

To subscribe
GULF TIMES
Newspaper
Please call
444 666 35



GOLF | Page 2

Catlin claims International Series Macau after tense playoff



FOOTBALL | Page 4

Leverkusen extend unbeaten run to 38 as title beckons

To advertise here,
PLEASE CALL
444 666 21

Monday, March 18, 2024
Ramadan 8, 1445 AH

GULF TIMES

SPORT

TENNIS

Swiatek crushes Sakkari to win second Indian Wells title

Page 3

FA CUP

PREMIER LEAGUE

Man Utd fightback ends Liverpool's quadruple quest

CITY TO FACE CHELSEA IN SEMI-FINALS, MAN UTD PLAY COVENTRY

AFP
Manchester

Manchester United ended Liverpool's quest for a quadruple of trophies in Jurgen Klopp's final season after Amad Diallo's winner edged a thrilling FA Cup quarter-final 4-3 after extra-time.

The Ivorian winger was sent off for a second booking after taking his shirt off in celebration at the end of a chaotic 120 minutes that kept United's chances of ending the season with silverware alive.

Erik ten Hag's men will be confident of reaching the final for a second consecutive season after being paired with Championship side Coventry in the last four.

Two goals in three minutes from Alexis Mac Allister and Mohamed Salah towards the end of the first half had swung the game in Liverpool's favour after Scott McTominay opened the scoring. Antony's first goal at Old Trafford for more than a year kept United alive to send the game into extra-time. Liverpool edged in front once again when Harvey Elliott's deflected shot found the bottom corner.

But Marcus Rashford, who had missed a glorious chance to win the tie deep into injury time, made amends by drilling home to make it 3-3. Diallo then scored just his second ever United goal in added time of extra-time at the end of a breakneck counter-attack from a Liverpool corner, led by the impressive Alejandro Garnacho.

"When it's Manchester United against Liverpool, it's one of the world's best football matches. It is historical," said Ten Hag.

United trail Liverpool by 17 points in the Premier League and having made an early exit from both the Champions League and League Cup, the pressure was on Ten Hag if he is to remain in charge for a third season.

The home team started like a side who knew their season depended on victory as they flew out of the traps and got their reward.

Garnacho's effort was saved by Caoimhin Kelleher but only looped up for McTominay to blast home his ninth goal of the season.



Man United's Antony (left) celebrates with Amad Diallo after scoring during FA Cup quarter-final against Liverpool in Manchester yesterday. (AFP)

Liverpool have had a far more intense schedule in recent weeks than United as they remain in three competitions, having already lifted the League Cup last month. Klopp's men took half an hour to awake from their slumber, but once they did were far more effective in the final third. The visitors turned the tie around in the dying embers of the first half as Mac Allister's deflected strike had too much power for Andre Onana.

Three minutes later, Liverpool led as Salah struck once more against his favoured opponents.

United pleaded in vain for a foul on Bruno Fernandes by Joe Gomez and Salah was left with a simple task to knock in his 13th goal in 14 games against United after Onana parried Darwin Nunez's initial effort. Liverpool enjoyed far more control of the game after the break but they were also guilty of not taking their chances to kill the game off. United were blunt and lacking ideas going forward as they chased the game until Antony became an unlikely hero. The Brazilian had scored just once in his

previous 38 games but showed no sign of a lack of confidence as he spun and fired into the far corner three minutes from time. Rashford should have completed the comeback as, after taking a brilliant first touch to cushion the ball into his path, he slotted wide with just Kelleher to beat.

A frenetic encounter continued to rage from end-to-end in extra-time as Elliott's deflected effort looked set to again put Liverpool into the last four. But United did not lie down as Rashford was more deadly when handed a second chance after Nunez gave the ball away deep inside his own half.

And as Liverpool sensed the chance to win it from a corner at the death, Garnacho broke clear and timed his pass to Diallo to perfection before he fired in off the far post. Manchester City will face Chelsea in the semi-finals at Wembley. Chelsea needed two stoppage-time goals to beat Championship promotion chasers Leicester 4-2 at Stamford Bridge.

Earlier, Carney Chukwuemeka rescued Chelsea with a stoppage-

time strike that inspired a 4-2 win over 10-man Leicester in an thriller. Chelsea were fortunate to survive a stirring fightback from Championship promotion chasers Leicester. Chukwuemeka netted in the closing minutes to save Chelsea from the embarrassment of being forced into extra-time. Nomi Madueke added Chelsea's fourth to ensure the angry fans who booed Pochettino in the second half were silenced, at least for now.

For the sixth time in the last eight years, the Blues have advanced to the last four in the FA Cup. But this was hardly a triumphant afternoon for Blues boss Pochettino, whose inconsistent team blew the two-goal half-time lead given to them by Marc Cucurella and Cole Palmer.

When Stephy Mavididi scored an eye-catching equaliser, Chelsea were in turmoil once again as the hapless Sterling earned the wrath of the home support. But Leicester's Callum Doyle was sent off for a professional foul on Nicolas Jackson, setting the stage for the Blues' late revival.

