

# 'Awesome' Harden inspires 76ers to opening win against Celtics



Philadelphia 76ers's James Harden (1) goes up for a basket during a victory over Boston Celtics in the NBA Eastern Conference semi-final at the TD Garden in Boston, MA, US, on May 1, 2023. ● GETTY IMAGES

James Harden inspired the Philadelphia 76ers to a thrilling 119-115 victory over the Boston Celtics in game one of their NBA Eastern Conference semi-final.

Harden scored 45 points, including a three-pointer to put the 76ers ahead with eight seconds remaining at TD Garden in Boston, BBC Sport reported.

"He was awesome," said Sixers coach Doc Rivers. "Kept his cool, knew when to attack, knew when to give it up."

Game two of the best-of-seven series is at the same venue on Thursday.

The Sixers were without the injured Joel Embiid. The six-time NBA All-Star suffered a knee injury in game three of the first-round play-off series against the Brooklyn Nets and it is not yet known when he will return.

Tyrese Maxey scored 26 points for the 76ers, while Jayson Tatum led the way for the Celtics with 39.

Two free throws from Tatum put Boston 115-114 ahead late in the final quarter, but Harden held his nerve to sink a three-pointer from 25 yards and give Philadelphia the lead.

"He had just the perfect mindset," said Rivers. "I'm so happy for him because it just tells you what he can do on a given night."

"It's amazing - the guy's a Hall-of-Famer and all you hear is the other stuff about him. He's fantastic."

In the Western Conference, Nikola Jokic scored 39 points as the Denver Nuggets beat the Phoenix Suns 97-87 to take a 2-0 series lead.

"Nikola's an MVP for a reason. He can take over a game. He can beat you in a lot of ways. I love an aggressive Nikola Jokic," said Nuggets coach Michael Malone.

Aaron Gordon added 16 points and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope 14 for the Nuggets in a game dominated by defences at the Ball Arena in Denver.

Devin Booker scored 35 points and Kevin Durant 24 for the Suns, who lost Chris Paul to a groin injury in the third quarter. Game three is in Phoenix on Saturday.

## Ma'rouf joins Shahdab Yazd



● FIVB

### Sports Desk

World-class setter Saeed Ma'rouf signed for Iranian Volleyball Super League champion Shahdab Yazd.

Former Iranian captain Ma'rouf, who retired from international duty after the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, is currently involved in the Turkish league with Fenerbahçe S.K. and will join up with his new team in Bahrain, where Shahdab will take part at the Asian Men's Club Volleyball Championship - starting May 14 in the city of Riffa.

Shahdab will get its campaign underway against Iraqi outfit South Gas in Pool B - also featuring Taichung Bank of the Chinese Taipei and Afghanistan's Kam Air.

## Iranian women rout Kuwait in Asian ice hockey meet



● MNA

### Sports Desk

Iran thrashed Kuwait 20-0 in its second outing at the 2023 IIHF Ice Hockey Women's Asia and Oceania Championship in Bangkok, Thailand.

This was second victory at the event for Farzad Houshidari's girls, who had routed India 17-1 in their Group B opener on Sunday. Iran finishes the group fixtures against Kyrgyzstan today.

Kyrgyzstan was beaten 3-0 by India later on Monday.

## Iran crowned at Greco-Roman Majid Cup in Tehran



● iwf.ir

### Sports Desk

Iranian wrestling team was crowned the champion at the international cadet Greco-Roman tournament, Majid Cup, in Tehran.

Ali Gharibi (45kg), Ali Dezfouli (60kg), Habibollah Rahimi (71kg), Kamran Bakpeykari (80kg), Ali-Akbar Asghari (92kg), and Rouhollah Hajivand (110kg) walked away with the ultimate prizes of their respective weight classes as Iran tallied 225 points at the second edition of the event.

## Djokovic able to play at US Open as vaccine mandate set to end

World number one Novak Djokovic will be able to compete at the US Open this year after the US government said on Monday it will end its COVID-19 vaccination requirements for international travellers on May 11.

