

Sports

IRVING MAKES A WINNING DEBUT AS BROWN HURT IN CELTICS WIN

CELTICS SHAKE OFF THE ABSENCE OF 3 STARTERS, BEAT 76ERS 106-99

LOS ANGELES: Kyrie Irving shook off some new-team nerves Wednesday, scoring 24 points in his Dallas debut to lead the Mavericks to a 110-104 NBA victory over the Los Angeles Clippers. Irving, a former NBA champion and eight-time All-Star who was traded to Dallas on Sunday after a sometimes controversial tenure with the Brooklyn Nets, added four rebounds and five assists and the Mavs led all the way despite the absence of star Luka Doncic, who remained sidelined with a foot injury.

"Incredible," Irving said of his first game since the trade he requested from Brooklyn, where, he said this week, he "felt very disrespected." "I had natural nerves out there, so I was just trying to play well," he added. "I got to play the game that I love with some guys that were selfless out there and it just feels good." Irving made nine of his 17 shots from the field and delivered four three-pointers against a Clippers team that was among those reportedly courting him once his trade request became public.

Dallas coach Jason Kidd said Irving's contribution went beyond scoring for a Mavs team that has floundered without Doncic on the floor. "His leadership down the stretch of getting everyone organized... a lot of great stuff on this new journey with him. It's going to be fun."

The Mavericks shot out of the gate, fueled by five three-pointers in the first quarter from Reggie Bullock. Irving found his range in the second period to help them push their lead to as many as 19. Clippers star Kawhi Leonard scored 13 of his 18 points in the third quarter as Los Angeles closed the gap, but Irving and the Mavs

had more than enough to keep them at bay. In Boston, the league-leading Celtics shook off the absence of three starters and the early exit of Jaylen Brown with a facial injury to beat the Philadelphia 76ers 106-99.

Brown took an accidental elbow from teammate Jayson Tatum as they both went for a rebound with less than two minutes left in the first half and Brown was knocked out of the game. The Athletic website later reported he had a facial fracture that would likely sideline him through the February 19 All-Star Game, although the Celtics did not immediately confirm that. His departure was a potentially crushing blow for a Celtics team already without Marcus Smart, Robert Williams and Al Horford, but the Eastern Conference leaders didn't miss a beat.

"Tonight was the definition of a team win," Tatum told broadcaster ESPN after the Celtics shot 52.6 percent from the floor, draining 19 of their 35 three-point attempts. Tatum himself had a quiet night with just 12 points, eight rebounds and nine assists, connecting on just five of his 15 shots from the field. But his unheralded teammates did more than enough to hold off the Sixers and their MVP candidate Joel Embiid, who led all scorers with 28 points. James Harden scored 20 for Philadelphia, who never led after the first quarter.

Lillard fuels Portland

In Portland, Damian Lillard had a triple double of 33 points, 10 rebounds and 11 assists as the Trail Blazers rallied to beat the Golden State Warriors 125-122. Jordan Poole scored 38 points and Klay Thompson added 31 for the Warriors.



LOS ANGELES: Kyrie Irving #2 of the Dallas Mavericks struggles for the ball at Crypto.com Arena on February 08, 2023 in Los Angeles, California. —AFP

who were again without injured Stephen Curry. The Sacramento Kings edged the Rockets 130-128 in Houston, where De'Aaron Fox made three free throws with three-tenths of a second left to seal it after Eric Gordon was charged with a

debatable shooting foul. Fox scored 13 of his 31 points in the fourth quarter as the Kings withstood 41 points from Houston's Jalen Green to win a tight back-and-forth battle that featured 22 lead changes. —AFP

PHOENIX SUNS TARGET DURANT

LOS ANGELES: NBA superstar forward Kevin Durant is headed to the Phoenix Suns in a blockbuster trade from the Brooklyn Nets, US media reported on Wednesday. The Nets were trading Durant and TJ Warren in exchange for Mikal Bridges, Cam Johnson, Jae Crowder and four first-round draft picks, according to US outlets, including ESPN, which cited unnamed sources.

The move, on the eve of the NBA's trade deadline on Thursday, follows Brooklyn's trade of Kyrie Irving to the Dallas Mavericks on Sunday, after Irving requested a move. It also comes on the same day that US billionaire mortgage lender Mat Ishbia made his debut as the new owner of the Suns, promising that he was "not going to be sitting here counting the dollars. I'm going to look at how can we improve our team."

Durant—a two-time NBA champion, two-time Finals MVP and a former NBA regular-season MVP—had requested a trade in June, less than a year after he inked a four-year, \$198 million contract extension with the Nets. The 34-year-old had reportedly grown frustrated with the direction of the franchise, who were swept in the first round of last season's playoffs despite having the star duo of Durant and Irving.

