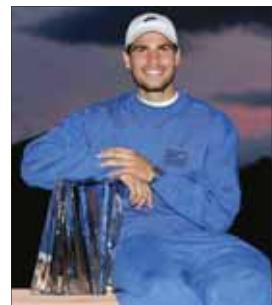




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TENNIS | Page 3

Alcaraz routs Medvedev in final, reclaims No. 1 ranking



MOTORSPORT | Page 2

Mercedes targeting big gains, says team principal



Tuesday, March 21, 2023
Sha'ban 29, 1444 AH

GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

New Zealand triumph in windy Wellington, sweep series 2-0

Page 2

WARM WELCOME ACCORDED TO ASIAN BEACH HANDBALL CHAMPIONS



The newly-crowned Asian beach handball champions Qatar received a rousing welcome upon their arrival at the Hamad International Airport in Doha yesterday. Qatar on Sunday regained the Asian Men's Beach Handball title - their sixth overall - after defeating Oman 18-14, 16-12 in the final in Bali, Indonesia. Qatar Handball Association (QHA) president Ahmed al-Shaabi and board members received the victorious Qatar team.

CRICKET

Asia Lions emerge as LLC Masters champions

Lions openers Tharanga and Dilshan's half-centuries blow away the Giants in the final



Asia Lions celebrate with the trophy after winning the Legends League Cricket Masters Qatar 2023 at the Asian Town Cricket Stadium yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Asia Lions openers Upul Tharanga and Tillakaratne Dilshan cracked breezy half-centuries to blow away the challenge of World Giants and to emerge as the new champions of Legends League Cricket (LLC) Masters Qatar 2023 at the Asian Town Cricket Stadium yesterday.

World Giants, who has won the inaugural international edition of the LLC Masters in Muscat, Oman, in 2022 were beaten by seven wickets as Asia Lions chased down the modest 148-run target with 23 balls to spare.

President of Qatar Cricket Association Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Saud al-Thani handed over the

winners' trophy to Asia Lions captain Shahid Afridi amidst cheers from the 10,000 strong crowd at the stadium in the presence of Co-owner of Legends League Cricket Yuvraj Khilachand, co-owner and CEO Legends League Cricket Raman Raheja, and Chairman Legends League Cricket Vivek Khushnani.

The architects of Asia Lions' victory were Sri Lankan openers Tharanga and Dilshan, who whopped the World Giants attack to put on 115 runs-opening partnership in 9.6 overs.

Dilshan cracked 58 off 42 balls (8x4s) while Tharanga scored 57 off 28 balls (5x4s, 3x6s).

Tharanga, who had also scored a 50 against India Maharanas to take Asia Lions into the final, was also adjudged the Player of the Series.

Earlier, Asia Lions restricted World Giants to 147 for 4 despite Jacques Kallis' unbeaten 78 runs off 54 balls with five boundaries and three sixes.

Kallis also had a 92 runs partnership in 11.1 overs for the fourth wicket with Ross Taylor, who hit 32 off 33 balls with three hits to the fence. World Giants, opting to bat, had a disastrous start with South African Morne van Wyk being cleaned up by Pakistan's Abdur Razzaq for nought in the third over.

More trouble followed with Giants' Aussie star Shane Watson being trapped leg before two balls later by Razzaq.

From being 2 for 9, Giants further slipped to 3 for 19 with opener Lendl Simmons being run out by a throw from Sohail Tanvir for 17 (16 balls; 1x4, 1x6).

It was then that Kallis in support from New Zealander Ross Taylor rebuild the innings.

When Afridi too bowled a tight tenth over for five runs, World Giants could muster only 49 at 3 at the halfway stage.

Although Kallis slog-swept Afridi for a six in the 12th over, runs were still hard to come.

Taylor and Kallis recorded their 50-run partnership in 7.3 overs when Kallis hit Thisara Perera for a boundary to fine leg.

Kallis reached his half-century in 41 balls lifting Perera for a six to mid-wicket. Perera struck with the third ball of the 17th over to clean bowl Taylor for 32.

The pair's 92 runs in 11.1 overs lifted World Giants to a challenging total. Paul Collingwood, who joined Kallis, was retired hurt for 6. Kallis then hit an ef-

fortless six to mid-wicket off Tanvir in the 19th over.