Villa held by West Ham after VAR drama

AFP
London

Aston Villa escaped with a 1-1 draw at West Ham yesterday after the hosts were denied a stoppage-time winner by a prolonged VAR check.

Australian referee Jarrod Gillett and VAR official Tony Harrington spent over five minutes debating whether West Ham defender Konstantinos Mavropanos' effort hit the arm of Tomas Soucek on its way into the net.

The replays were inconclusive, with a post obscuring the view of a sea of arms and legs on the goal-line.

But Mavropanos' goal was eventually ruled out, one of three chalked off for the Hammers, to spare Villa from a damaging defeat. Nicolo Zaniolo had equalised for Villa after Michail Antonio headed West Ham into a first-half lead.

"We've had four handballs this week that didn't go for us. It's what VAR do, it's their decision not ours, we can't do anything about it. It's there to do the job," West Ham boss David Moyes said.

"In the second half, Villa stepped it up, they were the better team for periods. But I was really pleased with how we performed overall."

Villa manager Unai Emery added: "The referee decided it was handball. We didn't control the game in the first half.

"We changed tactics in the second half and got chances to score a goal. In the end we did score. We have to accept it."

Fourth-placed Villa are now three points clear of fifth-placed Tottenham in the race to qualify for next season's Champions

League via a top-four finish. But it was a frustrating afternoon for Emery's men, who have played a game more than Tottenham and had hoped to take advantage of the north Londoners' loss at Fulham on Saturday.

West Ham made a strong start and Lucas Paqueta had a shot deflected wide by Soucek from Jarrod Bowen's cutback, before Vladimir Coufal's drive was blocked by Emiliano Martinez.

The breakthrough came after 29 minutes when Coufal swung in another cross and the diving Antonio got in front of Ezri Konsa to nod in his first goal since August.

Kodus had the ball in the net shortly afterwards, but Gillett had already blown for a foul on Martinez by Antonio.

West Ham had another goal disallowed, more contentiously, just after the break when Antonio bundled in a Bowen corner.

Martinez totally missed the ball, but VAR ruled Antonio had touched it with his arm.

Villa began to rally as West Ham's energy levels dipped, and Alphonse Areola saved a 20-yarder from Youri Tielemans. An equaliser looked inevitable, and it came in the 79th minute when Tielemans sent Moussa Diaby scampering down the right.

Diaby's cutback found fellow substitute Zaniolo, who arrived in the box right on cue to prod the ball past Areola.

In stoppage time, Matty Cash stopped what looked a certain goal for James Ward-Prowse before Mavropanos scooped the ball into the net from the resulting corner.

Bowen and Soucek forced the ball over the line, but Gillett was eventually beckoned to the pitchside monitor and decided it was handball against Soucek.



Aston Villa's Italian midfielder Nicolo Zaniolo celebrates after scoring during the Premier League match against West Ham United in London yesterday. (AFP)

FOCUS

Al-Qadi claims Big Tour class in ninth round of Hathab

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar rider Hamad Nasser al-Qadi won the Big Tour class in the ninth round of the Longines Hathab Qatar Equestrian Tour astride Happy Tina at the Qatar Equestrian Federation's Outdoor Arena.

Late on Saturday night, the Qatari rider guided his 12-year-old mare in two flawless routines, clocking times of 39.55 secs and 32.68 secs in the two phases of the feature event of the day to win QR25,000 in prize money.

Andre Sakakini rode Heavens Light H to second place, clocking 40.46 and 33.51 respectively.

Mohamed Khalifa Albaker, astride Lissabon 56, came third after completing the two phases in 40.85 and 33.70 respectively.

Earlier, in the Open Class, Hamad Towaim al-Marri clinched the victory with four-year-old bay stallion Famous, completing the round in 52.24. Dukhan 3, under Marc Bettinger, came second in 54.90, while Hussain Saeed Haidan teamed up with D Saucedo to claim third place with a time of 57.25.

In the Amateur class, Omar Qerrmane came first after topping the timesheet astride Fly High Felice. Gabbana M, with Khalid Jassim al-Suwaidi came second while Mariam Abdulkarim Abed, in the saddle of Wadi Rum D D H, sealed third place.



Qatar's Hamad Nasser al-Qadi astride Happy Tina in action during Big Tour class in the ninth round of the Longines Hathab Qatar Equestrian Tour at the Qatar Equestrian Federation's Outdoor Arena.



Chairman of the Longines Hathab Tour Organising Committee Sheikh Hamad bin Nooh al-Thani poses with the podium winners of the Big Tour.

GOLF

Catlin holds off Puig to claim Macau title glory

‘Still hasn’t quite sunk in and that was one heck of a battle’

AFP
Macau

John Catlin held off David Puig to win the International Series Macau with a birdie at the end of a tense playoff yesterday and seal his comeback from “a rough last two years”.

On a day of low scoring, American Catlin missed a five-foot birdie putt at the 18th hole in regulation that would have given him a six-under par round of 64 and the title by one stroke.

