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McIlroy shoots 64 to set early pace in Abu Dhabi



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Anderson demands more respect for AO Covid fight



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Pirlo wins first trophy as Juventus beat Napoli in Super Cup

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FIFA CLUB WORLD CUP

World title would be icing on Bayern's cake: Flick

Bavarians have the chance to win all six domestic and international titles up for grabs in one season

A win at the FIFA Club World Cup 2020 would see Hans-Dieter Flick and Bayern Munich make history by becoming only the second team after Barcelona (in 2009) to win all six domestic and international titles up for grabs in one season. And yet despite the enormity of the occasion, the coach says that he does not feel under any particular pressure.

"It's always the case at Bayern Munich that you want to have the most successful season possible," said Flick, "and after the treble, you're obviously looking at the FIFA Club World Cup. We're quite simply motivated to win something else, so we're all obviously really looking forward to the Club World Cup."

The record German league winners will get their campaign under way on February 8 in the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Qatar. The draw that was made on Tuesday in Zurich pitted them against whoever comes through the quarter-final between last season's league champions in the host nation Al Duhail SC (Qatar) and the CAF Champions League winners Al Ahly SC (Egypt).

Flick has four players in his ranks who know what it takes to win the FIFA Club World Cup, with captain and current Best FIFA Men's Goalkeeper Manuel Neuer, FIFA World Cup winners Thomas Muller and Jerome Boateng, and Austria's David Alaba, all part of the successful 2013 campaign for the club. Back then, Pep Guardiola was



Bayern Munich's Hans-Dieter Flick reacts from the sidelines during the Bundesliga match against FC Augsburg in Augsburg, Germany, on Wednesday. (AFP)

in charge when Bayern won the final in Morocco 2-0 courtesy of goals from Thiago and Dante. According to Flick, everyone had a positive experience of that victorious tournament.

"All of them, including Hermann Gerland, who was already on the coaching staff back then, said that it's quite simply a wonderful event and that it's fun to take part in it, pure and simple. And if we can have the same success that they did in 2013,

then that will make it a whole lot of fun and a unique event, which is exactly the kind of experience we're looking to have this year with the team."

A Club World Cup brings together not merely the best teams in a particular continent, but the cream of club football from all around the world - something that the Bayern coach was quick to underline.

"I know what it's like from working with the national team.

At European Championships, or for us in the Champions League, you always play European teams. Coming up against South American, Asian or African sides is always a little bit different in terms of the mentality of your opponents. On the one hand, as I've just said, it's the mindset and the way the players are set up, but you also come across the occasional new concept as regards the way you imagine and eventually play the game.

"From that point of view, I'm really looking forward to seeing and analysing what the tournament has to offer and maybe picking up some fresh ideas. This is why it's always really special when you get a global perspective on something and get to play against the best teams in the world."

As UEFA representatives, Bayern are automatically one of the tournament favourites. A look back at the roll of honour shows that clubs from the Old Continent have already enjoyed a great deal of success. The last time a non-European side came out on top was all the way back in 2012, when Corinthians from Brazil defeated Chelsea in Japan. Since then, Bayern (2013), Real Madrid (2014, 2016, 2017, 2018) Barcelona (2015) and Liverpool (2019) have all taken home the title, and Bayern will be hoping to add to that list by winning the final, to be held on February 11 in Education City Stadium.

"We're hoping and aiming to win the tournament, but as is always the case, we mustn't get ahead of ourselves," said Flick. "First off, we want to - and we have to - win our semi-final. We're obviously hopeful of making it to the final - it's our goal but it's also our duty to get that far. We'll be doing everything we can to prepare in the best way possible to realise our ambitions. But first and foremost we have to do our jobs, and then we can see whether we've earned ourselves a reward."

(FIFA.com)

FOCUS

Breakaway European Super League 'would not be recognised': FIFA

AFP
Lausanne, Switzerland

FIFA has gone on the offensive amid ongoing speculation about a European Super League, insisting that any breakaway by leading clubs "would not be recognised by either FIFA or the respective confederation" while players would risk being banned from the World Cup and other major tournaments if involved.

"Any club or player involved in such a competition would as a consequence not be allowed to participate in any competition organised by FIFA or their respective confederation," said yesterday's statement, signed by FIFA president Gianni Infantino along with the heads of all six continental confederations including UEFA.

The statement was a response to what it called "recent media speculation" about a breakaway by some of the world's richest clubs.

In October, outgoing Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu dropped a bombshell in a statement announcing his resignation, as he also claimed the club had accepted a proposal to join other clubs in "a future European Super League".

That followed reports in the UK that negotiations were nearing conclusion for the creation of a closed "European Premier League" of 18 clubs, backed by \$6bn of financing from major banks.

However, those reports came with discussions still ongoing about the future format of the UEFA Champions League, the world's most lucrative and prestigious club competition.

'PROTECT THE EXISTING MODEL'

The European Leagues organisa-



FIFA President Gianni Infantino.

tion, which represents leagues in 29 countries across the continent, said it "unanimously" supported FIFA's statement and rejected any attempts to follow the North American franchise model for professional sports.

"In the European football pyramid, every player has the opportunity to play in a club which can qualify from the base of the pyramid to the very top of professional football," European Leagues president Lars-Christer Olsson said in a statement.

"This is the foundation of the model and the main reason for football's success.

"We are determined to protect the existing model and how football is organised in Europe and the way the industry works for professional football."

Meanwhile FIFA remains focused on plans for an expanded, 24-team Club World Cup, championed by Infantino.

The competition was due to take place for the first time this year in China but was put back to a later date after Euro 2020 and the Copa America were postponed to June and July 2021 because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The delayed 2020 edition of the Club World Cup will go ahead next month in its existing format in Qatar.

SPOTLIGHT

With six months to go, cancellation fears cloud Tokyo Olympics

AFP
Tokyo, Japan

When the Tokyo Olympics were postponed last year, officials promised they would open in 2021 as proof of mankind's triumph over the coronavirus.

But six months before the re-scheduled start, victory over the virus remains distant, and fears are growing rapidly that the Games may not take place at all.

Publicly, organisers are still adamant the Games can go ahead, and say they can be held safely even if the virus is not under control by the time the flame is lit on July 23.

"It's precisely because we're in this situation that we need to remember the value of the Olympics - that humankind can co-exist peacefully through sport," Tokyo 2020 CEO Toshiro Muto told AFP.

However, with much of the world still paralysed by Covid-19, and Tokyo under a state of emergency, the doubting voices are growing louder.

Former London 2012 deputy chairman Keith Mills this week

said he thought the Games looked "unlikely" to happen, while British Olympics legend Matthew Pinsent said it was "ludicrous" to go ahead.

The long path to Tokyo's second Summer Games has been littered with obstacles, from bid bribery allegations to fears over the summer heat.

But none has loomed as large as the pandemic, which last March forced the first peacetime postponement in modern Games history.

PUBLIC DISENCHANTMENT
In Japan, whose emergency measures cover greater Tokyo and other parts of the country, public disenchantment is rising.

A poll this month found 80 percent of respondents opposed hosting the event this year, with 35 percent favouring outright cancellation and 45 percent calling for further postponement.

The Australian Open tennis Grand Slam has underlined the complexity of organising international sport in the pandemic, with major problems bringing in players and keeping them Covid-free.

"It's been really eye-opening here in Melbourne to see and hear



An aerial view shows the National Stadium, the main stadium of Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics, ahead of the six-months countdown to the Tokyo Olympics yesterday. (Kyodo/Reuters)

the amount of logistical challenges and the scale of trying to organise just a tennis event in the current situation," said Gordon Reid, the British wheelchair tennis player and Paralympic gold-medallist.

"You've got to multiply that by

a thousand when it comes to the Olympics and Paralympics because they are on another scale."

In an interview with Kyodo News published yesterday, International Olympic Committee boss Thomas Bach said the Games will go ahead this summer

and there is "no plan B".

Tokyo 2020 chiefs say another postponement is "absolutely impossible", meaning the Games will be cancelled if they cannot be held this year.

They are pushing ahead with a raft of coronavirus countermeas-

ures intended to ensure a safe Games, even without vaccines which remain non-mandatory for athletes.

A 53-page interim report released in December outlines measures including a ban on supporters cheering, regular testing for athletes and limited stays at the Olympic village.

Much is still undecided though, including a decision on how many spectators will be allowed - if any.

CLOCK IS TICKING

The coronavirus has taken a considerable financial toll, with some studies rating Tokyo as the most expensive Summer Olympics yet.

Anti-virus measures and other delay-related costs have added 294bn yen (\$2.8bn) to the price tag, which has ballooned to at least 1.64tn yen (\$15.8bn).

Efforts to reduce costs by cutting back on athlete welcome ceremonies and other trimmings have produced only minimal savings, though organisers say they have managed to keep all domestic sponsors on board.

Meanwhile many athletes are still sweating on qualification, with several events outstanding.

Disruption to training and competition schedules is also causing huge uncertainty.

However, plans to start the nationwide torch relay in March remain on course, with social distancing measures set to be enforced.

Japan is now desperately hoping it does not lose another Olympics - following the cancellation of the 1940 Summer and Winter Games because of war.

Cancellation would deal a serious blow to the Olympic movement and Japan's national pride, not to mention the huge financial impact on both Tokyo and the IOC.

Tokyo 2020 chiefs are betting the public mood will begin to swing in the Games' favour in the months ahead, when winter is over and vaccinations ramp up.

But the clock is ticking. Japan has yet to approve a coronavirus vaccine, but Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga has said he hopes the first jabs can begin in late February, with health workers and the elderly expected to be first in line.

Reports say the rest of Japan will start receiving vaccines in May - just two months before the Games start.

PREVIEW

Root calls for improvement in second Test

'We can't get ahead of ourselves and think we're something we're not'



England captain Joe Root.

Reuters
Galle, Sri Lanka

England captain Joe Root has warned his players not to get ahead of themselves and to continue improving as they seek to wrap up the series against Sri Lanka in the second and final Test at Galle International Stadium today.

England won the first match at the same venue by seven wickets in a dominant performance to record a fourth successive away victory for the first time in 64 years. They have not won five Tests in a row on the road since 1913.

Another victory on a famously difficult ground for visiting teams would be a feather in the cap and a big boost ahead of England's four-Test series in India that follows directly after.

"Sri Lanka are a proud team and have a great record at this ground so we have to play smart cricket again. We can't be happy with what we have achieved on this trip so far, we need to get better," Root told reporters yesterday.

"We can't get ahead of ourselves and think we're something we're not. This will not be an easy game, we will have to play some good stuff for five days if we want to keep taking steps forward as a team."

