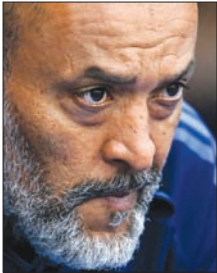


To subscribe
GULF TIMES
Newspaper
Please call
444 666 35



CRICKET | Page 2

Royal Challengers Bengaluru thrash Chennai Super Kings in IPL



FOOTBALL | Page 4

Nuno urges Forest to write new chapter ahead of quarters

To advertise here,
PLEASE CALL
444 666 21

Saturday, March 29, 2025
Ramadan 29, 1446 AH

GULF TIMES

SPORT

TENNIS

Eala dream run ends as Pegula sets up Miami final with Sabalenka

Page 3

QATAR STARS LEAGUE

Al Khor register 3-0 win over Umm Salal

Gomes nets a double in much-needed win for Al Khor, Al Shamal beat Al Shahania 3-0



Al Khor and Umm Salal players vying for the ball during their Qatar Stars League match at the Al Khor Stadium yesterday.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Ricardo Gomes struck as a brace as Al Khor scored a much-needed yet impressive 3-0 win over Umm Salal Qatar Stars League at the Al Khor Stadium yesterday. Gomes scored in the stoppage time of both the halves - 45+2 minute and 90+1 minute - while Sofiane Hanni scored one in the 58th minute.

It was Al Khor's only second win of the league, and came after six games. Their last win was over Al Gharafa. The result took Al Khor's points tally into double figures (10pts) although they still remain in twelfth place in the standings. For Umm Salal, this was their 12th loss and they remain in 11th place in the rankings with 15 points. Al Khor, who according to their coach Salam Shaker, were pepped up psychologically prior to this match, showed superb intent

right from the start and succeeded in finding their way to success. Al Khor were aggressive but were tied down for almost all of the opening half by Umm Salal. Al Khor's Cape Verdean forward Gomes was initially disappointed when an attempt of his went just wide of the right post and later a header also missed the target. But just ahead of the half time whistle, Gomes produced a gem to provide his teammates the right motivation. Having placed himself perfect-



Action from Al Shamal-Al Shahania match at the Al Bayt Stadium.

ly ahead of a shadowing defender, Gomes caught an Hanni corner kick to make the deflection superbly and the ball hit the top of the bar on the inside on the right before going in. Al Khor returned more vigorous in the second session and soon found their second goal through a fine combine. Abdulaziz Hazaa Alhasia cut across a lob from the left and Aitor Garcia Flores unleashed a volley strike which was stave away by a diving Umm Salal goalkeeper Ahmed Basher Ali but the ball went to an alert Hanni on the

left and his left-foot kick saw the ball take the inside of the crossbar on the left before going into the net. There more joy for Al Khor fans towards the end as Gomes made a flying header off a corner kick (taken by Ahmad Hassan al-Mohannadi) for the ball to diagonally find its way into the right corner. Meanwhile, Al Shamal also scored a 3-0 win over Al Shahania at the Al Bayt Stadium yesterday. Younes El Hannach (15th minute), Mouafak Awad (61st minute) and Mohamed Rafik Omar (75th minute) scored for the winners.

PSG's Enrique keen to keep momentum going

Paris St Germain (PSG) have a chance of winning Ligue 1 with seven games to spare if they win at Saint-Etienne and other results go their way this weekend, but coach Luis Enrique is keen to keep momentum going to help clinch more silverware. Unbeaten PSG have a 19-point lead over second-placed Olympique de Marseille with eight matches to go as they stand on the verge of their fourth straight Ligue 1 title. If PSG win, Marseille lose, and the next two teams in the standings, AS Monaco and Nice, drop points, that will ensure PSG's 11th league title since 2012-13, and the second straight crown under Luis Enrique. "We're never champions until it's mathematically a foregone conclusion. But we're the best team in Ligue 1. We're going to use this moment so that these eight games can be used for more global objectives," Luis Enrique told reporters yesterday. The Spaniard, who previously led Barcelona to a treble of La Liga, Champions League and Spanish Cup titles in 2015, has an opportunity to repeat the feat this year. "We need to be ready for the two or three months of competition," he said. PSG, who lost to Borussia Dortmund in the Champions League semi-finals last season, will face Aston Villa in the two-leg quarter-finals of the continental competition next month, after a French Cup semi-final against Ligue 2 side Dunkerque. Luis Enrique said PSG were fully motivated ahead of their visit to relegation-threatened Saint-Etienne who sit 17th in the table, one point below Le Havre who have played a game more. Saint-Etienne were closing in on their first win since January when they were 2-0 up at bottom side Montpellier on March 16, but the match was abandoned after home fans threw flares onto the pitch.

