

Invincibles no more

Liverpool suffer first Premier League defeat of the season after losing to Watford 3-0

REUTERS
LONDON, MARCH 1

FAR FROM being deflated by his team's first Premier League reverse of the season at Watford on Saturday, Liverpool's ever-positive manager Jurgen Klopp reckoned the shock 3-0 setback could prove liberating for his treble-seeking Reds. Klopp's champions-elect served up their worst performance of the year as they were outplayed by a Watford side who started the game one from the bottom of the table and 55 points adrift of his runaway leaders.

Yet while recognising his team's 44-match unbeaten league streak had been bound to be dismantled some time, the German optimist also reflected that he was not really disappointed by the end of the pursuit of some potentially unreal records. "I see it rather positive because from now on we can play free football again. We don't have to defend or try to get a record, we can just try to win football games again and that is what we will do," Klopp told reporters at Vicarage Road.

Asked if there was any disappointment, he added: "Not really, because I don't think you can break records because you want to break records; you break records because you are 100 percent focused on each step. And for that you have to perform. The boys performed and that's why we won the games, but tonight we were not good enough. It's not now a plus for me that in history, when they look back in 500 years, they will say, 'Liverpool nearly did it.' You cannot change that and it was always clear, sometimes we would lose a game."

Klopp dismissed the suggestion that weariness might have crept into his side, who lost in the Champions League first leg at Atletico Madrid and then had not been at their sharpest in defeating West Ham United in their previous two matches. "Nothing to do with tiredness," he said. "It's not easy to explain but it should not be now the biggest sensation in world football that it happened."

Klopp was keener to praise the quality of his conquerors, who had been inspired by the electric Ismaila Sarr, who scored twice after the break and made the third for Watford captain Troy Deeney. "The most important thing is to congratulate Watford, well deserved. That is what should be the headline. We didn't perform like we should have and Watford performed exactly how they wanted. "That's how football is. It has nothing to do with games you won before, it has nothing to do with the games you will win, it is just this one football game, unfortunately. For tonight, we have to admit Watford were the better team."



Mo Salah (L) and Sadio Mane look dejected after losing 3-0 to Watford on Saturday, which ended their unbeaten run. Reuters

MARCH HALTED

44 Number of matches Liverpool were unbeaten in the Premier League, dating back to January 2019. The run ended with the 3-0 defeat at Watford

3-0 Liverpool's defeat was the heaviest suffered by a team leading the top-flight table against an opponent in the relegation zone since Leicester beat Manchester United 3-0 on November 23, 1985

Next up for Liverpool is an FA Cup fifth round tie at Chelsea on Tuesday as they still chase a Champions League, Premier League and domestic Cup treble. "What the boys did so far is exceptional, but it is not over," said Klopp. "That is the only thing I am interested in -- it's not over. We will go again, I promise 100 percent, and then we will see where it leads us to."

Wolves come from behind to beat Spurs; Man Utd held

REUTERS
MARCH 1

WILY STRIKER Raul Jimenez struck a superb 73rd-minute winner as Wolverhampton Wanderers twice came back from a goal down to beat Tottenham Hotspur 3-2 and leap-frog them into sixth place in the Premier League table on Sunday. Everton and Manchester United, meanwhile, drew 1-1 at Goodison Park in the Premier League on Sunday in an enthralling game which ended in VAR drama.

After losing 2-1 to Chelsea last week, Steven Bergwijn gave Jose Mourinho's Spurs the lead in the 13th minute by slamming home a rebound to spare the blushes of Dele Ali, whose weak shot with the goal at his mercy was parried by Rui Patrício. The visitors struck back 14 minutes later through Irish international Matt Doherty, who took advantage of some poor defending to score after Spurs failed to clear Ruben Vinagre's cross.

