

Sports

Thai badminton star cleared of doping as tests linked to meat

BANGKOK: Former badminton world champion Ratchanok Intanon bears “no fault” after testing positive for doping, the sport’s governing body said yesterday, clearing the path for the Thai star to compete in the 2020 Olympics after another close brush with a possible suspension.

The Badminton World Federation (BWF) said the women’s world number 5 was found to be in violation of anti-doping regulations earlier this year. But Ratchanok, known as “May” in Thailand, was able to prove that the low amount of the banned substance clenbuterol was related to meat she had eaten at a barbecue restaurant.

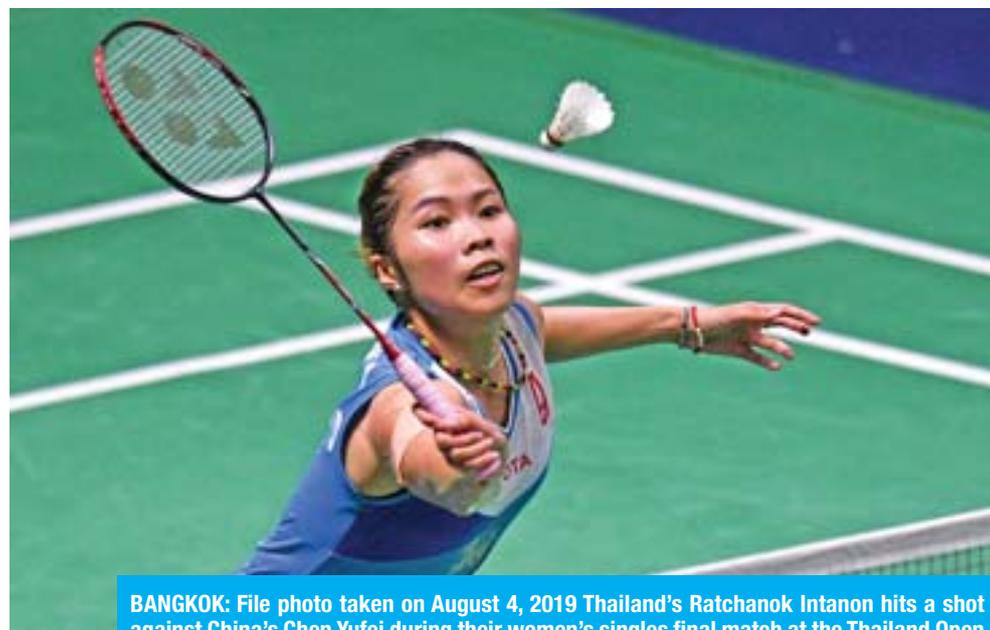
“She was found to bear no fault or negligence for the violation, and thus no period of ineligibility has been imposed on her,” the statement said. The conclusion was reached after taking into account the sufficiently low concentration of clenbuterol in her system, according to the 26-page doping panel decision.

It also cited positive tests of clenbuterol from at least eight samples collected from the restaurant where Ratchanok had eaten meat. Thailand’s Badminton Federation celebrated the decision in a statement saying Ratchanok was “confident”

she did not do anything wrong. It was the second close call with drug tests for Ratchanok, who broke down in tears in 2016 when cleared of doping. Back then it was ruled that the detected substance had been administered for a tendon injury and was allowed.

The player has caught the imagination of Thais as much for her rags-to-riches back story as on-court heroics. Her parents are migrants to Bangkok from the country’s poor northeast who worked in menial jobs at a badminton centre on the outskirts of the city.

While they worked, Ratchanok honed her on court skills. This week’s result will come as a relief to the former world no 1 and for Thai sports in general, which is already weathering a doping scandal in weightlifting. Thai weightlifters were not allowed to compete at the world championships despite the country hosting the event last month after nine Thais — including two reigning Olympic champions — were suspended following positive drug tests since November. The tests prompted Thailand to voluntarily ban itself from the September championships in Pattaya as well as next year’s Olympics. — AFP



BANGKOK: File photo taken on August 4, 2019 Thailand’s Ratchanok Intanon hits a shot against China’s Chen Yufei during their women’s singles final match at the Thailand Open badminton tournament in Bangkok. — AFP

High noon decision Friday on typhoon-hit Japan GP qualifying

SUZUKA: Japanese Grand Prix organisers will decide at noon Friday (0300 GMT) if the race weekend timetable, including tomorrow qualifying, can go ahead as Super Typhoon Hagibis threatens the Suzuka circuit.

A spokesperson for the governing body FIA told AFP Thursday that any decision to change the weekend programme rested with the local authorities in consultation with the FIA and Formula One.

The typhoon has already claimed casualties at the Rugby World Cup in Japan, with tomorrow’s England-France clash in Yokohama and the New Zealand-Italy match in Toyota City cancelled.

Two minor support races scheduled for Saturday at Suzuka have already been scrapped as a precaution. Tomorrow’s third free practice session and qualifying are likely to follow suit, but the volatile nature of Hagibis means even Sunday’s race could be under threat, though the current forecast is for better weather that day.