FOCUS

A truly remarkable experience: Imane reflects on her training camp at Aspire Academy

Algeria's Olympic boxing champion, Imane Khelif, has concluded an intensive training camp at Aspire Academy as part of her preparation for the upcoming 2025 World Boxing Championships in Liverpool, UK. During her training stint at Aspire Academy, Khelif focused on refining her technique, enhancing her endurance, and sharpening her strategic approach, all within a world-class environment. The academy's state-of-the-art facilities and expert coaching provided the ideal setting for her to elevate her performance, aiming to improve upon the silver medal she won at the 2022 World Championships in Istanbul, Türkiye. During her training camp, the Algerian boxing champion met with several student-athletes from Aspire Academy, where she shared valuable insights from her journey and the challenges she overcame throughout her career. Khelif praised the academy's high standards of care and support, commending the world-class facilities and the motivating environment that empowers young talents to thrive both on and off the field. She encouraged the students to remain dedicated and give their utmost effort in pursuit of their goals, emphasising that success is always within reach with determination and hard work. Khelif also highlighted the unique opportunity Aspire offers in helping



athletes strike a meaningful balance between academics and elite sports training—an opportunity she described as truly exceptional and one that should be fully embraced. Expressing her appreciation, Khelif said: "I couldn't have asked for a better opportunity to hold my training camp than at Aspire Academy—this remarkable sporting institution that has welcomed and nurtured countless champions, national teams, and clubs. I truly appreciate the great collaboration and warm reception from the Qatar Boxing Federation,

which spared no effort in ensuring the success of my camp. "I genuinely felt at home, with all the ideal conditions in place to focus on my preparation for the upcoming World Championships in Liverpool. None of this would have been possible without the dedication of Kotinos, which provided me with everything I needed. I am certain that every athlete who partners with them in the future will experience the same level of excellence and support. Qatar is a wonderful, hospitable, and safe country, and this certainly won't be my last vis-



it. I wish its kind people a blessed Ramadan, and may they always be in good health and prosperity." Khalid al-Hamar, Acting Director of Marketing and Communication at Aspire Academy, underscored the Academy's focus on empowering champions, stating: "Aspire Academy is committed to providing a comprehensive training environment and world-class support facilities for champions like Imane Khelif. We are proud to be part of her preparation journey for the World Championships and to support her readiness for high-level competition. Our support for athletes from around the world stems from our

core mission and commitment to building bridges of sports collaboration and empowering young talent to achieve their ambitions and reach the highest levels. We look forward to seeing Imane shine and achieve a new milestone in Liverpool — one that reflects her aspirations and represents her with pride." Khelif's training camp was further supported by the Qatar Boxing Federation, whose collaboration ensured a seamless and productive experience during her stay in Qatar. Ahmad Anani, Vice-Chairman and CEO of Kotinos - Aspire Sports Consulting and Manage-

ment company, commented: "Representing Algerian champion Imane Khelif and organising her training camp in Qatar is just a glimpse of what Kotinos is capable of. As a proud member of the renowned Aspire Zone Foundation, our mission is rooted in excellence and a commitment to delivering world-class experiences. "We extend our sincere thanks to all those who contributed to the success of this camp, especially the media who followed Imane's journey in Doha. This is only the beginning—we look forward to welcoming more champions and stars to the Kotinos family in the near future."

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Batsmen, bowlers combine to help RCB hammer CSK

CAPTAIN PATIDAR SMASHED A HALF CENTURY BEFORE EXPERIENCED HAZLEWOOD GRABBED 3 FOR 21

AFP
Chennai, India

Table-topping Royal Challengers Bengaluru thrashed Chennai Super Kings by 50 runs yesterday for a second win in this year's Indian Premier League (IPL), inspired by a "game-changing" performance from fast bowler Josh Hazlewood. Chasing 197, Chennai wilted despite a late cameo by veteran M S Dhoni who clubbed 30 runs off 16 balls, batting low down at nine in the order.

Australian seamer Hazlewood, who finished with 3-21 in his four overs, and skipper Rajat Patidar's 32-ball 51, sealed Bengaluru's comfortable victory.

Patidar, who is hoping to force his way into the India T20 team, was well-supported by teammates with openers Phil Salt and Virat Kohli both making scores in the thirties in a total of 196-7.

Chennai lost early wickets to Hazlewood and India veteran Bhuvneshwar Kumar, who finished with 1-20 in his three overs.

Hazlewood removed Rahul Tripathi (5) and Chennai skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad (0) in the second over of the innings.

Deepak Hooda (4) was then dis-



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Jitesh Sharma keeps wicket while MS Dhoni of Chennai Super Kings bats during their IPL match at MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai yesterday. (Reuters)

missed by Kumar in the fifth over to leave the home team reeling at 26-3.

Yash Dayal took 2-18 in his three overs with England's Liam Livingstone finishing with 2-28 in four overs of spin.

India duo Ravindra Jadeja (25) and Shivam Dube (19) put up

some resistance before Chennai limped to 146-8. Patidar said his "was a very important (innings). We were targeting 200 because that wouldn't be easy to chase" in Chennai. "My goal was clear that as long as I was there, I would maximise every ball."

Patidar said that Hazlewood's

spell "was game-changing because we got two-three wickets in the first six overs".

Earlier, Kohli made a scrappy 30-ball 31 with the Indian superstar and Salt (32), falling to Afghanistan leg-spinner Noor Ahmad.

Noor was the most impressive



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's captain Rajat Patidar celebrates after scoring a half century in Chennai yesterday. (AFP)

of all the Chennai bowlers and finished with an impressive 3-36 in his four overs.

