

## Sports

# Wild Oats finishes Sydney-Hobart in record time, faces likely protest

## Comanche finish just minutes behind Wild Oats

SYDNEY: Supermaxi Wild Oats XI finished the grueling Sydney to Hobart race in record time late yesterday, but confirmation of its ninth line honours win could be delayed by a protest from second-placed LDV Comanche.

Wild Oats completed the 628-nautical mile (1,163-kilometre) bluewater classic in a time of 1 day, 8hrs, 48min and 50sec, well inside the previous record set last year. The 100-footers had been in a fierce battle down Australia's east coast to the finish line at Hobart's Constitution Dock yesterday, swapping the lead several times. But the epic contest might not be over, with Comanche expected to lodge a protest against Wild Oats following a near-collision exiting Sydney Heads on Tuesday in which the latter boat appeared to tack too close to her rival. The protest must be lodged within six hours and an international jury will assess the evidence. With Comanche finishing just minutes behind Wild Oats, a possible punishment such as a time penalty could determine which yacht is crowned the winner. The 103-strong fleet, whittled down to 100 after three yachts retired, benefited from ideal wind conditions after a spectacular start from Sydney Harbour on Tuesday. The four supermaxis taking part, which include Black Jack and InfoTrack, were the favourites to take the line honours title. The favourable weather had raised expectations the 2016 record time of 1 day 13hr 31min 20sec, set by Perpetual Loyal (renamed InfoTrack this year), would be easily broken.



**But the epic contest might not be over**

"It's something quite extraordinary when you find that the race record in these days is beaten by five hours, as it was last year," Cruising Yacht Club of Australia commodore John Markos told reporters earlier yesterday. "We were all pretty staggered that the race (record) was so comprehensively beaten, and to find that the very next year that you've got the potential to beat it by several more hours is really extraordinary." The fast-paced race slowed significantly as the big boats entered the notoriously sluggish Derwent River in Hobart, with thousands waiting for the leaders as the sun set over the southern island city.

### CELEBRATIONS

This was the strongest line-up of supermaxis to contest the Sydney to Hobart, with all four having won line honours in previous races. There were jubilant scenes for Wild Oats and her supporters after her arrival in Hobart, despite uncertainty over the final outcome. The Mark Richards-skippered vessel had earlier closed the gap on Comanche helmed by Jim Cooney, even as she sailed "bare-headed"-mainsail-only-for some time after damaging the topsail, which is suited to the conditions. Currently in third place was Black Jack, followed by InfoTrack, with Hong Kong businessman Karl Kwok's 80-footer Beau Geste fifth.

In the race for the Tattersall Cup (overall winner) — the handicap honour for the vessel that performs best according to size—Matt Allen's new TP52 Ichi Ban was leading the charge ahead of Wizard. —AFP



SYDNEY: This handout photo from Rolex taken and released yesterday shows Australian Supermaxi yacht Wild Oats XI heading to Hobart during the Sydney to Hobart yacht race.—AFP

## Norway's Svindal targets third win at Bormio

BORMIO: Norway's Aksel Lund Svindal will be looking to keep his winning momentum in the men's World Cup downhill in Bormio after speeding to victories in the last two races this season. The speed specialist is leading the World Cup downhill standings after three races with wins at Beaver Creek, Colorado and Val Gardena in the Italian Dolomites, after opening with a third place at Lake Louise in Canada. And the 34-year-old will be hoping to pick up where he left off in the Italian Alpine resort of Bormio where he won last time the race was hosted. Bormio is returning to the men's calendar this season with downhill and combined races scheduled for today and tomorrow.

The venue has not hosted World Cup racing since the 2013-14 season because of a dispute with the company operating the ski lifts with nearby Santa Caterina Valfurva hosting events instead. The difficult and spectacular

Stelvio piste is famous for its physical and technical challenge and is traditionally loved by Italians who have had good results on the Stelvio and will be looking for the first podium this season.

Svindal clocked the ninth fastest time of 1min 58.2sec in the opening training run on Wednesday with the second run scheduled for Thursday depending on weather conditions with heavy snow forecast. Italian Peter Fill dominated early training ahead of compatriot Christof Innerhofer and Austrian Matthias Mayer. Another Italian Dominik Paris, winner in 2012, will also be seeking his first win of the season, with Swiss reigning world champion Beat Feuz eyeing his second win after the season-opener at Lake Louise.

