

France no more also-ran

PARIS, Aug 6: France emerged from the Atlanta Olympics as one of the world's sporting powers, their tally of 37 medals their best performance since the 1924 Games. In Paris, reports Reuters.

A French team official pointed out that the country's fifth place finish on the medals table, which included 15 golds, was a logical progression after their haul of 16 medals at the 1988 Seoul Games, and 29 from Barcelona four years ago.

"Today's success is not circumstantial," Bernard Bourandy, who helped prepare the team for Atlanta and was team chief in Barcelona, was reported as saying in the national daily Liberation on Monday.

The Seoul Games marked a thrill with 16 medals. In Barcelona, we collected 29 and confirmed the trend."

France were the sporting world's superpower at the start of the century, topping the medals table in 1900 in Paris and the unofficial 1906 in Athens. In 1924, France finished third worst finish — a 26th placing on the medals

table with just five medals.

An editorial in Le Figaro pointed out that the main difference with Barcelona was in the number of gold medals and that 10 were won in three sports at which France has traditionally excelled — cycling, fencing and judo.

It added that these sports, which accounted for 22 medals altogether, often benefited from coaching by former champions with experience of major world events like the Olympic Games.

Jean Galfione who won the pole vault in the absence of the bronze medal champion Sergei Bubka, was also a member of the traditionally remarkable French school of vaulting.

But, in contrast, double gold athlete Marie-Jose Perec had left France for the United States where she found better training facilities and coaching.

France Soir newspaper warned of a drying up of talent in athletics. Perec, Galfione and Patricia Girard-Leno, bronze medal winner in the 100 metres hurdles, were the only medal winners.

"But behind them? The relief (new batch) is a long way from being ready," the news-

paper said in an editorial.

It also pointed to a poor performance in swimming, another of the major Olympic sports. "Swimming has several lengths to catch up (with other sports)."

French sport, unlike neighbours Britain who had a very poor Games after serving as a model for France in the past, enjoys state funding and has a former Olympic champion in Sports Ministry Guy Ruit, the 1976 high hurdles gold medalist.

Drut, speaking in Atlanta, said the whole team appeared to have become caught up in the "dynamics of success. I felt among the athletes a spirit I have not always found at big events."

Bourandy, 60, said state funding was vital and warned against it being reduced.

He said the state funded top level sport to the tune of some 215 million francs (43 million dollars) a year.

"That's half the annual budget at OM (Olympique Marseille soccer club) in the (Bernard) Tapie era, and it's getting smaller each year," said Bourandy.

French heroes back home

ROISSY, France, Aug 6: French Premier Alain Juppe welcomed home Tuesday France's victorious Olympic athletes, who won the country's best medal haul for decades at the Atlanta Games, reports AFP.

Sprinter Marie-Jose Perec, who took two golds, was among the team given a hero's welcome at Roissy Charles de Gaulle Airport north of Paris, where they arrived from Atlanta.

"In a country which is looking for itself and questioning, which sometimes has doubts about itself, it does one good to see France moved by a spirit of victory," said Juppe.

Referring to the country's dismal economic outlook, he said "For once we find ourselves without a cloud in the sky, we should take advantage of that. French men and women have reason to be proud of their athletes."

Sabatini back on song

MONTREAL, Aug 6: Gabriela Sabatini returned to the WTA Tour for the first time in more than three months on Monday and posted a straight sets win at the Canadian Open, reports Reuters.

The ninth-seeded Argentine, who missed both the French Open and Wimbledon with a strained stomach muscle, eased past Canadian qualifier Sonya Jeyaseelan 6-4, 6-2.

In other first round play, 10th seed Amanda Coetzer of South Africa overpowered Italian Rita Grande 6-3, 6-2, and 12th seed Karina Habudova of Slovakia demolished Austrian Barbara Schett 6-0, 6-0.

The other seeds to see opening day action, American Amy Frazier (13), Nathalie Tauziat of France (15) and 16th seed Elena Likhovtseva of Kazakhstan all posted straight-sets wins.

Sabatini, whose ranking has dropped to 14th, played her first competitive matches since the April Hilton Head Tournament at the Olympics, where she lost to Monica Seles.

"I didn't play very well," Sabatini said of Monday's match.

"I wasn't dictating the rallies and I served pretty badly," added the Argentine, who had three consecutive double-faults during one game in the second set.

