

Sports

Title-hungry upstart Suns and Bucks meet in NBA Finals



ATLANTA: In this file photo Giannis Antetokounmpo of the Milwaukee Bucks reacts from the bench against the Atlanta Hawks during the second half in Game Six of the Eastern Conference Finals at State Farm Arena on July 3, 2021 in Atlanta, Georgia. — AFP

PHOENIX: Two long-frustrated franchises, the Phoenix Suns and Milwaukee Bucks, will meet in the NBA Finals starting tonight and one of them will put an end to an epic title drought. The Bucks captured their only title half a century ago while the Suns have never claimed the crown since the club began play in 1968. With star guard Chris Paul reaching the best-of-seven championship series for the first time in his 16-season career, the Suns have reached the NBA Finals for the first time since 1993. A Charles Barkley-led Suns squad lost to the Michael Jordan-sparked Chicago Bulls 28 years ago and the Suns also dropped the 1976 NBA Finals to the Boston Celtics.

Many thought Paul, an 11-time NBA All-Star and two-time Olympic champion, was too far past his prime at 36 to spark a title run. Instead, the poised veteran leader averaged 16.4 points, 8.9 assists, 4.5 rebounds and 1.4 steals a game for the Suns after arriving in a trade from Oklahoma City last November. "I've wanted to be part of this all of my career," said Paul, who writes "Can't give up now" on his shoes before every game.

The Bucks had not reached the NBA Finals since 1974 and won their only title in 1971, when legendary center Kareem Abdul-Jabbar — still known then as Lew Alcindor — sparked a sweep over the Baltimore Bullets. Greek superstar Giannis Antetokounmpo, the Bucks' new dominating big man, has reached the NBA Finals after taking NBA Most Valuable Player honors the previous two seasons only to suffer play-

off disappointment. Whether or not the 26-year-old will be able to play, however, is another question. Antetokounmpo missed the last two games of the Eastern Conference finals after hyperextending his left knee in game four against Atlanta.

The Bucks went a league-best 60-22 in the 2018-19 campaign and won a playoff series for the first time since 2001. They reached the Eastern Conference finals and grabbed a 2-0 lead only to drop the next four games and fall to eventual NBA champion Toronto. The next season, Antetokounmpo sparked the Bucks to a league-best 56-17 mark, but suffered a right ankle injury and missed most of the last two games as the Bucks lost to Miami in five games in the second round. While they didn't produce the league's best record this season, the Bucks did reach the final despite Antetokounmpo's injury. "Certainly any time you lose you've got to be honest with yourself," Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said. "When this group hasn't been able to advance it has hurt, it has been hard and the off-season the guys have put the work in — but there's still more to be done."

'Like a storybook'

The Bucks and Suns outlasted teams with more wins to reach the final, but only one fairy tale run is going to have a happy ending. "This is like a storybook, going somewhere I've never been," Suns star Devin Booker said. "It has been a long time coming to get to this moment. This is nice right here, but we still

have work to do." Suns coach Monty Williams, who says he likes Booker's "fearlessness" and killer instinct, is enjoying seeing Paul and others revel in the moment. "I'm enjoying watching our players enjoy this moment," Williams said. "I know how badly (Paul) wants to win."

Booker is averaging 27.0 points, 6.4 rebounds and 4.8 assists a contest in the playoffs while Paul is contributing 18.1 points, 8.7 assists and 3.9 rebounds a game in the post-season to make the Suns bright. Bahamas big man Deandre Ayton has 16.2 points and 11.8 rebounds a game.

The Suns will enjoy five days off before the NBA Finals opener while the Bucks will have only two. "We've had kind of long, extended pauses between each round and I'm kind of excited to try it without one," Budenholzer said. "Maybe we can be the team that's in a rhythm. It's a quick turn, but we'll be ready."

Antetokounmpo has averaged 28.2 points, 12.7 rebounds and 5.2 assists a game but has had great support from Khristian Middleton — with 23.4 points, 8.0 rebounds, 5.1 assists and 1.5 steals a game — and Jrue Holiday with 17.6 points, 8.4 assists and 5.6 rebounds a game. "To get to the finals is amazing," Holiday said. "It's a feeling I've never felt before."

