

A bright space is always the right space

To advertise here, call: 444 11 300



FOOTBALL | Page 3

Messi to put drama behind as Argentina begin quest



CRICKET | Page 7

Bravo reaches 150 IPL wickets but CSK lose to KKR

To advertise here, call: 444 11 300

Thursday, October 8, 2020
Safar 21, 1442 AH

GULF TIMES

SPORT



FORMULA 1

Raikkonen and Hamilton on brink of new records

Page 6

FOCUS

'Qatar will celebrate WC with fans from every continent'

FIFA President Infantino visits Qatar 2022 venue Al Bayt Stadium with SC Secretary-General al-Thawadi and other officials

HE Hassan al-Thawadi, Secretary-General of the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, said he was proud of the foundations laid by the country in the lead-up to the FIFA World Cup in 2022.

"We are immensely proud to be hosting the Arab world and Middle East's first FIFA World Cup in 2022," said al-Thawadi during a visit by FIFA President Gianni Infantino to Doha.

"With that pride comes a sense of responsibility, and that factor has been enhanced since the world has had to come to terms with Covid-19. We are optimistic that by kick-off in November 2022, we'll be ready to welcome fans from every continent here in Qatar to celebrate together, united by their shared passion for football," said al-Thawadi.

2022 being kicked in this stadium two years from now?"

Nasser al-Khater, CEO of FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 LLC, said Qatar was in excellent shape and looking forward to welcoming fans from all over the world in a little over two years' time.

"When it comes to World Cup infrastructure, we're in a great position, with construction nearing 90% completion across all projects," said al-Khater.

"At this point on the road to 2022, our focus is now shifting from delivering infrastructure to refining and optimising the detailed operational planning and fan experience for the tournament.

"We are also now significantly stepping up our promotion of the tournament to ensure as many people as possible have the opportunity to attend and enjoy this unique World Cup."

Meanwhile, Infantino took part in a seven-a-side match at Al Bayt Stadium, a 60,000-capacity venue designed to resemble a traditional Arab tent. The striking arena will be inaugurated in the coming months and has been confirmed as the venue for the opening game of the tournament.

"It is an absolute pleasure to play football at this amazing stadium, where on 21 November 2022, we will kick off the greatest FIFA World Cup ever," said Infantino.

"Al Bayt Stadium is incredible, a true football stadium. It has a real football feel and a local touch. The tented shape makes it truly unique, and the Arabic patterns in the roof are just beautiful. I am speechless."



FIFA President Gianni Infantino in action during a friendly seven-a-side match at Al Bayt Stadium yesterday.



HE Hassan al-Thawadi (left), Secretary-General of the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, and FIFA President Gianni Infantino (right) take part in a seven-a-side match at Al Bayt Stadium yesterday.



FIFA President Gianni Infantino was given a tour of Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor yesterday.



TENNIS / FRENCH OPEN

Djokovic survives scare to set up Tsitsipas semi-final

Reuters
Paris, France

World number one Novak Djokovic reached his 10th French Open semi-final but suffered an injury scare before beating Spain's Pablo Carreno Busta 4-6, 6-2, 6-3, 6-4 yesterday.

A month after being defaulted for striking a line judge with a ball while playing Carreno Busta in the US Open fourth round, the 33-year-old Serbian found himself in trouble once again.

This time it was nothing more sinister than pains in his neck and arm as Djokovic lost the opening set to the 17th seed — the first one he has dropped in the tournament.

Djokovic looked flat and had to save break points early in the second set before raising his game to level the match.

It looked plain sailing when he led 3-0 in the third set before a dip allowed Carreno Busta back but Djokovic saved a break point at 3-3 before pulling away.

Djokovic, bidding for a second French Open crown, produced several loud roars as he tried to

fire himself up.

Carreno Busta hung on gamely but Djokovic was superior in the big moments and one break in the fourth was enough to set up a semi-final clash with Greek Stefanos Tsitsipas.

Greek fifth seed Tsitsipas reached his second Grand Slam semi-final as he raised his game after a slow start to defeat Russian Andrey Rublev 7-5, 6-2, 6-3.

Before the quarter-final on Court Philippe Chatrier, the 13th-seeded Rublev had won both previous tour-level meetings against fellow 22-year-old Tsitsipas with their last encounter less than two weeks ago in the final in Hamburg.

The Russian looked set to keep his record intact as he served for the first set at 5-4 but Tsitsipas, who also reached the semi-finals at last year's Australian Open, then won three straight games to take the opener.

Tsitsipas did not look back from there and broke his opponent three more times in the next two sets.

KENIN BEATS COLLINS

In the women's draw, fourth seed Sofia Kenin claimed her maiden French Open semi-final spot as



Serbia's Novak Djokovic returns the ball to Spain's Pablo Carreno Busta (not pictured) during their French Open quarter-final at Roland Garros in Paris, France, yesterday. (AFP)

she fought to a 6-4, 4-6, 6-0 victory against fellow American Danielle Collins.

The Australian Open champion was kept on her toes for two sets by an opponent who had

beaten her in their previous encounters before strolling through the decider to set up a clash with

Czech seventh seed Petra Kvitova, who powered past unseeded German Laura Siegemund 6-3, 6-3 yesterday.

Collins seemed bothered by midriff pains in the third set, looking unable to give her maximum effort in the finale on court Philippe Chatrier.

After a solid start on both sides, Collins served a woeful double fault to hand Kenin the first break of the match, and a 3-2 lead.

She held serve and set up another break point at 4-2 but Collins saved it to stay in contention.

Kenin was, however, solid on her service games and she bagged the opening set when her opponent's return sailed wide.

It was the first time Kenin took a set against Collins in four encounters, and the fourth seed kept her momentum, breaking again for 3-2 in the second set as her unseeded opponent smacked a forehand long.

But this time, Collins hit back to level for 3-3 and she started to threaten Kenin's serve, eventually breaking again to level.

The comeback was short-lived, though, as Collins quickly fell 4-0 behind in the decider before taking a medical timeout,

holding her midriff as she went off the court for treatment.

Kenin easily won the remaining two games.

Kvitova, 30, a two-times champion at Wimbledon, reached the last four stage on the claycourts at Roland Garros for the second time since 2012 and was yet to lose a set at this year's tournament in Paris.

Siegemund, ranked 66th in the world, did not pose a challenge in the opening set but gave a good account of herself in the second despite suffering a lower back problem midway through the set.

Kvitova converted her second match point when her 32-year-old opponent served a double fault.

- RESULTS**
- Men (Quarter-finals)**
- 1-Novak Djokovic (SRB) bt 17-Pablo Carreno-Busta (ESP) 4-6, 6-2, 6-3, 6-4
 - 5-Stefanos Tsitsipas (GRE) bt 13-Andrey Rublev (RUS) 7-5, 6-2, 6-3
- Women (Quarter-finals)**
- 4-Sofia Kenin (USA) bt Danielle Collins (USA) 6-4, 4-6, 6-0
 - 7-Petra Kvitova (CZE) bt Laura Siegemund (GER) 6-3, 6-3

FRENCH OPEN

Pint-sized Diego Schwartzman growing in stature

Argentina is confident going into his French Open semi-final clash with Nadal

AFP
Paris, France

Diego Schwartzman is one of the shortest tennis players on the men's tour, but like the famous footballer he was named after, the Argentine has made a point not to be defined by his size.

Affectionately known as 'El Peque' ("shorty"), Schwartzman is a mere 5ft 7in (1.70m) and the smallest player in the world's top 50, but he is scaling new heights at the French Open.

The 28-year-old reached the last four of a major for the first time on Tuesday, defeating US Open champion and close friend Dominic Thiem in a five-hour epic.

"I'm still in the tournament and I really want to keep winning," said Schwartzman, having won his first Grand Slam quarter-final after three previous failures.

"This win is very important for me. In the second and third sets, I was going a little crazy and I was screaming at myself because I had so many chances."

Schwartzman accepts he will never be blessed with the serve of towering giants John Isner or Ivo Karlovic, but is quick to put his shortcomings into perspective.

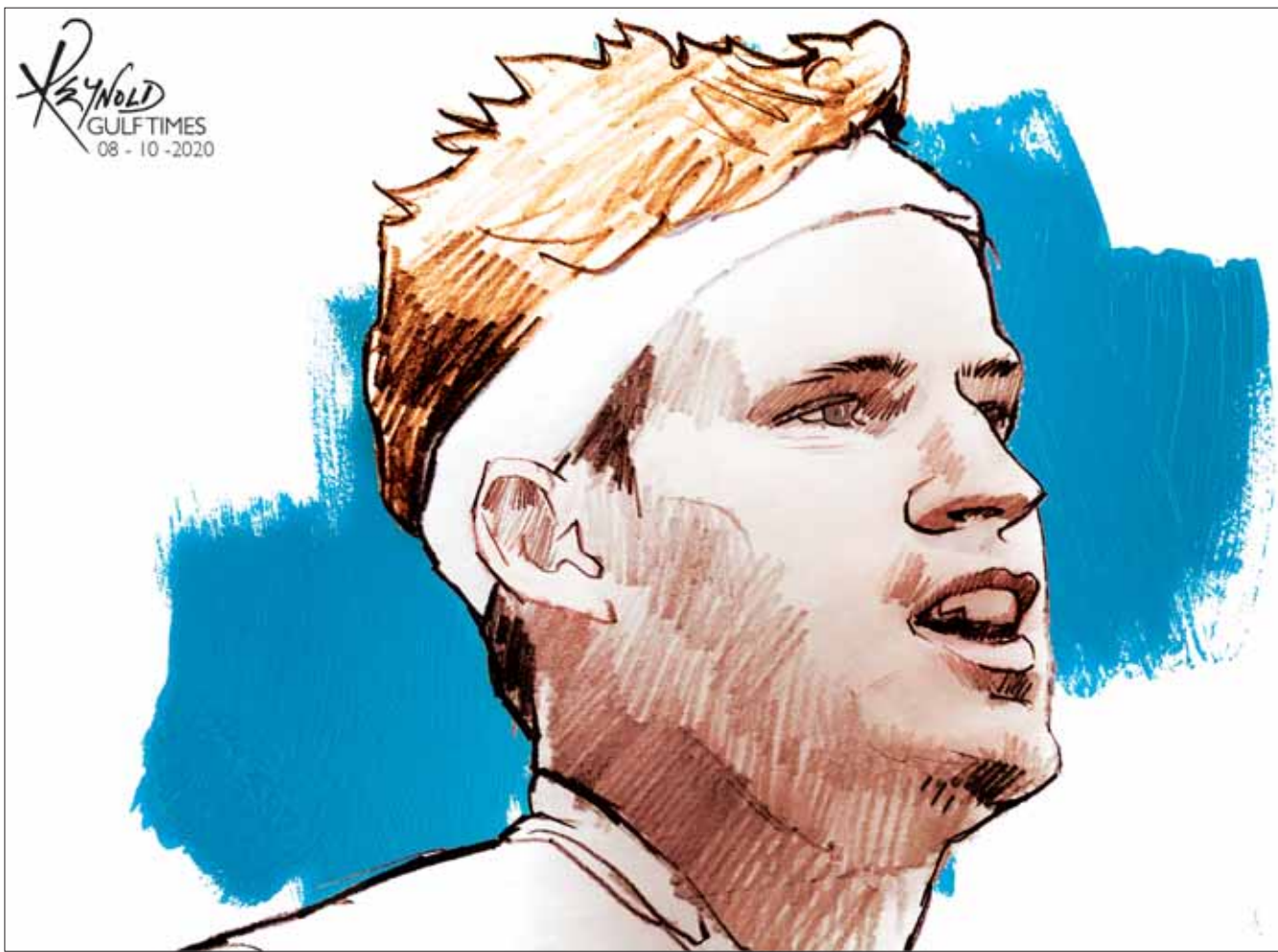
His Polish maternal great-grandfather escaped a train heading for a Nazi concentration camp during the Holocaust when a coupling broke apart, leaving a section of the train behind as the other carried on to its destination.

