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CRICKET | Page 2

Mitchell, Phillips
slam tons as
New Zealand
bag ODI series



FOOTBALL | Page 4

Dybala
boosts Roma's
Champions
League hopes



Monday, January 19, 2026
Rajab 30, 1447 AH

GULF TIMES SPORT



TENNIS

Alcaraz, Sabalenka
through as fans fume
on steamy day one
at Australian Open

Page 3

PREMIER LEAGUE

Aston Villa's title bid rocked by Everton loss

BOTTOM SIDE WOLVES HOLD NEWCASTLE UNITED TO DRAW TO EXTEND UNBEATEN RUN

AFP
London

Aston Villa's Premier League title challenge suffered a huge blow in a 1-0 defeat against Everton, while Newcastle's push towards the top four was derailed by a 0-0 draw at Wolves yesterday.

Unai Emery's side could have closed to within four points of leaders Arsenal if they had beaten Everton at Villa Park.

But they wasted the chance to put pressure on the Gunners with a limp performance that was punished by Thierno Barry's second half winner.

After Arsenal's goalless draw at Nottingham Forest on Saturday, Mikel Arteta's men are seven points clear of third-placed Villa.

Second-placed Manchester City are also seven points behind the leaders following their 2-0 loss at Manchester United on Saturday. Arsenal are chasing a first English title since 2004 and the stumbles from City and Villa this weekend have tightened their grip on the title race.

Adding to Villa's woes, their captain John McGinn limped off with a first half injury.

Villa had won their previous 11 home games in all competitions.

But Everton's Merlin Rohl nearly shattered that feeling of invincibility in just 11 seconds when he capitalised on sloppy defending to shoot against the post.

Despite being a boyhood Villa fan, Everton winger Jack Grealish was loudly jeered on his return to his former club. Grealish almost silenced his tormentors with a goal-bound volley that was blocked by Evans Guesand.

Everton's Jake O'Brien headed home from a corner, only to see his effort disallowed for offside against Harrison Armstrong.

Villa went close just before half-time when Youri Tielemans's cross picked out Guesand and the Ivory Coast forward looped his header

onto the bar. But Emery's men lacked a cutting edge and they paid the price in the 59th minute.

NEWCASTLE FRUSTRATED
It was a shambolic goal to concede as Pau Torres carelessly surrendered possession just outside his own area.

Dwight McNeil pounced with a shot that Emilio Martinez pushed out to Barry and the striker chipped the ball into the net from close-range for his third goal in his last five appearances.

Goalkeeper Jordan Pickford preserved Everton's victory with a brilliant tip-over from Morgan Rogers's curler, leaving Villa with only one win from their last four league games.

At rain-lashed Molineux, Eddie Howe's Newcastle were unable to prise open the Wolves defence as two points slipped away.

Wins over Burnley, Crystal Palace and Leeds had bolstered their bid to qualify for next season's Champions League.

But the Magpies are stuck in eighth place after failing to beat bottom-of-the-table Wolves. Following their disappointing 2-0 defeat against Manchester City in the League Cup semi-final first leg on Tuesday, it was another frustrating result for Newcastle.

"We needed to do more in attack. I expect us to do better and create more," Howe said after Newcastle took 85 minutes to muster a shot on target.

"Football is such a strange game. We scored four against Leeds and looked free-scoring, but today we struggled."

Nick Woltemade has now gone seven games without a goal, scoring just twice in 13 appearances after squandering two good headed chances. With crucial matches against top four rivals Aston Villa and Liverpool looming before the end of the month, Howe's men must get back on track quickly. Wolves are now unbeaten in four league games but still sit 14 points from safety.



Everton's French striker Thierno Barry (centre) scores the team's first goal during the Premier League match against Aston Villa at Villa Park in Birmingham yesterday. (AFP)

LA LIGA

Atletico edge Alaves to strengthen top-four hold

AFP
Madrid

Alexander Sorloth's towering header earned Atletico Madrid a narrow 1-0 win over Alaves yesterday in La Liga, helping them pull level on points with third-placed Villarreal. After dropping points in a draw at Real Sociedad in their last league outing, Diego Simeone's side got back on track, moving seven points clear of Espanyol in fifth.

The Rojiblanco, fourth, trail leaders Barcelona by eight points before the champions visit Real Sociedad later on Sunday.

"There are no easy games and we're happy for the victory," Atletico midfielder Pablo Barrios told DAZN.

"Sorloth is a player who gives us a lot, who can help us break through in games which are blocked up, with crosses."

Atletico had the better chances of a solid but not overly exciting first-half display at their Metropolitano stadium, with Antonio Sivera keeping Sorloth at bay after he broke through.

Julian Alvarez was also denied by the Atletico goalkeeper as his dry spell continued, going a fifth game without scoring.

