

Sports

Jokic triple double lifts Denver over Nets as 76ers thump Bulls

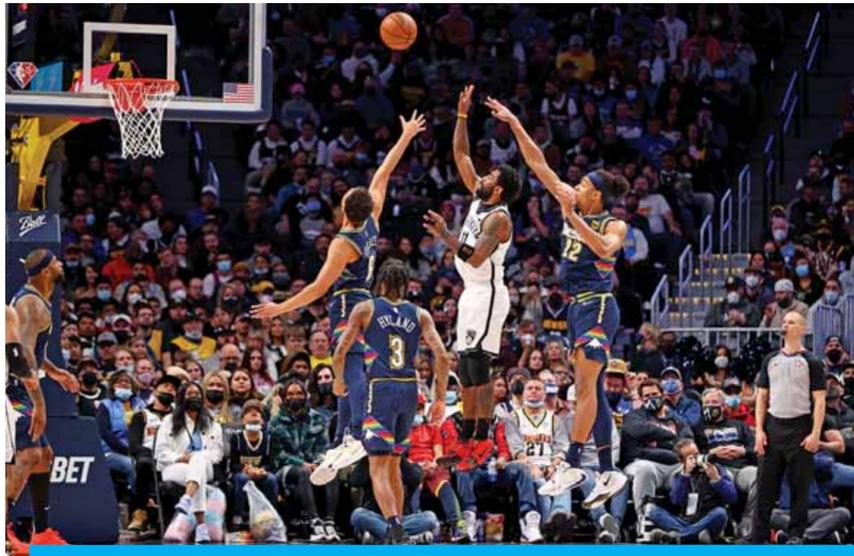
Antetokounmpo's Bucks rout Clippers

LOS ANGELES: Reigning NBA Most Valuable Player Nikola Jokic delivered his season-best 14th triple double with 27 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists on Sunday to lead Denver over Brooklyn 124-104. The 26-year-old center also sparked a defensive effort from the Nuggets that kept the Nets to a season-low 29 second-half points as Brooklyn's road losing streak reached eight games.

"In the second half, we knew we had to step up on defense because that is how we would win the game," Jokic said. The Nuggets led 76-75 at halftime then dominated from there, with the Serbian hitting 12-of-15 from the floor while adding two steals and a blocked shot. "We took it upon ourselves to go out there and get the job done," Denver's Will Barton said.

"We know if we want to make a deep playoff run, it starts on the defensive end," Jokic said the triple doubles come naturally in the flow of the games. "I'm just trying to play a game," Jokic said. "When I pass, I pass to the right guy to make a basketball play. It doesn't matter if I get 15, 20 shots. I share the ball and when bodies are moving we're hard to guard and tonight was a night like that." Barton contributed 21 points, six rebounds and four assists as the Nuggets, sixth in the Western Conference at 29-24, snapped a three-game losing skid. "Any time you can get a win on your home court, especially after a losing streak, it's a big deal," Barton said. "For us to be where we're at, we'll take it, but we're not satisfied. We just have to stay consistent and we'll be fine." The Nuggets have struggled with injuries to standouts Michael Porter and Jamal Murray, but Barton said Jokic has helped pick up the slack.

"With two of our main guys down, he's keeping us afloat and still doing great numbers," Barton said of Jokic. "He's the best player in the league right now. He can do it all, pass it, score it in the post, shoot threes. And I think he has stepped it up defensively this year



DENVER: Kyrie Irving #11 of the Brooklyn Nets drives against the Denver Nuggets at Ball Arena on February 6, 2022 in Denver, Colorado. — AFP

and also being a vocal leader for us." The Nets, who fell to 29-24, were led by 27 points from Kyrie Irving, who cannot play in home games under New York's coronavirus rules because he is unvaccinated.

Brooklyn has also been hampered by injuries to stars Kevin Durant and James Harden. Nets coach Steve Nash said the team is not intending to trade Harden as

rumors swirled - ahead of Thursday's NBA deadline - that Brooklyn might send him to Philadelphia in exchange for unhappy Australian guard Ben Simmons, who has not played all season. "I've talked to James," Nash said. "James wants to be here. He wants to be here long-term as well... we think we have the best chance to win with James." —AFP

Beijing Olympic hockey players wear COVID face masks during match

BEIJING: Russian and Canadian women ice hockey players wore medical masks yesterday for their Beijing Winter Games match after COVID results failed to arrive in time, in a bizarre pandemic-inspired chapter to the Games. Canada ran out 6-1 winners, but only after a delay of one hour when the Russians found they had no opponents to play. "We were just waiting for (Russia's PCR) results to come back and once they came back we were comfortable," said Natalie Spooner.

