

# Nets hold on to edge Celtics and regain first place in East

LOS ANGELES: Joe Harris scored a team high 20 points as the short-handed Brooklyn Nets withstood Jayson Tatum's 38-point performance with a 109-104 victory on Friday in New York. Kyrie Irving flirted with a triple double, finishing with 15 points, 11 assists and nine rebounds but it wasn't his best shooting game as the Nets had to hold off a late rally by the Celtics in front of a pandemic-limited crowd of 1,700 at Barclays Center arena.

"We know that we're not going to have it right away some games, so we've just got to battle through," Irving said. Even though they were missing Kevin Durant and James Harden, the Nets still managed to lead for most of the contest and regain first place in the Eastern Conference standings with the victory. They improved to 40-20 on the season for a half-game lead over the Philadelphia 76ers, who have been struggling of late.

Nets forward Durant missed his third straight game with a high injury which he got in Sunday's loss to Miami. Durant has played in just 24 of Brooklyn's 59 games this season. He recently returned from a 23-game absence due to a hamstring injury. Brooklyn also continues to be without star guard James Harden (hamstring), who sat out for the ninth straight game.

Jeff Green scored 19 points, Bruce Brown chipped in 15 and DeAndre Jordan grabbed 11 rebounds for Brooklyn, who controlled the tempo by outscoring the Celtics 32-3 in fast break points. Tatum led all scorers, rookie Payton Pritchard drained six six-pointers en route to 22 points, while Marcus Smart finished with 19 as the Celtics

outscored the Nets 27-15 in the last 10 minutes of the game. Tatum bounced back offensively after going three of 17 from the field in each of his previous two games.

"Any time you turn the ball over a lot and you give a team like Brooklyn opportunities to get out in transition, get easy shots and stuff like that, it's going to be tough to win games," Pritchard said. Boston dropped to 32-28, losing for only the third time in its past 12 games and falling one game behind the Atlanta Hawks.

## Curry rebounds

Elsewhere, Stephen Curry led a balanced offense with a game-high 32 points as the Golden State Warriors beat Nikola Jokic's Denver Nuggets 118-97. The 30-point game was the 12th in Curry's past 13 outings. He was held to just 18 points in a four-point loss at Washington on Wednesday.

Kelly Oubre had 23 points, Andrew Wiggins 19, Jordan Poole 15 as the under-manned Warriors surprised the Nuggets. Nuggets star Jokic was held to 19 points, six rebounds and six assists as Denver also lost Will Barton early in the game to an apparent hamstring injury.

Also, Bogdan Bogdanovic had 21 points and a game-high eight assists, leading the host Atlanta Hawks, who played without two of their biggest stars, to a 118-103 win over the Miami Heat. The Hawks were without a half dozen players, including Trae Young (ankle) and Clint Capela (bruised tailbone). Young and Capela are averaging 41 points per game and Capela leads the league in rebounds. — AFP



NEW YORK: DeAndre Jordan #6 of the Brooklyn Nets reacts after a call during the second half against the Boston Celtics at Barclays Center on Friday in the Brooklyn borough of New York City. — AFP

## Commercial logic remains for new European league

LONDON: "Soccernomics" economist Stefan Szymanski says the "pent-up demand" underpinning the concept of a European Super League will not disappear, despite the launch in Britain of a wholesale review into the running of English football.

The 12 elite European clubs pushing the much-vilified concept fell foul of an arrogant failure to consult and their "mad idea" of making it a US-style closed league without demotion, the British academic told AFP in an interview. But UEFA, the governing body of football in Europe, must still reckon with pressure to see the continent's greatest clubs play each other more regularly and help deal with the financial mess caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Szymanski, who teaches sports management at the University of Michigan, has been publishing research into the economics of football for decades, including in the best-selling book "Soccernomics" (2009), co-authored with journalist Simon Kuper.

Szymanski believes that some ideas informing the British review — such as the German model of fan ownership at clubs — are a legal and business minefield, and that mandating fan representation on club boards is a more likely route in future.

"(Prime Minister) Boris Johnson is an unmitigated populist, so he's going to go with whatever he thinks is going to buy him popularity. And it just might be that instituting something like that (the German model) might be a good idea," he said.