Earlier, the FIA issued a statement saying the safety of fans and drivers would be the top priority as Hagibis — classed as “violent” and the equivalent of a Category Five hurricane — is predicted to make landfall near Tokyo tomorrow. The latest forecasts for Saturday predict heavy rain and winds gusting in excess of 100 kilometres an hour to batter the Suzuka Circuit, which lies near the Honshu coast about 300 kilometres (180 miles) southwest of the capital.

“Every effort is being made to minimise disruption to the Formula 1 timetable, however, the safety of the fans, competitors and everyone at the Suzuka Circuit remains the top pri-

ority,” said the FIA. The qualifying session, originally scheduled to start at 3 pm Saturday (0600 GMT), determines the starting order for Sunday’s race.

It leaves the organisers with two options to form the race grid. They can either shift qualifying to Sunday morning, something that was done successfully at Suzuka in 2004 and 2010 because of bad weather, or they can use the timings of the drivers from Friday afternoon’s second free practice to determine the starting order. Whatever happens, a postponement of the grand prix to Monday is impossible, the FIA said. After the tail-end of a typhoon affected the 2014 race at Suzuka, French driver Jules Bianchi crashed heavily after losing control in rain and poor visibility and died the following year from his injuries having never recovered from a coma.

Drivers yesterday backed changing the weekend timetable. “I don’t think anybody wants to put anybody’s life in danger,” said Ferrari’s four-time world champion Sebastian Vettel. “The decision is not for us, necessarily, because for us it’s nice and easy, cosy, in the garage. “But for the people out there around the track, it is not nice to be sitting there with rain going sideways.” A blank Saturday would be a huge disappointment to thousands of fanatical supporters at one of the best-attended races on the circuit, but other drivers were prepared for the worst.

“I’ve got my speedboat on standby, so I’m ready,” joked Red Bull’s Max Verstappen. “At the moment it doesn’t look very likely. So we’ll have a bit more free time tomorrow and it means waking up a little bit earlier on Sunday,” he added. — AFP

Hamilton warns Ferrari not to snub Vettel to ‘ramp up’ Leclerc

SUZUKA: Lewis Hamilton said yesterday that Sebastian Vettel was now “clearly not” number one at Ferrari but warned against the team “ramping up” support for rookie Charles Leclerc ahead of this weekend’s Japanese Grand Prix.

Ferrari’s botched team orders at the previous race in Russia two weeks ago handed Hamilton a surprise victory after Mercedes had trailed Ferrari on the timing sheets all weekend.

Vettel ignored team instruction several times to hand back the lead to Leclerc at Sochi.

The German’s retirement with a mechanical problem and a virtual safety car then enabled Hamilton and Bottas to secure the top two steps of the podium.

Both Leclerc and Vettel were at pains yesterday to point out that all was now “clear” between them and Ferrari. But the major beneficiary of their spat, Hamilton, has been keenly watching the antics of the Maranello team. “It’s an interesting dynamic they have there because obviously Seb was number one and now clearly not,” Hamilton told reporters at Suzuka. Leclerc has been the fastest man on the grid since the summer break, securing four straight pole positions and two race wins.

“From kind of the energy, from the outlook, they’re trying to ramp Charles up to be (number one). Is that good for a team? I don’t think so,” said Hamilton.

Hamilton said he had a similar issue in his

2007 rookie season at McLaren when he partnered Fernando Alonso, and that didn’t end well after the Spaniard was angered by losing his number one status.

“Obviously when I was with Fernando he was the hired number one. But then mid-season they changed that,” recalled Hamilton.

“He was still the number one because he was the highest-paid driver.”

“But then they gave us equal fuel and then you started seeing changes like Montreal and Indianapolis. Then that dynamic shifted, and it obviously didn’t go well for the team,” he added.

“There are drivers that always wanted that number one status. I like to earn that. Start on an equal platform, then either of you can get that number one status on that weekend. Weekend-in, weekend-out.”

Mercedes can secure a record sixth successive constructors’ championship with another one-two in Japan. “It’s pretty special,” said Hamilton. “I’m really proud to be a part of it.”

Hamilton knows a victory Sunday will leave only his teammate Valtteri Bottas able to catch him in the remaining four races.

But Saturday’s qualifying and practice have been put in doubt by the approach of Super Typhoon Hagibis, which has already caused havoc with the cancellation of two Rugby World Cup games. Japanese Grand Prix organisers will decide at noon on Friday (0300 GMT) whether to scrap Saturday’s schedule, saying the safety of fans and drivers was their top priority.

A relaxed Hamilton, though, did not seem bothered by Hagibis, categorised as “violent” — the highest level on the Japan storm scale, even if it causes qualifying to be shifted to Sunday morning.

“I love driving in the rain,” Hamilton said, seemingly oblivious to Hagibis potentially lashing Suzuka with torrents of water and winds well in excess of 100 kilometres per hour. — AFP