Instead his 65 left him in a tie at 23-under at the top of the leaderboard with the LIV golfer Puig, who had a blistering 10-under final round of 60 containing nine birdies and an eagle.

“We made that a little more interesting than we needed to, didn’t we,” Catlin said to caddie Barry Cornwall after his birdie at the second playoff hole secured the \$360,000 first prize and a fifth Asian Tour win, but first since 2019.

“Still hasn’t quite sunk in and that was one heck of a battle,” the 33-year-old Catlin told reporters. “If you had told me I would finish minus 23 on the tournament and I still have to be in a playoff, I’d be like: You’re kidding.”

The 22-year-old Spaniard Puig began the day five shots behind history-maker Catlin, who shot to the top of the leaderboard on Saturday with the Asian Tour’s first-ever 59.

The pair went back down the par-five 18th for the playoff, where Puig agonisingly saw a bunker shot for eagle cannon away off the flagstick.

Second time around Catlin co-sied his third shot close and Puig missed a five-footer.

Catlin tapped home the winning putt and celebrated his first Asian Tour victory since the Thailand Open in 2019.



John Catlin of the US posing with the trophy after the final round of the International Series Macau at the Macau Golf and Country Club. (AFP)

The American also had three victories on the DP World (European) Tour but lost his card in 2023 after two years in the doldrums.

He got back to the Asian Tour via qualifying school in January and was stunned to be back in the winner’s circle again so soon.

“It’s been a rough last two years,” Catlin told AFP.

“You know, there’s times you start thinking about: ‘Am I ever gonna win again, am I ever going to get it back?’

“You just kind of keep putting your head down. You keep working.”

“I’m just really glad to be here. I just kept telling myself, I don’t know when it’s gonna happen, but I’m gonna win again.

“And to have it happen in a span of about two and a half months, from the start of the year, that’s just great.”

It was tough on Puig, who has been in rampant form.

He left college early to turn pro and joined LIV in 2022, leaving

the Asian Tour as his only pathway to ranking points to qualify him for majors and the Olympics.

Puig won the International Series Singapore last year and the Malaysian Open last month, and should break into the top 100 when the new rankings are published today – enough to qualify him for the US PGA Championship in May.

Another LIV player, Lucas Herbert of Australia, was third on 21-under par after a final-round 64.

Spieth talks possible meeting with Saudi Public Investment Fund

New York: Following his missed cut at The Players Championship late Friday, **Jordan Spieth** addressed a potential meeting, first reported by *Golfweek*, with the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia, possibly with the head of the PIF, Yasir al-Rumayyan. The meeting would come as early as today at the site of The Players event in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. The PIF is the main funding arm for the LIV Tour, which drew stars including Dustin Johnson, Brooks Koepka and Jon Rahm away from the PGA Tour. Spieth said he and the fellow player directors on the Tour’s Policy Board were “strongly encouraged” to meet. The *Golfweek* sources indicated a lack of clarity as to whether al-Rumayyan, governor of the PIF, would attend. “We are being encouraged to potentially meet with them at some point, yeah,” said Spieth, who provided no additional details but expressed optimism. “I’m not sure that I can say much more other than we’re being encouraged to potentially meet with them. But at the same time we probably feel like our membership should know timing and what could happen. ... We are being encouraged, obviously, which I think is probably a good thing that the entire board should if there’s going to be any potential for a negotiation.”



PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan said earlier this week that talking about specifics “really is not in the best interest of the PGA Tour and our membership and for PIF ...” “I would just stress the fact that we’re engaged, we’re making progress.” The commissioner had a January meeting with al-Rumayyan. “Our negotiations are accelerating,” Monahan said, “as we spend time together.” “While we have several key issues that we still need to work through, we have a shared vision to quiet the noise and unlock golf’s worldwide potential.” Monahan said discussions with the PIF would be the “best outcome.” The player directors are Spieth, Tiger Woods, Adam Scott, Peter Malnati, Webb Simpson and Patrick Cantlay.

FOCUS

Sri Lanka, Bangladesh hit by injuries to players

AFP
Chittagong, Bangladesh

Sri Lanka fast bowler Dilshan Madushanka will miss the rest of the tour of Bangladesh while home paceman Tanzim Hasan Sakib is also out of the decisive third and final ODI today after both suffered hamstring injuries.

Both players have been vital for their respective sides in a one-day series dominated by pace bowlers, picking up four wickets each in the first two matches.

The series is tied 1-1 after hosts Bangladesh won the opener by six wickets, with Sri Lanka taking the second by three wickets.

Sri Lanka Cricket said Madushanka suffered a hamstring problem

during the second ODI on Friday. “Madushanka will not take part in the ongoing tour as the bowler will return to start rehabilitation work,” SLC said.

Tanzim had similarly injured his hamstring, while bowling in the nets yesterday.

“He will be sent to Dhaka today for his scan,” Bangladesh Cricket Board doctor Monzur Hussain said.

Bangladesh have dropped opener Liton Das for Monday’s decider in Chittagong after he was dismissed for consecutive ducks in the first two matches.

