

More gifts for Jong

TOKYO, Sept 7: North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-Il gave a car and a flat Monday to a woman marathon runner who has earned the cash-strapped nation its first-ever World athletics gold, official reports from Pyongyang said, according to AFP.

Runner Jong Song-Ok also made it no secret that her success was all because of her love for the "Great Leader," in a blaze of propaganda carried over the weekend to coincide with important dates in the Stalinist state.

Kim Jong-Il marked one full year in absolute power on Sunday, four days before the 51st anniversary of the founding of a country dogged by famine and international mistrust over its nuclear and missile development.

"Marshal Kim Jong-Il is the man who stirred up the heart of Jong Song-Ok," Rodong Sinmun, the newspaper of the all-powerful Workers Party, commented on her triumph at the World Athletics Championships at Seville on August 29.

"Ardent worship for her leader was the secret of her victory and matches will power."

Jong was awarded the titles of national heroine and people's sportswoman, along with a gold star medal and a national flag order first-class, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said.

"A gold wrist-watch bearing the august name of the great leader President Kim Il-Sung and gift of the great leader Kim Jong-Il were also conveyed to her," according to the official news agency monitored here. "The gifts included a luxury car and a flat."

Jong thanked Kim for training her and giving her "inexhaustible strength and courage for victory and glory," KCNA said.

KCNA reported "she vowed to become a true daughter who always brings joy and pleasure to the fatherly marshal and remains loyal and dutiful to him."

State media earlier reported one million people turned out in the streets of Pyongyang Saturday to welcome home the 25-year-old runner, and that Premier Hong Song-Nam hosted a banquet in her honour.

A new song entitled "Welcome to Jong Song-Ok" could be heard at the airport and streets of the capital city of Pyongyang and all other parts of the country, KCNA said.

The party newspaper called on people to "defy economic blockade and pressure and vigorously accelerate the march at a canter on a steed to build a powerful nation and thus display courage and a staunch spirit like Jong Song-Ok."

On September 5, 1998, the junior Kim, also head of the Workers Party, was reelected as head of the national defence commission, a post redefined as the nation's highest. His father Kim Il-Sung, who died four years earlier, was made "eternal president."

All-Africa Games football

Hosts firm favourites

JOHANNESBURG, Sept 7: Tradition suggests South Africa will be strong challengers at the All-Africa Games football tournament with five of the previous six hosts reaching the final, reports AFP.

Congo, Nigeria and Algeria won the first three championships and Kenya and Zimbabwe were beaten by Egypt, who flopped at home in 1991 when Cameroon defeated Tunisia.

The seventh edition of a competition set to rival athletics for centre stage at the 1999 finals in Johannesburg kicks off on Thursday when South Africa meet Algeria and Mali tackle Uganda in Group 1 matches.

Cote d'Ivoire play Zambia and Cameroon face Mauritius in Group 2 on Friday. The mini-league action continues until September 14 followed by classification matches, semi-finals, a third-place play-off and the final.

South Africa, Cameroon and Cote d'Ivoire appear the best bets for gold in an intriguing event with Mali and Zambia dark horses, Algeria and Uganda outsiders, and Mauritius no-hoppers.

European club commitments will deprive South Africa of senior squad players Aaron Mokoena, Bradley Carnell, Quinton Fortune and 1998 African Nations Cup hero Benni McCarthy.

And while some contenders have been in camp for several weeks, local coach and former star Ephraim Shakes' Mashaba has just four days to mould a winning combination.

While African Champions League commitments rob Cote d'Ivoire of the teenage stars from defending champions ASEC, they remain a formidable force having qualified from the toughest zone.

The Ivoirians finished above hosts Ghana and Nigeria in a mini-league that demonstrated their defensive strength with just one goal conceded in three rounds.

Cameroon proved particularly impressive in away matches en route to South Africa, scoring four goals in Rwanda and three in the Central African Republic.

Zambia proved their worth with home and away wins over Zimbabwe, although the absence of midfielder Andrew Sinkala, who joined German giants Bayern Munich in mid-Ter.

Mali boast an excellent record in age-limit competitions with the youth team finishing third behind Spain and Japan at the world championships in Nigeria last April.



Jana Novotna of the Czech Republic smiles during her news conference on September 6. — AFP photo

Novotna calls it quits



NEW YORK, Sept 7: Surrounded by teenagers with booming serves and ground games to match, Jana Novotna decided Monday to leave tennis, announcing her retirement at the US Open.

Novotna, who will be 31 next month, said she would keep her tournament commitments for the remainder of the year and then put away her rackets.

"I've been thinking about this for a very long time," she said. "It's really difficult to point out one thing. I just feel the time for it is right."

