

## Warriors win as Mavs cry foul



DALLAS: Stephen Curry of the Golden State Warriors scores on a layup against Maxi Kleber of the Dallas Mavericks at American Airlines Center on March 22, 2023. — AFP

LOS ANGELES: The Golden State Warriors boosted their hopes of an automatic playoff berth with a crucial road victory over the Dallas Mavericks on Wednesday as Ja Morant made a smooth return from suspension for the Memphis Grizzlies. Steph Curry finished with 20 points as the Warriors clinched only their ninth away win of the season to edge past the Mavericks 127-125 at Dallas' American Airlines Center.

A back-and-forth battle saw the lead change hands 14 times, with Curry eventually giving Golden State a 125-122 lead with 8.5 seconds remaining from a superb layup. Kevon Looney bagged a pair of free throws to make the game safe before Reggie Bullock's three-pointer at the buzzer trimmed the deficit to two points. But the main talking point was a bizarre moment in the third quarter, when Dallas came out onto the court following a timeout and set up on the wrong side of the court.

That left Golden State free to dunk unopposed into the Mavs basket for a gifted two points. "It was great work the way we got organized and confused them," Warriors coach Steve Kerr joked

after the incident. "When I saw them at the other end I had to stop and think 'Wait, isn't this our basket?' I don't know what happened. I guess they assumed it was their ball."

Mavs owner Mark Cuban could be seen remonstrating with officials at the side of the court following the incident. Cuban later took to Twitter saying officials had erred by wrongly giving the ball to the Warriors, claiming they initially signaled possession to Dallas. "Worst officiating non call mistake possibly in the history of the NBA," Cuban said.

Curry, who finished with 20 points, 13 assists and five rebounds, was one of six Warriors players to make double figures. Luka Doncic led the scoring for Dallas with 30 points while rookie Jaden Hardy added 27, including six three-pointers. The win saw Golden State improve to 38-36 for sixth place in the Western Conference and on course for an automatic ticket to the postseason. But the defeat leaves the Mavs in ninth place and potentially at risk of missing the playoffs altogether with less than three weeks of the regular season remaining.

Elsewhere on Wednesday, Memphis claimed a 130-125 win over the Houston Rockets to remain in the second spot in the Western Conference. Grizzlies coach Taylor Jenkins opted to use returning superstar Morant off the bench. Morant had not played since he posted video of himself waving a handgun in a Colorado strip club on March 4. He was subsequently given an eight-game suspension by the league for conduct detrimental to the NBA.

There was little sign of rustiness though in Morant's 23-minute-and-47-second cameo on Wednesday, with the 23-year-old finishing with 17 points, four rebounds and five assists. "Before the game I did some meditation, just to ease the nerves and emotions I was feeling," Morant said. "Once I got out there on the court, just seeing how the fans reacted to me being back, it meant a lot, made me feel good inside. I can't put it in words."

In Los Angeles, the Lakers boosted their playoff hopes with an impressive 122-111 defeat of the Phoenix Suns. Anthony Davis led the Lakers with 27 points, while D'Angelo Russell (26) and Austin

Reaves (25) combined for 51 points. The win lifted the Lakers into 10th place in the Western Conference with nine regular season games remaining.

In Chicago meanwhile, the Philadelphia 76ers avenged Monday's loss to the Bulls with an emphatic 116-91 win. But the victory was tinged with concern for the Sixers, who saw Joel Embiid exit with a calf strain after the first half with Philadelphia leading 76-48. The Sixers played down fears of a serious injury however and said Embiid is expected to play on Friday against Golden State.

"He'll be ready for the next game," Sixers coach Doc Rivers said afterwards when asked about Embiid's fitness. "It was just precaution. We had a lead and felt like we could hold it. We're about to go on a long trip, it just felt like the right thing to do." De'Anthony Melton led the scoring for the Sixers with 25 points while Tyrese Maxey added 21 and Tobias Harris 20. In Miami, Jimmy Butler's 35-point haul and 22 points from Tyler Herro helped the Heat dig out a 127-120 win over the New York Knicks. R J Barrett led the Knicks scoring with 26 points. —AFP

## France begin new era with Mbappe as captain

PARIS: Three months on from their agonizing defeat in the World Cup final in Doha, France begin a new era with several veterans having retired and Kylian Mbappe handed the captain's armband for their Euro 2024 qualifying campaign. The aftermath of that loss on penalties to Argentina in Qatar has been turbulent, to say the least. Off the field, a series of scandals brought down veteran French Football Federation president Noel Le Graet but not before he had agreed a deal for coach Didier Deschamps to remain in his job until 2026.

