

TSONGA TWEETS A TOUCHING LETTER

Jo-Wilfried Tsonga has shared a heart-warming letter received from the ball girl, Giuliana, he helped during last year's Australian Open on his twitter. He halted play during his second-round match to check on the girl, who was struck by a ball and then escorted her off the court. Giuliana's letter reads: "Dear Mr Jo-Wilfried Tsonga. I wanted to take the opportunity to thank you for helping me. I'm not sure if you remember but I was the ball girl you escorted off court. I would also like to apologise for the times you asked for the ball but I did not service it or acknowledge you. I had picked up a virus which affected my vision and hearing. I apologise for not being able to perform my duties as a ball kid to the expected standards. Thank you so much for the kindness that you showed me. I really appreciate that you were able to see that I needed help."



Udayachal trump Old DOHS

SPORTS REPORTER

Fardeen Hasan slammed 108 as Udayachal Club posted a nine-wicket victory over Old DOHS Sports Club in the First Division Cricket League at the BKSP yesterday.

Udayachal scored 220 for one in 39.1 overs in reply to DOHS's 219 for seven in 50 overs.

At the Fatullah Outer Stadium, Sandwip Roy claimed six wickets for 23 runs to guide Talent Hunt CA to a five-wicket victory against Baridhara Dazzlers. Talent Hunt made 174 for five in 42.4 overs in reply to Dazzlers's 171 all out in 47.4 overs.

In the day's other matches, Rugganj Tigers CC (120-2) defeated Agrani Bank CC (119 all out) by eight wickets at Jahangirnagar University Ground, BKSP (155 all out) secured an exciting one-run victory against Sk. Jamal Cricketers (154-7) at Fatullah Cricket Stadium, and the Kakrail Boys Club (218-9) beat Bangladesh Boys Club (149 all out) by 69 runs at BKSP.



USA star Serena Williams celebrates her victory against Czech Republic's Barbora Strycova during their women's singles fourth round match of the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

U-16s leave for Japan today

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh U-16 women's football team will leave for Japan today to take part in the J-Green Sakai Lady's Festival as part of their preparation for September's AFC U-16 Women's Championship in Thailand.

A total of 20 teams including one team each from Bangladesh and Thailand, split into four groups, will be playing 40-minute length group matches before vying against the opponents of the three other groups on the basis of group standing.

Besides, the girls in red and green will also play a practice match on Wednesday before entering the group-stage matches on the following day. They will have to play three successive matches on Thursday before playing four more matches on Friday.

"For the first time, we are going to play against strong teams like Japan. I believe our girls will earn a vast knowledge from the festival and we can also see the standard of our team at the moment," said head coach Golam Rabbani Choton at a press conference at the BFF House yesterday.

Asked what if the girls suffer injuries due to the hectic schedule as the players have been going through hard training and whether this is the proper platform to judge the team, the coach said, "As it is a match of 40 minutes, I think the girls will face no injuries as they are used to playing 90-minute games. I think it will be a new experience for them and a stage to learn new things."

Choton also believes the fitness level of the players has improved compared to what it was during the AFC U-16 Championship Qualifiers in September last year and that they will play better football this time.

Captain Krishna Rani Sarker is also optimistic about earning some valuable experience from the festival.

"The other teams are much stronger than us and we have many things to learn from them. We will give hundred percent

Nadal, Serena reach last eight

AFP, Melbourne

Rafael Nadal struggled into his first Grand Slam quarterfinal since 2015 at the Australian Open on Monday, as Serena Williams accelerated towards a record title and the number one ranking.

Nadal, searching for a revival after injuries wrecked last season, was tested by France's Gael Monfils before winning 6-3, 6-3, 4-6, 6-4 to book a last-eight clash with Milos Raonic.

Nadal, 30, was also pushed to five sets by Alexander Zverev, 19, in round three, but he has survived to reach his first major quarter-final since the 2015 French Open.

The Spanish world number nine now has an excellent chance to add to his 14 Grand Slam titles after world number one Andy Murray and title-holder Novak Djokovic were both knocked out.

"I'm very happy being in the quarter-finals of a Grand Slam after a couple of years without being there," he said. "It's very special for

me, especially here in Australia where I feel (it's) a little bit like home."

A day after defending women's champion and top seed Angelique Kerber also fell by the wayside, Williams beat Barbora Strycova 7-5, 6-4 to set up a last-eight meeting with Johanna Konta.

The American great would gain much from winning in Melbourne, as she would overtake Steffi Graf's Open-era record of 22 Grand Slam titles and end Kerber's short reign as world number one.

In hot afternoon conditions, she fought off the Czech Republic's Strycova in two tight sets, following her sister Venus into the quarter-finals without dropping a set.

