The Peninsula Local focus, Global vision

Sport

MONDAY 1 FEBRUARY 2021





Bring on the Melbourne crowds: Djokovic

I had goosebumps coming into the court playing in front of the fans again after 12 months of not experiencing that. After playing professional tennis for more than 15 years, this is one of the biggest driving forces or motivations, inspirations that I have, playing in front of a crowd.

World number one Novak Djokovic

Sport |09



PREMIER LEAGUE RESULTS: Chelsea beat Burnley 2-0; Leeds United beat Leicester City 3-1; Liverpool beat West Ham United 3-1

Qatari drivers dominate in opening round of FIA Middle East Rally Championship

Al Attiyah cruises to record 15th win

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Nasser Saleh Al Attiyah continued to rewrite his own history by securing a comfortable victory in the Qatar International Rally yesterday.

The Qatari and French co-driver Matthieu Baumel managed the pace perfectly over the closing stages and guided their Autotek Motorsport Volkswagen Polo GTi R5 to a winning margin of 1min 48.4sec over Abdulaziz Al Kuwari and his new Irish co-driver James Fulton.

Al Attiyah duly broke his own record of achieving a 15th victory in Qatar and a record breaking 77th MERC win in the 218-event history of the series. Baumel earned his 26th regional rally victory on the 41st running of the Qatar event to overhaul both Chris Patterson and Giovanni Bernacchini in the Hall of Fame. He now has his sights set on Ronan Morgan's record of 41 successes.

"Today we did a really good job," said Al Attiyah.

"Leg one was a nice fight between me and Kris (Meeke). It was (becoming) a nice race but when Kris get out from the race it was an easy day for us today. It was great to have some high level in the Qatar Rally. If you look this year we had seven R5s. It was an amazing race. Thanks to the QMMF. I hope to continue in this level for this championship and this year."

Al Kuwari won three of the second's day's six special stages in his Tok Sport Škoda Fabia R5 and was pleased with the runner-up spot after infrequent rally appearances in recent seasons. Khalid Al Suwaidi and his navigator Hugo Maghalães rounded off the podium places to make it a Qatari driver 1-2-3.

Any hope of seeing Al Attiyah and visiting WRC star Kris Meeke battling for stage wins on the final day fizzled out when the Ulsterman was unable to restart after the team discovered engine damage on his SRT Škoda Fabia R5 that was sustained on stage five.

"Unfortunately no day two for us," said Meeke.

"On the last stage on Saturday, quite close to the finish, there were some waves (bumps) and I was on a similar line to my first pass in the morning. But the car skipped and landed nose on the next dip. This damaged the front bumper and took the water pipe off the radiator. That put an end to our rally. I really enjoyed the experience. It's a different kind of rallying here. It's a bit like a jigsaw puzzle and to try to work it out is a challenge enough."



The podium winners of the Qatar International Rally, Nasser Saleh Al Attiyah, Matthieu Baumel; Abdulaziz Al Kuwari, James Fulton and Khalid Al Suwaidi and Hugo Magalhães celebrate on the podium.

2021 QATAR INTERNATIONAL RALLY – POSITIONS AFTER SS11

1. Nasser Saleh Al Attiyah (QAT)/Matthieu Baumel (FRA) Volkswagen Polo GTI R5	1hr 50min 48.5sec
2. Abdulaziz Al Kuwari (QAT)/James Fulton (IRL) Škoda Fabia R5 Evo	1hr 52min 36.9sec
3. Khalid Al Suwaidi (QAT)/Hugo Magalhães (POR) Škoda Fabia R5	1hr 57min 16.9sec
4. Nasser Khalifa Al Atya (QAT)/Georges Nader (LEB) Ford Fiesta R5	2hr 09min 41.6sec
5. Meshari Al Thefiri (KWT)/Nasser Al Kuwari (QAT) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X (MERC 2)	2hr 17min 10.9sec
6. Saleh Al Saif (SAU)/Oriol Vidal (ESP) Can-Am Maverick X3 (T4)	2hr 19min 45.2sec
7. Rashid Al Mohannadi (QAT)/Yousef Juma (JOR) Subaru Impreza (MERC 2)	2hr 22min 31.3sec

2021 QATAR NATIONAL RALLY – POSITIONS AFTER SS11 (UNOFFICIAL)

1. Khalid Al Mohannadi (QAT)/Kirill Shubin (RUS) Polaris RXR 1000 (T3)	2hr 17min 42.6sec
2. Ahmed Allouh (QAT)/Firas Allouh (QAT) Can-Am Maverick X3 (T3)	2hr 26min 15.3sec
3. Ahmed Al Mohannadi (QAT)/Mubarak Al Khulaifi (QAT) Can-Am Maverick X3 (T3)	2hr 42min 24.3sec



Qatar National Rally winners Khalid Al Mohannadi and co-driver Kirill Shubin celebrate.

Fourteen cars remained in the main event as Al Attiyah headed to the new stage at Ras Laffan in the north-east of Qatar. A time of 11min 59.0sec enabled the Volkswagen Polo driver to regain 6.8 seconds of his overnight lead. Al Kuwari increased his cushion over third-placed Al Suwaidi to 51.6 seconds, as crews returned to Losail for the mid-session regroup and service.

Al Attiyah was 0.8 seconds faster on his second pass through Al Khor and 8.5 seconds clear of Al Kuwari to extend his lead to 1min 49.2sec. Al Thani was running near the rear of the field after his morning issues but Mohamed Al Attiyah retired at the midday halt and Shadi El Fakih went OTL with electrical issues and a fuel pump failure.

Al Attiyah shaved 1.1 seconds off his morning's sprint through the QMMF stage but he ceded the stage win to Al Kuwari. The top group held station and headed to the final stage of the rally at Ras Laffan.

There were no late dramas for Al Attiyah and the stage win confirmed the title for the 15th time, as Al Kuwari and Al Suwaidi rounded off the podium places.

This weekend's event was held under the chairmanship of QMMF President Abdulrahman Al Mannai, senior committee member Abdulrazaq Al Kuwari and the QMMF's Executive Director Amro Al Hamad.

Action resumes in the FIA Middle East Rally Championship with the Oman International Rally at the end of February.

Nasser Khalifa Al Atya and Lebanese co-pilot Georges Nader gave the host nation a another driver inside the top four and Kuwait's Meshari Al Thefiri began the defence of his MERC 2 title in impressive fashion by winning the showroom category and finishing fifth overall in his Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution X.

FIA T4 cars are permitted in gravel rounds of the series this season and Saudi Arabia's Saleh Al Saif showed that the Can-Am Maverick X3 is a competitive package, setting a fifth fastest stage time on the way to a superb sixth place.

Qatar's Rashid Al Mohannadi and Oman's Zakariya Al Aufi reached the finish in seventh and eighth and Lebanon's Ahmad Khaled was ninth. Rally first timer Sheikh Suhaim Al Thani retired his R5 Škoda before the last stage and missed out on a potential top 10 finish.