Djokovic, one of the most high-profile athletes unvaccinated against COVID-19,

missed the US Open in 2022 due to his vaccine status, Reuters reported.

The 35-year-old Serb was unable to enter the country this year after unsuccessfully applying to the US government for special permission to play at Indian Wells and Miami.

Djokovic missed last year's

Australian Open and was deported from the country due to his vaccine status and has said he would skip Grand Slams rather than have a COVID shot.

Djokovic has won three of his 22 major titles at the US Open. The hardcourt Grand Slam will be held from Aug. 28-Sept. 10 this year.



● MIKE FREY/USA TODAY SPORTS

## Napoli to shake off title blow with one more point to go

Naples woke up on Monday still digesting the disappointment of Napoli not sealing their first Serie A title in over three decades, but knowing glory is just a few more days away.

Everything was set up for Napoli to win their third Scudetto a record-breaking six matches before the end of the season on Sunday when their closest challengers Lazio collapsed late on at Inter Milan, leaving Luciano Spalletti's side needing a win over Salernitana to seal the deal, AFP reported.

And when Mathias Olivera headed Napoli into the lead the city exploded in celebration, with blue smoke engulfing the Stadio Maradona and fireworks being let off outside with the rapidity of machine gun fire.

However all that joy had to be bottled back up, ready to be unleashed at Udinese on Thursday, after Boulaye Dia's superb equaliser six minutes from the end spoiled the party and pushed Salernitana further towards safety.

Fans were not too downhearted however, hardcore supporters marching back from the Stadio Maradona into central Naples with flares lit and in fine voice, the festivities in the city only dampened by a Spring downpour later in the evening.

"From my point of view we've just postponed the party, I'm very comfortable with where we are in the league," Spalletti told DAZN with a wry smile.

"All it's doing is lengthening the party."

To say that Napoli are close to their goal of emulating the 1987 and 1990 triumphs led by Diego Maradona would be an understatement.



● Napoli players look dejected after being held to a 1-1 draw against Salernitana at the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona in Naples, Italy, on April 30, 2023. ● CIRO DE LUCA/REUTERS

Spalletti's team, who are at Udinese on Thursday, need just one more point from their final matches to be crowned champions.

And even though results have dipped, and the ferocious attacking play which bewitched Europe has become more stilted since the March international break, it is borderline impossible that Naples does not get its long-awaited party. A 17-point lead on Lazio means Napoli could

even win the league without kicking another ball, as the capital city club must beat Sassuolo today in order to mathematically stay in the fight.

But in reality the Scudetto has been a near-certainty for months, as Italy's traditional big three have failed to keep up with the runaway leaders' blistering form in the run up to and aftermath of the World Cup.

Between the start of September and end of February Napoli won 19 of 20 league matches, a run which left soon-to-be-dethroned

champions AC Milan, Inter Milan and Juventus trailing way off in the distance.

That trio are now involved in a six-team battle for the three remaining available Champions League positions, with six points separating Lazio from seventh-placed Atalanta.

Inter currently hold the final spot in fourth ahead of their trip to survival-seeking Verona today, but only lead Milan and Roma on goal difference with potentially season-defining fixtures coming up over the next fortnight.

Saturday is a repeat of this weekend's clash between the cities of Rome and Milan as Roma host Inter and Lazio travel to the San Siro for the second time in seven days, while Atalanta host third-placed Juve who have collected just one point from their last four league fixtures.

The two Milan clubs then have to prepare for the biggest derby for a generation in the first leg of their blockbuster Champions League semi-final.

Roma, who drew 1-1 with Milan on Saturday despite Tammy Abraham opening the scoring in the 94th minute, also have their Europa League last four clash with Bayer Leverkusen next week with a raft of injuries complicating their run-in.

Jose Mourinho's Roma travel to Monza today without defenders Rick Karsdorp, Chris Smalling, Diego Lorente and Marash Kumbulla, while Netherlands midfielder Georginio Wijnaldum and Andrea Belotti are also sidelined and Nemanja Matic is suspended.