

It's tennis time

SYDNEY, Sept. 18 (AFP) — Marat Safin, crowned world number one for the first time on Monday, flies into Sydney Tuesday on the final leg of a whirlwind jaunt across the globe that may have fatally compromised his dream of Olympic gold.

The 20-year-old who annihilated Pete Sampras in last week's US Open final is playing the tennis of his life and starts the Olympic tournament, which begins here on Tuesday, as top seed.

But after ten days in which he has gone through a total of 15 hours of time changes and spent more than 24 hours on planes, the crown prince of Russian tennis is going to have to dig deep into his mental and physical reserves if he is to become an Olympic Tzar.

The day after he beat Sampras in New York, Safin flew to Tashkent in central Asia to play in Uzbekistan's President's Cup.

After winning there on Sunday he is due to arrive here just hours before the action gets under at the Olympic tennis centre.

Organisers have given him the first day off but he must be

on court by Wednesday evening at the latest, giving him no more than 36 hours to recover from his Herculean exertions of the last three weeks.

In contrast, many of his rivals, including second seed Gustavo Kuerten, have been here for a week or more, relaxing and limbering up for the tournament.

But Kuerten, who won his second French Open title in June, is among those that believe the Muscovite is capable of pulling off the astonishing feat of winning three consecutive tournaments in different continents.

"He is a very strong guy and he likes to play a lot," the Brazilian said. "He is playing his best ever tennis and his confidence will be very high — that will help him to keep it going."

Todd Martin, a semifinalist at the US Open but only playing here after Sampras and Andre Agassi pulled out, agreed that Safin was the favourite but cautioned: "That is provided he comes here fresh enough to compete as hard as he did in New York."

Agassi had planned to come to Sydney to defend the Olympic title he won four years ago

in Atlanta but finally opted to stay in the United States with his sister and mother, who are both battling breast cancer.

Of the top 10 men in the new rankings, Thomas Enqvist of Sweden is the only other player not in Sydney.

Among the players attempting to prevent Safin and Kuerten from meeting up in the gold medal match on September 28 are Australia's trio of big hitters: Lleyton Hewitt, double US Open champion Pat Rafter and Mark Philippoussis.

Britain's Tim Henman, whose confidence has been buoyed by his best-ever season on North America's hardcourts, also has the potential to add to the doubles silver medal he won with Neil Broad in Atlanta.

But the draw has been less than kind to the Englishman, who faces a tough opening round clash with Karol Kucera, a former top 10 player from Slovakia. The pair have met 10 times on the tour with each of them winning five times.

"I was out for six weeks last year because of a wrist injury and it has been hard to get my form back but I think it is better."

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SYDNEY SIDELINES

SYDNEY, Sept. 18 (AFP) — The Spanish Infanta Princess Cristina became the latest European royal to attend the Sydney Olympics on Monday.

But the Princess, who has a one-year-old son Juan and is pregnant again, has a very personal reason for being in Australia as her husband the Duke of Palma Mallorca is a member of Spain's handball team.

The Olympics will have sweet memories for the pair who first met at the party at the Atlanta Games to celebrate Spain's bronze medal. At that time her husband was simply known as Inaki Urdangarin and he still plays handball under that name.

The Barcelona player will quit after the Sydney Games.

GALFIONE'S TACTICS

France's reigning Olympic pole vault champion Jean Galfione has taken up a new hobby as he prepares to defend the title he won in Atlanta.

The 29-year-old Parisian is a lover of marine life and has already taken the opportunity to study Australia's unique variety of sea creatures in the Sydney Aquarium.

Now his coach Maurice Hovion has persuaded him to take up sculpture in wood and Galfione's first effort — a dolphin — got the thumbs-up from his mentor.

BONDI'S BAIT

Sydney's famous Bondi Beach is proving the place to be seen at the Sydney Olympics.

The lure of such an exotic location — the venue for the Beach volleyball competitions — is too much to resist for the glitterati.

The world's richest man Bill Gates and Chelsea Clinton, representing her father on behalf of the United States, have already attended while another legendary American, Muhammad Ali, was also expected to watch a match on Monday.

