Armies Taekwondo Gold For Rafiei

TEHRAN, Oct. 3--Iranian taekwondo phenom Maysam Rafiei grabbed the 58 kg gold medal of the 2006 world armies tournament in South Korea.

Austria's representative took the silver and the bronze went jointly to South Korea and the United States.

The 20-year-old Rafiei, who hails from the southern Hormuzgan province, told IRNA Tuesday he has already won 10 medals in the nationwide events and scores of colorful medals in the international competitions.

He said the knockout of his South Korean rival in a hard-fought lash during the armies' tourney is the sweetest memory in his career.

Rafiei asked the officials to pay due heed to martial art players throughout the country.

Vietnam Seeking Iran's Sports Experiences

TEHRAN, Oct. 3--Vietnamese ambassador to Tehran in a meeting with Iran's vice-president and head of Physical Education Organization said his country intended to use Iran's experiences in different fields of sports, IRNA said.

In the meeting, Negoin Van-Hi expressed his country's intention to expand relations and cooperation with Iran in all fields, including sports and added, "We like to use Iranian knowledge and experiences in football to promote our abilities in this game".

He also invited Vice-President Mohammad Aliabadi to visit Vietnam and discuss issues of mutual interest with sport officials.

Head of Physical Education Organization also welcomed the expansion of ties with Vietnam and said, "We welcome the expansion of athletic relations not only with Asian countries, but with all other countries and we believe that sports have their own language which can be a factor for getting countries closer".

Aliabadi thanked the Vietnamese ambassador for his invitation and said, "We will be glad to be the host of Vietnamese sport officials in Tehran, too.

"Vietnam can dispatch experts in the field of table tennis to Iran, too.

Tursunov Wins First Title in Mumbai

MUMBAI, India, Oct. 3--Russian Dmitry Tursunov won his first Tour title on Monday when he defeated Czech world number 13 Tomas Berdych 6-3 4-6 7-6 in the rain-interrupted final of the inaugural Mumbai Open.

The temperamental Russian, seeded four, took the first set with ease, breaking the 1.95 meter tall Czech in the sixth game, but lost the rain-interrupted second set before rediscovering his rhythm in a tense decider.

The final was postponed by a day following rain on Sunday, Reuters said.

"I probably lost about 10 years of my life playing this," a relieved Tursunov said after winning his maiden title in only his second final appearance.

"I was up two breaks in the third set and still went to the tiebreak, so it was definitely nerve racking but I'm really happy that I won and just really hope that it won't go into a tiebreak in the third set in a final again."

The 23-year-old Tursunov, who recently put Russia in the Davis Cup final after beating American Andy Roddick in five sets, played some explosive forehands to quell Berdych's challenge in the first set.

But the Russian gave away easy points in the second when Berdych took control of the match after a 90-minute rain interruption.

Russia's Dmitry Tursunov plays a shot to Czech Republic's Tomas Berdych during their final match at the Mumbai Open tennis tournament, Sunday. (Reuters Photo)

Tursunov, who beat Spanish top seed Tommy Robredo in the semifinals, was broken in the 10th game to lose the second set after having traded breaks and was warned by the umpire for ball abuse.

The 21-year-old Berdych, who beat the Russian at the recent US Open, allowed his nerves to get the better of him and was broken in the fifth game of the decider. But he broke back in the eighth to level.

They were five all when there was a second rain interruption.

The Czech was broken in a close 11th game but broke back to take the contest into the tiebreak.

Tursunov raised his game when it mattered using his hefty serve to capture the tiebreak and the contest.

Berdych, who finished runner-up for a second time this year, said he was happy that his weary body had managed to last eight days.

Bulgaria Face Most Important Game

SOFIA, Bulgaria, Oct. 3--Bulgaria coach Hristo Stoichkov has underlined the importance of their Euro 2008 qualifier at home to Group G leaders the Netherlands on Saturday.

"It's our most important match," Stoichkov said on Monday.

"We realize that a positive result against the Netherlands will open the doors to the European championship finals."

Stoichkov, who as a player inspired Bulgaria to the semifinals of the 1994 World Cup, is keen for his team to make amends for failing to reach the 2006 tournament in Germany, Reuters said.

"We'll be searching for victory against the Dutch side but we'll not be disappointed with a draw either because it will keep our chances of making the finals alive," he said.

"We'll be satisfied if we can collect four points from the forthcoming matches against the Netherlands and Luxembourg as we know we have an easier fixture list than our main rivals next year." Bulgaria are away to Luxemburg on Oct. 11.

Stoichkov will be without injured midfielder Blagoi Georgiev but he has been boosted by the recovery from a groin injury of striker Dimitar Berbatov, who has scored 31 goals in 50 internationals.

"I'm happy that Dimitar is back on the pitch...He is known for his strong character and I hope he'll score on Saturday," said Stoichkov.