Uncapped Jaker Ali Anik took his place in the Bangladesh squad for the match.

Sri Lanka won the earlier Twenty20 series 2-1. The two sides are also set to play two Tests.

CRICKET

Nabi, Rashid shine as Afghanistan edge past Ireland by 10 runs

AFP
Sharjah

Led by captain Rashid Khan, Afghanistan proved too strong for Ireland with the ball as they won the second T20 international of their three-match series by 10 runs in Sharjah yesterday.

Afghanistan’s victory ties up the series 1-1 as Ireland’s multi-format tour against Afghanistan approaches its end.

A valiant knock of 39 off 18 balls by Gareth Delany was in vain as Ireland failed to score the 18 runs necessary off the last over to win.

One six was not enough as the penultimate ball was stopped for no run and the last saw Delany caught on the boundary off Fazal-haq Farooqi.

The visitors started their run chase of 153 strongly as opening pair Andy Balbirnie and Paul Stirling put on a 49-run stand, before Stirling’s dismissal in the sixth over.

The Irish captain was followed by Lorcan Tucker for 10 and a first-baller for Harry Tector, both courtesy of star spinner Khan, and Ireland’s run chase halted.

When Balbirnie was dismissed lbw by Nangeyalia Kharote on 45 with just 5.1 overs left, it left Ireland’s tail with too much to do, despite Delany’s late heroics.

Khan took four wickets for just 14 runs and his double-wicket 16th over effectively won the match for the hosts when he saw off George Dockrell and Mark Adair.

Afghanistan earlier won the toss and elected to bat first, putting on a total of 152-9 in their 20 overs.

Mohamed Nabi top-scored for



Mohamed Nabi of Afghanistan during his knock of 59 against Ireland in Sharjah yesterday. (@ACBofficials)

the hosts with 59 off 38, including six fours and three sixes, before he was caught by Stirling from Ben White’s bowling.

Adair was the pick of the Irish bowlers and finished with figures of 3-27 as Afghanistan’s top order struggled, with numbers four and five Mohamed Ishaq and Azmatullah Omarzai both collecting golden ducks.

Opener Sediqullah Atal was the only out-and-out batter to offer serious resistance but was run out on 35 to leave Afghanistan 93-5 with 6.5 overs remaining.

The final match of the tour takes place today in Sharjah with it all to play for as Ireland look to add a T20I series win to their Test victory, after Afghanistan claimed the ODI series earlier in March.

WOMEN’S PREMIER LEAGUE

Bangalore win maiden title after Delhi collapse in final

AFP
New Delhi

Aggressive knocks from Ellyse Perry and Sophie Devine buoyed Royal Challengers Bangalore at the right moment to seal an eight-wicket Women’s Premier League final win yesterday after a Delhi Capitals batting collapse.

Bangalore triumphed 115-2 with three balls to spare in their chase of 113 all out, with Delhi surrendering the fight at their home ground after their 64-run opening partnership was broken.

Australia’s Perry top-scored for Bangalore with 35 not out surpassing New Zealander Devine, whose 32 included five fours and a six in the 27 balls she faced.

Four of those boundaries came in the seventh over off Radha Yadav, closing a 36-run gap from the same point in Delhi’s innings. “We did the job,” Devine said yesterday. “We had all the parts last season as well, it was just about putting them together.”

Devine departed in the ninth after an unsuccessful review of her lbw trapping by Shikha Pandey, with captain and fellow opener Smriti Mandhana anchoring the innings before she was sent back after a catch off Minnu Mani for 31.

Delhi skipper Meg Lanning and Shafali Verma made a barnstorming start after opting to bat with eight boundaries between them in seven overs.

But slow bowler Sophie Molineux brought the home side’s innings to a screeching halt with



Royal Challengers Bangalore’s players hold the trophy after winning the Women’s Premier League (WPL) Twenty20 cricket final match against Delhi Capitals in New Delhi yesterday. (AFP)

three dismissals off four balls in the eighth over.

The Australian forced Verma to misjudge a sweep and drive a catch to mid-wicket then bowled both Jemimah Rodrigues and Alice Capsey off consecutive deliveries. A deflated Delhi conceded their remaining seven wickets for just 49.

“It all happened relatively quickly, as it tends to do,” Lanning said of the collapse.

“Crazy things happen, and every game has been pretty close,” she added. “They deserved the win.”

Bangalore were unexpected finalists for the WPL’s second edition after a narrow five-run win in

Friday’s eliminator over Mumbai Indians, who beat Delhi in the inaugural season’s final.

The franchise has long had a reputation as an also-ran competitor.

Bangalore was one of the founding teams of the Indian Premier League but has never won that tournament despite three finals appearances and a roster featuring star batsman Virat Kohli and former South Africa captain Faf du Plessis.

The WPL was first staged last year as a curtain-raiser for the IPL and has already proved a tidy earner for the country’s cash-rich cricket board.

Franchise rights were auc-

tioned off last January for \$572.5mn, while media rights for the first five seasons were sold to Viacom18 for \$116.7mn.

