

Haile skips Athens affair

ADDIS ABABA, July 15: Ethiopia's Olympic 10,000 metres champion and world record holder Haile Gebrselassie said on Monday he would not participate in next month's World Championships in Athens because the track was too hard, reports Reuters.

"I completed the Atlanta Olympics 10,000 metres event suffering great injuries with blood flowing from my soles. It took me a long time to recover from that injury and I do not want to undergo similar sufferings," he said.

Gebrselassie said he decided to withdraw after hearing the Athens track was similar to the one used in Atlanta, which he said favoured sprinters at the expense of distance runners.

An Ethiopian athletic federation official said he was unaware of Gebrselassie's decision. "As far as we are concerned, Haile is among the 24 Ethiopian athletes selected for the Athens games and he is participating in training without fail," said the official.

Gebrselassie denied he was missing Athens to prepare for more lucrative Grand Prix events.

Ethiopia must now look to women runners like Gete Wami and Deratu Tulu for medals in Athens.

Sotomayor back at his best

SALAMANCA, Spain, July 15: Javier Sotomayor of Cuba sprang back to top form on Monday at the scene of his high jump world record four years ago, reports Reuters.

Sotomayor produced his best performance since February last year with a clearance of 2.34 metres at the Salamanca international meeting.

The soaring effort came on his first attempt at the height and is the second best mark in the world this year.

The Cuban, who was the 1991 and 1993 world champion, set the world best of 2.45 metres at the corresponding meeting in 1993.

Sotomayor has endured knee and ankle operations since he limped away from the Olympic final last August when he could only finish 11th.

"I'm now about 97 per cent recovered. After this performance I am very encouraged," said Sotomayor.

The athletics track in the Spanish city is now named after Sotomayor and it was fitting that the Cuban was named "man-of-the-meeting."

Black only in relay

LONDON, July 15: Double Olympic silver medalist Roger Black, Britain's most successful athlete at the 1996 Atlanta Games, will run only in the 4x400 metres relay at the World Athletics Championships in Athens next month, reports Reuters.

Britain announced their team today, leaving 31-year-old Black out of the individual 400 metres event in favour of 24-year-old Jamie Baulch, who also took a 4x400 relay silver medal in Atlanta.

Black, silver medalist in both the 400 and 4x400 at Atlanta, took over from Linford Christie as national team captain last month but was forced to withdraw from the British trials in Birmingham last weekend because of illness.

He intended to compete in Hechtel, Belgium, next weekend and had wanted that race to be taken into consideration.

However, the selectors chose Baulch, who finished third in the trials, for the final 400 metres place with automatic choices Iwan Thomas and Mark Richardson.

Boldon's second in a row

STUTTGART, July 15: Trinidad's dual Olympic bronze medalist Ato Boldon completed his second consecutive sprint double in the Grand Prix meeting here on Sunday, reports AFP.

The 23-year-old Boldon, who won the 100, and 200 metres in Stockholm on Monday, recorded the world's best time this year in the 200 finishing in 19.77 seconds—bettering his own 19.82 in Stockholm.

"It was important for me to put on a show today as Frankie Fredericks was in the field, Boldon said.

Boldon, who also recorded a double in Lausanne last year, eased away from American Maurice Greene and Fredericks, the 1993 200m world champion, in the final 20 metres.

Johnson jives with 'wild' beat

RALEIGH, North Carolina, July 15: Double Olympic champion Michael Johnson has sent a warning to those with visions of claiming his world 400 metres title in Athens next month, reports Reuters.

Now that he has a special "wild card" invitation to next month's World Championships, the Athens 400 metres final will be no ordinary race, Johnson said on Monday.

"It would not do me any good to just try to get back to running 43.94 flat," Johnson, World and Olympic 200 and 400 metres gold medalist, said.

Loufer goals are on his mind, goals like the 43.29 world record for the 400 metres set by fellow American Butch Reynolds in 1988.

