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VIVA ITALIA! Italian kayakers Beniamino Bonomi and Antonio Rossi (L) jubilate just after winning the men's K2, 1000 metres final, on Penrith Lake yesterday. The pair took the gold medal. —AFP photo

Savon king of the ring

BOXING

SYDNEY, Sept 30 (AFP) — Felix Savon joined legendary compatriot Teofilo Stevenson in the Olympic boxing hall of fame with his third consecutive gold medal Saturday. But it could have been four.

Had it not been for Cuba's boycott of the 1988 Seoul Games there is every reason to believe Savon would have surpassed Stevenson's hat-trick of Olympic titles achieved between 1972 and 1980.

The long-limbed 33-year-old has dominated his division for more than a decade, winning the first of six world titles in 1986 before his three Olympic golds in Barcelona, Atlanta and Sydney.

His glittering CV and a dearth of talented heavyweights in professional boxing are believed to have attracted numerous multi-million dollar offers to turn professional.

Most promoters agree Savon could name his price — and infamous US ringmaster Don King once tried tempting him

with a 20 million dollar cash carrot.

But the fiercely patriotic Cuban is firmly opposed to giving up life in the amateur ranks.

"There is nothing greater than the love of one's countrymen," Savon has said, when rejecting offers to turn his back on Fidel Castro and his homeland.

He has also dismissed professional boxing as "dirty."

"I do not like professional boxing. There is a tremendous difference between Olympic style and professional boxing."

In the professional ranks the athlete is not protected at all and of course the main interest is earning money. It's a very dirty sport.

American eyes mean business

SYDNEY, Sept 30: Lisa Leslie and Natalie Williams each scored 15 points as the United States won Olympic women's basketball gold for the fourth time in the past five games with a 76-54 victory over Australia here Saturday, reports AFP.

Since starting their domination in 1984 at Los Angeles, the US women have lost only three games in Olympic competition and settled for less than gold only once, taking bronze in 1992.

The Australians settled for their best Olympic women's basketball showing, the Opals' only prior medal, a bronze, came in 1996 at Atlanta.

Sheryl Swoopes, the Women's National Basketball Association scoring champion who has led Houston to all four league crowns, added 14 points while Yolanda Griffith had 11 points for the Americans.

Australia was paced by 20 points from 19-year-old centre Lauren Jackson.



FANTASTIC FELIX: Felix Savon, the two-time Olympic champion boxer from Cuba, having a taste of the gold medal he won in the men's heavyweight category yesterday. —AFP photo

SYDNEY SIDELINES

SYDNEY, Sept 30 (AFP): Morocco's Hicham El Guerrouj will miss the finale of the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF) Grand Prix season in Doha, Qatar.

El Guerrouj complained of a pain in his left thigh after his shock defeat at the hands of Kenya's Noah Ngeny in the 1500m final on Friday night.

OUAADI LAST HOPE

French foreign legion corporal Mohamed Ouadi has the hopes of France weighing on his shoulders in Sunday's men's marathon.

France — despite a successful Games in other sports — have not won a single medal in track and field.

Emotional problems and injuries ended the challenges of Marie-Jose Perec and Eunice Barber while sprinter Christine Arron and 1996 Olympic pole vault champion Jean Galfione also flopped.

But the history books bode well for Ouadi, who was born in Morocco. France's 1956 Olympic marathon champion Alain Mimoun was also from North Africa. He won in Melbourne — the only other time Australia staged the Games.

WINNING FORMULA

The victorious Bahamas women's 4x100m relay team lay credit for their gold-medal running down to continuity.

Pauline Davis-Thompson ran the third leg, joining Seatheda Fynes, Chandra Sturup and Debbie Ferguson in the winning line-up.

And, unlike Jamaica and the United States, they ran in exactly the same order as their

World Championships winning last year.

"This is for all the people of the Bahamas," Davis-Thompson said.

DOUBLE DUTCH TREAT

Cyclist Leontien van Moorsel and swimmer Inge de Bruijn share two obvious things in common — both are Dutch and both have won three golds and a silver in Sydney.

But there's something else they share in common — both have distinctive fingernails.

