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CRICKET

Smith joins century party with Head as Australia dominate India in Gabba

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SPOTLIGHT

Real Madrid gear up for Intercontinental Cup final

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Real Madrid trained in the Spanish capital yesterday as they prepared for the Intercontinental Cup final against Pachuca, set to take place at Lusail Stadium in Qatar on Wednesday. The starting eleven from their La Liga clash with Rayo Vallecano on Saturday completed a recovery session, while the rest of the squad underwent intensive gym and on-pitch workouts.

David Alaba, Ferland Mendy and Kylian Mbappe trained separately as they continued their recoveries from injuries. While Alaba and Mendy have been ruled out of Wednesday's match, Mbappe remains in contention. The French forward, recovering from a muscle injury sustained dur-

ing the Champions League match against Atalanta last Tuesday, has been included in the travelling squad to Qatar. Meanwhile, Dani Carvajal and Eder Militao are sidelined for the rest of the season.

Brazilian star Vinicius Junior, who was substituted against Rayo as a precaution following his recent return from injury, participated in an intensive session alongside Eduardo Camavinga, who also featured in the weekend's draw against Rayo Vallecano. They were joined by Raul Asencio, Jesus Vallejo, Dani Ceballos, Endrick, and several youth players called up to bolster the first team.

Real Madrid's squad will continue training in Madrid before travelling to Qatar in pursuit of yet another addition to their illustrious trophy cabinet.

Despite dropping points against Rayo when a win would have propelled them to

the top of La Liga, Real Madrid, currently sitting third behind leaders Barcelona and Atletico Madrid, remain optimistic. Ancelotti is confident that his team is on the "right path" and is focused on lifting the FIFA Intercontinental Cup.

"We have a great chance to win a title on Wednesday, which would put the cherry on top of a great year," said head coach Carlo Ancelotti on Saturday.

Midfielder Jude Bellingham also turned his attention to Wednesday's final. Bellingham, who has scored in six successive La Liga matches, stressed the importance of shifting focus to the challenge ahead. Reacting to the Rayo Vallecano match on Instagram, star Bellingham wrote: "One of the more complicated away games but should be leaving with more than a point. Rest and refocus for an opportunity to win another title on Wednesday."



Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior (centre) trains with his teammates in Madrid yesterday.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Man United's late show deepens crisis at Man City

City have won just once in last 11 games, including eight defeats



Manchester United's Amad Diallo scores against Manchester City at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Manchester

Manchester United scored twice in the final three minutes to deepen Premier League champions Manchester City's crisis with a 2-1 win at the Etihad yesterday. City have now won just once in their last 11 games, a run that includes eight defeats.

Josko Gvardiol's first-half header had put Pep Guardiola's men in front. But United hit back for just Ruben Amorim's second win in five league matches since taking charge last month. Bruno Fernandes' penalty levelled before Amad Diallo squeezed home the winner from a narrow angle in the last minute of regular time. Defeat leaves City still in fifth, nine points off leaders Liverpool, who have a game in hand. United climb to 12th and within five points of their city rivals. The Red Devils will be hoping a dramatic victory can also be the starting point for Amorim to turn around the momentum of a rivalry that City have dominated over the past decade.

Amorim made a bold call before kick-off as both Marcus Rashford and Alejandro Garnacho were left out of the United squad with the Portuguese saying he "pays attention to everything". The United boss may have regretted

that call as early as the 12th minute when Mason Mount limped off to continue his injury-ravaged spell since joining from Chelsea 18 months ago.

It took 20 minutes for Phil Foden to have the first attempt on goal with a volley that flew just wide of Andre Onana's goal. But United's set-piece defending has been at the root of their poor start to life under new management.

For the third consecutive Premier League game they conceded from a corner as Kevin De Bruyne's deflected cross looped perfectly into the path of Gvardiol to head in on 36 minutes. A slow burn of a derby finally came to life seconds later when Kyle Walker and Rasmus Hojlund went head-to-head with both ending up getting booked.

Foden's double win this fixture for City last season on their way to an unprecedented fourth consecutive league title. But his lack of form and fitness has been one of the causes of City's struggles this season. However, Foden looked more like his old self as a jinking run and shot that deflected just wide came close to doubling City's lead before half-time.

United did not manage a single shot on target in the first 45 minutes and Amorim was growing visibly frustrated. A vintage City side under Guardiola would have put their neighbours to the sword, but English champions created nothing of note in the second period.

Diallo finally forced Ederson into action with a header that the Brazilian clawed around the post on the hour mark. Fernandes then missed a glorious chance to equalise 15 minutes from time when his dink over Ederson drifted wide with just the Brazilian to beat.