"I've seen the Netherlands playing in four or five matches recently and we all know they are a high quality side but we have nothing to fear...We have top-class players as well."

The Netherlands top the group with six points from two games, followed by Bulgaria and Romania on four points, Albania and Belarus on one and Luxembourg and Slovenia with zero.

Buoyant Button Looking for Success

TOKYO, Oct. 3--Britain's Jenson Button said on Tuesday that he was hungry for more success after breaking his Formula One duck this season.

Button finally won a race after 113 starts at a rain-soaked Hungarian Grand Prix in August and wants to continue in the same vein at Honda in 2007 with an improved engine, Reuters said.

"People say it changes you--and it does because you've won a race," Button told reporters ahead of Sunday's Japanese Grand Prix at Suzuka.

"I've definitely grown as a driver but not because of Hungary. If anything the win in Hungary has made me hungrier.

On the podium I was already looking forward to the next win." He added: "I have always had a lot of confidence in myself. Hungary hasn't changed me."

Button will go into Honda's home race at Suzuka with high hopes of a podium finish after a battling fourth-place finish in Shanghai last weekend.

Honda's plan to unveil their 'Suzuka Special' engine this week--the same engine they will look to develop for 2007--has fuelled Button's optimism.

"The engine in the car is definitely an improvement," said Button.

"If it's dry it will be a real fight to be on the podium but that's what we've got to aim at--if it's wet there's everything to play for. It will be exciting if it's wet."

Button is currently sixth in the drivers' standings on 45 points with team mate Rubens Barrichello seventh on 28 with just races in Japan and Brazil remaining.

Sunday's race has taken on even greater significance with Ferrari's Michael Schumacher and Renault's Fernando Alonso locked on 116 points in a pulsating title run-in.

There will be extra poignance for Honda in particular with Suzuka being replaced by Fuji Speedway for the 2007 Formula One season.

Morientes Losing Hope of Spain Recall

Fernando Morientes

MADRID, Spain, Oct. 3--Valencia striker Fernando Morientes said he is losing hope of winning a Spain recall and has criticized national coach Luis Aragones for the way in which he dropped his former Real Madrid colleague Raul.

"Some time ago I said I thought the door to the national team was still open to me but now I think it is beginning to close little by little," Morientes told a news conference on Monday.

"If I'm not included in the side the way I'm playing at the moment then it seems very unlikely that it will happen in the future because I don't think I can maintain this sort of form forever."

Morientes, who joined Valencia from Liverpool during the close season, has made an impressive start to the new campaign, striking up a prolific partnership with fellow forward David Villa and scoring seven goals in all competitions, reported Reuters.

The former Real Madrid player has been one of the national side's most reliable performers, with a total of 26 goals in 43 appearances but he was not selected for the World Cup.

He was also omitted from the squad for next week's Euro 2008 qualifier against Sweden as Aragones opted to include just two out-and-out strikers, Villa and Fernando Torres, in his 18-man party.

Real Madrid striker Raul, Spain's all-time leading goalscorer and their most capped outfield player, was also left out for the first time in 10 years for a reason other than injury.

Morientes said that Aragones should have informed the Spain captain of his decision beforehand.

"Aside from the debate over whether or not he should have been included, the manner he did it was probably not the most appropriate," he said.

"Given who it was, it would have been more logical to have rung the player before the announcement.

"Everyone has their own opinion about the decision. He could be playing well or badly, scoring or not scoring, but he is the top goalscorer for Spain, he has been the captain for many years and has been one of the most capped players of all time."

Spain are in joint second place in Group F, three points behind leaders Sweden following a shock 3-2 defeat by Northern Ireland in their last qualifier.

They play Sweden in Solna on Saturday.

Henman Advances At Japan Open

TOKYO, Oct. 3--British star Tim Henman opened his Japan Open account with a 6-2, 6-1 humbling of Canada's Frank Dancevic Tuesday and said he fancied his chances here.

"I'm very pleased. I did hit the ball well and served well. I enjoyed all the conditions. The court is a little bit quicker than where I usually play on, but it suits my game really, really well," said the tenth seed.

Meanwhile, seventh seed Robby Ginepri became the biggest men's seed to fall when the American crashed to 103rd-ranked Argentine Juan Martin Del Potro 6-2, 6-2, AFP said.

Henman, 32, scored one of the first major breakthroughs of his career in Japan 12 years ago, coming through the first two rounds before falling to Pete Sampras.

His appearance Tuesday was his first in Tokyo since reaching the last eight in 1998 and he needed just 55 minutes to beat Dancevic and become the first man into the third round after a first round bye.

"I remember four years before that in 1994, which was the first time I qualified for the tour event," said Henman.

"I won two rounds and played Sampras on the centre court. So that was a big, big breakthrough for me. So 12 years later, it's fun to be back and playing well."

