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TALL ORDER FOR GAUFF



GAUFF 'CONCERNED' ABOUT HEIGHT DIFFERENCE WITH FELLOW FLAGBEARER LEBRON

Coco Gauff joked yesterday that she is worried about the height difference with her fellow Team USA flagbearer LeBron James, ahead of the Paris Olympics opening ceremony. Gauff was selected alongside NBA superstar James by her fellow US athletes to carry the flag during today's ceremony along the river Seine. James is a foot taller - 2.06m (6ft 9ins) to 1.75m (5ft 9ins) - than the tennis world number two. "I am a little bit concerned about the height difference," she said. "I thought it was two flags but I saw pictures (of previous Olympics) and they're holding it together."

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GULF TIMES
SPORT



SPOTLIGHT

Paris holds its breath before Olympics opening ceremony

More than 7,500 competitors will sail down a six-kilometre stretch of the Seine river on 85 boats

AFP
Paris

Paris was yesterday counting down the hours to the most ambitious Olympics opening ceremony in history on the river Seine.

The show today evening will see up to 7,500 competitors sail down a six-kilometre stretch of the Seine on 85 boats, accompanied by a performance blending French culture and Olympic values that organisers promise will be spectacular.

Compared to the Covid-blighted Tokyo Olympics, where the Games were delayed by a year and opened in an empty stadium, the Paris ceremony will take place in front of 300,000 spectators and an audience of VIPs and celebrities from around the world.

The line-up of performers is a closely guarded secret but US pop star Lady Gaga and French-Malian singer Aya Nakamura - the most listened-to French-speaking singer in the world - are rumoured to be among them. The ceremony will take place amid an unprecedented security operation.

Central Paris has been turned into a fortress, with metal barriers along both banks of the Seine. Only residents and people with hotel bookings can enter the high-security area. Police snipers are set to be positioned on every high point along the route, with an assassination attempt on US presidential candidate Donald Trump on July 13 helping focus minds. Israel and the Palestinian team will be given extra security with the tensions from the Israeli offensive in Gaza feared to be a potential motive for would-be attackers.

At the Games yesterday, women's football took centre stage after a chaotic start to the sporting action in the men's football 24 hours earlier. The Spanish women's football team, the reigning world champions who are making their first-ever Ol-



Denmark's Mie Hoeglund (centre) attempts to score during the preliminary round Group A handball match against Slovenia at the Paris Olympic Games yesterday. (AFP)

mpics appearance, beat Japan 2-1 thanks to goals from 2023 world player of the year Aitana Bonmati and Mariona Caldentey.

Scandal-hit reigning champions Canada overcame New Zealand 2-1 without their coach Bev Priestman on the sidelines after she decided it would be inappropriate following incidents of Canadian staff spying on their opponents' training sessions with drones. Canada's assistant coach and an analyst were dismissed from the Olympics for their part in the affair.

It all added up to a difficult start for the football at the Games after a chaotic end to Argentina men's match against Morocco when the football kicked off on Wednesday. Morocco beat the two-time Olympic champions 2-1 in Saint-Etienne, but only after a late equaliser for the South American side was disallowed and the fi-

nal minutes took place in an empty stadium following crowd trouble.

The tennis draw threw up a mouth-watering potential second-round tie between 2008 gold medalist Rafael Nadal and 24-time Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic, while two-time Olympic champion Andy Murray withdrew from the singles. "I am excited for this duel in the second round, and I will give it my all," said Djokovic.

US gymnastics superstar Simone Biles, set to once again be one of the faces of the Olympics, got her first taste of the Bercy Arena as she trained ahead of the start of competition at the weekend. Biles is strongly tipped to add to her haul of four Olympic golds at the Paris Games after a tumultuous campaign in Tokyo three years ago, when she pulled out of most of her



Spain's midfielder Aitana Bonmati celebrates after scoring her team's first goal in the group C football match at La Beaujoire Stadium in Nantes, France. (AFP)



South Korea's Lim Si-hyeon poses after breaking the world record in archery preliminary round in Paris. (AFP)

events as she battled the disorientating condition that gymnasts call "twisties".

In other developments, US Olympic chiefs yesterday called for an end to the

feud between American anti-doping officials and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) after renewed verbal sparring. Gene Sykes, the chairman of the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee, said WADA and the US Anti-Doping Agency had been "playing ping pong with media bullets" since revelations about a 2021 doping scandal involving Chinese swimmers emerged.

The acrimony between the two bodies flared again on Wednesday, with the International Olympic Committee warning US officials they could be stripped of the 2034 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City if WADA was not respected as the "supreme authority" of the anti-doping movement. "What we want to do is to cool the tempers and find a way for these organisations to constructively work better together," Sykes said.

FOCUS

Palestinians slam IOC 'double standards' over Israel

AFP
Paris

The head of the Palestine Olympic Committee criticised "double standards" from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) yesterday over its decision to allow Israel to compete at the Paris Games. Palestinian Olympic head Jibril Rajoub demanded a boycott in a letter to the IOC earlier this week which was rejected by the head of the international Olympics body, Thomas Bach.

"This confirms that there are international institutions that insist on applying double standards and not adhering to the Olympic Charter, laws and regulations, or morals," Rajoub said as he arrived at Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport with the Palestinian sporting delegation.

Around a hundred people were there to welcome the athletes with dates and shouts of "Free, Free Palestine!". "The Israelis or the Israeli Olympic Committee have lost the moral, sports, humanitarian and legal right to participate," Rajoub added, saying Israel's ongoing bombardment of Gaza amounted to "crimes of genocide, ethnic cleansing".