"Everybody stays ready. Everybody plays together. Everybody stays locked in," Middleton said. "That's all you can ask for." Phoenix won both regular-season games against Milwaukee but only by one point each time. — AFP

Kuwait Olympic Committee inks deal to insure athletes

KUWAIT: Kuwait Olympic Committee and Gulf Insurance Group inked yesterday an agreement for insuring over 250 Kuwaiti athletes. Speaking at a news conference marking the deal, Kuwait Olympic Committee Chairman Sheikh Fahad Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah said insuring the athletes for pitch injuries will encourage youth to get engaged in sports, boost morale of the athletes and nudge them for greater achievements. The agreement that stipulates medical insurance for all Kuwaiti male and female athletes will enhance their morale to excel in local and external competitions and lift the name and flag of Kuwait aloft at sports quarters, Sheikh Fahad Al-Nasser said. He expressed gratitude to Sheikh Hamad Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah for his distinctive efforts for backing up the Kuwaiti athletes. Meanwhile, Khaled Al-Hassan, the group CEO, said in a statement during the news conference that the deal was necessary and in line with the company responsibility toward the society, namely the athletes. Insurance coverage for the Kuwaiti sportsmen and women have become necessary due to possible accidents that inflict short or long term injuries. The one-year deal, effective as of early July, benefits some 263 players of national teams. — KUNA

NBA star Doncic leads Slovenia into Tokyo Olympics

PARIS: NBA star Luka Doncic delivered a triple-double to lead Slovenia over Lithuania 96-85 on Sunday and into their first Olympic basketball tournament. Slovenia punched their ticket to Tokyo with the victory in the FIBA Olympic qualifying tournament in Kaunas, Lithuania. Doncic, 22, scored 15 of his 31 points in the second quarter and added 11 rebounds and 13 assists to lead Slovenia. Lithuania, led by NBA stalwarts Domantas Sabonis and Jonas Valanciunas, twice clawed back from double-digit deficits.

But Slovenia took control for good with a 14-0 scoring run bridging the third and fourth quarters and the Lithuanians will miss out on the Games for the first time. "We worked hard for this," said Dallas Mavericks star Doncic, who was named Most Valuable Player of the tournament.

"I don't care about the MVP," Doncic said. "We won here, we're going to the Olympics, the first time in our country. "It's amazing," he added. "I think every kid in Slovenia dreams about being in the Olympics, I did, too." The event in Kaunas was one of four men's basketball qualifiers concluding on Sunday. In Split, Croatia, Germany cooled off red-hot Brazil to book their first Olympic berth since 2008. — AFP



SPIELBERG BEI KNITTELFELD, Austria: Red Bull's Dutch driver Max Verstappen crosses the finish line to win the Formula One Austrian Grand Prix at the Red Bull Ring race track in Spielberg, Austria, on Sunday. — AFP

Verstappen celebrates 'insane' win in Austria to pull clear in title race

SPIELBERG BEI KNITTELFELD, Austria: Max Verstappen reeled off his third win in a row from pole in the Austrian Grand Prix on Sunday to consolidate his world championship lead over Lewis Hamilton who after finishing fourth said his toiling Mercedes team were "miles away from Red Bull".

Second place in the ninth round of the season went to Hamilton's Mercedes teammate Valtteri Bottas with McLaren's Lando Norris a fine third after picking up a five second time penalty. Verstappen's latest step towards ending Hamilton's hold on the drivers' title triggered a carnival atmosphere in Formula One's first capacity crowd since the coronavirus pandemic struck with most of the 100,000 in attendance decked out in his Dutch orange colors. "To see so much orange in the stands is incredible, it's an extra motivation, thank you" Verstappen told his cheering congregation at the Red Bull-owned Spielberg circuit. "The car was unreal," added the 21-year-old threat to Hamilton's bid for an unprecedented eighth world crown who was following up his win at the track last week. "It's insane - I'm a bit amazed myself how today went. I didn't expect it to be like this. Incredible job by everyone to deliver something like this."

After his fifth win of the season Verstappen moved on to 182 points in the standings, 32 clear of Hamilton ahead of the seven-time world champion's home British Grand Prix next month. Hamilton, without a win since Barcelona in early May, had forecast after qualifying Saturday that beating Verstappen looked unlikely. Aside from his Red Bull rival's superior pace, damage to Hamilton's car late on in the race cost him a likely second place. "We're miles away from them Red Bull. We need all hands on deck. They have brought a lot of upgrades over the last few races - and we haven't brought any," he said.

Flawless

Verstappen enjoyed a flawless in the Austrian mountains alive with the sound of his supporters who had come to watch his latest attempt towards a possible world title. He was clean away at lights out from Norris but by turn three the safety car had to be deployed after Esteban Ocon's race came to a premature end when his Alpine was nudged by Antonio Giovinazzi's Alfa Romeo. Racing got back under way on lap four with Verstappen gliding clear with Norris fending off an attack on his second spot from Sergio Perez in the other Red Bull. The Mexican, in his 200th Grand Prix, paid dearly for his audacity, going off on to the gravel to drop to 10th.