"I have absolutely nothing to lose in this tournament," said Williams, 35. "Everything here is a bonus for me. Obviously I'm here to win. Hopefully I can play better, I can only go better."

Britain's Konta, the ninth seed, also reached the last eight with a perfect record in sets after a convincing 6-1, 6-4 victory over Russia's Ekaterina Makarova.

Despite the task facing her, Konta was delighted to be playing Williams, a childhood idol, for what would be her second straight Australian Open semi-final.

"I'm really looking forward to the challenge and I'm looking forward to being on court, out on court with her and competing against her," said the 25-year-old.

Mirjana Lucic-Baroni wrote another chapter in her fairytale career revival when she beat American qualifier Jennifer Brady 6-4, 6-2 to reach her first Grand Slam quarter-final in 18 years.

The former teen prodigy, now 34, won the 1998 Australian Open women's doubles with Martina Hingis but she fled her abusive father and suffered a series of injuries to put her career on hold.

Her joy was unbridled at beating Brady as she reached the last eight at a major for the first time since 1999, when she lost to Graf at Wimbledon aged 17.

"I hope no one is going to pinch me and wake me up because this is just incredible," said Lucic-Baroni, who screamed with joy and jumped

up and down to celebrate the win.

"I am a tough little cookie and really stubborn: when I want something I will work hard and do anything I need to get it. What a satisfaction."

Lucic-Baroni will play her quarter-final against US Open finalist Karolina Pliskova, who ended home hopes with a 6-3, 6-3 win over Australia's Daria Gavrilova.

In the men's draw, David Goffin put away Austria's Dominic Thiem 5-7, 7-6 (7/4), 6-2, 6-2 to become the first Belgian man to reach the Australian quarter-finals.

Goffin will next play Grigor Dimitrov, who halted the fairytale run of Denis Istomin, the 117th-ranked Uzbek wildcard who shocked defending champion Novak Djokovic in round two.

The bespectacled Istomin won the first set but injury problems set in and he went down 2-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-2, 6-1 to the in-form Bulgarian.

Canadian third seed Raonic, still suffering from the effects of flu, beat Spain's Roberto Bautista Agut 7-6 (8/6), 3-6, 6-4, 6-1 to earn his quarter-final against Nadal.

How prepared is Hyderabad?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA from New Delhi



How smooth will be the conduct of the one-off Test between Bangladesh and India scheduled to start on February 9 at the Rajiv Gandhi stadium in southern Indian city of Hyderabad?

The question is being discussed in the corridors of cricket in Hyderabad as there is no recognised body governing the Hyderabad Cricket Association. Elections to HCA had been held but the results have not been declared due to a court order. Besides, there is fund shortage facing HCA which is the local host of the Test match.

But Ratnakar Shetty, the general manager (game development) of Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), yesterday assured cricket fans that the Test would be conducted smoothly.

Shetty said that he has been entrusted by the Board with the responsibility of ensuring smooth conduct of the Test keeping in mind the uncertainty in HCA. "Basically [I have been entrusted with the responsibility] to coordinate the smooth conduct of the Test match," Shetty told media when asked about the reason for this specific appointment.

The decision was taken by BCCI CEO Rahul Johri, empowering Shetty to even, if needed, take the Test out of Hyderabad.

BCCI's problems were compounded by the lack of funds at HCA which has already shot off a letter to BCCI, seeking grants. In the letter sent a few weeks ago, the HCA had stated that it would struggle to hold the game if funds were not sanctioned.

Hridoy's 7 powers Narayananj

SPORTS REPORTER

A double hat-trick from Hridoy Hossain powered Narayananj to a massive 9-0 win over Chuwadanga in the Agrani Bank 26th National Youth Hockey Championship at Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium yesterday.

Apart from Hridoy's seven goals, Shamim and Ratul scored one goal apiece in the one-sided affair in which Narayananj dominated the first half 4-0.

In the day's other match, Dhaka Educational Board handed a 6-2 defeat to Faridpur with Promod Dewan scoring three goals and Parimal Mardi, Ashiqur Rahman and Ashrafur Alam hitting the board one time each. Alif and Papon Chandra Roy reduced the margin for Faridpur.

Wenger apologises

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger apologised after he was sent off and then showed the fourth official during Arsenal's dramatic 2-1 win over Burnley but could still face a significant ban.

Having taken the lead through Shkodran Mustafi's first goal for the club on Sunday, Arsenal saw Granit Xhaka dismissed for a needless foul and then nearly imploded as Andre Gray struck from the spot following Francis Coquelin's foul on Ashley Barnes.

With their Premier League title hopes facing another major setback and the clock ticking down, Wenger was sent off for rowing with fourth official Anthony Taylor and the Frenchman then pushed Taylor, which will likely see him punished by the Football Association.

