

OPINION

Warriors clip Suns

Typically, any match featuring Stephen Curry and Kevin Durant would translate to compelling hoops. And, in terms of sheer drama, their meeting yesterday did not disappoint. Compared to the bulk of their previous encounters, however, there was a major difference: The two future Hall of

COURTSIDE ANTHONY L. CUAYCONG

perhaps, not quite as valuable in the grand scheme of things. Never mind that they found themselves under similar circumstances; both the Warriors and the Suns had 15-15 records borne of poor performances in the clutch.

For casual observers, the humdinger that arose from the set-to was as compelling as it was inevitable. For a good portion of the contest, the Suns looked to be on their way to a much-needed victory. Even Warriors fans at the Chase Center were fretting at the increasing probability of a fourth straight setback, especially with Curry uncharacteristically missing supposed gimmes in the fourth quarter. And then came the comeback from a double-digit deficit, spearheaded by the otherwise erratic Jonathan Kuminga and new acquisition Dennis Schroder.

The Suns would go on to lose by four, undone as much by the Warriors' sterling defense as by their stunning inability to put the ball in the hoop. In the last 6:48 of the playoff period, they could do no better than put up five measly points, and all from the free throw line. It didn't matter that Durant and noted scorer Bradley Beal burned rubber for every single second of the timeframe; for one reason or another, they could not make leather and nylon meet. Everyone in purple and orange seemed to know a train wreck was coming, and yet didn't have an inkling on how to stop it.

In any case, a win is a win for the Warriors; they get to breathe a little following the reprieve from all the losing. Which is not to say they found a lasting solution to their concerns; outside of more consistency from Kuminga and Shroder to help the overburdened Curry, they are handicapped by their uneven roster. Meanwhile, the Suns also suffer from systemic infirmities so significant that not even a yeoman's job from head coach Mike Budenholzer can prevent mediocrity from settling in. Yesterday, the stars met. From here on, fingers remain crossed the stars will align.



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Title-chasing Philippines XI go for Game 2 win in Thailand

Match on Monday
(Rajamangala Stadium, Bangkok) 8 p.m. (9 p.m. Manila time) — Thailand vs Philippines (Semifinal Leg 2)

AFTER breaking a 52-year winless streak against Thailand, is a breakthrough finals stint in Southeast Asia's centerpiece football tournament up next for fearless Philippines?

That's certainly the agenda as the Filipinos go for the kill shot and try to complete the upset for the ages against seven-time winners Thailand in Leg 2 of the Asean Mitsubishi Electric Cup semifinals on Monday.

But unlike in their monumental 2-1 upset in Friday's opening leg in front of friendly faces in Manila, the Pinoy booters will have to get it done in hostile territory in Bangkok, where the wounded three-peat-seeking War Elephants and their 50,000-plus rabid supporters lie in wait at Rajamangala Stadium.

"We need to be mentally tough throughout the whole 90 minutes," said Philippine team manager Freddy Gonzalez ahead of their gargantuan task at 9 p.m. (Manila time).

Thanks to the famous result in Leg 1, the Filipinos go into the return leg with a one-goal edge.

And all they need is a draw in the Thai capital to win the two-legged semis on goal aggregate and advance to the Jan. 2 and 5 Last Dance against either Vietnam or Singapore.

Another victory, of course, will be good for the soul moving to the upgraded objective of a milestone championship.

A loss by one goal will lead to a 30-minute extra time and potentially a penalty shootout to determine the winner of this Final Four matchup. But a loss by two goals or more will be catastrophic.

"I never go for a draw," said coach Albert Capellas. "We go

for a win and then let's see if we can win, if we can draw, or whatever result happens. I never play for a draw. Philippines, we are winners."

The prospect of playing a historic home game in the finale gives the Filipinos added motivation to bring this to the finish line.

"The job is not even halfway done," Sandro Reyes said after the Philippines eked out its first victory over Thailand since 1972. "We have a really difficult second leg coming up and we want to play a final in Manila, so we'll give everything to play that final game." — **Olmin Leyba**

Eala eyes qualification for a grand slam main draw



ALEX EALA

A GRAND SLAM main draw qualification for the first time, another pro and title and an entry to the Top 100.

