

## Sports

# Women World Cup victory a 'big win' for gay community

## Final draws 14.3 million US viewers, but misses record

WASHINGTON: The US women's soccer team's 2019 World Cup victory is an especially huge win for the line-up's gay players, who have spoken proudly of their sexual orientation in a sport where homosexuality is still a taboo. "Go gays!" cheered Megan Rapinoe, the US team's star striker, who was awarded the Golden Boot and Golden Ball and who scored one of the side's winning goals in the final on Sunday. "You can't win a championship without gays on your team—it's never been done before, ever. That's science, right there!" she quipped.

The line may have been tongue in cheek, but it still carried a lot of significance, noted Dawn Ennis of Outsports, a media outlet specializing in sexual minorities in sports. "Being authentic, being yourself, being true, makes you a better person," Ennis said. "It must make you a better athlete when you are not worrying about hiding a secret about who you are."

Football federations "need to make sure that players are their authentic selves," said Ryan Adams, president of the North American Gay Soccer Association, which pushes for the inclusion of members of the LGBTQ community in US soccer. "It's in their own interest, when people are their own authentic selves, they are not distracted about being in the closet," he said. Rapinoe is far from being the only openly gay member of the team. As well as coach Jill Ellis, five of the American world champions are lesbians, including Ashlyn Harris and Ali Krieger, who are engaged and are soon to marry.

Their defeated opponents, the Netherlands, also had five lesbian players in their line-up. According to Outsports, around 40 of the women who played in the World Cup are members of the LGBTQ community. Adams said the trend would only continue to grow: "They showed other countries that have closeted people and athletes that you can be your most authentic self and play among the best. It does amazing things for visibility."

### Where are the men?

That visibility—partly due to the 2019 World Cup coinciding with massive Gay Pride parades around the world—was enhanced by the fact that the tournament was the most-watched in the history of women's soccer. "I'm motivated by people like me, who are fighting for the same things," said Rapinoe. "I take more energy from that than from trying to prove anyone wrong. That's draining on yourself. But for me, to be gay and fabulous, during Pride month at the World Cup, is nice." "What's amazing is that the women who are out are not only out, they are out and loud and proud," said Ennis. "They are owning their identity and their orientation."

Does that mean the US will now be ready to totally accept gay players? Adams thinks that it is well on the way, although powerful stereotypes still remain. "In the US, there is an unfortunate assumption that very good athletes are lesbian. It's unfair and it's untrue," he said. For men, there is a different standard. French star Antoine Griezmann said recently that male "players do not come out of the closet because they are afraid," a fact borne out by homophobic comments on social media and chants in the stadiums.

"There are a lot of bad people in football and players can be afraid to go to stadiums and get abused," Griezmann said in an interview. "We know there are gay and bisexual men in sports, but there is a double standard," said Ennis. The number of professional male footballers around the world still playing after coming out as gay can easily be counted on the fingers of one hand. And the men's World Cup last year had no openly gay players on the pitch.

### Misses record

More than 14 million Americans watched on television as the US women's soccer team clinched their fourth World Cup title, broadcaster Fox said on Monday, but the TV audience failed to break records. Sunday's match in Lyon, France, in which the United



RHONE: United States' forward Megan Rapinoe poses with the Golden Ball next to United States' midfielder Rose Lavelle with the Bronze Ball after the France 2019 Women's World Cup football final match between USA and the Netherlands on July 7, 2019. — AFP

States beat the Netherlands 2-0, was seen by 14.3 million Americans on Fox and its cable sport channels, the broadcaster said.

The record for the most-watched soccer match in US history is held by the 2015 Women's World Cup final between the United States and Japan, which was played in Canada. That match drew a television audience of 25.4 million Americans, according to Nielsen data. Sunday's television viewing figures do not include audiences in bars and those who watched on large outdoor screens across the United States.