### Backlash from fans

But any talk of driving out the mostly foreign tycoons who run England's top six clubs risks capital flight, and longer-term consequences for which politicians are ill-prepared, according to Szymanski. "If I was advising Johnson, one thing I'd say is 'You know what? You buy yourself a lot of short-term popularity by using the law to mandate the German system, but also remember, the next time something goes wrong, it's all on you.' Because you have taken over football, you've said that you're in charge, so if there's any problem in the future, people are going to look for you to sort it out."

The Super League proposals involving Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United and Tottenham were the catalyst for the government finally launching its much-delayed review. The breakaway European Super League plan, which also involved six top clubs from Italy and Spain, collapsed this week after a furious backlash from fans. The UK government will examine wider questions about the way the sport is run, looking at examples such as the collapse of lower-league Bury, which went into administration last year.

The review will consider creating a new independent regulator for football, and changing the "fit and proper person test" for owners, which came back into contention last year when a Saudi-backed consortium tried to buy Newcastle United. More widely, UEFA has confirmed the Champions League will be expanded from 2024, but the controversy unleashed by this week's abortive breakaway leaves the 12 clubs grappling with an unprecedented united front from fans and demands for reprisals. Szymanski said the business case for a revamped European competition is strong, given the continent's biggest clubs are already global brands but are struggling to recover from the pandemic and recoup a greater share of broadcast revenues. — AFP

## Djokovic hopes COVID-19 vaccination will not be compulsory

BELGRADE: World number one Novak Djokovic said Friday he hoped it would not become compulsory for players to be vaccinated against coronavirus and insisted any decision he makes on whether or not to take the vaccine will remain private. "I am still a supporter of freedom of choice," Djokovic said after reaching the semi-finals of the ATP tournament in Belgrade.

It was in the Serbian capital last summer where Djokovic, as well as a number of other players, tested positive for COVID-19 after organizing a controversial exhibition event. On whether or not he will be vaccinated to guarantee entry to tournaments, 33-year-old Djokovic refused to commit himself.

"I will keep my decision to myself, I think it's a private, intimate thing. I do not want to be labelled as someone

who is for or against vaccination," added Djokovic who has expressed his reservations in the past. "I hope it does not become compulsory."

On court, Djokovic stayed on course for a third Belgrade title with a comfortable 6-1, 6-3 quarter-final win over compatriot Miomir Kecmanovic. Djokovic, the 2009 and 2011 champion at the event which is played at a venue which carries his name, will face Russia's Aslan Karatsev for a place in the final.

In their first meeting, Djokovic broke his 21-year-old opponent's first service game and repeated the feat for a 5-1 lead in the opener. His only blip was when he was broken as he served for the match at 5-2 in the second set.

However, it was a brief respite for world number 47 Kecmanovic who handed back the break in the next



BELGRADE: Serbia's Novak Djokovic celebrates after victory over Serbia's Mimir Kecmanovic during their ATP 250 Serbia Open quarter-final singles tennis match at The Novak Tennis Centre in Belgrade on Friday. — AFP

game allowing the top seed to complete a 75-minute win. "I think personally I'm feeling very well on court,

moving well, hitting the ball well and, of course, enjoying the home court advantage," Djokovic said. — AFP

## NBA star LeBron James's police tweet sparks uproar

NEW YORK: NBA star LeBron James was facing a firestorm of criticism from the US rightwing Friday over an incendiary tweet targeting an Ohio police officer who fatally shot a Black teenager, with conservative pundits accusing the athlete of racism and irresponsible behavior.

The policeman shot dead 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant as she lunged with a knife at another girl in James's home state of Ohio — prompting the Lakers star to post a picture of the officer on Twitter with the words "YOU'RE NEXT #ACCOUNTABILITY."

The killing coincided with the guilty verdict against the white police officer charged with the murder of George Floyd, a Black man whose death in Minneapolis last year sparked nationwide protests. The 36-year-old NBA star, popularly known as "King James," took down the tweet hours later, explaining his post was "being used to create more hate - This isn't about one officer, it's about the entire system and they always use our words to create more racism. I am so desperate for more ACCOUNTABILITY."

That explanation did little to stem the tide of anger on social media, stoked by prominent rightwing pundits led by former president Donald Trump who said "His RACIST rants are divisive, nasty, insulting, and demeaning. He may be a great basketball player, but he is doing nothing to bring our Country together!"

