



BARBER OVER THE BAR: France's world heptathlete champion Eunice Barber clearing the bar in Group B of the women's high jump heptathlon yesterday. —AFP photo

S Asians stay in hunt

HOCKEY

SYDNEY, Sept 23: Pakistan equalised in the last 37 seconds against Malaysia and India survived a Spanish scare on Saturday to stay in contention for the Olympic men's hockey semifinals, reports AFP.

Reigning champions the Netherlands were held to a 2-2 draw by Germany, while Australia came back from a goal down to defeat Argentina 2-1.

Pakistan's penalty corner ace Sohail Abbas saved his side from a humiliating exit at Malaysia's hands with a last-gasp goal that forced a 2-2 draw.

India repelled repeated Spanish attacks in the second half to emerge 3-2 winners, knocking the reigning silver-medallists out of the tournament.

Neither India or Pakistan were, however, any closer to confirming semifinals berths even though just one match remained for both in the preliminary league.

India, second in Group B with seven points to Australia's eight, must beat Poland in their last match to stay in contention.

South Korea, however, stand in the way, with five points and two matches in hand against Poland and the hosts.

Pakistan need a victory over the Dutch on Tuesday to qualify, while the Germans will go through with a draw against Great Britain.

The Pakistanis, who have six points, are currently lying third in Group A behind the Dutch and Germany, who have eight points each.

India almost saw their 3-1 lead evaporate as Spain made a last-ditch effort to stay in the race.

Pep Sanchez reduced the margin in the 48th minute, but Spain failed to get the equaliser despite six scoring shots at the goal and three penalty corners.

Baljit Dhillon scored two goals for India, the first with a penalty stroke, while Dilip Tirkey completed the tally. Xavier Ribas was Spain's other scorer.

"This was the match that worried me from the beginning," Indian coach Vasudevan Bhasakar said.

"Spain are always a dangerous side and I knew the 3-1

advantage we had was not enough.

"The defence really stuck it out there. With this win, we look forward to the last match against Poland with confidence," he said.

The Malaysians appeared set to end a 14-year losing streak against Pakistan when, with one minute to go, they led 2-1 through goals by Suhaimi Ibrahim.

Pakistan, however, earned a penalty corner 40 seconds before the final hooter and Abbas pushed home to earn his side a valuable point.

Malaysia, whose last win over Pakistan came way back at the Asian Games in Seoul in 1986, were served well by goalkeeper Nasihin Ibrahim.

Nasihin thwarted three penalty corners by Abbas, before the versatile Pakistani defender had the last laugh.

A relieved Islahuddin Siddiqui, the Pakistani manager, said his team needed to improve "100 percent" if it was to qualify for the semifinals.

"We were lucky today, but we can't be lucky every day," Islahuddin said. "We must play 100 percent better if we are to defeat the Dutch."

Australia, meanwhile, scored twice in a six-minute burst to bury Argentina.

The Argentines were headed for an upset when versatile striker Jorge Lombi scored his seventh goal of the tournament to put his team ahead in the 54th minute.

The Australians, backed by a full house at the 15,000-seater State Hockey Centre, drew level two minutes later through Daniel Sproule, before Michael Brennan scored the winner in the 62nd.



GET OUT OF MY WAY! Pablo Pol Amat (R) of Spain jumps to evade a fierce hit from India's Baljint Singh at the State Hockey Centre in Sydney yesterday. —AFP photo

SYDNEY SIDELINES

SYDNEY, Sept 23 (AFP): The omnipresent "Aussie Aussie Aussie, oi oi oi" chant that greets any Australian performance in the Sydney Games actually originates in England, according to a letter writer in the Daily Telegraph.

The chant is an adulteration of British chant "oggi, oggi, oggi, oi, oi, oi" which originates in Cornwall in southwest England.

An "oggi" is a local term for the most famous culinary export of that region — the Cornish Pasty.

And the letter writer — Chris Osborne from Pelican Bay — claims that the Aussies first got to hear it in 1975-6 at a surfing competition in Bude, Cornwall when locals were cheering on their favourites against the Australians.

Impressed by the chant, the Australians altered it and brought it back home with them.

INGE'S ROPE TRICK

There is no mystery about Inge de Bruijn's record-busting exploits in the Olympic swimming pool, the Dutch swim sensation claims.

Despite whispering campaigns against her by some of her defeated opponents that drugs are behind her improvement de Bruijn herself puts it down to a dry-land program in Oregon, the United States.

Climbing ropes, weight training and swimming in weight belts are some of the

exercises that have helped transform her from an also ran to an Olympic champion and serial world record breaker.

REALLY A KOELE KIKKER?

Holland's Pieter van den Hoogenband's girlfriend has a special nickname for the dual Olympic gold medalist, the Weekend Australian reported.

