

Sports

Sunwolves cull a blow to Asian rugby before WCup

Empty seats in Singapore underline the scale of challenge in expanding rugby in football-mad Asia

TOKYO: The decision by Super Rugby organisers to give Japan's Sunwolves the boot six months before the country hosts the World Cup has sparked concerns about the sport's growth prospects in Asia.

The axe will fall on the Tokyo-based franchise after next season following a chastening first three years in the southern hemisphere's elite competition.

Last week's announcement by Super Rugby organisers SANZAAR comes as a humiliating blow to Asian rugby as Japan gears up to host the continent's first World Cup later this year.

"It is clear that this is going to cause quite a lot of damage," admitted Sunwolves CEO Yuji Watase after a 37-24 defeat by South Africa's Lions at the weekend.

"It's obvious we had a responsibility to expand rugby in Asia. We have tried to do that and to an extent I believe we achieved that aim-but in pure economic terms, the reality is not that simple."

The Sunwolves were brought into Super Rugby in 2016 to tap into new Asian markets but SANZAAR said it wasn't prepared to bankroll the perennial whipping boys after Japan's rugby board withdrew financial support. Another reason for establishing the Sunwolves was to create a de facto Japanese national team-after Japan stunned two-time champions South Africa at the 2015 World Cup.

In reality, many Japan players stayed with their Top League teams, while others such as World Cup hero Ayumu Gohmaru and Japan captain Michael Leitch initially opted to play for other Super Rugby sides.

While Top League teams, backed by the corporate

might of companies such as Kobe Steel and Panasonic, can attract rugby greats like Dan Carter and Sonny Bill Williams, the Sunwolves were trawling for Super Rugby rejects in the run-up to their inaugural season.

EMPTY SEATS

Critics subsequently called for the team to be kicked out, pointing to their woeful record and the fact they rely so heavily on imports-with players from New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Fiji, Tonga, Georgia and South Korea having pulled on the red shirt.

That volume of foreigners, dissenters argue, defeats a key objective for including the Sunwolves in the first place-to help grow rugby in Asia.

The Sunwolves divide their home fixtures between Tokyo-where they largely sell out-and fly-away games in Singapore, where they don't come close.

The swathes of empty seats in Singapore underline the scale of the challenge in expanding rugby in football-mad Asia. Japan Rugby Football Union chairman Noriyuki Sakamoto called on Sunwolves fans to follow Top League teams or the Japan national side, who have maintained the feel-good factor since the 2015 World Cup. Organisers for this year's tournament are confident the impressive form the "Brave Blossoms" have shown under Jamie Joseph will boost ticket sales, and expect a large turnout for Asia's debut World Cup.

"We feel like this will be the most impactful Rugby World Cup we've ever had," tournament director Alan Gilpin told AFP in a recent interview.

"We will have taken the sport forward more than we



SINGAPORE: File photo shows Sunwolves' Ryohei Yamanaka (centre L) is tackled by Lions' players during the Super Rugby match between Japan's Sunwolves and South Africa's Lions in Singapore on March 23, 2019. — AFP

would have done in England or New Zealand or France," he added, pointing to 4.5 million ticket applications, 70 percent of those from Japan.

"There are a couple of hundred thousand kids play-

ing rugby now in Japan that weren't there a year ago, let alone five years ago. We are somewhere new, the opportunity is to leave a bigger legacy in this World Cup than we've ever done before." — AFP

Sindhu, Srikanth eye consistency ahead of 2020 Olympics

NEW DELHI: India's badminton stars PV Sindhu and Kidambi Srikanth said yesterday they are looking for a consistent run leading up to the 2020 Olympics, starting with the India Open tournament this week.

Olympic silver medallist Sindhu suffered a first-round exit in the women's singles of the All England Open early this month. Former world number one Srikanth lost in the men's quarter-finals in Birmingham.

But 23-year-old Sindhu, who claimed the World Tour Finals in December last year, said she has put the All England loss behind her to focus on qualifying for the Olympics.

Qualification for next year's Tokyo Games will depend on badminton world rankings between April 29, 2019 and April 26, 2020.

Two players each from men's and women's category will be allotted an Olympic berth if they are ranked in the top 16.

"2019, it wasn't a really good start. I have been losing and winning," world number six and top seed Sindhu told reporters ahead of the India Open starting today.