England have made one change from the first Test, with seamer James Anderson replacing Stuart Broad in an expected switch as they rotate bowlers in a busy winter period.

Broad was effective with his guile on the spin-friendly Galle wicket and Anderson brings plenty of that as he looks to add to his 600 Test wickets.

Neither seamers Chris Woakes or Olly

Stone were able to force their way into the side, which means they will go into the India series with little cricket under their belt.

Sri Lanka were roundly criticised for an abject batting display in the first innings of the first Test when they were skittled for 135, though they improved markedly in the second.

Batsman Angelo Mathews took the unusual step of suggesting his team mates look to Root for tips on how to master the wicket after the England skipper scored 228 in the series opener.

"Joe Root played a magnificent innings. We can learn a lot from the way he batted," Mathews said.

"You have to find that tempo, especially in these conditions. A traditional Galle wicket is very slow and takes turn, so you need to be able to find the shots according to each bowler."

Stokes and Archer return to England Test squad for India series



Reuters
London

England all-rounder Ben Stokes and fast bowler Jofra Archer will return for the four-Test series in India next month as the country's cricket board (ECB) named the squad for the first two matches.

Batsman Rory Burns also returns to the side after he skipped the Sri Lanka tour to stay at home for the birth of his first child but Ollie Pope has yet to recover from a shoulder injury and will be added to the squad only when he passes a fitness test.

England are currently playing a two-Test series in Sri Lanka where they lead 1-0 going into today final match while India returned from a successful tour of Australia where they retained the Border-Gavaskar Trophy with a 2-1 series win.

England's selectors have decided to rest Jonny Bairstow, Sam Curran and Mark Wood, who are currently in Sri Lanka while Craig Overton will also return home after the second test in the island nation.

The India series is scheduled to begin on Feb. 5, with the first two matches to be played in Chennai before they travel to Ahmedabad for the last two games.

England squad: Joe Root (captain), Jofra Archer, Moeen Ali, James Anderson, Dom Bess, Stuart Broad, Rory Burns, Jos Buttler, Zak Crawley, Ben Foakes, Dan Lawrence, Jack Leach, Dom Sibley, Ben Stokes, Olly Stone, Chris Woakes.
Reserves: James Bracey, Mason Crane, Saqib Mahmood, Matthew Parkinson, Ollie Robinson, Amar Virdi.

FOCUS

Rousing welcome for India's Rahane on victorious return

Reuters
Mumbai

India's stand-in captain Ajinkya Rahane returned home to a red carpet welcome in Mumbai yesterday, having led a severely depleted side to a famous test series win in Australia.

India's regular captain and main batsman Virat Kohli had flown home to attend the birth of his daughter after the opening defeat in Adelaide where the touring side were bundled out for 36 - their lowest innings score in test cricket.

Under Rahane, India levelled the series in Melbourne and secured a nerve-wracking draw in Sydney before triumphing in the decider in Brisbane with a second-string side to retain the Border-Gavaskar trophy.

Cricketer-mad India reacted with shock and disbelief at the team's capitulation in Adelaide, with fans thronging to social media platforms to vent their anger at the performance of their favourite sporting side.

But the mood in the country has since been transformed.

Rahane, accompanied by coach Ravi Shastri and other team mates, were congratulated by local cricket administrators on their arrival in Mumbai.

A viral video on social media showed Rahane, 33, being showered with flower petals as he walked along a red carpet amid the beating of drums and loud cheers to enter his housing society with his daughter in his arms.

India wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant also received a hero's welcome in Delhi after being adjudged man-of-the-match in Adelaide and finishing as the highest scorer for the team despite being ignored for the first Test.

His performance drew comparisons in local media with India's former captain and wicket-keeper MS Dhoni.

"It feels amazing when you compare me with MS Dhoni," Pant, 23, told reporters outside Delhi airport. "But I want to make my own name in Indian cricket. It's not good to compare a legend with some youngster."



Ajinkya Rahane...leading from the front

ODI

Gurbaz century leads Afghans to victory over Ireland

AFF
Abu Dhabi

A breathless century on his debut from teenage opener **Rahmanullah Gurbaz** helped Afghanistan to a 16-run win over Ireland in the first ODI in Abu Dhabi yesterday.

The 19-year-old, who hit a run-a-ball 127, and some late sloggery from Rashid Khan, who smashed 55 from 30 balls, took Afghanistan to an imposing 287 for nine from their 50 overs.

Off-spinner Andy McBrine was the pick of the Irish bowlers, picking up 5-29 from his 10 overs. But it proved to be too many for the Irish batsmen who struggled from the start. Lorcan Tucker made a battling 83 but they fell 16 runs short of the target.

Afghanistan took 10 points from the match which is the first in the World Cup Super League which serves as part of the 2023 Cricket World Cup qualification process.

After winning the toss and choosing to bat, Afghanistan got off to a solid start thanks in main to Gurbaz who made his first 50 from 38 balls as he scored the lion's share of an opening partnership of 120 with Javed Ahmadi.

He had 74 to his name by the time Ahmadi was caught by Singh off McBrine on the boundary for 38.

Gurbaz reached his hundred off 115 deliveries and went on to make 127, which included nine sixes and eight fours, before sloggery a long hop from Gareth Delany down the throat of Simi Singh on the square leg boundary.

When he fell at 198-6, the Afghanistan innings was in trouble after McBrine had assiduously worked his way through the



middle order, finding turn and bounce.

This was McBrine's first ODI five-wicket haul during which he became the eighth Irish bowler to take 50 ODI wickets.

Najibullah Zadran steadied the ship with 29 before Rashid Khan came in to hammer 55 from 30 balls, including five sixes, to take the innings away from Ireland.

It was always a stiff target for Ireland as the average second innings total at the Sheikh Zayed Stadium is just 206, although Pakistan did chase down 294 there against the West Indies in 2008.

They got off to the worst possible start, losing Kevin O'Brien in the third over, leg before to

Naveem-ul-Haq. As wickets fell at the other end, Paul Stirling made a rapid 39 before he too was trapped leg before by Mohammad Nabi.

At 88-4, Ireland were in trouble but Tucker and Curtis Campher (39) gave them renewed hope with an 86-run partnership for the fifth wicket.

Tucker attempted to increase the scoring rate but having reached 83 from 96 balls (three fours and three sixes), he was stumped by a delighted Gurbaz to round off a performance that secured him the man of the match award.

The second game in the three-match series takes place at the same venue tomorrow.

Aussie PM Morrison hits out at CA over national day marketing

Sydney: Australia's prime minister has taken a swipe at Cricket Australia over their marketing of matches on Jan. 26, when the country observes a national holiday.

The Australia Day holiday marks the day in 1788 when a fleet of British ships landed just south of Sydney to begin the colonisation of the country.

The observation of the holiday on that date is opposed by groups representing Australia's indigenous people, some of whom have dubbed the holiday "Invasion Day" or "National Day of Mourning".

In a spirit of inclusion,

Cricket Australia said on Wednesday it would be dropping references to Australia Day in its marketing of the three Big Bash League Twenty20 matches taking place on Jan. 26.

"I think a bit more focus on cricket, and a little less focus on politics would be my message to Cricket Australia," Prime Minister Scott Morrison told Queensland's radio 4RO yesterday.

"I think that's pretty ordinary."

Cricket Australia said the move came on the recommendation of their National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cricket Advisory Committee.

BOTTOMLINE

South Africa 'confident' over Australia tour but virus situation could still play a part

AFF
Johannesburg

Cricket South Africa interim board chairman Zak Yacoob said yesterday he was confident that Australia's Test tour of South Africa would go ahead, although he cautioned that the unpredictability of the Covid-19 virus could yet cause plans to change.

"I had a chat with the chair of Cricket Australia (Earl Eddings) about a week ago and we agreed that the tour is going to go ahead," he told a virtual press conference.

A three-Test tour was originally scheduled to take place during February and March but an aborted limited overs tour by England late last year led to speculation that either the tour might not take place or that it could be

switched to Perth in Western Australia.

The tour is now expected to go ahead in March or April.

"We are going to ensure that our facilities are as good as possible - as good as necessary," said Yacoob. "We agreed that we learn every day - but that is not on the basis that we did anything that was wrong when England were here."

England went home in December without playing three scheduled one-day internationals after two members of the hotel staff tested positive for Covid and it was reported that two members of the touring party had also tested positive - although both tests were later shown to be "false positives".

Sri Lanka subsequently played two Test matches in South Africa in December and January without

any breaches of a bio-secure environment.

"None of the England people were affected. That's the bottom line," said Yacoob.

"But we are learning that the virus changes all the time. As it changes things must change."

He said that he and Eddings had agreed to rely on experts to assess the safety of facilities.

"So far there is no doubt between the chair of Cricket Australia and myself that the tour will go ahead but we have agreed also that the coronavirus is changing and we cannot predict what will happen," said Yacoob.

"So if things suddenly go down for the worse and our experts and other experts say we can't do it, we won't be able to."

CSA acting chief executive Pholetsi Moseki said he expected that an announcement on the

tour would be made "in a week or so".

The press conference was called to provide an update on progress towards establishing a new structure for CSA following the resignation of the previous board last year.

Yacoob said the interim board believed that the majority of a permanent board should be independent rather than drawn from cricket structures.

Yacoob said the interim board had been granted a one-month extension to their original three-month mandate, giving them until February 15 to complete their work.

However, he said a further extension might be necessary if CSA's members' council, consisting of the presidents of provincial unions, did not agree to the interim board's proposals.

BADMINTON

Hong Kong's Lee stuns Indonesian Ginting in Thailand Open

AFP
Bangkok

Indonesian fifth seed Anthony Ginting suffered an unexpected defeat at badminton's Thailand Open yesterday to Hong Kong's Lee Cheuk-yiu, who moved into the quarter-finals with a 21-19, 13-21, 21-12 win.

Ginting was Indonesia's last remaining hope after Jonatan Christie's exit on Wednesday, but despite a fightback in the second game, the 20th-ranked Lee was able to close out the match.

"He played better than me," admitted Ginting, 24. "When I tried to come back, Lee knew - he's smart and he was in control." It was Ginting's second loss to Lee, who upset the Indonesian in the final of the 2019 Hong Kong Open.

"I had beaten him in the Hong Kong Open final, so maybe I was a bit more comfortable against him," Lee said.

He will face off against Denmark's Hans-Kristian Vittinghus, who beat Ginting's teammate Shesar Hiren Rhustavito 21-11, 15-21, 17-21. Thai star Ratchanok Intanon won a hard-fought nail-biter against South Korean Sung Ji-hyun, ranked 15th in the world, who sent the former world number one crisscrossing the court during extended rallies in her 19-21, 24-22, 21-17 win.

