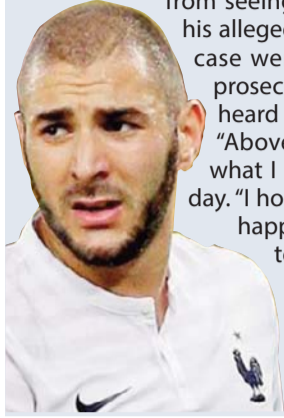


HOPE OF BENZEMA RETURN GOOD FOR FRANCE: ZIDANE

MADRID: Real Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane described the partial lifting legal restrictions on Real striker Karim Benzema as "a good thing" for the French team as hopes have been raised Benzema could now feature in the European Championships later this year. Restrictions prevented Benzema from seeing international teammate Mathieu Valbuena due to his alleged involvement in blackmailing Valbuena in a sextape case were lifted by a French judge on Thursday. However, prosecutors have appealed the decision with the case to be heard before a court in Versailles, outside Paris on March 4. "Above all it is a good thing for the French team. That is what I have always said and I repeat it," Zidane said yesterday. "I hope that this matter is fixed quickly and that is what is happening. I am happy above all for the French national team." The French Football Federation (FFF) suspended Benzema from the national team after he was placed under formal investigation in November for alleged complicity in a blackmail attempt targeting Valbuena.—AFP



KENYA APPOINTS STANLEY OKUMBI AS NEW COACH

NAIROBI: Kenya yesterday replaced Bobby Williamson with a former youth football coach Stanley Okumbi for the next round of African Cup of Nations qualifiers. New Football Kenya Federation (FKF) chairman Nick Mwendwa said Okumbi, who coached Kenyan premiership side, Mathare United last season, will take interim charge of the Harambee Stars when they play Guinea Bissau away in Bissau next month. Williamson, who had been the Kenyan national coach since August, 2014, was believed to be owed about 30 million shillings (30,000 dollars) in salary arrears by the former FKF administration of Sammy Nyamweya which was voted out office earlier this month. "The appointment of Okumbi is geared towards building local capacity," said Mwendwa. "We have picked our own whom I believe have the capacity to do the job. Personally I love the passing game and believe in our own style. Former international Musa Otieno, who acted as Williamson's deputy has been retained. Under Williamson Kenya struggled in their two opening round 2017 Nations Cup matches, drawing 1-1 draw away to Congo and losing 2-1 at home to Zambia.—AFP

CAR PICTURE PUTS BENDTNER OFFSIDE

BERLIN: Danish bad-boy Nicklas Bendtner has fallen offside at VW-sponsored Wolfsburg, and will cop a fine, after breaking club rules by posting a picture of him climbing into a luxury Mercedes. The picture, posted on social media site Instagram, shows Bendtner climbing into the vehicle with the text: "On my way to another session". But with Volkswagen being the Bundesliga club's main backer, Wolfsburg bosses have taken a dim view of the Danish forward's decision to use a picture featuring a rival manufacturer's car. "We have our rules, one of those being that you must pay attention to how you are photographed in public," said Wolfsburg's director of sport Klaus Allofs. "The rules are not new. It's misconduct and it's careless, which at the end of the day will cost (Bendtner) money." The 28-year-old ex-Arsenal forward has completely fallen out of favour with Wolfsburg's head coach Dieter Hecking and plays second fiddle to Dutch striker Bas Dost and Germany's Max Kruse.—AFP



10 QUALIFIED FOR RED BULL KING OF THE ROCK'S FINAL

KUWAIT: Red Bull King of the Rock's qualifiers kicked off through exciting qualifier tournaments that took place in GUST Basketball Courts followed by AIS - Meidan Hawally and KU Khaldiya out of which 10 champions qualified to the final tournament. The names of the applicants who qualified are listed as follows: Al Fadhli, Abdullah Al Salem, Ziad Houry, Talal Al Marri, Ali Ayed, Mohammed Hersi, James Cocheran, Bader Al Yaqout and Abdullah Bashir.