Coach Diego Simeone's son Giuliano Simeone signed a new deal until 2030 this week and was Atletico's biggest threat, offering energy on the right flank.

Atletico took the lead early

in the second half, with Sorloth leaping high to nod home Barrios's cross and break the deadlock.

It was the Norwegian target man's sixth goal of the league campaign, and his third in his last three games across all competitions.

Substitute Alex Baena came close to doubling Atletico's lead but hit Sivera's far post from just inside the area.

After dropping points in a draw at Real Sociedad in their last league outing, Diego Simeone's side got back on track, moving seven points clear of Espanyol in fifth

With Atletico leading by just one goal they endured some nervy moments during five minutes of added time but Alaves, 18th, could not find an equaliser. Lucas Boye headed a free-kick inches over Jan Oblak's crossbar just before the final whistle with the Atletico goalkeeper rooted to the spot.

"It wasn't to be, we knew it was hard to play here, they haven't lost here yet," said Alaves defender Jonny Otto.

"We know we're down near the foot of the table but it's still quite even... the team is fighting well."

Atletico Madrid's Alexander Sorloth (left) scores his team's first goal during the La Liga match against Deportivo Alaves at Metropolitano Stadium in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)



Amir Cup Round of 16 draw today

The Qatar Football Association (QFA) yesterday confirmed that the draw for the Round of 16 of the 54th Amir Cup will be held tomorrow in Doha. The draw comes after the conclusion of the preliminary stage, which featured second division clubs competing in a single-elimination knockout format. The preliminary round was contested based on the general ranking of the Second Division League for the 2024/2025 season.

From this stage, four teams including Al Saliya, Al Waab, Al Markhiya, and Al Kharaitiyat advanced to the Round of 16. This edition of the Amir Cup marks the third consecutive time that the competition features 20 participating teams.

The tournament includes 12 clubs from the top flight Qatar Stars League and 8 clubs from the Second Division, who entered the competition at the preliminary stage. Ahead of the draw, the participating teams are divided into two levels:

Level One: Teams ranked 1st to 8th in the QSL standings for the 2024/2025 season.

Level Two: Teams ranked 9th to 12th in the Qatar Stars League, plus the four qualifiers from the Second Division preliminary stage. Al Gharafa are the defending champions in the prestigious tournament.

They edged Al Rayyan 2-1 in a thrilling final at the Khalifa International Stadium to secure their eighth Amir Cup title.



CRICKET

Mitchell, Phillips slam tons as New Zealand bag series

BLACK CAPS BEAT INDIA BY 41 RUNS IN THE THIRD AND FINAL ODI TO SECURE SERIES 2-1

Reuters
Indore

New Zealand batters Daryl Mitchell and Glenn Phillips scored centuries in a superb partnership to lay the platform for a 41-run win over India in the third one day international (ODI) in Indore yesterday, which sealed a comeback 2-1 series victory for the touring side.

A target of 337 left the hosts facing a daunting task and they ran out of steam despite veteran Virat Kohli's battling knock of 124.

India started shakily and lost wickets at frequent intervals before Kohli gave home fans hope as he combined with Nitish Kumar Reddy (53) in an 88-run partnership.

Kristian Clarke removed Reddy to stymie India's momentum and the required run rate quickly climbed, but Kohli found another able partner in Harshit Rana as the pair stepped on the gas.

Kohli reached a record-extending 54th ODI century and Rana hit a whirlwind 52 off 43 balls, before a decisive over from Zak Foulkes broke India's resistance.

Foulkes tempted Rana with a full toss which was caught by Henry Nicholls at long-on, before an edge from Mohammed Siraj carried through to wicketkeeper Mitchell



New Zealand's Glenn Phillips (left) celebrates with teammate Daryl Mitchell after scoring a century during the third one day international against India at the Holkar Cricket Stadium in Indore yesterday. (AFP)

Hay on the next delivery. The final blow was dealt two overs later, when Kohli miscued a shot and sent the ball sailing into the hands of Mitchell at long-off.

"After the first game, coming here 1-1, the way we played was disappointing. Lot of areas need improving. Virat's batting and Harshit's batting have been posi-

tives," India captain Shubman Gill said.

New Zealand were struggling at 58-3 after being put into bat on a Holkar Stadium wicket known for



India's Virat Kohli walks back to the pavilion after his dismissal during the third one day international against New Zealand. (AFP)

producing high-scoring games. However, Mitchell took the attack to the hosts' bowlers and was well supported by Phillips as they added 219 off 188 balls.

Mitchell, who made 84 in the first ODI and 131 in the second, hit 15 fours and three sixes to post a career-high ODI score of 137 and record his fourth century in India.

