

LA ROCHELLE WIN BRUISING CLASH TO GO TOP IN FRANCE

PARIS: La Rochelle snatched pole position in the French Top 14 on Saturday with a bruising 22-8 win over an indisciplined Castres who gave up 20 penalties and finished the night a man short.

Victory allowed La Rochelle to move four points clear of Clermont who face Toulon later. After Brock James and Benjamin Urdapilleta had exchanged early penalties, it was Castres who scored the first try on a bitterly cold night. South Africa hooker Jody

Jenkeker barrelled over from short range for an 8-3 lead but Urdapilleta missed the extras. Zack Holmes cut the deficit for La Rochelle with a penalty as his team trailed 8-6 at the break.

Castres finished the opening period with Uruguayan skipper Rodrigo Capo Ortega in the sin bin for a dangerous tackle. No sooner had he returned early in the second half than scrum-half Rory Kockott was also yellow-carded for a similar offence.

Holmes kicked La Rochelle ahead and they never looked back with All Blacks World Cup winning flanker Victor Vito scoring a try after being set-up by veteran Springboks scrum-half Ricky Januarie.

Holmes slotted over the conversion for 16-8 before adding two further penalties for a comfortable win. Castres played the last 10 minutes a man short once again when replacement prop Yohan Montes was red-carded for appearing to aim a head butt at

Mohammed Boughanmi who was yellow carded for his role in the affray.

Montes had only been on the field for five minutes before he was sent packing. Earlier Saturday, Brive pushed Grenoble closer to relegation with a 23-22 win with the Top 14's top scorer Gaetan Germain kicking 18 of his side's points.

The match between Pau and Lyon, meanwhile, was postponed due to an icy pitch. On Friday, Montpellier scored three tries through Fijian winger Nemani

Nadolo, centre Vincent Martin and former Australian rugby league star Joe Tomane in a 31-26 win against faltering Bordeaux.

The win allowed Jake White's third-placed team to bury the shock 32-27 loss at Pau last week while Bordeaux have now lost for games in succession.

The only consolation for Bordeaux was Simon Hickey's last-gasp penalty allowing them to claim a defensive bonus point.—AFP

SEAHAWKS, TEXANS ADVANCE IN NFL PLAYOFF OPENERS

WASHINGTON: Russell Wilson tossed two touchdown passes to power Seattle over Detroit 26-6 while Brock Osweiler threw for one touchdown and ran for another as Houston beat Oakland 27-14 in Saturday's NFL playoff openers.

The Seahawks stretched their playoff win streak in Seattle to 10 games, third-best in NFL history, and booked a second-round National Conference matchup next Saturday in Atlanta.

"We're expecting a fight," said Seattle linebacker Bobby Wagner. They are rested. They are going to be hungry. But we're hungry too. We're going to come out and give them everything we've got."

The Lions suffered their NFL record ninth consecutive playoff defeat. Detroit has not won a playoff game in 25 seasons and has not won a road playoff game or an NFL title since 1957.

"We were just locked in," Wagner said. "We knew we were going to play well." Houston advanced to a second-round American Conference matchup next weekend at either New England or Kansas City.

"Overall, it was probably our best game of the year," Texans coach Bill O'Brien said. "I'm really proud of these players." Houston's fate depends upon the outcome of a later match between Pittsburgh-Miami playoff game.

"I don't care who we play. We are going to play at a high level," Texans defensive star Jadeveon Clowney said. "We are just going to keep fighting." The Green Bay Packers, entering the playoffs on a six-game win streak, host the New York Giants in Sunday's other playoff game, with the winner to visit Dallas a week later in the second-round.

'HARD-NOSED FOOTBALL'

At Seattle, Thomas Rawls carried 27 times for a team playoff record 161 rushing yards and a touchdown.

"I'm feeling so good. We worked so hard to get to this point," Rawls said. "It motivates us, playing tough hard-nosed Seahawks football. That's what we did."

The Seahawks, who have not lost a home playoff game since January 2005, opened the scoring on Wilson's 2-yard touchdown pass to Paul Richardson. Richardson made a one-handed touchdown reception while grabbing a defend-

er's face mask, but did not draw a penalty flag. Seattle's Steven Hauschka kicked a 43-yard field goal and Detroit's Matt Prater answered from 51 yards late in the second quarter to leave the Seahawks ahead 10-3 at half-time. Prater added a 53-yard field goal for the Lions but Hauschka answered from 27 yards early in the fourth quarter to give Seattle a 13-6 edge. On their next possession, the Seahawks drove 82 yards in eight plays capped by Rawls' 4-yard touchdown run, although Hauschka's missed conversion kick left Seattle ahead by only 19-6. Wilson lofted a final 13-yard touchdown pass to Doug Baldwin with 4:12 remaining to seal Detroit's fate.