Palestinian militants from Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, resulting in the deaths of about 1,170 people. Israel's retaliatory military campaign to destroy Hamas has killed 39,175 people, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza. Around 400 Palestinian athletes have been killed, while others have been unable to train or travel because of Israeli bombing or restrictions, the Palestine Olympic



Palestinian athletes and supporters pose after their arrival at the Charles de Gaulle airport ahead of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

Committee says. Russia has been banned from the Paris Olympics by the IOC for violating the Olympic charter when it annexed Ukrainian sporting organisations after the Kremlin's 2022 invasion.

The IOC has in the past denied that Israel is in violation of the Olympic charter and stressed the relationship between Israeli and Palestinian Olympic Committees. "We have two National Olympic Committees, that is the difference with the world of politics, and in this respect both have been living in peaceful co-existence," IOC chief Thomas Bach said in Paris on Tuesday. He added: "We are not in the political business, we are there to accom-

plish our mission to get the athletes together."

As he arrived yesterday in Paris, Yazan al-Bawwab, a Palestinian swimmer, said he wanted to raise awareness about the Palestinian cause and the suffering in Gaza. "As an athlete... it's not about the medals. It's about reaching the most people, about the Palestinian cause," he said. "If a medal gets me more awareness, that's what I care about. Sports is a tool for peace also, it's a way to spread my message to the world about Palestinians and that we're suffering".

The Israeli national anthem was whistled at the Parc des Princes stadium and Palestinian flags were waved by a handful of spectators.

Qatar athletes arrive in Paris for Olympic Games



Qatar's Olympic high jump defending champion Mutaz Barshim poses with members of the Qatari Security Forces on his arrival in Paris for the Olympics Games yesterday. Qatari security forces, equipped with armoured vehicles and urban camouflage livery, are at the French capital to help secure the global event.



Team Qatar athletes Bassem Hemeida, Ammar Ismail, Ismail Dawood and Shahd Mohamed arrive in Paris ahead of the 2024 Olympic Games. The track and field athletes aim to achieve significant milestones for Qatar as they join the Qatari contingent at the Olympic Games Village ahead of today's opening ceremony, which will take place at River Seine in Paris.

SPOTLIGHT

Emerging talents look good but boxing on the ropes

There are serious questions over whether boxing will even remain on the Olympic programme

AFP Paris

Muhammad Ali, Floyd Mayweather and Lennox Lewis are among the boxing greats who have cut their teeth at the Olympics, with a new generation of fighters eager to follow in their footsteps in Paris.

But there are serious questions over whether the sport will even remain on the Olympic programme.

Boxing made its debut at the modern Olympics in 1904 and has been contested at every Summer Games since, apart from the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm as Swedish law banned the sport at the time.

But it only went ahead at the Covid-delayed Tokyo Games three years ago after the International Olympic Committee stepped in to oversee the competition.

The IOC suspended its recognition of the International Boxing Association in 2019 because of concerns over governance, financial and ethical issues and last year it withdrew its recognition of the governing body.

The IOC will once again organ-

ise the boxing in the French capital and has given the sport until 2025 to get its house in order, otherwise it risks being excluded from the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

Against this uncertain backdrop, nearly 250 boxers – evenly split for the first time between men and women – will do battle between July 27 and August 10, the penultimate day of the Games.

Women's boxing made its Olympic debut at London 2012 across three weight categories but there will be six weight divisions in Paris, reflecting the growth of the sport.

Olympic boxing will take place at the North Paris Arena on the outskirts of the city and at Roland-Garros, better known as the home of the French Open tennis.

Among those to watch in the women's competition will be Ireland's Kellie Harrington, who won the lightweight title in Tokyo.

She suffered her first defeat in three years in April and knows the pressure is on after her heroics in 2021 catapulted her into the spotlight.

"It's not about being the greatest, it's not about bringing back a medal," the 34-year-old recently told Irish media.



"It's that feeling of, 'I'm just going to get this done because this is what I've worked for.'" Also in the women's event is Cindy Ngamba, who was born in Cameroon but moved to Britain aged 11 and will represent the Refugee Olympic Team.

There are several plotlines in the men's competition, which will similarly feature reigning Olympic champions, some boxers with professional experience and also emerging talents.

Led in the past by boxers such as Ali, Mayweather, George Foreman,

Roy Jones Jr and Evander Holyfield, the United States is the most successful nation in the history of Olympic boxing. But its men have failed to take home gold since Andre Ward – another who went on to become a world champion – in 2004.

Their hopes of ending that drought are led by the 21-year-old featherweight Jahmal Harvey. Cuba are another traditional heavyweight and in Arlen Lopez and Julio Cesar La Cruz they have two highly accomplished fighters who are looking to win gold for a third time.

Only three boxers have ever done that in the history of the Games.

Britain are another powerhouse, both in women's and men's boxing.

Anthony Joshua won gold for the hosts at London 2012 before turning pro and becoming heavyweight world champion.

Britain have high hopes for 27-year-old super-heavyweight Delicious Orié, who has been mentioned as the next possible Joshua and is a reigning Commonwealth Games champion. A sparring partner of Joshua's, Orié once said: "Some say I'm the new Anthony Joshua, but one day I aim to be even better and dominate."

Waseem Abu Sal will be the first Palestinian boxer to compete at the Olympics after earning a wildcard spot. "This has been my dream since I was 10," he told AFP at his gym in the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah. "Every day I woke up wondering how to get to the Olympics."