Meeting Ratchanok in the quarter-finals will be Indian star PV Sindhu, who disposed of Malaysia's Kisona Selvaduray in a rapid 21-10, 21-12 dusting - eager to erase the memory of a surprise first-round exit a week earlier in Bangkok.

"We all win and lose, so I took last week in a really positive way

and came in much stronger this week," sixth seed Sindhu said.

Denmark's Viktor Axelsen continued his quest for back-to-back titles as he dominated Thailand's Kunlavut Vitidsarn 21-11, 21-13. "He's an upcoming player that I respect a lot so I had to come with quite a high pace," said Axelsen.

The fourth-ranked Dane won last week's first of two consecutive Thailand Opens and will go up against Malaysian Darren Liew, ranked 41st in the world, in the quarter-finals.

Bangkok is hosting three tournaments in a row, culminating in badminton's World Tour Finals next week.

The players have been facing off under tight biosecurity because of the coronavirus pandemic, and without spectators, although the tournaments have been blighted by four positive coronavirus cases.



Hong Kong's Lee Cheuk-yiu celebrates his win over Indonesia's Anthony Sinisuka Ginting (right) in their second round match at the Toyota Thailand Open in Bangkok yesterday. (AFP)



GOLF

McIlroy sets early pace in Abu Dhabi

'I'M REALLY HAPPY WITH THAT. I THINK I GOT AWAY WITH IT'

AFP
Abu Dhabi

Rory McIlroy began his 2021 season in sparkling fashion, assembling a spotless 64 to take a one-shot first round lead over Ryder Cup teammate Tyrrell Hatton at the Abu Dhabi HSBC Championship yesterday.

The four-time major winner arrived at this first of three tournaments in the Gulf after a winless 2020. But the 31-year-old Northern Irish golfer shrugged off a near three-hour fog delay to lead the pack at eight-under par on his return to Abu Dhabi after a gap of two years.

"It feels good," McIlroy told Sky Sports after carding his lowest score at an event where he has done well in the past without winning. "I knew 65 is the best I've shot here and I've shot it a few times, so I thought let's try to go one better on the next nine and I was able to do that."

Looking back on his 2020 which ended with a tie for fifth at the rescheduled Masters at Augusta National he said: "It was getting better as the year went on and honestly it was sort of disappointing that it finished when it did because I felt like I was getting right back into it."

McIlroy, who became a father last year, added: "I didn't really take much time off after Augusta. I sat at home for maybe three or four days and was like I just



need to get out there and sort of keep this going. "Played quite a bit over the Christmas break and practised quite a bit. Felt maybe as sharp as I've ever done coming into the start of the season. It's paid off early."

Hatton conjured up an eagle on his opening hole, the 10th, adding another on the par-five 18th. The world number nine carded three birdies on the front nine, saying: "I'm really happy with that. I think I got away with

it. "In 10 holes I hit one fairway, so that wasn't ideal. Obviously I can only play with what's in front of me and I'm happy with the job I managed to do in the end." Defending champion Lee Westwood opened with a 69

to sit five shots off the lead but world number three Justin Thomas has work to do after a struggling 73. Lying in third place behind McIlroy and Hatton is Paraguayan Fabrizio Zanotti on six under.

MOTORSPORT

Tanak takes early lead in Monte Carlo season-opener

Reuters
Monte Carlo, Monaco

Hyundai's Ott Tanak took the early lead in the season-opening Monte Carlo Rally yesterday after winning the first two stages in the French Alps.

The Estonian crashed heavily as reigning world champion last year but kept his car on the road this time as he finished the first 20.58km stage 3.0 seconds clear of Toyota's Kalle Rovanpera.

Tanak added another 0.3 to his advantage in the second stage from Saint-Maurice to Saint-Bonnet.

French curfew rules due to the Covid-19 pandemic have forced changes to the scheduling, with early starts and finishes, no night stages and no spectators.

"We never started before in daylight and with consistent conditions," said Tanak.

"We have more stability with the car compared to last year and definitely better feedback."

Conditions on the asphalt roads were wet with icy patches and M-Sport Ford's Teemu Suninen was the first retirement after hitting a bank, rolling his car off the road and down an embankment on the opening stage.

Toyota's Elfyn Evans was running third with Hyundai's Belgian Thierry Neuville, last year's Monte Carlo winner now competing with new co-driver

Martijn Wydaeghe after splitting with Nicolas Gilsoul last week, in fourth. Seven times world champion Sebastien Ogier, bidding for a record eighth Monte Carlo win in what the Frenchman has said will be his final season, was fifth for Toyota.

Five stages will be held today, starting before dawn, with the 89th edition of the rally ending on Sunday with a formal finish in the Mediterranean principality.

The season marks the end of an era for the championship, with new hybrid cars coming in for 2022, and a new start with Pirelli replacing Michelin as sole tyre supplier after a 10-year absence.

STANDINGS AFTER FIRST DAY

1. Ott Tanak/Martin Jarveoja (EST-Hyundai) 24 min 17.5 sec.
 2. Kalle Rovanpera/Jonne Haltunen (FIN-Toyota) at 3.3sec.
 3. Elfyn Evans/Scott Martin (Toyota) 8.5sec.
 4. Thierry Neuville/Martijn Wydaeghe (BEL-Hyundai) 16sec.
 5. Sebastien Ogier/Julien Ingrassia (FRA-Toyota) 16.9sec.
 6. Daniel Sordo/Carlos Del Barrio (ESP-Hyundai) 42.7sec.
 7. Pierre-Louis Loubet/Vincent Landais (FRA-Hyundai 2C Competition) 1min 7.8sec.
 8. Andreas Mikkelsen/Ola Floene (NOR-Toksport Skoda) 1min 18.3sec.
 9. Adrien Fourmaux/Renaud Jamoul 1min 27.2sec (FRA-M-Sport Ford WRC2).
 10. Gus Greensmith/Eliot Edmondson (GBR-M-Sport Ford) 1min 30sec
- Specials winner:** Ott Tanak 2 (E51, E52).



Estonian Ott Tanak and his co-pilot Estonian Martin Jarveoja steer their Hyundai Shell Mobis World Rally Team during the ES 1 of the first stage of the 89th WRC Monte-Carlo Rally between Saint-Disdier-en-Devouly and Corps near Gap yesterday. (AFP)

Mickelson will 're-evaluate things' if struggles continue

Phil Mickelson said he will "re-evaluate things" if he doesn't get off to a solid start to his 2021 PGA Tour season. That effort begins Thursday at The American Express in La Quinta, Calif., where Mickelson is serving as the tournament host for the second consecutive year.

"If I don't play well early on (in 2021), I'll start to re-evaluate things and maybe play a few more events on the Champions Tour," he said Wednesday, "because what's fun for me is competing, getting in contention and trying to win tournaments."

The dual duty at The American Express didn't work out well last year with Mickelson missing the cut by six shots. That was beginning of a very difficult 2020 that saw him miss eight of 18 cuts on the PGA Tour while posting only three top-10 results. He failed to be competitive at any of the three majors last year and finished 2020 rated 66th in the official world golf rankings. However, he did win his only two starts on the Champions Tour after turning 50 over the summer.

That did not translate into success on the PGA Tour, where Mickelson failed to finish better than a tie for 44th in his final seven events of 2020.

His last event was a tie for 55th at The Masters more than two months ago, and Mickelson said he spent the time since working hard on his game.

"I've actually had a good offseason where I haven't had as much time off as I normally would take because it's been so much shorter," he said. "I feel like I've made a few good strides and I'm excited to start the year and see if I'm able to continue playing at the highest level."

"If I am, I'm going to really try to play more events on the PGA Tour and make a push hopefully for the Ryder Cup." Mickelson is currently 38th in the United States Ryder Cup standings, so he will need to start the year strong to get on the radar of captain Steve Stricker for a potential



Country music singer Jake Owen (left) talks with Phil Mickelson during the The American Express Charity Challenge in La Quinta, California, on Wednesday. (Getty Images/AFP)

captain's pick. "I've made some strides in my game," Mickelson said. "I'm excited to start the year and see if I can play at the highest level like I expect to." Mickelson said the desire to compete against the best in the world is what drives him to hit the gym and the range on a daily basis. At the same time, he admitted to

"My love of the game of golf is extremely high and my desire to compete and play against the best players is high, and so I find myself just internally motivated because of my love to compete and my love to try to bring out the best in me," he said. "I'm trying to find the right balance." (Reuters)

Cycling Tour of the Algarve postponed due to virus fears

The Tour of the Algarve scheduled for 17-21 February has been postponed due to complications from the coronavirus pandemic, organisers said yesterday, as Portugal deals with a second national lockdown. The start of the cycling season has been hit hard by the virus with races on several continents postponed or cancelled. Races affected so far include the Tour Down Under and the Cadel Evans Great Ocean Race in Australia, the Tour of San Juan in Argentina, the Tour of Colombia and the Saudi Tour.

"The way the pandemic is going in Portugal made it inevitable," the Portuguese cycling federation said. New dates of May 5-9 are being mullied over. Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa announced the country's second lockdown on Friday amid fierce criticism of the government's handling of the pandemic. According to data collected by AFP from national authorities, this week Portugal became the country with the highest infection rate relative to the size of its population.

TENNIS

Barty joins elite field for Adelaide exhibition

Reuters
Melbourne

World number one Ash Barty will join Serena Williams, Rafa Nadal and Novak Djokovic in playing a pre-Australian Open exhibition event in Adelaide at the end of the month, organisers confirmed yesterday.

U.S. Open winners Dominic Thiem and Naomi Osaka and women's No. 2 Simona Halep will be part of the eight-player field, which also includes 19-year-old Italian Jannik Sinner.

The Adelaide event, dubbed "A Day at the Drive", will launch Australia's summer of tennis and take place at the city's Memorial Drive Tennis Centre on January 29.

Barty, 24, has not played a competitive match since February, opting not to defend her French Open title and skipping the US Open in New York amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I am looking forward to playing my first match for the 2021 season in Adelaide," said the Queenslander, who won a WTA event in

Adelaide last year. "I have fond memories from the Adelaide International last year and it will be great to get back on court here for A Day at the Drive."

The Australian Open, the year's first Grand Slam, has been delayed until February 8 this year.

The Melbourne Park venue will also host warm-up events from Jan. 31. Hundreds of other players and their entourages are undergoing mandatory 14-day quarantine in Melbourne.

