

13 Australia complete dominant 4-0 Ashes series rout of England



14 Murray announces hip surgery, eyes for grasscourt season



15 Real fall 16 points behind Barca after draw with Celta



BARCELONA: Barcelona's new Brazilian midfielder Philippe Coutinho (CR) poses with his new jersey beside Barcelona FC President Josep Maria Bartomeu (CL) during his official presentation in Barcelona yesterday. — AFP

Coutinho completes 'dream' Barca move

Liverpool had put up a fight to keep the player

BARCELONA: Philippe Coutinho officially completed his "dream" 160-million-euro (\$192 million) move from Liverpool to Barcelona yesterday, making him the third most expensive player in history. Coutinho, 25, signed a five-year contract in a ceremony sitting alongside Barca president Josep Maria Bartomeu before posing on the Camp Nou pitch in a Barcelona shirt.

"I am very happy to be here. This is a dream come true and I hope to meet everyone's expectations on the pitch," Coutinho said. Minutes before the Brazilian midfielder put pen to paper after a whirlwind few days, the club said a thigh injury would delay his debut until the end of January.

Barca's swoop for Coutinho is outranked only by Paris Saint-Germain's stunning world record 222-million-euro signing of Neymar from Barcelona last year, and the Paris club's capture of French striker Kylian Mbappe in a deal eventually worth 180 million euros.

His arrival will help Barcelona to move on from the humiliation of losing Neymar to Qatar-backed PSG, and his presence alongside Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez will help take the pressure off another of the club's stars, 33-year-old Andres Iniesta.

Bartomeu said the club had secured "one of the stars of

world football" and admitted that Liverpool had put up a fight to keep the player. "It was not easy and other clubs expressed an interest in him, but he was determined to come here," the president said.

Barcelona had made a bid for Coutinho in the summer, but Liverpool stood firm. In the end, the lure of a huge profit on a player they paid just £8.5 million when he joined from Inter Milan in 2013 proved too strong for the English club.

A GOOD FIT

Coach Ernesto Valverde predicted Coutinho will comfortably fit into his star-studded team. He could now make his debut at home to Alaves on January 28. Coutinho played with Suarez for 18 months at Liverpool before the Uruguayan made the same move to Spain in 2014.

"Everybody knows about his quality. He has been play-

ing at the highest level for years now and that is important," Suarez said. "Now we need to make sure he feels at home because we know that changing club is always difficult, but I think he is the type of player who will fit well into the team."

“I hope to meet everyone's expectations on the pitch”

questioned because he will not be able to play in the Champions League this season having already played in the competition for Liverpool.

But he is likely to be used to give Iniesta a rest, keeping

Valverde admitted that it would be a challenge shoe-horning his new recruit into a squad already running away with the Spanish league title. "Coutinho is a player who I think can bring a lot to us," said Valverde.

"He's an important signing." "I have seen him play in various positions-on the right, the left, in the middle, on the wings." The timing of Barca's move for Coutinho has been

the veteran midfielder fresh for the Champions League as Barcelona seek to wrest the trophy back from bitter rivals Real Madrid. Rio-born Coutinho scored 54 goals for Liverpool in all competitions, although he won no silverware during his five-year stay at Anfield and he never made a secret of his desire to move to a club where Brazilians such as Ronaldinho and Romario have shone in the past. His departure now is a blow to Liverpool as he had just returned to top form after an injury-hit start to the season, scoring seven goals in the last eight games of 2017 to put his side firmly in the Champions League places.

"It is no secret that Philippe has wanted this move to happen since July, when Barcelona first made their interest known," Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said at the weekend. "Philippe was insistent with me, the owners and even his teammates this was a move he was desperate to make happen." Liverpool have been tipped to quickly reinvest their windfall from the Coutinho sale. Despite already paying Southampton £75 million for defender Virgil van Dijk, Klopp will be chasing an attacker with Leicester City's Algerian winger Riyad Mahrez and Monaco midfielder Thomas Lemar already linked with a switch to Anfield.—AFP

Lakers snap 9-game skid with win over Hawks

LOS ANGELES: The Los Angeles Lakers snapped a nine-game NBA losing streak on Sunday with a 132-113 victory over the Atlanta Hawks. Brandon Ingram scored 20 points to lead the Lakers, who hadn't won a game since a December 20 victory over the Houston Rockets. The victory quieted some of the noise growing around the embattled young team, including comments by outspoken basketball patriarch LaVar Ball-father of Lakers rookie Lonzo Ball-who told ESPN that coach Luke Walton had lost the confidence of his players. "I would disagree with that," Walton said at shootaround on Sunday morning, telling reporters that even as the defeats piled up his players were playing hard. The difference against the Hawks, Walton

said after the much-needed win, was a defensive commitment that set up the Lakers' transition offense. "I think it triggered everything for us tonight," Walton said. "Once we got engaged and we were crashing back on the glass and able to get out and run ... it was good to see the guys get back to that mode where defense anchors what we do offensively."

Lonzo Ball, playing just his second game after missing six with a shoulder sprain, was under scrutiny after his father's latest remarks. He scored 13 points and pulled down 10 rebounds while handing out six assists.

When he departed the game with 2:53 remaining, along with Kyle Kuzma, Larry Nance Jr. and Julius Randle they were cheered by fans-a turnaround from the boos heard during a loss to Charlotte on Friday.

At 12-27 the Lakers remain at the bottom of the Western Conference. But they avoided matching the longest losing streak in franchise history. Walton, while encouraged, said he wasn't expecting smooth sailing for his young players, but he said insisted their growing pains wouldn't tear them apart.

"The team's been fine," he said. "We've got guys and a group that are still figuring things out. It's nothing new when young teams that are trying to get better go through hard times."

Western Conference contenders San Antonio and Oklahoma City both endured defeats on the road. In Portland, CJ McCollum flashed to the basket and floated in the game-winner with 5.9 seconds left as the Trail Blazers edged the San Antonio Spurs 111-110.

LaMarcus Aldridge had chance to answer for the Spurs, but his mid-range jump shot bounced off the back rim at the buzzer. The Spurs were missing four regulars, including Tony Parker and All-Star Kawhi Leonard, who has a partial tear of a muscle in his left shoulder, according to San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich.

Portland were also short-handed, as point guard Damian Lillard was a late scratch with a calf injury. The close contest featured four lead changes in the final 2:48. Aldridge led the Spurs with 30 points and 40-year-old Argentinian veteran Manu Ginobili chipped in 26 to become the oldest player to score 20-plus points in back-to-back games.—AFP



LOS ANGELES: Lonzo Ball #2 of the Los Angeles Lakers grabs the rebound against the Atlanta Hawks on Sunday. — AFP