After fleeing he brought his family to Argentina by boat, arriving speaking Yiddish but no Spanish. His father's ancestors took a similar route as they emigrated from Russia.

"I don't know 100% of the history," said Schwartzman. "(But) they escaped from the war. That is the story, the big story. That's how the Schwartzman and the Dykes family, surname of my mum, started in Argentina."

BOOM AND BUST

His parents suffered travails of their own around the time he was born, as a once thriving family business reliant on im-



Argentina's Diego Schwartzman (also above) celebrates his French Open quarter-final win over Austria's Dominic Thiem (not pictured) at Roland Garros in Paris, France, on Tuesday. (AFP)

ported goods was badly hit by economic reforms. Schwartzman, named after

1986 World Cup hero Diego Maradona, played football as a child and is fan of Buenos Aires giants

Boca Juniors but chose to prioritize tennis.

He and his mother sold rubber bracelets left over from their clothing and jewellery company with the names and logos of popular football teams to help pay for travel expenses, competing to see who could sell the most.

Trips to Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador for regional events often left a teenage Schwartzman, travelling alone, in tears on the plane but ultimately strengthened his resolve.

He was far from a touted youngster, his only junior Grand Slam appearance in qualifying at the 2010 US Open ended in the first round and left him riddled with self-doubt.

But Schwartzman has steadily built himself into a quiet contender through years of graft and determination, quashing

any reservations about his ability to compete with the best.

He lists his favourite surface as clay, and favourite tournament as Roland Garros, but faces the tallest of orders against a man who has made the French Open his own, his idol Rafael Nadal.

"Rafa is the legend here, is the owner of this place almost," Schwartzman said of his semi-final showdown with 12-time champion Nadal.

While the odds will be stacked against him, Schwartzman knows Nadal is not entirely invincible having beaten the Spaniard last month when he made the final of the Italian Open in Rome.

"If I see the history, I'm 10-1 down. I'm not sure if I'm going to have a lot of confidence. But, yeah, I know this week that I can beat him. That's the important thing."

FOCUS

Nadal learned from Rome defeat by Schwartzman: Moya

Reuters
Paris, France

Rafael Nadal will be a tougher proposition for Diego Schwartzman than he was in Rome last month when they meet in the French Open semi-finals today, says Nadal's coach Carlos Moya.

Twelve-times French Open champion Nadal was surprisingly beaten 6-2, 7-5 by the Argentine in the Rome quarters - Schwartzman's first win over the Spaniard in 10 meetings.

That was Nadal's first tournament for seven months, however, and he has progressed to the semi-finals at Roland Garros without dropping a set, although he was pushed hard in the early stages of his match against Jannik Sinner on Tuesday.

Schwartzman is through to his first Grand Slam semi-final after a five-hour victory over US Open winner Dominic Thiem.

"The match in Rome was very strange because Rafa won two very good matches against powerful opponents," Moya told Eurosport.

"Against Schwartzman it was the first time that he had problems in the score and he did not manage it totally well on a physical or mental level.

"We learned from that moment and now he is at a great level with many more games played. It will be a tough mental battle and I think we have some weapons that will allow Rafa to compete with guarantees."



Spain's Rafael Nadal serves the ball to Italy's Jannik Sinner (not pictured) during their French Open quarter-final on Tuesday. (AFP)

Nadal will be the overwhelming favourite to avenge that Rome loss, although Moya says Schwartzman will provide a tough challenge and will not be affected by his attritional battle with Thiem.

"It will be a very difficult duel as we saw in Rome. Diego's match against Thiem yesterday was incredible and I think even Diego could have won more easily," Moya said.

"Diego is an incredible player and we don't think that the physical factor is going to influence too much."

Nadal has only lost two matches at Roland Garros out of the 100 he has played.

COMMENT

Kvitova powering through the clay, says coach Vanek

Reuters
Paris, France

By her own admission Petra Kvitova has never been totally at home on a claycourt despite winning five titles on the surface but this year's French Open conditions have appeared tailor-made for her powerful game.

The 30-year-old Czech's two Grand Slam titles have not surprisingly come at Wimbledon where the slick grass gives her maximum bang for her buck.

Kvitova is not a natural slider on clay and Roland Garros's slippery and dusty courts have always tended to negate her firepower, so much so that since she reached the 2012 semi-final she has never been past the fourth round.

Kvitova, seeded seven here, matched that run yesterday when she blazed past Germany's Laura Siegemund to move into the semis without even dropping a set.

While many of the fancied players fell earlier here in the damp and chilly conditions, Kvitova has kept it remarkably simple, using her attacking attributes to full effect on claycourts playing more like slow hardcourts.

Her coach Jiri Vanek says the key has been for her to play just as she does on a hardcourt.

"When I started to work with Petra she was always asking me, 'look, on the clay I have to slide' and I said come on play your game and don't concentrate on

playing different on the clay. "Because if you play your fast game, you are a good server, and you attack every return, then you don't have to be really running from side to side like the others.

"Just maybe sometime go more often to the net and make the drop volleys. I think she found a way to play like that and she feels much more comfortable on the clay now."

Kvitova's one moment of bother during the French Open this year was when she was 5-1 down to Canadian teenager Leylah Fernandez in the third round.

Her answer was to switch on the all-out-attack mode and she managed to avert a growing crisis.

The statistics back up her proactive approach. She has the most aces (24) and yesterday approached the net 14 times, winning 64 percent of those points. She has also hit 138 winners in her five matches.

Kvitova may never have a better opportunity to win a French Open title than in this extraordinary year when the cards have fallen nicely in her favour, although in Australian Open champion Sofia Kenin she faces a stern test in the semis.

It would be an incredible moment if she triumphs, especially as it was at the French Open in 2017 that she returned to action, six months after sustaining serious injuries to her left playing hand in a knife attack back home in Czech Republic.

"I'm really proud of her. Especially here, the emotions you can see after her last match, all the memories coming back."



Czech Republic's Petra Kvitova celebrates after winning the French Open quarter-final against Germany's Laura Siegemund (not pictured) at Roland Garros in Paris, France, yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Fired up by Guns N'Roses, Swiatek rocking through

AFP
Paris, France

Iga Swiatek will look to become the first Polish woman in 81 years to reach the Roland Garros final today, fired up by Guns N'Roses, AC/DC, Pink Floyd...and watermelons.

With a world ranking of 54, the 19-year-old would normally start the semi-final of any Slam as the underdog.

However, her opponent today will be Argentina's Nadia Podoroska, ranked at 131 and who is bidding to become the first qualifier to reach the final at a Grand Slam in the modern era.

In a Roland Garros like no other - being played four months late due to the coronavirus and with just a handful of spectators allowed on site - Swiatek has had to find novel ways to psyche herself up for her best run at majors.

Step forward Axl Rose and Slash, the wild heartbeat of US rockers Guns N'Roses, one of Swiatek's go-to bands.

"I am still listening to Guns N'Roses' Welcome to the Jungle because I want to keep my routines," she said.

"Actually I wanted to change it because right now it's kind of boring to listen every day to the same song. But yeah, I stayed



Poland's Iga Swiatek returns the ball to Italy's Martina Trevisan (not pictured) during their French Open quarter-final at Roland Garros in Paris, France, on Tuesday. (AFP)

with Guns N'Roses because I wanted to win."

It's paying off. Not only is she into the singles semi-finals without dropping a set, Swiatek is also in the last four of the doubles with Nicole Melichar, again all in straight sets.

She only teamed up with Melichar on the eve of Roland Garros after the American's

scheduled partner couldn't obtain a visa.

When she made the last 16 in Paris in 2019, Swiatek was discovering Pink Floyd.

"I love Learning to Fly, Comfortably Numb, and recently I've been listening to Shine On You Crazy Diamond," she told WTA Insider.

"If I want something more

aggressive, AC/DC gets me in the mood. I've been listening to Thunderstruck before matches."

'KIND OF CRAZY'

Music therapy is working wonders - at this Roland Garros, she knocked out 2018 champion and top seed Simona Halep, exacting revenge for the loss she suffered to the Romanian in the fourth round

in 2019, winning just one game.

Swiatek is yet to win a WTA final, the closest she came was a runners-up spot in Lugano last year.

But sport runs in the blood - her father Tomasz Swiatek is a former rower who competed in the men's quadruple sculls at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul.

"It's amazing for me. I never would have thought that I'm going to be in the semi-finals in singles and doubles, so it's kind of crazy," she said yesterday.

"I had to play a match every day. But it's good for me, because I'm still in the rhythm. Also doubles is helping my performance in singles because I'm learning new stuff.

"The only tough thing about that is that I'm getting tired."

That's where the watermelons come in.

