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Arthur set to rejoin as head coach of Pakistan



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Dominant Djokovic reaches AO quarter-finals



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Arsenal silence doubters with statement win over Man United

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QNB STARS LEAGUE

Sadd beat Arabi as Duhail go top with win over Shamal

Kenyan striker Michael Olunga scores a brace for the Red Knights while Al Markhiya hold Al Ahli in 2-2 draw

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Reigning champions Al Sadd defeated Al Arabi 2-0 in the Qatar Derby in Week 11 of the 2022-2023 season QNB Stars League at the Al Arabi Stadium yesterday.

It was a second win in a row for The Wolves, who were strengthened by the return of some of their top stars following the 25th Gulf Cup.

In the day's other two matches, Al Duhail beat Al Shamal 2-0 while Al Ahli were held by Al Markhiya in a 2-2 draw.

Al Sadd yesterday rode on goals from Santi Cazorla (66, penalty and captain Hassan al-Haydos (72).

The result took Al Sadd into fifth place in the standings with 13 points from nine matches, while Al Arabi (22 points) lost their leadership position to Al Duhail (23 points).

The Qatar Derby clash was a tough battle between Al Arabi and Al Sadd, but the latter showed a solid defence, making things difficult for The Dream Team.

Al Arabi did make a raid as early as the fifth minute, but an alert Jung Woo-Young staved off the threat.

It did not take Al Sadd to make the charge and a big chance came their way in the 15th minute when Akram Afif put Baghdad Bounedjah through with a superb cross but the Algerian star deflected it just wide of the goal.

The battle continued and in the 40th minute Al Arabi's Yousef Msakni looked menacing, but an alert Al Sadd goalkeeper Yousef Abdullah stood ground.

Al Sadd emerged stronger in



Action from Al Sadd's QNB Stars League match against Al Arabi at Al Arabi Stadium in Doha yesterday. Al Sadd won 2-0. **Right:** Bassam al-Rawi of Al Duhail celebrates a goal with Kenyan striker Michael Olunga during their 2-0 win over Al Shamal in Doha yesterday.

the second half, making forays and using the open spaces, yet they lacked at the finish.

The big moment came when a Bounedjah kick hit the hand of Aron Gunnarsson just on the left-side edge of the danger area. A VAR check by the referee ruled a penalty and Cazorla made no mistake with the kick.

Al Sadd doubled their lead soon and with a spectacular goal. It resulted off a free-kick that was headed off by an Al Arabi defender, but the ball went straight to al-Haydos who was waiting

outside the box.

He seized the opportunity es-saying a superb volley which went through the legs of two defenders and deflected off a third and beat a diving goalkeeper to his left.

Hosts Al Duhail beat Al Shamal 2-0 to bag full points

Al Duhail yesterday beat Al Shamal 2-0 at Al Duhail Stadium.

The Red Knights' win was realised through a brace from their Kenyan striker Michael Olunga, who scored in the 61st and 68th

minutes. The victory took Al Duhail's points tally to 23 points in 10 matches – coming from seven victories, two draws and one loss in the league so far.

Al Shamal remained on 10 points. They have won three matches, drawn one game, but have suffered four losses thus far.

Against The Red Knights, Al Shamal put up their good defence in the opening half, foiling several of their attempts on goal.

Al Shamal goalkeeper Babacar Seck stood out with his saves and alert anticipation which left Al

Duhail frustrated at times.

In the 40th minute, Al Duhail midfielder Lotfi Madjer managed to score but Olunga was ruled offside, and clearly so.

Al Duhail, however, did not have to wait much longer in the second half as their captain Al-moez Ali and Olunga made for a fine combination to fetch the first goal.

After a rasping drive from Al-moez ricocheted off goalkeeper Seck, Olunga moved in to latch on to the chance and score.

Olunga produced his and his

team's second goal minutes soon, positioning himself perfectly to reach for Ferjani Sassi's flag-kick and place it in the left corner of the net.

The goal also saw Olunga become the league's top-scorer. He now has a tally of nine goals, one ahead of Jacinto Dala of Al Wakrah, who has scored 8 goals.

Al Wakrah to take on Al Saliya today

Al Wakrah coach Marquez Lopez spoke to the media ahead of their 2022-2023 season QNB Stars

League Week 11 match against Al Saliya. "After the announcement came that Week 10 matches were postponed, we started preparing for the Al Saliya match. I think it is good for us to regain the services of three players after their national team duty and another injured player, and it is also good that we had time throughout the week to prepare for the match," Lopez said.

"Al Saliya could have scored more points from their first seven matches, but they could score only four points. In general, all matches are difficult. I know that they are at the bottom of standings, but they have good players in all departments, therefore it will be a difficult match like all matches in the First Division," he added.

Al Saliya coach Sami Trabelsi said at a press conference yesterday: "We are in a situation where we need every point and we are well aware that the next match is of utmost importance because the opponents are a good, organised and tactically strong team. They had made an excellent start at the beginning of the league that gave them have the mentality of victories and became more harmonious and performed well since last season. And they are continuing the outstanding performance this season.

"We, at Al Saliya, need to improve at the psychological level and start reaping positive results, so we can be psychologically free. We are working to improve overall and we will do our best to appear in a distinctive way in this match," Trabelsi added.

In the day's other two matches today, Qatar SC face Umm Salal at Thani Bin Jassim Stadium while at the same venue Al Gharafa play against Al Rayyan.

BOTTOMLINE

Lampard sacked as Everton boss: Reports

AFP
London

Relegation-threatened Everton have sacked manager Frank Lampard after less than a year in charge at the Goodison Park club, British media reported yesterday.

The former Chelsea boss was appointed to replace Rafael Benitez in January 2022 but leaves with the side languishing 19th in the table, level on points with bottom club Southampton.

In a sign of the turmoil enveloping Everton, club directors were earlier this month ordered to stay away from Goodison Park due to perceived security risks.