Oman's Zakariya Al Amri duly rounded off the top 10 and Lebanon's Henry Kahy clinched maximum points in the MERC 3 category for two-wheel drive vehicles after another measured drive in his Škoda Fabia 1.6 to take 11th place.

A furious three-way battle waged for outright success in the Qatar National Rally between Ahmed and Khalid Al Mohannadi and Ahmed Allouh. They each won a stage on the morning loop but time delays cost Allouh his chance later on and Khalid Al Mohannadi secured the win by the margin of 8min 32.7sec after problems for his rivals. Lebanon's Jad Al Aawar retired before the end of the morning's loop.

Yesterday, Al Attiyah headed out into the remaining six stages with a lead of 1min 40.6sec over Al Kuwari. Both Ahmad Khaled and Al Thani incurred one-minute time penalties after the Stewards' meeting for route violations, the latter losing a place in the overall rankings. Meeke did not restart after the engine damage caused to his car on the fifth stage.

Oman's Abdullah Al Rawahi confirmed before the restart that exhaust sensor issues had forced him to retire as well, as Al Attiyah headed to the 18.30km of the Al Khor opener. He carded the target time of 9min 47.1sec, although Al Kuwari claimed the fastest time by 0.7 seconds. Al Thani slipped to ninth after losing over five minutes, but the special spelt the end of the road for Kuwait's Jassim Al Muqahwi after engine problems.

A cautious Al Attiyah stopped the clocks in the new seventh stage in 11min 11.2sec, but Al Kuwari gained another stage win by six seconds and reduced the defending champion's overall advantage to 1min 33.9sec. Al Saif set the fifth quickest time and moved up to sixth at the expense of Al Aufi, but the loss of over 12 minutes pushed Al Thani down to 10th overall. A fastest time enabled Ahmed Allouh to snatch a 24.6-second lead in the Qatar National Rally.



Qatar's Nasser Saleh Al Attiyah and his navigator Matthieu Baumel of France driving their Volkswagen Polo GTI R5.

Denmark edge Sweden to retain world handball crown

REUTERS – CAIRO

Denmark won their second successive men's world handball championship after an outstanding performance by goalkeeper Niklas Landin helped them to a pulsating 26-24 win over Sweden in the final yesterday.

Landin racked up 15 saves and Denmark's left back Mikkel Hansen netted seven goals to keep Olympic champions Denmark at the summit after a titanic tussle in the Cairo Stadium Hall.

Earlier yesterday, European champions Spain won the bronze medal with a 35-29 win over France on the back of eight goals from back-court shooter Alex Dujshebaev.



Denmark's Niklas Landin Jacobsen lifts the trophy as they celebrate after winning the final against Sweden during the 2021 IHF Handball World Championship yesterday.

Salah double powers Liverpool to victory

REUTERS – LONDON

Liverpool's Mohamed Salah ended his Premier League goal drought in style by scoring twice as the champions raided the capital again to crush West Ham United 3-1 yesterday.

Liverpool came to life after a first half almost devoid of goalmouth action at the London Stadium, with Salah providing two superb finishes to claim the points for his side.

The Egyptian cut in to curl home with his left foot in the 57th minute -- his first league goal since Dec. 19 -- and doubled the lead with a silky finish from a 68th-minute counter-attack.

Substitute Roberto Firmino set up Gini Wijnaldum to tap home Liverpool's third in the 84th minute before Craig Dawson replied for the hosts with a consolation goal three minutes later.



Club World Cup to take place amid strict health and safety protocols

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Following the successful hosting of the AFC Champions League and Amir Cup finals, Qatar is gearing up to host the FIFA Club World Cup for the second time, with matches taking place from 4-11 February 2021.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the six-team tournament – which was originally due to take place in December 2020 – will be held amid strict health and safety protocols which have been fine-tuned in recent months.

Players and officials will be part of medical bubbles designed to protect their health and well-being. Additional safety measures will include regular COVID-19 testing, safe transportation methods, regular disinfection of all tournament venues, including training and media facilities, as well as the provision of medical staff in stadiums throughout the competition. A limited number of fans will be allowed to attend the matches – in line with Qatar's public health guidelines.

To be able to collect a ticket, fans are required to provide a negative COVID-19 antigen test within 72 hours of a match, present a vaccination certificate obtained a week after the second dose or present record of COVID-19 infection after 1 October 2020.

At the stadiums and surrounding precincts, fans must wear a mask, adhere to social distancing, take a temperature check on arrival and show the status of their EHTERAZ track and trace application. Clinics will be set up within each tournament venue to treat anyone who displays COVID-19 symptoms.

FIFA Club World Cup Qatar 2020 stadiums will operate at 30% capacity throughout the tournament. A total of seven matches will be played in two FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 stadiums: Ahmad Bin Ali and Education City.

In recent months, Qatar has successfully hosted 77 matches during the AFC Champions League by implementing a strict bubble system and setting an international benchmark when it comes to the safe resumption of professional football.

Qatari striker Almoez Ali played for reigning Qatar Stars League champions Al Duhail SC during the AFC Champions League and he spoke of his experience during the tournament.

"As players, we felt very safe," said Ali, who will also represent Al Duhail during the FIFA Club World Cup.

"All the precautions were clearly communicated ahead of time, and that level of support was tangible in every touchpoint of the competition – from our team hotel, to the training ground and on match day itself."

"Knowing that health and safety measures were also implemented on the bus, in the dining area, changing rooms and all common areas was also very reassuring. When combined with regular testing, we felt at ease that we could we focus on the important task at hand – the football," he added.

Qatar's successful implementation of COVID-19 safety measures has been applauded by the global football community, including many who attended the inauguration of Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium on 18 December – an event which safely hosted thousands of fans.

Commenting on the importance of Qatar hosting the FIFA Club World Cup, Nasser Al Khater, Chief Executive Officer of the LOC, said: "We're very pleased to be hosting the FIFA Club World Cup for the second time in February and will ensure it's delivered in a way that safeguards and prioritises the health and safety of fans, players and officials. The tournament offers us a golden opportunity to test our stadiums, training sites and infrastructure as we continue to gear up for the FIFA World Cup in 2022."

Al Khater added: "During a global pandemic which is affecting everyone, we continue to believe in the power of football to unite people and spread joy during these difficult times. Qatar is committed to playing a role in ensuring the continuation of top-level club football while the pandemic continues to affect people's lives."

The FIFA Club World Cup Qatar 2020 will kick-off on Thursday, February 4, 2021 and culminate with the final at Education City Stadium on February 11, 2021.

> During a global pandemic which is affecting everyone, we continue to believe in the power of football to unite people and spread joy during these difficult times. Qatar is committed to playing a role in ensuring the continuation of top-level club football while the pandemic continues to affect people's lives: ***Nasser Al Khater, Chief Executive Officer of the LOC***



Meet the contenders

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

The eyes of the football world will soon be on the Middle East for the first major tournament of the year. The FIFA Club World Cup Qatar 2020, presented by Alibaba Cloud, will be held from 4-11 February after the annual competition was delayed by two months due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The top clubs from five of football's six continental confederations will join host nation representatives Al Duhail SC in determining who will be crowned the world's best. Auckland City FC, who were nominated to represent the Oceania region at Qatar 2020, withdrew from the competition because of COVID-19 quarantine measures required by authorities in New Zealand.

