

## LYME DISEASE NEVER FAR FROM THOUGHTS OF WNBA STAR

**NEW YORK:** Chicago Sky head coach Pokey Chatman needs only a brief glance at Elena Delle Donne, one of the brightest stars in the WNBA, to know when the high-scoring forward will need a break. "Pokey can look at me in the morning and tell how I'm doing," said Delle Donne, the league's top scorer. "And she'll know to give me more rest that day. We're on an eye-contact level at this point." Delle Donne's fatigue and stiffness on certain days, unrelated with the rigors of a Women's National Basketball Association season, are linked to the lasting effects of Lyme disease.

A favorite to win the WNBA's MVP award this year, Delle Donne believes she contracted the disease, a bacterial infection often transmitted through the bite of an infected deer tick, in 2008.

She wasn't sure how she got the disease which wasn't detected in the early stages as its flu-like symptoms, such as fatigue and muscle stiffness, were misdiagnosed.

Delle Donne eventually got the illness, which has no known cure in its later stages, diagnosed and under control but in 2010, she "had a really bad relapse" and has been troubled by it ever since. That's caused the Delaware native to miss a chunk of last season, including the All-Star game.

She has not missed any time this season as she averages a league-best 23 points, while adding nearly 9 rebounds and 2 blocks, all career highs.

"This season I've been playing well and staying pretty healthy so people just think the disease is gone," she told Reuters. "But it's something I battle every single day."

The 26-year-old, 6-foot-5 (1.96 meter) Delle Donne said she can spend four hours a day "just doing things trying to stay healthy." After hard games or a long flight, she said she often will use a computerized massage machine that aids recovery in the legs, hips and arms.

She has to eat well, staying away from foods that could cause inflammation, and take dietary supplements. Chatman, the Sky coach, said when she sees the "glassy look" in Delle Donne's eyes, she knows it is time to sit her down.

"Sometimes people forget that just because Lyme hasn't reared its ugly head this year, she's fine. But it's still a day-to-day process with her," Chatman said. "Fortunately, Elena treats it with the respect it deserves and tries to get out in front of any potential problems."

Delle Donne sees Pennsylvania-based nurse practitioner Rita Rhoads every week during the off-season to make sure her blood tests are satisfactory. Once the



Elena Delle Donne

season starts, the two keep in touch via e-mails, texts and phone calls.

"Elena is a very driven person," said Rhoads, who has treated Delle Donne for the past five years. "She does everything she needs to do to stay on top of it." She's got that Type A personality. It's not just playing basketball. She follows directions."

playoffs. Off the court, Della Donne is a spokeswoman for Lyme disease prevention and is a global ambassador for the Special Olympics. She recently won the WNBA's Dawn Staley Community Leadership Award for the second consecutive year. Della Donne said she wants to educate the public about Lyme disease so no one has to go through the trauma she endured.

Two years after contracting the disease, she began to feel extreme fatigue, sleeping about 18 hours a day. She had not had Lyme symptoms in a long time and doctors were baffled as to the cause of her new problems.

"I never knew Lyme could go dormant and come back with a vengeance," she said. "I had no idea what was going on. I had doctors telling me I had mental illness. That's just so wrong." Delle Donne said she never lets herself believe she has conquered the disease. "I feel like I have really gotten a pretty good grip on it," she said. "But I've felt like that many times over the last five years and then had a horrible relapse. Unfortunately, you never know if it's coming back or not. You have to stay on top of it. Sometimes it feels like a second job. But I have to do it." —Reuters



Julian Savea

## ALL BLACKS BRACING FOR BRUISING PUMAS

**LONDON:** The All Blacks were counting the bruises yesterday after an intensely physical training session as they ramped up preparations for their defence of the Rugby World Cup.

The New Zealanders put a full stop to the promotional activities that were a focal part of the first four days after their arrival in London and turned their attention solely on their opening game against Argentina on Sunday.

"It was pretty full-on training. It was a good hit-out, some bumps and bruises," wing Julian Savea said, adding that despite the intensity there were no injuries.

