

Kingsize comeback by Pandya

AFP, Dubai

With his appetite for wickets and hard-hitting batting, Hardik Pandya has come back from controversies and injuries to become India's go-to all-rounder ahead of this year's Twenty20 World Cup in Australia.

Pandya stood calm with an unbeaten 33 and hit the winning six in the final over of a tense pursuit of 148 to beat arch-rivals Pakistan and begin the Asia Cup T20 tournament on a high on Sunday.

With the ball in hand earlier, he took 3-25 as he and fellow pace bowler Bhuvneshwar Kumar shared seven wickets to set up the victory chase at a packed Dubai International Stadium.

The Indian Express newspaper called him the "New cool king in town" and veteran commentator Harsha Bhogle tweeted there are "few better than him in this format".

Pandya's performance comes as no surprise after he returned from a back injury to lead Indian Premier League debutants Gujarat Titans to a fairytale title in May.

The 28-year-old flamboyant cricketer who loves his tattoos and expensive watches, had once said he likes to live life "kingsize".

"Grateful that we are getting this opportunity and we are able to do this because our process is just not for this but for the upcoming World Cup," Pandya told India's cricket board website after the five-wicket win.

"If we get another such situation, definitely we will remember this match."

He added he had felt "no pressure" when India needed seven off the last over, even though when Pandya hit the winning six off left-arm spinner Mohammad Nawaz there were just two balls to spare.



(R) Robert Lewandowski scored twice for the second game in a row as Barcelona cruised to a 4-0 win against Real Valladolid on Sunday night. (L) Meanwhile, UEFA Player of the Year award winner Karim Benzema scored a brace too, late in their game against Espanyol, as champions Real Madrid won 3-1. PHOTO: REUTERS



"The way he has batted and bowled in the last few series, I will pray that he performs like this in the World Cup and it will be good for us," said Kumar, who took four wickets.

Pandya put on a key fifth-wicket stand with Ravindra Jadeja as life came full circle for the player who was stretched off the field at the same venue in a 2018 Asia Cup group match against Pakistan. It was the start of Pandya's struggle with a back injury, which forced him to play mainly as a batsman in last year's T20 World Cup.

"I remembered it all. I was going out on a stretcher and it was the same dressing room," Pandya said. "I feel a sense of achievement because of how things unfolded and the way I got this opportunity."

India's cricket icon Sachin Tendulkar tweeted: "It came down to fitness of the fast bowlers while put under pressure, though both teams' pacers bowled well up front."

"Crucial knock by Hardik to stay till the end & get us over the line & ably supported by @imjadeja & Virat. Congrats on a nail-biting win."

Pandya proved his fitness in this year's IPL with 487 runs and eight wickets in 15 matches which earned him a recall for June's Twenty20 series against South Africa.

'To have Lewandowski in your team is a blessing'

AFP, Madrid

Veteran star strikers Robert Lewandowski and Karim Benzema both hit doubles on Sunday in contrasting victories for Barcelona and La Liga leaders Real Madrid.

Lewandowski scored twice for the second game in a row as Jules Kounde made his debut in Barcelona's 4-0 cruise past Valladolid.

Later, Real Madrid struggled for 88 minutes at Espanyol. With the scores tied and time running out, Benzema put Real ahead before sealing a 3-1 victory after 10 eventful added minutes.

Real saved their perfect start to the season and climbed back to the top of the table on nine points after three games, ahead of Real Betis on goal difference.

Barcelona rose to third, two points further back.

"To have Lewandowski in your team is a blessing," said Barca coach Xavi Hernandez.

"He's an extraordinary player. Spectacular. A natural leader. It's a blessing to have him with us, it's marvellous."

"He's a model, a born worker. He's humble, he works for the team, he helps the coaching staff, he makes the difference."

At the Camp Nou, Xavi handed Kounde his first start after the club was finally able to register the

France defender they signed from Sevilla last month for a reported 50 million euros (\$49.8 mn).

Lewandowski hit the post with an early header.

Pedri then spotted the run of Raphinha in behind but the Brazilian was thwarted by goalkeeper Jordi Masip, who was well beaten moments later when Ousmane Dembele's venomous shot clipped the crossbar.

Barca's pressure told after 24 minutes as Raphinha whipped in a teasing cross which a gambling Lewandowski stabbed home.

