



**COLUMBIA:** Stepan Starkov #10 of Russia goes flying through the crease of goalie Michael DiPietro #1 of Canada after getting upended by Noah Dobson #6 of Canada in Group A hockey action of the 2019 IIHF World Junior Championship.

**Quick Read**

**Kaka and Figo arriving in Pakistan today to launch World Soccer Stars event**

**KARACHI:** Football superstars Ricardo Kaka and Luis Figo are set to arrive in Pakistan on today (Thursday) to formally launch World Soccer Stars event. The duo will make special appearances at Karachi's Pearl Continental Hotel and Lahore's Packages Mall. Brazilian icon Kaka and Portuguese legend Figo will promote World Soccer Stars during their visit to Pakistan – an event aimed at uplifting football in the country and offering a gateway to football talent at grass-root level. World Soccer Stars has promised a football spectacle starting from April 26 to 29 with two matches in Karachi and Lahore. In a Twitter post earlier today, Kaka said he was looking forward to spending a few days in Pakistan. "Hello Pakistan! I'm on my way. Looking forward to spend a few days with you guys," the 36-year old star tweeted. Figo shared similar feelings in an earlier message on social media. "It is exciting to see another emerging country in Asia embrace football. I'm certain in a population of 220 million there must be huge potential waiting to emerge into the international scene," the former Portuguese footballer tweeted. —APP



**Elgar to captain South Africa in final Test against Pakistan**

**JOHANNESBURG:** Opening batsman Dean Elgar will captain South Africa in the third and final Test against Pakistan, starting at the Wanderers Stadium on Friday, Cricket South Africa announced on Wednesday. Elgar, 31, will stand in for regular captain Faf du Plessis, who was suspended for one match after South Africa fell short of the required over rate during their nine-wicket win in the second Test at Newlands. It was the second offence under Du Plessis's leadership within a 12-month period. It will be the second time Elgar has captained the side. He led South Africa in the first Test against England at Lord's in 2017 when Du Plessis returned home for the birth of his first child. South Africa have also called up uncapped Pieter Malan on standby for Elgar's opening batting partner, Aiden Markram, who will undergo a fitness test on Thursday. —AFP



**Tennis: World number one Halep stunned in Sydney**

**SYDNEY:** World number one Simona Halep's preparations for next week's Australian Open suffered a huge setback Wednesday when she was bundled out of the Sydney International at the first hurdle. The Romanian hadn't played since withdrawing from the WTA Finals in October with a herniated disc, and was no match for fast-rising Australian Ashleigh Barty, who scored the biggest win of her career 6-4, 6-4. Halep, the reigning French Open champion and 2018 Australian Open runner-up, had a bye through to the second round, meaning she heads to Melbourne Park for the opening Grand Slam of the year with just one game under her belt. Barty, who ended a breakthrough 2018 with a WTA title in Zhuhai and is now ranked 15, brought the momentum into the new year. —AFP



**MELBOURNE:** Clara Burel of France plays a shot during her practice match against Madison Keys of the United States ahead of the 2019 Australian Open

**ICC approves USA reinstatement as 105th member**

**WASHINGTON:** The International Cricket Council approved USA Cricket as its 105th member on Wednesday, restoring the sport in the United States after the expulsion of a previous national governing body. The move making USA Cricket the ICC's 93rd associate member allows the group to obtain ICC development funding and sanction international and domestic cricket in the United States.

That is expected to open the door for T20 Internationals to be played in Florida, which has a large base of West Indies supporters. "This is truly an exciting day for USA Cricket and the entire US cricket community," USA Cricket board chair Paraag Marathe said. "On behalf of the board of directors, I'd like to thank the ICC and their 104 other members for their trust in us." The USA Cricket Association had previously been an associate member of the ICC but was suspended over governance issues for a



third time in 2015 before being expelled in June 2017.

An ICC Americas regional support group oversaw US cricket as a transition plan was made while USA Cricket, based in Colorado near the home of the US Olympic Committee, was formed and began its growth into a sustainable governing body. "This is the culmination of a great deal of hard work and I would like to congratulate the chair of USA Cricket, Paraag Marathe, and the board, on this important milestone and wish them all the very best for the future," ICC chief executive David Richardson said.

All governing body obligations will be handed to USA Cricket this month with recruiting of a chief executive and other management spots to follow as Marathe hopes to "unlock the sport's undoubted potential for growth." A request for proposals for a domestic US T20 league has a January 18 deadline with Marathe aiming to start such a competition by 2021.

"We realize the incredible responsibility that comes with this recognition and we are committed to working hard to be great stewards of the game both for the United States and global cricket," Marathe said. "We do not take this responsibility lightly and pledge to lead this great game with the integrity, passion and tireless work ethic that is a foundation for global cricket." —AFP

**Djokovic, Federer, Serena remain favourites to win Opening Grand Slam**

**MELBOURNE:** Novak Djokovic and Roger Federer loom over Melbourne Park for the year's opening Grand Slam as favourites for the Australian Open as questions remain as to whether one of Generation Next could finally end their stranglehold.

The Serbian world number one and his Swiss opponent have won eight of the nine titles at Rod Laver Arena since 2010 and 11 of the last 13 on the bright blue courts in central Melbourne.

Both have six titles each, and are seeking to break a three-way tie for the most victories with Australia's Roy Emerson. While Federer has won the tournament for the last two years — with the 2017 victory at the age of 35 a surprising return after knee surgery in 2016 — Djokovic's history in Australia and rediscovery of his form midway through last year means the world number one will be the man to beat. The 31-year-old went into a bewildering slump in mid-2016 that only ended when he won Wimbledon last year before he went on to claim his third U.S. Open crown and move to 14 Grand Slam titles, three behind Rafa Nadal. The Spanish world number two, however, is battling another leg injury that forced him out of the Brisbane International last week. While he told local media on Tuesday that he did not feel any pain from his thigh

strain, it is apparent that hard courts are putting undue stress on the 32-year-old's body.

He retired in the quarter-finals against Marin Cilic last year in Melbourne and suffered yet another knee injury that forced him out of the U.S. Open semi-finals at Flushing Meadows before he had ankle surgery in November. Federer, however, continues to defy the odds at 37 and prepared for his title defence with some convincing performances in the Hopman Cup in Perth last week. The 20-times Grand Slam winner's victories over Greece's world number 15 Stefanos Tsitsipas and world number four Alexander Zverev prompted the German to playfully quip that he was tired of Federer winning everything.

"I mean, you're 30-whatever. Why? Just why?," Zverev asked jokingly of Federer at the Hopman Cup trophy presentation.

The 21-year-old Zverev appears the most likely of the younger generation of players hoping to end the world's top three's domination of Grand Slams, having beaten Federer and Djokovic at the ATP Tour Finals in London last November. While others in 'Generation Next' like Austria's Dominic Thiem and the 22-year-old Russians Karen Khachanov and Daniil Medvedev could cause upsets, it is debatable whether they have can win seven matches over 14 days. Two of the older generation who have shown they do have that

ability — Britain's Andy Murray and Switzerland's Stan Wawrinka — could be dangerous floaters in the draw as they make their way back from injury-plagued seasons.

Murray, a five-time finalist at Melbourne Park, spent most of last year recuperating from hip surgery and looked rusty last week in Brisbane but declared himself pain free.

Wawrinka, the 2014 champion, is also coming back from knee surgery and a back injury in the second half of 2018, but typically flies under the radar through Grand Slams and unlikely to have any pressure, which makes him more lethal. The women's draw looks more open even with Serena Williams, the most dominant force in the sport, back chasing a 24th grand slam singles title to tie Margaret Court's all-time record.

The American was eight weeks pregnant when she won her 23rd title at Melbourne Park in 2017 and returned to action last year where she reached finals at Wimbledon and the U.S. Open. Williams, who played at the Hopman Cup in Perth, enters the year's first grand slam ranked 16th but she still remains the favourite in Melbourne even if she lost to Naomi Osaka in the Flushing Meadows final.

World number one Simona Halep, with a massive burden off her shoulders, will hope to go one better this year having lost the 2018 final to Caroline Wozniacki. —AFP

**Japan's Imahira receives special invitation to Masters**



**WASHINGTON:** Japan's Shugo Imahira, last year's Japan Golf Tour leading money winner, has accepted a special invitation to play in this year's Masters tournament, Augusta National chairman Fred Ridley said Wednesday. The 26-year-old from suburban Tokyo will make his Masters debut after missing the cut in all three prior major starts at the 2016 British Open, 2017 US Open and 2018 PGA Championship. Imahira, ranked 53rd in the world, had 14 top-10 finishes last year and won his second career title at the Bridgestone Open, closing with three birdies for a one-stroke victory. His other Japan Tour title came at the 2017 Kansai Open. "Bobby Jones and Clifford Roberts established the Masters as a global sporting event, so throughout our history special invitations for deserving international players have always been carefully considered," Ridley said. "We are pleased to continue this tradition by welcoming Shugo Imahira to our field this year based on his impressive record during the past 12 months." —AFP

**Mohamed Salah voted African Footballer of the Year**

**DAKAR:** Egypt striker Mohamed Salah was voted as the African Footballer of the Year for the second successive year at the Confederation of African Football's awards ceremony in Dakar. Salah beat fellow nominees, Liverpool team-mate Sadio Mane and Arsenal forward Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang. He edged the same two players last year in a vote decided by the technical directors and head coaches of 56 CAF member associations. "This award is very big for me, I love it because I saw it when I was young and I always had a dream to win it one day," Salah said when collecting his trophy for his 2018 exploits. "I'm proud to win it twice, I must thank my family and my teammates, and I dedicate this award to my country, Egypt." Salah helped Liverpool reach the 2018 Champions League final but suffered a shoulder injury during the 3-1 defeat by Real Madrid in Kiev. That injury raised doubts about his World Cup participation but he regained fitness to represent Egypt in the finals in Russia, scoring twice as they exited in the first round. He has scored 13 Premier League goals this season to guide Liverpool to the top of the standings. It is the third time an Egyptian player has claimed the crown, with Mahmoud El Khatib's 1983 victory being the other occasion. —AFP

**Aamir returns as Pakistan announces squad for South Africa ODIs**

**LAHORE:** Fast bowler Muhammad Aamir and wicketkeeper-batsman Muhammad Rizwan made a comeback in the national squad as the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) on Wednesday announced a 16-member squad for the upcoming ODI series against South Africa.

The series will start in Port Elizabeth on 19 January. There are five changes from the Test side, which is presently in Johannesburg preparing for the third and final Test. Asad Shafiq, Azhar Ali, Haris Sohail, Mohammad Abbas and Yasir Shah have been replaced by Muhammad Hafeez, Shoaib Malik, Hussain Talat, Usman Shinwari and Imad Wasim, respectively.

The side will be led by Sarfaraz Ahmed and includes three openers

(Fakhar Zaman, Imam-ul-Haq, Shan Masood), four middle-order batsmen (Babar Azam, Shoaib Malik, Mohammad Hafeez, Hussain Talat), two all-rounders (Imad Wasim, Faheem Ashraf), one spinner (Shadab Khan), four fast bowlers (Mohammad Amir, Hasan Ali, Shaheen Afridi and Usman Shinwari) and Mohammad Rizwan as the second wicketkeeper/batsman. There are three changes from the 15-man ODI side, which drew with New Zealand in the UAE after the final ODI was washed out. Asif Ali, Haris Sohail and Junaid Khan have been replaced by Muhammad Amir, Hussain Talat, Mohammad Rizwan and Shan Masood.

"The selected team is a unanimous choice of the selection panel, including Pakistan captain Sarfaraz Ahmed and

Pakistan coach Mickey Arthur. While selecting the squad, we have tried to maintain consistency, taking into consideration player performances in white-ball cricket as well as looking ahead to the upcoming ODI challenges, including the World Cup," chairman of Pakistan's cricket selectors Inzamam-ul-Haq said.

Commenting on the non-selection of fast bowler Mohammad Abbas, Inzamam said: "He is very much in our scheme of things, but we have to manage his workload intelligently and smartly. He has just made a return following an injury, and we would like to give him sufficient rest before considering him for future assignments. "Amir's good performance in the Test series not only made him an automatic

selection, but also helped us in the decision to rest Abbas." Junaid Khan has not been considered for this tour because we feel he has to work more on his bowling since the fitness issues that he had cut short his series against New Zealand. "Asif Ali has been dropped due to an inconsistent and below-par performance. In his place, we have decided to give Hussain Talat an opportunity to show his mettle and skills. He is a good left-handed batsman, who can also bowl." Hussain is the only uncapped player in the side, but he has represented Pakistan in 11 T20Is. In 59 List-A 50-over matches since making his debut in 2018, Hussain has scored 1,402 runs at just under 38. He has also picked up 14 wickets with his medium-past bowling. In the 2018-19 season,

Hussain has scored 194 runs in seven matches with a century, while he took six wickets.

Inzamam added: "Before finalising the squad, we spoke with the team management, which has confirmed that all the players are fit for the ODI series." "I have had separate discussions with the coach and captain, and while they are disappointed with the performance in the Test series, they remain optimistic and confident that they can turn things around.

"I have complete faith and believe in the side that is presently in South Africa. It is just that it has been a tough and difficult tour for them. I have been in this situation in the past and I know exactly what they are going through. "That said, I am confident that this tour

will make them better and stronger cricketers."

Pakistan squad for ODIs: Sarfaraz Ahmed (captain, wicket-keeper) Babar Azam Faheem Ashraf Fakhar Zaman Hasan Ali Hussain Talat Imad Wasim Imam-ul-Haq Mohammad Amir Muhammad Hafeez Mohammad Rizwan (wicketkeeper) Shadab Khan Shaheen Afridi Shan Masood Shoaib Malik Usman Shinwari. —APP