

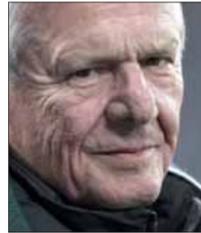
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CRICKET | Page 5

**Boards brace for losses in the time of coronavirus**



FOOTBALL | Page 7

**German billionaire Hopp – football villain or virus hero?**

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NFL  
**'Excited, humble and hungry' Brady signs with Buccaneers**  
Page 4

**FOCUS**

# IOC reviewing Olympics scenarios, cancellation not among them, says Bach

'We are contrary to other sports organisations or leagues in that we are four and a half months away from the Games'

Reuters  
New York, United States

The International Olympic Committee is considering various scenarios for the Tokyo Games amid the coronavirus pandemic but cancellation is not one of them, IOC President Thomas Bach has told the *New York Times*.

Organisers of the world's biggest multi-sports event have repeatedly said the Games would start on July 24 as scheduled, even as the rapid spread of the flu-like virus has brought sporting events around the globe to a standstill.

The coronavirus, which emerged in China late last year, has killed more than 10,000 people worldwide, sparking fears that the Olympics might be postponed or cancelled.

Bach, however, said the IOC was not even considering scrapping the Games.

"The cancellation is not on the agenda. We are committed to the success of these Games," he said.

An IOC task force, which included the World Health Organization, had determined it was too early to make a decision on how to manage the impact from the pandemic on the Olympics.

"We don't know what the situation will be," he said.

"Of course we are considering different scenarios, but we are contrary to many other sports organisations or professional leagues in that we are four and a half months away from the Games.

"What makes this crisis so unique and so difficult to overcome is the uncertainty. Nobody today can tell you what the developments are tomorrow, what they are in one month, not to mention in more than four months."

Japan is expected to welcome 600,000 overseas spectators and athletes to the event, which has seen sponsors pump in billions of dollars and at least \$12bn spent on preparations.

Bach said the final decision on the Games would not be determined by financial interests. Protecting the health of everyone involved and containing the virus were the main objectives, he added.

"Thanks to our risk management policies that have been in place for four years and our insurance, the IOC in any case will be able to continue operations and continue to accomplish our mission," he said.

"The 206 national Olympic committees and the international sports federations expressed that the world in this extremely difficult and concerning situation needs a symbol of hope.

"So for us, while not knowing how long this tunnel will be, we would like the Olympic flame to be a light at the end of the tunnel..."

In recent days several athletes,

## Olympic flame gets muted welcome in Japan

AFP  
Higashimatsushima, Japan

The Olympic flame arrived in Japan to a scaled-down welcoming ceremony

yesterday as doubts grew over whether the Tokyo Games will go ahead on schedule with the coronavirus pandemic causing chaos around the world.

As the flame, enclosed in a special lantern, landed on a charter flight, a Japanese Olympic Committee member broke ranks to call for a postponement and Olympics chief Thomas Bach admitted "different scenarios" were under consideration.

Reflecting the uncertainty caused by Covid-19, the flame's arrival at Matsushima Air Base in Japan's north was a muted affair after organisers were forced to cancel plans to invite 200 schoolchildren.

Former Olympic judo champions Saori Yoshida and Tadahiro Nomura lit a ceremonial cauldron in front of a few dozen officials and guests.

"Children had planned to welcome the Olympic flame, but we decided to scale it down, giving priority to their safety," said Tokyo 2020 chief Yoshiro Mori. The nationwide torch relay begins on March 26, starting from the J-Village sports complex in



Japanese three-time Olympic gold medalists Saori Yoshida (left) and Tadahiro Nomura (right) light Tokyo 2020 Olympic cauldron with the Olympic flame that arrived from Greece in Higashimatsushima, Miyagi prefecture, Japan, yesterday. (AFP)

Fukushima that was used as a base for workers during the 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster.

But organisers have been forced to scale back the relay, closing daily ceremonies to the public and urging spectators to "avoid

forming crowds" along the route. Speculation has been growing over the Games, scheduled to start on July 24, after the

Covid-19 outbreak closed sports competitions around the world and paralysed many countries, along with international travel.

The virus has already disrupted the early stages of the torch's journey in Greece, with the lighting ceremony in ancient Olympia taking place without spectators.

Organisers then had to scrap the Greek leg of the relay after large crowds mobbed Hollywood actor Gerard Butler as he lit a cauldron in the city of Sparta. With borders shut in Europe – which has become the epicentre of the crisis – Tokyo officials did not travel to collect the torch, with former Olympic swimmer Naoko Imoto representing Japan at the official handover.

As the flame landed, there are increasing clouds over the Games, with some athletes attacking the IOC for insisting there's no need for "drastic" action such as postponement or cancellation. Japanese Olympic Committee executive board member Kaori Yamaguchi, a former Olympic judoka, was the latest prominent figure to call for a postponement, citing the difficulties faced by athletes.

"It should be postponed under the current situation where athletes are not well prepared," Yamaguchi told the *Nikkei* daily. "By asking them to train under these conditions, the IOC is opening itself up the criticism that it is not putting athletes first," she added.



International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach. (AFP)

vault champion Katerina Stefanidi, accused the IOC of putting athletes' health at risk by urging them to continue to train while many countries are in lockdown mode.

Bach, a former Olympic gold medalist in fencing, said he sympathised with the athletes.

"For an athlete, the worst thing for preparation is the uncertainty that distracts from training and

the 220 athletes in the phone call Wednesday that we cannot pretend we have answers to all your questions.

"We are in the same situation as you and the rest of the world. It is a unique exceptional situation, which requires exceptional solutions."

### No need to rush Tokyo Olympic decision, says US

AFP  
Los Angeles, United States

United States Olympic chiefs said yesterday more time was needed to determine the fate of this year's Tokyo Olympics amid mounting calls to postpone the Games because of the coronavirus pandemic.

In a conference call with reporters, United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) chairwoman Susanne Lyons said there was no need for the International Olympic Committee to make an immediate decision on Tokyo.

"I think we would concur with the IOC to say that we need more expert advice and information than we have today to make a decision," Lyons said. "And we don't have to make a decision. Our games are not next week, or two weeks from now. They're four months from now. And I think a lot may change in that time period. So we are

affording the IOC the opportunity to gather that information and expert advice. At this point in time, we do not feel that it's necessary for us to insist that they make a decision." USOPC chief executive Sarah Hirshland admitted that athletes had suffered "significant" disruption to qualifying for Tokyo, and warned they would "likely continue to be significant". Hirshland insisted, however, that athletes were not unanimously in favor of the Olympics being postponed. "As diverse as our athletes are, so too are their perspectives, and that adds to the complication factor," Hirshland said. "There are athletes out there for whom this feels like their only opportunity, their last chance. I don't think we're in a position where all athletes have a unanimous point of view." Additional mental health resources were being made available to athletes as they grapple with "significant anxiety," she said.

### Olympics cannot go ahead, says UK Athletics chairman

Reuters  
London, United Kingdom

The Tokyo Olympics should be called off to spare athletes the "stress" of trying to train in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, UK Athletics chairman Nic Coward said yesterday. In the week the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Tokyo 2020 organisers insisted the Games will proceed as planned, Coward became the highest-profile UK sports administrator to say the Olympics could not go ahead.

Most Olympic athletes in Britain have found training facilities closed and are being advised to avoid going out. When asked whether it was now time to call off the Games in an interview with the *Daily Telegraph*, Coward said: "Yeah, it seems to be absolutely what has to happen. "And look, it shouldn't surprise

anyone that these very personal (athlete) experiences take time to come through to the IOC level. I can understand that.

"But as governments take action to protect their people – which includes closing down facilities on which athletes and para-athletes rely – and as that message is coming through more clearly now... I mean, we're only a week in in this country."

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Thursday that he believed that the virus could be beaten in 12 weeks, but Coward said that time scale would make it impossible for team members to prepare for the Olympics which start in July.

"From my perspective, right now, I think that will have to lead to the conclusion that the Games must be (postponed); that the decision has to be made that the Olympic and Paralympic Games can't take place as currently scheduled."

## FOCUS

# Closures force softball players into TFH mode: training from home

'We're all trying to do what we can do to be innovative with our training'

Reuters  
Oakland, California

Locked out of practice fields because of coronavirus-related restrictions, Olympic softball players this week began turning their homes into training centres and preparing to lean on smartphone apps for virtual coaching.

The coronavirus outbreak has brought most sport to a standstill, with events and competitions around the world postponed or cancelled as health authorities urge people to keep apart to limit the spread.

Organisers of the Tokyo Olympics, however, have said they are still planning for the Games to start on July 24 and have encouraged athletes to continue preparations.

With at least four of the six countries competing in softball's return to the Olympics having cancelled upcoming practice games, players have been left to train individually for longer than expected.

Closures of parks, gyms and batting cages have increased the challenges they face.

"It's unfortunate but at least we're all in the same boat mostly," said Mexican slugger Tori Vidales.

"We're all trying to do what we can do to be innovative with our training."

Team Mexico players said they were watching old games on YouTube to stay mentally sharp, tossing balls against backyard walls and dusting off old exercise equipment in their garages.

No longer able to practice with a nearby teammate, Mexico catcher Sashel Palacios said she had been building up her strength by watching television from the squat position.

Canada's strength and conditioning coach is recommending exercises with everyday furniture.



