

Not everyone in favour

SEATTLE, Oct 8: In the long and checkered history of professional boxing there has never been a match quite like the battle of the sexes on the card at Seattle's Mercer Arena Saturday—a chance for a man and a woman to slug it out legally, reports Reuters.

The fight pitting Margaret "Tiger" MacGregor, 36, against Lol Chow, 33, the first officially sanctioned male-female bout, has attracted international media attention along with howls of outrage from professional boxing circles.

The Association of Boxing Commissions, citing "very real health and safety concerns," is recognising the fight only as an exhibition. One well-known trainer offered 5,000 dollars to call off the match, and a state representative wants to make mixed-sex boxing illegal.

"We really think it's a dangerous precedent, and it's something that women's boxing is not embracing in any form," said Rick Kulis, a longtime sports promoter and founder of the International Female Boxers Association.

The outpouring of antagonism has made MacGregor more determined than ever to show she can take a pounding, and dish one out.

"I'm not trying to be a freak," MacGregor said in a television interview. "I'm not trying to be in a circus. I want to box, and it doesn't matter who it is."

Both fighters are expected to weigh in at about 125 pounds (57 kg), although MacGregor, at five-foot-five (1.65 metres), is three inches (8 cm) taller than her opponent.

"This is a professional athlete," said her trainer Vern Miller. "She spars every day—middleweights, welterweights. This isn't little Red Riding Hood. This is the big bad wolf."

Chow has fought just two professional matches and lost both in 1996. He agreed to the match after the original opponent, his sparring partner Hector Morales, failed to come up with a valid passport for the fight.

Loroupe hopeful

NEWCASTLE, England, Oct 8: World marathon record holder Tegla Loroupe of Kenya settled into the northeast of England on Thursday confident that she can repeat her success here six years ago by winning Sunday's Great North Run, reports AFP.

Loroupe sliced four seconds off her world mark when winning the Berlin marathon in 2hr 20min 43sec just under a fortnight ago and captured her third successive world half marathon title in Palermo, Italy last Sunday.

"It is a very strong field and should be very competitive providing the weather is good," said Loroupe, who faces fellow Kenyan, and reigning London Marathon champion Joyce Chepchumba, last year's winner Sonia O'Sullivan of Ireland and Portugal's European marathon gold medalist Manuela Machado over the 13-mile (20.8km) course.

But Loroupe reserved a special word for British debutant Paula Radcliffe, who won the world 10,000m silver medal ahead of her in Seville just over a month ago.

"Paula is a very strong and brave runner who isn't frightened to take on the pace," she said. "I know it is her first half marathon but I'm sure she'll not hesitate to do that on Sunday."

Recalling their clash in Seville, Loroupe praised the Briton while criticising Ethiopia's gold medalist, Gete Wami.

The Germany-based star said, "Obviously the distance was a little bit short for me but I played my part in taking the share of the pacemaking. The conditions were very hot and Paula also took her turn."

"But Wami did nothing. She just sat in on the pace and offered no help whatsoever even when I asked her if she would play a part. In such weather everyone should contribute and I was disappointed she didn't. But then she always does that."

"Hopefully on Sunday everyone will play a part in making it a great race. My aim is to win but if I can help Paula I will."

Brisk business

MOSCOW, Oct 8: Scalpers are demanding up to 150 dollars for the match between the former Soviet republics of Russia and Ukraine after all 83,000 of them sold out in a matter of hours, local newspapers reported Thursday, reports AFP.

The regular ticket price for the European Championship Group Four clash was established at 100-200 rubles (four to eight dollars) and nobody was allowed to buy more than 10 tickets for Saturday's match, said deputy general manager of Moscow's Luzhniki stadium, Viktor Gruzdev.

Ukrainian newspapers reported that the country's national squad support has been furious after receiving just 7,000 tickets instead of the 10,000 they had asked for.

Dozens of Russian fans spent the night outside the stadium this week in the forlorn hope of obtaining the treasured tickets, but to no avail as all were sold out last Saturday.

Russian squad members were also issued with 10 tickets each, even though Spartak striker Alexander Shirkov had asked for 60 passes.