Fox said that across streaming platforms, Sunday's final delivered an average minute audience of 289,000 viewers, making it the most-streamed Women's World Cup final in history. The television audience reflected surging popularity for soccer in the United States, where interest in the sport has lagged behind American football, baseball and basketball. In Britain, almost 12 million people tuned in to watch England's 2-1 defeat by the United States last week, making it the most watched television program of the year so far in Britain. — Agencies

## Briton, American injured in Spain's Pamplona bull run

PAMPLONA: Half-ton fighting bulls knocked over thrill-seekers yesterday in a fast, adrenaline-fuelled chase through the winding streets of Pamplona in northern Spain that sent an American and a Briton to hospital. There were no gorings but a 49-year-old British man fractured his ankle, requiring surgery, and a

42-year-old man from Chicago suffered a head injury in a fall although he was expected to be discharged from hospital later on, regional health officials said.

Six bulls and six steers that keep the herd together, charged through the narrow, cobbled streets of the city, clearing a path through a sea of hundreds of runners mostly dressed in white with red handkerchiefs around their necks in the third bull run of the famed San Fermin festival.

The bulls from the Jose Escolar Gil ranch in the central province of Avila completed the 848.6-metre (928-yard) course from a holding pen to the city bull ring in two minutes and 13 seconds, the fastest run so far this year. They were to be killed in bullfights later. Some people sought safety by crowding close to the walls of the winding route but others dared to touch the rear of

the bulls or to race a few steps in front of the sharp horns. Two Americans and a Spaniard were on Sunday gored in the first run, which is usually the most crowded of the festival. All three remain in hospital.

People from around the world flock to the city of 200,000 residents to test their bravery and enjoy the festival's mix of round-the-clock parties, religious processions and concerts. Sixteen people have been killed in the bull runs since records started in 1911. The most recent death took place in 2009 when a bull gored a 27-year-old Spaniard in the neck, heart and lungs. The nine-day fiesta, which dates back to medieval times and was immortalized in Nobel Prize-winning author Ernest Hemingway's 1926 novel "The Sun Also Rises", ends on July 14.—AFP

## Doping scandal guru believes drugs still used in baseball

LOS ANGELES: The mastermind of the notorious BALCO doping scandal believes the explosion in home runs seen across baseball this season shows that athletes are continuing to use performance-enhancing drugs, a report said Monday. Victor Conte, the founder of the Bay Area Laboratory Co-operative, told USA Today that baseball players had worked out how to elude drug-testers by varying the time and dosage of performance-enhancing substances.

Conte, 69, was jailed for four months in 2005 for his role in a notorious doping scandal which implicated baseball stars Barry Bonds and Jason Giambi and led to the downfall of Olympic track and field star Marion Jones. However, Conte has continued to speak out on the subject of doping in baseball, and believes a recent spike in home runs is explained by drug use. At the current pace, Major League Baseball is on target to record 6,668 home runs this year, nearly 1,100 more than last season, and 500 more than the all-time record of 6,105 set in 2017.

Some players and critics believe changes to baseballs used by the league are responsible for the rising homer rate. Conte, however, believes drugs are behind the boom. "There are guys using these drugs, really as many or more than ever before," Conte told USA Today. "The difference is these guys not only understand how and when to take it, but they've figured out how to circumvent the system rather easily, and are flying under the radar. That's why you have so many guys (on pace for) 40 homers, but nobody is hitting 80." Conte said testing players at stadiums was ineffective. Some performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) "are simply undetectable, and there are other ways that you can use PEDs and circumvent the testing," Conte said.

"In the old days, before testing, you can load up on testosterone and it will keep your levels high 24 hours a day. Now, they use a fast-acting testosterone. You can take a little (lozenge), take a cream, and after four hours, it peaks, and comes down six or eight hours later. "If baseball really wanted to bust their ass, you'd go to their house in the middle of the night or the first thing in the morning." Baseball has one of the toughest anti-doping regimes of any professional sport in the United States.

