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## Qatar box clever, punch above their weight



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# GULF TIMES SPORT



**PREMIER LEAGUE**

## Spurs strike late as Higuain scores twice for Chelsea

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### SPOTLIGHT

# Final ‘most important game of my life’: Captain al-Haydos



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani hugs Qatar football captain Hassan al-Haydos yesterday as the national team arrived in Doha after winning the Asian Cup in Abu Dhabi. At bottom, His Highness the Amir greets star player Bassam al-Rawi as Hamid Ismail looks on.



**AFC**  
Abu Dhabi

Qatar captain Hassan al-Haydos was elated at his side's stunning 3-1 win over Japan in the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 final, declaring he had emerged from the biggest competition of his career as a champion.

The 28-year-old labelled the decider at Zayed Sports City Stadium as the biggest game in his life, and goals to Almoez Ali, Abdelaziz Hatim and Akram Afif ensured he finished it from at the top of the Asian football mountain.

Speaking after becoming the first player in history to hoist the new AFC Asian Cup trophy, al-Haydos revealed

his delight to the-AFC.com

"Praise be to God. I think this was the most important game in my life, in the most important tournament of my footballing career," he said.

"Of course, I want to thank the boys, who were great throughout the tournament, the coaching staff and the management, all the officials in Qatar.

"I think everyone had confidence in us from the start. We didn't disappoint them and we are returning to Doha with the Cup!" Al-Haydos has enjoyed continental success before, playing a supporting role in Al Sadd's AFC Champions League final win over Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors as a 20-year-old in 2011.

Until now, that had been the most significant prize in his career, but Qatar's

on-field leader believes that achievement has been well and truly surpassed by claiming the biggest prize in all of Asian football.

"Frankly, there's a big difference (between the Asian Cup and AFC Champions League)," he said.

"Winning a championship with the national team has a different emotion to it. The happiness is there for everyone in the country!" Meanwhile, Al-Haydos' Al Sadd teammate and Qatari left-back Abdelkarim Hassan described Qatar's achievement as a dream come true.

Hassan entered the competition fresh from winning the 2018 AFC Player of the Year, and his stock continues to rise with each performance, but the 25-year-old said, for now, nothing can top becoming an Asian champion.



Captain Hassan al-Haydos holds aloft the Asian Cup trophy yesterday after the team's arrival in Doha.



We extend our heartiest greetings to

His Highness  
**Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani**  
Amir of the State of Qatar

His Highness  
**Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani**  
Father Amir

His Highness  
**Sheikh Abdullah Bin Hamad Al Thani**  
Deputy Amir

and to all the honorable people of Qatar

On the occasion of  
Qatar national football team's winning

**AFC Asian Cup 2019**

We hope for more success and promoting the name of our beloved Qatar to the highest level under the wise leadership of His Highness The Amir





COMMENT

# Winning Asian Cup a great achievement, says QFA president

**QNA**  
Abu Dhabi

**Q**atar Football Association (QFA) President HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani said that Qatar football team had made a historic achievement after winning the AFC Asian Cup for the first time ever, saying this achievement is the result of ongoing work and effort of years. He said that a strong national team has been built to bring more outstanding successes for Qatar in the 2022 World Cup.

In a press statement, Sheikh Hamad said that this unprecedented achievement was the result of a great work by officials in the country, and a great effort to

further bring more successes for the Qatari football.

He added that the Asian title win was deserved after preparing a strong and distinguished team under the supervision of the coach Felix Sanchez, who has been in touch with the young players for years. Sanchez led them to the Asian Youth Cup win in 2014 and to qualify for the World Youth Cup in the same year. His hard work with these players and first team members led them to succeed in the current edition of the Asian Cup and to claim the title.

QFA president said the 25-year-old generation is capable of achieving the best in the future, adding that these players could be boosted by other elements of the Olympic team or the youth team, who will compete in

the World Cup in Poland in the coming period.

Sheikh Hamad congratulated the players and their team for achieving this historic Asian achievement, stressing that the players have presented excellent levels throughout the tournament, and honoured their country and achieved a new glory for their country and made history for themselves.

This achievement is a unique point that adds a lot to the Qatari football on its way towards the World Cup 2022, he said, pointing out that Qatar has a group of small elements that have been equipped with great work to be complementary to this generation of players in the near future.

He stressed that preparing a distinguished team has been their goal since Qatar won the honour

of organising the 2022 FIFA World Cup nine years ago, pointing out that they have been preparing teams and smaller groups to set them on the path to success.

QFA president revealed that the association plans to form a special Olympic team that seeks to reach the Olympics in Tokyo 2020.

He praised the players' great efforts and success in the current edition of the Asian Cup, especially after they beat former champions, including Iraq, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Japan, stressing that the next goal is to continue to excel and achieve success in Copa America in June.

Concluding his statement, the QFA President congratulated His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani on the AFC Asian Cup victory.



QFA President HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani (right) at the team's arrival in Doha.

FOCUS

# Asian title just the beginning for Qatar

‘This is one step more to continue developing the team, to play another tournament in the summer, and to be a competitive team at the World Cup’

**DPA**  
Abu Dhabi

**T**he glittering gold confetti that heralded Qatar's Asian Cup win on Friday had hardly fallen back to earth before the next challenge was being discussed.

For most countries, winning a continental championship would spark days of celebrations and rewards aplenty for the gallant coach and heroes on the pitch.

But most countries are not Qatar, awarded a World Cup to host despite having never qualified for the event and with virtually no footballing history to speak about.

Coach Felix Sanchez and his players will, no doubt, indulge themselves — they have, after all, more than earned it by becoming the ninth different winners of the Asian Cup with a 3-1 triumph over Japan in Abu Dhabi.



Qatar players and officials hoist the AFC Asian Cup trophy during a victory parade in Doha yesterday. (Reuters)

But then it will be back to work.

“This is one step more to continue developing the team, to play another tournament in the summer, and be ready for 2022, to be a competitive team at the World Cup,” said Sanchez.

It is less than four years to the next World Cup, and as hosts, Qatar do not need to qualify. This, however, is a double-edged sword, with a lack of competitive games a problem after they play as guests in the Copa America this June.

## Al Annabi players dedicate AFC Asian Cup title to Qatari people

**QNA**  
Doha

**Q**atari players dedicated their win in the 2019 AFC Asian Cup to the people of Qatar and all residents, saying they met their promise to return to Doha with the AFC title.

Qatari star Assim Madibo, who expressed his great happiness with the prestigious title, said it was deserved after the team were impressive in all the games, all of which they won. He added that the team are really happy. He noted that despite all the circumstances, they succeeded in making the Qatari people happy, and their

efforts and those of the coaching and administrative staff resulted in this victory over the Japanese team, one of the best in Asia.

Saad al-Sheeb, who was chosen as the best goalkeeper in the tournament, said that the team deserved to win the title after showing best levels among all the teams participating in the tournament and winning against big teams like the Iraq, Saudi Arabia and South Korea, as well as against the hosts UAE in the semi-finals.

He added that they were expecting a tough game, but two goals in the first half helped a lot and gave the team strength to continue. He said that the team included 23 players each giving their all and even those

who did not participate in the games had a great role in supporting the other players.

Abdulaziz Hatem, the Qatar national team player who scored the second goal against Japan with a curling kick from outside the penalty area, expressed his delight with winning the Asian Cup for the first time in his history, after beating the Japanese team. He said that this crowning is the best in his career, and in the career of the current generation of Qatari national team supporters, as well as in the history of Qatari football.

Hassan al-Haydos, the captain, expressed his great satisfaction with the victory, saying that his feelings and those of his colleagues are indescribable.

Al-Haydos dedicated the win to the leadership and the people of Qatar and all those who supported the team during the championship, especially in the final, which was attended by a large number of fans who stood by the players, and supported them throughout the game.

He added that all of his fellow players have been champions in this edition of the Asian Cup, praising the great role of coach Felix Sanchez, who read all the matches, which made it easier for players, especially during matches against previous winners Iraq, Saudi Arabia and South Korea. He added that beating Japan and winning the title was the biggest success in their history.

Qatar's rush to be competitive following the World Cup award in 2010 was initially counterproductive. Coaches changed rapidly and there was little structure to the development of players.

Bit by bit that changed, aided by substantial investment and the long-term goal being placed above quick fixes. The decision to promote Sanchez, a long-term youth coach in the country, to the senior team was also inspired.

The Spaniard has known and worked with the majority of the squad for several years, many of them of since they were children.

Ali is one example and with

a tournament record nine goals will hog the headlines.

Sanchez has continually stressed the team rather than the individual with everyone doing their job.

Creative forward Akram Afif, 21, was involved in an astonishing 12 of the team's 19 goals in the United Arab Emirates, including all three in the final — scoring a late penalty having set up the other two.

“We have been together for seven years, I know Akram, and he will pass, and he knows what to

expect from me,” Ali said. “We get on very well together.”

Qatar defeated Lebanon, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, South Korea, the UAE and Japan to lift the trophy with a tournament record plus-18 goal difference. They were undeniably the best team but, as Ali said, Asia is weak — only Japan made it out of the group stage at the last World Cup.

South America is a different proposition and facing Colombia, Paraguay and Argentina will give a much better indicator of just how much work remains to

be done for this Qatar side.

“[Their performance was] not a surprise for me, we knew Qatar can have a tight defence and strength in attack,” said beaten Japanese coach Hajime Moriyasu. “They can move the ball and create chances, I think the head coach is building a great team for the World Cup.”