"It's really nice to contribute and to win over here. The way we built partnerships, with (Will) Young and GP (Phillips)," said Mitchell, who was named Player of the Series. "Always nice to get stuck into moments with your mates. I'm just trying to concentrate on being present, watch the ball and repeat,

and make some good decisions. GP is a mate, awesome to see him get a 100."

The teams next meet in a five-match Twenty20 International series from January 21-31, a key part of their preparations for the T20 World Cup which begins on February 7 and will be co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka.

BRIEF SCORES

New Zealand 337 for 8 (Mitchell 137, Phillips 106, Arshdeep 3-63, Rana 3-84) **beat India 296** (Kohli 124, Reddy 53, Rana 52, Clarke 3-54, Foulkes 3-77) by 41 runs

Man of the Match and Series: Daryl Mitchell

GOLF

Plucky Elvira wins Dubai Invitational

AFP
Dubai

Spain's Nacho Elvira recovered from one shot down to claim a dramatic victory in the Dubai Invitational yesterday after Shane Lowry's final hole meltdown.

The Republic of Ireland veteran had begun the closing round in a tie for second, two strokes off the Spaniard, but a birdie at the 15th lifted him into the lead and the title seemingly his to lose. Which he somehow conspired to do in unfortunate and cruel circumstances.

He found both the bunker and water on the 18th to finish with a double bogey which opened the door to Elvira to claim the first European Tour win of 2026.

The Spaniard, who had struggled early in the round, duly parred the hole for an unexpected but nonetheless welcome and important victory.

Elvira told Sky Sports: "It means the world. If you had told me on Tuesday that I was going to be winning this I would never have believed you. It is a dream come true."

Elvira finished on a 10-under par total of 274, one shot in front of New Zealander Matt Hillier, with Lowry a further shot back in a tie for third with three more players, including Rory McIlroy.

McIlroy, who started the final



Nacho Elvira after winning the Dubai Invitational to become the first champion of 2026 on the DP World Tour. (@DPWorldTour)

round three shots off the lead, forced his way into contention as Elvira faltered, and briefly held a share of an increasingly crowded leaderboard.

Lowry, bidding for his first DP World Tour title since the 2022 BMW PGA Championship, looked to have made the decisive move with a 25-foot birdie on the 15th to move to the top of the leaderboard.

And when McIlroy pulled his

birdie chance wide on the 17th, he set up a golden opportunity for his close friend. But moments after Lowry had powered his second shot on the 18th into the water, Elvira birdied the 17th to seize control. Hillier, whose six-under-par final round of 65 had him hoping for at least a play-off but Elvira, who had seen his overnight lead wiped out after successive early bogeys, held firm.

round three shots off the lead,

Dealing with the windy conditions was again the main topic for many of the golfers.

"Just knowing it's not going to be easy and just really trying to stay patient and not get too far ahead of yourself because it can go sideways in a hurry right now," Gerard said.

The tricky part is that not all windy conditions seem the same. "I know we played in the wind like this for the last couple days, but it's a slightly different direction, how much is it going to hurt, and you're always second guessing yourself," Parry said. "Wind feels like it's coming in every direction and a lot of shots into the greens are kind of a guess," Roy said.

Gotterup said his strategy won't change for the final round. "Just stick to the game plan and keep my head screwed on straight and making sure I'm hitting good quality shots in this wind," he said.

Hall's lone bogey of the round came at No 15, but he responded with a birdie putt from just inside 10 feet on the next hole. Three of his birdies came with putts from beyond 12 feet as he emerged alone atop the leaderboard by the time he completed his round.

"I hadn't had any competitive juices like this in a couple months," Riley said. "I definitely felt like I was forcing it a little bit early and trying to be a little

Riley in Sony Open lead after strong finish

HONOLULU: Davis Riley had a strong finishing stretch to shoot 3-under-par 67 and claim the lead through the third round of the Sony Open on Saturday at Honolulu.

Riley is at 12 under 198 going into the final round of the PGA Tour's season-opening tournament at Waialae Country Club.

"I just started feeling really good with the swing and I was hitting my start lines," Riley said. "That's the biggest thing in this wind, is hit your start lines and control the curvature, and I felt like I was hitting some really good hold shots against the wind."

Chris Gotterup (68), Kevin Roy (69) and England's Harry Hall (66) share second place at 10 under. Ryan Gerard (68), England's John Parry (69) and Canada's Nick Taylor (70), the defending champion, are three strokes back.

Riley began the round with bogeys on two of the first three holes. He finished by playing the last seven holes in 4 under, including consecutive birdies on Nos 14 (tap-in) and 15 (putt from 14 1/2 feet). He finished with a birdie on the last hole.

