

BASEBALL

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC HAMMERS CANADA IN WBC OPENER

MIAMI: Defending champion Dominican Republic exploded for four runs in the second inning as they routed Canada 9-2 in their World Baseball Classic opener on Thursday. Wellington Castillo hit a two-run homer in a four-run second inning and Jose Bautista blasted a three-run home run in the sixth in front of a crowd of 27,000 at Marlins Park.

In the night match, Italy belted four home runs early and rallied behind a five-run ninth inning to upset Mexico 10-9. Right handed pitcher Carlos Martinez tossed a solid game in his tournament debut as the 25-year-old pitched four innings, allowing just three hits and one run for the Dominicans. He also had three strikeouts and one walk.

The bullpen did the rest as Fernando Rodney and Jeurys Familia combined to strike out all three Canadian batters they faced in the ninth.

Canada falls to 3-6 all time in the tournament as

they are trying to advance beyond pool play to the second round for the first time.

Both Pool C teams resume play at Marlins Park on Saturday, when Canada takes on Colombia and the Dominican Republic faces the Americans.

Following their highly anticipated game against the USA, the Dominicans conclude play against Colombia on Sunday.

Former Major League Baseball all-star Ryan Dempster took the loss for Canada. The 40-year-old Dempster gave up four runs in the second inning in his first competitive game since the 2013 World Series.

Dempster is one of 63 former MLB players in the international tournament. There are just 25 MLB players from last season taking part as many owners expressed concerns that their players might get injured.

Baseball's birthplace, the United States, has never won the WBC. The US pitchers are Tampa Bay's Chris Archer, Washington's Tanner Roark, Toronto's Marcus Stroman and Kansas City's Danny Duffy, but few relievers have recent MLB experience.

Mexico had a comfortable four-run lead heading into the bottom of the ninth before their collapse in Guadalajara.

Italy's John Andreoli hit a walk-off single to cap the final inning comeback. Francisco Cervelli, Chris Colabello and Alex Liddi hit consecutive doubles to get the rally started.

Two of four teams advance from first-round pools in Seoul, Tokyo, Miami and Guadalajara, into second-round play at Tokyo and San Diego that will determine the four semi-finalists who play March 20-21 in Los Angeles. The 16-team competition concludes with the final at Dodger Stadium on March 22. — AFP



ORLANDO: In this Monday, March 25, 2013 file photo, Tiger Woods, left, and Arnold Palmer share a laugh during the trophy presentation after Woods won the Arnold Palmer Invitational golf tournament in Orlando, Fla. Tiger Woods won't be at the Arnold Palmer Invitational next week and still doesn't know when he will play again. — AP

TIGER TO MISS ARNOLD PALMER INVITATIONAL AT BAY HILL

PALM HARBOR: Tiger Woods won't be at the Arnold Palmer Invitational next week and still doesn't know when he will play again.

Woods announced on his website Thursday night that ongoing rest and rehabilitation on his back will keep him away from Bay Hill and the tournament he has won a record eight times. Woods said he was particularly disappointed because of a week at Bay Hill to celebrate the life of the tournament host.

Palmer died in September at 87.

"This is the one event I didn't want to skip," Woods said. It will be the fourth consecutive year that Woods does not play Bay Hill dating to his two-shot victory in 2013 that returned him to No. 1 in the world. That was the 77th victory of his PGA Tour career.

Woods won twice more that season, but none since then. He has plunged to No. 713 in the world due to playing only 19 times on the PGA Tour dating to the start of 2014 because of injuries.

And he didn't offer much insight into when he would play next.

"Presently, I have no timetable for my return to golf, but my treatments are continuing and going well," Woods said.

Woods was out of competition for 15 months because of two back surgeries in the fall of 2015. He played his Hero World Challenge in the Bahamas the first week of December, returned to the PGA Tour two months later at Torrey Pines (missed cut) and then withdrew after a 77 at the Dubai Desert Classic with back spasms.

Woods withdrew from the Genesis Open at Riviera - he even canceled his press conference and the Honda Classic. "We're not talking about an extended break," his agent, Mark Steinberg at Excel Sports Management, said in Los Angeles.

And yet that's what this appears to be. Woods withdrew from Dubai on Feb. 3. The Masters, which starts April 6,

would be his next logical option. Woods is not eligible for the Dell Match Play in two weeks, and he has never played the week before the Masters.

When he stepped away because of the scandal in his personal life in Thanksgiving 2009, Woods did not play for roughly five months until he showed up at Augusta National. He shot 68 the first round and tied for fourth.

But he was coping with back issues in 2010. The Arnold Palmer Invitational is set for a big week of emotions and celebrations, featuring a bronze statue to be unveiled near the first tee, and Palmer's cart parked behind the 16th tee of Bay Hill, his favorite spot to watch.

Woods noted that both his children were born at the Winnie Palmer Hospital for Women & Babies, and he said he thought of the King as a "close friend." "He will be greatly missed and can never truly be replaced," Woods said. — AP

HERMAN GRABS VALSPAR LEAD, STENSON TWO SHOTS BACK

FLORIDA: Henrik Stenson wielded a hot putter to card a flawless seven-under-par 64 in the opening round at the Valspar Championship in Florida on Thursday. On a day when American journeyman Jim Herman came up trumps with a 62 for a two-shot lead, Swede Stenson displayed a touch on the greens that will serve him well at next month's Masters.

The British Open champion rolled in seven birdies, including a 50-footer and a 35-footer in ideal morning conditions on the Innisbrook Resort's Copperhead Course at Palm Harbor.

One month before the year's first major, Stenson has already turned an eye towards Augusta National, where he has no top-10 finishes in 11 starts.

"This is one tournament of a few leading up to Augusta so we want to get some answers where the game's at," the world number six told Golf Channel.

"I'm very happy with that, especially putting. Long game I can go the range and work on a little bit. I don't think I've been playing super good any time going into Augusta, so I'm just working away. "We've got some work to do but I'm not too worried about it."

Stenson, 40, finished second at the Dubai Desert Classic on the European Tour five weeks ago, before last week exiting the WGC-Mexico Championship during the first round due to a stomach bug.

He and all of the other leaders on Thursday played in the morning, enjoying calm conditions on a day when the afternoon starters averaged more than two strokes higher.

"The morning is the time for scoring around here," he said. "It's certainly a good idea to be quick out of the blocks and we did that."

Stenson's 64 was matched by American Russell Henley, while leader Herman reeled off five birdies in his first seven holes en route to the lead.

"I was driving the ball really well, putting myself in position for good iron shots and I was putting really well. That all usually adds up to a pretty good score," said Herman.

The 39-year-old is a late bloomer who enjoyed a coming out party in 2016, winning the Houston Open.

A former club pro at Trump National Bedminster in New Jersey, he was a frequent golf partner of United States President Donald Trump. — Reuters



PALM HARBOR: Brian Harman hits off the 11th tee during the second round of the Valspar Championship at Innisbrook Resort Copperhead Course yesterday in Palm Harbor, Florida. — AFP