

## Sports

# Shcherbakova hails Japan virus measures after World Trophy win

## Biden backs Japan PM on holding 'safe and secure' Olympics

OSAKA: World figure skating champion Anna Shcherbakova helped Russia win the World Team Trophy in Osaka yesterday - then gave Japan's antivirus measures the thumbs up ahead of the Tokyo Olympics. Shcherbakova topped the women's free program with a score of 160.58 to lead Russia to its first title at the biennial six-nation competition, ahead of the US and Japan. The World Team Trophy is being held in Japan less than 100 days before the start of the coronavirus-delayed Tokyo Games, which were again cast into doubt this week over virus fears.

A senior Japanese politician said Thursday that cancelling the Games remains a possibility, as the country deals with a surge in infections. But Shcherbakova said she was "not scared" during her time in Osaka, and that coming to Japan was "a great joy". "Japan has very stringent antivirus measures in place," said the 17-year-old, who had previously been infected with the virus. "Abiding by the rules is something I've become accustomed to, so there was no problem."

Organizers insist the Games can be held safely, and have released virus rulebooks to allay public fears. Athletes will not be required to quarantine or be vaccinated, but will have to limit movements and be tested regularly. Several test events set to involve overseas athletes and officials have been postponed in Japan in recent months. But American skater Bradie Tennell said she felt the World Team Trophy had "run so smoothly".

"I think Japan has done a wonderful job with this competition," she said. "So, no, I haven't felt anything other than really happy to be here, and really grateful." Around 3,000 fans-half the venue's capacity-were allowed into the event each day, although cheering was strictly forbidden.

### 'Safe and secure'

US President Joe Biden on Friday gave his backing to Japan's efforts to hold a "safe and secure" Olympic Games this year after talk of cancellation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, meeting Biden as the US president's first foreign guest, said his country was listening to experts and doing its "utmost" to prepare for the Tokyo Games. "They are doing everything possible to contain infection and to realize safe and secure games from scientific and objective perspectives," Suga told a joint news conference.

"I expressed my determination to realize the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games as a symbol of global unity this summer, and President Biden once again expressed his support," the prime minister added. A joint statement afterward said that Biden "supports Prime Minister Suga's efforts to hold a safe and secure Olympic and Paralympic Games this summer."

"Both leaders expressed their pride in the US and Japanese athletes who have trained for these Games and will be competing in the best traditions of the Olympic spirit," the statement said. The Tokyo Games



OSAKA: Russia's Anna Shcherbakova competes in the women's free skating during the ISU World Team Trophy figure skating event in Osaka yesterday. — AFP

are due to open in July, with only Japanese spectators in the stands, after already being postponed by a year due to the pandemic. Uncertainty about their viability has grown amid rising virus cases.

Organizers said Friday that they scrapped another leg of Japan's Olympic torch relay — the third leg to be affected by a surge in infections — and that a BMX

Freestyle test event scheduled for April 24 and 25 would now be postponed.

### First time

Russia won the World Team Trophy for the first time, with the title already in the bag by the time Shcherbakova began her free program. Russian skaters were banned from competing under their country's name and flag at the world championships in Sweden last month because of a doping dispute. The ban will also apply at next year's Beijing Olympics. But it was not in place at this week's event, and team captain Elizaveta Tuktamysheva said hearing the national anthem on the podium was "a great moment".

"We were so happy because we had a Russian flag here, and that means a lot," she said. Russia finished on 125 points, ahead of the US on 110 and Japan on 107, with Italy, France and Canada bringing up the rear. Shcherbakova, who also won the women's short program, finished the free program ahead of Japan's Kaori Sakamoto in second on 150.29 and Tuktamysheva in third on 146.23.