Dozens of Russian journalists' accreditation demands were also rejected by the Russian Football Union (RFU) because the press box of the Luzhniki stadium only has 366 seats. The RFU's press service received more than 600 requests from reporters.



MOCK FIGHTING! Laila Ali (L), daughter of boxing legend Muhammad Ali, and her opponent April Fowler pretending to box during the weigh-in at the Turning Stone Casino Resort in New York on October 7. Laila makes her professional debut today. — AFP photo

Putting the pain behind

COLOGNE, Oct 8 (AFP): The human pain which Turkey's devastating earthquake unleashed will be forgotten for 90 minutes Saturday as the country's best footballers travel to Munich for a vital qualifier against Germany which they must win if they are to qualify directly for next year's Euro 2000 tournament.

It will be years before Turkey repairs the physical damage left by the killer quake, but they will now finally have an occasion to shelve their grief and celebrate a national event.

That the game is against Germany, a country to which Turkey has close ties because of the tens of thousands of Turkish guest workers who moved there in the 1960s and 1970s and who today form Germany's largest ethnic minority, will spice things up.

Normally the Turkish media hype things up in the four weeks before such a game but this time the response has been muted because of the human suffering caused by the quake.

"Football has become a side issue even for the most passionate of fans, the pain is just too great, no one feels like celebrating," Turkey's coach Mustafa Denizli said.

"My players are just as emotionally affected as everyone else who lives in the earthquake area. Just about every player has someone in his family who has suffered."

Football in Turkey is a matter of national pride and that was boosted in the first leg match when the home side scored a 1-0 win in Bursa over

the Germans, Europe's defending champions.

Denizli, who learnt his trade in Germany as coach of the now second division side Alemannia Aachen, doesn't want to stir up emotions for this game more than they already are.

Around half of the 64,500 fans in Munich's Olympic stadium Saturday are expected to be Turkish and special measures will be taken to secure the playing area because of fears Kurdish radicals may try to use the game as a platform for their armed struggle.

That was the case in Helsinki when Turkey's qualifier against Finland had to be stopped for 10 minutes to clear a group of Kurdish demonstrators who stormed the pitch.

German coach Erich Ribbeck has been through a stormy 13 months in charge including some unprecedented defeats and horribly inept showings, but that will be overlooked by followers if he can get his men to perform quality football against their toughest group 3 rival.

"We've got a home tie and we want to win. I've not settled on a final line up but I can promise you that we will play offensively," Ribbeck said.

That will mean strikers in the form of Oliver Bierhof and Ulf Kirsten will be in the middle, while wing-forwards Christian Ziege and Oliver Neuville play the wings.

The back line will be marshalled by Bayern Munich veteran Lothar Matthaeus while teammate Oliver Kahn returns to goal at the expense of disgruntled Dortmund keeper Jens Lehmann.

The German Football Federation (DFB), which has played

its part in providing aid for Turkish earthquake victims, wants to play up the symbolic nature of this game and take some of the heat out of the two countries' rivalry. DFB president Egidius Braun expects a win but not at any cost.

"The game is sure to be loaded with passion and emotion but for me, after the terrible earthquake, it's more the aspect of friendship with the Turks which is in the foreground," Braun said.

"Defeat wouldn't mean the end of everything and certainly not a catastrophe. Catastrophes are what the people of Turkey and more recently in Japan (nuclear accident) have gone through."

A draw would be enough for Germany to book their passage to Euro 2000—Germany are top of Group Three with 18 points while Turkey are second with 16.

Regardless of the outcome, Braun is hoping that an improved performance will finally take some of the heat off Erich Ribbeck and co. and, to illustrate his point, has a salutary tale.

"I just wish everyone would move a little closer and work as one regarding the national team because there's often just a fine line between success and failure."

"I remember the qualification series for the 1990 World Cup in Italy when we played our final qualifier against Wales in Cologne and only got through 2-1 after a mighty struggle and Thomas Haessler scored the winner."

"That sealed our ticket to Italy and, as everyone knows, we ended up being world champions."



