

TENNIS

USA CONFIDENT WITH BRYANS ON THEIR SIDE

MELBOURNE: Captain Jim Courier said the heavyweight Bryan brothers doubles pairing gave the United States the edge over Australia in their Davis Cup tie with the scores locked at 1-1 after the opening singles matches yesterday. Australia's Bernard Tomic beat Jack Sock to level the World Group round one tie between the great, traditional Davis Cup rivals after John Isner breezed past Sam Groth in the first match. Tomic rolled through the opening two sets against Sock before being forced to battle hard to win 7-6 (7/2), 6-3, 3-6, 6-4 in sweltering conditions at the famous Kooyong centre court in Melbourne. The victory, in sweltering temperatures, was crucial for Lleyton Hewitt's Australians, after world number 11 Isner trounced the 77th-ranked Groth 7-6 (7/2), 6-2, 6-2.

The retired Hewitt is on standby for a possible playing appearance following the match-eve withdrawal of star youngster Nick Krygios with a virus and back trouble. Courier, who works as a television commentator alongside Hewitt at the Australian Open, said he was confident America held the whip hand with doubles specialists Bob and Mike Bryan, who are multiple Grand Slam champions. "Bob and Mike seem to be at an advantage in the historical count of doubles in Davis Cup, but every day is a different day," Courier said. "They've played awfully well. We feel confident in them, but we don't take anything for granted. We'll be ready to go-but I love having them on our side."

'Anything can happen'

Hewitt, in his first Davis Cup as captain after retiring at the Australian Open in January, was giving little away about his selection options for the doubles, even about his own chances of playing a role. "We haven't spoken about it yet," he said. "The Bryans obviously are the favourites tomorrow in the doubles. But I still think our guys have got a good shot at it, and then on the last day anything can happen." Hewitt has until an hour before the doubles tie to finalise his combination and choose between the team's doubles specialist John Peers, Groth and himself. Earlier Tomic, ranked 20, sent tremors through the Australian camp when he hit a flat spot during the third set of his tie, inviting world number 24 Sock back into the match and a fourth set.

But Tomic rallied and broke the American in the ninth game and served out for a four-set win on the grass of Kooyong, former venue for the Australian Open. "It was very tough out there. I haven't beaten Sock before so I knew that it was going to be tough," Tomic said. "But playing him on a (grass) surface where I could beat him on I was very happy because the conditions were very tough."



MELBOURNE: John Isner of the United States hits an overhead volley return to Australia's Samuel Groth during their Davis Cup singles match in Melbourne yesterday. — AP

Earlier Isner's serve was too strong for Groth and he wrapped up the contest in one hour 49 minutes. Isner served his way out of three break points down in the first set to confidently

take the opening set in a tiebreaker 7-2. The beanpole American smashed 20 aces as Groth's game deteriorated and posed an early selection dilemma for new Australian captain Hewitt. — AFP

RUTHLESS RUSSIANS SINK RIVALS IN UROLEAGUE

BELGRADE: Russian clubs enjoyed a perfect week in Euroleague as Moscow rivals Khimki and CSKA as well as Lokomotiv Krasnodar all won to move closer to the competition's knockout stages. Khimki beat Barcelona 75-61 at home and Lokomotiv defeated Anadolu Efes Istanbul 76-61 away on Thursday, after six-time winners CSKA celebrated an impressive 96-87 victory at holders Real Madrid on Wednesday.

Khimki were tied with Barcelona in Group F before the game with both sides having won four and lost four of their eight matches. The Russians, however, blew away the twice former winners after taking a 19-point halftime lead and gained the upper hand in a tight race to reach the last eight. Barcelona fought hard to get back into the match after the break but Khimki's ironclad defense restricted the Catalan side to only 20 field goals from 61 attempts. "It was one of our best defensive performances of the season, we played tough from the first to the last minute," Khimki coach Rimas Kurtinaitis told www.euroleague.net.

Barcelona, winners in 2003 and 2010, now face an uphill battle to avoid an early exit in a fiercely competitive group after another lackluster performance. Six-times winners CSKA stayed top of Group F, improving to 7-2 after five of their players scored in double figures, led by power forward Kyle Hines, who amassed 16 points. "We got another victory in such a tough Top 16 group," said CSKA's Greek coach Dimitris Itoudis. "As I told my players, this was another day at work for us. We did good things during the game and proved that this CSKA team can score regardless what we play offensively."

The Top 16 features two pools of eight, with the top four from each section advancing to the best-of-five quarter-final playoff series. The winners will then qualify for the May 13-15 Final Four in Berlin. In Group E, Lokomotiv took a big step towards the playoffs after guard Malcolm Delaney sank 19 points and fellow American centre Anthony Randolph added 17 against Anadolu Efes Istanbul. They are second in the pool with a 7-2 record, behind Fenerbahce Istanbul, who have seven wins and one defeat ahead of their home game against Red Star Belgrade yesterday. Panathinaikos Athens, who have six titles, boosted their hopes of progressing with a 76-58 win at Unicaja Malaga. — Reuters

SWIMMING

PHELPS KICKS OFF ORLANDO MEET WITH 100M FLY WIN

MIAMI: Olympic superstar Michael Phelps kicked off the Orlando Pro Swim meet Thursday with a victory in the 100m butterfly in 52.28sec. Phelps, hoping to add to his stunning tally of 18 Olympic gold medals at the Rio Games in August, swam the first 50m in 24.62sec and held off fellow American Tom Shields for the victory. Shields clocked 52.35, with Brazilian Henrique Martins third in 52.59. Germany's Aliena Schmidtke won the women's 100m fly in 59.94. Yuliya Efimova of Russia produced a season's best of 1:05.70 in winning the women's 100m breaststroke.

In the men's 100m breaststroke, Brazil's Joao Gomes edged American Josh Prenot at the wall, winning in 1:00.64 to Prenot's 1:00.66. Brazil's Felipe Lima was third in 1:00.73. Katie Ledecky won the 200m freestyle in a time of 1:55.73 — second-fastest in the world this year behind the 1:54.43 she posted in Austin in January. "It felt pretty good," Ledecky said. "I guess it was about where I thought I would be time-wise. I worked this morning and this afternoon on some of the details I've been working on around my turns. I was pleased with how I put it all together."

Missy Franklin, winner of four gold medals at the 2012 London Olympics, was second in 1:57.67 and Allison Schmitt was third in 1:58.18. The women's 400m individual medley went to world championships silver medallist Maya DiRado, whose time of 4:36.82 made her the fourth-fastest this season. Vietnam's Vien Nguyen was second in 4:39.64 ahead of American Becca Mann (4:40.44). Freestyle queen Ledecky was fourth in 4:40.95. American Chase Kalisz won the men's 400m medley in 4:15.36, with South Africa's Sebastien Rousseau second in 4:20.06. — AFP