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Knicks' Julius Randle scores 57, Wolves still prevail



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Rafa Nadal out of top 10 for the first time since 2005



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# GULF TIMES SPORT



CRICKET

Klaasen clubs lightning ton as South Africa beat West Indies

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INTERNATIONAL U-23 FRIENDLY CHAMPIONSHIP

# Hosts Qatar to open against UAE today

COACH SAYS IT IS A GOOD OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUNG PLAYERS TO IMPRESS

QNA  
Doah

Coach of the Qatar Olympic football team Bruno Miguel Pinheiro, says the national Olympic team will make great gains during its participation in the International U-23 Friendly Championship for Asian teams which kicks off across Qatar's stadiums from today.

Qatar's young stars will meet the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the opening match at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium at 10pm today. The tournament will be held from March 22-28. Competing in a regional roundhouse, Qatar will compete alongside the likes of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Iraq, United Arab Emirates, Thailand, Kyrgyzstan, South Korea and Vietnam. Addressing a pre-match media briefing, Pinheiro said that the tournament is a great opportunity to prepare the team for the upcoming Asian Cup finals, pointing out that there are many new players whose abilities will be judged during the matches.

Pinheiro, who led the Qatari Olympic team to the WAFF Championship runners-up finish last November, said, "We are waiting for the best from all players and we are looking for the best preparation to ensure that we reach the required fitness. We have undergone some preliminary preparations during the past days, and we will try to make the most of it."

UAE's Spanish coach Denis Silva said that he also wants his players to make the most of the opportunity to gain experience during the competitions with the presence of 10 new players in the team. For his part, Saad al-Shehri, coach of the Saudi national U-23 team, said the tournament provides players the chance to play with several teams, thanking the Qatar Football Association (QFA) for hosting the tournament.

The coach, who led the Saudi to the West Asian Championship title, said, "Our goals are clear in this preparatory tournament, centred on implementing the programme that was set by the Saudi federation, and we look forward to exploring more players and giving the opportunity to some new faces against Thailand tomorrow will undoubtedly be difficult. Especially since it is a good team and has a distinguished group of talented players."

He stressed that the Saudi national team's winning of the last Asian championship bears a greater responsibility and the group is moving step by step and that



Qatar U-23 team coach Bruno Miguel Pinheiro with his players during a training session in Doha.

there was also a need to pump new blood at this stage to maintain the quality of the team.

Issara Sariharu, coach of the Thailand national team, stated that he is looking at good competition with some of the best teams in the continent in this age group. He said: "We are here to develop and improve the performance of the Thai national team, and we want to stand at the level of all players."

Portuguese coach Emilio Peixe of the Kuwait team expects the competition to be strong in view of the strength of the participating teams. "What matters is developing the players' performance and level in order to enter strongly into the next stage," he said.

In the same context, Kyrgyzstan coach Letsim Maxim said that participation will be important for his national team after the promotion of a number of new players from the youth team. He also expressed his great admiration for the stadiums in Qatar, which is also an opportunity for

his team to prepare appropriately for the upcoming qualifiers. Radi Shenaishel, the coach of the Iraqi team, expressed his great happiness in participating in the tournament, indicating that he aspires to make the most of this participation, especially in the presence of many strong teams, thanking QFA for organising this tournament, which represents an opportunity to play many matches in perfect time and will help evaluate his team's performance level.

The Iraq coach concluded: "Our goal is to prepare the Iraqi national team for the West Asian Championship next June, then the qualifiers for the Asian Cup finals, and some professional players will join, who will be a great addition to the team."

Oman's coach Akram Habreesh said that the benefit will be great for all participating teams, considering that playing with different styles is very important before entering the next qualifying stage.

QFA announced the schedule to be held in three rounds, with the participation of

Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, Kyrgyzstan, Iraq, Sultanate of Oman and Saudi Arabia, where the first round will witness five matches and the same in the second round, and based on the results of the first and second rounds, positions will be determined from 1 to 10, and the third and final round meetings will determine the final positions. The tournament comes as part of the teams' preparation for the U-23 Asian Cup finals, which qualifies for the 2024 Paris Olympics, which will be held in Doha.

**Qatar squad:** Khaled Ali, Mohamed Siraj, Osama al-Tiri, Tamim Mansour, Abdullah al-Yazidi, Abdul Rahman Rashid, Abdullah al-Sulaiti, Jassim Jaber, Amir Hassan, Abdulaziz Mohamed, Theyab Haroun, Mohamed Emad, Saif al-Din Hassan, Abdullah Yousef, Faisal Mohamed, Youssef Blida, Ellis Hamid, Abdul Rahman Mohamed, Mohamed Khaled, Ali Nader, Ali al-Marri, Mohamed al-Mannai, Mohamed Hassan.

## 'Past, present & future' Zlatan back in Sweden squad after knee injury

**STOCKHOLM:** Sweden welcomed back Zlatan Ibrahimovic from a knee injury yesterday ahead of their opening European Championship qualifier, with the record international goal-scorer cheekily declaring himself the past, present and future of the side.

The 41-year-old recently returned from a 14-month injury layoff and scored a penalty for AC Milan against Udinese to become the oldest player ever to score in Italy's Serie A. He is now setting his sights on the opening Euro qualifier with Belgium on Friday in Stockholm.

Asked whether he intended to take his side all the way to the finals in Germany next year, Ibra gave a tongue-in-cheek response reminiscent of his more bombastic younger self.

