

SPORTS BRIEFS



Shreyasi Singh after winning the gold on Monday.

Shreyasi crowned National Champion in Women's Trap

New Delhi: Reigning Commonwealth Games champion Shreyasi Singh won the women's Trap crown at the ongoing 63rd National Shooting Championship for shotgun events at the Dr. Karni Singh Shooting Range (KSSR) in New Delhi on Monday. Shreyasi, representing Bihar, got the better of Rajeshwari Kumari of Punjab in the top final, which also had the likes of seasoned shooters Shagun Chowdhary and Seema Tomar among others.

The 28-year-old shot 42 out of 50 birds to claim the brightest medal on offer, while Rajeshwari managed 38 hits to settle for silver. This was Shreyasi's fourth individual career National title but her first in Women's Trap. Varda Sharma of Delhi won the Junior Women's Trap competition getting the better of Manisha Keer of MP after a shoot-off took place to separate the gold and silver medal winners.

Saina withdraws from Korea Open

Gwangju: Back in form after a string of below-par performances, Kidambi Srikanth would look for another good outing while Saina Nehwal pulled out of the Korea Masters World Tour Super 300 tournament, which starts with the qualifiers here on Tuesday. After going through a tough phase since his final finish at India Open this year, Srikanth boosted his confidence with a semifinal appearance at the Hong Kong Open last week. World number 9 Saina, who has made early exits in a series of tournaments recently, decided to skip the event but she is likely to feature at the Syed Modi International World Tour Super 300 in Lucknow next week. With Saina's withdrawal, there is no Indian participation in women's singles.

Bhubaneswar to host Pro League

New Delhi: Bhubaneswar will host India's home matches during the 2020 Hockey Pro League, the sport's governing body announced on Monday. The second edition of the Hockey Pro League will be played between January 11 and June 28, the International Hockey Federation (FIH) said in a statement. Bhubaneswar has become a hockey hub in India and has been hosting a majority of tournaments, the most recent being the Olympic qualifiers.

The first team that India will host is the Netherlands on January 18. The Pro League will feature 144 matches in the coming season. Australia's home matches will be played in Perth and Sydney, while England will be playing its share in London. The first match will feature the Netherlands and China on January 11, 2020 at the Wujin Hockey Stadium in Changzhou.

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Nur-Sultan, the likely venue

Despite Pakistan federation's plea, their Davis Cup tie against India is likely to be shifted to Kazakh capital



Rohan Bopanna has pulled out of the tie due to a shoulder injury. File

SHAHID JUDGE
MUMBAI, NOVEMBER 18

INDIA'S UPCOMING Davis Cup tie against Pakistan is now likely to be held in Nur-Sultan, the capital city of Kazakhstan. The International Tennis Federation (ITF) had declared on November 4 that the venue for the match slated to be held in Islamabad would now be shifted to a neutral venue. The Pakistan Tennis Federation (PTF) appealed against the decision, but the world body is now poised to shift the tie anyway.

"The ITF hasn't confirmed it yet, but it seems most likely that it will take place in Astana (Nur-Sultan) in Kazakhstan," All India Tennis Association (AITA) secretary general Hironmoy Chatterjee told *The Indian Express*.

"The ITF hasn't made the announcement yet, but they wrote to us today and told us to start the visa process for Kazakhstan for our players. They also sent us a list of hotels."

The tie had initially been scheduled for September in Islamabad, but due to security concerns, the Indian federation wrote to the ITF asking for the tie to be either shifted to a neutral venue or be delayed by two months. Subsequently, the tie was rescheduled for November 29-30.

The AITA again approached the ITF to move the tie to a neutral venue in October, and the world body agreed. In turn, the Pakistan Tennis Federation (PTF) made an appeal against the decision, and the ITF was expected to take the final call late on Monday. But since the world body has reached out to the AITA, the Indian body is expecting the venue to be shifted to outside Pakistan.

"The fact that they've told us to start the visa process and given us hotel information means it's most likely the tie will be moved to Kazakhstan. So we have started the visa process," Chatterjee added. "It'll probably be played on indoor hard courts since it's very cold right now. It's supposed to be around -10 degrees Celsius right now."

The shift in venue, though yet to be confirmed, all but rules out a first Indian Davis Cup team visit across the border in 55 years.

Since then, the Indian team was scheduled to play in Pakistan back in 1973 as well, but the tie was shifted to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia since it was in the aftermath of the 1971 Indo-Pak War. Later on, the Pakistan team travelled to Mumbai to compete in the event in 2006.

Qureshi to skip the tie in protest after shift in venue

SHAHID JUDGE
MUMBAI, NOVEMBER 18

PAKISTANI TENNIS veteran Aisam-Ul-Haq Qureshi has decided to skip the upcoming Davis Cup tie against India if the tie does not happen in Pakistan. The Pakistan Tennis Federation (PTF) had appealed against the International Tennis Federation's (ITF) decision to shift the Group 1 Zonal tie to a neutral venue. Now that the tie is likely to take place in Kazakhstan, the 39-year-old may not feature for his country.