Tennis Australia Chief Executive Craig Tiley said earlier in the week that the top players were sent to Adelaide to ensure organisers did not exceed the limit set by the authorities for people quarantining in Melbourne.

That decision prompted claims from some of those isolating in Melbourne that the big names were receiving better treatment.

Tiley did not disagree.

"... they're the top players in the world and my general rule is if you're at the top of the game,

a grand slam champion, it's just the nature of the business," he said. "You are going to get a better deal."



Umpire 'recovering well' after hospitalisation in Melbourne

Tennis Umpire Carlos Bernardes was recovering well after being admitted to hospital on Wednesday while in quarantine in Melbourne ahead of next month's Australian Open, the ATP Tour said yesterday. The men's governing body said Bernardes' illness was not related to the novel coronavirus while local media outlets, including Yahoo Australia, said the Brazilian Umpire had suffered a heart attack. "Following admittance to hospital (non-Covid related) on Wednesday in Melbourne, we are pleased to report that ATP Umpire Carlos Bernardes is recovering well," the Tour said on Twitter. "Carlos passes on his gratitude for all the well wishes he's received, and we wish him all the best for a full recovery." Photos of Bernardes being wheeled into an ambulance were posted on social media on Wednesday. Brazilian website TennisNews reported he was expected to be released from hospital tomorrow. An ATP Tour official since 1990, Bernardes took charge of the 2006 and 2008 US Open men's finals as well as the 2011 Wimbledon men's title decider.

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Anderson demands more respect for Aussie Covid fight

'We all really need to respect whatever Australia has gone through to get to this point'

Reuters
Melbourne

Former US Open and Wimbledon finalist Kevin Anderson appealed to players at the Australian Open to show more respect for the local community's fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, following a chorus of complaints about quarantine conditions in Melbourne.

As many as 72 players are confined to their hotel rooms for two weeks and unable to train for the February 8-21 Grand Slam after passengers on three charter flights tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

Complaints by some players over the severity of the health measures, food quality and even mice infestations in their rooms have sparked a backlash in Australia, which has many citizens stranded overseas due to pandemic-linked border restrictions.

Novak Djokovic was panned after writing to Tennis Australia chief Craig Tiley to ask for reduced isolation periods and having players moved to "private houses with tennis courts".

The world No. 1 said on Wednesday his good intentions had been "misconstrued as being selfish, difficult and ungrateful".

Spaniard Roberto Bautista Agut and Alize Cornet apologised for their comments over the last few days and Anderson said players had to stop and think about how much Australians had sacrificed to stamp out the virus.

"We all really need to respect whatever Australia has gone through to get to this point where, you know, just driving through the courts you see the residents of Melbourne walking around without masks, interacting, and I know that they've sacrificed to get to that point," he told ABC Radio Melbourne.

The 34-year-old Anderson, who stepped in to lead the ATP Player Council last year after Djokovic stepped down to form a breakaway players body, said comments from disgruntled players were borne of frustration. This was especially so as many of their fellow competitors, who arrived in Melbourne and Adelaide in 14 other charter flights, were able to spend five hours a day outside their rooms to practice as they were not on



Former US Open and Wimbledon finalist Kevin Anderson. (Reuters)

Badosa first player to confirm Covid-positive in quarantine

Paula Badosa became the first player entered for next month's Australian Open to confirm a positive test for Covid-19 while in quarantine in Melbourne, with the Spaniard saying yesterday that she had symptoms. As many as 72 players are confined to their hotel rooms for two weeks and are unable to train for the February 8-21 Grand Slam after some passengers on three charter flights ferrying them to Australia tested positive for the novel coronavirus. Badosa, 23, arrived in Melbourne after playing in Abu Dhabi earlier this month and was on her seventh day in quarantine when she said her test came back positive.

"I'm feeling unwell and have symptoms, but I'll try to recover as soon as possible listening to the doctors. I've been taken to a health hotel to self isolate and be monitored," the world number 67 wrote on Twitter. On Wednesday, 10 people associated with the Grand Slam



- including four players - had tested positive for the virus. However, there has been confusion over the exact numbers, with several test results later reclassified by authorities as "viral shedding" from previous infections. Tournament director Craig Tiley said two players who tested

positive on Tuesday were non-contagious viral shedders. The strict protocols have taken a toll on several frustrated players who have complained in recent days but South Africa's Kevin Anderson has appealed to them to show more respect for the local community's fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. (Reuters)

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ATHLETICS

London Marathon plans for 100,000 runners this year

Reuters
London

This year's London Marathon is set to break new ground with a record 50,000 runners expected to tackle the course on the city's streets while another 50,000 compete in a remote race "wherever they are on the planet", organisers said yesterday.

The virtual London Marathon was held for the first time last year after the actual race was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Nearly 38,000 runners took part to set a Guinness World Record for the most in a remote marathon in 24 hours.

With a national vaccination

drive underway, organisers also hope to have 50,000 runners for the traditional race on October 3.

The virtual marathon allows participants to run on a 26.2-mile course of their choice but they must complete it on October 3. "The world record-breaking success of the virtual event in 2020 and the incredible stories from participants across the globe showed how the... marathon brought light and hope in the darkness of the pandemic," said event director Hugh Brasher.

"We want to offer that again and we have also accelerated the plans we have been working on for some years to increase the number of finishers on the streets of London to 50,000," he added in a statement.



General view at the finish of the London Marathon on April 28, 2019. (Reuters)

FOCUS

Turkmenistan to vaccinate foreign athletes

AFP
Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan plans to vaccinate foreign athletes competing in the isolated Central Asian state, one of the few countries in the world yet to declare a coronavirus case, state media said yesterday.

The ex-Soviet nation is set to hold qualifying events for tennis' Davis Cup and will host the Track Cycling World Championships in October.

President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov was shown discussing preparations for the sports events with another official, in a broadcast on a state-owned sports channel.

The Turkmen leader said foreign athletes should be able to choose the vaccine they want to be inoculated with. "And we must provide this vaccination for free," he added.

Kirill Dmitriev, head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, a government body that is financing the production of Russia's Sputnik V jab, said Monday that Turkmenistan had become the first Central Asian country to approve Sputnik.

Berdymuhamedov has said the Turkmen government is in talks with other companies over importing their vaccines.

Foreign observers had earlier cast doubt on the country's claim that it has no cases of the coronavirus. The government imposed a strict lockdown after the World Health Organisation, in a visit by a team of experts to the country last July, called on Turkmenistan to take steps "as if Covid-19 was circulating".

In addition to ordering citizens to wear masks and non-essential businesses to shut, the authoritarian leadership has championed herbal remedies including wild rue and licorice root as weapons against the virus.

NBA

Sexton's Cavaliers spoil debut of Nets' Big Three

'We seemed a little lost at times, which is natural because we haven't played together. So there's a little indecision'



Cleveland Cavaliers guard Collin Sexton (right) drives against Brooklyn Nets guard James Harden in the second overtime at Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse in Cleveland, Ohio, USA. (USA TODAY Sports)

AFP
Los Angeles

Collin Sexton scored a game-high 42 points as the Cleveland Cavaliers overcame a James Harden triple double and spoiled the debut of the Brooklyn Nets' Big Three with a 147-135 double overtime victory.

Wednesday's marathon contest was supposed to showcase the Nets' star trio of Harden, Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving playing together for the first time together.

Irving finished with 37 points, Harden had a triple double of 21 points, 10 rebounds and 12 assists and Durant tallied a team-high 38 points and 12 rebounds, but it wasn't enough as the Cavaliers had seven players in double-figure scoring at the Rocket Mortgage Fieldhouse arena in Cleveland.

Turkey's Cedi Osman scored 25 points, and Taurean Prince came off the bench to notch 17 as the Cavaliers bench outscored the Nets reserves 44-10.

"We seemed a little lost at times, which is natural because we haven't played together. So there's a little indecision," Nets

coach Steve Nash said. "We started the game turning the ball over, we had seven or eight in the first quarter. We cleaned it up and got ourselves back in the game, but obviously we have to defend better."

"We're just getting a feel for each other and this is a process that's gonna take the entire year."

Irving missed seven games for undisclosed purposes but was slapped with a \$50,000 fine by the league while he was out for violating the league's Covid-19 safety rules. Irving was punished after video surfaced showing him attending a family birthday event without wearing a face mask.

Brooklyn had won five of seven games without Irving and this was just their third loss since January 5.

"We will have good nights, we will have great nights, but it is how we galvanize this group together and how we sacrifice and compromise for the greater good," Irving said. "That still remains to be seen, obviously one game is out the way, but I am excited for what's to come."

Sexton hit the game-tying three-pointer with 1.2 seconds left in the first overtime period and scored 15 of his 42 in the second extra session.

RESULTS

Phoenix	109-103	Houston
Atlanta	123-115	Detroit
Miami	111-102	Toronto
Golden State	121-99	San Antonio
Clippers	115-96	Sacramento
Minnesota	96-97	Orlando
Cleveland	147-135	Brooklyn
Dallas	124-112	Indiana
Philadelphia	117-109	Boston

Sexton set the tone for Cleveland in the second overtime, hitting a free throw early and then draining a three pointer with three minutes left to give the Cavs a 134-127 lead. Sexton nailed his fifth and final three pointer with 89 seconds left to make it 142-131 as the Cavaliers dominated down the stretch.

Sexton surpassed his previous career high of 41, set in March 2020 against Boston, by scoring 31 points after halftime. He shot 16 of 29 from the field overall after missing the previous five games with an ankle injury.

Durant missed a potential game winner

at the buzzer in the first overtime as he, Irving and Harden all played the final 18 minutes of the game but couldn't get the job done.

"It felt right, felt perfect, felt like we belonged together," Durant said.

Elsewhere, Kristaps Porzingis collected 27 points and 13 rebounds and Trey Burke came off the bench to score 22 points to lift the Dallas Mavericks to a 124-112 victory over the host Indiana Pacers.

Tim Hardaway finished with 19 points in the win. On Monday, Hardaway missed all 12 of his shooting attempts in a loss to the Toronto Raptors.

Luka Doncic recorded his 30th career triple-double with 13 points, 12 rebounds and 12 assists for the Mavericks, who snapped a season-high three-game losing streak. Malcolm Brogdon scored 26 points, Domantas Sabonis added 25 and Jeremy Lamb had 10 in his first game since sustaining a torn ACL in Toronto 11 months ago. In other games, Joel Embiid scored 42 points and grabbed 10 rebounds to lift the host Philadelphia 76ers past the Boston Celtics 117-109 and Cole Anthony's three-pointer at the buzzer capped an Orlando Magic rally in their 97-96 win over the Minnesota Timberwolves.