Frenchman Nicolas Escude in action against Andre Agassi at the Swiss Indoor championship in Basle. — AFP photo

Rios, Bjorkman in semis

SHANGHAI, Oct 8: Top seed Marcelo Rios continued his march back to form Friday, defeating Austria's

Liam Todd Woodbridge 6-3, 6-3 for a place in the semifinals of the 350,000-dollar Shanghai Heineken Open, reports AFP.

The world number seven Chilean, who stood atop the rankings on three occasions during 1998 for a total of six weeks, has been dogged by injuries this year.

His latest has been a leg, which he still occasionally feels. "I'm much better now," said the 23-year-old. "It still bothers me occasionally but it's better than in the previous weeks."

Rios' quarterfinal showing here was his first since May. The South American next faces fifth seed Jonas Bjorkman Saturday.

Bjorkman won an all-Swedish clash, ousting young compatriot Andreas Vinciguerra 6-3, 3-6, 6-4.

In other quarterfinals at the Xian Xia Tennis Centre, holder Michael Chang was pitted against fellow American Jan-Michael Gambill, while second seed Magnus Norman was playing Thai surprise Paradorn Srichaphan. Norman, who leads the 1999 ATP tournament wins table with Andre Agassi and Pete Sampras, was glad to emerge over Peter Wessels of the Netherlands with a 6-7, 7-5, 7-6

win in two hours, 12 minutes.

Chang, the crowd-pleasing sixth seed, came through against powerful Belarus youngster Maxim Mirnyi 6-4, 7-5 in the night session.

Rios improved to 3-1 over Woodbridge in their career series. The top seed has won only two titles this year after suffering at the start of 1999 with a back injury and battling with other physical ailments this season.

Rios claimed titles on clay in May at Hamburg and St. Polten, his only titles of 1999.

Woodbridge, ranked 153 in the world, was broken in the fifth game of the first set and never really found his feet against the talented Chilean, a crowd favourite who is playing in China for the first time.

Rios swept the opening set in 33 minutes and was all but untouchable in the second.

Bjorkman showed 1998 Australian Open junior finalist Vinciguerra that he still has a lot to learn on the pro tour.

The challenger did threaten the former world number five, now trying to improve upon a ranking which has sunk into the 60s.

Asia and is followed by an indoor event starting Monday in Singapore.

Jennie out of action

TIANJIN, China, Oct 8: Jennie Thompson reinjured her left ankle in practice and is out of the US lineup for the World Gymnastics Championships, the team spokeswoman said Friday, reports AP.

Thompson, 18, third in the US championships in August, hurt the ankle Monday while practicing the vault, said spokeswoman Susan Polakoff. Team officials decided Thursday night she wasn't fit for the championships starting Saturday.

She will be replaced by Morgan White, 16, who like Thompson trains at the Cincinnati Gymnastics Academy. White finished seventh in the US championships and was the all-around gold medalist in the Pan American Games.

Thompson was a member of the American team that placed fifth in the last World Championships in 1997. In 1993, at age 12, she was the youngest ever US junior national champion.

The US women's team of White, Kristen Maloney, Vanessa Adler, Elise Ray, Jeanette Antolin and Alyssa Beckerman has its first qualifying round Sunday.

'I can beat the men'

LONDON, Oct 8: US Open and Grand Slam Cup champion Serena Williams has launched an attack on the women's tennis circuit and insists she is good enough to play on the ATP men's tour, reports AFP.

"Women's tennis is boring. I can beat the men," said the 18-year-old who lost to Sandrine Testud in her first match at the WTA Grand Prix in Filderstadt, Germany, this week.

World number four Williams has requested a wild card entry for the men's Eurocard Open and tournament director Markus Gunthardt has confirmed she will be entered into the draw if the ATP give their approval to a man-versus-woman match.

The tournament begins on October 25 and at present such clashes are not permitted in ATP-sanctioned competitions.

Williams' mother Orecene told German newspaper Bild: "We're expecting a positive outcome. Serena can survive against the men."