"For me that's an unfair and biased decision by the ITF," Qureshi told *The Indian Express*. "I don't see any reason why a five-member Indian team cannot come to Pakistan right now. I don't understand why they have security concerns and see it as a threat to the tennis team when there are so many Indians coming in day in and day out at the Kartarpur Corridor for religious activities. We don't want politics to come in the way of sports like it has been happening with cricket. That's the only reason I'm taking this stand."

Qureshi goes further to express his disappointment in his former doubles partner Rohan Bopanna, with whom he had promoted the 'Stop war start tennis' campaign. Both players are 'Champions of Peace,' which is created by Monaco-based organisation Peace and Sport.

"As an ambassador for peace, I'd have expected him to promote peace, and at least encourage his federation and his government to push for this tie to be played in Pakistan," Qureshi says of Bopanna, with whom he made the 2010 US Open doubles final.

"I spoke to Rohan at the Paris Masters in October and he said he'd be missing because of a knee injury. But now I see that he became available when the tie was shifted to a neutral venue. It's a bit sad for me to see that. He has been to Pakistan before and played here as well. He came for my wedding in 2010, there used to be Indo-Pak friendly ties before that as well, he was here for that. It's just sad, and that's why I'm heartbroken."

As it turned out, on Monday, Bopanna, who is India's highest ranked doubles player (38) pulled out of the tie due to a shoulder injury.

The Pakistani player, who is ranked 52 in doubles and is the only player from his country to be ranked within the top 1300 ATP ranks (in both singles and doubles), has previously used tennis to promote the idea of sports triumphing over politics. At the Wimbledon Championships and US Open in 2002, he teamed up with Israeli player Amir Hadad despite a backlash from his countrymen.

"When I played with an Israeli, half of my country was against me. But I felt I was making the right decision as a sportsman, putting sports first and not politics or religion. The same thing happened when I played with Rohan as well," he says.

Along with Qureshi, Pakistan's most capped Davis Cup player Aqeel Khan (51 ties) is also expected to skip the tie in protest of the ITF decision. And without the top two players, who continue playing singles and doubles in Davis Cup, Pakistan will be forced to field a highly depleted squad.

concerns. Prajnesh and Sharan continue to remain unavailable due to family reasons.

Eight-man team
Last week, the AITA announced an eight-man team for the tie that includes Nagal, Ramkumar, Mukund, Saketh Myneni, Sidharth Rawat, Bopanna, Jeevan Nedunchelzyan and veteran Leander Paes. On Monday though, it was confirmed that Bopanna had to pull out of the tie due to a shoulder injury.

"The way it stands, we will continue to take only the seven players that we had named for the squad and not add anymore," said Davis Cup coach Zeeshan Ali. "It's late in the year and injuries often come up with players. So it was crucial that we had Jeevan and Leander in the team as specialist doubles. We also have Saketh, who can play doubles, and Ramkumar has just won two back-to-back doubles Challenger titles."

The Pakistan team in turn, should the tie be held in Kazakhstan, is expected to travel without their most experienced players Aisam-Ul-Haq Qureshi and Aqeel Khan who have decided to boycott the tie as a mark of protest against the ITF's decision to shift the matches outside Pakistan.

For the Indian players though, the biggest concern now is the weather. "The winter months are coming and we've heard it can touch minus 10 in Kazakhstan," Ali added.

"Those are difficult conditions but our players are professional and have been on tour for so long. The main concern for them was the safety concern, which if it does happen in Kazakhstan, will not be a problem."

ers for the competition. Sumit Nagal, Ramkumar Ramanathan, Sasikummar Mukund, Prajnesh Gunneswaran, Rohan Bopanna and Divij Sharan had previously made themselves unavailable should the tie be played in Pakistan due to security

will virtually send India out of reckoning as far as the 2022 World Cup qualification is concerned and a direct spot in the 2023 Asian Cup. If India lose, they will trail Oman by nine points and have only three matches — maximum nine points — left to play in this second round of the qualifiers.

Even the runner-up sides from the eight groups are not guaranteed an automatic spot in the third round of the qualifiers. A draw against Oman will also make it difficult for India to qualify for the next round. Their last three matches — all to be played next year — are against Qatar (at home on March 26), Bangladesh (away, June 4) and Afghanistan (at home, June 9).

But getting at least a point against Oman may prove crucial as it will make it easier for India to get an automatic third round berth for the 2023 Asian Cup qualifiers. Stimac, however, knows it will be a mammoth task for his team. "Oman are much better now than the team we played against in Guwahati. They are the favourites. We know for a fact that match is going to be very difficult for us," he said.

(OMAN VS INDIA, LIVE ON STAR SPORTS NETWORK, 8.30PM)

SYED MUSHTAQ ROUND-UP



Tamil Nadu opener Murali Vijay will miss the Super League and Knockout matches of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy due to an ankle injury.

