

SECOND TEST

Williamson and Nicholls smash double tons for NZ

Kane Williamson becomes first New Zealand batter to cross 8,000-run mark

Reuters
Wellington

Kane Williamson and Henry Nicholls both scored double centuries and shared a partnership of 363 as New Zealand flayed Sri Lanka's bowling to rack up an imposing 580 for four declared on the second day of the second Test yesterday.

The tourists had responded with 26-2 by the close of play at Wellington's Basin Reserve and face an uphill battle to avoid being swept in the two-match series after losing the first Test by two wickets in Christchurch on Monday.

Williamson also scored a century, his 27th in Tests, in the second innings of that match, but yesterday's magnificent effort in the company of Nicholls was an entirely different order of dominance.

After a rain-disrupted day one, Williamson resumed on 26 not out with his country 155-2 and barely put a foot wrong until he holed out in the deep in the late afternoon with 215 runs to his name.

The 32-year-old became the first New Zealand batsman to score 8,000 Test runs as he marched to his sixth double century, pounding 23 fours and a couple of sixes in the 296-ball innings.



New Zealand's Kane Williamson (left) celebrates 200 runs with teammate Henry Nicholls on day two of the second Test against Sri Lanka at the Basin Reserve in Wellington yesterday. (AFP)

Matt Henry wasted little time in showing them how to bowl on the track, tempting opener Oshada Fernando into a push at the ball which Blundell gobbled up behind the wickets.

Doug Bracewell then celebrated his return to test cricket after a gap of nearly seven years with the wicket of Kusal Mendis, who departed for a duck after Doug Conway took a brilliant catch at point.

Skipper Dimuth Karunaratne, who was 16 not out, and nightwatchman Prabath Jayasuriya, unbeaten on four, will resume on Sunday with Sri Lanka a hefty 554 runs in arrears.

SCOREBOARD		
New Zealand 1st innings		
T. Latham c Jayasuriya b Rajitha	21	
D. Conway c & b de Silva	78	
K. Williamson c sub b Jayasuriya	215	
H. Nicholls not out	200	
D. Mitchell c & b Rajitha	17	
T. Blundell not out	17	
Extras (b2, lb17, nb8, w5)	32	
Total (for 4 wickets; 123 overs)	580/d	
Fall of wickets: 1-87 (Latham), 2-118 (Conway), 3-481 (Williamson), 4-530 (Mitchell)		
Bowling: K. Rajitha 32-6-126-2 (6nb), A. Fernando 26-6-110-0 (2w, 1nb), L. Kumara 25-1-164-0 (3w), D. de Silva 19-3-75-1 (1nb), P. Jayasuriya 21-1-86-1		
Sri Lanka 1st innings		
O. Fernando c Blundell b Henry	6	
D. Karunaratne not out	16	
K. Mendis c Conway b D. Bracewell	0	
P. Jayasuriya not out	4	
Extras	0	
Total (for two wickets, 17 overs)	26	
Fall of wickets: 1-13 (Fernando), 2-18 (Mendis)		
Bowling: T. Southee 6-3-5-0, M. Henry 7-3-15-1, D. Bracewell 3-2-1-1, M. Bracewell 1-0-5-0		
Toss: Sri Lanka		
Umpires: Richard Illingworth (ENG), Chris Gaffaney (NZL)		
TV umpire: Michael Gough (ENG)		

SPOTLIGHT

Shakib and Towhid set up record Bangladesh win against Ireland

AFP
Sylhet, Bangladesh

Shakib Al Hasan and debutant Towhid Hridoy both narrowly missed centuries but still guided Bangladesh to a record 183-run victory over Ireland in yesterday's first one-day international in Sylhet.

Shakib hit 93 and Towhid added 92 to guide Bangladesh to their highest ever ODI score of 338-8 after the tourists put them in to bat.

Ebadot Hossain led the reply with 4-42 and left-arm spinner Nasum Ahmed chipped in with 3-42 to bowl out Ireland for 155 runs just shy of 31 overs.

"The way we batted was exceptional. Wasn't the easiest wicket to bat for the first 20 overs. But Shakib was brilliant, Towhid also impressive," skipper Tamim Iqbal said after the match, according to *Cricbuzz*.