Svindal—the 2010 Olympic downhill silver medalist—won in Bormio four years ago. This season he is laying the groundwork for a return to Olympic success in PyeongChang from February 9 to 25. His Vancouver podium was one of three he won including the Super-G gold but despite heading to Sochi four years later as a favorite to win multiple medals he failed to return with a single. Hampered by knee injuries in the past few years and a torn Achilles tendon in 2014 he has been making his way back from knee surgery since January. —AFP

## Brunel replaces sacked Noves as France coach

PARIS: Guy Noves was sacked yesterday as France coach after two torrid years at the helm with former Italy boss Jacques Brunel named as his successor. French rugby federation president Bernard Laporte announced.

Brunel, 63, joins the national set-up from Top 14 side Bordeaux-Begles just five weeks before France face Ireland in their Six Nations opener. His contract stretches to the 2019 World Cup in Japan, Laporte told a press conference at a Paris hotel, and he will be assisted in a break from tradition before each game by "a pool of five or six" Top 14 coaches.

Laporte hailed Brunel for his passion "of man and rugby". "That's his major strength. He is able to assume this responsibility which is not an easy one. He has broad shoulders and experience," said the French rugby chief.

Noves, also 63, suffers the ignominy of becoming the first Les Bleus manager in history to be axed. He has paid the price for the worst record of any France coach with a meagre seven wins from 22 matches (21 Tests), alongside 14 defeats and a humiliating home draw with 2019 World Cup hosts Japan.

Under his watch France lost six consecutive games between June and November this year. "We couldn't continue heading towards the wall. We had to return to the table to find new solutions, because a France team that is not winning means a federation and a sport is dying," Laporte commented.

Brunel was once ex France boss Laporte's



PARIS: French Rugby Federation (FFR) President Bernard Laporte gestures as he gives a press conference yesterday in Paris. Guy Noves was sacked as France coach after two torrid years.—AFP

right-hand man as forwards coach from 2001-2007. He took Perpignan to the French league title in 2009 and spent five years in charge of Italy between 2011 and 2016 before switching to Bordeaux.

Brunel will officially begin the task of rebuilding the national side next week, Laporte said, after his final match as Bordeaux coach against Stade Francais on Saturday. Explaining the new system of assistants Laporte said: "We want to put in place a monitoring group for internationals of coaches who have players called up, because clubs and the France team can no longer exist apart." "There will be technical meetings, ask-

ing what are we doing with France? How are we playing? We no longer want a situation where on one side we have the management, on the other the clubs, and in the middle the players." Noves was appointed by Laporte's predecessor Pierre Camou after the debacle of France's 62-13 drubbing by New Zealand in the quarter-finals of the 2015 World Cup. He appeared an obvious choice, boasting an impressive domestic track record with 10 French titles and four European Cup triumphs during his time with Toulouse.

His assistants, Yannick Bru (forwards coach) and Jean-Frederic Dubois (backs), were also relieved of their duties. —AFP

## Chess champion ready for praise, blame over Saudi boycott

LVIV: Ukrainian chess champion Anna Muzychuk is ready for both praise and blame for boycotting this week's world speed chess championship in Saudi Arabia — something which means she will lose two world titles and pass up substantial earnings.

The 27-year-old Muzychuk is refusing to defend her titles in rapid and blitz chess in Riyadh in protest at the host country's record on women's rights. Rules governing women's status meant she would have been made to feel "a secondary creature", she said in a Facebook post.

Muzychuk, speaking to Reuters in her home town of Lviv, said she made the decision knowing she would relinquish both her titles and earnings from taking part. Her younger sister Mariya, a former women's world chess champion, would also stay away from Riyadh.

"As to whether it was right or wrong, there will certainly be people who will support me and people who will condemn me," Muzychuk said. "But I took this decision and I am responsible for it."

Saudi Arabia ended a ban on women driving in September but the conservative kingdom's male guardianship system requires women to have a male relative's approval for decisions on issues like education, employment, marriage and travel plans.

