

India deny doping after needle found at CGames

Sun, sea and equality at 'relevant' Commonwealth Games

GOLD COAST, Australia, April 2, (AFP): The Commonwealth Games are "more relevant now than ever", organisers said on Monday as they got ready to fire the starting gun on 11 days of competition at Australia's Gold Coast.

Questions have been asked about the standing and modern appeal of the tournament, an echo of colonialism which began as the British Empire Games in 1930.

But officials said the Games still had a role to play, pointing to the groundbreaking move to have an equal number of men's and women's medal events, and the policy of including para sports in the main programme.

"The Commonwealth has stood for generations now for fighting for fairness and freedom," said David Grevemberg, chief executive of the Commonwealth Games Federation.

"From our standpoint we're more relevant now than ever before for the things that have historically challenged the Commonwealth, to the ambitions and aspirations that this Commonwealth looks to uphold: peace, prosperity, good governance and human rights."

After Wednesday's opening ceremony, about 4,300 athletes from 71 nations and territories will compete across 23 sports in Gold Coast, a beach-fringed city in Australia's east.

Games chairman Peter Beattie said the Olympics should take note of the Commonwealth's move to gender equality for medal events, which he described as a first for a major Games.

"The Commonwealth Games stands for some things that are different: gender equality is one, inclusiveness is another," Beattie

said.

He added: "Of course it makes a difference that there are equal numbers of medals for men and women. Perhaps that's something the Olympics should follow."

Australian cycling great Anna Meares said the Games remained well regarded by athletes, and provided a crucial opportunity to gain experience.

"The people who seem to critique it and question its relevance are people who perhaps aren't involved in the sport itself," the former Olympic and Commonwealth champion said.

"You ask any athlete where the relevance of the Commonwealth Games sit and they'll tell you it's right up there."

CGAMES

However, not everyone is happy about the tournament and indigenous protesters have organised demonstrations against what they call the "Stolenwealth Games".

As the opening ceremony nears, Games organisers are also grappling with a possible doping controversy after the discovery of syringes in the athletes' village.

Grevemberg said the syringes were still being analysed but that one team, believed to be India, had been summoned over a breach of the Games' "no-needle" policy.

England's Adam Peaty and Australia's heavyweight team will highlight the swimming events, while Jamaica's Yohan Blake and Elaine Thompson will look to set the track alight following the retirement of Olympic sprint icon Usain Bolt.

Malaysia's Lee Chong Wei headlines a



The champion, Kuwait's Yousef Jumaa

(KUNA photo)

Jumaa wins gold in 5th Ras Al-Khaimah champ'ship

The Kuwaiti athletics team has won the first gold medal in a tournament abroad.

Jarrah Al-Fadhli, the rapporteur of the Kuwaiti athletics committee affiliated to the Kuwaiti Olympic Committee, said in a statement to KUNA, on Monday, that the team won the gold in the fifth Ras Al-Khaimah (UAE) championship.

strong badminton tournament and Olympic champions Australia will hope to become the inaugural gold medallists when women's

This is a leap for the newly-born game in Kuwait, said Al-Fadhli, speaking after return of the team from Ras Al-Khaimah where the champion, Yousef Jumaa, came first in the 94-kg category.

Jumaa was excellent in all the competitions of the championship, which concluded two days ago, he added. (KUNA)

rugby makes its Games debut.

Forecasts of wet weather for Wednesday and the following days didn't deter Beattie,

who declared: "A little bit of rain is not going to ruin the opening ceremony."

He added: "Queenslanders and Australians are very tenacious. We'll just do singing in the rain if that's what happens."

Meanwhile, India's men's boxing coach on Monday denied any doping after syringes were found in the Commonwealth Games athletes' village, saying one of his fighters was given a vitamin injection because he was unwell.

Santiago Nieva was speaking to Australia's 7 News as speculation grew over the syringes, which Games officials said were discovered after a tip-off from a cleaner.

"I'm confident that our boxers haven't taken anything," Nieva said. "We had one boxer that wasn't very feeling well and the doctor has given him an injection."

Asked if it had been a performance-enhancing drug, Nieva replied: "No, that was a vitamin substance."

Nieva's explanation contradicts team manager Ajay Narang, who told AFP on Saturday that the syringes were unconnected to India's athletes. They were found inside a water bottle on a path outside their accommodation, Narang said.