The two deals made the WPL the world’s second-most valuable women’s sports league after WNBA women’s basketball in the United States.

Match crowds have grown steadily for the second edition with a near-capacity crowd in Delhi for the final.

BRIEF SCORES
Royal Challengers Bangalore 115 for 2 (Perry 35*, Devine 32) **beat Delhi Capitals 113** (Shafali 44, Patil 4-12, Molineux 3-20, Sobhana 2-14) **by eight wickets**

BADMINTON

Christie and Marin claim All England Open titles

‘I AM VERY HAPPY BECAUSE WE MADE HISTORY, THE FIRST ALL-INDONESIA FINAL AFTER 30 YEARS’

Jonatan Christie beat compatriot Anthony Sinisuka Ginting to win his first All England Open men's singles with a 21-15 21-14 victory.

Both Indonesian men were playing in their first showpiece in Birmingham, with Christie taking his maiden Super 1000 win at the first time asking.

Christie, who entered the final ranked four places below his opponent, withstood fightbacks in both games to confirm Indonesia's first singles title since Hariyanto Arbi in 1994.

A tentative start burst into a strong lead for Christie in the first game as he built an eight-point advantage.

But up against his good friend and someone he had not beaten since 2019, the World No. 9 was never going to have everything his own way.

Ginting reeled in Christie to sit just two points behind but that was the warning shot he needed as he closed out the game with four straight points.

The second followed a similar path as Christie was only behind at the opening stages but Ginting continued to weave his way back to touching distance. With the game poised at 15-14, Christie again turned on the style powering to the title with six consecutive points.

It marks a remarkable turnaround for the 26-year-old who had come to Birmingham on the back of two first-round losses in a row.

"I am very happy because we made history, the first all-Indonesia final after 30 years," he said.

"I am the champion here and it is very important for me. The start of 2024 has been up and down but God helped me a lot this tournament.

"Sometimes you don't see the different side, it is upsetting when you lose in



Gold medallist Indonesia's Jonatan Christie after winning the men's singles final at the All England Open Badminton Championships at the Utilita Arena in Birmingham, central England, yesterday. (AFP)

the first round two tournaments in a row, when you try to train harder and harder.

"But I've managed to improve now."

Losing finalist Ginting was all class as he discussed the long history they have together, from coming to the national team at the same time to sharing the stage at one of badminton's biggest events.

He said: "My first memory of Jonatan is our first day in the national team. We were

the juniors, really young at the time, 16 or 17 years old.

"We were feeling shy and a bit scared with our seniors because we are young and it's Asian culture, right? We shared a bedroom, three of us, me, Jonatan and our teammate.

"There are good memories from that time until today, we can share together, and worked for this together. If there is no



Japan's Akane Yamaguchi (left) and winner Spain's Carolina Marin are seen on the podium after competing in the women's singles final at the All England Open Badminton Championships yesterday. (AFP)

Jonatan today, there is no me today."

Marin wins women's singles title as Yamaguchi retires

Carolina Marin claimed the women's singles title as Akane Yamaguchi was forced to retire at the All England Open Badminton Championships 2024.

With the game at 26-24 10-1 in Marin's favour, the Japanese shuttler was unable to continue with an injured hip.

For Marin, the title marks a return to the top tier in Birmingham for the first time since 2015.

The lead changed hands seven times in the first game, with no player ever more than three points ahead.

Yamaguchi saw five game-point opportunities pass her by as Marin battled until

the death. The Spaniard needed a medical timeout after letting her second chance at winning the game go by.

"I feel extremely happy," Marin said. "I'm very proud of myself. It was a tough week and I feel really, really proud because at the beginning of the week, I had a hard conversation with my coach about the things that I have to improve.

"And this is what I did during the whole week. So this is why I feel really proud and of course I feel really really happy to win my second All England after nine years.

"We didn't think about this tournament, we thought about the things that I need to improve, but not for this tournament.

"Actually, my main goal is going to be at the Olympic Games in the summer." www.allenglandbadminton.com

TENNIS

Swiatek beats Sakkari for second Indian Wells title



Iga Swiatek of Poland holds her winner's trophy after her straight-sets victory against Maria Sakkari of Greece in the final during the BNP Paribas Open at Indian Wells Tennis Garden in Indian Wells, California. (AFP)

Reuters

Indian Wells

Iga Swiatek dominated Maria Sakkari to win the Indian Wells final 6-4 6-0 yesterday and claim the title for a second time in the California desert.

In a rematch of the 2022 final, world number one Swiatek came out firing, building a 3-0 lead before Sakkari worked her way back into the set for 4-4.

But on her third set point, the Pole dragged Sakkari from one side of the court to the other before capturing the opener with a forehand winner.

Swiatek, who did not drop a set all tournament, dominated the second, crushing a running backhand for a 3-0 lead and then breaking serve for 4-0 as the out-matched Greek began to fade.

A backhand winner down the line put Swiatek a game away and the top seed sealed the win by breaking serve to love when Sakkari's forehand sailed wide on match point.

