

Sports

Camel racing storms back in Sinai after virus hiatus

A popular traditional sport in many Arab countries

SINAI: Spread out at the foot of a vast plateau in the Sinai desert, hundreds of excited Bedouins gathered to race their camels after a six-month break due to coronavirus. Shrouded in a vast sand cloud kicked up by the hump-backed beasts, more than 500 camels were loudly cheered on by their owners dressed in traditional jalabiyas and headdresses. Camel racing is a popular traditional sport in many Arab countries, most notably in the Gulf region. And in Egypt, Bedouins of the South Sinai desert have kept up the tradition.

But race events have been suspended since March following the Covid-19 outbreak, and orders only came down at the beginning of the month that they could resume last weekend. The camels ran around a two-kilometer track in the Tih plateau, completing it in a matter of minutes, as they were followed by spectators and owners riding in SUVs to get a close-up glimpse of the action. The competition "is a training for the international race, which should take place in October in Sharm El-Sheikh," Saleh Al-Muzaini, head of the Nuweiba camel club said.

One group of camels after another, placed in different categories according to age and whether they were male or female, made their debut on the dirt track lined by sand embankments on each side. On their backs sat mechanical jockeys wearing racing jerseys and brandishing whips, which are lighter than human riders.



SOUTH SINAI, Egypt: Camels carrying jockeys on their backs, run on a dirt track during a race in Egypt's South Sinai desert, after more than six months of hiatus due to the coronavirus outbreak. — AFP photos



SOUTH SINAI: Bedouins prepare camels before they take part in a race in Egypt's South Sinai desert.

In a different race, young boys mount the camels to complete a 10-kilometre course.

Crazy camels

Among the audience was 32-year-old Mostapha Abu al-Fadl, a geologist at an oil company in Cairo, who came especially to watch. "When I heard they were organizing the race again, I told my friends how crazy, how wonderful it is... We had to come and see," he said. To the Bedouins, the race is a way of keeping a traditional heritage alive. "There was camel racing in the past, but we revived it" in recent years,

Sheikh Hassan, of the Alegat tribe, which organizes the event said.

"Camels will not disappear for us. We can use them for centuries. If the camel goes away, the Bedouins will also go away." Egypt has so far registered over 100,000 coronavirus cases, and more than 5,500 fatalities. Strict measures, including banning large gatherings, have been imposed in the country since March to prevent contagion. Camel races - often attract large audiences of tourists, visitors and Bedouins to the middle of the Sinai desert.

Sheikh Hassan, however, says the sparsely populated peninsula with its breezy and dry weather had been only mildly affected by the pandemic, and there were no coronavirus measures noticeably in place for the racing. Suspending the races caused heavy losses for the camel owners, who still had to pay for their animals' training, food and health checkups. Over the six months alone, the owners lost some 10 and 15 million Egyptian pounds (between \$625,000 and \$940,000), according to Sheikh Hassan.

Costly passion

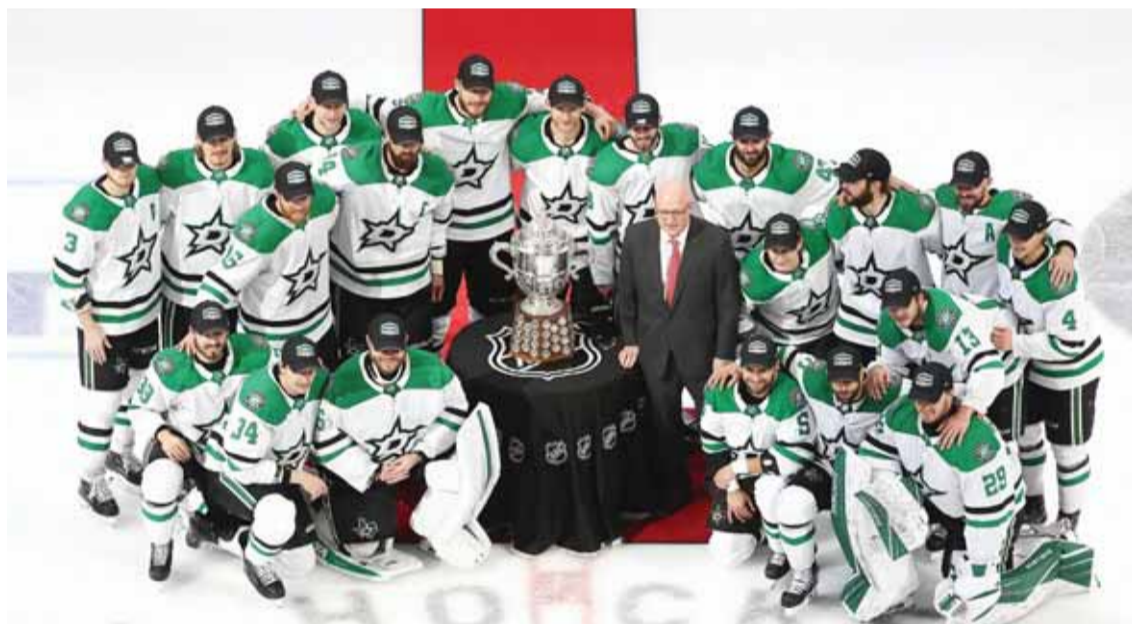
For owner Soleiman Hamad, Saturday's race ended on a high note as his animal came first in its category. There is no prize money, but the winners carry off a prestigious trophy which also helps boost their animal's value. For Hamad and others, camel racing represents a source of additional income, provided they also have the means to train, feed and care for the animal. "It's costly, but it's our passion," he said. Each camel costs up to 2,000 Egyptian pounds monthly to feed. — AFP

