Chess victories win Pakistan's ‘Queens of Karachi’ freedom

Pakistan schoolgirl winning 3rd victory in a row

KARACHI: Peering at the chess board from behind her spectacles, 14-year-old Pakistani schoolgirl Malooh Ali deftly put her opponent’s king in checkmate, winning her third victory in a row. With a score of 24-4, her team of blue-and-white uniformed teenagers from SMB Fatima Jinnah Government Girls School in Karachi, Pakistan's biggest city, trounced a group of boys from a prestigious private school.

"You have to watch your opponent’s every move from every angle," said Ali, sitting on a high stool. With echoes of Uganda's "Queen of Katwe", the Pakistani teens have defied expectations about girls in their conservative nation. By the age of 18, they have had nearly twice their age at chess. "These girls always give us a tough time," said Raud A Hulk, 15, from BVS Parsi High School who lost six of his eight games to the girls.

Like Phiona Mutesi - whose rise from a Ugandan slum to international chess champions inspired the 2016 Disney film - Pakistan’s chess queens have beaten the odds to succeed. About 23 million children do not go to school in Pakistan, half of them girls who often marry before the age of 18, miss out on education because they have to work or cannot commute long distances because it is not safe. The majority of children who go to school attend government institutions, which often have dilapidated facilities and poor attendance rates by teachers.

Things to watch in Super Rugby

HONG KONG: A massive clash in New Zealand tops the bill in the latest round of Super Rugby fixtures. Here are five things to look for this weekend:

Bake-off at the Cake Tin

Reigning champions Canterbury Crusaders suffered only one defeat last year, and that was against the 2016 Super Rugby winners the Hurricanes in Wellington's Westpac Stadium, affectionately known as the Cake Tin. They head back for the great New Zealand bake-off depleted by the loss of fly-half Richie Mo’unga, who has undergone surgery on the jaw he fractured against the Western Stormers. The Hurricanes jumped straight on a plane after beating the Jaguares in Buenos Aires last weekend for the long journey home across 16 time zones as they aim to conquer jetlag and extend their home stranglehold over the Crusaders, who haven’t won in Wellington since 2012.

Sharks or Sunwolves off the mark?

Japan’s Sunwolves swap Tokyo for Durban as they look for their first victory of the season against the winless Coastal Sharks. The sides have met twice before with the Sharks, who drew at home to NSW Waratahs last week, coming out on top both times. The Sharks are desperate to get off the mark before a tough trip to face ACT Brumbies, Melbourne Rebels and Auckland Blues in consecutive away matches. "We know we have a lot to work on after last week and this game against the Sunwolves is one that we need to really nail down so that we can gain some confidence," said kicking coach Braam van Straaten on the Sport24 website.

Star-studded Rebels

The new-look Melbourne Rebels are hoping to make it three wins in a row for the first time at the start of a Super Rugby season when they host the ACT Brumbies today. The Rebels ran in six tries in last week’s 37-17 win over the Sunwolves, but coach Dave Wessels thinks his star-studded backs featuring Wallabies Will Genia, Dane Haylett-Petty, Reece Hodge and Sefa Naivalu can do more. "We’ve got some firepower in our team and we need to come up with a mindset that we want to attack games," said Wessels on the team website. "There’s a subtle difference between playing to win versus playing not to lose. And we want to be a team that plays to win.”

Super Mario turns on ‘Tahs

The Jaguares have suffered three straight defeats under their new coach, the Argentine forward great Mario Ledesma, but the NSW Waratahs are expecting a torrent examination from the team drilled by their former scrum guru. Ledesma was credited for turning around the Wallabies’ international scrumming woes when he was brought in by Michael Cheika from the ‘Tahs, whose prop Tom Robertson is expecting a tough time in Buenos Aires. "The Argentines love their scrums so we are definitely expecting a big battle up front there," Robertson said. “Mario is one of the legends of the game. You don’t play in four or five World Cups and play for your country at such a high level without learning a few things.”

‘Special’ milestone for Barrett

Beauden Barrett will make his 100th appearance for the Wellington Hurricanes in front of his home fans when he lines up against Mo’unga’s replacement, Mitch Hunt, on Saturday. "The world player of the year in 2016 and 2017, Barrett made his Canes debut in Bloemfontein against the Cheetahs in 2011, and has scored more than 1,000 points in Super Rugby. "It was always a dream to play a game for the Hurricanes and for it to be my hundredth this weekend is very special," the 26-year-old said. He is the 12th Hurricanes player to reach the milestone after Dane Coles, Andrew Hore, Cory Jane, Ma’a Nonu, Julian Savea, Conrad Smith, Rodney So’oalo, Jeremy Thrush, Necemia Tialata, Tana Umaga and Victor Vito.”

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