

BERDYCH SPLITS
WITH IVANISEVIC

PRAGUE: Tomas Berdych yesterday parted ways with coach Goran Ivanisevic, the former Wimbledon champion, in an effort to rescue his faltering career. Berdych, the Czech world number 14, only teamed up with Ivanisevic in August last year. However, a second round exit at the French Open prompted the 31-year-old to seek a new direction. "Goran and I will not be working together anymore," Berdych wrote on Facebook. "I enjoyed the ride and we will remain great friends." "Wish him all the best in the future and I am committed to go after my goals with current team," said Berdych, who bowed out of Roland Garros after a straight sets loss to Russian youngster Karen Khachanov. Ivanisevic previously coached fellow Croat Marin Cilic, a partnership which yielded the US Open title in 2014. And Berdych, the 2010 Wimbledon finalist, hired Ivanisevic in August 2016 with a view to a first-ever Grand Slam title. He won the Shenzhen Open under Ivanisevic's guidance in October, but soon slipped out of the top ten for the first time in more than six years. —AFP



PREVIEW

COACH GATLAND URGES
LIONS TO GET CREATIVE

WELLINGTON: Coach Warren Gatland has given the British and Irish Lions free rein to express themselves under new captain Ken Owens as he seeks a much improved performance against the Auckland Blues tomorrow.

Gatland was not impressed by what he saw during the Lions' first fixture, a 13-7 win over a team of relatively unknown New Zealanders lumped together under a Provincial Barbarians banner.

The Blues, with eight All Blacks in their ranks, may be the weakest New Zealand Super Rugby side but they will be a more formidable opposition than the Barbarians.

Gatland, when he named his all-new line-up to play the Blues, said he was looking for players with "X-factor and that means an offload or something that is a little bit outside the box".

He has totally overhauled the starting XV from the Barbarians game, including giving the captaincy to a fit-again Wales hooker Owens.

While he said the Lions "need to be more clinical", Gatland rejected suggestions they will play to a set formula.

"What do you mean by one type of game?" he responded when asked if he had only one coaching style—the familiar Wales physical direct play.

"The message to the players is that we want to play positive rugby and move the ball and create chances," he said.

"The players have to back their ability. We don't want to be prescribed and play by numbers. They have been encouraged to demonstrate their level of skill and hopefully we can do that on Wednesday."

Wales pair Dan Biggar and Rhys Webb will fill the crucial halves roles, with Ireland fly-half Johnny Sexton an unimpressive

starter in Whangarei-on the bench.

"We have a few work-ons from last weekend and we know we need to be more clinical," Gatland said.

"We created some good opportunities against the Barbarians but didn't see them through and that is something we want to improve on." Owens was unavailable for the tour opener because of the ankle injury which also kept him out of the Scarlets' Pro12 final win against Munster last month.

But Gatland said he was fit to take over from tour captain Sam Warburton for what will be the Lions' first test against a Super Rugby team.

"We have stated from the off that we want to give every player a start in the first three games, and Wednesday is an opportunity for this set of players to show what they can do in a Lions jersey," Gatland said.

"We have made 15 changes to the starting XV and we are excited to see what this team is able to do against the Blues."

Jared Payne, a late scratcher from the Barbarians because of a thigh injury, will also start, partnering Ireland team-mate Robbie Henshaw in the centres.

Lions (15-1): Leigh Halfpenny (Wales); Jack Nowell (England), Jared Payne (Ireland), Robbie Henshaw (Ireland), Elliot Daly (England); Dan Biggar (Wales), Rhys Webb (Wales); CJ Stander (Ireland), Justin Tipuric (Wales), James Haskell (England); Courtney Lawes (England), Maro Itoje (England); Dan Cole (England), Ken Owens (captain, Wales), Jack McGrath (Ireland)

Replacements: Rory Best (Ireland), Joe Marler (England), Kyle Sinckler (England), Iain Henderson (Ireland), Peter O'Mahony (Ireland), Greig Laidlaw (Scotland), Johnny Sexton (Ireland), Liam Williams (Wales). —AFP

SCANDAL-HIT BWF DEPUTY
PRESIDENT STEPS DOWN

KUALA LUMPUR: The Badminton World Federation's (BWF) deputy president has stepped down as he fights corruption allegations in his home country of Peru, a statement said yesterday. Gustavo Salazar Delgado, the sport's number two official behind president Poul-Erik Hoyer, asked to be "excused from his duties", the BWF said. "In his communication to BWF, Salazar indicated he would step aside for the time being so as not to cause any reputational or undue damage to the BWF while the investigation is in progress," the Kuala Lumpur-based body said. The BWF said the accusations against Salazar related to "personal business matters" and are entirely unrelated to badminton and Salazar's role as BWF deputy president". Various reports said Salazar, 52, was under investigation over a bribery and money-laundering case linked to Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht. Bribery scandals linked to Odebrecht have swept up scores of Brazilian politicians and span several Latin American countries. In April, a federal court in New York fined Odebrecht \$2.6 billion, part of what US authorities describe as one of the largest-ever corporate settlements for international bribery. —AFP