Kyle Attil, a sales director at Blast Motion Inc., holds a baseball bat outfitted with one of the company's sensors which measures various aspects of baseball and softball swings in Carlsbad, California, United States. Players on at least five softball teams in the Tokyo Olympics are training with Blast sensors as Olympic softball players begin turning their homes into training centres. (Reuters)

One player went a step further and shared a video of her jokingly hoisting her dog during a squat exercise this week, head coach Mark Smith said.

United States head coach Ken Eriksen said players had returned to their respective home bases after a curtailed nationwide exhibition tour but that they would be filming themselves on their smartphones to evaluate technique.

Australian players still have gym access, albeit in small groups and with extra cleaning in between, but officials are preparing for players to train at home as the virus spreads.

Worst off may be Italy, where the coronavirus-caused respiratory disease Covid-19 has killed 3,405 people, more than in any other country, and prompted severe travel restrictions.

Some players do not have a space at home to swing or throw a ball, manager Enrico Obletter said. "It is hard to explain how hard it is, we can only hope all this to end soon and we can actually play the Olympics," he said.

#### NEW TECH

Carlos Caro, the Mexico head coach, is mailing players devices from California startup Blast Motion to monitor hitters'

training from afar.

The tiny gadgets attach to bats and score players through an app on how level, fast and on target their swings are. Data can be shared with coaches as well as team mates and synched with video of swings.

Australia started using Blast last month to survey home workouts, too, and players on the United States, Italy and Canada also use the sensors.

"When you're not together, when you're not with your coaches, it's a tool you can use everyday," catcher Palacios said. "If I see my teammate putting in 200 swings, that's going to motivate me and constantly make us better."

Her teammate Brigette Del-Ponte said this week that she had fielded softballs against a wall in her southern California backyard. But the infielder, who has a six-month-old daughter, said focusing on softball had been challenging.

"The priority right now is taking care of my family and making sure we have enough diapers, formula and food," she said. "One friend gave us two four-packs of toilet paper. Amazon had the baby supplies, and I looked up how to make formula at home."

## BADMINTON

## Olympic qualifying events called off due to coronavirus

Reuters  
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

The last five tournaments in the qualification period for the Tokyo Olympics have been cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Badminton World Federation (BWF) said yesterday.

The All England Open, played from March 11-15, was the final event to count towards Olympic qualification, with rankings at the end of April deciding which players will be at the Tokyo Games.

The BWF faced heavy criticism for continuing with the Birmingham tournament and subsequently suspended all tournaments until April 12 due to the spread of the flu-like virus.

The Croatian International, Peru International, European Championships, Asia Championships and Pan Am Individual Championships in Guatemala City were the latest April events to join the list of cancelled tournaments.

"All five tournaments were slated to be played within the To-

kyo 2020 Olympic Games qualifying period, but will no longer contribute to Olympic qualifying as they will now fall outside the qualification window," the BWF said in a statement.

"BWF will make a further announcement on any implications related to the Olympic qualification period at a later date."

The coronavirus, which emerged in China late last year, has killed more than 10,000 people worldwide, bringing sporting events around the globe to a standstill.

Some badminton players had urged the sport's ruling body to consider extending the qualification period for the Tokyo Games.

"The escalation of the Covid-19 outbreak globally has led the BWF, in close consultation and consensus with its continental confederations and host member associations, to confirm the suspension of these tournaments," the BWF said.

"Heightened travel and quarantine restrictions and the subsequent extreme logistical complications this has caused also contributed to the suspension."

### Colombia adds to call for Olympics delay if coronavirus persists

The 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo should be postponed if the coronavirus epidemic is not under control soon, the head of Colombia's Olympic Committee said, joining a chorus which has called for the event's suspension. "The most prudent and of course the most respectful decision of the International Olympic Committee and of the organisers in Tokyo is to postpone the Games in case they can't give the guarantee of risk-less participation," Baltazar Medida, head of the Colombian Olympic Committee told Reuters late on Thursday. "If they don't achieve that they undoubtedly will have to be postponed," he said. "In my personal opinion I would say yes (it should be postponed) and I'm sure that the International Olympic Committee would do it because it's a way of acting responsibly," he said. "We cannot, to comply with the scheduling of some Games, put at risk the health of 10,500 athletes and all the people with them."

### Slovenia latest to call for 2020 Games delay because of coronavirus

The Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games should be postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic, the president of the Slovenian Olympic Committee Bogdan Gabrovce told national news agency STA yesterday. "Olympic Games cannot be held in July in line with the Olympic charter. Aside from other things, sportsmen simply do not have equal opportunities in these conditions to prepare for the Games," Gabrovce said. "There would be nothing wrong with holding the Games in 2021, by then conditions will calm down. If that would not happen, the Olympic Games would not be important as a fight for survival would dominate," he added. Slovenian athletes are unable to train in groups after the country's government earlier on Friday prohibited all socialising in public spaces.

## SPOTLIGHT

## Covid-19 will not deter athletes, says Aussie hockey champion Dwyer

Reuters  
Melbourne, Australia

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted Olympic qualifying and put the whole Games in doubt but most athletes would be prepared to make big compromises to compete at Tokyo, Australia's field hockey gold medalist Jamie Dwyer has told Reuters.

The outbreak has infected over 242,000 people and killed nearly 10,000, bringing global sport to a virtual standstill and prompting calls for the July 24-August 9 Olympics to be cancelled or postponed.

Four-times Olympian Dwyer, however, said denying athletes

the chance to compete at the Games was a decision that should not be taken lightly.

"The Olympics aren't until the end of July, so there's still a long time to go before we get to cancelling or making plan B," the 41-year-old Queenslander said in an interview. "It's every four years. It's not like we get this shot every year or two."

A member of the Athletes' Commission of the Australian Olympic Committee, Dwyer says he has not heard concerns about the coronavirus from any aspiring Olympians Down Under.

Most would gladly sign up for Tokyo, he added, even if spectators were banned or some nations were blocked from participating due to the coronavirus.



"If I had a choice between playing at the Olympics with no crowd or not going at all, I'd take no crowds any day," said Dwyer, who won men's hockey gold at the 2004 Athens Olympics and

bronze medals at Beijing in 2008 and London four years later.

He also competed at the 2016 Games in Rio.

"I know in Australia, the majority would take that option, too.

"I'm 100 percent sure, whether you're a hockey player a swimmer or whatever, you'd take that opportunity to go."

"How big are the compromises? If one country can't come, or even 10 countries can't come, it's a shame but it's not the end of the world."

"If 50 percent can't come, well, yeah, you've probably got a bit of a problem."

The immediate problem facing organisers is qualifying, with athletes struggling to train, travel or compete.

Tokyo is set to host some 11,000 athletes and almost 60 percent have already earned their spot. The remainder will clinch their places through modified qualifiers or previous perform-

ances based on ranking.

"Athletes do tend to roll with the punches, but I think qualifiers are the biggest issue — how are they going to qualify over the next three months?" said Dwyer. "All of these events are getting shut down."

"The lack of competition is quite difficult and a distraction but it's the same for every country at the moment."

In his AOC capacity, Dwyer said he would support any athlete who decided to skip the Games for health concerns but would encourage them not to rush into such a decision.

"If they were that scared and didn't want to go, that's up to the athlete. But you don't want to make that (decision) now," he said.

"You want to make that decision a couple of days before the team heads off to the Olympics if you decide you're not going to go."

Running a hockey equipment company under his "JDH" brand, Dwyer is seeing first-hand how the coronavirus is affecting the sports business, with major competitions postponed or scrapped as part of containment efforts.

Cancelling the Olympics would mean another economic hit for an industry already suffering.

"What about the thousands of jobs, the billions of dollars spent?" he asked. "I know retailers all round the world are really hurting and the small businesses, like myself. It's pretty tough I guess when there's no sport."

## BOTTOMLINE

## Spanish athletes fight coronavirus cabin fever

Reuters  
Barcelona, Spain

With the Olympic Games four months away, Spanish race walker Laura Garcia Caro should be clocking up hundreds of kilometres in the Guadarrama Mountains outside Madrid, on her way to peaking for the sporting event of her life.

Instead of altitude training, the 25-year-old is restricted to rattling around an apartment, confined as part of a partial lockdown to fight the spread of the coronavirus which has infected around 18,000 people in

Spain and killed almost 800.

The disease has ravaged the international sporting calendar but the Olympics is still standing, for now, with Tokyo organisers insisting they will host the Games as scheduled from July 24-Aug. 9.

Even if the games go ahead, the preparations of competitors like Garcia will have been seriously hampered.

"We are living every aspect of life in uncertainty, we don't know what next week will be like, if we'll be able to go out of the house, what the state of the world's health will be like," Garcia told Reuters in a phone interview. Garcia usually covers 120km

(75 miles) per week, but the quarantine means she must remain in the flat she shares with a fellow competitor and use a cycling machine, weights and a cross-trainer to try to stay in shape.

"This situation is preventing us from practising our sport. We are limited at the moment and wondering what to do, whether we can get hold of a treadmill, or if we will be able to go out soon," Garcia said.

"We can remain in shape and do cardiovascular work but it's not like training outside at all. We're doing our best to stay fit at home, but it's very difficult." Garcia is also concerned about

the competitive imbalance between athletes from countries such as Spain and Italy which have imposed quarantines and nations where outdoor activity is still permitted.

She also believes the current climate of rising death tolls is no time for a festival like the Olympics.