More than 200 players from 70 countries are participating in the World Rapid and Blitz Chess Championships, which bear the name of King Salman bin Abdulaziz. In what the World Chess Federation (FIDE) called an "historic agreement", Saudi Arabia relaxed its dress code for the tournament, which has a total prize pot of \$2 million.

This meant women would not need to wear the hijab or abaya the loose-fitting, full-length robes that women are typically expected to wear. Instead, inside the venue, women could wear dark formal trouser suits and high-necked white blouses. But these changes did not go far enough for Muzychuk. "I have refused to go," she said. "It was certainly quite difficult to take such a decision because I am a current world champion in these chess disciplines — rapid chess and blitz. So if I do not participate in this tournament, I will lose both titles."

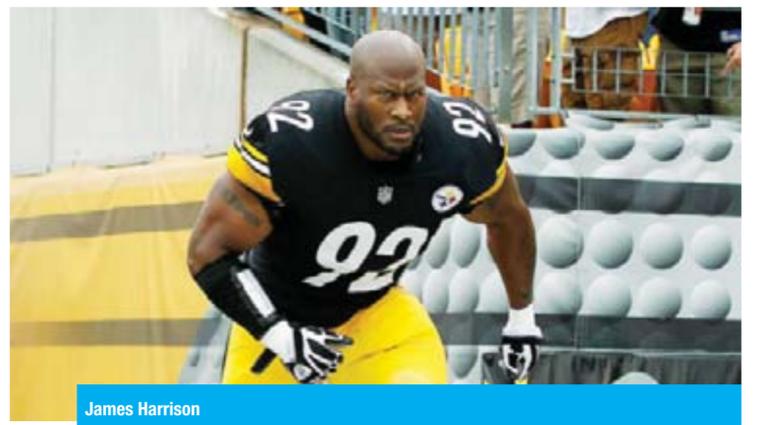
More controversy has dogged the tournament as seven Israelis have been denied visas to participate, a FIDE vice president said. It would have marked the first time Saudi Arabia had publicly hosted Israelis as the Gulf state does not recognize Israel and there are no formal ties between them. — Reuters

## Ex-Steeler linebacker Harrison signs new deal with Patriots

NEW YORK: Former Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker James Harrison signed a one-year deal Tuesday with the New England Patriots that could see him face his former team in the NFL playoffs. Harrison, the Steelers' all-time leader with 80.5 quarterback sacks, went unclaimed on waivers after being released Saturday by Pittsburgh. He made a free agent visit to the Patriots on Tuesday and signed with them.

The 39-year-old linebacker posted a photo on Instagram with new teammate Tom Brady, a 40-year-old quarterback and five-time Super Bowl champion, and the caption: "Finally... A teammate that's older than me! @tombrady." Harrison, whose contract terms were not released, can play Sunday in the Patriots' regular-season finale against the New York Jets and the upcoming playoffs.

The Patriots and Steelers are both 12-3 and have first-round byes in the American Conference playoffs. Should they each win at home in the second round, they would play for a berth in the Super Bowl. New England edged Pittsburgh 27-24 earlier this month in a regu-



James Harrison

lar-season contest that gave the Patriots a tie-breaker edge, meaning they will have a home-field edge throughout the American Conference playoffs by beating the Jets.

Harrison could have the chance to ruin the championship dreams of the team that released him after 14 seasons in Pittsburgh, including two Super Bowl championship campaigns. To make room for Harrison on the roster, the Patriots released linebacker Trevor Reilly. The Steelers released Harrison to make room for right tackle Marcus Gilbert, who was returning from suspension. Injuries

had hit the Patriots at linebacker while Harrison had seen his role diminish with the Steelers as defensive scheme changes put a greater emphasis on pass coverage for outside linebackers and rookie TJ Watt emerged as a top talent. Harrison was the 2008 NFL Defensive Player of the Year and a five-time Pro Bowl selection. He has 82.5 sacks, eight interceptions and 570 tackles in 191 career NFL games with the Steelers and Cincinnati Bengals. The Patriots now have the NFL's oldest offensive player in Brady and oldest defender in Harrison. —AFP