"It is these three tournaments (India, Malaysia and Singapore) and then the Olympic qualifications will also start. I have to be mentally and physically fit to give my best.

"I felt bad for a few days (after the All England loss) but then I thought it's not over with this and there is a lot more to come. Every time you can come back much more stronger and learn from your mis-



PV Sindhu

takes," said the lanky star.

Sindhu will open against compatriot Mugdha Agrey and is expected to face a sterner test later in the week with Thailand's Ratchanok Intanon and Chinese third seed He Bingjiao also in contention.

Denmark's Viktor Axelsen-top seed and world number four-leads the men's field in the \$350,000 tournament that will see many Indian players in action.

Srikanth, who has endured a title drought for the last 17 months, remains a firm favourite on home turf.

Last year's champion, Shi Yuqi of China, withdrew just ahead of the tournament.

"The results haven't really come my way but happy with the way I have been playing. (I am) working on to be more consistent and looking to do well at the Olympics," said world number seven Srikanth. — AFP

Record scorer Folau wants more high kicks

SYDNEY: Soaring record try scorer Israel Folau wants his NSW Waratahs teammates to kick him more high bombs after the fullback's aerial power set up a shock 20-12 win over champions Canterbury Crusaders.

Folau twice rose above the Crusaders defence to gather high kicks, one setting up a try for Cameron Clark and the second enabling the fullback to score a 59th Super Rugby try to match Doug Howlett's record set during stints at the Otago Highlanders, Wellington Hurricanes and Auckland Blues.

The display at the weekend by the spring-heeled former Australian Rules footballer prompted Crusaders coach Scott Robertson to remark: "He should be working for NASA."

And Wallaby Folau reckons he could be even more prolific if the Waratahs used the aerial tactic more often.

"I still think it is (underused)," he said on the Rugby Australia website of attacking kicks. "Of the 59 tries, you'd be probably lucky to get maybe 10 of them from kicks.

"So it is something I would like to see a lot more, because I am obviously confident in my ability to try and get up and contest for the ball," added the former rugby league international.

"I will continue to work on those combinations with Bernard (Foley) and Kurtley (Beale), whoever is in the playmaker role, and continue to execute," he added.

Folau's 59 tries came 10 games quicker than former All Black Howlett and he is set to run away with the record after last month signing a new four-year deal with the Waratahs until the end of 2022.

He has the chance to make the record his own on Friday when the Waratahs face Japan's Sunwolves in Sydney.

The 29-year-old said he had never met Howlett, but used to watch him growing up. "I have never come across him but I remember as a young kid watching clips of him with the All Blacks and obviously he was a great finisher, and someone who obviously scored a lot of tries," Folau said. "I wasn't coming into the game thinking about tries or anything like that. But it's always a bonus to cross and get a meat pie (try)." — AFP

Casey holds on late to repeat as PGA Valspar champion

MIAMI: Britain's Paul Casey won his second consecutive Valspar Championship on Sunday, holding off South Africa's Louis Oosthuizen and American Jason Kokrak for a one-stroke US PGA Tour victory.

The 41-year-old Englishman stumbled with a bogey at the par-3 17th hole but two-putted from 22 feet at 18 to become the first back-to-back winner of the event at Innisbrook Resort's Copperhead course in Palm Harbor, Florida.

Casey had never before defended a professional title and he won for only the second time in six tries with a 54-hole US PGA lead by firing a final round one-over par 72 to finish 72 holes on eight-under 276.

"Today wasn't easy but it felt very different since winning last year," Casey said. "That felt like my first victory. Since then, new confidence. I've felt like a totally different player."

Casey edged Tiger Woods and Patrick Reed by a stroke for last year's Valspar crown.

Oosthuizen, the 2010 British Open champion, and Kokrak, who failed to win his first PGA crown after 198 starts over eight seasons, shared second on 277 with two-time Masters winner Bubba Watson and South Korean Im Sung-jae another stroke adrift. Casey, who has never broken 70 when leading a US PGA event after 54 holes, won his only prior title when leading entering the last round at the 2009 Houston Open.

This marks the first time in seven years that European players have won three consecutive US PGA events, with Northern Ireland's Rory

Mellroy having taken The Players Championship last week and Italy's Francesco Molinari taking the Arnold Palmer Invitational two weeks ago.