However, City were to be the architects of their own downfall. Matheus Nunes' short backpass played in Diallo, who was then chopped down by the Portuguese midfielder in his desperation to atone for the original error. Fernandes this time coolly sent Ederson the wrong way to level. City's defence was then undone by one simple long ball over the top by Lisandro Martinez that Diallo raced onto, rounded Ederson and kept his composure to find the net.

SARR STARS AS CRYSTAL PALACE BEAT BRIGHTON

Earlier, Crystal Palace savoured a first win over rivals Brighton since 2021 as a 3-1 victory lifted the Eagles four points clear of the relegation zone. Ismaila Sarr teed up Trevoh Chalobah for the opening goal before scoring twice himself to secure Palace's first success over the Seagulls in seven games.

Brighton could have gone level with Manchester City in fifth but have now failed to win in their last four games to slip down to ninth. Palace are unbeaten in five.

INTERCONTINENTAL CUP

Facing Real is like a dream come true for Pachuca players

More than nine months ago, Pachuca started a journey which has taken them over land and sea, from near and far, all the way to the FIFA Intercontinental Cup 2024 final in Qatar.

Los Tuzos, indeed, kickstarted their Concacaf Champions Cup campaign all the way back in March with a 6-0 thumping of Philadelphia Union, before a similarly comprehensive 7-2 aggregate victory over Herediano. Fellow Mexican outfit Club America were swept aside in the semi-finals, paving the way for a 3-0 victory over Columbus Crew in the June decider.

That victory clinched the club a sixth continental crown and secured their place in the FIFA Intercontinental Cup 2024. They faced a Botafogo side in the FIFA Derby of the Americas on December 11 at Stadium 974 which had recently claimed both continental and domestic honours, but showed no fear as they dismantled their Brazilian counterparts 3-0.

A match against Al Ahly in the FIFA Challenger Cup – the club's ninth game all told in this mammoth quest for global glory – stood between Guillermo Almada's charges and a place in the final against Real Madrid at Lusail Stadium on Wednesday.

Penalties would decide the destination of the trophy. Despite Pachuca missing their opening two spot-kicks, the Hidalgo-based club sensationally prevailed 6-5 after Al Ahly's Khaled Abdelfattah hit the crossbar in sudden death.

"All of my nerves went away, it's an indescribable emotion," defender Bryan Gonzalez said of the moment the ball hit the bar.

"I'm so happy for the result. It's a team effort and I'm proud of them. I'm very excited, very happy, [and] proud of this team for its unity, the humility that it has and now we'll continue working for what's ahead."

After captain Salomon Rondon and fellow forward Borja Baston saw their penalties saved and

clear the crossbar respectively, their opponents netted three on the bounce and were on the cusp of advancing, until missing two of their own. "I still can't believe it," defender Luis Rodriguez, who scored his side's seventh penalty, said following the game.

"Anyone can miss or make a penalty, but in that moment I thought of a thousand things, mostly my family. The penalties were crazy. We started by missing, but that's football – anything can happen and more so in penalties. Today, it was our turn to enjoy [a] triumph."

Despite travelling more than 8,000 miles to reach Doha and playing against Botafogo just three days prior, Pachuca attacked with intent and didn't stop until the final whistle after 120 minutes of intense action. Midfielder Nelson Deossa, who also converted from the spot, believes that will hold them in good stead going into their Madrid clash.

"The intensity to always go forward is something that we work on daily," the Colombian said. "We are an aggressive team and we always work on intensity, aggressiveness. It's something that always characterises us. I'm so happy about this win. It was a difficult game, but we knew how to face it and we got to the penalty shootout, it happened and we won, thank God."

Now, only Real Madrid stand in Pachuca's way of global glory and their fourth trophy of the year. The excitement in the Pachuca camp is palpable. "I feel very proud, very happy," Deossa continued.

"All of the work that we have been doing has a great [reward] and it is a big final, to face the biggest team in the world. We hope to come out as champions. It's a tough game, but we must dream it. Ever since you are a boy, you dream of these moments (facing Real Madrid)," Gonzalez added. "To achieve it is a boyhood dream of mine, it's an honour. Now, we're going to give it our all in this final and try to win it!" (fifa.com)



Pachuca players celebrate after their win over Al Ahly at the Stadium 974 in Doha on Saturday.

BRISBANE TEST

Head, Smith smash tons as Australia dominate India

Former captain Steve Smith goes past Steve Waugh's tally as he scores his 33rd Test century



Australia's Travis Head (left) and Steve Smith celebrate reaching their century on day two of the third Test against India at The Gabba in Brisbane yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Melbourne

Steve Smith clambered out of his form slump with a drought-breaking century and Travis Head smashed another big ton as Australia posted a commanding 405 for seven on day two of the third Test against India in Brisbane yesterday.

