

The Peninsula SPORT

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Karolina Pliskova of the Czech Republic poses for a photograph with the winner's trophy, ball boys and ball girls after defeating Denmark's Caroline Wozniacki during their WTA Qatar Total Open final at the Khalifa International Tennis Complex in Doha yesterday.

Pliskova champion in Doha

Armstrong Vas
The Peninsula

A dominant Karolina Pliskova brushed aside the challenge Denmark's Caroline Wozniacki at the Qatar Total Open to pick up her second title of the year at the Khalifa International Tennis Complex yesterday.

For the Czech World No.3 it was her eighth career title and her first one in Doha in four appearances, while Wozniacki was aiming to win her 27th title and the maiden one in Qatar.

The pair had met three times before, with Wozniacki, 26, winning on every occasion over Pliskova, who is two years younger. Yesterday's meeting by far was the first one since 2014, and the first time Pliskova won.

"It's an amazing week. The weather has been taxing with all the rain and rescheduling of matches. I am excited to have won the title," said Pliskova after her win.

"It means so much to me

winning this tournament because it's not easy beating these two girls (Dominika Cibulkova in semis and Wozniacki in the final), you saw last night and even today given the way they fight," the 2016 US Open runner-up said.

Pliskova said her dominant style of play came through and helped her win the title.

"I was trying to play my natural game which is aggressive. Also, the serve was really important and for me it was working, so happy for that."

Pliskova said her win in Qatar will earn her new fans.

"I wanted to win here in Doha since I had been losing in the early rounds the last three years. So now it's exciting and finally I win some new fans here.

Wozniacki was disappointed with her loss in the final but happy with her performance in the tournament.

"I'm a little bit disappointed. It's a goal of mine to pretty much have won



Women's doubles champions K Srebotnik and A Spears celebrate with their trophies after beating Y Shvedova and O Savchuk in the final yesterday.

everything. But she played really well today. I thought I played well. I did my best. It's been a tough week. Yesterday I had two matches late at night. I just tried to recover as good as I could. Honestly, I feel like I'm playing really good tennis. I can still improve on some things. I'm really, you know, feeling positive and confident moving forward.

"It was very tricky with the wind. I think she served better than me in these conditions. Obviously she's already a big server. But I think she took advantage of that a little more," she added.

The Czech, seeded second in Doha took things under control from the very start raced to a 4-0 lead in the first set, but Wozniacki, the former World No. 1 in

2010 and 2011, but now ranked at 18, fought to hold her serve in the fifth game to make it 4-1.

In the next game, Wozniacki, who was making her eighth appearances in Doha and finished runner-up in 2011, broke the second seed for the first time to make it 4-2.

Thereafter, the two-time Grand Slam finalist from Denmark tried to make a fight of it, but had problem in getting her length right on her returns, leading to several unforced errors.

In the end, Pliskova, who recently guided his country to the Fed Cup title, won the first set 6-3.

In the second set, Wozniacki, seemed to have tightened the loose ends of the game and was more accurate in her returns.

The Dane managed to hold on to her serve till the ninth game, but Pliskova made the breakthrough move to take an upper hand at 5-4 and then broke in the next game to win the set and the tournament.

Qatar's Al Marri clinches silver

The Peninsula

Qatar's Hamad Al Marri clinched the silver medal in the Men's Double Trap of the Qatar Open Shotgun Championship to prevent an Italian one-two at the Losail Shooting Range yesterday.

The 42-year-old from Qatar, a gold medal winner in the Double Trap team event at the 2014 Asian Games in South Korea, finished behind Italian Alessandro Chianese and ahead of Marco Innocenti. Al Marri, who has been taking part in the Asian Games since 2002, carded 134, along with eventful winner Chinese, in the qualifying rounds to make it to the final round of six. In the final round, Chinese edged the local challenger to clinch the top spot. The Italian shot down 66 day pigeons while Al Marri shot one less.

In the battle for the bronze medal, 38-year-old Innocenti warded off competition from Khaled Alkaabi of UAE to take the third place.

Qatar's Masoud Al Aladba came fifth followed by Saif Alshamsi of UAE.

Chinese was happy to top the field in Doha in the first competition of the year, but admitted the conditions were challenging yesterday.

