

WILLIAMS LEADS OLYMPIC SEVENS STAMPEDE IN HK

HONG KONG: All Blacks superstar Sonny Bill Williams will stake his claim for an Olympic sevens spot when the informal dress rehearsal for Rio takes place this week in Hong Kong. The code-swapping, two-time Rugby World Cup-winner leads an unusually high-profile field at the famous Hong Kong sevens as a number of top names make their bid for Rio.

Williams has missed the last two sevens world series tournaments with a knee problem and he will be keen to prove his worth just four months out from the Olympics. Fellow All Black Liam Messam is also with New Zealand while colourful Wallabies winger Nick "Honey Badger" Cummins is hoping to nail down a spot

with Australia.

French Six Nations star Virimi Vakatawa is in Hong Kong and New England Patriots Super Bowl-winner Nate Ebner is training with the USA squad with his eye on Rio. The heavyweight line-up has ramped up anticipation for Hong Kong, the seventh of 10 world series tournaments and the highlight of the annual sevens calendar.

Hong Kong's format and sold-out, 40,000-capacity stadium are the closest the sevens series comes to conditions in Rio, making it a vital part of teams' preparations. The championship standings could also hardly be tighter with just one point each between leaders Fiji,

South Africa and New Zealand.

'Not holding back'

Although an injury now could ruin a player's Olympic chances, coaches insisted games would be as intense as ever in the three-day tournament starting on Friday. "I've got 24 players that are wanting to go to Rio to be Olympians so they're not holding back," said New Zealand coach Gordon Tietjens. "They're fighting for positions to go to Rio so it really makes it very competitive amongst the squad that I have."

Exuberant Fiji are perennial favourites in Hong Kong but they remain under a cloud after the devastation of super

cyclone Winston, which killed 44 people in February. "(Players) lost houses, families lost livelihoods and five percent of the population is without a roof over their heads at the moment, and there's a food shortage," said coach Ben Ryan.

"It's not been a lucky time for Fiji and the boys have obviously been affected on a personal level from that. "But saying that, Fijians are incredibly resilient and the boys... they've not moaned about it, they haven't complained about it and we certainly won't use that as an excuse for any lack of preparation. "We're as well prepared as any of the other sides. And the boys will have perhaps a little bit more motivation." — AFP

DAN CARTER RELISHING EUROPEAN CUP HYPE

PARIS: Dan Carter said lining up against Toulon and "good mate" Ma'a Nonu in the European Champions Cup will be "special". The Racing 92 fly-half will make his debut in the competition at home to reigning champions Toulon on Sunday and the New Zealand legend said this was one of the reasons he chose to end his international career and head to Europe.

"When you think of European rugby, there's the great competitions with a lot of history like the (French) Top 14, the (English) Premiership, but the ultimate level is the European Championship," said the 34-year-old, who expects people to be sitting up and taking notice back home. "I can see a few of the rugby supporters back home starting to take an interest once you get to the playoffs.

"I've watched a few European championship games and the finals, the playoff games, just to see the crowds that they get and the importance and just the hype around those games—that's something pretty special. "So when I was looking for a club in Europe, I wanted a strong club that would give me a chance to play in that competition because as a player you want to be playing in the best competitions and that's definitely one of them."

Carter will come up against the man who spent much of the last decade in an All Black jersey playing on his outside shoulder: Nonu. But Carter says facing up to his fellow cap-centenarian will be old hat. "I haven't even thought about it to be honest, that I'll be lining up against one of my good mates," he added. "I guess it's nothing new for me, we've played against each other at Super Rugby level for the last 12-13 years. We've matched up against each other in Crusader-Hurricanes games, so it's nothing new—I always enjoy playing against my good mates, it'll be good fun."

Nonu class

While Carter settled straight in at Racing and has been a huge success, Nonu took a little more time on the south coast and even complained a couple of months ago that his team don't throw the ball around enough.