In August it became clear that Durant would remain in Brooklyn, but the club got off to a chaotic start this season. They sacked head coach Steve Nash in November after a 1-5 start to the season. Then Irving was suspended for eight games after a social media post publicizing a movie with anti-Semitic themes and declining to apologize. Although the Nets fortunes had turned around under new coach Jacques Vaughn, Durant has been sidelined since January 8 because of a sprained ligament in his right knee.

On Tuesday, Vaughn told reporters that Durant "had a really good report" in his latest medical evaluation, although the team had offered no timeline on when he would return to the court. Durant was averaging 29.7 points per game on 55.9 percent shooting, 6.7 rebounds, 5.3 assists and 1.5 blocks per game this season. He was named an All-Star Game team captain as the top vote-getter in the Eastern Conference but will not be able to play in the game on February 19.

Conference rivals

The mercurial Irving, who reportedly asked out of Brooklyn after failing to agree on a contract extension, made his Mavericks debut on Wednesday, scoring 24 points in a victory over the Los Angeles Clippers. Irving, asked about the Durant trade after the Mavs game, said he was looking forward to taking on his good friend as a Western Conference rival.

"I love the competition now that we can be in the same conference," Irving said. "That's what I'm looking forward to. Everything else and in the in-between, I'm just glad that he got out of there." Durant and Irving both arrived in Brooklyn in 2019 aiming to form a "super team" along with James Harden—who was traded to the Philadelphia 76ers shortly before the trade deadline last year. Amid injuries, controversies and simple lack of chemistry, Brooklyn's "Big Three" never advanced past the second round of the playoffs together.

Durant will now join veteran star Chris Paul and Devin Booker in Phoenix in a bid to claim the third championship ring of his career, after he won two with the Golden State Warriors in 2017 and 2018. Irving's move to Dallas started the trade dominos falling in earnest. In addition to the Durant trade, the Los Angeles Lakers are reportedly poised to trade Russell Westbrook to the Utah Jazz in a three-team deal that will bring Minnesota's D'Angelo Russell to the Lakers, US media reported on Wednesday. —AFP

CRICKETERS TO WATCH AT WOMEN'S T20 WORLD CUP

PARIS: As the women's T20 World Cup gets ready to start in South Africa on Friday, AFP Sport picks out five cricketers to watch.

India: Shafali Verma

At the end of January, Shafali Verma led India to victory in the Under-19 World Cup. Barely two weeks later, the 19-year-old batter is back in South Africa to help India in their bid to win the women's T20. As a child she disguised herself as a boy in order to play but after breaking into the senior women's game, there has been no stopping her.

Youngest international, youngest to score 50 which she did against West Indies in her first series and the youngest to play in all three formats for India. Her aggressive batting style has resulted in the nickname "Lady Schwag", after explosive Indian men's opener Virinder Sehwa, but it was seeing Sachin Tendulkar batting when she was just nine that inspired her to chase the game. Ahead of the 2020 edition, when India were runners-up to Australia, Verma ranked as number one T20 batter in the world. She has now played 51 T20Is, racking up over 1200 runs at an impressive strike rate of 134.5.

England: Alice Capsey

If England are to unseat defending champions

INDIA DOMINATE AUSTRALIA IN TEST OPENER

NAGPUR: Indian spinner Ravindra Jadeja grabbed a five-wicket haul on his international return as India ruled the opening day of the first Test against Australia on Thursday. Jadeja returned figures of 5-47 and fellow spinner Ravichandran Ashwin took three wickets to bowl out Australia for 177 in the final session on a turning Nagpur pitch. In reply, India were 77 for one at stumps, with skipper Rohit Sharma on 56 and Ashwin, yet to score, at the crease. The hosts still trail Australia by 100 runs.

Rohit began by hitting three boundaries off Australian skipper Pat Cummins' first over, and put on 76 runs with opening partner KL Rahul, who made a labored 20. The Indian captain reached his fifty with a four off Nathan Lyon and remained sharp to see off the day's play. Rahul fell caught and bowled off debutant spinner Todd Murphy, who celebrated his first

AUSTRALIA THE TEAM TO BEAT IN WOMEN'S T20 WORLD CUP

CAPE TOWN: Defending champions Australia have undergone significant changes in their squad but remain the team to beat in the Women's T20 World Cup which starts in Cape Town on Friday. Meg Lanning's team slipped to a surprise loss to Ireland in a warm-up game on Wednesday but prior to that they had lost just once in 27 T20 internationals since March 2021. That defeat came in a super over after a tied match against India last December - they won all the other four matches in the series.

"Our squad has gone through a period of change since the last World Cup but I think that is a positive," said Lanning. "We are constantly evolving and we have great flexibility in our team both with bat and ball." Seven of the team that beat India in front

Australia they will need their 18-year-old all-rounder Alice Capsey to live up to and exceed her already remarkable progress. First, though, they need her to be fit - she broke her collarbone during England's tour of the West Indies in December. But if she is firing on all cylinders the batting all-rounder will be crucial. She made her international debut last summer and was England's highest scorer at the Commonwealth Games. A two-time winner of The Hundred with Oval Invincibles, she has also starred for Melbourne Stars in the women's Big Bash in Australia.

