

## Sports

# Spain and Poland power into ATP Cup semi-finals

## Schwartzman overwhelmed by World No 9 Hurkacz

SYDNEY: Roberto Bautista Agut swept past Serbia's Dusan Lajovic to steer Spain into the ATP Cup semi-finals yesterday, where they will meet Poland after world number nine Hubert Hurkacz overwhelmed Argentina's in-form Diego Schwartzman. The winner between Daniil Medvedev's defending champions Russia or the Matteo Berrettini-led Italy, last year's finalists, will also book a last-four berth when they meet in Sydney today.

The outcome of Group C is more complicated with all four teams - Britain, Canada, Germany and the United States - still in contention. They also play today. After Chile beat Norway earlier in the day, Spain only needed one win in their final Group A tie against 2020 champions Serbia to progress, and that came from the consistent Pablo Carreno Busta. The world number 20 topped Filip Krajinovic 6-3, 6-4 for his third consecutive win of the season before Bautista Agut, ranked one place above his teammate, rubbed salt in Serbia's wounds by cruising past Lajovic 6-1, 6-4.

"I'm very happy to have won the match in two sets, the humidity was tough, but we need these matches coming from Europe and the winter," said Bautista Agut, who played consistently from the baseline. "I haven't played three matches in a row for three or four months and it's really good to start the season with rhythm, with minutes on the court

and I couldn't be more pleased."

Despite missing Rafael Nadal, who is playing an ATP tournament in Melbourne, Spain have dropped just one set at the 16-team event as Carreno Busta and Bautista Agut warm up for the Australian Open which starts on January 17. Hurkacz has also been in fine touch, battling past 13th-ranked Schwartzman 6-1, 6-4 in 81 minutes. Both Poland and Argentina went into the tie unbeaten in Group D, winning previous clashes with Greece and Georgia, to make their showdown a winner-takes-all battle.

### 'Super proud'

Poland's world number 117 Kamil Majchrzak set up his team for victory with a gutsy 6-3, 7-6 (7/3) win against Federico Delbonis, who is ranked 73 places higher, leaving 2021 Miami Open champion Hurkacz to seal the tie. "So happy for Team Poland, we are in the semis and super proud of that achievement," said Hurkacz, who sent down 12 aces and won 85 per cent of his first-serve points. "We are a great team, have great team spirit and support each other and I think the atmosphere that we bring helps us play better."

It was another solid win for Hurkacz after a career-best 2021 garnered three ATP Tour titles. Schwartzman was coming off an upset win over world number four Stefanos Tsitsipas on Monday.

### Chile beat Norway



Roberto Bautista Agut of Spain

Majchrzak has been a more-than-competent second singles player for Poland, enjoying one of the best weeks of his career with three wins in a row. "My ranking maybe is out of the top 100, but I feel like I belong in the top 100 and more, so I'm going for it now," he said.

Greece's Tsitsipas revealed he was still in pain after November elbow surgery when he was beat-

en by Schwartzman, casting doubt over whether he would play his singles rubber. But he took to the court against Georgia's Nikoloz Basilashvili, only for his opponent to retire while losing 4-1 in the opening set, complaining of breathing difficulties. Greece and Georgia both lost their opening two ATP Cup ties and had no chance of making the semi-finals. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Ranji Trophy postponed

NEW DELHI: India's domestic Ranji Trophy has been postponed after a nationwide surge in coronavirus cases, the country's cricket board said in a statement. The first-class competition - named for Maharaja Ranjitsinhji, an Indian prince who played for England in the 1890s - was scheduled to start this month. But the long-format tournament and February's Twenty20 women's league were both called off until further notice on Tuesday, the Board of Control for Cricket in India said. "BCCI does not want to compromise the safety of the players, support staff, match officials and other participants involved," its statement read. Indian media reported that six Bengal players had tested positive for the virus ahead of the Ranji opener on January 13. The tournament was scheduled to be held in six cities - Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata, Ahmedabad and Thiruvananthapuram. — AFP

#### French Cup: Lens host Monaco

PARIS: Lens will face Monaco in the last 16 of the French Cup after Lille's Renato Sanches missed the crucial penalty when their game ended 1-1 after 90 minutes. Cup holders Paris Saint-Germain will host Nice in the next round, scheduled for the end of this month, while record 10-time winners Saint-Etienne will head to fourth-tier Bergerac, after the draw was made earlier on Tuesday. Lens captain Seko Fofana scored twice after his outfit trailed 2-0 in the first half and converted the winning penalty. "We're very happy, there's a lot of pride tonight," he told Eurosport. "At the start we found it hard to find each other on the field. We made some small errors. A game lasts 90 minutes, we put a big effort in and we were rewarded for that," he added. In front of just 5,000 fans at the 38,000-capacity Stade Bollaert-Delelis due to coronavirus restrictions, the visiting Ligue 1 champions Lille dominated the first half of the northern derby against Lens. — AFP

#### Kane 'involved' in Spurs project

LONDON: Tottenham boss Antonio Conte says Harry Kane is "totally involved in this project" at the club after the England captain attempted to engineer a move to Manchester City during the summer transfer window. Chairman Daniel Levy stood firm and the 28-year-old forward, who is under contract until 2024, was forced to stay at Spurs. Kane had a slow start to the season but has recovered his scoring touch under Conte, who replaced Nuno Espirito Santo as manager in early November. Conte, whose side visited his former club Chelsea in the first leg of their League Cup semi-final, said Kane was a key part of his plans. "I knew the situation in the summer and, when Harry decided to stay in Tottenham, I found a player totally involved in this project now," he said. "I am happy to have him in my team because for sure we are talking about the top player, a top striker in the world, and if we want to win or if we want to think to build something to win, Harry must be a point of start." — AFP

## Pakistan to host West Asia boxing tournament

KUWAIT: Pakistan's Ambassador to Kuwait Sayyed Sajjad Haidar welcomed his country's organization of the first edition of West Asia professional boxing tournament to be held in Islamabad January 22nd under the WBC rules - with boxers from 16 countries participating. The Ambassador spoke during his reception of WBC representative in Kuwait Mishal Al-Fajji.