Smith batted away questions about his place in the team with a hard-earned 101 while Head marched on to a swashbuckling 152 to the delight of most of the 34,227-strong crowd at the Gabba.

"It was nice to get in, feel good," said Smith, who scored his 33rd Test ton and first since Lord's at the 2023 Ashes.

"I missed out for a little while now so it's nice to get three figures again."

It took Jasprit Bumrah to salvage something from a tough day for India, the pace spearhead taking three wickets after tea to finish the day with his 12th five-wicket haul.

Seizing the new ball, he had Smith edge to Rohit in

the slips to break a 241-partnership with Head before removing all-rounder Mitchell Marsh (five) and Head in quick succession. But Bumrah's bravery also amplified India's heavy reliance on their star quick.

Recalled pacer Akash Deep and spinner Ravindra Jadeja were wicketless while seamer Mohammed Siraj spent time off-field after clutching at his hamstring when bowling in the morning.

Alex Carey was unbeaten on 45 and Mitchell Starc was on seven at stumps, having pushed Australia past 400.

CHALLENGING WICKET

The day belonged to Head and Smith, the former backing up his match-winning 140 in the pink ball Test in Adelaide and the latter posting his 10th ton against India.

Hitting Deep for a single off his pads, Smith ended his longest streak without a hundred, bringing the Gabba crowd to their feet. The 35-year-old threw an icy stare at the Australian team and kissed the crest on his helmet.

Head hurtled to three figures, hitting a Bumrah full

Most hundreds for Australia in Tests

Player	Playing era	Tests	Centuries
RT Ponting	1995-2012	168	41
** SPD Smith	2010-2024	112*	33
SR Waugh	1985-2004	168	32
ML Hayden	1994-2009	103	30
DG Bradman	1928-1948	52	29
MJ Clarke	2004-2015	115	28
AR Border	1978-1994	156	27
DA Warner	2011-2024	112	26

** Denotes active player

toss for three in the final minutes before tea to bring up his ninth Test ton, then flying past 150 at nearly a run a ball.

"Nice to come out and start again, build a nice partnership and be able to contribute to the day," said Head. "It is a nice wicket ... It was challenging, they bowled pretty well."

Siraj had late reward when he had Australia skipper Pat Cummins caught behind for 20 but appeared well

short of his best. Head and Smith batted throughout the entire middle session, unravelling India's hard work in the morning.

Rohit Sharma's men had shared the points up to lunch, grabbing early wickets after only 13.2 overs were bowled on a rain-hit day one.

Australia resumed on 28 for no loss and Bumrah struck with his seventh ball of the morning having opener Usman Khawaja caught behind for 21.

He then removed Nathan McSweeney for nine in his next over.

Siraj, booed in Adelaide for his send-off of Head, continued to make mischief as he marched past on-strike batsman Marnus Labuschagne and switched the bails around.

Labuschagne switched them back defiantly but was soon caught in the slips for 12 by Virat Kohli after a loose drive at relief bowler Nitish Kumar Reddy.

The five-match series is tied 1-1.

BRIEF SCORES (Third Test, Day 2)
Australia 405 for 7 (Head 152, Smith 101, Carey 45*, Bumrah 5-72) vs India (yet to bat)

SPOTLIGHT

New Zealand take charge as England are bowled out

Reuters
Hamilton, New Zealand

Kane Williamson scored a 38th half-century as New Zealand took charge on the second day of the third Test by dismissing England for 143 and making 136 for three at yesterday's close of play for an overall lead of 340.

England have already secured series honours after big wins in Christchurch and Wellington but were on the back foot from the very start of a hot day at Hamilton's Seddon Park as they tried to finish off New Zealand's first innings.

Spinner Mitchell Santner (76) and seamer Will O'Rourke resisted for more than an hour to add 32 runs to the overnight tally for the last wicket, taking New Zealand to a healthy 347 all out.

O'Rourke led the way with a brilliant spell as the pair then teamed up with Matt Henry to rip through England's batting order in a session and a half before tea to give the hosts a first-innings lead of 204.

New Zealand declined to force the follow-on and the batters took over for the final session with skipper Tom Latham chopping on after making 19 and Will Young scoring 60 from 85 balls before pulling a Ben Stokes delivery to midwicket.

O'Rourke returned to the crease as nightwatchman but edged behind off Ben Stokes for a duck, leaving Rachin Ravindra to take New Zealand to stumps on two not out in the company of Williamson, who was unbeaten on 50.

"I think a little bit in the first two tests, we probably didn't have heaps of the rub of the green," said O'Rourke.

"It was big for us just to be able to bring their bowlers back, and having to bowl big spells,



New Zealand's Matt Henry (centre) and Mitchell Santner (right) celebrates the wicket of England's Gus Atkinson on day two of the third Test at Seddon Park in Hamilton yesterday. (AFP)

and hopefully we can keep keep bringing them back tomorrow."