"It's not easy to make that transition and the class of the player has come out and he's shown what he's capable of the last three months playing at Toulon," said Carter. "He's been fantastic, he's been one of their best players, so I'm not too sure what all the talk early was. He's found his feet and is obviously a lot more comfortable in that team now and he's showing why he's one of the best players in the world."

And Carter says the half-back position he plays, dictating the gameplan, made it easier for him to adapt to the more forward and kick-oriented style in the northern hemisphere than centre Nonu. "There's definitely challenges, it's not going to be exactly as we had at home. He (Nonu) is obviously in a slightly different position where I'm directing play and can choose to kick the ball or pass, whereas he's not in that position at one wider where he doesn't have that decision. "So I can understand his frustration. I'm lucky enough to have experienced roughly what to expect here six years ago (during a brief stint with Perpignan) so it's not about coming here to try to change things to the way we did it back home in New Zealand, it's more about just trying to fit in the best way possible to the way that things are done with your club. "That's probably why he had those frustrations early on, but he's adapted now." — AFP



LAS VEGAS: Welterweight boxers Manny Pacquiao (left), and Timothy Bradley Jr (right), pose with promoter Bob Arum (center), during their final news conference at the MGM Grand Hotel & Casino. — AFP

PACQUIAO VOWS TO SIGN OFF IN STYLE

LAS VEGAS: Manny Pacquiao believes his 11-month absence from boxing following last year's defeat to Floyd Mayweather has left him hungrier than ever as he prepares for his farewell fight against Tim Bradley here tomorrow.

The 37-year-old Filipino insists he will retire from boxing after the third instalment of his rivalry with Bradley, vowing to focus on a political career in his homeland where he is seeking election to the Senate. While Pacquiao has carefully kept a door ajar to extending his career, he told reporters at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas on Wednesday that he views Saturday's bout as an opportunity to sign off in style. "It's really important for me to win this fight, to win convincingly," Pacquiao said. "It's part of my legacy." Asked if he still retained the killer instinct which helped him win an unprecedented eight world titles at eight different weight classes, Pacquiao said his long absence had served to renew his enthusiasm for the ring.

"I still have that (killer instinct)," Pacquiao said. "I rested almost one year and when I started training for this fight I felt fresh and hungry again, like I did when I first started

boxing. It's been good for me. It's good that I had a long layoff. "I still have that desire. I love boxing. Boxing is my passion. I grew up on boxing. I started when I was 12 years old, non-stop, until now."

Pacquiao's long-time trainer Freddie Roach said he had questioned whether retirement talk could prove a distraction. "I thought it might be, but training camp was great, it was just like every other training camp. Manny maybe worked a little harder and said 'Let's go out with a bang' and that's what we intend on doing," Roach said.

'Bat out of hell'

Pacquiao (57-6-2) has joked that a knock-out against Bradley—who has twice gone the distance with the Filipino, winning one, losing one—would boost his appeal at the ballot box when he stands in Filipino elections in May. Pacquiao however has not scored a knockout since 2009, when he demolished Britain's Ricky Hatton in two rounds before beating Miguel Cotto six months later with a 12th round TKO. Bradley said he expects Pacquiao to adopt an aggressive game plan. "I'm expecting him to be more aggressive,

he's going to come out like a bat out of hell and try to take my head off," Bradley said, shortly before going face-to-face with Pacquiao at a pre-fight press conference here. The 32-year-old from the Californian desert city of Palm Springs believes, however, that a combative approach from his opponent may play into his hands.

"If he's more aggressive, then it's probably going to give me more opportunities I would think," said Bradley, who showered Pacquiao with praise in what amounted to an endorsement of his opponent's political aspirations. "He's shown over and over again that he's for the people, he's by the people, and that he's a man of his word. And he's always shown that character, integrity," said Bradley. "I really hope you win, man." Roach meanwhile insisted Pacquiao would walk the line between controlled aggression and outright foolhardiness. "We're professionals, we won't make that mistake," Roach said. "We're not going to go in there looking for a knockout. We've never looked for a knockout because if you do it will never happen. The knockouts come as kind of a bonus but we never look for them out there." — AFP