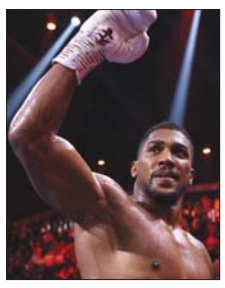
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India women beat Australia by eight wickets in historic Test



BOXING | Page 3

Joshua too strong for Wallin as Parker outpoints Wilder

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Qatar Table Tennis Association to host 4 WTT tournaments in January

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FOOTBALL

'Local boy' Ratcliffe takes 25% stake in Man United

Ratcliffe's stake purchase at $33 per share values the English club at $6.3bn including debt

Reuters
Manchester

British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe struck a long awaited deal yesterday to buy a 25% stake in Manchester United and pledged to invest $300mn in the English Premier League football club to try to revive its fortunes. The deal, which will also see Ratcliffe's Ineos group take over management of the club's football operations, ends more than a year of uncertainty after majority owners, the Glazer family, said in November 2022 they were looking at strategic options.

The Glazers have come under heavy criticism from fans for presiding over a decline in the club's performance since former manager Alex Ferguson retired in 2013 following a period of unprecedented success.

"As a local boy and a lifelong supporter of the club, I am very pleased that we have been able to agree a deal with the Manchester United Board that delegates us management responsibility of the football operations of the club," Ratcliffe, 71, said in a statement.

"Whilst the commercial success of the club has ensured there have always been available funds to win trophies at the highest level, this potential has not been fully unlocked in recent times. We will bring the global knowledge, expertise and talent from the wider Ineos Sport group to help drive further improvement at the club, while also providing funds intended to enable future investment into Old Trafford."

Ratcliffe's stake purchase at $33 per share values the 20 times English champions at $6.3bn including debt, a source familiar with the matter said. The club said $200mn of Ratcliffe's planned investment would be paid on closing of the deal, and a further $100mn by the end of 2024.

Ratcliffe's Ineos also owns French Ligue 1 club Nice, Swiss Super League side FC Lausanne-Sport, and works with Racing Club Abidjan of Ivory Coast Ligue One. It is also behind the Grenadiers, one of the world's most successful cycling teams.

"Sir Jim and Ineos bring a wealth of commercial experience as well as significant financial commitment into the club," United's executive chairs Avram Glazer and Joel Glazer said.

"And, through Ineos Sport, Manchester United will have access to seasoned high-performance professionals, experienced in creating and leading elite teams from both inside and outside the game."

Since Ferguson stepped down, United have cycled through five permanent managers and three caretakers but failed to recapture the glory days, winning one FA Cup, two League Cup trophies and a Europa League title in 11 years. The Glazers' adamant stance on not selling the club over the years has become a source of frustration for the fans who clamoured for change and held protests as the club's net debt soared to over $600mn.

The Manchester United Supporters Trust (MUST) welcomed the investment from Ratcliffe but questioned the new structure that will be put in place and demanded a meeting with the Ineos team to understand its plans.

"We note the statements that he and his team will control sporting activities, yet puzzle how any organisation can put its very core business in the hands of a minority shareholder, and how that meaningfully works in practice," MUST said in a statement.

"It is now incumbent on the club's owners and management to properly explain how this new structure will work, where the new investment will be directed and how it will benefit the team on the field."

Under Dutch coach Erik ten Hag, United are eighth in the Premier League table - 12 points off the top - despite a transfer outlay of nearly 1bn euros ($1.1bn) in the last six years.

They were also knocked out of European competitions after finishing last in their Champions League group.

"We are here for the long term and recognise that a lot of challenges and hard work lie ahead," Ratcliffe added.

"Our shared ambition is clear: we all want to see Manchester United back where we belong, at the very top of English, European and world football."

Ratcliffe has not got quite what he wanted, with the Glazers still the majority shareholders at Old Trafford.

The Americans, who completed a leveraged takeover in 2005, saddling the club with huge debts, have proved deeply unpopular with supporters.

Ratcliffe, nevertheless, will feel he can play a part in restoring United to the pinnacle of English and European football after a chastening decline since Alex Ferguson won the last of the club's 20 Premier League titles in 2013.