Whether Sanchez gets the chance to stay in the post that long remains to be seen. Rumours have linked big-name coaches to the job, and with the incentive of a home World Cup

along with the ability to pay huge wages, Qatar face few restrictions in choosing their boss.

That, however, was where Sanchez was happy to draw the line about the future.

“I’m only thinking about today, it’s a great day for me, the players, and the country,” he said. “There can be news, this person, this person [linked to the job] — we’re thinking about our work.”

“2022 is in three years’ time. In football you don’t know what will happen in two weeks.”

SPOTLIGHT

# History-maker Almoez sets sights on 2022

**AFC**  
Abu Dhabi

**A**lmoez Ali had no sooner etched his name in the history books of the AFC Asian Cup than he was already looking forward to the next challenge that awaits him and his Qatari teammates on the road towards the country's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Ali's nine-goal haul makes him the most successful striker at a single AFC Asian Cup Finals ever with his total surpassing the great Ali Daei's record, which was achieved the last time the tournament was played in the United Arab Emirates in 1996.

That tally saw him finish as the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 topscorer as well as claim the Most Valuable Player award, but despite an impressive personal haul, Ali is already setting his sights further forward.

Ali has been in devastating form through UAE 2019, also equalling the record of the most goals in one game with his four-goal burst against DPR Korea in the group phase, and his on-field relationship with Akram Afif was of paramount importance to his nation's first-ever AFC Asian Cup win.

As was so often the case over the last month, it was Afif who supplied the pass that allowed Ali to set himself up for his spectacular opener in the final against Japan and the Al Duhail forward paid tribute to his teammate.

“For the first goal I had one defender behind me so I knew I could put the ball in any corner, so I tried to put it in the corner past the goalkeeper,” he said. “It was a nice goal.”

“Akram and I have been together for seven years and I know where Akram will be and where he will pass and he knows what is expected from me, so it's normal after seven years that we get along very well together.”

Qatar head coach Felix Sanchez, who worked with Ali last year when he finished as the leading scorer at the AFC U23 Championship in China, praised the 22-year-old forward and stressed that he expected even more from him in the future.

“Almoez is a fantastic player and it's a pleasure to coach him,” said the Spaniard. “He's 100% committed and in each game he gives 100% and he reached this tournament in the perfect moment.”

“We're very proud of him. He got two awards that are very well deserved. He got this because of the group, but he did excellent work. It's very well deserved and we're proud of him.”

“It's not the first time that he has shown this performance and last year in China he was also the top scorer, so he's on the right way and I'm sure he will be looking to do even better in the next tournament and help the team.”

**“The Copa America is different and we will learn a lot from that. As a team from the Gulf, that will help us to have a better performance in 2022.”**

— Almoez Ali

“We are working on the target of the 2022 World Cup and we have started well with the Asian Cup,” he said. “We managed to win (the title) and defeat Japan and for the next step towards the World Cup, we will be preparing for that with the Copa America in Brazil.”

“We don't expect to get results but to learn more about football because we know the Copa America is one of the biggest tournaments in the world. The Copa America is different and we will learn a lot from that. As a team from the Gulf, that will help us to have a better performance in 2022.”



A young fan clicks a selfie with Qatar's Almoez Ali after the 2019 AFC Asian Cup champions arrived in Doha yesterday. **PICTURE:** Noushad Thekkayil





COMMENT

# WC hosts Qatar box clever, punch above their weight

Qatar conceded just one goal in Asian Cup and scored 19, winning all seven games

AFP  
Abu Dhabi

Coming from nowhere to win the Asian Cup is just part of the process for Qatar as they look ahead to this year's Copa America and then the big one — a home World Cup in 2022.

Felix Sanchez's team are keeping their expectations in check for the South American championship despite snatching the Asian title from a lowly world ranking of 93.

But it is hard to overstate their achievement in going from zero points at the last Asian Cup to their first continental title in record-breaking style.

It also means that Qatar are finally making headlines for the right reasons after the turbulence that has surrounded their successful bid to host the World Cup.

Almoez Ali's bicycle kick epitomised a stylish win as it sparked Qatar's 3-1 final victory over Japan and broke Ali Daei's 23-year-old mark for goals at single Asian Cup.

"I'm sorry for breaking Mr. Daei's record," a humble Ali said after scoring his ninth of the tournament.

"I expected to score goals — maybe three or four — but I didn't expect to score nine," he added.

Fittingly for a team that has punched above its weight, Akram Afif struck a boxing-style pose as he celebrated the late penalty that ended Japan's resistance.

Qatar conceded just one goal all tournament and scored 19, winning all seven games and beating former champions Saudi Arabia, Iraq and South Korea, as well as Japan.

They also thrived in a hostile environment in the United Arab Emirates owing to the ongoing Gulf blockade, with their fans largely barred from visiting and home spectators pelting them with shoes and bottles in the semi-finals.

The title raised the beguiling possibility of Qatar being crowned champions of both



Qatar captain Hassan al-Haydos receives the AFC Asian Cup winners' trophy from FIFA president Gianni Infantino and AFC president Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim al-Khalifa in the presence of QFA president Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, players and other officials on Friday.

Asia and South America, when they compete at the Copa America as guests in June-July.

But Ali said the Copa was all about learning for Qatar, continuing the methodical approach which has already paid dividends.

"We're not expecting to win, but just to learn because after the World Cup, the Copa America is the biggest competition in the world," Ali said.

"The weakest teams are in Asia, Asia is the weakest continent for football so in the Copa America we will learn more.

"We'll benefit a lot as a Gulf team — this will help us have a better performance in 2022."

After spending many millions of dollars on their world-class Aspire Academy, and scouring

the world for top coaches, Qatar are beginning to recoup their investment.

Head coach Felix Sanchez led Qatar to their first Asian under-19 title in 2014, and they reached the semi-finals at last year's Asian under-23s — where Ali was also the top-scorer.

Afif clocked up a tournament-record 10 assists and formed a devastating partnership with Ali, underlining Qatar's cohesion in both defence and attack after years spent playing together.

"We've been together seven years so I know exactly where Akram will be, where he will pass and he always knows what



Qatar's Akram Afif strikes a boxing-style pose to celebrate his late penalty that ended Japan's resistance on Friday. (Reuters)

to expect from me," Ali said.

"That's normal after all the time we've spent playing together. We get along very well together too."

Qatar's win sparked jubilant scenes back home in Doha but for the team, bigger goals now lie ahead.

"This is one step more to continue developing the team, to play another tournament in the summer and to be ready in 2022 to represent Qatar in the World Cup," Sanchez said.

## A look at those who lit up Asian Cup

AFP  
Abu Dhabi

From a record-breaking Qatar forward born who just couldn't stop scoring to a reluctant Kyrgyz sex symbol, AFP takes a look at five players who lit up the Asian Cup:

**LOAT LIKE A BUTTERFLY**  
Qatar's Almoez Ali scored an eye-popping record nine goals at a single Asian Cup, surpassing Iran legend Ali Daei's tally of eight in 1996 with a wonder strike in Abu Dhabi that sparked a 3-1 upset over Japan in the final.

The baby-faced striker had plastic bottles and shoes pelted at him after scoring in Qatar's 4-0 semi-final victory over hosts UAE, but had the last laugh as the 2022 World Cup hosts went on to lift the Asian Cup for the first time.

The Sudan-born Ali had been under investigation by tournament organisers after Emirati football officials lodged a protest over his eligibility. He was cleared to play in the final hours before kickoff and scored an outrageous overhead kick before walking off with the player of the tournament award for good measure.

**SAINTS AND SINNERS**  
Japan captain Maya Yoshida was the rock at the heart of Japan's run to the Asian Cup



Japan captain Maya Yoshida stands next to the AFC Asian Cup winners' trophy.

**LUX, BECAUSE HE'S WORTH IT**  
A little-known footballer from Kyrgyzstan became an instant sex symbol in the ex-Soviet republic after plundering a hat-trick against the Philippines to fire the White Falcons into the last 16 on their tournament debut.

The 29-year-old heart-throb Vitalij Lux, with the James Dean film-star looks and a name that sounds like a posh shampoo, admitted he was a little bemused by all the sudden attention.

Team officials revealed that Lux was a smash hit with the ladies back in Kyrgyzstan — but the bashful hunk insisted he would rather hide out in his hotel than get the David Beckham treatment.

**'IRANIAN MESSI'**  
Mercurial Iran striker Sardar Azmoun flounced away from the national team after last year's World Cup, upset with the abuse he had suffered from Iranian fans.

Coaxed back by coach Carlos Queiroz for the Asian Cup, the 24-year-old Rubin Kazan forward — dubbed the "Iranian Messi" — quickly rediscovered his mojo, scoring four goals before the tournament favourites were derailed by Japan in the semi-finals.

Azmoun, reportedly a target for Premier League club Wolves, cut a forlorn figure in a 3-0



Qatar's Saad al-Sheeb won Goalkeeper of the Tournament award.

defeat and was lucky not to be sent off for a petulant slap on a Japanese defender in a bitter end to an Asian Cup that had promised so much for Iran.

**ALL HANDS ON DECKCHAIRS**  
Though statistics suggest Qatar goalkeeper Saad al-Sheeb was one of the tournament's most underemployed players, he quietly set a record six clean sheets at a single Asian Cup as the 2022 World Cup hosts stormed into the final.

