

## LEDECKY OFF TO A BLAZING START ON BUSY WEEK AT WORLDS

**BUDAPEST:** Katie Ledecky started a very busy week at the world championships with a dominating performance in the preliminaries of the 400-meter freestyle yesterday. The 20-year-old American set a meet record with a time of 3 minutes, 59.06 seconds, nearly 3 seconds ahead of the next-fastest qualifier, teammate Leah Smith (4:02.00). Barely breathing hard, Ledecky eclipsed her winning time of 3:59.13

from the world championships in Kazan two years ago. She heads into the evening final as an overwhelming favorite to defend her title, the only bit of drama being whether she can break her world record of 3:56.46 from the Rio de Janeiro Olympics. "It's good to get the first swim out of the way," Ledecky said. "You're always a little bit nervous for the first swim. Now I can kind of carry that momentum forward through the rest of the meet."

Ledecky is hoping to win six gold medals in Budapest with a daunting schedule that would require her to swim a total of 6,300 meters. She won five gold medals at Kazan. "I know how to manage a meet like this," Ledecky said. "I've worked toward this meet all year. Just trying to put it all together now." In other preliminaries on the first day of swimming at Duna

Arena, home country favorite Katinka Hosszu led the women's 100 individual medley, world-record holder Adam Peaty of Britain dominated the men's 100 breaststroke, Sweden's Sarah Sjöström paced the women's 100 butterfly, Austria's Felix Aubock topped the men's 400 freestyle and Ukraine's Andrii Govorov was fastest in the men's 50 fly. Also qualifying for the men's 400 free final were China's Sun Yang, South

Korea's Park Tae-hwan and Australia's Mack Horton. Yang and Park have served suspensions for doping and drawn the ire of Horton, who doesn't think anyone caught using performance-enhancing drugs should be allowed to compete. Ledecky and Olympic gold medalist Simone Manuel are expected to join the U.S. women's relay for evening final. "That's all up to the coaches," Ledecky said. — AP

### TENNIS

## ISNER TO FACE AUSSIE QUALIFIER EBDEN IN NEWPORT FINAL

**WASHINGTON:** Top seed John Isner blasted 15 aces to defeat fellow American Bjorn Fratangelo 6-2, 6-4 Saturday, booking an ATP Hall of Fame Open final against Australian qualifier Matthew Ebden. Isner has not faced a break point in three matches this week on the grass at Newport, Rhode Island, as he goes for his 11th career title and third Hall of Fame crown after 2011 and 2012. "I've played three matches and six sets and I haven't played a tie-breaker I can't remember the last time I did that," Isner said. Ebden, the lowest-ranked ATP finalist of the year at 249th, downed Germany's 131st-ranked Peter Gojowczyk 6-3, 6-3 in the other semi-final. The 29-year-old South African-born former Commonwealth Games bronze medalist, appearing in his maiden ATP semi-final, needed just 62 minutes to advance. "This is pretty cool," Ebden said. "I can't believe it. I'm obviously very happy. Definitely couldn't be happier, not only winning but getting lots of matches." Isner, whose most recent ATP title came at Atlanta in 2015, made his first final since last November's Paris Masters, where he lost to Britain's top-ranked Andy Murray. The lanky 32-year-old credits work on being more aggressive on his return game for faster finishes than his trademark hard serves typically produce.

"There's no other way I should have to play. I should be aggressive. It's easier said than done," Isner said. He likes the extra rest as well, noting the benefits to such stalwarts as world number one Andy Murray of Britain and Serbia's fourth-ranked Novak Djokovic. "I feel good," Isner said. "To be like Murray and Djokovic and win these matches 2 and 2, it's great." Isner, ranked 21st, broke at love to close the first set in 34 minutes and the match ended after 72 minutes when 142nd-ranked Fratangelo swatted a forehand long, lifting Isner's career mark at Newport to 18-5. Isner has won both prior matches against Ebden without dropping a set, in the fourth round at Indian Wells in 2012 and in the second round at Wimbledon in 2015. "It's going to be a tough match," Isner said of facing Ebden. "He's feeling very good about his game and I think it's his best surface." Ebden, only 3-3 in ATP main draw matches this year until this week, has won six matches in as many days. He broke Gojowczyk five times and sealed victory on his second match point when the German smacked a backhand wide. A left knee injury led to a long 2016 layoff for Ebden that revitalized his game once healthy. "That helped me turn a corner mentally and just enjoy myself," Ebden said. — AFP