"Actually I'm eating a lot of watermelons here and also mango because fruits here are the best, like, every year."

For Swiatek, this weekend could have three happy endings - two titles for her and a 13th and record-equaling 20th major for Rafael Nadal, by far her favourite player.

"He was the only player I watched when I was younger. I just wish him the best and I hope he's going to get another French Open this year"

SPOTLIGHT

Messi to put drama behind as Argentina begin WCup quest

Messi has won everything in club game but his international trophy cabinet looks bare

AFP
Buenos Aires

Superstar footballer Lionel Messi will take a break from his Barcelona soap opera as he bids to fire Argentina to the World Cup in Qatar and what will probably be his last chance to try to win the coveted trophy.

The 33-year-old, a record six-time winner of the Ballon d'Or, has won everything in the club game with Barcelona several times over but his international trophy cabinet looks bare in comparison.

"The only goal I have now is to win the World Cup with the national team," he has said.

The closest he has come so far was as losing finalist against Germany in 2014. Today's clash with Ecuador gives him the chance to start building towards one last tilt at that goal.

He will be 35 by the time the Qatar World Cup ends, and will turn 39 during the following global showpiece in North America. In the meantime, he has a pair of qualifiers - Argentina also travel to Bolivia next Tuesday - to distract him from his club travails.

Messi tried to force his exit from the Catalan giants in the close season but Barca held firm and a 700 million euro release clause ensured he remained, albeit disgruntled.

Playing Ecuador in his homeland may provide a welcome respite but it is also fraught with potential difficulty.

Four years ago at the start of qualifying for the 2018 World Cup in Russia, Ecuador stunned Argentina 2-0 at River Plate's iconic Monumental stadium in Buenos Aires.

It took a hat-trick by an inspired Messi in Argentina's final qualifier - away to Ecuador - to send the twice world champions



In this file photo taken on July 2, 2019, Argentina's Lionel Messi strikes the ball during the Copa America semi-final against Brazil at the Mineirao Stadium in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. (AFP)

to Russia. Today's match will be in another iconic stadium: Boca Juniors' Bombonera.

But it will be a surreal experience in an empty ground that would normally be bouncing with stands packed full of some of the most fervent and passionate fans in the world.

Covid-19 has put paid to any hopes of a paying public.

MEMORY PLAYERS

This is a much-changed Argentina from that which disappeared at the last World Cup.

Young coach Lionel Scaloni embarked on an ambitious regeneration of the squad follow-

ing the abject exit from Russia under the tutelage of Jorge Sampaoli.

However, alongside Scaloni's 'new guard' remain several old hats, like Messi.

"We can say that there are seven or eight 'memory' players that are the foundation," said Scaloni, pointing out that with "only one day of preparation" they would need the experienced heads to help the team hit the ground running.

He will be without the injured Manchester City forward Sergio Aguero, though, while Scaloni has left out Paris Saint-Germain winger Angel Di Maria.

"Messi needs two players ahead of him that he can assist, and sit deep, not at the tip. That's how we got results at the Brazil 2019 Copa America," added Scaloni in reference to Argentina's third-place finish.

One player competing to lead the line is Sevilla's Lucas Ocampos. "He's strong, technical and scores goals, and also helps in the defensive phase," said Scaloni, who will have to also select between Paulo Dybala of Juventus and Inter Milan's Lautaro Martinez.

CRUYFF'S SUCCESSOR

It's been a turbulent Covid pe-

riod for Ecuador, who will be led by Argentine Gustavo Alfaro after Dutchman Jordi Cruyff quit without ever leading the team.

Cruyff, the son of late Dutch legend Johan Cruyff, was hired in January but football was put into lockdown over covid-19 before he could take charge of his first match and he subsequently resigned in July with no restart date yet fixed.

Alfaro has coached 13 clubs in Argentina, winning the Copa Sudamericana with Arsenal in 2007, but this is the 58-year-old's first job as a national team coach.

SETBACK

Scottish trio to miss Euro play-off after positive virus test

AFP
London

Scotland boss Steve Clarke admitted his plans had been thrown into disarray after Stuart Armstrong, Kieran Tierney and Ryan Christie were ruled out of today's European Championship play-off semi-final against Israel due to coronavirus protocols.

Armstrong has tested positive, while Tierney and Christie have been forced to isolate for 14 days after coming into close contact with the Southampton midfielder. All other members of the squad returned negative tests but two members of the backroom staff have also been identified as close contacts.

"Hopefully everyone involved will come through with no issues, the health of anybody is more important than any game of football," said Clarke.

"I have now spoken to all three players involved in the situation, they are very disappointed not to be involved in such a big game."

Scotland are two games away from a first major international tournament for 22 years. Beat Israel on Thursday and they will face Norway or Serbia in November for a place at next year's postponed Euros.

Armed defender Tierney and Celtic midfielder Christie would almost certainly have started, while Clarke has also lost Scott McKenna, Liam Palmer and Oliver Burke through injury.

"We were working towards one team and now we have to change that," added Clarke.

"We moved the training back to this afternoon. We have a little bit of time to work on one or two different things, one or two different players coming into the

team that maybe didn't expect to play. "Although it is disappointing for the ones who have had to drop out because of the situation, the ones who are going to get a chance to play - what an opportunity."

Armstrong, Tierney and Christie will also miss Nations League matches against Slovakia and the Czech Republic in the next week.

The two-week isolation will force Tierney to miss Arsenal's trip to Manchester City on October 17, while Christie will be absent for the first Old Firm game in 10 months against Rangers on the same day.

However, Arsenal said they were seeking more information on why the left-back has to isolate when he has tested negative.

"Our medical team have confirmed that Kieran was socially distant at all times from the player who tested positive and has broken no rules regarding Covid-19 protocols," Arsenal said in a statement. "We are currently seeking further advice and clarification of the details."

Tierney said: "I'm so disappointed and frustrated to be in this situation. I have adhered to all regulations and made sure I was socially distancing from my team mates in the hotel. I've also tested negative."

Stricter coronavirus regulations will be introduced in Scotland from Friday to curb a rising number of infections, but professional sport will continue to have an exemption to keep playing.

"It is something that is there, it is in everyone's lives now, we have to adapt as much as we can and be prepared for," said Clarke. "I tell the players that they have to be ready to step in at any time because we need everybody."



Ryan Christie (left), Kieran Tierney (right) and Stuart Armstrong.

Penalty king Panenka in serious condition at Czech hospital

Czech footballer Antonin Panenka, whose cheeky winning penalty technique against Germany in the 1976 European Championship has been copied by some of the game's greatest players, is in intensive care at a hospital, his former club said yesterday. Panenka, 71, led the Czechoslovak national team to their only international title after he lofted the decisive penalty past a surprised and sprawling German goalkeeper Sepp Maier in the shoot-out of the final. The shot - now called a Panenka - is a simple technique in which the player gently chips the ball down the

centre of the goal assuming the keeper will dive to the right or left. "Antonin Panenka was taken to an intensive care unit today, in a serious condition. We will not comment more on his state. Tonda, let's go!" Bohemians 1905 club said on Twitter. The club later said that Panenka tested positive for the novel coronavirus. Many of the world's greatest players have attempted Panenkas in big matches. France's Zinedine Zidane gave France a 1-0 lead over Italy in the 2006 World Cup final with the shot while Andrea Pirlo netted one for Italy against England in Euro 2012.

Barcelona president Bartomeu faces vote of no confidence

Barcelona edged closer to a change of president yesterday when it was confirmed that Josep Maria Bartomeu will face a vote of no confidence after turbulent times at the club. A petition against Bartomeu passed the required 16,250 signatures last month and those signatures have been officially

verified, a group leading the campaign said yesterday. In the referendum, Bartomeu's opponents will need two thirds of the votes cast to remove him from his post.

Opinion has turned heavily against Bartomeu but it could be difficult to get members to vote due to Covid-19 concerns

and restrictions. Bartomeu had also reportedly been considering resigning if the vote of no confidence was triggered.

Presidential elections would likely be held in January or February, slightly ahead of the scheduled date in March. Bartomeu is not running.

His departure could affect the future of Lionel Messi, who explained in September how the way the club is run had been a key reason for his attempt to leave Barcelona in the summer. Victor Font is one of the leading candidates to succeed Bartomeu and has linked his campaign to the arrival of

Messi's former teammate Xavi Hernandez as coach, although Font suggested this week Ronald Koeman could also continue with Xavi taking up a different role.

Joan Laporta, the president who appointed Pep Guardiola coach in 2008, is also in the running. (Reuters)

FOCUS

More than 'just a football game' as Kosovo aim for world stage

AFP
Pristina

It's just football, some say, but for Kosovo, one match means so much more than that.

Not only can today's game in Skopje take Kosovo a step closer to the re-scheduled Euro 2020 but it is also being seen as a chance for the Kosovar people to stand up and be noticed as an independent country.

Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia in 2008, meet neighbouring North Macedonia in the Euro play-off semi-finals, knowing that victory in Skopje will edge them closer to a place at sport's top table for the first time.

"I live for our flag to be raised among the 24 flags of the best nations in Europe," said 23-year-old psychology student Besart Morina.

The game has been dubbed by the media as "the most important match in Kosovo's history", and even head coach, 69-year old Bernard Challandes sees the Skopje showdown as "not just a football game".

"We are in the new country of Kosovo and the football team is so important for the people," the Swiss-born

boss said in a press conference.

Sports are a frequent arena for tensions with Serbia. The scars still run deep after the bitter war between the two which ran from February 1998 to June 1999. The Serbs attempted to block Kosovo from joining UEFA and FIFA in 2016 but their failure on that score makes the Kosovars the newest side in the qualifiers.

The fact that none of the 24 players selected for the match play in the domestic league is a remnant of Kosovo's violent past - a majority of the squad are descendants from ethnic Albanian refugees that fled the violent regime of Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic during 1990s.

A lot of the players born after the bloody conflict started their careers scattered from Sweden to Switzerland, but opted to play for the yellow-and-blues.

Some of them are good enough to play in Europe's top leagues. Captain Amir Rrahmani is at Napoli while Samir Ujkani and Mergim Vojvoda both play for Torino.

Another in Serie A is Lazio's Vedat Muriqi - he is in the squad for Skopje although a recent positive Covid-19 test makes him a doubtful starter.