'AN ULTIMATE TEAM VICTORY'

The Texans, 19-0 over three seasons when leading at half-time and 6-0 in this campaign, could become the first team to play a Super Bowl in their own home stadium. "This was truly an ultimate team victory, and I'm very proud of this football team," Osweiler said. "It means a lot."

The Raiders, in their first playoff game since the 2002 season, struggled behind rookie Connor Cook, who became the first quarterback to make his first NFL start in a playoff game after injuries to Derek Carr and Matt McGloin. The Texans, who hadn't won a playoff game in four years, had the fewest total season points of any playoff team since 2005, but their top-rated defensive unit was good enough to put them in the post-season. Houston's Nick Novak kicked a 50-yard field goal to open the scoring and Clowney picked off a Cook pass to set up a 4-yard touchdown run by Lamar Miller. "He has really stepped up and made a bunch of big plays for us," O'Brien said of Clowney. It has to continue."

Oakland answered on a 2-yard touchdown run by Latavius Murray but Novak's 38-yard field goal put Houston ahead 13-7.

Osweiler hit DeAndre Hopkins with a 2-yard touchdown pass with 80 seconds remaining in the second quarter to give the Texans a 20-7 half-time lead, then added a 1-yard touchdown run.

While the Raiders answered on Cook's 8-yard touchdown pass, interceptions by Houston's Corey Moore and A.J. Bouye snuffed out Oakland's final hope. "I'm proud of our guys," Raiders coach Jack Del Rio said. "We have a bright future."—AFP



MOUNT MAUNGANUI: New Zealand players celebrate winning the series after the 20/20 International cricket match between New Zealand and Bangladesh at Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui yesterday. — AFP

ANDERSON POWERS NEW ZEALAND TO T20 SWEEP

MOUNT MAUNGANUI: Corey Anderson bludgeoned 94 off just 41 balls as New Zealand beat Bangladesh by 27 runs in the third Twenty20 at Bay Oval yesterday to sweep the series. Anderson, who put on 124 runs for the fourth wicket with Kane Williamson (60), hit a New Zealand record 10 sixes in his batting blitz as New Zealand posted 194 for four.

Bangladesh in reply made 167 for six in their 20 overs. Tamim Iqbal and Soumya Sarkar launched Bangladesh's reply by reaching 44 in the fifth over when Tamim was dismissed for 24. Bangladesh were 89 for two after 10 overs, but with Soumya having fallen for 42, they could not sustain the run rate.

The tourists still had an outside chance of reaching their target at 120 for three after 14 overs when spinner Ish Sodhi produced a crucially tight over in which he took one for three, blowing out the required run rate to an improbable 14.44 per over.

New Zealand captain Williamson said the blustery conditions meant the win was not as easy as it appeared on the scoreboard.

POWER AND COREY

"Corey's knock was outstanding. It wasn't easy at times—you had to adjust to the wind but I don't think the wind mattered to Corey," he said. "He hit it to parts and hit it a long way and it was a good knock that set us up for victory."

New Zealand, sent into bat, were on the back foot early, slumping from 34 for nought to 41 for three in the space of 11 deliveries. That brought Anderson and Williamson together and after taking a few overs to settle in, with only 55 on the board at the halfway stage, they let fly in the second half of the innings which produced 139 runs. They also set a New Zealand fourth-wicket partnership record of 124, one more than the previous mark set by Colin Munro and Tom Bruce in the second game two days ago.

The big-hitting Anderson only faced 41 deliveries for the highest knock of his career while Williamson faced 57 balls for his seventh Twenty20 half-century.

Bangladesh captain Mashrafe Mortaza, who had the misfortune to see Williamson dropped off his bowling on 53 and 58, was unable to complete his fourth over because of injury, compounding his team's problems. Regular opener Imrul Kayes was also injured in the field. He dropped down the order during the Bangladesh innings and was not required to bat. Rubel Hossain was the pick of the Bangladesh bowlers with three for 31, including two wickets in one over when he removed Jimmy Neesham (15) and Munro, a century-maker two days ago, without scoring.

Sodhi took two for 22 and Trent Boult two for 48 for New Zealand. The defeat left Bangladesh winless after three 50-over matches and three Twenty20s, with two Tests remaining on their tour. — AFP

SCOREBOARD

MOUNT MAUNGANUI: Scoreboard in the third Twenty20 international between New Zealand and Bangladesh at Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui yesterday.