"Tough day. Tough final. Tough weather. Everything was difficult today. This is my first time to be on the podium here. I've got a good feeling (about) how I shot today. Also I'm quite delighted with this form before going to New Delhi for the World Cup," said the Italian, who heads to India for the championship which begins on February 23.

Al Marri, who has competed all over the world, from China to America, winning gold and silver medals in competitions held in the Gulf and a finalist place in the 2014 World Cup in Kazakhstan, was happy with his performance.

"I am happy with my level. But I'd have wished to do better than what I got in the end. The level of shooters is quite high. So I'm delighted with my performance. It is like a mini world cup here. All the top shooters are present here. So feeling great to have won the silver medal here," said Al Marri, alumni of University of Derby.

About his participation in the World Cup in Delhi, Al Marri said he was yet to take a decision.

"I will sit down with my team and take a decision whether to take part in the World Cup in Delhi," said the Qatari.

For Al Marri, this is second medal in quick succession this year at an international competition. At the beginning of the month, he won gold at the 13th Arab Shooting Championship in Kuwait in Double Trap.

Brazil's future stars arrive in Doha for important training camp

The Peninsula

Athletes from the Qatar Olympic Committee's Shine Project arrived in Doha for an important athletics training camp at the globally-renowned Aspire Academy.

The talented young athletes from disadvantaged backgrounds in Rio de Janeiro will spend a week receiving specialised coaching and sport science testing to support their journeys towards becoming Brazil's future Olympic Champions.

Speaking about the Shine athletes' arrival, Dr Thani Al Kuwari Al Thani, Secretary General of the Qatar Olympic Committee, said: "It is a pleasure to welcome our Shine athletes to Doha for their training camp and we look forward to sharing with them our culture, warm hospitality and passion for sport. The QOC believes in the power of sport to

transform lives and we are committed to spreading the Olympic spirit far and wide, and touching the lives of people from around the world. We were determined to grasp the opportunity of the Rio 2016 Games to deliver a true, meaningful legacy for Brazil's young athletes.

"Through Shine, we aim to utilise our resources and commitment to the global development of sport by providing support and assistance for the young athletes' future sporting careers. These athletes come from disadvantaged backgrounds in Brazil and the majority of them have never been overseas before. We hope that their experience at the Aspire Academy training camp will equip them with knowledge, expertise and cultural experiences that will enhance their future sporting and social development."

The Shine project is a partnership between the QOC, Aspire



Athletes from the Qatar Olympic Committee's Shine Project pose for a photograph upon their arrival at the Hamad International Airport yesterday.

Academy, Qatar Athletics Federation, Rio de Janeiro Athletics Federation and Futuro Olimpico, an NGO founded by Brazilian Olympic bronze medalist, Arnaldo de Oliveira. Last May,

almost 200 of the most talented young athletes in Rio de Janeiro competed in an athletics competition to win one of 10 places to travel to Qatar for the Aspire Academy athletics training camp.

Qatar Airways provided complimentary tickets for the Shine athletes to travel to Doha through their sponsorship of the QOC and Team Qatar at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. Over the next week,

the athletes will follow similar tailored and optimised athletics training programmes to those of the Aspire Academy students, with input from the world's best coaches and sport scientists. Notable athletics graduates of the Aspire Academy who have participated in these programmes include Qatar's first-ever Olympic silver medalist Mutaz Barshim and double World Junior Champion in the hammer throw, Ashraf Elseify.

In addition to the training camp, the QOC provided a further legacy from Rio 2016 through Bayt Qatar, the QOC's Rio 2016 Olympic hospitality house, by donating all proceeds from public entry fees to Futuro Olimpico. The donations will enable the NGO to buy uniforms and equipment for the athletes and for further athletes to benefit from the partnership.

The Shine training camp will conclude on February 25.

NBA: Westbrook-Durant drama sparks All-Star tensions

Washington
AFP

Once and future NBA team-mates Kevin Durant and Russell Westbrook played down the drama on Friday of hard feelings over Durant leaving behind Oklahoma City and Westbrook to play for Golden State.

Players gathered in New Orleans for interviews to hype Sunday's 66th NBA All-Star Game, in which ex-team-mates Durant and Westbrook will be reunited on the Western Conference team as it faces the Eastern Conference.