Others play in the France's Ligue

1, the Dutch Eredivisie or Germany's Bundesliga. "A lot of players got good contracts, but they must never forget their roots and what it means to play in the Kosovo shirt," said Challandes.

The European newcomers struggled during qualifying for 2018 World Cup, scoring only three goals and recording just a single point - a 1-1 draw in Finland - in 10 matches.

Despite being labelled as outsiders in Euro qualifiers, Kosovo were a revelation.

They put together a remarkable 15-game unbeaten run, including friendlies, before falling to England 5-3 in September 2019. But they finished third in their group, ahead of Bulgaria and Montenegro, to secure their place in the play-off.

"Challandes brought sustainability. He unified them with discipline and self-confidence," said Eroll Salihu, secretary general of the Football Federation of Kosovo (FFK). However, the side travel to Skopje plagued with fitness issues, as four of the squad are expected to miss the game through injury.

The coronavirus has also affected fitness levels with some players not having played since before lockdown.

"We have waited more than two

years for this match, and now we are in this situation," said Challandes.

"We don't have a lot of alternative options."

The historic match will only be played about 100 kilometres (62 miles) from Kosovo's capital Pristina but because of the virus no fans will be allowed into the stadium.

Kosovo also face a determined opponent - North Macedonia have waited 30 years to get this far.

"We will give everything to work out their weaknesses so we can win," said North Macedonian forward Vlatko Stojanovski.

But Kosovars are proud of their national team no matter what happens. Posters of the players are dotted around the streets in the bars and the shops are packed with replica kits.

Arsim Mehana, a 41-year-old taxi driver, told AFP the team was doing more for the international standing of the country than all the politicians.

"They are young but better and contribute more to our recognition on the international stage than our diplomats," he said.

If Kosovo win today they will still have one more hurdle before they reach the Euros - a play-off final against either Georgia or Belarus.



Kosovo's team players attend a training session in Pristina on October 5, 2020. (AFP)

COMMENT

No fans, no fight – Jones' on soccer's crazy scores

'The big thing for us is to work on our togetherness, on how hard we've got to fight'

Reuters
London

As part of his preparations for six weeks of international rugby, England coach Eddie Jones will try to ensure his players avoid the "no fans, no fight" mentality he feels has contributed to some of the crazy scorelines peppering the Premier League.

Aston Villa's 7-2 home win over Liverpool after Tottenham Hotspur won 6-1 at Manchester United on Sunday took the season's tally to 144 goals in 38 games – 40 more goals than last year, at an average of 3.79 goals per game, the highest for 90 years.

Jones believes the absence of fans is probably the key factor, leading to players not responding to going behind or working as hard defensively as they usually would in front of a baying full house demanding a response. "What I see in sport at the moment is that sides who are getting beaten lack a bit of fight," the Australian told a news conference on Tuesday as he began the build up for England's games against the Barbarians and then Italy in the Six Nations.

"So therefore you get the exaggeration of scores. Maybe the reason they don't have so much fight – and I don't know – is because they don't see the consequences of defeat as strongly as maybe they would if crowds were there."

Jones's players have been operating in empty stadiums in rugby's Premiership but it will feel even odder when they run out at Twickenham and Rome's Olympic Stadium with just the voices of squad members, coaches and officials echoing around the vast stands.

"The big thing for us is to work on our togetherness, on how hard we've got to fight for each other," he said.

"The other common feature is that the sides who have that togetherness and have that real fight stay in the battle when maybe the crowd gives you the reminder to do that – you have got to remind yourself now. That's going to be a good thing for us."

Sports psychologist Michael Caulfield agreed with Jones's analysis, telling the BBC: "Football is a game based on threat, fear, and that has disappeared with no fans in the stadium."



England's coach Eddie Jones reacts during team's three-day training camp at The Lensbury in Teddington, London, yesterday. (AFP)

England lock Lawes ruled out of autumn matches

England lock Courtney Lawes will miss the six-game autumn schedule after being sidelined for three months by an ankle injury. The Northampton forward, who has won 85 Test caps for the national side, was injured during Saints' Premiership game against Sale Sharks last week. In a statement, Northampton said: "Northampton Saints can confirm that, following consultation between the club's medical staff and a specialist, Courtney Lawes will undergo surgery on

the ankle injury he sustained against Sale Sharks last week. "The 31-year-old England lock will require a rehabilitation period of approximately 12 weeks." It is a second major injury blow for England head coach Eddie Jones, with Sale centre Manu Tuilagi facing six months out after he suffered an Achilles injury in the same game on September 29. Both players started last year's World Cup final against South Africa and they remain integral

parts of Jones's plans. England play the Barbarians in a non-cap international on October 25, followed by their delayed 2020 Six Nations clash against Italy in Rome six days later. Jones's men then face Autumn Nations Cup matches against Georgia, Ireland and Wales, plus a Nations Cup play-off fixture in early December. The Barbarians have confirmed that Chris Robshaw will play one final time in England before he starts a new club career in the

United States with San Diego Legion. "It is a massive honour and privilege to be able to wear the famous black and white shirt of the Barbarians and I will do so with great pride," said the former England captain. "It has been a strange season and while I have not been able to play out my Harlequins career in front of fans, I am so happy I will have a chance to say farewell to England at Twickenham."

OPINION

Rennie revamping Wallabies' team culture: Salakaia-Loto

AFP
Wellington

Lukhan Salakaia-Loto said new coach Dave Rennie has swiftly brought a multi-cultural Wallabies squad together ahead of the first Bledisloe Cup Test against New Zealand in Wellington this weekend.

Queensland Reds lock Salakaia-Loto also suggested the Australians' two-week quarantine in Christchurch had been "a blessing in disguise", allowing 16 uncapped players to become familiar with the team environment.

"There's a lot of energy and excitement around this group," he said. "It's been good being in lockdown, especially to get to know one another a bit more. It's sort of forced you to be together 24/7."

Around a third of the 44-man Wallabies squad have Pacific islander heritage and relations in the dressing room have not always been smooth.

Some Polynesian players spoke out last year when Israel Folau was sacked for homophobic social media posts, raising concerns his right to religious expression was being denied.

Salakaia-Loto said the team culture had changed under Rennie, who was born in New Zealand but has Cook Islander heritage.

He was appointed in July and has his first Test in charge of the Wallabies on Sunday.

"He's done really well in building the culture and getting the boys to understand different cultures because we're such a multi-cultural group," he said.

"Maybe in the past we haven't really understood each other as well as we should have."

Salakaia-Loto said the Wallabies under Rennie were "a level playing field", where everyone was encouraged to speak out and exchange ideas.

Rennie achieved a similar feat when he guided the Chiefs to back-to-back Super Rugby titles in 2012-13.

At the time, he was vocal about tapping into the Hamilton-based side's Maori heritage, ending years of under-achievement under his

predecessor Ian Foster, the current All Blacks coach.

Salakaia-Loto said it was difficult to know what to expect on Sunday, as the Wallabies and All Blacks had been out of action for so long due to the Covid-19 pandemic and both had new coaches.

"Both teams are going in a bit blindfolded because it's been such a crazy year," he said. "It's just rocking up on the day, making sure we do what we want to do and sticking to our guns."

ALL BLACKS EXPECTING 'PHYSICAL' WALLABIES

The All Blacks are expecting the Wallabies to bring a "physical" edge to their game under new coach Dave Rennie in Sunday's season-opening Test in Wellington, the team said yesterday. New Zealander Rennie is familiar to most in the All Blacks camp having coached the Waikato Chiefs to back-to-back Super Rugby titles in 2012-13.

"I guess they'll come here with a real physical mindset around the contact areas," All Blacks assistant coach John Plumtree told reporters in Wellington.

"And they'll probably play (with the ball) a lot – that's one of Rennie's basic principles of the game, really?"

Australia have not won in New Zealand since 2001 but former coach Michael Cheika guided them to victory over the All Blacks in Perth last year when the visitors played with 14 men for the second half due to a red card to Scott Barrett.

All Blacks hooker Codie Taylor also expected the Wallabies to bring a northern hemisphere flavour, with Rennie poached from the Glasgow Warriors and other staff recruited from England.

"With (Rennie), he's been with the Chiefs and Glasgow but he's got a couple of other coaches behind him like the English attack coach (Scott Wisemantel) from last year," Taylor said.

"I think they'll want to bring in a good mix of the way they play rugby in the north and the way Rennie likes to play.

"(Our knowledge of Rennie) helps but there's still a lot of question marks in terms of what they'll bring."



Wallabies' coach Dave Rennie.

SELECTION

France pick five uncapped players in squad for Wales

AFP
Marcoussis, France

France coach Fabien Galthie yesterday five uncapped players in his 31-man squad to face Wales later this month.

Galthie's men host Wayne Pivac's side on October 24 as a warm-up match ahead of the postponed Six Nations fixture against Ireland and the newly-created Autumn Nations Cup, which has replaced the scheduled November Tests cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Prop Georges-Henri Colombe Reazel and centre Olivier Klemenczak have been rewarded for their performances as Racing 92 reached the European Champions Cup final. Tight-head Colombe Reazel, 22, started both the quarter and semi-final European wins for Laurent Travers' side.

"He's a young player who is discovering our environment," Galthie said. "He's totally the type of player we want, he has proved

his worth since the start of the season. If Travers trusts him it's everything but by chance."

Klemenczak, 24, has benefited from the injury to Henry Chavancy and the suspension of Kurtley Beale by wearing the number 12 shirt in three of his club's four matches this term.

"He's been consistently good. The general performance of his team-mates has helped. He's been playing a lot," Galthie said of the centre.

Lyon lock Killian Geraci, Toulouse No 8 Selevasio Tolofua and La Rochelle winger Arthur Retiere are also international newcomers named in the squad.

The French rugby Federation and Top 14 clubs have been at loggerheads regarding the fixture, the latter arguing it was one week too many on national duty. But les Bleus team manager Raphael Ibanez said the discussions have had no effect on the coaching staff's preparations.

"It hasn't unsettled us, we have tried to keep the link between the coaching staff despite the pub-

lic health conditions which have forced us to adapt," former Test captain Ibanez said.

"For the political climate, it's been the same state of mind."

Retiere replaces Damian Penaud who suffered an ankle injury training with club Clermont last week.

Prop and former skipper Jefferson Poirot is omitted after announcing his retirement earlier this year while Stade Francais' in-form back-rower Sekou Macalou misses out due to a hamstring problem. Scrum-half Baptiste Serin is included despite missing two Toulon matches with a shoulder injury and is set to feature for his club against Montpellier this weekend.

