

Sports

Slovakian skier wins first gold as Paralympics get under way

USA clinch a hat-trick of victories

PYEONGCHANG: Slovakian skier Henrieta Farkasova won the first gold medal of the Pyeongchang Paralympics yesterday and the USA clinched a hat-trick of victories as sporting action got underway at Games marked by a rapid inter-Korean thaw. Medals were up for grabs in alpine skiing and biathlon. Russian athletes, competing under a neutral flag after a mass doping scandal, clinched two golds while France also won two.

The Paralympics in South Korea opened Friday with a glittering ceremony that mixed spectacular light shows and fireworks with traditional Korean performances and modern pop music. North Korea was in focus as the country's first two athletes to ever compete at a Winter Paralympics paraded into the Pyeongchang Olympic Stadium under their own country's flag.

It was the latest stage of a detente on the Korean peninsula that began at last month's Winter Olympics, and culminated with this week's announcement that US President Donald Trump had agreed to meet the North's leader Kim Jong Un. Slovakia's Farkasova was the first to take gold, skiing to victory in the women's vision-impaired downhill category, accompanied by her guide Natalia Subrtova.

She completed the course at the Jeongseon Alpine Centre in 1min 29.72sec, beating second-placed Millie Knight of Britain and her guide Brett Wild by 0.86sec. It was Farkasova's sixth Paralympic gold, and she hailed her victory as "great, amazing". "Hopefully we can inspire through our achievements and (show) others to strive and do their best," she said.



Medals up for grabs in alpine skiing, biathlon

USA STRIKE GOLD

The USA, who have the biggest team at the Paralympics with 69 athletes, got off to a good start, winning three golds, one silver and a bronze. In the biathlon—which combines skiing and shooting—the Americans took gold and silver in the women's sit ski, with Kendall Gretsche coming first and Oksana Masters second.

Gretsche said her victory was "pretty unexpected". "It's my first Paralympics, first race, so it's just a great way to kick off the week and hopefully (there's) more to come," she said. American Daniel Crossen, a former US Navy Seal, took gold in the men's sit ski.

Andrew Kurka from Team USA won gold in the men's sitting downhill skiing, with Japan's Taiki Morii clinching silver. In an echo of last month's Winter Olympics, 30 Russian athletes are competing as neutrals after the country was banned over allegations of state-sponsored doping.

Russian biathletes Ekaterina Remyantseva, competing in women's standing, and Mikhailina Lysova, in the women's vision-impaired category, both won gold yesterday. Marie Bochet and Benjamin Daviet clinched France's first golds, in women's standing downhill skiing and men's standing biathlon respectively. There were also golds for Ukraine, with Vitaliy Lukyanenko winning in the men's vision-impaired biathlon, and Canada, with Mac Marcoux clinching victory in the men's vision-impaired downhill skiing.

The North Korean athletes at the Games are two cross-country skiers, Kim Jong Hyon and Ma Yu Chol.



PYEONGCHANG: Slovakia's Henrieta Farkasova (top) and her guide Natalia Subrtova take part in the alpine skiing visually impaired women's downhill during the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Paralympic Games at the Jeongseon Alpine Centre in Pyeongchang yesterday. — AFP

They had originally been expected to march alongside their South Korean counterparts at Friday's opening ceremony but a row over how their "unification flag" should appear halted the plan.

Their countries' teams look part separately in the athletes' parade—but towards the end of the ceremony a

member of the North's delegation and a South Korean athlete carried the Paralympic torch into the Olympic Stadium together. The rapid inter-Korean detente began at last month's Winter Olympics. Athletes from the two Koreas marched together at the opening ceremony and Kim Jong Un's sister attended the event. — AFP

Hurricanes hold Crusaders off to win tough clash

WELLINGTON: The Wellington Hurricanes used a blistering start to hold off a Canterbury Crusaders' forward pack-inspired fightback and sneak a 29-19 victory in their Super Rugby clash at Wellington Regional Stadium yesterday.

The Hurricanes had stormed out to a 21-0 lead before the visitors slowed the pace of the game and starved the home side of the ball to get back to 26-19 with 25 minutes remaining.

The Crusaders, however, missed the experienced influence of All Blacks duo Ryan Crotty and Sam Whitelock, who were both taken off for head injury assessments and did not return. Both Crotty and Whitelock were the victims of a rampant Hurricanes side, who controlled the ball, stormed over the advantage line, put players into space and smashed into anyone wearing red.

They harnessed that intensity to race

out to a 21-0 lead with tries to prop Chris Eves, TJ Perenara and former All Blacks sevens winger Ben Lam, who finished off a sweeping 80-metre counter-attack. The Crusaders, however, slowly worked their way back into the game as their forwards began to compete in the collision area and give their backs opportunities with replacement winger Manasa Mataele crossing after he beat three defenders.

Hurricanes centre Matt Proctor restored the three-try advantage when Brad Shields charged down a Mitch Hunt clearing kick. The Crusaders, however, sent an ominous message just before the break when Jordan Taufua crashed over from a long-distance rolling maul to reduce the deficit to 26-12.

The eight-times champion Crusaders continued that momentum in the second half, dominated territory and possession and reduced the deficit to 26-19 when Michael Ala'alatoa placed the ball against the post. Fullback Jordie Barrett, however, managed to slam over a long-range penalty with less than 15 minutes remaining that gave the Hurricanes the breathing space they required. — Reuters

Halep, Pliskova advance, Muguruza suffers shock defeat

INDIAN WELLS: World number one Simona Halep and fifth seed Karolina Pliskova eased through their WTA Indian Wells openers on Friday but reigning Wimbledon champ Garbine Muguruza bit the dust in the California desert.

