

SHEIKH AHMAD AL-JABER ANNOUNCE 7TH KUWAIT TENNIS OPEN

KUWAIT: HE Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, President of Kuwait Tennis Federation (KTF), announced the start of applying to play 7th Kuwait Tennis Open. The tournament will be held from 1-7 March 2016 at the Tennis Center of Kuwait Tennis Federation inside Yarmouk Sports Club in Meshref.

There will be 11 events in the tournament: (Boys Under 11 - Boys Under 13 Singles - Boys Under 17 Singles - Veterans Over 45 Singles - Veterans Over 55 Singles - Veterans Over 45 Doubles - Men's Singles - Men's Doubles - Girls Under 18 Singles - Ladies Singles - Diplomats Singles). Matches start at 4:30

pm every day and 9:00 am on Fridays and Saturdays.

Deadline for receiving applications with a copy of Civil ID Card is at 6:00 pm on Saturday 27 February 2016 at KTF headquarters inside Yarmouk Sports Club, Meshref HE Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah expressed his hope that as many tennis players in Kuwait as possible to play the tournament. It is open for all players of different categories and nationalities in addition, to diplomats and veterans. 7th Kuwait Tennis Open is the biggest tennis event in the State of Kuwait. We expect more than 350 players to play the tournament.

TOP SEED GASQUET QUILTS ROTTERDAM

ROTTERDAM: Richard Gasquet handed the Rotterdam World Tennis tournament another box office body blow as the top seed quit on Tuesday a day before his opening match with a groin strain.

The pullout came a week after Roger Federer was unable to play after undergoing knee surgery which will keep him off the ATP for at least a month.

Frenchman Gasquet said that he felt his pain the day before winning the Montpellier tournament for the third time at the weekend. The 29-year-old ranked 13th came to Rotterdam in hopes he could heal but said that he is also now feeling ill and had no choice but to quit the indoor event.

Marin Cilic, the second seed, now takes the role of favourite at the tournament where he finished runner-up in 2014. Gasquet said that he hopes to be able to play in the Marseille event later this month.

"Of course I'm disappointed, I wanted to play here," Gasquet said. "It's impossible for me to play. If I don't feel 100 percent, it is better to quit. This is a big event for me, I'm sad not to be able to play here. It's tough for me but I had no choice.

"I need to rest," said the player whose season only began last week after missing the Australian summer campaign with back pain.

"I played four matches last week and maybe my body was not ready." On court, Luxembourg veteran Gilles Muller rallied to defeat Andreas Seppi 4-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-4, setting up his first career meeting with Cilic.

THREE DEFEATS

Muller, 32, had suffered three defeats at the hands of the Italian but turned the tables in slightly more than two hours at the Ahoy stadium. Muller will be keen to take on second seed Cilic for the first time after the 2014 US Open winner led a three-man Croatian waver into the second round in Rotterdam. "Cilic is one of the few guys I've not played, sometimes it happens like that," said Muller, losing quarter-finalist at the event a year ago to eventual champion Stan Wawrinka. "It will be exciting, a tough match, I hope to recover well and be ready for him." Muller's big serve accounted for 19 aces against Seppi, who dropped to 4-5 in 2016 as he played Rotterdam for the ninth time.

"It was a close match, it could have gone either way at the end," Muller, a semi-finalist last weekend in Sofia, said. "We were both fighting very hard.

"The first round of a tournament is always difficult, I also got to Rotterdam late which did not help. "It's a match I'm glad I won, but I can play better than this." Crowd-pleaser Marcos Baghdatis ended an upset of fourth seed David Goffin by winning a 41-shot rally as the Belgian fired a forehand long in a 6-1, 5-7, 7-6 (7/5) loss. Baghdatis was joined in the second round by French fifth seed Gael Monfilis, a 6-4, 6-4 victor over qualifier Ernests Gulbis. South Korea's Chung Hyeon advanced past Guillermo Garcia-Lopez of Spain 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 while Germany's Philipp Kohlschreiber easily eliminated Frenchman Julien Benneteau 6-4, 6-4. — AFP



Novak Djokovic

DJOKOVIC DOMINANT BUT IT'S STILL TIGHT AT THE TOP: HENMAN

MUMBAI: Novak Djokovic's domination of 2016 is not as inevitable as it might appear, former British number one Tim Henman believes, even if the other members of the "Big Four" will have to raise their game and hope the Serbian falters.

Djokovic won 11 titles including three of the four majors last year and has a 12-0 record this season, having thrashed Rafa Nadal, Roger Federer and Andy Murray to win the title in Doha and a record-equalling sixth Australian Open crown.

So impressive was the 28-year-old at Melbourne Park that many pundits believe a first calendar year grand slam in the men's game since Rod Laver in 1969 is on the cards.

Henman, while conceding there is now a gap between Djokovic and the other top players, does not think it has become a gulf.

"They can definitely challenge. Murray is at highest ranking in his career, he's number two in the world. He's playing great tennis," the 41-year-old Henman told Reuters in an interview.

"But obviously Djokovic is playing a little bit

better at the moment. "Roger was in the final of US Open last year and he was in the final of the Wimbledon last year. Djokovic stopped him in his quest to win more grand slams.

"They are still very, very close."

Henman thinks Federer, who won the last of his 17 major titles in 2012, and Murray look most likely to prevent a Djokovic grand slam sweep this year as Stan Wawrinka did at the French Open last year.