After the Wales friendly and Ireland Test, France play Fiji, Scotland and Italy between November 15-28 in Group B of the Autumn Nations Cup.

They will round up their unsettled 2020 calendar season with a finals play-off on December 5-6 against a team from Group A comprising England, Ireland and Wales.

THE SQUAD

Forwards: Cyril Baille (Toulouse) Jean-Baptiste Gros (Toulon), Julien Marchand (Toulouse), Camille Chat (Racing 92), Peato Mauvaka (Toulouse), Demba Bamba (Lyon), Georges-Henri Colombe Reazel (Racing 92), Bernard Le Roux (Racing 92), Paul Willemsse (Montpellier), Killian Geraci (Lyon), Romain Taofifenua (Toulon), Charles Ollivon (Toulon - captain), Francois Cros (Toulouse), Cameron Woki (Bordeaux-Begles), Dylan Cretin (Lyon), Gregory Alldritt (La Rochelle), Selevasio Tolofua (Toulouse)

Backs: Antoine Dupont (Toulouse), Baptiste Serin (Toulon), Romain Ntamack (Toulouse), Matthieu Jalibert (Bordeaux-Begles), Virimi Vakatawa (Racing 92), Arthur Vincent (Montpellier), Gael Fickou (Stade Francais), Olivier Klemenczak (Racing 92), Vincent Rattiez (Montpellier), Arthur Retiere (La Rochelle), Teddy Thomas (Racing 92), Anthony Bouthier (Montpellier), Thomas Ramos (Toulouse)



France's rugby union team general manager Raphael Ibanez (right) speaks next to head coach Fabien Galthie during a press conference to unveil the squad for the upcoming matches in Marcoussis. (AFP)

NBA

James, Davis put Lakers on brink of title

An attritional contest saw defenses on top throughout



Anthony Davis of the Los Angeles Lakers reacts to a three-point basket against the Miami Heat in Game Four of the 2020 NBA Finals at AdventHealth Arena in Lake Buena Vista, Florida.

James and Davis for long periods.

James in particular struggled to generate his usual rhythm throughout the first half, giving up five turnovers and scoring just eight points.

The Lakers looked to have built a head of steam towards the end of the first quarter, edging into a 27-22 lead after a Kyle Kuzma three-pointer and a driving layup from Alex Caruso.

But Miami responded swiftly at the start of the second quarter, transforming a five-point deficit into a 33-29 lead after Jae Crowder's three-pointer.

Butler, meanwhile had started smoothly, going five-from-five in the first quarter to move into double figures.

Despite Miami's defensive efforts, the Lakers were still able to carve open a series of good looks, only for off-target shooting to let them down.

Nevertheless the Lakers had inched into a two-point lead at half-time at 49-47.

In the third quarter, James' shooting from distance improved, his first three-pointer of the night coming with a 29-foot effort to put the Lakers ahead at 55-54.

A Danny Green bucket was followed by a driving layup from James and the Lakers had suddenly moved into a 59-54 lead.

James made another long-range three shortly afterward to put the Lakers 62-57 up with 6:44 left in the third.

Davis' first three-pointer of the game from 28 feet put the Lakers seven points clear with two minutes left in the third.

The Los Angeles big man closed the quarter with four free throws to leave the Lakers five points clear heading into the fourth.

The Lakers maintained that advantage for much of the fourth quarter.

Tyler Herro's three-point jump shot cut the Lakers lead to one point at 76-75, but three free throws from Markieff Morris followed by a superb fadeaway from James stretched the Los Angeles cushion to six points midway through the fourth.

Butler raised Miami's hopes after tying it at 83-83, but the Lakers pulled away with Caldwell-Pope's three-pointer transition followed by a layup to make it 95-88 with two minutes left on the clock.

Rajon Rondo's layup was then followed by a Davis crucial three-pointer with 39.5 seconds left which sealed the win.

SPOTLIGHT

LeBron savours 'winning time' after Lakers win



Jimmy Butler of the Miami Heat (L) tries to stop LeBron James of the Los Angeles Lakers on Tuesday.

AFP
Orlando

The Los Angeles Lakers maintained their remarkable fourth quarter winning streak as they secured the game four victory over Miami on Tuesday that left them on the brink of a 17th NBA crown.

The Lakers took a commanding 3-1 lead in the best-of-seven series after holding off a physical Miami side in a hard-fought contest to close out a 102-96 win in Orlando.

The result extended the Lakers' record of remaining unbeaten this season whenever they have led going into the fourth quarter. The team is 56-0 when taking a lead into the fourth.

"I think the fourth quarter, obviously it's winning time," Lakers star LeBron James said afterwards.

"You've got 12 minutes to buckle down defensively with the lead, kind of hold that lead, and then you have to execute offensively.

"That's the mindset for us. We've got 12 minutes. If we have the lead, it's our job to outscore the opponent or to hold them to (as many) points as us, which is the same exact thing, because if

Heat ready to respond: Spoelstra

AFP
Orlando

Miami Heat coach Erik Spoelstra backed his team to bounce back after the Los Angeles Lakers closed in on another NBA championship ring on Tuesday. After a 102-96 defeat in game four left them 3-1 down in the series, the Heat need a miracle if they are to prevent the Lakers from winning a record-equalling 17th title.

Only once before in NBA Finals history has a team overturned a 3-1 deficit, when a LeBron James-inspired Cleveland Cavaliers stunned the Golden State Warriors in 2016. But Spoelstra struck a defiant stance after Tuesday's defeat in Orlando which left Miami's championship aspirations hanging by the slenderest of

threads. "Our guys love competition and love the challenge," Spoelstra said.

"We are here for a purpose. We never expected this to be easy. We'll just rest and recover tomorrow.

"I think everybody could probably use that a little bit. Recallibrate, get back to work on Thursday. I know our group's going to be ready.

"We'll respond, that's academic at this point. We'll just rest up tomorrow and get back to work and get ready for the next one."

Spoelstra said Tuesday's defeat in a physical encounter dominated by defense, had been a "throwback" game.

"There were some moments of truth and it came down to making plays," Spoelstra said. "We made a lot more plays at the end of last game, they made their plays tonight."

we win the quarter, we win the game. That's kind of been our mindset all year long."

James, who will win a fourth championship ring if the Lakers win one of the remaining three games in the series, is already

looking forward to game five. "I get so excited - like right now, I'm excited about our meeting tomorrow watching film and breaking that down and seeing things that we can do better," James told reporters.

AFP
Orlando

LeBron James scored 28 points as the Los Angeles Lakers moved to within one win of a 17th NBA championship on Tuesday with a 102-96 victory over the Miami Heat. Humbled by Miami in game three on Sunday, James and the Lakers came roaring back in a hard-fought defensive battle that was finely balanced until Los Angeles pulled away in the closing minutes.

The win leaves the Lakers 3-1 up in the best-of-seven series, meaning they can clinch the championship with victory in game five in Orlando tomorrow.

"It felt like both teams were desperate, understanding the situation they had put themselves in," James said afterwards.

"Trying to get every extra possession, execute offensively, not to make mistakes defensively, that's what it was all about."

James started slowly but clicked in the second half to lead the scoring while providing eight assists and hauling down 12 rebounds.

Anthony Davis meanwhile finished with 22 points, while Kentavious Caldwell-Pope chipped in with a vital 15 point contribution.

Caldwell-Pope's tally included a three-pointer and a layup in the closing stages that put the Lakers seven points ahead with two minutes remaining.

Davis then drained only his second three-pointer of the night with 39.5 seconds left on the clock to give the Lakers a 100-91 lead and effectively seal the contest.

Butler, the 40-point hero of

Miami's win on Sunday, was restricted to 22 points, frustrated throughout by a commanding defensive display from Davis.

"He challenges me every night, I challenge him every night," James said of Davis.

"We have to do things to help our team win, defensively, and offensively, and he did that tonight - he was spectacular."

Miami coach Erik Spoelstra said the game had been decided in key moments in the closing stages.

"There was some moments of truth there at the end, and probably the bottom line is they won those moments of truth," Spoelstra said.

"It came down to making plays. They just made more plays and more shots to seal it."

An attritional contest saw defenses on top throughout, with Miami containing the threat of

Seattle Storm sweep Aces to claim fourth WNBA title

Reuters
Las Vegas

The Seattle Storm won their fourth Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) title on Tuesday by thrashing the Las Vegas Aces 92-59 in Game Three to sweep the series.

The Aces held an early nine-point

lead but that vanished quickly as Finals MVP Breanna Stewart took control to score 26 points and Sue Bird, who won her first title 16 years ago, showed off her mastery of the no-look pass to dish out seven assists. League MVP Aja Wilson had 18 points and four assists in a losing effort for the Aces, who had 19 turnovers, including 11 in the first two quarters. The best-of-five series marked

the end of a season unlike any other in the WNBA, the league staging all games inside a quarantined campus in Bradenton, Florida, after the novel coronavirus outbreak forced weeks of delay.

"Everybody bought in and we didn't know what to expect from one day to the next," said Stewart, who scored 85 points over three games. "We kind of rolled with the punches and continued

to play our game." The league dedicated its season to racial justice, with players protesting police brutality and violence against Black Americans on the court and off it during the truncated 22-game season. The championship was the fourth for 39-year-old Bird, who set a WNBA Playoff record for 16 assists in Game One of the Finals after missing the entire 2019 season with a knee injury.

BASEBALL

Rays bounce back to beat Yankees, Astros put A's on brink of elimination

AFP
Los Angeles

Tyler Glasnow and three other pitchers combined for 18 strikeouts and the batting order erupted for four homers as the Tampa Bay Rays rebounded from a game one loss to beat the New York Yankees 7-5 in their AL Division Series on Tuesday. Rays right-hander Glasnow struck out a franchise playoff-record 10 batters in five-plus innings. He gave up four

runs and three hits while walking three as the Ray levelled the best of five series at 1-1.

Randy Arozarena slugged a homer for the second straight game, Mike Zunino and Manuel Margot drilled two run shots, and Austin Meadows hit a solo home run for the Rays, who equalled a club playoff record with four long balls.

New York star Giancarlo Stanton homered in his fourth consecutive playoff game, including a towering 460-foot, three-run drive that cleared the upper deck in the fourth inning.