In the last over bowled by Udana, Kallis hit two consecutive boundaries off the second and third deliveries to remain unconquered on 78.

Chasing the target, Asia Lions' consistent openers Tharanga and Dilshan cruised smooth.

Dilshan hit Samit Patel's second and third deliveries for boundaries while Tharanga hit the fifth ball for a six over long-on.

They took 16 runs off the first over. In the second, Tharanga pulled Brett Lee for a boundary. World Giants then replaced the costly Patel with Ricardo Powell. Tharanga chopped Powell to the third man for a boundary.

Tino Best, who was introduced for the fourth over, was

also hit by Dilshan through the covers for a boundary. The pair recorded their 50 runs partnership in 4.5 overs with Tharanga hitting Powell for a six.

Tharanga smashed Powell's last ball of the fifth over too for a six to long-on. Dilshan greeted Chris Mpofu with two consecutive boundaries in the sixth over and also scored another off the fourth ball to pile up 72 runs from the powerplay.

Hoping to stop the run flow, World Giants introduced spinner Monty Panesar but too was not spared by Dilshan who drove him through extra cover for another boundary and took 13 runs off the over.

There was no impact of the bowling change. In fact, Lee was elegantly pulled for a boundary by Tharanga.

In the ninth over, Tharanga reached his half-century pulling Best for a boundary.

He had already hit four boundaries and three sixes. The 100-run partnership too came in

8.3 overs.

Asia Lions took the game totally away from World Giants with Dilshan too smashing Best for a boundary to mid-wicket and reaching his half-century in 32 balls with eight boundaries.

The 115 runs partnership ended when Lee had Tharanga clean bowled for 57.

Asia Lions needed only 33 runs in the last ten overs.

Dilshan was bowled out by Samit Patel for 58 when only 16 runs were needed for the victory in 41 balls. Mohamed Hafeez and Misbah Ul Haq steered their team to victory remaining unbeaten with nine runs each.

BRIEF SCORES
Asia Lions 148 for 3 in 16.1 overs (Upul Tharanga 57, Tillakaratne Dilshan 58) bt **World Giants 147 for 4 in 20 overs** (Jacques Kallis 78 n.o., Ross Taylor 32, Abdur Razzaq 2 for 14) by 7 wickets.
Player of the Match: Abdur Razzaq
Player of the series: Upul Tharanga



Asia Lions captain Shahid Afridi lifts the trophy as president of Qatar Cricket Association Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Saud al-Thani looks on.

TENNIS

Alcaraz routs Medvedev to bag Indian Wells trophy

"It feels amazing to lift the trophy here, to recover the No 1. I would say this has been the perfect tournament"

AFP
Indian Wells

Spain's Carlos Alcaraz swept past Daniil Medvedev 6-3, 6-2 on Sunday to win the Indian Wells ATP Masters 1000 and secure his return to number one in the world.

US Open champion Alcaraz ended Medvedev's 19-match winning streak, denying him a fourth title in as many tournaments to ensure he will supplant Australian Open champion Novak Djokovic atop the rankings.

"It feels amazing to lift the trophy here, to recover the No 1," Alcaraz said. "I would say this has been the perfect tournament."

Serbia's Djokovic, barred from entering the US because he hasn't been vaccinated against Covid-19, sat out Indian Wells and will miss the Miami Open starting this week, where Alcaraz is the defending champion.

Alcaraz, 19, who became the youngest world number one ever after his triumph at Flushing Meadows last year, claimed his third Masters 1000 title and joined compatriot Rafael Nadal as the only players to win at least three as a teenager. Nadal won six before turning 20.

He was unstoppable on Stadium Court, breaking through what he'd called the "wall" of Medvedev's formidable defences.

Medvedev, coming off titles in Rotterdam, Doha and Dubai, could find no answer as Alcaraz fired winners from all over the court, defying the windy conditions.

"Daniil obviously didn't play at his best level, but I'm very happy for my performance and how I played this tournament."