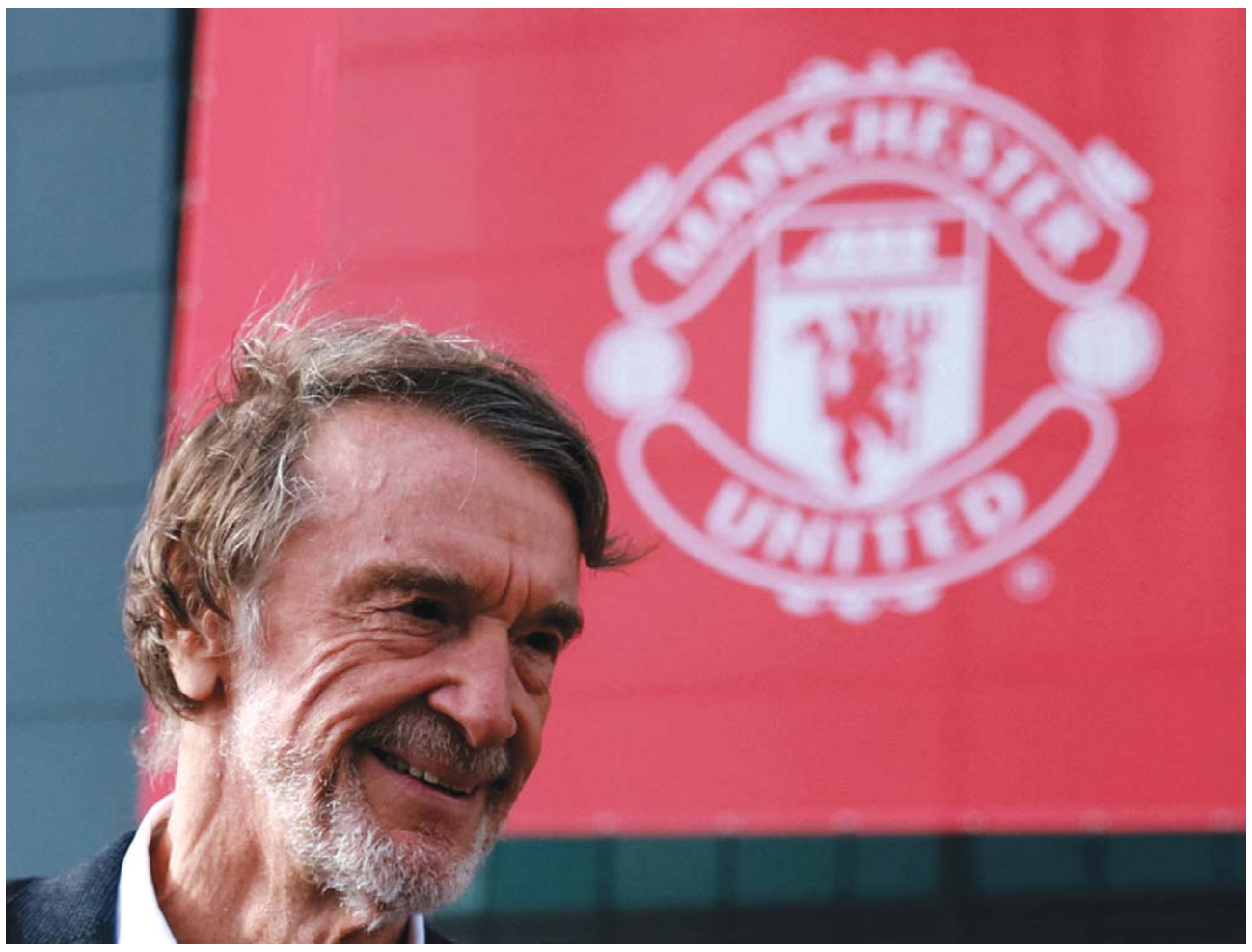
He is one of Britain's wealthiest people – Forbes estimates his net worth at $23bn (£18.1bn). But the glitzy world of international sport is a long way from Ratcliffe's humble beginnings, growing up in social housing near Manchester in northwest England.

Ratcliffe founded Ineos in 1998 and the company went on to become an industrial juggernaut in Britain.

It operates 194 sites across 29 countries, generates $65bn annually and employs more than 26,000 people. Ratcliffe has continued to diversify Ineos, entering the automotive sector to build the Ineos Grenadier, intended to be a successor to the Land Rover Defender. Despite his business success, Ratcliffe has remained something of an enigma.

The Englishman, who has skied to the North Pole and South Pole and climbed the Matterhorn, is a risk-taker but says he does not take unnecessary chances.

"To give you an example, I won't and would never jump out of an aeroplane, because you either live or die depending upon how well someone's packed your parachute," he said recently.


Ineos chairman Jim Ratcliffe is pictured at Old Trafford stadium in Manchester in the file photo take on March 17, 2023. *(Reuters)*

PREMIER LEAGUE

Wolves inflict wasteful Chelsea to another defeat

AFP
Wolverhampton

Wolves condemned Chelsea to a fourth defeat in six league matches yesterday, winning 2-1 in the first Christmas Eve Premier League match since 1995. Mauricio Pochettino's men dominated possession at Molineux but wasted chances in an incident-packed game littered with careless defensive errors by the visiting side.

Wolves appeared to be cantering to victory after goals from Mario Lemina and Matt Doherty but they were made to sweat when Christopher Nkunku pulled one back deep into stoppage time on his Premier League debut.

The defeat means Chelsea are stuck in 10th in the Premier League, with Wolves behind them only on goal difference. No side have lost more Premier League matches in 2023 than Chelsea's tally of 19, while only three sides have lost more across the big five European leagues during the calendar year.

Pochettino bemoaned his team's missed chances after a frustrating afternoon. "We feel very disappointed because I think we deserve much more," the Argentine said. "This competition wounds you when you are not clinical enough. We created chances. That is why it is so disappointing. We conceded after a few corners and it was really difficult."

He added: "We were talking a lot at the beginning of the season. We are young in age. It is a young team. We have players playing for the first time in the league. They need to adapt. It is confidence and about quality."

There were chances at both ends early in the game. Nelson Samedo burst forward but could not find Matheus Cunha on the left before Armando Broja stumbled on the ball in the box at the other end when well placed. Chelsea's Nicolas Jackson was also guilty of failing to make the most of some good openings.

The visitors wasted a gilt-edged opportunity to take the lead shortly after the half-hour mark when Raheem Sterling caught Joao Gomes in possession 40 yards out and drove forward. The England forward was one-on-one with Jose Sa, with two team-mates to his right, but he opted to shoot rather than pass and it was saved by the Wolves goalkeeper.

Wolves had a chance to break the deadlock in the closing moments of the half when Hwang Hee-chan burst through but he blasted over from an angle. The home side started the second half brightly and came within a whisker of taking the lead when Chelsea's Lesley Ugochukwu deflected Gomes's shot onto the outside of the post.