Tampa Bay Rays pitcher Tyler Glasnow (20) delivers a pitch against the New York Yankees on Tuesday. PICTURE: Orlando Ramirez-USA TODAY Sports

Stanton's four straight homers, ties for the third-longest streak in a single postseason.

Also, George Springer hammered two home runs and Framber Valdez won the battle of the lefties as the Houston Astros moved to within one win of reaching their fourth straight AL Championship Series with a 5-2 win over the Oakland A's. Left handed starter Valdez gave up two runs on five hits over seven innings and fanned four batters for the Astros, who will try to sweep the best of five series on Wednesday at the neutral

Dodger Stadium site in Los Angeles.

Houston grabbed a 4-2 lead in the fifth inning on Martin Maldonado's home run that knocked Oakland lefty Sean Manaea from the contest. Springer then smacked the first pitch from Oakland relief pitcher Yusmeiro Petit over the left field wall.

Elsewhere, Travis d'Arnaud broke a seventh-inning tie with a home run as the Atlanta Braves exploded for six runs in the seventh en route to a 9-5 victory over the Miami Marlins in game one of their NL series in Texas.



Jamie Hersch of the NHL Network interviews Alexis Lafreniere prior to the first round of the 2020 National Hockey League Draft at the NHL Network Studio in Secaucus, New Jersey.

building," he said. "I'm really honoured." Los Angeles Kings selected centre Quinton Byfield with the second pick, before the Ottawa Senators chose centre Tim Stutzle. Stutzle's selection was announced by Jeopardy! host and University of Ottawa

graduate Alex Trebek. The Rangers won the first overall pick after being one of eight teams that failed to advance past the qualifying round of the Stanley Cup playoffs in this year's coronavirus-interrupted season.

FOCUS

Bach promises to look into claims of Belarus athletes' discrimination

Reuters
Berlin

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is investigating claims by Belarus athletes they are being discriminated against because of their political views, IOC President **Thomas Bach** said yesterday.

Belarus has been rocked by protests since an Aug. 9 election that confirmed another term for President Alexander Lukashenko.

"We are very concerned about the information we are getting," Bach said in a conference call at the end of the body's executive board meeting.

He said the IOC had already corresponded with the national com-

mittee and would now also look into scholarship and other funds that had been directed to Belarus and whether they had reached the individuals they were meant for.

"What we are hearing is in fact athletes are saying that they are discriminated against by their National Olympic Committee (NOC) just for political reasons," Bach said.

Lukashenko is also president of his country's Olympic committee (NOC).

"Non-discrimination is an essential value of the Olympic movement. This is why we are taking it so seriously," Bach said.

"The Executive Board... decided we will strengthen our investigation to determine whether the NOC has fulfilled and is fulfilling obligation as

per the Olympic charter."

Lukashenko is struggling to contain nearly two months of street protests and more than 13,000 people have been arrested and many opposition leaders jailed.

Belarus athletes have repeatedly urged sports bodies including the IOC to suspend the national Olympic committee's membership.

"We are a civil non-governmental organisation and our mandate is limited to sport. We cannot change the laws or the political system or the laws of a sovereign country," Bach said. "But we are taking very seriously the mandate we have to ensure that the NOCs of any country respect the Olympic charter and that athletes enjoy rights in compliance with the charter."



FORMULA 1

Raikkonen and Hamilton on brink of new records

The Nuerburgring has not hosted a Formula One race since 2013

Reuters
Nurburg

Formula One is set for a record-breaking weekend when the Nuerburgring hosts the first Eifel Grand Prix on Sunday and one of them at least will not have Lewis Hamilton's name on it.

While the six times world champion has a second go at matching Michael Schumacher's 91 career wins at the German's home circuit, Kimi Raikkonen will line up for his 323rd grand prix start after equalling Brazilian Rubens Barrichello's record in Russia two weeks ago.

The Finnish 'Iceman', who made his Formula One debut with Sauber in 2001 and is now 40 and the oldest man in the race, is unlikely to give much more than a shoulder shrug at the achievement.

"Record or not, I am approaching this weekend as any other because once you're in the car, it's pretty much the same," said the Alfa Romeo driver, 2007 world champion with Ferrari.

"I've raced here quite a few times, I think I should have won a couple of races but we've been a bit unlucky at times, but this is how racing goes."

All eyes will also be on Alfa Romeo on Friday when Mick Schumacher, 21-year-old son of seven times world champion Michael and leader of the Formula Two feeder series, makes his practice debut.

The session has an added poignancy, Mick lapping at the German circuit closest to his father's boyhood home in Kerpen and one where Michael - who



Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton.

suffered severe head injuries in a skiing accident in 2013 - won five times.

Britain's Callum Iloft, another promising Ferrari junior vying with Schumacher for the F2 title, will also be taking part in practice with the Haas team.

Hamilton won at the Nuerburgring with McLaren in 2011 - the 16th of his 90 victories to date - and the race, brought back to fill gaps in a Covid-19

ravaged calendar, is a home one for his Mercedes team.

Even if the 91st win proves elusive, the Briton can be expected to stretch his records for successive points finishes (43) and podiums (159) and maybe also poles (96).

The Nuerburgring has not hosted a Formula One race since 2013, when Sebastian Vettel won on his way to a fourth championship with Red Bull, and this

will be the latest ever at the circuit. That means cold, and potentially rainy, conditions to add some uncertainty.

Hamilton has always gone well in the wet, however, and Mercedes have been on another level to the rest this season with eight wins from 10 races and every pole.

The Briton also took the last F1 pole to date at the Nuerburgring.

Mercedes had a shocker on home ground last year at Hockenheim, however, with Hamilton ending up ninth and teammate Valtteri Bottas spinning out.

The Briton has a 44 point advantage over Bottas after 10 races and will be fancied to extend that if he can stay out of trouble with the stewards after being punished in Sochi for his practice starts.

SPOTLIGHT

Tokyo Olympics organisers say will cut costs by \$280mn



Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games CEO Toshiro Muto speaks during a press conference in Tokyo yesterday.

AFP
Tokyo

The cost of the coronavirus-postponed Tokyo Olympics will be slashed by \$280mn, organisers said yesterday, touting a scaled-back Games with cuts to everything from staffing to pyrotechnics.

But the final price of the event - officially budgeted before the pandemic at 1.3tn yen (\$12bn) - remains unclear because additional expenses caused by the postponement have not yet been made public.

Plans for a lower-key Olympics were unveiled last month, with cost-cutting measures including fewer free tickets, scrapping athlete welcome ceremonies, and savings on banners, mascots and meals.

"This work will help to create a model for future global events including forthcoming Games amid the new normal in which we now live," organisers said in a statement after a presentation to the International Olympic Committee Executive Board.

They said they would calculate an updated budget - including additional costs linked to postponement and coronavirus counter-measures - by the end of the year.

The 2020 Games were pushed back a year as the deadly new disease spread around the globe, and are now set to open on July 23, 2021.

But the delay has thrown up a plethora of new costs, from re-booked venues and transport to retaining a huge organising

committee staff.

With many countries experiencing second or even third waves of infection, there have been doubts about whether the event can be staged, but organisers and Olympic officials insist it can be done safely.

"We're aware some people are of the opinion that it should be cancelled," Tokyo 2020 CEO Toshiro Muto said yesterday.

"But if we're not able to overcome Covid-19, is there anything positive about the situation? I think we can all agree that this is not a desirable situation."

Organisers and officials are considering a long list of possible virus countermeasures that they hope will make it possible to hold the Games, even if a vaccine is not available.

But enthusiasm for the Games appears to have waned in Japan, with polls over the summer finding just one in four Japanese people wanted to see them happen, and most backing either a further postponement or outright cancellation.

Muto acknowledged the importance of public support for the event.

"It's not our intention to hold the Games without gaining understanding" of people in Japan, he said.

If held at all, the final shape of the Games remains unclear, with questions including whether spectators will be allowed - including foreign visitors - yet to be resolved.

Organisers have made clear that at the very least it will be a more sober event than the usually exuberant spectacle.

GOLF

Rose frustrated by poor form

AFP
London

Former world number one **Justin Rose** admits his patience is being tested by the poor run of form that has seen him tumble down the world rankings.

The English golfer first topped the rankings in September 2018 and has spent a total of 13 weeks at number one but arrived at Wentworth for this week's PGA Championship at 23rd in the standings.

The 2013 US Open champion finished ninth in the US PGA Championship in August but has missed the cut in five of his past seven events after splitting from long-time coach Sean Foley in



June. "(It) hasn't worked out yet, but these things don't always happen immediately," Rose said yesterday. "The last couple of days there's been some lightbulb moments and it's a blend of some

Finau tests positive, withdraws from Vegas event

Los Angeles: US golfer Tony Finau was withdrawn from this week's Shriners Hospitals Open in Nevada after testing positive for Covid-19, the PGA Tour confirmed on Tuesday. Finau, the world number 16, returned a positive test during pre-tournament screening for the event staged at TPC Summerlin in Las Vegas, the tour said in a statement. Finau later confirmed the posi-

tive test in a brief statement on Twitter.

"Earlier today, I received a positive result for Covid-19 under PGA TOUR on-site testing protocols and have begun a period of self-quarantine to protect others around me," Finau said. "I am feeling well, and am otherwise in good spirits," added Finau, whose place in the field now been handed to Bronson Burgoon.

of the new things I've learned along the way and some of the old blueprints under Sean. "You always see results on the range before you see it on the golf course, but I feel positive and motivated

at the moment!" Rose, 40, who is in the process of moving back to England from the Bahamas, said he was enjoying his golf.

"You can only hope that does lead to good stuff eventually," he

said. "Patience-wise, it's been tested for sure. It's not fun not competing out there at the top end of the leaderboard."

"I've seen a couple of spells that keeps you buoyant. It's not all been doom and gloom and I feel like I'm working on ultimately a bit of a bigger plan and prize at the end of it all." Defending champion Danny Willett also comes into the event, starting today, on a run of poor form. The 2016 Masters champion has missed the cut in his past five starts.

"My game has not been in an amazing place, so nice to be back here and get a few nice vibes of how things went last year," he said. "We're working hard and see if we can get a little bit of form back and put up a little bit of a fight this week."