The meeting was attended by Pakistan's labor attache Farakh Amir Seyal, Deputy Chairman of Pakistan Boxing Association in Kuwait Hafez

Shubair and Kuwait's representative in the international tournament Boxer Abdelrahman Al-Sanad. Ambassador Haidar said, organizing such tournaments will strengthen friendship between people of the region and strengthen calls for peace. He said the tournament will see the best boxers in their countries participating which promises to be highly competitive.

On his part Al-Fajji lauded the support of the Pakistan Ambassador and his keenness on ensuring the tournament success adding that "we



worked hard for months to prepare for the first tournament and make sure for it to be successful. Kuwait's

boxer Abdelrahman Al-Sanad said he was ready and look forward to compete in the 70 kg category. — AFP

## KIB's team prepares for KBC tournament

KUWAIT: In line with its commitment to strengthen relations within the banking sector through sports, social and other community activities, Kuwait International Bank (KIB) announced that its football team is set to take part in the Kuwait Banks Club (KBC) League for this year, which kicks off later this month. The KIB team continued its training and preparations to compete in this annual tournament, with the team featuring a group of the Bank's employees who are passionate football enthusiasts with the necessary skills and abilities to qualify them to compete in the league's matches and vie for the championship cup.

On this occasion, Manager of External Communication at the KIB's Corporate Communication Unit (CCU), Fahad Al-Sarhan said: "As a 'Bank for Life', for both our customers and our employees, we strive to provide a creative and harmonious work environment for our employees by adopting internal activities and initiatives that allow them to express their themselves as individuals as well as a cohesive group- whilst also enabling to



actively pursue their hobbies.

This effectively contributes to boosting the physical and emotional health and well-being of our employees by promoting a balanced lifestyle and greater work-life balance. It also helps to enhance their sense of belonging to their workplace and motivates them to perform at an even higher level." Al-Sarhan also noted that KIB is keen on embracing the sports talents of its employees and encouraging them to continue developing their abilities and skills through training and participation in tournaments, such as the KBC League.

## Djokovic COVID-jab exemption sparks backlash in Australia

MELBOURNE: Australians reacted with fury yesterday after world number one Novak Djokovic received a medical exemption from having a COVID vaccine in order to play at this month's Australian Open. Tournament chief Craig Tiley said that the defending champion had been given "no special favor" but urged the Serb to reveal why he got the exemption to soothe public anger.

All participants at the first Grand Slam of 2022, which starts on January 17, must be vaccinated against COVID-19 or have a medical exemption, which is granted only after assessment by two panels of independent experts. The nine-time Australian Open champion announced late Tuesday he was en route to Melbourne with "an exemption permission", ending the drawn-out saga over whether he would defend his title.

But Stephen Parnis, a former Australian Medical Association vice-president, said it sent an "appalling message" to people trying to stop the spread of COVID-19. "I don't care how good a tennis player he is. If he's refusing to get vaccinated, he shouldn't be allowed in," Parnis said on Twitter. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said that if the reasons for Djokovic's exemption were "insufficient" then the

Serb would be "on the next plane home".

"We await his presentation and what evidence he provides us to support (his exemption)," Morrison told a press conference. "If that evidence is insufficient, then he won't be treated any different to anyone else and will be on the next plane home. There should be no special rules for Novak Djokovic at all. None whatsoever." Former Australian ATP Tour player Sam Groth, now a television commentator, said it was "a decision that spits in the face of every Victorian and Australian" in a column in Melbourne's Herald Sun newspaper.

There was also outrage on the streets of Melbourne. "I think it's disgusting. I think he should have made his mind up before now and it shouldn't be a last-minute decision to get him in," resident Ron Wilson told AFP. Other residents of the Victoria state city were more sympathetic, with Morteza Yari saying: "I think as long as the exemption is valid and they have valid reasons I don't see a problem with that." Among the conditions allowing entry without a vaccine is if a person has had COVID-19 in the past six months. It has not been revealed if that was the case with Djokovic.

### 'Sick hypocrisy'

Tiley said the two panels assessed each exemption without knowing the identity of the applicant and he did not know under what grounds Djokovic got the green light, which is confidential. "It will certainly be helpful if Novak was to explain the conditions in which he sought and was granted an exemption," Tiley told reporters, acknowledging the back-



Serbia's Novak Djokovic

lash. "I would encourage him to talk to the community about it... we have been through a very tough period over the last two years and would appreciate some answers to that."

Groth agreed that Djokovic should reveal why he has been allowed in. "You're willing to say you have an exemption but not willing to say why? It's sick hypocrisy. I don't like it at all," Groth wrote. However, Tiley defended the integrity of the exemption application process, which is overseen by national and Victorian state governments. He revealed that only 26 of the approximately 3,000 players and support staff travelling to Australia for the tournament had applied for a vaccine exemption. Only a few of those had been successful. — AFP