Then, Henman lost to Pete Sampras 6-1, 6-2 but said he has no fear of the top seeds in Japan this week, including world No.1 Roger Federer.

"In the men's game, really anyone from one to 100 can beat anyone else," said Henman, who made the semi-finals of the Thailand Open last week.

"You are aware of the rankings, whether you are seeded or not, but once you step onto the court and play a match, it really doesn't mean anything.

Earlier, Thailand's Danai Udomchoke beat Marin Cilic of Croatia 7-6 (7/3), 6-3 to reach the second round while Satoshi Iwabuchi of Japan outclassed Chen Ti of Taiwan 6-2, 6-1.

The 2003 Japan Open champion Rainer Schuettler was an easy 6-2, 6-1 winner over fellow German Michael Berrer.

Stefan Koubek of Austria downed Stevano Balvani of Italy 6-3, 4-6, 7-5, while Viktor Troicki of Serbia and Montenegro outplayed Fernando Vicente of Spain 6-7 (4/7), 6-4, 6-2.

In the women's draw, Japan's Aiko Nakamura, Vera Dushevina of Russia, Americans Jamea Jackson and Lilia Osterloh, and Chan Yung-Jan of Taiwan advanced to the second round.

Knicks Coach Vows to Bring Smiles

NEW YORK, Oct. 3--Isiah Thomas, head of basketball operations for the New York Knicks, has been given one year as coach by club owner James Dolan to turn the team around, Reuters said.

Thomas vowed to answer the ultimatum by putting smiles on the faces of his players and getting them to love basketball again following last season's dismal 23-59 campaign under Hall of Famer Larry Brown.

"It's a game that I love. It's a beautiful game. It's a game you can have a lot of fun with," Thomas said at the start of his bid to mend a team that often felt under siege during the brief tenure of the defensive-minded Brown.

Thomas and his players faced reporters at the Knicks' suburban practice facility on Monday before flying to Charleston, South Carolina, where they hold their training camp.

"There was a time that every single one of these players would wake up and take the train or the bus at nine in the morning to go to a park to play basketball and couldn't wait to get there," Thomas said.

"That feeling that they had when they were little kids, I want to bring that feeling back."

The Knicks were anything but happy last season, when Brown experimented with a record 42 different starting lineups and publicly criticized his players.

Owner Dolan fired Brown with four years and $40 million left on a five-year contract and named Thomas to coach players he drafted and traded for, saying there had to be "significant improvement" or Thomas would follow Brown out of the door.

Thomas, who won a college title at Indiana under Bob Knight and two NBA crowns with the Detroit Pistons, said he did not fear the pressure of a do-or-die season.

"I've lived with daily pressure all my life," said Thomas, who came from a rough Chicago neighborhood. "Growing up the way I grew up there was life or death pressure every time you walked outside your door.

"My job is to make our players feel comfortable operating under pressure. Pressure comes with what we do. It's a pressure packed environment, playing at this level."

Thomas coached three seasons with the Indiana Pacers before being fired.

"We have some talented players," he said. "(Stephon) Marbury has had great success. (Steve) Francis has had great success. I have to put players in the position where they can have success, where they can succeed and feel good about themselves."

Hope springs eternal for all teams as they head into a new season, especially the Knicks with eight players aged 25 and under, including center Eddy Curry, forwards Channing Frye and David Lee and guard Nate Robinson.

Ecuador Stick With World Cup Players

QUITO, Ecuador, Oct. 3--Ecuador included 15 members of their World Cup squad among 19 players named for next week's friendly international against Brazil.

Ecuador, who reached the last 16 of the World Cup before losing to England, face their fellow South Americans in Stockholm on Oct. 10, reported Reuters.

Goalkeeper Rorys Aragon, defenders Jairo Montano and Jose Aguirre and striker Edmundo Zara were the only four players who were not in Germany, Reuters said.

The main absentees were strikers Agustin Delgado, who has announced his international retirement, and Carlos Tenorio and fullback Neicer Reasco.

The surprise was the inclusion of uncapped Zara who plays for Ecuadorean second division club Imbabura.

Ecuador have played one match since the World Cup, drawing 1-1 with neighbors Peru in the United States.

Omani Keeper Keen To Avoid Bolton Bench

SINGAPORE, Oct. 3--Oman goalkeeper Ali Al Habsi is looking to escape English Premier League Bolton Wanderers after failing to earn a starting place, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) website reported on Tuesday.

Back in Muscat for a training camp before the Oct. 11 Asian Cup qualifier against UAE, Al Habsi told an Omani daily that Bolton were putting him on the loan list and he would know where he is heading in January when the transfer window opens, reported Reuters.

"I would like to play for one of the first division clubs in England as first (choice) goalkeeper instead of staying on the bench at Bolton," the AFC quoted Al Habsi as saying.

The 24-year-old, who has not made his debut for the Premier League side, became the first Omani on the books of an English club when he joined Bolton in January.