

All-time low  
Dire Bath  
humbled by  
Leinster in  
10-try  
defeat  
**Page 15**



**Match-day mayhem**  
Fan faces lifetime  
ban after bottle  
thrown at Villa  
players; City held  
by Saints; and a  
drone halts play

**Pages 4-7**



# The Observer Sport

23.01.22

Match-winner  
Marcus Rashford  
(left) and  
Diogo Dalot are  
delighted with  
three precious  
points for United

PETER POWELL/EPA

A large photograph of two Manchester United players in red jerseys, Marcus Rashford and Diogo Dalot, celebrating a goal. They are both shouting and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred stadium crowd.

## Going fourth

Last-gasp Rashford  
strike sees United  
leapfrog Hammers  
into the top four in  
race for Champions  
League place

**Pages 2-3**

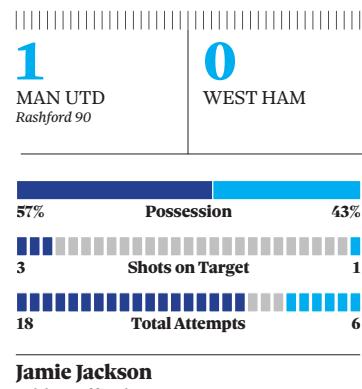


# Rashford's late show breathes fresh life into flailing United

Rangnick's side ride their luck as winner in the final second floors West Ham and earns interim manager a first back-to-back victory



• Ralf Rangnick has something to cheer at last



Jamie Jackson  
Old Trafford

Deep into added time this contest seemed set to go down as a nonevent, with both sides receiving a fair share of the spoils. But then Marcus Rashford finished Edinson Cavani's cross from the left to send himself, Manchester United and the home fans into ecstasy. Rashford, who has been off-colour, rushed across to the Stretford End for a knee-slide, joined by his jubilant teammates.

If there may be a debate as to whether any part of Cavani's arm was offside, Ralf Rangnick deserves full credit as the No 21, Rashford and Anthony Martial – who had played in the Uruguayan – were late attacking substitutions. For Rashford this was a second goal in consecutive outings: across this game and Wednesday's 3-1 win at Brentford, he has doubled his league output for the season. The forward, like United, may be stirring in the business phase of the campaign.

Before the showstopping climax this had been a match of

mediocre fare that did not augur well for either team's Champions League qualification hopes. Yet for United, who leapfrogged West Ham and are fourth, at least overnight, the picture changes after a fifth victory in Rangnick's eight league games as interim manager.

Early on Mason Greenwood had a shot that was blocked when he might have passed – a recurring fault. Bruno Fernandes, too, made the wrong decision when hitting a cross-field pass that lacked power: Jarrod Bowen dragged the ball down, surged forward and let fly, though not on target.

Vladimir Coufal then dawdled and was mugged by Fernandes, the right-back having to concede a free-kick. Ronaldo hit this into the wall

• Marcus Rashford meets Edinson Cavani's cross from the left to leave West Ham feeling aggrieved

LAURENCE GRIFFITHS/  
GETTY IMAGES

• West Ham's Craig Dawson dives in to head the ball away from Cristiano Ronaldo at Old Trafford

OLI SCARFF/AFP VIA  
GETTY IMAGES



## Joyless for Moyes

**15** David Moyes has never won an away Premier League match at Old Trafford in 15 attempts (D4 L11), a winless total matched only by Harry Redknapp.

and Greenwood – again – took aim and once more was unable to test Alphonse Areola, on his first league appearance in West Ham's goal.

United's one change from Brentford was Harry Maguire in place of the excused Victor Lindelöf, whose home had been broken into during the week. The captain was up against Michail Antonio and the centre-forward's clumsy touch allowed Maguire to win their first duel. Declan Rice emerged a victor when challenging Ronaldo, sitting the No 7 on his backside with a robust challenge, then laying the ball off.

Fernandes's curving delivery from the left had Ronaldo flinging himself toward – and missing – the ball. Next, poor control from Anthony Elanga, again preferred to Rashford, had Rangnick flinching but each team took turns to find a way to founder. For West Ham Manuel Lanzini tapped a pass to Pablo Fornals, received the ball back, and hit it straight out.

The half petered out, ending with zero shots on target. United were in the same position as at Brentford and an initial burst involving Ronaldo, Alex Telles and Elanga was reminiscent of their second half start there, when the last of that trio scored.

Fred drew a first save from either keeper with a fierce drive that Areola punched away. Were United awaking? A Ronaldo back-heal towards Greenwood that had West Ham scrambling suggested as much.

But when Bowen drew a foul from Maguire, they had a promising position on the right. Ronaldo, though, headed away Cresswell's delivery and this led to a United attack and corner. When Telles landed it on Raphael Varane's head the flick-on was wide but at least caused "oohs" from the Stretford End as did an Elanga swivel-and-volley that, again, missed.

This was the young Swede's last act, Rangnick deciding he should be hooked for Rashford in the first of the German's substitutions.

As the final whistle approached, Tomas Soucek went close for West Ham with a glancing header that veered past David de Gea's right post. Then, the goalkeeper's reflexes stopped Varane scoring inadvertently past him. By the end Cavani and Martial had joined Rashford and Ronaldo for United's dramatic finish.

They will now enjoy their winter break before reconvening at home to Middlesbrough in the FA Cup on 4 February.

**Manchester United**  
**4-2-3-1**  
De Gea; Dalot, Maguire, Varane, Telles; McTominay, Fred (Cavani 82); Greenwood (Martial 82); Fernandes, Elanga (Rashford 62); Ronaldo  
**Subs not used** Jones, Mata, Lingard, Matić, Henderson, Van de Beek  
**Referee** Jon Moss **Attendance** 73,130

**West Ham**  
**4-2-3-1**  
Areola; Coufal (Fredericks 70), Dawson, Zouma, Cresswell; Rice, Soucek; Bowen, Lanzini, Fornals; Antonio  
**Subs not used** Yarmolenko, Vlasic, Noble, Diop, Masauku, Johnson, Kral, Randolph

## 'Scoring so late on was extremely emotional'

Jamie Jackson

Ralf Rangnick hailed the dressing room atmosphere after Marcus Rashford's winner 27 seconds from the end meant Manchester United overtook West Ham to claim fourth place.

It was the interim manager's first back-to-back wins in the 10th game of his tenure and given the reported unrest surrounding the club due to unconvincing form and inconsistent results Rangnick was content.

"The atmosphere [in the dressing room] is amazing," he said. "Quite rightly, the boys were celebrating. They know what a massive win this was. This was an extremely emotional game and an extremely emotional moment."

"If you score in the last seconds of the game and there is no time for the other team to reply: knowing this was extremely emotional."

"Thank you to the [fans] – the way they supported the team all through the game, they pushed us and carried us. It was amazing. Since I arrived, it was by far the best atmosphere in the stadium."

Given how late the winner came, Rangnick was asked if there might now be "Ralfy Time" as there was once "Fergie Time".

"I don't know how long Fergie Time was. Was that the last five minutes? I wouldn't mind if that happened," he said. "But we would also like to have more games like Brentford when we were 3-0 up [United won 3-1]. But if you score in the last seconds the big advantage is there is no time for the team to reply."

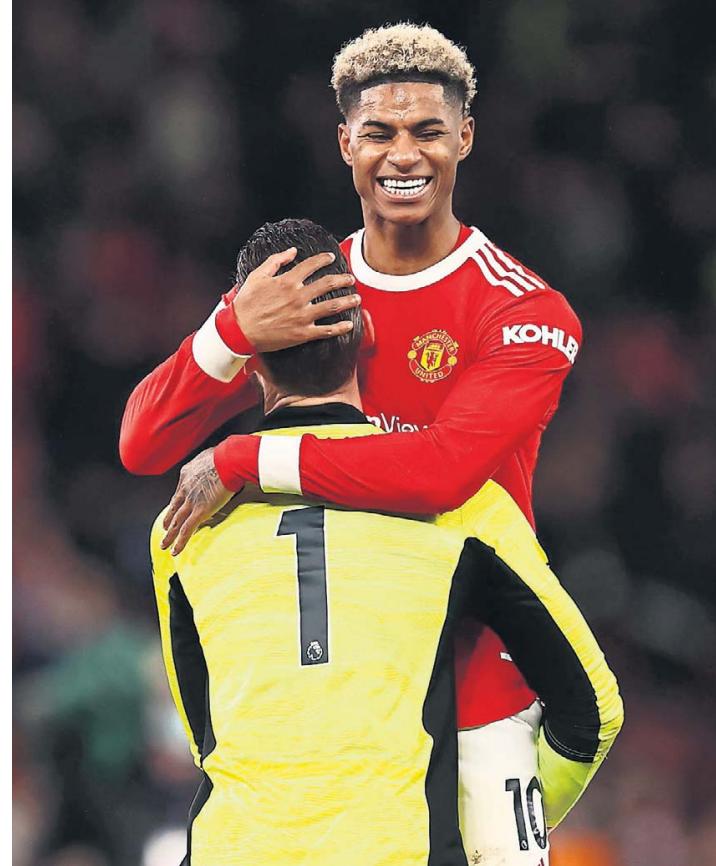
The winning goal was Rashford's second in consecutive games and Rangnick said: "He's one of the top strikers in England – we know the qualities he has. He has almost everything a modern striker needs: pace, skill, the size and physicality."

"In the end it's all about confidence for strikers and I'm pretty sure those two goals will have raised the level of confidence with Marcus and now it's about taking steps, it's about continuity. I think he can play a very important role for the rest of the season."

Rashford said: "It is an important goal and [to score so] late on is an amazing feeling. We have to use that winning feeling."

United's next game is at home to Middlesbrough in the FA Cup on 4 February. "We have high ambitions in the Cup," said Rangnick. "We know in all of these games we have to perform on a high level."

David Moyes was unhappy at how his team conceded. "I'm pissed off with that result for sure," West Ham's manager said. "We completely switched off."



• David de Gea hoists Marcus Rashford in the air after the striker's winner secured three points for United

PAUL CURRIE/SHUTTERSTOCK

how humans are supposed to exist. What will it do to us?

Rashford has always been streaky, even in his good times. Last season he had the best scoring spell of his career, but ended with three in 18. He played with an injury for a while. He's a good player with excellent movement, with some wonderful skills, but not, as yet, a killer. Perhaps his problem is performing at a level not quite on the same scale as his wider celebrity.

On the other hand maybe the real issue for Rashford is that he plays for Manchester United, or at least the version of the past four years.

Victory took them into fourth place, but this was not a good performance. United looked for long periods like a team that seemed to have no content, no centre, and certainly nothing in midfield to match Declan Rice, who was the best player on the pitch by some distance.

Rice has the kind of running style sports writers get very excited about. He glides, he whispers, he trots and frolics. The urge is there to use terms like "Rolls Royce". The main thing is how relaxed he seems, a player who sees the game as a series of spatial puzzles to be solved. Is he a "holding midfielder"? Is he "box to box"? He doesn't really seem to follow any of these standard forms. He's a gliding run-pass funnel. He's a defensive superconductor. He's a strolling ball-magnet.

He's a level up on anything United have had since Michael Carrick retired. Do you need a philosophy? A multilevel synchronised 74-part plan? Maybe you just need Declan Rice.

Harry Maguire was back, albeit only because Victor Lindelöf was absent. Maguire is another conundrum. He had a mixed game, occasionally smooth and reassuring, occasionally messy, often lacking in mobility.

Watching Maguire trundle around the Old Trafford pitch is like seeing a mahogany wardrobe being slid along a polished parquet floor on a wool weave rug: upright, square, impressive, but likely to topple over if turned too quickly.

Rashford came on with the game still waiting to be broken open. Ralf Rangnick is his fourth United manager. He wants him to be more direct, to attack defenders. And he did this twice just after he came on, the second drawing a booking for Rice.

As the final whistle blew Rashford walked around hugging his teammates and was grabbed by David de Gea, who hoisted him into the air and wheeled him around with genuine affection.

No doubt he will be fine from here. Attention will shift. For United, fourth place and a second win in four days look like riches indeed.

## Normal human being rises above frenzy of analysis

Barney Ronay

Old Trafford



What's eating Marcus Rashford? Here's a thought: maybe nothing. Rashford was once again on the bench against West Ham. He stayed there for 62 minutes as United produced a performance that was energetically blank, frantically vague, noisily blunt.

Football loves its bold strokes however, and Rashford did the most important thing in this game, scoring with almost the final kick, four yards out in front of an open goal, after a three-man cavalry sprint from close to halfway ended with Edinson Cavani squaring across the box for Rashford to tap home and spark a kind of rolling delirium around the stands.

It looked offside in real time. It might have been offside with the benefit of split-frame, tiny margins the usual forensic dissection. But the goal stood and on such tiny margins do hastily typed narratives swing.

No doubt the music will shift around Rashford. He scored against Brentford in midweek after coming on as a sub. Is he cured? Is this how it works? Man scores goal: man is now OK? Certainly, the wider reaction to Rashford's poor run of form over the past few months has been extraordinary.

According to Paul Ince, he's not happy. Steve McLaren thinks he has an attitude problem. Dion Dublin says he's "disheartened". Alan Shearer has, we hear, been offering

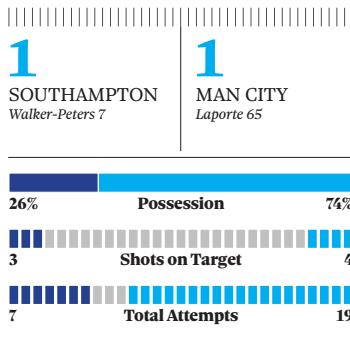
hints and tips, phone calls, text messages. We heard talk of Rashford training too hard, going to the gym too much, being too obsessed at being good at football.

The melancholia always seemed overblown. Footballers are people too. They have lows and blunt periods. Most of us get to have our blank moments, a lost January, those days where you feel like hiding in the toilet for half an hour reading a catalogue about strimmers, without Alan Shearer hammering on the door asking if you're feeling OK, peering in through the gap in the door jamb, saying look, we really need to talk, then going to the newspapers and saying you seemed fine but you were reading a catalogue about strimmers.

But then Rashford's existence is an extraordinary thing at an extraordinary time, when every act, every closeup, every twitch is spun out, pored over, given meaning, processed across every platform. When Marcus Rashford feeling low, playing with an injury, losing his scoring touch must be transformed into a mini-industry of its own, dissected by that unblinking compound eye. This is not really

**Most of us get to have our blank moments, a lost January, without Alan Shearer asking if we're OK**

# Laporte uses his head but City's run comes to an end



**Ben Fisher**  
St Mary's Stadium

It must have felt a little peculiar at full-time for Manchester City, as they left the pitch for the first time without the full complement of points in a Premier League game for the first time since October.

They failed to extend their winning run to 13 matches but they avoided defeat after Aymeric Laporte headed in a second-half equaliser to open up a 12-point advantage over second-placed Liverpool.

Southampton faded and survived two late VAR calls, the first for a possible penalty when Kevin De Bruyne bobbed towards the area and the second for a red card on Stuart Armstrong. Both seemed sensible calls and Saints deserved to take something from a lively encounter for their endeavour.

Pep Guardiola is viewed as a magician by so many but here it was almost a case of forecasting the future. Before kick-off he stuck to a familiar script, insisting his team are not invincible and they would drop points, and reiterating that the most important thing for him is how City react when they do find themselves in a spot of bother.

Rather inevitably, then, with seven minutes gone, just as City were stamping their authority on the game, they trailed to a game Southampton side that seemed intent on being the ones to halt a winning streak that



● Aymeric Laporte heads past the Southampton goalkeeper Fraser Forster to draw Manchester City level

MIKE HEWITT/GETTY IMAGES

had seen City win their previous 12 matches by an aggregate score of 34-7. It was a fine goal, too. Kyle Walker-Peters motored forward from right-back and played a neat one-two with Nathan Redmond, controlling the return pass with his left foot before, with his next touch, stroking the ball into the far corner with the outside of his right boot.

The galling thing for Guardiola, who at one point found comfort squatting on the edge of his technical area in a black puffer coat and brogues, was that City passed up

an opportunity seconds earlier. City succinctly shifted the ball from left to right but Raheem Sterling undercooked the key pass after spying Kyle Walker on the overlap.