"Our coaches and medical staff were not going to put us in a situation where we would not feel safe. "This is probably a cool story in the long run. We can say we were at the COVID Olympics and we even wore a mask in a game." The Olympics in the Chinese capital are taking place in a COVID-secure "closed loop" bubble where everyone must wear a mask at all times-except, usually, when they are competing.

Everyone in the bubble must also have a COVID test each day. "Pursuant to discussions between the two teams, they both agreed that the match would start with both sides wearing masks," the International Olympic Committee said in a statement to AFP. The Russian players took their masks off in the third period. "The results came in and they were negative and they said they were going to take their masks off," said Spooner.

"We figured we had them (the masks) on for two periods so why not keep being extra safe for one period." The Russian players said they had done nothing wrong and that they had their daily COVID test at their normal time of 8:00am. "It is out of our control. The Chinese at the laboratory, they were not ready to give our PCR test results," said Anna Shibanova, adding that all the Russian players tested negative for COVID.

Her team-mate Daria Gredzen said that "we did everything right". "We were preparing for the game as usual. We came out, did the warm-up and were about to go on the ice," she said. "And when we already came out on the ice, we found out that the other team was not there." Shibanova said she hoped she'd never have to play in a mask again. "It is not a nice feeling," she said. "There's not enough air." There have been 387 positive cases since January 23 in the bubble, according to official figures, among them an unknown number of players. — AFP



BEIJING: Finland's Noora Tulus (right) lies on the ice after a shot on goal during the women's preliminary round group A match of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games ice hockey competition between Switzerland and Finland yesterday. — AFP

Hoge captures first US PGA Tour title

SAN FRANCISCO: Tom Hoge out-dued former world number one Jordan Spieth down the stretch to win the Pebble Beach Pro-Am on Sunday, capturing his first US PGA Tour title with a final-round 68. Hoge trailed Spieth by one stroke through 15 holes. He hit his second shot from the fairway at 16 within inches and tapped in for birdie as Spieth made bogey from a greenside bunker at the 17th, leaving Hoge one shot up.

The 32-year-old pushed his lead to two strokes with a 22-foot birdie putt at the 17th and closed with a par for a 19-under total of 268. Spieth, a three-time major winner whose 12 tour titles include the 2017 Pebble Beach crown, finished with a three-under 69 for 270. American Beau Hossler was alone in third after a 71 for 271. "Feels pretty good," the 68th-ranked Hoge said of the victory in his 203rd career start.

Hoge, runner-up at La Quinta two weeks ago, said that in the past he's found himself uncomfortable after playing himself into contention, but not on Sunday. "It's awesome," he said. "You work through so many hard

times, to finally pull one off feels incredible." Hoge had held the first-round lead and shared the overnight lead with Hossler and Andrew Putnam. But it took most of 18 holes to separate himself on a day when five players shared the lead as the final group approached the turn.

After a birdie at the third, Hoge had a double-bogey at the fifth, rebounding with birdies at the sixth and seventh before a bogey at the eighth. He regained some momentum with a birdie at 11, then rolled in a 17-foot birdie at the 14th. "It was a weird day because I felt like I made a few too many mistakes early on, so I was kind of out of it," he said. "And I looked up and I was still in the game making the turn." "Luckily I made a few putts finally on the back nine."

Spieth had three birdies and a bogey on the front nine, but moved into the lead with back-to-back birdies at 12 and 13. His 15-foot birdie effort at 14 burned the edge and at 15 his shot out of the rough clipped a tree and finished short of the green and he settled for par. Down by one after missing a five-footer to save par at 17, he was in the long fairway bunker at the 18. "Solid week," Spieth said. "Obviously anytime I'm tied for the lead or in the lead the back nine on Sunday it's very disappointing if you don't win." "Today I felt a little off with my driver, but I felt like I hit a lot of shots exactly where I wanted to." —AFP

AFC stars stretch NFL Pro Bowl win streak to 5 games

LAS VEGAS: Justin Herbert threw two touchdown passes and Mac Jones tossed another as the American Conference (AFC) defeated the National Conference (NFC) 41-35 in Sunday's NFL Pro Bowl all-star game. It was the AFC's fifth consecutive victory over the NFC, the longest run by either side in the rivalry. The contest did not feature players from the Los Angeles Rams and Cincinnati Bengals, who will meet for the NFL crown in next Sunday's Super Bowl at Los Angeles.

Herbert, a second-year standout for the Los Angeles Chargers in his first Pro Bowl, was named the Offensive Most Valuable Player. He completed 7-of-11 passes for 98 yards on a day when there were seven interceptions, at least one from each quarterback. "It's an awesome opportunity to come out here and line up with the greatest players in the game," Herbert said. AFC defensive end Maxx Crosby of the host Las Vegas Raiders was named the Defensive MVP with five tackles, two sacks and three deflected passes.