Devdutt Padikkal (27) and Tim David, with an eight-ball 22, also played important roles to boost the visitors' total.

"It wasn't that easy to bat," said Chennai skipper Gaikwad who

added "bad fielding cost us" the game.

BRIEF SCORES
RCB 196 for 7 (Patidar 51, Salt 32, Noor 3-36, Pathirana 2-36) **beat CSK 146 for 8** (Ravindra 41, Dhoni 30*, Hazlewood 3-21, Dayal 2-18) **by 50 runs**

REVIEW

Lucknow's dashing Pooran justifies the top order slot

Reuters
Bengaluru

Lucknow Super Giants captain Rishabh Pant said sacrificing the number three slot for Nicholas Pooran was well worth it after they beat Sunrisers Hyderabad on Thursday for their first victory of the new Indian Premier League (IPL) season.

Lucknow wanted an aggressive left-handed batter to follow their right-right opening pair of Mitch Marsh and Aiden Markram and the choice was between Pant and Pooran, both renowned for their six-hitting prowess.

Former West Indies captain Pooran smacked six sixes and as many fours in his 70 off just 26 balls as Lucknow thumped Hyderabad by five wickets.

Pooran's 13 sixes in two matches is the highest by any batter this season and his powerplay carnage drew praise from Pant, who has dropped down to number four in the batting order.

"The thought was to give freedom to him," the Lucknow captain said after their victory in Hyderabad.

"We know what damage he can do down the order. I like that



Lucknow Super Giants' Nicholas Pooran in action against Sunrisers Hyderabad in Hyderabad, India, on Thursday. (Reuters)

freedom too, but you have got to give someone that charge that you have to go and express yourself.

"The way he has been batting is phenomenal for us."

Pooran raced to an 18-ball fifty against Hyderabad and his second-wicket partnership of 116

with Marsh set up their comfortable victory.

"I don't plan to hit sixes," Pooran said. "I just try my best to get in good positions and if it's there, just time the ball nicely.

"In the last nine years I have been working on my craft. Obvi-

ously, I have been getting the opportunity to bat higher up in the powerplay as well.

"It is really important to cash in when the wicket is nice and obviously when the match-up is there you try your best to execute your skills."

CYCLING

Brennan wins again, Ayuso has lead in Catalonia

AFP
Amposta, Spain

Sprinter Matthew Brennan continued his breakout season as he exploded past the pack in a bunch sprint on a blustery stage five of the Tour of Catalonia yesterday, his second win of the race.

Spaniard Juan Ayuso retook the overall lead from Primoz Roglic after taking a bonus second on the intermediate sprint as wind split the peloton with Simon Yates losing 41sec in the overall standings.

With two days to go Ayuso leads Roglic by 1sec with Enric Mas third at 21sec, Mikel Landa fourth at 22s and Lenny Martinez fifth at 28sec.

"It's better to lead by a second than trail by one," said Ayuso, a 22-year-old from Barcelona. "It's nice to have the jersey and this race is so often won by a very narrow margin."

Visma rider Brennan is just 19.



Team Visma-Lease a Bike's Matthew Brennan celebrates as he crosses the finish line to win the 5th stage of the 2025 Volta a Catalunya, a 172km race between Pauls and Amposta, yesterday. (AFP)

The Briton held the overall leader's green and white jersey for two stages after his opening day win in Barcelona. Today's mountain

run could prove decisive with four climbs including a summit finish at Queralt. "It's very easy to get dropped there. It'll be a great

race," said Ayuso. The race ends in Barcelona tomorrow with the ascent of Montjuic to the Olympic stadium.

Bangladesh star Tamim back home after health scare

Dhaka: Former Bangladeshi cricket captain Tamim Iqbal returned home yesterday, days after suffering a massive heart attack during a local match. The 36-year-old was leading Mohammedan Sporting Club in a match of the 50-over Dhaka Premier Division Cricket League when he was rushed to a nearby hospital complaining of severe chest pain on Monday. He was given stenting surgery the same day and later moved to a bigger health facility in the capital Dhaka. "After observing his health condition, we have decided to discharge him today," Shahabuddin Talukder, a doctor at Evercare Hospital told reporters. He added that Tamim would have to maintain a rehabilitation pro-

gramme and modify his lifestyle. "We hope he will be able to return to cricket soon," he added. Abu Zafar of the Bangladeshi health ministry told reporters on Wednesday that it was uncertain whether Tamim would be able to return to cricket. "Tamim won't be able to play sports for the next three months. If everything goes well, then he will be able to return," he said. "Unfortunately, he is a smoker, which is a risk factor for heart attacks. He must stay away from it. He will have to follow doctors' advice." Tamim scored more than 15,000 runs for Bangladesh in a career spanning 15 years and remains the only Bangladeshi to score hundreds in all formats of international cricket.

CRICKET

Root not eyeing England white-ball captaincy

Reuters
London

hiding place. It's a long old slog, you've got to be consistent."

Bairstow still has England ambitions despite Yorkshire captaincy role

Jonny Bairstow is still aiming for an England recall after being appointed as Yorkshire's red-ball cricket captain.