Besides her obvious ability in the pool, De Bruijn's long, manicured nails have been one of her distinctive features in Sydney.

But Van Moorsel also has manicure nails. As she celebrated her third gold medal Saturday they were painted in the red, white, and blue colours of the Dutch flag.

ACCOLADE FOR DRECHSLER

Germany's Helke Drechsler will carry her country's flag at the Closing Ceremony of the Sydney Olympics on Sunday.

Drechsler's victory in the women's long jump foiled Marion Jones' bid to win five gold medals — the American would later also miss out in the 4x100m.

It caps a memorable 17-year career at the top level for Drechsler.

FREE TICKETS

Five thousand volunteers at the Sydney Olympics will get free tickets to the Opening Ceremony, Sydney Games organisers (SOCOG) announced Saturday.

With 50,000 volunteers working at the different Olympic venues and support facilities SOCOG admitted a lot will be disappointed.

BUT SOCOG spokeswoman Liz Smylie said: "We will try and make it as equitable as possible."

TEMPERATURE ON RISE

With so many athletes done competing, the Olympic Village was turning into party central by the final weekend of the Games.

Australian marathon runner Lee Troop, forced to stay in training until the very last day, was feeling a bit envious as the other competitors let their hair down.

"It's tough," he said. "We get 35 condoms each. I suppose I'll have to take them home with me because I haven't been able to use them."

Despite Troop's claim that the sexual energy in the village was "at an all-time high," Village mayor Graham Richardson insisted: "I haven't seen a lot of open bonkage."

"If there is, it's being done with great discretion."

BANG, BANG BANG!

Fireworks fatigue must be setting in Sydney's Central Business District, where no fewer than 97 fireworks display permits have been granted during the two-week Olympic period.

The firework feast actually started before the Games, with 38 permits issued between August 6-20.

Amazing Algerian

ATHLETICS

SYDNEY, Sept 30: Algeria's Nouria Merah-Benida pulled off a stunning upset when she won the women's 1,500-metre Olympic title here on Saturday night, reports AFP.

Merah-Benida won in a slow 4mins 05.10 seconds ahead of Violeta Szekely of Romanian and her teammate Gabriela Szabo, who added the bronze to her gold from the 5,000 metres earlier in the week.

World number one Suzy Favour-Hamilton, who had led for almost half of the race, appeared to get tripped coming down the final straight and crashed to the track. She managed to get up and finish but even before the fall she had faded out of medal contention.

It was later revealed that Favour-Hamilton had collapsed from exhaustion.

"She is being treated for dehydration at the Olympic stadium medical facilities," said a statement issued by the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF).

"She is being treated with I.V. fluids and is responsive and is being tended to by stadium staff and the US delegation's medical team. No visible contact occurred to cause her to fall and at the moment it appears the fall was not injury related," it added.

The 29-year-old Merah-Benida kissed her vest before

Three cheers for Cuban women

VOLLEYBALL

SYDNEY, Sept 30: Cuba staged a magnificent recovery from two sets down against Russia Saturday to become the first women's team to win the volleyball gold medal three times in succession, reports AFP.

The Caribbeans, who have claimed every major trophy over the past decade, showed their courage as well as their brilliant blocking and electric spiking to win 25-27, 32-34, 25-19, 15-18, 15-7 in 1 hour 43 minutes.

It was another major disappointment for the Russians, who were silver medalists behind Cuba in the 1999 World Cup and last month's World Grand Prix final.

Russia had beaten the champions in the preliminaries — just as they did at Atlanta four years ago — and their confidence stood them in good stead in the first two sets when the Cubans failed in the critical closing stages.

But Cuba's capacity for winning lost causes came to the fore again. They similarly survived a five-set scare against Brazil in the semis and this was not uncharted territory.

Drawing on the experience of team captain Regla Bell, Ana Fernandez and Regla Torres, members of Cuba's previous two victorious Olympic teams, the champions came out with all guns firing in the third set.

Torres and Yumilka Ruiz, whose spiking attempts had been blocked in the first two sets suddenly had Russia's "Twin Souders", 1.94 Elena Godina and 1.91 Evgenia Artamanova leaning in the wrong direction. In a startling transformation, Cuba dominated the third and fourth sets from the start to square the match.

