

'IMPOSSIBLE' TO IMPROVE MADRID SQUAD: PEREZ

MADRID: Real Madrid president Florentino Perez insists the European champions' squad is "impossible to improve" after an uncharacteristically quiet transfer window. Perez, known for splashing hundreds of millions of euros in previous years on the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo, Gareth Bale and James Rodriguez, has limited his spending to just a 30-million-euro (\$33.5 million) buy-back of Alvaro Morata from Juventus. "We have won the European Super Cup and the first two games in La Liga," Perez said of Real's 100 percent start to the season. "We have a spectacular squad and it is impossible to improve." Madrid appealed a one-year transfer ban imposed by FIFA to allow them to sign players this summer, but they could be barred from registering new players after Wednesday's deadline until January 2018 should their appeal fail. Zinedine Zidane inspired a remarkable turnaround in Madrid's fortunes after being hired as coach in January, leading Real to an 11th European Cup. — AFP



POLICE FIRE TEARGAS AT SRI LANKA CRICKET FANS

DAMBULLA: Sri Lankan police fired teargas to disperse hundreds of fans trying to force their way into a stadium where the home team were playing their fourth one-day international against Australia yesterday. About 300 fans tried to force their way into the 18,000-capacity Dambulla stadium after the authorities announced that all tickets had been sold and asked anyone without tickets to leave the area, a police official said. "We asked them to go, but they tried to break in while some blocked the main road by sitting down," said a police official in Dambulla, around 150 kilometres (90 miles) north of Colombo. "The situation was quickly brought under control," added the official who spoke on condition of anonymity as he was not authorised to speak to the media. There were no immediate reports of casualties. There were also chaotic scenes during the third ODI at the same venue on Sunday when fans without tickets broke through barricades and entered the stadium en masse, dislodging thousands of ticket-holders from their seats. Sri Lankans are cricket-crazy, but interest in the game has soared to new heights since Angelo Mathews and his team recorded a historic whitewash in their recent three-match Test series against Australia. — AFP

BONY JOINS STOKE ON LOAN FROM MAN CITY

LONDON: Ivory Coast striker Wilfried Bony has joined Stoke City on a season-long loan from Manchester City, the two Premier League clubs announced yesterday. The 27-year-old joined City from Swansea City for a reported fee of 25 million pounds (\$32.8 million, 29.5 million euros) in January 2015, but has made only 46 appearances since then, scoring 10 goals. "#SCFC delighted to announce the season-long loan signing of @wilfriedbony from @ManCity," Stoke wrote on their official Twitter page. Bony was pictured holding a club shirt at Stoke's training ground. He had earlier tweeted: "It's a new day and I look forward to a new exciting challenge." Bony has made 44 appearances for Ivory Coast, scoring 13 goals, and was a member of the team that tasted glory at the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations in Equatorial Guinea. He was signed by City to provide back-up for Sergio Aguero, but young Nigerian striker Kelechi Iheanacho moved ahead of him in the pecking order. — AFP



VERA CASLAVSKA, CZECH GYMNASTICS GREAT DEAD

PRAGUE: Vera Caslavka, a multiple Olympic gymnastics gold medalist who stood up against the 1968 Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia, has died. She was 74. The Czech Olympic Committee yesterday said Caslavka died in Prague late Tuesday. Caslavka had cancer of pancreas and underwent surgery on May 15 last year, the committee previously said. She had later undergone chemotherapy treatment. Born on May 3, 1942 in Prague, Caslavka claimed her first Olympic medal - a silver - at the 1960 Rome Games. Her golden era began three years later. She won three Olympic golds in Tokyo in 1964 - in the vault, the individual all-round and the balance beam - to establish herself as a major force in her sport.



Vera Caslavka

Four years later, Caslavka became an outspoken supporter of Alexander Dubcek's liberal reforms meant to lead toward democratization of communist Czechoslovakia, an era known as the Prague Spring. She signed the Two Thousand Words manifesto published in June 1968 that called for deeper pro-democratic changes. That document angered the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, who ordered the Warsaw Pact's troops to invade

Czechoslovakia to crush the reforms in August. Facing a possible persecution, Caslavka went into hiding and was allowed only just before the Mexico Olympics to join the national gymnastics team.

She triumphed in four disciplines, winning the Olympic gold in the vault, the individual all-round, the floor exercises and the uneven bars. With another two silver medals at the 1968 Games, she became the top medalist and was later named the world's best female athlete of the year.