The top eight seeds received first-round byes but all attended the opening ceremony, including top seed and defending champion Seles and second seed Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario as the US Open tune-up season moves into high gear.

Martin, Stoltenberg sail

MASON, Ohio, Aug 6: Wimbledon semifinalists Todd Martin and Jason Stoltenberg opened their summer hardcourt seasons on Monday with first-round victories at the star-studded 2.2 million dollars ATP Championship, reports Reuters.

The 12th seeded Martin clobbered fellow-American Michael Joyce in the first set, but had some competition in the second en route to a 6-0, 6-4 victory.

Australia's Stoltenberg, the 16th seed who is coming off a second-round elimination at the Olympics, battled his way past 219th-ranked American Jim Grabb 6-4, 7-6.

The 56-player draw features nine of the top 10 players in the world as the US open tune-up season begins in earnest with only fifth-ranked Boris Becker missing. The German star is still nursing the wrist injury he sustained at Wimbledon.

World number one Pete Sampras and eighth seed Jim Courier are scheduled to play second-round matches today. Olympic champion Andre Agassi begins defence of his title Wednesday.

The top eight all received first-round byes. Sweden's Thomas Enqvist, the highest seed in action Monday at 10th, crushed Byron Black of Zimbabwe 6-1, 6-2. But two seeded players fell on opening day in minor upsets.

Cristiano Caratti of Italy picked off 13th-seeded Swiss Marc Rosset 2-6, 6-3, 6-3, and

Olympic doubles champion Mark Woodforde of Australia bounced 15th-seeded American Richey Reneberg 6-3, 6-3.

The 15th-ranked Martin, whose semifinal collapse put Malival Washington into the Wimbledon final last month, trailed 89th-ranked Joyce 4-2 in the second set. That's when Martin resumed his near-perfect first-set form to level the set at 4-4.

At break point in the ninth game, Martin rifled a blazing forehand passing shot down the line to put himself in position to serve out the match.

"The first set I felt so good hitting the ball," Martin said. "In the second set, I ran into a few obstacles that I was not prepared to deal with in my mind. I finished off the match fairly well, but not as well as I'd have liked."

The 25th-ranked Stoltenberg, who stunned Goran Ivanisevic to reach the Wimbledon semis, captured the only service break of his one hour, 35 minute match to win the first set.

He broke Gabb at love in the ninth game when the American double faulted at triple break point.

At 2-2 in the second set breaker Stoltenberg took control, reeling off the five points of the match.

"It was a typical match my first tournament on Tour since Wimbledon, even though I did play the Olympics," Stoltenberg said.

"I got myself into good positions, but I didn't take advantage of them all."

RESULTS

Singles

Petr Korda, Czech Republic, def. Todd Woodbridge, Australia, 6-3, 6-0.

Vincent Spadea, United States, def. Hicham Arazi, Morocco, 6-3, 6-1.

Bernd Karbacher, Germany, def. Jacco Eltingh, Netherlands, 6-2, 6-4.

Chris Woodruff, United States, def. Andrei Chesnokov, Russia, 4-6, 7-6 (7-0), 6-1.

Greg Rusedski, England, def. Kenneth Carlsen, Denmark, 7-6 (7-4), 6-4.

Daniel Vacek, Czech Republic, def. Alex Corretja, Spain, 6-4, 6-4.

Sasa Hirszon, Croatia, def. Scott Draper, Australia, 6-1, ret.

Jakob Hlasek, Switzerland, def. Wade McGuire, United States, 6-3, 3-6, 6-3.

Tim Henman, England, def. Jan Siemerink, Netherlands, 6-3, 6-2.

Alex O'Brien, United States, def. Mark Philippoussis, Australia, 6-4, 6-4.

Doubles

Martin Damm, Czech Republic and Peter Nyborg, Sweden, def. Kent Kinnear, United States and Dave Randall, United States, 4-6, 6-3, 6-4.

Patrick Galbraith, Seattle and Andrei Dlhovskiy, Russia, def. Trevor Kronemann, United States and David MacPherson, Australia, 3-6, 3-6, 6-3.

Luke Jensen and Murphy Jensen, United States, def. Joshua Eagle and Andrew Florent, Australia, 7-5, 2-6, 7-6 (7-3).

Castro welcomes comrades

HAVANA, Aug 6: President Fidel Castro welcomed home Cuba's Olympic delegation from Atlanta on Monday, saying although results had not lived up to the forecasts the athletes had returned "with the medal of dignity," reports Reuters.