For those who were not lucky enough to qualify for the final or to participate in the playoffs that passed, they can participate in the final qualifier. It is worth mentioning that Friday March 4th will witness the final of the competition in which the Red Bull King Of The Rock is culminated at the Radisson Blu Hotel. The final winner will qualify to represent Kuwait at the World Final in Turkey on September 18th.



KUALA LUMPUR: Lee Soo-min of South Korea putts on the first green during the third round of the Maybank Championship golf tournament in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, yesterday.—AP

LEE'S PUTTER ROLLS HIM INTO LEAD IN MALAYSIA

KUALA LUMPUR: Lee Soo-Min of South Korea surprised even himself with a dazzling putting display yesterday to snatch a three-stroke edge heading into the final round of the inaugural Maybank Championship Malaysia.

Lee shot a seven-under-par 64 to leapfrog 36-hole leader Nathan Holman of Australia and pre-tournament favourite Danny Willett of England. Lee, 22, is now at 15-under par, three shots ahead of Marcus Fraser of Australia, who finished the day with a five-under 66 at the par-71 Royal Selangor Golf Club.

Playing in just his second European Tour event, Lee rolled in nine birdies, including four straight on the back nine when he insists he was merely trying to get it close, only to watch the putts drop.

"After making birdie, I gained more confidence and continued to make more birdies," he said. If Lee can hold on Sunday to win the \$3 million tournament, which is co-sanctioned by the European and Asian Tours, it would be his maiden triumph outside of South Korea.

While Lee thrived, the stifling 33-degree (91 Fahrenheit) heat seemed to sap other key contenders. Holman, the recent Australian PGA champion, had established himself as the man to beat in Malaysia with an impressive tee-to-green game the first two days.

But the 24-year-old long-hitter strug-

gled yesterday, dropping four shots by the 11th. A late surge brought Holman to within a stroke of Lee, but he stumbled into the clubhouse with a triple-bogey on 18 after sailing a fairway bunker shot into a pond.

HOLMAN STILL HOPEFUL

He finished with a third-round 73 and goes into the final day four strokes behind Lee. "I fell back but it's still a good position so I'm looking forward to tomorrow. Four shots today is not too many," Holman said.

Masahiro Kawamura of Japan, Miguel Tabuena of the Philippines, and Spain's Jorge Campillo were locked in a tie for fourth at 10-under. Willett had entered as the field's highest-ranked player at world number 13, and was favoured following a victory two weeks ago in the Dubai Desert Classic and other strong recent finishes.

His fine play lately has catapulted him up golf's world rankings in recent months and a win in Malaysia would push him past Sweden's Henrik Stenson to first in the Race to Dubai rankings, according to the European Tour.

That may have to wait after he posted a disappointing two-over 73 on Saturday, leaving him nine shots off Lee's pace.

The tournament, which offers \$500,000 to the winner, is the successor to the long-time Malaysian Open, which has been discontinued due to a sponsorship realignment.—AFP

SPIETH EXITS, MCILROY IN THE HUNT AT RIVIERA

PACIFIC PALISADES: World number one Jordan Spieth crashed out of the Northern Trust Open Friday with fellow American Jason Kokrak leading by a single shot and Rory McIlroy firmly in the mix after the second round.

Reigning US Open and Masters champion Spieth bounced back from the worst opening round of his career with a three-under par 68 — 11 shots better than Thursday—but still missed the cut. Spieth said that sloppy iron play and not enough practice time on the driving range was his downfall but he vowed not to brood over his disappointment at the Riviera Country Club.

"I will be ready to go in the next tournament. I am not going to let this one get to me very much," said Spieth. "We rebounded in perfect form last year on just about every missed cut.

We'll be fine."