"We hadn't had any competitive juices like this in a couple months," Riley said. "I definitely felt like I was forcing it a little bit early and trying to be a little

perfect and I just felt a little tense." Riley has won twice on the tour, but most recently in 2024 at the Charles Schwab Challenge.

Dealing with the windy conditions was again the main topic for many of the golfers.

"Just knowing it's not going to be easy and just really trying to stay patient and not get too far ahead of yourself because it can go sideways in a hurry right now," Gerard said.

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MOTORSPORT

Thrilling contests as Arabian Drag Racing League 2nd round concludes



By Sports Reporter
Doha

The second round of the Arabian Drag Racing League (ADRL) 2026 concluded at Qatar Racing Club (QRC) amid high-energy competition and a strong spectator turnout.

Held under the patronage of QRC Chairman HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani, the event featured an expanded field of participants, with elite racers from the Gulf, the wider region, and the United States competing across eleven championship categories.

The round crowned new champions in the quarter-mile (402m) Index car categories. Abdul Latif Abdul Latif won the INDEX 9.0 title after defeating defending round champion Sulaiman al-Sannousi in the final. Al-Sannousi finished second, while Nasser al-Khadher claimed third place to secure his first podium finish of the championship.

In another highlight, Adel Ghanem claimed the INDEX 8.50 title in his first-ever appearance in a final, after winning the decisive race against Hussein Ashkanani. Ashkanani recorded his second podium finish, having placed third in the first round, while Mohammed Suleiman al-Shatti finished third in this round.

As for the three Index categories competing over the eighth-mile distance, they witnessed intense competition. In the most powerful of these categories, INDEX 4.0, Tareq al-Bastaki secured the title after defeating Hussein Abdul Rahim Ahmed in the final, while last round's champion, Rashid al-Balushi, finished second, while Abdulwahab Saleem claimed third place.

In the Super Street Bike category, the final was an exact replica of the first round's showdown and ended with the same outcome, as Yousuf al-Ali was crowned champion for the second time this season. Jaber al-Maghribi finished second, while Abdulkarim Saleem claimed third place.

Similarly, Mustafa Atat



reached the final for the second consecutive round but had to settle for second place, as the title went to Abdulaziz al-Saleh. Meanwhile, Sean Langdon recorded his first podium finish in the championship category by taking third place.

After two days of competition in INDEX 4.80 category, Zayed al-Balushi clinched the title, while Nawaf al-Khalidi finished second. Third place went to Saeed al-Balushi, who had to settle for third place in this round.

In the Super Street Bike category, Mohammed al-Awad recorded his first podium finish in the championship by winning the title in the most powerful motorcycle category, Pro Bike. He defeated Mishal al-Sabri in the final race, while first-round champion Bradley McCoy had to settle for third place in this round.

In the Super Street Bike category, the final was an exact replica of the first round's showdown and ended with the same outcome, as Yousuf al-Ali was crowned champion for the second time this season. Jaber al-Maghribi finished second, while Abdulkarim Saleem claimed third place.

In the Street Bike category, the title went to Mustafa Mahmoudi, who had finished third in the opening round, after he overcame Ahmed Karam in the final race. Meanwhile, the previous round's runner-up, Dawood al-Sharshani, finished third.

QRC General Manager Sheikh Jaber bin Khalid al-Thani honoured the podium winners. The third round begins on Wednesday.

SPOTLIGHT

Stage set for Doha Fencing Grand Prix 2026

QNA
Doha

The organising committee of the Doha Fencing Grand Prix 2026 yesterday unveiled the particulars of the new edition of this tournament, slated to be held at Aspire Hall from January 23-25, 2026.

The announcement came during a press conference held at Aspire Academy, in the presence of President of the Qatar Fencing Federation Abdullah Ali al-Ghanim, Deputy Director General of Aspire Academy Ali Salem Afifa, Director of the Championship Khalid Suwaidi, and Deputy Director of the Championship Hamad Saad al-Jassim, alongside members of the previous Doha Grand Prix.

organised Grand Prix championships.

Al-Jassim highlighted that this year's edition is set to witness the participation of around 433 athletes, comprising 254 men and 179 women, representing 53 countries.

The lineup will be led by the top three globally ranked fencers in both categories, alongside Olympic champions, including Japan's Koki Kano, gold medallist at the 2024 Paris Olympics, the Tokyo Olympic medallists, and Belgian fencer Nacer Layola, winner of the previous Doha Grand Prix.

The competitions are expected to be highly competitive and exhilarating, he noted.

Regarding Arab participation, al-Jassim noted that the championship will feature Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Kuwait, Tunisia, and the UAE. Qatar will field nine athletes, including Youssef Abdul Tawab, Mohammed



President of the Qatar Fencing Federation Abdullah Ali al-Ghanim and Deputy Director General of Aspire Academy Ali Salem Afifa during a press conference in Doha yesterday.

