



LONDON: Leeds United's French goalkeeper Illan Meslier (left) reacts after his mistake gifts a goal to Arsenal's English striker Eddie Nketiah (right) as Arsenal take the lead during the English Premier League football match between Arsenal and Leeds United on May 8, 2022. — AFP

## Arsenal boost top four bid

### Leeds slump into relegation zone

LONDON: Eddie Nketiah boosted Arsenal's bid to finish in the Premier League's top four with a brace in their 2-1 win against Leeds as the Yorkshire club dropped into the relegation zone after Everton's 2-1 victory at Leicester on Sunday. While second placed Manchester City waited for their chance to go three points clear of leaders Liverpool with a win against Newcastle later on Sunday, the focus in the day's early games was on the top four and the relegation battle.

Nketiah netted twice in the first 10 minutes at the Emirates Stadium as Mikel Arteta's side earned their fourth successive win. Leeds had skipper Luke Ayling sent off and, although Diego Llorente got one back, it was too little, too late for Jesse Marsch's strugglers. Fourth placed Arsenal are four points clear of fifth placed Tottenham, with three games left for both teams in the race to qualify for next season's Champions League via a top four finish.

Tottenham's gritty 1-1 draw at Liverpool on

Saturday had kept them in the hunt, but Arsenal will visit their north London rivals on Thursday knowing a win would guarantee they finish above Antonio Conte's men. Arteta signed a three-year contract extension on Friday and he is on course to repay that faith by leading Arsenal to their first Champions League campaign since 2016-17. Nketiah spent time on loan at Leeds earlier in his career, but the Arsenal forward showed no mercy to his old club.

In the fifth minute, Nketiah punished a poor touch from Illan Meslier, closing down the Leeds keeper and tapping into the empty net. Nketiah hardly celebrated out of respect for Leeds, but he struck again five minutes later, this time meeting Gabriel Martinelli's cross with a fine finish from 12 yards.

A dismal day for Leeds took another turn for the worse in the 27th minute as Ayling was sent off after a VAR review of his crude lunge on Martinelli.

Llorente reduced the deficit with a smart finish from Leeds' first corner in the 66th minute, but Arsenal held on. Leeds sit third bottom of the table due to having a worse goal difference than Burnley.

#### Everton out of bottom three

Everton made the most of Leeds' stumble as they beat Leicester to secure a second consecutive win. Frank Lampard's side arrived at the King Power Stadium with just one win and three draws from 16 away games, including losses in their last seven matches on their travels. But Lampard and his players were given a rousing send-off by Everton fans outside the club's Finch Farm training ground when they left for Leicester on Sunday morning. Everton responded to that show of support with a dream start. Ukrainian left-back Vitaliy Mykolenko ran onto Alex Iwobi's flick and netted with a stunning volley from the edge of the area in the sixth minute. Everton surrendered the lead five minutes later

as Yerry Mina and Seamus Coleman went up for a header, only to collide and allow Patson Daka to run through and beat Jordan Pickford. However, Mason Holgate won it for Everton in the 30th minute, the defender converting the rebound after Kasper Schmeichel saved Richarlison's header. Everton, hoping to avoid playing in the second tier for the first time since 1954, are one point above the relegation zone with a game in hand.

West Ham crushed relegated Norwich 4-0 at Carrow Road to ease the pain of their Europa League semi-final defeat at Eintracht Frankfurt on Thursday. Said Benrahma put West Ham in front after 12 minutes when his shot deflected off Max Aarons and squirmed past Norwich keeper Tim Krul. Michail Antonio doubled West Ham's advantage after 30 minutes with his first league goal since January 1. Benrahma bagged the third on the stroke of half-time and Manuel Lanzini converted a 65th minute penalty after Jacob Sorensen's handball. — AFP



SEVILLE: Barcelona's Spanish midfielder Sergio Busquets (2nd left) stops the ball during the Spanish League football match between Real Betis and FC Barcelona at the Benito Villamarín stadium in Seville on May 7, 2022. — AFP

### Barca secure top-four spot with Betis win

MADRID: Barcelona secured qualification for next season's Champions League on Saturday as Jordi Alba's 94th-minute winner against Real Betis guaranteed the Catalans' place in the top four of La Liga. Alba's stinging injury-time volley snatched a 2-1 victory for Barca at the Benito Villamarín to ensure they will play in the Champions League next term, an achievement likely to be crucial to the club's hopes of financial recovery.