DOOM AND GLOOM

Sydney and Australia are enjoying the unprecedented world interest in the country during the Sydney Games but football chiefs in the country would be forgiven for not joining in the party atmosphere.

In a country where winning

is all-important the lacklustre performances of the men's team — the Olyroos — have done nothing to raise the profile of a sport that, while growing in popularity, is still in the shadow of rugby league and Australian rules football.

"If winning is a habit then Australia's national soccer team can't get a fix and an addiction is a long way off," Australian Associated Press soccer writer Paul Millar lamented after the elimination of the Olyroos.

NIKKI COMING AGAIN

Nikki Webster, the small girl who captured the hearts of the world in the Olympic opening ceremony, will also star in the closing extravaganza, organisers confirmed.

"Nikki captured the hearts and the imagination of not only Australia but the world as she personifies the hopes and dreams of a young nation," a Games spokesman said.

"She will make the closing ceremony an even more unforgettable event."



KANGAROO-HEAD! Dierdra O'Hanlon, a fan of the Australian Olympic basketball team, wearing a hat with a kangaroo fitted on top at the Olympic Park yesterday.

—AFP photo

Ottey outrage over?

ATHLETICS

SYDNEY, Sept. 18: Legendary sprinter Merlene Ottey was selected to run the 100m at the Sydney Olympics Monday, at the expense of Jamaica's national champion Peta-Gay Dowdie, as the Jamaican team backed off a planned relay boycott if she was chosen.

Jamaican National Olympic Committee vice president Donald Anderson told AFP that calm had been restored to the Jamaican athletics camp and Ottey would run the sprint.

Agreement had been reached in a series of meetings between senior members of the delegation and athletes who had threatened to boycott the men's and women's sprint relays if Ottey was selected for the individual race, he said.

Such was the febrile atmosphere within the camp that 25 of them — half the athletics team — marched in protest in the athletes' village Monday holding banners saying "Merlene out, Peta in, Relays out".

The athletes' (protest) march was a reaction to Merlene Ottey being officially selected, Anderson said.

"We then held a series of

Olympics were to Jamaicans," Anderson said.

He said the athletes then promised they would not go ahead with a threatened boycott of the sprint relays.

"As far as we are concerned there would be no boycott. We expect the athletes to focus on their events and we will be most disappointed if they break their word," he said.

"Calm has been restored to the camp and they are back in training."

Ottey who placed fourth in the 100m at the Jamaican championships this year, had said she would not run in the 4x100m relay if she was not among the three selected for the sprint.

One Jamaican athlete, Patrick Jarrett, told AFP that the criteria under which the selectors could impose 40-year-old Ottey — known as the 'Lion Queen' and winner of 34 major championship medals in her career — ahead of Dowdie was only implemented this year.

"This is not about Merlene Ottey this is about standards," he said.

But Anderson said certain athletes and misinterpreted the criteria in which one athlete can replace another considered not to be in the same shape as they had been at the national trials.

Ottey, whose failure to win

an Olympic gold medal is the one omission of a glittering career that began in the Moscow Olympics in 1980, blamed her fourth place in the trials on her build-up which had been hampered by a ban for testing positive for nandrolone.

That ban was subsequently lifted, a decision criticised by Lamine Diack, the president of the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF).

Yang's mark

SYDNEY, Sept. 18: China's Yang Xia denied political sparring partners Taiwan their first Olympic gold medal on Monday when she beat world champion and former countrywoman Li Feng-ying in an enthralling weightlifting tussle, reports AFP.

Yang, who beat ex-teammate Li to win the 1998 Asian Games title, went on a world record breaking spree to ensure that Taiwan's 44-year long wait for their first gold continued. Taiwan compete under the neutral name of Chinese Taipei to avoid embarrassing China.

The 22-year-old Yang set new world marks in the snatch, clean and jerk and overall divisions to take the gold in the 53kg division with a total of 225kg (100kg and 125kg).



FINISHING TOUCHES: Top Australian women sprinter Cathy Freeman training with coach Sean McLoughlin at the practice ground of the Olympic Park yesterday four days ahead of the Games' athletics competition.