Abdul Ali, Mohammed al-Hazzaa, Abdulrahman al-Jadra, and Ali al-Khalif, as well as four women, namely Fatima al-Maadid, Thikrattyat al-Abdullah, Wadha al-Abdul-

lah, and Sheikha Ali.

The team prepared for the event through continental and Arab competitions, as well as domestic and international training camps,

he said. The contest will also see 19 referees overseeing the competitions, including three from Qatar: Mohammed al-Tiri, Mohammed Basahal, and Bashir El Shourbaji.

Al-Jassim further noted the crucial role of volunteers in ensuring the success of the event, with over 150 volunteers contributing in this edition, applauding their indispensable support in organising the competitions. He invited fans to attend the three-day Doha 2026 Fencing Grand Prix at Aspire, promising excitement and close encounters with world and Olympic champions.

Afifa, for his part, expressed pride in hosting the event, noting the academy's student participation and annual partnership with the Qatar Fencing Federation to develop players and provide full support.

The championship offers \$22,000 in prize money, with \$11,000 each for men and women, rewarding the top three finishers in both categories. This prestigious annual tournament attracts top-ranked fencers worldwide, influencing global rankings.

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Alcaraz, Sabalenka advance as fans fume on steamy day

The world No 1 decided not to play warm-up tournament and it showed in his first tour-level match



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz in action during his first round match against Australia's Adam Walton on day one of the Australian Open in Melbourne Park yesterday. (Reuters)

Reuters
Melbourne

Star attractions Carlos Alcaraz and Aryna Sabalenka progressed into the second round of the Australian Open yesterday as disgruntled fans fumed over long queues and a surprise ticket sales halt on a blockbuster opening day of the tournament.

The record 100,763 fans who did pack into the Melbourne Park precinct witnessed first-round wins for men's third seed Alexander Zverev and 10th seed Alexander Bublik, as well as a quick-fire victory for women's seventh seed Jasmine Paolini.

Venus Williams was given a standing ovation when she came out on court to face Olga Danilovic on her first visit to Melbourne Park since 2021 but the 45-year-old blew a 4-0 lead in the deciding set to bow out 6-7(5), 6-3, 6-4.

Alcaraz, seeking his first Melbourne title to complete a career Grand Slam, blew off the rust in the final match of the day on Rod Laver Arena with a 6-3, 7-6(2), 6-2 win over plucky Australian Adam Walton.

The Spanish world number one decided not to play an official warm-up tournament and it showed in his first tour-level match for nine weeks, particularly in the second set when he struggled to maintain his concentration.

"I just stayed at home," the 22-year-old said of his long break.

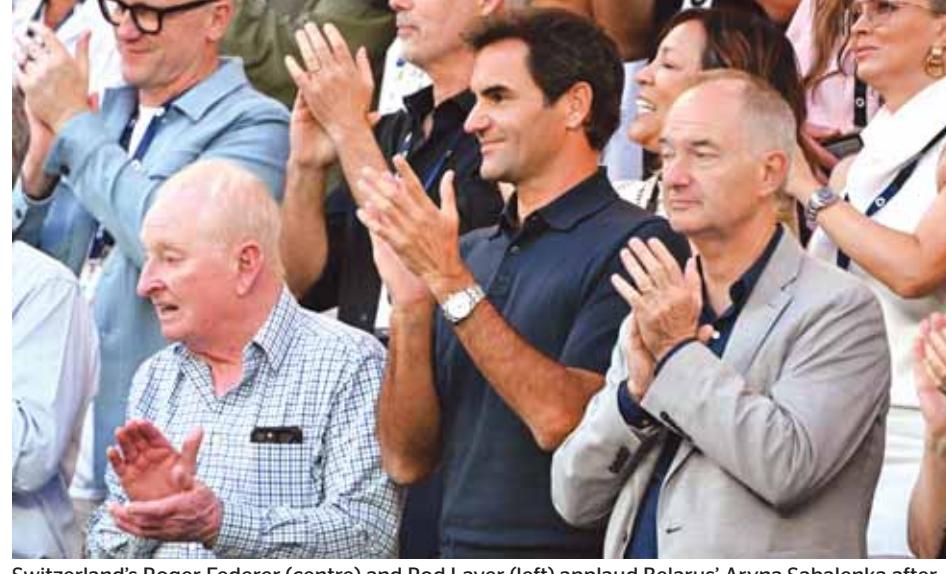
"I used to practise the whole morning (and) I took almost every afternoon off to do whatever I wanted - stay with family or friends, play board games and chilling at home."

"It's a better way to recharge the batteries, staying at home with the people you love."