But Wolves broke the deadlock in the 51st minute when Lemina did not even need to get off the ground to head home a Pablo Sarabia corner. Substitute Nkunku came close to equalising when his shot was hacked off the line by Toti.

Instead, Wolves doubled their lead in stoppage time. Substitute Hugo Bueno crossed and Chelsea were only able to block the ball as far as the waiting Doherty, who finished calmly from close range in the 93rd minute. France international Nkunku pulled one back when he headed home three minutes later but Gary O'Neil's side hung on to take all three points.

Goalscorer Doherty praised the fans for creating a crackling atmosphere. "Our record against top-six teams is good," he said. "We've beaten most of them here and away. We're doing really well."



Wolverhampton Wanderers' Mario Lemina (fifth right) heads the ball to score against Chelsea during the Premier League match. *(AFP)*

CRICKET

PREVIEW

India chase history in Test series in South Africa

It is a challenging place to bat; the statistics will tell you that'



A view of the SuperSport Park Stadium in Centurion where India will play first Test against South Africa from tomorrow.

Reuters
Pretoria

India go in search of history when they face hosts South Africa in two Tests starting in Pretoria tomorrow, hoping to claim a first ever series victory in a country where they have come close before only to fall agonisingly short.

South Africa have been victors in seven of India's eight visits since the first in 1992 with one series drawn in 2010/11, but six of those successes have been by a single win margin.

The tourists may now feel they have never had a better chance. This South African side does not have the experience and quality with bat and ball of those of years gone by, and their top six in particular can be brittle.

They also face late fitness tests for key fast bowlers Kagiso Rabada and Lungi Ngidi, who could be a handful on what is expected to be a lively Centurion Park pitch in the first Test, before the tour moves to Newlands in Cape Town for the second fixture from January 3.

"If it was possible to make this even bigger, the fact that India have never won here does that," said. "We certainly want to hold on to that proud record.

"There are so many matchups that this series hinges on. It's two Tests, so it's high pressure. You go 1-0 down and you can't win the series. You go 1-0 up, you can't lose. It's going to be like a heavyweight boxing bout."

India have some injured absentees but remain a formidable side with back-to-back series successes in Australia giving them the belief they can conquer this particular Everest. Leading seamer batter Ruturaj Gaikwad is also out with an injured finger. Virat Kohli flew home for personal reasons this week, but is expected to be back for the first Test.

Quite remarkably, South Africa have not drawn a Test at home since a rain-affected game against New Zealand in 2016, a run of 32 matches that has yielded 24 wins and eight defeats. That is testament to the steady weather, positive cricket they play and the pitches, which are among the most challenging in the world for all generally on offer through the five days. "It is a challenging place to bat; the statistics will tell you that," India coach Rahul Dravid told Star Sports.

"Every one of the batters will have a game plan as to how they want to go, and as long as they are clear about it and they commit to it and are practising towards that, that's fine. "We don't expect everyone to play in the same way. We want them to be very clear about what works for them, and then be able to execute that."

FACTBOX

WHEN?
December 26-30 (10:00am local time/0800 GMT)
WHERE?
Centurion Park, Pretoria (22,000 capacity)
MATCH OFFICIALS
Umpires: Paul Reiffel (Australia), Langton Rusere (Zimbabwe)
Third umpire: Ahsan Raza (Pakistan)
Match referee: Chris Broad

SOUTH AFRICA
World ranking: 4
Coach: Shukri Conrad
Captain: Temba Bavuma
Squad: Temba Bavuma, David Bedingham, Nandre Burger, Gerald Coetzee, Tony de Zorzi, Dean Elgar, Marco Jansen, Keshav Maharaj, Aiden Markram, Wiaan Mulder, Lungi Ngidi, Keegan Petersen, Kagiso Rabada, Tristan Stubbs and Kyle Verreynne.

INDIA
World ranking: 1
Coach: Rahul Dravid
Captain: Rohit Sharma
Squad: Rohit Sharma, Shubman Gill, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, K L Rahul, Ravichandran Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja, Shardul Thakur, Mohammed Siraj, Mukesh Kumar, Jasprit Bumrah, Prasidh Krishna, KS Bharat, Abhimanyu Easwaran.

PREVIOUS CENTURION PARK TESTS
2010 - South Africa won by an innings and 25 runs
2018 - South Africa won by 135 runs
2021 - India won by 113 runs
RECORD IN SOUTH AFRICA
Played 23
South Africa won 12
India won 4
Drawn 7
OVERALL RECORD
Played 42
South Africa won 17
India won 15
Drawn 10

FOCUS

Khawaja denied permission to have peace symbol on bat

AFP
Melbourne



Australia's **Usman Khawaja** has been denied permission to place a peace symbol on his bat and shoes for the Boxing Day Test against Pakistan, reports said yesterday.

A sticker showing a black dove and the words 01:UDHR - a reference to Article One of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - was on his bat and shoes during training in Melbourne yesterday.

The star batter had multiple meetings with Cricket Australia over recent days to find a message that would be appropriate for the second Test this week, local media said. But his latest humanitarian gesture has been turned down by the International Cricket Council, *The Australian* and *Melbourne Age* newspapers reported.

The ICC were not immediately available for comment.

Khawaja, a Muslim, was stopped from wearing shoes emblazoned with the hand-written slogans "Freedom is a human right" and "All lives are equal" during the first Test in Perth.

The 36-year-old had wanted to show his support for the people of Gaza.

But he was told they flouted ICC rules on messages that relate to politics, religion or race.