Sterling was guilty of missing a decent opening too, blasting over after cutting inside Che Adams but Southampton had Fraser Forster to thank for preventing City from levelling. Phil Foden sent in a teasing cross from the left flank, which Romain Perraud failed to clear and just as it seemed Sterling would tap-in – the Southampton supporters behind the goal sighed in unison as the ball found its way towards the back post – a sprawling Forster saved with his legs.

Guardiola could afford a wry smile as he headed down the tunnel at the

## Scottish Cup roundup

### Giakoumakis and Abada strike as Celtic progress to fifth round

#### Nial Briggs

Two first half goals earned Celtic a narrow 2-1 over Alloa Athletic and place in the Scottish Cup fifth-round.

The visitors opened the scoring after 14 minutes when a Liam Scales cross was met by Giorgos Giakoumakis with a volley at the front post. Liel Abada then scored with a cultured finish before half-time. Celtic could have extended

their lead but substitute Alan Trouten's introduction added energy to the home side in the second half and fellow substitute Stefan Scougall's crossed to the back post for Connor Sammon to head home with 12 minutes remaining.

Kallum Higginbotham's breakaway goal in extra time gave League Two side Kelty Hearts a sensational 1-0 win at home over cup holders St Johnstone

in the biggest shock of the day. It is another blow to hapless St Johnstone who sit at the foot of the Premiership table having lost their last 10 matches after winning the cup double last season.

Liam Boyce scored two goals on his return from injury as Heart of Midlothian defeated West of Scotland league side Auchinleck Talbot 5-0 at Beechwood. Andy Halliday, Peter Haring and Alex Cochrane were also on target.

First-half goals from Kyle McAllister and Greg Kiltie secured the win for Jim Goodwin's side.

Ayo Obliye's 16th-minute penalty narrowly won Livingston the all Premiership tie at home to Ross County. Fellow top-flight team

## Premier League

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Man City	23	18	3	2	55	14	+41	57
Liverpool	21	13	6	2	55	18	+37	45
Chelsea	23	12	8	3	46	18	+28	44
Man Utd	22	11	5	6	36	30	+6	38
West Ham	23	11	4	8	41	31	+10	37
Tottenham	19	11	3	5	26	22	+4	36
Arsenal	20	11	2	7	33	25	+8	35
Wolves	21	10	4	7	19	17	+2	34
Brighton	21	6	11	4	22	22	0	29
Aston Villa	21	8	2	11	28	32	-4	26
Leicester	19	7	4	8	33	36	-3	23
Southampton	22	5	10	7	26	34	-8	25
Crystal Palace	21	5	9	7	30	31	-1	24
Brentford	23	6	5	12	26	41	-15	23
Leeds	21	5	7	9	24	40	-16	22
Everton	20	5	4	11	24	35	-11	19
Norwich	22	4	4	14	13	45	-32	16
Newcastle	21	2	9	10	21	43	-22	15
Watford	20	4	2	14	23	40	-17	14
Burnley	17	1	8	8	16	27	-11	11

interval and the scoreline would have been worse had Armando Broja been onside when the commanding Oriol Romeu played the striker in on goal with a wondrous through ball on 23 minutes. Broja crept behind Walker but had strayed a shade offside.

The home support were on their feet again five minutes later in anticipation of a penalty when the referee, Simon Hooper, put his whistle to his mouth after Ederson brushed with Broja as the striker surged on to Adams's pass in the box, only to award City a free-kick for an offside.

Southampton had no desire to sit on their lead and within a couple of minutes of the restart Ederson pushed a Jan Bednarek header from a James Ward-Prowse corner to safety.

City were zipping the ball around, with Jack Grealish, operating down the middle as a false nine, drawing the odd foul but the hosts, not for the first time, came closest to doubling their advantage before City began to dissect their opponent. Another Ward-Prowse corner caused havoc in the City area and Broja nodded against a post from a yard out. Guardiola had seen enough and called for Gabriel Jesus, who replaced Sterling.

Rodri earlier curled a shot on the roof of the Southampton goal and Foden saw a volleys effort repelled by Forster as City tried to ratchet through the gears.

Then came the equaliser. De Bruyne flighted a free-kick towards the back post, where there was a scattering of dark blue shirts and Laporte powered in a header. Guardiola clenched both fists and embraced his assistant, Juanma Lillo.

From there, City refused to give Southampton their ball back and the visitors piled forward. De Bruyne could only bite his lip in frustration after curling a shot against the wood-work and Guardiola had his hands on his head when Jesus headed against a post with the goal gaping.

City would not go quietly but Southampton held on through six minutes of stoppage time.

#### Southampton

4-4-2

Forster; W-Peters, Bednarek (Lyano 71), Salisu, Perraud; Redmond (Elyounoussi ht), Ward-Prowse, Romeu, S Armstrong (Diallo 82); Adams, Broja

Subs not used Stephens, Fernandinho, Carson, Slicker, McAtee, Caballero, Walcott, Valery

Referee Simon Hooper Attendance 31,178

#### Manchester City

4-3-3

Ederson; Walker, Dias, Laporte, Cancelo; Silva, Rodri, De Bruyne; Sterling (Jesus 60), Foden, Grealish

Subs not used Stones,

Aké, Gündogan, Fernandinho, Carson, Slicker, McAtee, Caballero, Walcott, Valery

St Mirren sealed their place in the fifth round with a 2-0 victory at Ayr United.

Aberdeen eased their way into the fifth round after a dominant 3-0 win over Edinburgh City of League Two. The Dons were never troubled by



● Giorgos Giakoumakis celebrates scoring for Celtic against Alloa

their lower-league opponents and first-half strikes from Ryan Hedges and Christian Ramirez had the match won, before Lewis Ferguson added a third after 90 minutes with a looping header.

Dylan Levitt scored in extra-time as Dundee United edged through 2-1 against Kilmarnock at Rugby Park. United started in the right vein with Marc McNulty's strike but Killie levelled the scoring 16 minutes later through Rory McKenzie.

Championship high-fliers Arbroath beat Darvel 3-0 with three goals from Jack Hamilton at Gayfield Park while an extra-time strike from Liam Donnelly won Motherwell a hard-fought tie with Morton 2-1 at Fir Park.



● A fan was arrested after Lucas Digne, on his return to his former club, and Matty Cash were hit by a bottle thrown from the crowd seconds after Aston Villa went ahead at Goodison Park

LINDSEY PARNABY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

## Fan arrested and Everton vow to ban throwers

Andy Hunter

Everton have vowed to ban any fan found to have thrown objects on to the pitch after several Aston Villa players were struck by a plastic bottle during their side's 1-0 win over Duncan Ferguson's team.

The former Everton player Lucas Digne and his Villa teammate Matty Cash were both struck on the head by what appeared to be a full bottle of Lucozade as they celebrated Emilio Buendía's decisive goal. A supporter was arrested at Goodison Park. Several objects were thrown at the Villa players and Everton insist everyone responsible for the disgraceful scenes will be banned.

In a statement confirming the arrest, the club said: "Everton security staff and Merseyside police identified the supporter using CCTV footage. Several objects were thrown towards the pitch following Aston Villa's goal at the end of the first half, with one missile appearing to strike two opposition players. Investigations in conjunction with the police are ongoing, and the club will issue bans to any fans identified throwing objects."

Steven Gerrard made light of the incident but the Aston Villa manager said his players' reaction was key to an impressive away win. "None of the players have mentioned it. We scored at a really important time and so at half-time it was more about resetting the focus. I haven't seen anything so I don't want to comment on any incidents that may or may not have happened."

Ferguson condemned the bottle throwing. "I never saw the incident but I have been told about it," he said. "It is bang out of order. That is not the way to do things. That is totally wrong."

Several hundred Everton fans staged a sit-in protest that lasted for over an hour after the final whistle and called for Bill Kenwright, the chairman, plus other board members to leave a club that are in serious relegation trouble.

"For me, fans can protest and say what they want because it is their club," Ferguson said. "They have the right to support their club in any way they want. I know how sick they are. I am gutted as much as them. I am on the floor, I am sick for the fans."

# Bottles fly as Buendía ruins Ferguson's day

**0**  
EVERTON

**1**  
ASTON VILLA  
Buendía 45



this stage of a season since 1997-98 when the club avoided relegation on the final day under Howard Kendall.

Several hundred fans staged a sit-in protest that lasted for over an hour after the game and called for the departures of the chairman, Bill Kenwright, plus the board. The presence in the directors' box of Kia Joorabchian, an agent close to Everton's majority shareholder, suggested an appetite to change how the club are run is not shared by those at the very top.

The best player on the pitch, Emilio Buendía, scored the only goal of a fractious game marred by Villa players being struck by a plastic bottle in the celebrations that followed the midfielder's decisive header. A supporter was arrested and investigations are continuing.

Gerrard's side were the most creative before the break and repelled Everton's direct siege after it. Ferguson's team selection reflected his thoughts on the brief and divisive era of Rafael Benítez. Séamus Coleman, Michael Keane and Allan dropped to the bench while new full-backs Vitalii Mykolenko and Nathan Patterson, signed for a combined initial cost of £29m at the start of the window, did not make the match-day squad at all. Yerry Mina was named captain on his first start since 6 December.

Given the Scot's demand for greater aggression and a pumped-up Goodison crowd it was no surprise that a scrap unfolded from the outset. Abdoulaye Doucouré tearing

apart Jacob Ramsey's shirt was a neat metaphor for the early exchanges.

A Villa breakthrough would have the dual effect of lessening Goodison's intensity as well as preying on Everton's vulnerable confidence. Jordan Pickford was proving a stubborn obstacle, however. The keeper saved superbly with his leg to deny Ollie Watkins, even if the Villa striker was offside when heading Buendía's cross towards the bottom corner, and tipped over a Philippe Coutinho header after a Douglas Luiz free-kick. The resulting corner had dire repercussions for Everton on and off the pitch.



● Emilio Buendía's smart header won the points

Lucas Digne, sold to Villa following a falling-out with Benítez just days before his adversary was sacked, was roundly booed on his swift return. Had Benítez not been dismissed his reception might have been different. Digne responded with his feet, delivering an inswinging corner to the near post where the completely unmarked Buendía glanced a superb header over Pickford and Andros Townsend into the far corner.

While Everton players argued over conceding yet another set-piece goal Villa's celebrated in front of the Bullens Road stand. A seemingly full bottle of Lucozade was thrown from the crowd, who had already lowered the tone with a desperate old song about Gerrard, and both Digne and Matty Cash were struck on the head.

On the pitch, Everton improved in the second half but the visitors showed they are becoming a team of substance under Gerrard.

Ferguson wasted little time in making substitutions, introducing Anthony Gordon and Allan, and the former created a glorious chance for Dominic Calvert-Lewin with a first-time cross along the face of the Villa goal. Calvert-Lewin, rusty after four months out injured, turned the cross high over Emilio Martínez's goal at full stretch.

Tyrone Mings headed off the line from Ben Godfrey, Mina sent a looping header just wide and Demarai Gray fired wildly over, all from Gordon corners as Everton applied concerted pressure in the second half. But to no avail. The two clubs continue to head in opposite directions.

**Everton**  
**4-4-2**

Pickford; Kenny, Mina, Holgate, Godfrey; Townsend (Gordon 56), Doucoure (Onyango 65), Gomes (Allan 51), Gray; Calvert-Lewin, Richarlison. Subs not used: Keane, Begovic, Coleman, Gbamin, Rondon, Dobbins.

Referee Craig Pawson

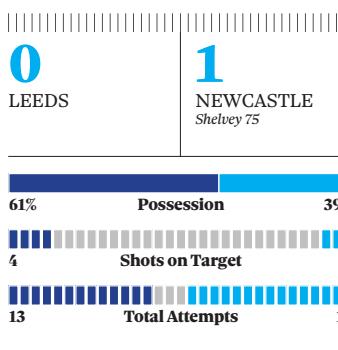
**Aston Villa**  
**4-3-3**

Martínez, Cash, Konsa, Mings, Digne, McGinn, Douglas Luiz, Ramsey, Buenda (Hause 90), Watkins (Ings 79), Coutinho (Carney Chukwuemekwa 74). Subs not used: Olsen, Targett, Sanson, Young, Kesler, Iroegbuam.



● Everton supporters staging an hour-long sit-in protest after full time

# Shelvey gives Howe warm glow as he heads for sun



Louise Taylor  
Elland Road

Eddie Howe has said he does not know whether he will meet Mohammed bin Salman in Jeddah this week but any conversation with Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler is bound to be considerably easier after this win.

Newcastle's manager is taking his players to a warm-weather training camp on the Red Sea coast today but at the final whistle he resembled a man feeling the sun on his back for the first time after a long, hard winter.

An amalgam of Jonjo Shelvey's second-half free-kick and a rare mistake on Illan Meslier's part secured Newcastle their second win of the season, lifting them to the heady

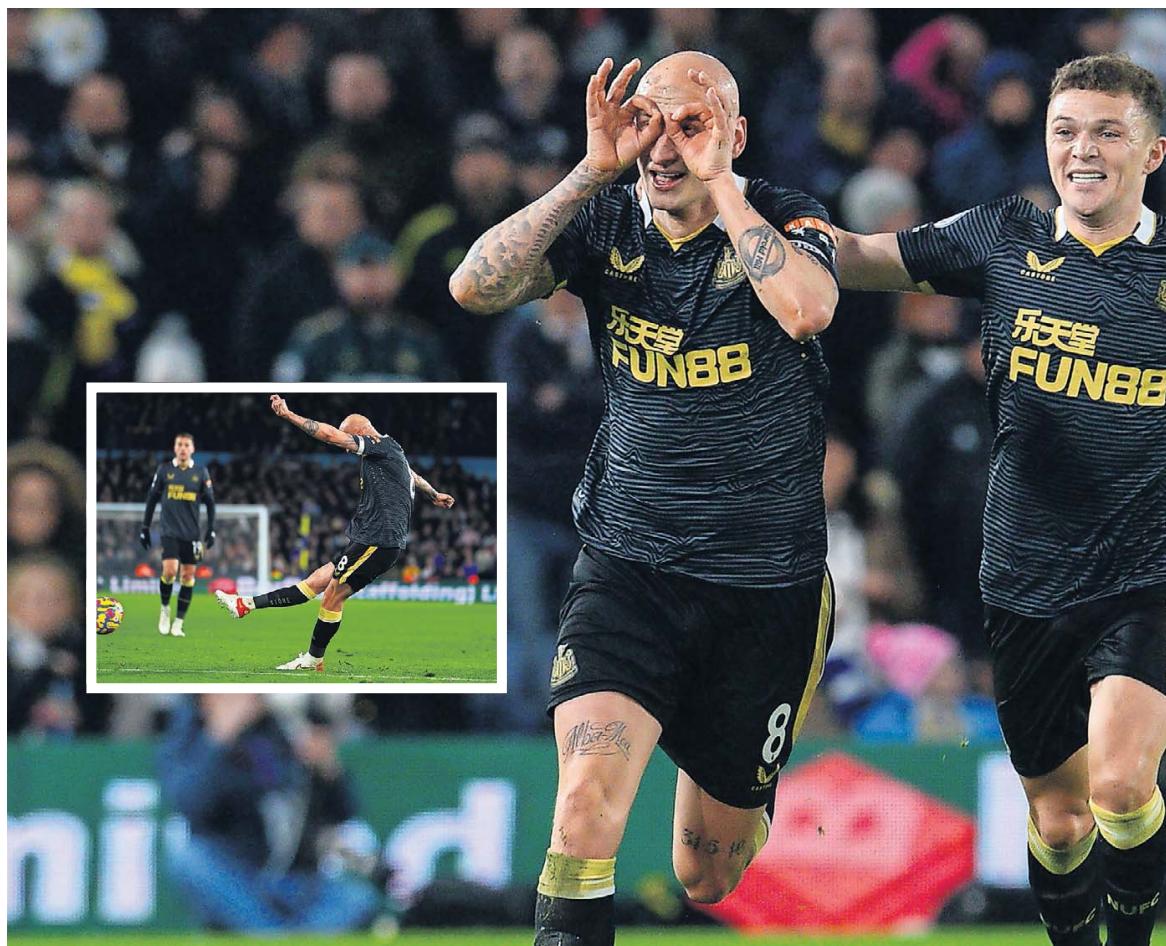
heights of 18th place. They have a mere 15 points but are one short of Norwich, four shy of Everton and seven behind Leeds; suddenly one of the Premier League's greatest escapes look feasible.