Utility back Colin Slade said the frustration of not having had a full training session for several days was evident. "For a couple of days

here we've been doing promotional stuff. The boys haven't been able to touch a rugby ball for a couple of days so the boys were a bit itchy," he said.

"So today was a bit about physicality. There was a bit of contact out there and it was good to get that out of the system." The All Blacks know from experience they are in for a rugged opening match against Los Pumas, who fancy their chances to dominate using a muscular forward pack.

In the last World Cup, when the two sides met in the quarter-finals, Argentina led 7-6 midway through the first half before the All Blacks pulled away to win 33-10.

It was not a game that holds pleasant mem-

ories for Slade who only lasted 30 minutes before a groin injury ended his World Cup campaign.

"They came out firing and they got on top of us early, and for me personally it wasn't the funniest night at the office," he said. "But the boys rallied. We talked about hanging in there and finishing off well towards the end of the game, and if that's what it takes this game we are more than ready for it."

"They're going to come out firing, we're expecting that and we just need to be able to handle that." Centre Ma'a Nonu, who delayed his departure from New Zealand by 24 hours to recover from a flu virus, declared himself fit and took a full part in the training. —AFP

## THOMAS RETIRES BECAUSE OF EPILEPSY

**LONDON:** Wales international Jonathan Thomas announced his retirement from professional rugby union yesterday because of epilepsy by saying his fellow players needed "more educating about the warning signs" of head injuries.

The 32-year's exit came just days before the start of the 2015 World Cup in England, with the debate concerning head impacts and concussion dominating rugby union's agenda in recent months.

Thomas has been playing most recently for English Premiership side Worcester. In a



Jonathan Thomas

statement, the Midlands club said Thomas was diagnosed with epilepsy last year "which is thought to be from multiple head traumas and has led to a degree of brain injury". A back-row forward, Thomas often took the field wearing a scrum cap but his case is a reminder of the limits of head protection. Thomas, who won 67 caps for Wales from 2003-2011 and appeared in two World Cups, said: "I've learnt a huge amount during the last few months about head trauma, seizures and epilepsy, and it would be great if I could help out in some way."

"At the elite level of the game, I think the unions and medical departments of clubs do a great job and have a great understanding, but I still think it's the players

who need more educating about the warning signs and getting out of that 'digging in' mentality."

Nevertheless Thomas added: "I must stress, however, in no way would I discourage anyone from playing the game that has given me so much. "Also in no way do I regret anything about my rugby career, and I wouldn't change a thing."

"In regards to the immediate future, I'm going to take some time out but have no doubt I'll stay involved with the game in some capacity."

"I would also like to get involved with charity work specifically related to head injury and help people gain a better understanding of what trauma can cause and how to deal with it."

Worcester high performance director Nick Johnston added: "We've sought the best medical opinion in the country in order to try and enable Jonathan to prolong his career."

"But unfortunately, on the advice of consultants, he has been advised to retire from professional rugby," Thomas featured in two Six Nations Grand Slam campaigns with Wales and spent 10 years with Welsh regional side the Ospreys before moving to Worcester in 2013.

"I've done everything in my power to keep playing," Thomas said. "However, there comes a point when you realise you need to listen to medical experts and also do what's best for your well-being. "I am keen to stress there are many different types of epilepsy, and I'm fortunate to only suffer from it in a mild way compared to some."

"Naturally though, it has proved too difficult to continue as a professional athlete." I have been working closely with my medical team and consultant for many months, and hoped this was something that could be managed in order for me to continue playing, but sadly this isn't the case." —AFP



NEW YORK: Novak Djokovic poses with the US Open tennis championship trophy in this file photo. —AP

## DJOKOVIC ON COURSE TO BE THE GREATEST

**NEW YORK:** Novak Djokovic may never be the people's champion, but with a 10th Grand Slam title wrapped up and his rivals flagging, the Serb is on course to be the sport's greatest player.

The 28-year-old became only the eighth man in history to reach double digits in totals of Slams won and now stands just seven behind the record of Roger Federer, the man he vanquished in Sunday's US Open final.

It may seem a huge target to chase, but Djokovic is six years younger than Federer. His second title in New York was his third major of the year to add to the Australian Open and Wimbledon victories.