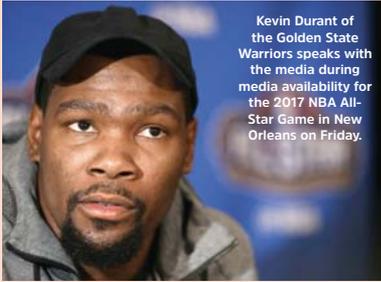
Durant has not spoken to Westbrook in the seven months since he signed a free agent deal with the Warriors, the team that beat the Oklahoma City Thunder with Durant and Westbrook in last year's Western Conference finals.

"I didn't come here for there to be any drama or have a heart to heart with anyone," Durant told ESPN of talking to Westbrook this weekend.

"It's not even something I'm thinking about. If it happens it does. If it doesn't it's no big deal. I'm coming here to enjoy the weekend."

For his part, Westbrook answered every question put to him about being in the same locker room again with Durant with only comments about "Fashion Week" and ignoring the issue altogether.

Westbrook leads the NBA in scoring with 31.1 points a game, ranks third in assists with 10.1 a game and stands 12th in rebounds with 10.5 per contest — putting him on pace to join Oscar Robinson as the only players to average a triple double for an entire NBA campaign.



Kevin Durant of the Golden State Warriors speaks with the media during the 2017 NBA All-Star Game in New Orleans on Friday.

Durant leads Golden State with 25.8 points and 8.3 rebounds a game, helping the Warriors to the NBA's best record at the All-Star break at 47-9 while the Thunder rank seventh in the West at 32-25.

Asked if he and the Thunder had moved on from Durant's

departure, Westbrook replied, "What does it look like?"

Having to pull together the West talent is Warriors coach Steve Kerr, who will have Golden State players Durant, Stephen Curry, Klay Thompson and Draymond Green on the West roster.

Kerr could play all four stars from the NBA's winningest team alongside the league scoring leader. But he has kept mum about if he will put Durant and Westbrook together on the floor or not since Westbrook is not among the starters.

"I've definitely considered it," Kerr said.

"The only thing you have to do as a coach in the All-Star Game is lead the minutes. That's it. You don't draw up any plays. So we've got to figure out the minutes and I have thought about it."

Durant was booed when he and the Warriors made their first visit together to Oklahoma City earlier this month. Durant has averaged 37.7 points against his former club in three wins over the Thunder this season.

He is already tired of his soured relationship with Westbrook being the prime topic of

All-Star weekend. "Everybody loves drama, man. It feels like we're in a big soap opera. A reality TV show," Durant said.

Curry, the NBA Most Valuable Player the past two years after Durant won the award in 2014, is counting on everyone getting along once game time arrives.

"I just feel like we'll be able to be there and be All-Stars," he said.

Green hoped he might be "an icebreaker" if the locker room gets tense.

"I don't think you take any tension, if you will, or anything from the regular season into an All-Star locker room," Green said.

Houston guard James Harden, a former Thunder teammate of Westbrook and Durant, won't be looking to play peacemaker.

"I'm staying out of it," he said.

Memphis Open: Young stuns Isner to cruise into semi-final

Memphis
AFP

American John Isner became the latest seed to be upset at the ATP Tour's Memphis Open on Friday as the second seed lost in three sets to unheralded Donald Young.

The world No. 81 Young posted his first career win over Isner in four meetings by outlasting the fellow American 7-6 (7/5), 3-6, 7-6 (8/6) to reach the semi-finals.

Isner was the last remaining seed in the tournament as none of the top seeds reached the semis.

Young won a first-set tiebreaker and dropped the second before holding on in the third set.

He let a triple match point opportunity slip away at 6-3 in the third-set tiebreaker, but after Isner won three straight points to tie it at 6-6, Young won two points to finish off the



File photo shows Donald Young who stunned John Isner in Memphis Open quarter-final on Friday.

contest. Qualifier Mikhail Kukushkin powered his way into the semi-finals with a 6-0, 6-4 victory over fourth-seeded Steve Johnson.

Kukushkin, ranked No. 103 in the

world, is on a roll. He won three matches while losing only 14 games along the way.

This is his first semi-final since 2015 in Sydney, Australia.