NFL

Chiefs set for AFC title vs Bills, with or without Mahomes

Reuters
New York

The good news for the Kansas City Chiefs is that Patrick Mahomes is practising.

However, Mahomes remained in concussion protocol as preparations began in earnest for Sunday's AFC Championship game pitting the reigning Super Bowl champion Chiefs against the Buffalo Bills at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, Mo.

"(Mahomes) took all the snaps and he feels good, so we're just going to follow this protocol as close as we possibly can," Chiefs coach Andy Reid told reporters Wednesday.

Last year's Super Bowl MVP suffered an injury in the third quarter of Kansas City's divisional round game against Cleveland and did not return. Backup Chad Henne and the Chiefs defense held on for a victory, in part because Henne scrambled for a big gain and then converted a game-clinching first down with a surprising completion to Tyreek Hill.

"For my preparation, it's going to stay the same: Prepare like you're the starter each and every week, no matter what happens," Henne said. "Whatever does happen, happens. I always stay ready."

Pretty sound outlook, though when Henne was named the quarterback for the Chiefs' last regular-season game after they had already clinched the AFC's No. 1 seed, the start was his first since 2014. The Los Angeles Chargers halted Kansas City's 10-game win streak, but the Chiefs raced to an early lead against the Browns despite coming off a first-round bye.

It is worth noting that Mahomes sprinted off the field for testing after first wobbling to the sideline against the Browns. Reid said later that Mahomes sustained an injury to his neck area and also, a toe injury Mahomes suffered in not causing him any problems.

"We're just leaving it the way we do," Reid said of his quarterback situation. "Chad's

comfortable with it and he feels that he can handle that if need be, so I think that's gone well there."

While everyone is awaiting word on Mahomes' status, the word on the Bills' Josh Allen is he is playing at a level equal to any quarterback still competing in the postseason. Considering that list of greats includes Mahomes, Tom Brady and Aaron Rodgers, Allen is in select company. He doesn't get distracted by comparisons, though.

"I'm just trying to be the best version of myself," Allen said. "I'm not trying to compare to the other guys who are arguably some of the best to ever play the game, the ones who are left. I'm just focused on what I can do."

Ever since a 26-17 loss to the Chiefs in Week 6, the Bills have rolled to 11 wins in 12 games, including eight straight, to gain their first AFC Championship appearance since 1993.

Allen's steady improvement with the Bills rode a huge uptick this season when he recorded eight 300-yard passing performances.

"He's poised. I've never seen him overly excited," said Stefon Diggs, whose All-Pro season included NFL highs of 1,535 yards and 127 catches.

"For him putting his head down and gaining actual (rushing) yards, things like that go far with us."

If the matchup comes down to key defensive stops, consider that Buffalo has allowed touchdowns on just two of eight red-zone situations in the playoffs. Taron Johnson converted one into a pick-six in the divisional round win against Baltimore.

As for Kansas City, it ranked last in the NFL in red-zone defense, allowing a touchdown rate of 76.6 percent. Yet the Chiefs have held nine opponents to 20 or fewer points.

Two Chiefs playmakers, Sammy Watkins (calf) and Clyde Edwards-Helaire (ankle) are practising after missing the divisional round. Linebacker Willie Gay (ankle) did not practice Wednesday. Vernon Butler (quad) and Gabriel Davis (ankle) did not practice Wednesday for Buffalo.



Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes

NHL

Canucks edge Canadiens in shootout after wild game

Reuters
Vancouver

Bo Horvat scored twice in a three-point game and netted the shootout winner as the Vancouver Canucks claimed their home opener by a 6-5 count over the Montreal Canadiens on Wednesday night.

Braden Holtby made 31 saves for the Canucks, who snapped a three-game losing streak with a win that saw them blow four leads and then tie the game late before prevailing. Brock Boeser added two goals and an assist for Vancouver, Tyler Motte contributed a goal and JT Miller collected three assists.

Tyler Toffoli's hat trick wasn't enough for the Canadiens, who also got a goal and an assist from Jesperi Kotkaniemi and a goal from Brendan Gallagher. Montreal goalie Carey Price stopped 23 shots. The Canucks and Canadiens meet again Thursday and Saturday in Vancouver.

Horvat opened the scoring with his team's first power-play goal of the season 11:07 into the clash, a one-timer from the high slot. The Canucks had been 0-for-16 on the man advantage.

Toffoli, who joined the Canadiens as a free agent after finishing last season in Vancouver, scored his first of the night 97 seconds into the second period to tie the game.

RESULTS

Canucks	6-5	Canadiens
Sharks	2-1	Blues
Golden Knights	5-2	Coyotes
Wild	3-2	Ducks
Oilers	3-1	Maple Leafs

Motte gave the hosts their second lead with a five-hole shot at the 4:25 mark of the middle frame. Toffoli netted his second of the game 62 seconds later with an easy redirect of a Nick Suzuki pass on a power play.

Boeser converted a backhand on the rebound for a man-advantage marker at 11:13 of the second period to give Vancouver a third lead.

With 95 seconds left in the second period, Gallagher joined Tomas Tatar on an odd-man rush and redirected the crossing pass into the net to make it a 3-3 game. Horvat netted his team's third power-play goal of the game

three minutes into the third period, a goal eerily similar to his first of the night, but Kotkaniemi slapped a loose puck from the slot home to tie the score for the fourth time at 10:14.

The back-and-forth didn't end there. Toffoli completed the hat trick with a deflection with 3:41 remaining in regulation to give Montreal a lead, but Boeser replied 32 seconds later with a slapper from the slot to force extra time and cap a three-point game.

The Canucks took a hit on the blue line, however, as veteran defenseman Alexander Elder left the game early in the second period and didn't return. Meanwhile Martin Jones made 23 saves as San Jose earned a shootout victory at St. Louis. Marcus Sorensen scored in regulation and Tomas Hertl produced the lone shootout goal in the fourth round for the Sharks, who earned a split in the two-game set at Enterprise Center. St. Louis won the first matchup 5-4 on Monday.

Brayden Schenn scored for the Blues and Jordan Binnington stopped 37 of 38 shots. The Blues missed two veterans from the blue line, and it showed.



Bo Horvat of the Vancouver Canucks scores what proved to be the game winning goal against the Montreal Canadiens in the shootout at Rogers Arena in Vancouver on January 20, 2021 in Vancouver, Canada. (Getty Images/AFP)



COPA DEL REY

Zidane says he has players' backing after cup humiliation

Real Madrid lose 2-1 to third-tier side Alcoyano in the extra time to bow out of Copa del Rey on Wednesday night

AFP
Madrid

Zinedine Zidane insisted his players still believe in him after Real Madrid suffered an embarrassing defeat by third-tier side Alcoyano in the Copa del Rey on Wednesday night. La Liga's reigning champions lost 2-1 to Alcoyano, who scored a remarkable winner in extra-time after having a man sent off.

Real Madrid have now won only once in their last five games, with an extraordinary loss heaping more pressure on Zidane. Asked if he still had the backing of the players, Zidane said: "Yes I believe so, you have to ask them. We've done good things this season, apart from the last four games. Now we have La Liga and the Champions League and we have to work. Whether my message gets through, you have to ask them, I can't answer that."

Zidane took responsibility for the defeat. "I'm the coach, it's my fault," he said. "I am responsible, the players have tried but well, we're out."

Zidane rotated his starting line-up but a team that included the likes of Marcelo, Isco, Casemiro and Vinicius Junior should have had enough to beat opponents sitting fourth in their division in Segunda B.

And when Zidane threw on the likes of Eden Hazard, Karim Benzema and Toni Kroos as substitutes to put the game to bed, the opposite happened, as Alcoyano, a man down, scored the winner, Juanan diverting in at the near post to pull off an incredible upset.

Alcoyano have not graced Spain's top



Third-tier side Alcoyano players celebrate after their win over Real Madrid in the Copa del Rey on Wednesday night.

flight since 1951 and their El Collao stadium holds less than 5,000 spectators. The only shame here was their fans were not able to see it.

They were comfortable in the first period but Madrid scored with their first chance on the stroke of half-time as Marcelo's delivery to the back

post found a diving Eder Militao, who headed in. But Madrid still laboured in the second half, even after Benzema replaced Mariano Diaz, and Alcoyano

equalised in the 82nd minute, a corner flicked on by Ramon Lopez to the back post, where the sleeping Vinicius allowed Jose Solbes a simple finish.

Lucas Vazquez went close with a late header and then Madrid could have had a penalty when Angel booted Militao in a scramble in the box. But without VAR to check, Alcoyano survived. Hazard, Marco Asensio and Kroos all came on for extra-time while Ramon Lopez went off, a late challenge on Casemiro earning him a second yellow card and leaving his team to play the final 11 minutes with 10 men. Lopez sat watching with his head in his hands, fearing presumably what he assumed would be a Madrid winner. Instead, his team did it without him, Ali Diakite's cross poked home by Juanan at the front post to complete an astonishing victory.

Alcoyano lived up to a past reputation which saw their name enter Spanish folklore as a byword for fighting spirit and the capacity to overcome the odds. "We really believed we could win even after the sending off. This will be talked about for the next 20 years, people will remember that on spirit alone, a team managed to knock out Real Madrid," said coach Vicente Perras.

The club's never-say-die spirit is summed up by goalkeeper Jose Juan, 41, who has had a long career but has only experienced 37 minutes of La Liga football. "I'm still in shock," he said. "This is an award for my career. I'm a servant to football."

Meanwhile, Real Sociedad made lighter work of their tie against Cordoba, winning 2-0 thanks to two goals from Willian Jose, the Brazilian striker who is set to join Wolves on loan until the end of the season. Willian Jose left a welcome farewell gift by scoring twice in the second half to put Real Sociedad safely through to the last 16.

FOCUS

Arsenal's Arteta focuses on new signings

AFP
London

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta is focusing on potential signings in the January transfer window after trimming his squad but refused to be drawn on a loan move for Real Madrid's Martin Odegaard. Sokratis Papastathopoulos was released from his contract this week, while Mesut Ozil is on the brink of a transfer to Turkish club Fenerbahce.

Sead Kolasinac and William Saliba have already left on loan deals as Arteta seeks to re-balance his squad. The Arsenal boss, speaking ahead of tomorrow's FA Cup fourth-round match at Southampton, would not be drawn on reports linking the club with a loan move for Real's attacking midfielder Odegaard. But he said the focus would now turn to the entrance door rather than the exit at the Emirates.

"We are in that process now," Arteta said when asked if it was now time to start bringing players in. "We have done the first part more or less and we are focusing now on the second phase. Obviously this market and the context makes it difficult, but we are looking at options and we will see what we can do."

