

JAPAN IRON MAN KITAJIMA CLOSES IN ON RIO

TOKYO: Japanese swim king Kosuke Kitajima turned back the clock at the national championships yesterday, with a devastating display of power to close in on a fifth successive Olympic appearance. The 33-year-old, who captured double gold in the men's 100 and 200 metres breaststroke at the 2004 and 2008 Olympics, flexed his muscles by qualifying fastest for today's 100m final with a time of 59.62 seconds at Tokyo's

Tatsumi Pool. Japan's latest swimming sensation Kosuke Hagino, meanwhile, booked his place at this summer's Rio Olympics with an equally convincing victory in the men's 400 metres medley.

A chiselled-looking Kitajima became the first Japanese swimmer to qualify for four Olympics four years ago and demonstrated he was not done yet with another strong swim in his semi-final heat. "I wanted a slightly quicker time,"

said Kitajima, who nonetheless landed a psychological blow by edging out young pretender Yasuhiro Koseki (1:00.09) and narrowly dipping under the Olympic qualifying time of 59.63. "But it's been a while since I swam 59-something. I feel this is a reward for all the hard work I've put in. I'd still like to set a personal best again in the final."

Hagino, who was ruled out of last year's world championships with a bro-

ken elbow suffered after falling off a bicycle, stormed to victory in 4:08.90 to qualify for Rio alongside rival Daiya Seto.

"I let a lot of people down last year through my own fault," said Hagino, the reigning Asian champion and bronze medalist at the 2012 London Olympics. "I have to work hard to make it up to everyone," added the 21-year-old. "I'm not happy with that time but I've quali-

fied for the Olympics and I'll look to get some revenge by swimming faster in Rio." Daiya, who retained his world title in Kazan last year in Hagino's absence, had already secured his qualification before the final. In the women's 400m medley, Miho Takahashi qualified for her second straight Olympics, along with Sakiko Shimizu. The Japanese nationals double as the country's Olympic qualifiers.—AFP

SAGAN'S SEASON ALREADY FULFILLED

UDENNAARDE: Peter Sagan will be a tough man to beat at Paris-Roubaix next Sunday despite claiming he has fulfilled his season's objectives.

The world champion won his first 'Monument' race by holding off three-time winner Fabian Cancellara at the Tour of Flanders on Sunday. Adding to his world title in Richmond in the United States last September, this was the biggest win of the talented 26-year-old's career and the Tinkoff rider claimed his year is already a success.

"Another big victory: first the world championships and now this. It's something special because it's with the (world champion's) rainbow jersey that I could win Flanders," said Sagan. "This is my biggest objective in the year from the start: Flanders-Roubaix, and now it's very good."

Sagan will almost certainly go into Paris-Roubaix as the favourite having also won the cobbled classic Gent-Wevelgem a week before Flanders and finished second to Poland's Michal Kwiatkowski two days before that at E3 Harelbeke. So far this season on the cobbles, he's been in a league of his own. Cancellara came into Flanders hoping to become the first man to win the race for a fourth time, but had to admit he'd been bested by a better man. He was clearly disappointed to have missed out on his date with destiny, particularly having joked two days beforehand that he would ask for Belgian nationality if he won.

"Second is not first and it's not history. I didn't win," said the 35-year-old Swiss. "Second was still a big thing. I was quite emotional (on Sunday) morning and I still am now. After so many tries, finishing second is not bad. I aimed for history but Peter showed (on Sunday) he managed things well: he's a deserved winner." Cancellara, who waved to the crowd as he crossed the finish line 25 seconds behind Sagan, is riding his final season as a professional. He will still have the chance on Sunday to match the record number of Paris-Roubaix

victories if he manages to snatch a fourth success there.

DEGENKOLB MISSING

With German reigning champion John Degenkolb still recovering from a training crash in February and missing the entire Spring Classics season, most will likely expect a Sagan-Cancellara battle.

Sagan, though, had no intention of worrying out Paris-Roubaix just yet. "Now I want to have fun after this big week and next week we will think about next week, not now," he said straight after his Flanders win. He spared a thought, though, for two Belgian cyclists-Antoine Demoitie and Daan Myngheer-who died a week before the Flanders race, the biggest in Belgium which is simply known as De Ronde (the Tour). "I want to dedicate this victory for the two guys who died last week, and also to (Tinkoff team-mate) Maciej Bodnar who had a very bad crash (on Saturday) and unfortunately didn't start (Flanders) because he's in hospital," added Sagan.