"If I feel good and I'm selected by the coach, I will help him, the team and the country to do my best. So I think at my age you cannot think future, you think present - even if I am the past, present and the future," he said with a wry smile.

The striker, who is Sweden's top scorer with 62 goals in 121 games but without an international goal since November 2015, revealed that he had undergone three knee operations in the last 14 months.

"Basically, my knee was swollen for eight, nine months, but then suddenly, one month ago, something happened and then everything became positive, and I got energy from it," he explained at a media conference.

"From there, we could work more and more, so from standing still for eight months, suddenly I could move normally, and then from normal I tried to play the game, and it became good, and from there I step it up."

Last Saturday, Ibrahimovic captained AC Milan against Udinese in his first start since the injury, and though his penalty represented another milestone in his glittering career, his joy was tempered by the fact that the game finished 1-1.

"I had the honour to be the captain for my team and I didn't win the game, so the outcome could have been better if I won the game, but I didn't," he said, but he showed he was glad to be back playing football at the highest level again.

"That is important to me, because I'm not here for charity... I'm here to play my game, to provide and bring results through my performance. Hopefully I can continue to do that, but at the same time feeling healthy," he said.



Sweden's forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic attends a training session in Solna yesterday, ahead of the Euro qualifier against Belgium to be played on Friday. (AFP)

FOCUS

# Al Duhail to face Al Sadd in exciting Ooredoo Cup semi-final



Al Sadd's Algerian striker Baghdad Bounedjah is seen during a team training session ahead of the team's Ooredoo Cup semi-final against Al Duhail tomorrow.

Agencies  
Doha

**A**l Duhail face Al Sadd in the semi-final of 2022-2023 season Ooredoo Cup at the Qatar SC Stadium tomorrow.

The kick-off is at 21:45. The face-off between the heavyweights is expected to witness great excitement.

Al Duhail made it to the knockout semi-finals by topping Group B with 13 points (four wins and one draw). The Red Knights were the only unbeaten side in the group.

Al Arabi, Al Gharafa, Al Rayyan, Al Shamal and Al Markhiya,

who finished in that order, were the other teams in Group B.

On the other hand, Al Sadd reached the semi-finals as runners-up of Group A with nine points (three wins and two losses).

Umm Salal, Al Sadd, Qatar SC, Al Ahli, Al Wakrah and Al Saliya, who finished in that order, constituted Group A.

Both teams are doing well, with Al Duhail leading the 2022-2023 season QNB Stars League standings with 39 points and Al Sadd occupying the third place with 32 points.

They both faced off recently in the league's postponed match from Week 10, which ended in a thrilling 2-2 draw.

The match will also see tactical battle between coaches Herman Crespo of Al Duhail and Juanma of Al Sadd, who both are good at making the best use of available resources.

Both sides include a number of outstanding players.

Al Duhail have the likes of league top scorer Michael Olunga, Almoez Ali, Nam Tae-Hee, Ferjani Sassi and Ismail Mohamed.

Al Sadd rely more on their spearhead Baghdad Bounedjah, Akram Afif, Santi Cazorla and Hassan al-Haydous.

**UMM SALAL FACE AL ARABI**  
Umm Salal face Al Arabi in the other semi-final at the Al Sadd

Stadium. The kick-off is at 21:45. Umm Salal qualified for the knockout semi-final by topping Group A with 13 points (four wins and one draw). The Orange Fortress were the only unbeaten side in the group.

Al Sadd, Qatar SC, Al Ahli, Al Wakrah and Al Saliya, who finished in that order, were the other teams in the group.

On the other hand, Al Arabi progressed to the semi-final as runners-up of Group B with 10 points (three wins, one draw and a defeat).

Al Duhail, Al Arabi, Al Gharafa, Al Rayyan, Al Shamal and Al Markhiya finished in that order in the group.

No doubt, both coaches Talal

El Karkouri of Umm Salal and Younes Ali of Al Arabi will be adopting special strategies for their wards to advance to the final.

Umm Salal and Al Arabi are having contrasting fortunes in the 2022-2023 season QNB Stars League.

Al Arabi are second in the table with 37 points, just two points adrift of Al Duhail, while Umm Salal are languishing at the 11th place with 13 points.