Marcelo Bielsa's alternately despairing and infuriated body language highlighted the severity of this blow to his team who, not for the first time, failed to turn dominance into goals before coming undone at a set piece. Patrick Bamford's long-awaited return to the Leeds attack after injury cannot come soon enough.

"It was an opportunity we didn't take advantage of," said Bielsa, who accused Newcastle of time-wasting tactics. "We had many moments to unbalance the game but we could not convert. We always got to the final third with ease but could not pick the final pass."

Howe, meanwhile, was busy remembering how to smile. "It was a big test and a massive win," he said. "We hope it's a turning point."

Initially, such a watershed appeared unlikely. Only a fine point-blank save from Martin Dubravka kept an early Dan James's shot out after a wonderfully fluid attacking move also featuring Rodrigo and Raphinha. Paul



**Newcastle have been lifted to the heady heights of 18th place. One of the Premier League's greatest escapes looks feasible**

Dummett is an underrated, positionally intelligent, left-back but he joined a long line of counterparts who have struggled to contain Raphinha.

On the opposite flank Stuart Dallas impressed as an attacking left-back and his dangerous advances prevented Kieran Trippier from acting as an attacking catalyst.

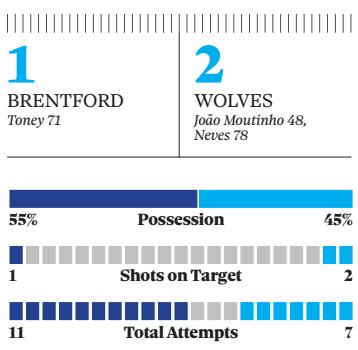
The resultant shortage of crosses left the one-time Leeds striker Chris Wood largely isolated, with his side's principal hope of a goal hingeing on the sort of odd bright

counter-attacking moment, which concluded with Meslier doing well to save Shelvey's volley.

Although Newcastle still need a midfield enforcer capable of anchoring the team effectively, Shelvey had one of his better games with most of Newcastle's better manoeuvres stemming from their playmaker's feet.

In Bamford's enduring absence, Leeds could not make their dominance and dynamism count and had no one to polish off Raphinha's deliveries. Jack Harrison should probably

# Neves shrugs off drone delay to give Wolves lift-off



Ed Aarons  
Brentford Community Stadium

If you like delays then this match had them all. First there was a serious clash of heads that caused two Brentford players to be substituted with suspected concussions, before play was stopped again during the first half for more than 15 minutes after officials spotted an "unofficial drone" circling overhead.

One day after Watford's game with Norwich was delayed by floodlight problems, a police helicopter patrolled the skies throughout the second half to ensure the drone did not return as Rúben Neves sealed a fourth victory in five league games for a rapidly improving Wolves.

There were certainly no such incidents the last time Brentford hosted Wolves in the top flight more than 70 years ago, with that campaign ending in relegation despite their 4-1 victory in 1947 at Griffin Park. Sitting comfortably in mid-table and seemingly within reach of safety in their first experience of the Premier League, Thomas Frank's side must have seen this as a great opportunity to take another giant step towards their ultimate goal, but they have now suffered four straight defeats. To compound matters, Frank was shown a yellow and then a red card after the final whistle for confronting the referee,

Peter Banks. "It just wasn't our day," said Frank, who revealed he is close to agreeing a contract extension until 2025.

Wolves, who were without the injured Raúl Jiménez and brought on the potentially Tottenham-bound Adama Traoré for the last 15 minutes, have emerged as surprise contenders for the top six thanks to some impressive performances: they came into this game having conceded only one goal in five matches since losing to Manchester City last month. After a slow start here they made the most of their opportunities following the repeated delays and were deserved winners despite being pegged back after taking the lead through João Moutinho.

"It was a very hard situation with all the delays," said the Wolves manager, Bruno Lage. "But I think we did very well in the second half and we showed personality to play our game."



Rúben Neves fires home  
Wolves' second goal against  
Brentford to keep his side in the  
fight for a top-six place

CLIVE ROSE/GETTY IMAGES

Brentford had looked the more dangerous team until the wind was somewhat taken out of their sails after 20 minutes, when a nasty clash of heads between Rico Henry and Mathias Jensen led to a long delay. Their replacements had been on

## Match numbers

# 8

Newcastle have won eight of their past 12 league visits to Elland Road (D1 L3) and no club have won more Premier League away games at Elland Road than the Magpies (seven, level with Liverpool).

# 40

Leeds have conceded 40 goals in 21 Premier League games this season, the earliest they have shipped 40 or more league goals since 2006-07 in the Championship (also 21 games).

Jonjo Shelvey celebrates his goal with Kieran Trippier as Newcastle win on the road for the first time

SERENA TAYLOR/GETTY; MIKE EGERTON/PA IMAGES

have given them the lead but allowed Fabian Schär, who made some vital interceptions, to block his shot and for all their slickness and quickness the home side failed to work Dubravka hard enough.

If Newcastle invariably looked in trouble whenever Leeds moved the ball wide, Bielsa became agitated every time Allan Saint-Maximin assumed possession. It was far from Saint-Maximin's finest hour but he still fazed a Leeds side unable to capitalise on Jamaal Lascelles's vulnerabilities. Newcastle's captain has not been at his best lately and he forfeited possession too many times for comfort. Indeed, he limped off after apparently pulling a hamstring attempting to retrieve one such concession near the halfway line.

By then Newcastle had already lost Joelinton and Dummett to injury but, for once, their luck was not entirely out. When Diego Llorente dragged back the overlapping Javier Manquillo, on for Dummett, Leeds conceded a free-kick in a dangerous position, just outside the area. Shelvey bent the ball low and its subtle curve evaded the previously assured but horribly wrong-footed Meslier who, having fallen for the deception, could only parry the ball into the back of the net.

Llorente subsequently cleared off the line from Ryan Fraser, Saint-Maximin, forlornly, demanded a penalty after Robin Koch's perceived foul and Meslier kept out Joe Willock's shot out.

In-between these highlights, Newcastle infuriated Bielsa by slowing the game down at every opportunity.

**Leeds**  
**4-1-4-1**  
Meslier; Ayling, Llorente ■, Struijk, Dallas ■; Koch; Raphinha, Küch (Gelhardt 80), Rodrigo ■, Harrison; James ■ (Roberts 71)  
**Subs not used** Klaesson, Bate, Hjelde, McKinstry, McCarron, Moore, Kenneth  
**Referee** Chris Kavanagh **Attendance** 36,405

**Newcastle**  
**4-3-3**  
Dubravka; Trippier, Lascelles (Clark 69), Schär, Dummett ■ (Manquillo 63); Willcock, Shelvey, Joelinton (Longstaff 42); Fraser; Wood, Saint-Maximin ■ **Subs not used** Darlow, Lewis, Hendrick, Murphy, Almirón, Gayle  
**Referee** Chris Kavanagh **Attendance** 36,405

the pitch for less than three minutes when play was stopped again, although this time it was due to the drone loitering overhead. The stadium announcer confirmed that the players would have to leave the pitch due to Premier League rules – “don’t blame us, blame the drone” – and it was more than a quarter of an hour before they re-emerged.

Yet aside from a couple of half-chances for Wolves there was not much else to raise the temperature on a cold west London afternoon and, a full 71 minutes after it had kicked off, the first half finally came to an end. It seemed like a bad joke when play was once more delayed at the start of the second period while Bankes adjusted his equipment in the tunnel, with Lage and Frank at least able to see the funny side as they waited patiently on the touchline.

Play finally resumed at just after 4.30pm and it did not take long for Wolves to find the breakthrough thanks to a masterful strike from Moutinho. The Portugal midfielder play a one-two with Nélson Semedo before curling home with the outside of his boot.

The hosts thought they could have had a penalty when Ivan Toney was clattered by José Sá after a free-kick, with replays suggesting Fábio Silva may have nudged the Brentford forward. Both sets of fans had reason to feel aggrieved when Bankes initially showed a red card to Toti Gomes for his foul on Vitaly Janelt before being asked to consult VAR and overturning his decision. But the home supporters' disappointment turned to glee immediately when Toney slammed home Bryan Mbeumo's free-kick on the volley to equalise.

Their joy was shortlived, however, as Wolves kept the ball alive after another attack by the impressive Semedo and Neves was given too much time to pick his spot and seal another crucial victory.

**Brentford**

**3-5-2**

Lössl; Ajer, Jansson ■, Pinnock, Canós (Ghoddos, 83), Jensen (Baptiste 27, Forss 79), Nørgaard ■, Janelt, Henry (Roerslev 26; Wissa 58); Mbeumo, Toney  
**Subs not used** Bidstrup, Sørensen, Stevens, Fernandez  
**Referee** Peter Bankes

**Wolves**

**3-5-2**

Sá ■; Kilman, Coady, Gomes ■; Semedo, Dendoncker, Neves ■, Moutinho, Ait-Nouri; Podence (Trincao 90), Silva (Traoré 75)  
**Subs not used** Chiquinho, Hoever, Marçal, Jordão, Ruddy, Giles, Cundle  
**Referee** Peter Bankes

# Van Dijk is constant rock in Klopp's shift from high-rollers to roundheads

With two of their potent strikers absent, Liverpool have become reliant on clean sheets and solidity to keep up in the title race, writes Richard Jolly

Liverpool's January always promised to revolve around African attackers. Just not Daniel Udoh, perhaps. And yet, should they keep a fourth consecutive clean sheet against Crystal Palace today, Shrewsbury's Nigerian target man will retain his distinction as the only player to score against them while Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mané were at the Africa Cup of Nations.

Liverpool could get through what threatened to be the most problematic period of their season unscathed. While Diogo Jota's double against Arsenal booked their place in the Carabao Cup final and suggested the Portuguese had found a way of compensating for his fellow forwards' absence, Jürgen Klopp argues that Salah and Mané have been replaced in part by stoppers, not scorers.

Udoh struck for Shrewsbury in the FA Cup but Liverpool allowed Arsenal and Brentford four shots on target in 270 minutes of football. Their defence has provided sturdy foundations that have assumed still greater significance.

“It’s the only way you can do it,” Klopp says. “When you lose key players for injuries or tournaments or whatever, then the solution is not that you will be flying in the next game. It’s not that you say: ‘OK, now we will score five or six and create chances like hell.’”

Liverpool’s reputation as adventurers precedes them, burnished by winning 7-0 on their last trip to Selhurst Park. Klopp believes his side are more cautious than kamikaze. “It was 100% clear that we need to be rock solid,” he says. “Maybe you don’t see it all the time but we are defending first.”

“We have to be organised: that’s the basis for everything we do. And in this moment, I can see outstanding commitment to our defending. Everybody is 100% involved in everything because they understand it’s now more important than ever. That’s helpful that we didn’t concede then.”

“It’s not that you fly through every period of a season with 3-0, 4-0 or

5-0 results; you have to win football games 1-0.”

The cornerstone of that defence has been the constant. Two years ago, it was unsurprising that Virgil van Dijk was ever-present. His campaign last season was curtailed by a cruciate ligament injury in October 2020 and Klopp spoke of the need to ease him back into action slowly.

But while he has rested the Dutchman in the Champions League and the centre-back missed two league games because of Covid, he has played every minute of the other 19 matches. Only one man has been on the pitch throughout all of Liverpool’s games since Christmas in all competitions: Van Dijk.

Klopp believes his season has been a triumph of Van Dijk’s intelligence and adaptability. “Virg had to learn a lot of things,” he says. “Some physical things are just not available like they were before; they came back but not from the first day. You have to adapt.”

“I’ve had injuries myself and you cannot ignore that. When you are an intelligent person like Virg you can’t ignore everything or say: ‘Who cares?’ The way back to your best is a bumpy one and he did exceptionally well.”

His forward line have also had to adjust. Liverpool were forewarned they would lose two of their front three. Yet that did not make it easier to prepare.

“While they are still here, do we train like they are not here?” Klopp says. “That makes no sense. So when they are gone we have three days until the next game: it makes it really tricky.”

“Players of their quality, you don’t replace like this,” he says, clicking his fingers. “I look forward to when they are back but I like as well the response of the squad I was never in doubt that it was possible. I know we can do it without them. Do I want to always do it without them? No.”

A game Klopp has termed a final has a finality: the last without Salah and Mané. Even with them, Liverpool will be outsiders in a title race that has runaway favourites in the shape of Manchester City.

“We cannot influence a slip from City,” Klopp says. “If I sat here and said: ‘I can smell it, we’ll get them,’ that would be really crazy. If I sit here and say: ‘We don’t even try,’ that would be crazy as well.”

If some of Klopp’s most famous deeds have contained a hint of the illogical and the implausible, the master of chaos has embraced order and organisation as he emphasises the pragmatic formula of clean sheets and solidity.



# Spurs' battling defeat of Foxes can be turning point for canny Conte

**Jonathan Liew**

Demanding Italian has a history of being strict then reaping the rewards – and the tough love is starting to work

It felt like an end, not a beginning. Internazionale had just gone 2-0 down at home to Torino with half an hour to play and, as the camera panned to the touchline, Antonio Conte bore the expression of a man who had accepted an invitation to dinner only to discover that the menu would be entirely vegan. His side had won three of their opening seven games of the 2020-21 season and were eighth in Serie A. The prospect of mounting any sort of challenge for the scudetto seemed laughably remote.

At which point, something stirring and strange happened. Alexis Sánchez pulled one back after a goal-mouth scramble. Romelu Lukaku bundled in a scruffy equaliser and then converted a contentious penalty with six minutes remaining.

Inter ended up winning 4-2 and with the benefit of hindsight – because who can really know these things at the time? – it was the point when all the pieces began to fall into place. Powered by the raw fumes of that comeback Inter went on a run of seven more straight wins that would set them on course for their first title in 11 years.

This is one of the hallmarks of Conte's most successful teams: the moment when they seem at their weakest is the moment from which they draw their greatest strength. At



**Despite Conte's reputation as a quick-fix coach, his methods rarely bear immediate fruit**

4.30pm Sky Sports  
**Chelsea v Tottenham**

some indeterminate point, whether through circumstance or epiphany, everything just clicks. The origins of Conte's 2016-17 title win with Chelsea came in a famous half-time tactical switch during a 3-0 defeat to Arsenal. It was a 4-1 mauling against Germany that convinced Conte to try the 3-5-2 system that ended up taking Italy to the quarter-finals of Euro 2016.

As Conte's Tottenham pulled off a remarkable 3-2 victory at Leicester on Wednesday, it was tempting to wonder whether we were witnessing another such moment. Trailing 2-1 five minutes into stoppage time, Tottenham improbably stole all three

points with two Steven Bergwijn goals, igniting uncontrolled celebrations in the away end, on the pitch and on the touchline.

For a club that has spent much of the past three years in a sort of waking sleep, this felt new and bracing. Would we look back on those two wild minutes as the point the Conte revolution finally began to take flight?

The first thing to say is that Tottenham have been playing decent football for a while now. It may be hard to unpick all the various narrative strands: the Covid interruptions, the humiliation at NS Mura, the elimination from Europe, twice

being outclassed by Chelsea in the Carabao Cup, Conte grumbling about transfers, the slow egress of the club's record signing, Tangy Ndombele.

But in a parallel universe, Tottenham are yet to lose in the Premier League under Conte. Only Manchester City have won more points a game since his arrival. Even before the Miracle of the King Power, the foundations of a resurgence were being built.

But all good uprisings need an origin story, a moment of growth, and this is where Conte comes in. For all his reputation as a quick-fix, shock-therapy coach, his methods rarely

## Impatient Tuchel says the fight goes on

'We don't have time and I don't want to wait,' says the Chelsea manager.  
Jacob Steinberg reports

Thomas Tuchel has said he is "awfully impatient" and does not want to be given time to turn Chelsea into title contenders. Their hopes of catching Manchester City this season are all but over and they are in danger of being dragged into another top-four battle before hosting Tottenham today.

