

Nets send a message with rout of Bulls

Brooklyn's "Big Three" shine in second game together of season



CHICAGO: James Harden (center left), Kyrie Irving (center) and Kevin Durant (center right) of the Brooklyn Nets smile on the bench during the game against the Chicago Bulls on Wednesday 2022 at United Center in Chicago, Illinois. — AFP

LOS ANGELES: Brooklyn showed just how dangerous they can be with their "Big Three" on Wednesday, manhandling the Bulls 138-112 in Chicago in a clash of the top teams in the NBA Eastern Conference. The Nets had Kevin Durant, James Harden and Kyrie Irving on the floor for just the second game this season and the superstar trio didn't disappoint.

Durant scored 27 points, Harden added 25 points and a season-high 16 assists and Irving chipped in with nine points in his third game of the season. Irving made his debut in January after the Nets decided they would let the unvaccinated player join the team for road trips even though New York's vaccine mandate means he can't play home games in Brooklyn.

While Irving may still be finding his feet, Durant delivered another dominant performance, scoring 17 points in the third quarter. The Bulls, trailing by two at halftime, pulled level at 71-71 early in the third, but the Nets outscored them 39-19 in the frame to take a 101-79 lead into the fourth.

Harden, back after missing one game with a hyper-extended knee, drained five three-pointers.

Patty Mills made six from beyond the arc on the way to 21 points as the Nets — beaten twice already this season by Chicago — edged closer to the Bulls atop the East.

"These last 10 games we've been up and down, so we wanted to come out against a really good team who've been playing very, very good basketball and execute and play really good on both ends of the ball," Harden said. "I think we did that."

Miami, who went into the day third in the East, just a half-game behind the Nets, kept the pressure on with a 115-91 victory over the Hawks in Atlanta. With stars Bam Adebayo and Jimmy Butler still sidelined, Tyler Herro led the Heat with 21 points — one of seven Miami players to score in double figures. Herro added 11 assists and nine rebounds, and the Heat held Hawks star Trae Young to 15 points on four-of-15 shooting.

In the West, the Sacramento Kings put up 40 points in the third quarter on the way to a 125-116 victory over LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers. All five Kings starters scored in double figures, led by De'Aaron Fox's 29 points. Sacramento connected on 55.1 percent of their shots from the field and out-scored the Lakers 70-42 in the paint.

The Lakers led 67-61 at halftime and were up 76-68 early in the third before the Kings rallied. James scored 34 points, Malik Monk added 22 and Austin Reaves contributed 19 off the bench for the Lakers, but Russell Westbrook connected on just two of 14 shots from the field on the way to eight points.

Knicks halt Mavs

Knicks forward RJ Barrett starred again, scoring 32 points to lead New York to a 108-85 victory

over Dallas that halted the Mavericks' six-game winning streak. The 21-year-old Barrett posted his second straight 30-point game, after scoring 31 in a rout of San Antonio on Monday. Mitchell Robinson added a season-high 19 points as all five Knicks starters scored in double figures.

Luka Doncic led the Mavs with 21 points and 11 rebounds. But Dallas — who halted the Chicago Bulls' nine-game winning streak on Sunday — struggled offensively. Doncic connected on just eight of 23 shots from the field, and the Mavericks as a whole shot 41 percent overall. They made only eight of 37 three-point attempts, a dismal 21.6 percent success rate.

The Boston Celtics shrugged off their recent road woes with a 119-100 victory over the Pacers in Indianapolis. Jaylen Brown scored 34 points and pulled down seven rebounds, and Jayson Tatum contributed 33 points for the Celtics, who had lost their last six games on the road. Charlotte, led by 30 points from Gordon Hayward, beat the 76ers 109-98, ending a 16-game losing streak against Philadelphia that had stretched back to November 2016. — AFP



Heat beat Hawks; Lakers woes continue

Muguruza upset, Jabeur suffers injury scare before Australian Open

SYDNEY: World number three Garbine Muguruza was sent packing from the Sydney Classic in the quarter-finals yesterday by clinical Russian Daria Kasatkina, who continued her strong start to the season ahead of the Australian Open. Muguruza had a first-round bye then had to battle hard to topple 40th-ranked Ekaterina Alexandrova, before crashing to Kasatkina 6-4, 6-4.

It was the second semi-final in as many weeks the Russian has reached after losing in the last four of the Melbourne Summer Set to eventual champion Amanda Anisimova. Kasatkina is a former world number 10 who bounced back up the rankings to 26 last year after winning two titles and reaching a further two finals.

"It's very good preparation before a Slam," she said. "At the beginning I was a bit over-excited but in the end I was able to control myself and make a few good decisions." She will meet ninth-ranked Paula Badosa for the place in tomorrow's final after the Spaniard fought past Tokyo Olympics gold medalist Belinda Bencic 7-6 (8/6), 3-6, 6-3.