SPECIAL SPELL

New Zealand are desperate for a consolation victory to send Tim Southee out a winner on his home ground in his final Test but it was the younger quicks who will assume the mantle he has worn for 16 years that did the early damage yesterday.

Henry (4-48) removed the England openers in the fifth over of the innings, taking a brilliant low catch to remove Zak Crawley for 21 before trapping Ben Duckett plumb in front for 11 four balls later.

O'Rourke (3-33) stepped up after lunch with two wickets in

two balls, having Bethell caught at point for 12 before danger man Harry Brook chopped on for a golden duck.

Pope saw off the hat-trick ball but Joe Root had no such luck when an O'Rourke delivery reared up into his face and the batsman cut it to Young at gully to depart for 32 with England having lost three wickets for five runs.

Pope and Stokes put on 52 for the sixth wicket to rescue England from 82-5 but spinner Santner (3-7) came on for the first time and had the wicketkeeper caught in the slips for 24 with his fifth delivery.

The left-armner also sent back the England captain lbw for 27 in his next over before he and Henry

tag-teamed to remove Brydon Carse, Gus Atkinson and Matthew Potts cheaply as the England tail folded. "It hasn't been our best day, it's as simple as that. We're always pretty honest in that dressing room," said England assistant coach Paul Collingwood.

"One thing I would say is that I think we witnessed a pretty special hostile spell of Test bowling (from O'Rourke) today. It was great to watch."

BRIEF SCORES (Third Test, Day 2)
New Zealand 347 (Santner 76, Potts 4-90) and 136 for 3 (Williamson 50*, Ravindra 2*)
lead England 143 (Henry 4-48, Santner 3-7, O'Rourke 3-33) by 340 runs

Smith, Head team up to give India bad case of 'deja vu'



Australia's Travis Head (left) and Steve Smith (centre) talk with India's Virat Kohli as they walk off the ground for the tea break on day two of the third Test at The Gabba in Brisbane yesterday. (AFP)

Melbourne: While racking up centuries and a 241-stand in the third Test at the Gabba yesterday, Australia's Travis Head and Steve Smith gave India a repeat of their nightmare in the World Test Championship (WTC) final.

At The Oval in June last year, the pair combined for 285 runs in the first innings to set a platform for Australia's maiden WTC title, Head smashing 163 from 174 balls while Smith played the patient accumulator in his 268-ball knock of 121.

The pair reprised their roles yesterday, Smith making 101 off 190 deliveries and Head racing to 152 at nearly a run a ball.

Jasprit Bumrah dismissed them both after tea but not until the pair had batted through the entire middle session to undo India's positive start of three morning wickets.

'Feeling good'

"I've been feeling good the last few games, I just haven't managed to get in and get into my work," said Smith, who shrugged off a dire run of scores and snapped his longest streak without a century.

"So today it was nice to have a little bit of luck early, get through it, and then put on a partnership with (Head).

"He makes things so easy, and I'm just at the other end doing my thing. It felt pretty similar to the Test Championship final, actually, the way we went about our business today."

With the series level at 1-1, Australia finished day two at well in front at 405 for seven after rain restricted them to 28 for no loss on day one.

Victory at the Gabba would put Australia within one Test win of sealing their place in the WTC final while taking India's hopes of reaching the decider out of their hands.

Back-to-back hundreds

Head celebrated back-to-back hundreds, having smashed a match-winning 140 in the pink ball Test in Adelaide, and posted his ninth test ton to continue his role as India's nemesis.

Rating Bumrah as "one of the greats", Head casually ramped the pacer behind the wicket for a boundary that fired up the Gabba terraces.

"From my side of things, I'm trying to be as positive as I can to (Bumrah) and get in good positions," said Head.

"So yeah, (he was) challenging again.

"He bowled really well again to us."

SPOTLIGHT

QREC-backed Doha International Arabian Horse Show to kick off on Thursday

The Qatar Racing & Equestrian Club (QREC) is set to host the 4th Doha International Arabian Horse Show from 19 to 22 December at the main arena of the Qatar Equestrian Federation.

The event will see the participation of 300 horses representing farms and studs from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and the UAE, with these participants aiming for prestigious titles of the Show.

The European Conference of Arab Horse Organizations (ECAHO)-affiliated event will be overseen by international judges from various countries.

The contests of each class will qualify winners to the champions of colts, fillies, mares and stallions.

The top three winners in each class will be awarded gold, silver and bronze medals, respectively. Luscious prize money are on offer for the winners of the prestigious titles at the conclusion of the Show to encourage participation and support local owners.