Officials also said the Commonwealth Games Federation court would hold a hearing into a breach of its No Needle Policy on Tuesday, but declined to identify the country involved.

Athletes must seek permission before bringing syringes to the Games, federation chief executive David Grevemberg said, adding that any penalties would be at the discretion of the court.

The contents of the syringes are still being investigated, Grevemberg said.

Poulter stars in Texas to punch ticket to Masters

Englishman wins with a pair at first extra hole

HOUSTON, April 2, (AFP): Ian Poulter dramatically earned the final Masters invitation, defeating American tour rookie Beau Hossler at the first extra playoff hole to capture the Houston Open on Sunday.

Poulter now joins a Masters field of 87 competitors, returning to Augusta National for a first time since 2016 with his appearance making amends after falling short a week ago in trying to qualify for the year's first major championship.

"I had to dig deep today and I am delighted with the way I played and how I've managed to come behind to win," Poulter said.

Poulter, 42, had been three shots clear of his 23-year-old rival standing on the 11th tee but then found himself one behind when Hossler birdied four holes in succession from the 11th to move one shot clear at 19-under par.

Poulter then drew on his enormous Ryder Cup experience to hole a 20-foot birdie putt at the 72nd green to tie Hossler's score of 67 and for both to finish on 19-under to send the event into extra holes.

Hossler then handed Poulter his first victory since 2012 in finding a fairway bunker with his drive and then sending his second into the water, eventually taking a triple bogey seven to Poulter's victory par.

"I had a good read on my putt on the final green in regulation as Beau's putt was on much the same line and I knew it was going to break a fraction right and it did, so I rolled it in at the right time," said Poulter.

The firebrand English golfer drew on his Austin disappointment a week ago when he missed

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out on a Masters' berth by just .0302 of a World Ranking point. Poulter then lost his afternoon quarter-final encounter in Austin to move to World No. 51.

Poulter has used both his anger and "Ryder Cup-like" determination to now head to Augusta National.

"Last week was painful and to come here this week I was tired and I was frustrated on Thursday and I did not play my best stuff and I had packed my bags to leave on Friday," he said.

"Thanks to a mental switch I said to myself 'let's go and play golf and see what happens.'

"So, to come out on Friday and shoot eight-under and then five-under on Saturday while today I was patient and I waited my time.

"This is just amazing as I haven't won a stroke-play event in the States. To have done it in this fashion is amazing."

The win is Poulter's 17th career victory but only his third on the PGA Tour after two earlier WGC victories. It is a first anywhere since capturing his 2012 WGC-HSBC Champions win in Shanghai.

Also, Poulter is the first PGA Tour winner in 35 years to come from 123rd after the first round, and win.

Triple major winning Jordan Spieth gave his Masters goal a huge boost with a closing 66 to share third place with Argentina's Emiliano Grillo (68).



This file photo taken on July 26, 2017 shows Britain's Adam Peaty (center), competing in the men's 50m breaststroke final during the swimming competition at the 2017 FINA World Championships in Budapest. (AFP)

Aussie Campbell eyes redemption

Blacked-out goggles, ice baths as outdoor pool poses challenge

GOLD COAST, Australia, April 2, (AFP): Some swimmers have taped over their goggles and others will be hitting ice baths as they grapple with the challenges of an outdoor pool at the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games.

Leading backstrokers Kylie Masse and Emily Seebomh have been working on ways to avoid veering into the lane ropes in the open-air pool, which gives them no overhead reference points.

Canada's world record holder Masse has been training outdoors in preparation, while Australia's triple world champion Seebomh has been swimming in semi-blacked out goggles in a bid to adjust.

"We knew it was coming so I tried to swim outdoors as much as possible this year to kind of prepare myself," Masse said.

"I've practised a bit outside, we've been down in Florida and Arizona for training camps a bit this year because we knew the Games were here and they'd be outside."

"A number of times you can be doing a really fast set or something then all of a sudden, wham, you hit the lane rope."

Australian coaching staff have come up with some inventive solutions to help their swimmers at the picturesque pool.

Seebomh said she had worked on improving her peripheral vision in the last month using partially taped goggles.

"We started taping our goggles so we could only see out the sides but we won't know what it's like until we're actually outside again," she said.

"We saw it at trials and we have the advantage that we have done it before and we just have to try our best." "I'm not going to go into my race with taped-up goggles, I'm just going in to do my best job."

