

Sports

Murray announces hip surgery, eyes for grasscourt season

Azarenka pulls out of Australian Open

LONDON: Andy Murray announced he had hip surgery in Australia yesterday and is hoping to return to competitive tennis in time for the grasscourt season midway through the year. The 30-year-old Scot has not played competitively since being knocked out of the Wimbledon quarter-finals last year and last week withdrew from this month's Australian Open.

"Today I underwent successful right hip surgery at the St Vincent Hospital in Melbourne," the former world number one said on Facebook. "I'd like to thank Dr John O'Donnell and all of the staff for looking after me. I look forward to returning to competitive tennis during the grasscourt season. Thanks to everyone for all the well wishes and support over the last few days. I'll come back from this."

The three-time Grand Slam champion, who dethroned Novak Djokovic from the top of the rankings towards the end of 2016, has slipped to 19th in the world due to his lengthy lay-off. He first felt pain in his right hip during his French Open semi-final loss to Swiss Stan Wawrinka in June.

The grasscourt season starts after the French Open, with the first event taking place in Stuttgart, Germany, from June 11.

Murray is a two-time Wimbledon winner and has been champion at Queen's in London on five occasions, both of which are played on grass courts. The BBC reported that he hopes to be hitting balls on court in about seven or eight weeks and has been given a timescale of 14 weeks as a guide for a return.

But Murray said he is not "interested in coming back for a specific tournament", in comments reported by the BBC. "My plan is to be back playing around the grass-court season-potentially before then-but I'm certainly not going to rush anything," he said. "I want to know when I come back that I'm ready."

"The surgeon felt that my hip will be feeling better than it did a year ago," Murray added. "Obviously, I was still doing fine a year ago-I was ranked number one in the world."

"I'm certainly not going to be putting in the same amount of tournaments and effort to try to get to number one in the world. I'll be playing a reduced schedule, and then focusing more on trying to win major events and big tournaments rather than trying to achieve certain ranking goals."

A host of top names are battling to be fit for the first Grand Slam of the year, which starts in Melbourne on January 15. Japan's Kei Nishikori has already pulled out and world number one Rafael Nadal and six-time Australian Open champion Novak Djokovic remain huge doubts, having yet to play a competitive match this year.

Meanwhile, former champion Victoria Azarenka, who has been locked in a custody battle over her young son, pulled out of the Australian Open yesterday. The two-time winner had been handed a wildcard into the opening Grand Slam of the year in Melbourne, starting on January 15, but will not be making the trip.

"It's unfortunate that Azarenka is unable to travel to



ABU DHABI: File photo taken on December 28, 2017 shows Andy Murray of Great Britain taking part in a tennis practice session in Abu Dhabi prior to heading to compete in the Australian Open in January. — AFP

Australia this year," tournament director Craig Tiley tweeted. "The Australian Open is her favourite tournament and she's looking forward to returning to Melbourne next year." Azarenka returned from maternity leave in the middle of last year but skipped the US Open after a Los Angeles judge presiding in a custody case over her son Leo ruled she could not leave

California until the matter had been settled. She had been in doubt for Melbourne Park after pulling out of last week's Auckland Classic. The Belarusian is the latest top name to withdraw from the Australian Open. Serena Williams, herself a new mother, opted out last week, saying she was still not at the level needed for a major tournament after giving birth. — AFP



Grasscourt season starts after the French Open

US runner-up Miner snubbed for Olympics

LOS ANGELES: Ross Miner was denied a men's berth at next month's Winter Olympics by a US Figure Skating selection committee Sunday, hours after his runner-up effort at the US championships. Teen star Nathan Chen, who landed five quadruple jumps to defend his US crown Saturday at San Jose and remain unbeaten this season, heads the American team for Pyeongchang, which also includes third-placed teen Vincent Zhou, like Chen the son of Chinese immigrants, and fourth-place Adam Rippon, the 2016 US champion.

Miner rose from fifth after the short program with a strong free skate Saturday to finish second. But it wasn't enough to convince the selection committee he deserved a spot in South Korea over Zhou or Rippon. It was the second selection controversy in as many days at the US championships, with former world silver medalist Ashley Wagner left off the team after a fourth-place finish.

Selectors on Saturday stuck with the women's podium finish to decide spots in sending Bradie Tennell, Mirai Nagasu and Karen Chen to Pyeongchang. Wagner was named as an alternate but Miner was tabbed only as a second alternate behind Jason Brown.