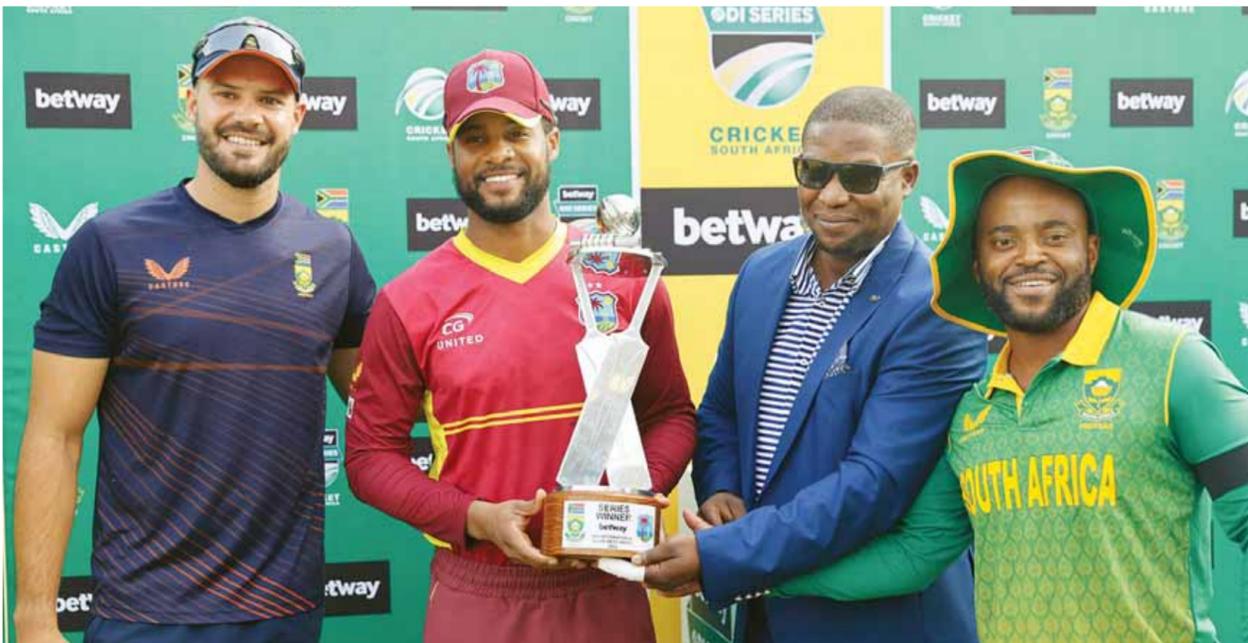
However, Ooredoo Cup is a different ball game altogether, as proved by Umm Salal while emerging as the Group A winners.

So, the game promises to be lively.

CRICKET

# Klaassen smashes ton as South Africa beat West Indies

The three-match ODI series is shared after Heinrich Klaassen hits 119 not out



South Africa's Aiden Markram (left), West Indies' Shai Hope (second left), North West Cricket (NWC) president Tebogo Motshabane (second right) and South Africa's Temba Bavuma pose for a group photograph following the third one-day international (ODI) at JB Marks Oval in Potchefstroom yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters  
Potchefstroom, South Africa

Heinrich Klaassen smashed an unbeaten 119 from 61 balls as South Africa eased to a four-wicket victory over West Indies in the third and final one-day international at Senwes Park yesterday, ensuring the honours are shared in the series.

South Africa won the toss and elected to bowl, restricting the tourists to 260 all out.

They got into trouble early on in their reply as they slipped to 87-4, only to cruise to victory thanks to Klaassen's power hitting with an astonishing 123 balls remaining in the innings.

"It's a pretty good wicket and that is one of my better knocks," Klaassen said at the post-match presentation.

"We tried to play to the conditions, not the situation, and I had to fight fire with fire early on against some excellent bouncers from Alzarri (Joseph).

"But the conditions dictate how aggressive you can be and it's great to get the team over the line."

The home side were without in-form captain Temba Bavuma who pulled out due to a hamstring injury, and they rested regulars Quinton de Kock, Kagiso Rabada and Anrich Nortje.

The West Indies innings was boosted



South Africa's Heinrich Klaassen in action against West Indies in the third ODI at Senwes Park, Potchefstroom, South Africa, yesterday.

by a run-a-ball 72 from opener Brandon King, but Nicholas Pooran (39) and Jason Holder (36) were the only two others to post solid scores on an otherwise good wicket for batting.

There were some wild shots from the visitors as they seemed determined to attack every ball, and more patience and concentration might have seen them post a target over 300.

South Africa made a poor start to their own innings, however, as they lost four wickets inside 13 overs.

But then it was Klaassen's time to shine. First he put on 55 with David Miller (17), and then added 103 for the sixth wicket together with all-rounder Marco Jansen, who scored a career-best 43 from 33 balls, before the latter became the third victim for the pick of the West Indies bowlers, Joseph (3-50).

Klaassen reached his second ODI century in 54 balls and saw the innings through to the end as South Africa avenged their 48-run defeat in the second ODI on Saturday.

The first game was washed out by rain without a ball bowled.

"They clearly outplayed us today," West Indies captain Shai Hope said.

"I thought we batted well in parts but were not good enough with the ball today," Hope added.

"We only have ourselves to blame. You can't concede 260-odd in 29 overs," Hope said.

The teams start a three-match Twenty20 International series in Pretoria on Saturday.

**BRIEF SCORES**  
South Africa 264 for 6 (Klaassen 119\*, Joseph 3-50) beat West Indies 260 for 9 (King 72, Fortuin 2-46) by four wickets  
Series: 1-1 shared

SPOTLIGHT

## Gary Stead points at separate coaches for New Zealand Test, white ball teams

Reuters  
Wellington

New Zealand head coach Gary Stead says it is time for the Black Caps to have separate coaches guiding the Test and white ball teams to help ease the demands on staff.

Stead has held both roles since succeeding Mike Hesson in 2018, guiding New Zealand to the final of the 50-over 2019 World Cup and the inaugural World Test Championship (WTC) title in 2021.

He hopes to continue coaching New Zealand when his contract expires after this year's World Cup in India.

"I think it's time that we do need to split off and look at it," the 51-year-old told reporters in Wellington yesterday.

"I think the modern game is becoming very, very tough for players and coaches to try and sustain everything across that whole period of time and New Zealand Cricket and I are definitely talking about that as an option."

