

RAIKKONEN ON TOP AFTER THIRD PRACTICE

SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS: Four-time winner Kimi Raikkonen topped the times ahead of Ferrari teammate Sebastian Vettel in the third and final free practice for today's Belgian Grand Prix. The Finn, re-signed by Ferrari for 2018, scorched to a record fastest lap in 1 min 43.916sec around the spectacular Spa-Francorchamps circuit on an overcast day in the forests of the Belgian Ardennes. This was enough for him finish 0.197sec clear of championship leading German teammate Vettel with Briton Lewis Hamilton, who is 14 points behind in him in the title race, third for Mercedes. Dutch driver Max Verstappen, backed by grandstands packed with his 'orange army', was fourth for Red Bull ahead of Finn Valtteri Bottas in the second Williams and Australian Daniel Ricciardo, in the second Red Bull. Briton Jolyon Palmer, of Renault, was seventh ahead of Mexican Sergio Perez of Force India, Spaniard Carlos Sainz of Toro Rosso and two-time champion Spaniard Fernando Alonso in a McLaren Honda. —AFP



CRICKET

SMITH CONFIRMS AGAR'S TEST RETURN AFTER FOUR YEARS

DHAKA: Australian captain Steven Smith confirmed Ashton Agar will play his first Test in four years when the two-Test series against Bangladesh begins in Dhaka today. Agar made a sensational debut to Test cricket in 2013, scoring 98 runs in his maiden innings batting at number 11 against England at Nottingham.

But since then the 23-year-old has made only one further Test appearance, and has been hungry for a return to the long format of the game. It was not until his impressive form in the Sheffield Shield this season-he claimed 16 wickets and scored 115 runs in four innings for Western Australia-that he caught the eye of the selectors again.

He was picked for Australia's two-Test tour of Bangladesh ahead of left-arm spinner Steve O'Keefe, whose 12-wicket haul against India earlier this year helped Australia win the first Test of that series. Agar will partner with off-spinner Nathan Lyon on a supposedly spin friendly wicket at Dhaka's Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium, where Australia will make their first Test appearance against Bangladesh in 11 years.

Australia have not toured Bangladesh since 2006 and this series has been long in the making. Smith expressed his hope it would be an exciting series and give them a reality check after their tour of India. "I think it's going to be a great series. It's a great challenge for my group of players to see what we have learned from India," Smith said in Dhaka.

"Looking at the wicket I think it's going to be somewhat similar to what we got in

India. Hopefully we can learn from what we did there." Australia visited India in February-March for four Test matches and despite a 2-1 loss Smith's men were praised for putting up a good show.

Smith led his side from the front scoring three centuries to become the highest run-getter in the series with 499 runs at an average of 71.28. Smith said he was surprised by the recent comments of Bangladesh coach Chandika Hathurusingha and all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan, who both expressed their hopes of winning the series 2-0.

"It's pretty confident, isn't it?" said Smith. "I think Bangladesh have won only nine out of their 100 games. So it's a very confident prediction. But obviously they are confident about their skill set at the moment. Most teams play pretty well at home. The comment surprised me a little bit, yes," he said.

Bangladesh captain Mushfiqur Rahim said his team has enough resources to win the series. "Cricket is all about winning the match," said Rahim. "You all know that we have been very consistent in the last series as well as in the last two years in our home condition. I think everyone is talking about winning the series because of that belief," he said. The second Test will be held in Chittagong from September 4-8.

Australia squad for first Test: Steve Smith (capt), David Warner, Matt Renshaw, Usman Khawaja, Peter Handscomb, Glenn Maxwell, Matthew Wade, Ashton Agar, Josh Hazlewood, Pat Cummins, Nathan Lyon. —AFP

AXELSEN AVENGES CHEN LOSS TO REACH FINAL

GLASGOW: Sweden's Viktor Axelsen gained revenge over China's defending champion Chen Long in the World Championships semi-finals in Glasgow yesterday. In a surprisingly short match, the Danish number three seed beat the Olympic champion 21-9, 21-10 in just 39 minutes and will now face either five-time champion Lin Dan or top seed Son Wan-Ho in the final. Chen had won the title in 2014 and 2015 and added the Olympic gold medal in Rio de Janeiro last year, beating Axelsen in the semi-finals on his way to glory. "I am a little out of words," said Axelsen. "I never expected to win so comfortably and I am so very happy. I made very few mistakes today. It was nice to get revenge from the Olympic semi-finals. I am very proud of myself. Denmark is a small country, but I am very proud that we can compete with the bigger countries. It's a dream come true. Ever since I was a little boy, I dreamed of making a World Championships final." —AFP