"It's an amazing thing to be

standing here again," Swiatek said during the trophy ceremony.

"Thank you for really making this feel like home. Every year that I come here I feel really positive vibes because of you. Thank you guys for coming and hopefully we're going to see each other next year."

Swiatek is now 19-4 in her career finals and 8-2 at WTA 1000 level while ninth seed Sakkari now has a 2-8 record in finals.

"I'm sorry I couldn't put up a better fight," Sakkari told the crowd after the match lasted just over an hour.

"It was pretty quick for you guys but credit to Iga. You're an amazing player, very good person, incredible champion.

"You really do deserve the best. You and your team have created something incredible. I'm really hoping we can play a lot more finals."

Swiatek, a four-time Grand Slam champion, has now won a WTA leading 20 matches this season and has two titles after her triumph at the Qatar Open in February. The 22-year-old will

look to capture her second "Sunshine Double" with a win at the Miami Open.

Top seeds Hsieh and Mertens win second doubles title

Top seeds Hsieh Su-Wei and Elise Mertens won their second BNP Paribas Open doubles title after defeating No.3 seeds Storm Hunter and Katerina Siniakova 6-3, 6-4 in the final yesterday.

The title is Mertens' 20th career doubles title and Hsieh's 34th.

This is the fourth Indian Wells title for Hsieh and her second with Mertens.

The two first lifted the trophy together in 2021. Hsieh also won the title in 2014 (w/ Peng) and 2018 (w/ Strycova).

Mertens has now won Indian Wells three times, having won her first with Aryna Sabalenka in 2019.

"It was a little bit special this year, because I didn't play this tournament for a while, and I was sick since Qatar, so I haven't practiced a lot," Hsieh said.

"And I couldn't do any exercise

because the doctor suggest to me do not do any sport."

The reigning Australian Open champions capped off a dominating fortnight in the desert, as the duo ran through the draw without losing a set. Hsieh and Mertens defeated No.6 seeds Demi Schuurs and Luisa Stefani, No.4 seeds Nicole Melichar-Martinez and Ellen Perez, and the No.3 seeds on Sunday to win their second team title of the year.

Earlier No.4 seed Elisabetta Cocciaretto defeated No.7 seed Diana Shnaider 6-3, 6-2 in the final of the Fifth Third Charleston 125 to complete a title run in which she did not lose a set.

The result seals the Italian's third WTA 125 title, following Tampico 2022 and San Luis Potosi 2023, and second on hard courts. Cocciaretto also captured her first tour-level trophy at the Lausanne WTA 250 event last July. No.60-ranked Cocciaretto was only taken to a tiebreak once in five matches, winning her semifinal over Greet Minnen 7-6(4), 6-1 after coming from 4-1 down and saving one set point in the first set.

SPOTLIGHT

French star Marchand sees Paris Olympics as golden 'opportunity'



AFP

Paris

French swimmer **Leon Marchand**, who broke Michael Phelps' 400m medley world record last year, believes the stars are aligned for him to peak at his home Olympics in Paris this summer.

"I'm 21 years old, I'm reaching my peak in my sport and the Games are at home. What more could you ask for?" Marchand said in an interview with French media including AFP.

The five-time world champion, who trains in the United States with Phelps' former coach Bob Bowman, has been tipped as one of the big stars of the Paris Games as he chases his first Olympic medals in front of his home crowd.

"I'm preparing myself mentally and physically for that," said Marchand whose father Xavier was a former swimming world silver medallist and Olympian, and mother, Celine Bonnet a French record-holder.

Marchand starred at the world championships in Fukuoka last year, winning three gold medals and breaking Phelps' long-standing 400m individual medley world record. He also won two world titles in the 200m and 400m individual medley at the 2022 world championships in Budapest.

"I understood it when I beat Michael (Phelps') record. Immediately in my head I said to myself: 'Well, the Paris Games, it's going to be different from what I had imagined!'"

"So I prepare for it every day with my mental coach. We prepare for everything that will be around me during the two weeks which

are going to be quite intense. "It's a new challenge, but above all it's an opportunity."

"I'm not going to complain, I'm going to prepare as much as possible and I'm going to enjoy."

A student at Arizona State University, Marchand has been following Games' preparations from afar.

"The Arena, I've never been there but I've seen quite a few pictures. I know that there will be a huge screen, I know how the swimming pool will be positioned.

"And I had my cousin who worked in the building and who was on the swimming pool project, so it was funny he sent me videos."

"I try to imagine things but I'm still so far away that it's not easy. But it's good, it'll remain a bit of a surprise and I'll be happy to find out when I'm there."

Despite the weight of expectation, Marchand insisted: "I'm not afraid of all that. I'm excited to return to France and prepare for the Games. I'll see my family again and spend time with them."

"Obviously I have a little more experience so I will manage things better."

"I'll try to be a little more open in terms of meeting people, signing autographs and sharing a bit more," continued Marchand, who found the national championships energy-sapping.

"It's true that the French Championships are not easy for me because it's no longer like before," continued the swimmer from Toulouse. Before, I was unknown, I did my races, my finals and went home. Now it's not the same thing."

