

Sports

Depleted Heat down Hawks, Morant sinks Wolves in thriller

MIAMI: Victor Oladipo led the depleted Miami Heat to a series-clinching 97-94 victory over the Atlanta Hawks on Tuesday as Ja Morant produced a dazzling late scoring spree to give Memphis a thrilling win over Minnesota in the NBA playoffs. Miami, missing injured stars Jimmy Butler and Kyle Lowry, produced a superb defensive performance to shut down Atlanta and advance to an Eastern Conference semi-final series against either Philadelphia or Toronto.

Oladipo, who only returned to action in March after an 11-month injury layoff, was handed his first start of the playoffs by Heat coach Erik Spoelstra. The 29-year-old two-time All-Star repaid that faith with a 23-point display alongside Bam Adebayo, who finished with 20 points and 11 rebounds. The win marked a fairytale return to center stage for Oladipo, whose career has been decimated by injuries and surgeries over the past three years.

Oladipo was sidelined for nearly a year after undergoing surgery to repair a ruptured quadriceps tendon in May last year. He had undergone surgery to treat the same problem in Jan 2019. "There's nothing I can't handle," Oladipo said after Tuesday's win. "There's nothing I haven't gone through. At the end of the day I feel like I can come back and get through anything. So when they told me I needed to start tonight, I just stepped up to the plate and did everything I could to help my team win... this is only the beginning."

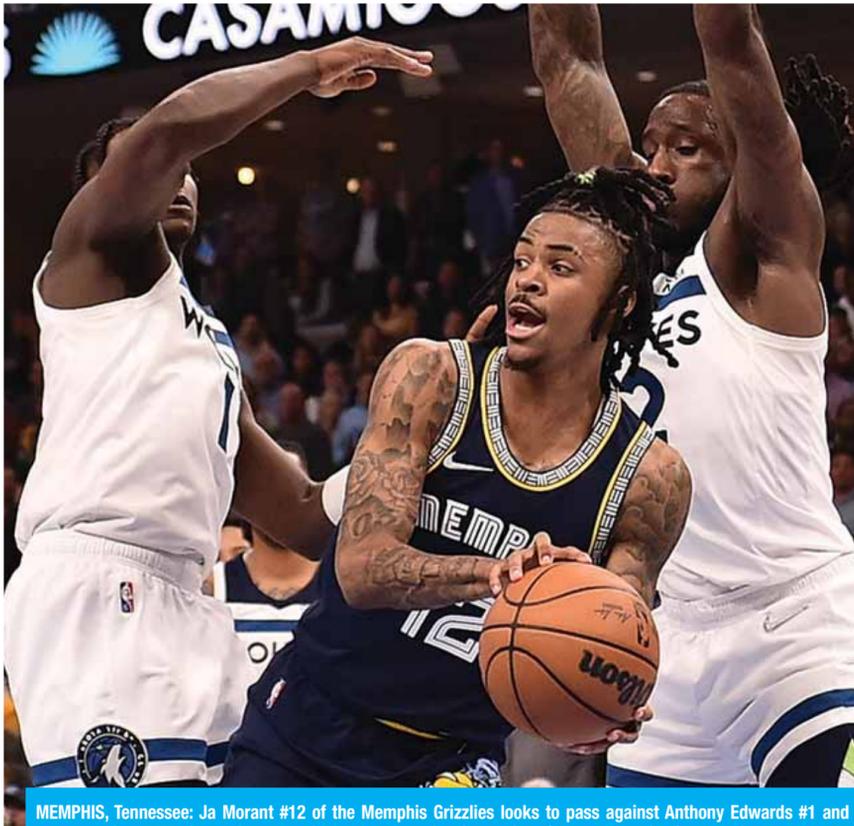
Adebayo took pride with a Miami defensive performance that restricted Hawks star Trae Young to just 11 points. De'Andre Hunter led the Atlanta scoring with 35 points. "We knew it was going to be a fight to the end, we just had to finish it with our defense," Adebayo said. "Defense wins championships."

