours and shows the football rising over the Earth's horizon as if it is the Sun. Rising football cleverly suggests the global facet of the tournament. Many praised this logo for being simple and creative.



FRANCE 98
WORLD CUP

2002 - Japan / South Korea

The logo shows a banner-waving supporter rather than a ball to represent the global community of fans. It reflects the artistic principles and traditions of Korea and Japan, such as asymmetry, dynamism and harmony. The text underneath the symbol featured the infinity symbol as the two zeroes in the year 2002, representing the "eternal spirit of unity and the harmonious link between the co-organisers and all others involved in the event". A circular shape was used because the circle has been part of the Asian culture for many centuries, having symbolised the universe, the sun, the world and even life itself. Part of the outer circle was deliberately left open to represent the route to the trophy. This logo was praised for the proportions/use of colours and being artsy, dynamic and active. This is thought to be one of the most strategically designed World Cup logos.



2002
FIFA WORLD CUP
KOREA JAPAN

ASHES

Smith double ton puts Australia in command

Visitors declared at 497 for eight, England were 23-1 at stumps after Cummins sent back Denly



Australia's Steve Smith acknowledges the crowd as he walks back after being dismissed on the second day of the fourth Test in Manchester, United Kingdom, yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Manchester, United Kingdom

Australia's Steve Smith took his run-spree this Ashes to a new level as he returned to international cricket with a superb double century on the second day of the fourth Test against England at Old Trafford yesterday.

Smith's 211 was the cornerstone of Australia's commanding 497-8 declared.

England then lost Joe Denly, a makeshift opener after swapping places with the struggling Jason Roy, for four when he was brilliantly caught at the second attempt by Matthew Wade at short leg following a genuine glance off Pat Cummins.

England were 23-1 at stumps, 474 runs behind, with Rory Burns 15 not out and night-watchman Craig Overton unbeaten on three.

They now face an uphill task to deny Australia a win that would see the holders retain the Ashes at 2-1 up with one to play in a five-match series.

Smith, the world's top-ranked Test batsman, missed England's series-levelling one-wicket win at Headingley with a concus-

sion suffered when struck by a Jofra Archer bouncer during the drawn second Test at Lord's.

THIRD CENTURY IN FOUR INNINGS

Even so, he has now made 589 runs this series — his first since completing a 12-month ball-tampering ban, including three hundreds, at a colossal average of 147.25.

This innings followed his scores of 144 and 142 in Australia's 251-run win in the first Test at Edgbaston, with Smith's lowest total in four knocks this series the 92 he made at Lord's.

The 30-year-old former Australia captain was, however, dropped on 65 yesterday when fast bowler Archer failed to hold a caught and bowled chance off a hard-hit full toss.

Smith was also rerieved on 118 when caught by Ben Stokes at slip off Jack Leach only for replays to reveal the left-arm spinner had bowled just the eighth no-ball of his first-class career.

But those two let-offs did not detract from Smith's latest impressive demonstration of the art of Test-match batting.

He faced 319 balls in total, including 24 fours and two sixes, in what was his third double

Scorecard	
AUSTRALIA 1st inn (a/n 170-3)	(Cummins), 8-438 (Smith)
M. Harris lbw b Broad 13	Bowling: Broad 25-2-97-3; Archer 27-3-97-0 (Inb); Stokes 10.5-0-66-0 (2nb); Leach 26.1-3-83-2 (Inb); Overton 28-3-85-2 (3w); Denly 31-1-8-0; Root 6-0-39-1
D. Warner c Bairstow b Broad 0	
M. Labuschagne b Overton 67	ENGLAND 1st inn
S. Smith c Denly b Root 211	R. Burns not out 15
T. Head lbw b Broad 19	J. Denly c Wade b Cummins 4
M. Wade c Root b Leach 16	C. Overton not out 3
T. Paine c Bairstow b Overton 58	Extras (nb) 1
P. Cummins c Stokes b Leach 4	Total (1 wkt, 10 overs) 23
M. Starc not out 54	Fall of wickets: 1-10 (Denly)
N. Lyon not out 26	Bowling: Starc 2-2-0-0; Hazlewood 4-1-3-0 (Inb); Cummins 3-0-10-1; Lyon 1-0-10-0
Extras (b8, lb14, w3, nb4) 29	
Total (8 wkts dec, 126 overs) 497	
Fall of wickets: 1-1 (Warner), 2-28 (Harris), 3-144 (Labuschagne), 4-183 (Head), 5-224 (Wade), 6-369 (Paine), 7-387	

century at this level, all made against England.