He said the big change in him since a semi-final defeat to Nadal last year at Indian Wells was his



Carlos Alcaraz of Spain poses with the trophy after defeating Daniil Medvedev of Russia during the final of the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden in Indian Wells, California. (AFP)



Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan poses with the winner's trophy after defeating Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus during the women's final. (AFP)

comfort level on the game's biggest stages. "I think my tennis didn't improve so much since last year. What I improve a lot is to not take the pressure, just to relax. That, for me, is the most important thing. That's why I show a great level, because I feel like I have no pressure. I enjoy it."

Medvedev certainly wasn't able to ratchet up the pressure on him. A stinging backhand winner gave Alcaraz an early break in the opening set as he raced to a 3-0 lead.

He gave himself a set point with a sharply angled forehand volley and sealed it with an unreturnable serve, then won the first 10 points of the second set on the way to a 4-0 lead.

He didn't face a break point as he polished it off in one hour and 11 minutes, a diving volley win-

ner giving him match point that he converted with another service winner.

"I expected a tougher match," he said. "Against him is always a tactic match, and I did perfect today. That's why it looks easy - but it wasn't."

Alcaraz has returned to number one despite a late start to the year. Injury forced him to miss the Australian Open, where Djokovic claimed a record-equaling 22nd Grand Slam title.

Since launching his season in February Alcaraz has won a title in Buenos Aires and reached the final in Rio de Janeiro. But to stay at the top he'll have to successfully defend his Miami title over the course of the next two weeks.

Medvedev, a former world number one and US Open winner himself, was disappointed

that he didn't play his best, but pleased to get past the fourth round at Indian Wells for the first time, despite twisting his ankle in a win over Alexander Zverev and cutting his thumb in another tumble against Alejandro Davídovich Fokina.

"Why didn't I play my best? I don't know. Maybe it was his ball. Maybe it was the wind, was pretty windy today, and for him it was easier to go through this wind, and that's normal. But the week was amazing," added Medvedev never a fan of the slow hard courts of Indian Wells."

Rybakina beats Sabalenka to claim Indian Wells title

Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina beat a misfiring Aryna Sabalenka 7-6(11) 6-4 on Sunday to claim the Indian Wells title and

avenge her loss to the Belarusian in the Australian Open final.

Rybakina, playing in her first WTA 1000 tournament final, saved three set points in the opening frame and was never really tested in the second where she cruised to a victory that will send her to a career-high seventh in the rankings.

The triumph in the California desert was the fourth career WTA singles title for the 23-year-old Rybakina and her first against second seed Sabalenka in five attempts.

"It's actually the first time it went my way (against her) so we'll see, hopefully we are going to play many more finals," Rybakina said during the trophy presentation before Sabalenka stepped in and joked: "I'll make sure it was the last one."

Rybakina

gave Rybakina her sixth set point of the opening frame at 12-11 in the tiebreak from where she closed it out when the Belarusian sent a forehand long.

Rybakina used a pair of breaks to bulldoze her way to a 5-2 lead in the second set before Sabalenka produced a sizzling stretch to get within 5-4.

But Rybakina sensed her opportunity and closed the deal on her first championship point opportunity when Sabalenka sent a service return into the net.

"I didn't serve that well, and it started to get a little bit more windy and I didn't adjust my serve," said Sabalenka.

"Of course I felt like she stepped in a little bit and started playing a little bit more aggressive."

Sabalenka's 10th double fault

GOLF

Moore lifts first PGA title at Valspar Championship

Reuters
Palm Harbour, Florida

After his two chief competitors missed must-putts at the 72nd hole, Taylor Moore was the last man standing at the Valspar Championship and won his first PGA Tour title on Sunday in Palm Harbor, Florida.

Moore shot a 4-under 67 in the final round to finish at 10-under 274. He beat Adam Schenk (70 Sunday) by one shot and Jordan Spieth (70) and Englishman Tommy Fleetwood (70) by two.

"(I was) just in compete mode, and watching the guys finish maybe in a play-off, maybe not," Moore told the NBC broadcast. "But it's so cool. It's so awesome. It's what I worked for."

The 29-year-old Moore recovered from a wayward tee shot at the par-4 18th at Innisbrook Resort's Copperhead Course and saved a 5 1/2-foot par. That made him the leader in the clubhouse while Schenk and Spieth were finishing up behind him.