The league carried out more than 11,526 drug tests last year, and tested 2,244 blood samples for human growth hormone. According to league figures, 11 adverse analytical findings were reported from the drug testing which led to sanctions. Eight cases were for performance-enhancing substances, two for the diuretic furosemide and one for the stimulant amphetamine. The performance-enhancing substances found included the steroid stanozolol and banned blood booster erythropoietin.—AFP



## Kuwait becomes main sponsor of UCI MTB Eliminator series

BRUSSELS: Yesterday the newly established Kuwait Cycling Club signed a cooperation with the Belgian sport company City Mountainbike. The agreement was announced in the framework of the second Tour de France stage, which departed in Brussels, Belgium's capital. The ceremony was attended by dozens of CEOs active in the Belgian sport and cycling ecosystem.

With this deal Kuwait will become the principal sponsor of the UCI MTB Eliminator series, a spectacular mountainbike race with already 12 professional

cycling races around the world. The official title of the international cycling event would be branded UCI MTB Eliminator series powered by Kuwait Cycling Club. This gives Kuwait an enormous visibility and credibility in the international cycling world.

In addition, parallel negotiations are also underway to organize an international mountainbike race in Kuwait-city, in the framework of the Middle East games or even the World Cup. Belgium's economic counselor in Kuwait Sam SERVAES, who attended the ceremony,

welcomed the deal as a positive example of the new dynamic in Kuwait's professional sport landscape.

Recently the International Olympic Committee (IOC) repealed the suspension of Kuwait International Committee. With this deal Kuwait makes a large step further with the internationalization of its cycling ambitions. Furthermore, he continued, "Belgium is famous for its cyclists and sport organizations. Our companies are ready to collaborate with Kuwait, at mutual benefit for the sports economics of our both countries".

## Nigeria goal poacher Ighalo could burst S African bubble

CAIRO: Former English Premier League forward Odion Ighalo could be the Nigerian who bursts the South African bubble when the countries clash today in an Africa Cup of Nations quarter-final. The 30-year-old, who played for Watford before moving to China two years ago, has scored three goals at the African football showpiece in Egypt. That tally gives him a share of the lead in the Golden Boot race with Senegalese Sadio Mane, Congolese Cedric Bakambu and Algerian Adam Ounas. Two of his goals came in the 3-2 second round defeat of defending champions Cameroon, and he could have finished with four having hit the woodwork and been foiled by a superb save. A few hours after Nigeria triumphed last Saturday, South Africa stunned hosts and pre-tour-

namment favorites Egypt 1-0 in Cairo with Theminkosi Lorch snatching a late winner.

Most South Africans had written off Bafana Bafana (The Boys) after a dismal one-win group campaign and were discussing who should replace unpopular coach Stuart Baxter. If Nigeria and South Africa can replicate their last-16 form, a titanic struggle for supremacy is on the cards at the Cairo International Stadium. Here, AFP Sport looks at the first quarter-final, between Senegal and giantkillers Benin at another Cairo stadium, and the showdown between Nigeria and South Africa.

### Nigeria v South Africa

Ighalo says the 2-0 group stage loss to outsiders Madagascar was a massive wake-up call that worked in favour of the Super Eagles. "Any thoughts we had of an easy passage to the closing stages vanished after that defeat. We realized that many teams were motivated by playing Nigeria and raised their game against us."

"While I have enjoyed scoring three times in Egypt, it is irrelevant who puts the ball in the net as long as he is a Nigerian. "We want to win the title a fourth time, but South Africa also want to get their hands on the trophy,

as do all the other title contenders." South Africa have consistently battled against Nigeria, with a shock 2019 Cup of Nations qualifying triumph in Uyo their lone competitive victory over them.

### Benin v Senegal

Liverpool star Mane does not want to take any more penalties at the Cup of Nations after missing two of three he was entrusted with during the tournament. The 27-year-old missed and scored from spot-kicks in a convincing group win over Kenya and fluffed another penalty when he edged Uganda in a last-16 encounter.

"I missed penalties in two games and that it is not a good ratio," admitted the forward who shared the last Premier League Golden Boot award with team-mate Mohamed Salah and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang of Arsenal. Benin shocked Morocco, considered one of the strongest title contenders, by winning on penalties after playing most of extra-time a man short when Khaled Adenon was red-carded. "This was the greatest achievement in Benin football history," said veteran forward Mickael Pote. "We may not be the best team in Egypt, but our team spirit is second to none." — AFP