Paris-Roubaix's line-up will also be without Greg Van Avermaet, the Belgian winner of the Tirreno-Adriatico stage race last month. He crashed innocuously in the first half of Flanders and was taken to hospital with a broken collarbone, showing his frustration as he sat on the Flemish tarmac, sobbing.

Britain's Team Sky will look to bounce back after ultimately disappointing despite having a seemingly strong squad. Luke Rowe finished fifth and Geraint Thomas was 12th as both came home in the chase group behind Sagan, Cancellara and third-placed Sep Vanmarcke. But Kwiatkowski faded badly in the final 20km despite making the initial attack that took Sagan clear of the group of favourites 30km from home. The Pole, world champion in 2014, finished 27th while Ian Stannard paid for an ambitious attack 40km from the finish and came home 32nd. More will be expected from them at the 'Hell of the North'. —AFP

BLACKWELL OUT OF COMA

LONDON: Nick Blackwell has woken from the induced coma he was placed in following a British middleweight title defeat by Chris Eubank Jr, the former champion's promoter said yesterday. Blackwell, 25, collapsed shortly after his tenth-round stoppage loss to Eubank Jr at London's Wembley Arena on March 26. He was then taken to London's St Mary's Hospital. Despite a bleed on the skull, doctors decided against an operation and instead placed Blackwell in an induced coma.

They subsequently reduced his medication, with Blackwell waking last Saturday and talking to relatives and friends on Sunday. "It was the outcome everyone had been hoping and praying for; Nick had won his toughest fight yet," said a statement released by Hennessy Sports. "On behalf of Nick, his family, and very close friends, we'd like to thank everyone for their continued support and well-wishes. It has been overwhelming at times and has certainly not gone unnoticed."

"Nick Blackwell won the hearts of over three million (television) viewers on March 26 with an astonishing display of all-action bravery and determination. "In the past week, however, he has humbled millions more. He's a fighter."

He's a warrior. He's a true champion and gentleman." During the fight Chris Eubank senior, the father of the new champion, could be heard telling his son to stop hitting Blackwell's head. "Even in sparring, I tell Junior to stay away from the head because his punching is fast, powerful and dangerous," Eubank, a former middleweight and super-middleweight world champion, later told the BBC. "So most certainly I was saying this to protect the fighter."

His ringside instructions were especially poignant as, 25 years ago, Eubank senior stopped Michael Watson in a world title fight that left his beaten opponent with irreparable brain damage and partially paralysed. —AFP



RANCHO MIRAGE: Lydia Ko of New Zealand holds the trophy after the final round of the 2016 ANA Inspiration at the Mission Hills Country Club on Sunday in Rancho Mirage, California. — AFP

KO BIRDIES FINAL HOLE TO WIN LPGA MAJOR AT ANA INSPIRATION

RANCHO MIRAGE: Lydia Ko took advantage of Ariya Jutanugarn's late collapse to win the ANA Inspiration Sunday for her second straight major victory and second LPGA Tour win in a row.

The top-ranked Ko hit an 88-yard wedge shot to a foot on the par-5 18th to set up her winning birdie - and an unlikely victory leap into Poppie's Pond. She closed with a 3-under 69 to finish at 12 under.

"This is an unbelievable moment," Ko said before jumping into the pond. Jutanugarn had a two-stroke lead at 13 under with three holes to play. The 20-year-old Thai player bogeyed all three holes, three-putting the par-4 16th, failing to get up-and-down from a bunker on the par-3 17th and hooking her drive into the water on 18. "I really get nervous, especially being my first time leading," Jutanugarn said. "Next time, it's going to be so much fun to be there." Charley Hull and In Gee Chun finished a stroke behind Ko, and Jutanugarn ended up fourth at 10 under.

Ko won the final major last season, the Evian Championship in September in France, and took the LPGA Tour event last week in Carlsbad. The 18-year-old New Zealander led 12 LPGA Tour victories, five last year when she was the tour's player of the year.

"It has always been my dream to play on the

LPGA Tour," Ko said. "For these amazing things to be happening it is unbelievable, but it also motivates me to work harder." Ko had a bogey-free round, also holing a 22-foot birdie putt on the par-3 fifth and a 40-footer on the par-3 eighth. She made three key par saves on the back nine, the first with a 15-foot putt after crisscrossing the par-5 11th. She ran in an 18-footer on the par-4 13th, and a 10-footer on 17.

FIVE-HOLE STRETCH

"Obviously, making those putts on 11 and 13 was crucial, too, but just not knowing anything, I wanted to focus on my game and just what I could control," Ko said. "But on 17, I knew what I needed to do. Something like a miracle needed to happen, so I think 17 was probably the most crucial putt."