Among the prominent participants from Qatar are Al Shaqab (Member of Qatar Foundation),



Al Shahania Stud, Al Sraiya Stud, Al Jood Stud, Al Jaham Stud and Al Jamal Stud along with several other stables and farms from outside Qatar.

The 4th Doha International Arabian Horse Show is part of the 2024-2025 horse show season, which features a range of local and international shows with participations from renowned farms and studs across Qatar and the region.

QREC management is committed to maintaining Qatar's leadership in Arabian horse shows, both in terms of organisation and winning championships at international and global events.

The outstanding results of Qatari studs at the World Arabian Horse Championship - Salon Du Cheval De Paris - achieved by Al Shaqab (Member of Qatar Foundation), Al Shahania Stud, Al Nasser

Stud, Al Naif Stud and others in recent years are a testament to this success.

The third renewal of the Show was held between 5 and 8 January this year and saw intense competitions among the participants. It was marked by the diversity of the winners of the major titles with the Gold Medal in the Stallion Championship awarded to BASHIR AL BASHIR, owned by Abdullateef

Basheer Alrasheedi. In the Mare Championship, the Salem Stud-owned D FALA won the Gold Medal while the Al Nasser Stud-owned ASHADIYA won the Silver Medal. The latter was also selected the Best in all the classes of the Show.

MZOON AL DIRIYAH won the Junior Female Championship Gold Medal for owner Mesfer Mohammed Al Hajri.

BAHI AL JAHAM, owned by Al

Jaham Stud, won the Gold Medal in the Junior Male Championship. In addition, the bay colt received the prize of the highest score in the Show, having collected 93 points in the qualifying stage.

MHSSORA, owned by Alkhashab Stud, won the Gold Medal in the Yearling Female Championship while QAYSAR RJ, owned by Al Rajhiah Stud, won the Gold Medal in the Yearling Male Championship



FOOTBALL

Iniesta ends his career in front of 45,000 in Tokyo

'I THINK IT WAS A GREAT GAME FOR THE JAPANESE FANS'

AFP
Tokyo

Retiring Spanish football legend Andres Iniesta bid farewell to his playing career yesterday in an exhibition match between Barcelona and Real Madrid greats in Tokyo and will now look to go into coaching.

The 40-year-old announced in October that he was hanging up his boots after a career that saw him win two European Championships and the 2010 World Cup.

He gave a crowd of more than 45,000 fans in Tokyo one last glimpse of the skills that also saw him win nine La Liga titles and four Champions Leagues during his 16 years with Barcelona.

He made sure he went out with a bang, delivering a last-minute cross that the Real Madrid defence turned into their own net to hand Barcelona a 2-1 win.

"I think it was a great game for the Japanese fans," said Iniesta, who played in Japan for five years after leaving Barcelona in 2018.

"If they went home satisfied then I'm very happy."

Iniesta lined up alongside former midfield partner Xavi Hernandez, with Rivaldo, Rafael Marquez and Javier Saviola also in the Barcelona line-up.



FC Barcelona Legends' Andres Iniesta poses for a photograph with his family members during his farewell ceremony after the match between Barcelona Legends v Real Madrid Legends at Ajinomoto Stadium, Tokyo, Japan, yesterday. (Reuters)

Roberto Carlos, Fabio Cannavaro and Iker Casillas were among the players in the Real team.

Iniesta said he had "a lot of fun" playing with Xavi, with whom he helped take Barcelona and Spain to new heights.

"Of course neither of us is at the same level that we were before

but a lot about the way we used to link up came back to me during today's game," said Iniesta.

Iniesta came up through Barcelona's famed La Masia academy and made his first-team debut aged 18. He made 674 appearances and won a total of 32 trophies during his time at the Camp Nou.

He moved to Japan's Vissel Kobe before playing one final season in the United Arab Emirates.

Iniesta said he wanted to stay involved in football.

"I'm thinking about getting my coaching licence and I want to see where my career takes me," he said.

TENNIS

Habib eager to bring joy to Lebanon in Melbourne



Hady Habib celebrates his final win over Ugo Carabelli in the ATP Challenger tournament held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on Dec 1, 2024. Habib won 6-4, 6-7 (3), 7-6 (2). (@ATPChallenger)

Reuters
Melbourne

Hady Habib blazed a trail by taking Lebanon to the Olympic tennis tournament for the first time earlier this year and he is hoping another breakthrough at the Australian Open in January will bring comfort to his war-torn country.

The Texas-born 26-year-old enjoyed a special moment when, as a lucky loser, he went down 6-3 6-1 to major winner Carlos Alcaraz in the first round of the Olympic men's singles at Roland Garros in July.

The experience fired his ambitions to get back to the biggest stages in the tennis world and he took a step towards that goal when he won a Challenger title in Chile earlier this month to clinch a spot in Australian Open qualifying.