New Zealand capped the home Test summer on Monday with an innings and 58-run win over Sri Lanka to sweep the series 2-0.

New Zealand's WTC title defence is already over but they won their last three Tests of the cycle and can look forward to the next championship with optimism.

Stead will now turn his attention to coaching the Black Caps in three ODIs and three T20Is against Sri Lanka starting at Eden Park on Saturday, with a slew of regulars such as Kane Williamson absent to play in the Indian Premier League.

Stead suggested his preference was to continue coaching the Test team if still in charge when the squad assembles for a tour of Bangladesh after the World Cup



in October-November.

However, he said he would not rule himself out of the job if New Zealand Cricket wanted him to continue overseeing the white ball teams as well.

Despite the comprehensive series win over Sri Lanka, New Zealand's bowling depth remains a concern following Trent Boult and all-rounder Colin de Grandhomme's decisions to opt out of their national contracts.

Kyle Jamieson is recovering from back surgery while 37-year-old fellow pacer Neil Wagner is sidelined with a serious hamstring strain and carried a back problem through the home summer.

None of New Zealand's fast bowling reinforcements offered a compelling case for their retention, though Blair Tuckner battled hard against the Wellington wind to take 3-84 in Sri Lanka's second innings on Monday.

Selectors opted against calling up Boult for the home test series against England and Sri Lanka, and Stead said it was still too early to confirm the former pacer spearhead would join New Zealand's bid for a first 50-over World Cup title in India.

"Trent and I will be talking in the near future before he goes to the IPL and just trying to, I guess, work out where we both lie with expectations as well," the New Zealand coach said.

### Ireland prepare for Bangladesh ODI



Ireland's Ross Adair bats in nets during a practice session at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium in Sylhet ahead of their third one-day international (ODI) against Bangladesh. (AFP)

### Rashid to lead strong Afghan squad for Pakistan series

Kabul: Wily spinner Rashid Khan will lead a strong 17-man Afghanistan squad in the Twenty20 international series against Pakistan starting in Sharjah this week, selectors announced yesterday. The three-match series, the first bilateral between the neighbours, will be played in Sharjah on March 24, 26 and 27.

Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) chief executive Naseeb Khan said the best available players had been chosen.

"Our team has been working hard in training camp and selectors have selected the best available players for the series," he said in a press release.

"I am confident that our team will perform at their best and make our nation proud."

Former captain Mohamed Nabi, who stepped down after the Twenty20 World Cup in November, is also part of the squad. Dashing opener Hazratullah Zai and middle-order batter Rahmat Shah have been dropped from the squad. Left-handed opener Sediqullah Atal has been added, and could make his debut for Afghanistan in the series.

**Squad:** Rashid Khan (captain), Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Ibrahim Zadran, Usman Ghani, Sediqullah Atal, Najibullah Zadran, Afsar Zazai, Karim Janat, Mohamed Nabi, Azmatullah Omarzai, Gulbadin Naib, Sharafuddin Ashraf, Noor Ahmad, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, Fareed Ahmad, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Naveen-ul-Haq.



CYCLING

# Ciccone wins as Catalunya mountain takes toll on Ineos

AFP  
Valter 2000, Spain

Giulio Ciccone won a tortuous, mountainous slog on stage two of the Tour de Catalunya yesterday just ahead of Primož Roglic and Remco Evenepoel.

The trio had chased down and overtaken Colombian climber Esteban Chaves over the final 500m of a twisting shoelace climb to set up a pulsating struggle to the summit finish at a snowy 2,150m altitude.

The result leaves Slovenian Roglic in the overall lead on a race already bearing the familiar pattern of Jumbo-Visma's black and yellow tunics heading up the main peloton.

Trek's Ciccone led the Tour de France as a rookie after claiming the fabled yellow jersey at La Planche des Belles Filles in 2019.

Here the Italian's performance earned him the King of the Mountains jersey on a Tour where it takes on particular significance due to its mountain-packed route.

"This is the most beautiful win of my career, a magical day," said Ciccone. "It was a really fast climb from the bottom of the ascent, Bahrain

made a good tempo and then Chaves attacked, but in my mind, I knew I just had to follow Evenepoel and Roglic," he said afterwards. "So I followed their wheels and then I did my best in the last 500 metres. In the last couple of weeks, I've lost many times, especially with Roglic - he's won everything. But after a long climb, here we're arriving at 2,000 metres of altitude and everything changes. I felt good, and I did my best."

Pretenders Mikel Landa, Jai Hindley and Joao Almeida were all close at the finish of a 164km ride featuring three climbs.

Adam Yates won here the last two times the Tour of Catalunya passed but he fell on Monday and rolled across the line battered and 10mins behind. Former Tour de France and Giro d'Italia winner Egan Bernal fell off the pace dropping 2min 45sec and seems to be still recovering from a life threatening accident 16 months ago.

Bernal's Ineos teammate Geraint Thomas also dropped 2min 24sec on stage two as the Welsh veteran played it cool.

The race left the seaside town of Mataro, a 30-minute drive north of Barcelona in bright sunshine headed for the ski resort of Vallter in the Catalan Pyrenees led by an eight rider break that would be caught at the foot of the final climb.