—AFP photo

Romanians reinstated Popov after history

SWIMMING

SYDNEY, Sept. 18: An Olympic ban on the Romanian weightlifter team was lifted Monday with the IOC's backing after the Romanian Olympic Committee paid a 50,000 US dollar fine, reports AFP.

Romanian Olympic Committee president Ion Tiriac justified the move, saying innocent people should not be punished for the actions of others.

"I believe the rule should be that everyone caught cheating should be banned for life, but these other weightlifters are innocent. They have spent four years working for this moment," he said.

The International Weightlifting Federation announced the team's ejection on Sunday after three positive doping tests, which sparks an automatic one-year suspension or the option to pay the fine.

But Tiriac said they jumped the gun.

"We have still not received the 'B' sample for Mateias," he said. "They announced the decision before waiting for the test. I don't know why they did that."

Andrei Mateias and Traian Chihorean, a bronze medalist in Barcelona eight years ago, were both tested on August 20 and Tiriac received Chihorean's positive "B" sample on Saturday. Mateias's is expected on Tuesday.

Another Romanian lifter tested positive earlier this year.

Protesting his innocence, Mateias on Monday threatened a hunger strike unless given another drug test to clear their names.

"If they don't give me another test I will begin a hunger strike today," said Mateias. "It

is impossible to accept this situation. I don't want to accept this."

Chihorean was leaving for home on Monday and Mateias will follow if his "B" sample is positive.

Female lifter Marioara Munteanu took part in the Olympic 53 kg competition and finished eighth.

While the IWF has offered no explanation for inadvertently announcing a ban, vice president Sam Coffa said the federation was now satisfied that the remainder of the team could still, legally, compete.

"As far as we are concerned, we have a rule and that is our rule and we can only abide by it," he said.

Earlier Patrick Schamasch, director general of the IOC's medical commission, insisted the Romanians were out of the Games.

He said there was no question of them buying their way back in.

"A fine can never, never replace a sanction. All the weightlifters have to leave the village," he said.

Tiriac said he did not know the facts when he made the comments and IOC vice-president Dick Pound later said: "We accept the rules of the international federations."

Earlier Monday, Norwegian weightlifter Stian Grimseth was expelled from the Olympics after testing positive for banned drugs.

Seven other athletes from Canada, Taiwan, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Kazakhstan were kicked off their Olympic teams before the Games got underway after positive dope tests.

SYDNEY, Sept. 18 (AFP) — Alexander Popov knew as soon as he won his first Olympic gold medal that one would never be enough.

"If you can win one Olympics, you become famous," Popov said after winning the 50m and 100m freestyles at the 1992 Barcelona Games. "If you win two Olympics you become probably great."

"And if you win three, you become history."

Popov will be chasing history when the 100m freestyle starts in Sydney on Tuesday.

A victory would make him the first man to win the same swimming event at three straight Olympics — feat accomplished on the women's side by Hungarian Kristina Egerszegi and Australia's Dawn Fraser.

And as the first leg of a potential 50m-100m free double, it would put him on the path toward becoming the first swimmer in history to win the same two events at three straight Games.

Standing in his way, however, is Australian Michael Klim, Popov's friend and training partner under coach Genadi Touretsky at the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra.

Klim looks an even more imposing obstacle after shaving three-hundredths of a second off Popov's six-year-old world record with a time of 48.18secs in leading off Australia's victorious 4x100m free relay on Saturday night.

"It's a wake-up call for the great sprinters of the world," Australian head coach Don

Talbot said of Klim's swim. "It doesn't guarantee a gold medal for Michael, in fact it tips a bit more pressure on him and he knows that."

"But they know that to beat Michael they're going to have to go world record or better," Talbot added. "I don't think it's inconceivable that somebody can break 48 seconds and I



hope it's Michael."

Popov, whose Russian squad was disqualified from the relay, gave Klim a discreet thumbs-up on the deck, a gesture of camaraderie for his training partner who at the Olympics is the opposition.

"He didn't say anything to me, but he gave me a good look," said Klim, adding that there was an unspoken understanding between himself and Popov that they want to keep the 100m free world record "in the group" that trains with Touretsky.