George Dockrell was the last man dismissed after making 45, Ireland's highest total.

Stephen Doheny and Paul Stirling put on 60 runs in the opening stand but once Shakib dismissed Doheny for 34 Ireland collapsed to 5-76, never to recover.

"We were not too disappointed at the halfway stage as the wicket was good and the best time was to bat under lights," Ireland captain Andrew Balbirnie said.

"But we kept losing wickets and didn't get any partnerships," Balbirnie added.

Graham Hume finished with a career best 4-60 but the hosts shrugged off early pressure from the Irish bowling attack.

Shakib and Towhid added 135 for the fourth wicket to lift Bangladesh from 81-3 after Tamim (3), Litton Das (26) and Najmul Hossain (25) all fell cheaply.

He became the second Bangladeshi cricketer to reach 7,000 ODI runs after Tamim.

Shakib is now also just the third cricketer to surpass that milestone in ODI runs and 300 one-day wickets after Sri Lanka's Sanath Jayasuriya and Pakistan's Shahid Afridi.

He shifted gears after reaching his third successive ODI fifty and



Bangladesh's Shakib Al Hasan plays a shot during the first one-day international (ODI) against Ireland at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium in Sylhet yesterday. (AFP)

hitting Harry Tector for five fours in an over.

He fell seven runs short of his 10th ODI hundred after chasing a wide yorker from Hume to get the bottom edge.

Towhid played the best debut innings for Bangladesh in ODIs, adding 80 runs for the fifth wicket with Mushfiqur Rahim, who struck 44 off 26 balls.

Hume removed both batsmen in the same over before taking the wicket of Taskin Ahmed but the tourists were unable to stop the flow of runs.

The remaining ODIs will be played in Sylhet tomorrow and Thursday.

Ireland, who will also play three Twenty20 internationals and a Test during their tour, last visited Bangladesh for a bilateral series in 2008.

BRIEF SCORES
Bangladesh 338-8 in 50 overs (Shakib Al Hasan 93, Towhid Hridoy 92, Mushfiqur Rahim 44; G. Hume 4-60) **beat Ireland 155 all out in 30.5 overs** (G. Dockrell 45, S. Doheny 34; Ebadot Hossain 4-42, Nasum Ahmed 3-43)
Toss: Ireland **Result:** Bangladesh won by 183 runs
Series: Bangladesh lead series 1-0

Asia Lions beat India Maharajas, reach final



Upul Tharanga of Asia Lions in action during the Eliminator match against India Maharajas in the Legends League Cricket Masters 2023 at Asian Town Cricket Stadium in Doha yesterday. Batting first, Asia Lions scored 191 for 5 in 20 overs. Asia Lions bowled out India Maharajas for 106 in 16.4 overs to win by 85 runs. Asia Lions will meet World Giants in the final tomorrow.

FOCUS

Lahore Qalandars defend PSL title with thrilling 1-run win over Multan Sultans



Lahore Qalandars players and team officials celebrate winning the PSL title for the second time in a row in Lahore yesterday.

AFP
Lahore

Lahore Qalandars became the first team to win back-to-back Pakistan Super League titles yesterday, beating Multan Sultans by one run in a thrilling final.

Captain Shaheen Shah Afridi took 4-51 after smashing a rapid 44 not out but had to effect a run out at the bowler's end as Multan's Khushdil Shah tried to make a third run to force a super over.

Qalandars had scored 200-6 in their 20 overs before a packed 25,000 Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore and Sultans finished on 199-8.

Qalandars had also defeated Sultans in last year's final.

Shaheen conceded 34 runs in his opening two overs as Sultans raced to 101-1 in 10 overs, with Rilee Rossouw (52) and Mohamed Rizwan (34) adding 64 for the second wicket.

Rossouw smashed seven fours and two sixes off just 32 balls.

But Shaheen returned for his second spell to dismiss Kieron Pollard (19), Tim David (20), Anwar Ali (one) and Usama Mir (nought).

With 35 needed in the last two overs, Shah and Abbas Afridi took 22 from Haris Rauf's 19th over but failed to get 13 in the last.

Earlier, Qalandars were lifted by a ram-paging Shaheen who clobbered a 15-ball



Lahore Qalandars captain Shaheen Shah Afridi launches a drive for a 6 during his innings of 44 not out against Multan Sultans in the final of PSL in Lahore yesterday.