He wore a black armband during the match and was reprimanded by the ICC, but insisted afterwards it was for a "personal bereavement" and vowed to contest the ruling.

Khawaja spoke on Friday about how the Israel-Hamas conflict had affected him, saying he despaired at seeing how many children had been killed.

"When I'm looking at my Instagram and seeing innocent kids, videos of them dying, passing away, that's what hit me the hardest," he said.

"I don't have any agendas other than trying to shine a light on what I feel really passionately, really strongly about."

Pakistan injury woes mount with Ahmed out of 2nd Test

Pakistan's injury woes went from bad to worse yesterday with off-spinner Abrar Ahmed the third player in as many days to be ruled out of the second Test against Australia. Ahmed missed their 360-run defeat in Perth with leg discomfort, and while improving, he has not recovered sufficiently to take part in the Boxing Day Test at Melbourne. "Considering the nature of the injury and the workload required from a spinner in a Test match, Abrar is not yet ready and will therefore not be available for the second Test," the Pakistan Cricket Board said. "He will undergo a preliminary fitness test on December 25, which will determine his probable return-to-play date." It follows fellow spinner Noman Ali being hospitalised with acute appendicitis and ruled out of the rest of the three-match series. Mohamed Nawaz has been drafted as a replacement, the PCB said. Pace bowler Khurram Shahzad is another injury casualty, sidelined for the last two Tests with a stress fracture in the ribs along with an abdominal muscle tear after impressing on his debut in Perth.

England rope in Pollard as assistant coach for T20 WC

England have appointed former West Indies captain Kieron Pollard as an assistant coach for the Twenty20 World Cup next year, the country's cricket board (ECB) announced yesterday.
Pollard helped the West Indies win the World Cup in 2012 while the 36-year-old, who made a name for himself as a T20 specialist, won five Indian Premier League titles with the Mumbai Indians between 2013 and 2020. The 2024 World Cup will be held in the West Indies and the United States in June. "Pollard will join the England men's team specifically for the T20 World Cup as an assistant coach and to provide expertise of local conditions," the ECB said in a statement. "Pollard was a part of West Indies' 2012 men's T20 World Cup success and has vast experience in the format having played more than 600 matches." England are the defending champions having won their second T20 World Cup title in 2022 in Australia.

REACTION

England's Curran has 'deep regrets' over intimidating umpire

AFP
Sydney

England bowler **Tom Curran** expressed "deep regrets" yesterday after losing an appeal over a four-match Big Bash League ban for intimidating an umpire, saying he has always respected match officials.

The Sydney Sixers' Curran, who has played 30 T20 games for England, was slapped with the punishment following a pre-match incident against the Hobart Hurricanes this month.

It involved umpire Mohamed Qureshi having to move to avoid a collision with him during a practice run.

Curran was charged with "intimidation or attempted intimidation of an umpire, match referee or medical personnel whether by language or conduct (including gestures) during a match".



He said he has "deep regrets" about the way he reacted.

"Across my decade-long professional career I have always sought to have a friendly and respectful relationship with match officials, which I believe is reflected in the lack of prior code of conduct breaches across the world," Curran added.

"I am genuinely sorry that I chose to continue to practise my run up in the direction of umpire Qureshi, and if he ever thought I sought to make physical contact with him.

"I would like to apologise to everyone that this has affected."

In upholding the ban, Cricket Australia general manager Alistair Dobson said match officials must be respected.

"Umpires are part of the lifeblood of cricket and it is essential they are respected and appreciated by players at all levels of the game," he said. "We acknowledge the remorse Tom's shown following the appeal and look forward to seeing him back in Sixers colours."

Sixers head Rachael Haynes said the club accepted the punishment.

"We sought to appeal the original decision based on previous code of conduct cases," she said.

"Whilst not disagreeing that Tom had breached the code through his conduct, we felt that the charge was inconsistent with other offences. Following the ruling, we respect that not to be the case."

SPOTLIGHT

India women beat Australia by 8-wicket in historic Test



India's players pose with the trophy after winning the Test match against Australia at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday. India's women's cricket team cruised to their first-ever win against Australia in Test cricket, beating the visitors by eight wickets in a one-off match. *(AFP)*

AFP
Mumbai

India's women's cricket team cruised to their first-ever win against Australia in Test cricket yesterday, beating the visitors by eight wickets in a one-off match in Mumbai.

India dominated play in the four-day match at the Wankhede Stadium, smashing 406 runs in the first innings to take a 187-run lead.

On the final day, Australia knocked out 261, with India's bowlers earning five wickets for just 28 runs, including right arm offbreak Sneh Rana - later awarded player of the match - taking two wickets in two balls.

Set a target of 75, India's skipper Harmanpreet Kaur's team chased down the runs in dramatic play in just under 19 overs for two wickets. For India's women, it was their first Test victory against Australia after 11 attempts since 1977.

It follows India's victory against England last week, also in Mumbai. Jay Shah, the Board of Control for Cricket in India secretary, celebrated the back-to-back Test wins. "They conquered it with brilliance," Shah posted on social media, praising skipper Harmanpreet Kaur. "History made today!"

India on December 16 thrashed England by 347 runs in another one-off women's Test, their first ever win at home against the rivals. India's victory margin against England was the largest by runs in women's Test cricket and also their first Test win against England at home.

"Everything went very well for us," Kaur told reporters yesterday.

"Hopefully after these two wins we will get many more Test games in upcoming games."