Russia's Anastasia Mishina and Aleksandr Galliamov won the pairs free program with a score of 151.59. Mishina and Galliamov, who also won the world title last month in Sweden, finished top in the short program the previous day. "We'll have to prepare a new program, then we'll take a little time off to rest," said Mishina. "Then we'll go into the specifics together with the coach on how to prepare for the Olympic season." — AFP



IMOLA: Ferrari team members work on the car of Ferrari's Monegasque driver Charles Leclerc in the pit lane before a practice session at the Autodromo Internazionale Enzo e Dino Ferrari race track in Imola, Italy, yesterday, on the eve of the Formula One Emilia Romagna Grand Prix. — AFP

## Verstappen fastest, Hamilton third in final Imola practice

IMOLA: Red Bull's Max Verstappen set the pace in final practice in bright sunshine at the Emilia Romagna Grand Prix at Imola yesterday, almost half a second faster than anyone else on the track. The entire top eight were within a second of each other as McLaren driver Lando Norris came second, while defending champion Lewis Hamilton's Mercedes was a slender 0.1sec behind in third in the final practice ahead of qualifying later Saturday.

Hamilton beat Verstappen on the season opening Bahrain GP in March but Mercedes were wary of the Red Bulls' superior speed ahead of the weekend and Hamilton will need to fall back on all his experience to clinch pole. "We may have won the first round, but we are under no illusions that this is going to be an easy season," Mercedes boss Toto Wolff said. "Our car still lacks speed on a single lap and Red Bull have the edge at the moment." On a bright day at the Autodromo Enzo e Dino Ferrari track with the snow-capped Apennines visible in the background Sergio Perez in the second Red Bull was fourth. Ferrari's Charles Leclerc and Alpha Tauri's Pierre Gasly were on the next row and the second Ferrari of Carlos Sainz was in seventh on the same time as Valtteri Bottas for Mercedes. Rounding out the top 10 were the Alpha Romeo Alpine pair of Fernando Alonso and Esteban Ocon as they impress on the car's return to F1. — AFP

## Pakistan complete sweep against South Africa

CENTURION: Pakistan completed a clean sweep of four trophies in four series against South Africa but had anxious moments before scrambling to a three-wicket win with one ball to spare in the fourth and final Twenty20 international at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Friday.

"It is a big moment for Pakistan. It is not easy winning matches in South Africa," captain Babar Azam said through an interpreter at the post-match presentation. Pakistan, who earlier in the season defeated South Africa in Tests and T20 internationals in Pakistan, followed up a 2-1 one-day series win with a 3-1 victory in the T20s to round off a successful tour.

Medium-pace bowler Faheem Ashraf set up what seemed likely to be an easy win for Pakistan when he took three for 17 as South Africa were bowled out for 144 on what is usually a high-scoring ground. Pakistan were cruising at 92 for one in the tenth over as Babar and Fakhar Zaman shared an impressive second-wicket partnership after Mohammad Rizwan was stumped in the first over.

But Fakhar, who hit five fours and four sixes in a 34-ball 60, went for one big hit too many and sliced a high catch to backward point. Babar, who was named man of the series, was caught at wide third man for 24 three balls later and Pakistan found themselves in a collapse in which six wickets fell for 37 runs.

Two no-balls in the penultimate over by Sisanda

## Quartararo tops Portugal MotoGP practice

PORTIMAO: France's Fabio Quartararo (Yamaha) topped the field going into yesterday's qualifying at the Portuguese Moto Grand Prix, but a trio of champions including the returning Marc Marquez was left scrambling for places. Quartararo clocked 1min 39.044sec to finish ahead of Italians Franco Morbidelli (Petronas Yamaha SRT) and Friday pace-setter Francesco Bagnaia (Ducati Lenovo Team).

Practice was marred by a sickening crash that saw Jorge Martin (Pramac Racing) stretchered off the track straight to hospital for further medical checks. The Spaniard was conscious, but with contusions to his head, right hand and right ankle.

Spain's Alex Marquez (Honda-LCR) and Japanese rider Takaaki Nakagami (Honda-LCR) both also suffered crashes. Three world champions finished outside the top 10: Joan Mir (Team Suzuki Ecstar), Valentino Rossi (Petronas Yamaha SRT) and Marquez (Repsol Honda Team) ended in 12th, 13th and 15th positions respectively.