44 not out with five towering sixes and two fours, helping his team smash 85 runs in the last five overs.

Abdullah Shafique top-scored with a 40-ball 65.

Shafique and Fakhar Zaman (39) took Qalandars to 95-1 after their team won the toss and batted and opener Mirza Baig hammered an 18-ball 30.

But once Zaman was dismissed, Qalandars lost four wickets in the space of 18 balls, slumping to 112-5.

Shaheen promoted himself to number seven and instantly made an impact, as he and Shafique hit 24 runs in the 17th over from pacer Ihsanullah.

Leg-spinner Usama Mir was the pick of Sultans' bowlers with 3-24.

BRIEF SCORES
Lahore Qalandars 200-6, 20 overs (Abdullah Shafique 65, Shaheen Afridi 44 not out, Fakhar Zaman 39, Mirza Tahir Baig 30; Usama Mir 3-24) **beat Multan Sultans 199-8, 20 overs** (Rilee Rossouw 52, Mohamed Rizwan 34, Khushdil Shah 25, Tim David 20; Shaheen Afridi 4-51, Rashid Khan 2-26) by 1 run
Player of the match: Shaheen Afridi (Lahore Qalandars)

BOTTOMLINE

Bracewell joins IPL side RCB, Ravindra brought into NZ squad

Reuters
New Delhi

Michael Bracewell will miss New Zealand's one-day international series against Sri Lanka, the country's cricket board (NZC) said yesterday, after he was signed by Indian Premier League (IPL) team Royal Challengers Bangalore to replace Will Jacks.

All-rounder Rachin Ravindra will take Bracewell's spot in the New Zealand squad for the three-match series, which begins on March 25 and ends on March 31, the same day the 2023 IPL season kicks off.

"Michael's been a key contributor to our white ball teams since making his debut last year," coach Gary Stead said. "With a World Cup in India this year it's great to have players getting more experience in those conditions."

Bracewell is the latest addition to the list of New Zealand players who will be released early after the current Test series ends on March 21, including Kane Williamson (Gujarat Titans), Tim Southee (Kolkata Knight Riders) and Devon Conway (Chennai Super Kings). Finn Allen (Royal Challengers Bangalore), Lockie Ferguson (Kolkata Knight Riders) and Glenn Phillips (Sunrisers Hyderabad) will leave the squad after the first ODI.

TENNIS

Unvaccinated Djokovic to miss Miami Open

Reuters
Miami

Novak Djokovic will miss next week's Miami Open after the Serbian was denied an exemption that would have allowed him to enter the US despite not being vaccinated against Covid-19, tournament director James Blake said yesterday.

"We tried to get Novak Djokovic to be allowed to get an exemption, but that wasn't able to happen," Blake told *Tennis Channel*.

"Obviously, we're one of the premier tournaments in the world, we'd like to have the best players that can play. We did all that we could. We tried to talk to the government, but that's out of our hands."

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and the state's two US senators were among those calling on the Biden administration to allow

world number one Djokovic to enter the US and compete at the tournament he has won six times.

Djokovic, 35, is also missing the ongoing Masters tournament in Indian Wells, California due to his inability to secure the exemption.

The US currently bars unvaccinated foreigners from entry into the country, a policy that is expected to be lifted when the government ends its Covid-19 emergency declarations on May 11.

Djokovic, who missed last year's Australian Open after being deported from that country due to his vaccination status, has said he would skip Grand Slams rather than have a Covid shot.

He won his record-tying 22nd Grand Slam at the Australian Open in January. He has not played at Indian Wells or the Miami Open - which together comprise the "Sunshine Double" - since 2019.

A representative for Djokovic said the player would make no further comment regarding his absence from the Miami tournament, and he planned to return to the tour at the Monte Carlo Masters claycourt event that begins on April 9.

Djokovic will then continue his preparations for the French Open in May by playing in the Srpska Open in Banja Luka, Bosnia.

Svitolina to make comeback at Charleston Open in April

Former world number three Elina Svitolina will make her return to the WTA Tour following her maternity break at next month's Charleston Open in South Carolina after accepting a wild card, organisers of the claycourt tournament said.