Never-say-die Stars stun Knights to reach first Stanley Cup final

LOS ANGELES: Denis Gurianov scored a power-play goal 3:36 into overtime as the Dallas Stars reached their first Stanley Cup final in 20 years with a 3-2 come-from-behind victory over the Vegas Golden Knights. Joel Kiviranta also scored a power-play goal late in the third period to force overtime as the Stars rallied from a 2-0 deficit Monday night to shock the Golden Knights and win the Western Conference final series 4-1. "We found our game. We scored a goal that got us going, then the powerplay took over," said forward Joe Pavelski of the Stars' eighth come-from-behind win in the post season.

On the winning goal, Gurianov, 23, took a pass from John Klingberg and hammered a one-timer past Vegas goalie Robin Lehner on the short side that sparked a mob scene celebration with Dallas goalie Anton Khudobin in the middle. Canada's Jamie Benn also scored while Khudobin stopped 34 shots for the Stars, who advanced to their first Stanley Cup final since 2000. Dallas will play either the New York Islanders or the Tampa Bay Lightning for the NHL championship. The Lightning can wrap their series up with a win on Tuesday in the NHL's quarantine bubble in Edmonton, Alberta.

Dallas has been outshot and outplayed for most of the series, but thanks to timely scoring and brilliant goaltending from Russia's Khudobin they were able to stun the favoured Golden Knights. Khudobin, who stopped 153 of 161 shots in the



EDMONTON: The Dallas Stars pose for a team photo with Bill Daly, the deputy commissioner and chief legal officer of the National Hockey League (NHL) and the Clarence S Campbell Bowl after winning the Western Conference Championship over the Vegas Golden Knights in Game Five during the 2020 NHL Stanley Cup Playoffs on September 14, 2020. — AFP

series, assumed the starting role last month from Ben Bishop, who is injured. "He stepped into an unsure situation and just ran with it. He got more confident with every game," Pavelski said of Khudobin. Vegas coach Pete DeBoer said his teams scoring woes started in the previous round against the Vancouver Canucks and carried over into the conference final.

"There's no doubt the last couple games of the Vancouver series against (Canucks goalie

Thatcher) Demko probably rattled our confidence in that area as a group," DeBoer said. "Honestly up to that point, I thought we were creating a ton of offence." Vegas forward Chandler Stephenson opened the scoring on a breakaway near the halfway point of the first after being set up by Knights leading playoff scorer Shea Theodore. Stephenson took a cross-ice pass from Theodore and drove to the net where he neatly slipped a backhand between the legs of Khudobin. — AFP

Pandemic batters market for Brazil's football transfers

SAO PAULO: Brazil exports more footballers than any other country, but the coronavirus pandemic has caused a plunge in international transfers, hitting the finances of clubs that depend on lucrative deals for their young talent. The number of Brazilian footballers transferred to foreign clubs fell 62 percent during the European summer transfer window this year, according to an AFP count based on data from the website Transfermarkt. From June 1 to September 8 last year, 194 players at Brazilian clubs left to play abroad, either on loan or transferred, according to the site.

This year, the number was just 74. "The transfer market has slowed. Clubs are trying not to spend as much because everyone's financial situation is complicated," said ESPN commentator Gustavo Hofman. Brazil leads the world with 2,742 footballers playing abroad, ahead of Argentina (2,330) and France (1,740), according to a May report by the International Centre for Sports Studies, in Switzerland.

In the country of Pele and Neymar, transfers typically generate around one-fourth of clubs' income, second only to TV rights as a revenue source. But the number of transfers is not the only thing that

has fallen. Amid the financial uncertainty unleashed by Covid-19, the amount of money involved in the deals has also dropped. Last year, the three top international transfers brought 77 million euros (\$91.4 million) to Brazilian clubs.

That included a 45-million-euro deal between Real Madrid and Brazilian club Santos for teenage winger Rodrygo. This year, the three top transfers have brought less than 62 million euros to Brazilian clubs. In the biggest, Portuguese club Benfica paid 28 million euros to Gremio for forward and national team standout Everton. The Lisbon club also paid 18 million euros to bring attacking midfielder Pedrinho from Corinthians. "In any other year, (Everton) might have brought a higher price from Benfica," said Hofman.