Not everyone in France agreed with the decision to extend the reign of a coach who has been in charge since 2012, especially as Zinedine Zidane is seen as an ideal successor. On the pitch, the biggest name to bow out is goalkeeper Hugo Lloris, who retired from international duty at the age of 36 and after over a decade as captain. The Tottenham keeper became France's most-capped player during the World Cup and his departure left Deschamps needing a new goalkeeper as well as a new skipper.

With long-term back-up goalkeeper Steve Mandanda also quitting, AC Milan's Mike Maigman will take the gloves when France welcome the Netherlands to the Stade de France on Friday for their opening qualifier. There was never any doubt about that, but there was some doubt over who would become captain, with Antoine Griezmann a contender.

Yet it was impossible to ignore Mbappe, who showed himself to be a leader with his breathtaking hat-trick in the World Cup final. At 24, the Paris Saint-Germain forward could realistically skipper the side for a decade. "Kylian ticked all the boxes to have that extra responsibility. But on the other hand it is nothing against Antoine who has always been an im-



Kylian Mbappe

portant player," Deschamps said this week. Olivier Giroud, France's all-time record goal-scorer, is still there at 36. But Raphael Varane has retired, as has Real Madrid's Karim Benzema, who missed the World Cup after succumbing to injury on the eve of the tournament. "You can't replace people who have been there for 10 years, you need time," admitted Deschamps, who said he understood the decision of Manchester United center-back Varane to step down at the age of 29. "The demands of the highest level can lead to fatigue, whether that be physical or psychological," said Deschamps, who himself quit playing entirely at 32. The luxury for Deschamps is that France's conveyor belt of talent seems to be never-ending. Varane's retirement opened the door for Chelsea prospect Wesley Fofana to get a first call-up at 22. He and Arsenal's William Saliba both then pulled out injured, but the coach then turned to ex-Barcelona center-back Jean-Clair Todibo, now excelling at Nice. — AFP

## Battle to buy Man Utd heats up as parties prepare fresh bids

MANCHESTER: The battle to buy Manchester United heated up on Wednesday as Qatari banker Sheikh Jassim Bin Hamad Al-Thani and British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe prepared to raise their bids for the 20-time English champions. Both parties were expected to increase their initial offers after the submission deadline of 2100 GMT was extended by merchant bank Raine, which is assisting with the sale of the club, following confusion over the timing, the BBC reported.

Sky Sports also reported that Sheikh Jassim and Ratcliffe had been granted extensions to submit fresh bids. The new deadline for offers has not been made clear, according to the BBC. United's owners, the Glazer family, have reportedly set a world record £6 billion (\$7.3 billion) valuation for a sports club. Sheikh Jassim's bid for 100 percent control of the club promises to wipe United's \$620 million debt and invest in a new stadium and training ground, in addition to backing for the men's and women's teams.

A source close to Sheikh Jassim's bid told AFP he remains confident his bid is "the best for the club, fans and local community". INEOS chemical company founder Ratcliffe, a boyhood United fan, has been more circumspect in his assessment, insisting he will not pay a "stupid" price in a bidding war for one of football's most iconic clubs.

"How do you decide the price of a painting? How do you decide the price of a house? It's not related to how much it cost to build or how much it cost to paint," Ratcliffe told the Wall Street Journal this week. "What you don't want to do is pay stupid prices for things because then you regret it subsequently." Ratcliffe, who wants the 69 percent stake owned by the Glazer family, said his interest in United would be "purely in winning things", calling the



Sheikh Jassim Bin Hamad Al-Thani

club a "community asset". Deeply unpopular with supporters since they saddled the club with debt in a £790 million leveraged takeover in 2005, the Glazers appeared ready to cash out at an enormous profit when they invited external investment in November. However, they could yet shun the option of selling a controlling stake in the club, with other parties interested in a minority shareholding.

The initial offers from the first round of bidding last month were believed to have been worth around £4.5 billion. That would surpass the Premier League record of £2.5 billion paid for Chelsea last year by a consortium led by LA Dodgers co-owner Todd Boehly and private equity firm Clearlake Capital, with a further £1.75 billion promised in investment in infrastructure and players. Bidders are expected to hear from United next week, with another round of bidding still in play. If one bid is vastly ahead of the others, it could be chosen to enter into a period of exclusivity, which would allow further negotiation ahead of a final sale.

Ratcliffe visited Old Trafford last Friday along with INEOS representatives, a day after a delegation from Sheikh Jassim's group toured the club's stadium and training ground to hold more talks as part of their due diligence. Just months after hosting the 2022 World Cup, a successful Qatari bid would give the Gulf state pride of place in the Premier League — the world's most-watched domestic competition. — AFP