Sabalenka preceded Alcaraz on the main showcourt and downed French debutante Tiantsoa Rakotomanga Rajaonah 6-4, 6-1 before taking a selfie with tennis greats Roger Federer and Rod Laver.

The Belarusian, who warmed up for her bid for a third Australian Open crown with a second Brisbane International title, was broken in her opening service game but looked closer to her intimidating best in the second set.

"It's the first match, right? You're always kind of trying to figure out where you are," said



Switzerland's Roger Federer (centre) and Rod Laver (left) applaud Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka after her victory on day one of the Australian Open yesterday. (AFP)

the women's top seed. "I didn't really know much about her. I was just struggling to find the rhythm of her shots. I'm happy that I could manage and I could get this win in straight sets."

20TH SEEDS UPSET

There were a few upsets for fans to enjoy as well with ailing men's 20th seed Flavio Cobolli losing to qualifier Arthur Fery and his hobbled women's equivalent Marta Kostyuk going out to Elsa Jacquemot in a match decided by three tiebreaks.

Qualifier Zeynep Sommez became the first Turkish woman to reach the second round at Melbourne Park but her upset of 11th seed Ekaterina Alexandrova might be better remembered for her rushing to the aid of a ball girl who fainted in the heat.

The world number 112 stopped playing and ran towards the girl, helping her to a seat so medical staff could provide treatment. Organisers said the ball girl had returned home following treatment.

Sinner and women's champion Madison Keys will not get their title defences underway until

tomorrow, with Novak Djokovic and Iga Swiatek headlining on day two, when another bumper crowd can be expected.

GROUND PASS SALES HALTED

With extra security deployed at the tournament following the mass shooting at Sydney's Bondi Beach last month, the patience of fans was earlier tested as they lined up in long, snaking queues to the Melbourne Park gates under a hot sun.

Organisers delivered an unwelcome surprise by halting sales of the popular "ground pass" tickets within an hour of the first shot being hit, citing intense demand.

The move disappointed hundreds of fans who had queued for long periods expecting to buy the cheaper walk-up tickets which allow access to the minor courts.

"We tried to buy a ground pass and they just told us it was only tickets that were A\$229 (\$153) per person," Melbourne resident Susan Walsh told Reuters.

"Didn't want to spend that much money... so, a bit disappointed."

'Proud' Venus Williams, 45, exits Australian Open after epic battle



USA's Venus Williams acknowledges the applause as she walks off the court after losing to Serbia's Olga Danilovic in their singles match at the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

MELBOURNE: Venus Williams fell at the first hurdle but said she was proud of herself after making history as the oldest woman to ever play at the Australian Open yesterday.

The American seven-time Grand Slam champion, 45, was handed a wildcard for Melbourne, five years after she last appeared at the major. It attracted some flak amid concerns that it deprived a younger player of the opportunity, compounded by Williams losing first-round matches at both her warm-up tournaments. The ageless veteran showed she still has what it takes in patches, pushing 24-year-old Serbian Olga Danilovic all the way before losing the last six games to crash out 6-7(5/7), 6-3, 6-4 in a grueling 2hrs 17mins.

"It was such a great game, such a great moment. The energy from the crowd was amazing. That lifted me up so much," Williams said. "She played a great game. Also some luck there, as well."

That's just the sport. That's how it works sometimes.

"I'm really proud of my effort today because I'm playing better with each match, getting to the places that I want to get to," she added.

"Right now I'm just going to have to keep going forward and working on myself and working to control my errors."

After getting a standing ovation,

the former world number one, now ranked 578, made a promising start, breaking the 69th-ranked Danilovic's first service game. But the Serb quickly struck back with a lucky net cord helping her level the set.

Williams sent down powerful serves and showed no issues moving around the court as the set moved to a tiebreak, where she fell 2-0 behind but rallied to clinch it with a clinical forehand winner.

Danilovic managed to get an early break in the second set and Williams had no answers, sending it to a decider, where the American raced 4-0 clear.

But she lost focus, allowing Danilovic to battle back to 4-4 before a huge 14-and-a-half-minute ninth game that proved pivotal.

Williams had six game points, but failed to convert, and the Serb took the game on her second break point before serving out for the win.

Williams, who first graced Melbourne Park in 1998, has played only sporadically in recent years. A five-time Wimbledon champion, she was an Australian Open singles finalist in 2003 and 2017 and won the doubles title four times alongside sister Serena.

Japan's Kimiko Date, who was 44 when she lost in the first round in 2015, previously held the record as the oldest woman to play singles at the Australian Open.



Germany's Alexander Zverev celebrates after his victory against Canada's Gabriel Diallo in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

SERIE A

Dybala boosts Roma's Champions League hopes

'He's a really good player with experience who's played in the top leagues'

AFP
Milan

Paolo Dybala starred for Roma with a goal and an assist in yesterday's 2-0 win at Torino which boosted his team's Champions League hopes, as Fiorentina beat Bologna 2-0 to honour deceased owner Rocco Commisso.