Bairstow was installed as skipper a week before the start of the English domestic season after the 35-year-old looked to feature in either the Indian Premier League or Pakistan Super League.

Instead, he will now captain Yorkshire, the most successful club in the history of the County Championship with 32 outright titles, as they look to return to the First Division.

Bairstow's late father David led Yorkshire from 1984 to 1987 and Jonny said: "He played here for 20 years and was captain as well. There's not many fathers and sons who have done it. The county is embedded in my heart, and I take immense pride in representing the club on the field."

Bairstow, while a veteran of 100 Tests and 187 limited-overs internationals, has not featured in any kind of England squad since last year's T20 World Cup.

But he still has six months left on the two-year England deal he signed in 2023 and, asked if he was thinking of an international recall, replied: "I'm still contracted. I'd be stupid not to. But it's not my choice. That bit is completely out of my control. I can load the gun, but I won't be the one pulling the trigger. We'll wait and see on that."

Bairstow's late father David led Yorkshire from 1984 to 1987 and Jonny said: "He played here for 20 years and was captain as well. There's not many fathers and sons who have done it. The county is embedded in my heart, and I take immense pride in representing the club on the field."

Bairstow, while a veteran of 100 Tests and 187 limited-overs internationals, has not featured in any kind of England squad since last year's T20 World Cup.

But he still has six months left on the two-year England deal he signed in 2023 and, asked if he was thinking of an international recall, replied: "I'm still contracted. I'd be stupid not to. But it's not my choice. That bit is completely out of my control. I can load the gun, but I won't be the one pulling the trigger. We'll wait and see on that."

Ruthless Red Bull dump Lawson for Tsunoda ahead of Japanese GP

Hong Kong: Red Bull said yesterday that Liam Lawson has been axed and replaced by Yuki Tsunoda, confirming days of speculation after disappointing performances in the first two races of the F1 season. Tsunoda will take over from the New Zealander starting at his home Japanese Grand Prix next week at Suzuka, Red Bull said in a statement. The 24-year-old Tsunoda moves up from the Racing Bulls (RB) sister team to partner four-time world champion Max Verstappen, with Lawson moving back down to RB, where he was last season. Christian Horner, Red Bull team principal, said: "It has been difficult to see Liam struggle with the RB21 at the first two races and as a result we have collectively taken the decision to make an early switch. "We came into the 2025 season with two ambitions, to retain the world drivers' championship and to reclaim the world constructors' title, and this is a purely sporting decision." Lawson, 23, who was drafted in from RB in the winter to replace

Sergio Perez, has endured a miserable start to the season and life at one of the top teams on the grid. He has been knocked out at the first stage of all three qualifying sessions and has yet to score a point. Verstappen in the other Red Bull is second in the title race with 36 points, eight behind early season leader Lando Norris of McLaren. "We have a duty of care to protect and develop Liam, and together we see that after such a difficult start, it makes sense to act quickly so Liam can gain experience, as he continues his F1 career with Racing Bulls, an environment and a team he knows very well," Horner added. Tsunoda has shown pace on both race weekends of the season. He was 12th in the season opener at Melbourne and only finished out of the points on Sunday at Shanghai because of RB's flawed two-stop pit strategy. Tsunoda made his Formula 1 debut with AlphaTauri in 2021, becoming the first Japanese driver on the grid since Kamui Kobayashi in 2014.



Racing Bulls' Japanese driver Yuki Tsunoda (left) and New Zealander driver Liam Lawson take part in the drivers' parade ahead of the Mexico City Grand Prix at the Hermanos Rodriguez racetrack in Mexico City on October 27, 2024. (AFP)

"We acknowledge there is a lot of work to be done with the RB21 and Yuki's experience will prove highly

beneficial in helping to develop the current car," said Horner. "We welcome him to the team and

are looking forward to seeing him behind the wheel of the RB21." Tsunoda started racing karts at the

age of four in his native Kanagawa, just outside Tokyo. He stands just 1.61 metres tall (5ft 3in) and his diminutive frame forced AlphaTauri engineers to develop a made-to-measure pedal kit to make him feel more comfortable in the cockpit. Tsunoda used to be known for his four-letter outbursts on the team radio but displayed a new-found sense of self-control last year, and it helped his performances. Away from racing, he tries to relax by snowboarding and playing video games, which he describes as "training" for keeping his cool on the track. "His progress last year, and more recently from the very start of 2025, has been nothing less than sensational," Laurent Mekies, team principal of RB, said in a statement Thursday. He added: "Everyone here at (the team) is looking forward to working hard with Liam to give him the best environment possible for him to shine in our car and to express the talent we all know he has." Lawson will partner with France's Isack Hadjar at RB.