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ABSORBING ANECDOTES

SYDNEY, Sept. 18 (AFP) — Quotes of the day Monday from the Olympic Games:

"I thought the world record would last for only two minutes, now it's two days. It's so weird: the world record and Olympic gold." — Pieter van den Hoogenband of the Netherlands after he vanquished Australian Ian Thorpe in the 200m freestyle final.

"I gave it my all out there. It was a great race. I was privileged to swim in that race, but I wish I could have swum a bit faster." — Ian Thorpe after his loss to Pieter van den Hoogenband in the 200m freestyle showdown.

"I'm very confused right now. I'm Olympic champion," — Diana Mocanu, 16, after winning the women's 100m backstroke to give Romania its first Olympic swimming gold medal.

"Everyone's got one eye on the job and one eye on the pool — maybe both eyes on the pool and none on the job." — Australian Employers Federation chief executive Garry Brack on the build-up to swimmer Ian Thorpe's big race.

"The touch was noticed by a member of the Royal party who later drew it to the attention of protocol officers." — SOCOG spokesman on a breach of protocol involving sports federation official getting too close to Princess Anne.

"If winning is a habit then Australia's national soccer team can't get a fix and an addiction is a long way off." — Australian Associated Press soccer writer Paul Millar on the Olyroos early Olympic exit.

"A fine can never, never replace a sanction. All the weightlifters have to leave the village."

— IOC medical commission chief Patrick Schamasch on Romanian weightlifters flung out of Games for doping. Shortly after four of them were let back in on paying a 50,000 dollar fine.

"It wasn't like throwing my dream away. I'm just passing it over to Kay. The ultimate goal in life is ultimate sacrifice and for the first time in my life I felt like a champion." — US taekwondo fighter Esther Kim on her decision to give away a US Olympic berth to her injury-hit friend Kay Poe.

Argentina, NZ eves prevail

SYDNEY, Sept. 18: New Zealand taught first-timers China that past results count for nothing by recording a 2-0 win in the Olympic women's hockey competition here on Monday, reports AFP.

The Kiwis scored once in each half, barely 30 hours after the Chinese girls made a sensational Olympic debut by defeating gold medal contenders the Netherlands 2-1 on Sunday afternoon.

Kate Trolove opened the scoring in the 11th minute, and Tina Bell-Kake increased the margin soon after half-time.

Meanwhile, Argentina, the surprise package of the Olympic women's hockey, overcame Britain 1-0 to record their second successive win in the competition.

Captain Karina Masotta scored the match-winning midway through the first half, lifting Argentina to the top of Group A with six points from two matches.

The Argentine girls, returning to the Olympics after 12 years, had stunned Atlanta Games silver-medallists South Korea 3-2 in Saturday's opening match.

Samaranch to be back in 2 days

BARCELONA, Sept. 18: International Olympic Committee president Juan Antonio Samaranch will return to Sydney later this week following his wife's funeral, a member of his entourage said Monday, reports AFP.

The aide said Samaranch would return to Sydney on either Tuesday or Wednesday.

Samaranch left the Sydney Olympics on Friday shortly after the Games opening ceremony to be at the bedside of his dying wife in Barcelona. He arrived back in Spain on Saturday, several hours after she had died.

She was cremated at a ceremony on Sunday and a funeral mass was due to be held in Barcelona on Monday evening.

Champs crash

SYDNEY, Sept. 18: Reigning Olympic singles champion Poul-Erik Hoyer and 1996 doubles gold medalists Ricky Subagia and Rexy Mainaky were sent crashing out of the Sydney Games badminton tournament here Monday, reports AFP.

On a day of drama and upsets, Danish world number three Hoyer was beaten 15-3, 16-17, 15-10 in a marathon battle with China's world champion Sun Jun.

Meanwhile, reigning men's badminton Olympic doubles champions Ricky Subagia and Rexy Mainaky of Indonesia were dumped out of the tournament on the same day.



ROW, ROW, ROW YOUR BOAT GENTLY DOWN THE STREAM: Five team's in action during the lightweight coxless four heat of the men's rowing competition on the Penrith Lake yesterday.

—AFP photo