Dybala laid on new arrival Donyell Malen, who signed on loan from Aston Villa on Friday, for a classy close-range finish midway through the first half before ensuring a third straight win for fourth-placed Roma in the 72nd minute.

The Argentina international's brilliantly guided finish from Devyne Rensch's cross was his first goal in nearly three months and helped put Roma on 42 points.

"We played really well and showed great desire to win, which is what we came here to do," said Dybala to Sky.

Dybala has had a difficult first campaign under Gian Piero Gasperini with familiar injury problems and the rise of countryman Matias Soule suggesting his time might be up in the Italian capital.

But the 32-year-old was excellent coming in from the left in a win which was revenge for being eliminated from the Italian Cup by Torino on Tuesday night, and moved Roma three points ahead of fifth-placed Juventus in the battle for Champions League football.

"Obviously it's easier for me to play in that position, it's where I've played most of my career," added Dybala, who enjoyed playing with Malen, who also had a goal ruled out for offside.

"He's a really good player with experience who's played in the top leagues. His movement makes it easier for us to find him."

Roma have won the Conference League and reached the Europa League final in recent years but last featured in Europe's elite club competition in the 2018/19 sea-



AS Roma's forward Paulo Dybala is seen during a Serie A clash against Torino yesterday. (@ASRomaEN)

son when they were eliminated by Porto in the last 16.

The capital city club trail league leaders Inter Milan by seven points but have looked a way off winning a first Scudetto since 2001 in defeats to the Milan clubs and Napoli who are leading the title race.

Without a win until just before Christmas, Fiorentina claimed a deserved third success in six matches thanks to goals in the first half from Rolando Mandragora and Roberto Soriano.

Paolo Vanoli's side sit just inside the relegation zone but level on 17 points with Lecce, who are 17th and face AC Milan later.

Fiorentina have a superior goal difference than Lecce and only sit below them by virtue of having played a game more.

That means a defeat for Lecce at

the San Siro against title-chasing Milan would push Fiorentina, who less than a month ago looked destined for the drop, out of the bottom three.

Yesterday's win was a fine way to pay tribute to American media mogul Commisso, who passed away on Saturday at the age of 76 and was remembered with a minute's silence ahead of kick-off.

During pre-match preparations, Fiorentina players wore T-

shirts with a picture of Commisso and the message "Thanks Rocco", in tribute to a man who just missed out on giving the Tuscan club a first major trophy since 2001.

Italian-born billionaire Commisso was the founder of Mediocom Communications, one of the largest cable TV providers in the United States, and was a pas-

sionate football fan who had also owned the New York Cosmos before acquiring Fiorentina in 2019.

He invested in a new 120-million-euro (\$139mn) training centre and redevelopment of the Stadio Artemio Franchi in Florence, works which are still ongoing ahead of Fiorentina's centenary next season.

He hired current Bologna coach Vincenzo Italiano, who took Fiorentina to three finals, two in the Conference League and one in the Italian Cup.

Italiano, who tasted cup success with Bologna last season, has had a tough time in recent weeks after a strong start to this campaign, with his eighth-placed team picking up just five points in nine matches since the start of December.

FOCUS

Man Utd's Martinez hits back at Scholes after height jibes

AFP
London

Manchester United defender Lisandro Martinez has challenged Paul Scholes to come to his house after the Old Trafford legend mocked the Argentine's height.

Scholes and former United teammate Nicky Butt poked fun at Martinez's chances of winning his duel with Manchester City striker Erling Haaland in Saturday's derby.

Butt joked the striker "would pick Martinez up and run with him" like a "dad after school running down the road with a little toddler" before Scholes laughed and said that "he'd score then throw him in the net".

Having seen Martinez's blast, Scholes didn't back down.

Posting on Instagram yesterday, the former England midfielder: "Someone's had a good game, was really happy for you. Tea, no sugar please!"

United's first win since Boxing Day was a much-needed boost after Ruben Amorim's recent sacking.

Martinez appears not to have been a fan of Amorim, judging by his pointed assessment of Carrick's immediate impact.

"So different, so different. Different mentality, different guy" he said. "He knows what it really means, this club. He sent us that message that he played here for a long, long time. He won everything."

"He's a big legend. He wants to help the club and I think we were in a tough situation and today was the best moment to change that."

United still have a chance to salvage their troubled campaign by qualifying for next season's Champions League.

They sit in fifth place, one point behind Liverpool, and Martinez expects Carrick will make a major difference to their fortunes.