TENNIS

Pegula beats Eala to set up final with Sabalenka

Sabalenka needed just 71 minutes to win against sixth seed Paolini

AFP
Miami Gardens

Philippines sensation Alexandra Eala's remarkable run at the Miami Open came to a brave end with a three-set loss to Jessica Pegula in the semi-finals on Thursday. In an enthralling battle over 2hrs 24mins, fourth-seeded American Pegula emerged with a 7-6 (7/3), 5-7, 6-3 win to seal a place in today's final against world number one Aryna Sabalenka. Sabalenka blasted her way into the final with a 6-2, 6-2 demolition of Italy's Jasmine Paolini. The 19-year-old Eala, ranked 140th in the world, had only two WTA main draw victories to her name before arriving in Miami. She proceeded to beat three Grand Slam winners in Jelena Ostapenko, Madison Keys and world number two Iga Swiatek. The lowest-ranked semi-finalist in the tournament's history, Eala seriously threatened to go one step further with another accomplished and effervescent display. The tide looked to have turned against her when Pegula broke to go 3-1 up in the second set, but Eala broke back and her fist pump and look of determination was a sign of things to come. Eala broke Pegula three times in the set and was broken twice herself but crucially was able to hold when serving for the set at 6-5. Both players protected their serve better in the deciding set but Eala's forehand let her down when the American broke to go 5-3 up and she served out for a victory that brought her visible relief. "Of course there is disappointment right after the match," said Eala. "But there are just so many times in tennis where you have



Jessica Pegula (left) of the US meets Alexandra Eala of the Philippines at the net after defeating her during Miami Open match at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida. (AFP)

to dig through the dirt to look for the positive and I'm just enjoying because there is so much positive around me and I don't know how many times that happens," she added. Playing with a strapped thigh from the outset, Eala turned her ankle mid-way through the second set but said she had not been impacted by the injury. "I literally gave everything I had, I'm half tape, I'm like a mummy. I did everything and I have no regrets," she said. "To have a week like this, the stars need to align and they did this week, and hopefully I can keep that up - that is my goal now, to keep this up," she added. Pegula said it had been difficult to play an opponent like Eala. "I let her back in the match at 3-1 up (second set) and she just

started ripping her balls, going for her shots and you just have to weather the storm with people like that. She competes really well," said the American. Sabalenka needed just 71 minutes to wrap up her win against the sixth seed Paolini. The Belarusian, beaten in the Indian Wells final earlier this month by Mirra Andreeva, will appear in the Miami final for the first time in her career. "I'm super happy with the level I played today. Of course super happy to be in my first Miami Open final," said Sabalenka. Sabalenka was never behind against Paolini. She served six aces and broke the Italian's serve four times. "I definitely would say that this was one of the best matches in the season so far. I don't know. I was just so focused

on myself, on the things I had to do today," she said. "It felt like everything was just going smoothly my way." Sabalenka will be keen to banish the memory of defeat in the Indian Wells final and in the Australian Open final, where she lost to Keys. "The lessons (of those defeats) was I believe focus on myself, not on what's going on the other side," she said. "I think in those finals I was more focusing on my opponents than on myself. I think I just have to bring the same attitude, the same mindset that I had today, I think I have to bring it in the finals," she said. She is only the sixth woman to reach the finals of both stops on the American 'Sunshine Swing' in the same season.

HOUSTON OPEN

Pendrith and Tosti among four co-leaders



Taylor Pendrith of Canada hits his tee shot on the 12th hole during the second round of the Texas Children's Houston Open 2025 at Memorial Park Golf Course in Houston, Texas. (AFP)

AFP
Houston

Canada's Taylor Pendrith, Argentina's Alejandro Tosti and US golfers Keith Mitchell and Ryan Gerard shared the lead on Thursday when darkness halted the first round of the PGA Houston Open. All four fired a five-under par 65 at Memorial Park before sunset stopped play on a rainy day with 18 competitors still on the course to complete their opening round on Friday morning. Top-ranked Scottie Scheffler, in the final tuneup event before he defends the Masters title next month, fired a bogey-free 67 to stand two adrift. "I started to play a little bit better on the back nine. The first nine I was kind of getting it around a little bit, but still post a score," he said. "Conditions were pretty tough out there with the rain and the wind, so overall nice to keep a clean card." World number two Rory McIlroy, the Players Championship and Pebble Beach Pro-Am winner who needs the Masters to complete a career Grand Slam, had two birdies and two bogeys in a first-round 70. "A little pedestrian I guess is a good way to describe it," McIlroy said. "Had to deal with those conditions early on, rainy and not too pleasant to play in. Made a few par saves early on that I needed to and then had quite a few chances on the second nine that I didn't convert." The only player within two strokes of the lead not to finish was Taylor Dickinson. The American

was three-under with three holes remaining. Pendrith, whose only PGA title came at last May's CJ Cup Byron Nelson, would have led alone but made his only bogey at 18 after finding a greenside bunker and missing a nine-foot par putt. His six birdies included a 42-foot putt at the par-4 fourth and another from just inside 24 feet at 17. "I played pretty good. Difficult day, rain was on and off and got gusty for us," Pendrith said. "Hung in there nicely, didn't make too many mistakes and drove the ball really well. Saw a couple nice putts go in early and gave me some confidence. It was a great start." Tosti's bogey-free round included a 22-foot putt at the par-5 third and a tap-in at the par-5 16th. "Very pleased with the result," Tosti said. "I played very solid." Another player seeking like Tosti his first PGA title is Gerard, a rookie whose best tour result was fourth at the 2023 Honda Classic. The back-nine starter birdied four of his first eight holes only to close his round with back-to-back bogeys. "Played really solid, just a weird couple things on the last two holes," Gerard said. "It's not easy when it's raining and then windy and then off and on with the umbrella and ball's kind of squirting off the face of the golf club. "Really tried to stay patient. That was the key to the day." Mitchell, whose only PGA win came at the 2019 Honda Classic, grabbed his share of the lead with a 12-foot eagle putt at 16. "Hopefully I can stay sharp and keep it rolling this week," Mitchell said.