The girlfriend — Minouche Smits — calls her lover 'koele kikker' in tender moments.

Translated from Dutch that means 'cool frog' but apparently Van den Hoogenband loves the amphibian tag.

HANDBALL A HIT

Handball is proving to be a huge hit in the Sydney Olympics even if few Australians had heard of it before the Games.

Even though the Australian teams are not at the same level of continental Europe where the sport is professional the excitement has sometimes forced police to calm down overheated supporters.

They had to quell heated tempers among a 6,000 crowd when Australia's women lost 38-12 to Denmark Thursday.

The finals are already sold out at the 10,000 seat Dome even though Australia will not reach that stage.

MAURICE IN LOVE?

Could Maurice Greene end up finding love as well as gold in Sydney?

According to local tabloid The Daily Telegraph, Greene and Australian model Ebony Melver have been "inseparable since meeting at the opening ceremony" a week ago.

The newspaper ran a photo of the smiling couple in its Saturday edition, ahead of Greene's run in the 100m final later the day.

WHEN IN DOUBT, ...

Sydney's bus drivers have been getting a musical welcome when they come back from long days on the Olympic trail.

Organisers were faced with a potential mutiny just a few days before the Games began when more than 100 drivers walked off the job because of bad working conditions.

Their answer? Bring in more drivers, improve the food in the drivers' cafeteria, and give the drivers some live entertainment as well.

Singer and musician Joanna Melas now performs nightly to about 1,000 tired drivers and support staff to try and boost their morale.

"I'm making out like this is MASH and I'm singing to the troops," she told Sydney tabloid The Daily Telegraph.

History eludes Fu

SWIMMING

SYDNEY, Sept 23: China's triple Olympic diving gold medalist Fu Mingxia had to settle for silver here Saturday as she and partner Guo Jingjing lost to Russia's Vera Ilina and Ioulina Pakhalina in synchronised diving, reports AFP.

By failing to win the top prize Fu, who at 12 years was the youngest ever world champion, cannot now overtake Americans Greg Louganis and Pat McCormick, with four golds apiece, as the most titled Olympic diver in history.

But she will be able to equal Louganis and McCormick's four if she triumphs in next week's individual competition.

On Saturday Russia's European champions scored a total of 332.64 points after five dives, achieving four maximum ten points to the Chinese' one, in the synchro event which was making its Olympic debut in Sydney.

The Chinese scored a combined 321.60, in a programme which was technically inferior to the Russians, with Ukrainians Ganna Sorokina and Olena Zhupina third on 290.34 points.

"We tried our best. We tried to catch up but we couldn't," said Fu, who won platform gold

in Barcelona and four years later swept both diving events in Atlanta before retiring at the age of 18 years.

"The Russians were technically better. The judges thought our skills weren't as good on the synchronised part," said a disappointed Fu.

Burned out after Atlanta, Fu came out of retirement in her bid to become the first diver ever to win five gold medals.

Atlanta silver medalist Ilina, 26, and European champion Pakhalina, 23, had been regarded as the strongest challengers to Fu and 18-year-old Guo after winning the Sydney World Cup together earlier this year.

"I think we won because we were more artistic, more beautiful than the others," said Pakhalina, competing in her third Olympics.

"We were very focused. There were only five dives and everything depended on them," she added.

The 22-year-old Fu is now looking towards a record-equalling fourth gold when she defends her springboard title which competition get underway on September 27.

"Today's event is finished. I'm just concentrating on the next," added Fu.

Animal Games!

SYDNEY, Sept 23: Magpies and mollus are eclipsing sharks and whales at the Sydney Games with marine life so far failing to live up to the Pre-Olympic hype, reports AFP.

On day eight of competition the thieving black-and-white birds were in gold medal position with the Bogong Moth, representing the lepidoptera team, proving a surprise package in silver but the once-mighty marine life outfit are looking as though they will have to settle for a bronze.

And the highly-touted Marsupial contingent have proved the biggest disappointment of the Games with the well-supported Kangaroos and Koalas even getting banned from the Opening Ceremony.

Sharks boasted a fearsome reputation going into the Games with organisers terrified that they would launch attacks on triathletes and sailors in Sydney Harbour.

But the sharks have proved a huge disappointment and have singularly failed to grab a bite of the action here.

Divers rode shotgun with shark repellent during the swimming stages of the triathlon in Sydney Harbour but the sharks — expected to flourish like Dutch swimming duo Pieter van den Hoogenband and Inge de Bruijn — failed to rise to the occasion in a display that was more reminiscent of Equatorial Guinea's Eric Moussambani and Paula Barila Bolopa.

But just when Olympians thought it was safe to go back on the beach, whales decided to disrupt the sailing programme on Thursday.

Two Minke whales cruised through one of the Olympic sailing courses outside Sydney Harbour.