"I just felt so much joy," he told *The National* newspaper.

"I'd had a couple of hard weeks before that. This was a goal of mine and to be able to achieve it in this last tournament and being the first

Lebanese to win a Challenger, just so much joy."

The world number 216 is determined to make the most of his hard-earned opportunity and has changed plans to go home to Lebanon for Christmas and will instead train in South America with his Argentine coach.

Habib moved back to Lebanon with his family at the age of six and is extremely proud to represent the nation, particularly since the war in Gaza spilled over into conflict in the southern part of the country this year.

"I've been able to bring something positive and show the resilience that I have," he told the newspaper. "Everyone who's living outside of Lebanon will tell you the same thing: it's horrific to see what's happening in a country that we all love so much."

Habib will certainly be able to count on some crowd support in Melbourne in January with around 1% of the Australian population having Lebanese heritage.

"I have family in Australia who will come to watch me," he said. "It's going to be amazing."

Gretchen wins 50m freestyle final



US Gretchen Walsh celebrates winning the women's 50m freestyle final during the World Aquatics Swimming Championships (25m) 2024 at Duna Arena in Budapest yesterday. (AFP)

BADMINTON

China's Shi wins second World Tour Finals title

AFP
Hangzhou, China

China's Shi Yuqi blew away Denmark's Anders Antonsen to win the men's singles crown at the season-ending BWF World Tour Finals yesterday as the hosts swept three titles.

In an all-Chinese women's singles final in Hangzhou, Wang Zhiyi fought back from a game down to defeat Han Yue 19-21, 21-19, 21-11 in 74 minutes.

Shi beat Antonsen 21-18, 21-14 in 52 minutes to win the prestigious title for a second time in his career, to go with his triumph in 2018.

"Playing at home makes me very happy," said the 28-year-old Shi, who paraded around the



China's Shi Yuqi (right) poses with his trophy after winning the men's singles final match against Denmark's Anders Antonsen (left) at the BWF Badminton World Tour Finals in Hangzhou, in eastern China's Zhejiang province, yesterday. (AFP)

venue after his victory and threw his shirt into the crowd. "These

people are very passionate and supportive," he added.

Antonsen's fellow Dane, the reigning two-time Olympic champion Viktor Axelsen, was not in China to defend his title after pulling out before the competition with injury.

There was home glory too for mixed doubles pair Zheng Siwei and Huang Yaqiong as they beat Malaysia's Chen Tang Jie and Toh Ee Wei in three games to retain their title.

It was a triumphant farewell to badminton for the 27-year-old Olympic gold medallist Zheng, who had announcement his intention to retire from the sport after the tournament.

South Korea's Baek Ha-na and Lee So-hee won the women's doubles and the Danish duo Kim Astrup and Anders Skaarup Rasmussen prevailed in the men's doubles final.

LA LIGA

Atletico maintain hot streak with win over Getafe

Sorloth came off the bench to head home the winner

AFP
Madrid

Alexander Sorloth earned Atletico Madrid an 11th straight victory with his goal sealing a 1-0 win over Getafe yesterday in La Liga.

Diego Simeone's side have been in fine form and continued their winning run across all competitions with a deserved home triumph, pulling provisionally level with league leaders Barcelona. Norwegian target man Sorloth came off the bench to head home the winner in the second half for his seventh league goal this season. Atletico, second, lead rivals Real Madrid by a point after Los Blancos drew at Rayo Vallecano on Saturday, while Barcelona were hosting Leganes late last night.

"I'll repeat it, I'm boring, I won't change - until the last day, we'll go game by game," Simeone told reporters when asked if his team could challenge for the title. "I always say the best result is 1-0 because you work hard in defence and you're effective in attack, if you win 4-3 there are things you have to improve."

Atletico Madrid controlled the first half but could not put away the chances they created. Two of the most inviting fell to winger Samuel Lino, but he failed to convert on both occasions. Giuliano Simeone crossed for the Brazilian and he poked the ball wide, before firing off-target again after Rodrigo De Paul passing him in with a clever lob.

Argentine midfielder De Paul, on a strong run of form, swept a shot wide as the hosts continued to dominate at the Metropolitan stadium. David Soria saved from Julian Alvarez shortly before the teams went in goalless at the break. Pablo Barrios fired narrowly off-target before Atletico took the lead in the 69th minute.

Substitute Sorloth peeled off his marker at the far post and placed a header back across goal and into the net from Nahuel Molina's



Atletico Madrid's Alexander Sorloth celebrates after scoring against Getafe CF at the Metropolitano stadium in Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

cross. Molina was another reinforcement brought on by Simeone, with Atletico's impressive squad depth telling.