Chen, 18, has won two Grand Prix Series titles and the Grand Prix Final this season and is the only man in the world to be credited with landing five different types of quadruple jumps in global competition.

Zhou, who was skating in his hometown, was last year's US runner-up and the 2017 world junior champion. Rippon finished second at two Grand Prix events this season and was fifth in the Grand Prix Final.

Madison Hubbell and Zachary Donohue broke through for their first national ice dance crown after three straight runner-up finishes as competition concluded Sunday. Their score of 118.02 on their sultry, blues-tinged free dance gave them a total of 197.12 and catapulted them past three-time world medallists Maia and Alex Shibutani.

The "Shib Sibs"—winners of world silver in 2016 and world bronze in 2011 and 2017 — had led by more than three points after an impeccable short dance. But her slight stumble cost them in the free dance and the two-time defending US champions finished with a total of 196.93 points, hanging on for silver ahead of Madison Chock and Evan Bates.

Selectors later confirmed the three duos would carry US hopes at Pyeongchang, where Canadians Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir and France's Gabriella Papadakis and Guillaume Cizeron are expected to be the top ice dance contenders.

"I'm actually kind of thrilled because we did not have a perfect skate," Donohue said. "We have a lot of room to grow in both our programs—that really puts us in line with what we intend podium-wise for Pyeongchang."

Selectors also named US champions Alexa Scimeca-Knierim and Chris Knierim to the only American pairs berth in Pyeongchang. — AFP



PITTSBURGH: Matt Hunwick #22 of the Pittsburgh Penguins reaches for the puck against Patrice Bergeron #37 of the Boston Bruins at PPG PAINTS Arena On Sunday in Pittsburgh. — AFP

Backstrom scores on a breakaway as Capitals down Blues

WASHINGTON: Nicklas Backstrom scored on a breakaway at 4:17 of overtime Sunday as the Washington Capitals downed the St. Louis Blues 4-3 at Capital One Arena in Washington. T.J. Oshie took the puck away from Colton Parayko at the Washington blue line and zipped a diagonal pass to Backstrom near the St. Louis blue line. Joel Edmundson couldn't catch Backstrom, and he roofed a wrist shot over Carter Hutton for his ninth goal. The Capitals extended their Metropolitan Division lead over New Jersey to three points, while the Blues lost for the second time in as many days but picked up a point to edge ahead of Nashville for second place in the Central Division. St. Louis forced overtime with Carl Gunnarsson's first goal in 27 games, a point shot at 15:51 of the third period that deflected off Alex Ovechkin and eluded goaltender Braden Holtby.

PENGUINS 6, BRUINS 5 (OT)

Evgeni Malkin scored the game-winning goal 2:51 into overtime to help Pittsburgh edge Boston, 6-5, in a thriller at PPG Paints Arena in Pittsburgh. Malkin finished with two goals and has 17 on the season. Jamie Oleksiak, Phil Kessel, Kris Letang and Riley Sheahan also scored for the Penguins (22-19-3). Boston (23-10-7) snapped a three-game winning streak but extended its points streak to 11 straight games (8-0-3).

BLUE JACKETS 3, PANTHERS 2 (SO)

Artemi Panarin, Jack Johnson and Josh Anderson scored in an eight-round shootout as host Columbus defeated Florida, 3-2. Aleksander Barkov and Mike Matheson scored for the Panthers in the shootout. Barkov also scored with 1:34 left in the third period to help send the game to overtime.

BLACKHAWKS 4, OILERS 1

Chicago received goals from four different players and goaltender Anton Forsberg turned aside 32 shots to record

just his second win of the season in a 4-1 victory over Edmonton at the United Center in Chicago. Nick Schmaltz, Alex DeBrincat and Brandon Saad scored goals in the opening two periods and defenseman Jordan Oesterle scored against his former team to complete the win for the Blackhawks.

JETS 4, SHARKS 1

Mathieu Perreault scored twice while Matt Hendricks and Marko Danon both lit the lamp once to give Winnipeg a 4-1 victory over San Jose at the Bell MTS Place in Winnipeg, Manitoba. That offense was more than enough to combine with a 31-save outing from goalie Connor Hellebuyck for the Jets to strengthen their hold atop the National Hockey League's Central Division.