Schenk was tied with Moore at 10 under but also drove left at No 18. Spieth was 9 under at the time and needed a birdie and a Schenk par or worse to join a play-off.

But after Schenk laid up, both Schenk and Spieth landed their approach shots short of the pin and on the wrong side of a slope in the green, their balls rolling back and off to the side.

Spieth's 51-foot birdie putt to tie Moore missed, and he flubbed his 4-foot par comebacker. Schenk hammered his par putt from 47 feet, and he had the right line but it was rolling too fast and it glanced off the cup and the pin.

"Second place being my best finish ever, I haven't had a ton of top 10s on the PGA Tour," Schenk



Taylor Moore of the US celebrates with the trophy after winning the final round of the Valspar Championship at Innisbrook Resort and Golf Club in Palm Harbour, Florida. (AFP)

said. "So, I mean, I want to close one out some day, but how many chances am I going to have, so (I thought) I'm not leaving this putt short. I'm getting it to the hole, I did and it was on line. It would have been amazing if it went in, but luckily, it hit the pin or else I would have been another 4, 5 feet behind."

On a day when only seven players broke 70, Moore shot his second round of 67 of the week. He began the day two off Schenk's lead but made five birdies - three on the back nine - and just one bogey.

Moore's previous best finish in a non-team event on tour was a T5 at last August's Wyndham Championship.

"I really wasn't worried about everybody else with how tricky

this place is. I was just really trying to focus on me and my conversations with my caddie and what I was doing. I might have been under the radar to some people watching, but I felt like I was in the golf tournament from the time I teed off today and was just excited to control what I could control and get it done."

Schenk made four birdies and three bogeys on the day. He converted crucial par saves down the stretch before the fateful bogey at the 18th.

Spieth, the 2015 Valspar winner, had three birdies and no bogeys through 15 holes. He survived a bad drive at the par-4 sixth by saving par, and he made a stellar up-and-down from the greenside bunker at the par-3 15th, placing his second shot in-

side 3 feet of the cup. But then Spieth struck his drive into the water at the par-4 16th and had to take a drop far behind the start of the fairway. He managed to sink a bogey putt from nearly 15 feet to fall to 9 under.

"I made two bad swings today. I got away with the one on 6 and I didn't get away with the one on 16," Spieth said. "Fought hard from there and made a nice bogey and then a nice couple shots on the last couple, and that 18th pin is just brutal there. You just can't rely on having a birdie that hole to that pin."

Wyndham Clark shot 70 finished fifth at 6-under 278, and two-time defending champion Sam Burns posted a 67, his best round of the week, to take sixth place at 5-under 279.

DANNY LEE PREVAILS IN PLAY-OFF TO WIN AT LIV TOURNAMENT IN ARIZONA

Marana, Arizona: New Zealand's Danny Lee fired a 2-under 69 in the third round before prevailing in a four-man play-off on Sunday to win LIV Golf Tucson in Marana, Arizona.

Lee closed his round with back-to-back birdies to finish with six against four bogeys on Sunday, leaving him tied with Mexico's Carlos Ortiz, Brendan Steele and Louis Oosthuizen of South Africa at 9-under 204 after 54 holes.

A 25-foot birdie putt on the second play-off hole then sealed the victory for Lee, who hadn't won on a tour in eight years.

"Last win I had was 2015 at Greenbrier. That was also a four-man play-off," Lee said. "Maybe it was a coincidence, I don't know. But it feels pretty amazing right now."

Despite coming up just short as an individual, Ortiz was able to celebrate as a member of Fireballs GC, which finished at 25 under to finish atop the leaderboard in team action. Sergio Garcia, Abraham Ancer and Eugenio Chacarra joined Ortiz in relishing the victory. 4Aces GC

(21 under) and Lee's squad, Iron Heads GC (19 under), finished in second and third, respectively. "It's great," Ortiz said of having his team pull out a win. "I think we've been pretty solid. We did well in Mayakoba, we finished terrible and we ended falling from the podium to sixth place, so it was nice revenge here."

Ortiz also shot the low round on Sunday, notching a 6-under 65.

Outside of the three-way tie for second place in individual play, Charles Howell III recorded an even-par 71 in the third round to finish fifth at 8-under 205. Spain's Garcia (73 on Sunday), Kevin Na (71), Australian Matt Jones (69) and Mito Pereira of Chile (67) all tied for sixth at 7 under, two strokes off the lead.