WOES FOR NO. 1 JOHNSON

Top-ranked Dustin Johnson, one adrift at the start, failed to make a birdie and shot 74 to share sixth with Spain's Jon Rahm and American Ryan Armour on 279. The poor round snapped Johnson's run of 14 consecutive rounds in the 60s, the longest such streak of his career or by any tour player this season.

Casey opened with a birdie but stumbled early. He found a bunker and took bogey at three, then followed a birdie at the par-5 fifth with bogeys at six after finding deep rough off the tee and seven on three putts from 26 feet.

Oosthuizen began with an eagle, holing at 82-foot bunker shot at the par-5 opening hole. He made bogey at the par-5 fifth but birdied the sixth and dropped his approach to three feet to birdie the par-5 11th and share the lead at eight-under. Casey blasted out of a bunker to two feet and birdied the par-5 11th to seize a one-shot lead over Oosthuizen and Kokrak, who birdied the par-5 11th and par-3 13th to join the hunt.

Casey couldn't save par from 14 feet after finding a bunker at the par-3 13th, but restored his edge on a birdie at the par-5 14th after dropping his approach two feet from the cup.

Oosthuizen fell back with a bogey at 16 but Casey, after saving par from deep greenside rough at 16, missed a tense five-footer and made bogey at the par-3 17th, falling back into a share of the lead with Kokrak.

Kokrak then missed a nervy eight-foot par putt at 18 and slid back level with Oosthuizen, leaving Casey needing a par at 18 to win.

Casey's final tee shot found a bunker right of the fairway, but he dropped his approach 22 feet from the cup then rolled his birdie try inches past the hole before tapping in for the victory. — AFP

Suspicion surrounds boxing decisions at 2016 Rio Olympics

PARIS: An internal investigation by amateur boxing's world body AIBA has raised serious questions about the judging at the 2016 Rio Olympics, with particular suspicion falling on a French official, French newspaper Le Monde reported yesterday.

France basked in the glow of six boxing medals in Rio, including golds for super heavy-weight Tony Yoka and his now wife Estelle Mossely. But three days before the end of the Olympic tournament, boxing federation AIBA removed its then executive director Karim Bouzidi from his role because he was accused of favouring fighters from certain countries, according to Le Monde's report.

Le Monde, which carried out the investigation with Bulgarian newspaper Bulgaria Today, said it had seen the internal AIBA report and emails that showed the body was concerned Bouzidi had influenced the decisions of so-called five-star judges in Olympic bouts.

An email from AIBA's then-president Wu Ching-Ko dated November 18, 2016 said the body suspected Bouzidi of acting with another senior official to influence the judges, in particular those featuring boxers from France and Uzbekistan.

Bouzidi did not reply to AFP's request for a comment yesterday. Andre Martin, the head of the French boxing federation, told Le Monde: "The results in Rio were not 'stolen', they are honest. It's true that we knew Bouzidi but we never blackmailed him."

AIBA's internal investigation found that Bouzidi had the power to appoint the referees and officials for competitions, but added there was no direct proof that these changes influenced the results of fights.

Bouzidi's arrival in the senior AIBA ranks coincided with a campaign by France to try to improve its Olympic boxing results after disappointing performances at the 2008 Beijing and 2012 London Games.

One part of the strategy involved setting up a franchise to take part in World Series Boxing, an international competition aimed at swelling AIBA's coffers. Kevin Rabaud, the former coach of the French team in the WSB series, said they had done nothing wrong.

"We always played by the rules... We organised events in France so that the athletes could become better known. If the fight was close, it might play in the boxer's favour if they were better known.

"In Rio, we got results thanks to our reputation and our previous results."

Boxing is already facing the threat of expulsion from the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Its inclusion depends on the outcome of an investigation into AIBA by the International Olympic Committee, which has presented the body with a list of 41 questions via audit firm Deloitte, who will then report back to the Olympic body.

Controversial Uzbek businessman Gafur Rakhimov, who the US Treasury Department has linked to "transnational criminal organisations", stepped down as AIBA president on Friday.

Relations between the IOC and AIBA were hit hard at the 2016 Rio Olympics when 36 officials and referees were suspended amid allegations of bout fixing. Rakhimov insists the allegations against him are "politically motivated lies".

His emergence as amateur boxing's head in 2018 was only made possible by a series of scandals and accidents of circumstance. — AFP