"Before the game I spoke with the players about thanking and recognising those who weren't going to start the game," said Simeone. "There are very important players who are competing in an extraordinary way, and you can tell that when they come into the team. That is our strength, to compete in the way we want, we need everyone to be as involved as they (currently) are, it's our biggest strength."

Getafe pushed for a leveller but it was Atletico who came closer to scoring in the final

stages, with Angel Correa running through on goal but between Soria and two defenders, the visitors managed to thwart him.

The winning goal came after two substitutes and Simeone said he was glad to see players coming off the bench to make a positive impact. "I always tell them that I imagine the matches with different situations, imagining what can happen and having answers. And we have answers, but it all depends on the commitment of the players," Simeone said.

"It's easy to say but it's very difficult how the players represent it when they go on the pitch, it makes me very happy to see the attitude I saw today."

SPOTLIGHT

Fiorentina off pace in Serie A title race after Bologna defeat

AFP
Milan, Italy

Fiorentina lost ground in the Serie A title race yesterday after falling to a 1-0 defeat at Bologna and missing the chance to claim a club-record ninth straight league win.

Raffaele Palladino's Fiorentina are fourth, six points behind league leaders Atalanta following a first league defeat in three months, albeit with a game in hand. Jens Odgaard guided home the only goal of the game at the Stadio Renato Dall'Ara to give Bologna their fifth win in seven matches in Italy's top flight.

Yesterday's result moved Bologna up to seventh and three points behind Juventus, who sit in the Conference League spot, with a game in hand and gave coach Vincenzo Italiano a big win against his former club. Italiano managed Fiorentina for three seasons, taking the Viola to two Europa Conference League finals and an Italian Cup final before joining Bologna in the summer.

"Today was a great win against a really good team," said Italiano. "We're growing as a team and our identity is starting to come through, especially defensively. To have conceded so little to this Fiorentina team is brilliant."

Verona snapped a four-match losing streak by winning 3-2 at Parma, a result which lifted Paolo

Zanetti's team one place and point above the relegation zone. Italian media report that Verona, who have long had financial difficulties, are set to be sold to American private equity fund Presidio Investors.

Como are level on 15 points with Verona, Parma and Genoa - who are at AC Milan in the day's late match - after two stoppage-time goals gave Cesc Fabregas' side a surprise, but deserved 2-0 win over Roma. Alessandro Gabrielloni put Como ahead two minutes into added time when he poked home his first Serie A goal from Patrick Cutrone's cut-back.

And shortly afterwards Nico Paz secured a first win since late September in front of a delirious home crowd, when after Roma cheaply gave the ball away with everyone in the Como area he rolled Gabrielloni's simple pass into an empty net. Roma have improved since Claudio Ranieri returned for his third spell as coach last month but Sunday's performance was a step backwards and left the capital club just two points above the bottom three.

"They did everything they could to win the match and we didn't do enough to create opportunities... we could be tired for the number of matches we've played but I don't like relying on excuses," said Ranieri. "I'm happy with how the boys are working but if there's a need to improve the squad (in January) I won't hide from that."



Fiorentina's Luca Ranieri is brought down by Bologna's Jens Odgaard during the Serie A clash in Bologna, Italy. (Reuters)

BUNDESLIGA

Last-gasp Larsen snatches point for Hoffenheim

AFP
Dortmund, Germany

Ex-Borussia Dortmund forward Jacob Bruun Larsen netted a last-gasp equaliser for Hoffenheim in a 1-1 draw at the home of his former club. In his first league start since October 2023, American forward Gio Reyna put Dortmund in front in the first minute of the second half, chesting down a deflected ball before blasting home.

In the first minute of stoppage time, however, Bruun Larsen was in the right place to score after Dortmund failed to defend a throw-in. The draw means Dortmund, who have not won in the league since November, sit eighth, 11 points off league leaders Bayern Munich, who lost on Saturday.

Hoffenheim now have five points from four league fixtures since Christian Ilzer took over in November. Injury-hit Dortmund, missing several first teamers, received a dose of pre-match good news with centre-back Nico Schlotterbeck, who was stretched off against Barcelona on Wednesday, fit enough to be named in the starting XI.

Dortmund striker Serhou Guirassy went



Hoffenheim's Jacob Bruun Larsen scores the equalising goal during the Bundesliga match against Borussia Dortmund. (AFP)

down in the box and a penalty was signalled midway through the first half, but the decision was overturned on VAR review. Reyna got Dortmund off to an excellent start after the break with a great goal from the edge of the box - his first since May 2023.

Dortmund seemed to be lacking energy and fluency as the second half wore on and Hoffenheim pressed in search of an equaliser. The visitors were rewarded in the first minute of stoppage time, substitute Bruun Larsen tapping in from close range to level the scores.