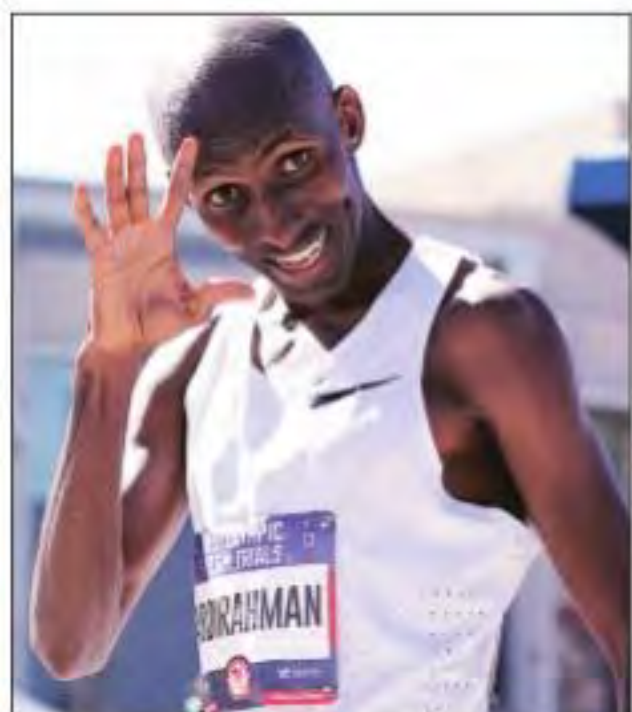
HOW THEY STAND

	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
Liverpool	28	26	1	1	44	79
Man City	27	18	3	6	39	57
Leicester	28	15	5	8	26	50
Chelsea	28	13	6	9	8	45
Man Utd	28	11	9	8	12	42

Serge Aurier restored the lead just before halftime, collecting the ball just inside the box before curling a sublime left-foot shot inside the far post, but again Wolves came back as Diogo Jota scored from close range in the 57th minute.

With Spurs striker Ali spurning several decent chances, Jota then set up Jimenez for the winner, sliding the ball into his path in the 73rd minute for Jimenez to cut swiftly inside before curling a sweet left-foot strike into the net.

Marathon man: Abdi, 43, books ticket to fifth Olympics



Somalia-born Abdi Abdurahman, 43, made his Olympics debut in the 10,000m at the Sydney Games in 2000.

REUTERS
ATLANTA, MARCH 1

IT IS often said that age is nothing but a number. For 43-year-old marathoner Abdi Abdurahman, it was little more than an afterthought at Saturday's U.S. Olympic marathon trials. Slicing through his younger peers on a hilly and demanding Atlanta course, Abdurahman defied the years and the odds to take third place in 2:10:03, becoming the oldest American man to book a spot on the U.S. Olympic marathon team.

"I never count myself out," Abdurahman told reporters after the race. "Everything worked the way I wanted... getting third or first, second is the same -- we're all going the same place and we all accomplished the same goals we wanted."

Prior to Saturday's race, many speculated whether the 43-year-old, four-time Olympian would crack the top 10. Few, how-

ever, expected him to walk away Tokyo-bound to a jaw-dropping fifth Olympics. He first joined Team USA two for Sydney 2000, where he placed 10th in the 10,000 metres, and followed that with 15th- and 10th-place finishes in the subsequent two Games.

He competed in the marathon at the London Olympics but failed to finish. Part of his successful run-up to Atlanta included a 12-week stint in the high altitudes of Ethiopia, where Abdurahman told reporters he put in "a lot of training" alongside four-time

Olympic gold medalist Mo Farah of the UK.

"After 20 years of running, I remember making my first Olympic team," he said. "I think it will be my last Olympics but it won't be my last trials."

Salazar's protege wins trials

AFP adds: Galen Rupp stormed to victory at the United States marathon trials to book his fourth consecutive ticket to the Olympic Games. The 33-year-old distance runner, the protege of banned coach Alberto Salazar, powered home in 2hr 9min 20sec in blustery conditions in Atlanta, Georgia. Jacob Riley claimed second place 2:10:02.

He underwent surgery in 2018 and last year suffered a blow when long-time coach Salazar was given a four-year ban by the United States Anti-Doping Agency for doping offenses. Rupp, who is now coached by Mike Smith, has never failed a doping test and has repeatedly denied using performance-enhancing drugs.

[SPORTS BAR]



Djokovic wins 79th career title in Dubai

Novak Djokovic set his sights on another marathon run of invincibility after capturing his 79th career title. The world number one claimed the Dubai Championships for the fifth time, defeating Stefanos Tsitsipas 6-3, 6-4 in the final on Saturday. Djokovic is now on an 18-0 winning run this season, and 21-0 overall since late 2019. World No. 2 Rafael Nadal, meanwhile, captured his first title of 2020, easily defeating unseeded Taylor Fritz in straight sets, 6-3, 6-2, in the final of the ATP Mexico Open on Saturday. The 33-year-old Nadal, playing in his first tournament since losing in the quarter-finals at the Australian Open last month, didn't drop a set all week and improved to 19-2 all-time at this event.