Nadal, who was knocked out of Australian Open in the first round, may not be the same player that won nine French Open titles but can still pose a serious threat on the clay courts at Roland Garros.

"The challenge for all those other players is to try and raise their levels and probably hope that Djokovic doesn't play quite as consistently," the former world number four and a four-time Wimbledon semi-finalist said.

"There's no doubt right now that Djokovic is the player to beat." Tennis is reeling from revelations in a report by the BBC and BuzzFeed in

January that 16 players who have been ranked in the top 50 had been repeatedly flagged to the Tennis Integrity Unit (TIU) over concerns they had thrown matches.

Henman, who was in the city as the brand ambassador of HSBC Road to Wimbledon programme, a joint initiative by the All England Lawn Tennis Club and India's tennis body, said his first reaction to the allegations was one of "surprise" and called for more proof and not just speculation.

"If there has been any match-fixing then we need to make sure that it's erased from our sport because it's a crime in sports. We have no place for it in any sport let alone tennis," he said.

"It's also important to educate the young players so they appreciate this is something very, very serious if it has happened and make sure it never happens again."

"We have a tennis integrity unit and if they need to invest more money in that then we must do that. We must find out the facts and we then can move on from that." — Reuters



NETHERLANDS: Luxembourg's Gilles Muller returns the ball to Croatia's Marin Cilic during their second round match at the ABN AMRO World Tennis Tournament in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, on Tuesday. — AFP

MANOR F1 TEAM SIGNS MERCEDES WEHRLEIN

LONDON: Pascal Wehrlein, reserve driver for world champions Mercedes and last year's German Touring Car (DTM) series winner, will race for Manor this season, Formula One's smallest team said yesterday.

"We're a small team up for a big challenge... so we've chosen a driver with the talent and hunger to match our own on-track ambitions," said owner Stephen Fitzpatrick in a statement.

"Pascal has impressed in testing for Mercedes and Force India, together with commanding performances in DTM... Manor Racing is perfectly placed to help Pascal make a big impact in his first season."

The 21-year-old German, whose mother is from Mauritius, became the youngest DTM champion in 2015 when he won the title with Mercedes. That domestic series pits Mercedes against rivals Audi and BMW in cars that superfi-

cially resemble production models but whose performance is closer to single-seater racers.

While Mercedes dominated Formula One last season with triple champion Lewis Hamilton and Nico Rosberg winning all but three races, Manor - as Marussia - failed to score a point and finished last in 10th place.

Team principal and founder John Booth and sporting director Graeme Lowdon departed at the end of the year and the team's name has changed for 2016.

They have made some high-profile appointments and the switch from a year-old Ferrari engine to Mercedes power units should see them become more competitive even if they still have the smallest budget.

"Manor Racing is a great place for me to start my Formula One racing career," said Wehrlein, who thanked Mercedes for making the move

possible. "It's a small and totally focused team and I soon hope to know everyone.

"It will be a tough challenge but I think we should be able to challenge for points along the way." The team have only scored points once, with the late French driver Jules Bianchi in Monaco in 2014. They almost folded at the end of that season before being rescued from administration.

Mercedes had initially played down speculation Wehrlein could be part of the Manor deal, arguing that the former Marussia team needed drivers who brought sponsorship with them.

Manor had American Alexander Rossi, Britain's Will Stevens and Spaniard Roberto Merhi racing for them last year. Indonesian Rio Haryanto has also been linked to a 2016 race seat, but needs to raise money to secure it. — Reuters



Pascal Wehrlein, reserve driver for world champions Mercedes.

TAKEYASU, LEE SEIZE EARLY LEAD IN BANGLADESH OPEN

DHAKA: Japan's Shunya Takeyasu and Soomin Lee of South Korea carded impressive seven-under-par 64s to share the opening-round lead in the \$300,000 Bashundhara Bangladesh Open yesterday. Fresh from his maiden Asian Development Tour victory in Malaysia last week, the 23-year-old Japanese began his charge with a flawless display to hit seven birdies.

Lee, who finished in the top 10 in the Myanmar Open also last week, was equally impressive at the Kurmitola Golf Club in Dhaka. The duo hold a one-shot lead over Thitiphun Chuayprakong of Thailand, who took third place with six-under-par 65.

Takeyasu, playing his first Asian Tour event this week, needed only 23 putts around the course-including a 32-footer putt for par on the first hole.

"I played solid today, especially my putting. I sank a long putt on the first hole and that was kind of the highlight for me today," he said. Lee, who finished tied second in the inaugural edition of

the tournament last year, was thrilled to put up another excellent performance in one of his favourite hunting grounds.

"I feel very excited out there. I had a good finish last year and I was very happy because it was my first year playing on the Asian Tour," said the 22-year-old Korean in comments supplied by the organisers. Home favourite Siddikur Rahman, a two-time Asian Tour winner, is tied in 14th position on 68 along with several other players.

Leading scores:

64- Shunya Takeyasu (JPN), Soomin Lee (KOR)
65- Thitiphun Chuayprakong (THA)
66- Shubhankar Sharma (IND) Pavit Tangkamolprasert (THA), Mithun Perera (SRI)
67- Kevin Techakanokboon (THA), Sutijet Kooratanapisa (THA), Namchok Tantipokhakul (THA), Gaganjeet Bhullar (IND), George Gandranata (INA), Rahul Bajaj (IND), Piya Swangrunporn (THA). — AFP