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FOOTBALL/AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Xavi strikes first AFC goal as Sadd avenge Nasaf defeat in style

The big win sends Al Sadd to the top of Group C with nine points from four games, and leaves them needing four points to qualify for the Round of 16



Al Sadd captain Xavi (L) celebrates with Akram Afif after scoring the first goal against Uzbekistan's Nasaf in Doha yesterday. PICTURE: Noushad Thekkayil

By Sports Reporter
 Doha

A four-goal blitz without reply put Al Sadd on the brink of the last 16 stage of the AFC Champions League yesterday as the Qatar giants avenged their defeat to Uzbekistan's Nasaf in sensational style.

Last week Nasaf had scored an upset 1-0 win as Al Sadd failed to get together in the southern Uzbek city of Qarshi in a match in which they clearly missed their inspirational captain Xavi who was rested after picking up a back injury.

Their troubles didn't seem to end there as they also lost to Umm Salal in a crucial QNB Stars League match to allow Al Duhail to walk away with the title with two rounds remaining.

But with the Spanish and Barcelona legend back in action yesterday, their luck changed dramatically as they took the lead with just three minutes on the clock.

That the goal came from Xavi himself was the icing on the cake for the team, the skipper turning in a pass from Boaleum Khoukhi to put Al Sadd ahead in front of their home fans at the Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Stadium.

It was Xavi's first-ever goal in the AFC Champions League and it set the stage for Al Sadd's complete domination of the Uzbeks who rarely had a shot at goal and spent most of the time chasing shadows.

Al Sadd doubled their lead in the 16th minute and this time it was a defender who got on the scoresheet. Full-back Abdelkarim Hassan finished off a surging solo run from the halfway line with a fierce strike that left Nasaf keeper Sanjar Kuvvatov with no chance of saving.

Baghdad Bounedjah then gave the Qatari side a comfortable 3-0 cushion at half time, with the Algerian netting his fifth goal of the tournament with an acrobatic overhead kick in the 43rd minute.

Fellow Algerian Jugurtha Hamroun, who had provided the assist for Bounedjah, got a goal of his own in the 71st minute, smashing in a low shot past Kuvvatov to round off a quick counter-attack.

"I have no complaints with the way we played today," said Al Sadd coach Jesualdo Ferreira. "Xavi's early goal set the stage and inspired the boys. All in all it was a comprehensive victory for us," he added.

The big win sends Al Sadd to the top of Group C with



Al Sadd's Baghdad Bounedjah also got onto the score sheet yesterday.

nine points from four games, and leaves them needing four points to qualify for the Round of 16. They host bottom of the group Al Wasl on Matchday Five when Nasaf welcome Persepolis to Uzbekistan.

An Al Sadd win coupled with Nasaf failing to beat Persepolis would see the Qatari and Iranian sides advance with a game to spare.

Meanwhile, Iran's Tractorsazi Tabriz continued their winless run after drawing 1-1 at home with Al Jazira of the UAE.

Tractorsazi started brightly and had a number of opportunities to go ahead in the first half, but were denied a goal by some stellar goalkeeping by Al Jazira's Ali Khaseif.

While the hosts enjoyed clear domination, it was Al Jazira who opened the scoring against the run of play, in the 44th minute. Brazilian star Romarinho latched on to an aerial pass from defender Musallam Fayeze and slotted in the first goal of the match.

SPOTLIGHT

Gharafa share the spoils with Al Ahli in Jeddah

AFC
 Jeddah

A l Ahli of Saudi Arabia and Al Gharafa shared the spoils after a 1-1 draw in Group A of the 2018 AFC Champions League yesterday.

Al Gharafa came within a whisker of stunning their hosts in the sixth minute when Abdelaziz Hatem rattled the right post after a cross from Wesley Sneijder.

Al Ahli gradually grew into the game and Saleh al-Amri took advantage of a misplaced pass to advance through on goal but failed to take his chance. At the other end of the pitch, Moayed Hassan tested the goalkeeper from distance but Yasser al-Mosaleem was well positioned to save.

Al Gharafa came within a whisker of stunning their hosts in the sixth minute when Abdelaziz Hatem rattled the right post after a cross from Wesley Sneijder

The visitors came the closest to opening the scoring in the 19th minute when Mehdi Taremi found himself in front of an empty net after onrushing goalkeeper al-Mosaleem failed to clear a ball from Assim Madibo but the Islamic Republic of Iran international somehow missed the target.

After a goalless first half, the Qataris finally took the lead through Taremi who converted a cross from Hassan in the 56th minute.

Al Gharafa's joy didn't last for long as Al Ahli responded instantly in similar fashion after Saeed al-Muwallad crossed for Moamen Zakaria, who headed home at the far post two minutes later.

The hosts almost snatched a winner when Ioannis Fetfatzidis cut inside from the right flank and fired a shot that ricocheted off the far post. Zakaria found the rebound but failed to net the second goal as his attempt sailed above the crossbar 15 minutes before the final whistle.

The result keeps Al Ahli top of Group A with eight points ahead of Matchday Five against Tractorsazi Tabriz while Al Gharafa are on five points, level with Al Jazira who they host next.

COURTESY CALL

PSG president visits injured superstar Neymar in Brazil

AFP
 Rio de Janeiro

Paris Saint-Germain president Nasser al-Khelaifi has visited injured superstar Neymar at his luxury home in Brazil amid rumours swirling about the striker's intention to quit PSG.

The star's father, Neymar Santos Sr, posted pictures of the meeting on Instagram. "Visit of the day at @neymarjr! Thanks @PSG," he wrote.

In one picture, Neymar gives the thumbs up, flanked by al-Khelaifi and his father. Another picture shows the club president with Antero Henrique, sports director at PSG, and Jean-Martial Ribes, the club spokesman. They also visited Neymar's charity centre, the Neymar Junior Institute, in Praia Grande, Sao Paulo state.

The world's most expensive player broke a bone in his right foot on February 25 and faces weeks of recuperation following surgery in early March. Unconfirmed media reports are swirling in Europe that Neymar has



French football team Paris Saint-Germain's (PSG) Qatari president Nasser al-Khelaifi (R) and Neymar Santos, father of Brazilian superstar and PSG's footballer Neymar Junior, pose with children at the Neymar Junior Institute project, in Praia Grande, Sao Paulo.

also grown disenchanted with PSG, who crashed out of the Champions League as the forward missed the sec-

ond leg on March 6, and wants to return to Barcelona or even join rivals Real Madrid.

PAKISTAN SUPER LEAGUE

Pollard blast in vain as Islamabad win

By Sports Reporter
 Sharjah

K eiron Pollard's 47-ball 73 went in vain as Islamabad United defeated Multan Sultans by 33 runs to secure their playoff spot in the Pakistan Super League yesterday.

Replying to a formidable Islamabad score of 185/4, made with the help of Luke Ronchi's 58, Alex Hales' 46 and Hussain's Talat's 33, Multan Sultans made the worst possible start imaginable when they lost four wickets for 20 runs in 5.1 overs.

But West Indian Pollard gave them some hope, hitting six sixes and five fours in a calculated assault on the Islamabad bowlers. He was the eighth batsman out with 142 runs on the board and 14 balls remaining in the innings.

However, Islamabad kept the Multan tailenders quiet to help their team



to a comfortable win.

Samit Patel, Amad Butt, Shadab Khan and Faheem Ashraf claimed two wickets apiece for Islamabad as Multan were bundled out for 152 in 19.1 overs.

Ronchi, whose 58 came off 36 balls, was declared man of the match.

EPL

Pep plays down hopes of clinching title in derby

'The important thing is to be champions. When and where it doesn't matter'

AFP
Manchester

Pep Guardiola tried to play down growing excitement among Manchester City supporters over the possibility of winning the Premier League title when they face bitter rivals United in the derby early next month.

Jose Mourinho's side visit the Etihad Stadium on April 7 for a game which could see City make mathematically certain of being crowned champions following their 2-0 victory at Stoke on Monday.

First, City must win their visit to mid-table Everton but, should they do so, Guardiola will win his first league title in English football with victory over his old rival Mourinho at the Etihad.

"Everybody is always asking this question," said Guardiola. "But the important thing is on March 12, we have 81 points, that is a lot of points."

"We want to be champions. We need three wins, but we are able to do it with two (if City beat United)."

"But before and after United, we have the (Champions League) quarter-finals, and at the moment that is the most important thing to focus on."

"I understand for the fans, okay, but the important thing is to be champions. When and where it doesn't matter."

The in-form English team are also in with a strong chance of winning Europe's premier prize for the first time in their history.

The draw for the Champions League last eight takes place on Friday and Guardiola will watch it live, along with his first-team squad, at their warm weather training camp in Abu Dhabi, where City flew immediately following the Stoke win.

City's shock exit from the FA Cup, at the hands of third-tier Wigan, leaves them without a game until the clash with Everton on the final day of the month. "We are going to be together and make three training sessions in five days," said the City manager.

"We are going to have lunch together, dinner, some people are playing golf. But the weather conditions are better than here - the forecast in Manchester is rain, rain, rain!"

"So we are going to go there and do the training we should be doing here. Last season we were there and it was good and that's why we're going to the airport now."

Manchester City's Spanish midfielder David Silva leaps into the arms of Manchester City's Brazilian striker Gabriel Jesus as he celebrates scoring his second goal of the English Premier League match against Stoke City in Stoke-on-Trent, central England. (AFP)



Football a 'welcome relief'

City's victory at Stoke came courtesy of two goals from David Silva, whose season has been disrupted because of a family crisis, following the premature birth of his son Mateo in December.

The City forward has been returning to Spain frequently to visit his family and admitted after his superb performance against Stoke that football has been a welcome relief.

"I think when I play football I forget everything, it's good for me to play," he said.

"I know in my private life it is not a very happy moment. But my son is fighting, you know, and I am very happy because he is getting stronger, getting better, so it is okay."

City captain Vincent Kompany offered support to Silva, who has been given permission to miss the Abu Dhabi trip to spend time in Spain.

"David just explained his

story, it puts everything into perspective for us," said the defender. "It is a massive boost and relief to be able to play this game like we do. It gives us perspective and brings a moment of joy into our lives."

City, meanwhile, can look forward to a memorable finale to the season given their current form and dominance over the Premier League although their demanding manager is clearly not in the mood to allow his players to relax.