Seebomh is bidding for her third consecutive Commonwealth Games gold medal in the 100m event, after winning in Delhi and Glasgow.

Masse broke an eight-year world record with 58.10 seconds in winning the world title in Budapest last year.

Another concern is that the warm pool temperatures under the Gold Coast sun will affect some of the competitors, notably Australia's Olympic 400m freestyle champion Mack Horton.

Pale-skinned Horton is looking to cool his body temperature after he overheated during the 1,500m freestyle at last month's national selection trials in the Games pool.

"It's just about managing my body temperature, trying to stay cool before I race and cooling down faster after heats," Horton said.

"The air-con in the village is help-

ing. I've turned it down. I think we will have ice baths at the pool and we've got some in the basement of the village as well so when we get back we can cool down."

Horton has a big programme at the Games, combining the 200m, 400m and 1500m freestyle and the 4x200m freestyle relay.

A defiant Cate Campbell has promised a return to her best form at the Commonwealth Games as the Aussie swimmer looks to exorcise the demons of her Olympic flop two years ago.

The 25-year-old is blazing the comeback trail after taking a year out from the sport, prompted by what Campbell described as the "greatest choke in Olympic history" in Rio — her sixth-place finish in the 100 metres freestyle final.

Campbell, who is limbering up for the Commonwealth Games in Gold Coast this week, rediscovered her mojo at the national trials, where she dominated the 100m freestyle and broke Australian records in the 50m free and 50m butterfly.

"I definitely missed being part of the team," she told reporters. "To be back in the green and gold, it really makes my heart beat a little bit faster."

Meanwhile, even Anthony Joshua would struggle to beat the world's best faced with the hardships confronting Kiribati's Commonwealth Games boxers. While Britain's undefeated heavyweight world champion counts the millions from Saturday's win over New Zealander Joseph Parker, Kiribati's boxers have had to prepare without even a boxing ring.

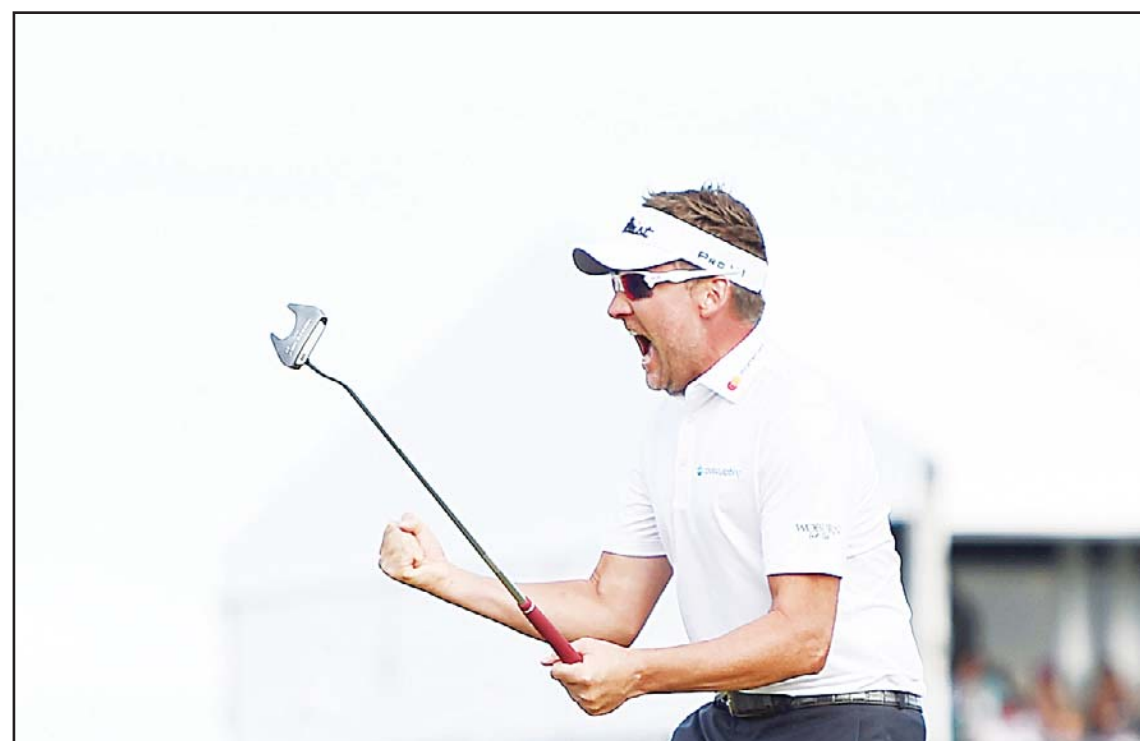
"We make do outside or in a house as our ring is broken at the moment," said Tekamwi Rabaere, coach of the two boxers representing the Pacific Ocean island in Australia's Gold Coast.