Six-time MotoGP world champion Marquez made a remarkable comeback Friday in his first competitive ride since crashing nine months ago. The trio will race the first part of qualification, with only the fastest two going on to Q2, the top 10 after the three practice sessions having already booked their slots. — AFP



PORTIMAO: Monster Energy Yamaha MotoGP's French rider Fabio Quartararo rides during the third MotoGP free practice session of the Portuguese Grand Prix at the Algarve International Circuit in Portimao, yesterday. — AFP

## Qatar seeking virus jabs for all World Cup visitors

DOHA: Qatar is in talks with coronavirus vaccine makers to ensure all fans attending the 2022 World Cup in the country have been vaccinated, the foreign minister said Friday. The Gulf nation is facing a resurgence of virus cases and deaths despite progress in its mass vaccination program, forcing authorities to impose a nationwide lockdown. "We have been negotiating and talking to the vaccination providers on how we can make sure that everyone attending the World Cup is vaccinated," Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani said.

"Right now there are programs under development to provide vaccination to all the attendees of the World Cup," he added during the Raisina Dialogue, a virtual event hosted by the Observer Research Foundation. "We will be able, hopefully, to host a COVID-free event. We also hope that globally the pandemic will start to go down and disappear."

Globally no one vaccine certification system has yet been universally accepted or recognised, though the International Air Transport Association (IATA) Travel Pass has gained popularity amongst Gulf airlines including Qatar Airways.

As of Friday, 194,930 of Qatar's 2.75 million people have tested positive for the coronavirus since the pandemic began, with 21,965 currently active cases — almost one percent of the population. Over 26,000 vaccine jabs were administered on Friday, bringing the total to 1,209,648 doses, according to official data.

One in five of the 367 deaths Qatar has suffered since the start of the pandemic has been reported this month with officials blaming the more virulent British variant. Last week Qatar announced the reimposition of strict lockdown measures, banning most indoor activities except retail and work in an effort to contain the virus. Qatar has defied soaring coronavirus case numbers to stage several high profile global sporting events in recent months, serving as a test bed for different restrictions but also suffering high-profile infection cases.

The wealthy Gulf nation has bucked the trend of more established sporting nations which have cancelled or postponed a slew of leading events, instead hosting soccer, tennis, motorcycling, judo and beach volleyball since January. FIFA boss Gianni Infantino has previously said that measures to contain the coronavirus will need to be taken during the 2022 tournament but did not give details. "Maybe some precautionary measures have to be taken," he told AFP during the FIFA Club World Cup in Doha in February. — AFP

Temba Bavuma because of injury, batted poorly but clawed their way back into the game despite bowling four no-balls and seven wides.

"I am disappointed but we have young cricketers with great talent and I am proud of them," said stand-in captain Heinrich Klaasen. "We showed we can fight and compete as a young group but we need to get more consistency in our performances."

Faheem earlier started a South African collapse similar to that which later afflicted Pakistan. South Africa had reached 73 for one after the early loss of Aiden Markram when Faheem had Janneman Malan caught at mid-off for 33 in the ninth over.

He followed up with the wickets of Klaasen and George Linde. He bowled his four overs in succession and did not concede a boundary. "My brief was clear from the captain but the tone was set by the new ball bowlers," he said.

Fast bowlers Hasan Ali and Haris Rauf took three for 40 and two for 18 respectively. Rassie van der Dussen top-scored for South Africa with 52 off 36 balls. The series completed a truncated home season for South Africa, who lost a T20 series against England and gained their only series win when they won two Tests against Sri Lanka before taking on Pakistan.

Babar praised the facilities provided for his team in a bio-secure country club between Johannesburg and Centurion, with the matches shared between the two venues. His team will now head to Harare for three T20 internationals and two Tests against Zimbabwe. — AFP



CENTURION: Pakistan players and support staff celebrate their series victory after the fourth Twenty20 international cricket match between South Africa and Pakistan at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Friday. — AFP