"To motivate my players is really easy, we are not champions yet, and when we are, we must carry on, to focus on the next goals which is the Champions League quarter-finals," said Guardiola.

"There are always goals to pursue, statistics to overcome, and we will carry on and then work towards next season. There is always room for improvement and that is what we will do."

Fernandinho promises no let-up in City title quest

Fernandinho has urged Manchester City to remain ruthless in their pursuit of the Premier League title - which they could seal against Manchester United. City went 16 points clear at the top of the table with just eight games left in the league season following a 2-0 win away to Stoke on Monday.

David Silva scored two magnificent goals as City moved a step closer to their first Premier League title under Pep Guardiola.

Pep Guardiola's men now need a maximum of three more wins to make sure of lifting the trophy but two will do the trick if one of them comes against cross-city rivals United.

Should City defeat Everton on March 31, they could clinch the title with a win at home in the Manchester derby on April 7. "We cannot deny we are close

to winning the league but we have to keep working and keep focused, as we did since the first day, (going) game by game, step by step," said City midfielder Fernandinho.

"By working hard every day, every week, every game we are going to go get there," the Brazilian added.

For all Stoke's reputation as a hostile venue for opposition teams, City were rarely tested on Monday, a goal in each half from David Silva securing victory.

"Of course it is a tough place to come and play good football but we did it," said Fernandinho. "We are happy for that and one more step to the title." His comments echoed those of City manager Guardiola, who was unconcerned as to when his side won the title as long as they did indeed win it.

SPOTLIGHT

Forced absence from Europa League frustrates Aubameyang

Reuters
London

Arsenal striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang said that his forced absence from the club's Europa League campaign this season was the main reason for a "frustrating" start to life at London.

Aubameyang, who joined Arsenal in January, played for former club Borussia Dortmund in the Champions League this season and UEFA's 'cup-tied' rule prevents him from representing his new team in Europe for the rest of the season.

"I am really frustrated because the rules are a bit... I don't know how to say in English but I am disappointed because I can't help my team," Aubameyang told British media.

"When I was in Dortmund, I was playing every three days but now I play once a week or have a long time between games. It is not easy... that's life. I have to deal with it."

Gabon international Aubameyang has scored three Premier League goals in five starts for the club, including in the 3-0 league win over Watford last Sunday.

"I didn't play a lot in January so it was difficult to find the rhythm. Now I'm feeling better. I

work hard, I work a lot in the last weeks and I am happy because I feel better," he added.

The 28-year-old will watch from the stands as his team mates take on AC Milan in the second leg of their Europa League last 16 clash at the Emirates Stadium on Thursday.

Arsenal beat AC Milan 2-0 in the first leg.

Striker Danny Welbeck, who is tasked with leading Arsenal's line in Europe in the absence of Aubameyang and the injured Alexandre Lacazette, said he was relishing the competition with his fellow forwards.

"It's competition and I embrace it," Welbeck said.

"Ever since I was a kid, I've been playing for an academy with scouts all over the world that are looking for top players to come in."

"You have competition throughout your whole life and it only makes you better... gives you extra motivation."

Welbeck has struggled with hip and groin injuries this season and has not found the net since Arsenal's 4-2 FA Cup third round defeat by Nottingham Forest in January.

"My mindset's focused on looking forward, bettering myself, getting on the pitch, on the training pitch, doing what I can do to improve myself."

SERIE A

Scudetto not over, warns Allegri as Juve look to pull clear

AFP
Turin, Italy

Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri warned the battle for the Scudetto was not over even if the champions can pull four points clear after today's Serie A game against Atalanta.

Napoli lost 4-2 at home to AS Roma eight days ago and were held by Inter Milan last weekend allowing Juventus to overtake Maurizio Sarri's side on the top of Serie A.

"If we win tomorrow the championship is absolutely not over," insisted Allegri as Juventus - unbeaten in the league since November 19 - target a seventh straight title. "The numbers speak for themselves. Napoli are still there, have 70 points and can get to 100. That means we need to be aiming above the 100-point mark."

Juventus have 71 points and can break their record of 102 points for a season achieved under Allegri's predecessor Antonio Conte in 2014.

"I don't care about the records," said Allegri. "If they

tell me that only 81 points to win the Scudetto are happy."

"Right now Juventus have won nothing yet, but we have an Italian Cup final to play and right now we're leading the League against a Napoli I have to compliment because they're having a great season, otherwise the league would be over."

AS Roma are third 14 points behind Napoli. Atalanta, in eighth, are six points off the European places but are coming off last weekend's win at Bologna and have had good results this season with wins over AS Roma and AC Milan and holding Napoli, Lazio and Juventus in Bergamo. Today's game replaces the February 25 tie which was snowed off in Turin.

"We've been in the lead for only a few days so we have to be good at not giving up the bone," said Allegri.

"We have to take a step at a time, there is still a direct clash with Napoli, many difficult matches remain, until the end Napoli will be there to fight."

"For us it will be difficult: we will have the Champions League quarter-finals and we also hope for the semi-finals."

FOCUS

PAOK president apologises after gun incident

AFP
Athens

The president of Greek club PAOK yesterday apologised after storming onto the pitch with a holstered gun tucked in his belt, an incident that prompted the indefinite suspension of the championship.

"I am very sorry over what happened. I clearly had no right to enter the field of play in this fashion," Greek-Russian businessman Ivan Savvidis said in a statement.

Savvidis, who has extensive holdings in Greece and is rumoured to be close to the government of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, was on the run for 24 hours after an arrest warrant was issued following Sunday's incident. His antics have put pressure on Tsipras, who is accused by rivals of allowing Savvidis to continue a rapid rise in the Greek business world in return for political support and help with pri-

vatisations.

FIFA is demanding swift results in the attempt to restore order, the latest in years of initiatives to stamp out violence and murky dealings in Greece's most popular sport. Savvidis himself said yesterday that Greek football is "completely sick."

"Despite attacks at all levels, I will continue to fight for fair football and honourable refereeing in all matches, so that games are won on the pitch and not in courtrooms," he said.

He denied claims that he had bickered with the referee and an official from PAOK's opponents, AEK Athens, and claimed his foray onto the pitch at his club's Toumba stadium was solely aimed at preventing violence from breaking out.

"My only aim was to protect tens of thousands of PAOK fans from provocation, clashes, human victims," he said, even though, owing to a ban on away fans, only home supporters were present.

The diminutive, bearded Sav-

vidis was pictured jaw to jaw with AEK's head of football operations, while PAOK's technical director Lubos Michel - a Slovak former FIFA referee - is believed to have threatened match referee Yorgos Kominis.

Praise for Tsipras

Savvidis, a 58-year-old tobacco industrialist and a former lawmaker with the party of Russian President Vladimir Putin, has applauded Tsipras for "protecting investors."

"Hold onto Tsipras. He is a precondition for future success," Savvidis said in May.

"When I saw his speech (in parliament) I felt exactly like when I heard Vladimir Putin in 2000. I want a president like that," he said.

Flanked by bodyguards, Savvidis stormed onto the field in the 90th minute after a goal that would have given PAOK victory in the top-of-the-table clash was disallowed for offside. Police have said Savvidis is not sought over the gun, for which he has a

license, but for the pitch invasion, which is a misdemeanour offence not punishable in prison.

PAOK and AEK are in a neck-and-neck race for the Super League title, which would be the first for either team for more than two decades.

Tsipras has staked his political capital on resolving the crisis, insisting he would disregard any "political cost" to restore order to the league.

"We must all decide to ignore the political cost... It's a question of will. Personally, I am determined to go ahead," Tsipras said.

Powerful figure

His deputy minister for sport, Yorgos Vassiliadis, had said after an emergency meeting with Tsipras that the league would "not start again without a new framework agreed by all."

Vassiliadis said the government was in close contact with European football body UEFA, which he said had been "shocked" by the incident.

He did not rule out the prospect of Greek clubs sitting out next season's European competitions, but insisted the national team would not be affected.

FIFA said it "now expects appropriate measures to be taken, and rapidly."

It warned a failure to take action "to eradicate" violence could lead to the suspension of the Greek association from the sport's governing body.

Dubbed "Ivan the Terrible" by adoring PAOK fans, Savvidis has put the club from the northern port of Thessaloniki back in contention after decades of the championship being dominated by clubs from Athens.

Adding to the complications for the government, companies owned by Savvidis are the main sponsors of the Greek league.

Savvidis bought PAOK in 2012, followed by ailing state tobacco manufacturer SEKAP and Thessaloniki's top hotel Macedonia Palace in 2013, under the conservative administration that preceded Tsipras.



A picture taken on May 6, 2017, shows PAOK's Greek-Russian president Ivan Savvidis holding the trophy after the cup final match between PAOK Thessaloniki and AEK Athens in Volos. (AFP)

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Conte and Valverde go head-to-head as Chelsea look to upset Barcelona

'This question is very difficult to answer. I think we have to wait until the end of the season and then we'll see'

AFP
Barcelona

Antonio Conte has said he will consult his players ahead of Chelsea's Champions League clash with Barcelona on Wednesday and after the game he might do better to seek out Ernesto Valverde.

Both coaches faced chaotic starting points this season but only Valverde heads into this last 16 second leg at the Camp Nou with his domestic campaign still very much intact.

Each began the campaign at the end of a frenzied summer, in which key players were sold, less wanted ones bought and with the feeling overall of a squad weakened rather than bolstered.

Asked in September to reflect on the club's transfer dealings, Conte said: "This question is very difficult to answer. I think we have to wait until the end of the season and then we'll see."

Valverde was even less diplomatic. "The best thing about this window is that it is now closed," he said.

Each had unexpectedly found a gaping hole in attack as Neymar was lured by Paris Saint-Germain while Conte was only too happy to let Diego Costa leave, but then watched Manchester United walk off with Romelu Lukaku, the intended replacement.

Barcelona bought Ousmane Dembele, the club's most expensive signing, who limped off 55 minutes into his debut and would not return until January.

Chelsea, meanwhile, plumped for Alvaro Morata, who lacked confidence and gumption, and then in January Olivier Giroud, who had already been failing to get into the Arsenal team.

There were the players missed. For Chelsea, Lukaku, Alex Sandro, Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain and Fernando Llorente. For Barcelona, Marco Verratti, Hector Bellerin and Jean Michael Seri.