The tournament will also showcase two FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 stadiums: Ahmad Bin Ali and Education City.

As part of our FIFA Club World Cup build-up, qatar2022.qa takes a closer look at the six clubs seeking to win the prestigious title.



Bayern Munich players celebrate after winning the UEFA Champions League title.

AL DUHAIL SC

Country: Qatar
Qualified: Host nation champions
FCWC record: First appearance
Head coach: Sabri Lamouchi

As reigning Qatar Stars League (QSL) champions, Al Duhail SC will be flying the flag of the host nation at this year's FIFA Club World Cup. The Red Knights will be making their debut in the competition after edging Al Rayyan to last season's league title by a single point.

Founded in 2009 as Lekhwiya SC, the club rebranded under the name Al Duhail when it merged with El Jaish SC in 2017. Since coming into existence, Al Duhail's impact on Qatari club football has been impressive, as last season's league triumph was their seventh QSL title. The club's honour roll also includes three Amir Cup titles, three Qatar Cup crowns and two Sheikh Jassim Cup successes.

Al Duhail's domestic success over the past decade has also earned the club nine consecutive appearances in the AFC Champions League since 2012, with the Doha outfit set to take part again in 2021.

Al Duhail are led by head coach Sabri Lamouchi, who is a familiar face to followers of the QSL. The former France international enjoyed spells with Al Rayyan, Umm Salal and Al Kharaitiyat in the latter stages of his playing career. He was also El Jaish's last head coach before the club joined Lekhwiya to become Al Duhail in 2017.

The current squad includes several members of Qatar's national team, including key players that led the Maroons to AFC Asian Cup glory in 2019. They include centre back Bassam Al Rawi, midfielders Ali Afif and Assim Madibo, as well as the tournament's best player and top goal scorer Almoez Ali. Lamouchi's side also includes experienced Moroccan international defender Medhi Benatia, Belgian winger Edmilson and Brazilian attacking midfielder Dudu, who is on loan from Palmeiras in his home country.

FC BAYERN MUNICH

Country: Germany
Qualified: UEFA Champions League winners
FCWC record: Second appearance (Best finish: winners in 2013)
Head coach: Hans-Dieter Flick

A German and European football powerhouse, FC Bayern Munich will be looking to follow a highly-successful 2019-20 season by claiming a second FIFA Club World Cup title in Qatar. Their debut appearance in the competition resulted in the Bavarians winning the title at Morocco 2013. They also claimed the precursor to the Club World Cup on two occasions, winning the Intercontinental Cup title in 1976 and 2001.

Bayern secured their berth at Qatar 2020 after claiming their sixth UEFA Champions League title with a 1-0 win over Paris Saint-Germain in the final last August.

Founded in 1900, Bayern are Germany's most successful club, having won a record number of Bundesliga (30), Cup (20), Super Cup (9) and League Cup (6) titles. Alongside their six UEFA Champions League titles, Bayern's success in European club football includes winning the now-defunct UEFA Cup Winners' Cup in 1967, the UEFA Cup (now UEFA Europa League) in 1996 and two UEFA Super Cup crowns in 2013 and 2020.

Led by former Bayern midfielder Hans-Dieter Flick, the Bavarians boast some of world football's top players. Last month, Polish international Robert Lewandowski was crowned The Best FIFA Men's Player after topping the scoring charts in both the Bundesliga and UEFA Champions League, while German international and World Cup winner Manuel Neuer was named The Best FIFA Men's Goalkeeper. Lewandowski was also named in the FIFA FIFPro Men's World11 2020 alongside Bayern team-mates Alphonso Davies (Canada) and Joshua Kimmich (Germany).

SE PALMEIRAS

Country: Brazil
Qualified: CONMEBOL Libertadores winners
FCWC record: First appearance
Head coach: Abel Ferreira

One of the most successful clubs in Brazilian football, SE Palmeiras were the last club to book their place at the FIFA Club World Cup Qatar 2020 following a dramatic 1-0 victory over fellow Brazilian side Santos in the 2020 Copa Libertadores final on 30 January 2021.

Their triumph in the Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro was the Sao Paulo outfit's second title, having won the South American club crown for the first time back in 1999. Though they will be making their Club World Cup debut in the Middle East, Palmeiras appeared in the 1999 Intercontinental Cup final, where they lost 1-0 to English giants Manchester United. They also won the first intercontinental club tournament in the Copa Rio back in 1951.

Known as O Verdao (The Greens), Sociedade Esportiva Palmeiras was founded in 1914 and hold the record for the most Campeonato Brasileiro Serie A championships with ten titles to their name.

AL AHLY SC

Country: Egypt
Qualified: CAF Champions League winners
FCWC record: Sixth appearance (Best finish: 3rd in 2006)
Head coach: Pitso Mosimane

Widely regarded as world football's most decorated club, Al Ahly SC have been a dominant force in Egyptian and African football, with their success earning them the accolade of 'Club of the Century' from the Confederation of African Football (CAF). The Cairo-based outfit will be making their sixth appearance at a FIFA Club World Cup after defeating arch-rivals Zamalek SC 2-1 in the 2020 CAF Champions League final. Their best finish in the competition was third at Japan 2006.

Founded in 1907, Al Ahly's trophy cabinet includes a remarkable 139 titles in domestic and international club competitions. They are Egypt's most decorated club, having won 42 Egyptian Premier League titles, 37 Egyptian Cup crowns and 11 Egyptian Super Cups. This includes a domestic league and cup double triumph last season.

Among the list of former players that enjoyed success with Al Ahly are SC ambassadors Mohamed Aboutrika and Wael Gomaa.

ULSAN HYUNDAI FC

Country: Korea Republic
Qualified: AFC Champions League winners
FCWC record: Second appearance (Best finish: 6th place in 2012)
Head coach: Hong Myung-bo

After claiming their second AFC Champions League title with a 2-1 victory over Iranian side Persepolis in Qatar last month, Ulsan Hyundai FC will make their second FIFA Club World Cup appearance when they return to the Middle East in early February. The Korea Republic club's triumph in Doha followed their maiden success as Asian club champions back in 2012.

Founded in 1983 as Ulsan Hyundai Horang-i, the Tigers concluded their 2020 campaign with success in the AFC Champions League. On the domestic front, Ulsan narrowly missed out on more silverware by finishing runners-up in K League 1, three points behind champions Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors. It was the same opponent that Ulsan fell short to in the two-leg Korean FA Cup final, as Jeonbuk secured a league and cup double with a 3-2 aggregate win.

Along with their two AFC Champions League titles, Ulsan's honour roll includes winning K League 1 in 1996 and 2005, the Korean FA Cup in 2017, five Korean League Cup titles and a Korean Super Cup in 2006.