Halep beat Karolina's sister Kristyna Pliskova 6-4, 6-4 while Karolina eased past Irina-Camelia Begu 7-6 (7/4), 6-1 to reach the third round of the combined WTA/ATP hardcourt tournament. Muguruza became the first major casualty of the event, suffering a shock 2-6, 7-5, 6-1 defeat to world number 100 Sachia Vickery. "It slipped away a little bit from me," said Muguruza. "I'm going to learn a lot from this match. I'm going to watch it and I'm going to see what went wrong."

Muguruza, who was seeded third here, was named WTA player of the year last year after winning titles in Wimbledon and Cincinnati. The 24-year-old also reached number one in the world in September and was ranked third heading into Indian Wells. This the Spaniard's first loss to a player ranked in the 100s since she was beaten by Jana Cepelova (124) at Wimbledon in 2016. Muguruza had five double faults and had her serve broken five times in the two hour, 11 minute night match.

Crowd favourite Vickery posted her first



INDIAN WELLS: Simona Halep hits a forehand during her match against Kristyna Pliskova of the Czech Republic during the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden on Friday in Indian Wells, California. — AFP

career win over a top 10 player as she served masterfully and controlled the rallies with her ground strokes. Vickery said the partisan crowd motivated her. "The atmosphere really helped me even though I was feeling it a bit physically. I kept telling myself 'just do your best'," said the 22-year-old who is making her second appearance in Indian Wells. Halep roared into the third round by overpowering Kristyna in straight sets. The 26-year-old Romanian will meet US wildcard Caroline Dolehide who beat Dominika Cibulkova, of

Slovakia, 5-7, 6-3, 6-4.

"I was ready to play. I was ready to work and ready to fight," Halep said. "It wasn't an easy match. But I am really happy I won my first match here and I get a chance to play again." Halep and Caroline Wozniacki have been taking turns at No. 1 this year. Denmark's Wozniacki took the world number one ranking after beating Halep in three sets in the Australian Open final, but Halep reclaimed it from her just prior to Indian Wells. — AFP

WADA seeks new sources for drug test kits

MONTREAL: The World Anti-Doping Agency said Friday it was "actively exploring alternatives" after Swiss manufacturer Berlinger Special AG said it would stop making secure anti-doping sample collection bottles.

Berlinger announced earlier Friday that it was pulling out of the business but pledged to keep sending out collection kits until stocks ran out in a bid to prevent a short-term shortage. WADA said they had contacted anti-doping agencies, accredited laboratories and sample collection agencies, including the International Olympic Committee, to update them on the situation and offer guidance "to secure the integrity of the doping control process".

"In parallel, WADA is actively exploring alternative sources of sample collection kits and, to that end, is also collaborating with the Institute of National Anti-Doping Organizations and a number of Anti-Doping Organizations," the agency's statement said.

WADA said in January it had

looked into reports from one lab that a new-generation test kit produced by Berlinger could be "susceptible to manual opening without evidence of tampering". An older model was used instead at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics last month.

"WADA wishes to reassure athletes, anti-doping organizations and other stakeholders that it remains resolutely committed to following up with Berlinger and affected stakeholders as necessary until the matter is resolved and that it will keep stakeholders updated along the way," the agency said.

In the 2014 Sochi Olympics doping scandal detailed in a report by Canadian lawyer Richard McLaren, investigators discovered that Russian staff involved had developed a method to open supposedly "tamper-proof" sample bottles undetected.

The far-reaching scandal saw Russia barred from the Pyeongchang Games, although Russian athletes who meet certain criteria were allowed to compete as neutrals. Berlinger said Friday that "increasingly institutionalized forms of doping malpractice" had increased the demands made on the test kits.

"These developments are not only damaging to sport: they have become increasingly incompatible with our corporate values and core competencies," chairwoman of the board Andrea Berlinger said in a statement posted on the company's website. — AFP

Sharapova splits with Dutch tennis coach

INDIAN WELLS: Five-time Grand Slam winner Maria Sharapova has decided to split with her tennis coach Sven Groeneveld following her shock first round exit from the WTA Indian Wells tournament.

After four years of working together, the decision to go their separate ways was a mutual one, Sharapova said on Friday. "After four successful and challenging years of collaboration together, I would like to thank Sven for his incredible loyalty, work ethic and most importantly the friendship that we have formed that will go beyond this working partnership," Sharapova said in a news release.

"Although we have mutually agreed to part ways during this time, I have been incredibly fortunate to have a team leader like him in my corner."

The former world number one, and twice a winner in the California desert, suffered a stunning defeat on Wednesday to Japanese No. 1 Naomi Osaka, losing in straight sets, 6-4, 6-4.

Sharapova was one of the tournament's major attractions after missing the last two.



INDIAN WELLS: Coach Sven Groeneveld (left) watches Maria Sharapova of Russia play Naomi Osaka of Japan during the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden in Indian Wells, California. — AFP

"Maria has been one of the most hardworking and professional players I have ever worked with. Her strength and fighting spirit will continue to be a force to reckon with and I have the deepest respect for her as a player and person," said Groeneveld of the Netherlands.

For Sharapova the loss to the 20-year-old Osaka was another painful reminder that it's

back to the drawing board for the Russian as she makes her way back from a 15-month drugs ban. It was her second first round loss in a row after she withdrew from the Dubai tournament with a forearm injury.

In her only Grand Slam appearance this year, Sharapova reached the third round of the Australian Open before losing to Angelique Kerber. — AFP