The two whales were sighted just outside the entrance of the harbour as the men's and women's 470 crews were preparing to race, but they proved unable to live up to the hype — rather like America's outgoing high jump champion Charles Austin, who failed to qualify for the finals.

And in the end they did a

passable imitation of France's Marie-Jose Perec, fleeing the Australian coast rather than crossing swords with the sailors.

As for Kangaroos and Koalas they have a big home support but they shared the fate of the Bulgarian weightlifting team, expelled for doping offences.

Organisers decided to declare the Opening Ceremony a Marsupial-free zone to avoid giving a cliched depiction of Australia.

That was a huge disappointment to the home supporters who have turned up in their thousands with Koalas and especially Kangaroos adorning banners and with Australian team members hurling cuddly versions to the crowd.

But the real thing has disappointed although some have made the Media Village they have got nowhere near Stadium Australia.

Instead the Bogong Moth has grabbed the limelight invading Olympic venues in their thousands — with organisers admitting defeat and telling spectators the only solution was to 'learn to love them'.

But the gold medal performance of the Games so far is undoubtedly that of the Magpies, who have a long tradition of snatching gold.

Their aerial attacks on mountain bikers delayed the start of that event.

Mutola closer

SYDNEY, Sept 23: A supremely confident Maria Mutola moved to within one race of securing Mozambique's first ever Olympic gold when she powered to victory in her 800m semifinal heat here on Saturday, reports AFP.

The 28-year-old 1998 Commonwealth Games champion pushed to the front in the final 20 metres to come home in 1:58.86, well outside her personal best of 1:55.19 but faster than her opening round 1:59.88secs.



RUN FREE! Australia's Cathy Freeman during Heat 4 of the ladies' 400 metres yesterday. —AFP photo

Grant's grand act

SWIMMING

SYDNEY, Sept 23 (AFP): Grant Hackett knew it would take more than a slim win to dethrone Kieren Perkins as the king of distance swimming, at least in the hearts of Australian swimming fans.

"It was not only good just to win," Hackett said of his triumph in the Olympic 1500m freestyle. "I won by a good margin."

Hackett completed the 30-lap race in 14min 48.33sec, with Perkins second in 14:53.59.

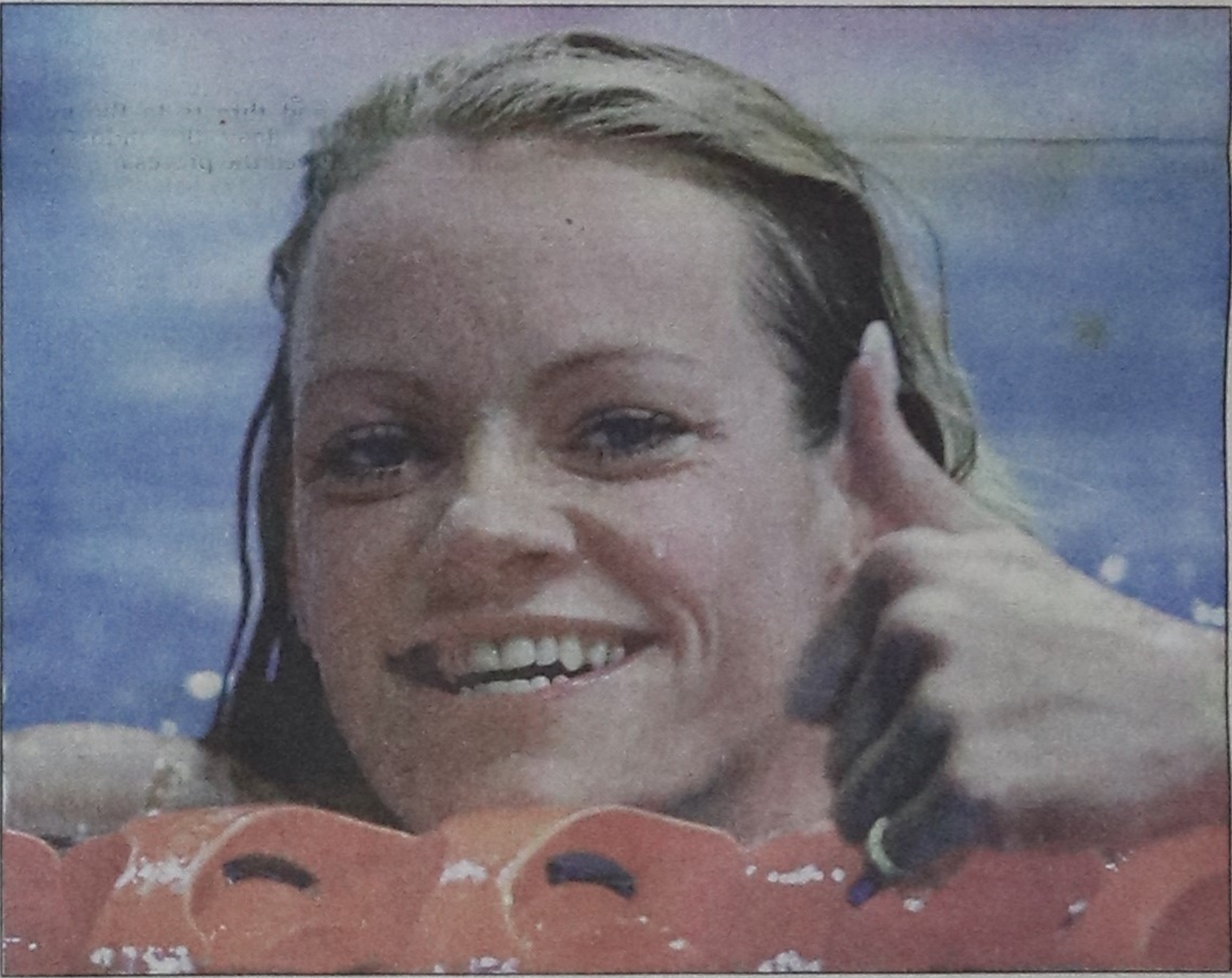
American Chris Thompson squeezed out Alexei Filipets for the bronze in 14:56.81. He edged the Russian by just seven-hundredths of a second as the top four all finished under 15 minutes, a feat never before seen in a 1500m race.