Tom Cotton, a hardline Republican senator from Arkansas, took to Twitter to say that "LeBron James is inciting violence against an Ohio police officer. This is disgraceful and dangerous. Is the NBA okay with this? Is Twitter?"

James had avoided wading into social issues in the early days of his sporting career, but that changed with the shooting of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager shot dead in 2012 by a man who subsequently avoided jail under Florida's "Stand your ground" law.

"I think it starts with the Trayvon Martin situation and the reason it starts with that, I believe is because having kids of my own - having boys of my own - it hit home for me to see and to learn the story and to think that if my boy left home and he never returned," he said in an interview with CNN in 2018.

Since then he has often spoken out about racial discrimination in the country. "I think it's just the natural evolution and growth of a man," his longtime friend Maverick Carter told the sports new website Bleacher Report in 2018.



DALLAS: LeBron James of the Los Angeles Lakers in the second quarter at the American Airlines Center on Thursday in Dallas, Texas. — AFP

### "Shut up and dribble"

Thanks to his status as an athlete, his commentary on social issues and his activism, James is now seen as one of the most influential sports personalities in the political sphere. He had several very public spats with Trump in the past, most frequently played out on Twitter before the social media platform barred the former president over his own incitement of a mob that attacked the US Capitol on January 6.

James even produced his own 2018 documentary series on the political engagement of Black athletes called "Shut Up and Dribble," whose title was drawn from a Fox News commentator's reaction to the basketball player's clashes with Trump. He also has a television talk show on HBO with Carter, who is a businessman, called "The Shop" in which he discusses social issues of the day with prominent personalities. In 2020, the four-time NBA player of the year went even further by launching "More Than a Vote", recruiting tens of thousands of volunteers to encourage Black people to register to vote ahead of last year's elections, in which Trump was defeated by Democrat Joe Biden.

"LeBron James should focus on basketball rather than presiding over the destruction of the NBA, which has just recorded the lowest television RATINGS, by far, in the long and distinguished history of the League," Trump said in his statement.

In 2016, Trump linked bad ratings at the NFL to the movement started by quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who had taken a knee during the national anthem at ball games in protest of police violence against Black people. The WNBA women's basketball league racked up the highest ratings gains among major US leagues in 2020 when its players were by far the most active in supporting the movement that emerged after George Floyd's death. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Chiefs land Orlando Brown

WASHINGTON: Kansas City Chiefs star quarterback Patrick Mahomes has a new blind-side blocker to protect him after the NFL team made a trade Friday with the Baltimore Ravens for Orlando Brown. Mahomes, who spent much of February's Super Bowl loss to Tampa Bay scrambling because his blockers struggled to stop the Buccaneers, tweeted his delight with five smiley faces and a story about the deal. Mahomes was the 2018 NFL Most Valuable Player, led the Chiefs to the 2019 season crown with a Super Bowl MVP award and led Kansas City to the title game again last season. Brown, a Pro Bowl offensive tackle, will fill a void on the left side of the Chiefs' line and complete a major revamp of the protection for Mahomes. — AFP

#### Zimbabwe beat Pakistan

HARARE: Zimbabwe beat Pakistan for the first time in a Twenty20 international Friday, with four-wicket Luke Jongwe the star of a shock 19-run triumph at Harare Sports Club. A maiden victory in 16 attempts seemed unlikely when the tourists restricted the hosts to a meagre 118-9 with Tinashe Kamunhukwe (34) the only batsman to impress. But right-arm medium pacer Jongwe (4-18) wreaked havoc and Zimbabwe bowled out Pakistan for 99 in 19.5 overs. It was the lowest total defended in a T20 international in Harare and victory for Zimbabwe leveled the three-match series at 1-1 ahead of the decider at the same venue Sunday. — AFP

#### Red Bull to develop engines

PARIS: Red Bull Racing will develop their own engines from 2025, the team announced Friday, as they plan long-term following the decision by current supplier Honda to leave the sport this season. The team of Max Verstappen and Sergio Perez said they have also recruited Ben Hodgkinson as technical director from Mercedes to oversee the switch. Red Bull have acquired the technology of Honda and will produce it in-house between 2022 and 2024 before going solo with their own powertrains to comply with new regulations from 2025. "The formation of the powertrain division represents Red Bull's single largest investment in F1 since the establishment of Red Bull Racing in 2005," said a team statement. — AFP