Humpy climbs to No. 2 spot in world rankings

Indian Grandmaster Koneru Humpy has moved up as No. 2 player in the latest world ranking, displacing reigning world champion Ju Wenjun. Humpy, the world rapid champion who recently won the prestigious Cairns Cup in the US beating a strong field that included Wenjun, is ranked behind China's Yifan Hou as per the March FIDE ratings. Humpy, who won or tied for the first place in three elite tournaments in a row, is now on 2586 (Elo), trailing only Yifan on 2658.



Dutee Chand (R) clinched the gold medal with a timing of 23.66 seconds.

Dutee wins 200m gold at Khelo India Games

Dutee Chand won her second gold of the Khelo India University Games after she bagged the top honours in the 200m final here on Sunday. The 24-year-old, who is representing Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology, clinched the gold medal with a timing of 23.66 seconds. Kirti Vijay Bhoite from the University of Mumbai settled for silver with a timing of 24.98 seconds while Deepali Mahapatra from Utkal University won the bronze, clocking 25.19 seconds. "It feels very good to win the 200m gold. In 100m, it's difficult to gauge when to run in full throttle and when to relax a little bit, but in 200m, it's easier to understand when to run in full speed and when to ease out," said Dutee after her win. The two dominant universities ended with 17 gold medals each. But Panjab University, with a total tally of 46 medals (19 silver, 10 bronze) as against Pune's 37 (11 silver, 9 bronze), walked away with the coveted trophy. The second runners up trophy went to Punjabi University, Patiala with a total medal tally of 33 (13g, 6s, 14b).

RANJI TROPHY

Karnataka blitzed away by Bengal pace

SHAMIK CHAKRABARTY
KOLKATA, MARCH 1

ISHAN POREL bent the ball off a length. Mukesh Kumar had the biggies – KL Rahul and Manish Pandey – in his bag. Akash Deep softened up the tail with fizz and bounce.

In terms of profile, Karnataka's batting belongs to the top rung in domestic cricket. A line-up that comprises the likes of Rahul, Karun Nair, Manish Pandey, R Samarth and the up-and-coming Devdutt Padikkal surrendered tamely in their first innings against the Bengal pacers' aggression. The hosts' catching, too, was first-class. After Bengal's first innings ended on 312 in the morning, Karnataka folded for 122. At 65/7, they were even staring at a follow-on. A Sunday crowd of close to 5,000 at Eden Gardens cheered the home team non-stop.

Porel bowled magnificently, consistently hitting the right areas, bowling at good pace and moving the ball sideways. He removed Samarth in the first over of Karnataka's innings. The outswinger pitched on leg stump, but the batsman made the mistake of closing the face of the bat too early. The leading edge took the ball to Manoj Tiwari at second slip.

Nair got a beauty from Porel, with the ball pitching on a good length and leaving the batsman. Nair attempted an on-drive, instead of playing straight. The outside edge went to Anustup Majumdar at first slip. Porel's other three victims – Padikkal, S Sharath and Abhimanyu Mithun – came from a couple of good outswingers and a bouncer respectively. He had 2/16 from six overs in his first spell followed by 3/23 from seven overs in his second. It was his third five-for in the Ranji Trophy.

When the Bengal team management decided to move on and dropped Ashok Dinda early into the Ranji season, the bowling leadership mantle was quietly passed on to Porel. At 21 years of age, it could have been a heavy cross to bear. He had a pretty average last season and needed to raise his game and the youngster has responded well.

Not that Porel has played every game this season. A tour to New Zealand with India A saw him miss a few Ranji Trophy matches. But whenever he played, he led from the front. Even with a heavily-strapped ankle in the quarterfinal against Odisha, he claimed three wickets in the first innings. Porel has taken his tally to 20 wickets from five matches, at an average less than 16. And he now has a new celebration, very Roberto Firmino-like, copied from the FIFA game on PlayStation 4. "This has to be my best; a five-wicket haul in a Ranji Trophy semifinal. When we get the new ball, we go for the kill. If it doesn't happen, we try to bowl in partnership and contain the run rate and not leak runs," Porel said after the day's play.

Bengal's partnership bowling has proved to be so effective this season that head coach Arun Lal called his pace trio as the best in the business in domestic cricket. "We have the best bowling attack in the country. In any conditions, I want these three. As a unit, they are unmatched," he said. Porel, Kumar and Akash now have 72 wickets between them this term.

On Sunday, they were relentless. Kumar cleaned up Pandey with an in-ducker that came back so much off the seam that the batsman, a regular in India's white-ball set-up, barely had a clue. Then, the medium pacer set a trap for Rahul by pushing the third man squarer and tempting him with a short ball a little wide outside off-stump. Rahul took the bait and was undone by the extra bounce. Abhishek Raman took a fine catch, running in and diving forward.