Johnson strained his left quadriceps in a 150 metres race against Olympic champion Donovan Bailey in Toronto on June 1 and finished a demoralising fifth in a 400 metres event in Paris on June 25. He plans to make the World Championships his first race back.

"Prior to the injury I felt I was on target to run a very low 43, if not 42, and that's the kind of shape I'm trying to get into now," Johnson said.

"I would not be going to the championships unless I was 100 per cent healthy."

"If I go out and run my kind of race, a smart race, I cannot be beat."

Conceding that he was probably the moving force behind the decision of the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) to grant wild cards to all defending world champions, Johnson said: "It's and honour to be treated that way."

"I feel they (the wild cards) probably came about because of what happened in Toronto," he said.

But it remained unclear whether wild American world champions who received wild cards would compete in their events.

Brad Hunt, Johnson's agent who also represents world champions Dan O'Brien and Gwen Torrence, said Decathlon world record-holder O'Brien would undergo a bone scan for a possible stress fracture today before deciding whether to compete.

Bob Kersee, coach of women's world 100 metres hurdles champion Gail Devers, told reporters: "If she (Devers) gets on the (4x100 metres relay), I won't have her run the hurdles."

US women's team coach Gary Winkler said Devers, who pulled out of the US 100 metres final citing injury, would be a member of the US relay pool.

However, he declined to offer a relay spot to Torrence, the defending women's world 100 metres champion, because she did not attend the US Championships.

"But my decision could easily be overridden by others," Winkler added.

US men's team coach Dean Hayes said he would probably add Johnson to the American 4x400 metres relay pool but wanted clarification from IAAF officials on Johnson's relay status before doing so.

Johnson said he would enjoy being a part of the relay.

But the speedy Texan said he also had another assignment for Athens, following his projected 400 metres final, he is to join the NBC television crew for its coverage of the World Championships.

"It ensures that we have great match-ups, it ensures that we have marquee names," he said.

Johnson said he was surprised to hear that reigning champions could switch events.

"We were never asked that question so I do not understand now that conclusion can be drawn from the vote. The board cannot accept such a decision," he said.

The ruling largely affects the United States which has strict rules on qualification for major championships, allowing only the top three in the national trials to make the team.

The decision will certainly make their team much stronger and weaken the importance of the US trials in the future.

It could also influence Kenyan and British athletes.

Britain's world triple jump champion Jonathan Edwards, who has been suffering with a heel injury, is now guaranteed his place at the event and does not need to prove his fitness to national selectors.

The IAAF also said that the host country of the championships would be allowed to enter one athlete in each event even if the athlete had not reached the qualifying standard for the discipline.

The changes were believed to have had the full backing of president Primo Nebiolo.

The body's ruling council was persuaded that it was a decision which would help the promotion of the championships which take place every two years.

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Pan-Arab Games

Qatar tops the table

BEIRUT, July 15: Authorities at the eighth Pan-Arab Games have suspended the results of 800-metres for men and women following complaints that some athletes were jostled by others, officials said Tuesday, reports AP.

The races held Monday were won by Algeria, and the victories had put it on top of the medal table with six golds.

With the results withdrawn, Qatar is now on top with five golds. Morocco follows with four golds and six silvers while Algeria has slipped to the third position with four golds and two silvers.

A number of countries complained about both the 800-metres, said a spokesman of the games who cannot be identified under briefing rules.

He said an athletics technical commission will meet Tuesday to decide whether the races should be repeated or if the old results can stand.

It was not known which countries formally complained, but Algerian winner Nouriah Binaida herself told reporters after the race that Moroccan competitors, who came second and third, jostled and pushed her.

"I don't want to win if they have to do this," she said.

Also late Monday, Egypt won the men's fencing, taking the first gold medal outside the track-and-field events.

Mohammed Fouad defeated Kuwaiti Abdul Mohsen Shahrayan 15-9 to give Egypt its third gold. Nine fencers from five Arab nations spent the day contesting the foil category of the sport at suburban Mont La Saluit east of Beirut.

