

Aussiephobia

ATHLETICS

PARIS, Sept 28: France's triple Olympic gold medalist Marie-Josée Percec said Thursday she will never set foot in Australia again, claiming she was forced to flee the country before her much-hyped Olympic clash with Cathy Freeman because of the behaviour of Australians towards her in the street, reports AFP.

Percec, frequently sobbing during the telephone interview with French sports daily L'Equipe, claimed she was "completely wiped out" and when asked if she would compete again she said: "If the decision had to be taken today then it would be no."

And the Guadeloupe-born star also took a swipe at Freeman, who took her 400m title, by saying she would have won had she competed at the Sydney Olympics.

The Frenchwoman made a dramatic departure from Sydney with her agent claiming a stalking incident had prompted her flight, although French Athletics officials have since cast doubt on that claim.

On the flight home Percec and her partner Anthuan Maybank were detained for 11 hours by Singapore police after Maybank had an altercation with a photographer in the transit lounge. Chang. No charges were laid.

In her interview with L'Equipe Percec said that she had been hounded throughout her stay in Australia.

"There was not a day went by without me being hunted like an animal, truly," Percec said.

"People made threatening gestures and started following me. Several times, in a supermarket, there were problems. You can put up with words. But I was really frightened."

"That's what made me leave. Suddenly, that morning, I took my bag and nothing more counted other than leaving — even the gold medal I had come for."

"I will never set foot there again," said Percec, who said that Australia had been the land of her dreams.

Percec said she would have run inside 49 seconds had she competed in the final — Freeman's winning time was 49.11sec.

She said she had tried not to watch the Olympics on television but had seen Freeman win the 400m.

"Then I felt completely wiped out, destroyed," wept Percec.



THE WALKING WAR: Participants of the women's 20km walk shortly after start of the competition inside the Olympic Stadium yesterday.

A kiss of gold

TENNIS

SYDNEY, Sept 28: Yevgeny Kafelnikov, who arrived in Sydney despairing of his form after the worst slump of his career, won a marathon battle with Germany's Tommy Haas to claim the Olympic men's tennis gold medal for Russia, reports AFP.

A see-saw, sometimes scrappy match finally ended after three hours and 35 minutes with the former world number one winning 7-6, 3-6, 6-2, 4-6, 6-3 to complete a remarkable renaissance in the Olympic arena.

It was a victory for which the Russian had to dig very deep into his mental and physical reserves.

Haas, 22, went into the final set looking the more likely winner after dominating the fourth set and coming out firing on all cylinders at the start of the fifth.

But just as victory looked within his grasp he stumbled, two unforced errors in the eighth game of the final set handing Kafelnikov, 26, the chance to serve out for the match.

The big Russian made no mistake, powerfully killing off the match to secure an Olympic gold medal he said would mean more to him and his country than his 1996 French Open title.

"It is absolutely fantastic," he said. "When I lost that fourth set, I told myself if you lose this match you are going to regret it for the rest of your life."

The Russian graciously admitted that, at that point, he thought he was heading for defeat. "He was in good physical shape — the shots he was hitting were incredible."

Kafelnikov's win completes a fantastic month for Russian tennis after Marat Safin's triumph in the US Open and 18-year-old Elena Dementieva's silver medal performance here.

It also marks a remarkable turnaround in Kafelnikov's own fortunes. The 26-year-old had arrived in Sydney totally despairing of his form after failing to win a singles title all year — a surprising statistic for a player who plays more tournaments than almost any other top player and has won at least three titles every year since 1994.

"Before the tournament I really thought I wasn't going to challenge for any medal," he revealed.

"To get the gold is beyond all my expectations. I'm really proud of myself and my country. To have won two grand slam titles and an Olympic gold means I'm not going to be forgotten in my country."



WATER-HARMONY: The US synchronised swimming team performs in the technical routine of the competition yesterday.

Synchronised Russia

SWIMMING

SYDNEY, Sept 28: Russia were on course for their second Olympic synchronised swimming title Thursday when they headed the team technical programme before Friday's free routine, reports AFP.

Olya Brusnikina and Maria Kisseleva, who won Russia's first ever synchro gold in Tuesday's duet, were back in the Olympic pool as part of the eight-strong Russian team.

And the Russians achieved the highest score of 98.800 points and will take 35 per cent of that — 34.580 — through to Friday's final, to be added to 65 per cent of the marks they receive for the concluding free routine.

World and European champions Russia are strong favourites having dominated all competitions in recent years, but they face a strong challenge from Japan, who won silver in Tuesday's duet and were runners-up in the 1998 World Championships.