On lap 20 Norris was dealt a double blow. He was told race stewards had handed him a five second penalty over the Perez incident, and was then overtaken by Hamilton despite valiantly trying to fend off his compatriot. "Such a great driver, Lando," Hamilton told his pits. After all the leaders had pitted for the first time Verstappen was over 15sec clear of the chasing Hamilton, with Bottas now up to third. Down in mid-field it was Perez's turn to pick up a five second penalty for aggressively shutting out the Ferrari of Charles Leclerc. Bottas was told by the pits not to overtake Hamilton whose car had picked up damage to his rear left tyre. But by lap 52 the Finn heard over the radio he was clear to race his teammate and, fighting for his job next season, nipped by him.

Norris meanwhile, having served his time penalty, had Hamilton's wounded Mercedes in his cross hairs and he duly swept past to cement his fourth podium finish. "It was a lot of fun, a good race," said the man leading McLaren's revival - he is the only driver to score points in all nine races staged this season. He added: "It was exciting but also disappointing because I felt we should have been in second place. "Should have, would have, could have in the end. It's nice to know that we can race them, first time in many years we have been able to keep up with the Red Bulls and Mercedes." Another English driver George Russell, the man Bottas is in a 'drive-off' with to be Hamilton's teammate next season, went desperately close to earning his first point for Williams only for Fernando Alonso's Alpine to pass him on the final lap. — AFP

Japan's Ohtani adds pitcher role to his historic All-Star debut

LOS ANGELES: Two-way player Shohei Ohtani became the first player in Major League Baseball history on Sunday to be selected to the All-Star game as both a position player and pitcher. The Japanese sensation, who leads MLB in home runs with 30, was chosen as a starting pitcher for the American League team, receiving 121 votes in balloting by players, coaches and managers. Ohtani had already been selected in fan voting as a designated hitter for the AL squad and is entered in the Home Run Derby on All-Star weekend. "The guy's going to participate in Home Run Derby, pitch in the game and hit in the game. That doesn't happen, like, ever," Angels manager Joe Maddon said. "Even the non-baseball fan can really latch onto this and become interested."

Ohtani has drawn comparisons for his two-way play to the legendary American Babe Ruth, who retired in 1935 after 22 seasons. Ruth, nicknamed the 'Sultan of Swat', ended his career with 714 home runs and 10 World Series titles. But Ruth didn't pitch much after the 1919 season and the All-Star game didn't come into being until 1933.

Heading into Sunday, Ohtani had a .278 batting average and 66 RBI along with a 3-1 record and a 3.60 ERA in 12 starts on the mound to go with 83 strikeouts in 60 innings. He will join fellow starting pitchers Gerrit Cole of the New York Yankees, and Lance Lynn and Carlos Rodon of the Chicago White Sox in the All-Star game July 13 at Coors Field in Denver, Colorado. Maddon said earlier in the week that he expects Ohtani to pitch at least one inning in the mid-season showcase. "Of course, he'd only pitch one inning, and he'd maybe get one at-bat," Maddon said. "Let him hit and pitch. People want to see that." — AFP



Shohei Ohtani



BANGKOK: Mateus Castro (4L) of Japan's Nagoya Grampus celebrating with teammates after scoring a penalty against Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim during their AFC Champions League group G football match at the Rajamangala Stadium in Bangkok on Sunday. — AFP

Nagoya make last 16 as Ratchaburi hold Pohang

DOHA: Nagoya Grampus became the first team to progress to the Asian Champions League's round of 16 from the continent's eastern half after they beat Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim 2-1 to secure top spot with one match to spare in Group G on Sunday.

The Japanese club's fifth victory in as many matches put them in an unassailable position with 15 points after their main rivals Pohang Steelers were held to a goalless draw by Thai debutants Ratchaburi FC. Only the group winners and the three best second-placed teams from each group qualify for the last 16 after the AFC expanded the tournament to give teams from Southeast Asia a chance to test their skills against the continent's big guns. Group stage matches in Asia's western zone were completed in the COVID-19 impacted tournament in April.

Nagoya went ahead at the Rajamangala Stadium in Bangkok on Sunday through Brazilian Mateus, who scored from the penalty spot in the third minute after he was brought down inside the box by Adam Nor Azlin. Yuki Soma and Kazuki Nagasawa missed chances later but Nagoya managed to consolidate in the 28th minute after Hiroyuki Abe got past the defence and beat Johor goalkeeper Hazik Nadzli all ends up.

The Malaysians however were not spirited and pulled a goal back in the 42nd minute with Ramadhan Usman scoring on the rebound with a simple shot after Corbin Ong's earlier effort was parried by Nagoya's Australian goalkeeper Mitchell Langerak. Johor could have got the equalizer midway through the second half but Ahmad Bakri could only watch in agony as his thundering shot from inside the box hit the crossbar. That was the last time Johor got close to the Nagoya goal as they remained on three points with just one win from five matches. Pohang Steelers, meanwhile, were clear favorites against Ratchaburi but the Koreans failed to convert any of the numerous chances that came their way to share points and take their tally to 11 points with one match remaining. — AFP