Arteta, whose team are FA Cup holders, said the departures had left his squad short in certain areas. He said a left-back could be on the radar, with the decision to allow Kolasinac to join Schalke until the end of the season leaving him with only Kieran Tierney



as a natural option. "With the departure of Kola we are a little bit short with left-footed full-backs at the moment," he added.

Both Ozil and Sokratis were omitted from Arsenal's Premier League and Europa League squads for the first half of the season. Arteta had stressed several times he was unhappy with the bloated nature of the squad and feels the departures will help him achieve a better balance.

"We could not carry on with 31 players in the squad," he said. "It is unmanageable. And when you have to leave some of the foreign players out, it makes it even more dif-

ficult. To do it for a few weeks is OK, to do it for months and maintain the health, the ambition and the chemistry is really complicated. So one of the main objectives was to make some decisions about how we are going to offset that. We have done it."

SAINTS' INGS COULD RETURN TO FACE ARSENAL: HASENHUETTL

Southampton striker Danny Ings could play in FA Cup fourth round tie at home to Arsenal after missing the last two games because of a Covid-19 positive test, manager Ralph Hasenhuettl said. Ings returned a positive result for the novel coronavirus after scoring the winning goal in Saints' 1-0 Premier League home victory over Liverpool on Jan. 4. The 28-year-old missed Saturday's 2-0 Premier League defeat at Leicester City and the 2-0 win at home to Shrewsbury Town in the FA Cup third round on Tuesday.

"An option for the weekend is Danny, he is coming back," Hasenhuettl told reporters. "(Him) being available means we have more options in the front. It is important after the injury he had and now Covid too that he is available again. He is important for our game and we try to bring him in the position that he can score again and help us."

Ings, who has seven goals in 13 league games this season, has been linked by British media with a move away from Southampton to play Champions League football, but Hasenhuettl said the club wanted him to stay "for as long as possible". The England forward's Southampton contract is due to expire in June 2022.

SPOTLIGHT

Pogba fires Man United back to Premier League summit



Manchester United's Paul Pogba (left) celebrates with Bruno Fernandes after scoring against Fulham in the Premier League at Craven Cottage in London on Wednesday night. (AFP)

AFP
London

Paul Pogba produced a moment of magic as Manchester United came from behind to beat Fulham 2-1 and reclaim the Premier League lead on Wednesday night, ending Manchester City's short stay at the top.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's in-form team started the match third in the table after 24 hours of chopping and changing at the summit. The win sent the Red Devils two points clear and equalled the club record of 17 Premier League away games without defeat set by the treble-winning side of 1999.

United were forced to dig deep after Ademola Lookman punished them for an untidy start before Edinson Cavani pulled them level with a poacher's goal later in the first half. Pogba – back in the starting line-up in recent weeks after a spell on the periphery of Solskjaer's team – put United in front with a stunning left-foot curling effort from outside the area in the second half.

United have now won seven Premier League games after going behind this season. "Fantastic goal by Paul and we had some other chances to finish the game but of course when it is just one goal, and the players they put on,

it is going to be like heart in your mouth," Solskjaer said.

But the Norwegian refused to be drawn on a title challenge, even though United are top at the halfway point of the season. "It is always going to be talked about when you are halfway through and top of the league but we are not thinking about this," he added. "We just have to go one game at a time. It is such an unpredictable season."

The Premier League race is shaping up to be a thriller, with just eight points separating United from seventh-placed West Ham. United knew they had to respond after City beat Aston Villa 2-0 earlier on Wednesday to leapfrog Leicester, who topped the table after their 2-0 win against Chelsea the previous evening. But the defensive discipline they showed in their goalless draw against Liverpool on Sunday was absent in the early minutes and they paid the price. United were punished in the fifth minute when Lookman sprang the offside trap, collecting a ball over the top from Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa.

The forward had time to pick his spot and gave Manchester United goalkeeper David de Gea no chance, striking the ball into the bottom corner with his right foot. The away side settled and were level in the 21st minute through Cavani, moments af-

ter Bruno Fernandes had hit the inside of the post. Fulham goalkeeper Alphonse Areola failed to hold a Fernandes cross from the left, spilling the ball into the path of the veteran Uruguayan, who made no mistake with a left-footed finish from close range.

The increasingly influential Fernandes tested Areola from distance as United began to flex their muscles without creating many clear-cut chances.

Fulham made a bright start to the second period as United again struggled to find openings. But in the 65th minute Pogba broke the deadlock, creating space before producing an unstoppable drive past a diving Areola.

The Frenchman said he had been "really mad" after failing to convert a late chance against Liverpool. "It was a beautiful goal and beautiful win," he said. "It wasn't my favourite goal ever but it was still beautiful."

As the second half wore on, United faced some nervy moments. De Gea was forced to make a smart save with his legs from Ruben Loftus-Cheek, who blasted another chance over the bar. And United had their hearts in their mouths when Aleksandar Mitrovic's header deflected off Eric Bailly and inches wide of the post deep into time added on. Defeat for Fulham leaves them third from bottom, four points from safety.

Aguero self-isolating after contracting coronavirus

London: Manchester City's record goalscorer Sergio Aguero said yesterday he has contracted coronavirus and is self-isolating. The 32-year-old Argentinian striker had already been self-isolating due to being in close contact with someone who tested positive for the virus. Britain is in the midst of a third lockdown due to the emergence of a new strain of Covid-19 across the country in recent months which is believed to be more contagious. Manchester City have been hard hit by the virus with 11 players and staff testing positive in recent weeks.

They were forced to postpone a Premier League match with Everton in late December. Aguero has had a frustrating season making just three starts due to a series of injury problems. City have prospered despite his absence, their 2-0 win in the Premier League over Aston Villa on Wednesday be-

ing their ninth successive win in all competitions.

GOALKEEPER SETS WORLD RECORD FOR LONG-RANGE GOAL

Goalkeeper Tom King's midweek goal for fourth-tier Newport County has been confirmed as the longest in football history. King's wind-assisted effort against Cheltenham on Tuesday travelled 96.01 metres (315 feet), erasing Asmir Begovic's 2013 goal from 91.9 metres for Stoke City from the record books.

The official Guinness World Records website confirmed the new mark, saying: "With his epic downfield kick, King officially broke the record for the longest goal scored in a competitive football (soccer) match, which covered an incredible distance of 96.01m (105 yards)."

"Booting the ball from his own six-yard-box, it was picked up by the wind and soared into

the net just out of opposition goalkeeper Joshua Griffiths' reach." The 25-year-old's goal was the opener in a 1-1 draw for Newport, who are based in Wales but play in the England's League Two. "I'm obviously absolutely delighted because it's not something that I intentionally set out to do," said King.

"I'm sure it will be talked about for a long time, so I'm proud and I'm sure my family will be extremely proud too. I'll have to drop Asmir a message to send my commiserations."

BETTING SCANDAL ENGLAND FOOTBALLER SWAN DEAD AT 84

Former England defender Peter Swan, whose involvement in a betting scandal ended his hopes of playing at the 1966 World Cup finals, has died aged 84, his old club, Sheffield Wednesday, announced. Swan won 19 England caps and was a member of the squad at

the 1962 World Cup in Chile, although illness prevented him from playing.

It was widely thought he would feature at the 1966 World Cup, which England went on to win on home soil. But his involvement in a betting ring meant he missed out, with Swan jailed for four months.

Swan's football career came to a shuddering halt in 1964. That was when Britain's Sunday People newspaper revealed that Swan and fellow teammates Tony Kay and David Layne had placed a bet on reigning English champions Ipswich Town to beat their Wednesday side in December 1962 following an approach from Jimmy Gauld – a leading member of a betting ring.

All three players received four-month jail terms and lifetime bans, dashing Swan's hopes of becoming a member of the only England squad to have won the World Cup.

SPOTLIGHT

Pirlo wins first trophy as Juventus beat Napoli in Super Cup

'Winning a first title (as a coach) is a great joy, different from that felt as a player'



Juventus' players and staff celebrate with the trophy after winning the Italian Super Cup at the Mapei stadium in Reggio Emilia, Italy. (AFP)

AFP
Reggio Emilia, Italy

Andrea Pirlo won his first trophy as a coach on Wednesday night as Juventus beat Napoli 2-0 in the Italian Super Cup. Cristiano Ronaldo blasted in his 20th goal of the season following a corner on 64 minutes in Reggio Emilia, before Napoli captain Lorenzo Insigne missed a penalty and Alvaro Morata added a second deep into injury time.

Pirlo, 41, clinched his first silverware five months after taking over at his former club where he won four league titles. "Winning a first title (as a coach) is a great joy, different from that felt as a player, it's even more beautiful," said Pirlo, who lifted the trophy three times as a player with Juventus and AC Milan.

Juventus won the annual trophy, played between the league champions and Italian Cup holders, for the ninth time, having finished runners-up last year to Lazio. "This trophy is very important because it can give us confidence for the rest of our season," said Ronaldo.

Juventus sit fifth in the league, 10 points behind leaders AC Milan, after losing 2-0 to second-placed Inter Milan last weekend. "The Scudetto is possible, Milan and Inter are very strong, but there are still a lot of games to be played and we can still do it," added Ronaldo.

It was the first meeting between Pirlo and Napoli coach Gennaro Gattuso, who won the 2006 World Cup together and spent a decade as AC Milan teammates, winning two Serie A titles and two Champions League crowns together.

They have not faced off this season after Napoli refused to travel to Turin for

their October league match because of coronavirus cases — a fixture which has still to be played. "I'm sorry for Gennaro Gattuso, but we wanted to react after the defeat against Inter Milan," said Pirlo. "We bet a lot on the pride of the players, we wanted to show that we were a team."

Juventus received a boost hours before kick-off with Juan Cuadrado recovering from coronavirus and starting for the first time in two weeks. Napoli had the best chance of the first half in the Mapei Stadium, with Juve keeper Wojciech Szczesny demonstrating quick reflexes to save Hirving Lozano's diving header just before the half-hour mark.

Federico Bernardeschi came off the bench after the break in place of Federico Chiesa and immediately had an impact. Juventus piled on the pressure after an hour when Ronaldo was sent through on goal and defender Kostas Manolas almost

deflected the ball into his own net.

But the five-time Ballon d'Or winner made the most of the resulting corner, with the ball bouncing off Tiemoue Bakayoko and into the path of the unmarked Portuguese forward to fire in his 20th goal of the season. Napoli had a chance to equalise from the spot after Weston McKennie fouled Dries Mertens, but Insigne wasted the opportunity by dragging a woeful effort wide. Szczesny pulled off another late save before a last-gasp Morata goal sealed victory.