Stuttgart won 3-1 away at Heidenheim to climb up to sixth in the Bundesliga. Germany defender Maximilian Mittelstaedt put Stuttgart in front with a smart finish after bursting into the area on 20 minutes.

Heidenheim starlet Paul Wanner, on loan from Bayern Munich, equalised with an excellent long-range effort on 41 minutes. Stuttgart however hit back just before half-time, Enzo Millot heading in a Joshua Vagnoman cross. The visitors were pinned back by Heidenheim as the second half continued but Stuttgart eventually sealed the result from the penalty spot when Nick Woltemade converted a spot-kick in the 85th minute. The 1.98-metre tall Woltemade now has four goals and an assist in his past three games for Stuttgart.

Surprise runners-up last season, Stuttgart have struggled to adjust to the demands of a return to the Champions League. Sebastian Hoeneß' side have come into form recently however, with Sunday's win their fourth in a row. Heidenheim, who qualified for the Europa Conference League with an eighth-placed finish last season in their debut top-flight campaign, have also found the going tough this term.

Heidenheim are third last, in the relegation playoff spot, with 10 points from 14 games.

Premier League strugglers Wolves sack manager O'Neil

London: Wolverhampton Wanderers yesterday sacked manager Gary O'Neil after a run of four straight Premier League defeats left them stranded in the relegation zone.

The club are second from bottom of the table with just nine points from 16 games after Saturday's painful 2-1 home loss to fellow strugglers Ipswich.

Just days ago Shi said the Midlands club were "united" behind the former Bournemouth boss despite Wolves' struggles. O'Neil, 41, was appointed in August 2023 following the departure of Julen Lopetegui and signed a new four-year deal with the club in August this year. Wolves finished 14th in his

first season at Molineux but are now in a relegation scrap - they have 11 defeats and just two wins and are four points from safety. Frustrations boiled over in Monday's defeat to West Ham when Mario Lemina scuffled with Jarrod Bowen after the full-time whistle, resulting in the Wolves midfielder being stripped of the captaincy.

Emotions also spiked at full-time at Molineux on Saturday after Jack Taylor scored a stoppage-time winner for Ipswich. Rayan Ait-Nouri was shown a second yellow card and Matheus Cunha had to be restrained.

After the defeat, O'Neil said he had struggled to reverse his team's slide. "

BEACH VOLLEYBALL

Three Kings crowned in historic Queen & King of the Court finals

By Sports Reporter
Doha

There was a first in Queen & King of the Court history in Doha as three Kings were crowned during the Queen & King of the Court Beach Volleyball Finals 2024 at the Aspire Zone on last night.

Stefan Boermans had to drop out of the final after two rounds to be replaced by countryman Steven van de Velde. He and Yorick de Groot won, in a unique result in the sport. Boermans was well on his way to his first-ever crown. He and Yorick de Groot had gathered the most points in the first two rounds, but just before the second round came to a stop Boermans injured his groin. He was unable to continue, leaving the organization with a spot to fill. It's within Queen & King of the Court regulation to introduce a different player. Steven van de Velde, who was outside the stadium playing a game for fun, came to his aid.

Van de Velde was surprisingly sharp, he and De Groot ran to ten points quite early. The comeback of Clemens Wickler and Nils Ehlers (Kings of 2023 in Doha) was stopped in time and thus came about the unprecedented situation of crowning

three Kings. Wickler and Ehlers won the silver, the bronze medal went the way of France's Calvin Aye and Remi Bassereau.

On the women's side, Lezana Placette and Sandra Ittlinger claimed the crown after a tight final in which they beat their German and Dutch opponents. Placette and Ittlinger normally feature on opposite sides of the net. But this time they teamed up for Doha and made it count. In the final round they ousted two teams that made the final directly from the Group Stage: Germany's Cinja Tillmann and Svenja Muller and Dutchies Katja Stam and Wies Bekhuis. This is the second crown for Ittlinger, who won the 2021 Finals with Isabel Schneider. Placette is on the top step of the podium for the first time, after having won silver and bronze before. It was the fourth time the Queen & King of the Court Finals were held in the Aspire Zone.

FINAL STANDINGS

Men: 1. Stefan Boermans / Yorick de Groot / Steven van de Velde (NED); 2. Clemens Wickler / Nils Ehlers (GER); 3. Calvin Aye / Rémi Bassereau (FRA)
Women: 1. Lezana Placette (FRA) / Sandra Ittlinger (GER); 2. Cinja Tillmann / Svenja Müller (GER); 3. Katja Stam / Wies Bekhuis (NED).



Netherlands' Stefan Boermans, Yorick de Groot and Steven van de Velde stood out as the Kings; the French-German pair of Lezana Placette and Sandra Ittlinger emerged as the Queens at the Aspire Zone yesterday.