Chelsea have won four of their past 13 league games and Spurs, who have four in hand on their London rivals, will close the gap to five points if they win at Stamford Bridge.

The pressure on Tuchel has increased, though history shows that Chelsea's problems are not solely down to him. They have not challenged for the title since

winning it under Antonio Conte in 2017 and have become more effective in cup competitions.

They face Liverpool in the final of the Carabao Cup next month and Tuchel, who has been in the job for a year, won the Champions League four months after replacing Frank Lampard last season.

That success seemed to suggest that Chelsea were ready to overtake City, the beaten Champions League finalists, but it is interesting to note that Lampard said Chelsea were not ready to challenge for the title this time last year. Little has changed since then.

The European champions lack continuity because of their cycle of hiring and firing managers,

although Tuchel does not want to use that as an excuse. The German struck a defiant tone when he was asked if it is going to be a slow process for Chelsea, who have not built their squad as smoothly as City and Liverpool.

"Maybe, but we will never accept it," Tuchel said. "Even myself, I will always fight against it. I never said it and even if I can see the reason behind it, that we need time, time, time, we don't have time and I don't want to wait."

"I am awfully impatient and this is part of what drives me and part of what brings me to a great opportunity – to be part of a club like Chelsea."

"I think we are competitive. I

think we know what it takes and we have what it takes to challenge for the title."

Tuchel, who was in an irritable mood when Chelsea drew 1-1 at Brighton on Tuesday, suggested injuries, a draining fixture list and Covid absences have been key to his side's slump. "We could not influence the circumstances and we struggled there. I could feel on Tuesday the disappointment from the players, also from me, that we are in the stage where we are right at this moment."

"But it does not help. We still

► Thomas Tuchel has had to contend with an injury crisis, fixture congestion and a Covid outbreak



◆ Steven Bergwijn struck twice at Leicester as Spurs pulled off a remarkable 3-2 win that included players on the fringes brought back into the first-team fold

ROB NEWELL/CAMERASPORT VIA GETTY IMAGES

◆ Antonio Conte salutes the Spurs fans. Today's London derby against Chelsea will show how far his team has come

SIMON STACPOOLE/OFFSIDE VIA GETTY IMAGES



bear immediate fruit. Indeed, the early days of a Conte stewardship are often rich in conflict and reluctance, the sound of an expert Italian bullshit-detector sniffing around the place and deciding who needs to stay, who needs to go and who needs a double dose of yo-yo tests and a strict keto diet.

"Better to create a deep wound that will lead to an even deeper healing," Conte's fitness coach, Giampiero Ventrone, told *FourFourTwo* in 2017. "The bigger the disruption, the better the results. At first the impact is severe: the players react badly. But after two or three months the situation changes. While the player is complaining, there's a change in him that will ultimately lead to improvement. The results arrive."

The sight of Ventrone screaming at Tottenham's fringe players as he put them through a series of gruelling post-match sprints early in the Conte reign offers just a hint of the confrontational leadership to which the squad has already been subjected. But the remoulding process goes beyond simple physical coercion and is much more dialectic than is often assumed.

Tactically and psychologically, Conte tries to drill a win-at-all-costs habit into his players. But only when that improvement is borne out in the shape of tangible results does it really begin to make sense. Until then, it's just a very angry middle-aged man shouting about spaces and desire.

This is why the Leicester game felt like such a watershed. From front to back – and with the caveat that they still look defensively brittle – Tottenham demonstrated a vigour and purpose that was painfully absent during Nuno Espírito Santo's miserable tenure. The sight of Harry Kane getting off 10 shots – many of them admittedly stupid efforts from distance – was nevertheless a sign the England captain may just have begun to back himself again.

Tottenham visit Stamford Bridge today. It is the third time these teams have met in the space of three weeks and on the first two occasions the gulf between them was sharply evident. By the same token these are two clubs on very different trajectories: one doubting themselves, one believing.

Are Tottenham still imprisoned by their flaws or have they really turned the corner? This afternoon seems as good a time as any to find out.

are obliged and it is our duty to have full commitment – by full I mean 100% – to what we do and to what we believe and to how we do things. The rest will take care of itself.

"I love the team, I love all the players and I love the club. It's on us to bring out the very best in ourselves.

Where this is over the last weeks, it depends on the circumstances. But we will always try.

"The next game is always the most important. Everything has huge influence. With me, we will never start prioritising. We will never start judging the importance of games."



## Serie A

Stefano Pioli is full of praise for the character and calmness of Fikayo Tomori



tenure of his predecessor, Marco Giampaolo. Pioli's first triumph may simply have been reminding his young players to have fun.

"Having fun is fundamental. That's a thing that we look for. We try to be as serious as possible, committed and professional. But football is passion, enjoyment."

Pioli was supposed to be a caretaker. Milan lined up Ralf Rangnick to replace him in the summer of 2020, only to change their minds as performances improved. Instead, the club doubled down on Pioli, supporting him with further signings. Last January, Fikayo Tomori arrived from Chelsea – initially on a six-month loan.

"I had watched videos and seen impressive characteristics," says Pioli. "But Fika was a positive surprise in every way. On a footballing level, because he is a defender who has characteristics the team needed – aggression, pace, a capacity to read the game. Then he is an extremely serious lad, extremely calm."

"We were talking before about how you motivate a player. With Fika it was easy because he is always determined, always enthusiastic, always positive, always attentive."

The admiration is mutual. Tomori has spoken about how much he appreciates Pioli's attention to detail, working on specifics of his positioning.

After finishing as runners-up to Internazionale in Serie A last season, Milan find themselves in a familiar position, second behind their neighbours. They missed a chance to go top when they lost to Spezia on Monday. Milan were denied a late winning goal when the referee blew his whistle prematurely, instead of playing advantage after Ante Rebic was fouled (Spezia scored a late winner of their own deep into stoppage time).

Even in defeat, the manager found encouragement in the response of players, accepting responsibility instead of berating the official.

"The behaviour of my players was immense," he says. "They showed respect for sporting values and towards a person who made a mistake. In sport, we all commit mistakes. That should not make us feel superior to, nor less worthy than, anyone else."

Milan's next game is at home to Juventus tonight. Then comes the derby with Inter. Pioli calls it "not a decisive moment, but an important one". His target is for Milan to improve on the 79 points they finished with last season. He had hoped for a better showing in the Champions League, his team finishing bottom of their group behind Liverpool, Atlético Madrid and Porto, but he is able to see the glass half full – highlighting strong performances against the Spanish champions and that many Milan players were making their debut in the competition.

"My young footballers are growing well," he says. "But soon it is going to be time to stop calling them young footballers, and just call them footballers, ready to compete at certain levels."

Pioli is a parent with high expectations. If his mother can still scold him after all these years, there is no chance of his players getting an easy ride now.

# 'I move past the value of a player and get through to the person'

**Stefano Pioli has revived Milan's fortunes but still has to contend with his mother's criticism, he tells Nicky Bandini**

Stefano Pioli led Milan back to the promised land, guiding a team that used to define themselves by continental conquests to a first Champions League qualification in eight years, but even that could not save him from parental criticism. If the *Rossoneri* end this season without a trophy, his mother will be waiting to remind him, again, that he has won no major silverware in two decades of senior club management.

"Definitely. Yes, definitely," he says. "And it's right that she does. In every family there is the hard one and the soft one. My father was the softer one, my mum is the very tough one. That's how it should be. That's how you get the most out of someone."

A discussion of parenting styles feels like a necessary step toward understanding Pioli's rise. So many players have described him as like a father – from the Milan midfielder Sandro Tonali to the Fiorentina striker Dusan Vlahovic – that you start to think he should write books on how to raise your young ones.

"I do try to look beyond the surface," he says. "To move past the value of a player and get through to the person. Even if these are young lads who we would call fortunate, they are still young lads with their own lives, their own emotional triggers, personal ties, difficulties."

He is not one to mollycoddle. If anything, Pioli believes he is more like

his mum. "I don't tolerate mediocrity," he says. "And I don't tolerate us failing to strain to get better."

"If I see players who are demanding of themselves, who are getting better through their own attitude, their own work, then I become more of a, I wouldn't say a friend, but I give positive support. When I don't see that level of strain, I have to ask more."

Pioli was the right man at the right moment for Milan, a nurturing presence at a time when they were rejuvenating their squad. The club had gone through a series of clumsy transitions before his appointment in October 2019; sold by Silvio Berlusconi to the enigmatic Li Yonghong, who ceded control within two years to a hedge fund, Elliott Management, after defaulting on a loan.

There were chaotic spending sprees, with close to €100m splurged in the summer of 2018 on players who did not stick. Only in the past three years can we observe a more coherent policy of recruiting young talent to develop alongside the occasional veteran, such as Zlatan Ibrahimovic, who can offer leadership beyond their contribution on the pitch.

Pioli inherited a group with potential, including a midfield pairing of Franck Kessié and Ismaël Bennacer, Theo Hernández at left-back and Gianluigi Donnarumma in goal. None of it had looked all that promising, though, during the seven-game

**'It is soon time to stop calling them young footballers, and just call them footballers, ready to compete'**  
**Stefano Pioli**

# Wilder's Boro reboot: 'He doesn't like sloppy – he'll nail you for that'

**Local boy Dael Fry has been a key figure in surge to sixth under their new manager, writes Louise Taylor**

Dael Fry tries his best to remain measured but before long candour prevails. "Everyone's really excited," says Middlesbrough's former England Under-21s centre-half. "The atmosphere around the place is absolutely fantastic. Everyone's buzzing, everyone in the town's talking about promotion."

Since Chris Wilder succeeded Neil Warnock as manager in early November, Boro have collected 20 points from nine league games, rising from 15th to sixth in the Championship. They travel to third-place Blackburn, coached by their former captain, manager and enduring hero Tony Mowbray, tomorrow aiming to reinforce realistic automatic promotion hopes.

Wilder does not really do coy and he has duly galvanised his players with sometimes brutal honesty and vaulting ambition. Euphemism is out as the former Sheffield United manager's brand of high-energy, high-pressing football revitalises Boro's squad in front of steadily rising attendances at the Riverside.

At this rate there should be no need for Steve Gibson to pursue any more lawsuits of the sort the Boro's owner is engaged in with his attempt to

extract about £40m in compensation from Derby, arguing their circumvention of the EFL's financial fair play rules denied his club a play-off place in 2018-19.

To many neutrals – not to mention Boro fans – Gibson's legal action against a club now under real threat of extinction seems as ill-advised as his decision, in 2009, to sack Gareth Southgate as manager and replace him with Gordon Strachan.

Overall, though, the owner has got much more right than wrong at the Riverside and, more than a decade on from the Strachan nadir, Wilder among his most inspired manoeuvres.

Seven wins from the past eight games in all competitions have certainly vindicated the decision to switch to a back three increasingly accomplished at moving forward with the ball.

If that rearguard is not quite a mirror image of Sheffield United's overlapping centre-halves, there are distinct similarities.

"Chris has brought that style of play here," says Fry, who generally operates alongside Paddy McNair and Anfernee Dijksteel in a defensive

**'Wilder said he would make me a better player and he's done it. He's given me a lot of confidence'**  
**Dael Fry**

Boro's Chris Wilder 'makes everything seem so simple; everybody knows exactly what they are doing'

ALEX DODD/CAMERASPORT VIA GETTY IMAGES



trinity adept at stepping upfield. "We're all comfortable on the ball and we're moving it across the back quickly.

"We're encouraged to create attacks but, at the same time, we can't forget our main job is defending. Chris makes sure he gets that message drilled into us.

"He doesn't want us doing Cruyff turns but I've always known I could play out from the back. When I was going away with England when I was a bit younger you had to pass through the lines and when Chris came in he told me that's what he wants me to do now.

"He said he'd make me a better player and he's done it. He's given me a lot of confidence, this is the most enjoyable style of football I've ever played."

Wilder has also made a certain C-word taboo. "At the start of the season we were a little bit inconsistent, we'd win one game but then lose two," says Fry, who hopes to be marking Cristiano Ronaldo when Boro visit Manchester United in the fourth round of the FA Cup next month. "So the manager's taught us not to be complacent or get too ahead of ourselves.

"Even on the training pitch, if there's something he doesn't like or that he thinks is sloppy, he'll make sure he tells us and we put it right, straightaway. It's always about keeping your standards high every day and making sure you take that in to games. If you don't, he'll nail you in the dressing room. The mentality's really changed, we're consistent and seeing out games now."

As at Sheffield United, most training sessions are conducted by Wilder's assistant, Alan Knill. "He's been very good," says Fry. "He makes everything seem so simple; everybody knows exactly what they're doing."

Such clarity of thought is perhaps heightened by an awareness that competition for places has intensified. Kieran Scott, Boro's director of football, remains busy, with the acquisition of the strikers Folarin Balogun and Aaron Connolly on loan, from Arsenal and Brighton respectively, and the signing of the Australia midfielder Riley McGree from MLS Charlotte FC, enhancing a newfound sense of expanding horizons.

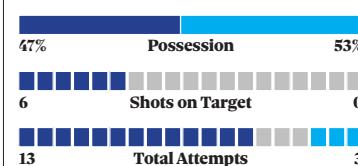
For the first time since Boro won promotion in 2016, supporters are daring to dream that a Premier League place could soon be within touching distance.

"It feels a bit like the year we got promoted last time, I know we're going to give it a really good go," says Fry. "We can't get ahead of ourselves, it's important not to become complacent but coming from Middlesbrough I feel so proud to be part of this team."



## Johnson sinks battling Derby as chaos reigns on and off the pitch

2	NOTTM FOREST Grabban 48, Johnson 82	1	DERBY Lawrence 88pen
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**Peter Lansley**  
*City Ground*

Nottingham Forest's push for a place in the play-offs was boosted by a dominant second-half display illuminated by goals from Lewis Grabban and Brennan Johnson but the only way Derby will be going

down is with a fight. Tom Lawrence's late penalty gave Wayne Rooney's team a whiff of yet another comeback before Ravel Morrison's stoppage-time dismissal for a lunge on Philip Zinckernagel sparked one melee and the final whistle another, for which the former Manchester United player came back on to the field to join in.

Forest's third successive win extended the longest unbeaten league run in this fixture in history to nine games and while they aspire to playing their next east Midlands derby against Leicester in the Premier League next season, Derby would at the moment probably settle for knowing they will survive liquidation in order to play Burton in League One.

Derby's hopes of staying in business beyond 1 February were boosted on the eve of the game by news of a firm £28m bid from the

## Roundup

### Fulham march on to go eight points clear

Fulham extended their lead at the top of the Championship with a thrilling 3-2 win at Stoke.

There was an explosive start inside two minutes, with Rodrigo Muniz cancelling out D'Margio Wright-Phillips's first senior goal for Stoke. Fábio Carvalho's eighth goal of the season put Fulham ahead after 33 minutes. Lewis Baker levelled with

a 58th-minute goal on his debut after his free transfer from Chelsea, but Bobby Decordova-Reid secured Fulham's fourth straight win.

Marco Silva, Fulham's manager, said: "Stoke are always hard to beat but we showed we have the character to be top of this league."

Bournemouth are eight points adrift of Fulham after a surprise 1-0 home defeat by Hull. Ryan Longman curled home the winner 13 minutes from time. The Bournemouth manager, Scott Parker, said: "Today is a real wake-up call for me. We lacked everything I want my team to stand for."

Albert Adomah struck late as fourth-placed QPR won 2-1 at Coventry. Andre Gray's early opener



Nottingham Forest's Brennan Johnson slides in to double his side's advantage in a fiery east Midlands derby

in this week. I take care of the football and they take care of the business.

"Of course we have players lined up: we have to keep doing our job whether that's reality or not. We have seen players who would like to play for Derby and there is one here today at Forest."

Lawrence, who after last week's match-winning performance against Sheffield United gave Derby late hope here after he was scythed down by Steve Cook in the 87th minute, should have scored early on but slotted wide after a neat one-two with Colin Kazim-Richards.

Steve Cooper changed the game by moving Ryan Yates out of a five-man defence into midfield, and after a cautious first half Forest took charge.

"They didn't press us as much as we thought so that's why we had to change it tactically," the Forest manager said. "With the [personnel] we field, we can play two formations, basically around Yates's role, and we looked in complete control from then on. We were worthy winners."

