



FRENCH FLAIR FLAUNTED in Olympics opening

AFP, Paris

A historic boat parade down the River Seine launched the Paris Olympics with spectacular French flair Friday, as the City of Light welcomed the world's greatest athletes for a sporting extravaganza.

A show-stopping performance by Celine Dion, a flaming Olympic cauldron lifted into the night sky by hot-air balloon, and a dazzling Eiffel Tower light show brought the curtain down on a four-hour celebration of French culture, history and art.

Braving torrential rain, some 300,000 people had lined the river banks to cheer on the armada carrying competitors past the city's iconic sights: the Eiffel Tower bearing the five Olympic rings, the Louvre and Notre Dame Cathedral.

The wildly ambitious display was the first time the Olympic opening ceremony has been staged outside the main stadium, making it the biggest-ever launch for the "Greatest Show on Earth".



But that gamble also made the ceremony hostage to the weather, with spectators, VIPs, and athletes alike drenched or huddling in transparent ponchos.

In the City of Love, the ceremony stressed togetherness and unity in a world that has suffered wars, massacres, and political upheaval since the Covid-delayed Tokyo Olympics.

For just over a fortnight, organisers hope the superhuman performances of stars like gymnast Simone Biles, tennis champion Novak Djokovic or sprinter Noah Lyles will provide the world with much-needed distraction.

Beach volleyball at the Eiffel Tower,



breakdancing in Place de la Concorde, equestrian sport at the Palace of Versailles: 100 years since Paris last staged the Olympics, the city will provide a stunning backdrop to the sport.

"I declare open the Games of Paris celebrating the 33rd Olympiad of the modern era," said President Emmanuel Macron. In a symbol of the Games' message of gender parity, French track legend Marie-Jose Perec and three-time



Olympic judo champion Teddy Riner lit the Olympic cauldron together.

Dion closed the show from the first level of the Eiffel Tower, with her first public performance since revealing she

was suffering from a rare illness.

Paris 2024 organiser Tony Estanguet had said the opening ceremony needed to "push the limits as far as possible", showing from the start France's ambition for the Games.

And from Moulin Rouge performers doing the cancan to a video showing dancers on the scaffolding of fire-damaged Notre Dame, it was a colourful festival of all things French.

Led out by Greece through jets of water cascading from a bridge, accompanied by an accordion player, around 7,000 athletes cruised down a six-kilometre (four-mile) stretch of the Seine to the Eiffel Tower on 85 boats.

In a city where memories of the November 2015 terrorist attacks are still raw, the unprecedented ceremony sparked a colossal security operation: Snipers, specialist frogmen, and AI-augmented cameras were deployed, with airspace closed and the area around the Seine virtually locked down.

To everyone's relief, the ceremony passed off without major incident.

Sporting royalty mingled with celebrities and world leaders on and off

the Seine, which will host triathlon and the swimming marathon after a historic clean-up to make it swimmable.

The ceremony kicked off with a video of French football legend Zinedine Zidane, who took the torch on an offbeat journey through the Metro, and the Paris catacombs.

Basketball icon LeBron James and tennis player Coco Gauff carried the flag for Team USA, which has topped the medal table at every Olympics since Beijing in 2008.

True to its slogan "Games Wide Open", the Paris Olympics can boast gender equality for the first time ever -- for Paris 1924, the last time the Olympics took place in the city, four percent of athletes were women.

But the ceremony did not shy away from the chaos in the world -- to the strains of John Lennon's "Imagine", the city was plunged into darkness in an invitation to reflect.

But with the Games now open, the stars are aligned for sporting brilliance as the stage is set for the 10,500 athletes to fulfil their dreams and turn in the performance of their lives.

'I couldn't imagine a better place': Tamberi after losing wedding ring in Seine

REUTERS, Paris



High jumper Gianmarco Tamberi issued a profuse apology to his wife on Saturday after his wedding ring slipped off his finger while he was serving as Italy's flag bearer on a boat in the Seine River during the opening ceremony of the Paris Olympics.

"Too much water, too many kilos lost in the last few months or maybe the irrepressible enthusiasm of what we were doing," Tamberi, who won gold at the Tokyo Games, wrote on Instagram in a post directed at his wife, Chiara Bontempi Tamberi.

"Probably all three things, the fact remains that I felt it (my ring) slip away, I saw it fly.... I followed it with my gaze until I saw it bounce inside the boat."

Tamberi said that his wedding ring then bounced into the waters of the Seine in what he described as "a few moments that lasted forever."

"But if it really had to happen, if I really had to lose it, I couldn't imagine a better place," Tamberi added. "It will remain forever in the riverbed of the City of Love."

"May it be a good omen to return home with an even bigger gold!" he wrote.

IOC apologises to South Korea over opening ceremony gaffe

REUTERS, Paris

The International Olympic Committee apologised to South Korea on Saturday after its delegation of athletes were introduced as from rival North Korea at the Paris Olympics opening ceremony.

South Korea's vice minister for sports and culture, Jang Mi-ran, who was in Paris, said IOC President Thomas Bach planned to speak with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol to convey an apology.

"It was clearly deeply regrettable and we apologise wholeheartedly," IOC spokesperson Mark Adams told a press conference on Saturday.

South Korea's National Olympic Committee immediately referred the incident to the Games' organisers and requested that the error will not be repeated.

South Korea's delegation includes 143 athletes competing in 21 events. North Korea, which is returning to the Games for the first time since Rio 2016, has sent 16 athletes.

China's teen duo grabs FIRST GOLD

REUTERS, Chateauroux

Social media-savvy teenaged duo Huang Yuting and Sheng Lihao upheld a Chinese shooting tradition as they won the first gold of the Paris Olympics in the 10 metres air rifle mixed team event on Saturday.

Chinese shooters have claimed their country's first gold of the Games more



times than athletes in any other sport and that trend continued with Huang and Sheng triumphing at the Chateauroux Shooting Centre.

Their 16-12 win, quelling a late challenge from the South Korean pair of Keum Ji-hyeon and Park Ha-jun, ensured China remain the only country to win the gold in the mixed team event introduced in Tokyo three years ago.

Three years after China's Yang Qian

and Yang Haoran won the gold in Tokyo, reigning world champions Huang and Sheng topped the qualifying round ahead of their Korean rivals to signal their intent.

The gold medal contest was not really a cakewalk though despite them racing to a 14-8 lead after the 11th round.

Keum and Park staged a late comeback to reduce the gap at 14-12 but the Chinese pair prevailed in the end.

Huang said she was jittery when the Koreans started breathing down their neck.

"I was quite tense to be honest," said the 17-year-old, whose puppy hair clips are quite popular among her social media fans back home.

Huang and Sheng will be gunning for a second gold in Paris but said the team event result would have no bearing on their individual rifle competitions.



Argentina's Ezequiel Fernandez celebrates with teammates after putting the game to bed in the 84th minute in a 3-1 win against Iraq in a Group B fixture at the Lyon Stadium in Decines-Charpieu yesterday. The victory helped Argentina men's team bounce back from the emotional blow suffered in a defeat against Morocco under controversial circumstances in their 2024 Paris Olympics campaign opener.

PHOTO: REUTERS