Everton fell to a damaging 2-0 defeat at fellow strugglers West Ham on Saturday – a ninth loss in their past 12 Premier League matches.

Everton owner Farhad Moshiri had previously offered public backing for Lampard, 44.

But Moshiri, watching Everton

for the first time in more than a year at the West Ham game, was far less supportive when asked after the match whether it was time for Lampard to be sacked.

"I can't comment. It's not my decision," he told *Sky Sports*.

Speaking about his own future, Lampard said: "Those things are not my choice. It is my job to work, focus and keep my head down.

"I know there's things going on at the club but it's never been a consequence for me whether a chairman or board member is at the game."

Everton felt compelled to act over Lampard's future as they fight to avoid playing outside the top flight for the first time since 1954.

Lampard arrived at Everton 12 months ago with the team languishing in 16th place and the former Chelsea and England midfielder initially looked a shrewd appointment, helping the Merseyside club avoid relegation. Fuelled by fervent backing

from their fans at Goodison Park, the Toffees beat the drop by winning three of their last six league matches, including a dramatic 3-2 success against Crystal Palace that preserved their top-tier status. But Everton are now looking for their eighth permanent manager in less than seven years after Lampard failed to build on the momentum from that successful end to last term.

Lampard won only 12 of his 44 matches in charge of Everton in all competitions.

Former Burnley boss Sean Dyche, ex-Leeds coach Marcelo Bielsa and West Ham's former Everton manager David Moyes are among the potential candidates to replace Lampard, according to bookmakers.

Al Ittihad boss Nuno Espirito Santo, formerly of Wolves, and ex-Everton striker Wayne Rooney, now in charge of MLS side DC United, have also been mooted as possible contenders.

Hampered by the sale of Brazil forward Richarlison to Totten-

ham in the close season, Everton managed only three wins in 20 league games this term against a backdrop of mounting fan fury.

There have been widespread protests against the board and Lampard at recent games.

Supporters staged a sit-in demonstration after the recent loss to Southampton, with Everton defender Yerry Mina and teammate Anthony Gordon confronted by fans when they left Goodison Park in their cars.

Lampard, Chelsea's all-time leading goalscorer as a player, started his managerial career at Derby.

He led Derby to the Championship play-off final in his only season in charge at Pride Park, which ended in defeat by Aston Villa at Wembley.

Lampard took Chelsea into the Champions League during his one full season as manager at Stamford Bridge, but was dismissed in January 2021 with the Blues in ninth place in the Premier League.



In this file photo taken on December 31, 2022 Everton's English manager Frank Lampard watches his players warm up ahead of the English Premier League match against Manchester City at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England. Relegation-threatened Everton have sacked Lampard after less than a year in charge at the Goodison Park club, British media reported yesterday. (AFP)

CRICKET

Arthur to rejoin as Pakistan head coach: PCB

AFP
Karachi

Pakistan are set to appoint experienced South African **Mickey Arthur** for a second stint as head coach, a top cricket board official said yesterday.

The 54-year-old will replace Saqlain Mushtaq, whose contract expires next month.

"I am in negotiations with Mickey personally and we have covered 90 percent of the issues," Najam Sethi, chairman of the Pakistan Cricket Board's management committee, said.

"Hopefully, very soon we may give you the news that Mickey will be joining us," he told a press conference in Lahore.

Sethi said Arthur will have his own team of support staff. "I think the issues will be solved in the next two to three days and Mickey will come with support staff," added Sethi.

Under Arthur's tenure as head coach between 2016 and 2019, Pakistan won the Champions Trophy and became number one in the Twenty20 interna-

tional rankings. But his contract was not renewed after Pakistan failed to reach the semi-finals of the 2019 World Cup.

Arthur is currently serving as head coach of Derbyshire in England on a three-year contract.

He has vast experience, having also coached his native South Africa, Australia and Sri Lanka.

Pakistan cricket is going through a number of changes after PCB chairman Ramiz Raja was removed last month. Raja was replaced by a 14-member committee led by Sethi who has the backing of PM Shehbaz Sharif.

In Pakistan, the PCB's Patron-In-Chief is the PM of the country making the appointment of the PCB chief a political one.

Former batsman Haroon Rasheed was also appointed as chief selector, replacing Shahid Afridi, who served on an interim basis for one month. Rasheed played 23 Tests and 12 ODIs for Pakistan between 1977 and 1983.

Apart from his previous role as a selector, has also served as PCB's director of cricket operations and the Pakistan team manager.



ICC overturns Rawalpindi pitch demerit point on appeal

A demerit point handed to Pakistan's Rawalpindi pitch was yesterday rescinded following an appeal, a month after it was deemed "below average" during a Test against England. The International Cricket Council said a panel reviewed footage of the match following a challenge by the Pakistan Cricket Board and was unanimous in its decision. "There were several redeeming features - including the fact that a result was achieved following a compelling game, with 37 out of a possible 39 wickets being taken," the ICC said. "As such, the appeal panel concluded that the wicket did not warrant the 'below average' rating." The lifeless pitch yielded 1,786 runs in the December Test, prompting match referee Andy Pycroft to hand out the penalty. England piled up 657 runs in their first innings, including a world-record opening-day score of 506-4. The tourists won the Test by 74 runs after setting Pakistan a 343-run target. At the time, Pycroft was quoted in an ICC statement saying "it was a very flat pitch which gave almost no assistance to any type of bowler". It was the second time the pitch received such a verdict, after 1,187 runs were scored for the loss of just 14 wickets in a tame draw between Pakistan and Australia nine months earlier. ICC rules say that if a venue accumulates five demerits in five years it is suspended from hosting international cricket for 12 months.