#### CRIPPLING IMPACT

Spain's quarantine has also had a crippling impact on its Olympic team sports, such as the women's hockey side, who clinched qualification for Tokyo in October.

"The only face I've seen is my neighbour's from the balcony,"

said assistant coach Andrew Wilson, who has been in self-isolation in his apartment for a week.

News of the shutdown hit while the team were in a training session, which was immediately cut short.

The virus wrecked the team's planned training camps in the Netherlands, Germany and Spain, as well as a reconnaissance trip to Tokyo.

Players who usually train four times per week with their clubs and with the national team every two weeks now can only focus on staying fit inside their apartments. Players and coaches are keeping in touch through WhatsApp.

### Swimming Australia call for 'level playing field' if Games go ahead

Swimming Australia have called on the International Olympic Committee to ensure there is "a level playing field" if the Tokyo Games go ahead as athletes struggle to train properly because of measures to contain the coronavirus outbreak.

In an open message of solidarity aimed at "peers and colleagues in every sport", Swimming Australia offered their support to anyone affected by the pandemic, which has shut down pools and gyms in large parts of the world.

With IOC and Tokyo organisers saying they were continuing to plan for the Games to open on July 24, Swimming Australia said it should be taken into

account that "athlete preparation is being severely compromised".

"We hope the IOC... are considering everything they can to ensure that there is a level playing field, with athletes being able to perform in healthy conditions," the message continued.

"We do understand that decisions about the Olympics... are extremely difficult to make, and that it would be devastating to all involved if cancelling or postponing becomes the outcome.

"At the heart of the Olympic... competition is the notion of fair play — a value we hold very close, and we do not want that to be compromised."

NBA

# 'Super Spreader': More players test positive for coronavirus

'The testing was initiated because of exposure to a known positive case'



Exterior of Staples Center after NBA postponed seasons due to corona virus concerns on March 12, 2020. (TNS)

AFP  
New York

Two members of the Los Angeles Lakers have tested positive for the new coronavirus on Thursday as the Philadelphia 76ers also confirmed that three of their players had contracted the disease.

The Lakers said they tested their players because on March 10 they played the Brooklyn Nets, who had four players previously tested positive for the virus. The Lakers said team doctors are closely monitoring the two players.

"We learned today that two Lakers players have tested positive," said Lakers spokesperson Alison Bogli in a news release. "Both players are currently asymptomatic, in quarantine and under the care of the team's physician."

"All players and members of the Lakers staff are being asked to continue to observe self-quarantine and shelter at home guidelines, closely monitor their health,

consult with their personal physicians and maintain constant communication with the team."

The Sixers said the positive cases were uncovered after health authorities warned that certain players, coaches and support staff may have been exposed to Covid-19.

Like the Sixers, the Lakers declined to name the players who tested positive.

Marcus Smart of the Boston Celtics and the Denver Nuggets also announced positive tests on Thursday for Covid-19.

On Wednesday, commissioner Adam Silver said NBA players should be considered "super spreaders" of the disease. Silver's comments came amid criticism that wealthy athletes are getting tested for the virus ahead of critically ill patients in American hospitals. The Sixers said their three individuals were in self-isolation while being monitored by medical professionals.

"Three individuals have received positive test results for Covid-19," the Sixers said. "All other tests results are currently

negative. We have reported this information to state and local health authorities as required."

"The health of our players, staff, fans and community is paramount, and we continue to be guided by medical experts at this time," the team said.

Also, the Celtics said Thursday at least one player tested positive as part of a series of tests they are conducting on their team. Immediately after the Celtics announcement, guard Smart revealed he had tested positive.

Smart said he was tested five days ago and got the results back on Thursday night.

"What's up everyone," said Smart in a video on his Twitter account. "So I just found out I tested positive for the coronavirus. I am OK. I feel fine. I don't feel any of the symptoms."

"Help protect others by protecting yourself."

**MORE TESTS COMING**

The Celtics said Smart would continue to be isolated.

"The testing was initiated because of exposure to a known positive case," a Celtics spokesman said. "The team is awaiting further testing results and will communicate them as appropriate."

Earlier, the Denver Nuggets said one member of the organisation had tested positive, but did not specify whether the person was a player.

"The person, who was tested after experiencing symptoms consistent with Covid-19 on March 16th, is currently under the care of team medical staff and in self-isolation," the team said.

These are just the latest NBA players to test positive for Covid-19 since Utah's Rudy Gobert was confirmed to have contracted the disease last week, prompting the league to impose an indefinite suspension on play.

**Booker donates \$100K towards virus relief**

Phoenix Suns guard Devin Booker pledged to donate \$100,000 toward coronavirus relief efforts on Thursday.

Per AZCentral.com, Phoenix Suns Charities is matching Booker's donation.

Booker said Thursday that he also intends to raise more money for relief efforts using a Twitch livestream.

"With countless people around the globe turning to streaming to get their mind off things, I thought this was the perfect opportunity to bring people together, raise awareness

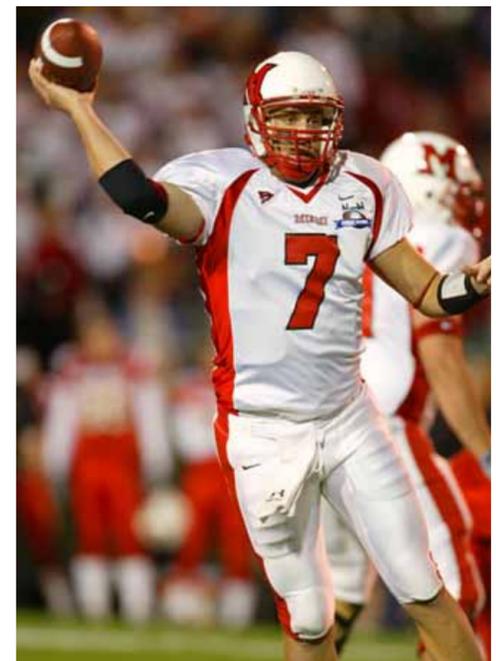
and help those in need at the same time," Booker said in a statement.

"These are trying times that transcend basketball and I would like to call on everyone to be good teammates as we deal with this challenge together."

Booker made a \$2.5mn commitment to Phoenix Suns Charities last season, pledging to donate \$500,000 annually for five years. The 23-year-old is in the first season of a five-year, \$158mn contract extension. **Reuters**

NFL

## Roethlisberger says he feels younger after elbow surgery



File photo of Pittsburgh Steelers Ben Roethlisberger. (TNS)

Reuters  
Los Angeles

Ben Roethlisberger ramped up his throwing program six months removed from surgery on his right elbow, and the Pittsburgh Steelers' quarterback is giddy about the results.

"I'm throwing without pain for the first time in years," Roethlisberger told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. "Some games, I would have a little pain. Some games, I would have a lot of pain. But in the New England game and the Seattle game [in 2019], it got to be too much. To be able to throw without pain now? That feels nice. That's a nice feeling. I know I'm not getting any younger, but I feel younger because I don't have any pain."

Roethlisberger, 38, went on injured reserve after Week 2 and required surgery on the elbow on his throwing arm.

Steelers general manager Kevin Colbert couldn't hide his own optimism regarding Roethlisberger's return to the field in 2020 when pressed for an update at the 2020 NFL Scouting Combine.

Colbert said he expects Roethlisberger to be at full strength for the start of the 2020 regular season. That's news because Roethlisberger has been operating at less than 100%.

"The thing that's exciting about it is we might have a better Ben Roethlisberger coming out of this surgery," Colbert said. "He sat for a year. Didn't have wear and tear on his body for a year. Sure, he had a significant surgery, but we're optimistic he might be better." Currently Roethlisberger

is throwing twice a week at no more than 20 yards, with plans to increase to three times a week at a longer distance next week. He has hosted Steelers receivers and had a workout with only Ryan Switzer, while also throwing from his knees to increase strength.

"I'll gradually ramp up the number of days and the throws and the distance and the velocity," Roethlisberger said in the interview. "I really feel like I could let it rip right now if I had to, but what's the point? There's no need for me to rush it. Our goal was for me to be 80%, 90%, 100% by OTAs and minicamp. Now that it looks like those things are going to be cancelled [because of the coronavirus pandemic], I can take my time a little more."

**WISNIEWSKI AGREES TO TWO-YEAR DEAL**

Stefen Wisniewski, who won Super Bowl rings with each of his past two teams, will now look to capture a championship with his hometown team.

The veteran offensive lineman agreed to a two-year deal with the Pittsburgh Steelers, NFL Network's Tom Pelissero reported Thursday night.

He figures to slot in at left guard for the Steelers, who had a vacancy at the position after Ramon Foster retired Monday at age 34.

Wisniewski, who will turn 31 on Sunday, was the Kansas City Chiefs' left guard for their run to the Super Bowl title last season. He spent the first 14 games of the regular season on the bench before gaining a regular role late in the year.

He spent the previous three seasons at left guard for the Philadelphia Eagles, helping the team win the Super Bowl after the 2017 season.

SPOTLIGHT

# Ex-NBA coach Pitino leaves Greek giants Panathinaikos

AFP  
Athens

Former NBA coach Rick Pitino has left his post at Panathinaikos in an agreement by mutual consent, the Greek club said yesterday.

The 67-year-old former Boston Celtics and New York Knicks coach said last week he had accepted a job with Iona College in the United States.