Morant magic sinks Wolves

In the Western Conference playoffs Morant scored a gravity-defying last-gasp layup as the Grizzlies conjured an epic late fightback to stun the Minnesota Timberwolves 111-109. Morant's wizardry with one second remaining sealed an enthralling battle which leaves Memphis 3-2 ahead in the best-of-seven series with game six in Minnesota on Friday.

Minnesota had led by 13 points early in the fourth quarter after big performances from Karl Anthony-Towns, who finished with 28 points and Anthony Edwards (22 points). But Morant, who bagged 30 points, suddenly found his scoring touch to haul Memphis back into contention. The 22-year-old rising star of the NBA erupted for 18 points in the fourth quarter as Memphis outscored Minnesota 37-24 in the final period.

The catalyst for Morant's masterpiece appeared to be a jaw-dropping dunk over Wolves guard Malik



MEMPHIS, Tennessee: Ja Morant #12 of the Memphis Grizzlies looks to pass against Anthony Edwards #1 and Taurean Prince #12 of the Minnesota Timberwolves during Game Five of the Western Conference First Round NBA Playoffs at FedExForum on April 26, 2022. — AFP

Beasley at the end of the third quarter that brought the Memphis crowd to their feet. Morant later said he was "not that excited" by the dunk, but added: "It definitely ignited the crowd and that gave us some energy." The Grizzlies' come-from-behind win was too close for comfort for Morant though. "Me personally, I'm tired of it, tired of playing from behind," he said. "Last three games we haven't played our basketball."

Morant, who also had 13 rebounds and nine assists, was backed with a 25-point display from Desmond Bane while Brandon Clarke added 21 points with 15 rebounds. In Tuesday's other game, Western Conference top seeds Phoenix returned to winning

ways with an emphatic 112-97 win over New Orleans in Arizona to take a 3-2 series lead. Mikal Bridges led the way for Phoenix with 31 points and five rebounds while Chris Paul added 22 points with 11 assists. "Hell of a win tonight," Bridges said. "We stayed together to get the win, now we've got to go and get another one."

The win marked a return to form for Phoenix, who had been erratic over the opening four games of the series against the eighth-seeded Pelicans. "They've been playing harder than us so we knew we'd have to come out tonight and play harder than them," Bridges said. Game six in the series takes place in New Orleans on Thursday. — AFP

Seattle chase elusive CONCACAF Champions League crown

MEXICO CITY: The Seattle Sounders are eyeing an end to more than two decades of futility on Wednesday when they take on Mexico's Pumas UNAM in the first leg of the CONCACAF Champions League final. The Sounders are bidding to become the first Major League Soccer side to be crowned continental champions since Los Angeles Galaxy lifted the title in 2000.

No MLS side has won the tournament since it was remodeled in 2008 as the CONCACAF Champions League, along the lines of the UEFA Champions League. Since the Galaxy's victory 22 years ago, the top competition for teams from North America, Central America and the Caribbean has been treated as the near-exclusive fiefdom for teams from Mexico. Pumas would become the 17th straight Mexican side to lift the title if they thwart Seattle's ambitions this year.

Despite that record of Mexican dominance, the Sounders start this year's final as favorites in the eyes of many. Seattle have already accounted for one Mexican club in their journey to the final, beating Leon 4-1 on aggregate in the quarter-finals before vanquishing New York City in the last four. The Sounders also have the advantage of playing the May 4 second leg at home, where they have a 100 percent record in this year's tournament.

"I think it's an incredible, historic opportunity," Seattle general manager Garth Lagerwey told the club's website. "I know I've been perhaps hyperbolic in some of my public speaking about it but everything I say is sincere. This is for immortality." Lagerwey says a Seattle victory would be the "biggest achievement in club history, period."

"It's certainly the hardest tournament to win, if you think about what you have to achieve just to

qualify for the tournament and then the process you have to go through playing games both home and away, just a massive amount of travel, starting early in the season, just all the difficulties, there can be no greater degree of difficulty than winning this tournament," he said.

