

SPORTS

Bush, Prime Minister Rudd exhort caution by Beijing on Tibet issue

Press Release
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Bush and Australia's new prime minister, Kevin Rudd, urged China's leaders Friday to meet with the Dalai Lama over violent unrest in Tibet.

"It is absolutely clear that there are human rights abuses in Tibet," Rudd told reporters after his meeting with Bush at the White House. "It's clear-cut; we need to be upfront and absolutely straight about what's going on."

Bush said he told Chinese President Hu Jintao this week that "it's in his country's interest" that top Chinese leaders meet with representatives of the Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader.

"We urge restraint," Bush said.

Rudd, a China expert who wants stronger economic ties with Beijing, was making his first official visit to the White House as China faces continuing

the Chinese government has failed to live up to its commitments to improve human rights conditions in China and Tibet. "I believe a boycott of the Beijing Olympics would unfairly harm our athletes who have worked so hard to prepare for the competition."

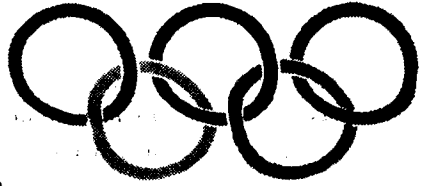
The California Democrat, who has long contended that expanded trade and political ties to China should be tied to improvements in Beijing's human rights record, said she believed the International Olympic Committee made a mistake in awarding the 2008 summer games to China and sponsored a resolution at the time expressing that view.

She said the Olympics should provide an opportunity for free expression and that she supported the rights of individuals and groups to make their views on China known when the Olympic torch passes through San Francisco next month.

Pelosi drew fire from the Chinese for her visit with the Dalai Lama in India last week for discussions



Beijing 2008



criticism over its handling this month of violent unrest by Tibetans protesting Chinese rule.

He said he would raise the issue during his visit to China next month.

Earlier, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a longtime critic of China's human rights policies, said it would be wrong to boycott the Beijing Olympics.

She said in a statement that while

suppression of anti-Chinese disturbances in Tibet.

"As I said in India last week where I met with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, if freedom-loving people throughout the world do not speak out against China's oppression in Tibet, we have lost our moral authority to speak out on behalf of human rights anywhere in the world," she said.

The end of baseball spring training

Press Release
ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Cleveland Indians lost their final spring game in Florida while the New York Yankees dropped one on their renamed Grapefruit League field. Boston didn't play and Atlanta lost but both teams got encouraging news about key starting pitchers.

Carlos Pena hit one of Tampa Bay's three home runs and the Rays beat Cleveland 9-7 in 10 innings Thursday in the Indians' final spring game in Winter Haven, Fla.

Minor league infielder Andy Gonzalez hit a grand slam for the Indians, who extended their 16-year stay at Chain of Lakes Park by 30 minutes with a ninth-inning rally to tie it at 5.

"It's always bittersweet to leave a place, but times change," Indians manager Eric Wedge said. "There's a lot of memories here."

The Indians are moving to a new \$76 million spring training complex in Goodyear, Ariz., in 2009.

This was no ordinary getaway day. Moving vans replaced Cadillacs in the players' parking lot. Fans pleaded with players to sign one last autograph in the Florida sunshine.

One fan held up a sign that read "Go ahead and call security. I don't want to leave."

In Tampa, Fla., Derek Jeter homered to the Yankees lost 5-2 to the Pittsburgh Pirates in the first game at George M. Steinbrenner Field.

The Yankees' spring training home, formerly Legends Field, was renamed in honor of the owner in a pregame ceremony.

The Tampa City Council and the Hillsborough County Commission recently approved resolutions calling for the name change.

"Well deserved," Jeter said. "They could have named it for him when

they opened the field. What he's meant, not only to the Yankees organization, but what he's done for the community of Tampa. A special day. I'm very happy for him."

Steinbrenner helped pull the cover off a new sign above the scoreboard in left field.

His wife, Joan, threw out the ceremonial first pitch. "It was great," George Steinbrenner said. "It was a great ceremony."

Atlanta's John Smoltz and Boston

down here and throw and just have my eyes on my next start on Sunday."

Smoltz is expected to start the season on the disabled list. He hasn't appeared in a major league game since March 15 so his time on the DL can be backdated.

Beckett, who missed Boston's trip to Japan because of back spasms, pitched four shutout innings in a minor league game in Florida.

He threw 47 pitches, allowed one hit, didn't walk a batter and struck out six.

Boston manager Terry Francona, in California for three exhibition games against the Dodgers, said he spoke with Beckett afterward and was told he felt fine.

"It's good because he's healthy. He's just trying to get ramped up for the season," Francona said. "Everything's gone great there, so that's why there's not a lot of anxiety from that standpoint."

Beckett will pitch again in Florida on Tuesday, then is scheduled to join the team for the April 4-6 weekend series in Toronto. Francona said he may pitch there, but "that's not etched in stone."

In spring training games: Brewers 10, Cubs 10

At Mesa, Ariz., Alfonso Soriano hit a three-run homer for Chicago and Mike Cameron homered for Milwaukee.

Mariners 10 (ss), Padres 10

At Peoria, Ariz., Seattle's Felix Hernandez gave up three runs and nine hits in five innings, including home runs by Scott Hairston and

Khalil Greene. Diamondbacks 8, White Sox 4
At Tucson, Ariz., Arizona's Dan Haren allowed two runs and three hits in seven innings. Chicago third baseman Joe Crede left the game after fouling a ball off his left foot. Mets 9, Braves 4

At Kissimmee, Fla., Mets lefty Oliver Perez gave up three runs and seven hits in 6 1-3 innings, striking out four and walking one as New York and Atlanta each relied heavily on backups.

Blue Jays 8, Astros 3
At Dunedin, Fla., Toronto third baseman Scott Rolen said his broken right middle finger could sideline him six weeks. Blue Jays starter Dustin McGowan allowed three runs and four hits in seven innings. Rangers 8, Royals 5

At Surprise, Ariz., Hank Blalock and Milton Bradley hit back-to-back homers for Texas and Rangers starter Jason Jennings gave up two runs and six hits in 5 1-3 innings. Tigers 14, Phillies 5

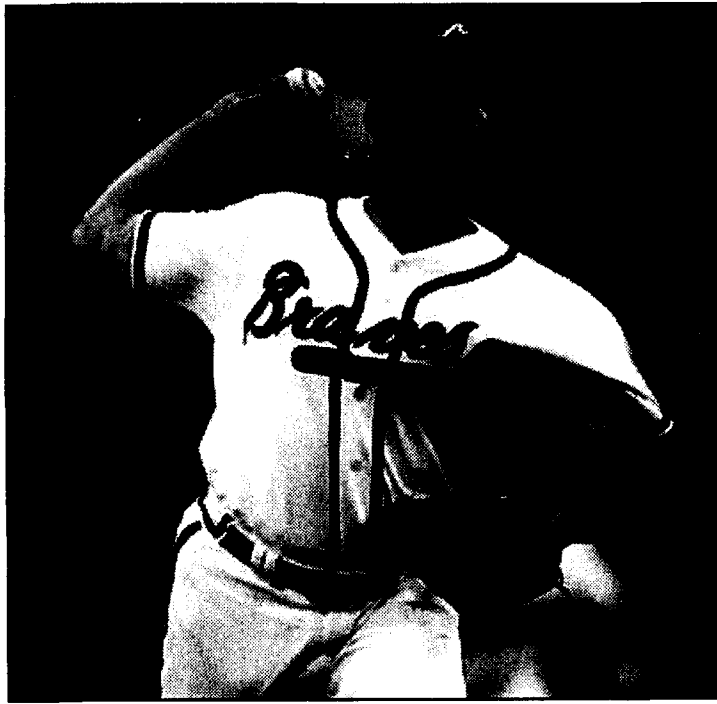
At Lakeland, Fla., Detroit's Brandon Inge went 3-for-3 with three RBIs and Placido Polanco and Clete Thomas homered for the Tigers.

Rockies 6, Angels (ss) 2
At Tempe, Ariz., Troy Tulowitzki, Garrett Atkins and Chris Iannetta hit home runs for Colorado and Los Angeles catcher Jeff Mathis upped his spring average to .343 with two of the Angels' six hits.

Reds 5, Twins 1
At Sarasota, Fla., Bronson Arroyo pitched seven shutout innings for Cincinnati, throwing 65 strikes out of 89 pitches.

Nationals 2, Orioles 1
At Viera, Fla., Dmitri Young went 1-for-2 for Washington in his quest to win the starting first base job over Nick Johnson. Manager Manny Acta said he's made a decision, but won't announce it yet.

Cardinals 2, Marlins 0
At Jupiter, Fla., Rick Vandenhurk walked five and needed 100 pitches to get through 4 2-3 innings in his first outing after Florida made him its No. 2 starter.



Atlanta Braves' John Smoltz felt good after his last pre-season outing, stating "his best day of the spring. He is anxious to begin the season with his teammates and looks forward to his April 6 start."

right-hander Josh Beckett also felt good after encouraging outings.

Smoltz threw in the bullpen for about 20 minutes and called the session his "best day" of the spring.

Smoltz said he is on track to make his first regular-season start on April 6 and said he had no recurrence of the shoulder stiffness he suffered on Friday, forcing him to be held out of a scheduled start.

"I just needed some time for it to settle down. It has settled down," Smoltz said in Kissimmee, Fla.

"Now I'll approach it like anything else. I'll take two days off, come

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Youth ultimate fighting OK in Missouri

By MARCUS KABEL
Associated Press Writer

CARTHAGE, Mo. (AP) Ultimate fighting was once the sole domain of burly men who beat each other bloody in anything-goes brawls on pay-per-view TV.

But the sport often derided as "human cockfighting" is branching out.

The bare-knuckle fights are now attracting competitors as young as 6 whose parents treat the sport as casually as wrestling, Little League or soccer.

The changes were evident on a recent evening in southwest Missouri, where a team of several young boys and one girl grappled on gym mats in a converted garage.

Two members of the group called the "Garage Boys Fight Crew" touched their thin martial-arts gloves in a flash of sportsmanship before beginning a relentless exchange of sucker punches, body blows and swift kicks.

No blood was shed. And both competitors wore protective gear. But the bout reflected the decidedly younger face of ultimate fighting. The trend alarms medical experts and sports officials who worry that young bodies can't withstand the pounding.

Tommy Bloomer, father of two of the "Garage Boys," doesn't understand the fuss.

"We're not training them for dog fighting," said Bloomer, a 34-year-old construction contractor. "As a parent, I'd much rather have my kids here learning how to defend themselves and getting positive reinforcement than out on the

streets."

Bloomer said the sport has evolved since the no-holds-barred days by adding weight classes to better match opponents and banning moves such as strikes to the back of the neck and head, groin kicking and head butting.

Missouri appears to be the only state in the nation that explicitly allows the youth fights. In many states, it is a misdemeanor for children to participate. A few states have no regulations.

Supporters of the sport acknowledge that allowing fights between kids sounds brutal at first. But they insist the competitions have plenty of safety rules.

"It looks violent until you realize this teaches discipline. One of the first rules they learn is that this is not for aggressive behavior outside (the ring)," said Larry Swinehart, a Joplin police officer and father of two boys and the lone girl in the garage group.

The sport, which is also known as mixed martial arts or cage fighting, has already spread far beyond cable television. Last month, CBS became the first of the Big Four television networks to announce a deal to broadcast primetime fights. The fights have attracted such a wide audience, they are threatening to surpass boxing as the nation's most popular pugilistic sport.

Hand-to-hand combat is also popping up on the big screen. The film "Never Back Down," described as "The Karate Kid" for the YouTube generation, has taken in almost \$17 million in two weeks at the box office. Another current mixed martial arts movie, "Flash

Point," an import from Hong Kong, is in limited release.

Bloomer said the fights are no more dangerous or violent than youth wrestling. He watched as his sons, 11-year-old Skyler and 8-year-old Gage, locked arms and legs and wrestled to the ground with other kids in the garage in Carthage, about 135 miles south of Kansas City.

The 11 boys and one girl on the team range from 6 to 14 years old and are trained by Rudy Lindsey, a youth wrestling coach and a professional mixed martial arts heavyweight.

"The kids learn respect and how to defend themselves. It's no more dangerous than any other sport and probably less so than some," Lindsey said.

Lindsey said the children wear protective headgear, shin guards, groin

protection and martial-arts gloves.

They fight quick, two-minute bouts. Rules also prohibit any elbow blows and blows to the head when an opponent is on the ground.

"If they get in trouble or get bad grades, I'll hear about it and they can't come to training," he added.

In most states, mixed martial arts is overseen by boxing commissions.

