BASEBALL

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz.

Clemens fires U.S. team to win against Giants

The Rocket is ready.

Roger Clemens struck out three in two scoreless innings and Chase Utley went 5 for 5 with a home run and three RBIs in Team USA's debut Sunday, a 12-7 exhibition victory against a San Francisco Giants split squad.

Utley's two-run shot off Jack Taschner broke a 7-7 tie in the eighth inning of a game that went 10 to allow extra work for Team USA players, some of whom had not had an at-bat this spring.

Chipper Jones also hit a two-run homer for the U.S. squad, which opens its World Baseball Classic play Tuesday against Mexico at Chase Field in Phoenix.

Clemens, who has yet to say whether he will pitch another season in the majors, got the start. The 43-year-old right-hander allowed just one hit, Steve Finley's two-out double in the first. Clemens threw 29 pitches. He struck out the final two batters he faced and three of his past four.

"It was everything I expected it to be, a lot of pride," he said. "Finally, everything's come together."

Clemens will start Friday against South Africa.

Commissioner Bud Selig, who pushed strongly for the 16-nation tournament, spoke to the U.S. team in the clubhouse before the game.

FORT MYERS, Fla.

Former Twins great Puckett has stroke

Former Minnesota Twins center fielder Kirby Puckett had a stroke at his Arizona home Sunday and was taken to a hospital for surgery, the team announced from its spring training camp.

PUCKETT

The 44-year-old Puckett, who led Minnesota to World Series titles in 1987 and 1991 and is a member of the Hall of Fame, was taken to a Scottsdale hospital.

"The Minnesota Twins and major league baseball ask fans to keep Kirby and his family in their thoughts and prayers," the team said in a statement.

The Twins played the Boston Red Sox in an exhibition game Sunday at their spring training complex here. Center fielder Torii Hunter sat out the game after learning about the stroke.

Puckett, who broke in with Minnesota in 1984, had a career batting average of .318. Glaucoma forced Puckett to retire in 1996 after 12 seasons with the Twins when he went blind in one eye.

Puckett is divorced and has two children.

BASKETBALL

Bryant centerpiece of USA Basketball team

Kobe Bryant will be the centerpiece of the new-look USA Basketball team that is expected to improve upon a disappointing bronze medal at the 2004 Olympics.

Bryant brings NBA championship credentials and high-powered scoring, joining Carmelo Anthony, LeBron James and 20 other players selected Sunday for a possible spot on the world championship and 2008 Beijing Olympic teams.

"It's his time," USA Basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski said of Bryant. "He's 27 years old now. He should try to assume a position of leadership in the team. I would think he's very hungry to do this. I see him fitting in very, very well."

Bryant was supposed to play in Athens, but withdrew because of his sexual assault trial in Colorado. Criminal charges eventually were dropped, and he settled a civil suit with his accuser.

Lamar Odom, Shawn Marion, Amare Stoudemire and Dwyane Wade, members of the 2004 Athens team, also were selected to the roster. They'll be joined by Gilbert Arenas, Shane Battier, Chauncey Billups, Chris Bosh, Bruce Bowen and Elton Brand.

National team managing director Jerry Colangelo announced the team. He was appointed last April and hired Krzyzewski after the United States finished a disappointing sixth in the 2002 worlds in Indianapolis and third in Athens.

"We wanted a team not of individual stars, but athleticism, shooters, role players and distributors," Colangelo said. "Chemistry is something we all talk about, we seek."

Boilers surge past Hoosiers

The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS

Aya Traore scored 11 points, and Katie Gearlds added 10 to lead No. 14 Purdue past Indiana 67-41 Sunday in the Big Ten tournament semifinals.

Cyndi Valentin led Indiana with 21 points, and Whitney Thomas added 10 rebounds for the Hoosiers.

Second-seeded Purdue (24-5) advanced to play No. 5 Ohio State in today's final at Conseco Fieldhouse. The top-seeded Buckeyes defeated No. 16 Michigan State 68-64 in Sunday's early game. It is the third time in tournament history that the top two seeds have reached the finals.

At halftime, Purdue led Indiana 27-10, the fewest points the Boilermakers allowed in a half this season and four off the school record for a half. The Hoosiers (17-13) shot 3 for 24 before the break.

The previous two games between the teams went to overtime, with each team winning on the road. Purdue was never threatened Sunday after taking an early 17-6 lead and led by as many as 31 points in the second half.

It was Indiana's lowest-scoring game of the season. The Hoosiers shot 26 percent, made 2 of 13 3-pointers and had 22 turnovers. Purdue outscored Indiana 24-11 from the free-throw line.

The Hoosiers considered themselves a team on the bubble for an NCAA Tournament bid, and felt their chances were good if they could beat the Boilermakers for a second time.

Purdue improved its record to 38-23 all-time against Indiana. The Boilermakers have won 16 of the past 18 meetings.

Purdue prevented alum Sharon Versyp from coaching the Hoosiers to their second tournament upset. Sixth-seeded Indiana beat No. 3 seed Minnesota on Friday.