"We did not because of Lorenzo's penalty. Let's move on," said Gattuso, 43, whose side beat Juventus in last season's Italian Cup. "In the first half there was a bit of fear. I don't remember Juve's serious chances today. We could have done better, but the match is very similar to the one seven months ago. In fact, we suffered more seven months ago than today."

FOCUS

Ronaldo scores 760th career goal, but is it a world record?

AFP
Paris

Cristiano Ronaldo scored his 760th career goal in Juventus' 2-0 Italian Super Cup win over Napoli on Wednesday night, prompting claims he is the top scorer of all time. However, doubts persist as to who actually holds the record.

With five goals for Sporting Lisbon, 118 for Manchester United, 450 for Real Madrid, 85 for Juventus and 102 for Portugal, there is little debate over Ronaldo's own tally. The Portuguese forward, who turns 36 next month, is the undisputed holder of several records, easily the leading scorer for Real Madrid and his country, and above Lionel Messi in the Champions League goalscoring charts.

But uncertainty arises from the totals of his rivals from previous eras, with the likes of Brazilian duo Pele and Romario both claiming to have netted more than 1,000 goals. Last month Barcelona's Messi surpassed Pele's recognised total of 643 goals for a single club, but Santos swiftly countered saying the three-time World Cup winner racked up 1,091 goals for them including those in friendlies.

Pele's own Instagram bio notes he is the "Leading Goal Scorer of All Time (1,283)". However, if just official matches are the measuring stick, the Brazilian is apparently still behind Josef Bican, who football historians calculated scored 805 goals between 1931 and 1955 playing for half a dozen clubs as well as Austria and Czechoslovakia.

"Pepi", as he was known, is credited with scoring 805 goals

in 530 games, giving him a career average of 1.52 goals per game," FIFA.com said in an article devoted to him last year. Included in that number though are 27 goals for Rapid Vienna's reserve and amateur sides, in addition to some that were scored not in official international matches.

Discounting those strikes puts Bican on 759 goals from just 495 games, although international football research website RSSSF (Rec. Sport Soccer Statistics Foundation) says data is partially missing from the 1952 season in the Czech second division.

Pele is credited with between 757 and 767 goals in competitive matches over his career, which included 92 Brazil internationals and two seasons with the New York Cosmos. He is listed third (767) by RSSSF behind Romario, who helped Brazil to the 1994 World Cup and ended with 772 goals.

Romario celebrated reaching a "personal count" of 1,000 goals in 2007, a total comprising strikes at youth level and in friendlies and testimonials. Other reports and statisticians suggest Romario's official haul is just under 750 following a globetrotting career that included spells at PSV Eindhoven, Barcelona, Flamengo, Miami FC and Adelaide United.

As for Messi, who at 33 is two years Ronaldo's junior, he is on 719 goals for Barcelona and Argentina and will undoubtedly factor into the equation before he is done. What is certain is that even if Ronaldo did not break the all-time record, the mark appears well within reach for a player who continues to score at a remarkable rate as he approaches his 36th birthday.



With five goals for Sporting Lisbon, 118 for Manchester United, 450 for Real Madrid, 85 for Juventus and 102 for Portugal, there is little debate over Cristiano Ronaldo's (right) goal tally. (AFP)

BUNDESLIGA

Bayern Munich maintain lead with victory over Augsburg

AFP
Berlin

Robert Lewandowski scored his 22nd Bundesliga goal of the season as Bayern Munich stayed four points clear, helped by a late penalty miss from Alfred Finnbogason in a 1-0 victory at Augsburg on Wednesday.

Lewandowski's 13th-minute penalty was enough for a win which kept the reigning champions clear of second-placed RB Leipzig, who edged out Union Berlin 1-0 thanks to an Emil Forsberg goal. But Bayern survived a late scare in the Bavaria derby as Finnbogason could only hit the post from the spot with 14 minutes to play.

"We've now won our last two games and that's a sign to our rivals," said Bayern captain Manuel Neuer. Poland striker Lewandowski has scored 10 goals more than his nearest rival, Dortmund's Erling Braut Haaland, in the Bundesliga this term.

But he was replaced midway through the second half after treatment for a leg knock, but Bayern coach Hansi Flick said it was only as a precaution. Bayern battered the hosts' goal with 15 first-half shots while Augsburg did not trouble the European champions with a single attempt in the first 45 minutes.

It was a different story after the break as Augsburg wasted a string of chances, including Finnbogason's miss after Benjamin Pavard handled in the area. The clean sheet in Augsburg saw Bayern goalkeeper Neuer equal



Bayern Munich's Robert Lewandowski (centre) runs with the ball during the Bundesliga match against Augsburg on Wednesday. (AFP)

Oliver Kahn's Bundesliga record of 196.

Earlier, Schalke remained rooted to the foot of the table after slipping to a 2-1 home loss to fellow strugglers Cologne, despite a fifth goal in three games for American teenager Matthew Hoppe.

Cologne defender Rafael Czichos gave the visitors a first-half lead, but Hoppe equalised before the hour mark.

Cologne snatched a late win when Jan Thielmann fired past Schalke goalkeeper Ralf Faehrmann in injury time. Despite the away win, Cologne remain in the

relegation play-off place. Schalke stay bottom, behind Mainz on goal difference.

Arminia Bielefeld's 3-0 win over Stuttgart later on Wednesday saw Schalke and Mainz fall 10 points from the guaranteed safety of 15th in the table. Schalke next host Bayern on Sunday having been thrashed 8-0 by the European champions at the Allianz Arena on the opening day of the season.

The Royal Blues' new signing Klaas-Jan Huntelaar missed Wednesday's game with a calf strain after rejoining on Tuesday following two years with Ajax.

SPECIAL OCCASION

Chorley boss relishing FA Cup tie with Wolves

AFP
London

English minnows Chorley host mighty Wolves in the FA Cup today, with manager Jamie Vermiglio hoping to rekindle the spirit of a famous win against the same opponents 35 years ago. Vermiglio, who doubles up as a primary school headteacher, is said that the club's fans cannot share in the occasion as a result of strict coronavirus restrictions.

The sixth-tier side, the lowest-ranked team left in the competition, recorded one of their finest moments in 1986 when they famously beat Wolves in the first round. Back then the four-time FA Cup winners had fallen on hard times and were playing in the fourth tier — a sharp contrast from their current Premier League status.

Chorley, near Manchester in northwest England, have overcome 2013 FA Cup winners Wigan, third-tier Peterborough and Championship outfit Derby to earn their big day against Nuno Espirito Santo's men. But Vermiglio said he would have loved to have shared the magic of the part-timers' run with his family as he prepares his men for the fourth-round tie.

"The one difficult thing about this run which has been lost due to Covid is my little boy Sam usually comes to every game with me," he said. "One of the biggest things of my life I cannot share with my wife and children. It makes me quite emotional and it



Chorley boss Jamie Vermiglio. PICTURE: Stefan Willoughby

is difficult."

Vermiglio, who teaches in nearby Warrington, would also have expected to have seen some of his pupils and their families filing into the 4,300-capacity Victory Park but he hopes they will tune in to watch on TV instead.

"It is wonderful for my school and others up and down the country whose kids have been really inspired by this," said the 38-year-old, who has had a long association with the club. "With schoolchildren not being able to go to their dance classes or football training they have not got much to do."

Vermiglio has very little spare time on his hands between training with the National

League North side and running his school, particularly during the punishing Covid-19 pandemic. "The pressures are enormous on the staff," he said. "They have to look out for children whose families are struggling to rub two coins together and so we have to try and feed them. The staff have to provide devices for children both in school and delivering them to those at home. It is tough and not enough credit goes to teachers, who do not get a lot of positive publicity but trust me they are doing their bit."

He said the club's FA Cup run had given people something to focus on. "These are such difficult times and there is not much for people to do save go for a walk," he said. "I think that is another reason our story has touched many people out there and given them hope."

Vermiglio said he understood there was a bit of "doom and gloom" among the Wolves fans after their poor recent run in the English top flight. "When they saw they were playing Chorley, naturally they started saying 'here we go again, they did us 3-0 in 1986, could it happen again?'" he said.

"The pressure is on them to come and win and I think (Nuno) will want to play one of his strongest sides to make sure there are no banana skins."

And the Chorley boss is not ruling out a repeat of the 1986 heroics against Wolves' multimillionaires. "If the lads play to their capabilities and do the extraordinary and get a result, then it will be these players that are talked about for the next 40 years," he said.

BOTTOMLINE

Huebner banned but 'no evidence' found of racial abuse

AFP
Berlin

The German FA (DFB) yesterday said there was "no evidence" that Union Berlin's Florian Huebner racially abused Bayer Leverkusen midfielder

Nadiem Amiri, but gave the defender a two-match ban and 20,000-euro (\$24,292) fine.

Huebner was alleged to have used a racist insult against German-born Amiri, whose parents are from Afghanistan, after the pair argued following Union's 1-0 Bundesliga win in the capital last Friday. But the DFB said "no evidence of a racially motivated or

discriminatory act could be provided" and instead banned Huebner for "unsportsmanlike conduct". "Even Nadiem Amiri could not rule out during the investigations that the choice of words was different," the DFB said in a statement. The disciplinary committee said both players had apologised to each other for their "respective misconduct".

HORSE RACING

She's Our Queen, Perfect Empire, Off He Goes, Jabalaly win big

Sheikh Mohamed's Off He Goes wins Gr 3 Khor Al Adaid Cup for second straight time; treble for trainer Ghazali

By Mikheil Bhat
Doha

Hassan Ali al-Abdulmalik's She's Our Queen, Al Wasmiyah Farm's Perfect Empire, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani's Off He Goes and Al Bida Racing's Jabalaly won the Thoroughbred features on the Classic/Pearl Day at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Rayyan Park turf track yesterday.

In the finale, Thoroughbred Pearl for fillies and mares, Deborah Mountain-schooled She's Our Queen showed some impressive pace on the home straight despite traffic to land the 2,000m run by more than a length as Alberto Sanna guided Mahaarat to the runner-up spot.

In the penultimate race of the day, also a QR100,000 prize money affair like the other features, Jassim Ghazali's ward, Perfect Empire, built on a promising fourth place finish in the Qatar Derby (QA Group 1) to win the Thoroughbred Classic for four-year-olds. Soufiane Saadi helmed the winner to a three-quarters-of-a-length win ahead of Jason Watson-ridden King Pacha.

His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani's famous white stars and royal blue silks entered the winner's enclosure twice yesterday, first with the Doha Triple Crown winner Ebraz and then with Off He Goes.