Arsenal went on to snatch the points as Alexis Sanchez scored a penalty with virtually the last kick when Laurent Koscielny was caught in the head by Ben Mee's raised foot.

Wenger, who was furious Coquelin's challenge was ruled a spot-kick, had calmed down by the time he faced the media.

"I regret everything. I should have shut up. I apologise for that," Wenger said. "I haven't spoken to the fourth official yet because I had to do this press conference. Look, it was nothing bad, I said something you hear every day in football."

"Overall nine times out of 10 you are not sent to the stands for that, but if you are, you are. I should have shut up."

Wenger, who saw his side move up to second place, eight points behind leaders Chelsea, was less forgiving about Xhaka's second red card for Arsenal.



Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger (R) is sent to the stands by English referee Jonathan Moss at the Emirates Stadium on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

instructions to stay on his feet, Wenger warned the midfielder to curb his overzealous challenges.

"Xhaka has to control his game and not punish the team with a lack of control in his tackling," said Wenger.

"We don't encourage our midfielders to go down in their tackles and make this type of tackle."

Arsenal have won four of their last five league games and with a trip to Stamford Bridge looming on February 4, Wenger challenged his players to keep the pressure on leaders Chelsea.

"We got an unlikely win, when it is 10 against 11 with two minutes to go it is difficult to win," Wenger said, hailing his side's resolve.

ASIAN CUP 2019 DRAW India face Kyrgyzstan

AFP, Abu Dhabi

India was pitted against Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar and Macau when the draw for the final round of qualifying for the 2019 AFC Asian Cup took place Monday.

India, which like other Asian nations has invested heavily in football in recent years, is hoping to reach its first Asian Cup finals since 2011.

The final qualifying round sees six groups of four battling it out for the remaining 12 spots available.

The winner and runner-up from each group will qualify for the finals, which are held every four years. Australia are the current holders.

The 2019 tournament, which takes place in the UAE, will be contested for the first time by 24 teams.

- GROUP A: Kyrgyzstan, India, Myanmar, Macau.
- GROUP B: North Korea, Hong Kong, Lebanon, Malaysia.
- GROUP C: Jordan, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Cambodia
- GROUP D: Oman, Palestine, Maldives, Bhutan.
- GROUP E: Bahrain, Turkmenistan, Taiwan, Singapore
- GROUP F: Philippines, Tajikistan, Yemen, Nepal.

Barcelona thrash Eibar

AFP, Madrid



Lionel Messi, Luis Suarez and Neymar were all on target as Barcelona shrugged off the loss of the injured Sergio Busquets to remain just two points behind La Liga leaders Real Madrid with a 4-0 win at Eibar on Sunday.

Sevilla separate the giants of Spanish football in second, just a point behind Madrid, after twice coming from behind to edge a seven-goal thriller 4-3 at rock-bottom Osasuna.

However, Real Madrid also have a game in hand over their title rivals.

Barca's visit to the Basque Country was only eight minutes in when Busquets had to be carried off with ankle ligament damage after a dangerous challenge from Gonzalo Escalante that went unpunished.

The visitors were briefly unsettled as a fine save from Marc-Andre ter Stegen prevented Adrian Gonzalez giving Eibar a shock lead at the tiny 6,200 capacity Ipurua.

Yet, there was little doubt over the outcome once Denis Suarez, who had replaced Busquets, drilled home his first Barca goal into the far corner from outside the box on the half hour mark.

Neymar missed a one-on-one and Luis Suarez hit the post as Barca squandered a series of chances to kill off the game before half-time.

However, Messi doubled their lead just six minutes into the second-half

when he swept home Luis Suarez's cross for his 28th goal in 26 games this season.

And Luis Suarez matched his strike partner as La Liga's top scorer this season with 15 when he robbed Florian Lejeune before slotting home at the near post 22 minutes from time.

Neymar hadn't scored from open play since October, but brought that run to an end by slotting home Aleix Vidal's low cross in stoppage time.

"A positive run of results means everything flows better, the players have more confidence," added Enrique after a fourth straight win.

"But we are still far off where we want to be."

Sevilla scored twice in the final five minutes to end Real Madrid's 40-game unbeaten run in all competitions last weekend and have now won five of the seven La Liga games when they have conceded first this season.

"The team did some good things and made mistakes, but from start to finish looked to win the game," said Sevilla boss Jorge Sampaoli.

"To finish the first half of the season with a record number of points (42) and be second fills us with excitement for what is to come."



Barcelona players celebrate their second goal scored by superstar Lionel Messi (C) during their La Liga clash against Eibar at the Ipurua Stadium on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP