

Du Plessis criticises 'big three' move



CAPE TOWN: South African cricket captain Faf du Plessis believes cricket needs more, not fewer, elite nations. Speaking after South Africa's 107-run win in the first Test against England on Sunday, Du Plessis was asked his opinion about plans for an annual 'Super Series' of one-day games, involving the so-called 'Big Three' of India, Australia and England, with one other country to be invited on a revolving basis. "The last year or so you can see what's going on in terms of the big three countries," he said. "There's a lot of movement going towards that, a lot more matches being played against the top three, or big three. It's probably better if you include more teams, the better to grow the game as much as you can." Du Plessis pointed out that there was inequality of fixtures, especially in Test cricket, with new Test nations such as Ireland and Afghanistan struggling to get fixtures. "There's a lot of smaller nations not playing a lot of Test cricket, they're actually playing less," he said. —AFP

Pogba set to return for Manchester trip to Arsenal



LONDON: Manchester United midfielder Paul Pogba is set to return for their Premier League visit to Arsenal on New Year's Day after sitting out Saturday's 2-0 win over Burnley as a precaution, manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer has said. The France international returned from a long layoff injury in United's 2-0 defeat by Watford on Dec. 22 and played 45 minutes in their 4-1 win over Newcastle United on Boxing Day. Pogba felt pain in his ankle after the Newcastle game but Solskjaer said the 26-year-old would be ready for United's next match. "He's been out for a long while and he didn't feel right," Solskjaer told reporters. "When you've been out for such a while it's always going to take time until you're 100%. "He wasn't ready (to face Burnley) because he's not really done too many games and he's had two in a few days and he just needed another day's recovery." United midfielder Scott McTominay damaged knee ligaments in the win over Newcastle and Solskjaer said the 23-year-old could be out of action for about a month. "I wouldn't expect him to be back within a few weeks," the Norwegian added. "I don't know if it's three or four weeks ... We've just got to find a way through it." United's win over Burnley lifted them to fifth in the table, while Arsenal dropped to 12th after losing to Chelsea. —AFP

Yachting: Ichi Ban declared overall Sydney-Hobart winner



SYDNEY: Australian yacht Ichi Ban won the bluewater classic Sydney-Hobart handicap honours for being the boat that performed best according to size, race officials announced on Monday. The gruelling 628-nautical mile (1,163-kilometre) race down Australia's east coast, which started in Sydney Harbour on Dec 26, awards trophies for a line honours winner and an overall handicap winner. The TP52 Ichi Ban, skippered by Matt Allen, crossed the finish line in 11th place on Saturday night, about 12 hours behind line honours winner Comanche. "This is Matt's third win - twice as a skipper, once as a crew member back in the '80s - so we are delighted to announce that really well deserved victory," Cruising Yacht Club of Australia commodore Paul Billingham said. Ichi Ban, which first won the Sydney-Hobart in 2017, finished in two days, six hours, 18 minutes and five seconds. But the crew had to wait until others completed their race to find out if they had the best corrected time to lift the Tattersall Cup, which they eventually did on Monday morning. —AFP

Shiffrin equals Vonn's record with WC giant slalom win



LIENZ, Austria: American Mikaela Shiffrin equalled compatriot Lindsey Vonn's record for most women's World Cup victories in one discipline after winning the giant slalom event for the 43rd time in Lienz, Austria. Vonn had set the mark in the downhill event before she ended an 18-year career last February and Shiffrin is now on 64 World Cup wins overall, moving one step closer to Vonn's all-time record of 82. Shiffrin, 24, recorded the fastest time in both legs and beat second-placed rival Petra Vlhova of Slovakia by 0.61 seconds and Switzerland's Michelle Gisin, who finished 1.73 seconds behind. "I was pushing as hard as I could, that was it," Shiffrin said with a smile. "I don't really remember what happened during the run but it was good. "I could see her (Vlhova) from the start... she's skiing really well so I had to go, like, 110 per cent and I did." The win also moved Shiffrin closer to the record for most wins in a single discipline set by Sweden's Ingemar Stenmark, who won the giant slalom 46 times between 1975 and 1989. —Reuters

England opener Sibley the latest to fall ill in South Africa



CAPE TOWN: Opener Dominic Sibley has joined the growing list of England players and staff stuck down by illness in South Africa, the England and Wales Cricket Board said in a media release on Monday. Sibley had scores of four and 29 in the first test in Centurion, which South Africa won by 107 runs to take a 1-0 lead in the four-match series, but will now be a doubt for the second game starting in Cape Town. The Board had better news about seamer Chris Woakes and spinner Jack Leach, who have shown signs of improvement and are out of quarantine at the team hotel. —Reuters



MANCHESTER: Liverpool's Sadio Mane (centre right) attempts a shot at goal during the English Premier League football match.

ICC to consider mandatory four-day Tests

LONDON: Four-day Test matches could become mandatory as part of the World Test Championship for 2023, with the ICC's cricket committee likely to formally consider the change in 2020 amid widespread discussions among member boards about how to reduce numerous pressure points in the global cricket calendar for the future.

However, the world's cricketers stand as the most likely source of opposition to the change, with many viewing the step up from four-day first-class games to five-day Tests as a critical point of difference at the top end of the long-form game.

The ICC's increasing demand for event windows, the proliferation of domestic T20 leagues, the BCCI's demands for its own sizeable share of bilateral calendar space, and the costs of staging Test series are all factors contributing to the move, which would shave off a significant amount of time from the calendar for the 2023 to 2031 cycle. As an example, mandatory four-day Test matches rather than five-day matches during the current cycle from 2015 to 2023 would have freed up a total of 335 days of scheduled cricket over the period, a valuable amount of time that would also be enhanced by the ability to consistently schedule Test matches on a Thursday-to-

Sunday basis, not dissimilar to the rhythm of golf tournaments on the world's major professional tours. It would also allow for more Test series to be played over three or five matches, affording host boards and broadcasters a greater share of the higher revenue-raising early days of a Test without having to budget for a fifth day. Australia's recent history against India has seen Test series played over four matches for a total of 20 scheduled days - the same number that would be scheduled for a five-match series of four-day Tests.

Matches played over four days would likely see the increase of the minimum overs in a day from 90 to 98, meaning that over four days only 58 scheduled overs would be lost. There has been an increasing proliferation in the number of Test matches finishing inside four days - more than 60% of matches played since the start of 2018 have ended in four days or fewer.

"It is something that we have got to seriously consider," Cricket Australia chief executive Kevin Roberts told SEN Radio this week. "It is something that can't be driven by emotion, but it needs to be driven by fact. We need to look at what's the average length of Test matches over the past five years in terms of time and overs. "We need to look at it very carefully and perhaps

it is more likely than not in the mid-term future. What we absolutely will do is that over the next 12 to 18 months, is make sure the cricket calendar is nailed down for the years 2023 to 2031. What we are committed to doing is working with all the ICC members - nobody is saying it is easy but what we are doing is looking at it holistically and we are committed to doing that."

The contrasting view, shared among many players, was provided by Australia captain Tim Paine at the conclusion of Australia's 247-run victory over New Zealand in Melbourne. "We might not have got a result if we'd done that in the Ashes, I think every game went to a fifth day," he said. "That's the point of difference with Test cricket, it is five days, it's harder mentally, it's harder physically, and it tests players more than the four-day first-class fixtures do. I think that's what it's designed to do, so I hope it stays that way." Members of the ICC Cricket Committee at the two-day meeting in Mumbai International Cricket Council A shift to four-day Tests would place an even greater premium on the quality of pitches around the world, with curators being required to provide a surface that aids pace bowlers, batsmen and spin bowlers over their course, without the chance of an extra day for the pitch to

Lampard calls for Chelsea to show persistent fight

LONDON: The fighting spirit Chelsea showed in Sunday's victory over Arsenal is exactly what manager Frank Lampard wants from his young side, but the Englishman says the team will only push on if they can consistently replicate that aggression. Chelsea's 2-1 come-from-behind win at their London rivals kept them fourth in the table despite their struggles against the Premier League's lesser lights in recent weeks. Lampard's men lost to West Ham United, Everton and Bournemouth before outclassing Jose Mourinho's Tottenham Hotspur, then were beaten by struggling Southampton before their stunning late comeback against Arsenal. "It was everything I wanted," Lampard told reporters. "We've been rightly questioned recently. Everton away being a good one... we were quiet after that game in the dressing room. I didn't like it." Chelsea's players were involved in heated discussions in the tunnel at the Emirates Stadium after going a goal down before halftime and Lampard said a frank dressing room exchange during the break was the catalyst for their comeback. "I don't want 11 quiet players who get on with it and trot out again," he added. "I said my piece and it was pretty firm ... Then the lads started talking. It was aggressive, which was a good thing." The 41-year-old stopped short of describing the performance as a turning point and said marrying character with style was the next step in Chelsea's development. "Last week we won at Tottenham by playing really good football from beginning to end," he added. —AFP

