



Tennessee Titans wide receiver A.J. Brown (11) catches a touchdown pass as he is defended by San Francisco 49ers cornerback Josh Norman, (left), in the second half of an NFL football game in Nashville, Tenn. Titans won 20-17. (AP)

# Sports

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Three of nine matches scheduled for Sunday postponed

## Villa hoping to have enough players available vs Chelsea

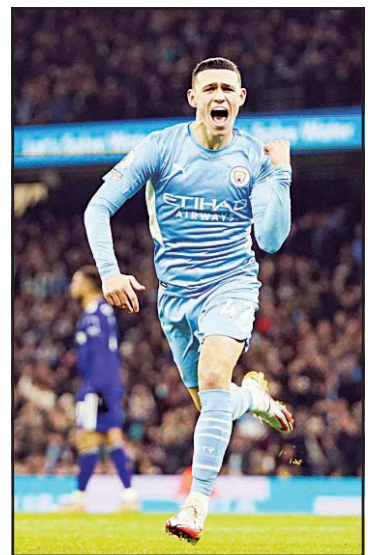
LONDON, Dec 25, (AP) — Aston Villa manager Steven Gerrard is hoping to have enough players available against Chelsea after the last match against Burnley was postponed due to a coronavirus outbreak. Keinan Davis, Marvelous Nakamba, Morgan Sanson, Anwar El Ghazi, Bertrand Traore and Leon Bailey were all unavailable with a variety of problems, but Gerrard confirmed "a couple" of players were back in contention. Romelu Lukaku and Callum Hudson-Odoi can return for Chelsea. The forwards were two of the eight Chelsea players out with COVID-19 but they are back in training. Defender Andreas Christensen is also in contention after a back injury. The Blues were angry their match at Wolverhampton last weekend, which they drew 0-0, was not postponed like six other Premier League games were. Thomas Tuchel's team have slipped to six points behind leaders Manchester City in third place after drawing their last two games.

Meanwhile, three of the nine matches scheduled for Sunday were postponed due to coronavirus out-

breaks: Burnley vs. Everton, Liverpool vs. Leeds and Wolverhampton vs. Watford.

Striker Danny Welbeck is poised to end a three-month injury absence for Brighton. Midfielder Pascal Gross and forward Neal Maupay are also expected to be available after missing Brighton's loss to Wolverhampton but defender Lewis Dunk is out. Adam Webster has returned to training after injury and could be in contention and another defender, Shane Duffy, returns after serving a one-match ban but midfielder Yves Bissouma is suspended. Brentford striker Ivan Toney is pushing for a starting spot having returned to action against Chelsea in the midweek League Cup loss after a spell out with COVID-19. The Bees have not played in the Premier League for two weeks after matches against Manchester United and Southampton were postponed.

Jack Grealish and Phil Foden could return for leaders Manchester City after being left on the bench at Newcastle last week for disciplinary breaches. Defender Kyle Walker will hope to return after a fitness issue while forward Ferran Torres, currently sidelined with a broken foot, looks to have played his final game for the club as he nears a move to Barcelona. Leicester manager Brendan Rodgers is hoping his players will bounce back quickly from losing on penalties to Liverpool in



Manchester City's Phil Foden celebrates after scoring his side's opening goal during the English Premier League soccer match between Manchester City and Leeds United at Etihad Stadium in Manchester, England. (AP)

### SOCCER

the quarterfinals of the League Cup. More injuries were sustained in the process - striker Jamie Vardy played the last 20 minutes with a tight hamstring while defenders Caglar Soyuncu and Ricardo Pereira were forced off - which does not make the task any easier against the champions. Leicester have a decent recent record against City, with two wins in the last four meetings. But after two successive fifth-placed finishes, Rodgers' FA Cup winners have lacked their usual spark this season, winning just six of their 16 Premier League matches to sit in ninth approaching the midway point.

Norwich manager Dean Smith is again dealing with coronavirus concerns, with the last-place club waiting on PCR results to determine who will be available having seen the previous game at West Ham called off. Milot Rashica (groin) is not yet back in contention, while Mathias Normann (pelvis) is set for an extended spell on the sidelines. Arsenal are expected to be without forward Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang for a fifth consecutive match following recent internal disciplinary action. Sead Kolasinac (ankle) is also absent while Pablo Mari, Calum Chambers and Albert Sambi Lokonga have all tested positive for COVID-19 in recent days. Arsenal strikers Alexandre Lacazette and Eddie Nketiah, who have scored nine goals between them this season, are out of contract next summer and free to talk to overseas clubs in January. Arsenal travel to Norwich in fourth place with Emile Smith Rowe their leading scorer this season with eight goals in all competitions.

Tottenham manager Antonio Conte has no new injury concerns, although Ryan Sessegnon misses out again with a muscular problem. Crystal Palace will be without James McArthur due to a hamstring injury. The south London club have not played for 10 days after last weekend's match at Watford was postponed due to the opposition dealing with a coronavirus outbreak and now Palace have infections in the squad. Tottenham are in seventh place, six points behind fourth-place Arsenal but with three games in hand, while Palace are 11th.

West Ham are set to be without Michail Antonio after he tested positive for coronavirus. Aaron Cresswell (ribs) remains doubtful while Vladimir Coufal serves a one-game ban for his recent dismissal at Arsenal. Southampton manager Ralph Hasenhuttl has a decision to make over his goalkeeper after Fraser Forster returned to training, with Willy Caballero deputizing in the last two games. Stuart Armstrong, Che Adams and Adam Armstrong have recovered from recent injuries so are back in contention.