Team Trek-Segafredo's Italian rider Giulio Ciccone celebrates as he crosses the finish line first during the 2nd stage of the 2023 Tour of Catalonia cycling race, covering a distance 165.5kms from Mataro to Vallter, yesterday. (AFP)

BASKETBALL

# Knicks' Randle scores 57 but Timberwolves still prevail

The Timberwolves needed every bit of Prince's effort to overcome a 57-point performance by Randle

Reuters  
New York

**T** aurean Prince outdueled Julius Randle in a battle of performances that flirted with history Monday night, hitting all eight of his 3-point shots and scoring the insurance basket with 10.4 seconds remaining as the visiting Minnesota Timberwolves edged the New York Knicks 140-134.

Prince racked up 35 points and finished one 3-pointer shy of tying the NBA record for most 3-pointers without a miss, held by Ben Gordon (twice) and Latrell Sprewell. Prince is just the seventh player to hit at least eight 3-pointers without a miss.

The Timberwolves needed every bit of Prince's effort to overcome a 57-point performance by Randle, who tied Richie Guerin (Dec. 11, 1959, against the Syracuse Nationals) for the third-most points in a game in team history and finished five points shy of tying Carmelo Anthony's franchise mark, set Jan. 24, 2014, against the Charlotte Hornets.

Mike Conley (24 points, 11 assists) had a double-double for the Timberwolves, who snapped a three-game losing streak. Jaden McDaniels scored 18 points while Rudy Gobert had 16. Jalen Brunson supplied 23 points for the Knicks.

**Bulls 109, 76ers 105 (20T)**  
Zach LaVine scored 26 points, DeMar DeRozan added 25 and Chicago outlasted host Philadelphia 76ers.

DeRozan hit consecutive shots to tie the game before LaVine and Coby White sealed the victory with two free throws apiece in the final 51.4 seconds of the second overtime. Joel Embiid had 37 points, 16 rebounds and three blocked shots for the Sixers. Embiid fouled out with 3:54 remaining in the second extra period trying to block LaVine's shot.

Embiid's driving layup gave the Sixers a 99-97 advantage with 47.6 seconds left in the first overtime, but DeRozan tied the game at 99 on a layup with 37 seconds to go. Following a turnover by James Harden, the Bulls had one last chance to win the game but DeRozan misfired on a 3-pointer to force a second extra session.

**Jazz 128, Kings 120**  
Rookie Ochai Agbaji scored a career-high 27 points to lead short-handed Utah to a victory over Sacramento in Salt Lake City. Agbaji, who led Kansas to the NCAA championship a year ago, made several key plays down the stretch to help the Jazz win despite the absence of injured starters Lauri Markkanen (back), Jordan Clarkson (finger) and Collin Sexton (hamstring). Kelly Olynyk tallied 19 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists for Utah.

De'Aaron Fox produced 37 points and seven assists and Keegan Murray had 22 points, but the Kings saw their three-game winning streak end. A Domantas Sabonis dunk cut the gap to 123-120, but Agbaji restored a five-point advantage with a pair of free throws with 41.3 seconds remaining and Utah closed it out.



New York Knicks forward Julius Randle (30) drives to the basket against Minnesota Timberwolves forward Kyle Anderson (5) during the fourth quarter of their NBA game at Madison Square Garden. (USA TODAY Sports)

**Hornets 115, Pacers 109**  
Kelly Oubre Jr. scored 28 points and Charlotte wiped out a 21-point first-half deficit to defeat visiting Indiana. Terry Rozier racked up 23

points and Gordon Hayward hit a pair of key fourth-quarter baskets to finish with 22 points as the Hornets snapped a four-game losing streak by winning the finale of a five-game homestand.

Nick Richards supplied 14 points and a career-high 17 rebounds. Myles Turner and Buddy Hield both had 20 points for the Pacers, who couldn't overcome a five-minute scoring drought down

the stretch. Benedict Mathurin notched 18 points, Isaiah Jackson had 12 and Jalen Smith added 10.

**Warriors 121, Rockets 108**  
Stephen Curry and Klay Thomp-

son combined for 59 points as Golden State snapped an 11-game road losing streak with a victory over Houston.

Curry finished with 30 points, seven rebounds and five assists while Thompson added 29 points and seven rebounds. They combined to shoot 21-for-44 overall and 10-for-28 from 3-point range to pace the Warriors.

Jonathan Kuminga chipped in 17 points off the bench for Golden State, which won on the road for the first time since a Jan. 30 victory at Oklahoma City. All five starters scored in double figures for the Rockets. Rookie Tari Eason posted his seventh double-double with 21 points and 12 boards while fellow rookie Jabari Smith Jr. also recorded a double-double with 17 points and 11 rebounds.

**Grizzlies 112, Mavericks 108**  
Memphis trailed by 13 points at the end of three quarters but outscored Dallas 29-12 in the fourth to earn a hard-fought home win.

Jaren Jackson Jr. played most of the game in foul trouble but led Memphis with 28 points, while Santi Aldama scored 22 points and grabbed a career-high 14 boards to earn his fourth double-double of the season. Kyrie Irving led Dallas with a team-high 28 points. He also added four rebounds and two blocks.

Jackson picked up his fourth and fifth fouls within a span of three seconds and he left the game with 7:10 left in the third. With Jackson out, the Mavericks outscored the Grizzlies 22-16 the remainder of the quarter and took a 96-83 lead into the final frame before Memphis came back.