Julian Smart-trained Off He Goes successfully defended his Khor Al Adaid Cup (QA Group 3) title after Tomas Lukasek guided the seven-year-old gelding to a confident three-length victory in the 2,800m race for four-year-old and older Thoroughbreds.

Lukasek had his mount follow fellow Julian Smart ward, Money Multiplier, before making the move coming on to the home straight. Umm Qarn's Duke of Dundee surged forward too under Ronan Thomas but that wasn't enough as Off He Goes was up and away.

Earlier, three-time His Highness The Amir Sword (Group 1 PA) topper Ebraz had missed out on victories narrowly on his last two starts. With Tomas Lukasek in the saddle, the Julian Smart-trained eight-year-old got into the groove coming off the final bend and, with an impressive



QREC Board member Khalifa bin Mohamed al-Attiyah (right) presents the owner's trophy to Hassan Ali al-Abdulmalik after She's Our Queen won the Thoroughbred Pearl race yesterday. PICTURES: Juhaim



Ivan Rossi rides She's Our Queen to Thoroughbred Pearl victory.



Ronan Thomas rides Al Bida Racing's Jabalaly to Al Areeq Cup victory.

turn of foot went, past the leader, Soufiane Saadi, ridden Jabalah to land the 1850m Purebred Arabian Conditions event.

Thomas, however, had ridden the first feature winner of the evening when he guided Al Bida Racing's gelding Jabalaly to his

second straight victory. Ibrahim al-Malki-trained bay horse held off the challenge posed by Sheikh Mohamed's duo - Markhor and Al Shaman - by almost a length to bag the mile-long Al Areeq Cup for Class 2 Thoroughbreds. Qatari apprentice jockey



Connections pose with His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani's Off He Goes, with Tomas Lukasek astride, after the win in the Khor Al Adaid Cup (QA Group 3) yesterday.



QREC Racing manager presents the owner's trophy after Al Wasmiyah Farm's Perfect Empire won the Thoroughbred Classic yesterday.

Rashid Ali al-Marri entered the winner's enclosure for the 11th time this season with a fantastic ride astride Alban de Mieuille-trained Barra in the colours of Patrice Nicolet. Guiding the eight-year-old for the first time, al-Marri had Barra take the lead coming off the final bend in the Local Purebred Arabian Conditions event and then pulled away to win the six-furlong sprint by almost six lengths.

The trainer-jockey combine of Jassim Ghazali and Marco Casa-

mento combined well to register two straight wins yesterday. First up was Jassim Mohamed al-Badi's Qatar Gold who completed a hat-trick of victories when the five-year-old landed the Local Thoroughbred Plate event over six furlongs. Casamento had ridden the Atlantic Air colt to his first two victories too.

Half-an-hour later, it was Mohamed bin Ahmed bin Mohamed al-Attiyah's AJS Al Moheeb who topped the Local Purebred Arabian Handicap for horses rated

85 and below. The eight-year-old was at the back of the pack for the bulk of the mile-long race before Casamento got him to make up ground on early leader Shaveesh, ridden by Rashid Ali al-Marri. At the business end of the straight, Casamento and his mount were breathing down Shaveesh's neck before edging him out by a head at the post.

In the meeting opener, Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari's Bottom Bay raced to his first victory in Qatar on only his third outing here with Michael Forest guiding the Zuhair Mohsen charge to a thrilling head victory in the Class 3 Thoroughbred Handicap event.

RESULTS

Race 1: THOROUGHBRED HANDICAP (Class 3) (70-90)
1. Bottom Bay (Michael Forest), 2. Karbasann (Ronan Thomas), 3. Wedream (JP Guillambert), 4. Wemyss Ware (Adnan Hawa). Won by: Hd, ½, 1. Time: 2:05.75. Owner: Khalifa bin Sheail al-Kuwari. Trainer: Zuhair Mohsen.

Race 2: LOCAL THOROUGHBRED PLATE
1. Qatar Gold (Marco Casamento), 2. Al Adheed (Soufiane Saadi), 3. Wadhah (Michael Forest), 4. Admiral (Ronan Thomas). Won by: 1, ¾, 1 ¼. Time: 1:13.08. Owner: Jas-

sem Mohamed al-Badi. Trainer: Jassim Ghazali.

Race 3: LOCAL PUREBRED ARABIAN HANDICAP (85 & below)
1. AJS Al Moheeb (Marco Casamento), 2. Shaveesh (Rashid Ali al-Marri), 3. AJS Al Aredh (Meteb Ali al-Marri), 4. Tahr (Alberto Sanna). Won by: Hd, 2 ¾. Hd. Time: 1:46.99. Owner: Mohamed bin Ahmed bin Mohamed al-Attiyah. Trainer: Jassim Ghazali.

Race 4: LOCAL PUREBRED ARABIAN CONDITIONS
1. Barra (Rashid Ali al-Marri), 2. Warden Al Hashm (Faleh Bughanaim), 3. Kasser (Meteb Ali al-Marri), 4. Hazm Al Sulaimi (Marco Casamento). Won by: 5 ¾, 1 ¼, 1 ¼. Time: 1:18.88. Owner: Patrice Nicolet. Trainer: Alban de Mieuille.

Race 5: PUREBRED ARABIAN CONDITIONS
1. Ebraz (Tomas Lukasek), 2. Jabalah (Soufiane Saadi), 3. Evolution Du Croate (Alberto Sanna), 4. Akmar (Marco Casamento). Won by: 1, 7 ½, 1. Time: 2:05.21. Owner: His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani. Trainer: Julian Smart.

Race 6: AL AREEQ CUP (Class 2 THOROUGHBREDS)

1. Jabalaly (Ronan Thomas), 2. Markhor (Soufiane Saadi), 3. Al Shaman (Tomas Lukasek), 4. Beachwalk (Ivan Rossi). Won by: ¾, Hd, Nk. Time: 1:36.88. Owner: Al Bida Racing. Trainer: Ibrahim al-Malki.

Race 7: KHOR AL ADAID CUP (QA Gr3) (4-year-olds & older Class 1 THOROUGHBREDS)

1. Off He Goes (Tomas Lukasek), 2. Duke of Dundee (Ronan Thomas), 3. Otwo (Faleh Bughanaim), 4. Harry Hotspur (Soufiane Saadi). Won by: 3, 1 ¾, ¼. Time: 3:09.11. Owner: His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani. Trainer: Julian Smart.

Race 8: T/B CLASSIC RACE (4-year-old Class 2)

1. Perfect Empire (Soufiane Saadi), 2. King Pacha (Jason Watson), 3. Hayzum (Michael Forest), 4. Sir Arthur Dayne (Marco Casamento). Won by: ¾, ¾, 2. Time: 2:06.78. Owner: Al Wasmiyah Farm. Trainer: Jassim Ghazali.

Race 9: T/B PEARL (Class 2 Fillies & Mares)

1. She's Our Queen (Ivan Rossi), 2. Mahaarat (Alberto Sanna), 3. Festive (Ronan Thomas), 4. Make A Wish (Marco Casamento). Won by: 1 ¼, 2 ½, Nk. Time: 2:05.82. Owner: Hassan Ali al-Abdulmalik. Trainer: Deborah Mountain.

FOOTBALL

We win by huge scores because we are strong, says Al Sadd's Xavi

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Head coach Xavi Hernandez hailed Al Sadd's 7-0 rout of Al Khor, saying the huge winning margins this season is because of how strong their teams is. After their victory at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium on Wednesday, Al Sadd extended their lead on top to 13 points over second-placed reigning champions Al Duhail.

Rodrigo Tabata scored a hat-trick, while Baghdad Bounedjah netted a double. Santiago Cazorla and Ali Asad were the other scorers as unbeaten Al Sadd notched up their 13th victory to be on 41 points.

"We study each team separately and before every match we have a big job to do. We have won by huge scores because we are strong and not because the opponents are weak. We fully deserve all these victories," said Xavi after the match.

"I am delighted for all the players. We have taken a new step towards winning the league title, and now we have a 13-point lead. We must continue to work in the same way until we achieve our goal, and I am proud of the team and the performance," the Wolves coach added.

Xavi was also pleased with performances of non-regular players. "I am happy with the win and the performance. We played a new kind of match, in



terms of the magnificence of the performance, and I am happy with the players who had not played much before, including Ahmed Suhail, Musaab Khidir, Salem al-Hajri and Tabata, who were more than excellent and deserve to be praised with the rest of the players. We are living through the best moments of the season and we must ben-

efit a lot from this," the Spaniard said.

Meanwhile, Al Sadd defender Ahmed Suhail attributed his side's 7-0 victory over Al Khor to the respect they gave to the opponents, and added that the competition was not over yet. "We went into the match with the aim of winning and extending our lead, and we put pres-

sure on the Al Khor goal and got a good result in the first half by scoring four goals," he said.

"The big result is because we respected the Al Khor team and converted our chances into goals. Our performance as a group remains the secret of Al Sadd's strength in all the league matches. We have not clinched the league title yet, and we will continue to perform in the same way in the next matches; the campaign is not over yet," Ahmed added.

Meanwhile, Al Duhail's campaign to retain the league shield suffered another blow after they were held to a 1-1 draw by Qatar SC. Al Duhail stood second with 28 points, while Qatar SC slipped from fourth to fifth place with 24 points. In fact, that was the only change in the ranking table as Al Rayyan and Qatar SC swapped positions.

Al Gharafa moved on to 27 points following their 2-1 win over Al Kharaitiyat, with captain Moiad Hassan scoring two quick goals to give his side their eighth win. Mensah Evans had put Al Kharaitiyat ahead.

Al Gharafa stood third, but Al Kharaitiyat's misery worsened as they are still the basement side with six points. Umm Salal and Al Arabi played out a goalless draw to remain in the ninth and seventh spot with 15 and 20 points respectively.

The QNB Stars League will now take a break and Week 16 fixtures have been scheduled for 13th and 14th February.

Bulacan Starks win Game 2 of the PIBAQ finals



Action from Game 2 of the SBP Qatar, PIBAQ Premiere League 2020-2021 Finals series between Bulacan Starks (in black) and Lombar (in white and grey) at Al Gharafa Training Gym. Lombar's Eric Tamayo top-scored in the game with 37 points but that wasn't enough as Starks won the game 89-84. Mar Mercado was the top-scorer for the winners with 17 points. Game 3 of the series will be held today. PICTURES: Ronnie Castro



Lombar's Rey Solomon was given the season's MVP award.



Bulacan Starks celebrate their win over Lombar in Game 2 of the Finals series.