Only a third defeat in four years at the French Open final prevented him from celebrating what would have been the first calendar Grand Slam since 1969. It was also a major psychological boost for Djokovic who had lost four finals in New York before Sunday's 6-4, 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 win.

It was the second time after 2011 that he had won three of the four Grand Slams in the same season. Djokovic has now won nine of the last 20 Slams and finished runner-up in six others. By contrast, 34-year-old Federer has not added to his 17 Grand Slams since Wimbledon in 2012 and has lost five of his last seven finals at the majors.

World number three Andy Murray is still stuck on two with the most recent coming at the All England Club in 2013. Rafael Nadal, meanwhile, is the equal second best of all time alongside Pete

Sampras with 14 Slams but outside of the French Open, his last major came in New York in 2013.

Djokovic is also the model of consistency. The last time he failed to make at least the quarter-finals of the majors was when he slipped to a third round loss at the 2009 French Open.

"I'm so flattered and honoured to be a part of an elite group of players, legends of our sports to manage to win this many Grand Slam trophies," said Djokovic who is just one shy of going level with Bjorn Borg and Laver on 11 majors.

"So to be just mentioned alongside them is truly something special. "I'm 28. I have always valued the care for my body, and my mind and had this holistic approach to life."

"I always thought this is utmost importance for my tennis. I will continue on with the same kind of lifestyle, same kind of approach."

"Hopefully this kind of approach will give me longevity and that I can have many more years to come, many more opportunities to fight for these trophies." His confidence has been boosted by seeing his rivals flag in 2015. Victory on Sunday took Djokovic to 63 wins for the year against just five defeats. He also has seven titles. Federer has five titles and 51 wins against eight losses.

The Swiss was runner-up at Wimbledon and in New York but was a third round loser at the Australian Open and made just the quarter-finals in Paris.

Murray has 59 wins and 10 losses with four

titles on the year. After finishing runner-up to Djokovic in Melbourne, he was a semi-finalist at the French Open and Wimbledon and a fourth round loser in New York. Nadal's season has been a catastrophe by his high standards, quarter-final runs in Australia and Paris followed by a second round exit at Wimbledon and third round loss in New York. Djokovic is also becoming almost impossible to beat down.

On Sunday, he saved 19 of 23 break points against Federer and six of seven in his Wimbledon final victory over the Swiss. Even in his French Open final defeat to Stan Wawrinka, he saved 11 of 15 break points and seven of 12 in Melbourne.

Federer believes that Djokovic is becoming an unstoppable force. "Are you kidding me?," he barked when asked if his rival was going to keep adding to his tally.

"He's just really consistent. Seems like there are not many guys that can hang with him, don't have the tools or dare to go forward, or they don't dare to serve and volley against him because he's so good on the return. "He has perfected his game on the hard courts, no doubt about it. He was always a great clay-court player, and because he moves as well as he does, he's solid and consistent now on the grass."

"He's having an unbelievable career. He already has a ton, so obviously he's got to stay healthy and hungry, but obviously you would think he will win more." —AFP

## DOPING DOUBTS CAST SHADOW OVER WCUP

**LONDON:** The Rugby World Cup starts this week with the sport facing new doping doubts and even its global chief Bernard Lapasset says banned substances are the biggest danger facing rugby.

World Rugby this month confirmed a two year drug ban against former South African hooker Chiliboy Ralepelle. And revelations that French prosecutors are investigating pharmacists in Toulon, after being alerted by the country's anti-doping agency, emerged in the week that France left for their World Cup base in England. The problem has also been acknowledged in the tournament's host country.

World Cup blood and urine tests are to be carried out by UK Anti-Doping (UKAD). It has refused to say how many tests will be carried out but it knows rugby well. Of the 47 people on the UKAD banned list 16 are from rugby union and another 12 from rugby league.

Many of those banned in Britain and other rugby powers are still young. In New Zealand, Finn Hart-Strawbridge, 19, a former young New Zealand Barbarian, was banned for two years after admitting buying a banned substance on the internet. His lawyer said Hart-Strawbridge bought the human growth hormone precursor GHRP-6 as a "joke." —AFP