

Lure of Olympics brings best of badminton talent to Thailand

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BAT chief Patama hopes Kingdom stars will win at least two titles at Thailand Open.

Thai badminton chief Khunying Patama Leeswadtrakul, back row centre, poses with officials and players at a press conference.

The national badminton body has set a target of winning two titles at the Toyota Thailand Open to be held in Bangkok later this month.

The World Tour Super 500 tournament at Indoor Stadium, Hua Mark, offers a total purse of US\$350,000 and qualifying points for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

The July 30-Aug 7 event is also being organised to celebrate His Majesty the King's birthday on July 28.

The tournament has attracted players from 20 countries, including world and Olympic champions as well as top-ranked stars.

There are five categories -- men's and women's singles, men's and women's doubles and mixed doubles.

The event has received the backing of Gongsak Yodmani, governor of the Sports Authority of Thailand.

Khunying Patama Leeswadtrakul, president of the Badminton Association of Thailand, said the annual competition has gained more importance this year as it serves as a qualifying event for the 2020 Olympics.

"It is important for our players, as well as for stars from other countries, to gain points for Olympic berths," she said.

"We have more famous players in the tournament this year."

Among the participants in the men's singles are the world's top four players -- No.1 and world champion Kento Momota of Japan, No.2 Shi Yuqi of China, No.3 Chou Tien Chen of Taiwan and No.4 Chen Long of China -- as well as five-time world champion and two-time Olympic winner Lin Dan of China.

The women's singles event features world No.2 and former world champion Nozomi Okura of Japan, No.3 and All England champion Chen Yufei of China, No.4 Akane Yamaguchi of Japan, No.5 PV Sindhu of India and No.6 He Bingjiao of China.

In the women's doubles, the world's top-three pairs from Japan have confirmed their participation, including reigning world champions Mayu Matsumoto and Wakana Nagahara.

Top-ranked Marcus Fernaldi and Kevin Sanjaya of Indonesia will lead the field in the men's doubles, while the mixed doubles event features world champions and top duo Zheng Siwei and Huang Yaqiong of China.

The local players include former world champion Ratchanok Intanon, Kantaphon Wangcharoen, Nitchaon Jindapol, Busanan Ongbamrungphan, Bodin Isara, Maneepong Jongjit, Jongkolphan Kititharakul, Rawinda Prajongjai, Sapsiree Taerattanachai and Dechapol Puavaranukroh.

Patama hopes the country wins at least two titles with the best bets being Ratchanok in the women's singles and Dechapol and Sapsiree in the mixed doubles.

In the 2018 edition, Thai players failed to win a single title.

Ratchanok, seeded sixth for the tournament, will start her campaign against Yvonne Li of Germany in the first round.

If she gets past the German, the former world No.1 will face either compatriot Nitchaon or Busanan in the second round.

"Our players have been training hard. Our best hopes are in the women's singles [Ratchanok] and mixed doubles [Sapsiree and Dechapol]," Patama said.

Sapsiree and Dechapol are the fourth seeds.

The winner of each singles event will get \$27,250 in prize money and a winning pair will receive \$27,650.

Patama said the BAT has spent more than seven months to prepare for the tournament.

"We are working hard to ensure that everything meets the requirements set by the BWF [Badminton World Federation]. We also want every participant to be happy," she said.

Tickets are priced at 100-800 baht and available at Thai Ticket Major.

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