Many of the top players in the world decided to skip the Memphis tournament in order to play in events in Rotterdam, Netherlands and Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Kukushkin's semi-final opponent will be Nikoloz Basilashvili, who defeated qualifier Matthew Ebden of Australia 7-6 (7/3), 6-4.

Basilashvili, of Georgia, advanced to the quarter-finals by knocking off top-seeded Ivo Karlovic on Thursday.

Meanwhile, Wu Di and Zhang Zhizhen won their doubles rubber yesterday, sealing China's victory over Taiwan in the Davis Cup Asia/Oceania Group 1 tie.

The Chinese pair took three straight sets from Taiwan's Jason Jung and Peng Hsien-yin 7-6 (7/4), 6-4, 6-3 in Kaohsiung in southern Taiwan.

That puts China through to face Kazakhstan in a promotion play-off in early April.

Taiwan has not beaten China in almost a decade, having lost the last three times the cross-strait opponents faced off in 2011, 2012, and 2013.

Taiwan's Yung is ranked 168th, the highest among both teams, but had conceded his Friday's singles match due to a leg injury. His team-mate Chen Ti also lost his singles match after playing a gruelling five-set against China's Li Zhe.



Ben Hermans

Hermans flying high at Tour of Oman

Jebel Al Akhdar
AFP

Belgium's Ben Hermans maintained his Tour of Oman lead with yesterday's success in the fifth and penultimate mountain stage.

After this summit finish win on the Jabal Al Akhdar (Green Mountain) 5.7 climb, the BMC rider has a 22 second cushion over nearest rival Rui Costa going into today's closing stage.

Hermans was followed across the finish line by Italian Fabio Aru at 35c and Portugal's Rui Costa at 11sec on the day.

The 30-year-old has brought his good early season form to Oman after his second in last month's Tour of Valencia.

In yesterday's stage he dominated the specialist climbers up a six minute final climb with an average gradient of 10.5% over the final 2,000 metres to the summit finish.

BarDET, second in last year's Tour de France, remained sixth overall at 1min 17sec with all realistic hope of winning the title which concludes today.

RESULTS

Memphis Open

- Quarter-finals
Mikhail Kukushkin (KAZ) vs Steve Johnson (USA) 6-0, 6-4
Nikoloz Basilashvili (GEO) vs Matthew Ebden (AUS) 7-6 (7/3), 6-4
Donald Young (USA) vs John Isner 7-6 (7/5), 3-6, 7-6 (8/6)
Ryan Harrison (USA) vs Damir Dzumhur (BHR) 6-3, 6-4

'Laker Test' centurion Richardson dies

London
AFP

Peter Richardson who made a century for England in the 1956 Ashes Test in which Jim Laker took a world record 19 wickets has died aged 85, his former county Kent announced on Friday.

Richardson accrued five centuries in the 34 Tests he played between 1956 and 1963 — starting his international career with two half centuries in the 1956 Ashes series — and the opener finished his first year as a Test batsman with 491 runs to his credit, the most in the world that year.

At the time he was an amateur playing for Worcestershire but the county refused to allow him to turn professional.

He had to sit out the 1959 season but having finally secured his move he found competition for the opening spots in the Test team restricted his appearances.

Richardson, who played on for Kent until 1965, made history in 1957 when he and brother Dick played one Test together against the West Indies, becoming the first siblings to do so for England in the 20th century.

New York
Agencies

Jaromir Jagr earned his 760th career goal as Florida scored three times in less than six minutes during the second period in a victory over Anaheim at the Honda Center.

The 45-year-old Jagr, who ranks third in NHL career goal scoring, now needs 41 to tie Hall of Famer Gordie Howe for second place. Wayne Gretzky finished his Hall-of-Fame career with 894 goals. Colton Sceviour, Aaron Ekblad and Derek MacKenzie also scored for the Panthers while Andrew Coplan scored his 12th goal for the Ducks.

Meanwhile, Columbus defeated Pittsburgh in an overtime battle among foes

NHL RESULTS

Florida	4	Anaheim	1
Colorado	2	Carolina	1
Columbus	2	Pittsburgh	1
Edmonton	6	Philadelphia	3
St. Louis	4	Vancouver	3
Minnesota	3	Dallas	1
Buffalo	2	Colorado	0
Ottawa	3	New Jersey	0
NY Islanders	4	NY Rangers	2

adjacent to each other in the Eastern Conference on Friday.