The Russians were rocked on their heels and Cuba maintained the momentum in the tie-breaking fifth where they



ETHREAL ETHIOPAINS: Deratu Tulu (L) of Ethiopia and compatriot Gete Wami embrace each other after bagging the gold and bronze medals respectively in the women's 10,000 metres final yesterday. —AFP photo

Tulu on target

ATHLETICS

SYDNEY, Sept 30: Deratu Tulu of Ethiopia won a gripping women's 10,000-metre final here on Saturday night in a new Olympic record, reports AFP.

The 28-year-old Barcelona champion clocked 30mins 17.49 seconds to finish more than five seconds ahead of her teammate Gete Wami with Atlanta gold medalist Fernanda



CUBAN CARNIVAL: The Cuban women's volleyball team is exultant after clinching the gold by beating Russia yesterday. —AFP photo

Ottey goes on silver

ATHLETICS

SYDNEY, Sept 30: Jamaican sprint legend Merlene Ottey finished her extraordinary Olympic career with yet another minor medal, silver, here on Saturday in the 4x100 metres relay and declared that it might have been gold if the team had practised more, reports AFP.

The 40-year-old, who in six Olympics has won eight medals but never gold, claimed that if they had practised more she might well have finished with a gold but she added that after all the protests over her inclusion ahead of champion Peta-Gay Dowdle in the individual event she hadn't raised the issue to avoid more tension.

"To come in and get silver is some consolation," she said.

"We had a great chance for gold but I lost a metre thanks to receiving the baton from Beverley McDonald in the small of my back... still at least I didn't drop it," she added.

However, Ottey, who was winning her 35th medal in a major championships, said she felt that her successful battle to clear her name following the two-year ban imposed last August for testing positive for nandrolone — was quashed for lack of evidence — felt like an Olympic gold medal.

"I am a fighter and I was determined to clear my name," she said.

"These were my darkest days."

"I felt like somebody who

PM's denial

SYDNEY, Sept 30: Australian Prime Minister John Howard Saturday dismissed speculation here that the 2004 Olympic Games could return to Sydney at Athens' expense, reports AFP.

The International Olympic Committee has warned Athens 2004 organisers that time was running out to resolve an array of problems including security, venues, accommodation, transport and communications.

Criticism of the Athens preparation has led to speculation in the Australian media that the Games may return to Sydney, but Howard said he was confident the there would be no change from Athens.

"Greece have got the Games," Howard said.

"I am quite certain the people of Greece and Athens will rise to the occasion very effectively, and they will do it with great flare," he said referring to the "sentimental symbolism" of the Games going back to Athens.

Howard did not rule out another Olympics Down Under but said: "Being realistic, your not looking at the return of the Games to Australia for some time yet."

IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch warned Athens in April that the Games could be in danger unless organisation was drastically improved.

Coming of age

SYDNEY, Sept 30: Ethiopia's Million Wolde came-of age when he won the Olympic 5,000 metres title here on Saturday, reports AFP.

The 21-year-old who won the world junior title two years ago and finished eighth at the World Championships in Seville a year ago, ran his race to perfection, beating out second placed Ali Saidi-Sief of Algeria and Morocco's Brahim Lahlaoui.

With no one prepared to set a fast pace, Wolde bided his time before pouncing 200 metres out.

He burst past the 22-year-old Saidi-Sief who had taken the lead but simply had no answer to the Ethiopian's power.

It was another heartbreak for Lahlaoui who lost out to Seville in the dash for the line after leading the last lap.

Fischer the greatest

SYDNEY, Sept 30: Birgit Fischer became the greatest canoeist of all-time here Saturday winning her ninth medal and sixth gold in an Olympic career spanning 20 years, reports AFP.

The 38-year-old was a member of the German women's K4 500m crew which came from behind to pip Hungary by 0.41 seconds and defend the title won in Atlanta.

"The race wasn't really the good, but the main thing is that we won," Fischer said playing down the significance of her individual performance.



PROUD FAMILY: Kristine Armstrong, wife of US cyclist Lance Armstrong, cheering on her husband with son Luke from the stands as Lance receives his bronze medal in the men's individual time trials yesterday. —AFP photo