For many, she will be remembered for her silent protest against the Soviet invasion. Standing on the top of the medal stands alongside Soviet gymnast Larisa Petrik, with whom she shared the gold in the floor exercise, Caslavka turned her head down and to the right when the Soviet national anthem was played.

Combined with her gymnastic performances, the gesture made her the star of the games. At home, Caslavka faced persecution from the post-invasion hard-line Communist regime. It wasn't until 1974 that she was allowed to work as coach in her country and later, in 1979-81, in Mexico.

After the 1989 anti-communist Velvet Revolution led by Vaclav Havel ended more than 40 years of communism, Caslavka became Havel's adviser and was elected the president of the Czechoslovak and later of the Czech Olympic Committee. In 1995-2001, she was a member of the International Olympic Committee. She received the UN's Pierre de Coubertin Prize for promoting fair play in 1989 and was also awarded the Olympic Order.

In a personal setback, her marriage with Josef Odlozil, an athlete whom she married during the Mexico Games, ended in the 1980s. Her son, Martin, was found guilty of assault that led to his father's death in 1993 and was sentenced to four years in prison. Although he was soon pardoned by Havel, Caslavka had to undergo treatment for depression and withdrew temporarily from the public life. — AP



SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS: Red Bull driver Max Verstappen of the Netherlands smiles prior to the third practice session at the Belgian Formula One Grand Prix circuit in Spa-Francorchamps, Belgium. — AP

VERSTAPPEN IN FOCUS AS HAMILTON EYES HAT-TRICK

MONZA: Formula One is braced for the next episode of the Max Verstappen show as Red Bull's teen sensation heads for Ferrari's home circuit only days after making the Italian team's drivers see red.

While triple world champion Lewis Hamilton is aiming for his 50th grand prix win on Sunday, to become the first since Argentine Juan Manuel Fangio in the 1950s to win three years in a row at Monza, Verstappen will be the talk of the town.

"I told him not to tell anyone where he is staying in Monza because there might be a few angry fans," team boss Christian Horner joked after a controversial Belgian Grand Prix last weekend. The 18-year-old tangled with Kimi Raikkonen and Sebastian Vettel at the start before aggressively defending against the former later in the race and then refusing to accept any criticism.

"I think they should be ashamed to cause a crash like that with their amount of experience and then complain about me," the unrepentant Dutchman said. "Vettel can come and talk to me

(at Monza), but I think he first has to realise what he did in turn one." Raikkonen, the 2007 world champion for Ferrari, warned afterwards that Verstappen's late block that forced the Finn to brake on the straight at Spa could have triggered a big accident. Monza is even faster, with the turbo hybrid cars hitting 360 km per hour on the straight, and Sunday's race promises another battle between Ferrari and Red Bull to be best of the rest behind leaders Mercedes.

ELBOWS OUT

While Verstappen has thrilled fans, with the youngster busy rewriting the record books after winning in Spain and starting on the front row in Belgium, there are those who feel limits need to be set.

"He comes in here, no fear and no respect," said Mercedes motorsport head Toto Wolff in Spa. "He puts the elbow out and it reminds me of the great ones. It reminds me of Lewis and it reminds me of Ayrton Senna."

"And you can clearly see that some guys

around are starting to think twice how to overtake him... I just fear that it might end up in the wall heavily one day. For me it is refreshing but dangerous." Wolff will be hoping his drivers are safely out in front, with Hamilton seeking to extend his nine-point lead over Nico Rosberg in the last European race of the season.

The Briton took a hit at Spa, starting at the back after taking engine penalties, but still finished third behind his team mate and now has a plentiful supply of fresh power units to last him the rest of the campaign. "The speed, the history, the atmosphere... it's just so iconic in every way," he said of the 'Pista Magica' outside Milan.

"Standing on that amazing podium, looking out over a sea of fans on the straight, has to be up there as of the most incredible experiences a sportsman can have," he said.

"I had a perfect weekend on track there last year. If I can repeat that it would be amazing... It's game on for me now with the penalties out of the way and fresh engines ready to use. I can't wait to get back out there." — Reuters



In this Oct., 1968, file photo, Vera Caslavka of Czechoslovakia holds her four Olympic medals, three gold and one silver which she won in the gymnastics competition. Caslavka, multiple Olympic gold medalist in gymnastics and the most famous Czech sports woman of all times who stood up against the 1968 Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia. — AP

BRAZIL'S BRAZ TO RAIN ON LAVILLENIE'S PARADE AGAIN

ZURICH: Brazilian upstart Thiago Braz Da Silva has already rained on Renaud Lavillenie's parade once this season, stealing the Frenchman's thunder to take a shock gold at his home Olympics in Rio.