Fares Abdur Razzak of Kuwait and Omar Natour of Jordan shared the bronze.

As his victory was announced, Fouad raised his hands in the air toward the Egyptian delegation.

Preliminary rounds in basketball and boxing also began on Monday.

In soccer matches, Oman drew with Libya 2-2 while Syria defeated the United Arab Emirates 3-1.

Tuesday, five final events in track-and-field are scheduled besides the women's fencing final.

ATP's top 20

MONACO, July 15 (Reuters): Leading rankings issued by the ATP today.

Player	Points
1. Sampras	5,388
2. Chang	3,768
3. Ivanisevic	2,788
4. Muster	2,724
5. Kafelnikov	2,390
6. Corretja	2,310
7. Enqvist	2,148
8. Rios	2,143
9. Bruguera	2,139
10. Moya	2,085
11. Becker	1,884
12. Kuerten	1,851
13. Philippoussis	1,820
14. Pietrangeli	1,797
15. Kraljevic	1,752
16. Rafter	1,634
17. Beraatoglu	1,591
18. Henman	1,584
19. Woodbridge	1,539
20. Medvedev	1,539

Gunners gun for foreign guns

LONDON, July 15 (Reuters): Jurgen Klinsmann, Eric Cantona, Dennis Bergkamp and Juninho have all been one and left their mark on English football, but this season a new band of imports from just across the Channel are set to take the Premier League by storm.

What is more, the majority of them all seem to be headed for Arsenal.

In a ground-breaking move, Arsenal's French manager Arsene Wenger, has signed five top-class French players along with Dutch international Marc Overmars and a handful of others, to boost the North London club's chances of winning the league for the 11th time in its history and for the first time since 1991.

When the new season kicks-off on August 9 the gunners are very likely to field six or seven foreign players in their first choice side — a number unprecedented in the English league.

There is still much debate among the red half of north London whether the club are moving in the right direction, but if they win the league or FA Cup this season, the arguments will end.

Arsenal have never been without top-class players but in the wake of the Bosman ruling, and in keeping with most of Europe's other major outfits, it has had an increasing number of overseas players arriving on its doorstep.

French internationals Dennis Bergkamp and Patrick Vieira brought a continental flavour to the side and helped Wenger, who moved to Arsenal nearly a year ago, eradicate the "boring boring" label it has had for generations.

That tag acquired for the team's reliance on a solid defence. But Arsenal showed last season they can attack and entertain with the best.

Wenger's fresh approach has been welcomed by the players.

"We need a big squad with players who can pass the ball to play with possession suits us better," said Bergkamp. "You need players who, in one movement or with one touch, can change the game."

Wenger is an unlikely football manager. An economics graduate who speaks six languages, his injection of French flair has revolutionised Arsenal — a club traditionally renowned for its conservatism.

Even so many were sceptical of his ability when he arrived but Wenger quickly won them over introducing new training techniques, including more ball work and shadow playing, to mould the team.

"It's a calculated, gamble putting so many different, new elements together," he said. "Of course it will take time for our players to integrate into English football."

The new players would take their lead from the club's more experienced campaigners, he said. "Players like Tony Adams are winners. It's up to the new players to show they have the right spirit."

The influx of foreign players has coincided with Wenger's decision to sell England international Paul Merson — at Arsenal since he was 14 — a poignant symbol of the club's break with the past.

The gunners — who finished third last season — now have a squad of 34 players, many of them internationals. For 24-year-old Overmars, that will only serve to produce better football.

"It's only good. The best 11 players will play, there is a lot of competition," he said.

It is the running and passing skills of players such as Overmars that Wenger has invested Arsenal's future. And the squad are confident the strategy will reap rewards.

"I think with the players we have signed, the championship is well within our grasp," said 21-year-old French midfielder Vieira, who joined last season.

"The character of the players involved is exactly what the club's been looking for."