TIGRES UANL

Country: Mexico
Qualified: CONCACAF Champions League winners
FCWC record: First appearance
Head coach: Ricardo Ferretti

No debutant at a FIFA Club World Cup will feel more delighted at having the opportunity to face the world's best clubs than Tigres UANL. The Mexican outfit have been a strong contender to win the CONCACAF Champions League title in recent years – only to come up short at the final stage on three previous occasions. Last month, however, Tigres finally reached the regional summit when they defeated Los Angeles FC 2-1 in the final of the 2020 edition.

Founded in 1960, Club de Futbol Tigres de la Universidad Autonoma de Nuevo Leon have been one of the more consistent sides in Mexico in recent seasons. Among their seven Liga MX titles, their last four triumphs were achieved between 2015 and 2019 (three Apertura titles, one Clausura crown). The Monterrey-based outfit's honour roll also includes three Copa MX titles and three consecutive Campeon de Campeones crowns (2016, 2017, 2018).



Al Duhail players celebrating their QNB Stars League title win.

Palmeiras conquer South America to book FIFA Club World Cup spot

REUTERS – RIO DE JANEIRO


Palmeiras players celebrate after winning the Copa Libertadores final on Saturday.

A dramatic goal eight minutes into stoppage time won Palmeiras the Copa Libertadores as a Breno Lopes header earned the Sao Paulo club a 1-0 win over Santos.

The final of South America's equivalent of Europe's Champions League was played on a roasting hot afternoon in Rio de Janeiro and chances were few and far between.

Just as a lacklustre match looked sure to go to extra-time, however, substitute Lopes timed his jump perfectly at the back post to loop a header into the net.

His goal, moments after Santos coach Cuca was sent off for a touchline fracas only to clamber into the stands to watch the final minutes with those Santos fans allowed in to the match, provoked wild celebrations among Palmeiras supporters who had gathered to view the game in Sao Paulo.

"It's an unforgettable day for me, scoring the goal that wins the Libertadores," said Breno, a 25-year old winger who only joined Palmeiras in November.

"I can't explain the emotions I am feeling." With the temperature in Rio de Janeiro toping 100 degrees, neither side was able to make an early impact in the final of the continent's blue riband tournament. Although the game opened up slightly towards the end of the second half, it failed to live up to expectations of TV viewers in 191 countries or the 5,000 specially invited guests who watched the match live at the Maracana.

Victory, however, continued a superb season for Palmeiras and their recently appointed 42-year old coach, Portuguese Abel Ferreira.

The club won the Paulista state championship in August and they play Gremio in the Copa do Brasil final in February.

This was Palmeiras' second Libertadores title – and their first since 1999 – and the third time in four years that a Brazilian team have won South America's biggest club competition.

The final was originally scheduled to be held in November but the tournament was halted for six months due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Palmeiras will pocket $15m for winning the title match alone and have qualified along with Champions League winners Bayern Munich for the Club World Cup, which is due to start next week in Qatar.

Thousands of fans celebrated in and around the Palmeiras' stadium after the final, chanting and letting off fireworks.

Many were expected to go to Sao Paulo airport to greet the team on their arrival back in the city later on Saturday night. Earlier in the day, one Corinthians fan was reported dead after gangs of Corinthians and Palmeiras supporters clashed in Sao Paulo, O Globo reported.

Neymar goals not enough as PSG slump to shock 3-2 loss

AP – PARIS

Neymar's two penalties were not enough as Paris Saint-Germain slumped to a shock 3-2 defeat at struggling Lorient, opening the door for Lille to move three points clear at the top of the French league if it wins later yesterday.

After pulling a silly face to celebrate his second penalty, Neymar cut a different figure at the final whistle, throwing his arms up in exasperation as he looked at the defense. An equally frustrated Kylian Mbappe did the same.

Defending champion PSG has lost five league games already this season, and this was coach Mauricio Pochettino's first defeat since replacing Thomas Tuchel, who was fired in December.

But the manner of this loss, with two goals conceded late, will raise concerns with PSG facing Lionel Messi's Barcelona in the Champions League on Feb. 16.

Lorient is languishing in 18th place but took the lead in the 35th minute through captain Laurent Abergel after PSG's Danilo Pereira was closed down on the edge of the penalty area.

Neymar's first penalty came on the stroke of halftime when Houboulang Mendes fouled him and the Brazil star sent goalkeeper Matthieu Dreyer the wrong way.

PSG appealed for another penalty in the 55th for a handball by Mendes, but the referee ruled it out after a video review. Moments later, he awarded one when Mendes fouled striker Mauro Icardi. Neymar again wrong-footed Dreyer from the spot.

But PSG's complacency cost it again as substitute forward Yoane Wissa equalized with 10 minutes left, firing home after playing a near one-two with Terem Moffi.

Moffi then hit the winner in the first minute of injury time after Abergel picked him out on a swift counterattack, and he held off defender Presnel Kimpembe before shooting past goalkeeper Sergio Rico. Lille was hosting 19th-place Dijon later yesterday.

A victory would push it two points ahead of Lyon and drop PSG down to third place.

The day after 250 fans of struggling Saint-Etienne interrupted the club's training session, the players responded to their demands with a 1-0 win at Nice. Striker Charles Abi got the winner with just three minutes left as coach Claude Puel secured a much-needed victory against his former side.

Barca to sue newspaper for publishing Messi contract

REUTERS – BARCELONA

Barcelona said yesterday they will take legal action against Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* for publishing Lionel Messi's contract with the club.

El Mundo published full details of the deal Messi penned with Barca in 2017 until June 2021.

The report said the contract, which was previously described by French newspaper *L'Equipe* as the most lucrative in football, had contributed to the club's recent financial troubles, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Barca's last accounts showed their net debt had doubled to €488m ($592.24m), while the club's interim president Carles Tusquets said recently they had been forced to delay payments to players.

Barcelona denied any responsibility for the publication of the contract in a statement, adding they regretted its release as it was a "private document governed by the principle of confidentiality between the parties".

Messi, who joined Barca in 2000 aged 13 and made his debut in 2004, is the club's all-time scorer with 650 goals and has also provided 280 assists in 755 appearances for the Catalans.

He is also their captain and most decorated player with 10 La Liga titles, four Champions Leagues plus six Copa del Rey triumphs.

The Argentine tried to leave Barca last August via a release clause in his contract but eventually decided to stay in order to avoid a court case with the club.

He can move to any club for free from June but has not ruled out staying at Barca, saying in a December interview that he will make his decision at the end of the season.

Messi's contract worth $674m: El Mundo

BLOOMBERG



Lionel Messi, the superstar striker with FC Barcelona, will earn more than €555m ($674m) from his current contract with the top Spanish soccer team, newspaper *El Mundo* reported, citing a copy of the contract.

El Mundo, which published a redacted version of the document on its website, said Messi had the most lucrative contract in sports history. The compensation includes salary, marketing rights and a series of other bonuses and incentives, the paper said.

Chelsea beat Burnley 2-0 for first win under Tuchel

REUTERS – LONDON


Chelsea's Marcos Alonso scores their second goal.

Chelsea notched up their first win under Thomas Tuchel yesterday with a 2-0 victory over Burnley thanks to goals by Spanish defenders Cesar Azpilicueta and Marcos Alonso who have both been given a chance to shine under the German coach.