While Lavillenie already has a record seventh consecutive Diamond Race title in the bag, Braz is ready to push for a symbolic season-ending pole vault victory over France's 2012 Olympic champion at Thursday's Diamond League meet.

Lavillenie was reduced to tears at Rio's Olympic Stadium as the raucous, partisan crowd got behind local hero Braz and jeered the Frenchman both during competition and when he collected his silver medal on the podium.

He was later consoled, among others, by IOC president Thomas Bach and IAAF chief Sebastian Coe. "He remains an opponent," Braz said of Lavillenie Wednesday, with the two vaulters enjoying somewhat frosty relations.

"Whether he wins or not, that doesn't change anything for me. I have to do my job. Now I wish we have good relations. I tried to calm down the public when the jeering started, but they carried on," Braz said of the hostility shown Lavillenie,

adding: "As a professional athlete, Renaud should have prepared for everything. Personally I couldn't change anything."

Braz, whose winning 6.03-metre vault in Rio was his personal best, added: "I don't go out wanting to beat Renaud or the French vaulters, but simply to go as high as possible." In potential bad news for Lavillenie and his French cohorts, however, Braz signalled his intention to up his level of competition next season, when the world athletics championships will be held in London in August. "In 2017, I want to vault more often after a season focused on the Olympics," said the Brazilian, who has had just eight competitions this year.

"Next year I'll be more present in European meets, a dozen or so of them to give a continuity to my results."

Braz said he had been slightly overwhelmed by the reactions in Brazil to his gold medal-winning performance.

"In Brazil, there's no real culture of athletics, of pole vaulting. But kids have come up to me in the street to ask me how to do pole vault," he said. "It's odd to have this sudden celebrity. I saw famous sportspeople on the television before and now it's me." — AFP

GOLDEN ROSE BACKS RYDER ROOKIE PIETERS

HONG KONG: Olympic gold medalist Justin Rose gave Ryder Cup rookie Thomas Pieters a ringing endorsement yesterday after the big-hitting Belgian was picked for the biennial match against the US next month.

"The really difficult decision was choosing Thomas Pieters over Russell Knox, two guys who are in form, two guys who deserve their place in the team," Rose told a news teleconference, as he confirmed he would defend his Hong Kong Open title in December. "Choosing one of them was always going to be very, very difficult but I think what Thomas has shown Darren (Clarke) in the last few weeks has been incredible," added Rose.

Europe's Ryder Cup captain Darren Clarke announced England's Lee Westwood, Germany's Martin Kaymer and Pieters as his three wildcards on Tuesday.

Clarke had been widely expected to turn to experienced Ryder Cup campaigners Westwood and Kaymer, but Pieters was picked ahead of Scotland's Russell Knox who was the highest ranked player not to qualify automatically.

"The phone call to Russell was one of the hardest I have ever had to make," admitted Clarke as he announced his choices for the match at Hazeltine National in Minnesota.

But Rose, who will be making his fourth Ryder Cup appearance, said he fully backed his captain's judgement.

Rose noted that Pieters had made a bold statement for inclusion with a stunning opening round of 62 playing alongside Clarke on his way to victory at last week's Made in Denmark tournament.

Two weeks earlier Pieters had just missed the podium in Rio. In between he was runner-up at the Czech Masters.

"He finished fourth in the Olympics and then second and first in his last two events," said Rose. "And the style and manner in which he won over the weekend I think really impressed the captain."

Rose believes the 24-year-old Pieters has the type of game that can suit the team format of the Ryder Cup, where players need to adapt to foursome (alternate shot), fourball and singles play over three days of intense competition.

"I think Thomas is a great young talent. He's good for the dynamic of the team," said Rose.

"He's very long off the tee and has a great short game so I think maybe the captain has the option of playing him in many different formats with many different players."

Rose promised he would bring his Olympic gold medal to Hong Kong when he defends his title in December.

There he will come up against Masters champion Danny Willett, who also confirmed his participation Wednesday in the co-sanctioned European Tour and Asian Tour event at Fanling from December 8-11. — AFP



FARMINGDALE: Olympic gold medal winner, Justin Rose of England, tees off from the first hole during the final round of The Barclays golf tournament in Farmingdale, NY. — AP