Ukraine's Svitolina, who last played a year ago in Miami, is set to return to action following the birth of her daughter Skai with husband and fellow tennis player



Serbia's Novak Djokovic in action during his semi-final against Russia's Daniil Medvedev in Dubai in this March 3, 2023, file photo.

important to us as a tournament and to our players," tournament director Bob Moran said in a statement.

"We are passionate about working with Elina, who has a deep and personal understanding of the needs in her home country right now, to further exemplify the mission of Tennis Plays for Peace and stand united with Ukraine."

The tournament hosted a program in 2022 and raised \$100,000 in donations for relief efforts in Ukraine.

Svitolina, who has 16 WTA titles and is a two-times Grand Slam semi-finalist, will be joined in the Charleston field by five former champions including holder Belinda Bencic.

Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka has also signed up to play.

The Charleston Open will take place from April 1-9, organisers have confirmed.

INDIAN WELLS

Rybakina knocks out defending champion Swiatek

'I had nothing to lose, I just wanted to enjoy. I think it was one of my best matches'

Reuters
Indian Wells

Elena Rybakina knocked out defending champion Iga Swiatek with a 6-2 6-2 semi-final victory at Indian Wells to set up a clash against Aryna Sabalenka in the final.

Two months after Rybakina knocked Swiatek out of the Australian Open in the fourth round, the Wimbledon champion once again put in an impressive display against the world number one.

Rybakina was in control from the start, breaking early to take a 2-0 lead, before going on to clinch the first set when Swiatek produced a double fault on set point.

Rybakina's serve was tested in the first game of the second set, but the Kazakh held under pressure and then won the next four games to take a 5-0 lead.

Swiatek was far from her best on the night and later revealed that she had struggled with "discomfort" in her ribcage during the match, but added that she was still expecting to defend her title at next week's Miami Open.

"We're going to consult with the medical team. For sure I'm going to use these days off before Miami (to recover)," Swiatek told reporters.

The Pole did manage to avoid a bagel in the second set by saving a break point to hold before breaking to then further reduce the arrears, but Rybakina broke back immediately to extinguish the comeback and secure the win.

"I really played well today, it was a really nice atmosphere tonight," Rybakina said in her on-court interview.

"I didn't expect I would play that well today. I had nothing to lose, I just wanted to enjoy. I think it was one of my best matches this season."

Rybakina will be out for revenge when she faces Sabalenka, who defeated her in the Australian Open final in January. The



Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan reacts after match point as she defeated Iga Swiatek of Poland in the semi-final of the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden. (USA TODAY Sports)

Belarusian leads 4-0 in their head-to-head. "It was really close, we had so many battles and so far I'm losing, but hopefully that will change," Rybakina added.

Earlier, Australian Open champion Sabalenka was not at her best in a 6-2 6-3 win over Greece's Maria Sakkari, but maintained her composure even when her old nemesis - the double fault - reared its ugly head on a sunny day in the Southern California desert.

"In the past I lost so many matches

like that after a few not super smart mistakes," said Sabalenka.

"I was reminding myself that it is okay to make mistakes. I'm not a robot, I'm a human. I can miss those shots, and probably that's why I was able to keep fighting and keep trying."

After the start of the match was delayed by more than 30 minutes to fix an audio issue related to the electronic line-calling system, Sabalenka cracked an ace out wide to open the match.

She broke Sakkari for a third time on an errant Sakkari forehand to capture the first set but the Belarusian's frustration began to mount in the second when two double faults gave Sakkari a look at break points at 2-2.

Sabalenka regrouped to hold for 3-2 and broke Sakkari in a lengthy deuce game for a 4-2 advantage she would not relinquish, pouncing on a short return of serve on match point and burying the ball with an emphatic backhand.

Rybakina says she reached highest level in rout of Swiatek

Indian Wells: Elena Rybakina said she showed glimpses of her best form during her dominant win over world number one Iga Swiatek in the Indian Wells semi-final, adding she feels she can beat anyone by maintaining that level.

The world number 10 thrashed holder Swiatek 6-2 6-2 to set up a clash with Aryna Sabalenka. The Kazakh said her aggressive style and booming serve made all the difference in the match.

"Today I was pushing a lot. Overall, some players it's more difficult to play against," Wimbledon champion Rybakina said.