India's Nehwal pulls out of Denmark Open

New Delhi: Former women's number one **Saina Nehwal**

has pulled out of next week's Denmark Open, the first tournament since the world tour was suspended in March as a result of the coronavirus.

Compatriot PV Sindhu, the world number seven, announced her withdrawal from the event last month saying she did not want to risk international travel.

The Super 750 event in Odense starting October 13 will be the first on the BWF World Tour since the All England Championships seven months ago. Nehwal told Indian media it didn't make sense to travel to Europe for just one tournament, and she would instead wait until the new year to resume tournament play.

Nehwal's husband Parupalli Kashyap, currently ranked 24 in the world, has also pulled out of the tournament.



"There is no injury issue," told Indian media. "I decided that I will start the season from January only with the Asian tour." The Badminton World Federation (BWF) has postponed the Thomas and Uber Cup Finals and three events in Asia to 2021, and cancelled the Denmark Masters.

IPL

Bravo reaches 150 IPL wickets but CSK lose to KKR

'I STUCK TO BOWLING THE HARD LENGTHS AND IT WORKED'

AFP
Dubai

Birthday boy Dwayne Bravo reached 150 wickets in the Indian Premier League yesterday but his side Chennai Super Kings (CSK) went down to Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) by 10 runs. The West Indies all-rounder, who turned 37, got to the landmark with his third wicket of Shivam Mavi for nought as Chennai bowled out Kolkata for 167 in Abu Dhabi.

"I stuck to bowling the hard lengths and it worked," Bravo said after he returned figures of 3-37 from his four overs for the MS Dhoni-led side. It was Bravo's third game for the three-time champions this season but the paceman said, "At my age it doesn't make sense to play all games. When I get the opportunity, I back myself to do well".

The paceman recently became the first player to take 500 T20 wickets while playing for Trinbago Knights Riders in the Caribbean Premier League.

Mumbai Indians paceman Lasith Malinga leads the IPL wicket-takers chart with 170 scalps from 122 games but the veteran Sri Lankan pulled out of this season due to family commitments. Kolkata's move to open with Rahul Tripathi in place of Sunil Narine proved key as the batsman smashed 81 off 51 deliveries including eight fours and three sixes. Chennai faltered in their chase to manage just 157 for five in their 20 overs despite a valiant 50 by Australia's Shane Watson and lost their fourth match out of six this season in the United Arab Emirates.

"We thought we will ease Sunny's (Narine) pressure a little bit and send Rahul up," said Kolkata skipper Dinesh Karthik.

"Our batting is very fluid. I started at three, I am batting at seven. That is the good thing. Over the years fluid line-ups have done better."

Chennai also changed their batting order with Dhoni coming in at number four but was bowled by leg-spinner Varun Chakravarthy for 11.

BRIEF SCORES: KKR 167 all out (Tripathi 81, Bravo 3-37) beat Chennai Super Kings 157 for 5 (Watson 50, Russell 1-18) by 10 runs



Rahul Tripathi of Kolkata Knight Riders in action during their Indian Premier League match against Chennai Super Kings in Abu Dhabi yesterday. (Inset) Birthday boy Dwayne Bravo. (Sportspics for BCCI)

Smith becomes latest IPL skipper hit for slow over-rate

Australia's Steve Smith has become the third Indian Premier League captain to be fined for a slow over-rate, adding insult to injury after his Rajasthan Royals team were hammered by reigning champions Mumbai Indians. The Royals allowed Mumbai to post 194 for four and lost by 57 runs after being bowled out for 136 - despite England's Jos Buttler hitting 70 - in Abu Dhabi on Tuesday. The win put Mumbai top of the IPL table. Smith followed Virat Kohli of Royal Challengers Bangalore and Delhi Capitals skip-

per Shreyas Iyer in having to pay \$1,600 for the slow over-rate under the IPL code of conduct. The defeat was the third in a row for the Royals, the 2008 champions, who are desperate for the return of England all-rounder Ben Stokes. Stokes has arrived in Dubai from New Zealand, where he was with his ailing father, but is now in a six-day quarantine and will not be able to play before Saturday. "We haven't been able to get a good start in the last three games. Outside of Jos and Jofra Archer at the end,

we've got work to do on our batting," said Smith. "Stokes is not out till the 10th. He's not too far away. Hopefully we can get a few wins and get some momentum." The Royals were undone by a blazing unbeaten 79 by Mumbai's Suryakumar Yadav who smashed 11 fours and two sixes despite taking a blow to his helmet off paceman Archer. Mumbai quicks Jasprit Bumrah, who claimed four wickets, and Trent Boult, with 2-26, then combined to pack off Royals in 18.1 overs.

FOCUS

RCB's 'death' over bowling a headache for skipper Kohli

IAN S
New Delhi

In three of their five IPL matches this season, Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB) have conceded 200 runs or thereabouts. What has been worse is that all of these poor bowling performances have come in Dubai, where none of the other six games, which haven't featured RCB, have seen anything close to 200.

This continues the problem of bowling options for skipper Virat Kohli, especially at the 'death'; and if the early trend is anything to go by, it will be this weakness that may again stand in the way of RCB's quest for an IPL title. Kohli has been RCB captain since 2013 when he was appointed the regular skipper.

Among the IPL skippers who have led their sides in more than 100 matches - MS Dhoni, Rohit Sharma and Gautam Gambhir being the other ones - Kohli has the worst success percentage and is the only one among them to have not won an IPL title. Gambhir, who led KKR to two IPL titles, has in the past criticised Kohli's leadership skills, saying that the India captain is very lucky and needs to be thankful to RCB for letting him captain the side for such an extended period.

This is the eighth year of Kohli being in charge of RCB - the most after MS Dhoni at Chennai Super Kings.

His win percentage is less than 50, which means he has lost more than half the games. None of those mentioned above have had such a poor record.

Things began well in the first match of this season when all-

rounder Shivam Dube bowled an economical 19th over to seal the win over Sunrisers Hyderabad.

However, it all fell apart in the very next match when Dube conceded 23 runs against Kings XI Punjab in the last over.

Dale Steyn, who bowled the second last over, conceded 26.

It brought back a familiar headache for Kohli. In recent seasons, neither Umesh Yadav nor Navdeep Saini, both pretty quick, have had any success in stopping the run-flow towards the end.

Most other teams have got bowlers who can bowl at the 'death', with Mumbai Indians having Jasprit Bumrah and James Pattinson, Kings XI Punjab have Mohamed Shami and Sheldon Cottrell, SunRisers Hyderabad had Bhuvneshwar Kumar, who has got injured, while Chennai Super Kings have Dwayne Bravo. After the match against Delhi Capitals, an embarrassed Kohli blamed his bowlers for letting Delhi Capitals get to 196, a total hard to chase in Dubai.

"The execution with the ball towards the end could have been better," he said after the match which RCB lost by 59 runs.

Against Delhi Capitals, his bowlers conceded 53 in the last four overs, against Kings XI Punjab 74 in the last four overs and 79 against Mumbai Indians.

A desperate Kohli said that he was looking forward to the return of Chris Morris, who hasn't played a match this season. Morris doesn't just provide a 'death' overs option with the ball but also one with the bat. Morris's career T20 economy rate is less than eight though last year, for RCB, he went well over nine. He could be the only hope for Kohli.

Late cricketer Jones farewelled in last lap of empty MCG

Former Australia batsman Dean Jones has been farewelled in a poignant final lap of an empty Melbourne Cricket Ground following his sudden death last month.

The casket of Jones, who collapsed and died aged 59, was draped in an Australia flag and carried in a white hearse adorned with flowers spelling "324", his Test cap number and his highest first-class score, achieved at the MCG. "Rocket Man" by Elton John - a friend of Jones - echoed through the 100,000-capacity arena as the hearse, followed by only 10 mourners due to anti-coronavirus rules, proceeded around the field on Saturday.

"We have been deeply moved by the outpouring of love for Dean over the last week and can't thank everyone enough for their support and for sharing their memories with us," Jones's widow Jane said in a tribute statement.

"We will forever miss Dean's

energy, his zest for life, passion for cricket and his love for us as a family," she added.

The father of two, a colourful and popular character who played regularly for Victoria and Australia at the MCG, died while working in Mumbai as a commentator for the Indian Premier League.

He played 52 Tests from 1984-1992, amassing 3,631 runs at an average of 46.55, while his 164 one-day internationals yielded 6,068 runs at an average of 44.61.

Known universally as "Deano", and an inspiration for his aggressive batting, Jones was remembered as a fierce competitor whose knockabout demeanour concealed a keen cricketer's mind.

At Chennai in 1986 Jones, vomiting and shaking at the crease, defied severe heat and dehydration to score 210 and save Australia's hopes in only the second tied Test in cricket history.

(Reuters)

SPOTLIGHT

Street vendor to IPL – the fairy tale of Jaiswal

AFP
New Delhi

Teenage batsman Yashasvi Jaiswal sold street food and lived in tents to pursue his cricket dream, and now he is playing with top stars in the Indian Premier League.

The 18-year-old left-hand batsman scored 400 runs in six one-day matches for India at this year's Under-19 World Cup, but it was his IPL deal with Rajasthan Royals that turned heads.

He was snapped up by the Steve Smith-led Royals for \$338,000 in the December auctions of the world's richest Twenty20 tournament, making him the most expensive of a new crop of youngsters.

Life, though, was not always easy for Jaiswal, who hails from a small town in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh but moved to Mumbai at the age of 11 to hone his skills.

"Initially finding a place to stay (in Mumbai) was the hard

part. I used to sleep in a dairy and then stayed at my uncle's place but it wasn't big enough and he asked me to find a different place," Jaiswal told AFP from the United Arab Emirates, where this year's IPL is being held.

"I then started to stay in a tent near Azad Maidan (a Mumbai sports ground) and would play cricket there during the day.

"I sold pani puri at night, to help earn some money for food," he said, referring to a popular street snack.

Jaiswal also did some cricket scoring and worked fetching balls in club games to help finance his career.

His efforts started to pay off after he won a place in the Mumbai team and became the youngest batsman in the world, at 17 years and 292 days, to score a one-day double century.

But it was an even bigger day in the life of the Jaiswal family when the young batsman and useful leg-spinner was bought by the Royals for more than 12 times his base price of \$27,000.

The Royals fielded Jaiswal

in their opening game against Chennai Super Kings, but the opener scored just six runs and in his second outing, he was out for nought off Mumbai Indians quick Trent Boult.