GOLF

Rahm holds off Thompson to win US PGA trophy

'BALL-STRIKING WAS GREAT, I HIT A LOT OF GREAT PUTTS - IT'S JUST GOLF'

AFP
Los Angeles

Fourth-ranked Jon Rahm endured a frustrating day on the greens, but his four-under-par 68 was enough to hold off rookie Davis Thompson and claim a second US PGA Tour title in as many weeks at the American Express tournament.

Spain's Rahm, who opened the year with a victory in the Tournament of Champions in Hawaii, had five birdies on the Stadium Course in La Quinta, California, finishing with a 27-under-par total of 261. Thompson, who started the day tied with Rahm for the lead, carded a three-under 69 for 262.

"Ball-striking was great, I hit a lot of great putts - it's just golf," Rahm said of a multitude of putts that didn't drop. "I was burning edges all day."

Rahm led much of the day after back-to-back birdies at the first and second - both from about two feet. He rolled in a seven-foot birdie at the ninth and picked up another stroke at 11 - but it was far from smooth sailing from there.

A bogey at 13, where he missed the green and his five-foot putt to save par lipped out, Rahm was tied with Thompson for the lead.

He got his nose in front again with a birdie at the par-five 16th, where his second shot from the fairway avoided a steep drop off to a greenside bunker and his eight-foot birdie putt agonisingly circled the cup before falling in.

Thompson, meanwhile, was in a tough lie in a fairway bunker on the way to a par at 16.

"The turning point was 16," Rahm said. "He missed that tee shot and I put it in the fairway. That's pretty much a half-stroke penalty right there."

"I knew if I did what I could do I was mostly likely going to have a one-shot lead going to the last two holes."

Thompson, a former amateur standout at the University of Georgia and a winner on the Korn Ferry developmental tour, had followed his first birdie of the day at



Jon Rahm (left) of Spain celebrates with the winner's trophy alongside amateur Frank Marzano with his low amateur trophy after the final round of The American Express at PGA West Pete Dye Stadium Course in La Quinta, California. (AFP)

the fourth with a bogey at the fifth, where he was in the water.

He closed the gap to one stroke with birdies at the sixth, ninth and 11th. He came agonisingly close to pulling level again at the 17th, where his 48-foot bird-

ie putt brushed the pin and didn't drop. "I usually always leave the stick in from a long distance," Thompson said.

"I feel like it helps me with my speed. I'll probably play the 'what if' game in my head for a long time, unfortunately."

Rahm then saw his 20-foot birdie attempt at 17 settle on the edge and he was in a fairway bunker off the tee at 18 while Thompson found the fairway.

But Thompson's second shot went through the green, leaving him a tough chip from a swale below the putting surface while Rahm found the green for a routine par to win.

"Luckily, it was enough," Rahm said. Despite the disappointment, Thompson called it a "great week" in the California desert, where his five eagles in the first two rounds matched the PGA Tour record for a 72-hole tournament.

"A lot of nerves and I hit a lot of quality golf shots under pressure, which was really cool," he said.

Xander Schauffele and Chris Kirk shared third on 263. Schauffele's 62 included an albatross at the par-five fifth - where he holed his second shot from 225 yards out in the fairway.

Kirk closed with a 64.

Second-ranked Masters champion Scottie Scheffler, who needed a solo ninth-placed finish or better to supplant Rory McIlroy atop the rankings, carded a 65 for a 22-under total of 266 that left him tied for 11th.

- LEADING FINAL-ROUND SCORES**
(USA unless noted, par-72)
- 261**-on Rahm (ESP) 64-64-65-68
262-Davis Thompson 62-64-67-69
263-Xander Schauffele 65-68-68-62, Chris Kirk 69-67-63-64
264-Taylor Montgomery 64-69-65-66
265-Erik van Rooyen (RSA) 65-72-66-62, Matti Schmid (GER) 64-72-65-64, R Shelton 66-68-65-66, Kim Joo-hyung (KOR) 69-62-67-67, J.T. Poston 65-66-66-68
266-Garrick Higgo (RSA) 67-68-68-63, Scottie Scheffler 68-65-66-67, Patton Kizzire 69-63-67-67, Sam Burns 64-70-64-68, Christiaan Bezuidenhout (RSA) 68-67-62-69
267-Danny Lee (NZL) 67-68-67-65, Tony Finau 69-67-65-66
268-Adam Hadwin (CAN) 68-69-64-67, Jason Day (AUS) 67-64-70-67, Im Sung-jae (KOR) 65-66-68-69, Harry Higgs 70-66-62-70.

SPOTLIGHT

Plucky Henderson goes wire-to-wire at the Tournament of Champions



Canada's Brooke Henderson and caddy Brittany Henderson celebrate winning the Hilton Grand Tournament of Champions at Lake Nona Golf & Country Club in Orlando, Florida. (AFP)

AFP
New York

With a 2-under-par 70 in the final round, Brooke Henderson completed a wire-to-wire victory at the LPGA's season-opening Tournament of Champions on Sunday in Orlando, Fla.

The 25-year-old Canadian was the solo leader after each round, owning a four-shot edge after just two rounds and cruising to the finish line at 16-under 272 at Lake Nona Golf & Country Club.

It marks her third career wire-to-wire win and her 13th LPGA title. She placed second at this event last season.

Henderson finished four strokes better than Sweden's Maja Stark and England's Charley Hull, each of whom shot a final-round 69 to tie for second at 12 under.

"I always try to win a couple times each year, so to get one right away right out of the gate takes a little bit of pressure off," Henderson said on NBC. "I just love playing out here on the LPGA Tour against the best in the world every week."

Henderson birdied the par-5 second hole by setting herself up for a short putt with a long chip across the green. Her only bogey of the day came at the par-3 sixth, but she bounced back with birdies at the par-5 ninth and

15th. Henderson struggled with back pain last season but still won two events, including the Evian Championship, the fifth and final major of the season.

She also had her wisdom teeth removed over the winter and swapped out all of her equipment.