"With Iga, she's a tough opponent, but when I play like this and everything goes in... Today in some moments I played at my highest level. There are moments you feel, 'OK, I can beat anyone if I always play like this'."

"It's the goal, but you never feel amazing and perfect every match. I think today it was really good from me."

Rybakina said she was reaping the rewards of the hard work she had put in over the years.

"I think I've been improving in these four years on tour. It's just everything coming together - the experience, the team became bigger and I'm working a lot on fitness," she said.

"Just getting stronger a bit physically and just the work we did for the past four years. It's showing now on the court and with my results."

Rybakina will look to beat Sabalenka for the first time in their fifth meeting, after losing to the Belarusian in the Australian Open final in January.

"It's not going to be an easy match," Rybakina said. "It's going to be in these clutch moments that I need to play better. Hopefully now it's going to change the score between us."



Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates in attendance for the semi-final between Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina and Poland's Iga Swiatek at the 2023 WTA Indian Wells Open in Indian Wells, California, on Friday. (AFP)

Sabalenka says WTA doing its best to support players amid tensions due to war

Indian Wells: World number two Aryna Sabalenka said the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) was doing a good job of supporting players from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus amid tensions in the locker room following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine last year.

Ukraine's Lesia Tsurenko withdrew from her match with Belarusian Sabalenka at Indian Wells due to what she said was a panic attack triggered by a chat with WTA Chief Executive Steve Simon about tennis's response to Russia's invasion.

The top-ranked Iga Swiatek called for more support to be offered to Ukrainian players after Tsurenko's pullout and said the actions taken by the tennis leadership was not enough.

"Nobody can control the emotions of others. I think the WTA are doing their best," Sabalenka said after reaching the Indian Wells final. Sabalenka said there was still tension between players but individual athletes had not done anything wrong.

"I think the WTA are doing a really great job to support both sides," Sabalenka said.

GOLF

Slick Schenk grabs PGA Valspar Championship lead with Spieth lurking

AFP
Miami

Adam Schenk, playing for a 10th consecutive week, fired a two-under-par 69 to grab a one-stroke lead after the second round of the PGA Valspar Championship.

The 31-year-old American, who shared the 18-hole lead, was on seven-under 135 after 36 holes at Innisbrook's Copperhead course in Palm Harbor, Florida.

"It really couldn't have been a ton better with the amount of putts I made," Schenk said. "We're doing a really good job managing the courses."

Countryman Kramer Hickok, chasing his first PGA crown like Schenk, was

second on 136 after a second 68 in windy conditions.

Three-time major winner Jordan Spieth, the 2015 Valspar champion, fired a 70 to share third on 137 with fellow Americans Cody Gribble and Davis Riley plus England's Tommy Fleetwood.

"Kind of an off day on approaching the greens, hit pretty rusty wedges," Spieth said. "To shoot one-under on this golf course in the wind is a good score so I feel good about my position going into the weekend."

Schenk made a birdie-birdie start, blasting out of a bunker to seven feet and sinking the putt at the par-5 first hole then dropping his approach inside three feet to set up a tap-in at the second.

After a three-putt bogey on the third,

Schenk answered with a 17-foot birdie putt at the par-5 fifth and added another birdie from 4 1/2 feet at the 12th before a closing bogey after finding a greenside bunker. "I had better control of my golf ball," Schenk said. "Made a few putts, had some nice saves for par which really holds the round together. It was another one of those rounds that could have been even par. It wouldn't have been 5- or 6-under ever but we managed it well and very pleased with 2-under."

Schenk, whose best PGA finish was third at the 2021 Shriners Children's Open, is keeping busy before the birth of his son next month.

"Having a little baby boy here in about a month and a half," Schenk said. "So trying to make as many points as I can to take

as much time off as I can and spend time with him and my wife, which will be very special."

Hickok birdied three par-5 holes and made two birdies on par-3 holes with putts from 30 feet at the fourth and just inside 40 feet at the 15th.

"I've been putting really nice," said Hickok. "Seeing the lines really well and hitting some good putts. I don't really feel like I'm playing that well tee to green but just keeping the ball in front of me and really scoring pretty well."