But he said Cuba would analyse how it could do better in future Olympics, including any changes needed to the national sports system. "Maybe we are conceited in thinking our sports system is very good," he said.

Cuba won nine gold medals, eight silvers and eight bronzes and finished eighth in the medals table. This was better than any other nation from Latin America or the developing world, but below its pre-games target of equalling its fifth place in the Barcelona 1992 Olympics.

"I want to congratulate you, you have come home with the medal of dignity, which is most important," Castro told the assembled athletes on the tarmac at Havana airport.

The delegation had pulled off a "sporting feat" and had

fought with "honour and dignity," Castro said. He added Atlanta had been the Games of the "special period" — the official term for the economic crisis Cuba has suffered since the demise of its old ally the former Soviet Union.

He said Atlanta had shown competition was getting tougher, and added there were sports where Cubans should be competing but were not.

Castro, who has presided over the building of a state sports network on the communist-ruled island, was warm in his praise of outstanding athletes, including 800 metres silver medalist Ana Fidelia Quirot. She fought for years and won a "diamond medal," he said.

Quirot returned to competition from terrible burns suffered in a domestic fire three years ago. Castro described the boxing team, which won four golds, as "brilliant," and praised the women's volleyball team, gold medalists in their event.

He also singled out the

gold-medal winning baseball team, saying they won despite the absence of star pitcher Rolando Arrojo, who defected to the United States just before Atlanta.

Castro, angered by Arrojo's defection and that of two boxers from the squad in the run-up to the Games, sent the Olympic delegation to Atlanta with a stern warning that defectors at the Games would be viewed as traitors.

But there was only one Cuban defection during the Games, that of boxing coach Mariano Leyva, on loan to the Mexican boxing squad.

Touching political themes, Castro said the Games had shown the gulf between rich countries and poor, with developing nations unable to compete in sports such as horse-riding.

In a swipe at the United States, Cuba's longstanding political adversary, Castro noted the Atlanta Games had been criticised around the world for a series of organisational glitches.

A bizarre protest!

PRAGUE, Aug 6: Czech canoeist Lukas Pollert has sold his Olympic gold and silver medals for an undisclosed amount after accusing the Olympic Movement of selling out to politicians and sponsors, local media reported on Monday, reports Reuters.

Pollert sold his silver medal won in the canoe singles in Atlanta and his gold medal from the 1992 Barcelona Games to a Prague investment brokerage, the Czech CTK agency said.

It said Pollert and the firm agreed not to reveal how much has been paid for the medals, which will be displayed in the firm's headquarters.

"We didn't want the medal of a Czech sportsman to fall into foreign hands," CTK quoted the executive director of the firm, Martin Hanzlik, as saying.

A trained paediatrician, Pollert said he was fed up with the atmosphere at the games.

Pollert was not available for comment on Monday.

It is not yet clear whether Pollert intends to compete at the 2000 Sydney Games.

The Czech Republic won four gold, three silver and four bronze medals in Atlanta.



IT'S ALL OVER, BABY! Where thousands cheered even a day before, a lone employee, tends Atlanta's barren Olympic Stadium on August 5.

Sydney learns a lesson

SYDNEY, Aug 6: International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Juan Antonio Samaranch has cited communications, security and transport as the key areas Sydney must address at the 2000 Games, Australia's sports minister said on Monday, reports Reuters.

"Samaranch highlighted security, transport and communications as the areas which required special attention in Sydney," Warwick Smith said after meeting Samaranch in Atlanta.

Smith said he would report to Australian Prime Minister John Howard before the end of August with recommendations in security, quarantine and customs, provisions for the 2000 Games.

"I am particularly concerned... that there is a single command structure in place where in one person is ultimately made accountable for all matters relating to security," Smith said in a statement.

Two people were killed and 110 injured in a bomb blast in Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park during the Games which ended on Sunday.

Australian officials are also considering the introduction of new security laws to expand the powers of police and intelligence agencies ahead of the Sydney Games.

Existing security plans feature two electronic fences at the main Sydney Olympic site and infra-red cameras, metal detectors and built-in movement alarms at all Olympic venues.

Atlanta was plagued by traffic congestion during the Games, its transport system for athletes, spectators and media did not meet demand and the Games' computer system failed to deliver prompt and accurate results.

