

Kings hold off Warriors, Lakers top Bulls



● USA TODAY SPORTS

AFP — The Sacramento Kings, fueled by a career-high 39 points from Harrison Barnes, edged the Golden State Warriors 134-133 on Thursday as Lakers star LeBron James celebrated his record-setting 20th NBA All-Star nod with a win.

Domantas Sabonis's dunk with 22.1 seconds remaining sealed a dramatic win for Sacramento after back-to-back dunks by Jonathan Kuminga gave the Warriors their first lead of the second half at 133-132.

Golden State had a chance to close it out, but Kuminga was denied by Barnes and superstar Stephen Curry, under fierce pressure from De'Aaron Fox, and lost the ball in the final second.

Sabonis posted his 26th-straight double-double with 18 points and 13 assists and Fox added 29 points for the Kings.

Curry scored 33 points to lead the Warriors, who were playing their second game since the death of assistant coach Dejan Milojevic from a heart attack last week.

In Los Angeles, James scored 25 points and handed out 12 assists in the Lakers' 141-132 victory over the Chicago Bulls, which came hours after James was named an All-Star Game starter for the 20th consecutive year — a streak stretching back to his second season in the league. D'Angelo Russell hit eight three-pointers on the way to 29 points, leading seven Lakers players in double-figures in the dominant victory.

Elsewhere, Pascal Siakam's triple-double propelled the Indiana Pacers to a 134-122 victory over Philadelphia that snapped the 76ers' six-game winning streak.

The Boston Celtics routed Miami 143-110 in an Eastern Conference final rematch, the New York Knicks thumped the defending champion Denver Nuggets 122-84 and Western Conference leaders Minnesota held on for a 96-94 victory over the Nets in Brooklyn.

The Pacers were in charge throughout in Indianapolis, where Siakam scored 26 points with 13 rebounds and 10 assists to lead the charge against the sluggish 76ers.

Philadelphia's reigning NBA MVP Joel Embiid scored 31 points, but coach Nick Nurse pulled Embiid and the rest of his starters for the fourth quarter as the Pacers romped despite the continued absence of injured Tyrese Haliburton.

Iran remains Asian title contender amid average displays by heavyweights



By Amirhadi Arsalanpour
Staff writer

The group stage of the AFC Asian Cup concluded on Thursday in Qatar, where Iran was one of only three teams to progress to the round of 16 with maximum points. A trademark linkup between Sardar Azmoun, who was handed a first spot in the starting XI, and Mahdi Taremi saw the latter find the net twice against Yahya Al Ghassani's late consolation as Amir Qalenoee's men defeated the United Arab Emirates 2-1 on Tuesday for a clean sweep of group victories — a feat only achieved by the host and Iraq.

Iran's performance over the course of the three matches, however, has been far from convincing for the best part of the fans and pundits in the country.

Despite enjoying the majority of the ball possession and creating better chances in the three outings, which Qalenoee has been boasting about throughout his press conferences in Qatar, the Iranian head coach will have much to think about ahead of Wednesday's knockout tie against Syria and a likely showdown with Japan in the quarterfinals.

Iran's backline display — the Asian powerhouse's strong suit during ex-coach Carlos Queiroz's nine-year spell in charge — has been shaky, even against minnow opponents in Palestine and Hong Kong, not to mention the frontline failed to dominate consistently in each of the group games and Qalenoee hopes his side will not struggle against Hector Cuper's Syria, which kept clean sheets against Uzbekistan and India while conceding only one goal against Australia.

Iran might have much to improve on in chasing a first trophy in the continent's flagship international event in 48 years but the good



Iranian players celebrate during a 2-1 victory over the UAE in the AFC Asian Cup in Education City Stadium, Al Rayyan, Qatar, on January 23, 2024.
● AFC

news for Qalenoee and his team is that neither of the pretournament favorites have been flawless so far in the tournament.

Japan headed to Qatar on the back of impressive victories over Germany and Turkey, widely regarded as the top contender for the ultimate prize, but the Samurai Blue's defensive problems were exposed against Vietnam and Iraq, with the latter bringing Hajime Moriyasu's side's 11-game winning streak to an end with a shock 2-1 triumph.