Three minutes into the second half the game caught fire. Scott McKenna headed James Garner's free-kick back into the middle for Keinan Davis to tee up Cook. His blocked shot fell for Grabban to score for the third successive game.

Red flares sparked in the Bridgford End and police had to intervene as rival fans sought to get closer. "Derby are going down with a fiver in the bank," gloated home fans.

Garner helped set up the decisive goal as his nonchalant pass ushered Zinckernagel down the left and from the substitute's low cross, Johnson slid home his seventh goal of the season. These clubs may be heading in opposite directions, but on this showing there is plenty of life left in both of them.

Nottingham Forest	Derby
<b>3-4-1-2</b>	<b>4-4-1-1</b>
Samba; Yates, Cook, McKenna; Spence, Garner, Colback, Lowe; Grabban (Taylor 84); Johnson, Davis (Zinckernagel 68)	Altissop, Byrne, Stearman, Davies, Buchanan; Ebosale (Morrison 59), Bird, Thompson (Sibley 78), Knight; Lawrence; Kazim-Richards (Plange 59) Subs not used Roos, Forsyth, Jozwiak, Cashin
<b>Subs not used</b> Horvath, Figueiredo, Bong, Cafu, Silva	<b>Subs not used</b> Roos, Forsyth, Jozwiak, Cashin
Referee Tim Robinson Attendance 29,256	

Referee Tim Robinson Attendance 29,256

was cancelled out by Jordan Shipley before Adomah made it four consecutive league wins for QPR.

West Brom stay fifth as goals from Cédric Kipré, his first for Albion, Karlan Grant and Grady Diangana in the final 12 minutes sealed a 3-0 home win over Peterborough.

Danny Ward scored a hat-trick as Huddersfield won 4-3 at Reading, where six goals came in an action-packed first half, while Chris Martin struck twice

Bobby Decordova-Reid is delighted with his winning goal for Fulham at Stoke



as Bristol City came from behind to beat Cardiff 3-2.

Onel Hernández and Scott Hogan were on target as Birmingham claimed a first win since the end of November with a 2-1 home victory over Barnsley while Sheffield United beat 10-man Luton 2-0 at Bramall Lane thanks to goals from Rhian Brewster and Jack Robinson. Ryan Manning's thunderbolt saw Swansea defeat Preston 1-0, their first victory in five games, and Shayne Lavery's second-half goal earned Blackpool a 1-0 win over Millwall. PA Media

## Barclays Women's Super League

# Eidevall excited to blood new Arsenal talent for challenge of flying City

Manager insists struggling leaders are confident before crunch clash, writes Maryam Naz

Jonas Eidevall likes challenges so the Arsenal manager must be looking forward to today's task in hand. The WSL leaders have suffered a dramatic loss of form since December and face a Manchester City side that are on a six-game winning streak. Eidevall, under pressure after a run of one win in five games, promised Arsenal were going "to bring everything" to the game at City's Academy Stadium.

"Playing matches against Manchester City really excites me," he said. "It's a great football team. I like challenges in football, I like playing against good teams."

City are definitely a good team at the moment, having scored 25 goals in those six wins, conceding only three, and are clearly capable of damaging Eidevall's title ambitions. Arsenal are still four points clear at the top of the table but second-placed Chelsea have a game in hand.

Eidevall insisted his players are in good spirits, bolstered by the return of Lia Wälti and Lotte Wubben-Moy from injury, and that he can give his trio of January signings – Stina Blackstenius, Laura Wienroither and Rafaelle Souza – their league debuts. "I wouldn't say that I would experience any problem with the spirit," Eidevall said of his squad. "We know what we need to do better, we know what we need to develop and I feel we're all very committed to carrying on with that."

He pinpointed the attack as key to Arsenal finding form again, hoping that Tobin Heath and Vivianne Miedema can cause City problems. "We only got to see a glimpse of Tobin before she was injured. The way we played at home at Hoffenheim was our best performance [of the season] and she was a big part of that."

The US international can contribute in both attack and defence, meaning better support for Miedema. "Viv is perfect with her

movement" Eidevall said. "She has real moments of high quality on the left. However, we are playing the ball towards her where there is no space or numerical superiority. On those occasions, we need a much better support structure."

The Dutch striker's connection with the centre-back Leah Williamson may once again be tweaked. "Keep the combination play on with the full-backs but if it is not on, we might need her lower on the pitch for central overload."

Miedema's movement is a focal point for both attack and defence, ensuring that Arsenal do not allow City's most important players to flex their muscles. The high press on opposition defences from the attack, evident during Joe Montemurro's tenure, is still alive and kicking.

It will be an intriguing game, not least because of City's return to form after a poor start to the season. They are playing at home for the first time in two months and there is a confidence about returning to the Academy Stadium.

Leading their charge is Georgia Stanway, who has scored in five consecutive league games and is

**'We're high on confidence, but we understand the game isn't won on confidence alone'**  
Gareth Taylor

staking her claim for a place in the starting XI. The City manager, Gareth Taylor, said: "We want to get her up as high as possible. We've seen her enthusiasm and tenacity on the pitch.

"We're high on confidence at the moment but we understand the game isn't won on confidence alone. We want to dominate as much as we can and that comes down to small details."

Those small details could be anything from playing Stanway further up, the return of Lucy Bronze from injury, or even a change in Arsenal's attacking methods – all of which Taylor says is likely to make it a tight game.

City are without their first-choice keeper, Ellie Roebuck, with Karima Benamer set to play. Taylor, however, is confident his team will benefit from having Bronze – and Steph Houghton – return and that his defence will be up for the challenge. "They give you big presence on the pitch – they are big-game players and we've seen that," he said. "Those players being involved helps the rest of the team. We have a bit more support now in a number of areas."



Jonas Eidevall says there is no problem with the spirit in the Arsenal squad despite a run of one win in five

DAVID PRICE/ARSENAL FC/GETTY IMAGES

# 'Panicked' Evans blown away by fast-improving Auger-Aliassime

**Tumaini  
Carayol**  
Melbourne Park



Last Briton standing in the singles says 'I missed my chance' against maturing Canadian one year after thrashing his 21-year-old rival

Over the last few years, the very best he has produced, Dan Evans has grown accustomed to the sensation of being the last British man standing in any given tournament. Plenty of times he has soared, but yesterday evening his game crumbled before the John Cain Arena crowd.

Evans's Australian Open ended in brutal fashion at the hands of an efficient and mature Félix Auger-Aliassime. The ninth seed withstood early pressure and then picked Evans apart by the end, winning 6-4, 6-1, 6-1 to reach the fourth round at the tournament for the first time.

Afterwards, Evans noted the quality of Auger-Aliassime's play but he was, as ever, honest in his assessment of his performance. "I panicked on the court," Evans said. "It was total. I missed my chance and I panicked a bit and that happens in tennis. I'm not going to sit here and say he was too good. I panicked and I felt that."

There was reason for Evans to believe that he could engineer a better ending. He has started the year strongly, winning his first five matches across the ATP Cup and a Sydney semi-final run. When he and

Auger-Aliassime met in the final of the Murray River Open played at Melbourne Park last year, Evans steamrolled Auger-Aliassime 6-2, 6-3.

After his easy first-round win over David Goffin, Evans' second-round opponent, Arthur Rinderknech, withdrew on the morning of their match. Evans initially thought it was a great slice of luck but the break ultimately worked against him, robbing him of his rhythm and leaving him with extra time to overthink his third-round match. He had never experienced this situation in a major.

"I'm not making excuses but it wasn't easy to have a walkover and I sort of lost my momentum a little bit and I never had that before, two days off," he said. "It was difficult. I thought about the match quite a lot and probably overthought it. And to be honest, he was way better than me as well. But I think I didn't get my game on court."

The first set played out to an unusual soundtrack, a concert across the Melbourne Park grounds, with the off-pitch belts of a cover singer botching Beatles and Elton John songs. "I don't know what that was, but actually, they should have kept it on," said

Evans, smiling. "I played better with it on. No, it was probably the best part of the match, listening to that, I think Rocket Man by Elton John."

In the early stages, Evans appeared to have settled well. He attempted to pin Auger-Aliassime in his backhand corner with his backhand slice, complicating the Canadian's attempts to dominate with his inside-out forehand while looking to expose Auger-Aliassime's impatience. He was initially successful, yielding early break points at 2-2 and 4-4.

But the 21-year-old is a different player to the youngster who froze in their final a year ago. He is now consistently making deep runs in big events, having reached the Wimbledon quarter-finals and US Open semi-finals in his most recent majors. His experience is growing and he sits at a career high of No 9 after leading Canada to victory in the ATP Cup. "I think I'm just more relaxed and more composed and have better self-confidence that I can go into second week, I can go into quarters or more," he said.

Under pressure in the first set, Auger-Aliassime served extremely



well and directed his forehand with clarity to hold serve twice from break point down. Then, at 5-4, Auger-Aliassime landed returns, demonstrated his improved shot tolerance by grinding out errors from the Briton and reached set point at 30-40. Evans responded by dumping a routine forehand drive volley into the net.

**'I'm not making excuses but it wasn't easy to have a walkover and I sort of lost my momentum'**

Dan Evans

## Sabalenka solves fault lines to end with a smile

**Emma Kemp**  
Melbourne Park

Aryna Sabalenka threw her hands into the air, clapped them together and then punched the sky. "I'm really happy," she said, "and mostly really happy that I made only 10 double-faults."

She was laughing, the crowd was laughing and cheering. Marketa Vondrousova was probably doing neither, having lost the third-round showdown despite starting the stronger. The No 31 seed had taken the opening set, just as Sabalenka's previous two Australian Open opponents had done. In much the same manner as those matches, the world No 2 had closed out the contest with ease.

"It feels like I'm warming up in the first set and then I start playing," she said. "I really want to win it in two sets and that's why I'm getting so emotional on the first set and that's why I'm over-thinking and I'm missing a lot."

"After the first set when you're losing, you're: 'OK, maybe I don't have to overhit or panic like [I did] earlier.'

At Margaret Court Arena she finished almost flawlessly, which



will not be lost on the Estonian Kaia Kanepi, who will face her in the last 16 after beating the Australian wildcard Maddison Inglis.

Vondrousova broke Sabalenka twice in the opening set. Sabalenka, though, started landing the big first serves for which she is known. Vondrousova found herself on the back foot, forced to take more risks than desired and finding not enough were paying off.

The past few months Sabalenka has relied on other areas of her generally imposing game to compensate for her well-documented serving troubles, which peaked in round two when she served 19 double-faults against Wang Xinyu, including six in her opening service game. Ten against Vondrousova bring her tournament tally to 41.

She spent much of the off-season

working on this and accepted help from Mark Philippoussis this month after 38 double-faults in her opening two losses of the season in Adelaide.

"It's more mental," she said. "Because I put a lot of pressure on myself about my serve and the last matches I was trying to control everything on my serve; my legs, my arm, the ball toss."

"I was overthinking, so I just

stopped thinking. Like today, for example, I was focusing only on the good jump and that's it. Because I have this muscle memory and I just trust myself today, much more than in the first matches."

That trust will be put to the test against Kanepi, who relied on her own resilience to go the distance against Inglis.

The Western Australian, who has never progressed past the first round of a grand slam, appeared to be on her way to a stunning upset when she stole the first set in emphatic fashion. But it was short-lived and her failure to hold serve for seven straight games gave Kanepi the ascendancy to win 2-6, 6-2, 6-0.

"This week, I really proved to myself and to the people around me that I do have it in me," Inglis said. "Belief does a lot for your game and how you play."

It followed the day's trend of comebacks in the women's singles, with America's Danielle Collins prevailing 4-6, 6-4, 7-5 after losing the first set to the emerging Dane Clara Tauson and the French veteran





## Guinness Six Nations

# France favourites to harvest rewards after golden autumn

Five teams have a chance to win northern hemisphere's annual tournament while Italy will only improve under their new coach

**Andy Bull**



Twickenham Stadium has a particular smell on a game day. It's the fug of sweat and condensed breath when you're pressed up close, sizzling sausages and onions, spilled beer, mud, waxed jackets and, when it's raining, of wet wool. You used to catch gusts of cigar smoke, too, until they banned smoking. I never thought I would miss it particularly, but round about now anything that offers a hint of spring is welcome. After the past two years, when the Six Nations lost so much of its colour and fun while it was being played in empty stadiums, the prospect of having it back again feels pretty good.

That's the thing other fans never understand. When people say the Six Nations is the best tournament in the world, they are not talking about the quality of the rugby but everything around it: the good cheer and bellyfuls of beer, the walk down Whitton Road, the Royal Welsh's regimental goat, the first burst of La Marseillaise and (better yet for everyone else) the way the French

will hoot and whistle their own team when they're losing, the painfully slow going of the opposition coach when stuck behind the pipe band on a slate-grey day at Murrayfield, The Fields of Athenry, the uproar in Cardiff city centre.

It will be enough to have all that back or as much of it as the restrictions on travelling fans allow. But this year, as it happens, the rugby is shaping up to be pretty good too.

Just ask Eddie Jones. He used to cross his fingers when asked about that view of the tournament. "When I started six years ago, they were always talking about how it's 'the greatest rugby tournament in the world,'" he told me last month. "And you know probably under my breath I was saying: 'I don't think that's the case,' but now I don't think there's any debate."

Well, maybe Jones would say that given England finished fifth in 2021, but even the people who take most of what he says with a pinch of salt will agree he has a point. This tournament is set to be the most competitive in years.

**The talk was always about how this was the best tournament in the world. Now there's no debate'**

Eddie Jones

England's Maro Itoje, Charles Ollivon of France and the Ireland wing Keith Earls can help to ignite this year's Six Nations

AFP; SHUTTERSTOCK



At the end of November, the northern sides won a clean sweep over the four southern hemisphere teams. England beat South Africa by a point, Wales did the same against Australia, and, in the standout match of the year, France beat New Zealand by 15. It was the first time the three teams had been beaten on the same weekend since 2002.

Scotland, who had defeated Australia a fortnight earlier, beat Japan at Murrayfield. The following day, Ireland, who had beaten the All Blacks the previous week, thrashed Argentina 53-7. If you were a European, it was the best weekend of Test rugby in a very long time.

The world lurched, but it has not turned upside quite yet. South Africa and New Zealand top the rankings and they and Australia, too, had their own good reasons why they underperformed on tour, but there is an undeniable sense of something stirring.

The All Blacks coach, Ian Foster, said at the end of the autumn: "The top six or seven teams in world rugby right now are strong." Jones agrees: "The five bigger countries are all on an upward curve."

Every one of them can beat the other and each will believe they are capable of winning a grand slam, which is precisely why pulling it off has never been harder.

It says a lot about how good France are that they start as clear favourites. The schedule suits them, too, because it begins with home games against Italy and Ireland, who have become quietly formidable under Andy Farrell. They have now won their past eight Tests.

England are intriguing, still rebuilding, and Jones says the question is whether "we can play really good rugby for five games and keep going on the pathway we've set ourselves, with an exciting young group of players, and some older players coming back who want to prove that they can still be the best". Their tournament may turn on whether they can win that first match at Murrayfield.

Scotland are also searching for more consistency. Last year, they did the hard part and won away against England and France but still ended up finishing fourth after they were pipped by Ireland and Wales at home.

Wales, the champions, seem to be struggling, as ever, with a spate of injuries, but so often seem to find a way to win that you would be a fool to write off their chances.

Which leaves Italy and the perennial questions about whether they are worth their place. Only Jones believes they're improving too, under their new coach, Kieran Crowley.

"People shouldn't underestimate what a great job he did for Canada," Jones says. "When I started off with Japan, Canada were ahead of us and he'd done a fantastic job, he got them up to like 12th in the world."

"He will do a great job with Italy because he's had that experience of coaching a tier-two country and he knows how to bring them up."

Spring's a way away yet, but winter's looking up.

## Saints tie called off as Covid cases take grip

Northampton's Champions Cup tie at Racing 92 has been cancelled because of several positive Covid-19 tests in the Saints camp. Tournament organisers European Professional Club Rugby (EPCR) said Racing 92 had been awarded the match 28-0 with five match points.