"I preferred before when I was unknown, because what I really like is swimming fast and having fun in the water."

BUNDESLIGA

Leverkusen extend unbeaten run to 38 as title beckons

‘IT WAS A GOOD PERFORMANCE, A DESERVED VICTORY’

AFP

Berlin

Florian Wirtz scored after 84 seconds as Bayer Leverkusen made it 38 games unbeaten in all competitions with a 3-2 victory in Freiburg yesterday.

Leverkusen's seventh league win on the bounce kept them 10 points clear of serial champions Bayern Munich with eight games to play in their quest for the club's first ever Bundesliga crown.

"It was a good performance, a deserved victory. It's not easy to win in Freiburg but we keep going," Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso told DAZN before praising the performance of his playmaker Wirtz.

"It's not just the goal he scored, he has a super game. He has real quality and I am very happy for his development."

Wirtz, one of Leverkusen's key performers this season, got things moving in style. The Germany forward cut in from the left and unleashed a perfect shot with his right foot, chalking up his seventh league goal of the campaign.

The early goal stunned Freiburg, who came into the game fresh from a 5-0 thrashing at the hands of West Ham in the Europa League, with Leverkusen to face the Londoners in the quarter-final of the competition next month.

Freiburg responded against the run of play though, with Japan forward Ritsu Doan exchanging passes neatly with Lucas Hoeler to drill a low shot beyond the unsighted Lukas Hradecky.

Leverkusen put their noses back in front before half-time though, with Adam Hlozek tapping into an empty net after a mistake by Freiburg goalkeeper Noah Atubolu.



Bayer Leverkusen's midfielder Florian Wirtz celebrates after scoring the opening 0-1 goal during the Bundesliga match against SC Freiburg in Freiburg, Germany, yesterday. (AFP)

Patrik Schick put the gloss on another convincing victory for Alonso's team, with a sensational finish to a scintillating Leverkusen counter-attack.

Jeremie Frimpong's cross from the right was caressed into the top corner by the Czech striker, who was the Leverkusen hero on Thursday with two stoppage-time goals against Qarabag in Europe.

Yannik Keitel pulled one back for Freiburg but the damage was

already done, leaving the hosts in ninth and with European qualification slipping away.

In the final game of the weekend, Borussia Dortmund left it late against Eintracht Frankfurt but eventually secured a 3-1 win to stay a point ahead of RB Leipzig in the race for fourth spot.

Dortmund, who beat PSV Eindhoven in the Champions League last week to set up a quarter-final showdown against Atletico Ma-

drid, fell behind to a breakaway Frankfurt goal by former hero Mario Goetze in front of the Yellow Wall.

But the hosts struck back through Karim Adeyemi before the break.

Mats Hummels' diving header from Julian Brandt's free-kick put Dortmund ahead for the first time in the 81st minute, with Emre Can's stoppage-time penalty adding the gloss.

SERIE A

Milan consolidate second position, Fiorentina's match at Atalanta postponed

AFP

Milan

AC Milan consolidated second place in Serie A yesterday by beating Verona 3-1 after Juventus were held by Genoa, while Fiorentina's match at Atalanta was postponed after the club's general manager Giuseppe "Joe" Barone was taken ill.

Goals shortly before and after half-time by Theo Hernandez and Christian Pulisic put Milan two ahead before Samuel Chukwueze volleyed the away side out of sight with 11 minutes remaining.

Yesterday's win moved Milan three points ahead of third-placed Juve in the race for Champions League football.

Stefano Pioli's team trail runaway league leaders Inter Milan by 13 points, however they are all-but guaranteed a spot in next season's revamped edition of Europe's top club competition.

Milan sit 14 points above fifth-placed Roma who host Sassuolo later, and with Italy favourites for an extra place in the Champions League next term the seven-time European champions have a massive cushion with nine fixtures remaining.

"We played very well as a team and we created a huge amount. It was a really positive performance," said Pioli to DAZN after his team's fifth straight win in all competitions. Verona put on a good show and Tijjani Noslin's unstoppable strike in the 64th minute gave the hosts hope they could pull off another good result after winning their previous two matches.

Instead, Verona stay two points above the relegation zone with a potentially huge clash at fellow strugglers Cagliari coming up after the international break. Juve meanwhile con-



AC Milan's forward Christian Pulisic celebrates after scoring his team second goal during the Serie A match against Hellas Verona in Verona yesterday.

tinued their poor run of recent form with a largely uninteresting goalless draw with Genoa in Turin.

Massimiliano Allegri's side were league title contenders in January but one win in their last eight matches has left them 16 points behind Inter.

Inter host Napoli in Sunday's late match, searching for one of the five wins they need to secure a 20th Scudetto.

Juve were frustrated by their stubborn opponents and were booed off by home fans at both half-time and the final whistle.

"I am happy with what the team is doing," insisted Allegri.

"We did really well in the first half of the season, but we are not doing enough now. We have to be in the top four come May 26."