TENNIS

# Nadal out of top 10 for first time since 2005

Reuters  
London

**R**afael Nadal's absence from Indian Wells saw the 22-times Grand Slam champion slip out of the top 10 for the first time since 2005 on Monday but the Spaniard will still be the "man to beat" at the French Open if he can get back to full fitness.

Nadal was forced to skip the Masters 1000 event in California, where he reached the final last year, as he continues his recovery from a hip issue that ended his Australian Open title defence in the second round in January.

Unable to defend the 600 points from Indian Wells resulted in Nadal dropping four places to 13th in the rankings, ending his record 912-week stay inside the top 10, which began when current number one Carlos Alcaraz was not even two years old.

However, with Nadal preparing to return to action at the Monte Carlo Masters next month ahead of the French Open, which he has won 14 times in his career, his time outside the top 10 might be short.

World number four Casper Ruud, who lost to Nadal in the Roland Garros final last year, said he would not be shocked to see the 36-year-old lift the trophy once again.

"It wouldn't surprise me because he'll probably use these weeks and these months, as he's preparing for exactly Roland Garros," Ruud told *Eurosport* as part of the 'Ruud Talk' series. "It doesn't matter if he loses in Monte Carlo or Rome or Madrid. The only thing that's probably on his mind these days is just to be fit, be healthy and be ready for Roland Garros."



Spain's Rafael Nadal during his second round match against Mackenzie Mcdonald of the US at the Australian Open in Melbourne in this January 18, 2023, file photo. (Reuters)

Tennis lost two of its greats when Serena Williams and Roger Federer bowed out of the sport last year, but Nadal and rival Novak Djokovic are still soldiering on.

Djokovic, who turns 36 in May, has shown few signs of slowing down and drew level with Nadal on 22 Grand Slams by winning the Australian Open.

"For the whole tennis world it would be nice to see one last showdown at Roland Garros," former US Open champion Dominic Thiem said, adding that Djokovic would be favourite to win the remaining Grand Slams this year.

"The only tournament is Roland Garros: if Rafa is fit there, it's exactly the opposite. He's the man to beat when he won the tournament 14 times, it's crazy!"

**Swiatek, Shelton sign up with Federer-backed Swiss sportswear brand**  
Women's world number one Iga Swiatek has agreed a deal with Swiss sportswear brand On and will don their gear starting from this week's Miami Open.

Reigning French and US Open champion Swiatek from Poland becomes the first female tennis player to join the elite roster of On, which has Swiss great Roger Federer on board as a co-entrepreneur.

"It has been very inspirational for me to develop my ideas and needs with them, working on my current and future gear. On's core values are what connects me with the company," Swiatek said in a statement. On, which also signed rising American player Ben Shelton, did not disclose financial details of the deals.

FOCUS

# Series of sport events lined up for women in Ramadan

QNA  
Doha

**Q**atar Women's Sport Committee (QWSC) is keen in its Ramadan activities to provide the opportunity for women to enjoy activities during the holy month of Ramadan, after the committee succeeded over the past years in achieving a positive association between the holy month and sports.

As part of the committee's preparations for the activities targeting women and girls during the holy month, two competitions will be organised in padel in co-operation with Padel Qatar from March 26 to 29.

The committee also announced that it is in the process of organising Ramadan activities in co-operation with Qatar Sports for All Federation (QSFA) in two tournaments; the first is for indoor football, and the second is for volleyball, as part of the joint co-operation between the federation and the committee. Registration to participate in these events is expected to witness a high turnout.

President of Qatar Women's Sports Committee Lolwa al-Marri told Qatar News Agency (QNA) that the committee has close co-operation with a number of institutions in the country in organising sport events for women, and based on the success and great turnout in previous years, it continues this co-operation during the holy month of Ramadan in organising competitions in padel, volleyball, and indoor football, out of the belief in the importance of sport.

Al-Marri added that the committee's message is that all girls and women in Qatar have the opportunity to benefit from the participation in sports, with a focus on providing them with opportunities to participate in sports activities and to make them part of their lives.

In the same context, Execu-

utive Director of the committee Amna al-Qasimi said that QWSC is keen, in all its sports and community activities, to provide an integrated environment for women and girls, especially during the holy month, to enjoy a distinguished package of activities designated for them.

She noted that the committee's goals are based on encouraging women to participate in sports and improving their lives. Al-Qasimi added that mothers can participate in various sports activities with their kids in Ramadan through fitness competitions.

QWSC's Executive Director hailed the turnout in the past years for the events organised by the committee, stressing that registration in the events organised by the committee in Ramadan is available to age groups from 16 years and above. She also appreciated the great role that the committee plays with sports institutions in the country, in order to organise special competitions for

women during Ramadan. On the other hand, the Qatar Golf Association will organise a competition during the holy month, part of which will be devoted to women.

Female golfer in Qatar's national golf team Yasmin al-Sharshani affirmed that she is keen to practice in sports during Ramadan in order to maintain her physical fitness.

Moreover, Qatar Shooting & Archery Association will organise competitions in Ramadan with the participation of the Qatari women's team. In this context, national team female shooter Reem al-Sharshani said that every year she participates in the competitions organised by the Association in Ramadan, in order to maintain her physical fitness, especially in this holy month.

She added that she is preparing to participate in many competitions during the current year. Therefore, she is keen to train during Ramadan in order to be in perfect readiness for local and international events.

## Navratilova reveals she is 'cancer-free' after double diagnosis

**London:** Martina Navratilova has revealed she is now "cancer-free" after the tennis great feared she "may not see next Christmas" following a devastating double diagnosis.