Brandon Dubinsky netted the game-winner 1:04 into the extra period. Ryan Murray scored only his second goal of the season early in the second period for Columbus' regulation goal. Ian Cole netted his fourth goal of the season after an assist from Evgeni Malkin for the Penguins offense in the game.

In other match, Mikko Rantanen scored with 36.4

seconds left in overtime as Colorado snapped its five-game losing streak with a victory over Carolina. Rantanen scored his 12th of the season, taking a feed on a 2-on-1 rush from Matt Duchene, beating Hurricanes goaltender Cam Ward with a one-timer and snapping the Avalanche's six-game skid at PNC Arena dating to February 2009.

Tyson Barrie opened the scoring with his fourth of the season for the Avalanche.

Jeff Skinner scored his team-leading 19th for the Hurricanes.

Meanwhile, Penguins center Sidney Crosby scored a milestone 1,000th career NHL point against the visiting Winnipeg Jets and later added the winning goal in Pittsburgh's 4-3 overtime victory at PPG Paints Arena.



Pittsburgh Penguins right wing Patrick Hornqvist (left) skates against Columbus Blue Jackets' Jack Johnson (7) during their NHL game in Columbus, Ohio, on Friday. The Blue Jackets won 2-1 in overtime.



Qatar's Hanan Al Boinin throws a stone during a round-robin curling game against Japan at the Asian Winter Games in Sapporo, Northern Japan yesterday. Picture Courtesy of: Associated Press

Desert to ice: Qatar takes on curling at Asian Winter Games

Sapporo, Japan
AP

For members of Qatar women's curling team, just about everything is a new experience.

Curling, a sport that has links with medieval Scotland and is more suited to the Canadian prairies, has taken a small foothold in the Middle East.

Just how new are Qatar's players to the sport? Some of them in Japan for the Asian Winter Games in Sapporo had never experienced snow before.

The fledgling curlers are doing their best to get up to speed but it's a huge challenge when you live in a desert

climate. The Qatari women can only train one day a week on ice that is not quite up to international standards.

It's a tough road ahead. Qatar lost 17-1 to Japan yesterday in a preliminary round game at Sapporo Curling Stadium.

"For now, we are training more to get experience and know more about the game and its strategies," said skipper Maryam Binali, who has been throwing stones for just 11 months.

"We learned a lot from the Japanese team today because they are more experienced but hopefully we will do well."

University student Binali said she likes the sense of teamwork that the sport provides.

Players in Qatar train on a public rink shared by figure skaters and ice hockey players. There are only two ice rinks in Doha so ice time comes at a premium.

Soccer is the most popular sport in Qatar but the country is looking to broaden its sporting horizons — even to winter sports.

The Qatari women's team is coached by Hungarian Lajos Belleli, who is a seven-time Hungarian national champion.

"Curling is totally new and strange, a winter sport in one of the hottest countries in the world," Belleli said. "Curling is totally new there so I have to convince people that this will be good for them, which is not easy but a nice challenge."

So far there are just seven female players — and 15 male curlers — in Qatar, which is the only country in the Middle East that has joined the World Curling Federation.

Qatar could take inspiration from Japan, a country that has rapidly developed in the sport.

Japan's women's team is ranked sixth and won the silver medal in the 2016 world championships.

"Curling is a sport that traditionally has only been played in countries that have winter sports," said Kate Cathness, president of the World Curling Federation. "But we can play the sport anywhere and want to make it a truly global sport."



We learned a lot from the Japanese team today because they are more experienced but hopefully we will do well, says Team Qatar's Maryam Binali.



North Korea will send a team to Pyeongchang Games: IOC member

Tokyo
Reuters

North Korea will send a team to next year's Winter Olympics in neighbouring South Korea, the country's International Olympic Committee (IOC) member has said.

Pyeongchang will stage Asia's first Winter Games outside Japan next year, kicking off an Olympic cycle that reflects the continent's growing influence on sport with Tokyo hosting the 2020 Summer Games and Beijing the 2022 Winter Olympics.

North and South Korea are still technically at war and tensions have risen in the last week with the North's test firing of a ballistic missile in contravention of United Nations resolutions.

North Korea have sent seven athletes to Japan for the Asian Winter Games in Sapporo, which starts today, and IOC member Chang Ung told reporters the nation would also be represented in Pyeongchang next year.