Perkins, vying for an unprecedented third straight Olympic 1500m title after four years of intermittent illness and

doubt, thrilled Aussie fans in the heats by swimming under 15 minutes for the first time since Atlanta.

The 27-year-old had languished behind Hackett in the rankings in recent years and vowed that this race would be his last.

Even so, Hackett knew that he needed a victory over the ageing legend — still the world record-holder — to cement his reputation as Australia's premier distance freestyler.



IRREPRESSIBLE INGE: Holland's Inge de Bruijn gives a thumbs-up after bagging the gold in the women's 50 metres freestyle yesterday. —AFP photo

'Comeback King' Zelezny

ATHLETICS

SYDNEY, Sept 23 (Internet report): Jan Zelezny of the Czech Republic, winner of the Olympic javelin titles in 1992 and 1996, on Saturday established a piece of Games history when he took the gold medal for a third time.

Zelezny, the 34-year-old former Czech army colonel, took the lead from the first round, throwing 89.41 metres.

But when his great rival Britain's Steve Backley (right), broke the eight-year-old Olympic record with 89.85 in the second round, Zelezny came back in the following round to seize the title that he has made his own with a gold medal-winning effort of 90.17 metres.

Zelezny's entire career has been marked by comebacks, and often from far greater adversity. A career-threatening spinal injury in 1989 has been followed by a series of operations on his throwing shoulder, most recently two years ago.

Yet still Zelezny — whose name means "Man of Iron" — has come back for more, the world record-holder showing himself to be the greatest javelin thrower of all time — he also won silver in Seoul in 1988 before embarking on his gold spree.

"He has proved to be a true champion," Backley, the three-time European champion whose own Olympic medal collection now comprises two silvers (1996 and 2000) and a bronze (1992).

"My shoulder's better than

ever now," Zelezny said, "so I ought to thank my doctors." Zelezny said he would return home to Prague hailed as a hero.

Despite the history of the occasion, Zelezny said he never felt under pressure to win. He had taken a relaxed approach to competition this season, picking and choosing his appearances.

"Winning isn't everything," he said. "I am a father now, there are other things in my life."

Until Saturday, Zelezny was one of just three men ever to win the Olympic javelin twice — Sweden's Eric Lemming in 1908 and 1912 and Jonni Myrta, of Finland (1920-24) being his predecessors.

Now, though, Zelezny is unique, and there was a sense that Backley was forced to take consolation in losing to an athletics legend. "When I look back, I'll be pleased with the silver medal," Backley, aged 31, said.

"He will know how I feel, because it happened to him like that in 1988."

The bronze medal went to Russia's Sergey Makarov, with 88.67m.

Samaranch sings Sydney song

SYDNEY, Sept 23: International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Juan Antonio Samaranch had nothing but praise for the Sydney Games Saturday, saying it had so far been exceptional, reports AFP.

He singled out the size and enthusiasm of the Australian crowds.

"It is an exceptional Games with everything going very well," he said. "But the real winners are the people, the population. They are very much interested, helping and enjoying the Games."



BEST OF THE BEACH: Brazil's Adriana Behar (R) blocking an attempted spike from Japan's Mika Saiki during their women's beach volleyball semifinal at Bondi Beach yesterday. Highflying Brazil won 15-10. —AFP photo