New Zealand		Bangladesh	
K. Williamson b Rubel Hossain	60	Soumya Sarkar c&b Sodhi	42
J. Neesham lbw Rubel Hossain	15	Sabbir Rahman b Williamson	18
C. Munro c Soumya Sarkar b Rubel Hossain	0	Shakib Al Hasan c Anderson b Boult	41
T. Bruce c Imrul Kayes b Mosaddek Hossain	5	Mahmudullah b Sodhi	18
C. Anderson not out	94	Mosaddek Hossain c de Grandhomme b Santner	12
C. de Grandhomme not out	4	Nurul Hasan not out	7
Extras (lb14, w2)	16	Rubel Hossain not out	1
Total (4 wks, 20 overs)	194	Extras (lb1, w3)	4
Fall of wickets: 1-34 (Neesham), 2-36 (Munro), 3-41 (Bruce), 4-165 (Williamson)		Total (six wickets; 20 overs)	167
Did not bat: M. Santner, T. Blundell, B. Wheeler, I. Sodhi, T. Boult		Fall of wickets: 1-44 (Tamim), 2-82 (Soumya), 3-97 (Sabbir), 4-122 (Mahmudullah), 5-150 (Mosaddek), 6-161 (Shakib)	
Bowling: Mashrafe 3.2-0-42-0, Taskin 4-0-37-0 (2w), Rubel 4-0-31-3, Shakib 4-0-22-0, Mosaddek 3.4-0-27-1, Soumya 1-0-21-0		Did not bat: Imrul Kayes, Mashrafe Mortaza, Taskin Ahmed	
Bangladesh		Bowling: Santner 4-0-37-1 (2w), Wheeler 4-0-29-0, Boult 4-0-48-2, Neesham 1-0-17-0, Sodhi 4-0-22-2 (1w), de Grandhomme 1-0-4-0, Williamson 2-0-9-1	
Tamim Iqbal c de Grandhomme b Boult	24	Result: New Zealand won by 27 runs.	



HOUSTON: Houston Texans cornerback Johnathan Joseph (24) breaks up a pass intended for Oakland Raiders wide receiver Amari Cooper (89) during the first half of an AFC Wild Card NFL game Saturday, in Houston. — AP

RISING STAR THOMAS LEADS TOURNAMENT OF CHAMPIONS

LOS ANGELES: Justin Thomas is doing his best to avoid a repeat of his lacklustre start to 2016, shooting a six-under 67 Saturday to seize sole possession of the lead at the USPGA Tournament of Champions.

Thomas was at 18-under 201 after firing his third straight 67 heading into today's final round at the Plantation Course in Kapalua, Hawaii. The 23-year-old American had a two-shot lead over the hottest player in the game, Japan's Hideki Matsuyama (66), who is seeking his fifth win in his last six tournaments worldwide.

Asked what it is going to take to win, Thomas said, "I am not sure. That is the thing, you don't know what everyone else is going to do." So saying that, I just need to go out and keep doing what I am doing."

Second round co-leader Ryan Moore was tied for third at 14-under with fellow Americans Jimmy Walker and William McGirt. World number one Jason Day of Australia has his work cut out for him as the Australian was tied for 13th at 10-under following a three-under 70.

After getting off to a flat start last season, when he missed the cut at the Sony Open in Waialae, Hawaii, and the Career Builder Challenge in La Quinta, California, Thomas was mindful of being ready for 2017. "I am just looking for a chance to win," he said. "That is why we enter each tournament, or at least why I do. It is nice to be

able to put yourself in an opportunity in the first event of the year."

A rising star on the Tour, he posted six other top-10 finishes last season. He's got two USPGA titles to his credit, successfully defending his CIMB Classic title in Malaysia in October as the tour's 2016-17 season was getting underway.

In Saturday's third round, Thomas fashioned a string of three straight birdies beginning at the par-four third hole. He added an eagle on the par-four 14th and punctuated the round with a birdie at 18.

His only stumble came when he made bogey at the seventh. "I am not disappointed but I left a lot out there," Thomas said. "That is always a good thing because I can just go work on it and improve."

Matsuyama, who briefly held the lead in the second round, birdied all four par-fives on Saturday. His eight total birdies included five in a seven-hole stretch starting at the par-five ninth.

"Hideki is the hottest golfer in the world right now. I am glad he had some time off or I wouldn't like my chances going into tomorrow. But he is playing great so it is going to be a great test," said Thomas.

Defending champion Jordan Spieth, still fine tuning his game to start the year, fired a three-under 70 in a round that included a double bogey and an eagle on the front nine.—AFP



MOUNT MAUNGANUI: Rubel Hossain (L) and Nurul Hasan (R) of Bangladesh celebrate the wicket of New Zealand's James Neesham during the 20/20 International cricket match between New Zealand and Bangladesh at Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui yesterday. — AFP