ATHLETICS

European sprint queen Asher-Smith targets elusive Olympic crown

AFP Paris

Dina Asher-Smith once watched up close as Jessica Ennis-Hill won Olympic heptathlon gold and now Britain's greatest ever female sprinter hopes the roles will be reversed in Paris.

Asher-Smith carried bags for athletes at the 2012 London Games and watched one of her heroines Ennis-Hill take the title on what became known by the hosts as 'Super Saturday' as Greg Rutherford won the long jump and Mo Farah the 10,000 metres.

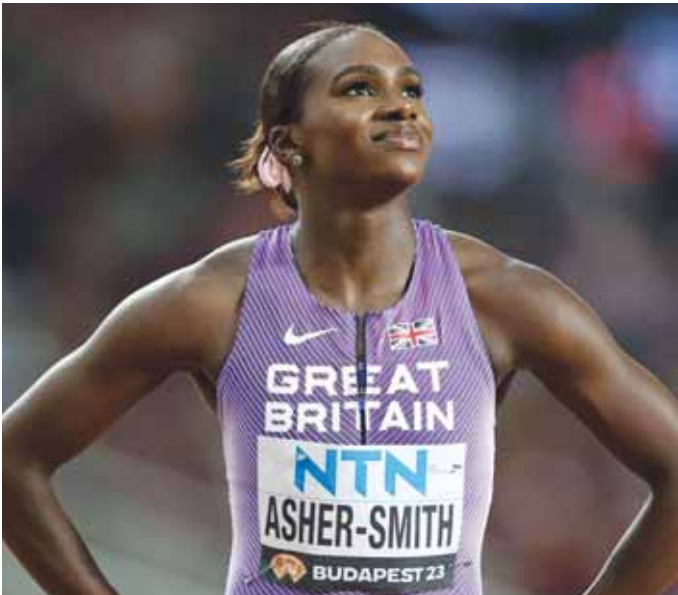
At 28 this could be Asher-Smith's last chance of securing an elusive Olympic individual medal at 100m or 200m.

In a neat flip, Ennis-Hill will be watching from the BBC studio in the Stade de France.

Asher-Smith has already emulated Ennis-Hill and her other athletics role model Christine Ohuruogu in winning her first global title – the 200m world outdoor title in 2019 – at 23, the same age they won their maiden crowns.

With her morale boosted by her second European 100m title in Rome in June, she pits her wits against world 100m champion Sha'Carri Richardson and the Jamaicans are bound to be strong.

Stepping up into the 200m, she will find Jamaica's world champion Shericka Jackson and American Gabby Thomas, who produced a remarkable come-



from-behind run to win the London Diamond League meeting on Saturday as Asher-Smith faded to third.

"We're definitely in the golden age of women's sprinting and it's great to be acknowledged in that group," the Briton told *Eurosport*.

"We've been in the golden age of women's sprinting for a while now – the times on the women's side, what it takes to make the podium, what it takes to make the final, it's incredibly fast. It just pushes you to really fulfil your potential."

Ennis-Hill remains a believer that Asher-Smith is a contender. "She's had a good winter, she's

not had any particular niggles and she's consistently built for Paris, so I think she can be right up there in the medals, definitely," Ennis-Hill told *The Standard*.

"She knows the field for both the 100 and 200 will be absolutely phenomenal. But she's also got the talent to do it."

'Light and joyful'

Asher-Smith had been guided for nearly 20 years by coach John Blackie but last year she made the decision to move to the United States. It was Blackie who Asher-Smith dedicated her 200m world title to as he had seen "special things" in her as an eight-year-old. They remain

close. In Texas she is training with two up-and-coming young talents, St Lucia's world indoor 60m champion Julien Alfred and Ireland's European 400m silver medalist Rhasidat Adeleke. She has found the experience liberating.

"What has stood out to me here (in the USA), is that I can just kind of 'be,'" she told the Guardian.

"That feeling of always being 'on' (in the UK) – of always having to look all right, because people will stop you and take a picture.

"And always having to appear happy, even if you're having the worst day ever. It has been almost 10 years since I can just kind of 'be' in my life. Being able to switch off has been one of the best things."

Already armed with a history degree, Asher-Smith has taken up another challenge, pottery.

"I wanted to learn a new skill, something creative that stimulated my mind in a different way," she said. "I'm loving it. I go once or twice a week, and I'm chatting to people, being bad at stuff, watching things collapse, and trying again. I'm still not very good at putting the handles on."

That will no doubt come in time but first up she has that date with the Olympics although she insists past disappointments do not play on her mind.

"Some people are very motivated by previous frustrations.

"But I'm somebody who just needs to feel free and light and joyful to run fast. That's my mentality."

FOCUS

beIN Sports reveal record-breaking views of Euro 2024

beIN Sports, the leading sports broadcaster in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), has set a new record with an unprecedented cumulative viewership of more than 1.2 billion views of its multilingual coverage of the month-long UEFA European Championships (Euro 2024) held in Germany.

For context, the broadcaster's coverage of the Euro 2020 tournament generated 0.96 billion views across the same numbers of matches, meaning this year marks a 27 per cent rise in views.

Sunday's final, the last of 51 games held between 14 June and 14 July, saw Spain beat England 2-1 to clinch a record fourth continental title courtesy of a late goal by Mikel Oyarzabal.