And the ones brought in. Ross Barkley, Tiemoue Bakayoko and



Barcelona's defender Gerard Pique (second left), forward Lionel Messi (second right) and defender Samuel Umtiti (right) take part in a training session at the Joan Gamper Sports Centre in Sant Joan Despi near Barcelona on the eve of the UEFA Champions League round of 16 second leg match against Chelsea. (AFP)

Antonio Rudiger, for Chelsea. Paulinho and Gerard Deulofeu, on a buy-back agreement, for Barcelona. But, eight months on, and with the season's end now in sight, one coach allowed the frustration to fester and deepen, while the other has ensured it is all-but forgotten.

Barcelona sit eight points clear at the top of La Liga, and are unbeaten after 28 games. Chelsea are fifth, four points adrift of the Champions League qualification spots, and perhaps need to

win the tournament to play in it again next season. The Blues could certainly beat Barca - they were unfortunate only to come away from the first leg with a 1-1 draw - or still sneak into the Premier League's top four.

But they are 25 points behind Manchester City and their miserable title defence is likely to mean Conte departs in May.

What Conte has complicated, Valverde has simplified. Barcelona have become more functional this season, playing 4-4-2

as well as 4-3-3, and tighter at the back. They have conceded only one more league goal than the miserly Atletico Madrid.

When Valverde was asked about the possibility of Neymar returning last week, he typically brushed it off with minimal fuss. "It is a fantasy and we will not talk about speculation we know would not end here," he said.

And he has kept Messi happy, the Argentinian arriving this week with five goals in his last four games, including the crucial

winner against Atletico Madrid.

Conte, meanwhile, is yet to find a solution to his striking problems, has given oxygen to his conflict with the club's hierarchy and has succeeded only in alienating his own best player, Eden Hazard, who is disillusioned with a lone role up front.

After Barcelona edged out Atletico 1-0 earlier this month, Diego Simeone said Messi was the decisive factor but also had paid tribute to Valverde's calm and calculated Barca revival.

"It makes me happy to see Barca so tight and strong defensively," Simeone said.

"What Valverde is doing is wonderful. He has reinvented them."

They hope to have Andres Iniesta available again after the midfielder trained on Monday, following a hamstring strain.

On Chelseaam Valverde said: "They are very strong and defend very close together. We have a lot of hope and all is still to play for."

Barca will make late call on Iniesta before Chelsea - Valverde

Barcelona will make a late decision on whether captain Andres Iniesta is fit to face Chelsea in the Champions League today, coach Ernesto Valverde has confirmed. Iniesta sustained a hamstring injury against Atletico Madrid on March 4 but the midfielder took part in a light training session on Monday ahead of the last-16 second leg at the Camp Nou. The first leg finished 1-1.

"It's clear when a match like this arrives, a player tends to risk," Valverde said yesterday. "What we have to decide is whether the risk is excessive." Iniesta could be replaced by Paulinho in the starting line-up but the Spaniard's absence would represent a major blow to his team's hopes of reaching the quarter-finals.

"We know what Andres brings to the team, not only on the pitch but as a captain," Barcelona midfielder Sergio Busquets said.

"You give him the ball and he always knows what he has to do to create chances. Everything that he contributes is positive. He is training and we hope he plays."

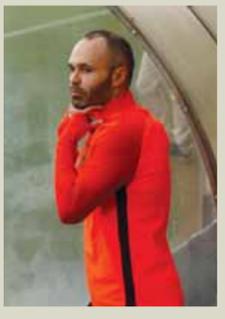
Lionel Messi, however, is available again, after the Argentinian missed Saturday's win at Malaga to attend the birth of his son, Ciro.

"He will be fine," Busquets said. "In fact he will be more motivated than what we are used to and physically he is going to be great, after having an extra game's rest. I hope that this is perfect."

Busquets was also asked whether he thought Messi, who scored his team's crucial away goal at Stamford Bridge, would ever leave Barcelona and move to the Premier League.

"He is at home here," Busquets said. "He has a great changing room, he is winning titles, has a great project, is winning collective and individual awards."

"In the end all these positive things are difficult to find elsewhere, so the Premier League is a league that maybe you would like to play in but if you have to balance the positive and the negative out of here, it is very difficult to leave."



EPL

Coach Pellegrino sorry to leave Southampton in danger

Reuters
London

Mauricio Pellegrino said he was sorry to leave Southampton in danger of relegation after becoming on Monday the ninth Premier League manager this season to lose his job.

Southampton managed only one win in Pellegrino's last 17 Premier League matches at the helm, sliding to fourth from bottom in the table, one point above the relegation zone. The Argentine, who replaced Claude Puel, wrote an open letter to fans which was published on the club's website yesterday.

"From the beginning I tried to do my best every single day, I tried to give back to the club and tried to represent the club with pride," the letter began.

"Some moments we managed this, some moments we couldn't, but we have been living a difficult season for many reasons."

Pellegrino did lead Southampton into the FA Cup quarter-finals, where they will play third-tier Wigan Athletic on Sunday, but the priority for whoever takes over for the rest of the season will be to preserve their top-flight status.

"I feel so sorry to leave the club in this situation, but when you don't get results I understand the decision the club has to take," he said.

"I wish everyone all the best for the rest of the season, I have enjoyed an amazing experience and I know that Southampton



has everything required to move forward."

Southampton face a huge relegation clash in their next league match when they go to West Ham United, who are one place

and two points better off in the table.

Mark Hughes, who had a short spell at Southampton as a player, is one of the leading favourites to replace Pellegrino.

Initial refusal to sell Van Dijk cost Pellegrino

Southampton's refusal to sell defender Virgil van Dijk in the close season had disrupted their Premier League campaign which ultimately led to manager Mauricio Pellegrino being sacked, former club captain Matt Le Tissier has said. Southampton dismissed Pellegrino on Monday after just one victory in 17 league games under the manager. Saturday's 3-0 defeat by Newcastle United had left them a place and a point above the relegation zone and sealed the Argentine's fate. Le Tissier suggested that the turmoil surrounding Dutchman Van Dijk's future amid interest from Liverpool and Manchester City had affected the team's performances early in the season. Van Dijk eventually moved to Liverpool in January for 75 million pounds (\$104.24 million), according to British media reports. "I think that was probably something that, looking back with hindsight, the club would probably regret, trying to keep him in the summer," said Le Tissier, who scored 209 goals for Southampton during his 16 years at the club. "They tried to do the right thing by the fans, in terms of not selling their best player every season, but sadly that did appear to backfire, and that situation probably didn't help the performances in the first half of the season."

FOCUS

Ribery in, Robben out, Heynckes annoyed as Bayern go to Besiktas

AFP
Munich

Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich take a comfortable lead to Besiktas today where fan favourite Franck Ribery and ageing coach Jupp Heynckes can make a case for contract extensions by securing a Champions League quarter-final berth.

The 5-0 first-leg advantage will ease Bayern's worries over injuries which have ruled out Arjen Robben with a pinched nerve, adding to a list of longer-term absentees including striker Kingsley Coman, 'keeper Manuel Neuer and midfielder Corentin Tolisso.

Club chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said Robben's exclusion was "just a precaution".

Fiery French winger Ribery showed he still has a point to make when he scored twice in the 6-0 trouncing of Hamburg at the weekend, one of which capped a run where he dribbled past four defenders.

"I'm still hungry and I want to stay at Bayern for as long as possible," said Ribery, a month short of his 35th birthday.

"But they have given me no indication that I should expect anything, it isn't easy," said the

player who burst onto the international scene at the 2006 Germany World Cup.

Ribery's contract is up on June 30, as is the contract of the 72-year-old Heynckes, whom club chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge suggested was annoyed at the speculation over his future.

"I never said that I'd be stopping on June 30," Heynckes said last week.

"He's reversed the roles on us," Rummenigge quipped back as the team prepared for the trip to Turkey.

"We are the ones worrying now. I spoke about a successor, but I never spoke about a date for that successor," said Rummenigge, who is thought to be lining up Thomas Tuchel.

Heynckes won the Champions League with Bayern before being pushed aside to bring in Pep Guardiola, and has been a success since his return to galvanise the side that had lost its way under Carlo Ancelotti.

Besiktas, making their debut in the knockout stages of the Champions League, face a near-impossible task after Bayern club captain Thomas Mueller and Robert Lewandowski both netted twice as they thrashed the 10-man Turks in the first leg with the now-injured Coman adding the fifth.

SPOTLIGHT

Smith demands centuries from Australia batsmen

'...if we're getting batters scoring big hundreds it certainly helps us out a hell of a lot'

Reuters
Johannesburg

Australia captain Steve Smith has demanded his team's batsmen lift their output and score centuries against South Africa in the wake of their humbling six-wicket loss in the second Test at Port Elizabeth.

Australia were restricted to 243 in the first innings at St. George's Park and were bowled out for 239 in the second to give the Proteas an easy victory chase of 101 to level the series at 1-1.

While no Australian has managed a century, the home side has had two – rookie opener Aiden Markram scoring a gallant 143 in the loss in Durban and AB de Villiers setting the platform for victory at Port Elizabeth with an unbeaten 126.

"We haven't got a hundred so far in this series, so that's not ideal," Smith told Australian radio station SEN.

"Mitchell Marsh probably deserved a hundred in the first Test to be fair, but if we're getting batters scoring big hundreds it certainly helps us out a hell of a lot.

"Unfortunately, we haven't been able to do that so far in this series, but we've got a good opportunity to turn it around in the next."

After a rollicking home summer against England, the prolific Australia captain has also been down on his own lofty standards. His highest score was 56 at Durban and he was dismissed cheaply twice in Port Elizabeth. Smith has scored only one ton against South Africa – an even 100 in his first match at Centurion in 2014 – and only three fifties in 14 innings against the same opponents since.

"I've played a lot more now since 2014 and the more you play, the more people have plans to you to try to keep you quiet and those kind of things," Smith said.

"It's just a part of batting,



Australia's captain Steve Smith leads his team including David Warner (right) off the field after their defeat on the fourth day of the second Test against South Africa at St George's Park in Port Elizabeth on Monday. (AFP)

sometimes you have to work really hard for your runs and take a little bit longer, and some days you come out and things happen really quickly for you."

The four-Test series resumes in Cape Town from March 22 and Australia will be glad for the extended break as all-rounder Marsh races to recover

from a groin strain.