"There definitely was a lot of patience involved, especially early on in the offseason," Henderson said. "A lot of big changes, a lot of things, but it couldn't have worked out any better."

The No. 7 player in the world rankings was not seriously threatened Sunday. Stark bogeyed three of her first seven holes before recovering with six birdies over her final 10. Hull had a double bogey and an eagle on a colourful card.

World No. 2 Nelly Korda entered the day tied for second, three shots behind Henderson, but she managed only a par 72 with three birdies and three bogeys. She placed fourth at 11 under. "I was hitting it really well with my driver. I just wasn't executing my shots well," Korda said.

Former tennis player Mardy Fish won the tournament's celebrity competition for the fourth time.

He scored a 35 Sunday in the Modified Stableford scoring system and finished with a four-day total of 152, 16 points better than former major-league pitcher Mark Mulder in second.

T20 break for Kohli and Rohit, says India coach Dravid

Indore: India's omission of star Virat Kohli and skipper Rohit Sharma from an upcoming Twenty20 series against New Zealand is only intended to give them a rest, coach Rahul Dravid said yesterday. The duo's absence from two successive series had stoked rumours that Hardik Pandya would take over as regular T20 captain. Pandya led the team to a 2-1 T20 series win over Sri Lanka earlier this month and has been named captain for the New Zealand matches, starting with Friday's opener. Speaking ahead of the final one-day international against New Zealand today, Dravid said India would prioritise the 50-over format

going into this year's Cricket World Cup. "There are certain priorities we need to give to certain white-ball tournaments," said Dravid, whose team already have an unassailable 2-0 lead in the ODI series, said. India host Australia for four Tests starting February 9, followed by three ODI matches. "So the priority after last year's T20 World Cup has been these six games and Virat has played all these six games and he will get a bit of a break along with Rohit and 1 or 2 other guys in the next week while we play some T20I cricket. And they come refreshed on the 2nd and we have a good week's camp before we play Australia. So yeah it's just priorities,"

Dravid said, referring to the ODIs against Sri Lanka and New Zealand. Dravid was pressed further on India's plans for a split captaincy in different formats. "That's a question you need to ask the selectors but as of now, I don't think so," the 50-year-old said.

India's coach Rahul Dravid (right) and captain Rohit Sharma (centre) attend a practice session at the Holkar Cricket Stadium in Indore on the eve of their third and final ODI against New Zealand. India lead the three-match series 2-0. (AFP)





SPOTLIGHT

Djokovic, Sabalenka sweep into Australian Open quarters

Djokovic demolishes De Minaur to step up his bid for a 10th Melbourne crown and record-tying 22nd major title

AFP
Melbourne

Novak Djokovic surged into the Australian Open quarter-finals in ominous fashion yesterday while Aryna Sabalenka was an equally ruthless winner. After a series of shocks at Melbourne Park, normal order was more or less restored on day eight, except for fourth seed Caroline Garcia bowing out under the weight of expectation.

Djokovic demolished Alex de Minaur for the loss of just five games to sweep into the last eight and step up his bid for a 10th Melbourne crown, and record-tying 22nd major title in all. He will meet fifth seed Andrey Rublev for a semi-final berth after the Russian top-placed Danish teenage talent Holger Rune in a thrilling five-set clash also at Rod Laver Arena.

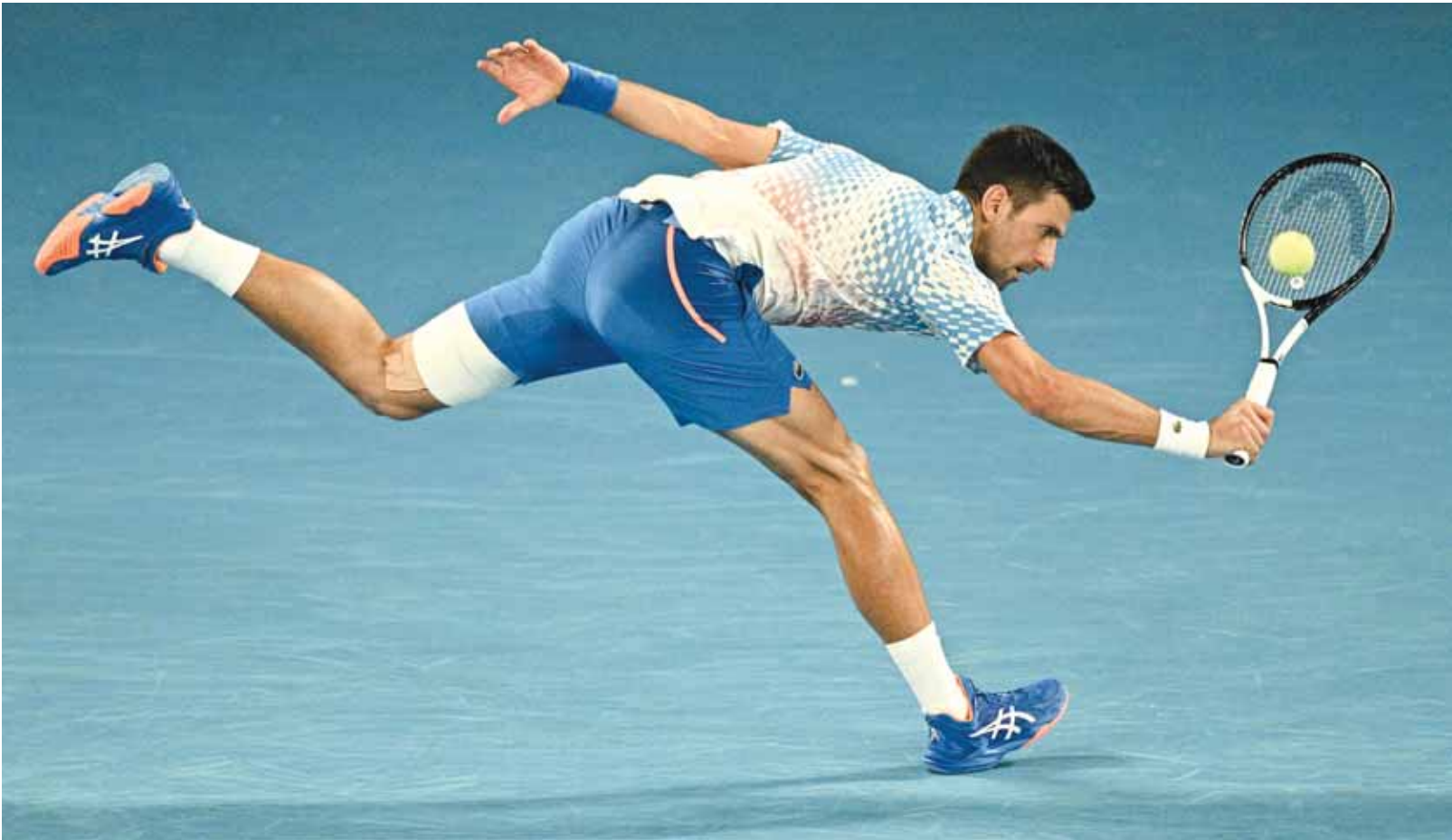
The Serb's 6-2, 6-1, 6-2 triumph over 22nd-seeded home hope De Minaur was significant also because his troublesome left hamstring was much improved. Asked afterwards how he had been so emphatic, Djokovic told the crowd: "Because I wanted to."