It was just the third missed cut in the 22-year-old Texan's past 20 worldwide starts and the first time he has missed one since last year's Deutsche Bank Championship in Boston.

Long-hitting Kokrak surged up the leaderboard with a seven-under 64 to finish at 10-under 132 after 36 holes in the \$6.8 million US PGA Tour event. Chez Reavie fired a 67 and is alone in second at nine-under 133. American Dustin Johnson, who finished second to Bubba Watson at Riviera in 2014 and lost a sudden-death playoff to James Hahn last year, shot a 66 and was tied for third with Watson (68) and Troy Merritt (66) in the event, which concludes the tour's west coast swing.

World number three McIlroy had another solid round with a two-under 69, leaving him tied for seventh at six-under 136, four adrift of Kokrak. Spieth was hoping to use the event as a stepping stone ahead of defending the Masters title at Augusta National. But a disappointing eight-over 79 in the first round put him 12 shots back of McIlroy.

"I guess Rory is considering this as the start to his run at the Masters," Spieth said of the first major of the season that begins April 7. "This was not my start to the run at the Masters. Mine will start the next time." McIlroy would complete a career Grand Slam with a victory at the Masters, where he had a four-shot lead heading into the final round in 2011 before a spectacular collapse.

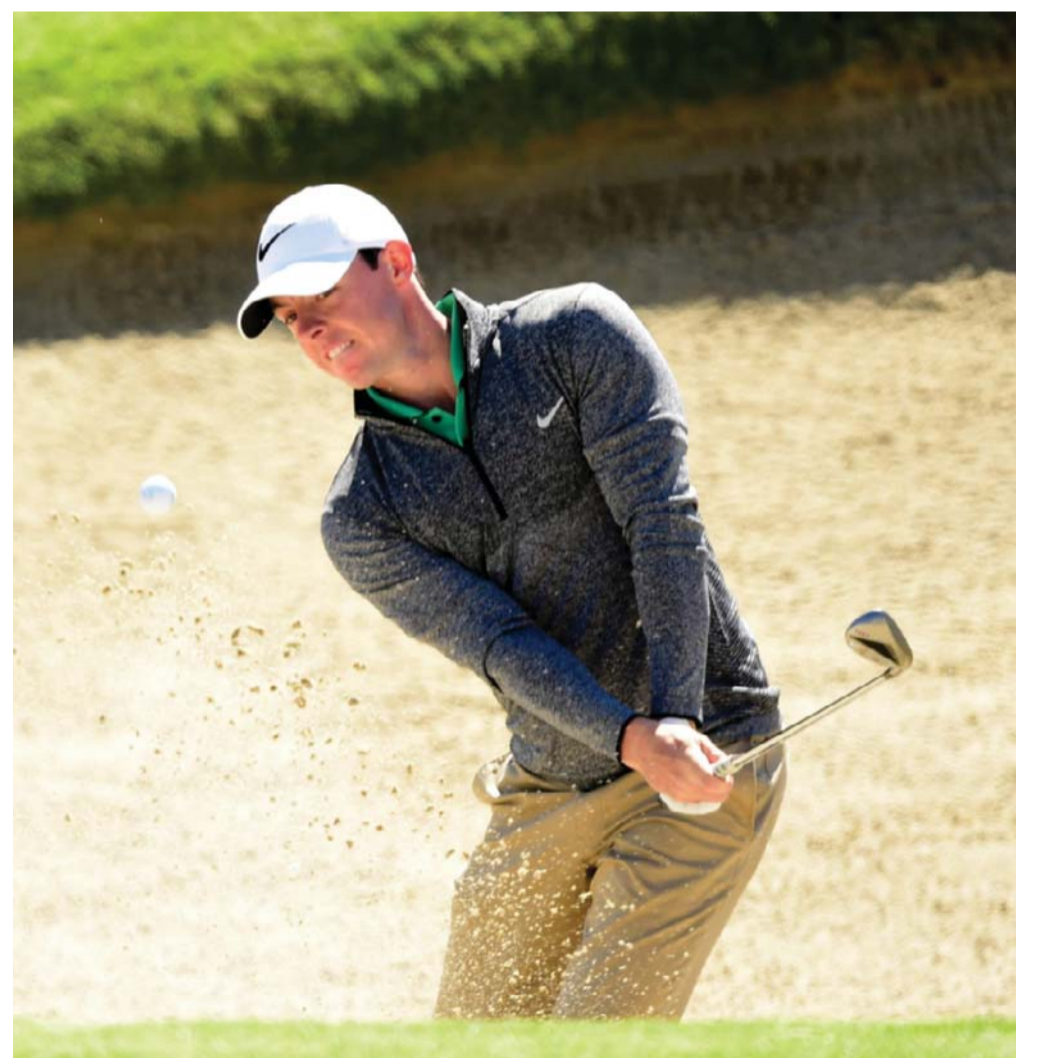
Spieth plans to take next week off and then compete at the World Golf Championships Cadillac Championship at Donald Trump's Doral course in Florida.