FC GOA NAME LOBERA
AS ZICO REPLACEMENT

MUMBAI: Indian Super League side FC Goa announced yesterday that unheralded Spaniard Sergio Lobera would replace Brazilian legend Zico as their new head coach. The ISL team said that 40-year-old Lobera, who recently coached Moroccan side Moghreb Tetouan, had signed a two-year deal and would take up his role in July. "I see FC Goa as the ideal step in my career and hope to achieve the best results for the club," Lobera said in the club's press release. In 2012 Lobera was briefly an assistant to the late Tito Vilanova at Spanish giants Barcelona before leaving to take charge of Las Palmas. Zico was head coach of Goa for the ISL's first three seasons before leaving at the end of the last campaign. The ISL is a franchise-based tournament whose club owners are largely Bollywood film stars and cricketers. The season takes place towards the end of the year and lasts around three months. —AFP



PARIS: Toulon's Daniel Johannes Vermeulen is tackled by Clermont's Arthur Iturria during the Top 14 final rugby match between Clermont Ferrand against Toulon at the Stade de France stadium in Saint-Denis, north of Paris, Sunday. — AP

RUGBY

CLERMONT WIN TOP 14 TO
PUT CHOKERS TAG TO BED

PARIS: Clermont finally held firm when it mattered most, beating Toulon 22-16 in Paris on Sunday to win the French Top 14 final. Having lost 11 of 12 previous finals, Clermont had earned the unwanted moniker of perennial "chokers". But Morgan Parra kicked 17 points as the favourites delivered for once after so many disappointments, including losing European Champions Cup finals to Toulon in 2013 and 2015, and Saracens earlier last month. Two years ago, they were also beaten Top 14 finalists by Stade Francais. "I'm proud, we've had some years of struggle but I'm proud of everyone—the players, the fans, no one ever gave up," Parra told France Televisions. Coach Franck Azema added: "This team deserves it. On that last (Toulon) line-out, honestly, we thought we'd lose out again. "It was really tough but so good and intense that you quickly forget it." Having played scintillating first half rugby, without getting the reward their dominance deserved, Clermont doggedly held firm in the second period as Toulon, beaten finalists last year by Racing 92, came storming back. "Two years in a row where we come up short at the same stage—European Cup quarter-finals and league final, it's tough to swallow. We're going to have to pick ourselves up," admitted Toulon captain Guilhem Guirado. After an immaculately-respected minute's silence in memory of the victims of Saturday's London attack, Clermont made a blistering start and only a knock-on by captain Damien Chouly a yard from the line prevented them from opening their account early doors.

ZEST AND INTENSITY

Toulon were restricted to some desperate, last-ditch-and at times barely legal-defending with one Ma'a Nonu tackle resembling a shoulder charge. Under pressure, Toulon collapsed a scrum and Parra kicked a sixth minute penalty to give Clermont the lead.

On 10 minutes, Clermont held firm against a wave of battering Toulon attacks before Nick Abendanon ripped the ball from Romain Taofenua's grasp and the Jaunards launched a counter from deep inside their own 22. Damien Penaud did brilliantly with a mazy run to scamper 50 metres upfield before passing to Fijian wing Alivereti Raka, who hitch-kicked and side-stepped inside compatriot Josua Tuisova before strolling under the posts. Parra converted and added a second penalty to give the Vulcans a 13-0 lead.

Clermont were playing with a zest and intensity that Toulon simply couldn't manage but New Zealand great Nonu managed to stem the yellow tide with a crucial interception off Parra inside the Toulon 22. Barring an Anthony Belleau penalty, all the team in red could manage in attacking terms were some testing up-and-unders for full-back Abendanon. That was until a reckless high tackle from Clermont No.8 Fritz Lee knocked Australian full-back James O'Connor unconscious. Samoan Lee was perhaps a touch lucky to be shown only a yellow card but Clermont were soon made to pay.

South African prop Marcel van der Merwe made ground up the middle and quick ball spread wide allowed the bulldozing Tuisova to take revenge on Raka, flattening his countryman in contact and then holding off a double tackle from Penaud and Abendanon to touch down in the corner. Belleau's conversion from the flank brought Toulon back

to within three points but a Parra penalty made it 16-10 at the break. Clermont had scored a combined 59 points to 15 in the last two meetings between these sides but Toulon were a different proposition this time. It was a brutal game with Clermont locks Sitaleki Timani and Arthur Iturria both forced off following head knocks, leaving Fijian back rower Peceli Yato to come on in an unfamiliar position.