Lessons to learn

Seattle's title ambitions received a reality check on the domestic front last weekend however when they were stunned 4-3 by the San Jose Earthquakes in California. The Sounders squandered leads of 2-0 and 3-1 as San Jose forward Cristian Espinoza scored a hat-trick to engineer victory. Sounders manager Brian Schmetzer said a "little complacency" had crept into his players as they looked ahead to Wednesday's final. "We just need to be hard to beat, a little bit harder defensively in certain moments of the game, a little bit more steely," Schmetzer said, adding that he believed the San Jose loss was a "one-off". Schmetzer has also been encouraged by the fact that his squad recognized what went wrong against San Jose during video analysis. "Any time in life where you can have good conversations about things that happened in the past are good conversations," Schmetzer.

"I credit the senior guys on the team. They all get it. It's always best if it comes from within the team. It's a really resilient, smart group." Seattle's Cristian Roldan believes a repeat of the lapses against San Jose in Wednesday's final at Mexico City's Estadio Olimpico Universitario could be fatal. "We have to learn from these moments, keep the positive because going into Wednesday, it's not going to be easy," Roldan said. "These moments in a final will put you down bad." — AFP

ous to what's going on. But do I care who's going to be playing or do I care who's going to be making money?

"No, not at all. At the end of the day I'm here to win majors. I'm here to win PGA Tour tournaments. Hopefully return and defend my Race to Dubai title. There's a lot of other things that are on my mind and a lot of goals that I set at the beginning of the year that I look forward to."

World number three Morikawa believes he is not alone in prioritizing tournament victories over money. But the 25-year-old concedes that he has not looked too closely at whether players deserve a greater share of the revenue generated by major championships.

"Sure, I'm guessing that the majors do make a lot of money and there's never anything bad about making more money, but when you say something like that and you put us in the boat of the only other thing that could keep us here is the money, then that's just not true," he said.

"Because if that were the case, then you would have had 100 out of 100 sign up for this other tour that's happening, but you don't, right? You have the 15, the unknown 15. When it comes down to it, it's just the love for the game. I think what the PGA Tour and the DP World Tour have aligned themselves to do and what we're going to be growing into is great." — AFP



Colin Morikawa



MUNTINLUPA, Philippines: Indonesia's Chico Dwi Wardoyo plays against Japan's Kento Momota during their men's singles qualifying match at the Badminton Asia Championships on April 27, 2022. — AFP

Top seed Momota suffers shock early exit

MANILA: Two-time world champion Kento Momota suffered a shock first-round defeat at the Asia Championships on Wednesday as his poor run of form hit a new low. Indonesia's Chico Dwi Wardoyo, ranked 52nd in the world, lost the first game but stormed back to stun the Japanese top seed 17-21, 21-17, 21-7 in just over an hour in Manila.

In the women's singles, top seed and Momota's fellow Japanese Akane Yamaguchi had no such trouble with a 21-15, 21-9 demolition of India's Aakarshi Kashyap in just 26 minutes. The 27-year-old Momota, a former world number one but now ranked second behind Denmark's Viktor Axelsen, said: "I couldn't cope with the wind and heat at the venue today." — AFP

Morikawa puts golf glory ahead of financial gain

LONDON: British Open champion Collin Morikawa on Tuesday insisted he will always put golf glory ahead of financial gain amid the controversy over a series of new Saudi-backed tournaments. Phil Mickelson's agent revealed on Monday that the six-time major winner has requested a release from the PGA Tour to play the first LIV Golf Invitational Series event in June.

The lucrative event has reportedly persuaded 15 of the world's top 100 players to ask for their releases from the PGA and DP World Tours in order to play at Centurion Club from June 9-11. On a conference call to promote his British Open title defence at St Andrews later this year, Morikawa made it clear he would not be joining the rush to chase a profit.

"No, I said at Riviera earlier this year (in February) that my alliance is to the PGA Tour," he said. "Will I still watch what's going on? I mean, yeah. You're curi-

Parag, bowlers help Royals return to top IPL

PUNE: Rryan Parag's unbeaten 56 and inspired bowling helped Rajasthan Royals defend 144 against Royal Challengers Bangalore to go top of the IPL table on Tuesday. The 20-year-old Parag smashed 30 off the last two overs to steer Royals, who won the inaugural IPL title in 2008 under late Australian great Shane Warne, to a competitive total before pace bowler Kuldeep Sen took 4-20 to complete a 29-run victory in Pune.