The 35-year-old called it his "best match of this year so far" and a "perfect match". And of his hamstring added: "Tonight I didn't feel any pain. I moved as well as I have the whole tournament. "It means we are progressing in the right direction."

His next opponent Rublev admitted he was "lucky" after saving two match points against Rune in energy-sapping heat. He described beating the 19-year-old as "not like a rollercoaster, it's like they put a gun to your head. A rollercoaster is easier".

In a men's draw decimated by shocks, including the second-round exit of reigning champion Rafael Nadal, there will be a last-eight clash between two unseeded Americans. The 20-year-old Ben Shelton, on his first trip outside the United States, emerged from another five-setter against friend and fellow American JJ Wolf.

Shelton is only the fourth man in the past 20 years to reach the Melbourne quarter-finals on debut. "Definitely a surprise," said 89th-ranked Shelton,



Serbia's Novak Djokovic stretches for a return during his Australian Open fourth round match against Australia's Alex de Minaur in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

who a year ago was at the University of Florida and ranked 569 in the world. "It being my first time, never being out of the United States, I knew it would be a struggle," he added.

"So I think it maybe has helped me a little bit kind of not having that expectation or the feeling that I have to perform, but being able to just go out there, be myself and play free." He plays Tommy Paul, who defeated 24th seed Roberto Bautista Agut of Spain.

In the women's draw, Garcia became the latest top-10 seed to fall, with a shock defeat to Magda Linette, ranked 45 in the world. This is the first Grand Slam since the Open era began in 1968 to lose the top two seeds in both

the men's and women's draws before the last eight. Unseeded Pole Linette stunned Garcia 7-6 (7/3), 6-4 and the French player admitted that expectations and nerves got the better of her. Asked if being one of the favourites for the title had been too much to handle, she replied: "Yes, I think so. It's one of the things I'm not comfortable with." Linette said she "couldn't believe it" as she reached her first Grand Slam quarter-final at the age of 30. She faces Karolina Pliskova after the former world number one romped past China's Zhang Shuai 6-0, 6-4.

Sabalenka never really looked like she would follow top seed Iga Swiatek, Garcia and the rest out of the first major

of the year. The Belarusian and third-seeded American Jessica Pegula – both chasing a maiden major crown – are now the women to beat.

Sabalenka defeated dangerous 12th seed Belinda Bencic 7-5, 6-2 to set up a last-eight clash against unseeded Donna Vekic, who beat 17-year-old Linda Fruhvirtova in three sets.

Hard-hitting Sabalenka sprinted into her first quarter-final at the Australian Open and said: "My whole life, it took me a little while to understand that negative emotion is not gonna help you on court."

"You have to just stay strong and believe no matter what, and then do everything you can."

Fourth round Results

Men's singles: Andrey Rublev (RUS x5) bt Holger Rune (DEN x9) 6-3, 3-6, 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (11/9); Novak Djokovic (SRB x4) bt Alex De Minaur (AUS x22) 6-2, 6-1, 6-2; Ben Shelton (USA) bt JJ Wolf (USA) 6-7 (5/7), 6-2, 6-7 (4/7), 7-6 (7/4), 6-2; Tommy Paul (USA) bt Roberto Bautista (ESP x24) 6-2, 4-6, 6-2, 7-5
Women's singles: Karolina Pliskova (CZE x30) bt Zhang Shuai (CHN x23) 6-0, 6-4; Magda Linette (POL) bt Caroline Garcia (FRA x4) 7-6 (7/3), 6-4; Aryna Sabalenka (BLR x5) bt Belinda Bencic (SUI x12) 7-5, 6-2; Donna Vekic (CRO) bt Linda Fruhvirtova (CZE) 6-2, 1-6, 6-3

Quarter-finals line-up (x denotes seed):

Men: Karen Khachanov (RUS x18) v Sebastian Korda (USA x29); Stefanos Tsitsipas (GRE x3) v Jiri Lehecka (CZE); Andrey Rublev (RUS x5) v Novak Djokovic (SRB x4); Ben Shelton (USA) v Tommy Paul (USA)
Women: Elena Rybakina (KAZ x22) v Jelena Ostapenko (LAT x17); Jessica Pegula (USA x3) v Victoria Azarenka (BLR x24); Karolina Pliskova (CZE x30) v Magda Linette (POL); Aryna Sabalenka (BLR x5) v Donna Vekic (CRO)



Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka lets out a roar after her win over Switzerland's Belinda Bencic. (AFP)

FOCUS

Vekic out to avenge Bencic after ending teen Fruhvirtova's run

AFP
Melbourne

Donna Vekic ended the fairytale Australian Open of teenager Linda Fruhvirtova in the fourth round yesterday then eyed "revenge" against her last-eight opponent for knocking out her good friend Belinda Bencic.