Pitino left the United States for Greece under a cloud after an escort scandal and then a recruitment scandal derailed his career with Louisville firing him.

"Mr. Pitino's presence in the Panathinaikos family has been a great honour for us," Panathinaikos said.

"Every minute of our co-operation with Mr. Pitino has been extremely educational for our team members."

"The knowledge of the American coach leaves a great legacy for the present and future of our club," Panathinaikos said.

"We are very pleased that his return to the US to be close to his family in these difficult times for humanity has been combined with his return to his home court: the NCAA championship," the statement from Panathinaikos con-

tinued. Pitino rejoined Panathinaikos last November and leaves the Athens outfit in sixth place in the Euroleague standings and top of the Greek league although due to the coronavirus both the Euroleague and the domestic circuit have been suspended.

"Thank you Panathinaikos owner, staff and players. I can't love a country and organisation anymore. Thank you. You're the best!" Pitino tweeted.

Pitino led Panathinaikos to the Greek league title last season before quitting because he wanted to return to the US. He said his wife persuaded him to return to Greece.

Besides holding the job at Panathinaikos, Pitino had also been hired to coach the Greek national team starting in May and he has said that he will keep this post.

Pitino made his name in US college basketball, guiding Kentucky to a national title in 1996 and then repeating the feat at Louisville in 2013 when he was named to the Basketball Hall of Fame, but the university was stripped of that title in 2017 as punishment for a "play for play" recruiting scandal that ended Pitino's US career until he was hired by Iona.

The college, based just outside Pitino's native New York, has only won one NCAA tournament game in its history.



**Former FIBA chief Stankovic dies at 94**

Borislav Stankovic, the long-time secretary-general of the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) instrumental in paving the way for NBA players to compete in the Olympics, died yesterday in Belgrade at the age of 94, state-run media reported.

Born in Bosnia, Stankovic starred as a player for Red Star Belgrade and also represented Yugoslavia at the 1950 World Championship in Argentina. He ran the Yugoslav Basketball Federation for a decade, building up the sport's popularity in the former Yugoslavia, which became a basketball powerhouse under his leadership. Stankovic served as FIBA's secretary-general from 1976 to 2002, a period in which he notably helped clear the way for NBA players to compete in the Olympics, starting at the 1992 Barcelona Games.

During his tenure FIBA also introduced the three-point shot and divided matches into quarters. **AFP**

BOXING

# Hearn says Joshua's Pulev fight not yet off

Reuters  
London

Promoter Eddie Hearn says Anthony Joshua's world heavyweight title defence against IBF mandatory challenger Bulgarian Kubrat Pulev in June has not been postponed yet due to coronavirus, despite the opponent suggesting it would be moved.

Hearn, who manages Joshua, also floated the idea that a blockbuster bout for the undisputed world heavyweight title with Tyson Fury might take priority in the event of a long postponement.

"Right now, for us, we're fighting Kubrat Pulev, June 20, and it could be July 25, but everything is uncertain at the moment, whilst the country and the world tries to contain this pandemic," Matchroom Boxing boss Hearn told Sky Sports.

The 38-year-old former European amateur super-heavyweight champion Pulev had said the fight would probably

take place at the end of the year instead of June 20 at Tottenham Hotspur's stadium in London as scheduled.

The 30-year-old Joshua reclaimed the WBA, WBO and IBF belts back with a unanimous points win over Andy Ruiz Jr in December.

Fury annexed the WBC belt with a brilliant seventh round stoppage of American Deontay Wilder in Las Vegas and Wilder has invoked his contractual right to a re-match.

But Hearn suggested the delays caused by the coronavirus may lead to a re-think.

"Well I think, all of a sudden, does the Joshua-Fury fight start taking priority, maybe over a Pulev fight, if the Pulev fight extends beyond the summer. There's so much that could happen right now," said Hearn.

"I mean anything is possible, but contractually Deontay Wilder is going to want his fight next, whether that's in July or whether there's a force majeure that takes that to October, November wherever," he said.



File photo of Anthony Joshua celebrating winning his fight against Andy Ruiz Jr. (Reuters)

FOCUS

# 'Excited, humble and hungry' Brady signs with Buccaneers

'I LOOK FORWARD TO MEETING ALL MY NEW TEAMMATES AND COACHES AND PROVING TO THEM THAT THEY CAN BELIEVE AND TRUST IN ME'



File photo of former New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady. (AFP)

AFP  
New York

Six-time Super Bowl champion quarterback Tom Brady announced yesterday he has signed an NFL contract with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Three-time NFL Most Valuable Player Brady, who turns 43 in August, announced Tuesday he was leaving the New England Patriots after 20 seasons and a record six crowns under coach Bill Belichick.

"Excited, humble and hungry," Brady said in an Instagram posting of a photo of him signing the document.

"If there is one thing I have learned about football, it's that nobody cares what you did last year or the year before that. You earn the trust and respect of those around through your commitment every single day.

"I'm starting a new football journey and I'm thankful for the Buccaneers for giving me an opportunity to do what I love to do. I look forward to meeting all my new teammates and coaches and proving to them that they can believe and trust in me."

The Bucs said only that Brady

signed a "multi-year" contract while ESPN and the NFL Network reported it was a two-year guaranteed deal for \$50mn (46.7mn euros) with up to \$4.5mn in incentives each season.

ESPN also reported the contract has a no-trade clause and a ban on Brady being named a franchise player, a move that hints Brady is looking at the possibility of playing beyond the 2021 season. "I have always believed that well done is better than well said, so I'm not gonna say much more," Brady wrote. "I'm just gonna get to work."

Brady joins a Buccaneers club owned by Manchester United owner Malcolm Glazer, a team that has not reached the NFL playoffs since 2007.

The 12-year post-season drought is the NFL's second-longest active futility run behind only Cleveland.

But if Brady can make magic happen, the 2021 Super Bowl is set to be played on the Bucs' home turf at Raymond James Stadium.

**'PROVEN CHAMPION'**

That's clearly the Buccaneers' goal, their website announcement of Brady's arrival declaring they are "all in" and Brady as the

"greatest of all time." Buccaneers general manager Jason Licht was a member of the Patriots' scouting staff when Brady was drafted in 2000.

"Tom is a proven champion who has achieved greatness on the field because he demands the best out of himself and his teammates," Licht said.

"I've known Tom since we drafted him in New England 20 years ago and through this process it became very clear that his desire to be a champion burns as strong today as it ever has. He possesses the type of rare natural leadership qualities that will immediately impact our entire organization."

The Bucs, who won their only Super Bowl title in 2003, are coached by Bruce Arians, who as an assistant coach guided such star signal callers as Peyton Manning with Indianapolis and Ben Roethlisberger in Pittsburgh.

"Tom is the most successful quarterback in the history of our league, but what makes him so special is his ability to make those around him better," Arians said. "I've had the privilege to work with some of the best passers in our game, and the characteristics they all possessed were the ability to lead and get the best out of their



In this file photo taken on February 5, 2017, Tom Brady of the New England Patriots celebrates after winning their Super Bowl 51 match against Atlanta Falcons in Houston, Texas. (AFP)

teammates. Tom is no different.

"He's a proven winner who will provide the leadership, accountability and work ethic necessary to lead us to our goal of winning another championship."

The Buccaneers' offence ranked third in both total offense and scoring in 2019 behind Jameis Winston, who threw 33 touchdowns and an NFL-high 30 interceptions. Brady had 24 touchdown throws with only eight interceptions, six shy of his career most in any season.

Tampa Bay has two 1,000-yard

receivers in Mike Evans and Chris Godwin, a rising star at running back in Ronald Jones, strong tight ends in O J Howard and Cameron Brate and likely their pick of free agents anxious to play alongside Brady.

Brady has an NFL-record 219 career wins against 64 defeats as a starter plus a 30-11 mark in the playoffs.

Brady has completed 6,377 of 9,988 career passes for 74,571 yards and 541 touchdowns and run for 1,037 yards and another 22 touchdowns.

SPOTLIGHT

# Saints head coach Payton tests positive for coronavirus



Reuters  
Los Angeles

New Orleans Saints head coach **Sean Payton** announced on Thursday that he tested positive for coronavirus.

The 56-year-old coach confirmed his diagnosis with ESPN, becoming the first known case within the NFL's ranks.

Payton said he wasn't feeling well on Sunday, got tested on Monday and received his results on Thursday. He said he feels fatigued but has no fever or cough. He is resting at home under quarantine and is optimistic about making a full recovery.

"Appreciate the well wishes. I'm feeling better and fortunate to not have any of the respiratory symptoms. 4 more days at home. #BEATCovid," Payton wrote on Thursday afternoon on Twitter.

Commissioner Roger Goodell released a statement on Thursday evening.

"Our primary concern is for Sean's health and well-being," Goodell said. "He did the right thing by seeking medical attention and we wish him a speedy recovery."

"It shouldn't come as a surprise as this pandemic continues that members of our NFL family will be directly impacted. This news underscores the importance of everyone following the advice from medical and public health experts to protect themselves and others."

Payton told ESPN's Adam Schefter that he came forward with his diagnosis because he wants everyone to heed the warnings of government and health officials, stay inside and behave responsibly.