Juve could have claimed the win despite their underwhelming display as Dusan Vlahovic twice went close with second-half headers while Samuel Iling-Junior and Moise Kean both had efforts strike the woodwork.

Vlahovic was sent off in stoppage time for dissent meaning he will miss Juve's next fixture against Lazio. A big draw for promoted Genoa put Alberto Gilardino's side 10 points above the relegation zone.

David continues scoring streak as Lille draw with Brest

Canadian striker Jonathan David continued his superb form in front of goal as Lille drew 1-1 away to fellow Champions League contenders Brest in Ligue 1 yesterday, while Japan's Junya Ito was the match-winner for Reims.

David finished cleverly from an Angel Gomes assist to give Lille the lead midway through the second half in Brittany.

It was David's 22nd goal of the season in all competitions, and his 15th since the turn of the calendar year.

The 24-year-old has netted 10 times in his team's last nine Ligue 1 outings. His total of 15 in Ligue 1 this season is bettered only by Kylian Mbappe, who has 21 for Paris Saint-Germain.

However, that goal was not enough to win the game, as Uruguayan striker Martin Satriano poked in a late equaliser for a Brest side who had seen Romain Del Castillo hit the post in the first half.

Brest remain second, but this was a second straight game without a win for them, and leaders PSG can stretch their lead at the top of the table to 12 points with victory at Montpellier later. Monaco could have climbed above Brest into second with a win at home to Lorient, but they were held to a 2-2 draw after Tiemoue Bakayoko headed in a 95th-minute equaliser for the struggling away side in the principality.

Wilfried Singo's own goal had given Lorient a first-minute lead, only for Formose Mendy's own goal and a Youssouf Fofana effort to turn the game around before Bakayoko's leveller in a game both teams ended with 10 men. Monaco remain third, three points above Lille who reclaimed fourth from Nice, 3-1 winners at Lens on Saturday. The top three in Ligue 1 go straight into next season's new, expanded Champions League, with fourth entering the competition in the third qualifying round. Rennes boosted their hopes of qualifying for Europe with a 2-0 win at home to Marseille, as Martin Terrier fired the hosts ahead in the first half and Benjamin Bourigeaud added a late penalty. Marseille had recorded five straight wins in all competitions under new coach Jean-Louis Gasset before a 3-1 defeat away to Villarreal in the Europa League on Thursday.

SPOTLIGHT

Bayern's Kane returns to England for ankle injury treatment

AFP

Munich

Harry Kane will have an ankle injury treated by England national team doctors in "close consultation" with Bayern Munich's medical department, the Bundesliga champions said yesterday.

Kane scored his 31st Bundesliga goal of the season in Bayern's 5-2 victory at Darmstadt on Saturday, surpassing Uwe Seeler's record for the most goals in Germany's top flight in a debut season.

But England's captain and record goalscorer limped off in the 82nd minute after suffering a blow to his left ankle.

Bayern coach Thomas Tuchel confirmed later that Kane had "stumbled and fell into the net and twisted his ankle" with club sporting director Christoph Freund insisting Kane "will take no risks" with injury.



Bayern Munich's Harry Kane holds his leg after falling during the Bundesliga match against SV Darmstadt 98 in Darmstadt. (AFP)

Kane will travel to England's training base at St George's Park ahead of two friendlies at London's Wembley Stadium against Brazil on March 23 and Belgium three days later.

The forward has a long history of ankle injuries, having been sidelined on five separate oc-

casions with problems during his time at Tottenham Hotspur.

Two separate injuries to the same ankle in 2019 saw him miss three months of the season, including both legs of Tottenham's Champions League semi-final victory over Ajax.

On Saturday, Tuchel said he "hoped the incident was just a scary moment" with the team's next match at home to Borussia Dortmund on March 30.

"When Harry goes off it's never a good sign because Harry never goes off when there's still goals to score."

Kane broke a 60-year record for most goals scored in a debut season in the Bundesliga.

His 31 goals from 26 games overtook German legend Seeler, who scored 30 goals in the 1963-64 season for Hamburg.

Bayern are on a run of 11 straight Bundesliga titles but sit seven points behind league leaders Bayer Leverkusen, who have a game in hand.

The German champions on Friday drew Arsenal in the Champions League quarter-finals.

Al-Rifai extends overall F 4 Saudi Arabia Championship lead, Qatar's Jabor shines



Italian-born Emirati driver Federico al-Rifai extended his overall Formula 4 Saudi Arabia Championship lead with two impressive wins in the Qatar Gulf Prix which took place at the Lusail International Circuit late Saturday. Al-Rifai won Race 1 and Race 4, while Faisal Alkabbani and Omar Aldereyaane also notched up victories in the Qatar round, the third leg of the championship. In Rookie Class, Saudi Arabia's Aldereyaane won two races, while Serbian driver Andrej Petrovic and Kyrgyzstan's Kirill Kutskov also secured victories in the same category. Emerging Qatari racer Jabor al-Thani also displayed impressive talent, securing second place in the Rookie Class in Race 2 of the Championship which took place for the first time in Qatar.