While al-Sheeb had the deckchairs out for much of the time behind a defence

boasting Asian footballer of the year Abdelkarim Hassan and faced only 11 shots on target, he showed cat-like reflexes when called upon — notably with two superb saves during Qatar's semi-final win over UAE.

As Qatar beat three former champions in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Son Heung-min's South Korea without ever looking seriously stretched, Al-Sheeb provided an immovable last line of defence for the tournament's shock winners and unsurprisingly was voted best goalkeeper.

FOCUS

# Qatar's win ignites hope for 2022

Reuters  
Abu Dhabi

Qatar running rampant to secure a maiden Asian Cup title in Abu Dhabi might have been the worst-case scenario for the hosts but it also offered hope for Gulf football that the 2022 World Cup might not now be a humiliating experience for the region.

Qatar coach Felix Sanchez said throughout the Asian Cup that his mission was to show that his young squad could match the best teams in Asia and they delivered, beating former champions Saudi Arabia, Iraq and South Korea on their way to the final.

On Friday, they conceded their first goal of the tournament but still stunned four-times champions and World Cup regulars Japan 3-1, with striker Almoez Ali setting an Asian Cup scoring record with his ninth strike.

It was a beauty, too, an overhead kick taken with such composure that you would never have guessed that Ali and his teammate Bassam al-Rawi were under the cloud of an eligibility row until only a few hours before kickoff.

Politics is never far from the surface in Asian football and the political and economic boycott of Qatar launched by the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt 18 months ago hung heavily over the later stages of the tournament.

There were almost no Qataris in the stadium to witness their triumph, with thousands of Omanis making the journey from the neighbouring sultanate to step in as proxy supporters.

Ali and his team mates had been pelted with sandals and drinks bottles for the temerity of celebrating their goals when the locals finally turned out to support the UAE in the semi-finals, only to witness a humiliating 4-0 rout.

In farcical scenes after Friday's final, Saudi journalists berated Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu for not having delivered the thumping they felt Qatar deserved, rants that the bemused Moriyasu answered with a polite "thank you".

The timing of the UAE FA protest against the eligibility of Ali and Al Rawi, which was dismissed, also left a sour taste in the mouth, looking at best like bad sportsmanship and at worst a politically-motivated attempt

to derail the Qataris.

Japan and Qatar will next play competitively as guest nations at the Copa America, a tacit admission that other Asian countries do not offer strong enough opposition to truly test a team with ambitions to compete at the highest level.

Ali made that charge explicit, declaring Asia was the weakest of football's regions and saying he needed to go to Europe to improve his game before 2022.

It was hard to argue with his analysis given the standard of some of the football at the first Asian Cup featuring an expanded 24-team field.

A format that left some teams still in with a chance of advancing despite losing their first two matches did not help, and neither did a lack of marketing which resulted in many UAE residents being completely unaware the Asian Cup was going on.

Champions Australia flopped in the quarter-finals mainly because of their inability to turn dominant performances into goals, while Saudi hopes that they could end their long wait since their third title lasted only until the round of 16.

Carlos Queiroz's Iran looked like they might end their 43-year drought until they were undone in the semi-finals by the only Japan performance that came anywhere near the dominant style that won the Samurai Blue four titles.

With some emotion, Portuguese Queiroz drew a close to his eight years in charge of Team Melli, as did China's Italian World Cup-winning coach Marcello Lippi following his error-prone side's defeat to Iran in the last eight.

There were some bright notes from nations with less footballing pedigree — India were denied a first run to the knockout stages only by a stoppage-time penalty and Vietnam's effervescent style took them to the last eight.

South Korea were joined by the one Asian player of world stature for their third match but a fatigued Son Heung-min failed to revive their lacklustre campaign and returned to Tottenham Hotspur after the quarter-final loss to Qatar.

Ali was named Player of the Tournament but the award could easily have gone to his forward partner Akram Afif, who sealed the title for Qatar when he coolly despatched a spot kick for the final goal of the 17th Asian Cup.

SPOTLIGHT

# British media praise Qatar's triumph

QNA  
London

British media have praised Qatar national team's historic achievement in the Asian Cup for the first time in their history after beating Japan 3-1 in a thrilling final at the Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi.

The BBC's website highlighted Qatari achievement on its homepage titled "World Cup 2022 hosts Qatar won their first ever Asian Cup with a 3-1 victory over four-time winners Japan".

It praised the performance of Qatar team as they had gone 10 hours and eight minutes without conceding a single goal at this year's competition prior to a goal by Japan's Minamino in the final.

The BBC added: "Qatar impress three years out from hosting World Cup."

The historical achievement of Al Annabi was also highlighted by the *Guardian* newspaper, which said on its sport page: "Qatar stunned Japan with 3-1 win to be crowned Asian Cup champions."

It added that Qatar team claimed a first continental title with a stunning 3-1 win over four-times champions Japan.

The newspaper also praised Almoez Ali who scored with a spectacular overhead kick for a record ninth goal of the Asian Cup to set Qatar on their way to a first continental title.

It also highlighted the role of Omani fans who had turned out

to support Qatar in the absence of their own fans, who were unable to travel because of the unjust blockade imposed by the siege countries.

Another article in the Independent said Almoez Ali scored with a spectacular overhead kick for a record ninth goal of the Asian Cup to set Qatar on their way to a first continental title with a stunning 3-1 win over four-times champions Japan.

It added Ali's early goal took him past Ali Daei's 1996 tally and helped the Qataris make an emphatic statement ahead of their hosting of the 2022 World Cup.

As for the *Daily Mail*, it said Almoez Ali scored spectacular overhead kick as Qatar managed to win the Asian Cup for the first time.

It added that Qatar made an emphatic statement ahead of the 2022 World Cup.

*France Football* newspaper covered the event under the title "Qatar makes history and wins its first Asian title."

Reuters news agency said Qatar stunned four-times champions Japan 3-1 in Abu Dhabi to claim the first ever continental title.

The *Guardian* newspaper said World Cup 2022 hosts Qatar beat Japan to win major Asian trophy.

Spanish newspaper *Mundo Deportivo* highlighted the game and talked about Spanish Felix Sanchez, the Qatar coach, saying he led the Qatari team to win the Asian Cup.

Australia's FTBL chose a headline saying: "Impressive Qatar beat Japan to win Asian Cup."



ASIAN CHAMPS ARRIVE TO ROUSING WELCOME



Members of the Qatar football team celebrate atop a bus as they take part in a parade along the Corniche yesterday.



Akram Afif poses with a welcoming party of children.



Qatar players celebrate with the flags of friendly countries.



Qatar coach Felix Sanchez kisses his son watched by his other children yesterday. **PICTURES:** Noushad Thekkayil and agencies



Salem al-Hajri poses with a group of children.



PREMIER LEAGUE

# Man City look to revive title bid against Arsenal

AFP  
Manchester

Pep Guardiola needs a quick response from his side against Arsenal today to show that Manchester City's challenge for the Premier League title remains intact. Guardiola can be thankful City will go into the match at the Etihad Stadium only five points behind leaders Liverpool.

It could well have been worse after a lethargic display brought a surprising 2-1 defeat at relegation-threatened Newcastle on Tuesday, but Jurgen Klopp's side struggled to take advantage as they were held to a 1-1 draw at home by Leicester the following night.

City could argue Tuesday's defeat was a blip, given they had won their previous eight matches, but three of those victories were in cup games against lower-division opposition.

A more worrying statistic for City manager Guardiola is that his team have

lost four of their past nine league fixtures, and that three of those defeats have been against teams who started this weekend in the bottom half of the table.

At St James' Park, City allowed their concentration to slip after Sergio Agüero had given them a first-minute lead, and there was a strong sense they missed the leadership skills of club captain Vincent Kompany, who has made just six league starts this season because of a series of fitness problems.

Without Kompany's authority, City are vulnerable to switching off, and that cost them heavily at Newcastle. They were not helped either by the tactics of their opponents, with Rafa Benítez setting up a 3-4-2-1 system that crowded the middle of the pitch and gave Fernando little space to operate in.

The Brazilian midfielder, who has been one of City's outstanding performers this season, did not have a good night in England's northeast, clumsily conceding the penalty from which Matt Ritchie scored the home side's winner.

City, though, need others around Fernandinho to be more consistent too. Kevin de Bruyne is one player still seeking that consistency, having so far failed to rediscover the form that made him the club's player of the year last season.

De Bruyne, undoubtedly struggling as a result of a long World Cup campaign with Belgium and a series of injury problems since, made only his third league start of the season at Newcastle, and was subdued. Guardiola needs the Belgium midfielder back to his best if City are to stand any chance of catching Liverpool.

But the optimistic City boss said: "If we didn't have the motivation, we would not be where we are, which is still in all competitions.

"We are in the Carabao (League) Cup final, still in the Champions League, and we are there in the league.

"People were saying not so long ago that we were the perfect team. My answer is the same now as it was then: Every game is a challenge.

"There are ups and downs during a season. Players cannot sustain the same level for 11 months of a season."

While Guardiola did not make any major signings during January, Arsenal could give a debut to former City youth midfielder Denis Suarez, who joined on Thursday from Barcelona for the rest of the season.

Manager Unai Emery is still looking for consistency from his players; a 22-match unbeaten sequence in the autumn suggested this might be a successful season, but since that run ended on December 16, Arsenal have gone out of both domestic cup competitions.