Smith was eventually out when he reverse-swept a leg-break from England captain and part-time spinner Joe Root to Denly, who had been at short third man.

Smith received good support from Australia captain Tim Paine in a sixth-wicket part-

nership of 145, the pair batting through the whole of yesterday's second session.

Fast bowler Mitchell Starc, in his first match of the series, then showcased his proven batting talent with a blistering 54 not out off 58 balls, including seven fours and two sixes, before Paine closed the innings.

Australia resumed on 170-

3 under sunny skies after Wednesday's rain-marred first day and Smith drove Archer through extra cover for a superb back-foot four in the second over to go to 65.

The next delivery, however, saw Smith hammer a full toss straight back at Archer, who dropped the two-handed caught-and-bowled chance, with the ball going for four.

England also gave Paine a 'life' when he edged Stuart Broad on nine only for Roy to drop a second-slip catch he should have held.

Then came Leach's no-ball, with Root gathering his team around him afterwards as he issued a rallying cry.

England took the new ball as soon as they could but that did not stop Smith cover-driving Broad for a majestic back-foot four.

Wicketkeeper Paine, dropped on 49, fell to the first ball after tea when caught behind off Overton.

But there was no stopping Smith, who twice drove Leach for six.

Meanwhile left-hander Starc hit four fours in a row off Broad including two classic straight drives before he slog-swept Root for six.

SPOTLIGHT

Leave off, Ponting tells Broad 'bunny' Warner



Reuters
London, United Kingdom

Stuart Broad has got David Warner's number at the Ashes but the embattled opening batsman can turn it around if he ramps up the aggression against the England paceman, former Australia captain Ricky Ponting has said.

Compared to his stellar World Cup, Warner has had a nightmare of a series, averaging 11.28 with the bat and falling five times in seven innings to Broad.

His second-ball duck on day one at Old Trafford was the second time in the series he has fallen attempting to leave the ball and is evidence, according to Ponting, of a player who has deserted his natural game.

"Davey is obviously struggling with Stuart Broad," Ponting told Cricket Australia's website (cricket.com.au) after Australia went to stumps at 170 for three on Wednesday.

"He has got his number, that round-the-wicket angle is really worrying him. It's worrying all the left-handers to be honest.

"Davey, again, was lured into playing trying to leave. That's the second time in the series it's happened and I think it's a real mindset thing for him.

"If he's looking to hit the ball and not leave the ball like he is I think he'd be fine."

Barring his first innings 61 at Headingley, Warner has looked a

shell of his normal self, failing to surpass eight runs in his other six innings in the series.

His second consecutive duck was viewed dimly by Australian cricket media yesterday, who branded him 'Broad's bunny' and questioned whether selectors had dumped the wrong man in number three Usman Khawaja.

Warner has had precious little support from his opening partners, with Marcus Harris scoring 13 following his eight and 19 at Headingley.

Harris replaced Cameron Bancroft after the second test, with the Western Australian dumped for a similarly meagre output.

The opening failures have repeatedly thwarted Australia's hopes of stealing a march on England and put pressure on Steve Smith, who will resume on 60 not out on day two, to continue to rescue the touring side.

Ponting said he had spoken to Warner about ways to combat Broad, who has been honing in on the opener's stumps rather than seeking to find an edge.

"I've said a few things to him about how I thought he could line up and try and play but it's a different thing to work on that at training and have the courage to go out and try and do that in a test match," Ponting said.

"When you see Davey at his best he's not really even thinking about leaving those (deliveries), he's trying to stand up on top of the bounce and hit that through the covers."

Ganguly bats for Rohit as Test opener

IANs
New Delhi

Former India captain Sourav Ganguly has once again backed Rohit Sharma for the Test opener's role and feels that the batsman deserved an opportunity in the longest format of the game. Ahead of the India and West Indies series, Ganguly had opined Sharma should be tried for the opening slot. However, he was left out for both the games. Ganguly also said KL Rahul's poor form can push the team management to try out Sharma as the opener with

Mayank Agarwal. Sharma had a great run in the recently-concluded World Cup 2019, where he slammed five hundreds.