Azpilicueta was entrusted with a place in Chelsea's starting line up by Tuchel in his two games since replacing Frank Lampard and he scored with an angled shot in the 40th minute after sprinting 80 yards to seize on a lay-off by Callum Hudson-Odoi.

Alonso, playing for the first time since September, secured the win in the 84th minute when he controlled a pass from Christian Pulisic with his chest and knee before swivelling to blast a shot past Burnley goalkeeper Nick Pope.

Hudson-Odoi, also making the most of much more playing time under Tuchel, and fellow Chelsea academy product Mason Mount were at the heart the Blues' best moves.

Their form contrasts with the struggles of the club's two expensive German signings in 2020, Timo Werner and Kai Havertz who pose Tuchel's most immediate challenge.

Werner wasted a good first-half chance for Chelsea while Havertz was dropped to the bench and only came on for the last 10 minutes.

Tuchel praised his team for controlling the game – Burnley did not have a single shot on target – but said he needed more from his strikers.

"It should be a signal to our guys up front that we needed two defensive players to score. We lack in the moment precision in the last pass... in the finishing," he told BT Sport. "We will work with this, absolutely." The German coach said Werner was suffering from a lack of confidence.

"We cannot expect any changes from one minute to the other, from one day to the other," he said. "He's not the only striker in the world who is very sensitive when he does not score." Werner was the Bundesliga's second-highest scorer last season with RB Leipzig and he seemed to have put a barren start at Chelsea behind him when he hit four goals in four league games in October and November. However, he has had a drought in the league since then.

Sunday's win pushed Chelsea – who drew 0-0 last week against Wolves in Tuchel's first game – up to seventh in the Premier League standings, 11 points behind leaders Manchester City. Burnley slipped to 16th place.

Fourth jersey, lifestyle collection available at Villaggio Mall

Paris Saint-Germain X Jordan Brand a new range for another dimension

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Paris Saint-Germain and Jordan Brand, exclusive partners since 2018, are releasing a Spring-Summer 2021 lifestyle collection.

Developed around a visionary fourth jersey inspired by the Milky Way, this collection illustrates the new dimension in which the capital's club is evolving. Symbolising the ambition of Paris Saint-Germain as the first club of the new generation, the range also underlines the will of a club that dares, a club that is avant-gardist and pioneering, pushing the limits and innovating internationally, creating and inspiring.


PSG Star Neymar sporting the new jersey.


Kylian Mbappé wearing the new jersey.

This new kids, women and men's collection – including an Air Jordan 1 Zoom and a fourth jersey – expresses the constant creativity of Paris Saint-Germain and Jordan. This audacity has been acclaimed for several seasons by millions of fans across the globe, and already the 20/21 collection's success in winning over retailers in France and abroad is extraordinary.

The two ranges, Performance and Lifestyle, are based on a spatial universe, with the Hyper Pink, Psychic Purple and Black colors bringing the theme to life. The jersey and shorts use a unique mesh that echoes the mythical Elephant Print created for the Air Jordan 3 in 1987. The Performance range is completed by a training kit featuring a new monogram "PARIS", based on the NASA space shuttle typeface, as Paris Saint-Germain projects itself into the future while relying on the past.

Bring on the Melbourne crowds: Djokovic

REUTERS — MELBOURNE

World number one Novak Djokovic found playing without crowds last season strange and he can't wait to wow the fans in the stands at his 17th Australian Open.

Some 25,000-30,000 fans will be admitted to Melbourne Park on each day of the Grand Slam and Djokovic got a taste of what was to come when he played an exhibition match in Adelaide after coming out of quarantine on Friday.

"I had goosebumps coming into the court playing in front of the fans again after 12 months of not experiencing that," the Serbian told reporters yesterday.

"After playing professional tennis for more than 15 years, this is one of the biggest driving forces or motivations, inspirations that I have, playing in front of a crowd.

"Feeding off that energy, exchanging that great passion and joy that I have for the sport and the fans have for the sport."

Djokovic said the blister on his right hand that restricted him to one set in Adelaide on Friday was "nothing major" and would not be an issue when he leads Serbia in their ATP Cup title defence this week.

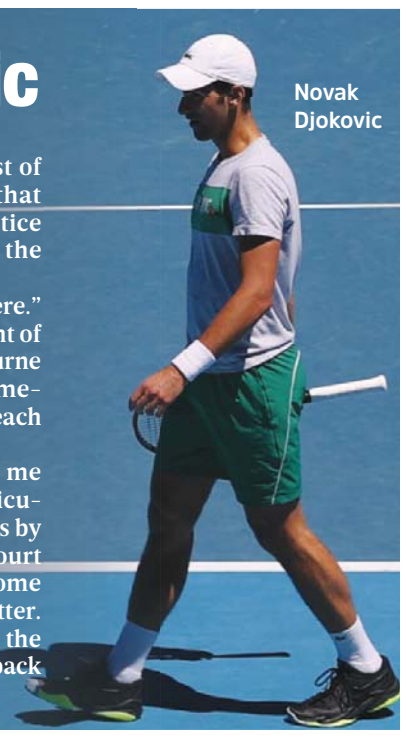
Having upset some locals when he sent a letter to organisers asking for the quarantine conditions to be changed, Djokovic expressed his gratitude at being able to play in Australia.

"I'm grateful, as I think most of us that are here in Australia, that we have an opportunity to practice and to play and to compete in the sport that we love," he said.

"So we are all excited to be here."

The 33-year-old has won eight of his 17 Grand Slam titles at Melbourne Park and said it felt like a homecoming returning at the start of each year.

"It does feel like a home for me in Australia, in Melbourne, particularly in Rod Laver (Arena). That is by far my most successful tennis court in my career. Each year that I come back to the court, it feels even better. The more you win on the court, the more confident you feel coming back to it."



Novak Djokovic



Rafael Nadal practises in Melbourne yesterday.

Unusual circumstances, but time to talk tennis for Rafa Nadal

REUTERS — MELBOURNE

Rafa Nadal brushed aside questions about the Australian Open quarantine yesterday and said it was time to get down to the business of playing tennis and entertaining fans around the world.

The 34-year-old, who secured his 20th Grand Slam title at last year's delayed French Open, completed his two weeks of isolation in Adelaide on Friday before playing an exhibition match and then heading to Melbourne.

"When we arrived here, we have this quarantine. But I think that's over. It's the moment to start talking about tennis," the world number two told reporters yesterday.

"That's why we came here. To play tennis, to try to give to the fans around the world and to the fans here in Australia a good show. For some of the people who are suffering a lot at home, we try to have a good entertainment for them."

Nadal will get his first taste of competitive action for the season when he spearheads Spain's challenge for the ATP Cup, which makes a much-delayed start in Melbourne tomorrow.

Spain lost the ATP Cup final to Novak Djokovic's Serbia last year and Nadal said he and his team mates would be doing their best to go one better this year, despite the proximity of the tournament to the Feb. 8 start of the Australian Open.

"Of course, it's different circumstances than last year. It's a very unusual situation for most of us," he added.