Ravichandran Ashwin returned figures of 3-17 after Sen dismissed skipper Faf du Plessis (23) and Glenn Maxwell (0) in successive deliveries to put Bangalore in trouble at 37-3. Ashwin rattled the middle order with his off-spin and a dramatic run out of Dinesh Karthik, who departed for six after a mix-up with Shahbaz Ahmed, took the wheels off the chase. Sen returned to wrap up the Bangalore innings as they were bowled out for 115 in 19.3 overs. "The top order is a trick we need to fix," Du Plessis said after his team's second straight loss and batting failure following their 68 all out last week in the IPL. "You need someone in the top four to bat through and we haven't done that consistently. We tried changing the batting lineup today and we feel that they can try playing positively, they can't go into a shell."

A struggling Virat Kohli opened the innings for Bangalore and avoided a third straight golden duck but nearly got caught on the third delivery, with the ball falling short of the fielder at square leg. Kohli, who has scored just 128 runs in nine matches, got off the mark on the fourth ball with a boundary and survived a few inside edges that missed the stumps but finally fell to Prasad Krishna in the next over, for nine.

"Great players go through phases like this. We wanted him to get in straightaway so that he doesn't sit on the sidelines and think about the game," Du Plessis said of his team's star batter and former captain. "He is a great player and we still back him to turn it around and hopefully it's around the corner. It's a game of confidence."

Earlier, Bangalore's Josh Hazlewood removed the in-form Jos Buttler for eight to push Royals on the back foot after fellow quick Mohammed Siraj struck twice in his opening two overs. Buttler, who has hit three centuries this IPL season and is the leading batter with 499 runs, mistimed a pull to mid-on where Siraj took a stunning catch. Skipper Sanju Samson attempted to hit back in his 21-ball 27 but was bowled by Sri Lankan leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga.

Hazlewood took 2-19 as Bangalore dried up the runs for Royals between overs 10 to 18, but Parag cut loose and survived a dropped catch on 32 to set up the team's sixth win of the season in eight matches. Parag returned to the field to take four catches and named man of the match. — AFP

'Fantastic cricketer' Kohli will turn form around: Du Plessis

NEW DELHI: Royal Challengers Bangalore skipper Faf du Plessis is confident Virat Kohli will overcome his IPL batting slump. Kohli took his Indian Premier League tally this season to just 128 runs from nine matches after scoring a scratchy nine in the defeat to Rajasthan Royals on Tuesday following two golden ducks. Moved up to open the batting, Kohli was inches away from failing to score for a third match in a row with a shot that fell just short of a fielder.

The former India captain remained jittery and lasted only 10 balls before an attempted pull shot off Prasad Krishna was edged on to his helmet to give a catch at cover point. "Great players go through things like this and great characters have to find a way to get through it," Du Plessis said after his team fell 29 runs short of a modest target of 145. "Our thinking was to get him into the game straight away so he does not sit on the side and think too much about the game. "He is a fantastic cricketer, so we still back him that he will turn it around and it's just the case of getting a good start."

Kohli, one of the best batsmen of the modern era, has failed to score a century for more than two years for club or country and departed first ball in his previous two IPL innings. He has been the flagbearer for Indian cricket and Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB), for whom he amassed a record 973 runs in the 2016 edition of the Twenty20 tournament.

"He is a great player and seen many ups and downs in his career," Bangalore coach Sanjay Bangar told reporters. "I have seen him up close and he is a fighter. So he will come out of this run of low scores in the last three matches and will soon get us a win." Bangar, who worked as India batting coach with Kohli, said he "possesses the art of coming out of difficult situations". "His mental capability is such that he will do well in the upcoming games."

The match also saw England's Jos Buttler, the 2022 IPL's highest scorer with 499 runs and three sparkling centuries, make just eight, his lowest of the season. Former India coach Ravi Shastri called for Kohli to take a break and come back refreshed. "He has played non-stop cricket, captained the team across formats. It would be wise of him to take a break," Shastri said on an internet chat show.—AFP