But Jaiswal, who greeted Chennai captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni with his hands folded together in prayer, a mark of respect, before the game in Sharjah, says sharing a dressing room with big guns including Jos Buttler, Jofra Archer and Smith is a tremendous learning experience.

"It's been great to talk to all the great players here. I've been talking to everyone and picking up things that would help me improve my game," said Jaiswal.

"It has been good to have the support of skipper Steve Smith. He's been very helpful and has been open to anything I've asked him. I've been trying to learn from his international experience."

Jaiswal, who was player of the tournament in the U-19 World Cup in South Africa, where India were runners-up, credits coach Jwala Singh for helping

him through his tough times in Mumbai.

"I started practising there (Mumbai) but my father, who runs a paint shop, said 'Let's go back home', but I wanted to stay on," said Jaiswal.

"One day after my practice I met coach Jwala and he offered to help me with my accommodation and work on my game and fitness. It helped me as a player."

The young boy's ambition struck a chord with Singh, who played state cricket himself but had to give up because of a lack of money and guidance.

"I saw in Yashasvi a younger me and thought God is giving me another chance to play well in my second innings of life," Singh told AFP.

"I always believed he would play cricket at the highest level." As for what the future holds, Jaiswal - who, like many young Indians, idolises record-breaking batsman Sachin Tendulkar - will take it as it comes.

"My focus is to work on things I can control and not worry too much about the future."



Rajasthan Royals' Yashasvi Jaiswal plays a shot during their Indian Premier League match against Chennai Super Kings held in Sharjah September 24, 2020. (Sportspics for BCCI)

FOCUS

Katara prepares to launch first edition of International Arabian Horse Festival in Feb 2021

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Cultural Village Foundation Katara has signed a cooperation agreement with the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC) to host the Qatar International Arabian Horse Championship, as one of many events of the Katara International Horse Festival, which will be held in February 2021.

"Katara intends to launch the first edition of the International Arabian Horse Festival, in which the Qatar International Arabian Horse Championship will be its most distinguished event," HE Dr Khalid bin Ibrahim al-Sulaiti, General Manager of the Cultural Village Katara, said.

He added: "The hosting of this tournament in Katara reflects our endeavour to be present with our public on all forums. We hope that the Qatar International Arabian Horse

Championship will be a global event that attracts all those interested in the horse and equestrian world."

The tournament will be held on Katara Beach, which has hosted many large sports tournaments and competitions in the world. Katara has always organised and presented major international festivals and exhibitions that symbolise the originality of our heritage.

For his part, QREC Chairman HE Issa bin Mohamed al-Mohammadi said, "We are happy to be present in Katara to sign this agreement that resulted in hosting the Qatar International Arabian Horse Championship. We strongly hope that this agreement will lead to the development and progress of sports in general and the championship."

The Katara International Arabian Horse Festival will be held in February 2021 at Katara Beach, and will include various events, such as the Qatar International Arabian Horse Championships.



Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club Chairman HE Issa bin Mohamed al-Mohammadi (left) and Katara General Manager HE Dr Khalid bin Ibrahim al-Sulaiti sign the agreement yesterday.

SPOTLIGHT

Hathab Equestrian Tour Season 4 begins on Friday

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The new season of the annual Qatar Equestrian Tour - Longines Hathab Supported By The Social & Sport Contribution Fund (Daam), Qatar's premier local horse-riding competition series, will kick off this weekend on October 9-10.

The Qatar Equestrian Tour is organised and hosted jointly by Qatar Equestrian Federation (QEF) and Al Shaqab, member of Qatar Foundation. It comprises individual and team competitions over 12 legs, from October 2020 to March 2021. The opening Tour of Season 4 will be held at Qatar Equestrian Federation's Indoor Arena, with the remaining tours taking place either at QEF or Al Shaqab.

Longines, ExxonMobil, and Salam International are the main partners of the Qatar Equestrian Tour, which is supported by Daam.

Hamad bin Abdulrahman al-Attiyah, Chairman, Qatar Equestrian Tour Organizing Committee, said: "After the challenges we faced during Season 3, the Organizing Committee is very happy to announce that the new season will begin on schedule."

"As Qatar's premier equestrian competition series, the Qatar Equestrian Tour fulfils a vital role in the horse-riding community. The vision for the tour is to be a national series of equestrian competitions to inspire Qatar's next generation of international champions. At the same time, we want to increase awareness of horsemanship, which has a proud place in Qatar's history and tradition."

For the health and safety of equestrian fans, and in line with national Covid-19 precautionary measures, Qatar Equestrian Tour Season 4 will be held without spectators in the arena. However, fans of the tour can follow the thrilling action live on Al Kass TV.



CYCLING / GIRO D'ITALIA

Ganna 'redeems Ineos' with stage win

Portugal's Joao Almeida tightening his grip on the leader's pink jersey

AFP
Camigliatello Silano, Italy

Italy's Filippo Ganna gave the Ineos team a boost yesterday with a breakaway win in the fifth stage of the Giro d'Italia through the southern Calabria region with Portugal's Joao Almeida tightening his grip on the leader's pink jersey.

Ineos lost their lead rider Geraint Thomas to a broken pelvis on Tuesday, and subsequently promised to target stage wins instead of the overall standings. "A success that partially redeems the team after Thomas's unfortunate retirement," said 24-year-old Ganna after his second stage win in this year's race.

It was also the time-trial specialist's first ever win on a road race and given his huge frame, is an astonishing result for a stage where a slender climber had been expected to triumph.

Ineos had a disappointing Tour de France with defending champion Egan Bernal's withdrawal, while Ecuadorian Richard Carapaz is not defending his Giro d'Italia title.

The powerfully built world time-trial champion Ganna crossed the line alone 34sec ahead of a group of favourites including Deceuninck's Alme-

ida, who finished third just behind Austrian Patrick Konrad of Bora-Hansgrohe.

Ganna won Saturday's opening time-trial in Palermo, and on his first Giro d'Italia has two more time-trials to target.

"It was not planned for me to go in the breakaway," said Ganna. "Then after some attacks this morning I told Salvatore (Puccio) to stay on my wheel."

"We managed to go in the breakaway, then all went incredibly well."

The race crossed to mainland Italy after four days in Sicily, covering 225km from Mileto to Camigliatello Silano.

Ganna was the sole survivor of a breakaway launched before the 50km mark on the rolling slopes of the Valico di Montescuro, attacking with 17km to go.

The Italian left Belgian Thomas De Gendt and Colombian Einer Rubio in his wake, after the pair had counterattacked at the foot of the climb, cresting the summit one minute ahead of his pursuers.

In the descent, uneven and slippery in the rain, Italian two-time Giro winner Vincenzo Nibali set the pace and tested his rivals.

The Italian held on for the stage win, while his compatriot Nibali, winner in 2013 and 2016, remains well positioned in sixth,

one-minute adrift of Almeida.

"It was a very cold stage, with some rain," said Almeida who nevertheless extended his two-second overnight advantage to 43 seconds on second-place Spaniard Pello Bilbao.

"I'm happy with how I rode. After (Jonathan) Caicedo was dropped I managed to stay with the main favourites and gave everything until the finish line."

Thursday's sixth stage stays in the foot of Italy with a 199km run between Castrovillari and Matera in the Basilicata region.

STAGE 5 RESULTS (TOP 10)

1. Filippo Ganna (INE) 5:59:17
2. Patrick Konrad (BOR) +00:34
3. Joao Almeida (DEC) +00:34
4. Wilco Kelderman (SUN) +00:34
5. Lucas Hamilton (MIT) +00:34
6. Jai Hindley (SUN) +00:34
7. Harm Vanhoucke (LOT) +00:34
8. Pello Bilbao (BAH) +00:34
9. Jakob Fuglsang (AST) +00:34
10. Fausto Masnada (DEC) +00:34

OVERALL STANDINGS (TOP 10)

1. Joao Almeida (DEC) 17:06:23
2. Pello Bilbao (BAH) +00:43
3. Wilco Kelderman (SUN) +00:48
4. Harm Vanhoucke (LOT) +00:59
5. Vincenzo Nibali (TRE) +1:01
6. Domenico Pozzovivo (NTT) +1:05
7. Jakob Fuglsang (AST) +1:19
8. Steven Kruijswijk (JUM) +1:21
9. Patrick Konrad (BOR) +1:26
10. Rafal Majka (BOR) +1:32



Team Ineos rider Filippo Ganna of Italy celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the fifth stage of the Giro d'Italia, a 225-kilometre route between Mileto and Camigliatello Silano, yesterday. (AFP)

Al Arabi face Al Sadd in Ooredoo Cup final on Saturday

Al Arabi will take on Al Sadd in the final of 2019-20 Ooredoo Cup at the Al Duhail Stadium on Saturday.

While Al Arabi progressed to the knockout quarter-finals as the third team from Group B with seven points, after Al Khor (13 points) and Qatar SC (10 points), Al Sadd made the cut as the third team from Group A with seven points, after Al Ahli (12 points) and Al Wakrah (eight points).

In the semi-finals, Al Arabi edged Al Rayyan 2-1 and Al Sadd beat Al Ahli 2-0.

Al Arabi fought back from being a goal down through Al Rayyan's Abdulrahman al-Harazi, with The Dream Team scoring through Abdulaziz al-Ansari and Hamdi Harbaoui. In the Al Ahli vs Al Sadd

semi-final, Santi Cazorla and substitute Akram Afif scored the goals for The Wolves.

Al Arabi qualified for the semi-finals by defeating Al Wakrah 1-0, while Al Sadd progressed to the last four by edging Qatar SC 5-4 on penalties after the regular time ended in a 1-1 draw.

On the competition front, both Al Arabi and Al Sadd are all set to give their best on the pitch. It is also a great opportunity for them to better prepare their players for tough times ahead in the ongoing 2020-21 season.

Al Arabi and Al Sadd have outstanding players in their ranks, be it overseas or Qatari professionals, and have some encouraging youngsters who have come up through the ranks.

Al Rayyan and Al Duhail post wins



Action from the match between Al Rayyan (in red and black) and Al Sadd (in white) during their Amir Cup handball tournament match yesterday. Al Rayyan won the game 31-29 to reach the next round. (Right) Al Duhail (in red) beat Qatar Sports Club (in yellow and black) 24-19 in their match to advance. PICTURES: Shemeer Rasheed