"There is no reason why we won't come (to Pyeongchang) and no reason why we can't," Chang told Kyodo News. "We will proceed according to the Olympic Charter."

The North boycotted the 1988 Summer Games held in Seoul, but have sent teams to Asian Games hosted in the South in 2002 and 2014.

The two countries have also shown solidarity at recent Olympics, marching together under one flag in the 2000 Sydney and 2004 Athens Games.

North Korea have won just two medals at the Winter Olympics, with the last in 1992 in Albertville. They did not participate at the last Games in Sochi in Russia in 2014.

The seven athletes at the Asian Winter Games will compete in short track speed skating and figure skating.

Pyeongchang is only 80 kilometers from the border with North Korea.

Olympic white elephants? Rio's got a herd of them

Rio de Janeiro
AFP

Rio's Olympic organisers promised there'd be no white elephants after the crowds and athletes went home. Unfortunately, six months later there's a herd charging through Brazil's run-down second city.

From the dead grass at the world famous Maracana Stadium to the unsold apartments in the 31 towers of the athletes' Village that were meant to become a new luxury neighborhood, you don't have to look far to see the unfulfilled promises of South America's first Olympic Games.

Even a year before the Games started, a top official in the mayor's office, Pedro Paulo, promised: "We will leave no white elephants." Right before the August 21 closing ceremony, then mayor Eduardo Paes repeated the assurance.

City and sports officials point to a new metro line and bus network as lasting achievements. The transport system in often chaotic Rio was badly in need of help and these costly infrastructure projects are widely seen as a success.

But the Olympic Park, partly built on land formerly occupied by a deeply rooted local community, is in a state of eerie abandonment.

Open to the public only on weekends, the vast area where swimming, gymnastics, basketball and other popular



A view of the Tennis Court at the Olympic Park after it was covered by sand to be used for beach volleyball in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on Friday, about six months after the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. Rio's Olympic organisers promised there would be no white elephants after the crowds and athletes went home. Unfortunately, six months later there's a herd charging through Brazil's run-down second city. INSET: (Top left) View after part of the upper seats were removed from the Carioca Arena 1, which hosted basketball. (Top right) The outside cover of the Olympic Aquatic Stadium is falling off.

competitions took place sees few visitors.

Construction equipment is scattered about, former rows of seats are piled up, and sewage holes are left half-uncovered.

As for the Olympic swimming warm-up pool, which was just half a year ago Michael Phelps

prepared to raise his medal tally to an Olympic record of 28, it's now a dank, mosquito-filled hole.

One of the most popular sporting legacies promised was to turn the Deodoro canoe slalom course into a giant swimming pool. This was sure to

be popular with the poor residents of northern Rio during the city's scorching summers.

But instead the park is closed. And although the mayor's office says "everything is being done to reopen it as soon as possible," few are holding their breath.

At the base of Rio's problems

is uncertainty over who will even run the installations. The Olympic Park was expected to go into the hands of a private management company, but no one was interested. So the Brazilian sports ministry had to take over.

The Arena of the Future was meant to be broken up and

transformed into four schools — another bright idea in the optimistic legacy plans. However, this has not happened and the new mayor, elected after the Olympics, says more time is needed to check the budget.

Other installations are meant to be turned over for use as high level sporting centers, but that also has yet to take place.

Arguably the biggest legacy promise was dramatically reducing pollution in Guanabara Bay, the sewage-infested bay where sailing events took place. Brazilian officials initially promised to cut out 80 percent of the untreated sewage pouring into the waterway.

That didn't come close to happening and now that the media attention has largely ended, there are doubts about the future of event tentative efforts to reduce the sewage and garbage. After the Games ended, officials predicted that 25 years would be needed to do the job properly and even then only if there were huge private investment.

The brightest spot is in transport, with a metro line extension connecting the western neighborhoods of Barra da Tijuca to the tourist-friendly south of Rio.

A once dirty and abandoned harbor zone was given a huge makeover, where the Museum of Tomorrow and the AquaRio aquarium have proved hits. However, Brazil's recession has put a stop to plans for further development.



Real Madrid's Alvaro Morata (left) celebrates with team-mates after scoring a goal against Espanyol in Madrid yesterday.