Former Wimbledon legend Boris Becker poured scorn on Williams' claim that she could beat men.

"I think it's a pretty good joke," said Becker. "If that's the case and she is going to play, lots of men will go the other way and ask for wild-cards into women's competitions and you will see some strange winners of women's Grand Slams."

"I doubt it very much if Serena could compete with the men. She is very masculine and very strong but if you compare her game to the likes of Pete Sampras or Andre Agassi in all honesty you are talking about two different sports."

Davenport withdraws

FILDERSTADT, Germany, Oct 8: Second seed Lindsay Davenport was forced to withdraw from the 520,000-dollar Filderstadt Grand Prix here on Thursday, reports AFP.

The former world No 1, due to face Germany's Anke Huber in Friday's quarterfinals, has not recovered from a left wrist injury suffered during her second round victory over Silvia Farina.

Davenport has also been forced to pull out of next week's tournament in Zurich, where she was the two-time defending champion. She will return home to California to undergo treatment and hopes to be fit for the season-ending Chase Championships.

Nathalie Dechy of France set up a quarterfinal meeting with world No 1 Martina Hingis after upsetting eighth seed Dominique Van Roost of Belgium 6-3, 6-2.

Germany's Anke Huber defeated Russian Elena Likhovtseva 6-4, 6-3, while Austria's Barbara Schett eased past another Russian, qualifier Elena Dementieva, 6-3, 6-1.

Belgian qualifier Sabine Appelmans will face defending champion Sandrine Testud of France after a 6-2, 7-6 victory over American Amy Frazier.

Serena Williams, beaten by Testud in the second round, was again at the centre of controversy in Filderstadt despite flying home to Florida.

The 18-year-old American had reportedly asked for a wild card into this month's ATP event in Stuttgart.

Williams first spoke to tournament director Markus Gunthardt at the French Open, and when the pair bumped into each other in Filderstadt, Williams quipped: "What about my wild card?"

Gunthardt confirmed that he had told Williams to apply by fax, if she was serious and had considered the implications of what might happen if she played.

The American had previously lost 6-1 to German doubles specialist Karsten Braasch in an exhibition set at the 1998 Australian Open. The WTA dismissed the whole story as a publicity stunt, designed to help ticket sales.

Xavier denies drug allegations

NEW DELHI, Oct 8: Goldmedal winning Indian swimmer Sebastian Xavier is alleged to have tested positive for banned drugs during the just-ended South Asian Federation Games in Kathmandu, but he denies this saying he was not tested at all, reports PTI.

Three participants, one from India and two from Sri Lanka were announced by South Asian Games Federation secretary general Drubha Bahadur Pradhan on Wednesday as having tested positive for banned drugs at the September 25-October 4 games.

The organisers claimed that urine samples of Xavier along with Sri Lanka's 85 KG weightlifting bronze medalist in an exhibition set at the 1998 Australian Open. The WTA dismissed the whole story as a publicity stunt, designed to help ticket sales.

According to the organisers, the Indian swimmer, the Sri Lanka hurdler had tested positive for the banned drug Nandrolone while the lifter's sample had shown traces of the stimulant Ephedrine. A positive test for drugs entails an automatic two year ban while the punishment for taking a stimulant is far lighter, and the culprit can even be let off with a warning.

Pradhan had announced in Kathmandu that the A samples had tested positive and action would be formalised only after the B sample was analysed.

Drug testing, which was introduced only with this edition of the SAF Games, was done at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) approved Laboratory in Kuala Lumpur.

Agassi, Henman crawl



BASLE, Switzerland, Oct 8: World number one Andre Agassi saved three points to clinch a round win over Frenchman Nicolas Escude at the Swiss Indoor championship on Thursday, reports Reuters.

Fourth seed and defending champion Tim Henman also needed three sets to battle past Andrei Medvedev, fighting back from a set down to beat the French Open finalist 5-7, 6-4, 6-1.

World number two Yevgeny Kafelnikov, locked in a battle with Agassi for the year-end world number one ranking, recovered from a momentary lapse to brush aside Frenchman Lionel Roux 6-1, 7-6.