The match saw more than 95.2 million viewers tune in, making it the most-watched game of the tournament. For further context, the broadcaster's coverage of the Euro 2020 final between Italy and England attracted 64.4 million viewers, meaning this year marks a nearly 50 per cent rise in viewers.

The two semi-finals in particular attracted huge audiences, with more than 54.1 million fans tuning in to watch a 16-year-old Lamine Yamal become the youngest goal-



scorer in the competition's history as Spain beat France, before 54.4 million watched England's Ollie Watkins decide a tense encounter with the Netherlands in stoppage time. Across the whole tournament, 23.8 million viewers watched each match on average, which was over 5 million more viewers per match versus the average for Euro 2020.

beIN's cross-platform digital coverage, featuring minute-by-minute match updates, post-match highlights, interviews and special studio coverage saw its social media platforms reach record numbers. Total cumulative impressions across beIN's social media channels soared to 2.6 billion, reflecting a 261.8% increase compared to 718 million in 2020. Meanwhile, cumulative video views across its platforms saw a 518% increase from 178 million in 2020 to 1.1 billion views recorded during the 2024 tournament.

Al Shaqab to host Summer League today

DOHA: The Summer League, a captivating showjumping event hosted by Al Shaqab exclusively for participants of the Al Shaqab Summer Camp, will be held today at the Longines Indoor Arena from 3pm to 9pm.

This internal competition is a fantastic opportunity for young equestrians to showcase their

training, striving for excellence in a spirited and supportive environment.

The training categories for the Shaqab League will be as follows: intro Category 1 (height 40cm); intro Category 2 (height 60cm); intro Category 3 (height 80cm); intro Category 4 (height 100cm)

BOTTOMLINE

Qatar Airways official title, airline partner of British & Irish Lions Tour 2025



Qatar Airways is proud to announce its latest partnership as the Official Title Partner and Official Airline Partner of The Qatar Airways British & Irish Lions Tour to Australia 2025.

The British & Irish Lions Tour is a historic and highly anticipated event which takes place every four years.

The Tour will see the Lions, a combined team of the best rugby players from England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, take on the Wallabies in a series of Test matches as well as a number of games against Australian teams.

Brisbane's Suncorp Stadium will

host the first of three Tests on Saturday 19 July, 2025. The second Test will be played on Saturday 26 July, 2025 at the iconic Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG), and the final Test will be played at Sydney's Accor Stadium in Sydney Olympic Park on Saturday 2 August.

In preparation for the first Test, the Lions will face a combined Australian and New Zealand team at the Adelaide Oval, while the tour will also include fixtures in Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney.

Qatar Airways Group Chief Executive Officer, Badr Mohamed al-Meer,

said: "We are taking our commitment to the sport of rugby to the next level, flying some of the world's best athletes, coaching staff and officials to compete in The Qatar Airways British & Irish Lions Tour to Australia 2025. We look forward to enabling rugby fans across the world to connect for this unique sporting event. Our network of over 170 destinations will serve as the perfect means to fly fans from all over the globe and experience the service that earned us the Skytrax World's Best Airline award for a record eight times."

CEO of The British & Irish Lions,

Ben Calveley, said, "An airline partner is a vital logistical component of every Lions tour and alongside our partners in Rugby Australia we are very pleased to welcome Qatar Airways on board as Series Title Partner for the 2025 Tour to Australia. Qatar Airways has a proven track record of excellence as a premium global airline, providing high-quality service to customers travelling to and from almost 100 countries. This three-way partnership between the Lions, Rugby Australia and Qatar Airways will play an important part in delivering the Lions Tour in 2025."

SWIMMING

Dressel has no confidence in fairness after doping scandal

'No, not really. I don't think they have given us enough evidence to support them with how this case was handled'



FROM LEFT: France's water polo player Thomas Vernoux, South Africa's swimmer Chad Le Clos, Canada's swimmer Jacqueline Simoneau, Germany's swimmer Florian Wellbrock, World Aquatics President Husain al-Musallam and Executive Director Brent Novicki, US' water polo player Maggie Steffens, Britain's Diver Tom Daley, and US' swimmers Regan Smith and Caeleb Dressel pose during the World Aquatics Olympic press conference yesterday, ahead of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. (AFP)

AFP Paris

Seven-time Olympic swimming gold medalist Caeleb Dressel said yesterday he has no confidence in the ability of authorities to ensure a fair contest in the pool at the Paris Games. Swimming has been engulfed in a doping row following revelations in April that 23 Chinese swimmers failed drugs tests ahead of the Tokyo Games in 2021 but were not sanctioned. The World Anti-

Doping Agency (WADA) accepted the conclusion of Chinese officials that the case was caused by food contamination at a hotel, triggering strong criticism from the US anti-doping body USADA and several top swimmers. Asked whether he had confidence that governing bodies had created "a level-playing field", the American Dressel was succinct. "No, not really. I don't think they have given us enough evidence to support them with how this case was handled. To answer your ques-

tion - no," he said. Dressel will be aiming to defend his 50m freestyle and 100m butterfly individual titles in Paris. Brent Novicki, executive director of World Aquatics, said he was saddened to hear Dressel's views. "This entire team, entire organisation works tirelessly. Every day they go to work and pour their heart into what we do. So when you hear someone like Caeleb say that, obviously it is not what you want any athlete to say," he said. Novicki said that swimming's

governing body needed to work to regain the confidence of its athletes. "We have to look forward, we have to regain his trust and those athletes' trust who share that same opinion, that's why we go to work every day and pour our heart into this," he said. "I would invite you to ask the same question in LA (2028 Olympics). "My goal, my hope is that his mind changes and that's why I have to work harder so that in four years' time, he says, 'They did what they said they were going to do'"