BRIEF SCORES: **406** (Deepti 78, Mandhana 74, Gardner 4-100) **and 75 for 2** (Mandhana 38*) **beat Australia 219** (McGrath 50, Vastrakar 4-53, Rana 3-56) **and 261** (McGrath 73, Rana 4-63) **by eight wickets.**

BOXING

Joshua too strong for Wallin, Parker outpoints Wilder

'NOT SO MUCH A THROWBACK FIGHT, JUST ANOTHER DAY IN THE OFFICE'



Britain's Anthony Joshua celebrates after defeating Sweden's Otto Wallin during their heavyweight boxing match at the Kingdom Arena in Riyadh on Saturday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Riyadh

Former world champions Anthony Joshua and Joseph Parker re-established their heavyweight title credentials with victories on the same Riyadh bill on Saturday.

British boxer Joshua produced one of his best performances of recent times by stopping Sweden's Otto Wallin, who was pulled out by his corner after the fifth round of a one-sided bout.

Earlier, Parker enjoyed a unanimous points-decision win over fellow former world champion Deontay Wilder, the New Zealander triumphing 118-111, 118-110, 120-108 in a dominant display that appeared to scupper pre-fight talk the American would next face Joshua.

There had also been speculation that whoever triumphed in a Wilder-Joshua bout would then face the winner of February's clash between Tyson Fury and Oleksandr Usyk, who between them currently hold all the major versions of the world heavyweight title.

But Joshua said he had paid no attention to Wilder's fight, telling DAZN: "I wasn't watching. I just focused on myself...Deontay, everything that he said about me, I could rip him apart right now, but I'm going to take the higher ground."

Victory gave Joshua his third win of 2023 after he beat Jermaine Franklin Jr by unanimous decision in April before a seventh-round stoppage of Robert Helenius in August.



US' Deontay Wilder and New Zealand's Joseph Parker in action during their boxing match yesterday. *(AFP)*

It also took the 34-year-old's professional record to 27 wins and three defeats as he inflicted the first inside the distance loss of Wallin's career.

Joshua is looking to become a three-time world champion following two defeats by Usyk and a shock 2019 loss to Andy Ruiz.

"Not so much a throwback fight, just another day in the office," said Joshua.

"You want to do whatever it takes to be victorious. That's all I want to be."

Wallin's only previous professional loss had come against Fury. But he had no answer from the opening bell against Joshua, who with just over a minute of the fifth round remaining produced a superb left hook that had Wallin stumbling towards the ropes.

Earlier Parker, comprehensively defeated Wilder in the former World Boxing Council champion's first bout in over two years.

"Everyone had other plans but this is God's plan," said Parker, 31, who improved to 34-3 with 23 knockouts after sparring with Fury.

Renowned as a knockout artist, Wilder was involved in a trio of dramatic bouts with current WBC champion Fury, drawing the first before losing the next two.

Wilder's long period of inactivity appeared to count against the 38-year-old, with Parker - who lost the World Boxing Organisation title to Joshua by a unanimous points decision in Cardiff five years ago - landing the cleaner punches as well as producing several thumping roundhouse rights.

"Well done Joseph, he did a great job avoiding my punches," said Wilder, who fell to 43-3 with one draw and 42 knockouts.

"We move on to the next thing... We make no excuses. We'll be back for sure. We have a little bit more left."

But he added: "I've done a great job with managing my money and investing. I'm a happy fighter. I'll be back soon and if not, it's been a pleasure."

FOCUS

India suspends newly-elected wrestling federation

AFP
New Delhi

India's sports ministry said yesterday it had suspended the newly elected governing body of the scandal-hit wrestling federation, accusing it of ignoring rules by hastily announcing championships.

The Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) has "been instructed to suspend all its activities until further orders," the ministry said in a statement.

It comes just days after new WFI president Sanjay Singh was elected to replace his close ally Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, a lawmaker charged with sexually harassing women wrestlers.

It was hoped the ballot would open the way to ending the federation's suspension by United World Wrestling, the international governing body, but the government's order throws that into doubt. After his win on Thursday, Sanjay Singh met with the former head and announced that national junior wrestling championships would be held before the year's end.

"The actions smack of complete arbitrariness on the part of the new president," the ministry statement said, adding that the new board "appears to be in complete control of former office bearers".

Many of India's top wrestlers had led a noisy sit-in protest campaign demanding Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh's ouster after the allegations came to light in January.

The accused 66-year-old ruling party lawmaker has denied all charges and has claimed he is the victim of a conspiracy to force him out of parliament.

A criminal case against him is ongoing and could see him sentenced to five years in prison if found guilty. Wrestling is hugely popular in rural northern India, and star athletes saw a wellspring of public support.

The new president defeated Anita Sheoran, who won a gold medal at the 2010 Commonwealth Games and supported the campaign by athletes against his predecessor. She is also a witness in the case.

Record number of pro golfers earned $1mn

The influx of cash into men's professional golf has resulted in a record number of players reaching the $1mn earnings mark in 2023. All 49 members of LIV Golf to start in at least six events this past season earned more than $1mn. The Saudi-funded league completed its second season with Talor Gooch as its individual champion. Gooch wrapped up the year $35.3mn richer thanks in part to an $18 million bonus for first place in the standings. The PGA Tour, which is now in negotiations with Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, sought to keep up with the increase in prize purses LIV Golf was able to offer by introducing much higher purses for designated events, or "signature events" as they'll be called going forward. That helped 139 PGA Tour players make at least $1 million in the 2022-23 season, meaning 188 male golfers earned at least that much this year. (The PGA Tour season included the fall of 2022 and all of 2023 in advance of returning to calendar-year seasons.) Scottie Scheffler racked up $21,014,342 over 23 events played on the PGA Tour. The designated events, including a $4.5mn payday for winning The Players Championship, helped him break his own single-season record of $14.04mn from 2021-22.