"This is not just about social distancing," Payton told ESPN. "It's shutting down here for a week to two weeks. If people understand the curve and understand the bump, we can easily work together as a country to reduce it. Take a minute to understand what the experts are saying. It's not complicated to do what they're asking of us. Just that type of small investment by every one of us will have a dramatic impact. "I was fortunate to be in the minority, without the serious side effects that some have. I'm lucky. Younger people feel like they can handle this, but they can be a carrier to someone who can't handle it. So we all need to do our part. It's important for every one of us to do our part."

Payton has compiled a 131-77 record in 13 seasons with the Saints. He led New Orleans to the franchise's only Super Bowl championship during the 2009 season.

The Saints went 13-3 and won the NFC South division title for the third straight season in 2019 before losing to the Minnesota Vikings in the playoffs.

Louisiana has been one of the states hardest hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, with 347 known cases and eight deaths as of Thursday, according to CNN.

## Giants land free agent QB McCoy

The New York Giants and free agent quarterback Colt McCoy agreed to terms on a contract, multiple media outlets reported Thursday. ESPN reported that the one-year deal for McCoy includes \$1.5mn guaranteed. According to SNY, the contract's full value is \$2.25mn. McCoy, who spent the past five seasons with the Washington Redskins, will join starter Daniel Jones and Alex Tanney as quarterbacks on the Giants' depth chart. The 33-year-old Texas product has completed 560 of 923 passes for 6,080 yards with 29 touchdowns

and 27 interceptions in 39 games with the Cleveland Browns (2010-12), San Francisco 49ers (2013) and Washington. McCoy was a third-round selection by the Browns in the 2010 NFL Draft. Jones, who was the sixth overall pick of the 2019 NFL Draft, claimed the starting role from the now-retired Eli Manning last season. Jones, 22, completed 284 of 459 passes for 3,027 yards with 24 touchdowns and 12 interceptions in 13 games as a rookie. He also rushed 45 times for 279 yards and two scores. **Reuters**

CRICKET

# Boards brace for losses in the time of coronavirus

'THE LOSS AT THIS STAGE IS NOTIONAL. THE BIGGEST LOSER IN ANY ECONOMIC DYNAMICS IS ALWAYS ITS BIGGEST GAINER, WHICH IS BCCI IN THIS CASE'



A jubilant Mumbai Indians pose with the IPL trophy after defeating Chennai Super Kings in the final on Sunday, May 12, 2019, in Hyderabad. (AFP)

Reuters  
New Delhi

When the mighty Indian cricket board decided this week that only the chief among its national selectors would travel business class, it merely confirmed straitened times for the game amid the coronavirus outbreak.

The uncharacteristic austerity by the world's richest cricket board follows its decision earlier this month to halve the winner's purse at this year's Indian Premier League (IPL), a cash cow with a brand value of \$6.8 billion. The franchise-based Twenty20 league was scheduled to begin on March 29 but has now been postponed until April 15.

To many, a condensed tournament, possibly without foreign players, later this year looks like a more realistic prospect.

A curtailed or cancelled tournament would mean significant losses for the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), which gets around 40 billion

rupees (\$532 million) annually from broadcaster STAR India and its central pool of sponsors. "The loss at this stage is notional. The biggest loser in any economic dynamics is always its biggest gainer, which is BCCI in this case," SportzPower co-founder Thomas Abraham, whose company monitors sports business in India, told Reuters.

"For STAR India, it's also a loss of opportunity. It was building the India launch of its Disney+ OTT (streaming service) around the IPL."

A truncated tournament would necessitate renegotiation with Disney-owned STAR India, which was not available to share how it plans to dovetail the launch of its new platform with the IPL.

Chinese smartphone maker Vivo, which bagged the 2018-22 title rights for 219 million rupees, is unlikely to suffer a big loss. "They would have been preparing for new launches around IPL. They can still do it," Abraham said.

Vivo did not elaborate if the truncation had disrupted their

plans to leverage their tournament rights. "In light of the global health risk... we at Vivo completely support BCCI's decision to postpone the series," Nipun Marya, Director of Vivo India's Brand Strategy, said in a statement to Reuters. "We shall continuously evaluate the situation as it progresses."

**MONITORING SITUATION**

The BCCI and IPL franchises also pay 20% of a player's annual fee to his home board, which stands to lose that money if it does not allow the cricketer into the IPL due to fears about the coronavirus for example. A shorter tournament will mean a smaller share from the shrunken central pool of revenues for the eight IPL franchises, not to mention a reduction in gate receipts.

Further afield, the Women's Twenty20 World Cup narrowly escaped the health crisis but the outbreak has cast a shadow over the men's event in Australia, which begins on October 18.

The International Cricket Council (ICC), which runs the tournament, said it was monitoring the situation.

"We are planning for the event to go ahead as scheduled," it said on the tournament website.

Cricket Australia stands to lose some A\$300 million (\$174 million) should the coronavirus outbreak derail their high-profile home test series against India later this year.

"We're in uncertain times, and it's difficult to project precisely what will transpire over the next number of months," CA chief executive Kevin Roberts said this week. "But we will be working through with advice from experts, externally as to what are the various scenarios that are plausible, how likely are they, and how would we plan to deal with each of them."

**IN THE BALANCE**

In England, the fate of the inaugural 'The Hundred' championship hangs in the balance after the epicentre of the pandemic moved from Asia to Europe, shutting down most sport on the continent.

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) have invested

heavily in promoting the competition in the 100-ball format, which is scheduled to begin on July 17.

"It is clear that every industry, including cricket, will be impacted by this unprecedented situation," Tom Moffat, chief executive of the Federation of International Cricketers' Associations (FICA), told Reuters. "It's more important than ever for the cricket industry to work together collaboratively at this time."

Individually, top players from outside India risk losing IPL contracts worth millions of dollars if they are unable to travel or their boards deny them permission to play. As far as FICA is concerned, Moffat said, the well-being of the players while the world deals with an international health crisis is far more important than cash.

"Governing bodies, employers, and leagues owe a duty of care to provide players with a safe workplace," he added.

"And enforcing that players travel to, or work in conditions that are unsafe, would not meet that standard."

FOCUS

## Pakistan's Umar Akmal could face lifetime ban over corruption charges

AFP  
Karachi



Controversial Pakistan batsman Umar Akmal could face a lifetime ban if convicted of match-fixing charges unveiled yesterday by the country's cricket authorities.

The 29-year-old was provisionally suspended by the anti-corruption unit of the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) on February 20, the day when the Pakistan Super League commenced in Karachi.

The PCB said Umar violated its code on two counts.

"The PCB has charged Umar Akmal with two breaches of the anti-corruption code which relates to not reporting a fixing offer," said a PCB press release. Under the PCB anti-corruption code a player is required to immediately report to a team manager or officials of the anti-corruption unit when he receives an offer to fix a match.

Under the code if a player is found guilty the penalty ranges from a suspension of six months to a lifetime ban.

Umar has 14 days to respond to the charges in writing. Umar has a history of disciplinary problems, having been arrested and detained for a day after

a brawl with a traffic warden in 2014. He was also banned for three months after a spat with then Pakistan head coach Mickey Arthur in 2017.

Last month he escaped punishment after making rude remarks to a fitness trainer in Lahore. Often described as a talented yet undisciplined cricketer, Umar has played 16 Tests, 121 one-day internationals and 84 Twenty20 internationals since his debut in 2009.

He last played for Pakistan in the Twenty20 series against Sri Lanka four months ago, failing to score in either match.

Umar's anti-corruption case is the latest of many that has hit Pakistan cricket in the last 20 years, resulting in life bans and fines for several players. The PSL was hit by a spot-fixing case in 2017 when openers Sharjeel Khan and Khalid Latif were banned for five years.

**World Snooker Championship postponed**

The World Snooker Championship in Sheffield became the latest staple of the British sporting diet to be postponed yesterday because of the coronavirus pandemic. The 17-day season-ending showpiece, scheduled for April 18 to May 4 at the Crucible Theatre, will be re-arranged for July or August, according to the World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association (WPBSA).

"These are tough times for everyone but we are determined to get through it," chairman Barry Hearn said.

"Fans around the world - as well as the 144 players involved - are anxious to know if and when the World Championship will go ahead. I can assure everyone that we are doing all we can alongside our broadcasters, the venues and other partners to confirm new dates as soon as possible." Snooker's world championship attracts sell-out crowds and a huge television audience. It is especially popular with older viewers, thousands of whom are being advised to stay indoors while Britain deals with the coronavirus outbreak.

SPOTLIGHT

## Super Rugby set to resume in Australia within weeks

AFP  
Sydney



Australia's four Super Rugby clubs yesterday agreed to play a domestic competition starting next month after the coronavirus pandemic forced their season to be suspended, with axed team Western Force set to replace Japan's Sunwolves.

The southern hemisphere club championship, which features 15 teams from five countries, was halted last weekend after New Zealand and Australia said all inbound travellers must self-isolate for 14 days to counter the spread of Covid-19.

Since then, governing body SANZAAR has been exploring ways to resume the 18-round tournament, with Australia agreeing to a domestic competition without fans in line with government restrictions on public gatherings of more than 500 people. Rugby Australia chief Raelene Castle said the proposal would see the Australian teams playing a round robin home-and-away format beginning on April 3.

"There are still some elements to work through as a group, but we are extremely confident that we will deliver a meaningful product for the remainder of the season for fans and broadcasters," she said.

The Queensland Reds, NSW Waratahs, Melbourne Rebels and ACT Brumbies have all continued to train as normal.