A marauding Dembele tested Masip from range, and then created the second for Pedri by rolling a perfectly weighted ball for the midfielder to bury on the stroke of half time.

Lewandowski all but put the game beyond reach on 64 minutes, running onto a pass from Dembele and cleverly backheeling past Masip with the help of a deflection off Joaquin Fernandez.

Valladolid nearly pulled one back but Marc-Andre ter Stegen saved well from Oscar Plano and Kounde stuck out a leg on the line to keep out the follow-up effort from Roque Mesa.

Barca grabbed a fourth in stoppage time as Roberto volleyed home after Lewandowski was denied a hat-trick after Masip, a former Barcelona player, tipped his

shot onto the bar.

In the late game, Vinicius Junior ran on to a sharp diagonal pass in the 12th minute to slide the ball into the far corner and give Real Madrid the lead.

Espanyol fought back. Joselu levelled after 43 minutes. He burst through and when Thibaut Courtois saved his first thump at goal and the ball bounced off Eder Militao, the Espanyol striker beat both Real players to the ball and scuffed it in.

Both teams had chances in the second half before Benzema, as so often in the last year, decided the game. After a quiet game, he found space at the far post with two minutes left, met Rodrigo's cross and volleyed home from close range.

Deep into frantic added time, Espanyol goalkeeper Benjamin Lecomte, charged out of his box to stop a Real attack and received a red card for a foul on Dani Ceballos.

Benzema fired home the free-kick.

"We were quite slow," said Real coach Carlo Ancelotti. "We had difficulty managing the intensity of the match."

Villarreal dropped their first points of the season in a 0-0 draw at Getafe as Unai Emery's side saw the award of a penalty overturned following a VAR review in the dying stages.

Verstappen hails his most dominant week



REUTERS, Spa-Francorchamps

Formula One championship leader Max Verstappen hailed the Belgian Grand Prix weekend as his most dominant yet in the sport.

The Red Bull driver ended Friday practice nearly a second clear of his rivals, was comfortably quickest in Saturday's qualifying and overcame engine and gearbox-related penalties to win from 14th on the grid on Sunday.

"I think if you look at the whole weekend, yes," said the Dutch 24-year-old when asked if this had been his most dominant display.

"The car has been incredible from first practice. I don't think we expected it to be like this but sometimes it's nice when things positively surprise you."

Team boss Christian Horner told Verstappen he was in a class of his own.

Mexican team mate Sergio Perez who finished 17.8 seconds behind Verstappen in second place despite having started on the front row said he was "untouchable".

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc, who started one place behind Verstappen after collecting similar engine and gearbox penalties but finished fifth, described Red Bull and his rival as being "on another planet completely".

Verstappen said he had not even thought on Saturday that he might be leading the race as soon as the 12th of 44 laps around the Spa-Francorchamps circuit.

"I just wanted to have a good race and I knew that as soon as I was out of trouble after Lap One, we could have a good race but I never really think about what lap I'm going to lead," he said. "It's impossible to imagine."

Verstappen, who also set the fastest lap and was voted 'Driver of the Day' by fans, recognised his imperious display in the country of his birth was special.

"It was just that this track seemed to be perfect for the car," he said, with a home race at Zandvoort next weekend.

"I know that some tracks which are coming up might be a little bit more difficult and I expect again a good battle with Ferrari."



A tennis fan takes a selfie in front of banners bearing pictures of Serena Williams and Novak Djokovic on the eve of the US Open at USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Centre in New York on Sunday. The final Grand Slam of the year kicked off last night. PHOTO: AFP

Man Utd to sign Antony

AFP, London

Manchester United have agreed a fee that could rise to £85 million to sign Ajax's Brazilian winger Antony, reports said Monday.

The Premier League giants have agreed to pay £80.75 million, with a further £4.25 million in additions, the BBC, Sky Sports and other media said ahead of the close of the transfer window on Thursday.

The 22-year-old could be the second player to follow United manager Erik ten Hag from the Dutch champions following the arrival of Lisandro Martinez.

Tyrell Malacia, Martinez, Christian Eriksen and Casemiro have arrived so far this summer and Ten Hag is hoping to keep Cristiano Ronaldo, despite the Portuguese wanting to leave to play Champions League football.

The 37-year-old was on the bench for United's 1-0 win at Southampton on Saturday before making a largely anonymous substitute appearance in the second half.