Peter Uihlein, Matthew Wolff and South African Branden Grace finished T10.

Second-round leader Marc Leishman of Australia shot a 6-over-par 77 on Sunday, causing him to slide down the leaderboard and finish in a five-way tie for 13th.

FOCUS

Els posts 3rd Champions win with one-shot victory at Hoag

Reuters
Newport Beach, California

Ernie Els returned to the site of one of his two career Champions wins to earn a third, bettering the field by a single stroke Sunday to win the Hoag Classic at Newport Beach, California.

The South African native shot a final-round 6-under 65, vaulting ahead of 12 golfers with the best scorecard turned in by any player Sunday (tied with American Scott McCarron). He had zero bogeys on the day in finishing 13 under for the tournament.

"I made two bad swings today. I got away with the one on 6 and I didn't get away with the one on 16," Els said. "Fought hard from there and made a nice bogey and then a nice couple shots on the last couple, and that 18th pin is just brutal there. You just can't rely on having a birdie that hole to that pin."

"It's been a long run, I've

played good golf, especially last year," Els said. "I had, I don't

know how many top-10s I had,

but it was many. I had a couple

seconds. Getting close and not

winning gets a little, you know,

and then having a chance now

today and missing the short



pressure-filled situation on 18, might have been his most impressive. His bunker shot that set up a 15-foot putt for the win was his shot of the day.

Americans Steve Stricker (4-under 67) and Doug Barron (1-under 70) tied for second one stroke back at 12 under. Stricker, like Els, also managed a birdie on 18, one of four on the day for him in a bogey-free round.

Germany's Bernhard Langer, who came into the day with a one-shot lead and an opportunity to become the Champions Tour's sole all-time winner, had a disappointing finish with a final-round 73.

Langer remains tied with Hale Irwin with 45 all-time victories.

Dicky Pride (67), Rob Labrant (68) and Spain's Miguel Angel Jimenez (71) tied for fourth at 11 under. Langer and McCarron finished tied for seventh at 10 under with four other golfers.

The final birdie of the day, in a

QATAR MOTORSPORT ACADEMY STUDENTS SHINE

Three Qatar Motorsport Academy (QMA) students - Bader al-Sulaiti (Max Class), Taha Hassiba (Max Class) and Tameem Hassiba (Junior Max Class) - took part in the UAE Rotax Max Challenge Round 7.2 at Al Ain Raceway. Among the young Qatari drivers, Bader al-Sulaiti impressed throughout the race weekend, placing himself in the 10th position in the qualifying round and then climbing up to seventh in the pre-final. However, a crash in the final dragged him to the 18th position while Taha finished 14th, 27.076s adrift of the winner of the Max Class - Italian Filippo Parmeggiani. Meanwhile, Tamim, competing in the Junior Max Class, also showed promise, finishing in the 21st position - 18.839s behind the race winner.

PSG lead in Ligue 1 cut after home defeat against Rennes

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain's march towards another Ligue 1 title was slowed on Sunday as they went down 2-0 at home to Rennes, a result that allowed Marseille to close the gap on the leaders to seven points with 10 games remaining.

Kylian Mbappe had an effort disallowed for off-side before Karl Toko-Ekambi put Rennes in front with a magnificent strike right on half-time. Arnaud Kalimuendo made it 2-0 three minutes after the restart against his former club, as PSG faced with a defensive injury crisis - slumped to a first home league defeat of the campaign. It is the Parisians' fourth Ligue 1 loss this season, all of them in 2023, and the second time they have been beaten by Rennes. They also lost when the teams last met in Brittany in January. Marseille responded by winning 2-1 away to Reims later, with Alexis Sanchez scoring twice.

"A defeat is always upsetting. Obviously I can't be happy with the way the match went but in the context, with the number of players we had out, we knew we were going to have difficult moments in defence," said PSG coach Christophe Galtier.

PSG only have a ninth Ligue 1 title in 11 seasons left to play for after being knocked out of the Champions League in the last 16 by Bayern Munich.