The Western Australian, who scored 96 in Durban, had a tough test at Port Elizabeth, battling a stomach complaint and dropping a catch in the slips.

He was also fined 20% of his match fee for swearing at South Africa fast bowler Ka-

giso Rabada, who was himself banned for the rest of the series for repeated code of conduct breaches.

"In regards to Mitch Marsh, it's a good break now between now and the next test match and he's telling me he'll be fine but we'll wait and see how things go," said Smith, who also

gave a clean bill of health to Australia's pace trio of Mitchell Starc, Josh Hazlewood and Pat Cummins.

"I think all the quicks are going really well. I haven't heard today, but before today they were all feeling fine, so hopefully with a good 10-day break they can freshen up a little bit."

COMMENT

Bangladesh want to create own 'brand' in T20s: Mahmudullah

AFP
Colombo

Bangladesh skipper Mahmudullah said yesterday they plan to hone their "brand" of Twenty20 cricket against India in a key tri-series showdown.

The visitors staged a 215-run chase to defeat hosts Sri Lanka in their second match of the tournament, rebounding from a loss in their opener against India.

Bangladesh, 10th in the world T20 rankings behind Afghanistan, will be in strong contention for the tri-series final if they beat table-toppers India today.

Mahmudullah, who was named captain after Shakib al-Hasan was ruled out of the tri-series due to injury, said they entered the series wanting "to create a Bangladesh brand of cricket."

"I think the skills are there. We need to be smart to take that calculated risk," he told reporters in Colombo, saying his side had to compensate for its lack of power hitters.

"Taking on a particular bowler who we think can be targeted, these sort of things we need to apply when we are playing. These things will give us that Bangladesh brand of T20 cricket."

The Tigers have beaten top sides

in Test and one-day internationals, but struggled to find consistency in the shortest format of the sport, having lost nine of their last 11 T20s.

Mahmudullah urged his bowlers to learn from their Indian counterparts, who have utilised the batting-friendly conditions at the R. Premadasa Stadium in Colombo.

Rising Indian pacemen like Jaydev Unadkat and Shardul Thakur have been instrumental in elevating India to the top of the table in the series.

Spinners Yuzvendra Chahal and Washington Sundar have also chipped in with disciplined bowling and crucial strikes.

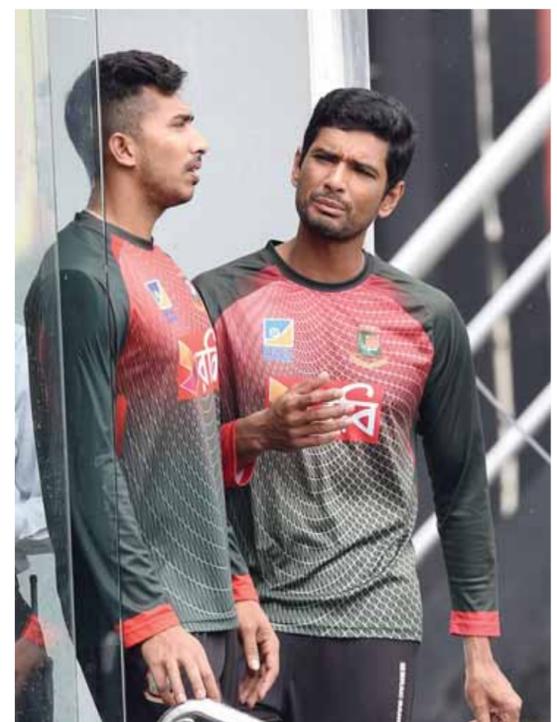
Bangladesh's left-arm quick Mustafizur Rahman has picked up five wickets in two matches but leaked close to 10 runs an over.

Mahmudullah backed his strike paceman to come good in the remaining matches in conditions he believes are tough for bowlers.

"I think he is a great bowler for our team, he has been doing really well. It's just the wicket that suits the batsman most," said Mahmudullah.

"Mustafiz is in great shape and is our strike bowler and I will always back him up."

Bangladesh have never won a T20 tournament since they started playing the format in 2006.



Bangladesh captain Mohammed Mahmudullah (right) with teammate Soumya Sarkar in the dressing room after rain delayed a training session at the R Premadasa stadium in Colombo yesterday. (AFP)

England cricket hopefuls Barbados-bound

Forget net sessions in cold indoor schools in Bradford or Bristol – some of England's most promising cricketers will instead prepare for the upcoming English season with a series of matches in Barbados starting later this week.

This will be the second edition of a one-day series that pits representative teams from northern and southern counties against each other, following the South's 3-0 series sweep in Dubai and Abu Dhabi last year.

The aim is to develop England's white-ball depth ahead of the country staging next year's 50-over World Cup.

But long-format county players will also be on show in Barbados with the first-class match between MCC and the champion county, once a staple of the Lord's

fixture list, moving from its recent home in the UAE to the Kensington Oval. As a result, Essex, the 2017 county champions, will also be heading to the Caribbean.

"We introduced the North-South Series last year as part of a concerted attempt to emphasise the importance of 50-over cricket in the countdown to staging the 2019 ICC World Cup," said England and Wales Cricket Board director of England cricket Andrew Strauss in a statement issued Tuesday.

"The series was successful in a number of ways, allowing players to press their World Cup claims in front of the England selectors and management." Two former England internationals in Paul Collingwood (North) and Mark Ramprakash (South), will

coach the teams while England's head coach Trevor Bayliss and his deputy, Paul Farbrace, are on tour in New Zealand with the senior England squad.

"This year's series was always going to be a little different given the schedule of the England team which means Trevor Bayliss and Paul Farbrace are both in New Zealand," said Strauss, himself a former England captain.

"But the appointment of two members of the England coaching staff in Mark Ramprakash and Paul Collingwood to take charge of the teams underlines that the stakes will again be high for the players selected," added Strauss, who on Monday announced a shake-up that will see James Whitaker leave his role as England's head selector next month.

New Zealand's Wright returning to Derbyshire

Former New Zealand and India coach John Wright is to return to Derbyshire to oversee their upcoming campaign in English domestic cricket's Twenty20 Blast competition, the Midlands county announced yesterday.

Wright knows Derbyshire well, having played for the club during his career as a New Zealand batsman.

Last season saw Wright guide Derbyshire to their first Twenty20 quarter-final in more than a decade before they were undone by Pakistan star Shahid Afridi's blistering 42-ball century for Hampshire. Wright will be back working alongside former Derbyshire and England seamer Dominic Cork. "We saw great progress in the shortest format in 2017, securing a home quarter-final for the first time and playing a positive brand of cricket throughout the competition," said Derbyshire cricket advisor Kim Barnett. "John, Dominic and all the players are determined to build on the successes from last summer and continue our progression in this format," the former Derbyshire captain added. "Our ultimate aim is to reach Finals Day and bring silverware to Derbyshire."

QATAR AIRWAYS DIVISION 'A' T20

Khetco and United Challengers make it to final

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Khaleel's electrifying 45-ball 78 was backed up well by bowlers Musawir and Naveed, setting up a splendid nine-run triumph for Khetco against City Exchange in the semi-finals of the Qatar Airways Twenty20 Cricket Tournament for Division A teams.

Qatar Airways, one of the youngest airlines in the world with a strong presence in all six continents, is the sponsor of the tournament and has been supporting the Qatar Cricket Association in the development of the game in the country.

After being put into bat first, Khetco piled up a stiff 182 for eight in 20 overs. Khaleel batted solidly to lay the base

of his team's total. He smashed five sixes and seven boundaries to compile 78. Buhari (three for 30) and Rayees grabbed five wickets to be the most successful City Exchange bowlers.

City Exchange put up a spirited chase, which was spearheaded by Jackson. He cracked 61 off just 31 balls, hitting two sixes and seven boundaries. Faisal chipped in 22 with three fours in 19 balls. However, Musawir and Naveed struck vital blows to have the rivals falling short of the target narrowly.

Musawir grabbed three wickets for 24 in four overs and Naveed scalped two players for 31. Khaleel was named the Man of the Match for his fine half-century and one stumping.

In the final, Khetco will clash with United Challengers, who were guided to a four-wicket win over Regal Strik-

ers by Farhan and Ahnaf with 17 balls to spare.

Ajay's 59 off 36 balls with three sixes and four boundaries lifted Regal Strikers to a fighting 150 for nine in 20 overs. Aamin added 39 in 28 deliveries, blasting four sixes and two fours. Farhan, who got four scalps for 31 runs in four overs, and Niksy (two for 19 in three overs) managed to restrict the opponents.

United Challengers batted steadily and secured the win in 17.1 overs as Ahnaf smashed a six and six boundaries in his fine 27-ball 41. Imran contributed 18 not out, including a six and a four, to drive the chase, despite five wickets by Sulah (three for 33) and Shamsher (two for 24).

Farhan was adjudged the Man of the Match for his four-wicket haul and a catch.

Brief scores Khetco beat City Exchange by nine runs

Khetco: 182 for eight in 20 overs (Khaleel 78 in 45 balls, Buhari 3/30, Rayees 2/34)

City Exchange: 173 for nine in 20 overs (Jackson 61 in 31 balls, Faisal 22 in 19 balls, Musawir 3/24, Naveed 2/31)

Man of the Match: Khaleel of Khetco for 78 runs and one stumping.

United Challengers beat Regal Strikers by four wickets

Regal Strikers: 150 for nine in 20 overs (Ajay 56 in 36 balls, Aamin 39 in 28 balls, Farhan 4/31, Niksy 2/19)

United Challengers: 153 for six in 17.1 overs (Ahnaf 41 in 27 balls, Imran 18 in 12 balls, Sulah 3/33, Shamsher 2/24)

Man of the Match: Farhan of United Challengers for four wickets.



Khaleel of Khetco



Farhan of United Challengers

NHL

Ovechkin hits 600th goal of his career as Capitals win

Ovechkin became the fourth player to reach 600 goals in less than 1,000 games, reaching the mark in his 990th game

Reuters
Washington

Evgeny Kuznetsov scored with 49 seconds left in overtime, and Alex Ovechkin collected the 600th goal of his NHL career earlier as the Washington Capitals defeated the Winnipeg Jets 3-2 on Monday night in Washington.