The Sunwolves, who were in the Australian conference, have returned home with Perth club Western Force set to

replace them. It appears to call time on the underperforming Japanese franchise, which was due to be axed from Super Rugby at the end of the season.

But it has opened the door again for Western Force, who were controversially culled in 2017 after SANZAAR decided to reduce the competition from 18 teams to 15.

They were due to play in mining magnate Andrew Forrest's Global Rapid Rugby competition this year, featuring teams across the Asia-Pacific, but that too fell victim to the virus.

The reworked Super Rugby competition would run until June, followed by a yet to be determined finals series with New Zealand and South Africa believed to be exploring similar scenarios.

"In what has been a challenging time for everyone in our sport, we have seen the rugby bodies in Australia come together to put their full weight behind finding a way for our game to continue in 2020," said Castle.

While some sporting codes in Australia, including cricket and basketball, have cancelled or suspended their activities, rugby league, Australian Rules and football have opted to press ahead without spectators.

DECISION

# English rugby season ended below Premiership level due to Covid-19

AFP  
London

English rugby chiefs yesterday confirmed the end of the 2019/20 season for all levels beneath the Premiership due to the coronavirus.

The move applies to "all league, cup and county rugby", according to a statement from the Rugby Football Union (RFU), which said it was in "active discussions" with the Premiership.

RFU chief Bill Sweeney said in a letter to rugby clubs: "We are working through the implications of ending the season early and have instigated a thorough process to ensure fair and balanced outcomes for the game.

"We will communicate these outcomes by the middle of April. While we would like to provide all the answers now, we need some time to get it right for the best interests of the game." Runaway leaders Newcastle are



Signage at Kingston Park, Newcastle, referring to a Newcastle Falcons fixture after the RFU confirmed the end of the 2019/20 rugby season in England with the exception of the Premiership. (Reuters)

targeting promotion to the top-flight Premiership from the second-tier Championship.

Saracens' relegation from the Premiership as punishment for repeated salary cap breaches has already been confirmed and Newcastle looked likely to take their place.

The RFU had previously sus-

pending all rugby activity until April 14, while the Premiership is currently due to resume on April 24.

There are nine rounds of Premiership matches remaining before the scheduled semi-finals and final. Exeter lead the table by five points after 13 rounds of fixtures.

**Wasps players take 25% pay cut**

Wasps players will take a 25 per cent pay cut until the English Premiership resumes to offset the slump in revenue caused by the coronavirus. Premiership Rugby has been suspended for at least five weeks because of the epidemic.

The potential for the delay to go on even longer is causing concern among English clubs, who fear a severe impact on their short-term finances. Wasps have responded by implementing the wage cut until top-flight matches return.

"We are putting in place salary reductions of 25 per cent across the majority of the Rugby department until we are playing Premiership matches again," Wasps chief executive Stephen Vaughan said yesterday.

"These measures will take effect from April 1. A number

of lower-paid staff will be excluded from these salary reductions."

Other Premiership clubs are implementing similar measures with the prospect of resuming games in late April looking unlikely.

"We would all love the season to be back underway immediately, but all Rugby activities are currently suspended and there are no guarantees as to when we might start playing again," Vaughan said. "With this in mind, we need to take some extremely difficult and significant action to reduce costs immediately so we can resume doing what we love when this is all over. I spoke with (interim head coach) Lee Blackett and senior members of the playing squad and we then communicated this message to the wider team and colleagues."

## SPOTLIGHT

# F1 to hold virtual series in place of postponed races

The season is not due to start until the Azerbaijan Grand Prix on June 7, at the earliest

Reuters  
London

Formula One drivers will join video gamers in a series of virtual Grand Prix to replace races postponed by the coronavirus outbreak, the sport announced yesterday. The first, run on the official F1 2019 PC video game, will be held from 8pm GMT tomorrow when fans should have been tuning in on television to the Bahrain Grand Prix.

The virtual race will be over 28 laps, half the usual distance of the real one under the Sakhir floodlights. "Every subsequent race weekend will see the postponed real-world Formula One race replaced with a Virtual Grand Prix," Formula One said in a statement. The Esports Virtual Grand Prix Series will run until May. The season-opening Australian and showcase Monaco grands prix have been cancelled along with the races in Bahrain, Vietnam, China, the Netherlands and Spain.

The season is not due to start until the Azerbaijan Grand Prix on June 7, at the earliest. "The first race of the series will see current F1 drivers line up on the grid alongside a host of stars to be announced in due course," said Formula One, whose existing esports world championship starts later in the year. "In order to guarantee the participants safety at this time, each driver will join the race remotely, with a host broadcast live from (London's) Gfinity Esports Arena."

The broadcast will be available on the official Formula One YouTube, Twitch and Facebook channels and is expected to run for 90 minutes with qualifying to set the grid positions. "Due to the wide



The first, run on the official F1 2019 PC video game, will be held from 8pm GMT tomorrow when fans should have been tuning in on television to the Bahrain Grand Prix. The virtual race will be over 28 laps, half the usual distance of the real one under the Sakhir floodlights. (Reuters)

variety of gaming skill levels amongst the drivers, game settings will be configured in such a way to encourage competitive and entertaining racing," Formula One added.

"This includes running equal car performance with fixed setups, reduced vehicle damage, and optional anti-lock brakes and traction control for those less familiar with the game."

Formula One said it will also host online exhibition races, allowing fans to go head-to-head with real F1 drivers, on non-race weekends. "We are very pleased to be able to bring some light

## F1 teams plan to build medical equipment to fight virus

London: Formula One's British-based teams are working on a plan to manufacture medical equipment needed to fight the coronavirus. The British government and health authorities need more ventilators in intensive care units as a result of the respiratory problems caused by the illness. Formula One teams have engineering capabilities that could speed up the production of the units. With the Formula One season delayed due to the pandemic, the teams are evaluating a number of routes in conjunction with existing manufacturers and organisations from the aerospace and automotive sectors.

"A collective of UK-based Formula 1 teams, engine manufacturers and their respective technology arms is evaluating support for the manufacture of respiratory devices in response to the UK government's call for assistance," a statement on the F1 website said.

"The teams are working in collaboration with F1, the UK government and other organisations to establish the feasibility of the teams producing, or supporting, the production of medical devices to help in the treatment of coronavirus patients. It is hoped this work, which is being rapidly progressed, will produce a tangible outcome in the next few days."

relief in the form of the F1 Esports Virtual GP, in these unpredictable times, as we hope to entertain fans missing the regular sporting action," said Julian Tan, Formula One's head of Esports.

"With every major sports league in the world unable to compete, it is a great time to highlight the benefits of esports and the incredible skill that's on show."

Formula One will be one of several offerings aiming to fill the gap this weekend, with some Formula One drivers also involved in those. "Super Sim Saturday" will see three virtual races in quick succession – the Nuerburgring Endurance Series, IMSA Super Sebring and THE RACE All-Stars Esports Battle. The All-Stars event, first organised at short notice by Torque Esports and www.the-race.com last Sunday when Australia was cancelled and featuring

Red Bull's Max Verstappen, has moved from Sunday to Saturday to avoid a clash with F1.

Veloce Esports are also running a 'Not the Bah GP' at 6pm GMT tomorrow after an initial 'Not the Aus GP' with McLaren F1 driver Lando Norris last weekend.

Golfer Ian Poulter said he will be in that field, along with Real Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois. "I love cars, I love Formula One, I love everything about motorsport," the Briton told Sky Sports television from his home in Florida, where he has a simulator in his garage. "It should be fun not just for me but viewerships around the world which are craving sports... we'd love to get back to normality in sport as soon as possible, but if we can do it in a different format it will be quite fun for everyone to see."

## FOCUS

## For Formula One, coronavirus means less is more in 2020



Monaco F1 Grand Prix, a glittering fixture on the world motorsport calendar for 65 years, was cancelled, the latest event to fall victim to the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. (AFP)

AFP  
Paris

It was supposed to be a record 22-race world championship but with seven Grands Prix already either postponed or cancelled, Formula One in 2020 has become a shorter, tightly-packed and economically challenging sprint for the title.

The season-opener in Australia and F1's iconic Riviera showpiece in Monaco have been axed. Races in Bahrain, Vietnam, China, Netherlands and Spain have also been shelved but with organisers still hoping to shoehorn them into a breathless finale once the threat of the coronavirus has subsided.

A season which should have started in Melbourne on March 14 will now not start until Azerbaijan on June 7 – at the earliest.

"It's super complicated to redo a calendar because you don't know when everything will be operational," Frederic Vasseur, the team principal of the Alfa Romeo F1 team, said.

"You need to have a global vision. England is not too affected at the moment but it could be when Italy is less affected," he added in reference to the two countries which play host to

most of the teams in the world championship.

There are still 15 races left on the schedule before the concluding race at Abu Dhabi on November 29. Last weekend, Ross Brawn, the sporting director of F1, said he was optimistic of a "17-18 race" championship. However, that was when only Australia, Bahrain, Vietnam and China had been dropped.

On Thursday, the Dutch Grand Prix, slated to make its return to the calendar for the first time since 1985 on May 3, and the Spanish event, set for May 10, were postponed. The Monaco GP, an annual showstopper since 1955 and set for May 24 this year, was cancelled completely.

"I'm pretty optimistic that we can have a good 17-18 race championship or more," Brawn said. "I think we can squeeze them in. But it depends on when the season can start."