GROUP D

All-round Harshal shines as Haryana mauil Meghalaya

Mumbai: Powered by an all-round show by Harshal Patel, Haryana ended their league stage campaign on a high with a 99-run win against Meghalaya in a Group D match of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy here on Monday. Haryana have already made it to the Super League stage of the national T20 tournament, which begins in Surat on November 21. Mumbai, who lost only one game in the league phase, have also booked their place in the Super League stage. Put into bat at the BKC, Haryana rode on a quick fire 82 off 40 balls by opener Patel to amass a competitive 202/6 despite losing two early wickets of Himanshura and in-form Chaitanya Bishnoi. The chase was an uphill task for Meghalaya, who struggled to get going and were restricted to 103/9. Patel, a right-arm medium pacer, then shone with the ball to return with figures of 3/22.

BRIEF SCORES: Haryana 202-6 in 20 overs (Harshal Patel 82, Rahul Tewatia not out 31) beat Meghalaya 103-9 (Abhay Negi 25, Sanjay Yadav 21, Ravi Teja 21; Harshal Patel 3-22) by 99 runs.

GROUP E

Delhi qualify for Super League after dismantling Odisha

Surat: All-rounder Lalit Yadav claimed three wickets with his off-breaks as Delhi notched up a comprehensive 20-run win over Odisha in their final Group E match to qualify for the Super League of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy here on Monday. Electing to bat, Delhi posted 149 for six and then returned to dismiss Odisha for 129 in 18.1 overs to complete the win and top Group E with 22 points from seven matches. Going through a rough patch, Shikhar Dhawan top-scored with a 33-ball 35, which comprised three fours and a six.

His struggle was apparent against an unfancied Odisha attack. He failed to get going. Earlier, Delhi batsmen, including opener Hiten Dalal (20) and first-down Dhruv Shorey (26), got starts but none could convert them into big scores but they did enough to help the team post a decent score on board. For Odisha, Abhishek Raut (2/21) took two wickets, while Govinda Poddar (1/18), Suryakant Pradhan (1/31), Pappu Roy (1/35) and Subham Nayak (1/29) accounted for one wicket each. Defending the total, Yadav returned with impressive figures of 3.1-1-10-3 and he was supported by Pawan Negi (2/38) and Nitish Rana (2/6).

BRIEF SCORES: Delhi 149/6 in 20 overs (Shikhar Dhawan 35; Abhishek Raut 2/21) beat Odisha 129 in 18.1 overs (Suryakant Pradhan 48; Lalit Yadav 3/10).

WORLD CUP QUALIFIER

After stumbling against minnows, India take on mighty Oman

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
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A LOT has changed since India's previous match against Oman two months ago. Heading into that tie, the campaign opener, in Guwahati, India were brimming with confidence on the back of some eye-catching results. That belief reflected in the way the team challenged a shaky Oman, troubling them with their pacy counter-attacks and coming closer than ever to beating them.

But when the two teams line up for the return leg in Muscat on Tuesday, the circumstances could not have been more different. Oman are pushing Qatar in the race for the top spot in Group E, winning three out of the four matches.

India, on the other hand, are yet to win even one match (3 draws and 1 defeat). And the back-to-back draws against Bangladesh and Afghanistan have taken away whatever little momentum and optimism there was after they stole a point against Asian champions Qatar.

If complacency was India's undoing against Bangladesh last month, coach Igor Stimac has had to deal with injuries and out-

of-form players in this doubleheader away from home.

Against Afghanistan, Stimac was forced to field a make-shift back-line (Ashique Kuruniyan, a forward, was played as a left-back) because of an injury to Sandesh Jhingan and a family emergency for fellow centre-back Anas Edathodika, who had to fly home. Edathodika has joined the team in Muscat. But his match fitness remains a question.

While the focus will be on India's defence, Stimac will hope for the midfield to step up. India were guilty of making one mistake too many in the midfield, thus surrendering the possession too cheaply, in the matches against Bangladesh and Afghanistan. Consequently, they never were able to assert themselves against the two lower-ranked opponents, which ultimately cost India victories in two seemingly winnable matches.

Stimac mixed things up against Afghanistan by benching Anirudh Thapa and playing Pronay Halder while also giving a runaround to Len Doungel, whose goal saved India of embarrassment against Afghanistan. Whether the Croatian coach sticks to the same combination, or is

tempted to exploit Thapa's playmaking abilities, remains to be seen.

Stimac has so far done little wrong in his player selections as well as substitutions. Against Oman, however, he will have to find the right balance between speed and strength.

Oman's physical superiority

Oman play with a lot of pace and enjoy a physical superiority over the Indians. In the previous encounter, India troubled Oman till the time they played at a high-intensity. The moment India sat back, Oman dictated the game and played at a pace that was very tough for India to match.

Rabia Al Mandhar, Mohsin Johar, Muhsen al Ghassani and Arshad al Alawi have been at the centre of most attacking moves Oman have created in this campaign. "They are quick, they switch positions fast and can score from long. We have to be extra cautious of their long-range shots," defender Pritam Kotal said.

Tuesday's match will be crucial for India keeping in mind their future commitments. An upset win will certainly keep India in the hunt for a next round berth. A loss, however,



India will once again pin their hopes on Sunil Chhetri.