Kuznetsov got a breakaway and beat goalie Connor Hellebuyck (40 saves) with a high shot in an overtime where Washington had all seven shots. Ovechkin finished with two goals after not scoring a point in the past three games. However, he scored once in each of the first two periods to become the 20th player ever to reach the 600-goal milestone. In addition, Ovechkin became the fourth NHL player to reach 600 goals in less than 1,000 games — this was the 990th game of his career. Wayne Gretzky, Mario Lemieux and Brett Hull are the others.

GOLDEN KNIGHTS 3, FLYERS 2

Erik Haula, William Karlsson and Ryan Carpenter scored one goal each to lift Vegas past Philadelphia at the Wells Fargo Center. Golden Knights goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury stopped 38 shots in earning his 400th career win, third among active players. It was Vegas' 45th victory this season, an ongoing record for an expansion franchise in the National Hockey League. Claude Giroux and Wayne Simmonds scored for the Flyers and goaltender Petr Mrazek made 26 saves in the loss.

BLUE JACKETS 5, CANADIENS 2

Alexander Wennberg notched a goal and three assists, and Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 38 shots as Columbus claimed a win over Montreal in Columbus. Defenseman Seth Jones, however, left the game after the second period due to an upper-body injury.

The Blue Jackets have won five straight games and have claimed six



Alex Ovechkin (left) of Washington Capitals skates past Josh Morrissey of Winnipeg Jets during the NHL match in Washington, DC, on Monday. (AFP)

consecutive victories at Nationwide Arena, this one after falling behind just 34 seconds into the clash.

BLUES 4, DUCKS 2

Four players scored a goal each and Jake Allen made 20 saves for just his fourth win in 21 games as St.

Louis dumped Anaheim in a matchup of Western Conference playoff hopefuls

in Anaheim. Patrik Berglund gave the Blues valuable insurance with his ninth goal at 11:28 of the third period, taking a pass in the high slot from Kyle Brodziak and wiring a wrist by John Gibson.

It was the second straight win for the Blues, who moved within a point of Colorado for the conference's last playoff spot, three days before they host the Avalanche. Derek Grant pulled

the Ducks within a marker at 6:15 with his ninth goal, deflecting a Chris Kelly shot, but Anaheim couldn't avoid its third straight loss. It stayed at 80 points, good for third in the Pacific Division, after going 7-1-1 in its previous nine games.

KINGS 3, CANUCKS 0

Goaltender Jonathan Quick stopped 35

shots for his fourth shutout of the season as hometown Los Angeles blanked Vancouver. With the win, the Kings moved above the National Hockey League playoff bar. Their 81 points put two points behind San Jose for second place in the Pacific Division. LA also moved a point ahead of both Colorado and Anaheim in the Western Conference wild-card race.

Tyler Toffoli led the Kings with a goal and an assist, while Anze Kopitar, Tanner Pearson also tallied for the Kings as they posted their eighth win in 12 games.

SHARKS 5, RED WINGS 3

Timo Meier and Chris Tierney both collected one goal and one assist and goalie Martin Jones stopped 23 shots as San Jose beat Detroit. Tierney iced it with an empty netter with 94 seconds remaining in regulation. The Sharks finished a six-game homestand at SAP Center with a 4-2 mark and sit second in the Pacific Division. Jimmy Howard made 29 saves for the Red Wings, who have lost seven straight, including six in regulation. Tyler Bertuzzi collected three assists in the loss.

SENATORS 5, PANTHERS 3

Matt Duchene and Magnus Paa-jarvi scored two goals each as Ottawa snapped Florida's franchise-record eight-game home winning streak. Florida's Aleksander Barkov nearly gave the Panthers their first lead of the game when he got a breakaway, shorthanded attempt with 5:51 left in the third period. But Barkov failed to fool Ottawa goalie Craig Anderson, a Broward County resident and a former Panther. After Barkov came up empty, Duchene and Alexandre Burrows scored for Ottawa to snap a 3-3 tie.

RANGERS 6, HURRICANES 3

Jimmy Vesey scored a hat trick, including the go-ahead goal midway through the third period, and Mats Zuccarello added two goals to lead New York to a win over visiting Carolina. The Rangers snapped a three-game losing streak with the win, while the Hurricanes lost for the third time in four games.

Vesey scored the go-ahead goal with 7:45 left in the game, beating Scott Darling short-side for his 14th goal of the season. Vesey's goal came less than four minutes after a Victor Rask goal tied the score at three 8:23 into the period.

NBA

Harden powers Rockets to victory as Spurs problems deepen

AFP
Los Angeles

James Harden scored 28 points as the Houston Rockets tightened their grip on first place in the Western Conference on Monday with a 109-93 victory over the San Antonio Spurs.

Another inspirational display from MVP-candidate Harden included six rebounds and six assists as the Rockets delighted their home fans to improve to 53 and 14 at the top of the standings. The Rockets now have a two-game advantage over the Golden State Warriors as the playoffs approach, meaning they are in pole position to retain home advantage through the postseason.

Harden was backed by 18 points from point guard Chris Paul, who had nine assists and three rebounds. Trevor Ariza added 15 points while big man Clint Capela scored 13 with nine rebounds. Gerald Green added 14 off the bench.

The victory also means Golden State are assured of a playoff berth for a sixth straight season. Rockets coach Mike D'Antoni paid tribute to his team's stamina during a grueling recent run of fixtures. "We've played a lot of games in 10 days," D'Antoni said. "To have the legs and be able to do what they're doing and put the game away is pretty good."

D'Antoni said his team would now be focused on finishing first while ensuring their squad would be at full fitness for the playoffs. "We want to finish first, get home court advantage, make sure everybody's healthy," D'Antoni told reporters.

Injury-hit San Antonio, meanwhile, who have struggled in the absence of Kawhi Leonard and LaMarcus Aldridge, mostly failed to impose themselves on the Rockets defence. Bryn Forbes and Derrick White led the scoring off the bench with 14 points each, while Rudy Gay was the leading scorer out of the starters with 13 points.

The loss saw the Spurs fall out of the playoff position in the Western Conference. Gregg Popovich's team are now in 10th place in the standings, and will need to arrest a steep dip in form if they are to avoid missing the postseason for the first time since 1996-1997. The Spurs have now lost 11 of their last 14 games, and are in a battle to make the playoffs in a crowded mid-table where only one game separates the teams placed seventh to 10th. The top eight teams reach the playoffs. Popovich meanwhile said he hoped his team could be revitalised by the time of



James Harden (left) of Houston Rockets drives past Rudy Gay of San Antonio Spurs during the NBA game in Houston, Texas, on Monday. (AFP)

the playoffs as the injury crisis eases.

"Everybody tries to be the best they can be by playoff time, and that will be our goal too — to be in the playoffs and be as good as we can possibly be, no matter what the circumstances are," said Popovich, who was pleased with the contribution of French veteran Tony Parker, who underwent knee surgery last year.

"I think he's starting to feel in pretty good shape, pretty confident about his knee, and starting to exert that leadership again, which we'll need," Popovich said. "I think he's on the right trajectory for sure."

Elsewhere Tuesday, Russell Westbrook had a triple double as the Oklahoma City Thunder brought up their 40th win of the

season in a 106-101 defeat of the Sacramento Kings. Westbrook finished with 17 points, 10 rebounds and 11 assists as the Thunder improved to 40-29 to move up to fourth place in the Western Conference.

In the Eastern Conference, the Milwaukee Bucks cruised to a routine 121-103 win over the Memphis Grizzlies, staying in eighth place in the playoff seedings. Khris Middleton had 24 points and Giannis Antetokoumpo 20. Brandon Jennings excelled off the bench with 16 points, 12 assists and eight rebounds.

RESULTS

Houston 109 San Antonio 93; Milwaukee 121 Memphis 103; Oklahoma City 106 Sacramento 101; Portland 115 Miami 99

MLB

Phillies' Arrieta thanks Cubs, fans in handwritten letter

Reuters
Chicago

Jake Arrieta was nearly ready to walk away from baseball when the Chicago Cubs came calling. After four rocky seasons with the Baltimore Orioles, Arrieta was dealt to the Cubs in 2013. The move couldn't have worked out any better for Arrieta, who became a Cy Young winner, All-Star and a World Series champion.

On Monday, Arrieta left Chicago in free agency after five seasons to sign a multi-year deal with the Philadelphia Phillies. The eight-year veteran penned a heartfelt letter by hand to thank the Cubs and their fans before leaving.

"In the midst of what felt like never-ending adversity and failure, I was traded to the Chicago Cubs on July 2nd, 2013," Arrieta wrote. "This day was the beginning of a four and a half year stretch that would forever change our lives. On the verge of walking away from the game I love dearly, (Cubs president of baseball operations) Theo (Epstein) called, and the transformation began. I looked myself in the mirror, as well as my two year old son and pregnant wife knowing in my heart that everything was about to change."

Arrieta went 20-25 with a 5.46 ERA and 27 strikeouts in 69 games with the Orioles from 2010 to 2013. He was shipped to the Cubs along with Pedro Strop and cash in exchange for Steve Clevenger and Scott Feldman.

In his first half-season with the Cubs, Arrieta showed marked improvement while going 4-2 with a 3.66 ERA in nine starts. Two years later, Arrieta posted a career-best record of 22-6 with a 1.77 ERA and 236 strikeouts en route to the NL Cy

Young Award. He went 18-8 with a 3.10 ERA and 190 punch outs the next season to earn his lone All-Star selection and help the Cubs end their infamous 108-year World Series drought.

Overall, Arrieta went 68-31 with 2.73 ERA in 128 starts with Chicago.

"Chicago was our home, and will forever be a special place for my entire family. We raised our children in Wrigleyville, one of the most iconic places in all of sports. Going to work everyday was an honor for many reasons from the storied history of the organization, to the high character individuals I was surrounded by year after year.

"Three consecutive NLCS appearances, two NL Central titles, and a World Series Championship..."

The first in 108 years, childhood dreams turned reality, thanks to so many amazing people, all holding one another to a very high standard."

Arrieta signed a three-year, \$75mn deal to join the Phillies, joining Carlos Santana as the second high-profile player to join the 2008 World Series champs in free agency this offseason.

"I send gracious thanks to the (Cubs owners) Ricketts family and front office for the commitment to winning at any cost. Going the extra mile to take care of our families was never taken for granted. I was lucky to have dedicated teammates that willingly shed blood, sweat, and tears to achieve our goals," Arrieta wrote.