Kontaveit through

In-form world number seven Anett Kontaveit also made the last four after Ons Jabeur, ranked three places below her, retired hurt. The Estonian won a

tight first set 6-4 before the Tunisian called for a medical timeout. After lengthy treatment on her lower back, Jabeur forfeited the match.

It is a big setback for Jabeur, with the opening Grand Slam of the year starting on Monday. She had a breakthrough 2021, when she won her maiden WTA singles title and surged into the top 10 for the first time. Kontaveit will now play world number four and French Open champion Barbora Krejickova, with the Czech crushing France's Caroline Garcia 6-0, 6-2.

"It's never the way you want to win and I really hope Ons is going to be fine for next week and that it's nothing too serious," said the Estonian. "The first set was really competitive and we've had some tough matches before and she's always come out on top, so it was good to get the set and that I was playing the way I was playing."

The understated Kontaveit is shaping up as a serious contender at Melbourne Park after her electric form in the second half of last season, capturing four titles in two months before ending runner-up at the WTA Finals to Garbine Muguruza. Krejickova also raced through the rankings last year, winning at Roland Garros, Strasbourg and Prague. "I'm glad to be putting myself in these situations and getting good matches and getting quality time on court," she said. — AFP

Djokovic drawn to play Australian Open as deportation threat looms

MELBOURNE: Novak Djokovic drew a first-round clash against a fellow Serb in the Australian Open yesterday, taking a step closer to his dream of a record 21st Grand Slam despite a looming decision on his deportation. The unvaccinated world number one, top seed and defending champion is looking to clinch a 10th title at Melbourne Park.

The 34-year-old tennis superstar was drawn to play Serb Miomir Kecmanovic in the first round. But the openly vaccine-sceptic Djokovic's championship hopes were in peril as Australia's Immigration Minister Alex Hawke pondered whether to revoke his visa for a second time and throw him out of the country.

Hawke is considering using his powers to annul the visa, his spokesman has said, although "lengthy further submissions" from Djokovic's legal team have delayed a decision. In a lengthy press conference, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said no decision had yet been taken.

Djokovic flew into Melbourne airport on January 5 carrying a vaccine exemption because of a claimed positive PCR test result on December 16. Border agents rejected his exemption, saying a recent infection was an insufficient justification, tore up his visa and placed him in a detention center.

But Djokovic's high-powered legal team overturned the visa decision in court on Monday on a procedural matter related to his airport interview. Melbourne's Herald Sun newspaper quoted an unnamed government source as saying that allowing Djokovic to stay in Australia without a COVID-19 vaccine would set a dangerous precedent.

The source was quoted as saying

Morrison's government was expected to act despite any international "backlash" because cancelling the visa would be in line with Australia's efforts to control the fast-spreading virus.

'Drift on and on'

The government's legal battle with Djokovic is politically charged in a country that has endured nearly two years of some of the toughest COVID-19 restrictions in the world, and in the run-up to May general elections.

"Australia has a policy of not allowing unvaccinated people into Australia. It is beyond my comprehension how we have got to this point," Labor Party opposition leader Anthony Albanese said in an interview yesterday. "How is it that Novak Djokovic was able to come here?"

As COVID-related hospitalizations rise in Melbourne, the Victorian state government said Thursday it would cap capacity at the Australian Open at 50 percent. Spectators must be vaccinated or have a medical exemption. Face masks will also be mandatory at the opening Grand Slam of the year except when eating or drinking, and those watching must socially distance while indoors. The tournament starts Monday.

As the Omicron variant races through Australia's population, Djokovic's anti-vaccine stance has come under scrutiny. The tennis ace described reports about his post-infection outings in Serbia as "misinformation" in an Instagram post Wednesday.

On the day of his claimed positive test in Serbia, he appeared at a ceremony to honour him with stamps bearing his image. The follow-



MELBOURNE: Novak Djokovic of Serbia takes part in a practice session ahead of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne yesterday. — AFP

ing day he attended a youth tennis event. He appeared at both apparently without a mask.

Djokovic said he only received the PCR test result after attending the children's tennis event on December 17. But he admitted that he also went ahead with an interview with French sports daily L'Equipe on December 18.

"On reflection, this was an error of judgement and I accept that I should have rescheduled this commitment," Djokovic said. The journalist who carried out the L'Equipe interview, Franck Ramella, said Djokovic's representatives had told him not to ask about COVID-19 vaccinations. The reporter said he had been unaware at the time of the interview that Djokovic was COVID-positive.

The tennis star also admitted to a mistake on his Australian travel declaration, in which a box was ticked indicating that he had not, or would not, travel in the 14 days before flying to Melbourne. In fact, social media posts and reports show he flew from Serbia to Spain during that period. — AFP