The 64th-ranked Croatian overcame the 17-year-old Czech 6-2, 1-6, 6-3. She now faces Aryna Sabalenka for a place in the semi-finals at Melbourne Park, after the Belarusian fifth seed ousted 12th seed Bencic in straight sets.

Sabalenka's win upset the plans of Vekic, who had been looking forward to meeting Bencic of Switzerland in the quarter-finals. "All of our matches have been really tough, so I'm sure the next one will be, as well," she said of the last-eight clash with Sabalenka, who is emerging as a title favourite having not dropped a set in 2023. "It's a big match for us both. I'm sure she'll be feeling it as well. I will try to take revenge for Belinda," she smiled. "Really sad it's not Belinda. But I'm sure she'll give me some tips."

She may not need them. Vekic has played Sabalenka six times on the WTA Tour and holds a 5-1 advantage in match wins. She beat Sabalenka in three sets when they last played, at San Diego in 2022. She also knocked the Belarusian out of the Tokyo Olympics, coincidentally won by Bencic. "I have a great head-to-head record with her. All of our matches have been really tough, so I'm sure the next one will be, as well," said Vekic.

The last-16 match was uncharted territory for the Czech Republic's Fruhvirtova, the youngest player left in the draw.



Croatia's Donna Vekic hits a return during her match against Czech Republic's Linda Fruhvirtova at the Australian Open. (AFP)

The teenager reached the second round of the 2022 US Open on her Grand Slam debut. Her run in Melbourne was more proof of her rich promise, especially as she fought back from a set down to play her part in a terrifically entertaining 2hr 7min tussle at Margaret Court Arena.

"I didn't really feel like I had much control in the second set to be honest, but I just had to keep fighting and hoping and believing that I will win," said the 26-year-old Vekic.

Vekic extended her own win streak to seven matches, after being unbeaten in three matches at the United Cup.

Sabalenka's stands at eight. The 82nd-ranked Fruhvirtova

showed all the fighting spirit and talent that has marked her as a future Grand Slam champion when she romped to the second set in 35 minutes.

But it was the more experienced Vekic who was able to go the distance, although she needed to battle the never-say-die Fruhvirtova for another 53 minutes to edge to victory. "It definitely showed me that I can be in Grand Slam quarter-finals," said Fruhvirtova.

"I think Vekic is in really good form right now, but it was about a few points. I was really good in the rallies. It was close, but it definitely showed me what to work on next and come back stronger."

BOTTOMLINE

Shelton 'hustling' after reaching quarters

AFP
Melbourne

The 89th-ranked Ben Shelton admitted yesterday he was more surprised than anyone with his run to the Australian Open quarter-finals, on his first time outside the United States. The 20-year-old became only the fourth man in the past 20 years to reach the last eight on debut in Melbourne and will play fellow American Tommy Paul for a place in the semi-finals.

Shelton prevailed 6-7 (5/7), 6-2, 6-7 (4/7), 7-6 (7/4), 6-2 in sapping heat against JJ Wolf in another all-American clash to reach the quarter-finals in only his second Grand Slam. "Definitely a surprise," said left-hander Shelton, who a year ago was at the University of Florida and ranked 569 in the world.

"I got on the plane with no expectations. I know that it's very hard to adjust to Australia from the United States just with the jet lag, time change and everything. It being my first time, never being out of the United States, I knew it would be a struggle."

"So I think it maybe has helped me a little bit kind of not having that expectation or the feeling that I have to perform, but being able to just go out there, be myself and play free," he added. "I think that's been a big contribution to my success."

By making the last eight, Shelton joined just three other men to get that far in Melbourne on debut over the past two decades – Ukraine's Alexandr Dolgoplov (2011), American Tennys Sandgren (2018) and Russian Aslan Karatsev (2021). In his



only previous Grand Slam appearance, as a wildcard at the US Open last year, Shelton crashed out in the first round.

Nothing separated him and his friend Wolf in the opening set, with Shelton's one break point the highlight as it went to a tiebreak. Ultimately, Wolf's power-hitting got him over the line at a scorching John Cain Arena.

Set two also began as a battle of small margins, but Shelton got the first break of the match in game six when Wolf netted a volley then slapped a forehand wide, breaking again as Wolf began wilting in the afternoon heat. Wolf removed his shoes and

left the court at the changeover, returning with new attire and footwear.

In a virtual carbon copy of the opening set, it went to a tiebreak where Wolf again prevailed. Shelton then took the fourth in another narrow tiebreak before putting his foot to the floor in the fifth. "It was definitely a gruelling match. There were a lot of swings throughout the match," he said. "I really focused in the fifth set, just being energetic, trusting my fitness and just hustling, being courageous."

Paul defeated Spanish 24th seed Roberto Bautista Agut 6-2, 4-6, 6-2, 7-5 to also reach a first Grand Slam quarter-final.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Arsenal silence doubters with win over Man United

Arsenal have 50 points after 19 games, 5 clear of champions City with a game in hand

AFP
London

Premier League leaders Arsenal have had their title credentials questioned all season but their last-gasp 3-2 win against Manchester United has silenced many of the remaining doubters. Eddie Nketiah scored the winner in the dying moments of a pulsating match at the Emirates on Sunday as the home fans were infused with fresh belief that this could be their year.