Galtier has insisted that the prospect of what would be a French record 11th top-flight title is sufficient motivation for his team, but their performance indicated otherwise.

"The objective is to win the league. Will this defeat mean the board will consider my future?

Maybe. But everything needs to be put into context," Galtier added when asked about his position.

"There are no excuses but there are reasons for it."

The result allowed Rennes to reclaim fifth place from Lille in the fight for European qualification.

"To beat Paris twice in the same season says something about us. If we are capable of taking six points out of six against such a team, it means we have progress to make so we can do that in 90 percent of our matches," said Rennes coach Bruno Genesio. PSG have been severely hampered by injuries, with Neymar recovering from ankle surgery and their defence decimated.

Achraf Hakimi, Presnel Kimpembe, Marquinhos, Sergio Ramos and Nordi Mukiele were all sidelined, leaving an almost unrecognisable back line featuring 17-year-old El Chadaille Bitsibau.

PSG have usually been able to rely on their attack for inspiration but Mbappe could not add to his 19 league goals this season and Lionel Messi

was denied by veteran Rennes goalkeeper Steve Mandanda, who was in fine form.

Cameroon international Toko-Ekambi, brought up in Paris as a PSG fan, opened the scoring with an emphatic finish past goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma after latching onto a long ball forward.

The home side were left facing an uphill struggle as they conceded again just after the interval, with Lesley Ugochukwu's low centre being turned in by Kalimuendo.

(AFP)

FOOTBALL

Xavi 'proud' after Clasico, Barca move 12 points clear of Real

'Twelve points clear at the top of La Liga, we are having an extraordinary league campaign'

AFP
Barcelona

Barcelona snatched a 2-1 Clasico win over Real Madrid with Franck Kessie's late goal on Sunday to move 12 points clear at the top of La Liga.

The victory dents Madrid's ambitions of retaining the title and leaves the Catalans close to lifting the trophy for the first time since 2019.

Carlo Ancelotti's Madrid took the lead through a Ronald Araujo own goal but Barcelona pulled level when Sergi Roberto tucked home just before half-time.

Both sides had chances to win the game and Marco Asensio struck for Madrid, but the goal was ruled offside by VAR, before Alejandro Balde set up Kessie in the 92nd minute.

"It's not definitive but it's a very important step," Xavi told reporters.

"Twelve points clear at the top of La Liga, we are having an extraordinary league campaign, I am very happy for that and proud to watch the team play."

The build-up to the match was overshadowed by Barcelona's corruption charge in the "Casos Negreira" refereeing scandal.

Madrid joined Spanish prosecutors' complaint against Barcelona last week and their president Florentino Perez snubbed the game for the first time in over 20 years, amid rising tensions between the two Spanish giants.

That fed the match's intensity, both on and off the pitch, in Xavi's sixth Clasico as Barcelona



Barcelona's Franck Kessie celebrates with teammates after scoring his team's second goal during the Spanish league match against Real Madrid CF at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona yesterday. (AFP)

coach but only his first at Camp Nou.

Xavi asked fans to make the stadium a pressure cooker and they responded, selling it out, whistling Madrid in possession and conjuring one of the best atmospheres of the season.

However, they fell behind in unfortunate circumstances. Araujo deflected Vinicius' cross in at the near post, with Ter Ste-

gen helpless.

Araujo, playing at right-back to counteract the Brazilian, has enjoyed his duels with Vinicius in the past but this time the winger triumphed, albeit fortuitously. Barcelona supporters became enraged by his emphatic celebration in front of them.

It was the first goal from open play Barcelona have conceded at Camp Nou in La Liga all season

long, and only the second strike at home and ninth overall.

Barcelona complained defender Nacho, already booked, should have been sent off for a hand-off on Raphinha.

The hosts did not get their wish, but were building up steam and found the breakthrough just before half-time, from an unlikely source.

Selected in place of injured

midfielder Pedri, Sergi Roberto was in the right place at the right time to control a loose ball in the box and arc it beyond Courtois.

Barcelona had significantly more possession than in their cup win over Madrid and significantly more chances, but Madrid nearly won it.

Madrid substitute Asensio fired home but the goal was ruled out for offside after a nervy wait for VAR instruction.

"We did not win because of an offside that we're still doubtful about," complained Ancelotti.