Their only serious hope of a trophy is in the Europa League, a tournament in which they have largely fielded fringe players this season.

Emery is aiming to make a little piece of history on Sunday; in 11 previous meetings as a manager with Guardiola, he has never won. If he were to end that run this weekend, the result would be welcomed warmly in north London, and perhaps at Anfield too.



Manchester City's Spanish manager Pep Guardiola.

SPOTLIGHT

# Spurs strike late as Higuain scores twice for Chelsea

Spurs are now just four points behind leaders Liverpool, who are in action on Monday

AFP  
London

Son Heung-min struck late to fire Tottenham into second place in the Premier League yesterday as Gonzalo Higuain opened his account for Chelsea in a five-goal rout at Stamford Bridge.

Spurs looked to be heading for their first league draw of the season at Wembley but Son's 83rd-minute goal earned Mauricio Pochettino's men a hard-fought 1-0 win over Newcastle and enabled them to leapfrog Manchester City, who play today.

Chelsea beat bottom side Huddersfield 5-0 thanks to two goals apiece from Higuain and Eden Hazard and a late header from David Luiz as they returned emphatically to goal-scoring form.

Tottenham are now just four points behind leaders Liverpool, who are in action at West Ham on Monday, but just as significantly they consolidated their position in the top four after their 19th win in 25 matches.

Spurs enjoyed more than 70% possession but faced a dogged Newcastle, buoyed by a stunning 2-1 win over Man-

**"We don't need to be in some position like today to convince ourselves about our capacity or potential. We believe in ourselves"**

chester City in midweek that carried the Magpies five points clear of the relegation zone.

An incredible clearance off the line from Fabian Schar denied what seemed a certain goal for Christian Eriksen and Fernando Llorente then looped a golden headed chance high and wide.

But Son again stepped up to the mark, just as he did with an equaliser against Watford in midweek, to compensate for the injured Harry Kane's absence with his 14th goal of the season.

The South Korean had a helping hand from Newcastle goalkeeper Martin Dubravka, who let Son's powerful effort slip beneath his grasp to undo all his side's good work.

"It is a massive result to be in a very good position in the table," said Pochettino. "We don't need to be in some position like today to convince ourselves about our capacity or potential. We believe in ourselves."

And the Argentine lauded Son's stamina since he re-



Chelsea's Gonzalo Higuain celebrates scoring their first goal against Huddersfield in the Premier League yesterday.

turned from the Asian Cup.

"Sonny is like a battery that you have that you work, work, work, work but when the battery is gone, it's gone," he said.

Chelsea manager Maurizio Sarri admitted before the match against bottom side Huddersfield that he had found it hard to get any rest since Wednesday's humiliating 4-0 defeat at Bournemouth.

His side, seeking to avoid a third straight Premier League defeat, went ahead in the 16th minute through Higuain and doubled their lead with an Hazard penalty on the stroke of half-time.

Both players scored again midway through the second half and Luiz made it 5-0 with a late strike as Chelsea returned to the top four at the

expense of Arsenal.

Higuain, 31, was signed on loan until the end of the season from Juventus to help the 2016/17 champions rediscover their sharpness in front of goal.

Elsewhere, struggling Fulham were unable to recapture the spirit of their dramatic midweek comeback against Brighton, losing 2-0 to Crystal Palace.

Wolves consolidated their position in seventh place by beating Everton 3-1 at Goodison Park, while Southampton conceded a penalty deep into added time to draw 1-1 at Burnley. The match between Brighton and Watford finished goalless.

In the late kick-off, Cardiff are playing at home for the first time since the disappearance

of a plane carrying new signing Emiliano Sala from France.

Defending champions Manchester City, five points adrift

of leaders Liverpool, host Arsenal today, with Manchester United travelling to former champions Leicester.

## RESULTS AND STANDINGS

Tottenham.....1	Newcastle Utd.0	6 Man United	24	13	6	5	48	35	45
Crystal Palace.....2	Fulham.....0	7 Wolverhampton	25	11	5	9	33	32	38
Burnley.....1	Southampton.....1	8 Watford	25	9	7	9	33	34	34
Chelsea.....5	H Field Town.....0	9 Everton	25	9	6	10	36	36	33
Brighton & Hove0	Watford.....0	10 Bournemouth24	10	3	11	37	42	33	
Albion Everton...1	Wolverhampton3	11 Leicester	24	9	5	10	30	30	32
Cardiff Bournemouth	1730	12 West Ham	24	9	4	11	30	37	31
		13 Brighton	25	7	6	12	27	36	27
		14 Crystal Palace25	7	5	13	26	33	26	
		15 Newcastle Utd25	6	6	13	21	33	24	
		16 Southampton25	5	9	11	27	42	24	
1 Liverpool	24	19	4	1	55	14	61		
2 Tottenham	25	19	0	6	51	24	57		
3 Man City	24	18	2	4	63	19	56		
4 Chelsea	25	15	5	5	45	23	50		
5 Arsenal	24	14	5	5	50	33	47		
		17 Burnley	25	6	6	13	26	46	24
		18 Cardiff	24	5	4	15	20	46	19
		19 Fulham	25	4	5	16	25	55	17
		20 H.field Town25	2	5	18	13	46	11	

FOCUS

## Buffon would like to stay a second season at PSG



AFP  
Paris

Goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon said yesterday that he wants "to stay another season" at Paris Saint-Germain.

The 41-year-old, who played 176 times for Italy and won the World Cup in 2006, arrived as a free agent from Juventus last summer on a one-year contract with an option for a second.

At PSG, he has split goal-keeping duties with Alphonse Areola, who was part of the France squad that won the World Cup last summer.

"If Alphonse and the club want it, I would stay another season here, but for the moment, it's important to stay focused on the objective, the match in Lyon, then Bordeaux and after that Manchester," Buffon said.

Runaway Ligue 1 leaders PSG visit third-placed Lyon today and take on Manchester United in the last 16 of the Champions League on February 12 and March 6.

"As to my contract for the next season, we have plenty of time to think about it," said Buffon, at a press conference he gave with Areola yesterday.

Meanwhile, coach Thomas Tuchel said he was "not com-

pletely satisfied" with the club's dealings in the January transfer window but that he "wasn't angry."

Tuchel had asked for two players to increase his defensive options, but the club only landed one.

"Angry, no, no," the German said. "The winter transfer window is so complicated. Who wants to lose a player?"

"There are very few possibilities in the winter transfer window. The challenge is putting together a team during the summer."

"If you need to do a lot of deals in the winter, you will probably be disappointed," Tuchel added. At Christmas, he asked for "a second (Marco) Verratti and a second Marquinhos" but PSG only bought Argentine midfielder Leandro Paredes for an estimated 47mn euros (\$54mn) from Zenit Saint Petersburg, while Everton turned down PSG bids for Idrissa Gueye.

PSG have lost Neymar with injury until early April and midfielder Adrien Rabiot remains at the club after the transfer window but has expressed his desire to leave.

"If you ask if I'm satisfied with Paredes, I say clearly yes," Tuchel said. "He has the quality and personality to play for PSG," he said. "He has a good vision of the game. He can accelerate play. He can make a lot of passes."

## Search for missing Sala plane to begin today

**London:** The privately-funded search for the missing plane carrying Argentinian footballer Emiliano Sala will begin today, conditions permitting, the scientist leading the mission said yesterday.

Sala was travelling from France to join up with his new club, Premier League strugglers Cardiff City, in a light aircraft on January 21 when it went missing close to the Channel Islands.

Suspected debris from the plane washed up on the Normandy coastline on Wednesday.

Marine scientist David Mearns, who is directing the private search on behalf of the Sala family, said: "Tomorrow the weather will be good. We will be able to

operate tomorrow."

The search will be conducted "in close co-ordination" with the Air Accidents Investigation Branch (AAIB), with two vessels scouring around four square nautical miles of sea bed north of the Channel island of Guernsey.

Sala was flying in the Piper PA-46 Malibu plane after transferring from French team Nantes in a 17mn euro move. It vanished from radar around 20 kilometres (12 miles) north of Guernsey, with pilot Dave Ibbotson the only other person aboard.

Rescue workers suspended the official search for the aircraft last Thursday after an intensive hunt involving planes and boats failed to locate it.



NBA

# Irving nets 23 points in front of admiring Knicks fans

‘Obviously what’s going on in terms of that noise and commentary is just a bunch of nonsense right now’



New York Knicks forward Kevin Knox (left) shoots the ball past Boston Celtics center Al Horford during the first-half at Madison Square Garden. **PICTURE:** USA TODAY Sports

AFP  
Los Angeles

Kyrie Irving, who could become a free agent at the end of the season, finished with 23 points, 10 rebounds and six assists as the Boston Celtics defeated the struggling New York Knicks 113-99 Friday.

The contest came just one day after the Knicks traded injured Kristaps Porzingis to the Dallas Mavericks which will give New York the funds to go after top free agents this summer.

Knicks fans are hoping Irving will be willing to sign with them - and he got a loud ovation from the crowd of 19,700 at Madison Square Garden when the starting lineups were announced. A “We want Kyrie! We want Kyrie!” chant echoed through the arena in the third quarter.

“It’s nothing but a distraction at this point,” said Irving, who was born in Melbourne, Australia but grew up in New Jersey. “Like I said, I’m appreciative of the

fan support I get in any arena,” he said on Friday. “Obviously what’s going on in terms of that noise and commentary is just a bunch of nonsense right now.