'Un-Australian' swim coach faces being sent home from Olympics

An Australian swimming coach faced being sent home from the Paris Olympics yesterday after endorsing a South Korean to win ahead of two of his countrymen. Michael Palfrey, part of the Australian coaching team in Paris, told South Korean media he hoped Kim Woo-min won gold instead of Sam Short and Elijah Winnington in the men's 400m freestyle. The trio - all former world champions - will face off tomorrow in the opening day of action at La Defense Arena. "Very disappointed, extremely disappointed," Australian head coach Rohan Taylor said. "For a coach on our team to promote another athlete ahead of our athletes is not acceptable." Palfrey works with Australian swimmers Zac Incerti, Abbey Connor and Alex Perkins, but also mentored Kim while he was training in Brisbane ahead of the Games. According to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Palfrey was wearing Australian team colours when he was interviewed by South Korean journalists and declared "Go Korea" while talking about his hopes for Kim. Taylor said he needed to make a "pragmatic" decision "sooner rather than later" about whether Palfrey stays on the team,

balancing the needs of his swimmers with discontent in the squad. "Promoting an athlete who is not Australian is un-Australian to be honest," he said. "The options are he either goes home or he stays, and what is the impact on the performance of the team. "If he goes home we have to find other coaches to pick up the load and our coaches are really stretched. "If he stays, it's about the team dynamic and whether the other coaches can support that and the athletes can go about their business and not be distracted." Australian chef de mission Anna Meares called Palfrey's comments "a serious error of judgement". "Like a lot of people, it was a surprise and a shock. My first thoughts went to the athletes and the welfare of the athletes," she said. Zac Stubblety-Cook, who is preparing to defend his 200m breaststroke title, spoke to Winnington and Short yesterday and said they "weren't super fazed to be honest". "Yes, it is disappointing but it hasn't rocked the boat too much," he added. (AFP)

DESIGN OF THE PARIS 2024 GAMES TORCH

THE TORCH IN DETAIL

- Size: 70 cm Weight: 1.5 kg
- Minimum Diameter: 3.5 cm
- Maximum Diameter: 10 cm
- Steel thickness: 0.7 mm
- No. of Torches Produced: 2000
- 1500 for the Olympic relay
- 500 for the Paralympic relay
- All torches are reusable and rechargeable.
- Material:** ArcelorMittal Xcarb recycled and renewably produced steel (recovered and melted scrap steel from household appliances, cars). Steel with a reduced Carbon Footprint, 100% Made in France.
- No. of assembled parts: 10 main components
- MANUFACTURING**
- Manufacturers: ArcelorMittal, Guy Degrenne and a subcontractor of ArcelorMittal.
- ARCELORMITTAL: 3 STEPS MANUFACTURING**
- ▶ Casting steel to obtain a 30-ton bar
- ▶ Rolling steel to obtain a steel strip of 0.7 mm thickness, wound into a coil
- ▶ Cutting this steel strip into sheets ready to be processed
- GUY DEGRENNE: SHAPING THE TORCH**
- ▶ Laser cutting of the sheets
- ▶ Shaping of the sheets
- ▶ Molding sheets to mark wave patterns
- ▶ Laser welding to form the upper and lower parts of the Torch
- SURFACE TREATMENT**
- ▶ Microblasting for the upper part to provide a satin appearance
- ▶ Mirror polishing for the lower part to create reflections reminiscent of water
- ▶ Coating both parts with a high-tech finish commonly found in luxury or aerospace industries

INSPIRATION FROM 3 THEMES OF PARIS 2024

EQUALITY

From the bid through to the organising of the Games today, equality is a driving force behind the Paris 2024 project. Equality means putting the same ambition into organising the Paralympic Games as the Olympic Games. Following on from the emblem and the mascots, the Olympic and Paralympic Games will share the same Torch design. Equality in the Paris 2024 project is also reflected in the strong commitment to parity in the Olympic Games: for the first time in the history of the Games, as many women as men will take part in the competitions. To reflect this ambition, the design of the Torch is perfectly symmetrical, both horizontally and vertically, to symbolise this equality.

WATER

Water will occupy a special place in the Paris 2024 Games. Arriving via the Mediterranean Sea aboard the Belem, the Torch will take the Olympic Flame across the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans in the "Relais des Océans", to reach 5 overseas territories: Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique, French Polynesia and Réunion. Water has inspired the wave, 3D and vibration effects on the Torch, which reproduce the ripples and movements of water, in addition to the reflections of light on its surface.

PEACEFULNESS

The Olympic and Paralympic Games have always been a symbol of peace. Since ancient Greece, the Olympic Flame has carried a message of unity to people and nations. The legacy of a thousand-year-old tradition, it symbolises the ideal of the Olympic truce. Reflecting this desire for peace, the Torch, with its curves and rounded lines, is suffused with gentleness. Pure in form, almost elemental, the design of the Torch conveys generosity and solidarity.