Djokovic reaches Miami Open final after win over Dimitrov

MIAMI: Novak Djokovic outclassed Grigor Dimitrov 6-2, 6-3 yesterday to reach the final of the Miami Open, becoming the oldest man to reach a ATP Masters 1000 title match. Djokovic, who now has a 13-1 record against the Bulgarian, totally dominated the contest which was over in 69 minutes. The Serb will face the winner of the other semi-final between Czech teenager Jakub Mensik and American third-seed Taylor Fritz. Earlier Djokovic beat Sebastian Korda 6-3 7-6(4) in the quarters. Djokovic let out a triumphant roar after sending down an ace



on match point as the 37-year-old's former rival and now coach Andy Murray jumped out of his seat to do the same. "I've been serving great the entire tournament but particularly

today I needed it in the second to try to come back," Djokovic told Tennis Channel. "In the tiebreak, a couple of points really decided the winner, 5-4 service winner, ace at 6-4 to finish off the match. So I'll take that as the highlight." Victory ensured that Djokovic, who turns 38 in May, became the oldest ATP Masters 1000 semi-finalist, surpassing Roger Federer, who made the final four at Indian Wells and Miami aged 37 years and seven months in 2019. The match was originally scheduled for Wednesday but postponed under ATP rules

aimed at avoiding matches dragging on into the early hours of the morning. Fourth seed Djokovic, gunning for a record seventh Miami Open title, has a chance to win his 100th tour title tomorrow. Unseeded Mensik was a 7-6(5) 6-1 winner over 17th-seeded Frenchman Arthur Fils and will meet American Taylor Fritz in the semis after he outlasted Italian 29th seed Matteo Berrettini 7-5 6-7(7) 7-5. Third seeded Fritz saw six match points come and go in the second set but converted on his seventh opportunity in the decider to put away Berrettini.

PTPA, governing bodies 'may prefer talks over trial'

MIAMI: The class-action lawsuit filed against tennis' governing bodies by the Professional Tennis Players' Association (PTPA) is a call for serious and formal negotiations and none of the parties may prefer a trial, a former ATP Board member believes. Established in 2020 by Novak Djokovic and Vasek Pospisil, the PTPA has been fighting for a spot at the table as a voice for players and it said last week it was forced to take legal action after years of good-faith efforts to reform the sport. Briton Alex Inglot, a former European player representative at the ATP, told Reuters the case was a long time coming and the product of the PTPA's frustrations. "They've tried to go by the book, play the game, be polite, try to be productive, progressive and additive. They've tried to build their relationship with players through various events and meetings," Inglot said via video call from London. "It's now got to a head where the players and the PTPA have decided they just haven't been given sufficient respect, haven't been given a seat at the table, haven't been taken seriously and it's time to raise the stakes. That as a result means the case is a call for serious and formal negotiations. I'm not convinced anyone wants this to go to trial."

FA CUP

Nuno urges Forest to write new chapter ahead of quarters

‘As a group and as a club we have managed to change many things’

AFP

London

Nuno Espirito Santo wants Nottingham Forest to write a new chapter in the club's proud history by reaching the FA Cup semi-finals for the first time in 34 years.

Forest, chasing a Champions League place after a fine Premier League season, travel to Brighton for the last-eight tie today, knowing they are one win away from a date at Wembley.

They have not played an FA Cup semi-final since 1991 under Brian Clough, when they lost to Tottenham in the final, and Nuno is determined to end the wait.

“As a group and as a club we have managed to change many things. We’ve broken records that have stood for 30, 40 years,” said the Forest manager.

“Suddenly we have another chance to break another. This is how we think.

“Since the beginning of the FA Cup, we have had only one ambition - to go as far as possible.”

Forest, who needed penalty shoot-outs to get past third-tier Exeter and Premier League strugglers Ipswich, hammered Brighton 7-0 in February's Premier League meeting at the City Ground, but Nuno said that result would have no bearing on this weekend's



A combination of file pictures shows Nottingham Forest's manager Nuno Espirito Santo (left) and coach Fabian Hurzeler (AFP)

match. “We want to go as far as possible in the FA Cup. We love this competition and our fans love it,” he said. “In terms of the bond between fans and the squad, it is growing, it is getting stronger.

“There is a natural belief on both sides that we can do anything, as long as we keep our same approach, work as hard as we can.”

Forest's prolific striker Chris Wood is missing with a hip injury picked up on international duty with New Zealand and the club are awaiting results of a scan to assess the severity of the injury.

Nuno's men are third in the Premier League, five points clear of fourth-placed Chelsea and six ahead of fifth-placed Manchester

City with nine games to go.