BARGUIL EXPELLED FROM VUELTA BY SUNWEB TEAM

HELLIN: French rider Warren Barguil was thrown out of the Vuelta a Espana by his Sunweb team yesterday for failing to follow team orders. Barguil had been lying in 13th overall, less than two minutes behind race leader Chris Froome, but failed to fall back to help Sunweb's leader Wilco Kelderman after a puncture in Friday's seventh stage. "Team Sunweb have decided to withdraw Warren Barguil from the Vuelta a Espana," the German team said in a statement. The 25-year-old rider, the recent winner of two stages and the mountain jersey at the Tour de France, "openly expressed that he didn't race (in line with) the team's goal, which left Team Sunweb with no other option than to take this decision." Kelderman lost 17 seconds on Friday's stage to slip behind Barguil to 14th in the general classification. "I have to leave the Vuelta by the decision of the team," said Barguil. —AFP



DUNEDIN: New Zealand's captain Kieran Read (C) holds the Bledisloe Cup during the second Bledisloe Cup match between New Zealand and Australia under their Rugby Championship test, at Forsyth Barr Stadium in Dunedin yesterday. — AFP

RUGBY

NEW ZEALAND BEAT AUSTRALIA IN BLEDISLOE CUP THRILLER

DUNEDIN: Flyhalf Beauden Barrett scored a try with two minutes remaining to give the All Blacks a 35-29 win over the Wallabies yesterday, allowing them to retain the Bledisloe Cup in a classic rugby test. Barrett finished with two tries and 20 points as New Zealand overcame a 17-0 deficit after only 15 minutes, then came back after twice losing the lead in the last 10 minutes for an extraordinary victory.

Australia started as massive underdogs after last weekend's 54-34 loss in Sydney but produced one of the greatest turnarounds in rugby history to go within a fraction of an historic upset. Australia snatched late leads with tries to scrumhalf Will Genia and center Kurtley Beale but on both occasions New Zealand instantly bounced back with tries of its own.

The Wallabies rocked the All Blacks with three early tries, including one from an intercept inside the first minute to fullback Israel Folau. Captain Michael Hooper in the 11th minute and flyhalf Bernard Folau, in the 15th, added tries which stunned the All Blacks in Dunedin's indoor stadium. The match started late after the Wallabies complained their buildup had been affected by a floodlight failure. New Zealand clawed its way back with tries to winger Rieko Ioane - his sixth in as many tests and to scrumhalf Aaron Smith to go to halftime only three points behind at 17-14. The All Blacks finally gained the lead for the first time with Barrett's first try in the 60th minute, edging ahead 21-17. But that was only the beginning of a dizzy finish in which five tries were scored in 20 minutes and the lead changed hands four times.

Genia reclaimed the lead in the 66th with a try that put the Wallabies ahead 22-21. Departing fullback Ben Smith immediately scored to give the All Blacks a 28-22 lead in what seemed likely to be the last act of the match. But the Wallabies came back again with a try to Beale and led 29-28. With only three minutes left, the All Blacks regained possession from the kickoff and scrumhalf T.J. Perenara, flyhalf Lima Sopoaga and captain Kieran Read combined to create the winning try for Barrett.

All Blacks coach Steve Hansen said his players had showed huge character to come back repeatedly, extending their hold on the Bledisloe Cup into a 15th year. "It was a great test match," Hansen said. "Anyone who paid money to watch it should have loved it. Our set piece was really good and our scrum was what allowed us to get back in the game."

GREAT IMPROVEMENT

Read said the All Blacks had stayed calm and struck at the right moment. "That's what the Bledisloe Cup is about, two great nations playing their hearts out," he said. "We had to dig deep. Those are the games which hinge on certain moments and I guess we had one at the end there." The Wallabies showed great improvement on their performance last weekend when they were beaten by eight tries to four and by a record score. They more than patched the holes in their defense. They revitalized their defensive game and gave the All Blacks few opportunities, though the teams eventually finished with five tries apiece. The Wallabies' attack was also enormously improved and their performance is likely to have lifted some of the gloom that has hung over Australian rugby after the poor performance of their Super Rugby teams this season and a series of administrative crises.

"It was close to a fantastic performance," Hooper said. "We were fully confident to come

down here and win. "New Zealand was too good tonight and the pressure they applied both sides of halftime was fantastic." Folau set the tone for the Wallabies' performance with his try after little more than 40 seconds, swooping on a pass by All Blacks fullback Damian McKenzie and dashing 65 meters to score.