After witnessing Atlanta's troubles, Sydney officials have begun drawing up plans for a full-scale test of the city's infrastructure in late 1999 or early 2000.

"We've got to give ourselves enough time to that we can make any fine-tuning necessary before the event," said New South Wales (NSW) state Premier Bob Carr after returning from Atlanta.

Carr said a number of events would be held simultaneously at the main Olympic

site in Sydney's west as part of the exercise.

Atlanta was a privately-funded venture but the NSW state government is underwriting the 2000 Games and has budgeted to spend a 1.9 billion dollars (1.46 billion US dollars) to stage them.

Australia's media on Monday urged Sydney organisers to learn from Atlanta's painful experience.

"The Hard Lesson from Atlanta is that is easier to win the game than to run an efficient Olympics," the Sydney Morning Herald newspaper cautioned in its editorial.

The newspaper said Atlanta made crucial mistakes in failing to build all the venues well in advance or properly organise its army of volunteers.

Another newspaper warned that Sydney's airport did not have the capacity to cope with the surge of international visitors expected during the Olympics.

But the Herald concluded its editorial, saying "Sydney, ironically, is now well-placed to run a successful and efficient Olympics because Atlanta — unfortunately — failed to do so."

Tonga tops the table!

SINGAPORE, Aug 6: Tiny Tonga sits on top of an alternative Olympics medal table while the United States languishes in 36th place, reports Reuters.

Bryan Thomas, vice-president at the Bank of America in Singapore, devised a table which gives points to medals awarded divided by a country's population.

Tonga's sole medal, a silver, came from the boxing tournament courtesy of super-heavyweight Paea Wolfgramm. With a population of around 100,000 ensured they finished at the top of the alternative table.

Of the more established sporting nations, Hungary and Australia finished sixth and seventh while Germany occupied 21st position. Russia finished a place above the United States in 35th. China, the world's most populous nation, was 70th.

Top 20:

1. Tonga
2. Bahamas
3. Cuba
4. New Zealand
5. Jamaica
6. Hungary
7. Australia
8. Denmark
9. Ireland
10. Bulgaria
11. Norway
12. Switzerland
13. Czech Republic
14. Namibia
15. The Netherlands
16. Greece
17. Belarus
18. Sweden
19. Slovenia
20. Finland.

Two Romanian natants defect?

BUCHAREST, Aug 6: Two Romanian swimmers have refused to return home from the Atlanta Olympic Games and want a sporting career in the United States, Romanian newspapers said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Alexandru Ivanovic and Razvan Petcu, little known previously, had told Romanian Olympic delegation officials they want to settle in the United States, daily newspaper Curierul National said.

Romanian sports authorities could not immediately confirm the reports and officials at the US embassy in Bucharest said they had no indication the swimmers had applied for immigration.

Romanian media said that weightlifter Marius Chihorean had reappeared on Monday, after a weekend disappearance that had sparked reports that he had also made a dash for a better life.

"At this moment, I have no precise information about the sportsmen who might want to spend a part of their life in the United States," Dumitru Pruteanu, a senior sports ministry official, told Reuters.

A final head count would be made later on Tuesday, when the Romanian Olympic delegation is expected to return from Atlanta, Pruteanu said.

Defections are part of the history of the Olympics. The most prominent athlete to ask to remain this year was Iraqi weightlifter Raed Ahmed, who carried his country's flag at the opening ceremony.

Post-Games photo stop!

ATLANTA, Aug 6: With the Olympic flame snuffed out and much of Centennial Olympic Park closed, sightseers have found a new attraction — the apartment of Richard Jewell, reports AP.

Several carloads of tourists found their way Monday to the apartment bombing remained closed to sight and the FBI and media maintained round-the-clock scrutiny.

Some passed by for a quick peek and waved at the dwindling battery of television crews camped outside. One man stopped his car in the middle of a road and turned on his video recorder.

The gawkers caught no sight of Jewell, who has remained inside since meeting Sunday with attorney Jack Martin, a past president of the Georgia Criminal Defense Lawyers Association.

Jewell, a privately hired security guard, was the first to notice the knapsack-bomb that exploded July 27 at Centennial Olympic Park, killing one woman and injured 111.

His heroic image crumbled when federal authorities began investigating him, apparently believing the ex-deputy Sheriff fit a common profile of a "lone bomber" — a former cop, military man or aspiring police officer who seeks to become a hero.