Spieth birdied the par-5 first, fifth and 11th holes but made bogeys at the par-3 eighth and par-4 10th.

"I drove the ball maybe the best of the year today. Gave myself a lot of chances with some wedges," Spieth said.



Jordan Spieth lines up a putt on the fifth green during the second round of the Valspar Championship. (USA TODAY Sports)

FOOTBALL

Tottenham drop crucial points in top-four race

LEICESTER CITY SNAP A RUN OF FOUR CONSECUTIVE LEAGUE DEFEATS

Reuters
London

Tottenham Hotspur's hopes of a top-four finish in the Premier League suffered a dent as Southampton earned a last-gasp 3-3 home draw with a James Ward-Prowse penalty that would have been cheered in Newcastle yesterday.

Antonio Conte's side looked set to move into third place as goals by Harry Kane and Ivan Perisic put them 3-1 ahead with around 15 minutes of normal time left on the clock.

But bottom club Southampton battled back to salvage a point in their quest to beat the drop.

A big day at the foot of the table saw Leeds United move out of the relegation zone with a 4-2 victory at fellow-strugglers Wolverhampton Wanderers while second-from-bottom Bournemouth came down to earth after last week's defeat of Liverpool as they went down 3-0 at Aston Villa.

Leicester City snapped a run of four consecutive league defeats to draw 1-1 at Brentford.

Fourth-placed Tottenham have 49 points from 28 games with Newcastle United, who benefited from a stoppage-time penalty to beat Nottingham Forest on Friday, have 47 points having played two games less.

At the bottom, Southampton have 23 points from 28 games.

Bournemouth on 24 from 27 along with West Hm United who dropped into the relegation zone courtesy of Leeds United's impressive win at Wolves. Everton, who were playing Chelsea in the late kick-off are next on 25 points, the same total as Leicester.

Tottenham may come to rue the day they allowed Southampton a relegation lifeline.

Without playing that well they were in control thanks to Kane and Perisic but allowed Theo Walcott to score his first goal for two years to make it 3-2 in the thrilling clash.

Tottenham substitute Pape Sarr was then adjudged in the 90th minute to have fouled Ainsley Maitland-Niles as he attempted to hack clear a bouncing ball and



Tottenham Hotspur's English striker Harry Kane controls the ball during the English Premier League match against Southampton at St Mary's Stadium in Southampton, southern England, yesterday. (AFP)

Ward-Prowse made no mistake to earn his side a point.

Leeds will head into the international break above the relegation zone thanks to a superb display at Wolves.

Jack Harrison smashed home the opener for Leeds from near the penalty spot in the sixth minute and Luke Ayling doubled the lead from a corner early in the second half.

Leeds substitute Rasmus Kristensen added a third just after the hour mark but Wolves hit back with goals by Jonny and Matheus Cunha before Jonny was red-carded for a dangerous tackle on Ayling.

Rodrigo chipped Wolves keeper Jose Sa to seal the points and Wolves were handed another red card when unused substi-

tute Matheus Nunes was dismissed for arguing. Harvey Barnes netted a superb second-half equaliser to earn Leicester their point at Brentford who had Shandon Baptiste sent off in the closing stages.

Brentford, dreaming of a European qualification spot, had gone ahead in the 32nd minute through Danish midfielder Mathias Jensen's deflected drive.

Also yesterday, Ellis Simms grabbed a last-gasp equaliser as struggling Everton boosted their fight for Premier League survival with a dramatic 2-2 draw against Chelsea.

Sean Dyche's side were moments away from a damaging defeat until Simms scored his first goal for the club to stun Stamford Bridge into silence.

Everton's show of defiance came after they twice trailed in west London.

Joao Felix had put Chelsea ahead early in the second half with his second goal since joining on loan from Atletico Madrid in January.

Abdoulaye Doucoure's equaliser was followed by Kai Havertz's third goal in his last three appearances as the German converted penalty in the closing stages.

Simms was on loan at Championship side Sunderland earlier this season, but the 22-year-old showed he could be Everton's saviour in the relegation battle with his crucial leveller. Everton are now two points clear of the relegation zone after extending their unbeaten run to three games.