A top-four finish for Forest would guarantee qualification for Europe's elite competition for the first time since the 1980/81 season and fifth spot would likely be enough.

The club were crowned European champions under Clough in 1979 and again the following year.

Mateta ‘ready’ to return for Palace in FA Cup after horror injury

Mateta is “ready” to return for Crystal Palace in their FA Cup quarter-final against Fulham today after suffering a horrific ear injury in the previous round. Mateta needed 25 stitches to his left ear after being kicked in the head by Millwall goalkeeper Liam Roberts in Palace's FA Cup fifth-round victory on March 1. Roberts, who caught Mateta as he rushed out from goal, received an extended six-game ban. The 27-year-old French striker has not played since that match during a period that has included a two-week international break. Palace manager Oliver Glasner said Friday that Mateta, who has scored 15 goals in all competitions this season, is ready to play at Craven Cottage this weekend. “Oh yes, he trains now for two weeks with us,” said the Austrian. “Of course, always with his protection and it's also

important for him to train a little bit. “We had an internal game in the international break where he could play for 60 minutes without any problems. He's ready.” Mateta will wear a protective mask against Fulham.

“I said to him to maybe try water polo because he is tall enough,” said Glasner. “It looks a little bit strange, but he says he is comfortable. “Let's see, when he scores a header tomorrow then it was the right mask and the right protection.” Palace chairman Steve Parish described the incident as the “most reckless challenge” he had ever seen, but Mateta said it was a case of “too much emotion” in the heat of the battle. “Liam contacted me and texted me while I was in hospital and I told him, ‘It is OK, it is football,’” Mateta told Sky Sports. “He apologised. He was worried.”



PREVIEW

Guardiola seeks redemption as City head to Bournemouth

AFP

London

Pep Guardiola takes Manchester City back to Bournemouth in the FA Cup quarter-finals tomorrow hoping to avenge the defeat that sparked their stunning decline this season.

City's 32-game unbeaten run in the Premier League came to a shock end when they were beaten 2-1 at Bournemouth in November.

Coming just days after a League Cup last-16 exit at Tottenham, it was the first time City had lost successive games in all competitions since September 2023.

City, champions for the previous four seasons, surrendered pole position in the Premier League to Liverpool as a result of their loss at the Vitality Stadium and won only once in their next 11 games in all competitions.

Looking back at City's first-ever defeat to Bournemouth, Guardiola - whose team are fifth in the league - acknowledged he could see the signs of their impending collapse.

“It was our first defeat in the Premier League this season. We have to learn from it and try to reach the semi-finals,” Guardiola told reporters yesterday.

“That was the first game where



we were a little bit not competitive in terms of the standards we required.

“The game before we lost in the (League) Cup against Spurs. We were good there. But I could not turn around the symptoms that the (Bournemouth) game started, in terms of being present and winning duels.

“I tried for many months. This time it took more time.”

With their dynastic reign over English football suddenly fading, City have been reduced to fighting to qualify for next season's Champions League, while a third FA Cup triumph in the Guardiola era would salvage a little pride. “The target is to reach the FA Cup semi-finals for seven years in a row, then after that we have to win games to qualify for the Champions League,” Guardiola said.

“In the good moments you learn and in the bad moments you learn. When experiences happen, if you

don't learn they will happen again.

“When I said in the past Champions League qualification was a huge success, people didn't believe me. Now they believe me.”

After FA Cup final victories over Watford in 2019 and Manchester United in 2023, Guardiola could become only the eighth manager to win the trophy three times.

“Of course with the season we have, to come back to Wembley, with the chance to reach the final, that would be nice,” said the Catalan, whose team lost to United in last year's final. “We take the FA Cup seriously like the League Cup in the past when we won it four times in a row.”

Asked if Rodri could return in time for the FA Cup final or the Club World Cup in June and July, Guardiola refused to give a timeline for the Spain midfielder's recovery.

Rodri was expected to miss the rest of the season after having surgery on his ruptured anterior cruciate ligament in September, but the Ballon d'Or winner has been training with City recently.

“Listen, it would be nice if he could play tomorrow but it is the wrong decision right now,” Guardiola said.

“He is behaving on the pitch really well but competition is different. We have to be sure he is fine before he is involved.”

FOCUS

Ex-Barcelona star Dani Alves has conviction annulled

AFP

Madrid

A Spanish appeals court overturned yesterday former Brazil international footballer **Dani Alves'** rape conviction, citing insufficient evidence.

Alves was sentenced to four-and-a-half years in jail in February last year for raping a young woman in the VIP bathroom of a Barcelona nightclub on December 31, 2022.

The 41-year-old, who won the Champions League three-times with Barcelona, was released from jail last March pending his appeal after he posted the one million euros (\$1.1mn) bail set by the court.

The appeals court said its four judges had “unanimously” accepted the player's appeal and “annulled” his conviction.

His trial contained “a series of gaps, inaccuracies, inconsistencies, and contradictions regarding the facts, the legal assessment, and its consequences,” the court said in its ruling.