"I've been working," Crosby said. "I had to come out here and put on a show for the fans." The game had some experimental rules, including no kickoffs, to increase scoring chances. A team that scored could try and keep possession by converting a fourth down and 15 play from its own 25-yard line. Teams making the attempt went 0-for-8. There was a relaxed attitude about hard hits and tackles with few kicks of any type attempted.

AFC defender Darius Leonard returned an interception 45 yards to open the scoring while NFC defender Antoine Winfield returned an interception 63 yards for a touchdown on the final play of the first quarter to pull the NFC within 14-13. AFC lineman Myles Garrett picked off a deflected pass attempt that was ruled a fumble and returned it 22 yards for a touchdown on the first play of the second quarter. Herbert threw touchdown passes of 7 and 15 yards to Mark Andrews in the first half to give the AFC a 28-21 halftime lead while Jones tossed a 6-yard touchdown pass to Hunter Renfrow in the third quarter. AFC receiver Stefan Diggs ran four yards for a touchdown, evading his brother Trevon, an NFC defender, to reach the end zone as the AFC took a 41-21 lead after three quarters. Kyler Murray, who hit Mike Evans on a 19-yard touchdown pass in the second quarter, connected on a 5-yard touchdown pass to Kyle Pitts to lift the NFC within 41-28 with 10:18 to go. —AFP



CALIFORNIA: Tom Hoge of the United States celebrates with the trophy after winning the final round of the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am at Pebble Beach Golf Links on February 06, 2022. — AFP

Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai repeats sexual assault denial

BEIJING: Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai said she never accused anyone of sexual assault, in an interview published yesterday, again walking back an allegation that sparked what she described as a "huge misunderstanding". The former doubles world number one alleged in a social media post in November that former Chinese vice-premier Zhang Gaoli forced her into sex during a years-long relationship. The post was swiftly deleted and Peng was not heard from for nearly three weeks, prompting concern around the world about her safety. She has since appeared at some public events, and denied ever making the accusation.

"I never said anyone had sexually assaulted me in any way," Peng told the French sports daily L'Equipe on Sunday, reiterating a similar comment she gave to a Singaporean newspaper in December. The 36-year-old said she was the one who deleted her allegation from Weibo, China's Twitter-like platform. It was widely suspected that China's strict internet censors, sensitive about any criticism of the ruling Communist Party, had removed it.

When L'Equipe asked why she deleted it, Peng said: "Because I wanted to." "There was a huge misunderstanding in the outside world following this post," she said during the interview in the Beijing Winter Olympics bubble. "I don't want the meaning of this post to be twisted anymore. And I don't want any further media hype around it." Peng also told L'Equipe that she was retiring from professional tennis, citing a major injury and disruptions to travel and treatment during the pandemic.

'Never disappeared'

Some of the world's biggest tennis stars, including Serena Williams, Naomi Osaka and Novak Djokovic, spoke out about the Peng case. The United Nations and the White House also expressed concern. The Women's Tennis Association (WTA) suspended its tournaments in China over the matter. When asked about the worries her absence sparked, Peng said she had "never disappeared". "It's just that many people, like my friends or people from the IOC messaged me, and it was simply impossible to answer so many messages."



China's Peng Shuai

Peng was accompanied by Chinese Olympic Committee chief of staff Wang Kan during the interview. Concerns have swirled about Peng's safety despite her appearances following the three-week absence, which showed her attending sporting events. After she denied making any sexual assault allegations in December, the WTA said it was still not convinced of her well-being. At the Australian Open last month, activists handed out 1,000 "Where is Peng Shuai?" T-shirts to spectators ahead women's final to highlight the case.

Bach meeting

International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach held a video conference with Peng on November 21, but that led to accusations that he was trying to protect the hosts of the 2022 Winter Games. Bach said ahead of the Games that the IOC would back an inquiry into her allegations if she wanted one, saying he would hold a meeting with Peng to "know better about her physical integrity and her mental state".

Bach, along with IOC member Kirsty Coventry, met Peng over dinner at the Olympic Club in Beijing on Saturday, the body said in a statement. "We had dinner together on Saturday and we had a nice discussion and exchange," Peng told L'Equipe. "He asked me whether I am considering competing again, what my projects are, what I'm planning to do, and so on."

The IOC said Peng shared with Bach and Coventry "her intention to travel to Europe when the COVID-19 pandemic is over". "All three agreed that any further communication about the content of the meeting would be left to her discretion," the IOC statement added. There was no mention in it of Peng's wellbeing, if she could move freely inside China or travel abroad. "I don't think it is for us to judge one way or another," IOC spokesman Mark Adams said at a daily briefing in Beijing, when asked if he believed Peng spoke freely during the L'Equipe interview. — AFP