The game against in-form United was seen as a critical test for the Gunners, especially after Manchester City closed the gap at the top of the table to just two points earlier in the day. It was a challenge they did not fluff, hitting back hard after conceding the first goal, scored by Marcus Rashford, and staying calm after Lisandro Martinez cancelled out Bukayo Saka's strike in the second half.

Arsenal, who have made their best-ever start to an English top-flight season, now have 50 points after 19 games – five clear of defending champions City with a game in hand at the halfway point of the campaign. "I don't think it gets much better than that," said a buoyant Arsenal coach Mikel Arteta.

"It was a beautiful moment, a really special one because we were pushing and pushing and pushing and the goal wasn't coming and it came at the end... it was just electric. It was really emotional, really passionate and I lost it."

Arteta said he hopes the result, which follows last week's 2-0 win against Tottenham in the north London derby, gives his team the belief that Arsenal can be crowned league champions for the first time since 2004. But he wants to keep his team's feet on the ground despite a remarkable season in which they have lost just once in the league.

"We know our reality, we know how much we still have to improve," said the Spaniard, who was previously Pep Guardiola's assistant at City. Arsenal face the defending champions in the middle of next month but their upcoming fixtures all look winnable and



Arsenal's Bukayo Saka (right) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Manchester United during the Premier League match in London on Sunday. (AFO)

it is getting increasingly difficult to see where they will slip up.

Leaving the match against City aside, Arsenal's next opponents in the league are relegation-threatened Everton, Brentford, Aston Villa, Leicester, Bournemouth, Fulham, Crystal Palace and Leeds. City, with title-winning pedigree, appear to have found their form again after a wobble and the sides at the bottom of the table will fight for their lives as the trap door looms.

But former Arsenal captain Arteta has transformed his side from also-rans last season into title favourites, through luck and judgement. Saka has gone from strength to strength while Nketiah has stepped up in the absence of new signing Gabriel Jesus, injured while playing for Brazil at the World Cup.

The 23-year-old now has six goals in six games in all competitions since the tournament in Qatar. "What Eddie's doing is incredible," said Arteta. "We cannot say we saw that. We were hoping that he could do that because of the way

he is, because of his mentality, because of his qualities."

When asked to sum up the first half of the season, Arteta said it was "extraordinary" but was again careful to avoid the impression that his team are the finished article. "It doesn't get much better than that, that's the reality," he said. "I think we deserve the points that we have. "We have played well enough to win most of the matches but the reality as well is that we still have a lot of things that we can get much better at."

So does he believe Arsenal are now favourites for the title, on course to win the Premier League for the first time since Arsene Wenger's last triumph nearly two decades ago? "I don't have an opinion," he said. "It can be a perception. I know my team so well, I know where we are, I know why we are here and I know where we want to be. And we are still far from that and I know the level of the other teams, especially one that has won everything in the last five or six years and we are not there yet."

Al Nassr coach praises Ronaldo for his influence on team

Jeddah: Al Nassr coach Rudi Garcia said that Cristiano Ronaldo was instrumental in helping his new team secure victory over Al Ettifaq on Sunday even though he was not involved in the only goal of the match.

Anderson Talisca earned Al Nassr a 1-0 home win over Al Ettifaq, with Ronaldo making his Saudi Pro league debut as captain of the team. "It's a positive addition when you have a player like Ronaldo as he helps to distract the defenders, which is what happened with our goal," Garcia told reporters. "Today we created opportunities for him and asked the players to diversify the game between him and Talisca, and we must not forget that he participated in the (exhibition match against) Paris St Germain and did not get enough rest. Even with the presence of Ronaldo, it is not easy to win the Saudi League because of... the strength of the competitors."

Al Nassr's win moved them back to the top of the league standings with 33 points from 14 matches. They are a point ahead of second placed Al Hilal, who have played one game more.

POLAND SET TO APPOINT SANTOS AS COACH

Poland will appoint former Portugal manager Fernando Santos as their new coach, Polish media reported yesterday.

The 68-year-old Santos, whose Portugal contract was terminated in December after their World Cup quarter-final exit to Morocco, was photographed at Warsaw airport yesterday.

Polish FA (PZPN) president Cezary Kulesza said on Sunday that the new national team manager will be presented today. Santos led Portugal to success at Euro 2016 and the 2018-19 Nations League with Cristiano Ronaldo as captain.

LA LIGA

Benzema and Kroos lead Real to victory at Bilbao, Barcelona scrape past Getafe

AFP
Bilbao, Spain

Karim Benzema and Toni Kroos's goals kept Real Madrid on Barcelona's tail in La Liga with a 2-0 win against Athletic Bilbao on Sunday. After the Catalans had beaten Getafe 1-0, champions Madrid won a tight clash at the San Mames to remain three points behind their rivals.

Benzema broke the deadlock with a superb volley in the first half while Kroos fizzed home the second late on to kill off Athletic's hopes. After losing the Spanish Super Cup to Barcelona last weekend, anxiety had increased in the capital, but a stirring Copa del Rey comeback against Villarreal on Thursday settled nerves.

This victory in Bilbao will reassure Los Blancos fans further, ahead of their derby clash in the cup with Atletico Madrid next week. "It's clear that the team is defending well again, (we were) compact, solid," Real coach Carlo Ancelotti said.

"With us ahead in the game we needed to defend and we did it well. We did not give things away and in the end we won."

Madrid had led in eight goals in their previous four games across all competitions, but despite the injury absences of David Alaba and Aurelien Tchouameni, they were far more sturdy in the Basque Country. Anticipating a physical clash with the Basques, Ancelotti benched midfield stalwarts Luka Modric and Kroos, opting to line up with Eduardo Camavinga and Fede Valverde as part of his central trio.