AP PHOTO

Purdue's Katie Gearlds, left, drives to the basket past Indiana's Nikki Smith during the first half of their Big Ten Women's Basketball Tournament semifinal game Sunday in Indianapolis. The Boilermakers won 67-41.

In Sunday's other action

WOMEN

Wis.-Milwaukee 58 Butler 57

MILWAUKEE — Molly O'Brien grabbed a rebound, dribbled the length of the court and scored a layup with 4.8 seconds remaining to give Wisconsin-Milwaukee a victory against Butler in the semifinals of the Horizon League women's basketball tournament Sunday.

The Panthers overcame an 11-point deficit in the final 7:26 of the game.

Milwaukee (21-8) advances to the championship game today, where they will face the winner of the second semifinal between Wisconsin-Green Bay and University of Illinois-Chicago.

O'Brien led the Panthers with 14 points, while Meredith Onson and Nichole Drummond scored 12 points each.

A 3-pointer by Jackie Closser gave Butler a 53-42 lead with 7:26 remaining, and the Panthers did not retake the lead until O'Brien's layup. Butler turned the ball over as the buzzer sounded.

No. 7 Connecticut 71 Notre Dame 60

HARTFORD, Conn. — Barbara Turner scored 19 points and Ketia Swanier added a career-high 11 to lead No. 7 Connecticut to a win against Notre Dame in the Big East tournament quarterfinal.

The second-seeded Huskies (27-4) advance to play the winner of Sunday's late game between Pittsburgh and DePaul.

Notre Dame's Megan Duffy had 14 of her team-high 20 points in the final 10 minutes of the game as the Fighting Irish tried to rally from 21 down.

Willnett Crockett had a team-high 11 boards for UConn, which finished with a 36-23 advantage on the glass and outscored the 10th-seeded Irish 34-20 in the paint. The Huskies' 27 defensive rebounds afforded the Irish few second chances and helped UConn get out in transition quickly. Guards Renee Mongtomery and Swanier directed UConn's uptempo attack with a combined 10 assists as the Huskies shot 58 percent from the floor.

UConn, the defending tournament champ, is looking for its 13th conference tournament title. It was Turner's ninth tournament game and the senior forward's 19 points were a tournament high for her. Ann Strother added 10 for UConn.

Courtney LeVere finished with 15 points and two blocked shots for the Irish.

No. 5 Ohio State 68 No. 16 Michigan State 64

INDIANAPOLIS — Ohio State showed it can improvise when needed.

With two-time Big Ten player of the year Jessica Davenport frustrated by the Michigan State defense, the Buckeyes changed strategy without a hitch.

Debbie Merrill scored seven of her 15 points in a critical late flurry to give the No. 5 Buckeyes the lead for good, and the conference's regular-season champs fended off No. 16 Michigan State in the tourney semifinals.

"Jessica is such a great player and draws so much attention, I was just wide open underneath and I just laid it up," Merrill said.

Ohio State won its 18th straight and reached its first tourney title game since 2003. It will face No. 14 Purdue into night's championship.

With Davenport struggling to get open against the swarming Spartans — once throwing an elbow at a Michigan State player, the Buckeyes relied on others to do the dirty work.

Merrill, who was in foul trouble much of the first half, was the primary option. Brandie Hoskins and Marscilla Packer, whose outside shooting and hard drives gave Ohio State a more balanced attack, provided more help. Hoskins and Packer each finished with 15 points, while Davenport managed 10 points and 14 rebounds.

It was exactly the way fourth-seeded Michigan State wanted to play, just not the result they'd expected.

MEN

No. 9 Ohio State 76 Purdue 57

COLUMBUS, Ohio — After waiting 14 years for an outright Big Ten title, Ohio State's fans had to wait until the second half to start their celebration.

Terence Dials scored 20 points and the ninth-ranked Buckeyes broke the game open with a 14-2 blitz to start the second half.

J.J. Sullinger had 16 points for the Buckeyes (23-4, 12-4), who have won their past five games and are the top seed heading into this week's Big Ten tournament in Indianapolis. Jamar Butler added 15 points.

Gary Ware scored 25 points for Purdue (9-18, 3-13), which has lost four in a row and finished last in the Big Ten for the first time in 40 years. The Boilermakers fell to 0-12 on the road.

The Buckeyes held a tenuous four-point lead to start the second half, but quickly sprinted away.

No. 17 Florida 79 Kentucky 64

LEXINGTON, Ky. — Joakim Noah had 15 points and 11 rebounds to lead Florida, giving the Gators a fourth straight win against the Wildcats for the first time in the 79-year history of the series.

The Gators won for the first time at Rupp Arena since 1998 and clinched second place in the Southeastern Conference's Eastern Division and a first-round bye in the conference tournament this week. Kentucky, third place in the East, will have to play on the tournament's opening day for the first time since 1979.

Kentucky (19-11, 9-7) lost on Senior Day for only the fifth time in 86 years.

The Wildcats seemed to have turned their season around with an 80-78 victory Wednesday at East champion Tennessee.

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