"When you have a coach like Michael Carrick, who really knows, who really can share with you the energy of the club and what it means, it's so different," Martinez said.



Manchester United's Lisandro Martinez controls the ball during the Premier League match against Manchester City at Old Trafford in Manchester on Saturday. (AFP)

JEONG SNATCHES UNION BERLIN LATE DRAW AT STUTTGART

Union Berlin's Woo-yeong Jeong scored with seven minutes remaining to snatch his side a point in a 1-1 draw at Stuttgart in the Bundesliga yesterday. Germany winger Chris Fuehrich's goal had Stuttgart on course for third spot but the South Korean's late equaliser leaves the German Cup holders in fourth, a point ahead of fifth-placed RB Leipzig. "At the end it is OK," Fuehrich told DAZN.

"As expected, it was a tough game and there was a fair bit of to-and-fro in the opening half."

"We'll take the point and we can take plenty of positives out of the past few games - that's what counts."

Unfancied Union are now unbeaten since early December, a run of five matches, and sit ninth, five points behind the European placings.

After a first-half with few chances for either side, Fuehrich put the hosts in front just before the hour mark. Stuttgart defender Ramon Hendriks charged forward before finding Fuehrich, who hit a low shot just inside the left-hand post.

Germany midfielder Angelo Stiller had a golden chance to double Stuttgart's lead with 10 minutes remaining but blasted wide with the goal beckoning and only Union goalkeeper Frederik Ronnow to beat.

The miss came back to haunt the hosts almost immediately when former Stuttgart forward Jeong sliced his shot into the top corner in the 83rd minute.

Jeong, who did not celebrate his goal, had a chance to seal victory in the dying moments, but his strike was well saved by Stuttgart's

Alexander Nuebel.

In Sunday's late game, struggling Augsburg gave up a two-goal lead to draw 2-2 at home to Freiburg, who remained eighth. Augsburg's Alexis Claude-Maurice and Elvis Rexhbecaj scored within three minutes of each other at the start of the second half, but Freiburg's Yuito Suzuki and Igor Matanovic also grabbed a quick-fire double to level things up around the hour mark.

On Saturday, Harry Kane scored his 21st goal of the Bundesliga season as Bayern Munich came from

behind to win 5-1 at RB Leipzig.

The victory restores Bayern's 11-point lead atop the ladder over second-placed Borussia

Dortmund, while continuing their record-breaking campaign.

Unbeaten Bayern have dropped just four points on their way to a record-equaling tally of 50 after 18 games. Bayern's total of 71 goals scored is also a record at this stage of a German league season.

Leipzig took a first-half lead through Romulo, but Bayern kicked into gear after the break, with Serge Gnabry, Kane, Jonathan Tah,

Aleksandar Pavlovic and Michael Olise all scoring.

Bayern coach Vincent Kompany said Leipzig were "twice as good as we were" in the opening half, adding "but in the second-half - my god, the boys delivered."

"We weren't afraid and we really went for it."

Leipzig goalscorer Romulo said "we played 75 minutes really on top, then I don't know what happened, we turned off our minds. We have to learn something out of that."

(AFP)

BOTTOMLINE

Frank on the brink as Romero calls for unity amid Spurs 'disaster'

AFP
London

Thomas Frank is in danger of being sacked after his future as Tottenham manager was reportedly discussed by the club's hierarchy yesterday.

Tottenham fans called for Frank to be axed during Saturday's dismal 2-1 home defeat against struggling West Ham.

It was Tottenham's third defeat in a row and eighth loss in 14 matches, leaving Frank on the brink of being dismissed just seven months after arriving from Brentford.

Tottenham captain Cristian Romero admitted his team are in a "disaster moment" and reports yesterday said the north London team's powerbrokers have met to debate Frank's fate.

Only half a season after being hired from Brentford with a reputation as one of the most talented

managers in the Premier League, Frank is anxiously awaiting a verdict on whether he will avoid the sack.

Tottenham have won just once in their last eight matches and have been knocked out of both the FA Cup and League Cup.

They are 11th in the Champions League group phase ahead of a crucial visit from Borussia Dortmund on Tuesday in the battle to qualify for the last 16.

"It is difficult and also a disaster moment for us, but especially in this moment, we need silence."

"Back tomorrow in training work, work hard every day and stay together. In three days we have another big match and this moment it is really silence and work hard."

Romero believes a Tottenham win over Dortmund would help turn the tide, assuming Frank is still in charge by then.

"It is a difficult moment, it is like a disaster but Champions League, we have another big opportunity to maybe win and go to top eight and go to the next round. That's the most important thing," he said.



Tottenham Hotspur's head coach Thomas Frank (left) shakes hands with West Ham United's head coach Nuno Espírito Santo after the Premier League match at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London. (AFP)