Alex Eala has locked her eyes on those goals for 2025 after a year marked by triumphs and heartbreaks, near hits and misses this season.

"No. 1 is to qualify for a grand slam main draw. That's the first goal," said Ms. Eala on the *Power and Play* radio program of his uncle Noli Eala over the weekend.

The 19-year-old Filipina sensation this year made it to the qualifying finals in the French Open, Wimbledon and US Open with hopes of being the first Filipina player ever in a Grand Slam main tournament.

But Ms. Eala succumbed to more seasoned and higher-ranked opponents to miss out on the golden opportunity.

Ms. Eala bowed to Julia Riera of Argentina, 6-4, 6(3)-7, 4-6, in the French Open finals, to New Zealand's Lulu Sun, 6(3)-7, 5-7, in the Wimbledon finale and to Romania's Elena-Gabriela Ruse in the US Open qualifying championship.

"I do think that I passed a lot of milestones this year but there are definitely moments where I thought I was so close to achieving more but it just didn't happen. It's okay, at the end I'm very happy with how I performed and improved this year," she added.

As for her two other inspirations, it's only a matter of when next year owing to a steady rise in the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) and consistent showing in world tours.

"Ranking-wise, I'd like to get close to Top 100 and third, I'd like to win a title," she beamed.

Ms. Eala is currently No. 148 in the WTA rankings, after starting from outside the Top 1000 in her 2020 debut, with five singles and three doubles titles to show.

She won her latest singles title in the W100 Vitoria-Gasteiz in Spain, where she also ruled the doubles division with partner Estelle Cascino from France.

That's the first of three doubles crowns she all won this season after also reigning supreme in the W75 Croissy-Beaubourg in France with Cascino and the W50 Pune in India with Latvia's Darja Semenistaja. — **John Bryan Ulanday**

More than 120 killed after South Korean airliner crashes

MUAN COUNTY, South Korea — At least 124 people were killed when an airliner belly-landed and veered off the runway, erupting in a fireball as it slammed into a wall at South Korea's Muam International Airport on Sunday, the national fire agency said.

Jeju Air flight 7C2216, arriving from the Thai capital Bangkok with 181 people on board, was attempting to land shortly after 9 a.m. (0000 GMT) at the airport in the south of the country, South Korea's transport ministry said.

It is the worst air accident involving a South Korean airline in nearly three decades and on track to become the country's deadliest ever, according to ministry data.

The twin-engine Boeing 737-800 can be seen in video from local media skidding down the runway with no apparent landing gear before slamming into a wall in an explosion of flame and debris. Other photos showed smoke and fire engulfing parts of the plane.

Two crew members, a man and a woman, were rescued from the tail section of the burning plane, Muam fire chief Lee Jung-hyun told a briefing. The fire was extinguished as of 1 p.m., Mr. Lee said.

"Only the tail part retains a little bit of shape, and the rest of (the plane) looks almost impossible to recognize," he said.

Authorities have switched from rescue to recovery operations and because of the force of the impact, are searching nearby areas for bodies possibly thrown from the plane, Mr. Lee added.

The two crew were being treated at hospitals with medium to severe injuries, said the head of the local public health center.

Hours after the crash, mortuary vehicles were lined up to take bodies away, and authorities said a temporary morgue had been established.

The crash site smelled of aviation fuel and blood, according to Reuters witnesses, and workers in protective suits and masks combed the area while soldiers searched through bushes.



REUTERS

RESCUE WORKERS take part in a salvage operation at the site where an aircraft crashed after it went off the runway at Muam International Airport in Muam, South Korea, Dec. 29.

Yonhap news agency cited a fire official as saying most of the 175 passengers and six crew were presumed dead.

Authorities had worked to rescue people in the tail section, an airport official told Reuters shortly after the crash.

The crash is the worst by any South Korean airline since a 1997 Korean Air crash in Guam that killed more than 200 people, according to transportation ministry data.

Investigators are looking into bird strikes and weather conditions as possible factors, Mr. Lee said. Yonhap cited airport authorities as saying a bird strike may have caused the landing gear to malfunction.

A passenger texted a relative to say a bird was stuck in the wing, the News1 agency reported. The person's final message was, "Should I say my last words?"