FOCUS

Barcelona referee corruption charge overshadows 'El Clasico' buzz

AFP
Barcelona

Spain's Clasico is one of the world's biggest sporting occasions, pitting giants Barcelona and Real Madrid head-to-head, but the build-up to today's La Liga clash has been overshadowed by "Caso Negreira".

Barca have been charged with corruption by Spanish prosecutors for payments between 2001 and 2018 to the company of former refereeing chief Jose Maria Enriquez Negreira, totalling around €7.3mn (\$7.8mn).

The club say they were paying for reports and advice on refereeing but prosecutors have accused the club of seeking to gain favourable decision-making from officials.

Charges were filed last week against Barcelona, former vice president of Spain's refereeing committee (CTA), Negreira, and two former Barcelona presidents, Sandro Rosell and Josep Maria Bartomeu, among others.

Although La Liga leaders Barcelona can virtually clinch the title if they beat second-place Real Madrid today to move 12 points clear, headlines remain dominated by the Negreira case, with tensions rising around Spain.

In the first round of fixtures after Barcelona were charged last weekend, at various stadiums there was a form of protest against the supposed corruption scandal.

It was clearest in the Basque country, where Xavi Hernandez's side faced Athletic Bilbao on Sunday.

Supporters threw mock money onto the pitch with "mafia" printed on it, along with Barcelona's club emblem.

"I was surprised at the hostile atmosphere towards Barca, it was sad to see," said Xavi after his team's narrow 1-0 win.

"(Barca) are being judged prematurely, which I don't think is good for society."

After Barcelona's payments to Negreira's company were unearthed in February, the club responded quickly and denied any wrongdoing.

President Joan Laporta said the club had ordered an external investigation and would provide answers as quickly as they could.

However, they have not scheduled a news conference to answer questions on the issue and their silence has been criticised by La Liga president Javier Tebas.

"Yes (It's the worst moment) that I remember," Tebas told Movistar channel Vamos on Tuesday. "The problem that we have is the worst. There are payments recognised by Barcelona to the vice-president of the CTA, that's something abnormal."

"It's understandable that tension is generated."

"The reputation of our football is at stake. I am ashamed. We have no explanation from Barcelona."

Laporta did speak at a lunch event with the Equestrian Circle in Barcelona and said there was a "campaign" to damage Barcelona's interests.

"Let it be clear Barca have never bought referees and Barca have never had the intention of buying referees, absolutely never," said the president.



FC Barcelona's players attend a training session at the Joan Gamper training ground in Sant Joan Despi on the eve of the 'El Clasico' clash against Real Madrid. (AFP)

FORMULA ONE

Perez takes Saudi GP pole after Verstappen suffers car problem

AFP
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Sergio Perez claimed pole position for today's Saudi Arabian Grand Prix to salvage pride for Red Bull after Max Verstappen was forced out of qualifying with a driveshaft failure in Q2.

The 33-year-old Mexican clocked a best lap in one minute 28.265 seconds to beat Ferrari's Charles Leclerc, who faces a 10-place grid penalty, by 0.155sec in a closely fought qualifying session.

It is Perez's second career pole and second in Saudi Arabia, while Verstappen will start from 15th.

"Good job guys," said Perez. "Hopefully, Max will be able to fight through in the race and we can enjoy a good result. We've got a good car and it's a good circuit for me."

As a result of Leclerc's penalty, two-time champion Fernando Alonso will start from the front row of the grid for Aston Martin alongside Perez after winding up third fastest ahead of Mercedes' George Russell and Carlos Sainz, who was fifth in the second Ferrari.

Lance Stroll was sixth in the second Aston Martin ahead of Alpine's Esteban Ocon, seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton in the second Mercedes and rookie Oscar Piastri of McLaren.

Pierre Gasly was 10th for Alpine. "Red Bull are on a different planet," said Leclerc, who will set off from 12th on the grid. The floodlit session began in cooler conditions than FP3 and Williams led the way.

Nyck de Vries, who had missed the



Pole position winner Red Bull Racing's Mexican driver Sergio Perez (left) chats with second-placed Ferrari's Monegasque driver Charles Leclerc at the end of the qualifying session of the Saudi Arabia Grand Prix at the Corniche Circuit in Jeddah yesterday. (AFP)

earlier session due an engine change on his Alpha Tauri car, spun almost immediately at the first corner, but recovered. His tyres, however, were gone for a flying lap.