VOYAGE

▶ April 16 - Olympic Flame lighting ceremony in Olympia ▶ 9-day relay in Greece ▶ April 26 Flame handover ceremony in Athens ▶ April 27 Departure of the Belem from the Port of Piraeus ▶ May 8 Arrival of the Flame in France ▶ 68-Day Relay in France ▶ July 26 Lighting of the cauldron during the Olympic Games Opening Ceremony

Designing the Torch for the Games is a designer's dream, one that comes around once in a lifetime, like an extraordinary encounter with history. Ritualistic and magical in equal measure, the Torch is a mythical object. A symbol of cohesion and sharing, it really does play a key role in the Games. It will travel thousands of kilometres, passed from person to person, on land and sea. For Paris 2024, and for the first time in its history, it plays on perfect symmetry, speaking to us more clearly about equality. I wanted it to be extremely pure, iconic, almost elemental. As simple as a hyphen and as fluid as a flame.

Mathieu Lehanneur,
Designer of the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games Torch

SOURCE: PARIS 2024



FOCUS

Axelsen, 'calm competitive dragon' of Danish badminton

AFP Copenhagen

Denmark's Viktor Axelsen lost his world number one ranking in June after 131 weeks at the top, but the reigning Olympic badminton champion is dead set on defending his gold medal in Paris. The 30-year-old, a towering figure at 1.94m (6ft 4in), says he "is slowly but surely" working his way back into form despite an ankle injury he picked up at the Singapore Open in late May. "You can't think about injuries if you want to prepare well. I have good people around me and right now, my physical condition is good," he told reporters recently. Such resilience is typical of Axelsen, who was given the nickname An Sai Long - 'calm competitive dragon' - by his teacher while studying Mandarin, a language he speaks fluently. In a sport dominated by players from Asia - China's Shi Yuqi is the current number one - Axelsen and his compatriot Anders Antonsen, ranked fourth, are outliers. Axelsen's success is a testament to his longevity.

Aged 16, he won the world junior championships in Mexico, becoming the first European to do so. He has racked up an impressive list of achievements in the decade-plus since. In 2022, his 39-match winning streak shattered the previous record of 31 held by double Olympic champion Lin Dan. "We play all the time. I had the benefit of going far in loads of tournaments, I train hard and I'm 30 years old, so it's clear that my body doesn't recover as if I was still 16," he said. Axelsen, the world champion in 2017 and 2022, believes such wear and tear is the cause of his ankle issues. "It's true Viktor has had some physical problems, even more than in the build-up to the last Olympic Games," Danish badminton official Jens Meibom told newspaper Berlingske. "That's created a kind of uncertainty, but at the same time, I would also say he's displayed a very high level this spring. He'll be able to come back." "Viktor is training well at the moment and he's not had any setback, so we're staying positive until the opposite happens."



Axelsen, who won bronze at the 2016 Games in Rio, has repeatedly said he is not considering retirement, with the chance to claim another title in the French capital supplying ample motivation. "It's that prospect that makes me impatient," he told French sports daily *L'Equipe*. The Dane is also attuned to the

power of social media and its ability to help grow badminton's popularity, with one million followers on Instagram and both Weibo and Tiktok accounts. "I don't take lightly the visibility that social networks offers me. It's a good opportunity to introduce my sport and make a name for myself as well," he said.

SPOTLIGHT

Biles nails signature vault in Olympic gymnastics training

AFP Paris

Simone Biles got her first taste of Bercy Arena yesterday, delivering a stellar signature vault in training ahead of the start of the Olympic women's gymnastics competition at the weekend. Biles nailed a spectacular Yurchenko double pike vault, sticking like glue on the landing. It is a skill so difficult that no other woman attempts it in competition, and since Biles completed it at the World Championships it has been named for her as the Biles II. "We would take this one in a heartbeat," Biles' coach Cecile Landi

said. "Yeah, it was really good." Landi said Biles was getting "more and more comfortable" with the skill, but yesterday's effort still stood out. "She had one in the warmup gym that was also really good, but, no, I don't see it like that every day." Biles is strongly tipped to add to her cache of four Olympic golds at the Paris Games after a tumultuous Tokyo campaign, when she withdrew from most of her events as she battled the dangerous and disorientating "twisties". After a near two-year absence, Biles has quickly reestablished herself at the top of a sport she redefined with a unique combination of athleticism and artistry. Meticulous attention to her



US' Simone Biles poses for a selfie on her mobile phone during an artistic gymnastics training session at the Bercy Arena in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

the competition arena, opening on balance beam, where Biles delivered some solid tumbling elements. Moving on to floor exercise, Biles wowed with her triple-twist double flip but was a hair off in landing several of her impressive tumbling skills. That took the Americans to the vault, where she offered a glimpse of just what everyone else in the field will be up against. Biles closed out the session on uneven bars, high-fiving coach Laurent Landi after completing her routine. Cecile Landi said Biles and the entire US team - heavily favoured to regain team gold after settling for silver in Tokyo - were delighted with Bercy Arena, even finding the blue and pink Olympic colour scheme "calming".

"The whole team they're excited to finally start," she said. "Finally we're here. The arena is beautiful. The girls feel it's kind of cozy with the black seats - it's a big change from Tokyo and they really love it." The session also offered a look at team medal contenders China and Italy as well as Algerian teen Kaylia Nemour, who has emerged as a gold medal threat in uneven bars. Host nation France and the Brazilian squad led by vault world champion Rebeca Andrade were due to train later. Women's competition opens on Sunday with the qualification round, with their first medals to be awarded in the team final on Tuesday. The women's individual all-around final is on August 1, with the individual apparatus finals to follow.



TENNIS

Djokovic, Nadal set for second-round clash

Second seed Alcaraz tackles 275th-ranked Habib of Lebanon in opening round

AFP
Paris

Grand Slam record-breakers Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal were placed on an Olympics second-round collision course in the draw for the Paris Games yesterday.