There is wriggle room. The traditional three-week summer shutdown in August has been scrapped to be replaced by a 21-day break in March and April while the racing season hunkers down. The championship now becomes a frantic six-month sprint rather than a nine-month marathon.

To rescue the calendar, there is an option of two races organ-

ised on the same weekend. "It's possible," said Brawn, eyeing the three weeks between the Hungarian Grand Prix on August 2 and at Spa in Belgium on August 30. "One thing we have also been talking about is two-day weekends, and therefore if we have a triple header with two-day weekends, that could be an option."

F1 experimented with three races in a row in 2018 but support was lukewarm from teams who sweated over staff fatigue. "I think what we need from the teams this year is flexibility, I think they've got to give some scope to do these things," added Brawn.

"Because we are in very unusual circumstances, and we've got to make sure we've got a season that gives a good economic opportunity for the teams. For sure we're going to have a quiet start. I'm sure the teams will be flexible to allow us to fit those things in."

More than ever, bank balances and income will be key in 2020 as teams and organisers grapple with the implications of a shorter, crammed season. "The costs are not necessarily much lower if you do 18 races rather than 22," said Vasseur. "Also, our income will be less – we do fewer races, we will have less commercial rights."

## ROUND-UP

## Goretzka, Kimmich set up virus programme

Bayern Munich players Leon Goretzka and Joshua Kimmich yesterday announced that they had launched a programme to help fight the coronavirus and had put in the first 10m euro. "Germany is at a standstill," the two 25-year-olds wrote on their platform "We-KickCorona.com". "As professional footballers we lead a healthy and privileged life. In these difficult times, we feel it is our duty to take responsibility." They are appealing for donations to feed a fund, which can be called upon by charitable or medical institutions involved in the fight against the pandemic. The two men are also part of the initiative launched on Wednesday by the German national team, after a suggestion from their 'players' council, with a donation of 2.5m euros or \$2.69m.

### 'EURO 2020' RETAINS NAME DESPITE NEW 2021 SCHEDULE

Football's European Championships may have rescheduled from 2020 to June and July 2021 but organisers insisted yesterday the event will retain its original name of Euro 2020. The competition was rescheduled due to the coronavirus on Tuesday, pushed back 12 months to June 11 to July 11 next year to clear the way for suspended domestic competitions to wrap up if conditions allow.

As the event quickly became known as Euro 2021, European football's governing body UEFA moved swiftly to insist they were keeping the original name and logo. "Although it will provisionally take place from 11

June – 11 July 2021, #EURO2020 will still be known as UEFA EURO 2020," UEFA said on Twitter. UEFA said the postponement "will help all domestic competitions, currently on hold due to the Covid-19 emergency, to be completed" as it made a "commitment" to finishing club seasons by June 30. Twenty of the 24 nations set to take part in the Euro have already qualified, but play-offs to determine the final four participants, due to be played this month, have been postponed. UEFA said those matches, and other scheduled friendlies, would be played in June subject to a review of the situation.

### RADIO STATIONS TELL VIRUS-HIT EUROPE: 'YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE'

Football anthem "You'll never walk alone" rang out from radios across around 30 European countries yesterday as DJs sent out a message of coronavirus solidarity. The song, originally sung by Gerry and the Pacemakers but long adopted by Liverpool football club, was played by 180 European stations, said Dutch DJ Sander Hoogendoorn, who organised the idea. "This is for everyone who's at home, everyone who's working so hard," Hoogendoorn, a DJ with the Dutch radio station 3FM, said at the start of the broadcast. Broadcasters in other countries hailed the idea, including Britain's BBC Radio 1 station.

### DOCTOR STEPS DOWN FROM ROLE WITH ENGLAND FOOTBALL TEAM

Rob Chakraverty has stepped down from his role as doctor to the England men's football

team. Chakraverty's exit comes just weeks after he faced allegations relating to his previous post as UK Athletics' chief medical officer. He was reportedly involved in a controversial procedure on British four-time Olympic gold medalist Mo Farah. Farah was given an infusion of the legal supplement L-Carnitine before the 2014 London Marathon, but Chakraverty was said to have failed to record the levels. There are no suggestions of any wrongdoing during his four years at the FA.

### BRAZILIAN CLUBS OFFER STADIUMS IN FIGHT AGAINST VIRUS

Brazilian clubs have joined the fight against coronavirus by offering their stadiums and training grounds to authorities. Bahia, Athletico Paranaense and Sao Paulo are among the clubs who made the offer on Thursday.

Bahia said it had three pavilions with 28 rooms at their Fazendao training centre and that authorities would soon transport patients there. "We are going to transfer to the Fazendao Covid-19 patients that do not need complex treatments," said Bahia state governor Rui Costa. Curitiba club Athletico offered their stadium and training ground, where world champions Spain trained during the 2014 World Cup, to authorities "for whatever use they deem necessary". Sao Paulo also offered their facilities, including the Morumbi stadium that hosted the opening match of last year's Copa America.

South America's biggest nation has so far confirmed 621 cases of the coronavirus.

## FOOTBALL

## Manager Southgate urges England fans to work together to beat virus



AFP  
London

England boss Gareth Southgate has urged fans to work together to fight the coronavirus pandemic, with football currently in lockdown. The Three Lions had been due to play Italy and Denmark in friendlies later this month before the suspension of sporting action brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In an open letter to supporters on the official England Twitter account, Southgate called the virus the "most extreme test that we've faced collectively in decades".

"In the way you've all come together to support our team, we must now work together to combat a virus that is causing physical and emotional issues to so many," he said. "So, please continue to follow the guidelines for hygiene and also the sensible precautions put in place to control the spread of the virus

in order to protect those most vulnerable to its impact. That responsibility lies with us all." Southgate said England were due to play next week but that "now is clearly not the moment for us to take centre stage".

"The heroes will be the men and women who continue working tirelessly in our hospitals and medical centres to look after our friends and families," he said. "They won't receive the individual acclaim, but we all know their importance is beyond anything we do on the pitch. When we play again as an England team, it will be at a time when not only our country but the rest of the world as well is on the road to recovery. Hopefully we will be closer to each other than ever, and ready for the beautiful distraction that football can bring."

With Euro 2020 postponed by UEFA by a year, football chiefs on Thursday decided to indefinitely extend the 2019/20 football season, which will not resume until April 30 at the earliest.



SPOTLIGHT

# German billionaire Hopp – football villain or virus hero?

For 'ultras', Hopp is a symbol for how wealthy hold too much power in football

AFP  
Berlin

Long despised by German fans as the face of big-money football, billionaire Dietmar Hopp is now being held up by some as a national hero in the coronavirus crisis.

Three weeks ago, the 79-year-old owner of the Hoffenheim club was the subject of nationwide protests in Germany's football stadiums, with fans raining abuses at him and holding up pictures of his face in crosshairs. This week, Hopp raised hopes of a vaccine for the Covid-19 disease, suggesting a company he owns could develop one as soon as the autumn. Ranked by Forbes as the eighth richest person in Germany, Hopp made his fortune with SAP, the software company he co-founded in 1972.

Decades later, he used his wealth to propel Hoffenheim, based near Sinsheim in southwestern Germany, from amateur league anonymity to the top-flight Bundesliga and a place among Europe's elite in the Champions League. That made him a hate figure for football fans across the country.

For Germany's "ultras", Hopp is a symbol for how wealthy investors hold too much power in football. They see him as a threat to the culture and traditions of the German game, and more specifically to the 50+1 rule, which underpins the considerable influence of supporters in the way German clubs are run.

Hopp has also riled fans by taking legal action over insulting chants sung about him by away supporters. A decision by the German Football Association to ban Borussia Dortmund fans from Hoffenheim for two years prompted a flood of protests last month, with fans across the country accusing football authorities of pandering to Hopp's personal wishes.

Supporters of clubs such as Bayern Munich, Borussia Moenchengladbach and Union Berlin held up banners insulting Hopp and the DFB, leading in some cases to games being suspended. Three weeks on, the Bundesliga has been suspended due to the coronavirus crisis, but



Co-founder of German software company SAP and owner of German Bundesliga club Hoffenheim. (AFP)

Hopp remains firmly in the headlines.

He is now being heralded as a hero in some quarters, after it emerged that one of his companies, biotech firm CureVac, is working on a vaccine for Covid-19. "We need to do tests on animals first, and then humans. But I think it should be available by the autumn, and that's when the next wave of infections might come," Hopp told Sport1 website on Tuesday.

CureVac's research, meanwhile, was at the centre of a diplomatic row last weekend. According to a report in Welt newspaper on Sunday, US President Donald Trump offered the company up to a bil-

lion dollars to secure exclusive rights to the vaccine research for the United States.

CureVac denied the report, while Hopp said such a deal "would not be an option". "It's obvious for me that it can't be the case that a German company develops a vaccine which is then used exclusively in the US," he told Sport1. The firm response earned him praise both in the media and among leading German politicians.

Football fans, though, remain largely unmoved by Hopp's comments on the vaccine, which he says should be for "people across the world". "It's very nice that a successful businessman is recog-

nising his social responsibility and acting accordingly, but that has nothing to do with his involvement in football," said Sig Zelt, a spokesman for the organisation "Pro-Fans", on Wednesday.