FOOTBALL

Rangers beat Motherwell to close on leaders Celtic

AFP
Glasgow

Rangers beat Motherwell 2-0 at a wet and wild Fir Park yesterday to return to within two points of Scottish Premiership leaders Celtic. Kieran Dowell started and finished the move for the opening goal in the fourth minute before fellow midfielder Todd Cantwell doubled the lead 12 minutes later. The game should have brought more goals, but in a wind-affected encounter the strikes proved enough for Philippe Clement's men.

Rangers are now on 43 points after 18 games - two behind champions Celtic with a game in hand. They face Ross County on Wednesday, with a crucial encounter at Celtic Park on December 30 looming large. Clement has gone 16 games unbeaten since taking over from Michael Beale in October. "The players put their egos aside and only focused on the team," Clement told the BBC.

"That is the mentality I want to see. It is important that players are ready for that but also that everyone in every position knows what to do. I know where the danger is when success is there. I am going to be very strict on the message that it is all about the team."

Rangers took the lead early in the match when Dowell robbed Harry Paton at the edge of the penalty area and played a one-two with Cyriel Dessers before blasting the ball home.

The second goal came when left-back Ridvan Yilmaz's cross into the box was controlled by Abdallah Sima, with Cantwell running in to sweep the ball low past the diving Liam Kelly.

A speculative drive from Callum Slattery that skipped past the Rangers goal was Motherwell's only real response while the visitors continued to threaten sporadically. Motherwell had a penalty shout in the 75th minute when Yilmaz bumped Brodie Spencer to the ground but referee David Dickinson was unmoved.

NBA

Pistons slump to record-equalling 26th defeat

AFP
New York

The Detroit Pistons matched an NBA single-season mark for futility on Saturday, slumping to a 26th straight defeat in a 126-115 loss to the Nets in Brooklyn.

As the Los Angeles Lakers snapped a four-game skid behind 40 points from LeBron James and reigning champions Denver and Eastern Conference contenders Boston and Milwaukee posted comfortable victories, the Pistons matched the league's longest single-season losing streak - set by the 2010-11 Cleveland Cavaliers and the 2013-14 Philadelphia 76ers. Detroit, an iconic franchise that won NBA titles in 1989, 1990 and 2004 - hasn't won since October 28.

Mikal Bridges scored 29 points with six rebounds and seven assists to lead the Nets - who had seven players score in double figures. Jaden Ivey scored 23 points and Cade Cunningham added 22 for the Pistons, who coughed up 14 turnovers leading to 22 Nets points.

Brooklyn out-scored Detroit 62-42 in the paint and held an 18-9 edge in second-chance points and never trailed after the first quarter.

The Pistons were in the hunt, down by six late in the third quarter, when the Nets put together a 15-0 scoring run to pull away.

Detroit will try to turn the tables when they play the Nets in Brooklyn again on Tuesday, when a defeat would land them with the single-season record - and put them one away from matching the longest losing streak ever, the 28-game slide of the 76ers that spanned the 2014-15 and 2015-16 seasons.

Pistons coach Monty Williams said he'd seen some good things from his team, and he praised their continuing determination in the midst of the morale-destroying slide.

"Losing is awful in this league," Williams added. "And we've had a lot of it. I'm proud of the way that they just keep battling every night. Our guys don't want to be a part of any kind of losing streak, whatever. But every day they come back with focus and drive and grit trying to win a game."

In Oklahoma City the Lakers, struggling since capturing the inaugural in-season tournament crown, snapped their four-game losing streak with a 129-120 victory over the Thunder.

Lakers coach Darvin Ham shuffled his lineup, starting Jarred Vanderbilt in place of D'Angelo Russell in a bid to "lean in" to the defensive effort.

But it was NBA all-time leading scorer James who set the tone, scoring 15 of his 40 points in the fourth quarter as the Lakers ruthlessly suppressed the Thunder's bid to rally from a 26-point deficit.

Anthony Davis scored 26 points and grabbed 11 rebounds and Rui Hachimura added 21 points off the bench for the Lakers, who had 37 total assists and 16 three-pointers.

In New York, Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 28 points to lead Milwaukee to a 130-111 victory over the Knicks, stretching the Bucks' winning streak to seven games.

The Greek star added seven rebounds and seven assists while Bobby Portis came off the bench to deliver 23 points and a team-high 11 rebounds for the Bucks, who improved to 22-7.

The Bucks remained second in the Eastern Conference behind the Boston Celtics, who improved to an NBA-best 22-6 with a 145-108 victory over the Clippers in Los Angeles.



Detroit Pistons' Jaden Ivey takes a shot against Brooklyn Nets' Day'Ron Sharpe and Dorian Finney-Smith during their NBA game at Barclays Center in Brooklyn. *(USA TODAY Sports)*

TABLE TENNIS

QTTA to host four WTT tournaments in January

Four tournaments boast a combined prize money of approximately $750,000

By Sports Reporter
Doha



Qatar Table Tennis Association president and chairman of the WTT tournaments organising committee Khalil bin Ahmed al-Mohannadi (centre), Vice-Chairman of the Organising Committee Mohamed Abdullah Saleh (right) and Tournament Director Ali Sultan al-Muftah at a press conference yesterday.