"We try to design a ring, but it is not the same."

Worse still, the tiny nation has just two pairs of useable boxing gloves. "When we spar we share the gloves with everyone," added Rabaere, saying that while Kiribati — population 115,000 — is woefully short of facilities and equipment, they have plenty of talented boxers.

"If we have more capacity, more gloves, more rings and better coaches, it will encourage many more to come and train," said Rabaere.

No matter how Tevii Steven and Betero Aaree fare in Australia — and they will not be expected to get far in the tournament — Rabaere believes they can inspire others back home.



Ian Poulter of England reacts after winning the Houston Open at the Golf Club of Houston on the first playoff hole on April 1. (AFP)

Spieth sets sights on Masters

Garcia not taking superstitions into title defence

AUGUSTA, Georgia, April 2, (RTRS): After earning a long-awaited maiden major title at last year's Masters, Sergio Garcia would be forgiven for allowing a few superstitions to creep in at Augusta National Golf Club next week.

Yet the Spaniard, who needed 74 attempts finally to claim a major, said he would not be trying to replicate last year's off-course routines, nor staying in the same house or eating the same foods.

"I'm not that superstitious to try to do everything like I did last year," said Garcia.

"I think that at the end of the day, you control things in your head..."

"It's just a matter of going back there, being confident again, enjoying what I'm doing and try to do it the best way possible so I can give myself a great chance at defending my title."

For Garcia, slipping into a Green Jacket after last year's playoff victory

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over European Ryder Cup team mate Justin Rose fulfilled a lifelong dream of matching his Spanish idols Seve Ballesteros and Jose Maria Olazabal as a Masters champion.

The 38-year-old Spaniard is now focused on becoming only the third golfer to successfully defend their Masters title and first since Tiger Woods accomplished the feat in 2002.

Garcia has enjoyed top-10 finishes in each of his last three PGA Tour starts — two of which came at World Golf Championships events in Mexico and Austin. He is happy with where his

game is even if he is not considered a favourite to win the Masters.

"I'm excited to go back there and defend my title as well as I can be and as well as I can do," Garcia said about returning to Augusta National for the April 5-8 Masters.

"You know, if I'm looked at as a favourite or not, it doesn't really matter, because at the end of the day, it depends on myself and what I do and on what I believe."

"So, you know, those things, I don't think really matter that much, any-



Defending Masters champion Sergio Garcia (left), greets Nicholas Gross, of Downingtown, Pa, after Gross' putt on the 18th green to win the putting championship for his age group during the Drive Chip Putt National Finals at Augusta National Golf Club on April 1, in Augusta, Ga. (AP)

way." Since winning the Masters, Garcia has got married, wore his Green Jacket to his wedding reception, was named the European Tour Player of the Year and named his baby girl Azalea, after Augusta National's 13th hole where he scrambled for a miracle par in the final round to spark his victory charge.

Meanwhile, it was "goal accomplished" for an upbeat Jordan Spieth as he headed off to Augusta National after finishing in a share of third at the Houston Open on Sunday.

The final result was always going to matter less to Spieth than his form heading into the U.S. Masters, which starts on Thursday.

The 2015 Masters champion arrived in Houston looking to find his swing and putting stroke and, with the exception of a mundane third round, showed clear improvement as the week progressed.

He even flirted with contention on Sunday before carding six-under-par 66 to finish three strokes behind winner Ian Poulter, who beat Beau Hossler in a playoff.

"Starting four back on a very gettable golf course, you kind of need a really flawless round (to have a chance of winning)." Spieth told NBC after nailing a 30-foot par putt dead centre at the final hole at Golf Club of Houston.

"I had an opportunity to shoot eight or nine under, I'm very pleased with my six under," said the three-times major winner. "Goal accomplished for the week."

Most pleasing for Spieth on Sunday was his short putting, which has been a weak link in his game recently.