Dani Ceballos, Nacho Fernandez and Marco Asensio also started after their fine performances against Villarreal. Athletic started well but Benzema volleyed Madrid ahead from Asensio's header back in his direction. It was Benzema's 228th La Liga goal, pulling him level with the iconic Raul Gonzalez as Madrid's



Real Madrid's Karim Benzema (centre) goes for the header with Athletic Bilbao's Dani Vivian (left) and Aitor Paredes during the La Liga match in Bilbao, Spain, on Sunday. (Reuters)

second top scorer in the competition – with Cristiano Ronaldo leading the way on 311.

"What Karim does is incredible, he helps us a lot with his goals, it's good that's he's on fire for us," Nacho said. The hosts fought hard for a leveller but were finished off by Kroos, who steered home from the edge of the box to wrap up Madrid's victory in the 90th minute.

Athletic sit eighth, five points below the Champions League qualification spots. Pedri Gonzalez's goal made the difference for Barcelona in their single goal win over Getafe. With-out suspended striker Robert Lewandowski, Barcelona created few noteworthy chances, but did just enough to emerge with the three points to drive on their bid for a first league title since 2019.

"We didn't play well, we were

sluggish, we didn't attack well," Barca coach Xavi Hernandez said. "We did defend well, but it's always hard to attack a defensive line sitting so deep, but we weren't polished in our play, we didn't have a great game by any means and we have to improve. But we do take an important win, three points at home, and another clean sheet which is important too."

Xavi's side have won six games in a row across all competitions and fans chanted the coach's name in the final stages despite a sub-par display. The coach selected Ansu Fati up front in place of Lewandowski but the young Spain international struggled to get into the game.

Barca's first real chance came in the 35th minute and was converted by Pedri from close range, turning home Raphinha's cross after a great interception by An-

dreas Christensen set the Brazilian free. Former Madrid striker Mayoral should have equalised for the visitors but was denied by Marc-Andre ter Stegen when through on goal, after a poorly judged Pedri back-pass.

Barcelona's German stopper is back to his best this season after a long dip in form and that is reflected in their sparkling defensive record. The Catalans have kept 13 clean sheets in 17 La Liga matches, conceding just six goals in the top flight. The result leaves Getafe 16th, along with Celta Vigo and 18th place Real Valladolid on 17 points.

Earlier Villarreal, fifth, beat mid-table Girona 1-0 thanks to Dani Parejo's 100th minute penalty. Bottom of the table Elche earned a 1-1 draw against Osasuna, seventh, but remain without a win this season in the top flight.

SERIE A

Juve held by Atalanta in thriller

AFP
Milan

Juventus played out a thrilling 3-3 draw with Atalanta in their first match since being slapped with a massive points deduction for illicit transfer activity, Roma taking their place in Serie A's Champions League positions following a 2-0 win at Spezia.

Italy's biggest football club were rocked on Friday by the Italian Football Federation's decision to dock them 15 points after ruling they had managed capital gains from transfers to artificially benefit their accounts. That decision, which leaves them ninth in Italy's top flight on 23 points, drew howls of disapproval from Juve fans at the Allianz Stadium before a hugely entertaining encounter and was blasted as "unjust and unequal" by CEO Maurizio Scanavino pre-match.

But the team showed fight to twice come back from going behind to Ademola Lookman goals to draw an exciting encounter, with Danilo's drive midway through the second half eventually earning his team a point. Juve are 14 points from the Champions League positions, a bad situation for a club whose last accounts were nearly 240mn euros in the red and have various bodies examining their financial conduct.

"I think we'd need 71 points to get into the Champions League... We need to look at the reality who how things are," said coach Massimiliano Allegri. Juventus had been leading at half-time when Angel Di Maria's 25th-minute penalty cancelled out Lookman's early opener before Arkadiusz Milik's superb volley nine minutes later.

But the hosts were rocked again when Nigeria



Juventus' Danilo (right) celebrates with Nicolo Fagioli after scoring against Atalanta. (AFP)

forward Lookman sent Joakim Maehle through to level seconds after the break. Lookman then thumped home a perfect header in the 53rd minute to take his tally in his debut Serie A season to 11 before Danilo made sure both teams would share the spoils and leave Atalanta in fifth place.

"We're in a good position now but there's a long way to go.... this is a very strange season and we don't know what will happen," said Atalanta coach Gian Piero Gasperini. "I don't like it when the table changes during the season, it should be done at the start or the end, otherwise you haven't got credibility."

Roma are fourth, level on 37 points with Inter were hosting Empoli late last night and just one behind second-placed AC Milan ahead of the champions' trip today to take on Lazio, who will move above Jose Mourinho's side into the top four with a win.

League Cup semis 'not enough' for Newcastle: Howe

London: Newcastle manager Eddie Howe says reaching a semi-final "isn't enough" as prepares his team to face Southampton in the League Cup today, bidding to end a decades-long trophy drought.

The Magpies reached their first League Cup semi for 47 years by beating Leicester earlier this month to set up the clash against Saints, who dumped Manchester City out of the competition.

Newcastle have not won any domestic silverware for 68 years and Howe, who takes his side to the south coast for the first leg of the tie today,

does not want to fail with next month's Wembley final in sight. "We're delighted to be where we are, but the semi-final itself isn't enough, I don't think it's enough for anybody," he said yesterday.

"I think you go into these games and to say you got to a semi-final is nothing. Ultimately, you want to get one step further, I know the players feel the same way. Me and my coaching team feel passionately about it that we want to make the final, but we have to navigate these two games, they're going to be very difficult."

Newcastle have made enor-

mous strides since a Saudi-led consortium bought the club in October 2021 and are third in the Premier League, with just one league defeat all season. "We're desperate for the next step, but we have to take our mind off that really and focus on the process and the job, and the job is to go to Southampton and perform," said Howe.

Newcastle extended their Premier League record to 15 games unbeaten with a goalless draw at Crystal at the weekend. Manchester United travel to Nottingham Forest for the first leg of their semi-final tomorrow.