"I will miss going to battle with all of you, but look forward to competing on opposite sides moving forward. Lastly, thanks to all Cubs fans around the world for standing with us, and investing in us even where times were tough. You will all be missed dearly. Thanks for the memories!"

Arrieta closed out his letter by signing it "49", his jersey number with the Cubs.



Jake Arrieta signed a three-year, \$75mn deal to join the Phillies.

RUGBY

Wales boss Gatland wary of 'disciplined' France

'I hope so. I hope they have been partying all night in Paris after that win – they deserve it!'

AFP
Cardiff, United Kingdom

Wales coach Warren Gatland jokingly said he hoped France had been "partying all night" after beating England ahead of their Six Nations finale in Cardiff on Saturday. Wales will be assured of the runners-up spot behind already-crowned champions Ireland if they record a bonus-point win over France at the Principality Stadium.

But the French will arrive in Wales buoyed by a 22-16 victory over England in Paris last weekend that ended the visitors' hopes of a third successive Six Nations title. This was France's second straight victory following a 34-17 defeat of perennial strugglers Italy and a sure sign of their recovery under new coach Jacques Brunel, appointed after Guy Noves was sacked following a miserable two-year spell in charge that yielded just seven victories in 22 matches.

Asked if France might struggle to produce two "big" performances on consecutive weekends, Gatland told reporters: "I hope so. I hope they have been partying all night in Paris after that win – they deserve it!"

On a more serious note, however, Gatland paid tribute to the influence of Brunel. But for an extraordinary last-ditch drop-goal from Jonathan Sexton, the former Perpignan and Italy coach would have won his first game in charge of France in their Championship opener against an Ireland side who are now just 80 minutes away from a Grand Slam.

"You have to take your hat off to Jacques Brunel in terms of the discipline he has brought into the squad," said Gatland. "They played like that – they played with discipline against England. They deserved to win the match."

The New Zealander added: "Their defence looks strong at the moment, it was good in the first game against Ireland. They were unlucky not to win that, and then they started well against Scotland (a match France eventually lost 32-26 in Edinburgh).

"Probably conditioning and fitness wise it cost them a little but having a



France rugby union players take part in weight-lifting session, as part of the team's preparation for the Six Nations match against Wales. (AFP)

few more games under their belt, a win against Italy, they are showing some cohesion now having been together for a number of games. I thought they were exceptionally good against England."

Gatland is set to revert to his first-choice side, with regular captain Alun Wyn Jones in line to return to the second row, after making 10 changes to his starting XV for Sunday's 38-14 win

at home to Italy. Wales ran in five tries, including two from powerhouse wing George North, against the Azzurri but they were down to 13 men early in the second half after both Liam Williams and Gareth Davies were shown yellow cards. Gatland was particularly annoyed by the way Williams got himself sin-binned for a high tackle on opposing fullback Matteo Minozzi and

warned such indiscipline could prove costly against stronger opposition

"He gave away what I thought was a penalty that did not need to be given away at the breakdown," Gatland said. "The tackle at the end – I understand what he was trying to do, he was trying to hit him as hard as he could. There was just a bit of frustration, and if he makes that tackle a bit lower there is no prob-

lem, but he catches him high and it possibly could have been a red card."

Former Ireland boss Gatland insisted: "I don't want him to lose that emotion. That what makes him as a good as he is – he is physical, he has got great work rate, he has great energy and you don't want to take those things away from him. When things aren't quite going his way, he needs to keep control and keep calm."

SIX NATIONS

England's Armand ready for Ireland

AFP
London

Don Armand is ready to play anywhere in England's back row after being called up as No. 8 cover for Exeter colleague Sam Simmonds ahead of their Six Nations finale against Ireland. Back-to-back defeats by Scotland and France have wrecked England's dreams of a third successive Six Nations title and now they will try to do to already-crowned champions Ireland what the Irish did to them in Dublin last season by denying the visitors a Grand Slam on Saturday.

It is 12 years since England last lost three games in a single Championship campaign. But they have yet to be beaten at Twickenham since Australian coach Eddie Jones took charge following their first-round exit on home soil at the 2015 World Cup.

But following a 22-16 loss to France last weekend, England find themselves confronting a back-row injury crisis with both Nathan Hughes and Courtney Lawes ruled out as a result of knee problems suffered in Paris.



This is in addition to the fact that loose forwards such as Billy Vunipola, Sam Underhill and Tom Curry were already sidelined. Jones gave Armand his England debut off the bench in Argentina last year, when several first-choice players were with the British and Irish Lions in New Zealand.

But for all that Armand has been a respected performer for Premiership champions Exeter, Jones had not recalled him for England duty until this week.

"We took Don to Argentina. He's a good solid player, who keeps on playing well for Exeter," Jones said.

"We've got a few injuries in that No 8 spot so we're relying on Simmonds and need another back-up in that area."

Armand has played most of club rugby this season at either openside or blindside flanker, but the 29-year-old had no qualms about moving to a central position in the three-man back-row if needed.

SPOTLIGHT

Hamad al-Qadhi leads Hathab series ahead of ninth leg



By Sports Reporter
Doha

Hamad Nasser al-Qadhi is leading the Hathab Equestrian Series standings, ahead of the ninth leg of the popular event, which will be held at Al Shaqab this Friday and Saturday. Nasser al-Ghazali is the second place, followed by Rashed Tuwaim al-Marri in third.

In the junior's, Saeed al-Qadhi occupies the first place. Mohamed Sultan al-Suwaidi and Mohamed Saeed Haydan are in second and third place respectively. Hathab, meaning 'Canter' in Arabic, is an initiative launched by Qatar Olympic Committee President HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani.

The series, which carries a total prize money of QR1 million, is open for Qatari nationals and also to residents of Qatar. The 12-leg event is being conducted jointly by Qatar Eques-

trian Federation (QEF) and Al Shaqab and will run until April 2018.

Organisers aim to improve the standard of horse riding among Qatari youths through Hathab, while also encouraging the involvement of private stables and individual horse owners to increase awareness of horsemanship as part of Qatar's history and tradition. Results of the competition will be used in the selection process of riders to represent Qatar in future international competitions. Each leg will carry points, with only top seven results to be counted, and an overall winner to be declared at the end of series.

QATAR TO PARTICIPATE IN POLAND INTERNATIONAL BOXING TOURNAMENT

The Qatari boxing team is taking part in the Polish Feliks Stamm tournament, which is held till March 17. Five Qatari boxers will be in action as they prepare for the upcoming major competi-

Italy mull bid for 2026 Winter Olympics

Milan: Italy are considering a push to host the 2026 Winter Olympics, two years after Rome's mayor scuppered the city's bid for the 2024 Summer Games. In 2016, major Virginia Raggi's anti-establishment Five Star Movement killed off the Italian capital's bid to host a first Summer Olympics since 1960.

But M5S party founder Beppe Grillo, a former stand-up comedian, has since done a U-turn and believes "the Olympic Games are a great occasion for Turin and for the Movement".

"We will prove we can have zero debts and (host) in a sustainable way," said Grillo. Turin's M5S mayor Chiara Appendino wants the northern Italian city to issue a "manifestation of interest" to the International Olympic Committee.

Meanwhile, the president of the Veneto Region, Luca Zaia, of the right-wing Lega Nord party, has put forward the hypothesis of a candidacy of the Dolomites. Milan is also being considered.

Italian Olympic Committee (CONI) president Giovanni Malago said that any decision would depend on the future government.

Italy was plunged into uncertainty after the March 4 elections resulted in a hung parliament with no group in a position to govern alone. The M5S became Italy's leading single party with 32.7% of the vote.

Italy has twice hosted the Winter Olympics – Cortina d'Ampezzo in the Dolomites in 1956 and Turin in 2006. Sion in Switzerland has already announced it intends to bid, with Turkey also considering throwing its hat in the ring, along with Innsbruck in Austria, Calgary in Canada, Stockholm and the Japanese city of Sapporo.

Almaty in Kazakhstan is another possible candidate. Beijing will host the 2022 Winter Games, after hosting the Summer Games in 2008. Paris won the right to host the 2024 Summer Olympics.

FOCUS

QIA football tournament from next week

The 6th edition of the QIA football tournament for the Indian expatriate community will be held in the third week of March. The final is scheduled for 2nd week of May, with matches being held on

Thursdays and Fridays at Doha Stadium. The Qatar Indian Association for Sports and Games (QIA) is conducting the event with the support from Qatar Football association.

QIA is one of the most promi-

nent Indian expatriate associations, working towards the empowerment of Indian community in State of Qatar by creating recreational platform for of Indian expatriates. QIA football tournament is the only national level

football tournament for Indian expatriates, which is recognized by Ministry of Culture & Sports, Qatar Football Association and Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy. Around 12 teams will battle it out for the trophy.



TENNIS

Venus knocks out Serena, Wozniacki marches on

'It wasn't very easy, obviously. It was good to play and try to get in the rhythm'

AFF
Indian Wells, United States

Serena Williams' return to the WTA Tour came to an abrupt end Monday as she crashed out of Indian Wells with a 6-3, 6-4 loss to her sister Venus.

Venus closed out the 29th career meeting between the two on her second match point as Serena sailed a forehand long to end the third-round showdown.

It was the first meeting between the sisters since they clashed in the final of the 2017 Australian Open, which Serena won before taking a 15-month hiatus due to her pregnancy.

Serena said she is still easing her way back into match fitness. "It wasn't very easy, obviously," she said. "It was good to play and try to get in the rhythm and get into the swing again."

"I can't really replicate the situation no matter how much I do in practice. I make those shots 10 times out of 10 in practice."

"It's just the nerves, the anticipation you feel naturally. It's a little bit of everything that comes in a match that just doesn't normally happen."

The 10th seeded Venus moves on to the round of 16 where she will face Anastasiya Sevastova, who defeated 12th seeded Julia Georges 6-3, 6-3.

It is rare for the Williams sisters to play this early in a tournament and the earliest they have faced each other since their first encounter at the Australian Open in 1998.

They arrived outside the stadium together on a golf cart then walked through the tunnel with Serena entering the court first, as many in the crowd stood and cheered.

Venus blasted six aces but had eight double faults in the one hour 26 minute main stadium match in front of a crowd of about 13,000.

Serena is still shaking off the rust after the long layoff as she hit four aces but had her serve broken four times.