"Most of you that are around tennis knows I never play the week before a Grand Slam, so it is a little bit new and it is strange situation.."

WTA stars tune up for AO after quarantine

AP — MELBOURNE

Australians Sam Stosur and Daria Gavrilova had contrasting fortunes in their first matches at home after long absences yesterday in the first round of the Yarra Valley Tennis Classic at Melbourne Park.

Stosur, playing her first competitive match since March and now ranked 112, lost 6-2, 6-0 to 16th seeded Czech Marie Bouzkova in just over one hour.

The 2011 US Open champion took a break from tennis in 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic and the birth of her first child. She didn't hit a ball for two and a half months before returning to the training court in September, beginning to work towards next month's Australian Open.

Stosur hasn't made any firm plans for the coming year but said she hopes to play all four Grand Slams.

"It's about getting through the Aussie summer and then after that it is hard to know, given we are still going to need to quarantine if we want to come home," Stosur said.

"It makes it tough to make a schedule given the family circumstances now.

"Ten years ago I'd jump on a plane and not come back for a year but I am not in a position to do that at the moment."

Gavrilova, ranked 451 and playing as a wildcard, won her first match on home soil since 2019, easing past Slovakia's Viktoria Kuzmova 6-2, 6-0.

The 26-year-old made a return at WTA level at last year's French Open after missing a full year with injury. She will face 23-time Grand Slam champion Serena Williams in the second round after Williams had a first round bye.

"I've seen her training on Instagram," Gavrilova said in a courtside interview. "She doesn't look rusty at all."

The Yarra Valley Classic and the Gippsland Open, being played concurrently at Melbourne Park, are the first WTA tournaments of the season for most players who have just emerged from quarantine ahead of the Australian Open.

More than 1,000 players and officials went into a two-week quarantine from January 14 when the first of 17 flights chartered by Tennis Australia landed in Melbourne and Adelaide.

Venus Williams, the oldest player in the tournament at 40, took only 65 minutes to beat Arantxa Rus of the Netherlands 6-1, 6-3 in her first round match.

Australia's World No. 1 Ashleigh Barty had a first round bye in the singles but combined with Jennifer Brady of the United States to win her doubles opener.

"It's exciting for all of tennis to be back and getting a few matches hopefully under my belt before (the Australian Open) starts would be good," Barty said.

"It's an adjustment, but come the Australian Open the crowds will be here and there's going to be a really nice vibe."

Former Australian Open semifinalist Danielle Collins of the United States, seeded 13th, beat Belgium's Ysaline Bonaventure 6-3, 6-3 in just over 75 minutes.

Fellow American Shelby Rogers joined Collins in the second round with 6-2, 7-5 win over No.12 seed Fiona Ferro. The Yarra Valley Classic and the Gippsland Open, being played concurrently at Melbourne Park, are the first WTA tournaments of the season for most players who have just emerged from quarantine ahead of the Australian Open.

More than 1,000 players and officials went into a two-week quarantine from January 14 when the first of 17 flights chartered by Tennis Australia landed in Melbourne and Adelaide.

The 2017 French Open champion Jelana Ostapenko of Latvia, seeded 13th, beat Sara Errani of Italy 4-6, 6-3, 6-1, in a first round match between former top-5 ranked players in the Gippsland Trophy.

Ostapenko, currently ranked 45 and one of four Grand Slam champions in the draw, needed 1 hour, 46 minutes to win her first match of the season. She also posted her maiden win over Errani who was seeking her first win over a top-50 player since April, 2018. Errani, now ranked 131, beat Ostapenko in their only previous meeting at the 2015 US Open.

Ostapenko took time to add accuracy to her power game but eventually hit 56 winners.

Caroline Garcia of France, seeded 12th, launched her season with a 6-3, 6-4 win over Australian wildcard Arina Rodionova.

"It was a lot of emotions to get back on court, finally," Garcia said. "I tried to stay very calm and play one point at a time and I think I improved during the match so that's the most positive thing about today."

Kaia Kanepi of Estonia fought back from the brink of defeat to beat another Australian wildcard, Astra Sharma, 1-6, 7-5, 6-2 after being two points from defeat at 1-6, 3-5.



Jelana Ostapenko

Venus Williams

No complaints but quarantine differentials were a mistake, says Zverev

REUTERS — SYDNEY

Alexander Zverev has no complaints about being forced into quarantine ahead of the Australian Open but believes allowing top players like Novak Djokovic and Rafa Nadal more salubrious isolation conditions was a mistake, the German said.

A select group of players, also including Serena Williams, Naomi Osaka and Dominic Thiem, enjoyed stays in higher-end Adelaide hotels for their obligatory 14 days of isolation than the rest of the players sequestered in more modest Melbourne hotels.

Zverev said repeatedly that he thought Tennis Australia had done a great job in difficult circumstances in all but this one regard.

"I think maybe the only real mistake that there was the Adeliade thing for top players," the world number seven told a news conference at Melbourne Park.

"Because they did get more practice time, they did get more freedom. But other than that, the quarantine and the flights, we have to accept that.

"We have to understand that Australia doesn't have any COVID cases at all except for us tennis players and... we shouldn't complain too much about the circumstances." Zverev, who reached the semi-finals at Melbourne Park last year, said he did not think the better quarantine conditions would be a factor when the Grand Slam gets underway on October 8.



Alexander Zverev

"It's tough to beat Novak, Dominic and Rafa anyways so that doesn't change," he laughed.

Zverev will get a chance to get some match fitness when he spearheads the German challenge in the ATP Cup, which starts tomorrow.

The 23-year-old also addressed his recent split with coach David Ferrer, explaining that the Spaniard was not prepared to endure the long periods of quarantine away from his family necessary to travel on the circuit.

"At the time I was very surprised with the decision in a way, but I need to respect the reasons," said Zverev, who is being coached by his father and brother Mischa.

"I don't think it makes sense for me to look for anyone new during COVID-19 either. I think we left everything open with David.

"I think with my dad and with my brother more involved now... I have a great coaching team. I think I can win big tournaments with that coaching staff that I have."

Meanwhile, World number nine Petra Kvitova considers Olympics as the "fifth Grand Slam" and hopes the Tokyo edition goes ahead as scheduled this year, defying the COVID-19 pandemic.

Amid speculation that the Games could be cancelled due to the pandemic, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said on Friday that Japan remained determined to stage the Olympics, which had to be rescheduled last year.

"First of all, I hope that the Olympics really will happen," two-time Wimbledon champion Kvitova told reporters yesterday. "I know that Tennis players are a little bit different because we have our peaks during the year, we have four of them.

"For me Olympic Games are very important ... it's like a fifth Grand Slam. I really wanted to be part of it this year."

Hafeez left out of Pakistan T20 squad to play South Africa

AP — ISLAMABAD

Pakistan has left out veteran batsman Mohammad Hafeez **(pictured)** from its Twenty20 squad for the series against South Africa because he would not meet the Pakistan Cricket Board's deadline for players to enter a bio-secure bubble.

The PCB had said that all players had to be in the team's bubble by February 3 ahead of the three-match series against the Proteas that starts on February 11.