Nadal, a singles gold medalist at the 2008 Olympics, is playing in his final Games having also won doubles gold in Rio in 2016, while Djokovic was a bronze medalist in singles in 2008.

Serbia's Djokovic, a 24-time Grand Slam champion and top seed in Paris following the withdrawal of world number one Jannik Sinner, begins his campaign against Australia's Matthew Ebden. "I am excited for this duel in the second round, and I will give it my all," said Djokovic, who has faced Nadal 59 times over the past 18 years. "I am aware of the importance of the Olympic Games. I represent my country, which is more responsibility and even more pressure."

Spain's Nadal, who has won 14 of his 22 Grand Slams on the clay of Roland Garros, faces Hungary's Marton Fucsovics in his opener. French Open and Wimbledon champion Carlos Alcaraz, the second seed, tackles 275th-ranked Hady Habib of Lebanon in opening round of the tournament, which starts tomorrow.

"Roland Garros is the most special place in the world of tennis for me," said 38-year-old Nadal, who was defeated in the first round of the French Open by Alexander Zverev last month during an injury-hit season. "This year I was not able to spend a lot of time at Roland Garros so I am excited to be back here. It's another opportunity and a chance to enjoy every single moment."

Defending Olympic champion Zverev, seeded third, takes on Jaume Munar of Spain. Russian fourth seed Daniil Medvedev, playing in Paris as a neutral following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, will meet Rinky Hijikata of Australia. Two-time singles gold medalist Andy Murray, who will end his career at the Olympics after almost two decades on tour, will play doubles.

The 37-year-old former world number one underwent surgery to remove a cyst on his back before Wimbledon, which also sidelined him from singles at the All England Club. At the Olympics he will play doubles with Dan Evans. "The Olympics are incredibly special for me and I am happy to do it one more time to compete for my country," Murray said at draw. "I trained the last few weeks to get myself ready to play singles and doubles but I am getting older and it's harder to recover from all the injuries. I just ran out of time."

Murray and Evans start their doubles bid



FROM LEFT: Britain's Andy Murray, Germany's Angelique Kerber, Spain's Rafael Nadal, Ukraine's Elina Svitolina and Switzerland's Stan Wawrinka pose after the draw ceremony for the tennis event at the Paris Olympic Games in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

against Japan's Kei Nishikori and Taro Daniel. Nadal and Alcaraz, who will team up for the first time, face Argentina's Andres Molteni and Maximo Gonzalez. Nadal, Djokovic and Nishikori are playing at the Olympics for the fifth time in their careers.

Also making a final appearance will be Germany's Angelique Kerber, who announced yesterday she will retire once the Games end. The 36-year-old, who won three Grand Slam titles, was a silver medalist in singles at the 2016 Rio Olympics. In a first-round clash of mothers, Kerber faces four-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka of Japan.

"I took the toughest decision of my life today," said 36-year-old Kerber. "It is not easy to make such a big decision and if I could, I would play forever."

Women's world number one Iga Swiatek, returning to the scene of her fourth French Open title last month, begins against Romania's Irina-Camelia Begu. Second-ranked US Open champion Coco Gauff, who missed the Tokyo Olympics three years ago with Covid, takes on Australia's Ajla Tomljanovic. Gauff will join basketball great LeBron James as a flag-bearer for the US team in today's opening ceremony on the Seine in the heart of the French capital.



Novak Djokovic (left) of Serbia and Carlos Alcaraz of Spain embrace during a training session at the Roland-Garros Stadium in Paris yesterday. (Reuters)

Rybakina joins missing list from Olympic tennis

Paris: The Olympic tennis competition suffered another blow as women's third seed Elena Rybakina joined a lengthy list of non-starters hours after the draw took place at Roland Garros yesterday.

The big-serving 25-year-old Kazakh was down to face Romania's Jaqueline Cristian in the first round of the singles.

Organisers confirmed she had pulled out and would also not compete in the mixed doubles alongside compatriot Alexander Bublik.

No reason was stated for her decision.

Rybakina's withdrawal means that France's Caroline Garcia moves into her spot in the draw as the 17th seed while Australia's Daria Saville enters the draw as an alternate.

With the action to begin tomorrow, the flurry of high-profile withdrawals has cast something of a cloud over the tournament being staged on the famous Parisian clay.

On Wednesday, men's world number one and top seed Jannik Sinner of Italy had to withdraw from the singles and doubles because of illness while exciting Danish youngster Holger Rune also pulled out on Wednesday with a wrist injury.

Czech player Marketa Vondrousova, who was runner-up in the singles in Tokyo three years ago, withdrew on Monday because of injury, as did Poland's Hubert Hurkacz because of a knee injury sustained at Wimbledon.

Switzerland's Belinda Bencic, the champion in Tokyo, is also missing after giving birth to a daughter in April.

Two-time Olympic singles champion Andy Murray announced before yesterday's draw that he was not fit enough to compete in the singles but would still play doubles with Dan Evans. The British former world number one, who will retire at the end of his fifth Games, has still not fully recovered from back surgery last month.

He believes the men's doubles offers his best chance of another medal. Murray won gold in singles at London 2012 and in Rio four years later, as well as silver in mixed doubles with Laura Robson in 2012.

Other notable absences from the tennis at the Games include world number three Aryna Sabalenka, Tunisia's Ons Jabeur, Britain's Emma Raducanu, American Ben Shelton and Tokyo men's bronze medal winner Pablo Carreno Busta of Spain.