The passengers included two Thai nationals and the rest are believed to be South Koreans, according to the transportation ministry.

The Boeing 737-800 jet, operated by Jeju Air, was manufactured in 2009, the transport ministry said.

Jeju Air Chief Executive Officer Kim E-bae apologized for the accident, bowing deeply during a televised briefing.

He said the cause of the crash was still unknown, that the aircraft had no record of accidents and there were no early signs of malfunction. The airline will cooperate with investigators and make supporting the bereaved its top priority, Mr. Kim said.

No abnormal conditions were reported when the aircraft left Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport, said Kerati Kijmanawat, president of Airports of Thailand.

Founded in 2005, Jeju Air is a low-cost airline that operates international routes to Japan, Thailand, and the Philippines, in addition to numerous domestic flights.

Boeing said in an e-mailed statement, "We are in contact with Jeju Air regarding flight 2216 and stand ready to support them. We extend our deepest condolences to the families who lost loved ones, and our thoughts remain with the passengers and crew."

The US Federal Aviation Administration did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

All domestic and international flights at Muam airport had been canceled, Yonhap reported.

South Korean acting President Choi Sang-mok, named interim leader of the country on Friday in an ongoing political crisis, arrived at the scene of the accident and said the government was putting all its resources into dealing with the crash.

Two Thai women were on the plane, aged 22 and 45, Thai government spokesperson Jirayu Houngsub said, adding that details were still being verified.

Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra sent condolences to the families of the dead and injured in a post on X, saying she had instructed the foreign ministry to provide assistance.

The ministry said in a statement it was in touch with the South Korean authorities. — **Reuters**

Trump sides with billionaire Musk in debate over H-1B visas

WEST PALM BEACH, Florida - President-elect Donald J. Trump on Saturday sided with key supporter and billionaire tech Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Elon Musk in a public dispute over the use of the H-1B visa, saying he fully backs the program for foreign tech workers opposed by some of his supporters.

Mr. Trump's remarks followed a series of social media posts from Mr. Musk, the CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, who vowed late Friday to go to "war" to defend the visa program for foreign tech workers.

Mr. Trump, who moved to limit the visas' use during his first presidency,

told *The New York Post* on Saturday he was likewise in favor of the visa program.

"I have many H-1B visas on my properties. I've been a believer in H-1B. I have used it many times. It's a great program," he was quoted as saying.

Mr. Musk, a naturalized US citizen born in South Africa, has held an H-1B visa, and his electric car company Tesla obtained 724 of the visas this year. H-1B visas are typically for three-year periods, though holders can extend them or apply for green cards.

The altercation was set off earlier this week by far-right activists who criticized Mr. Trump's selection of

Sriram Krishnan, an Indian American venture capitalist, to be an adviser on artificial intelligence, saying he would have influence on the Trump administration's immigration policies.

Mr. Musk's tweet was directed at Mr. Trump's supporters and immigration hard-liners who have increasingly pushed for the H-1B visa program to be scrapped amid a heated debate over immigration and the place of skilled immigrants and foreign workers brought into the country on work visas.

On Friday, Steve Bannon, a longtime Trump confidante, critiqued "big tech oligarchs" for supporting the H-1B pro-

gram and cast immigration as a threat to Western civilization.

In response, Mr. Musk and many other tech billionaires drew a line between what they view as legal immigration and illegal immigration.

Mr. Trump has promised to deport all immigrants who are in the US illegally, deploy tariffs to help create more jobs for American citizens and severely restrict immigration.

The visa issue highlights how tech leaders like Mr. Musk — who has taken an important role in the presidential transition, advising on key personnel and policy areas — are now drawing scrutiny from his base. — **Reuters**

North Korea launches 'toughest' US strategy

SEOUL — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un held a key policy-setting meeting of the country's ruling party last week ahead of the new year, state media KCNA reported on Sunday.

The meeting of party and government officials decided that North Korea would launch the "toughest" strategy to counteract the United States for its security and national interests, the report said, without elaborating.

The alliance between South Korea, the US and Japan has expanded to a "nuclear military bloc" and South Korea has become an "anti-communist outpost" for the US, the KCNA report added.

"This reality clearly shows to which direction we should advance and what we should do and how." — **Reuters**

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- Fluent in both Korean and English language

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