The Qatar Table Tennis Association (QTTA) yesterday announced plans to host a combined World Table Tennis (WTT) World Championship events, featuring four tournaments under one banner.

Doha serves as the bridge between seasons, concluding the 2023 WTT campaign with the thrilling Professional Tour Finals on January 3-5. The baton then passes seamlessly to the 2024 season, commencing in the same city with the WTT Star Contender tournament scheduled for January 8-13. This seamless transition promises an uninterrupted flow of table tennis excellence, keeping fans on the edge of their seats.

Following the WTT Star Contender the action continues with the third tournament, the WTT Contender running from January 14th to 20th. This event offers even more opportunities for talented players to showcase their skills and vie for championship glory.

The grand finale of the entire championship series arrives with the WTT Youth Contender taking place from January 22nd to 25th. This prestigious competition shines a spotlight on the bright stars of tomorrow, showcasing the future of table tennis and giving fans a glimpse of the next generation of champions.

The announcement of the combined WTT World Championships - to be hosted by the QTTA - took place yesterday at Al Bidda Tower. The press conference was attended by Khalil bin Ahmed al-Mohannadi, Chairman of the Supreme Organising Committee and president of QTT. Mohamed Abdullah Saleh, Vice-Chairman of the Organising Committee and Ali Sultan al-Muftah, Tournament Director, also spoke on the occasion.

The four tournaments boast a combined prize money of approximately $750,000, with winners in each taking home their share of this substantial reward. A total of 700 players will be in action during the events. This includes the elite group of 16 top seeds competing in the professional singles finals and eight of the world's best doubles players.

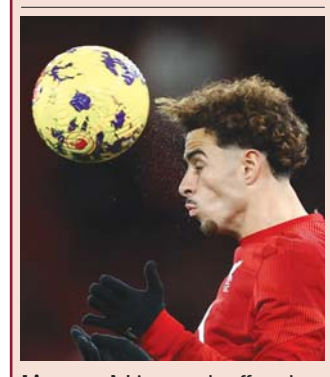
"The month of January will not only welcome an elite group of world champions and top players, but also a sizeable contingent of guests and delegations from around the globe. This signifies a significant moment for Qatari table tennis, showcasing its ability to organise world-class competitions," said al-Mohannadi.

"The competitions will kick off at the Lusail Multipurpose Sports Hall with the WTT Finals Men marking the launch of the World Professional Tour Finals for men under its new format. This is the third edition of the event, with previous editions held in Singapore, Germany, and most recently, Japan for the women's championship," he added.

"The men's professional tour finals, kicking off January 3rd and concluding on January 5th, 2024, will showcase the world's top 16 players in a fierce battle for ultimate glory. These elite athletes, including Chinese stars like Ma Long and Fan Zhendong, Japanese prodigy Tomokazu Harimoto, Brazilian sensation Hugo Calderano, and German national team standouts, will compete solely based on their global rankings, ensuring the participation of only the very best," he added.

Al-Mohannadi also highlighted the significance of these championships as a valuable rehearsal for Qatar's upcoming hosting of the 2025 World Cup. tee, expressing eagerness for the tournament guests to arrive. Ticket sales for the event are being conducted entirely online, accessible to both Qatar residents and international fans.

Liverpool suffer Tsimikas injury blow



Liverpool: Liverpool suffered another injury blow as left back **Kostas Tsimikas** sustained a suspected broken collarbone in the 1-1 Premier League draw against Arsenal on Saturday.

The Greek defender fell awkwardly in the 35th minute after a strong challenge by Bukayo Saka and collided with Liverpool manager Juergen Klopp who was standing on the touchline. While Klopp quickly got to his feet, Tsimikas was clearly in pain and walked off holding his arm gingerly to be replaced by Joe Gomez. Liverpool are already without first-choice left back Andy Robertson, also with a shoulder injury.

"It was massively overshadowed by Kostas Tsimikas collarbone issue, definitely broken, so he is out for a long time," said Klopp whose side stayed second in the table behind Arsenal. "The other issues we will have to see. It is hard for us to swallow with the Andy Robertson situation."

Klopp added: "Of course it effected me. I had no pain but thought maybe Kostas was going to be fine. I would happily give my collarbone for him to be fit again. It is not cool when something like that happens in front of you and you are involved in that, I was not sure what even happened or if I fell on him. It is not nice to see."

Liverpool were second best against Arsenal early on as they trailed to a header by Gabriel. But Mohamed Salah equalised before halftime with a stunning strike and while both sides could have collected all three points, a share of the spoils was just about right. It left Arsenal top of the pile on 40 points with Liverpool and Aston Villa on 39 and Tottenham Hotspur on 36, two ahead of champions Manchester City who have a game in hand.

"Neither side gave up. Until the last second it was top intensity, everybody felt it, super intense. Tough game, good game, in moments spectacular," Klopp said.

"Absolutely, we take confidence from the result. You have to take confidence from these results and performances against a top, top side."

Klopp was also left frustrated about his side not being awarded a penalty for an apparent handball by Martin Odegaard. "I am sure someone will come to explain it to me why it was not a handball but I don't know how?," Klopp said.

"I don't say that the ref can see it because I don't know where he was in that moment. But how can a guy in an office see that and not come to the conclusion that maybe, possibly it could be worth the referee having another look?"

PREMIER LEAGUE

Scholes, Neville slam 'embarrassing' Man United


Manchester United's Luke Shaw (left) and Jonny Evans applaud fans after their loss to West Ham in the Premier League at the London Stadium on Saturday. *(AFP)*

Reuters
Manchester

Former Manchester United players Paul Scholes and Gary Neville expressed their disappointment at their old club's performance after Erik Ten Hag's side fell to a 2-0 Premier League defeat to West Ham United on Saturday.