SPOTLIGHT

Olympic archery opens with history and Napoleon for company

AFP
Paris

The first competition at one of Paris' postcard Olympic venues opened yesterday at the Invalides, the resting place of Napoleon Bonaparte, with the first records of the Games as Lim Si-hyeon topped women's archery qualifying.

It was a day of almost uninterrupted conquest for South Korea. Nam Suh-yeon was second in the women's qualifying and Kim Woo-jin and Kim Je-deok topped men's qualifying. The ancient martial competition is being held on the lawn in front of the gilded dome of France's military museum, where Napoleon was entombed in 1861.

Qualifiers represented the calm before the tumult. So that all 64 qualifiers could shoot at once, the competition was held on the practice range, which has no space for spectators. The archers lined up, side by side, all firing six arrows before they paraded together across to the targets to check their scores. After the 12th, and final round, they were accompanied by scattered applause from coaches and officials.

For the knockout rounds, when only two archers shoot at the same time, competition will move to the main arena with, for archery, an unprecedented capacity of 8,000.

The only American man in the competition, world record holder Brady Ellison wanted it to be as raucous as the infamous 16th hole at golf's Phoenix Open. "I want it to be loud and proud," he said. "I want it to be like the Phoenix Open, you know, the 16th green. Just people throwing crap and just loud."

Ellison, who equalled an archery Olympic record yesterday by competing at his fifth Games, said he was not worried about controlling his adrenaline level. "I want to step into that stadium and have it be so loud that they raise the hair off my arms. It's what we're here



Archers competed during the team ranking round in Invalides, Paris, yesterday. (Reuters)

for, right?" he said. "After Tokyo, anything is going to be better in the stands."

If competitors glance up as they shoot, they can see the four raised, gilded statues on the Pont Alexandre III hovering above their targets. But, said American coach Chris Webster, competitors are blind to the environment "when you're in it." However, he added "when you take that step back and truly appreciate where we are in this venue, there's nothing better."

South Koreans have won nine out of the last 10 women's golds. The records the 20-year-old Lim shot down, as she scored 694 out of a maximum of 720, belonged to compatriots, including the world record of 692 set by Kang Chae-young in 2019. "I was very nervous because it was my first Olympics, and I tried to enjoy the game as much as I could," Lim said.

Her closest challenger was, inevitably, an-

other South Korean, Nam Suh-yeon, with 688. Yang Xiaolei of China was third on 673, 17 points behind Lim. Kaufhold, who entered the Olympics as the top-ranked woman, was on 672.

The men's competition was tighter, Kim Woo-jin shot 686 to lead by four. Just nine points separated Kim Je-deok in second from the 17th-best on the day, Brazilian Marcus D'Almeida. All 64 competitors still advance to the singles knockout stage. Yesterday's scores determined seedings for the singles and doubles. Some nations, including South Korea, always select their highest-scoring qualifier in mixed doubles, so Lim gave herself a chance of three golds. Lim shot 72 times yesterday. In the head-to-head knock-out, where the winner is the first to take three 10-arrow sets, Lim might only shoot 30, in victory or defeat, when she faces the lowest-ranked qualifier, Alondra Rivera of Puerto Rico in the first round.

FOCUS

WADA chief Banka says US not the 'world's anti-doping policeman'

AFP
Paris

World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) chief Witold Banka said yesterday his organisation plans to review the USA's Rodchenkov Anti-Doping Act to ensure it was compliance with the global watchdog's rules. The 2020 law, named after Russian whistleblower Grigory Rodchenkov, enables US authorities to prosecute individuals involved in international doping fraud conspiracies.

Conviction can result in fines of up to \$1mn and prison sentences of up to 10 years. The legislation however has become a bone of contention in the acrimonious feud between WADA and US authorities, with Banka telling AFP in an interview that it amounted to an "unfair" parallel anti-doping system. "The United States cannot give themselves the right to investigate anti-doping cases in all countries in the world," Banka said. "This case is actually very concerning."

Banka was speaking the day after the International Olympic Committee, who are a stakeholder in WADA, had surprised many by throwing a curve ball at Salt Lake City. Whilst Salt Lake was awarded the 2034 Winter Games, they were warned the decision could be reversed if US lawmakers and the US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) were

not brought into line. USADA chief Travis Tygart hit back accusing the IOC of "stooping to threats." USADA and WADA have seldom seen eye to eye - most recently over the 23 Chinese swimmers cleared to compete in 2021 - and it appears the Rodchenkov Act will be their next battleground.

The law targets the entourage of athletes - coaches, agents, dealers, managers and sports or government officials - rather than athletes themselves, who are already subject to sanctions by WADA. In 2023 Eric Lira a "naturopathic" therapist based in the city of El Paso, became the first individual to be convicted under the law for supplying drugs to Nigerian sprinter Blessing Okagbare in the lead-up to the Tokyo Games in 2021.

Most recently Brent Nowicki, the CEO of World Aquatics, was subpoenaed to testify as part of a US criminal investigation into the affair of the Chinese swimmers. Banka, though, made it clear his unease at the Rodchenkov act.

"(The Americans) cannot give themselves the right to investigate anti-doping cases in all countries in the world," he said. "They can do that in accordance with their legislation. This is the question mark about the harmonisation of the system. They have to be part of the system. They cannot create a parallel anti-doping system managed by US. This is completely unfair."