Japan were not far behind, receiving 98.600 points for their performance to a karate theme to take 34.510 through to the final.

Canada were third with 96.533 and will take 37.789 through to the final, with France in fourth position on 96.467 (33.763).

"We were expecting gold because of all the work we've done," said Russia's Yulia Vasileva.

"We've trained a lot, expended a lot of energy and power during the routine and were very happy with the performance."

However, the Japanese karate routine was a real crowd-pleaser and received a resounding applause in Sydney's International Aquatic Centre.

Japan's Miya Tachibana, silver medalist with Miho Takeda in the duet, said that they were pleased with the routine.

"From the beginning we were very confident. We have strong support from the crowd so we wanted to do our very best."

Russia's routine, depicting trolls in the forest, achieved one maximum ten mark for artistic impression, while Japan received two for technical merit and artistic impression.

Reigning Olympic champions the United States, who until Tuesday had won a medal in every synchronised swimming event in the sport's history, finished in fifth position out of the eight teams on 95.800 (33.530), with Australia, who received an automatic berth as the host nation, bottom with 89.667 (31.383).

Coming into the Sydney Games, the United States and Canada had shared every synchro gold and silver since the sport was introduced at the 1984 Games, and Japan had taken every bronze.

Ray Flynn told AFP that Bailey, whose defence of his Olympic crown ended when he all but pulled up in his second round heat, was not in the right state physically or mentally to run for the defending champions.

"It's a combination of his health and his mental state," Flynn said.

"He really isn't ready to race at the moment," he added.

The other source close to Bailey's camp, which includes Canada's two-time world 100m silver medalist Bruny Surin and Olympic 100m bronze medalist Obadele Thompson of Barbados, suggested that the way he was feeling suggested he would retire soon despite next year's World Championships being held in Edmonton, Canada.

Bailey, who has seen his world title, world record and Olympic crown all fall into the hands of bitter rival Maurice Greene, has never really recovered his form or fitness since he returned from rupturing his Achilles tendon in 1998.

Although Bailey, who came late to the sport after a successful period as a marketing executive, has always gone by the mantra that "Donovan Bailey don't lie down for nobody" the source said that that was even beginning to ring hollow in the former champion's mind.

"His future is really up in the air," the source told AFP.

"He's going through a reflective period with all options being considered."

"I don't think he ever really wanted to come here and that was mirrored in the way he ran in the 100... his mind wasn't on the job," he added.

What's eating Bailey?

ATHLETICS

SYDNEY, Sept 28: Canada's former 100 metres world recordholder Donovan Bailey has pulled out of his country's 4x100 relay team, his manager said on Thursday.

Another source close to Bailey suggested that he might well retire by the start of next season.

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"I don't think he ever really wanted to come here and that was mirrored in the way he ran in the 100... his mind wasn't on the job," he added.

The source added that even trying to get Bailey up by going back over all his achievements was not doing the trick in reenergising his confidence.

"Normally one would think that that tactic would work but that's not the type of person Donovan is," he said.

"I don't think he should have come back after the injury and the trouble is he is finding it out the hard way now because quite apart from trying to rediscover his form physically he now is too down to even believe he can fight back," the source added.

Should Bailey fail to make it to Edmonton it will herald the end of a golden era in Canadian sprinting at major championships in the past Ben Johnson era.

Surin, who is a two-time world indoor 60m champion, has already said he will not be there and will only compete in the Francophone Games before the 33-year-old Haitian-born runner retires at the end of next season.

The business daily says the firm is "hopping mad" that swim star Ian Thorpe draped a national flag over his shoulder as he accepted his 400m gold medal, covering up the Nike logo on his official Australian team tracksuit.

Thorpe — Australia's most marketable swimmer — is sponsored by adidas, while Nike is official clothing supplier to the host nation's team.

Both adidas and Thorpe deny the incident was deliberate, but the newspaper noted it was reminiscent of the US basketball "Dream Team's" refusal to wear Reebok team tracksuits to receive their medals in 1992.

KING-SIZE FAN

Morocco's red-hot favourite for the 1500m Hicham El Guerrouj got some top level support before his run in the semifinal Wednesday night.

The North African country's King Mohammed VI rang El Guerrouj, whose hopes of gold in Atlanta four years ago were scuppered by a fall when he was spiked.

"The King rang me to wish me good luck," said El Guerrouj.