Until Sunday, best known for blowing a two-stroke lead with a closing triple bogey at age 17 in the 2013 LPGA Thailand, Jutanugarn made four birdies in a five-hole stretch in the middle of the round to move into position for a breakthrough victory that slipped away. She finished with a 71.

"I got a lot of experience from this week," Jutanugarn said. Hull birdied the 18th for a 69 and her best finish in a major. "I know I can play

well under pressure now when I have to get it going," the 20-year-old English player said. "I'm happy I holed that putt on the last, and I'm proud of myself. It feels great. Lydia hit a great shot into the last, and she should be proud of herself."

Chun also closed with a birdie in a 70. The U.S. Women's Open champion was making her first start after sitting out a month because of a back injury. She was hurt when she was struck by a hard case suitcase that rival South Korean player Ha Na Jang's father dropped down an escalator at the Singapore airport.

Lexi Thompson, the third-round leader, eagled the last hole for a 73 to finish fifth at 9 under. The 2014 winner had three front-nine bogeys and failed to make a birdie. "Just overall tough day," Thompson said. "I struggled today, ball-striking, and the bad ball-striking didn't give me many birdie chances, so I struggled a bit with the putter as well." Michelle Wie, tied for seventh entering the round, shot a 77 to drop into a tie for 36th at 5 over. She's winless since the 2014 U.S. Women's Open and hasn't had a top-10 finish in 31 events. Brooke Henderson shot a 67 for the best round of the day. The 18-year-old Canadian tied for 10th at 7 under and to run her top-10 streak to six events. —AP

UNHERALDED HERMAN TRUMPS STENSON TO WIN PGA TITLE

LOS ANGELES: Journeyman Jim Herman held off top 10 players Henrik Stenson and Dustin Johnson to win his first US PGA Tour title at the Houston Open on Sunday and book a Masters berth. Herman, a 38-year-old who was encouraged by Donald Trump to keep pursuing his PGA Tour dream, had five birdies in a four-under 68 — including a spectacular chip-in from thick hillside rough at 16 that gave him a one-stroke lead he wouldn't relinquish.

"Sorry for the tears, but I'm really happy," Herman told a post-round interviewer having parred the last for the win after an agonizing wait on the 18th tee.

His 15-under total of 273 gave him the narrow triumph over Stenson, the world number seven from Sweden who endured another in a long line of near-misses worldwide since he won the European Tour's season-ending World Tour Championship in 2014.

In a back-and-forth battle, Stenson had briefly taken the lead with a birdie at 13 and was tied for the lead after a birdie at 15. He had five birdies in a four-under 68 for 274, but narrowly missed an 18-foot birdie attempt at the last that would have at least put him in a playoff.

Herman's victory was his first in 106 starts on the PGA Tour. He was working as a pro at one of Trump's golf courses when the property tycoon turned US presidential hopeful encouraged him to keep pushing his competitive career. Now he's headed to the first major of the year at Augusta National. "Never thought it was possible," said Herman, who wears a Trump logo on his shirt.

Johnson, ranked ninth in the world, had six birdies to counter a bogey and a double-bogey in a 69 for 275. He was one shot in front of Spain's Rafa Cabrera Bello, whose sparkling seven-under 65 included five birdies and an eagle at the par-four 12th-where his 306-yard tee shot left him a five-foot putt.

For a few moments it looked like Jordan Spieth would mount a challenge as the world number two got off to a hot start in his bid to build momentum heading into his Masters title defence at Augusta National next week. With renewed rhythm on the greens the 22-year-old

Texan birdied five of his first seven holes to charge up the leaderboard, a run that included a 45-footer at the fifth.

But he bogeyed three of his next four, failing to get up and down from the greenside rough at the tough par-three-ninth before poor shots at 11 and 12 — a second shot to the bank of the

water hazard at 11 and a driver into the water at 12 — cost him two more strokes and after two more birdies he closed with a double-bogey at 18, where he was in the water again.

Spieth signed for a two-under 70 that left him tied for 13th on 280 in a group that also included five-time major winner Phil Mickelson. — AFP



LILLE: People are gathered during the funeral of cyclist Antoine Demoitie, yesterday, in Les Avins. 25-year-old Belgian cyclist Antoine Demoitie died on 27 March in a hospital in Lille, France, after he was hit by a motorcycle following a fall during the Gent-Wevelgem cycling race. — AFP



HUMBLE: Jim Herman of the United States poses with the trophy after his victory at the Shell Houston Open at the Golf Club of Houston on Sunday in Humble, Texas. — AFP