“Can’t do anything about it so I’m just accepting, I’m appreciative, but at the same time I’ve got a game to focus on.”

The New York fans’ admiration might be misdirected as Irving already made a point at a Celtics’ fan event last fall of telling the crowd he would re-sign with Boston.

Although he seemed to back off on that somewhat Friday when asked if his mind has changed about remaining a Celtic. “Ask me July 1,” he said.

Marcus Morris added 18 points for the Celtics, who won for the eighth time in nine games. Damyean Dotson scored 22 points and Kevin Knox had 21 for the hapless Knicks, who lost their 12th straight. New York has now started February with a loss after losing 24 of 27 games in December and January.

In Thursday’s multi-player deal, the Knicks gave up Porzingis, Tim Hardaway, Courtney Lee and Trey Burke to Dallas and received Dennis Smith, DeAndre Jor-

RESULTS		
Denver	136-122	Houston
Oklahoma City	118-102	Miami
Boston	113-99	New York
Utah	128-112	Atlanta
Charlotte	100-92	Memphis

dan and Wesley Matthews, plus two future first-round picks. The Knicks’ new players weren’t available, so they started Dotson and Kadeem Allen as guards.

Dallas announced Friday that Porzingis likely will not play this season as he continues to recover from a torn ACL injury.

Elsewhere, Paul George scored 43 points and had a career-high 10 three-pointers as the Oklahoma City Thunder beat the Miami Heat 118-102, extending the NBA’s longest current winning streak to seven games.

“Paul George, tonight, was tremendous,” Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. “One of the more impressive shooting displays I’ve seen this season.”

Russell Westbrook got his fifth straight triple-double and 18th of the season, finishing with 14 points, 12 rebounds and 14 assists as the Thunder defeated the Heat for the sixth consecutive time. “There were some real good positive things to take from the game all the way around,” Thunder coach Billy Donovan said.

Kelly Olynyk scored 21, Josh Richardson scored 18 and Hassan Whiteside finished with 12 points and 16 rebounds in the loss.

In the late game, Nikola Jokic had 31 points and 13 rebounds and Malik Beasley had a career-high 35 points as the Denver Nuggets beat James Harden and the Houston Rockets 136-122.

Harden scored 30 points to stretch his streak to 25 games of scoring 30 or more points. He needed a late three-pointer to keep the streak alive. Harden’s streak started with a 50-point night against the Los Angeles Lakers on December 13, and nearly ended on a difficult shooting game for the reigning league MVP. During one stretch Harden missed 10 of 11 shots and four free throws.

GOLF

# Eagle flurry sends Li in joint lead

AFP  
King Abdullah Economic City, Saudi Arabia

Li Haotong made four eagles, including a record three on par-4 holes, to catch up with former world No1 Dustin Johnson on top of the leaderboard at the end of the penultimate round of the inaugural Saudi International yesterday.

The 23-year-old Chinese star was in the news recently when he was controversially penalised two shots on the final hole of the Dubai Desert Classic under the new Rules of Golf after his caddie was deemed to have lined up his putt. The penalty had dropped him from tied third place to a share of 12th position.

Yesterday, at the Royal Greens Golf Club, Li was in rampant form as he started with a chipped-in eagle on the par-4 first hole, and then chipped in for another eagle on the 10th hole. He then drove the par-4 17th hole for his third eagle, and then made his putt from eight feet on the par-5 18th after reaching the green in two.

It was the first time since the European Tour started keeping records in 1999 that a player made three birdies on a par-4 hole, and his four eagles matched the effort of Mark Pilkington in the second round of the 2007 Singapore Masters.

On the PGA Tour, Willie Wood (1990 Pebble Beach Pro-Am, third round) and Scott McCarron (1995 Bob Hope Chrysler Classic, second round) have made four eagles in a single round.

Li finished on eight-under par 62 and caught up with Johnson (65) at 16-under par 194. England’s Tom Lewis (62) moved to third place on his own, but he was five shots behind the leaders at 11-under 199.

Johnson seemed to be powering ahead with four consecutive birdies around the turn - hitting his approach shot on the difficult and long par-4 ninth to four feet, and then getting to similar length with a chip on the 10th and his tee shot on the 164-yard par-3 11th. On the 12th, he drained a long 30-footer putt to go four ahead at that stage.

But with back-to-back eagles on the 17th and 18th holes, Li finally caught up with the American.

Johnson, who shot a 61 on Friday, could not capitalise on the 17th and 18th holes which were playing easy and downwind, but he was happy with his Golf.

“I thought I played well. Probably played just as well as I did yesterday. Gave myself a lot of opportunities. Made a lot of good putts. Just holed a few more yesterday than I did today,” he explained.

New Zealand’s Ryan Fox and Frenchman Alex Levy both shot rounds of 67 to move to tied fourth place at nine-under par, seven behind the joint leaders.

Former US Masters champion Sergio Garcia was disqualified during the Saudi International third round for intentionally damaging the greens at the Royal Greens Golf and Country Club in King Abdullah Economic City.

Garcia apologised in a statement posted on the European Tour website.



Storming finish lifts Fowler to Phoenix lead

Rickie Fowler birdied his last four holes on Friday to seize a one-shot lead - and at least temporary bragging rights - over good friend Justin Thomas after two rounds of the US PGA Tour’s Phoenix Open.

“It’s fun, getting to play with your buddies, those are the people you want to lose to the least,” Fowler said after his sizzling finish propelled him to a six-under par 65 at TPC Scottsdale. His 13-under par total of 129 put him one stroke on front of Thomas, who carded a five-under 66 and at 130.

It was a further stroke back to South African Branden Grace, who highlighted his 64 with a hole-in-one, and American Trey Mullinax. Fowler, who shared the overnight lead with Thomas - his housemate this week - and Harold Varner, was two-under for the day after three birdies and a bogey when he birdied 15 to launch his run. At the par-three 16th, where a raucous crowd of thousands surrounds the green, he rolled in a 10-footer. He drained a 13-foot birdie at 17 and capped his round with an eight-foot birdie.

“I hit some really good putts to finish the day off,” said Fowler. But with two runner-up finishes in Phoenix on his resume, the American was well aware that there remains “a lot of Golf to be played”. “We’re halfway, and we’re going to battle it out,” he said.

Thomas made the last of his six birdies at the 15th, bouncing back from his first bogey of the week at 14.

NHL

# Lightning squeak by Islanders in shootout

Reuters  
New York

Victor Hedman scored the only goal in the shootout Friday night as the Tampa Bay Lightning edged the host New York Islanders 1-0.

The Lightning have alternated wins with losses in their last seven games. The Islanders have lost two straight but only five of their last 20 (15-3-2).

It was the Islanders’ first 1-0 game decided in overtime or shootout since a shootout win over Philadelphia on Nov. 24, 2014, and the Lightning’s first 1-0 game decided in overtime or shootout since an overtime loss to the New York Rangers on March 6, 2017. Lightning goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy made 36 saves in regulation and overtime.

Islanders goalie Thomas Greiss recorded 41 saves in regulation and overtime. Hedman’s lone goal, scored on the Lightning’s first shot in the shootout, capped a spirited, defensive-minded battle of division leaders that served as an appetiser for a potential Eastern Conference finals matchup.

Though there were just five penalties called, there were several on-ice skirmishes, including a mix-up in the Lightning’s crease at the end of the first period.

The teams combined for 72 scoreless shots in regulation. The Islanders had the best opportunities during the first two periods, including a pair of breakaway chances by Ryan Pulock that were turned away by Vasilevskiy in the opening 20 minutes.

RESULTS		
Chicago	7-3	Buffalo
Nashville	4-1	Florida
Tampa Bay	1-0	Islanders
Pittsburgh	5-3	Ottawa
Washington	4-3	Calgary
Detroit	3-2	Toronto
Carolina	5-2	Las Vegas
Dallas	3-1	Minnesota

Vasilevskiy also stopped Valtteri Filppula at point-blank range midway through the second with a kick save that dislodged the goal from its moorings.

The Lightning’s best early chance came late in the second period, when Hedman had a brief opening at a breakaway before Islanders defenseman Johnny Boychuk and Nick Leddy caught Hedman and wrapped him up deep in the New York zone.

Tampa Bay buzzed throughout the first half of the third period, during which it held a 14-5 shot advantage. The Islanders nearly scored with a little more than eight minutes left, when Jordan Eberle forced a turnover behind the Lightning net and was stuffed by Vasilevskiy, who also smothered a pair of putback attempts by Anders Lee.

Boychuk and Leddy then teamed up again to slow down Anthony Cirelli with a little less than three minutes to go. Pulock shovelled Brayden Point’s shot out of the crease in the final minute.

## RUST, GUENTZEL POWER PENGUINS PAST SENATORS

Bryan Rust and Jake Guentzel each scored twice Friday as the Pittsburgh Penguins held on for a 5-3 win over the visiting Ottawa Senators for their second straight win.

Teddy Blueger also scored, and Phil Kessel and Sidney Crosby each had two assists for the Penguins, who built leads of 3-0 and 4-1. Goaltender Casey DeSmith stopped 37 of 40 Senators shots. Bobby Ryan, Mikkel Boedker and Matt Duchene scored for Ottawa, which lost its third in a row. Anders Nilsson made 35 saves and picked up an assist.