For all the world-class talent in the squad in Son Heung-min, Kim Min-

jae, and Lee Kang-in, South Korea, looking to end a 64-year Asian Cup drought, hit the brick wall in stalemates against Jordan and Malaysia, though a runner-up finish in the group might eventually play out in Jürgen Klinsmann's favor after his team avoided Japan in the last 16.

"We can do better in the defensive transition but overall, the group stage is done and now the tournament really starts... It wasn't our plan to concede three goals today just to avoid Japan. We wanted to go through as group winners and the team tried," Klinsmann

said after sharing the points with Malaysia in a thrilling 3-3 draw on Thursday.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has probably the most high-profile coach of the tournament in Roberto Mancini on its bench, but while the Saudis' buildup to the event was dominated by the exclusion of three senior players by the Italian, the Green Falcons had to dig deep to salvage a win against Oman and then secure the points against nine-man Kyrgyzstan before being held by Thailand in a goalless contest.

Australia also won the group with seven points but the Socceroos' most mediocre squad in years have hardly proved to be championship material.

With all of the Asian elite sides having their own woes to deal with in the knockout round, Qatar has enjoyed an easy run in its title defensive while Iraq has been the team to watch after an inspiring group campaign.

Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Bahrain, Thailand, Tajikistan, and Indonesia, meanwhile, will be looking to continue their fairytale runs in Qatar.

Australian Open:

Sensational Sinner dethrones Djokovic to reach final

Jannik Sinner downed defending champion Novak Djokovic 6-1 6-2 6-7(6) 6-3 at the Australian Open on Friday to hand the top seed his first defeat at Melbourne Park in six years and power into his maiden Grand Slam final.

Sinner provided a master class in tennis in the opening two sets to put the wheels in motion for Djokovic's only defeat in the semi-finals of his favourite major. It also made the youngster the only Italian player to reach an Australian Open singles final.

In marking the arrival of a new generation of tennis stars, the Melbourne title clash on Sunday will also be the first since 2005 not to feature Djokovic or fellow "Big Three" members Roger Federer and Rafa Nadal.

"It was a very, very tough match," said Sinner, who did not face a single break point in the match. "I started out very well, for two sets I felt that he was not feeling too good on court so I just tried to keep pushing and then in the third set I had match point and I missed the forehand, but you know, this is tennis.

"I just tried to be ready for the next set, which I started off really well, and of course the atmo-



Jannik Sinner celebrates winning his Australian Open semi-final match against Novak Djokovic in Melbourne, Australia, on January 26, 2024.
● ELOISA LOPEZ/REUTERS

sphere was so great. It's so great to play here."

Fourth seed Sinner stunned Djokovic twice in three matches at the end of last season and he made a rollicking start on Rod Laver Arena by targeting his

36-year-old opponent's shaky serve and error-prone backhand to comfortably win the opening set.

Djokovic had not lost at his favourite stomping ground since the 2018 edition when he

crashed to South Korean Chung Hyeon and there were worrying signs for the 10-times Melbourne champion as the 22-year-old Sinner eased through the next set following a double break. He outplayed me complete-

ly today," Djokovic said. "I was shocked with my level in a bad way. Not much that I was doing right... This is one of the worst Grand Slam matches I have played, that I can remember.

"At the same time, credit to him for doing everything better than me in every aspect of the game."

"I was looking forward to this match, it's always nice to have this kind of player where you can learn from," Sinner said.

"I lost (to him) last year in the semis at Wimbledon, I learned a lot from that, and it's all part of the process."

Victory meant that Sinner has now defeated Djokovic at the ATP Finals, the Davis Cup and in a Grand Slam.

"I don't know, ask him," Sinner said with a laugh when asked why his game was so difficult for Djokovic.

"We play similar and first of all you have to try and return as many balls as possible. He's such an incredible server, and I just try to guess sometimes, you know, trying to push, trying to move him around a little bit.

"I'm not going to give you the tactics because I hope I'm going to play him in a couple of different matches."