The Frenchman carried the momentum into the third,

There were no hiccups in Rusedski's demolition of Slovak Dominik Hrbaty as the 1997 champion, playing his best tennis of the season, disposed of his opponent 6-2, 6-2 in just 59 minutes.

But while Agassi easily disposed of the young Frenchman in straight sets in the quarterfinals of the US Open, it was a more confident Escude who stepped on to the court having claimed his first title in Toulouse last week.

The opening set produced just one break opportunity but that was all the French and US Open champion needed, blasting an overhead smash past Escude to take a 5-4 lead.

But Escude, ranked 54 in the world, refused to be intimidated by Agassi or the fans who were squarely in the Las Vegas's corner, capitalising on a timely break of his own at 6-5 to take the second set.

The Frenchman carried the momentum into the third,



Jiri Novak of the Czech Republic makes a backhand return against Nicolas Kiefer in Basle on October 7. — AFP photo

Early test for McEnroe



NEW YORK, Oct 8 (AFP): Newly appointed US Davis Cup captain John McEnroe's power of persuasion over

his temperamental stars will be tested early thanks to the States' 2000 first-round tie in Zimbabwe.

The draw, announced in London on Thursday, means McEnroe will have to sell players like Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi on the merits of a long journey the week after the Australian Open.

"That is a tough one," McEnroe admitted at a US Tennis Association press conference several hours after the draw.

"A tough travel trip. But I like our chances."

Agassi, a longtime Davis Cup stalwart who swore off the nations competition last year in frustration with policies of the USTA, said at the time of McEnroe's appointment last month that he was ready to return.

"Andre already committed, so unless he's injured, he's going," McEnroe said of the reigning French and US Open champion and world number one. "He is stuck."

But McEnroe acknowledged that an agreement to play in principle was a different matter from committing to a lengthy overseas journey sandwiched between a Grand Slam tournament and the start of the US indoor season.

"Quite honestly, I can't look at Andre in the face and say, 'Listen, what I think you should do is play Australian, then play

Davis Cup, and then go to San Jose for that tournament," McEnroe said.

"It is not fair to anyone... I just don't think that is right."

Despite the difficulties, McEnroe saw some pluses to playing the tie in Zimbabwe rather than in the United States.

"This is a chance for the Black brothers (Zimbabwe's Wayne and Byron), it's like David and Goliath," he said. "This is a very exciting moment for Zimbabwe."

"It would be tougher scenario to sell here, so in that sense it is better for the sport."

The dilemma prompted McEnroe to ponder some possible changes to the Davis Cup schedule, such as playing two

weeks around Wimbledon and again two weeks before the US Open, rather than spreading the four weeks out over the course of the year.

Whatever changes are made, McEnroe said, the most important key to the success of the Davis Cup is persuading the top players to play.

Former world number one Pete Sampras, who long shunned Davis Cup in his pursuit of the top ranking and Grand Slam titles, has expressed an interest in playing under McEnroe.

"He is coming around," McEnroe said. "I think he realises it is the right thing to do. I really do."

The challenge as captain, McEnroe said, was conveying his view to Sampras.

"Andre is someone who I feel a real kinship toward for a long time, we have closer ideologies or attitudes... which makes that all the more challenging to get Pete to do what I think deep down he wants to do."

"That's the difference between being a player and a coach."

"I believe that this is one of the things Pete needs. He should put aside the pressure he felt by this insane ranking system... and he should focus on the big ones and Davis Cup."

One player McEnroe isn't planning on fielding is himself. "I doubt it," he said. "I don't want to say it is impossible. Nothing is impossible."

"I feel like I am capable of playing, but it's certainly not my plan to play... unless I can't get anyone to go to Zimbabwe."

Random doping tests for Spanish booters

BARCELONA, Oct 8: A total of 60 soccer players underwent surprise doping tests during training sessions in Spain on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) medical staff visited 15 of Spain's 20 First Division clubs.

It was the first time the RFEF had taken samples outside competition. Tests are usually organised immediately after first division matches.

Results will be made available in around 10 days, the RFEF said.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

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