Alves' accuser was an “unreliable complainant” since her testimony “differed notably” from evidence of video footage taken before she and Alves entered the bathroom where she alleges the player forced her to have sex without her consent.

As a result, the court said there was “insufficient evidence” to prove Alves was guilty.

During the trial, the woman, who testified behind a screen to protect her identity, said Alves had violently forced her inside the bathroom to have sex despite begging him to let her go, causing her “anguish and terror,” according to prosecutors present for her declaration.

Alves testified that his sexual encounter with the woman was consensual and denied hitting the woman and grabbing her hair.

“I am not that type of man, I am not violent,” he told the court after his defence lawyer asked if he had forced her to have sex.

“If she wanted to leave, she could have left, she was not



obliged to be there,” he added.

His lawyers argued during the trial the victim had been “glued” to the player while dancing at the nightclub.

Alves initially denied knowing his accuser in a TV interview but later acknowledged having sex with her after CCTV footage emerged showing the pair entering the lavatory of the nightclub.

He told La Vanguardia newspaper he had lied because he was afraid his wife would leave him.

The appeals court also lifted all restrictions on Alves, including a travel ban and restraining order, and dropped a 150,000-euro compensation claim against his accuser.

“Alves is very happy. He is innocent, that is demonstrated. Justice has spoken,” his lawyer Ines Guardiola told RAC1 radio.

But former equality minister Irene Montero, who drafted a tough new law against sexual offences which came into effect in 2023, said the ruling was a “clear example” of “patriarchal justice that does not protect women and maintains the culture of impunity for aggressors”.

The appeals court ruling can still be appealed to the Supreme Court. Alves was a pivotal part of an all-conquering Barcelona team - crowned La Liga champions six times - and won 126 caps for Brazil, winning the Copa America twice. He also won European league titles with Italian giants Juventus and French outfit Paris Saint Germain.

At the time of his arrest, he was contracted to Mexican club Pumas UNAM - he was sacked soon afterwards. Brazil's leftist President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva criticised the court's decision to grant Alves bail, saying at the time that money “cannot undo the crime that a man commits by raping a woman”.

Ancelotti to go on trial for alleged tax fraud

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti will go on trial next week for allegedly failing to declare income to Spain's tax office, the Madrid court which will hear the case said yesterday. Prosecutors are seeking a jail term of four years and nine months for the 65-year-old Italian, accusing him of costing Spain's treasury more than one million euros (\$1.1mn) in undeclared earnings from image rights in 2014 and 2015. The trial will begin on Wednesday and it is expected to last two days, a spokesman for the court said. Ancelotti, who as a coach has won a record five Champions League trophies including three with Real Madrid, must be present for the hearings, the spokesman added. Ancelotti appeared fairly relaxed about the announcement when he appeared at his pre-match press conference yesterday. “This is not the place really to talk about it,” he said.

LA LIGA

Barcelona cruise past Osasuna

AFP

Barcelona

Barcelona swept to a comfortable 3-0 victory over Osasuna to move three points clear at the top of La Liga despite their discontent at having to play their match on Thursday.

The Catalans' appeal against the rescheduling of this game was rejected but Hansi Flick's side, unbeaten in 19 matches across all competitions, still made light work of Osasuna, 14th.

Ferran Torres and Dani Olmo netted in the first half with Robert Lewandowski on target after the break.

Barca were without key winger Raphinha as he played for Brazil on Wednesday in South America in World Cup qualifying but cruised at the Olympic stadium regardless.

The match was originally due to be played on March 8 but it was postponed after a Barcelona club doctor died.

Flick put veteran striker Lewandowski on the bench, deploying Torres in his place to excellent effect.

Barcelona controlled the game from the start, taking the lead through Torres after 11 minutes.

Frenkie de Jong led the way as Barcelona moved the ball around smartly, with Alejandro Balde receiving it on the left.

The full-back, in fine form,

sent a dangerous low ball into the six-yard box where Torres darted in to stab home.

The Spaniard should have added a second when teenage star Lamine Yamal clipped a fine ball over the top for him but Sergio Herrera saved well.

The goalkeeper brought down Dani Olmo to concede a penalty for Barcelona's second midway through the first half. Herrera saved Olmo's spot kick, low to his right, but a re-take was ordered after an Osasuna player encroached, and this time the playmaker made no mistake.

Olmo was taken off hurt a few minutes later, with Flick angry on the sidelines at the situation, as Barca face an intense run of nine games in 28 days across all competitions, starting with this victory.

Torres whipped a free-kick against the crossbar with Barcelona remaining dominant, as midfield maestro Pedri Gonzalez controlled the game.

The second half was a low key affair as Barcelona were content with their lead, until Lewandowski came on for Torres, hungry to get in on the action.

The veteran Polish striker nodded home from Fermin Lopez's cross at the end of a quick break to extend Barca's lead and his own at the top of Spain's scoring charts with 23 league goals.

Lewandowski rifled over late on and Herrera saved bravely from Pau Victor.

Barcelona's win helped them put daylight between themselves and champions Real Madrid, while Atletico, third, are seven points behind.



Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski celebrates with his teammate Fermin Lopez after scoring his team's third goal during the La Liga match against Osasuna in Barcelona. (AFP)