FBI spokesman Jay Spadafora declined to comment Monday on the investigation but he suggested that Jewell shouldn't expect the agency to publicly vindicate him if it decides not to charge him.

"We don't announce that people are cleared. The FBI just doesn't do that," Spadafora said.

Nagano preening herself

ATLANTA, Aug 6(AP): The welcome mat for the next Olympics already is out.

Nagano, Japan, host of the Winter Games opening in 18 months, is offering foreign athletes help in paying their airfare, a 172 miles per hour train ride into the mountains and, for some, a chance to break Japanese law.

As of now, organisers are planning to ask them to observe a Japanese custom — shoes off in their homes away from home, a cluster of high-rises that will become housing for Japanese after the Games.

In 1991, just before Nagano was chosen over Salt Lake City as host for the 1998 Games, the organisers promised to pay for accommodations and travel expenses for all competitors.

Japan's economic slowdown since then and setbacks caused by the yen's rise against the US dollar have brought headaches for Nagano's financial planning.

A new plan will limit payments to 1,000 dollars per athlete for travel.

Takashi Yamada, a spokesman for the organisers, said that since some 1,700 athletes from outside Japan are expected at the Nagano Games, this alone will cost 1.7 million dollars at current exchange rates.

Once the athletes reach Tokyo, the train ride to Nagano, about 125 miles (200 kilometres) to the northwest, will take just 90 minutes on a new "bullet train" line due for completion by the end of 1997. The train ride currently takes twice that long.

Athletes competing in biathlon, which combines shooting with cross country skiing, will have special dis-

pensation to break the Japanese law banning anyone under age 18 from shooting firearms.

The organisers have lined up 1,300 buses and 1,300 cars for transportation among the venues.

Asked about Atlanta's problems with lost and late buses, Makoto Kobayashi, the organising committee's director-general, said Saturday that "We have already basically formulated the transportation plans, but what we have seen here in Atlanta will help us in finalising them."

Japanese security specialists also have been observing Atlanta's arrangements, but "I don't think there is much chance of a terrorist attack in Japan," he said.

Making their Olympic debuts as medal sports at the Nagano Games will be snowboarding, women's ice hockey and curling.

Also for the first time, professionals from the National Hockey League will compete, opening the possibility of several Dream Teams like the squad of American pros now competing in Olympic basketball, Canada, Russia, Sweden, the Czech Republic and the United States all are capable of fielding similar squads in hockey.

Nagano has promised that simplicity will be another feature of the Games. That might comfort an IOC member from a tropical country who expressed worries that a long opening ceremony would expose spectators to an uncomfortable amount of winter weather.

Now if only the argument over the men's downhill ski course would go away.

Nagano, a city of 350,000, is a center of high-tech indus-

tries amid the Japan Alps. It plans to stage 14 international competitions this winter to test its Olympic facilities.

The downhill ski course was tested by men's World Cup racers last winter, and sking's world government body FIS pronounced it too short to provide the challenge desired of Olympic competition.

Not all the comment was bad.

"It's short, but twisty and risky," said France's Luc Alphand, last season's top World Cup downhill racer. "I like short courses, too, maybe because I'm not that young."

FIS wants the start raised from the present 5,512 feet (1,681 metres) to 5,906 feet (1,801 metres). A ski lift to that height exists, but environmental groups object, saying racing from there would require building more facilities in a nature protection area where construction is banned.

Nagano's Olympic organizing committee, in keeping with its time of games that is in harmony with nature, is siding with them.

Johnson retains IBF crown

INGLEWOOD, California, Aug 6: Mark Johnson successfully defended his IBF flyweight title, stopping Ray Juarez in the eighth round, reports AP.

Johnson, who also floored the Mexican challenger in the third round Monday night, improved to 30-1 with his 23rd knockout. The Washington, DC, fighter extended his unbeaten streak to 29 and his knockout string to 12.

Kenya stands its ground

NAIROBI, Aug 6: A Kenyan athletics chief on Monday defended the African country's performances on the track at the Atlanta Games, reports Reuters.

Kenya was widely tipped to dominate events ranging from the 800 metres to the marathon, but in the end only left with one gold medal. Joseph Keter won the 3,000 metres steeplechase.



Heavy earthmoving machinery at work on the site of the main Olympic Stadium in Sydney yesterday. The city hosts the 2000 Games. In the background are the controversial, high-voltage electricity pylons the US TV networks want removed before the mega-event gets underway.