ISLANDERS 5, DEVILS 4 (SO)

Brock Nelson scored the only goal of the shootout Sunday as New York came back from a two-goal, third-period deficit to beat New Jersey, 5-4, in a shootout at Barclays Center in Brooklyn, NY. Nelson scored in the fifth round, as the Islanders snapped a five-game losing streak heading into their "bye week."

FLYERS 4, SABRES 1

Sean Couturier scored two goals and Shayne Gostisbehere and Ivan Provorov each scored one goal, leading Philadelphia past Buffalo, 4-1, at the Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia. Backup goaltender Michal Neuvirth started for the first time since Nov. 28 and earned the win with 30 saves on 31 shots on goal. Brian Elliott had started the previous 16 games.

CANADIENS 5, CANUCKS 2

Brendan Gallagher scored the winning goal and added an assist as Montreal beat Vancouver, 5-2, in Montreal. The Canadiens (18-20-4) earned their second straight win, while the Canucks (16-20-6) have lost four straight games and 12 of the past 14.

LIGHTNING 5, RED WINGS 2

Yanni Gourde had two goals, Nikita Kucherov scored his league-leading 27th goal and Tampa Bay snapped host Detroit's four-game winning streak. Louis Domingue made 34 saves in his Lightning (30-9-3) debut. Gustav Nyquist and Justin Abdelkader scored for the Red Wings (17-17-7). — Reuters

IOC extends North Korea's Winter Olympics deadline

LAUSANNE: The International Olympic Committee has "extended the deadline" for North Korea's participation in the Winter Olympics, it announced yesterday. "We will be as flexible as we can be," an IOC spokesman told AFP over North Korea sending a team to the Pyeongchang Games in South Korea.

Talks between the two Koreas hosted by IOC president Thomas Bach will take place at the Olympic movement's headquarters in Lausanne today. "We welcome the discussion which will take place... between the governments of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)," the IOC said. "The IOC has been having discussions with both sides for a long time. "In doing so we have kept the door open by extending the deadline for registration, and by offering support to North Korean athletes in the qualification process, whilst always respecting United Nations sanctions."

On Saturday, North Korea Olympic body member Chang Ung said the isolated state was "likely to participate" in the Pyeongchang Games from February 9-25, Kyodo news agency reported. Today's Lausanne summit comes days after the two Koreas agreed to hold their first official dialogue in more than two years to discuss the North's participation in the Winter Olympics. — AFP

Patriots open title defense against Titans

TENNESSEE: The New England Patriots begin their quest for a third Super Bowl title in four seasons on Saturday when they meet the Tennessee Titans in the NFL playoffs. Champions in the 2014 and 2016 seasons, the Patriots (13-3) are aiming for a sixth Super Bowl title, all with the now 40-year-old Tom Brady at quarterback.

They will be big favorites in the American Football Conference (AFC) divisional round having won their last six meetings with the Titans, including a 2015 game. Tennessee (10-7), who have not won in New England since 1993, advanced to Saturday's game with a 22-21 wildcard victory over the AFC West champion Kansas City Chiefs. The top team in the National Football Conference, the Philadelphia Eagles, host the Atlanta Falcons (11-6) on Saturday. Atlanta, who blew a 25-point lead in an overtime loss to New England in last year's Super Bowl, scored a 26-13 wildcard victory over the NFC West champion Los Angeles Rams. The Eagles, who won the NFC East with a 13-3 record but are missing injured quarterback Carson Wentz, hold an 18-14-1 all-time mark against the Falcons, with the last win coming in 2016. Divisional round games continue on Sunday with the AFC North champion Pittsburgh Steelers (13-3), who like the Patriots and Eagles had a first-round bye, hosting AFC South winner Jacksonville Jaguars (11-6).

NFC North winner Minnesota Vikings (13-3) face NFC South champion New Orleans Saints (12-5). Jacksonville, who beat the Buffalo Bills 10-3 to set up a meeting with the Steelers, enjoy a surprising 13-11 all-time record over Pittsburgh, including a 30-9 victory in October.

New Orleans held off the Carolina Panthers for the third time this season on Sunday, winning 31-26. The Vikings are 21-11 all-time against the Saints including a 29-19 regular season victory in September.

Next weekend's divisional winners will meet on Jan. 21 for Conference titles with the victors playing for the Super Bowl on Feb. 4 in Minneapolis. — Reuters