Hafeez, who is not among the PCB's centrally contracted players, is currently playing in the T10 League in the United Arab Emirates. He had asked the PCB to allow him to join the team in Lahore after the February 3 deadline.

"Unfortunately, the scenario is as such that every player has to join the (bio) bubble on February 3 and if a player can't do so, it means he is unavailable," chief selector Mohammad Wasim said.

"If he (Hafeez) was available, there's no question on his performance, but unfortunately he is not available."

Hafeez, 40, has scored 2,323 runs in 99 Twenty20 internationals at a strike rate of 121.30 and 14 half centuries. He was the world's leading T20 cricketer last year, scoring 415 runs in 10 matches at an average of 83 and a strike rate of 152.57.

PAKISTAN T20 SQUAD

Babar Azam (captain), Haider Ali, Khushdil Shah, Hussain Talat, Danish Aziz, Asif Ali, Iftikhar Ahmed, Mohammad Nawaz, Zafar Gohar, Faheem Ashraf, Aamer Yamin, Amad Butt, Mohammad Rizwan, Safaraz Ahmed, Shaheen Afridi, Haris Rauf, Mohammad Hasnain, Hasan Ali, Usman Qadir, Zahid Mehmood.

The selectors have recalled Asif Ali, who is also playing in the T10 League in the UAE, but Wasim said the batsman will join the team by the February 3 deadline. The selectors dropped opening batsman Fakhar Zaman and fast bowler Wahab Riaz due to their recent poor performances while all-rounder Shadab Khan is still nursing a leg injury. Pakistan's other Twenty20 regular - all-rounder Imad Wasim - was unavailable because of a family commitment.

Left-handed opener Fakhar could score only 192 runs in his last 17 Twenty20 internationals at an average of 11.29 while left-arm fast bowler Riaz took six wickets in his last 8 T20 internationals.

In addition to Asif, fast bowler Hasan Ali and Aamer Yamir were also recalled to the Twenty20 team that also includes four rookie players - Zafar Gohar, Danish Aziz, Zahid Mehmood and Amad Butt.

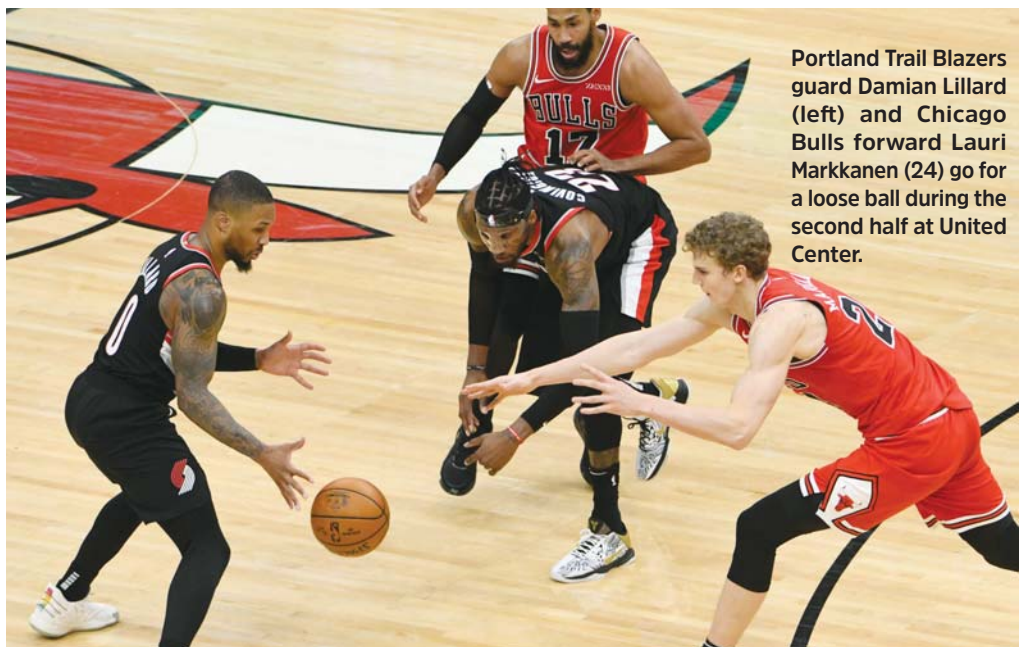
The South African Twenty20 squad will arrive in Pakistan on Feb. 3. All three matches will be played in Lahore on February 11, 13 and 14.

The PCB said that Pakistan players taking part in the Test series against South Africa who are also part of the Twenty20 team will join the bubble in Lahore at the end of the second test, which starts in Rawalpindi on February 4.



NBA: Blazers win on last-second Lillard trey as Heat edge Kings

NEW YORK — REUTERS



Portland Trail Blazers guard Damian Lillard (left) and Chicago Bulls forward Lauri Markkanen (24) go for a loose ball during the second half at United Center.

Damian Lillard made a 3-pointer as time expired to give the Portland Trail Blazers a 123-122 win over the host Chicago Bulls on Saturday night.

Team-mates mobbed Lillard after his step-back shot over the outstretched arms of Bulls forward Lauri Markkanen. Lillard finished with 44 points on 15-for-26 shooting, including 8-for-17 from beyond the arc.

Enes Kanter scored 22 points and grabbed 11 rebounds for Portland, which snapped a two-game skid and avenged a loss against the Bulls earlier in the season. Gary Trent Jr. finished with 18 points for the Blazers.

Markkanen had 31 points and six rebounds to lead Chicago. Zach LaVine added 26 points and seven rebounds.

Los Angeles Lakers 96 - Boston Celtics 95

Boston Celtics 95 Anthony Davis had 27 points and 14 rebounds in his return from a quad injury, LeBron James scored 21 and Los Angeles survived a late rally by host Boston.

Kemba Walker missed what would have been a game-winning shot for the Celtics with 2.7 seconds left, and Daniel Theis whiffed on the follow up as the Lakers avoided blowing a seven-point lead with 1:40 remaining.

Montrezl Harrell added 16 points for Los Angeles, which snapped a two-game losing streak. Davis had missed the team's matchup in Detroit two nights prior. Jayson Tatum

Miami Heat 105 - Sacramento Kings 104

Jimmy Butler, returning from a 10-game COVID-19-protocol absence, scored 20 of his game-high-tying 30 points in the first half as host Miami defeated Sacramento.

Sacramento had its three-game winning streak snapped despite a productive night from De'Aaron Fox, who had 17 of his 30 points in the fourth quarter. He also had a team-high six assists.

Houston Rockets 126 - New Orleans Pelicans 112

Christian Wood scored 27 points, Victor Oladipo added 20 and they led a second-quarter scoring burst as visiting Houston won its fifth consecutive game by beating New Orleans.

Wood and Oladipo each had 16 points during a 48-point second quarter that came a night after the Pelicans withstood a 44-point second quarter to defeat Milwaukee. John Wall finished with 15 points, Eric Gordon had 14 and Jae'Sean Tate added 13 for the Rockets.