Morata, Bale score as Real tighten grip on top spot

Barcelona Reuters

Gareth Bale marked his return to action after a long injury layoff by sealing a 2-0 victory for Real Madrid over Espanyol yesterday to provisionally stretch Zinedine Zidane's side's lead at the top of La Liga to four points.

Alvaro Morata headed home a floated cross from Isco to put Real ahead after 33 minutes against a stubborn Espanyol side and Bale steered another pass from the Spain midfielder in off the post in the 83rd minute shortly after coming off the bench. Bale, making his first

appearance since damaging ankle ligaments against Sporting Lisbon in November, netted his eighth goal of the season. Real also set a club record of scoring in 42 consecutive games in all competitions.

They top the standings on 52 points, four clear of Barcelona who host Leganes on Sunday while Sevilla, in third on 46, entertain Eibar later on Saturday. Real have two games in hand on both their title rivals.

Earlier, Kevin Gameiro came off the bench to score a hat-trick in the space of five minutes to fire Atletico Madrid to a 4-1 win over struggling Sporting Gijon that kept them fourth in the standings on 45

points. Yannick Carrasco had given Atletico the lead 12 seconds into the second half but Sergio Alvarez gave the impressive home side a deserved equaliser in the 49th minute.

Sporting continued to cause Diego Simeone's side problems after drawing level and Alvarez missed a gilt-edged chance to put them ahead when he sent a half-volley over the bar from close range.

The Frenchman is the first Atletico player to score a hat-trick in the league as a substitute while his treble was the second fastest in the history of La Liga, behind only Bebe's for Deportivo La Coruna against Albacete in 1995.

United not to take FA Cup lightly, says Mourinho

London Reuters

FA Cup holders Manchester United will not be taking today's fifth-round clash against second-tier Blackburn Rovers lightly despite their heavy fixture schedule, according to manager Jose Mourinho (pictured).

In 2005, Mourinho's Chelsea were knocked out of the FA Cup by Newcastle United in the same week as wins in the League Cup final over Liverpool and Champions League against Barcelona.

"Yes, I threw it away. In the same week we were Champions League against Barcelona and the cup final against Liverpool and in the middle of it we had FA Cup against Newcastle and I threw it away. I gambled too much," Mourinho told reporters.

Mourinho, whose side beat St Etienne 2-0 in the first leg of their Europa League last-32 tie on Thursday, will resist the temptation to make wholesale changes for the game at Wood Park as he tries to navigate through a hectic run of fixtures.

"I focused too much on Barcelona and Liverpool. It was good because we beat Barcelona and won the final against Liverpool. But the feeling that I threw it away was not good," the Portuguese added.

"So I don't throw it away. If I lose, I lose because the opponent was better," Mourinho said.

United played the second leg against St Etienne on Wednesday before facing Southampton in the League Cup final today when Mourinho will be bidding to win his first major trophy at the club.

"I am not going to throw it away," he said.

Five-minute Gameiro's hat-trick helps Atletico rout Sporting 4-1

Madrid AFP

Substitute Kevin Gameiro hit the second fastest hat-trick in La Liga history in five minutes as Atletico Madrid maintained their grip on fourth in La Liga with a 4-1 win at Sporting Gijon.

Gameiro was only introduced 28 minutes from time but struck in the 80th, 81st and 85th minutes to move Atletico to within four points of leaders Real Madrid, who are in action later at home to Espanyol.

La Liga: Atletico stay at fourth

- Substitute Gameiro strikes in the 80th, 81st and 85th minutes to score second fastest hat-trick in the league's history
- The victory consolidates Atletico's fourth spot with Real being the leaders



Atletico Madrid's French forward Kevin Gameiro celebrates after scoring a goal during the La Liga match against Sporting Gijon at El Molinon Stadium in Gijon yesterday.

Yannick Carrasco had bundled Atletico into the lead seconds into the second-half before Sergio Alvarez levelled three minutes later. Defeat leaves Sporting still languishing in the relegation

zone, two points off safety. Atletico boss Diego Simeone named a strong side despite a trip to Bayer Leverkusen to come in the Champions League last 16 on Tuesday. However, Atletico were

slouggish in the first 45 minutes with Sporting's giant 6ft 8in striker Lacine Traore twice coming close to opening the scoring. The visitors got a break right at the start of the second period

when Carrasco was allowed to bear down on goal despite Antoine Griezmann standing in an offside position and tapped home at the second attempt after Ivan Cuellar had saved his first effort.