The Penguins played without center Evgeni Malkin. The team announced before the game he has an upper-body injury. Pittsburgh did have Nick Bjugstad and Jared McCann in the lineup. They were acquired earlier in the day in a trade with Florida and arrived about 15 minutes before puck drop. Bjugstad picked up a secondary assist. Blueger, playing in his second NHL game, got his first goal to open the scoring at 3:19 of the first.

Matt Cullen dug the puck out of the corner and set up a Blueger blast from the left dot. At 17:55 of the first, Guentzel scored his 25th to give Pittsburgh a 2-0 lead.

He scored on a one-timer off a backhand feed from Crosby. Rust scored his 12th goal in the past 21 games to make it 3-0 at 11:36 of the second.

His shot from the top of the slot went over Nilsson’s glove. On an Ottawa power play, Ryan cut it to 3-1 at 15:00 of the second. He sped to the net and converted a feed from Ryan Dzingel.



Tampa Bay Lightning’s Victor Hedman celebrates with his teammates after scoring game winning goal against the New York Islanders at NYCB Live’s Nassau Coliseum in Uniondale, New York. (Getty Images/AFP)



SIX NATIONS

# Scotland make winning start with 33-20 victory

Reuters  
Edinburgh

Winger Blair Kinghorn scored a hat-trick of tries and pivot Finn Russell provided decisive moments of genius as Scotland got their Six Nations campaign off to a winning start with a 33-20 victory over Italy at Murrayfield yesterday.

Scotland scored five tries to three for Italy for a deserved win, headlined by Kinghorn's three scores but inspired by Russell's clever touches, both out of the hand and with the boot.

But Scotland will be concerned after letting a 31-3 lead slip in the final 10 minutes after Simon Berghan was yellow carded and Italy took advantage of the one-man advantage to score through Guglielmo Palazzani, Edoardo Padovani and Angelo Esposito to give some late gloss

to their score. Stuart Hogg got Scotland's third try, although television replays cast doubt on its veracity, and substitute Chris Harris went over for their fifth.

Italy opened the scoring from Tommaso Allan's penalty but Scotland led 12-3 at halftime, going on to open up a 28-point lead before allowing Italy to come back late on a clear but icy-cold afternoon.

Italy's ninth-minute penalty came after Ryan Wilson was penalised for a spear tackle on 35-year-old Italian captain Sergio Parisse, who broke Brian O'Driscoll's record of Six Nations caps with his 66th competition appearance, all of them as a starter.

Their 3-0 advantage lasted just three minutes before Scotland got their first score as Russell delivered an inch-perfect crossfield kick into the arms of Kinghorn, who had a simple sprint to the line.

The winger went over again 10

minutes later after captain Greig Laidlaw shifted the ball to the left after a turnover and it went through several hands before Kinghorn crossed over.

At the start of the second half, Russell stabbed through a clever grubber kick over the Italy line that Hogg chased and got a touch on, but there did not seem to be any downward pressure on the ball from the Scotland fullback.

Nevertheless referee Luke Pearce, on his test debut, awarded it, then referred it to the TMO and got a positive second opinion even though television replays continued to cast doubt.

A break from Jamie Ritchie and another subtle Russell off-flood saw Kinghorn complete his hat-trick in the 54th minute and eight minutes later there was another home try, this time for replacement Harris, with Russell again involved in the build-up.

Scotland lost focus and allowed Italy a sudden glimmer of

hope after Berghan was sent to the sinbin for collapsing the ball.

Palazzani, who had to play from the kickoff after first-choice scrumhalf Tito Tebaldi was hurt in the pre-match warm-up, went over from close to the line, then Padavani burst through for the second and winger Esposito finished off the late rally with another breakaway try.

**NORTH DOUBLE HELPS WALES PAST FRANCE**

A George North try double helped Wales overcome a 16-point first-half deficit to seal a dramatic 24-19 victory over France in the 2019 Six Nations opener and equal their longest winning sequence since 1999.

In an uncharacteristically error-ridden first-half, Wales spilled the ball and conceded turnovers under pressure from a fantastic showing by the home back-row led by ubiquitous No 8

Louis Picamoles.

Despite racing to a 16-0 half-time lead, France were left to rue their woeful goal kicking at the rain-hit Stade de France, Morgan Parra and Camille Lopez combining to miss 13 points with their respective boots.

"I'd be lying if I didn't say that was a relief. Credit to George North and the defence, who came through in the conditions," captain Alun Wyn Jones told BBC.

"We hold our hands up and say we came out a bit cold in the first half but we learnt pretty quickly at the start of the second half as we should have."

France opened at a lick and when Wenceslas Lauret secured a turnover in their own half, Yoann Huget charged up the field. The winger was brought down, but after several phases was back in the thick of it, combining with Lopez to find Picamoles on the outside.



Scotland's wing Blair Kinghorn (left) celebrates with Scotland's flanker Jamie Ritchie after scoring his third try during their Six Nations match against Italy at Murrayfield in Edinburgh, Scotland, yesterday. (AFP)

CRICKET

# Opener Karunaratne stretchered off as Sri Lanka chase big total

'We lost a couple of wickets afterwards so it was definitely a distraction'



Team doctors check Sri Lanka's batsman Dimuth Karunaratne after being hit by a delivery from Australia's Pat Cummins during day two of the second Test at Manuka Oval Cricket Ground in Canberra yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Canberra

Opener Dimuth Karunaratne was rushed to hospital after a frightening blow by a bouncer yesterday as Sri Lanka chased a massive 534 for five when skipper Tim Paine declared.

In overcast conditions, the home team resumed day two of the second Test in Canberra on 384 for four and extended their lead to a massive 534 for five when skipper Tim Paine declared.

At stumps, Sri Lanka were 123 for three in reply with Kusal Perera on 11 and Dhananjaya de Silva not out one. Paine's declaration looked premature given the ease with which Sri Lanka's openers weathered the new-ball attack led by under-pressure Mitchell Starc.

On a flat Manuka Oval track Karunaratne and Lahiru Thirimanne saw off some lightning quick deliveries and a bouncer barrage and had built an 82-run stand before disaster struck.

Playing in his 58th Test, Karunaratne was 46 not out when a rising Pat Cummins ball glanced off his shoulder and onto his hel-

met, close to the neck area.

He slumped to the ground, dropping his bat as Australian players ran to assist.

A doctor and physio sprinted onto the ground and called for more medics and after some 10 minutes, he was put on a stretcher and taken off the field on a golf buggy. Cricket Australia said he complained of pain in the neck and tingling to the hands and was ferried to hospital.

Coach Chandika Hathurusingha said later he was in "good spirits" and "in no danger".

"It hit on the back of the neck so he is being assessed," he added. It clearly unsettled Thirimanne who fell to spinner Nathan Lyon for 11 in the next over, caught by Usman Khawaja at slip.

Cummins then clean-bowled Kusal Mendis for six and when captain Dinesh Chandimal gloved a Starc ball to Paine behind the stumps for 15, the tourists were in trouble. "We lost a couple of wickets afterwards so it was definitely a distraction," admitted Hathurusingha. The impressive Kurtis Patterson was not out 114 and Paine on 45 at the declaration with Vishwa Fernando the pick of the Sri Lankan bowlers with 3-126.

Scorecard	
SRI LANKA 1ST INNINGS	AUSTRALIA 1ST INNINGS
D. Karunaratne <i>retired hurt</i> 46	( <i>overnight 384-4; T. Head 161</i> )
L. Thirimanne <i>c Khawaja b Lyon</i> 41	J. Burns <i>b Rajitha</i> 180
D. Chandimal <i>c Paine b Starc</i> 15	K. Patterson <i>not out</i> 114
K. Mendis <i>b Cummins</i> 6	T. Paine <i>not out</i> 45
K. Perera <i>not out</i> 11	<b>Extras</b> (lb3 nb10, w4) 17
D. de Silva <i>not out</i> 1	<b>Total</b> (5 wickets declared, 132 overs) 534
<b>Extras</b> (lb2, b1) 3	<b>Fall of wickets:</b> 1-90 (Thirimanne), 2-101 (Mendis), 3-120 (Chandimal)
<b>Total</b> (3 wickets, 43 overs) 123	<b>Bowlers:</b> Rajitha 28-5-103-1, Fernando 30-3-126-3, C. Karunaratne 22-0-130-1, Perera 32-4-112-0, De Silva 20-2-60-01.
<b>Fall of wickets:</b> 1-90 (Thirimanne), 2-101 (Mendis), 3-120 (Chandimal)	
<b>Bowlers:</b> Starc 8-2-32-1, Richardson 9-4-23-0, Cummins 10-2-25-1, Lyon 16-5-40-1.	

After being dropped on his first ball, Patterson, who earned a debut in the first Test at Brisbane after hitting 157 and 102 for a Cricket Australia XI in a warm-up against Sri Lanka, never looked back.

The New South Welshman shored up his credentials ahead of an Ashes tour to England later this year by bringing up his maiden hundred with a drive to mid-off for three after starting

the day on 25.

"It's another nice milestone. I've played that innings in my mind ever since I was a little boy," said Patterson. "More importantly, it just put the team in a position to win another Test match." Following a century drought stretching back to October when Khawaja scored 141 against Pakistan in Dubai, it turned into a flood in Canberra with three players bringing up

the magical mark.

Opener Joe Burns punished the inexperienced Sri Lankan attack on Friday in a 308-run stand with Travis Head (161), carrying his bat through the day.