Belleau and Parra traded penalties and the former could have levelled the scores but saw two penalties hit the uprights.

Toulon's rugged, relentless power play was starting to wear down Clermont and a Francis Trinh-Duc penalty nine minutes from time had them back to within three points. But these were not the Clermont chokers of old and Parra responded immediately with a kick of his own before the yellow shirted warriors held out close to their own line as Toulon launched one last-ditch attack, but in vain. —AFP

TOULON FLOP GOROMARU
SET TO RETURN TO JAPAN

TOKYO: Japan's Rugby World Cup star Ayumu Goromaru will return to Japanese Top League side Yamaha Jubilo after a frustrating spell at French Top 14 club Toulon, the full-back said yesterday.

The 31-year-old, who played just a handful of games in France since making his Toulon debut last November, announced on his official website that his contract would begin on July 1.

"Unfortunately I wasn't able to achieve the results I wanted in France," said Goromaru. "After a year and a half challenging myself overseas I will return home and go into the season with refreshed spirits and a new attitude."

Goromaru shot to fame at the 2015 World Cup when Japan, then coached by current England boss Eddie Jones, won three matches, including an astonishing 34-32 shock over two-time champions South Africa in their opening game.

Japan's talisman moved to Australia to play Super Rugby for the Queensland Reds after impressing at the World Cup, but his season was prematurely cut short by a shoulder injury.

Goromaru enjoys a cult following back in Japan, where life-size statues of the player are sculpted, zoo animals are named after him and he has even been made a "ninja master".

Despite his celebrity status, however, Goromaru struggled in Super Rugby and also subsequently in France, departing with club president Mourad Boudjellal's comments ringing in his ears.

"We don't want him either," the outspoken businessman told RMC Sport. "We won't be keeping him, he doesn't want to stay." Current Japan coach Jamie Joseph has expressed his frustration at not having the likes of Goromaru playing in Japan.

The Brave Blossoms missed a step after their swashbuckling World Cup campaign, their momentum stalling because of delays in bringing in a successor to Jones.

When Joseph eventually took over, he complained that the team's blueprints for their dazzling run at the England tournament were lost and that he was forced to start from scratch.

Japan host the next World Cup in 2019, the first to take place in Asia. —AFP



PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron, left, shakes hand with Clermont's Peceli Yato as he kneels before him the Top 14 final rugby match between Clermont Ferrand against Toulon at the Stade de France stadium in Saint-Denis, north of Paris, Sunday. — AP

WALLABIES 'READY FOR THE FIGHT'
TO RESTORE MORALE: CHEIKA

SYDNEY: Coach Michael Cheika has vowed the Wallabies will lift the spirits of the Australian game amid a demoralising Super Rugby campaign in this week's start to the international Test season.

Australian rugby is in the doldrums with its five franchises struggling and one, as yet unnamed, facing the axe when Super Rugby reverts to 15 teams next season from the current 18. New Zealand teams are currently unbeaten in their 23 Super Rugby matches against Australian opposition this year. Cheika said Sunday the Wallabies' first five Tests of 2017 were going to be "like Everest for us", but added that the players were ready for the fight.

Super Rugby takes a back seat for the next three weeks as the Wallabies take on Fiji, Scotland and Italy at home. Also ahead in August is the Bledisloe Cup, which Australia has not been able to win back from the All Blacks since 2002.

"These first five games of our season, the three June Tests and the two Bledisloe Cup matches, are going to be like an Everest for us," Cheika said on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Offsiders programme. "We've got to be fully prepared and

we've got to enjoy the challenge as well... and get stuck into it. "I'm a strong and passionate believer in rugby in this country. Yeah, there's some tough times on and off the field but it's what you get from those and how you respond." Cheika added that Australian rugby fans were looking to the Wallabies to put things right on the field.

"We've got to play with a certain attitude that says we're here for the fight," he said.

"The Australian team will be playing with no fear and having been well prepared to go out there and have that positive mindset."

While Cheika believed that Australia had "punched above our weight so far... even to be where we are now-third in the world", he wanted to set the team's sights even higher ahead of the 2019 World Cup in Japan.

"But maybe we've been satisfied at that level instead of going to the next step. You got to start believing and dreaming that. "For the next generation of players, that's the mindset we want to put in their head."

The Wallabies kick off their 2017 international campaign against Fiji in Melbourne on Saturday, followed by Tests against Scotland in Sydney on June 17 and Italy in Brisbane on June 24. —AFP