Lyon shoots down Warne call to rest for Sydney

SYDNEY: Australia's Nathan Lyon on Monday shot down a suggestion from Shane Warne that he take a rest for the Sydney Test against New Zealand this week so leg-spinner Mitchell Swepson can make his debut. Tim Paine's team have already won the three-match series against the Black Caps after crushing them by 247 runs in Melbourne on Sunday, following their comprehensive win in Perth. Cricket great Warne has championed Swepson and over the weekend flagged the idea of axing Lyon if selectors opt for one spinner in Sydney. "Just giving Mitchell Swepson a taste of it, giving him a chance, I reckon it will pay dividends in the long run," Warne said. But Lyon, who took four wickets to wrap up late New Zealand second innings resistance, said there was no way he would be standing aside.

"Did Warnie ever want a rest and give Stuart MacGill a go?" he asked, noting the lack of opportunity given to Warne's leg-spin rival at the height of their careers. "I won't be resting. I haven't met any Australian cricketers that would like to be rested. "It's that hard playing Test cricket, but it's that rewarding as well so every opportunity you get to play cricket for Australia it means the world to us. —Reuters



SYDNEY: Dale Steyn celebrates an early breakthrough during BBL T20 match.

Basketball: Lakers outmuscle Mavericks, Thunder surprise Raptors

LOS ANGELES: Anthony Davis had 23 points and nine rebounds as the Los Angeles Lakers defeated the Dallas Mavericks 108-95 at Staples Center. Kentavious Caldwell-Pope came off the bench to score 19 points while LeBron James, who turns 35 on Monday, finished with a double double, 13 points and 13 assists. James became the ninth player in league history to reach 9,000 career assists. Luka Doncic, who entered the contest as the NBA's third-leading scorer at 29.1 points per game, had 19 points on five-of-14 shooting and seven assists.

The Mavericks got a scare in the second quarter when Doncic was slammed to the ground by Lakers Dwight Howard, who was hit with a foul on the play. Doncic was driving to the basket and in the air when Howard reach in with his left arm sending Doncic crashing to the floor. This is the second vicious hit by Howard on Doncic this

season. In November, Howard bloodied the 20-year-old Slovenian with an elbow to the head.

Delon Wright added 14 points off the bench, while Kristaps Porzingis managed 11 points on 4-of-10 shooting. The Lakers outshot the Mavericks 48.7 percent to 36 percent. The Mavericks also played most of the game without Tim Hardaway who left the contest with 5:26 remaining in the first quarter after suffering a hamstring injury.

Hardaway, who had 25 points in the Mavericks' win at Golden State on Saturday, seemed to hurt himself after a dunk.

CHAMPIONS BEATEN: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander nailed the go-ahead jump shot with 36 seconds left and equalled his career best with 32 points as the Oklahoma City Thunder edged the defending NBA champion Toronto Raptors 98-97. Chris Paul scored 20 of his 25 points in the

second half as the red-hot Thunder won their sixth game in their last seven. Paul added 11 rebounds and eight assists, Nerlens Noel tallied 13 points and Darius Bazley scored 12 for Oklahoma City. Kyle Lowry and Fred VanVleet each scored 20 points for the Raptors. Patrick McCaw added 13 points, Serge Ibaka had 12 and 14 rebounds while Terence Davis had 11 points in the loss. Toronto led by six points halfway through the second quarter. After the Thunder cut into their deficit, VanVleet's three-pointer pushed the lead back to eight with 3:44 left before halftime. The Thunder went on an 11-0 run, capped by Gilgeous-Alexander's three-pointer to lead by three points with 1:26 remaining. The Raptors pressed late and the game was tied 47-47 at halftime. The Thunder led by eight with 9:35 left in the third quarter but Toronto bounced back to take a two-point

lead on Chris Boucher's three-pointer. Toronto led 80-76 after three quarters. In the final quarter, the Raptors failed to hold their lead and the Thunder led by three points on Paul's jumper with 9:04 left. In New Orleans, Brandon Ingram and Lonzo Ball scored 27 points each as the host New Orleans Pelicans defeated the injury-hit Houston Rockets 127-112. Jrue Holiday and E'Twaun Moore added 25 each and Derrick Favors had 12 points and 16 rebounds as the Pelicans won for the fifth time in six games. The Rockets played without Russell Westbrook and James Harden, who sat out with a sore toe. Harden is averaging a league best 38.3 points per game. Westbrook sat out because the Rockets were playing two games in as many days after beating New Jersey 108-98 on Saturday. Danuel House scored 22 points, Eric Gordon added 20 to lead the Rockets. —AFP