Novotna's decision comes less than a month after long-time rival Steffi Graf announced her own retirement.

"It is very ironic, actually," Novotna said. "When I was 14 years old, when I started my career, when I travelled for my first international tournament, I happened to play Steffi Graf in the first round. It is pretty incredible that we are retiring in the same year."

Novotna said a nagging ankle injury had nothing to do with the decision.

"Physically, I'm fine," she said. "There is really no problem. My ankle injury doesn't have anything to do with the decision."

But after losing in the third round of the Open last Friday to Anke Huber, Novotna expressed

doubts about her future. "If I feel I can no longer compete with these players or I cannot physically be out there and stay in the top 10 and play on the level I would like to play," she said. "But for right now, I want to take time to think about everything and don't make any emotional statements."

It took just three days for her to make the decision.

Novotna won her 24th WTA Tour event this season at Hanover, beating Venus Williams in the final. She has earned more than 10 million dollars in a career that began in 1986.

Novotna said the new generation of women players is more physically fit than ever before. One of those baseline boomers is Serena Williams, who said she would miss Novotna's voice.

"It's the sweetest voice I've ever heard," she said. "It's so light. You'd think someone with her stature, her size, how long she's been around on the Tour and stuff, I never realized that her voice was like that."

Novotna said her victory at Wimbledon a year ago fulfilled her greatest ambition in tennis and made her decision to leave the sport less troubling.

"Winning Wimbledon last year and having the wonderful year that I had just made everything much easier," she said. "I said throughout my career that winning one Grand Slam tour-

nament would be very fulfilling and it would be a dream come true for me. It finally did happen. That was the greatest thing that ever happened."

"I can just look back and be very happy and very thankful for the career that I've had. I'm very happy with this decision."

It was at Wimbledon in 1993 that she suffered her greatest disappointment. Leading Graf 4-1 and 40-15 in the third set, five points away from the championship, she came apart.

Graf rallied to win the title, leaving Novotna in tears as she accepted the runner-up trophy from the Duchess of Kent. It was one of the most emotional moments in the tournament's history.

In 1997, Novotna was No 2 in the world and made it back to the finals at Wimbledon again, this time beaten by Martina Hingis, left again to accept the runner-up trophy and the Duchess' sympathies.

Finally, last year came the breakthrough when she defeated Hingis in the semifinals and Natalie Tauziat in the finals.

Given her frequent meetings with the Duchess, Novotna was asked whether she had discussed the retirement decision with her.

She laughed.

"Yes, I called her last night," Novotna said. "She said, 'Don't do it.' I said, 'I have to. I'm still going to come to Wimbledon because I have the little badge.'

"You are always going to have favourite places and not," she said. "Hopefully it's going to grow on me."

She just realised that it's going to be windy for the rest of my career here," Seles said. "The stadium is going to play fast, all these things."

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Sport

OPEN NOTEBOOK

NEW YORK, Sept 7 (AP): A thawing in relations between Andre Agassi and the US Tennis Association means the world number two may again make himself available for Davis Cup.

After the USTA summarily dismissed well-liked physician George Fareed -- the last in a string of decisions that annoyed Agassi -- the Nevada native declared he wouldn't play in the nations tournament.

Now Fareed has been hired back in a secondary role in the team and Agassi said that decision, and other efforts by the USTA to solicit player input, might lure him back.

"I'm certainly reconsidering it," Agassi said. "There have been efforts made on behalf of the USTA to kind of allow the players to have a bit more input as to the things that really affect the players out there on the court. We're going to take it one step at a time."

Agassi said he would also push for players to have the ultimate word on who captains the team, although he said his decision to return wouldn't depend on having a particular person as captain.

"I'm not as concerned with who the captain is as much as I'm concerned with how the captain is picked," Agassi said.

VOICE AS LIGHT AS HER VOLLEY

Former Wimbledon champion Jana Novotna, who announced Monday that she would retire at the end of the year, will be remembered by many for her delicate serve and volley game.

But 17-year-old Serena Williams said she'll remember Novotna's silvery voice.

"I like her voice," Williams said. "It's the sweetest voice I've ever heard. It's like so light. You think someone with her stature, her size, how long she's been around on the Tour and stuff, I never realized that her voice was like that."

SELES TRYING HARD

Monica Seles, who won her two US Open titles on the old Louis Armstrong Stadium at the National Tennis Centre, is trying hard to learn to love the cavernous Arthur Ashe Stadium.

Seles has always found the giant Ashe court windy -- her fixation on the subject showing in her analysis of which doors can be opened or closed to change the direction of the gusts.

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