But he only lasted five overs Saturday after resuming on 172, adding eight runs before chopping a delivery from quick Kasun Rajitha onto his stumps.

He trudged off dejected after missing a glorious chance to notch a first Test double century against a team missing its three first-choice pace bowlers - Suranga Lakmal, Lahiru Kumara and Dushmantha Chameera - through injury.

Burns' departure brought the consistent Paine to the crease, who kept the pressure on the visitors, still reeling after being beaten at the first Test in Brisbane by an innings and 40 runs.

At the other end Patterson grabbed his chance with both hands, smashing 14 fours and a six in his breakthrough knock.

Patterson was preferred for Brisbane and Canberra to young batting prospect Will Pucovski, who was released from the squad late Friday to deal with mental health issues that have plagued him in the past.

RUGBY

## Resurgent England upset holders Ireland

Reuters  
Dublin

Resurgent England upset Six Nations champions Ireland yesterday, handing Joe Schmidt a first ever home defeat in the championship with a resounding 32-20 victory that blew the tournament wide open at the first weekend.

Ireland coach Schmidt had predicted the clash between the holders and England, champions in 2016 and 2017, would be decided in the last quarter but it was over far sooner than that as the four-try visitors ran away from his uncharacteristically sloppy side. England made a sensational start and never really looked back, stunning the hosts with a try after just 90 seconds.

After a clever lineout handed Manu Tuilagi a typically thumping reintroduction to Six Nations action, England went through a couple of fast phases

to draw Keith Earls out of the Ireland defensive line and hand Jonny May a clear two-on-one.

The try was the visitors' first in Dublin in eight years and while Ireland, as they so often do under Schmidt, appeared to compose themselves, they were being forced into a raft of errors that would come back to haunt them throughout the game. England's targeting of Robbie Henshaw in his first start at fullback for Ireland since his debut six years ago was also reaping early dividends.

First though, the hosts briefly grabbed the lead back with a Johnny Sexton penalty and - after looking like they had spurned Tom Curry's 10 minutes in the sin bin - barrelled over for a Cian Healy try upon the England flanker's return to the fray. But they gifted the advantage back five minutes later when Jacob Stockdale tried to field an Elliot Daly dink through under pressure only to juggle it over the line where the ball fell back at the feet of a grateful Daly.



England's centre Henry Slade dives over the line to score a try during the Six Nations match against Ireland at the Aviva Stadium in Dublin yesterday. (AFP)

SECOND TEST

## Patient Bravo helps Windies extend lead

AFP  
North Sound, Antigua and Barbuda

Darren Bravo's ultra-patient half-century extended the West Indies first innings lead to 119 as the home side were eventually dismissed for 306 on the third morning of the second Test against England yesterday.

Trailing in the three-match series after suffering a 381-run defeat in the first Test in Barbados, England openers Rory Burns and debutant Joe Denly survived four overs in reaching nine without loss at the interval at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium in Antigua.

Bravo was the lone West Indies batsman to fail in both innings of the match at Kensington Oval and made amends in a manner completely against his nature, his even 50 coming off 216 deliveries, the slowest-ever by a West Indies batsman in Test Cricket in terms of balls faced.

In stark contrast to the watchful defiance which typified his near six-hour occupation of the crease, the left-

hander was last out when he charged down the pitch at Moeen Ali to be stumped.

It was the off-spinner's third wicket of the innings.

Stuart Broad, England's outstanding bowler on the second day when he picked up three wickets, was left empty-handed on the third morning as opening partner James Anderson finally got among the wickets to limit the West Indies quest for a sizeable first innings advantage after he resumed at 272 for six.

He first removed Jason Holder, who contributed 22 to a 45-run seventh-wicket partnership with Bravo, via a catch to stand-in wicketkeeper Jonny Bairstow.

England team officials have confirmed that although regular 'keeper Ben Foakes suffered no fracture when struck on the hand while batting on the first day on Thursday, Bairstow will do duty behind the stumps for the rest of the match.

Kemar Roach then became Anderson's second wicket courtesy of a fine diving catch by Ben Stokes at second slip when the tailender essayed a massive drive at the experienced swing bowler.



HORSE RACING

# No surprises as Pazeer, Gazwan win features

‘Pazeer has always been the best horse in my stable, especially among the Thoroughbreds. He won his last race impressively, but the distance was a little bit shorter than this one. Today, he repeated it again, and he won against the biggest horses in Qatar’



Trainer Ibrahim al-Malki and connections lead in Pazeer, with Eduardo Pedroza astride, after the victory in the HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al Thani Trophy yesterday. **PICTURES:** Juhaim



Trainer Julian Smart and jockey Theo Bachelot with Gazwan after the win in HH The Amir's Sword Trial (Gr3 PA).

**By Mikhail Bhat**  
Doha

Abdulatif Hussain al-Emadi-owned Pazeer has been one of the mainstays in Ibrahim al-Malki's Thoroughbred roster. And barring minor aberrations, the colt had a good strike rate having won 10 out of his 18 career outings going into yesterday's meeting.

Yesterday, in the USD100,000 HE Sheikh Joaan Bin Hamad Al Thani's Trophy, the five-year-old improved his record notching his 11th win with a confident run under Eduardo Pedroza in the 2200m race at the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club's Al Rayyan Park.

Once he snatched the advantage on the home straight, the Siyouni colt held off challenges from His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani's Veranda, helmed by Ronan Thomas for trainer Stefano Ibdio, closer to the post to win by half a length. Julian Smart-trained Al Shaman put up an impressive show surging from back of the pack to snatch third under Theo Bachelot, also in the famous royal blue and white stars silks like Thomas.

“Pazeer has always been the best horse in my stable, especially among the Thoroughbreds. He won his last race impressively, but the distance was a little bit shorter than this one,” al-Malki told *Gulf Times* referring to the colt's victory in the 2000m Umm Qarn Trophy last month.

“Today, he repeated it again, and he won against the biggest horses in Qatar. He deserves to be a champion here in Qatar,” added al-Malki, who also had a winner in Sheikh Faisal bin Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani's Surra Man Raa.

The horse notched his second straight victory winning the Local Thoroughbred Trial event for four-year-old and older horses.

There was nothing stopping Julian Smart-trained Gazwan once he grabbed the advantage on the top of the home straight in the HH The Amir Sword Trial (Gr3 PA) yesterday.

At eight years he was the oldest horse in the 2200m race for four-year-old and older horses, but that was no factor for the His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani-owned horse, with Bachelot in the saddle, to match pacemaker Aaley Al Mag'am up front.

Taking the advantage almost

RESULTS	
<b>Race 1:</b> 1. Fahim (Ronan Thomas), 2. Al Baraa (Eduardo Pedroza), 3. Barq Al Shajaa (Saleem Golam), 4. Aws (Adnan Hawa). Won by: 2 ¾, ¾, ½. Time: 1:34.54. Owner: Umm Qarn. Trainer: Alban de Mieulle.	Face (Tomas Lukasek), 3. Copleys Walk (Ronan Thomas), 4. Victory Laurel (Eduardo Pedroza). Won by: Nk, 1 ¼, Shd. Time: 1:24.14. Owner: Injaaz Stud. Trainer: Mohamed Jassim Ghazali.
<b>Race 2:</b> 1. AJS Al Maha (Tomas Lukasek), 2. AJS Al Moheeb (Ronan Thomas), 3. E'zaaz (Harry Bentley), 4. Soultia (Theo Bachelot). Won by: Nk, 4 ¼, 5. Time: 1:32.43. Owner: Al Jeryan Stud. Trainer: Hadi Nasser al-Ramzani.	<b>Race 7:</b> 1. Sharesa (Theo Bachelot), 2. Daloob (Faleh Bughanaim), 3. Al Naama (Ronan Thomas), 4. Qassy (Ryan Curatolo). Won by: ½, 1 ¼, ¾. Time: 1:45.18. Owner: Sheikh Khalifa bin Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani. Trainer: Julian Smart.
<b>Race 3:</b> 1. Darkanna (Jean Baptiste Hamel), 2. Anima Rock (Harry Bentley), 3. Cristofano Allori (Stephan Ladjadi), 4. Izzthatright (Theo Bachelot). Won by: 1 ½, 1 ¼, Hd. Time: 1:11.99. Owner: Al Thumama Racing. Trainer: Mohamed Hussain.	<b>Race 8:</b> 1. AJS Moaddie (Faleh Bughanaim), 2. Fakhir (Harry Bentley), 3. Winne Taouy (Theo Bachelot), 4. Al Junood (JP Guillaumbert). Won by: 2 ¾, 2, ¾. Time: 1:46.78. Owner: Al Jeryan Stud. Trainer: Hadi Nasser al-Ramzani.
<b>Race 4:</b> 1. Cococabala (Ivan Rossi), 2. Rex Place (Faleh Bughanaim), 3. Arabic Channel (Tomas Lukasek), 4. Julius Limbani (JP Guillaumbert). Won by: 3, ¾, Hd. Time: 1:25.78. Owner: Al Jasra Stud. Trainer: Tareq Essa Abdulla.	<b>Race 9:</b> 1. Gazwan (Theo Bachelot), 2. Al Walid (Faleh Bughanaim), 3. Spaghetti (Harry Bentley), 4. Rajeh (Ryan Curatolo). Won by: 3, 4 ¼, 2 ¾. Time: 2:27.67. Owner: His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani. Trainer: Julian Smart.
<b>Race 5:</b> 1. Surra Man Raa (Eduardo Pedroza), 2. Al Lusail (Faleh Bughanaim), 3. Abha (Ronan Thomas), 4. Footprintinthesand (Saleem Golam). Won by: 2 ¾, ½, ¼. Time: 1:54.29. Owner: Sheikh Faisal bin Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani. Trainer: Ibrahim al-Malki.	<b>Race 10:</b> 1. Pazeer (Eduardo Pedroza), 2. Veranda (Ronan Thomas), 3. Al Shaman (Theo Bachelot), 4. Jewel House (Ivan Rossi). Won by: ½, 1 ¼, ¼. Time: 2:19.59. Owner: Abdulatif Hussain al-Emadi. Trainer: Ibrahim al-Malki.
<b>Race 6:</b> 1. Nordic Dream (JP Guillaumbert), 2. Top	

one and a half furlongs out, Gazwan was off and away for a fantastic victory that had Smart yelling in celebration.