"I was not so sure. We have doubts about it, and we go back to Madrid with this doubt."

Barcelona seemed content with the draw but Kessie's last-gasp strike sparked wild celebrations at Camp Nou.

"I don't have the feeling (the league is won) but I understand the fans singing 'campeones - it's a considerable advantage but we can't relax,'" added Xavi.

"The atmosphere was extraordinary, how the fans supported the team."

Earlier Real Sociedad held on to fourth place with a 2-0 win over Elche on Sunday. They are under pressure from Real Betis and Villarreal who both won too.

Betis, fifth, are three points behind the Basque side after they beat Mallorca 1-0, while Villarreal, sixth, thrashed Osasuna 3-0 on the road and sit four points behind the Andalusiens.

Sevilla fell to a disappointing 2-0 defeat at Getafe as their topsy-turvy season continued, leaving Jorge Sampaoli's side 14th and two points above the drop zone.

Napoli now only need 15 more points to guarantee the league title, even if Lazio win all of their remaining 11 matches. Without the deduction, Juve would still trail Napoli by 15 points.

The only negatives for Juve were substitute Federico Chiesa limping off with seven minutes remaining and Leandro Paredes being red carded alongside Inter's Danilo

RAMSEY BACKS WALES TO PROSPER IN POST-BALE ERA

Aaron Ramsey believes a new generation of Wales players can forge their own success after Gareth Bale's retirement.

Midfielder Ramsey is the new national captain, replacing former Real Madrid and Tottenham forward Bale, who called time on his career in January.

Bale, Wales' record goal-scorer and most-capped player, was not the only senior star to quit international football after the World Cup in Qatar. Chris Gunter, Joe Allen and Jonny Williams also retired from Wales duty after a golden era that included a run to the Euro 2016 semi-finals.

Wales manager Rob Page is ushering in a new era and Ramsey is confident there are enough

emerging youngsters to keep his country in contention during the Euro 2024 qualifying campaign. "Gareth, Joe, Jonny, Gunters have been instrumental for us over the years and will forever be a part of Welsh history," Nice midfielder Ramsey, 32, said yesterday.

"We will be forever grateful for what they brought to this team, this nation, and we'll miss those players around the place. "But football is forever changing and there'll be opportunities for these younger players to step up and show what they're capable of. Hopefully now we can create our own history." Wales are hoping to make a third successive appearance at the European

Championship in Germany next year. They face Croatia in Split on Saturday before hosting Latvia on March 28. Armenia and Turkey complete the Group D line-up. The qualifiers follow a poor 2022 World Cup campaign in Qatar. Page's side scored only once and finished bottom of their group in their first appearance at a World Cup since 1958. "It was disappointing," said former Arsenal and Juventus player Ramsey. "You have a big build-up going into it, the first time for many years Wales had qualified. "You want to go there and show what you are capable of doing, but we didn't quite get to the level we are used to."

Tottenham defender Ben Davies

has been ruled out of the two qualifiers, replaced in the squad by Morgan Fox.

Richardson, Marquinhos out of Brazil-Morocco friendly

Tottenham forward Richardson and Paris Saint-Germain defender Marquinhos will both miss Brazil's friendly against Morocco on March 25 due to injury, joining star Neymar on the absent list, the team said. The new injuries leave the five-time world champions without a string of top players as they prepare to take on surprise World Cup semi-finalists Morocco in Tangier in their first match since Qatar. Richardson, 25, left the pitch in tears Saturday after suf-

ferring an injury early in Tottenham's 3-3 draw at Southampton. "National team doctor Rodrigo Lasmar contacted Richardson's club, and established that the athlete will not be fit to play for the friendly," the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) said in a statement late Saturday.

Marquinhos, 28, is still recovering from a muscle injury in his abdomen and will not be fit in time, it added. Interim Brazil coach Ramon Menezes called up 22-year-old Yuri Alberto of Sao Paulo club Corinthians to replace Richardson and 26-year-old Bremer of Juventus to replace Marquinhos, the CBF said. It will be Yuri Alberto's first cap.

(AFP)



Juventus' Filipe Kostic celebrates after scoring against Inter Milan in Milan on Sunday. (Reuters)