Chelsea's Ross Barkley, (right), challenges for the ball with Brentford's Mads Bech Sorensen during the English League Cup quarterfinal soccer match between Brentford and Chelsea at Brentford Community Stadium in London. (AP)

## India look past omicron, see chance of 'history' in SAfrica

No fans will be allowed

CAPE TOWN, South Africa, Dec 25, (AP) — For all their glorious history, India has never won a Test series in South Africa and the chance to change that will be the focus for Virat Kohli's top-ranked team on a monthlong tour spent in another coronavirus bio-bubble, this time amid the threat of the new omicron variant.

Despite omicron, the three-Test series goes ahead, starting on Sunday in Centurion, but with a tightening of virus protocols after South Africa first identified and announced to the world the existence of the highly contagious variant last month.

Both teams will live in stricter bio-secure environments than originally planned, especially for the first two Tests in the Gauteng province, the center of the world's first surge in virus cases driven by omicron. The tour, with the first Test initially due to start Dec. 17, was also pushed back, perhaps to give India the chance to see how South Africa's omicron surge plays out. The news is there's been a noticeable drop in cases in recent days.

Still, no fans will be allowed at any of the tests in Centurion, Johannesburg and Cape Town, or any of the three one-day internationals that will follow, in a change caused by omicron. South Africa was preparing to allow a limited number of supporters into games before omicron emerged and foiled those plans.

But India's cricketers, who have won in Australia and England over the last year to cement their status as the No. 1 Test team in the world, are as familiar as any international sportsmen and women with the now not-so-new reality of play-



Ashant Sharma of the national Indian cricketers during a practice session ahead of their first Test against South Africa, in Centurion, Pretoria, South Africa. (AP)

ing in a pandemic. They will be quarantined in their hotels for the month, leaving only for matches and training sessions.

"Sometimes I feel (a) bio-bubble helps the team environment where you end up spending more time with the team players, you are in the team room, you are having more team dinners together," India batsman Cheteshwar Pujara said. "So, overall I feel sometimes it helps the team environment.

"Yes, there are some challenges as well," he added. "You are not allowed to go out, you cannot explore the country. But at the same time you are getting to play some cricket and that's the most important thing being a cricketer."

When it comes to the cricket, India's chances of finally cracking South Africa on their eighth Test tour to the country are improved by a world-class and deep fast-bowling lineup led by Jasprit Bumrah,

and with Ishant Sharma, Mohammed Siraj, Mohammed Shami, Shardul Thakur and Umesh Yadav all ready to support.

India have often fallen short on South Africa's pacy, seaming pitches because their quick bowlers were second best. That may not be the case this time.

"Our fast bowlers have been the difference between the two sides whenever we have played abroad," Pujara said. "We have done exceptionally well as a bowling unit and I am sure that will be the case even in South Africa."

Rohit Sharma's absence for the injury because of a hamstring injury still leaves a formidable batting lineup led by the superb Kohli, who has given up the limited-overs captaincy and can concentrate solely on securing that test victory in South Africa.

South Africa have slipped to

### CRICKET

No. 6 in the test rankings amid years of trouble behind the scenes at the national cricket body, where numerous leaders have been fired for misconduct and a temporary committee was brought in to run the sport. Now, head coach Mark Boucher and director of cricket Graeme Smith are to be investigated next year over allegations they discriminated against Black colleagues.

South Africa captain Dean Elgar said the current team has learned to pull together through the turmoil.

"We, as a playing group, have been through such a crappy time that we've formed such a tight bond within our group over the past year or so," Elgar said. "For me it's not an excuse to use. If we were in the first month of all these bad scenarios, then I might understand it. But we've been here before and I'd like to believe we've formulated something to deal with this."

### 'CAN deserves more respect'

LONDON, Dec 25, (AP) — Crystal Palace manager Patrick Vieira won't try to block his players from competing in the African Cup of Nations, arguing that the tournament deserves more respect.

It begins in early January in Cameroon despite the fast-spreading omicron variant adding to concerns that include European clubs threatening not to send players after raising doubts about coronavirus protocols put in place by the Confederation of African Football.

"I will never stop any players to go to play the African Cup of Nations," Vieira said at a press conference ahead of Palace's match at Tottenham on Sunday. "I believe that that competition has to be more respected. This competition is as important as the European Championship."

### SOCCER

The Dakar-born Vieira, who played internationally for France, is set to lose Cheikhou Kouyate (Senegal), Wilfried Zaha (Ivory Coast) and Jordan Ayew (Ghana). "I respect and I understand the passion and the importance of those players to go and to represent their country," Vieira said.

Liverpool would be missing league-leading scorer Mohamed Salah (Egypt) as well as Sadio Mane (Senegal) and Naby Keita (Guinea), among other teams set to lose players. Vieira said more media coverage would help people "understand more how important it is for the African continent."

Perhaps the biggest doubts now are when national teams will have their full 28-man squads.

The organization representing the world's leading domestic leagues says teams shouldn't have to release players until Jan. 3, a week later than stipulated by FIFA and only six days before the tournament begins. That would allow stars like Salah and Mane to squeeze in two more Premier League games.



Conte