The lead lasted just three minutes as Atletico's once solid defence was breached by Alvarez as his effort evaded the attempts of Stefan Savic to clear off the line.

Atletico have now conceded more goals in La Liga so far this season than all of last season in La Liga.

Gameiro was summoned from the bench just after the hour mark as Atletico upped the pressure in search for a winner.

Griezmann was harshly denied by the offside flag 15 minutes from time.

However, the French international did have a vital role to play in Gameiro's first as it was his through ball from which Gameiro rounded Cuellar to slot home.

Thomas Partey teed up Gameiro to thrash home seconds later and Gameiro completed his hat-trick with another composed finish on the counter-attack.

Guardiola rules out Barca return

Manchester AFP

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola says he will never go back to Barcelona as their coach amid growing uncertainty about present incumbent Luis Enrique's future.

Enrique is out of contract at the Nou Camp at the end of the season, and the chances of him leaving have increased significantly after a calamitous 4-0 defeat away to Paris St-Germain in the Champions League on Tuesday.

That result, in the first leg of their last 16 tie, left Barcelona on the brink of elimination from the competition, and they also lag behind bitter rivals Real Madrid in the race to win La Liga.

Atletic Bilbao coach Ernesto Valverde is reportedly a contender for the job if Enrique leaves, along with Eusebio Sacristan of Real Sociedad and Everton's Ronald Koeman, who as a player scored the goal that secured their first European Cup



Pep Guardiola

Pep Guardiola in 1992. Guardiola, who won 14 trophies in four years as Barcelona's head coach, says he has no intention of returning to the job he left in 2012.

"No, I will never go back to Barcelona to be coach there. My period there is gone."

Despite their stumbles, Barcelona remain the standard-bearers of world football, according to Guardiola. "Barcelona are still the best team in the world," said the 46-year-old Spaniard.

"It's always a surprise because they are so, so good, but in football anything can happen."

"There's a lot of competition, the opposition are so strong. You can win heavily or you can lose heavily, that can happen, it's happened to me, but there are 90 minutes to go and anything can happen."

"If there's a team who can do it, then it's Barca, with their mentality. "When you have dominated world football, it's

normal that the people expect you to keep up that level, but my advice to you, knowing Luis and the players a little, is not to talk too much, because they will be back and prove you wrong."

"They've done it over the years, dominating football for 10 years, and they continue to be the best team in the world," he said.

Guardiola, meanwhile, has suggested the quality of English football would be improved if FA Cup replays were scrapped.

Quarter-final replays were ditched last summer by the Football Association, which had abolished them at the semi-final stage in 1999.

Guardiola would prefer to see further action taken, calling for a system similar either to that used in Spain's Copa del Rey, where all ties bar the final are played over two legs, or Germany's Cup competition, where drawn matches are decided with extra-time and penalties, without the need for a replay. "In Spain, we play two games. I prefer that situation," he said.

PSG thrashing could have been worse: Luis Enrique

Barcelona AFP

Barcelona boss Luis Enrique (pictured) admitted his side's 4-0 Champions League mauling at the hands of Paris Saint-Germain could have been even worse as he insisted he has taken no decision over his future yesterday.

The Spanish champions are on the verge of not reaching the Champions League quarter-finals for the first time in 10 years after defeat in Paris that matched their heaviest in Enrique's three-year reign.

"Evidently, it is a huge blow for everyone, but the fact hasn't caved in," Enrique said yesterday ahead of his side's clash at home to Leganes.

"The opponent deserves more. They were better, we have to accept that."

"It would be a fair result. The truth is it could have been even more."

Enrique has received fierce criticism over the past few days with even midfielders Sergio Busquets and Andres Iniesta



questioning his tactics. The former Barca captain is out of contract at the end of the season with no talks scheduled over a renewal.

However, he claimed that the debacle in Paris would not decide whether he decides to stay on if offered a new deal.

"The only thing that is clear is that what happens in these months has nothing to do with my decision," he added.

"Not one game, not 10 games, no even our 38 games this year. "I still haven't made my decision."