"EPCR has been informed by Northampton Saints that they have recorded a number of positive test results for Covid-19 among their tournament squad and as a consequence, the club is not in a position to fulfil its Heineken Champions Cup, Round 4 match against Racing 92," said EPCR.

"The Pool A fixture at Paris La Defense Arena is therefore regrettably cancelled with Racing 92 awarded the match on a 28-0, five match points basis, in accordance with the tournament rules.

"EPCR would like to acknowledge the efforts of both clubs to fulfil the fixture, and reiterate that awarding the match to Racing 92 is a measure with the objective of ensuring that all fixtures in the 2021-22 Heineken Champions Cup are accounted for, and not a sanction."

The cancellation ends winless Northampton's hopes of making the Champions Cup last 16 and all but secures Racing finishing top of Group A. The Saints could still qualify for the knockout stage of the European Challenge Cup, with clubs finishing between eighth and 11th dropping into the second-tier competition.

On Friday, the ties between Leicester and Bordeaux-Begles and Toulouse and Cardiff were cancelled because of coronavirus, as was Newcastle's Challenge Cup clash against Toulon.

Elsewhere, Makazole Mapimpi scored a hat-trick as the Sharks climbed to the top of the United Rugby Championship's South African Shield with a thrilling 47-37 win over the Lions in Johannesburg.

Sean Everitt's side fought back from conceding two early tries to emerge with a victory to replace their hosts at the summit after six matches.

Andre Warner and Wandile Simelane touched down inside the opening nine minutes, but the Sharks responded through Aphelele Fassi, Mapimpi (two) and Kerron Van Vuuren to reach half-time at 27-18 up and with a bonus point already in the bag.

Ruben Schoeman, Edwill Van Der Merwe and Morne Van Den Berg crossed for the Lions as they secured a bonus point of their own in the second half, but Mapimpi also completed his hat-trick and Lukhanyo Am went over late on to secure victory.

PA Media

● Jimmy O'Brien runs in his fourth try during Leinster's convincing Champions Cup win at Bath



## Four for O'Brien makes a perfect 10 for Leinster

**7**  
BATH

**64**  
LEINSTER

**Luke McLaughlin**  
Recreation Ground

On a freezing day in Bath, Leinster delivered with ice-cool precision to secure a bonus-point victory before half-time. Jimmy O'Brien scored four of their 10 tries as they boosted their hopes of a favourable draw in the knockout stages of the Champions Cup.

If there was a positive for the hosts, they displayed no lack of spirit or effort, but were hopelessly out-classed by a team crammed with international quality.

The Bath head coach, Neal Hatley, had likened the Leinster fly-half, Jonathan Sexton, to Yoda before kick-off, with England's new recruit Orlando Bailey in the role of Luke Skywalker: a box office duel between opposing No 10s.

It was a catchy line but there could be no question which player had demonstrated true mastery of their art. Sexton was sublime, as he so often is: passing and kicking with relentless accuracy and variation, unleashing Leinster's glittering array of attacking talent, leaving Bath bereft.

"He has a smile on his face in the dressing room," said Leinster's head coach, Leo Cullen, of Sexton.

"He was gutted missing out on selection for the Lions and we're definitely the beneficiaries of that. He kept himself in tip-top shape ... you can see he's a little bit rejuvenated."

Before last week's 13-try demolition of Montpellier, Leinster had not played for five weeks due

to Covid-19-related disruption and if Cullen wished to see his defence properly tested he got his wish in the first 10 minutes. Bath tore into the contest, but the visitors held firm and after an initial spell of pressure it was mostly one-way traffic.

Leinster appeared to have taken the lead when O'Brien dotted down after Sexton's grubber kick. But after a lengthy TMO review, Jordan Larmour was correctly adjudged to have pulled back Bath's Max Clark.

A deafening mixture of laughter and disbelief from the home support, watching replays on the big screen, seemed to prompt a rethink from the Italian referee, Andrea Piardi.

It remained scoreless after 15 minutes and things were starting to warm up when Bath's Sam Underhill took a bang to the head and was taken off. The hosts had also lost their No 8, Josh Bayliss, to injury a minute before, prompting an early restructure in the back row.

With Underhill out of action it did not take long for Leinster to cross the tryline. They span the ball left and a clinical pass by Hugo Keenan allowed O'Brien to touch down. Josh van der Flier's athletic sprint, running a superb line on to a Robbie Henshaw pass, brought the second.

Another stunning piece of timing sent Larmour racing over and it was 19-0 in double-quick time. But a fine steal and galloping run by Charlie Ewels, followed by a composed offload to Clark, brought a seven-pointer for Bath.

No panic from Leinster. Henshaw was soon speeding into space from the right and another laser-guided grubber by Sexton popped up perfectly for O'Brien. Bonus point sealed.

Ciaran Frawley bashed over before

the break for the fifth try and a score of 33-7.

Bath's Gabriel Hamer-Webb was sent to the sin-bin five minutes after half-time for a deliberate knock-on and Andrew Porter was soon pushed over.

Sexton's perceptive cross-kick, switching the point of attack, allowed O'Brien the space to score his hat-trick. Another fluent wave of passing prompted by Sexton's chip kick into space saw Keenan crash over.

Max Deegan was then shown a yellow card, for an off-the-ball hit on the Bath scrum-half, Ben Spencer, on a rare foray into the Leinster 22, but at 14-a-side, the hosts could not trouble the scorers.

Dan Sheehan romped over the line with 10 minutes left, latching on to Jamison Gibson-Park's pass, and O'Brien galloped on to a kick from deep to add his fourth, and Leinster's 10th try, on another sobering afternoon for Bath.

"Sometimes, rock bottom is a great foundation," Hatley said. "We're not happy with it, we're not proud of it, we're disappointed with where we are."

"We've got to make sure we put things in place at this great club that we never find ourselves in this position again."

### Bath

McConnochie (Simpson 65), Butt, Clark (Ojomoh 50), Redpath (Atkins 65), Hamer-Webb, Bailey, B Spencer, Cordwell (Doughty 53), Du Toit, Stuart (Jonker 75), W Spencer, Ewels, Underhill (McNulty 13), Bayliss (Williams 12; Cordwell 80)  
Try Clark Con Bailey

Referee Andrea Piardi (It)

### Leinster

Keenan, Larmour (Frawley 33), Ringrose, Henshaw (Frawley 69), J O'Brien; Sexton (Byrne 53), McGrath (Gibson-Park 53), Porter (Healey 56), Kelleher (Sheehan 56), Ala'alatoa (Abdaladze 56) Molony, Murphy (Baird 41), Doris, Van der Flier (Deegan 41), Conan Tries O'Brien 4, Van der Flier, Larmour, Frawley, Porter, Keenan, Sheehan Cons Sexton 5

## Racing

# Shishkin gets better of Energumene in Clarence House Chase classic duel

**Greg Wood**  
Ascot

The long-awaited first meeting between Shishkin and Energumene lived up to every expectation here, as the champion two-mile chasers in Britain and Ireland duelled around Ascot in the Clarence House Chase, setting up a final battle for the winning post that no one who was here to see it is ever likely to forget.

It was Shishkin who finally got to the line a length in front, having apparently been on the back foot for much of the race as Energumene cut out the running.

There was a sudden peck from Shishkin early on the second circuit which padded Energumene's lead and Nicky Henderson's chaser needed to be ridden by Nico de Boinville to close the gap as Paul Townend turned for home apparently going the better of the two.

Energumene had been backed from 13-8 to 5-4 in the hours before the race and traded at 1-9 in running as he powered towards the final fence, still just over a length to the good. Shishkin, though, has an exceptional finishing kick.

The question now for backers of the 4-5 favourite was whether he could still find it at the end of such a fiercely run race.

He could, and De Boinville rode a wave of noise from the stands as Shishkin closed in on his rival and then swept into the lead a few strides from the line. He crossed it a length in front, with First Flow, last year's Clarence House winner, 18 lengths further back in third.

Fans and professionals alike were looking both forward and back as the two horses returned to unsaddle. Forward to their next encounter, probably in the Queen Mother Champion Chase at Cheltenham on 16 March, and back into racing history, to measure the moment against the great head-to-heads of the last 50 years.

"It was built up and it produced," Henderson said. "A race like that goes

back to the Grundy and Bustino days [in the 1975 King George at Ascot] and he [Shishkin] only lives about four boxes from where Grundy did [at Seven Barrows in Lambourn].

"They [De Boinville and Townend] said to each other going down the hill, 'We're flat to the boards'. It had to be that, there was no point hiding.

"There were moments it looked as if we weren't going as well, but he stays very well. The great thing is they've both come home safe and well ... and there's going to be a rematch."

Willie Mullins, Energumene's trainer, was also looking forward to the Festival while finding reasons why it could be difficult for his horse to turn the form around.

"We have no excuses," Mullins said. "We ran a cracker, jumped well and did everything right. I was watching my own horse but Shishkin made two mistakes, I think, so that would leave you to think we have a bit to go yet before we beat him."

Shishkin was a shade of

## Greg Wood's tips

**LINGFIELD** 12.50 Our Jester  
1.20 Ballygriffincottage 1.50 War Lord (nb)  
2.25 Darver Star 3.00 Dashel Drasher  
3.35 Pemberley (nap)

**WARWICK** 1.10 Saint Segal 1.40 Fearless  
2.15 Theatre Glory 2.50 Lydford 3.25 Keltus  
4.00 Kimberlite Candy

odds-against for the Champion Chase before yesterday's race but is now top-priced at 8-11 with Unibet, while Energumene can be backed at 3-1 for one of the few races at the Festival that Mullins has yet to win.

The one-length margin here yesterday was a result to warm the handicappers' hearts, as it reflected exactly the 1lb difference in the two horses' ratings beforehand: 172 to 171.

Both are eight-year-olds with – all being well – two or three seasons of top-flight competition still ahead, and even if Shishkin and Energumene never meet again, we will always have Ascot.

Cheltenham, though, with six or seven times as many racegoers in the stands, promises to be better yet.



● Shishkin, ridden by Nico de Boinville, wins his first meeting with Energumene in a stunning race at Ascot

## Golf

## Abu Dhabi Championship

# Fox remains in credit despite pandemic lottery

**Ewan Murray**  
Abu Dhabi



New Zealander has made another cut in the desert but past 18 months of endless quarantine and travel have been hard

A glance at Ryan Fox's performances since Covid-19 rocked the world would not particularly nudge anybody towards further investigation. The 35-year-old made 15 cuts from the 20 European Tour events he played during 2021 but recorded just two top 10 finishes.

He came 82nd in the order of merit, 24 places lower than in 2020. His annual prize money remained consistent at just under €400,000, but was still a considerable drop from what he had accumulated in the

three seasons between 2017 and 2019. He has slipped outside the world's top 200.

The New Zealander is keen to insist many people have had it far, far worse during the pandemic but his country's strict border controls have made life far from straightforward for Fox, his wife, Anneke, and their 13-month-old daughter, Isabel. Or, as he puts it: "Brutal."

At the end of Fox's run in the Middle East – he is here at Yas Links, competing in the Abu Dhabi Championship – he will return to New Zealand for a fourth mandatory hotel quarantine. This time it will be for 10 days, at least, as opposed to 14.

"I'm in a good place, I know I've got a job," he says. "There are some Kiwis overseas that are not as well placed as me, that don't have a job. It was frustrating enough at the start and it's probably got worse. Our system has got harder and harder. We finally, just before Christmas, had some help. I think we get 22 spots a month as individual athletes trying to get into the country.

"There's less and less hotel spaces. We went from basically first in, first

served to where you put your passport number in a system at a certain time and that number gets randomised. You get in a queue to book a room. They will release dates for maybe three months and if the date you want is gone then you can't go back at all.

"I spent the whole back end of last year, me and my wife, trying to get in this lottery system to get a space to go home for Christmas. I missed a couple of events because that was the only time we could get home. Hopefully, when we go back this will be the last time that I do it. It's been an incredibly frustrating 18 months. I find it really, really hard in quarantine by myself."

Fox and his wife have a small flat in London as an alternative base. The problem there is the lack of broader family backup with everyone else in New Zealand. The newly named DP World Tour's span from South Africa to the Middle East to mainland Europe means England is not always a convenient home.

"It was really tough on my wife last year having four months where she was with a baby 24 hours a day," Fox says. "I was out playing golf. She



► Ryan Fox says missing events by deciding not to travel would put pressure on him at the end of the year

**'People are a lot worse off than me. There are some missing dying relatives' funerals'**

Ryan Fox

travelled to some events but just not being able to have any support was pretty tough. We were desperate to get home at the end of the year. Thankfully we did manage to get a spot to do that but it was a pretty messy way to get it."

Fox is of illustrious stock. His father, Grant, is a famed All Black. The late Merv Wallace, who played Test cricket for New Zealand, was Ryan's grandfather. Not only is it admirable

that Ryan has forged his own sporting pathway, he has always been one of the most engaging individuals on tour. He has been able to compartmentalise life in a tough professional environment and maintain domestic harmony.

"Back home a lot of people think they should just shut the borders," Fox says. "You don't get Covid if you don't let anyone in."

"I've personally not caught flak for travelling but there's an undercurrent of: 'Why are people travelling in the middle of the pandemic?' Well, it's very results driven. If I don't play or I don't play well, I don't have a job and I can't support my family. I feel like I don't have a choice."

"If I miss these events, it's a big opportunity wasted and it puts a lot of pressure on later in the year. You know you've got no choice but you're caught between a rock and a hard place not knowing when you can get back, if you can get back."

In keeping with his character, Fox supplies broader context. "You look at some of the stories of pregnant woman getting stuck overseas," he says. "People who are living illegally with no money in a different country, applying for an emergency spot and getting told just to go to another country. These people are a lot worse off than me. People missing dying relatives' funerals."

It just seems fair to wish Fox well. Making the cut here at Yas Links has done him no harm at all.

## Hatton rages over his nine at the last

**Ewan Murray**  
Abu Dhabi

Any sense of joy felt by Tyrrell Hatton on account of the new golf season failed to last long. The Englishman, perhaps already irked that the Abu Dhabi Championship moved from the golf club bearing the same name after he won there 12 months ago, fired a quite epic volley towards the 18th hole at Yas Links after delivering a quadruple bogey nine there yesterday.

"It must be one of the worst par fives that I've ever seen in my life and, over the last two days, I've clearly played it about as well as it was designed," said Hatton, who took seven there on Friday.

"It's just really frustrating. I thought I played pretty good yesterday and was not sure how I managed to shoot 77. I really wanted to go out today and make amends and I played so good. I'm six under for 13 holes, I've got all the shots back and more and then we get to the 18th."

Indeed, at six under par before his final hole woes, Hatton was at least



► Tyrrell Hatton plays out of a bunker on the way to a quadruple bogey nine on the 18th hole in Abu Dhabi

ANDREW REDLINGTON/  
GETTY IMAGES

the ball as "basically unplayable". He ended up in a greenside bunker, took two to get out and the same number of putts.

On matters more positive, Jamieson's advantage is by one from Shane Lowry and Thomas Pieters. "It would be massive, a game changer to win a tournament of this stature," said Jamieson, the world No 336. "There's definitely been some great champions here but there's an awful long way to go."

Lowry is seeking a first win since the 2019 Open. He had troubles of his own at the last after confusion between he and his caddie about where an approach shot should be aimed. Lowry at least saved par. "We were aiming at the HSBC sign but his one was 30 yards right of the one I was looking at," Lowry explained. "New course, I thought I hit a perfect shot. I couldn't believe it came down where it did. It was a bad mistake to make because we shouldn't be doing it in that situation. I got very lucky, it could have been a different story. I'm not sure I'd be standing here if so, I might be sitting in the locker room sulking."

**'I can't remember the last time I got a nine. I was probably about 14 the last time it happened'**

Tyrrell Hatton

in contention to successfully defend his title. The 54-hole lead, held by Scott Jamieson, is 11 under.

Pressed on what precisely is wrong with the 18th, Hatton was not of a mind to back down. "What's wrong with it? Where do you start?" he asked. "It shouldn't have a bunker in the middle of the fairway and it shouldn't be over 600 yards from a forward tee. If you hit a good drive as a pro you should have at least a chance to go for the green in two, otherwise the hole becomes a par

three [after the first two shots] and that's if you play it well. Hardly anyone will get there in two today.