Pedroso the heart-breaker

ATHLETICS

SYDNEY, Sept 28: Cuba's Ivan Pedroso, the world's finest long jumper for the past five years, finally won Olympic gold here on Thursday night, his last gasp 8.55 metres jump denying the Australian home favourite Jai Taurima after an absorbing duel, reports AFP.

The bronze medal was won by the Ukraine's Roman Schurenko, with 8.31m.

It all came down to the final jump. Taurima had been a man inspired all night, the capacity crowd in Stadium Australia roaring him to a new level of performance, seeing him twice break his own Australian record and taking the lead with a mark of 8.49 metres.

In a long jump competition the likes of which has not been seen in a major championship since the duel between Mike Powell and Carl Lewis at the 1991 World Championships in Tokyo, Pedroso needed to summon up all his experience in the sixth and final round to better Taurima's mark.

For once the crowd was silenced as the Cuban hit the board perfectly and soared through the night sky. You could hear more than 100,000 Australians let out a collective sigh as Pedroso landed in the sand close to the eight and a half metre mark.

When the figures 8.55 were flashed on to the scoreboard, the crowd's disappointment was evident.

Taurima, who had responded to every opponent's challenge all night, was asked once again to out-jump his previous best. But on this occasion he was found wanting and had to settle for the silver medal.

For the flamboyant 28-year-old Taurima, who had taunted his American rivals as "dribblers" before the Games, being denied at the end of a competition was not a new experience.

Last year, the biggest jumper to come of Australia since the kangaroo was denied a bronze medal at the World Championships by a single centimetre.

A year earlier, at the Commonwealth Games, Taurima was beaten on countback to the title by his countryman, Peter Burge.

SYDNEY, Sept 28: Russia's Yevgeny Kafelnikov in action during the men's tennis gold medal clash against Tommy Haas of Germany yesterday. Kafelnikov won the gruelling five setter 7-6, 3-6, 6-2, 4-6 and 6-3.



PEDROSO POWER: Ivan Pedroso of Cuba sheds tears of joy after winning the gold in the men's long jump yesterday.

Raducan rejected

GYMNASTICS

SYDNEY, Sept 28: Heartbroken gymnast Andrea Raducan vowed to return stronger than ever after losing her battle to win back her Olympic gold medal here Thursday, reports AFP.

Raducan, who was stripped of the medal after being disqualified for ingesting a stimulant contained in an over-the-counter cold remedy, was defiant after a court tossed out her appeal.

"My whole dream in my life was to come to the Olympics and maybe win a medal. I'm sorry that I can't do that — but life goes on and I just have to get over it as soon as I can," said the tiny Raducan, who turns 17 on Saturday.

"I know we did a good job here. I lost a medal but in my soul I know that was my place (first)," she added.

"I'm not going to stop here. I'm going to prove to everybody that I can go even higher than here in Sydney, to prove to people that I am the person that I am."

"I'm very disappointed with the result. It's not for me to judge the decision of the court. But I know in my heart I didn't do anything wrong and I am at peace."

Raducan was flanked at the press conference by her idol Nadia Comaneci, Montreal 1976 Olympic gold medalist as well as teammates Simona Amanar and Maria Olaru.

Comaneci slammed the decision to withhold Raducan's medal.

"I don't see how they can say 'You're innocent, but we're still going to keep your medal'. I don't think that's fair."

Raducan's gold medal will now go to teammate Amanar. Amanar's silver goes to bronze medalist Olaru. Earlier reports said the two gymnasts would refuse the medals but Amanar said she would now keep the gold.

"For me this medal does not mean anything. I'm going to accept it only because it belongs to Romania but I don't want it. It belongs to Andrea — the Olympic champion on that day was her, not me."

Olaru echoed Amanar's remarks, describing her elevation from the bronze medal position.

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ROMANIA GET BEHIND RADUCAN: Protesters wave front pages of newspapers with the pictures of gymnast Andrea Raducan at the Romanian capital Budapest yesterday. Hundreds gathered to show their support for the 17-year-old who was stripped of her gold medal after testing positive for doping.

Greene fit & ready

SYDNEY, Sept 28: America's newly crowned 100 metres Olympic champion Maurice Greene has announced himself fit and ready to run in Friday's 4x100m relay first round heats, reports AFP.

The 26-year-old, who is also the world 100m recordholder and world champion, had been suffering from a sore leg following his success in the blue ribbon event on Saturday.

There had also been question marks over his participation at all as he had a row with US Track and Field head coach John Chaplin over dropping his Hudson Smith International (HSI) teammate Curtis Johnson, who was eliminated in the 100m semifinals, from the squad.