The slump comes at the worst possible time for Brazilian clubs, which were already struggling with heavy debt. Now, they are also reeling from the economic fallout of Covid-19 in the country that has the second-highest death toll worldwide, after the United States. "Clubs' financial fragility has increased because of the pandemic," said Rodrigo Capelo, a sports business journalist at Brazilian media house Globo. —AFP

Goodbye India, hello IPL: Singh Dhoni set to 'rule roost' in UAE

NEW DELHI: India's Mahendra Singh Dhoni may have signed off from international duties but he'll be at the heart of the action in the Indian Premier League—a tournament he helped inspire, and where he remains a towering figure. Dhoni, who has led the Chennai Super Kings to three titles and five runner-up finishes in the IPL's 12 editions, will feature in the opening match on Saturday against the Mumbai Indians, the defending champions.

The game comes more than a year after the 39-year-old last played for India in their semi-final loss to New Zealand in the 2019 World Cup. After much speculation, the wicketkeeper-batsman finally announced the end of his 16-year international career last month. And without the pressure of having to play well to keep his place in the national team, the flamboyant Dhoni is expected to shine in UAE, the IPL's temporary home as India battles a rampant coronavirus problem.

"He is very fit and I believe he is working very hard on it. Plus he has stopped playing international cricket so there will be less burden on his body," Saba Karim, another former India wicketkeeper, told AFP. "Global cricket still needs an icon like MS Dhoni to continue." Dhoni's captaincy began with India winning the inaugural T20 World Cup title in 2007, a success that triggered the birth of the IPL—the

world's most popular and richest cricket league—a year later.

"Dhoni played an instrumental role in kick-starting the IPL because of the way he brought a different dimension to the shorter format of the game because of his aggressive side with the willow," Karim said. "Also with his calm exterior behind the stumps." Dhoni, once hailed as the world's best finisher, has played 190 IPL matches, scoring 4,432 runs including 23 half-centuries. An exemplary leader with fast glove-work, Dhoni has made Chennai one of IPL's most loved franchises with almost 200,000 people following the team's fan club on Twitter.

'Soul of Chennai'

Chennai chief executive Kasi Viswanathan says Dhoni remains key to the team's plans and they expect him to keep playing till the 2022 edition. The team has been under scrutiny after arriving in the UAE last month with two players testing positive for the coronavirus. Senior batsman Suresh Raina and veteran spinner Harbhajan Singh later opted out of the competition. "I swear if Dhoni pulls out of IPL, there's no IPL for me this year!" a Twitter user wrote after the withdrawals. Cricketer-turned-commentator Aakash Chopra said Dhoni is "the biggest strength of the team and the entire franchise is dependent on him". —AFP

News in brief

NFL issues warning to coaches

LOS ANGELES: The NFL has issued a warning to coaches across the league about wearing face coverings properly after several ignored established guidelines in last weekend's opening round of fixtures. In a memo sent to all 32 teams across the league, NFL executive vice president of operations Troy Vincent said individuals who violated the face covering Covid-19 protocols risked "accountability measures." "We must remain vigilant and disciplined in following the processes and protocols put in place by not only the league, union and clubs, but also by state and local governments," Vincent wrote in the memo. — AFP

FIA investigating Hamilton

MUGELLO: Formula One's ruling body is reported to be considering action against world champion Lewis Hamilton after he wore a t-shirt highlighting police brutality at Sunday's Tuscan Grand Prix. The six-time world champion and series leader, who won the race, wore a t-shirt bearing a message that said "Arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor" before and after the race, during an anti-racism ceremony and television interviews. A spokesperson for the International Motoring Federation (FIA) told the BBC that the case against Hamilton is "under active consideration". Hamilton had previously worn a "Black Lives Matter" t-shirt at every race without any comment from the FIA. Taylor, a 26-year-old black woman, was shot by police in Kentucky in March. She was a medical worker and was killed in her own home. — AFP

PGA Tour Player of the Year

NEW YORK: After three tournament wins and a FedExCup title, Dustin Johnson added more hardware to his trophy case on Monday when he was named PGA Tour Player of the Year for a second time. Johnson missed the start of the season while recovering from a knee injury and also had to sit out the COVID-19 shutdown like everyone else. But he then had a blazing end to the campaign with two wins and two runner-up finishes in his last four starts that pushed him back to the top of the world rankings. Victories at the Northern Trust and Tour Championships earned the 36-year-old American a first FedExCup title and the \$15 million payday that goes along with the trophy. His other win came at the Travelers Championship. — Reuters

Dates for Bledisloe Cup tests

AUCKLAND: The Bledisloe Cup series between New Zealand and Australia will kick off in Wellington on Oct 11 with the second match in Auckland a week later, New Zealand Rugby (NZR) said yesterday. The announcement comes after New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern telephoned Australian counterpart Scott Morrison to defuse tensions over the scheduling. The tests will be the first involving traditional rugby powers since the northern hemisphere's Six Nations was halted in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The third and fourth matches of the Bledisloe Cup, the annual series involving the trans-Tasman neighbors, will double as games in the four-nation Rugby Championship, which was awarded to Australia last week and begins in November. — Reuters