Australia: Kim Garth

Kim Garth was only 14 when she made her international debut in an ODI against New Zealand in 2010. That, however, was in the green shirt of her native Ireland with whom she won 114 caps in total as well as being vice-captain. She was named Ireland cricketer of the decade in 2021 but by then had decided to try for a pro career in Australia. It worked. The 26-year-old all-rounder did well enough to qualify for her new country, making her debut in a T20 in Mumbai in December. Defending champions Australia have a side packed with big names so Garth's opportunities may be limited but if she should get some time in the spotlight, expect her to make the most of it. One thing she will be glad, however, is that Ireland are in the other group.

Pakistan: Nida Dar

Amid the young guns, an old-stager in the shape of Pakistan's 36-year-old off-spinner Nida Dar. After making her international debut against Ireland in 2010, she has gone on to play 84 ODIs and over 100

Test wicket. Jadeja, a left-arm orthodox bowler who came back into the Indian side after a knee injury, stood out with his guile, taking key wickets including those of Marnus Labuschagne (49) and Steve Smith (37). Both Australians had launched a fightback with their third-wicket 82-run stand after losing openers Usman Khawaja and David Warner early in the day.

Peter Handscomb (31) and wicketkeeper-batsman Alex Carey (36) also put on a partnership of 53 before Ashwin ended Carey's spell at the crease to record his 450th Test wicket. Jadeja's double strike on successive balls soon after lunch rocked the tourists as he sent back Labuschagne and then trapped Matt Renshaw for a first-ball duck. He later bowled Smith with a delivery that went through his bat and pad. Ashwin and Jadeja kept up the charge to get into the Australian tail when the tourists took tea at 174-8, and added just three runs in the final session.

Earlier, seamer Mohammed Siraj struck on his first ball to get Khawaja trapped lbw for one with a delivery that swung in to the left-hander, after the tourists elected to bat at the start of the one-match series. An appeal was turned down by the on-field umpire but India successfully reviewed the decision. Mohammed

of a world record crowd of 86,174 in the 2020 final in Melbourne are in the squad in South Africa, including stars such as Lanning, Alyssa Healy, Beth Mooney, Ashleigh Gardner and Megan Schutt.

If anything, Australia have been strengthened by the inclusion of Ellyse Perry, one of women cricket's all-time greats, who was injured in the early stages of the 2020 tournament, while Tablia McGrath has emerged as one of the game's leading all-rounders. They have also unearthed an exciting fast bowler in Darcie Brown, 19, and introduced former Ireland all-rounder Kim Garth.

From the cauldron of a packed Melbourne Cricket Ground, Australia will start the defence of their title in quieter surroundings when they meet New Zealand in Paarl on Saturday, where they are likely to have to contend with a slow pitch. They will also be up against arch-rivals New Zealand, the only team to have beaten them since the 2020 World Cup, other than in a super over. The White Ferns' two wins, though, were countered by four victories by Australia.



Pakistan's Nida Dar

T20Is. She was named Pakistan's player of the tournament at the 2018 T20 World Cup and featured again in 2020. She is now just five short of West Indies' Anisa Mohammed's record of 125 T20 wickets. Her nickname "Lady Boom Boom" is a reminder that she is also a useful slugger with the bat.

S Africa: Marizanne Kapp

When Dane van Niekerk was cut from the squad there was a fear that her wife Marizanne Kapp might also step away. But the 33-year-old stayed with the team which, realistically, is only likely to progress from a group that includes Australia and New Zealand, if she delivers. Kapp has had her problems, not least four bouts of COVID, but she is a class all-rounder with a Test hundred under her belt as well as a lorryload of wickets. She was South Africa's standout performer in last year's ODI World Cup with 203 runs and 12 wickets. —AFP



NAGPUR: India's Ravindra Jadeja celebrates his fifth wicket, after the dismissal of Australia's Peter Handscomb (not pictured) during the first day of the first Test cricket match between India and Australia on February 9, 2023. —AFP

Shami raised the noise in the next over when the seamer bowled the left-handed Warner for one. Australia controversially left out in-form left-hand batsman Travis Head, while India handed Test caps to Twenty20 sensation Suryakumar Yadav and wicket-keeper Srikrishna Bharat. —AFP



Australia's Meg Lanning

Competing attractions

Women's cricket reached a high point in Australia in 2020 which is unlikely to be challenged in terms of crowd attendances in South Africa, where tickets for all matches remain available. Advance sales for some matches have been promising, however, notably for the opening match between South Africa and Sri Lanka at Newlands on Friday and the final at the same ground on February 26. —AFP