

Senegal wrestlers ready for combat after yearlong wait

DAKAR: Ten burly Senegalese wrestlers raise a chant, singing “Mother, pray for us,” while jogging up and down a sandy field by the Atlantic Ocean. Training has resumed after a year of coronavirus-related restrictions that had stopped them from practicing their sport. Wrestling in the West African nation is a centuries-old tradition rooted in harvest festivals, and draws a fanatical following.

Hulking fighters dressed in loincloths face off in packed stadiums, performing mystic rituals in the sand before going toe-to-toe. On Sunday, the first major bout since the start of the pandemic will take place in a 20,000-seater stadium just outside of Dakar. “This fight is of huge importance to me,” says Eumeu Sene, 42, one of the men training in the suburb of the capital Dakar.

A former national champion once crowned ‘King of the Arenas,’ Sene is hoping to make a comeback in his match against a fighter known as Lac 2. There are five separate bouts on Sunday’s fight card, but this one is the main draw. Panels advertising the event line the streets. Gaston Mbengue, the fight promoter, told AFP that there had not been a clash of this level “for years”.

‘Must not lose’

Such fights can grind daily life to a halt, with many people glued to television sets to watch wrestlers spar and attempt to throw each other to the ground. But Senegal’s fans have been deprived of the spectacle since the onset of the

pandemic last year, when the government banned wrestling matches and training sessions in professional stables. After nationwide unrest, Senegal lifted health restrictions this month, allowing the sport to resume.

At the training session in the Dakar suburb of Petit Mbaou, barrel-chested fighters grapple with each other until a call to prayer interrupts them. “My career depends on this, I must not lose,” says Sene, who has weighed in at 120 kilos, for his upcoming fight. Sene, whose real name is Mamadou Ngom, won the prestigious King of the Arenas title in 2018 but lost it the following year.

A victory against Lac 2 would allow him to joust for the title again. Like Sene, many wrestlers go by evocative nicknames, such as ‘John Cena’, after the American professional wrestler; or simply, ‘Building’. Sunday’s fight will take place in front of 10,000 spectators, the stadium at half its capacity to try to avert coronavirus infections.

Mystical rituals

Khalifa Ababacar Niang, the head of the wrestling stable that includes Sene, said that few are allowed to approach wrestlers ahead of bouts, for fear of black magic. “We are very careful about strangers,” he explained, adding that some spells can render fighters lazy or dizzy. Niang underlined that allowing AFP to interview his prize fighter was a rare privilege.

Mysticism plays an important role in tradi-



PETIT MBAOU, Senegal: Senegalese wrestlers grapple during a training session on March 29, 2021. —AFP

tional wrestling in Senegal. Fighters sport magical charms known as “gris-gris” (pronounced “gree-gree”) wrapped around their waist, wrist or biceps. They coat their bodies in a liquid deemed to be imbued with magical properties and then face off in the arena, serenaded by “griot” singers. With the return of the season, many wrestlers in this poor nation of 16 million people are hoping for a boost to their incomes.

Coronavirus restrictions put some 8,000 professional fighters out of a job, according to Senegal’s national wrestling association. Wrestler Ngarafe Ndiaye, 22, said he started selling telephones during the pandemic. Nicknamed “Sadio’s Son,” Ndiaye added that he hopes to make a full-time living from wrestling one day. “Right now, I need another job to get by,” he said. —AFP

Ring-rusty South Africa begin march on 2023 World Cup

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa return to one-day international cricket for the first time in a year against Pakistan from today with a history-making new captain at the helm and their sights set on the 2023 World Cup. The Proteas have not played an ODI since completing a 3-0 home series win against Australia in March 2020. Following that series, South Africa went to India but the tour was aborted because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A planned series against England last December was then postponed after two members of the touring party tested positive for coronavirus - results which later were declared as false positives. As a result, South Africa have yet to secure their first points in the World Cup Super League which decides which seven teams join hosts India as automatic qualifiers for the 2023 World Cup.

The Proteas and the Netherlands are the only teams who have yet to play a match in the 13-team league. Seven teams already have three or more wins, so South Africa, under new captain Temba Bavuma, will be seeking to make up ground when they play Pakistan at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Friday in the first of three one-day internationals. —AFP

New Zealand beat Bangladesh in rain-hit T20

AUCKLAND: New Zealand beat Bangladesh by 65 runs in a rain-shortened third Twenty20 International in Auckland on Friday to claim a series clean sweep. With their innings reduced to 10 overs due to bad weather, Bangladesh were all out for 76 with three balls to spare, well short of the 142 target set by New Zealand. The Black Caps made 141 for four after losing the toss and being asked to bat, with Finn Allen hitting 71 from 29 balls.

Spinner Todd Astle was the standout bowler, taking four wickets for 13 runs in his two over spell. Captain Tim Southee said it was satisfying for the New Zealanders to notch their seventh home series win of the season on all formats. “It’s been a great summer and we’ve played some good cricket and seen a lot of guys come into the environment and do well,” he said.

Bangladesh captain Liton Das said mistakes cost his side, including a series of dropped catches that allowed Allen to run away with the match. “We’re not playing good cricket in batting and fielding,” he said. “We’ve been very good bowling but that’s cost us. We’re a young team and we’re learning.”

New Zealand made a blistering start, with Martin Guptill smashing three sixes in the first two overs. Allen was also finding the boundary but rode his luck with two dropped catches as the Black Caps raced to 69 without loss after five overs. Guptill smashed 16 off the first three balls from Mahedi Hasan but the



AUCKLAND: New Zealand players celebrate their series victory after the third Twenty20 cricket match between New Zealand and Bangladesh yesterday. - AFP

spinner had his revenge when the batsman was caught on 44 trying to clear the rope. Allen brought up his maiden half century off 18 balls and was gifted another life when Soumya Sarkar dropped a straightforward chance. He finally fell in the final over, scooping a Taskin Ahmed delivery over his head to the fielder, but by then the damage had been done.

Bangladesh made a disastrous start, losing two wickets to paceman Southee in the opening over. They were starting to rebuild when Astle also claimed a brace, leaving Bangladesh teetering on 37 for four. Astle’s second over proved just as destructive and the tourists had no answer as the run rate climbed to an insurmountable level. —AFP