McIlroy sizzles

McIlroy started quickly with birdies on two of his first three holes on what is considered a shot-makers course.

And McIlroy certainly had that part of his game on display Friday, especially on the par-five 17 where his aggressive approach saw him reach the green in just two while his playing partners Hideki Matsuyama and Matt Kucher both laid up. His eagle putt stopped two feet short for an easy birdie. "I just need to get off to a fast start tomorrow, get myself close to the leaders and play a good, solid round and see where that puts me going into today," McIlroy said.

Kokrak, ranked ninth on the tour in driving distance, is seeking his first win on the PGA Tour. His best finish was a second at the Frys.com Open four years ago. "This is one of the best fields on the Tour," said Kokrak. "So there are plenty of guys out there. I just have to stick to my game plan and try to hit good shots."—AFP



PACIFIC PALISADES: Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland takes his shot from the bunker on the second hole during round two of the Northern Trust Open at Riviera Country Club on Friday in Pacific Palisades, California.—AFP

SHIN, NOMURA, KANG SHARE LEAD IN AUSTRALIAN OPEN

ADELAIDE: South Korea's Jenny Shin, Japan's Haru Nomura and American Danielle Kang shared the lead yesterday heading into the final round of the LPGA-sanctioned Australian Open at The Grange in Adelaide.

The trio are on nine-under 207 just ahead of world No.1 Lydia Ko and Australia's five-time winner Karrie Webb after 54 holes.

Shin, the American-based Korean seeking her first-ever LPGA Tour win, bogeyed the last hole with a three-putt or she would have been the outright leader. Shin carded a two-under 70, along with Nomura, while Kang fired a five-under 67.

Nomura, 23, birdied the last hole to get herself into today's final group. Poised for the final charge assault are Ko and Webb, just one shot off the pace. Webb teetered on the edge of disaster when she over-hit a chip at the 18th hole only to roll the putt in to save par and post eight-under par overall.

Webb said it was a "huge momentum putt going into tomorrow." "I'm not sure my name

means the same on a leaderboard as perhaps it did a little while ago but I think most people respect the fact that I know how to win, and that if I'm up there with a few holes to go I probably might have a good crack at it," Webb said.

Ko, the relentless Kiwi, birdied the first four holes and threatened to take over the tournament and finished with a 68. She was pleased to find a score in the 60s for the first time at The Grange.

"It's going to be fun tomorrow, obviously in the final groups there might be a bit more tension, but I'm going to try and enjoy it," she said. The field condensed yesterday as the overnight leaders-Scotland's Catriona Matthew and England's Holly Clyburn—both gave back shots to par. Veteran Matthew struggled to a 73 but was consoled by the fact she had "not played myself out of it." Clyburn imploded with a 78 and is out of contention. There are 18 players within four shots on a packed leaderboard.—AFP