West Ham's Jarrod Bowen and Mohamed Kudus scored second-half goals at the London Stadium to condemn United to their 13th defeat in all competitions - their most losses at Christmas since 1930, when they were relegated from the top-flight. United, eighth in the standings and eight points off the top four, have struggled in front of goal, failing to score in four straight games in all competitions for the first time since the 1992-93 season.

They have just 18 league goals in as many matches, with only bottom-club Sheffield United having scored fewer. In their 18 league games, United have failed to score in seven. "There is no threat to the team. This is a very patched up team you have to say," former midfielder Scholes said.

"You spend a lot of money on players, expecting a lot more from them. Not happening for (Marcus) Rashford either. Easiest thing to coach in football is defending, hardest thing is to teach them to how to score goals. That has to come from the players. It is seriously lacking. It's getting embarrassing, creativity is the big problem."

Ex-defender Neville slammed United's inconsistency, said: "It doesn't surprise me at all. What we're seeing from this team, under any manager in the last seven or eight years, is pretty much the same. You can't trust them, they will let you down. They give you a glimmer of hope and then they go and lose a game they shouldn't lose. We're watching an inconsistent bunch. Inconsistency is a really bad trait, in all walks of life."

United next host third-placed Aston Villa in a league clash tomorrow.

SERIE A

Pellegrini, Lukaku fire Roma to victory

Reuters
Rome

Lorenzo Pellegrini and Romelu Lukaku scored to give AS Roma a 2-0 home win over Napoli in Serie A on Saturday as Matteo Politano and Victor Osimhen were sent off for the visitors.

Roma moved up to sixth place on 28 points, one ahead of Napoli who dropped to seventh. Walter Mazzarri has now lost five games from eight in all competitions since taking over from Rudi Garcia in November. The opening goal of a nervy game came in the 76th minute when Pellegrini, only on the pitch five minutes, hit a half-volley on the turn into the top corner when the ball fell to him after a mis-hit shot from Stephan El Shaarawy.

Champions Napoli were already down to 10 men after Politano was sent off in the 66th minute for kicking out at Nicola Zalewski when the Roma player pulled him back by his jersey. Osimhen picked up a second yellow card in the 86th minute, and Napoli had goalkeeper Alex Meret to thank for keeping the score at 1-0 before Lukaku wrapped up the win in the 96th minute with Napoli chasing a late equaliser.

From a counter-attack, Lukaku picked up possession inside the Napoli half and passed the ball to Ndicka who played it back for the Belgian striker to fire his shot into the net. In the first half, the referee reached for the yellow card on six occasions, including booking both managers, as Napoli dominated possession, and it was Roma who looked the more dangerous side.


AS Roma's Lorenzo Pellegrini (right) celebrates with Romelu Lukaku after scoring against Napoli during the Serie A match in Rome on Saturday. *(Reuters)*

"Maybe you don't agree, but my feeling is that right after 5-10 minutes we would have won the game," Roma manager Jose Mourinho said. "Roma came in very, very well, we were always in control against a much stronger team from a technical point of view."

The first chance fell to Roma when Lukaku laid a pass back to Edoardo Bove and his shot from the edge of the area clipped the crossbar. The game was still a cagey affair until Politano's moment of madness. Mourinho made a triple-change, and it was Pellegrini who made the biggest impact with his first touch of the ball.

"Then with 10 men we had an advantage, we took advantage of it well with the changes and with our interpretation. I think it's a well-deserved victory," Mourinho said.

Napoli pushed for an equaliser but created no real chances, and Meret was quick off his line to palm away a Lukaku effort before Osimhen's red card ended Napoli's hopes.

Bologna moved back up to fourth spot as a late goal from Lewis Ferguson gave them a 1-0 win over Atalanta.

Al-Mudahka becomes Vice-President of Arab Chess Federation



Doha: The General Assembly of the Arab Chess Federation (ACF) elected Qatar's **Mohamed al-Mudahka** as Vice-President by acclamation, during the meeting held yesterday in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates.

The meeting was attended by 21 Arab federations, which resulted in the formation of the Executive Office of the Board of Directors of the ACF, headed by the Emirati Sheikh Khalid bin Humaid al-Qasimi.

Al-Mudahka, who is the President of the Qatar Chess Federation, said the new executive office aspires to strengthen the position of Arab chess at the continental and international levels. He said the first meeting will discuss many topics that concern the future of the game in the region.

Al-Mudahka said: "The Arab Federation seeks to raise the level of the game by expanding the base of participation in the tournaments organised by the federation, and developing tournaments for young age groups."

He pointed out that the General Assembly thanked the Federation of Arab Sports Federations for its prominent role in the electoral process with the aim of working to raise the level of the game of chess in the Arab region. The meeting, which was hosted by the Sharjah Cultural Club, was attended by Major General Ahmed Nasser, President of the Federation of Sports Federations of the Union of Arab Olympic Committees, and Issa Hilal al-Hazami, President of the Sharjah Sports Council.

The General Assembly also elected 3 other vice-presidents: Ali Abbas of Syria, Ibrahim Jalloul of Algeria and Fawzi Bou Raja from Libya. While four candidates won membership for the Executive Office: Dr Sabri Abdel Mawla of Yemen, Rawad Hamoud from Lebanon, Sidi Mohamed Taj al-Din from Mauritania and Morocco's Mustafa Amzal.