Hooper broke the defense from a lineout in the 11th minute and Genia, Australia's inspiration, made a try for Foley four minutes later. New Zealand's scrum gave them a huge advantage in the middle stages of the game but the hosts made too many handling errors to fully capitalize. They had three tries disallowed, to winger Ioane, fullback Smith and lock Brodie Retallick, but remained composed and closed the gap with

Aaron Smith's try on the tick of halftime.

Barrett scored from a simple short side movement from a scrum in the 60th, giving the All Blacks a narrow lead and setting in motion the thrilling finale. Genia made a brilliant individual break for his try, beating Ardie Savea and McKenzie, but Foley missed a vital conversion. Foley managed only two of six shots at goal, hitting the post on three occasions.

Smith, playing his last test of the season, scored the game's best try after the All Blacks had held the ball through 22 phases in the 70th minute. After Beale's try, the All Blacks seemed down and out but again found the capacity to rebound, instantly making the winning try for Barrett. — AP

BADMINTON

LIN STAYS ON TITLE TRACK AS MARIN CRASHES OUT

GLASGOW: Lin Dan stayed on course for a record-breaking sixth men's singles title at the World Championships in Glasgow on Friday with a straight games quarter-final win over Hong Kong's Wong Wing Ki Vincent in Glasgow.

But Carolina Marin's reign came to a surprise end following a 19-21, 21-14, 15-21 defeat to Japan's Nozomi Okuhara. Marin, champion in 2014 and 2015 and Olympic gold medalist last year, had come through two easy matches but more than met her match against the dogged No.7 seed.

"I am very happy, but also very tired," said Okuhara. "Carolina is a very speedy player. At the start of the third and in tough points in the match I was telling myself 'You can do it, you can do it!' Now I want the gold medal." Lin, 33, hasn't won the title since 2013, but the Chinese veteran is guaranteed at least a bronze medal after the 21-17, 21-18 victory. After two three game matches, Lin was delighted to get on and off court within the hour.

"I really enjoyed today's match," he said. "I am very happy that I managed to minimise my opponent's performance. It was good to get it done quicker today and I expect to perform fully to my 100 percent tomorrow." In the semi-finals, he clashes with the new world No.1 from South Korea, Son Wan Ho. Lin's first world medal was a silver in 2005 — he then won the title in 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011 and 2013.

For Son, it is the prospect of a first major title that spurs him on. He cruised past Kidambi Srikanth 21-14, 21-18. "Today I am really happy with my performance and to reach my first world semi-final," he said. "I will now prepare really hard for my match against Lin Dan."

In the bottom half, China's defending champion and Olympic gold medalist,

Chen Long, will meet the last European hope, Denmark's Viktor Axelsen.

LOCAL GIRL GILMOUR EXITS

Axelsen needed three games to overcome Chou Tien Chen 21-18, 20-22, 21-16, but Chen beat compatriot Tian Houwei much more easily, 21-12, 21-17. In the women's singles, Okuhara will meet India's Saina Nehwal - she knocked out local hope Kirsty Gilmour - and Chen Yufei continued to knock out higher seeds.

Following her win over favourite Akane Yamaguchi on Thursday, the teenager came from behind to beat Thailand's Ratchanok Intanon. Seeded one place lower at No.9, Yufei, the world junior champion, dropped the opening game 14-21 but battled back to win the next two 21-16, 21-12. "I am very happy to win two very tough matches in a row," said the 19-year-old. "I am also happy as I now know I can compete with the best in the world."

"After losing the first game, I was just trying to gain my confidence. I changed my strategy. When I was serving high I was putting myself under a lot of pressure because she is a very good attacking player, however when I switched to the short serve it helped my game a lot." Chen now needs to stage a third underdog victory to reach the final. In the semis she will face the No.4 seed from India, Pusarla V Sindhu. In the mixed doubles, Chinese No 2 seeds, Lu Kai and Huang Yaqiong suffered a shock defeat to Hong Kong's Lee Chun Hei Reginald and Chau Hoi Wah. In a tough three end match, the No.10 seeds won 21-13, 17-21, 21-15.

"We don't really think about the medal," said Chau, who is now guaranteed bronze. "We have never beaten them before but every time it is close and always goes to three games. It's good to win at last." — AFP



GLASGOW: Spain's Carolina Marin returns during her quarter-final women's singles match against Japan's Nozomi Okuhara during the 2017 BWF World Championships of badminton at Emirates Arena in Glasgow on Friday. — AFP



SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS: Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton (C) celebrates winning the pole position next to second placed Ferrari's German driver Sebastian Vettel (L) and third placed Mercedes' Finnish driver Valtteri Bottas after the qualifying session at the Spa-Francorchamps circuit in Spa yesterday ahead of the Belgian Formula One Grand Prix. — AFP