Charlotte Hornets 126 - Milwaukee Bucks 114

LaMelo Ball and Gordon Hayward each scored 27 points and host Charlotte squandered a 20-point lead but recovered to defeat Milwaukee.

Malik Monk tallied 18 points and Graham and Terry Rozier both finished with 12 points for Charlotte, which defeated the Indiana Pacers a night earlier. Miles Bridges added 11 points. Ball, a rookie, had nine assists, while team-mate Cody Zeller hauled in 15 boards.

It took plenty to offset Giannis Antetokounmpo's 34-point, 18-rebound, nine-assist outing for the Bucks, who have given up huge point totals in consecutive losses.

Memphis Grizzlies 129 - San Antonio Spurs 112

Ja Morant scored 19 points and dished out 11 assists to lead seven players in double figures as Memphis pulled away late to defeat host San Antonio in the first of two games between the squads over a three-day period.

The win was the sixth straight for Memphis, which was playing for the first time since Jan. 18 after having five games postponed because of COVID-19-created limited player availability. And the Spurs were playing the second of a home back-to-back after beating Denver on Friday.

Heponiemi scores winner on debut

REUTERS — LOS ANGELES

Aleksi Heponiemi scored at 2:45 of overtime in his first NHL game to give the visiting Florida Panthers a 3-2 win over the Detroit Red Wings on Saturday.

Anthony Duclair was stopped on a breakaway by Detroit goaltender Thomas Greiss, but the puck stayed in the Wings' zone. Duclair then slipped a pass across the crease to Heponiemi, who tapped it in for his first career goal.

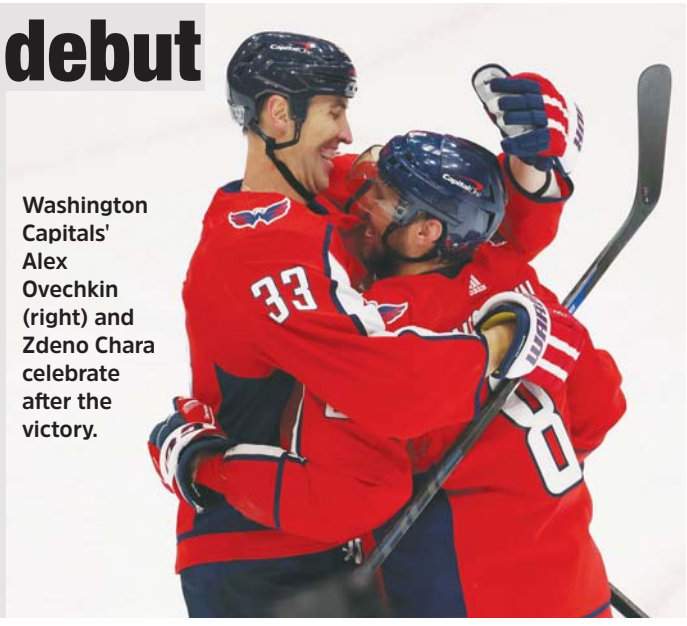
Aleksander Barkov and Keith Yandle had the regulation goals for the Panthers. Sergei Bobrovsky made 25 stops for the Panthers.

Meanwhile, Alex Ovechkin scored 28 seconds into overtime in his return as Washington extended its season-opening point streak to a franchise-record nine games with a victory against visiting Boston.

Ovechkin gathered the puck in his own end of the ice, skated over the Boston blue line and fired a wrist shot from the top of the faceoff circles that beat Bruins goaltender Tuukka Rask. It was the 708th goal of Ovechkin's NHL career, tying him with former Capital Mike Gartner for seventh place on the league's all-time list.

It was also Ovechkin's 111th career game-winning goal, moving him past Brett Hull and Teemu Selanne and into sole possession of fourth place in NHL history.

Nicklas Backstrom had a goal and two assists and Trevor van Riemsdyk and Richard Panik also scored for the Capitals.



Washington Capitals' Alex Ovechkin (right) and Zdeno Chara celebrate after the victory.

We'll never ask for athletes to be vaccinated first, says Italian Olympic Committee

REUTERS — MILAN

The president of the Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI) said that it will never ask for its athletes to be vaccinated against COVID-19 before others in the country ahead of the Tokyo Summer Games.

Hungary and Serbia began inoculating their Olympic athletes on Friday, while Israel's Olympic Committee said it had already vaccinated half its Olympic delegation and would complete the process by the end of May.

International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach said on Wednesday the organisation was not in favour of athletes "jumping the queue" for vaccines, a view backed by CONI President Giovanni Malago in an interview with Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*.

"We already know there are many countries where national athletes are about to be vaccinated," he said.

"We will never ask for this and we don't want it either. An elderly person has their sacred right to be vaccinated before a 20-year-old athlete is.

"The athlete is forced to move around: they don't participate in gatherings, they go through airports, changing rooms, competitions, contacts, to defend the Italian flag. Politics needs to make this assessment, not sport," he added.

Shortfalls in COVID-19 vaccine deliveries from US drug-maker Moderna have spread across Europe, as Italy joined France and Switzerland in announcing the company's shipments for February would miss expectations.

Like many European countries, Italy is now grappling with broad vaccine delays, at least temporarily, as all Western vaccine makers with approved shots - Moderna, Pfizer and its German partner BioNtech, and AstraZeneca -- fall behind their initial delivery targets to the countries.

PEN MAG CLASSIFIEDS



I would quarantine again for the Olympics, says Osaka

REUTERS — MELBOURNE

Naomi Osaka said she would be willing to undergo two more weeks of quarantine to play at the Tokyo Olympics later this year, if it helped ensure the safety of the people of her home country.

Two days after completing 14 days of isolation in Adelaide ahead of the Australian Open, the US Open champion said she would be prepared to do it all again to play in the Olympics on home soil.

"The way that I feel is I will stay in my room for two weeks to play the Olympics," the 23-year-old told reporters yesterday.

"I missed out on the last one. Playing in Tokyo would be very special to me. My concern would be the general safety of everyone else because you're opening the country.

"Everyone is flying in from different places. I would just want the public to feel safe. I feel like the athletes definitely would want to play, but I would want the public to feel safe." Although plans are changing daily, Tokyo organisers are not currently considering wholesale quarantine for the 11,000 athletes taking part in the Games.

Osaka's most recent competitive match was the US Open final last September so she said she was looking forward to getting a decent amount of match practice this week in the Gippsland Trophy warm-up tournament at Melbourne Park.

"I'm actually really happy," she said. "For me, I like it's being held at the same spot. I know normally we don't get that sort of luxury."

> *I missed out on the last one. Playing in Tokyo would be very special to me. My concern would be the general safety of everyone else because you're opening the country.*
>
> *Naomi Osaka*
> Japan's tennis star

The US Open was played without fans and Osaka said while she was delighted that there will be fans in attendance when the year's first Grand Slam starts on Feb. 8, it did have a downside.

"I think I get distracted by the crowd sometimes because I want to show off a little bit, so I do some crazy shots," she said.

"(But) I would say I definitely love having a crowd watching. I feel like you sort of interact with them. Sometimes they shout things and it makes you laugh."



Naomi Osaka