In Missouri, the Office of Athletics regulates the professional fights but not the amateur events, which include the youth bouts. For amateurs, the regulation is done by sanctioning bodies that have to register with the athletics office. The rules are different in Oklahoma,

where unauthorized fights are generally a misdemeanor offense. The penalty is a maximum 30 days in jail and a fine up to \$1,000.

Joe Miller, administrator of the Oklahoma Professional Boxing Commission, said youth fights are banned in his state, and he wants it to stay that way.

"There's too much potential for damage to growing joints," he said. Miller said mixed martial arts uses a lot of arm and leg twisting to force opponents into submission.

Those moves, he said, pressure joints in a way not found in sanctioned sports like youth boxing or wrestling.

But Nathan Orand, a martial arts trainer from Tulsa, Okla., said kids are capable of avoiding injuries, especially with watchful referees in the rings. He thinks the sport is bound to grow.

"I can see their point because when you say 'cage fighting,' that right there just sounds like kids shouldn't be doing it," Orand said.

"But you still have all the respect that regular martial arts teach you. And it's really the only true way for youth to be able to defend themselves."

Back in the Carthage garage, Bloomer said parents shouldn't worry about kids becoming aggressive from learning mixed martial arts. He said his older son was picked on by bullies at school repeatedly last year but never fought them, instead reporting the problem to his teachers.

And fighters including his 8-year-old son get along once a bout is over, Bloomer said.

"When they get out of the cage, they go back and play video games together. It doesn't matter who won and who lost. They're still little buddies."

LPGA tour update

Press Release
ASSOCIATED PRESS

SUPERSTITION MOUNTAIN, Ariz. (AP) Angela Stanford shot a career-best 10-under 62 on Thursday to break the Prosperator Course record and take a three-stroke lead over defending champion Lorena Ochoa in the Safeway International.

Stanford, the 2003 ShopRite LPGA Tour Classic winner, had a bogey-free round at Superstition Mountain Golf and Country Club. She had six birdies in a front-nine 30 and birdied the final two holes for a back-nine 32.

"It all happened so slowly," Stanford said. "I'm still in a fog. It's just one of those days you can't even get in your own way."

The 30-year-old Texan broke the course record of 63 set by Cristie Kerr in 2004, and topped her previous career best of 64 in the first round of the 2006 Canadian Open.

Ochoa, the Mexican star who won the tournament last year for the first of her eight 2007 titles, had nine birdies and two bogeys. She won the HSBC Champions on March 2 in Singapore for her 18th LPGA Tour title.

"I'm going to try to be aggressive (Friday) and try to catch her. Maybe I can beat that," Ochoa said after congratulating Stanford on her round.

Sherri Steinhauer was third after a 66, Karen Stupples, Jee Young Lee and Yani Tseng and Heather Young shot 67s, and Michele Redman, Sophie Gustafson and Na Yeon Choi followed at 68. Three-time winner Annika Sorenstam birdied the final two holes to match Paula Creamer

with a 69.

"I finished strong and got a little momentum," said Sorenstam, who shot the first 59 in women's tournament history in her 2001 victory at Moon Valley. The 70-time LPGA Tour winner also won in 2004 and 2005 at Superstition Mountain.

Stanford wasn't pleased with her 3-wood approach on the par-5 18th, but put it on the green from 236 yards to set up a two-putt birdie.

"Hook. Chunk. Duck. It was just bad," she said. "But I had enough topspin to make it to the green."

Stanford said she sensed a special round coming when she got up-and-down for par from a greenside bunker on No. 1.

Stanford's lone victory came 114 starts ago and her best finishes since came in 2006, when she was second twice.

"I'm not even going to think about it (winning)," Stanford said. "I want to, but I'm just not going to."

Ochoa shot a 5-under 31 on the front nine, but three-putted the par-3 12th for a bogey and also dropped a stroke on the par-4 15th when she hit a wedge over the green and into a bunker.

"Two silly mistakes," she said. "I'm OK. It's a great way to start."

The 45-year-old Steinhauer had eight birdies and two bogeys.

"Yeah, that's all right," Steinhauer said. "It's fun to come out ahead of the young ones at times. ... I've been terming myself Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Today was Mr. Hyde, but tomorrow it could be Dr. Jekyll."

Patricia Meunier-Lebouc aced the 167-yard 17th hole with a 7-iron. She finished with a 72.