Akash removed KV Siddharth – Karnataka's batting hero in the quarterfinal against Jammu & Kashmir – in his first over. In his second spell, he bounced out K Gowtham before dismissing Ronit More caught behind. Gowtham used the long



Ishan Porel celebrates after dismissing Karnataka's A Mithun. PTI

Saurashtra gain upper hand vs Guj

Rajkot: Sheldon Jackson struck a gritty hundred before the bowlers shone as Saurashtra gained the upper hand on the second day of their Ranji Trophy semifinal against Gujarat here on Sunday. Jackson's knock of 103 helped Saurashtra post 304 and then the home team bowlers wreaked havoc on Gujarat's batting line-up to reduce them to 119 for six.

BRIEF SCORES: Saurashtra 304 (Sheldon Jackson 103, Kishan Parmar 37; Arzan Nagwaswalla 5-81) vs Gujarat 119/6

handle and the 56-run eighth-wicket partnership helped Karnataka avoid the follow-on. But overall, the visitors so far have proved to be a letdown in the semifinal. They bowled the wrong length during Bengal's first innings and allowed the tail to wag. In fact, resuming at 275/9, Bengal added another 37 runs because the Karnataka pacers refused to bowl full and straight to Porel, targeting him with the short ball instead. Finally, when a full and straight delivery came, Porel was bowled.

In terms of batting, Karnataka looked iffy against Bengal's pace attack. Their bowlers – the excellent Mithun to be precise – found the right line and length during Bengal's second innings, but discipline still cost them. In the final over of the day, Prasad Krishna had Majumdar caught behind, but the bowler had overstepped. Majumdar, who scored an unbeaten 149 in the first innings, could make Karnataka suffer. After taking a 190-run first innings lead, Bengal finished the day on 72/4. This is now their game to lose.

BRIEF SCORES: Bengal 312 (Anustup Majumdar 149 not out; Ronit More 3/52, Abhimanyu Mithun 3/77) and 72/4 (Sudip Chatterjee 40 not out; Abhimanyu Mithun 3/9) vs Karnataka 122 (Ishan Porel 5/39)

Security breach

Karnataka took exception to a security breach that saw a fan invade the pitch and give Rahul a hug, as play was about to start after lunch. Then, Gowtham, who was fielding near the boundary, reportedly had to face abuse from the fans. It is learnt that the Karnataka team management complained to match referee Prakash Bhatt, who in turn asked the Cricket Association of Bengal to have extra security personnel at the ground from the third day onwards.

ISL: Bengaluru eke out narrow win over ATK

Defending champions Bengaluru FC registered a narrow 1-0 win over ATK in the first leg of their Hero Indian Super League semifinal clash at the Sree Kanteerava Stadium in Bengaluru on Sunday. Deshorn Brown's opportunistic strike (31st minute) proved to be the difference. Edu Garcia kicked off an even contest with a shot from outside the box that went wide in the second minute. Goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu's punt from his own half ended up at the feet of Juanan whose shot from inside the box was hit straight at Arindam Bhattacharya. The ATK custodian messed up the save and spilt the ball into the path of Deshorn Brown, who broke the deadlock.

Bagan beat TRAU 3-1, inch closer to title

Mohun Bagan inched closer to a second I-League title with a convincing 3-1 win over debutants Tiddim Road Athletic Union (TRAU) FC in Imphal on Sunday. Spaniard Fran Gonzalez (14th minute) scored his 10th goal of the season, converting a penalty to go top of the scoring charts, while compatriot Joseba Beitia (22nd) and Senegalese striker Papa Babacar Diawara (23rd) also found the net for the Mariners. This was Mohun Bagan's seventh win on the trot and extended their unbeaten run to 12 games.



Jhawar, Jalta win DDA Lt. Governor's Golf Cup

Rohit Jhawar won the DDA Lt. Governor's Golf Cup at the Qutab Golf Course on Sunday while Amita Jalta won the ladies championship. Delhi Lt Governor Anil Bajjal said the popularity of the tournament, which is held annually and attracted more than 700 golfers this year, has been on a rise. After the tournament concluded, it was announced that a state-of-the-art driving range, which is under construction, will be functional soon and will be on two levels, with 28 hitting bays. "In addition, this driving range will have a number of facilities like teaching room, simulator room, fitting room and a pro shop. For guest in waiting, there will be an air-conditioned coffee shop. The range will have night usage facility with flood lights. There will also be an artificial turf putting arena," DDA said in a release.