The former world number one, who won 18 Grand Slam singles titles during her long career, revealed in January she had been diagnosed with throat and breast cancer. The 66-year-old is due to undergo further preventative radiation treatment but said in an interview with Piers Morgan on *Talk TV*

she should then "be good to go". "As far as they know I'm cancer-free," she said in the interview due to be aired later today, excerpts of which were reported in the British press. Navratilova, winner of 59 Grand Slam titles in singles and doubles, revealed her diagnosis had left her fearing the worst. "I was in a total panic for three days thinking I may not see next Christmas," she said. "The bucket list came into my mind of all the things I wanted to do. And this may sound really shallow, but I was like, 'OK, which

kick-ass car do I really want to drive if I live like a year?'" Navratilova, who previously underwent treatment for early-stage breast cancer in 2010, sought medical help after noticing an enlarged lymph node in her neck, with tests subsequently confirming she had cancer. She added: "This was the first week in December. (I'm thinking) I will see this Christmas but maybe not the next one." But doctors were able to tell her the throat cancer was "extremely treatable"

## FOCUS

# Mbappe named new France captain after Lloris retirement

'Kylian ticks all the boxes to have this responsibility. On the pitch as well as within the squad'

AFP  
Clairfontaine-en-Yvelines, France

**K**ylian Mbappe will take over as captain of France after Hugo Lloris stepped down following the World Cup final defeat to Argentina, a source close to the team has told AFP.

Paris Saint-Germain forward Mbappe, 24, accepted the role after discussions with coach Didier Deschamps.

His first game as captain will be Friday's Euro 2024 qualifier against the Netherlands at the Stade de France, Les Bleus' first match since their World Cup final disappointment in Doha on December 18.

Speaking to French outlet Telfoot, Deschamps said: "Kylian Mbappe is the new France captain. Antoine Griezmann is the vice-captain.

"Kylian ticks all the boxes to have this responsibility. On the pitch as well as within the squad, by being a key element."

Tottenham goalkeeper Lloris, 36, brought an end to his international career in January, in the weeks after Lionel Messi's Argentina side beat the French in a penalty shootout following a thrilling match that ended 3-3 in extra-time.

Lloris had been skipper for more than a decade.

Atletico Madrid attacker Antoine Griezmann was named vice-captain after Manchester United centre-back Raphael Varane also hung up his boots following the defeat to Argentina in December.

Mbappe, who scored a hat-trick in the World Cup final defeat, had been heavily linked with the captain's role for weeks.

Michel Platini, who captained France to victory in the 1984 Eu-



In this file photo taken on December 18, 2022 France's Kylian Mbappe celebrates scoring his team's second goal during the Qatar 2022 World Cup final against Argentina at Lusail Stadium in Lusail. (AFP)

ropean Championship, said the decision was "a very good idea".

"In giving him the responsibility of the captaincy, it allows Kylian, when necessary, to go still further, higher, stronger," Platini, the ex-head of European football's governing body UEFA,

said in a statement to AFP.

Mbappe helped Les Bleus to World Cup glory as a teenager in 2018 and has established himself as arguably the leading forward on the global stage.

The Paris-born former Monaco player is vice-captain at

PSG behind Brazilian defender Marquinhos and led the side in the defender's absence during Sunday's loss to Rennes.

Mbappe has scored 19 goals in 24 Ligue 1 matches this season and contributed seven goals in PSG's run to the last 16 of the

Champions League, where they were knocked out by Bayern Munich.

France are grouped with the Dutch, the Republic of Ireland, Greece and Gibraltar in their qualifying group for Euro 2024, to be held in Germany.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Haaland to miss Euro qualifiers over groin injury

AFP  
Oslo

**N**orway's star striker Erling Haaland will miss the country's next two Euro qualifiers against Spain and Georgia due to a groin injury, the Norwegian FA said yesterday.

Haaland, who recently scored five goals for his club Manchester City against Leipzig in the Champions League and a hat-trick against Burnley in the FA Cup, complained about groin pain following the Burnley game over the weekend.

The Norwegian Football

Federation said Haaland had left the national team's training camp in Marbella, Spain, to undergo a medical follow-up with his Premier League club.

"We hoped it was just a discomfort that would pass by Saturday, but after tests and examinations yesterday it is clear that he will not be ready for the games against Spain and Georgia," team doctor Ola Sand was quoted as saying in a statement.

Norway will play two away games in their Euro 2024 qualifying group A debut, first against Spain in Malaga on Saturday and Georgia in Batumi on Tuesday.



## Hojbjerg calls on Conte to elaborate after Tottenham criticism

Tottenham Hotspur midfielder Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg has called on manager Antonio Conte to elaborate on his stinging criticism of the players after Saturday's Premier League draw at Southampton. The experienced Denmark international is the first Spurs player to publicly react since Italian Conte's angry rant in a media conference following the 3-3 draw. Conte, who labelled his players selfish, lacking team spirit and not being able to play under pressure during his tirade, is tipped to leave the club before his contract expires in June. Speaking head of Denmark's Euro 2024 qualifiers against Finland and Kazakhstan, the 27-year-old Hojbjerg was asked for his thoughts on Conte's comments.

