

BADMINTON

MARIN SHOCK LOSS PUSHES HER TO THE VERGE OF EXIT

DUBAI: Carolina Marin, the world champion, the BWF player of the year, and the favorite to win the Super Series finals for the first time, was pushed to the edge of the exit yesterday after a second surprising defeat in two days. The Spaniard's 21-9, 21-15 loss to the half-overlooked but highly mobile Japanese player Nozomi Okuhara left Marin's survival depending on Taiwan's Tai Tzu Ying achieving an improbable first win of the week against former world number one Saina Nehwal.

And yet Marin's debut in the tour's flagship event started satisfactorily two days ago with a tidy victory over Tai. It went very oddly wrong however when she missed a game point in the first game yesterday against Nehwal, her far-from-fit predecessor as number one, and slid to a defeat that sounded as though it was as unexpected to her opponent as to anyone else. It soon became even worse today against Okuhara, who took the

lead straight away, dominated the first game, resisted Marin's fightback from a four-point deficit to 11-11, and finished as confidently as if she had expected this outcome all along.

Certainly in the slow conditions the result was less of a surprise than it seemed. Marin's formidable smash hardly ever found the floor, and after one long rally which she nearly won several times but somehow never quite did she ended flat on her back on the floor. That dramatic moment, at 13-11, also seemed significant. The Spaniard's point-winning screams of celebration grew fewer while Okuhara's movements became ever quicker and, after completing her third win of the week to become an unexpected semi-finalist, Okuhara claimed she expected to play even better.

She added: "I'm now going off to do more training", to general amazement. Marin was honest. "I didn't prepare so well for my match with Saina," she admitted. "And today

I made far too many mistakes. I'm very disappointed." She also spoke about going home straight away to Spain at the end of a long hard season. But there was a wait of several hours before that probability, along with Nehwal's fate, could be confirmed. A few moments later Ratchanok Intanon joined Okuhara in the semi-finals. The former world champion from Thailand was able to create many more openings than Marin had, and enterprisingly squeezed out a 21-14, 21-19 win against Wang Shixian, the former world number one from China.

The other Chinese player, Wang Yihan, the former world champion, had already qualified in this group, with two tough three-game wins, one of which was against her compatriot, the other Wang. The best known Chinese player here, the defending champion Chen Long, completed an unbeaten three-match sequence in his group with a 21-14, 21-17 win over Jan Jorgensen, the

world number two from Denmark. Both had already qualified for the semi-finals and according to Chen "enjoyed themselves out there."

That did not however prevent him from accelerating impressively from a 10-13 deficit to win the first game, and producing another well-timed surge of five points out of six in the middle of the second game to ensure control of the match. He looks an odds on favorite. Earlier the tournament saw the premature exit of one famous player, but in the process lost two pairs of Olympic champions, when Zhao Yunlei withdrew with a knee injury. Zhao, a winner gold medals in women's and mixed doubles at the 2012 London Olympics, had struggled through four matches in the two doubles events with her partners Tian Qing in the women's and Zhang Na, before deciding to call it off for the week after two wins and two defeats. — AFP

WITH NO HEADGEAR, US OLYMPIC BOXERS ARE STRUGGLING WITH CUTS

RENO: Antonio Vargas never had a cut in his boxing life until blood trickled down his forehead Wednesday during his most important bout. The touted flyweight fought through the surprise and pain, but his Olympic dreams were imperiled when he lost a split decision at the US team trials. "It happened so fast," Vargas said. "It was just a clash of heads. I had that fight, man." Vargas didn't blame his loss on the blood, but facial cuts are a growing problem worldwide for Olympic-style boxers fighting for places in Rio de Janeiro at the first Olympics since the International Boxing Association (AIBA) decided male boxers will no longer wear protective headgear.

Seven fighters developed significant cuts during the first three days of the US Olympic trials in Reno this week, including heavy-weight favorite Cam F. Awesome and Vargas, the Pan Am Games champion who might be the Americans' best chance to end their 12-year gold medal drought. They both fought on, but three other boxers were cut badly enough to force them out of the tournament. Mark Dawson was done after he needed 18 stitches in his forehead to seal a grotesque cut, also the first of his career. Even Chris Ousley's Olympic dream died because his opponent, Carlos Monroe, was cut down to the skull and couldn't continue, yet still won their bout on the scorecards.