The Red Bulls were soon setting the pace again, Verstappen heading Perez by six-tenths on his first run, before Lando Norris brushed the wall at the final corner.

As the Ferraris showed sign of improvement, Aston Martin pushed in response and after 12 minutes, Alonso spun at Turn Two, retaining control without

hitting any barriers and snatched fourth place.

Logan Sargeant was another spinner, the American rookie revolving his Williams at Turn 22 as McLaren's pit crew worked frantically to salvage Norris's car and hopes in vain.

The blur of busy and error-strewn Q1 action ended with Norris eliminated in 19th along with Sargeant, 20th, Yuki Tsunoda and his Alpha Tauri team-mate De Vries, and Alex Albon in the second Williams.

The Q2 segment began with Alfa

Romeo and Haas leading the queue ahead of the Aston Martins. Alonso immediately lit up the time screens in purple and set the pace in 1:28.757.

Verstappen, who had a sharp snap through Turns One and Two, soon reported a power problem. "It's an engine problem," he said, as he made slow progress. "It's almost not accelerating."

The Dutchman limped back to the pits and with five minutes remaining climbed out as his crew set to work. He left the garage, walked away to the weigh-room and out of qualifying as the team diagnosed a driveshaft problem.

This left Alonso on top ahead of Perez, who returned to try and restore some pride for Red Bull on a second run, clocking 1:26.635 to beat him by a tenth ahead of the two Ferraris.

The two Haas cars and both Alfa Romeos were eliminated along with Verstappen, creating the prospect of an unexpectedly open battle for pole with Alonso seeking his first pole in 11 years since the 2012 German Grand Prix.

"It happened at Turn 10," said Verstappen. "Very annoying because we were having such a good weekend. It will be tricky now to get to the front so have to concentrate on points, but anything is possible at this track."

With Leclerc facing a 10-place grid penalty, his rivals sensed a rare chance for pole, Alonso attacking his lap, Leclerc outpacing him and then Perez going top in 1:28.265 - half a second clear of the Ferrari.

Russell also dipped into the 1:28s to go third ahead of Alonso before the Aston Martins and Ferraris returned for their final flings.

Al Wakrah beat Al Ahli 5-2 in week 17 of QNB Stars League

DOHA: Al Wakrah returned to winning ways, prevailing 5-2 over Al Ahli in their Week 17 match of the 2022-2023 season QNB Stars League at the Al Wakrah Stadium yesterday.

The Blue Wave showed their intent and form right from the word go, with Mohamed Benyettou (19th-minute penalty), Khaled Munir (38th minute), Jacinto Dala (40th and 90th minutes) and Yousef Abdurisag (49th minute) getting the five goals for them.

Al Dokali al-Sayed helped Al Ahli pulled back two goals, striking in the 33th and 64th minutes.

The win also saw Al Wakrah inch their way into 27 points from 17 games, while Al Ahli stayed on 21 points from 17 matches. The Blue Wave's attacking play had Al Ahli working hard in defence and Hossein Kanaani had his team pay the price for bringing down a charging Khaled Munir inside the penalty area. The referee straight away signalled for the spot and Benyettou, who stepped up, put Al Wakrah in the lead.

Al Ahli retaliated as their midfielder Al Dokali fired from top centre just outside the box to make it 1-1.

Al Ahli's joy was however shortlived as Al Wakrah struck back and this time with Abdurisag working his way past defenders to set up Muneer with a perfect pass for a fine goal (2-1).

Minutes later, it was the turn of Al Wakrah's Angolan star Dala to show his class as he dribbled his way long before striking from the top of the box for a superb goal (3-1).

Dala then set up Abdurisag with a fine ball to run in without being challenged and score. The goal left the player delighted (4-1).

Al Dokali scored off a corner kick which fell to him following a header and his left foot kick went on to beat the goalkeeper (4-2).

Dala then scored one more goal, this time off a cross from Benyettou while rushing in, with the goalkeeper well-beaten.



Action from the QNB Stars League round 17 match between Al Wakrah and Al Ahli yesterday. Al Wakrah won 5-2 on home soil. In other matches yesterday, Al Duhail beat Qatar SC 3-1 while Al Rayyan edged Al Markhiya 3-2.