**BUDAPEST:** Australia's Mack Horton (L) and Italy's Gabriele Detti (R) react after competing in a men's 400m freestyle heat during the swimming competition at the 2017 FINA World Championships in Budapest, yesterday. — AFP

### SWIMMING

## NERVOUS HORTON SETS UP SUN YANG SHOWDOWN

**BUDAPEST:** Olympic champion Mack Horton set up a showdown with Chinese superstar Sun Yang yesterday after the Australian squeezed into the men's 400m freestyle final at the world aquatic championships. Horton dethroned Sun as Olympic champion over 400m at last year's Rio Games, branding the Chinese superstar a "drugs cheat" after his three-month doping ban in 2014. The pair will lock horns at the worlds in Budapest, but neither were fastest in the morning heats. "Austria's Felix Aubock clocked three minutes, 44.19 seconds with Sun second fastest at 0.36secs behind with Horton fifth fastest, at 1.41 back, of the eight finalists. "I felt OK in the morning and I took the heats as a warm-up. I will try my best in the final but I did not set any goal for the evening," said Sun. Horton admitted he had a few nervous moments after finishing third in his heat, but did enough to secure a berth in the final. "The plan was just to make the final. You usually go for the top two, so when I was third, I was a little bit worried, but it was ok," admitted Horton. "I feel pretty relaxed, you always feel better when you get the first one out of the way and blow out the cobwebs. "I just need to go faster tonight." On Friday, Horton described his clash with Sun as "a rivalry between elite athletes and athletes who have tested positive", but was more reserved after the heats, simply saying "everyone knows how I feel about that."

### LEDECKY, PEATY BLAST OUT

The USA's gold-medal machine Katie Ledecky could lower her own world record in the women's 400m freestyle final today evening. The 20-year-old broke her own championships record, set two years ago in Rio, when she clocked three min, 59.06 secs in the heats. Her time was three seconds slower than the world record she set in Rio last year, but Ledecky says there is more to come. "It's good to get the first one out of the way, but I feel like I have more for tonight," said Ledecky. "I've worked towards this meet all year. I'm just trying to put it all together now." Ledecky will compete in six freestyle events in Budapest and races twice yesterday evening. After the 400m final, she will join the USA's 4x100m freestyle relay squad, who were the fastest into the final. Great Britain's Olympic breaststroke champion Adam Peaty came within a whisker of his own championships record as the fastest into Sunday's 100m semi-finals with 58.21secs, just ahead of Cody Miller and Kevin Cordes of the USA. Peaty is looking to lower his world record of 57.13secs set in Rio last year. "It was a lot faster than I've normally been in heats, so it's looking very promising," said Peaty. "Personally, it's how far can I take my body." Elsewhere, Sarah Sjöström, the defending world and Olympic champion, was the fastest into this evening's semi-finals of the women's 100m butterfly. Sweden's Sjöström clocked 55.96secs-half a second slower than her world record set last year at the Rio Olympics-with Kelsi Worrell of the USA and Australia's Emma McKeon, the next fastest qualifiers. Home-crowd favourite and Hungary's 'Iron Lady' Katinka Hosszu blasted her way into the women's 200m individual medley final today. The world record holder clocked the fastest time of two mins, 07.49 secs-more than two seconds faster than her nearest rival. —AFP

### RUGBY

## LIONS, CRUSADERS STAY ON COURSE FOR SUPER SHOWDOWN

**SYDNEY:** Leading contenders the Golden Lions and Canterbury Crusaders are one game away from playing off for this season's Super Rugby title after contrasting victories this weekend. South Africa's Lions, who finished top of the regular season standings, needed a huge late penalty goal from Ruan Combrinck to scrape home 23-21 over the Coastal Sharks in Johannesburg. The Lions will face a New Zealand team for the first time this season, against defending champions Wellington Hurricanes, in next weekend's semi-finals. If the Lions win they will host the final on August 5. The Crusaders, bidding for their eighth Super Rugby crown, grounded out a 17-0 win over the Otago Highlanders in driving rain to reach the last four. The Crusaders have to negotiate an all-New Zealand semi-final against the Waikato Chiefs to advance to the final. Shaun Stevenson scored a try four minutes from time to seal a 17-11 win for the Chiefs over South Africa's Western Stormers in Cape Town to claim their semi-final spot. The Lions, beaten only once this season, were facing a shock elimination at Ellis Park until Combrinck landed an angled 58-metre kick under massive pressure to squeeze home over the Sharks. The Sharks, dismissed as no-hopers after a 17-point regular-season home loss to the Lions the previous weekend, built a 14-3 half-time lead and were one point ahead when Combrinck struck. The Crusaders scored two tries in wild weather to overcome the Highlanders in the South Island derby. "It was hugely satisfying," coach Scott Robertson said. "It was a final, that was what we talked about because the Highlanders are better than a seventh-placed team. We knew we had to treat it as we did, and front up."