"I can't remember the last time I got a nine, I certainly haven't had one that I can recall as a pro. I was probably about 14 the last time it happened."

Hatton had found the bunker in question from the tee but from a bad lie subsequently had to play on to the 10th fairway. He then hit into water, had to take a drop into cabbage from where he regarded

## Cricket

# Sciver frustrated as second Ashes T20 is washed out

Raf Nicholson

The second Ashes T20 was washed out, with 4.1 overs being bowled as made England 25 without loss, leaving the series 3-1 to Australia going into the third T20 today.

The match was initially reduced to 14 overs a side after the start was delayed by 50 minutes, before a second shower over the Adelaide Oval put paid to any chance of a result.

The England all-rounder Nat Sciver said her side had come out full of motivation to fight back from their nine-wicket drubbing in the first match of the series. "Batting the way we did, we're not too disheartened. It made us more motivated for today but we'll have to take that to tomorrow as well," she said.

The vice-captain conceded, however, that England's bowling in the first match had been sub-par. Leg-spinner Sarah Glenn suffered particularly at the hands of Tahlia McGrath, with her three overs costing England 39 runs, while Sciver went at more than 10 an over.

"We were a bit short with the ball in hand and that's the main focus where we want to improve for tomorrow, being a bit more consistent and hitting our lengths a bit better," she said.

England had opted for an extra bowling option, with the off-spinning all-rounder Charlie Dean presented with her maiden T20I cap before play – though Dean was left frustrated after failing to make it on to the pitch.

"She's a great addition to our squad," Sciver said. "She'll throw herself into anything whether it's batting,

**'We have been a bit short with the ball in hand and that's the main focus where we want to improve'**

Nat Sciver



Australia's Ashleigh Gardner bowls as Danni Wyatt of England looks on, but rain soon ended play at Adelaide Oval

SARAH REED/GETTY IMAGES

**West Indies v England**  
Read Simon Burnton's report from last night's first T20 international in Bridgetown at [theguardian.com/sport](https://theguardian.com/sport)

Published in later editions of Observer Sport

bowling or fielding. Having another bowling option for us on this wicket was important."

Australia had suffered a blow with the seamer Tayla Vlaeminck, who clocked speeds of 123kph (76mph) in the first match – extraordinarily quick for the women's game – sitting out with an injury to her right foot.

Vlaeminck had suffered a stress fracture in the same foot on the eve of the 2020 T20 World Cup, ruling her out of the tournament, but Australia's captain, Meg Lanning, said the seriousness of the new injury was not yet known.

"It was just [soreness] out of the first game, and we're still assessing how it is," she said. "We'll know a little bit more over the next few days. It's not ideal."

There was more encouraging news about the opening batter Beth Mooney, who was in the nets not long after undergoing an operation to mend the fracture in her jaw. "She's going really well," Lanning said. "She's had a couple of hits, which is really exciting for her. It's nice to see her back."

Lanning also spoke candidly about the omission of Elyse Perry from Australia's starting line-up, making it clear that the 31-year-old will need to up her game if she is to fight her way back into contention in the 20-over format.

"We feel like we can pick players to play specific roles, and Elyse didn't quite fit into that," Lanning said. "We need players who can come in and impact the game straight away. We've gone down the path of playing a lot of all-rounders and with our bowling we had other options to go to ahead of her."



CAMERON SPENCER/GETTY IMAGES

Stuart Broad (left) shakes hands with England captain Joe Root after the fourth Ashes Test at the SCG

he has tended to pick a team for the previous Test, not the one in front of him.

Silverwood's boss is the director of cricket, Ashley Giles, who has been no better. He was wrong to abolish the role of national selector, wrong to oust Ed Smith and wrong to give Silverwood so much power. The post England could manage without is not Smith's old job but Giles's current one. They don't need a director of cricket as well as a performance director (Mo Bobat) and a chair of the cricket committee (Andrew Strauss).

Giles's boss is Tom Harrison, the ECB's chief executive. He could have resigned over the handling of the Yorkshire racism saga; he could have resigned last week; he could, at the very least, have turned down the hefty bonus that awaits him. Instead we keep hearing that he is "unimpressed" with what he has seen of the touring party. The feeling may well be mutual.

Not one of Root, Silverwood, Giles and Harrison has done enough to retain the confidence of the cricket-loving public. Who, you may wonder, would do better? It's all guesswork, but we can at least make sure the guesses are educated.

Everybody agrees England's red-ball cricket needs a reset. Happily, they have someone who has conducted one before, with spectacular results. It was Strauss who saw, in 2015, that something drastic needed to be done about England's white-ball cricket. He sacked the captain, his old opening partner Cook, and promoted Eoin Morgan, who turned out to be the most successful England captain since Mike Brearley. So put Strauss in charge: it barely matters what his title is.

The coach will have to be someone with plenty of Test experience and a firm hand because Root and Silverwood have been playing good cop, good cop. Gary Kirsten wants the job, Jason Gillespie probably does not, Alec Stewart may or may not. Any of them would surely outshine Silverwood.

The captain needs to be commanding, intense and interested in tactics and strategy. When Ben Stokes took over from Root in Adelaide, England suddenly shaped up. He has the presence and the clarity and he did superbly with a bunch of understudies in last year's one-day series against Pakistan. But he seems reluctant, so Strauss will need a plan B.

B for Broad, that is. England's best performance of the Ashes, off the field, was Stuart Broad's press conference in Sydney. He was bolder, clearer and sharper than anyone else in the camp had been. He is a natural analyst and a fierce competitor: even as a stopgap, he would be an upgrade. He should be offered the job on three conditions – that he rebuilds his batting, gives himself the odd game off and lets someone else handle the reviews.

Good leaders know their limitations.

## Broad has right stuff to replace bad-team bully Root as captain

Andrew Strauss reset the white-ball team – now he should dismiss Silverwood and find new Test leaders for England, says Tim de Lisle

**S**even weeks ago, at the start of the Ashes, Joe Root made a strikingly clear statement. "Of course it will define my captaincy," he said. "I'm not naive enough to think that it won't."

He was right and there's no wriggling out of it now. To lose one Ashes series 4-0 may be regarded as a misfortune, as long as the captain is inexperienced. To lose two that heavily, when you have been in charge for more Tests than any other England captain, looks like a reason to resign.

Root is an honourable person who may come to this conclusion now that he's back home with his young family. If he doesn't quit, the England and Wales Cricket Board could well stand by him. An organisation whose predecessor once churned its way through four captains in one summer, in 1988, has lurched to the other extreme. The last Test captain to be fired was Kevin Pietersen, 13 years ago this month.

It is all a far cry from the 90s, the golden age of the Ashes fiasco. As yet another series went horribly wrong, a howl would go up in the shires: "Sack the lot of them." Whisper it,

but we could do with a little more of that now.

Root needs to return to the ranks because he has never been a natural captain and he is getting worse. His win/loss ratio is 1.08 (27 Tests won, 25 lost). If you look at the league table of the 18 England captains who have lasted at least 20 Tests, Root has fallen from eighth equal with MJK Smith at the end of January 2021 to 13th, just below his immediate predecessor, Alastair Cook.

Against the top three teams – Australia, India and New Zealand – Root's ratio plummets to 0.42, whereas it is 3.33 against the rest. Genial though he may be, he has become a bad-team bully.

Even his batting, which can be so glorious, is patchy. Since the start of last year, he averages 81 when Jos Buttler is there to share the tactical burden and 22 when Buttler is missing. All four of England's victories in that time have come with Buttler present and it now looks as if his Test career is over.

In the chain of command above Root, even allowing for the stresses of the pandemic, it is hard to say who is the weakest link.

The head coach and chief selector, Chris Silverwood, is well out of his depth: England's best performance of the Ashes came when he was not there and in Australia and India

Andrew Strauss must press the red-ball reset



# Full Time



► Danny Ward celebrates his hat-trick in Huddersfield's 4-3 win

## Europe

### LA LIGA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Real Madrid	21	15	4	2	45	18	+27	49
Sevilla	22	13	7	2	34	16	+18	46
Real Betis	22	12	4	6	41	25	+16	40
Atlético Madrid	20	9	6	5	33	24	+9	33
Real Sociedad	20	9	6	5	22	21	+1	33
Villarreal	22	8	8	6	36	23	+13	32
Barcelona	20	8	4	8	31	23	+8	32
Rayo Vallecano	20	9	4	7	27	21	+6	31
Valencia	21	7	8	6	33	33	0	29
Athletic Bilbao	21	6	10	5	20	17	+3	28
Celta Vigo	22	7	6	9	26	25	+1	27
Espanyol	22	7	6	9	26	30	-4	27
Osasuna	21	6	7	8	20	27	-7	25
Granada	21	5	9	7	26	31	-5	24
Elche	21	5	7	9	21	28	-7	22
Getafe	21	5	6	10	17	23	-6	21
Mallorca	21	4	8	9	17	33	-16	20
Cádiz	22	3	9	10	19	36	-17	18
Alavés	21	4	5	12	16	34	-18	17
Levante	21	1	8	12	21	43	-22	11
Atlético Madrid L Valencia L;								
Levante O Cádiz 2; Sevilla 2 Celta Vigo 2;								
Villarreal 3 Mallorca 0								

### SERIE A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Internazionale	22	16	5	1	53	17	+36	53
Milan	22	15	3	4	47	25	+22	48
Napoli	22	14	4	4	39	15	+4	46
Atalanta	21	12	6	3	44	26	+18	42
Juventus	22	12	5	5	34	21	+13	41
Lazio	22	10	5	7	46	39	+7	35
Roma	22	11	2	9	36	28	+8	35
Fiorentina	21	11	2	8	40	29	+11	35
Verona	23	9	6	8	43	38	+5	33
Torino	21	9	4	8	29	20	+9	31
Empoli	22	8	5	9	35	43	-8	29
Sassuolo	22	7	7	8	38	37	+1	28
Bologna	22	8	3	11	29	37	-8	27
Udinese	22	5	9	8	31	36	-5	24
Spezia	22	6	4	12	23	42	-19	22
Sampdoria	22	5	5	12	29	40	-11	20
Venezia	22	4	6	12	20	40	-20	18
Cagliari	22	3	7	12	21	43	-22	16
Genoa	23	1	10	12	20	45	-25	17
Salernitana	21	3	2	16	13	49	-36	10
Genoa O Udinese O; Internazionale 2 Venezia 1; Lazio Atalanta L								

### VANARAMA NATIONAL LEAGUE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
PSG	21	15	5	1	42	18	+24	50
Nice	21	12	4	5	34	18	+16	39
Marseille	20	10	7	3	28	16	+12	37
Strasbourg	21	10	5	6	41	29	+15	36
Rennes	21	10	4	7	40	19	+21	34
Monaco	21	9	6	6	33	23	+10	33
Lens	21	9	6	6	38	29	+7	33
Lille	22	8	8	6	30	30	0	32
Montpellier	21	9	4	8	34	28	+6	31
Lyon	21	8	8	5	29	27	+2	31
Nantes	21	8	5	8	26	25	+1	29
Brest	22	7	7	8	28	33	-5	28
Angers	20	6	8	6	26	27	-1	26
Reims	21	5	9	7	22	23	-1	24
Troyes	21	5	5	11	19	29	-10	20
Metz	21	4	7	10	24	41	-17	19
Clermont Foot	21	4	6	11	20	38	-18	18
Lorient	21	3	8	10	16	34	-18	17
Bordeaux	21	3	8	10	30	50	-20	17
St-Etienne	21	2	6	13	18	43	-25	12
Brest 2 Lille 0; Lens 1 Marseille L								



► Edin Dzeko snatches Inter's last-minute winner against Venezia

## The week's fixtures

### Today (2pm unless stated)

#### Africa Cup of Nations

Last 16 Burkina Faso v Gabon

(4pm) SSF; Nigeria v Tunisia

#### (7pm) SSME

#### Premier League

Arsenal v Burnley; Chelsea v Tottenham (4.30pm) SSPL;

Crystal Palace v Liverpool;

SSPL; Leicester v Brighton

BBC Two; Leicester v Aston Villa; Manchester City v

Arsenal (6.45pm) SSF;

Manchester Utd v Tottenham (noon); Reading v Birmingham;

West Ham v Everton (3pm)

#### FA Women's Super League

Brighton v Chelsea (12.30pm)

BBC Two; Leicester v Aston Villa; Manchester City v

Arsenal (6.45pm) SSF;

Manchester Utd v Tottenham (noon); Reading v Birmingham;

West Ham v Everton (3pm)

#### Africa Cup of Nations

Last 16 Guinea v Gambia

(4pm) SSME; Cameroon v

Comoros (7pm) SSPL

#### Sky Bet Championship

Blackburn v Middlesbrough

(7.45pm) Sky Sports Football

#### Africa Cup of Nations

Last 16 Guinea v Gambia

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Last 16 Guinea v Gambia

(4pm) SSME; Cameroon v

Comoros (7pm) SSPL

#### Sky Bet Championship

Blackburn v Middlesbrough

(7.45pm) Sky Sports Football

#### Africa Cup of Nations

Last 16 Guinea v Gambia

(4pm) SSME; Cameroon v

Comoros (7pm) SSPL

#### Sky Bet Championship

Blackburn v Middlesbrough

(7.45pm) Sky Sports Football

#### Africa Cup of Nations

## Sky Bet League One

	HOME				AWAY				GD	Pts	Form			
	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D						
Wigan	24	7	2	3	18	12	10	1	1	29	12	+23	54	DWWWW
Sunderland	28	11	1	2	31	9	5	5	4	22	24	+20	54	WDLDW
Rotherham	26	10	2	2	33	13	6	3	3	13	5	+28	53	WLWLW
Wycombe	28	9	2	2	24	17	6	5	4	22	16	+13	52	WDWWL
MK Dons	27	7	3	4	18	14	6	4	3	28	18	+14	46	DDWWL
Oxford Utd	27	9	4	2	30	15	4	3	5	13	16	+12	46	WDLWW
Plymouth	26	7	3	3	19	13	5	4	4	22	18	+10	43	LWWLL
Sheff Wed	26	6	4	1	19	10	4	6	5	17	22	+4	40	WLWLW
Ipswich	27	6	6	2	25	19	4	2	7	20	18	+8	38	DWWLW
Portsmouth	26	6	3	3	17	12	4	5	5	12	13	+4	38	WDLWL
Burton Albion	26	7	3	3	23	14	3	3	7	10	18	+1	36	LWDWL
Cambridge Utd	27	5	6	4	19	19	4	3	5	18	20	-2	36	LDWWWW
Accrington Stanley	27	7	3	4	21	20	3	3	7	12	23	-10	36	WDDDL
Charlton	27	6	3	5	21	15	3	3	7	13	17	+2	33	LLLDW
Bolton	26	5	4	3	18	17	4	1	9	15	20	-4	32	LLLWW
Lincoln City	26	3	3	7	12	17	5	4	4	19	17	-3	31	LWWLW
Cheltenham	27	5	5	4	17	22	2	5	6	15	24	-14	31	LDDDL
Shrewsbury	27	7	3	4	17	13	1	3	9	17	-40	30	WDWLW	
AFC Wimbledon	25	2	7	2	15	15	4	3	7	16	22	-6	28	LLDDD
Fleetwood Town	26	5	2	6	21	20	2	5	6	17	25	-7	28	DLWVL
Morecambe	27	5	4	6	23	26	2	2	8	15	27	-15	27	LWDLW
Crewe	27	4	4	5	14	19	1	3	10	10	26	-21	22	WLWDL
Doncaster	27	4	3	6	11	16	1	1	12	8	33	-30	19	LLLWL
Gillingham	26	2	3	7	8	21	1	6	7	13	23	-23	18	LDLL