"I just have a long way to go,"



Venus Williams and Serena Williams hug after their third round match in the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden. Venus won the match. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

Serena said. Despite the loss Serena still leads their career series 17-12.

This was their first encounter with Venus as an aunt and Serena as a new mother after giving birth to her baby daughter, Alexis Olympia, on September 1.

Venus's victory also comes 17 years after an ugly booring incident led to a 14-year boycott of the tournament by the sisters.

It brought closure to the once testy relationship between Indian Wells and the sisters who hail from the Los Angeles suburb of Compton.

Serena returned to the tournament in 2015 and Venus a year later.

Asked about the incident finally being put to rest, Venus said, "It never crossed my mind."

Serena said she is trying not to look too far into the season. "I have a lot to improve on," she said.

Elsewhere, Australian Open champ Caroline Wozniacki benefited from a challenge call in the final game en route to defeating Aliaksandra Sasnovich 6-4, 2-6, 6-3.

First major
Wozniacki silenced the critics earlier this year when she claimed her first Grand Slam

title at the Australian Open, becoming the first Danish woman to win a major.

The 27-year-old world No. 2 Wozniacki moves on to the fourth round where she will face 20th seeded Russian Daria Kasatkina, who surprised reigning US Open champion Sloane Stephens 6-4, 6-3.

"I managed to get my feet going more steady, and to start playing more steady, and that paid off today," said Wozniacki.

Wozniacki challenged a call in the final game when the line judge ruled that Sasnovich's shot caught the line.

Wozniacki asked for a second look and the review showed that

the line judge mistakenly called the ball in.

Wozniacki said the court conditions were difficult but she managed to make adjustments.

"These courts are really difficult to play on. That's also why you see a lot of upsets," she said. "The ball bounces really high and it goes extremely slow."

In other women's third round matches on Monday, French seventh seed Caroline Garcia defeated Australia's Daria Gavrilova 7-5, 6-4.

Danielle Collins also won her third round match, defeating Sofya Zhuk of Russia 6-4, 6-4.

GOLF

Garcia ponders Masters return as fatherhood looms

AFF
Washington

Sergio Garcia began handling Masters champion duties in astonishing fashion yesterday, speaking on a conference call from a hospital where his wife was about to give birth to their first child.

The 38-year-old Spaniard, who captured his first major title last April at Augusta National, and wife Angela, whom he married last July, were at a Texas hospital awaiting a baby girl who was not expected to arrive until Sunday.

"It looks like she's coming a little early," Garcia told reporters. "It has been an eventful morning. About an hour and a half ago Angela's water broke. We're at the hospital. Exciting. Nervous. It's very exciting and nerve-wracking at the same time."

The situation left Garcia pondering one dream come true, matching Spanish idols Seve Ballesteros and Jose Maria Olazabal as a Masters champion last year, while another dream, becoming a dad, was happening around him.

"It's kind of surreal," Garcia said. "It has been unbelievable, everything that has been going on. It has been great, every moment of it. I've been fortunate to have an amazing career, an amazing life and now it's getting even better."

Garcia couldn't compare the pressure of competing for a major title with that of expecting to become a first-time father.

"It's a different feeling. I'm not the one having it. I'm on the outside looking in. I'm a little nervous," Garcia said.

"I look forward to everything, to raise a little girl, make all the decisions as best as we can. Hopefully we have a healthy baby girl that grows up to be an amazing woman."

No golfer has won the Masters twice in a row since Tiger Woods in 2001 and 2002, and Woods, 42, had his best PGA finish in nearly five years last week, sharing second at the Valspar Championship where Garcia was fourth.

Garcia ponders one dream come true, matching Spanish idols Seve Ballesteros and Jose Maria Olazabal as a Masters champion last year, while another dream, becoming a dad, was happening around him.

"I don't know if I should be," Garcia said. "It doesn't really matter to me. I like my game. I'm happy with my new equipment. I'm as excited as I can be to come back there and defend my title."

Garcia has asked Olazabal about time management as a Masters champion but not inquired to rival dads about how fatherhood could impact his game.

"It can't be that different from what we deal with week in and week out. We can manage it," Garcia said of time constraints.

"Every child is different and every family is a different one. You've got to figure out what works for you. It's brand new for both of us. We're not sure what to expect. We'll get the experience of being together with the baby in the best way for all of us."

The baby has nursery walls of light gray and pink plus some "cute little dresses" for the Masters, where Garcia needs a new rental house. "We need a bigger place with the baby coming," Garcia said. "I'm not that superstitious to try and do everything the same. I don't think it depends on that. It's just a matter of going back there and concentrating on what I'm doing and do it the best I can so I can defend my title."

Tiger 'will do well'
Woods, a 14-time major champion and four-time Masters winner, appears to be peaking in his surgery comeback with the Masters looming on April 5-8.

"It has obviously been a big impact," Garcia said of Woods' return to form.

"We all know what kind of player he is and player he can be when he's healthy. The way he has been able to swing doesn't look like he's in any pain - that's the most important thing."

"I'm sure he's excited to come back to Augusta. It's a place where he has done well. I expect he will do well. I don't know how well. I expect he will be a little nervous. He will have to deal with all those feelings again."

Garcia, who has won at Valderrama and Singapore and switched equipment from TaylorMade to Callaway since capturing the Masters green jacket, isn't concerned about being considered a 2018 Augusta favourite.

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FOCUS

Players champ Kim eager to defend title

Reuters
Seoul

After becoming the youngest golfer to win The Players Championship in 2017, South Korea's Kim Si-woo has now set his sights on being the first to successfully defend the title when he returns to TPC Sawgrass in May.

The Seoul native stunned a strong field last year to win the PGA Tour's flagship event when he was 21-years-old, his victory coming six years after compatriot K.J. Choi also took the title.

If Kim defends his title at the \$10.5 million tournament from May 10-13 this year, he would be the first to do so since it was established in 1974.

"Someone told me there hasn't been any back-to-back champion, and I've noticed a lot of champions who come back don't play well," the 22-year-old said at a media event at TPC Sawgrass in Florida on Monday.

"I would like to change that, and I'm already preparing to come back and defend my title this year."

Kim said returning to the scene of his biggest victory counted up many happy memories.

"To see my pictures up on the wall and to drive up to this course, it brings back a lot of memories, and even though all tournaments are great, I would

like to come back and win this one and defend my title," he added. Kim, ranked 53rd in the world, said that while it was an honour to have won the same title as Choi, he had a long way to go to matching the feats of the South Korean trailblazer, who has won eight times on the elite US tour.

"I don't think I'm quite there yet. Obviously K.J. has a lot more wins and a lot of experience. I currently only have two wins. But I definitely hope to be as great by having more wins and playing on the tour."

Kim also said he was glad to be returning to full fitness after his form was hampered by a back problem. "I went back to Korea last winter, and I think just having the cold weather there didn't help, and I didn't really exercise or stretch as much as I should have, so looking back, I think that's what caused a lot of the injury," he said. "Now it feels great. I'm able to swing without any pain."

He added that it was great to see Tiger Woods, who won the Players in 2001 and 2013, returning to the tour after recovering from back surgeries.

"To know that we're both The Players and to know that we both won on this course, it's pretty amazing, and to just see him out there practising is just unreal because he's such a legendary player and I watched him growing up and watched him just dominate the sport," said Kim.

SPOTLIGHT

Federer rolls into fourth round

AFF
Indian Wells, United States

World number one Roger Federer stepped up his bid for a sixth Indian Wells Masters title with a 6-2, 6-1 demolition of Filip Krajinovic on Monday.

The 36-year-old marvel continues to defy the ageing process as he needed just 58 minutes to overpower the Serb with a brilliant display of Swiss timing.

"I was feeling like he was not loving my slice and I was also mixing in dropshots," said Federer who extended his perfect record this season to 14-0.

"I really I was able to mix up my game nicely, make it difficult for him. At the same time, have fun with my game, play a variation, but for the most part try to stay on the offensive."

Federer blasted six aces, had one double fault and won 89 percent of his first serve points, losing just three points on his serve the entire match.

"I actually was explosive out there today and I felt good," he said. "So I'm very happy how things are turning out to be."

After handing back an early break to allow Krajinovic to draw level at two-all, Federer moved into cruise control.

At one point he won 17 straight points en route to taking a 6-2, 3-0 lead, winning 10 of the final 11 games in the match.



Roger Federer of Switzerland attempts a running forehand in his match against Filip Krajinovic of Serbia during the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden in Indian Wells, California. (Getty Images/AFP)

a row doesn't faze him. "You've got to be ready for it. It's what tennis players do. We wait, we play, we wait again, we play again."

"In Rotterdam I played five matches in a row," he said. "Back in the day, I used to play six matches in a row."

"At the Masters 1000s, when the format was different, it was the best-of-five-set finals in the finals. Playing three matches in

a row. I think I'm okay." Federer has already won two titles in 2018, claiming his 20th Grand Slam crown by winning the Australian Open in January. The other victory came in Rotterdam. In the next round he faces Jeremy Chardy, who beat fellow Frenchman Adrian Mannarino 7-5, 4-6, 6-1.