When Xavi Hernandez took over as coach in November, Barcelona lay ninth in La Liga, with genuine concerns about their chances of closing the gap. But, Xavi's team surged up the table and can now look forward to rejoining their rivals Real Madrid in Europe's premier tournament next season. "We have saved the situation," said Xavi. "This team believes until the end, it has a competitive edge that we didn't have in November."

The difference between Champions League and

Europa League football could be worth more than 50 million euros (\$52.7 million) to Barcelona, who began the season with debts of more than a billion euros, and were forced to let Lionel Messi leave for free last summer. While a trophyless season can never count as a success for Barca, finishing in the top four is an impressive achievement for Xavi and a huge relief for the club.

"We are Barca, so this is the minimum requirement, but in November we were ninth," added Xavi. "We've had a very good second half of the season and now we look forward to next year, to improve enough to win titles." Victory leaves Barcelona second in the table, 11 points clear of Betis in fifth. Both teams have three games left to play. Barca should now be confident of clinching second place too, with a five-point edge over Sevilla, who play at Villarreal on Sunday.

Betis looked like they had sealed a point after Marc Bartra headed in an equalizer in the 78th minute, three minutes after Ansu Fati had come off the bench to give Barcelona the lead. Alba, though, fired in at the back post to claim all three points for the visitors. Fati's goal was his first in the league since November as the 19-year-old continues his latest recovery from another lengthy spell on the sidelines. — AFP

### Tunisia's Jabeur hungry for more after historic title

MADRID: Ons Jabeur says she is hungry for more success after she claimed the biggest title of her career, becoming the first Arab or African player to win a WTA 1000 title thanks to a 7-5, 0-6, 6-2 victory over American Jessica Pegula on Saturday in Madrid. The Tunisian trailblazer picked up her second WTA trophy and is set to return to her career-high ranking of number seven in the world on Monday. Jabeur, who is the first Arab player-man or woman to crack the top 10, owns a tour-leading 12 victories on clay so far this season and picked up a 20th win overall in 2022.

"I honestly still can't believe it. I went through a roller coaster of emotions during the past few days, just after the semi-final. I was really stressed trying to breathe," said Jabeur, who had won just one of her previous five WTA finals. "I really didn't want to get disappointed again. I thought my heart was going out of my chest today. I'm very happy and trying to realise that I won today really."

Pegula had to save four break points in her opening two service games before she upped the pressure on the Jabeur serve to break for 3-1. The Tunisian struck back in game seven, finding her range on the return and was soon on level terms with Pegula. Jabeur faced a set point in an error-strewn 10th game but weathered the storm to hold then broke Pegula to love using a signature drop shot return. The world number 10 closed out the set on the 54-minute mark.

Pegula was in trouble at the start of the second set, but she swatted away three break points and it was her turn to attack as she swept the next six games in under 30 minutes. The first three games of the decider went against serve until Jabeur finally consolidated a break to inch ahead 3-1. The 27-year-old doubled her advantage and fell to her knees when she wrapped up a milestone victory.

#### Pegula set for career-high

Jabeur improved to 2-4 in WTA finals and to 3-2 head-to-head against Pegula, who will rise to a



MADRID: Tunisia's Ons Jabeur celebrates with the trophy after winning against US Jessica Pegula during the 2022 WTA Tour Madrid Open tennis tournament women's singles final match on May 7, 2022. — AFP

career-high number 11 in the world on Monday. "I think for both of us, the last two weeks proved a lot. We've come a long way from a few years ago, we were ranked 75 and 76, we were right next to each other. So that's pretty amazing," Pegula told Jabeur during the trophy ceremony.

The 28-year-old American has shown great consistency at WTA 1000 tournaments, winning 28 matches at that level since the start of the 2021 season. Only one player has tallied more victories within that span at such events-world number one Iga Swiatek. Meanwhile, Jabeur has already shifted her focus onto her next tournament in Rome, where she faces Romanian Sorana Cirstea in the opening round on Tuesday. "Definitely all those matches I've won on clay will give me a lot of confidence. I'm just going to try to take as many (ranking) points as I can in Rome. I know I didn't play last year, so it's extra points for me," said Jabeur. "When you're confident like that and you win a lot of matches, I think I should take this opportunity to go, like, really forward and win." — AFP