The result keeps alive the Crusaders' dream of adding to their record seven Super Rugby titles, their most recent success coming in 2008. The Hurricanes scored 20 unanswered points in a dominant second-half to keep alive their title hopes and end Australia's ACT Brumbies bid in Canberra. Wellington were relentless, overcoming a 16-15 half-time deficit in a 35-16 victory to reach the semi-finals. "We knew they would come out with a lot of emotion and intent and we worked hard in the first-half and came away with building pressure in the second-half," All Black ace fly-half Beauden Barrett said. It was an emotional comeback to rugby for cancer survivor Christian Lealifano, who came on in the second-half as a replacement for the Brumbies. Hurricanes skipper TJ Perenara paid a post-match tribute to Lealifano: "I want to congratulate Christian for coming back. "Everyone focuses on the game and the result, but when men like that come back with the fight he's had, it's humbling to be around him and he's inspiring not just to his team but to the rest of the rugby community." The Hurricanes' biggest win in Canberra extended New Zealand teams' record over Australian opposition to 26-0 this season. The Chiefs survived some late pressure from the Stormers before hanging on for victory in South Africa. Substitute winger Stevenson gathered a long pass from skipper and fly-half Aaron Cruden to cross the line unopposed for the Chiefs' clinching try. "We are a team of warriors with a clear game plan that we try to execute whenever and wherever we play," All Black Cruden said. "The Crusaders in Christchurch is going to be a tough test, but we can beat any Super Rugby team anywhere on our day." —AFP



**British and Irish Lions in action**

## MELBOURNE BEAT CANBERRA TO STAY TOP IN NRL TABLE

**SYDNEY:** Melbourne overcame injuries to stars Cameron Smith and Billy Slater to beat Canberra 20-14 and to stay atop the National Rugby League table with six regular season rounds remaining. Canberra's Sia Soliola was placed on report for a late, swinging arm tackle on Slater, who was knocked out and carried from the field in the 50th minute. Melbourne protested that Soliola, who later set up a try for Canberra, should have been sent off. "If it's not a sending off then I don't know what is a sending off," coach Craig Bellamy said. "For him to get knocked out like that, it's pretty severe. He's talking but he's not feeling too good." In a statement late Saturday, NRL referees boss Tony Archer agreed Soliola should have been sent off. "It's important to note that Sia Soliola is on report and the matter will be addressed by the Match Review Committee," Archer said. "But based on a review of the tackle, the incident did meet the indicators of a send off." Slater is thought likely to be sidelined for at least a week but Australia captain Smith, who left the field with a pectoral injury, might miss more of Melbourne's run-up to the playoffs. It was the first time since 2009 Smith played less than 50 minutes of a premiership match for Melbourne. Smith later said the decision to leave the field was precautionary and the seri-

ousness of the injury was yet to be determined. "The decision was to come off because there's still a long way to go in the season," he said. "It wasn't worth the risk, to be honest." Cameron Munster kicked a penalty after Slater's departure to give Melbourne a 14-6 lead before Soliola contributed to a try by Nick Cotric which cut their lead to four points with 15 minutes remaining. Dale Finucane's second try restored the lead and Canberra halfback Aidan Sezer completed his double with a try in the final minute after Munster was sin-binned. Canberra's loss was a major setback to its playoffs hopes, dropping it back to 10th place, two matches outside the top eight. The Roosters' 28-4 win over Newcastle left it in second place, two points behind Melbourne and two points ahead of Brisbane, who beat the Bulldogs 42-12. Brisbane took charge of the match when it scored 18 points in a seven-minute spell spanning halftime. Cronulla beat Souths 26-12, and North Queensland beat the New Zealand Warriors 24-12 to join the Broncos in fourth and fifth places respectively, separated by points differential. Sixth-placed Manly has a chance to move up when it plays St. George Illawarra on Sunday, while St. George could move up from eighth place. Parramatta, two points behind Manly in seventh place, plays Wests. —AP



**NASSAU:** The Australia girls team celebrate victory in the Girl's Rugby 7's Gold medal Final on day 4 of the 2017 Youth Commonwealth Games at QE Sports Centre on Friday in Nassau, Bahamas. — AFP