## Sky Bet League Two

	HOME				AWAY				GD	Pts	Form			
	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D						
Forest Green	25	9	2	2	23	9	7	5	0	28	12	+30	55	WDWDW
Tranmere	26	10	0	3	19	6	4	6	3	9	9	+13	48	WWDDW
Sutton Utd	26	9	1	3	22	12	4	4	5	19	21	+8	44	WWWDW
Northampton	25	7	2	3	17	9	5	4	4	15	15	+8	42	WLDD
Newport County	26	6	3	3	24	13	5	5	4	19	21	+9	41	LDLWW
Swindon	25	3	6	3	16	14	8	2	3	24	17	+9	41	DWLWD
Mansfield	25	9	3	3	25	17	3	2	5	10	14	+4	41	WWWWW
Exeter	25	6	4	2	19	11	4	6	3	18	15	+11	40	LLDWW
Port Vale	24	5	3	4	17	12	5	3	4	19	15	+9	36	WLWLD
Salford City	26	5	6	3	15	11	4	1	7	14	16	+2	34	WDLWL
Harrogate Town	24	4	4	4	21	18	5	2	5	17	17	+3	33	LLLLW
Bradford	25	4	7	1	19	14	3	5	5	12	15	+2	33	DWLWD
Leyton Orient	23	6	4	2	24	7	1	7	3	13	14	+16	32	LWLD
Crawley Town	25	4	3	5	15	18	5	2	6	14	17	-6	32	WWDL
Bristol Rovers	23	6	1	5	19	18	2	5	4	11	16	-4	30	LLWW
Hartlepool	26	7	4	2	17	12	1	2	10	8	25	-12	30	LDLDD
Walsall	25	4	5	4	19	19	3	3	6	10	15	-5	29	WDLL
Rochdale	24	3	6	3	14	12	3	4	5	16	20	-2	28	LWLD
Stevenage	27	5	6	3	18	18	1	4	8	7	24	-17	28	LWWDW
Carlisle	26	3	7	3	9	10	3	2	8	10	23	-14	27	WWDDL
Barrow	25	3	5	5	15	17	3	3	6	11	14	-5	26	LDLWL
Colchester	25	3	3	5	10	14	3	4	7	12	21	-13	25	LLLLW
Scunthorpe	26	2	4	6	8	17	1	6	7	11	28	-26	19	WLWL
Oldham	25	2	2	8	16	25	2	4	7	6	17	-20	18	DLDD

Burton Albion (0) 1 AFC Wimbledon (0) 1 Jeblison 77  
Burton Garratt, Hughes, Brayford, Oshilaja, Hamer, Taylor (Kokolo 73), Gilligan (Lakin 85), Borthwick-Jackson, Powell, Jeblison, Ahmade. **Subs not used** Smith, O'Connor, Hawkins, Leah, Mancienne.  
AFC Wimbledon Tzanev, Alexander, Heneghan, Nightingale, Osewu, Woodway (Chislett 84), Marsh, Rudoni (Cosgrave 81), McCormick, Mbude (Assal 64), Palmer. **Subs not used** Csoka, Ablade, Guiness-Walker, Ouahab.  
Att 2,768. Ref Chris Pollard (Suffolk).  
Cambridge Utd (1) 1 Crewe (0) 0 May 42  
Cambridge Utd Mitov, Williams, Sherring (Iredale), Dunk, May (Woman 87), Digby, Knibbs (Lankester 75), Hoolahan (Brophy 87), Smith. **Subs not used** Mannion, Bennett, Dickens, Yearn.  
Crewe Richards, Johnson (Offord 8), Sass-Davies, Williams, Mandron (Anley 70), Lowery, Robertson (Murphy 64), Finney (Griffiths 82), Long, Porter. **Subs not used** Jaaskelainen, Onyeka, Salisbury, Taberner. Att 5,428. Ref Sam Allison (Somerset).  
Charlton (0) 2 Fleetwood Town (0) 0 Burston 53, Morgan 90  
Charlton MacGillivray, Clare, Harding, Ihiekwe, Basler, Morgan, Dobson (Lee 69), Blackett-Taylor (Purrington 86), Anek (Burstow (Washington 81). **Subs not used** Peake, Leko, Watson, Henderson.  
Fleetwood Cairns, Johnston (Nsiala 81), Clarke, Jules, Andrew, Matete (Batty (Pilkington 75), Camps, Lane, Harrison, Hayes (Morris 61). **Subs not used** Callum Johnson, Biggins, Donaghy, Boyle. Ref Brett Huxtable (Devon).  
Ipswich (1) 2 Accrington (1) 1 Burns 23, Chaplin 65 Hamilton 15  
Ipswich Walton, Donacién, Woolfenden, Edmundson (Burns, Morys, Carroll (Bakinson 73), Vincent-Young, Celina (Chaplin (Jackson 90), Bonne (Norwood 76). **Subs not used** Poly, Pigott, Burgess, Edwards.  
Accrington Savin, Clark, Rich-Baghelou, Nottingham (Amankwall, Pell (Morgan 76), Butcher, Hamilton, O'Sullivan (Mansell 79), Bishop, McConville (Longo 73). **Subs not used** Rodgers, Procter, Isherwood, Nolan. Att 2,126. Ref Geoff Ellington (Tynes & Wear).  
MK Dons (0) 0 Doncaster (1) 1 Dodo 41  
MK Dons Cumming, Watson, O'Hora, Lewington, Harvie, McEachran (Coventry 75), Corbeanu, Parrott (Wickham 75), Twine, Eisa. **Subs not used** Ravizzoli, Bird, Ilunga, Davies.  
Doncaster Jones, Knolle, Ollie Younger, Olouwu (Horton), Smith, Galbraith (Seager 44), Rowe, Agard (Boyle 55), Diodoo, Martin (Barlow 83). **Subs not used** Mitchell, Hasan, Blythe, Raventhil. Att 7,229. Ref Darren Drysdale (Lincolnshire).  
Morecambe (1) 3 Wycombe (1) 2 O'Connor 39 Akinfewa 2, Grimmer 54 Ayungo 60, Stockton 67  
Morecambe Carson, Cooney, O'Connor, Bedeau, Leigh (McLoughlin, Dioguraga, Wildig (Fane 8), Ayungo (Stockton (Duffus 90), Gnaha. **Subs not used** Leethen, McDonald, Phillip (Faycal 90), Gibson, McCalmon (McLennan 90).  
Wycombe Stockdale, Stewart, Tafazoli (Jacobson (De Bar 87), Grimmer, Thompson (Horgan 75), Mehmeti (Wheeler 65), Obita, McCleary, Hanlan, Akinfewa. **Subs not used** McCarthy, Przybek, Pendlebury, Joseph. Att 3,865. Ref Ben Toner (Lancashire).

Forest Green (1) 3 Sheff Wed (1) 2 Taylor 45 62, Winnall 84 Bannon 7, Windass 61  
Oxford Utd Stevens, Long, Moore (McNally 46), Thornley (Moushini 87), Seddon, Brannagan, McGuane, Sibes, Bodin, Holland (Winnall 74), Taylor. **Subs not used** Eastwood, Forde, Agyei.  
Sheff Wed Peacock-Farrell, Palmer, Hutchinson, Johnson, Hunt (Dele-Bashiru (Paterson 87), Luongo, Bannon (77), Mendez-Laing (Brown 76), Gregory, Sow (Windass 59). **Subs not used** Byers, Borahino, Wildsmith, Storey. Att 10,071. Ref Alan Young (Cambridgeshire).  
Plymouth (1) 1 Lincoln City (0) 2 Jephcott 34  
Plymouth Michael Cooper, Wilson, Scarff, Crichlow-Noble, Edwards (Garrick 77), Randell, Houghton (Camera 71), Broom, Grant, Ennis, Jephcott (Law 85). **Subs not used** Bolton, Gilesley, Lewis, Burton.  
Lincoln Long, Bishop (Norton-Cuffy 83), Poole, Melbourne, Bramall (Whitmore 84), Whittle, McGrandles (Farrington 84), Whitmore (Garrick 85), Marquis (Trevor 86). **Subs not used** Wright, Sanders, Adelakun, Sorensen, Robson. Att 12,269. Ref Neil Hair (Cambridgeshire).  
Rotherham (1) 1 Cheltenham (0) 0 Smith 24  
Rotherham Vickers, Harding, Wood, Ihiekwe, Basler, Ogbe, Rathbone (Lindsay 83), Wiles, Miller (Ferguson 75), Smith, Ladapo (Grigg 89). **Subs not used** Johansson, Kayode, Odifin, Edmonds-Green.  
Cheltenham Evans, Long (Raglan 4), Pollock, Boyle (Blair), Sercombe (Bolton 87), Thomas (Wright 87), Freestone, May (Ramsey 62), N'Lundu (Ete 87). **Subs not used** Brown, Edwards, Thomas, March. Att 9,187. Ref Oliver Langford (Midlands).  
Shrewsbury (0) 0 Bolton (0) 1 Charles 89  
Shrewsbury Marosi, Pennington (Ebanks-Landell, Nurse, Bennett, Vela, Davis, Leahy, Ogbe (Bloxham 90), Bowman, Udoh (Janneh 78). **Subs not used** Pierre, Fornara, Burgoyne, Pyke, Daniels.  
Bolton Trafford, Jones, Santos, Johnston, Fossey, Williams, Morley, John, Lee (Afolayan 46), Charles (Boyle 55), Bakayoko (Bodvarsson 66). **Subs not used** Dixon, Aimson, Thomason, Baptiste, Gordon. Att 2,087. Ref Charles Breakspeare (Surrey).  
Sunderland (0) 1 Portsmouth (0) 0 Emberton 40  
Sunderland Hoffmann, Flanagan (Batt, Doyle, Gooch, Evans, Neill, Cirkin, Embleton (Winchester 83), Stewart, Dakaju (O'Brien 88). **Subs not used** Xhemajili, Patterson, Diamond, Tru Hume, Mbunga-Kimpoka.  
Portsmouth Bazunu, Carter, Raggett, Robertson (Jacobs 78), Romeo (Morrel 79), Thompson (Williams 71), Hackett-Fairchild, Harness, Walker, Curtis (Hirst 71). **Subs not used** Brown, Freeman, Ogilvie, Steward. Att 32,220. Ref David Rock (Hertfordshire).  
Wigan (2) 3 Gillingham (0) 2 Keane 87 Humphrys 21 Reees 53, O'Keefe 70  
Wigan Amos, Power, Whatmough, Watts, Darikwa (Yor, Shimine, Edwards (Kerr 67), Keane, McClean, Humphrys (Massey 86). **Subs not used** Jamie Jones, Pearce, Bayliss, Asgaard, Sze. Att 9,359. Ref Declan Bourne (Nottinghamshire).  
Wigan (2) 3 Gillingham (0) 2 Keane 87 Humphrys 21 Reees 53, O'Keefe 70  
Wigan Orient Vigouroux, Mitchell (Beckles, Ogie, O'Leary, Moss (Khan 62), Kyriano (Young 62), Pratley, Wood (Smith 90), Smith, Drinan. **Subs not used** Sargeant, Happe, Thompson, Sotiriou.  
Port Vale Stone, Smith, Martin, Hall, Gibbons (Cass 7), Pett, Walker (Garrity), Barry (Hussey, Amoo (Arratt 71), Wilson (Edmondson 71). **Subs not used** Benning, Hurst. Att 5,761. Ref Declan Bourne (Nottinghamshire).  
Leyton Orient (0) 0 Port Vale (0) 0 Leyton Orient Vigouroux, Mitchell (Beckles, Ogie, O'Leary, Moss (Khan 62), Kyriano (Young 62), Pratley, Wood (Smith 90), Smith, Drinan. **Subs not used** Sarge

# Jonathan Wilson

*Inside football*



## Exits of Algeria and Ghana a shock but Africa's also-rans are catching up

The middle continues to rise. In Europe at least, the question about African football is why it has not kicked on the past two decades from the time when, in the space of 12 years between 1990 and 2002, Cameroon and Senegal reached World Cup quarter-finals and Cameroon and Nigeria won Olympic golds. One quarter-final since does not look much like progress.

And yet for all that issues of infrastructure and administration continue to blight the highest level of the African game, where there has been clear progress has been lower down the pyramid. There is a healthy and growing middle class. It's not so long ago that expanding the Cup of Nations from 16 to 24 teams would have seen a marked dilution of quality, but not now.

Comoros and the Gambia, both traditional minnows and at their first Cup of Nations, have reached the last 16. Comoros have perhaps been a touch fortunate but the Gambia have played with an impressive level of calm organisation and deservedly beat Tunisia to go through.

Malawi, in their second tournament, beat Zimbabwe and, but for VAR controversially overturning a penalty, might have beaten Senegal. Only Mauritania have really looked out of their depth – which, given what a terrible format six groups of four is, might be an argument for expanding to 32 teams. Logistics may make that difficult but, given Zambia, South Africa and DR Congo all failed to qualify, it's hard to argue against the move on grounds of quality.

The format – with four third-placed sides making the last 16 – is awful. There is too great a risk of dead rubbers, advantaging the teams in the later groups who know what they need to do, and there is the fundamental unfairness of comparing between groups that have their own dynamics – most obviously a team resting players for the final game if they're already through – and should be discrete. But the tournament has developed



MOHAMED ABD EL GHANY/REUTERS

a recent habit of producing remarkable drama.

The final round of group games at the Euros – Viktor Claesson's injury-time winner for Sweden to put Poland out, Germany saved by Leon Goretzka's late equaliser against Hungary – may have been more thrilling but those at the Cup of Nations felt more consequential, with the reigning champions, Algeria, and the four-time champions Ghana both eliminated.

Algeria were the big surprise. Ghana were in obvious chaos before the tournament, with Charles Akonnor sacked in November to make way for the return as coach of Milovan Rajevac. The Serb led Ghana to the final in 2010 but his cautious, possession-based approach, which got the best out of a young side including André Ayew, has led only to sterile football this time.

Goals conceded in the final 10 minutes cost them a draw against Morocco and a win against Gabon, a match that ended in a brawl that highlighted the frustration

in the camp, Benjamin Tetteh being sent off for a left hook.

Still a win against Comoros would have taken them through, but having been undone on the break, they lost Ayew to a harsh red card for a challenge on the goalkeeper. A second goal on the break followed, and although Ghana fought back to level, Comoros picked them off again in the 85th minute, the culmination of 10 days of rolling ill-discipline that saw Ghana fail to make the knockout stages for the first time since 2006.

The president of the Ghana Football Association, Kurt Okraku, defended Rajevac, pointing out how little time he has had to work with his squad – but that prompts the question of why the GFA sacked Akonnor when they did. The dismissal of the Serb, at a reported cost of \$275,000, was confirmed yesterday morning.

There was no such sense of foreboding about Algeria, though. Rather they came into the tournament on a run of 34 games unbeaten as, by general consent, the best team in the continent. The only real doubt about them was the habitual struggles of north African

• Joy for the Gambia as they progress to the last 16 of the Africa Cup of Nations but Algeria's Riyad Mahrez (below left) is heading home

sides outside north Africa; Egypt in 2008 and 2010 remain the only north African country to win a Cup of Nations south of the Sahara.

To an extent Algeria were unfortunate in Cameroon – a sense only exacerbated when their federation released a statement denying it was bringing in a faith healer to help. They had more touches in the final third than any other side in the group stage while only Nigeria and Mali had more shots, and there's no doubt that the poor quality of the pitch in Douala hampered their passing.

Djamel Belmadi proved two years ago in Egypt what a capable coach he is, his side playing a modern pressing game that looked ideal for international football. He had suffered only one defeat in 44 games in charge before last Sunday, since when he has suffered two in a week – to Equatorial Guinea and Ivory Coast.

Both were similar in the way the midfield, at key stages, disintegrated and allowed their opponents to counterattack. The final 10 minutes against Equatorial Guinea were extraordinary in the way the structure that had been such a strength in 2019 fell apart: essentially four forwards standing on the halfway line and waiting for the ball to be delivered to them as Equatorial Guinea frolicked in the space in the Algerian half. Similarly the 15 minutes after half-time against Ivory Coast were shambolic: the Ivorians scored a decisive third but missed three other decent chances.

Perhaps it was just one of those things. Bad things can happen to good sides at tournaments. But equally it feels significant that the two finalists from 2019, Algeria and Senegal, both of whom play very structured football, managed just two goals between them in six group games.

The lack of preparation time before this tournament, exacerbated by Covid complications, has probably cost them fluency – and it has been notable how much better the football has become generally as the group stage went on – and in the present environment, in which there are a wealth of decent if not brilliant teams, can be enough to cause the continent's giants real problems.\*



**There has been clear progress lower down the Afcon pyramid – a healthy and growing middle class**