In other men's matches, fifth seeded Dominic Thiem became the latest top seed to fall as he was forced to retire from

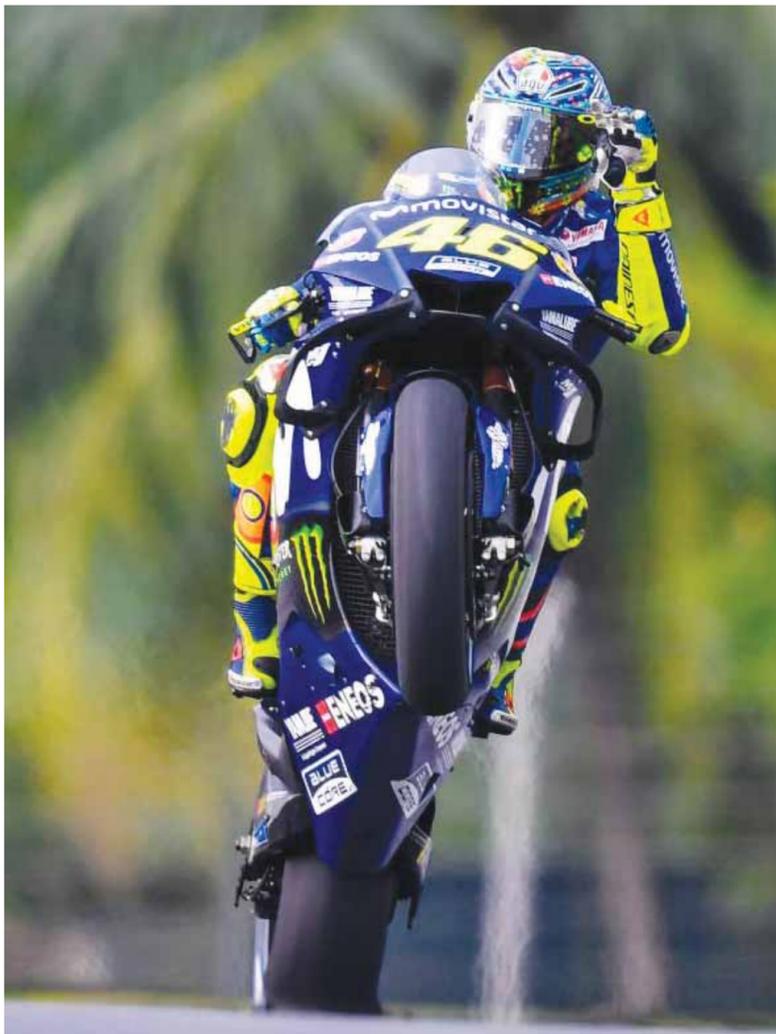
his match with Pablo Cuevas of Uruguay in the third set with a right ankle sprain. Cuevas was leading 3-, 6-4, 4-2 when Thiem packed it in.

Also, American Taylor Fritz defeated Fernando Verdasco of Spain, 4-6, 6-2, 7-6 (7/1), Croatia's Borna Coric breezed past Roberto Bautista 6-1, 6-3 and Pablo Carreno-Busta of Spain, stopped Russian Daniil Medvedev 6-1, 7-5.

MOTOGP

Rossi's quest for tenth crown begins this weekend in Losail

At a stage in life when most riders have hung up their leathers, the 39-year old Italian continues to defy age and logic



Valentino Rossi won last of his nine MotoGP World Championship title back in 2009.

Ask even the most fervent MotoGP fan what happened on October 25, 2009 and the response maybe nothing more than a wild guess or shrug of the shoulders. It was the day in Malaysia when Valentino Rossi last won a MotoGP World Championship.

Ever since, the question of whether Rossi can win an elusive 10th title has been asked a gazillion times and then some. As the wild celebrations subsided in the early hours of October 26, 2009, nobody thought for a nanosecond that nearly a decade later, Rossi wouldn't have managed to take his title tally into double figures. Likewise, very few waking up with tired eyes and sore heads in Kuala Lumpur could have envisaged Rossi maintaining the desire and motivation to be attempting to capture wins and titles less than a year from his 40th birthday.

But here we are counting down the hours to Grand Prix of Qatar, with Rossi poised to start his 23rd season in the World Championship, and the end of his illustrious career nowhere in sight.

The 15th edition of the Grand Prix of Qatar will be held at Losail International Circuit this weekend. And Rossi, the old warhorse is still clinging onto a dream that he can gallop to one last title success before new pastures beckon.

So, will that dream have a fairytale ending, or was the final chapter of Rossi's MotoGP title success written nine years ago in Sepang? As American author Mark Twain once famously said: "Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter." Age has not dulled Rossi's competitive edge. At a stage in life when most riders have hung up their leathers, Rossi continues to defy age and logic. His voracious appetite for speed and competition means he is widely tipped to sign a new



Valentino Rossi is tipped to sign a new two-year deal with Yamaha to race until 2020, by then he'll be 41.

two-year deal with Yamaha to race until the end of 2020. By then he'll be 41!

The broken bones of 2010 and 2017 and the shattered dreams of 2015 haven't diminished his love for racing. Anyone doubting how far his passion for MotoGP extends need look no further than last September's MotorLand Aragon round when he heroically raced to a top-five finish just 24 days after smashing his right leg in an enduro accident.

It might be that Rossi's age and speed aren't weak links in his title challenge in 2018, but it's clear that mentally and physically Rossi is still on his A-game. And he undoubtedly still has the speed after concluding the last pre-season test at Losail International Circuit in Qatar with the second fastest time.

But is Yamaha ready? The last time a YZR-M1 won was Rossi's

success in Assen last June. The M1 still stresses the rear tyre too much, which means Rossi runs out of grip in the crucial latter stages of races. Stressing the rear tyre compromises durability and generates wheelspin. That means more traction control cuts, which kills Rossi's acceleration. Worryingly for Rossi, there has been no progress made by Yamaha during the off-season to improve tyre life and acceleration with the controlled Magneti Marelli electronics. Not negligible progress, but zero progress.

Yamaha's woes may have dampened his optimism about the start of 2018, but nothing can suppress his insatiable enthusiasm. And only a fool will dismiss Rossi as a genuine title threat.

Rossi is no fool himself though and he's not oblivious to the monumental task he faces to win that 10th title. Of his astonishing

89 premier class wins, only 12 have come in the 139 races since he was crowned World Champion in 2009.

That's a winning average below 10% and only one win more than the 11 achieved by Marc Marquez on his way to title success in 2016 and 2017. Since Marquez began blazing his way through the MotoGP record books in 2013, Rossi has won 10 races compared to the Spaniard's 35. And Andrea Dovizioso won the same number of races (6) in the last 13 of his breakthrough 2017 than Rossi did in the previous 51.

If Rossi is to win that elusive 10th title in 2018, then those stats alone prove it will be his greatest accomplishment. But if 2018 is not the year, then Rossi, known popularly as 'The Doctor', has an appointment with a 10th title, well there's always next year. And the next. (Motogp.com)

ROUND-UP

Qatar Junior tennis team returns to warm welcome

The delegation of Qatar junior tennis team, which qualified for the 2018 Asia Oceania Qualifying event of Junior Davis Cup, returned home to a warm welcome.

The Qatari delegation was received by Ibrahim al-Khelaifi, Deputy Chairman of National Teams Committee of the Qatar Tennis, Squash and Badminton Federation and Ahmad Batti, Chairman of Public Relations Committee in addition to a large number of administrators and coaches.

The Qatari team secured their place in qualifying event after finishing second in the 2018 Asia Oceania Pre-Qualifying in Colombo, Sri Lanka last Saturday. In the final, Qatar suffered a 1-2 defeat against hosts Sri Lanka.

The Qatari team began their campaign in the event with a 2-1 victory over Pakistan then

defeated Philippines 2-1 in the quarter-finals before edging past Malaysia in the semi-finals. Ibrahim al-Sulaiti, Rashed Nawaf and Nasser al-Yafei represented Qatar in the event.

QATAR TO PARTICIPATE IN SPECIAL OLYMPICS MENA GAMES IN ABU DHABI

Qatar's special Olympics team will leave Doha today to Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates to participate in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) Special Olympics Regional Games 2018.

The MENA Special Olympics Regional Games will take place from this Thursday till March 23rd in Abu Dhabi, with events being held at the same venues and facilities that will be used during the 2019 World Games.

With more than 1,200 athletes from 27 countries competing in 16 different sports, the regional Games will provide more excite-

ment, spectacle and inspiration than most sporting events.

CANADIAN TEAM ARRIVES TO TAKE PART IN MARATHON SWIM WORLD SERIES

The Canadian swimming team arrived in Doha on Monday to participate in the opening round of the 2018 FINA Marathon Swim World Series to be staged at the Doha Corniche this Friday and Saturday.

Doha will open the FINA Marathon Swim World Series 2018, which features nine meetings taking place in some of the world's most scenic waterways, including the Seychelles, Portugal, Canada and China.

Over 350 athletes from over 50 national federations all over the world will compete in the one-day competition programme from March until November, with a total of \$30,000 prize money available per event.

SPOTLIGHT

Artistic Gymnastics World Cup to be held in Doha from March 21

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The 2018 Artistic Gymnastics World Cup will be held from March 21 to 24 in Doha, with 40 countries participating in the annual championship, the organisers said yesterday.

Qatar Gymnastics Federation (QGF) President and chairman of the organising committee Ali al-Hitmi said that the preparations are underway and all working committees are currently finalising the details to stage the championship at the Aspire Dome.

The four-day event will feature some of world's top names, including reigning all-around Olympic champion Kohei Uchimura of Japan. Uchimura has won six world all-around titles and the last two Olympic all-around titles, the longest streak of dominance in gymnastics history.

The Doha leg of FIG Individual Apparatus World Cup for men and women is celebrating its 11th edition this year. With unstinted support from the Qatar Olympic Committee, the QGF is leaving no stone unturned in making the event a truly world class one.

The al-Hitmi thanked the FIG for reposing its faith in Doha and lauded the great support provided by HE Sheikh Joam bin Hamad al-Thani, the president of the Qatar Olympic Committee. "It's a great moment to organise the 11th edition of the Gymnastics World Cup in Qatar. This one particular event had helped us win the bid for this year's FIG World Championships. I like to thank the Emir His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and QOC President HE Sheikh Joam bin Hamad al-Thani for their support to host the competitions," said al-Hitmi.

The QGF President said that this year's edition of the World Cup will be a dress rehearsal from the organisational point of view for the 2018 FIG Artistic Gymnastics World Championships scheduled for to be held this October in Doha. The QGF's decade-long experience and excellent infrastructure at the Aspire Dome were important factors that earned them the right in 2013 to host the FIG Artistic World Championships. "This year's competition will be a test event for the Worlds in October and we plan to have a gala competition," added al-Hitmi.



Jana Kiki and Ahmed Nabil will represent Qatar in the 2018 Artistic Gymnastics World Cup from March 21 to 24 at Aspire Dome in Doha.



Qatar Gymnastics Federation President Ali al-Hitmi.

While gymnastics continue to be a low-profile sport, the competition has earned the reputation as one of the best in the world, he said. He pointed out that two players of the Qatari national team - Jana Kiki and Ahmed Nabil - will participate in the event, expressing hope that they will

achieve good results to reflect the extent of the development of gymnastics in Qatar.

The qualifications will be held on first two days of the championship, with eight best gymnasts making it to the finals and will strive for medals on the last two days of the competition.



Qatar junior tennis players Ibrahim al-Sulaiti, Rashed Nawaf and Nasser al-Yafei.