Serious cuts

The problems aren't confined to the US, with serious cuts reported from tournaments around the world since the 2013 rule change. AIBA reportedly reassessed its headgear decision during the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow when Australian boxer Daniel Lewis was cut too badly to continue, but quickly confirmed the plan would move forward to Rio. Even AIBA's detractors realize the absence of headgear has made Olympic boxing more television-friendly. While AIBA acknowledges the danger of cuts, it claims the change was made because concussions will decrease without the heavy protective padding, although many American coaches and fighters chuckle at the science used to justify the decision.

"I don't like it, and I don't think it's necessary," said Virgil Hunter, the respected veteran trainer behind Olympic gold medalist Andre



RENO: Cam Awesome (left) and Derae Crane compete in the US Olympic Boxing Trials in Reno, Nev. Facial cuts have become a problem for many Olympic boxing hopefuls fighting toward the Rio Games, where they won't wear headgear. — AP

Ward's career. "Because what does it really say about the sport? You're subjecting a kid to trauma for nothing. It's one thing to get cut, and you get a million-dollar check when you get out of there. It's another thing to get cut, and you get a trophy or a handshake." Boxers have worn headgear in every Olympics since the 1984 Los Angeles Games, and women still wear it. The proliferation of cuts is fueling complaints throughout the sport from athletes and trainers who believe head guards are the only practical way to compete in an Olympic-style, multi-fight tournament.

WBO 140-pound champion Terence

Crawford was an accomplished amateur boxer, but the unbeaten pro star wouldn't be interested in the current version of the sport. "These kids are getting cut up and not getting paid for it, and it's potentially coming back to haunt them in their pro career," said Crawford, who traveled to Reno to support friends from Nebraska. "I've already seen four cuts in one day, and then you ask them to get stitched up and go fight tomorrow." In a sport long dominated by tedious complaints about judging, AIBA's move from computer scoring to a traditional 10-point judging system has drawn widespread praise. — AP

FORMULA E COULD DEVELOP DRIVERLESS ELEMENT: AGAG

LONDON: Imagine a motor race where the cars drive themselves from the garage to starting grid and then park up, ready for the drivers to jump in. Sounds like science fiction? Not for Alejandro Agag, the chief executive of the Formula E electric series whose latest brainchild is an entirely driverless championship to be known as 'Roborace'. If the Spaniard concedes that robot racing is not sport as the world knows it, he believes the technology could also find a home in more conventional competition—and maybe not in the too distant future.

"Maybe...(Formula E) cars could drive themselves to the starting grid and the drivers can just walk and do interviews on the way," Agag told Reuters when asked about potential crossover between Roborace and his main series. "I think that is a transfer we could organize quite soon, actually," he added. "I kind of just came up with it but...the cars could just go and place themselves on the grid and then we start the race. This is the kind of technology every car will have in the future," he added. Agag, an entrepreneur whose office in Hammersmith, West London, overlooks a particularly traffic-choked part of the capital, is a big fan of 'disruptive' technology that changes the existing order.

He also likes to think out loud, the conversation free-wheeling from the dawn of classical civilization to the realms of science fiction, but his series has pushed boundaries from the start.

The 'Roborace' concept was conceived less than two months ago when Agag flew back from Beijing with Denis Sverdlov, founder of investment fund Kinetik. It was unveiled last month as a proposed support package for Formula E's 2016-17 season, with 10 teams each fielding two identical all-electric cars in hour-long races.

Every 'car' will have a name, so that fans—and particularly gamers—can engage even without the human element. For those who say robot racing is a long way from sport, Agag can only concur. "This is a competition of technology which is not necessarily motorsport or sport at all. Sport is Formula E. Driverless racing is probably not sport," he said. "People will always want to see drivers racing. Driverless is never the end of motorsport. Motorsport will always be there. From the Roman times, or before, we've been watching humans racing each other."

Prototype production

Driverless technology is, however, a major focus for manufacturers and others such as Google and Apple. "Formula E wants to be where the industry is going. This is one of the places where the industry is going and we want to add value to the industry," said Agag. The Spaniard recognized, however, that the technology was still only 90 percent complete. "I think we can have a prototype ready in September (2016), so we will do testing...in October, November and December and then start producing in January and you can have 10 or 20 cars by end of March and do the first race in April (2017)," he said. "This car is more or less going to be like a skateboard. So you have a flat battery in the floor, four motors - one on each wheel - and that's it. "It may not look like a car. But cars of the future may not look like cars. Or the cars today won't look like cars of the future," he added. — Reuters