"I had suggested earlier about trying Rohit Sharma as an opener in Test cricket and I still believe that he needs to be given an opportunity because he is too good a player to be left out in the cold," Ganguly wrote in *The Times of India*. "After a fantastic World Cup, I believe he will be itching to grab the opportunity to open in Tests. With Ajinkya Rahane and Hanuma Vihari settling in nicely, there is not much left to play around in the middle-order," the former captain added.

FIRST TEST

Shah steers Afghanistan with historic century in Chittagong

AFP
Chittagong, Bangladesh

Rahmat Shah yesterday became the first Afghanistan cricketer to score a Test century, helping the minnows start strongly against Bangladesh on the opening day of the one-off match.

Shah made 102 and put on a crucial 120-run fourth-wicket stand with Asghar Afghan, batting on 88, to counter the Bangladesh spin attack at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong.

Afghanistan were 271 for five at stumps with Afghan and Asghar Zazai, on 35, putting together a 74-run partnership in the final session of play.

But it was Shah and Afghan who ensured that Afghanistan fought their way back in to the

contest after being in trouble at 77 for three at lunch.

"It is a proud moment for me. I am the first person who has the first half century (in a Test) for the country and now the century," Shah told reporters after the opening day's play.

"I had the dream to become the first centurion for Afghanistan. So naturally I was very upset when I got out scoring 98 against Ireland. Today I got the chance and scored the century," he said.

Taijul Islam and Nayeem Hasan took two wickets each to hurt Afghanistan after the tourists elected to bat first in just their third five-day game.

The war-torn nation had a bruising introduction to Test cricket after India outplayed them inside two days in 2018.

STANDING OVATION

Afghanistan registered their first Test victory against Ireland early

this year with Shah scoring two fifties in the game including a 98 in the first innings.

The top-order batsman extended his prolific run of form as he reached his hundred with a boundary off Hasan, raising his bat to a standing ovation from the crowd and the dressing room.

His celebration though was shortlived as Hasan got the batsman, who hit 10 fours and two sixes in his 187-ball knock, out on the next ball.

Hasan struck again with his off spin three balls later in the same over, rattling the stumps of Mohamed Nabi for nought as Afghanistan slipped to 197 for five.

Afghan, who survived a reprieve on 42 by TV umpire after being given leg before out off Mehidy Hasan, struck three fours and two sixes so far in his second Test fifty.

In the first session Taijul bowled opener Ihsanullah Janat for nine

with his left-arm spin and became the fastest Bangladeshi bowler to reach 100 Test wickets.

Taijul, who finished the day with 2-73, also became the third Bangladeshi bowler after Shakib Al Hasan and Mohamed Rafique to achieve such a feat in the longer format in his 25th match.

Off-spinner Mahmudullah chipped in when he forced Hashmatullah Shahidi to give a catch to Soumya Sarkar at slip for 14 in his first over.

Bangladesh fielded an all-spin attack without picking a single pace bowler while Afghanistan handed a Test debut to Ibrahim, Qais Ahmed and Zahir Khan.

Afghanistan skipper Rashid became the youngest ever Test captain at the age of 20 years 350 days with the toss, overtaking the record of Zimbabwe's Tatenda Taibu, who made his debut as Test captain just eight days older than Rashid in 2004.



Afghanistan's Rahmat Shah (right) acknowledges the crowd after reaching his century (100 runs) on the first day of the one-off Test against Bangladesh in Chittagong, Bangladesh, yesterday. (AFP)

Scorecard

AFGHANISTAN 1st innings	
I. Zadrar c Mahmudullah b T. Islam	21
I. Janat b T. Islam	9
R. Shah c Sarkar b N. Hasan	102
H. Shahidi c Sarkar b Mahmudullah	14
A. Afghan not out	88
M. Nabi b N. Hasan	0
A. Zazai not out	35
Extras (lb1, nb1) 2	
Total (5 wickets, 96 overs) 271	
Fall of wickets: 1-19 (Ihsanullah), 2-48 (Ibrahim), 3-77 (Hashmatullah), 4-197 (Rahmat), 5-197 (Nabi)	
Bowling: T. Islam 31-4-73-2 (nb1), Shakib 17-1-50-0, M. Hasan 22-4-59-0, N. Hasan 13-0-43-2, Mahmudullah 4-0-9-1, Sarkar 4-0-26-0, Haque 4-0-9-0, Hossain 1-0-1-0	