Al Shaqab Racing's Al Walid, ridden by Faleh Bughanaim for Alban de Mieulle, was second, ahead of Jassim Mohamed Ghazali-schooled Spaghetti, helmed

by Harry Bentley.

“I was told that probably the young horses will win (HH The Amir's) Sword this year, they are that good. So we waited. What I have got at home this year is a Gazwan who feels and trains better than he has been training in a while,” an ecstatic Smart

told *Gulf Times* yesterday.

“The race (Qatar National Day Trophy) with Yazeed last time, there was no pacemaker in the race, and we only lost by a nose (short head). Today, he followed the pacemaker and I believe he has beaten the track record. And we weren't even going quick. So

wait till (HH The) Amir's Sword and let's see what time is it that day.”

Smart's first winner on the day was Sharesa, who has been nothing less than impressive this season, taking her fourth consecutive victory in Qatar yesterday. Ridden by Bachelot in the colours of Sheikh Khalifa bin Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani, Sharesa began moving up the order on the outside coming on to the home straight in the mile-long Purebred Arabian Trial.

Bachelot and his partner went past two Al Shaqab Racing horses – Daloob and Al Naama – in the final furlong, and then held on to the position to win by half a length at the post. Daloob and Al Naama, both schooled by De Mieulle, finished second and third under Bughanaim and Thomas respectively.

Earlier, Qatari jockey Bughanaim rode a winner in the HH The Amir Silver Sword Trial for four-year-old Purebred Arabians. AJS Moaddie was the second winner on the day for trainer Hadi Nasser al-Ramzani and Al Jeryan Stud.

In a close finish to the mile-long Thoroughbred Cup Trial for four-year-olds and older horses, Injaaz Stud's Nordic Dream, rid-

den by JP Guillaumbert, edged out the competition by a neck to register his first career victory.

Ivan Rossi rode his second winner of the season when he partnered Tareq Essa Abdulla schooled Cococabala in the Thoroughbred 3 Year Old Trial event yesterday. An objection by Jean Baptiste Hamel over interference in the Thoroughbred Sprint Trial saw Mohamed Hussain-trained Darkanna pick up a victory in the six furlong run.

In the race, Harry Bentley had the favourite, Anima Rock, schooled by Ghazali, come in from wide on the home straight to close in on the rails leaving little room for Hamel and Al Thumama Racing's Darkanna. Eventually, the matters were settled in the steward's room, with Darkanna registering her first victory in Qatar, pushing Anima Rock to second, while Stephan Ladjadi had Cristofano Allori finish third.

Umm Qarn's Fahim built on his second place finish on debut last month to shed his maiden status in the day's first race, a seven furlong Local Purebred Arabian Novice Plate, under Thomas. In the Local Purebred Arabian Novice Cup, Lukasek rode Al Jeryan Stud's AJS Al Maha to her second victory this season.

FOCUS

## Serbia, Australia, Germany grab Davis Cup finals berths

**AFP**  
Paris

Former champions Serbia, Germany, Australia and Italy punched tickets to the Davis Cup finals yesterday, while Japan rallied from a 2-1 deficit as Taro Daniel won the decisive rubber to overcome China.

Serbia, playing without Australian Open champion Novak Djokovic, watched their 2-0 overnight lead evaporate in Tashkent as Uzbekistan roared back to send their clash to a fifth rubber. Denis Istomin partnered Sanjar Fayziev to a 2-6, 6-1, 6-3 win over Nikola Milojevic and Viktor Troicki in the doubles before he downed Dusan Lajovic 6-3, 6-4 in the singles.

But Filip Krajinovic picked up the decisive point by coming from behind to beat world number 280 Sanjar Fayziev 4-6, 6-3, 6-0 to nail down a place for Serbia at November's revamped finals in Madrid. Germany, who won the last of three titles in 1993, eased to victory over Hungary as Jan-Lennard Struff and Tim Puetz strolled to a 6-2, 6-3 doubles triumph to an unassail-



Germany's Alexander Zverev returns during the Davis Cup qualifiers against Hungary's Gabor Borsos in Frankfurt. (AFP)

able 3-0 advantage.

Third-ranked Alexander Zverev cruised to a 6-3, 6-4 win over Gabor Borsos in the first reverse singles as the countries opted to play out the remaining dead rubbers in Frankfurt.

Australia romped to a 4-0 rout of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Adelaide, as John Peers and Jordan Thompson clinched the tie with a 7-5, 6-1 defeat of Mirza Basic and Tomislav Brkic in the doubles. Teenager Alexei Popyrin, in his Davis Cup debut, followed up with a 6-1, 7-6 (7/2) win over Nerman Fatic, while the fifth match was not played.

Andreas Seppi guided Italy into the finals of the revamped competition after the 1976 champions dispatched India 3-1. Seppi brushed aside India's number one Prajnesh Gunneswaran 6-1, 6-4 in the first reverse singles tie on Kolkata's grass court after India avoided a whitewash by taking the doubles.

Italy, who had led 2-0, overnight were forced to extend the encounter after Simone Bolelli and Matteo Berrettini lost to Rohan Bopanna and Divij Sharan 6-4, 3-6, 4-6. Canada's Denis Shapovalov overcame Martin Klizan 7-6 (7/4), 6-4 to level

their tie with Slovakia at 2-2 in Bratislava and set up a winner-takes-all showdown between Felix Auger-Aliassime and Norbert Gombos.

Shapovalov and Auger-Aliassime had earlier dropped the doubles to Klizan and Filip Polasek, losing 3-6, 7-5, 6-3. Unheralded Swiss duo Henri Laaksonen and Jerome Kym kept their nation's hopes alive with a 4-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/1) win over Evgeny Donskoy and Andrey Rublev to trim Russia's lead to 2-1 in Biel.

Switzerland, the 2014 champions, are without both Roger Federer and Stan Wawrinka who have combined for a total of 23 Grand Slam singles titles.

Japan fought back after dropping the doubles to sweep the reverse singles in Guangzhou as Daniel clinched the final point with a tense 6-3, 6-7 (4/7), 6-3 victory over Li Zhe.

Yoshihito Nishioka thrashed Wu Yibing 6-2, 6-0 to level the tie after Gong Mao-Xin and Zhang Ze edged Ben McLachlan and Yasutaka Uchiyama 5-7, 7-5, 6-4. Kazakhstan are also through as Mikhail Kukushkin completed a 3-1 victory over Portugal by swatting Joao Sousa aside 6-4, 6-1.

TENNIS

## Bertens sets up final with Vekic

**AFP**  
Saint Petersburg

Dutch second seed Kiki Bertens beat Belorussian fourth seed Aryna Sabalenka in straight sets yesterday to set up a final with Donna Vekic of Croatia in the Saint Petersburg WTA indoor event.

The 27-year-old world number eight, who is seeking her eighth career title, won 7-6 (7/5), 6-2 in one hour 38 minutes to record her third win over Sabalenka in as many meetings.

“It was a really tough match,” Bertens said. “Aryna is a great player. She hits the ball really hard, so I had to stay aggressive where I could and just try to return the balls back where I couldn't. Luckily it was enough to win today.”

Both players looked nervous at the start producing a catalogue of unforced errors.

But Bertens was slightly more accurate, winning the opening set in a tiebreak after 56 minutes on court. In the second, Bertens tightened her grip on the play breaking twice for a commanding 4-0 lead.

Sabalenka, 10th in the WTA rankings, broke back to reduce the arrears but it was her last success in the match as Bertens broke again in the final game which lasted more than nine minutes sealing her spot in the



Netherlands' Kiki Bertens celebrates winning her semi-final against Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka yesterday. (Reuters)

final on the fourth match point.

Later yesterday Vekic, who was seeded eighth here, out-classed Russian veteran wild card Vera Zvonareva, now ranked 97th, 6-2, 6-2 to level their head-to-head record at one all.

Vekic, 30th in the WTA rankings, was in complete command from the start breaking her rival's serve twice for a one-set lead in 38 minutes.

The 34-year-old Zvonareva had beaten three higher-ranked opponents this week but looked tired and failed to match the

tempo maintained by the Croatian.

The second set was almost a carbon copy of the first as Vekic produced two more early breaks to claim her place before sealing her victory with a backhand volley after one hour 10 minutes on court.

“I'm really happy to be here in the final,” Vekic said. “It was much more difficult to win than the scoreline indicates. She's a really tough player, she gets a lot of balls back and I had to work really hard for every single point today.”