"He gave a very honest and very open press conference. It is because he is not satisfied. You don't do that if you've reached the quarter-final of the Champions League and if you're in the semi-final of the FA Cup," the former Southampton player said. "I understand that if you want to be successful as a team, you need 11 men who are committed to a project and a culture. But I think he has to elaborate on how he feels before you as a player can start measuring and weighing."

Tottenham remain in fourth place in the Premier League heading into the international break but fifth-placed Newcastle United are only two points behind with two games in hand. The London club also bowed out of the FA Cup and Champions League this month. Asked if Conte was justified in his remarks, Hojbjerg added: "Fortunately, I am not the one to judge it. If that's how he sees it, then you have to be a little more precise in order for you as a player to take it to heart. "But it is clear that you work with each other every day, you want the best for each other, and you want to be successful together. And sometimes the waves go high in football."

## APPOINTMENT

# Hodgson returns as Palace manager until end of season

AFP  
London

**C**rystal Palace have re-appointed former England boss Roy Hodgson as their manager until the end of the season, with a mission to save the Premier League strugglers from relegation.

The 75-year-old, who replaces the sacked Patrick Vieira, said the "sole objective" was to ensure survival in the English top flight.

Hodgson, who was in charge at Selhurst Park between 2017 and 2021, takes over with Palace lying 12th in the Premier League, three points above the relegation zone after a 12-match winless run.

"It is a privilege to be asked to return to the club, which has always meant so much to me, and to be given the important task of turning the team's fortunes around," Hodgson said in a club statement.

"Our sole objective now is to start winning matches, and to get the points necessary to ensure our Premier League status."

Hodgson will be assisted by Paddy McCarthy, with Ray Lewington returning as first-team coach.

Palace chairman Steve Parish welcomed the former Liverpool and Inter Milan manager back to his boyhood club, saying his

experience would be crucial in the battle to avoid the drop.

"We are obviously in a very challenging period but we believe that Roy's and Ray's experience, knowledge of the club and players, alongside Paddy, can help fulfil the immediate requirement of keeping us in the league," he said.

Former Arsenal and France midfielder Vieira was sacked on Friday, taking the number of managerial sackings during the 2022/23 campaign to nine, one fewer than last season's total, which equalled the Premier League record.

Hodgson has a difficult job on his hands turning around the form of a club that have not won a match in 2023.

The bottom nine teams in the Premier League are separated by just four points, cranking up the pressure as the season enters its final months.

Palace, who lost 4-1 to league leaders Arsenal on Sunday, have scored just 22 goals in 28 games in the Premier League this season - the joint lowest tally in the division.

Hodgson's first match in charge will be a home game against fellow strugglers Leicester on April 1.

The widely travelled Englishman, who managed the national side from 2012 to 2016, was most recently in charge at Watford for a short spell in 2022, leaving after they were relegated to the Championship.



## ANNOUNCEMENT

# Struggling Sevilla replace sacked Sampaoli with Mendilibar

AFP  
Madrid

**A**rgentine Jorge Sampaoli was sacked and replaced by Jose Luis Mendilibar as coach of struggling Sevilla yesterday, with the club just off the La Liga relegation zone.

"I go with my head held high," said Sampaoli.

The side are 14th in the Spanish top flight but just two points above Valencia in 18th, the first relegation place.

Mendilibar's first game in charge of the six-time Europa League winners will be on April 1, after the international break, with a trip to Cadiz, who are one spot below Sevilla in the table on goal difference.

"The Basque coach has signed a contract until the end of the season, June 30, and will take charge of his first training session this evening," the Spanish outfit said of the 62-year-old.

"Mendilibar's most successful stint as manager was his second spell at Eibar," said the Sevilla statement.

"Joining ahead of the 2015/16 season, he kept the team in La Liga for six straight seasons, before eventually suffering relegation in the 2020/21 season."

Former Chile and Argentina boss Sampaoli joined Sevilla in October, but they failed to shake off their mid-table form and lost at home to Getafe on Sunday.

"Following the defeat at Getafe, which leaves the side



just above the relegation zone, the club have decided to part ways with the Argentine coach ahead of the international break," said the Sevilla statement. In his second stint at Sevilla, Sampaoli oversaw 13 wins, six draws and 12 losses in 31 matches but also led the club to the quarter-finals of the Europa League where they face Manchester United.

"It's time to say goodbye to a club I love," said Sampaoli, 62.

"Football doesn't always make you happy. It can even give you insomnia. But there's no doubt it was worth my while. It seemed like a good idea at the time," said the fiery coach who was under contract until the end of next season.

Sampaoli's assistant Sebastian Beccacece, who was also sacked, was later appointed coach of La Liga's bottom side Elche as a replacement for Pablo Machin.

## BECCACECE TAKES OVER AT LOWLY ELCHE

Sebastian Beccacece will coach Elche as they attempt to avoid relegation from La Liga, the Spanish strugglers announced yesterday. The 42-year-old Argentine was sacked earlier in the day by Sevilla where he was assistant to Jorge Sampaoli, who was also shown the door.

Beccacece takes over at Elche from Pablo Machin who was axed on Monday after a 2-0 defeat at Real Sociedad left the team 14 points from safety.

"The Argentine coach assumes the reins of Los Franjiverdes first team until the idea at the time," said the fiery coach who was under contract until the end of next season. Sampaoli's assistant Sebastian Beccacece, who was also sacked, was later appointed coach of La Liga's bottom side Elche as a replacement for Pablo Machin.