They may be more impressed by his promises to support smaller clubs which face financial problems due to the suspended football season. While Borussia Dortmund CEO Hans-Joachim Watzke controversially ruled out financial aid this week, Hopp took the opposite position, calling for a "solidarity fund" for smaller clubs. "The strong must help the weak," he said.

## BEIN SPORTS TO BROADCAST THE GREATEST TOURNAMENTS AND BEST LEAGUES

**Doha:** This week, beIN Sports will broadcast a thrilling thematic sporting schedule of the best historic competitions and programmes across its channels in 24 countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

Whilst live sport has temporarily stopped across the world following the Covid-19 outbreak, beIN Sports has delved into its deep archives to keep viewers and fans at home entertained and on the edge of their seats. Starting today, beIN Sports HD1 will showcase 2018 FIFA World Cup matches: re-living exciting fixtures from Russia which led France to lift their second FIFA World Cup trophy and Croatia reach their first ever final.

The football viewing journey will start with an exclusive programme featuring beIN legends including Arsene Wenger, Marcel Desailly, Andy Gray, Dwight Yorke, Hafid Darradji, Ayman Jadah, and Alessandro Altobelli, who will talk about their favourite FIFA World Cup memories and goals.

The 2018 FIFA World Cup saw Kylian Mbappe emerge on the world stage and capture the imagination of fans with his speed and skills, becoming only the second teenager, after Pele, to score in a World Cup Final.

Speaking to beIN Sports French and Arsenal legend Arsene Wenger said: "I was one of the first to say that Kylian

Mbappe has the potential to reach the same levels as Brazil legend Pele. Why? Because I look at the numbers and when he started at Monaco, this guy had contributed to over 30 goals aged 17-and-a-half years."

All of the matches and goals will be widely discussed on social media across Mena this weekend, and you can join in the conversation by using the hashtag #beINHistory.

The 2018 FIFA World Cup will be followed by:

- Tomorrow, beIN Sports HD1 will have a full dedicated 2016 UEFA Euro day with matches and special programs featuring star names from the world of football and beIN talent.

- Monday 23 March will see beIN Sports HD1 broadcast the unforgettable AFC Asian Cup 2019 campaign, with historic matches including the final between Qatar and Japan - where Qatar won their first ever AFC Asian Cup trophy.

- During the rest of the week, beIN Sports HD1 will have dedicated LaLiga (Tuesday 24 March), Serie A (Wednesday 25 March), Bundesliga (Thursday 26 March) and FIFA Club World Cup (Friday 27 March) shows and matches exclusive with Arabic commentary for all its fans across Mena - including the 2019 FIFA Club World Cup final between Liverpool and Flamengo, which was played in Doha's Khalifa Stadium.

DEMISE

## Indian football legend PK Banerjee passes away

IANS  
Kolkata

Legendary Indian footballer **PK Banerjee** died yesterday at a city hospital after battling a chest infection for a long time, family sources said. He was 83.

He was on ventilator support in the intensive care unit of Medica Superspecialty Hospital for more than two weeks. Banerjee, who was admitted in the hospital on March 2, breathed his last at 12:40pm, according to a family member. A two-time Olympian and the only surviving goal-scorer of India's 1962 Asian Games gold medal winning team, Banerjee is survived by two daughters - Paula and Pixie and younger brother Prasan Banerjee, a former India captain.

The Asian Games gold medalist was suffering from sepsis and multi-organ failure due to pneumonia on a background of Parkinson's disease, dementia and heart ailments.

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) condoled the death of Banerjee. "We at AFC condole the passing of former Indian captain, coach and technical director Mr Pradip Kumar Banerjee," the AFC said in a tweet.

Apart from being rated as one of the greatest players to have played for the country, Banerjee also embarked upon a highly successful coaching career and



is credited with overseeing the careers of many great Indian players. One of his most famous wards is former Indian captain Bhaichung Bhutia, who played for East Bengal under Banerjee and won the 1997 Fed Cup final. "He was a great human being. A very happy soul and a father figure to me," Bhutia said. "I was fortunate to play one of my greatest matches under him. It is a big loss to Indian football. He is one of the greatest footballers and coaches India has ever seen."

Current Indian captain Sunil Chhetri took to Twitter to remember Banerjee. "I would like to offer my heartfelt condolences to the family of Mr P.K. Banerjee as well as to the entire Indian football fraternity. He was a pioneer in every sense of the word, and his achievements will forever have a place in Indian footballing history. Rest in peace," said the all-time highest goalscorer for India.

FOCUS

## Italian football unites to raise millions for health system

Reuters  
Rome

Italian football clubs, players and fans have banded together to raise millions of euros to support the country's stretched health system amid the devastating coronavirus outbreak. Thursday was one of the bleakest days in Italy's battle against Covid-19 as the death toll rose to 3,405, overtaking China as the highest number of fatalities from the disease in one country.

A state of nationwide lockdown remains in place as the government looks to control the spread of the virus and all sports events have been suspended since

March 9. In Italy's top football league, Serie A, the number of cases among professional footballers rose to 13 when Juventus' French midfielder Blaise Matuidi and Hellas Verona player Mattia Zaccagni tested positive.

But a series of campaigns by clubs, players and owners has helped fight back against a crisis that is being felt at every level of Italian society. AS Roma delivered 8,000 pairs of protective gloves and 2,000 bottles of hand sanitiser to churches around the capital, where they will be redistributed to those most in need, while Inter Milan donated 300,000 face masks to the public health department.

First-team players and staff at Inter have donated 500,000 euros while

crowdfunding campaigns set up by Roma, AC Milan, Juventus and Fiorentina have each raised more than 420,000 euros. A campaign set up by Lazio highlighted the importance of people continuing to go and give blood, reassuring house-bound residents that it is permitted and safe to do so.

Individuals have also been at the forefront of the fundraising charge. AC Milan striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic launched a "Kick the Virus Away" campaign on Thursday, putting in the first 100,000 euros himself, and his fund has passed the 250,000 euros mark.

Others, including SPAL striker Andrea Petagna, Napoli captain Lorenzo Insigne, Torino forward Simone Zaza and Juve-

nus winger Federico Bernardeschi, have raised or donated more than 430,000 euros between them. Former Roma and Italy forward Francesco Totti also weighed in, donating 15 machines for monitoring vital signs to a hospital in Rome.

The largest contributions came from two of the biggest names in the country. Former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, owner of third-tier team AC Monza and former President of AC Milan, made a 10 million-euro donation to the Lombardy region on Tuesday to help build a 400-bed intensive care unit.

The Agnelli family, owners of Juventus football club and the Fiat Chrysler Group, matched the sum to support the national health service.

BOTTOMLINE

## 'Blessing amid misfortune': the Chinese club at coronavirus ground zero

AFP  
Shanghai

The team are split in half, with some players in lockdown and others training, but a modest Chinese club from the epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic is at last beginning to turn its attentions to football again.

Wuhan Three Towns FC, a team in China's third division that draws crowds of between 2,000 and 4,000, were gearing up for a promising new season in League Two South when their world was turned upside down.

"We have been isolated at home for almost two months," Yu Chen, an assistant coach, said by telephone from Wuhan - the city of 11mn people where the outbreak emerged in December. As virus deaths ticked up alarmingly, Chinese authorities placed Wuhan and the surrounding province of Hubei on a strict lockdown in January, with nobody allowed in or out of the area and an estimated 56mn people ordered to stay indoors. The start of the Chinese

football season was indefinitely postponed. "Earlier, when the epidemic was serious, I was very panicky," said the 32-year-old Yu. "At that time, I felt that many people in Hubei were quite afraid, so were my friends. We were worried about the health of our families and did not know if they were going to be infected and how."

But as the coronavirus spreads in other parts of the world, notably in Europe, China is beginning to see some light at last. The country yesterday reported no new local cases for a second straight day, suggesting that the stringent containment measures are having an impact. The Chinese government, which has begun slowly easing travel curbs, is now concerned about a second wave of infections from people arriving from other countries. Mercifully, no Three Towns players or staff have contracted the coronavirus, which has killed nearly 3,300 people in China, most of them in Hubei. Nor have any of the players lost loved ones. "This is a blessing amid misfortune," said Yu. But some players have suffered a psychological toll from being confined to their



Wuhan Three Towns players take part in a training session in Haikou in China's southern Hainan province. (AFP)

homes for weeks on end, he added.

Ten players are languishing in Wuhan - which is still under harsh measures - and they have been attempting

to keep fit by doing basic exercises at home for an hour each day, five days a week. Fourteen more players are 1,500 kilometres (900 miles) away, training

on the Chinese island of Hainan. "At the moment, the whole team is separated and there is no centralised training, which is the biggest difficulty," said Yu.

Wuhan Zall, the Chinese Super League (CSL) side from the city, have also been badly affected by the virus outbreak. They returned to China this week having been stranded in Spain since the end of January.

But with nobody allowed in or out of Wuhan the team are in Shenzhen, where they are in quarantine.

Zall have at last been able to train together for the new season, whenever it begins. Yu said the Three Towns players are desperate to get out and meet again, and hope to eventually play a small part in getting the city back on its feet.

The team's Spanish head coach, Albert Garcia, is with the bulk of the players in Hainan - although he too is in quarantine - and Yu hopes that the rest of the squad can soon join them there. "Hubei province and Wuhan city are slowly returning to work, and the work of the club will soon get back on track," said Yu.

"Our team will represent the city of Wuhan on the pitch and the players will have a sense of responsibility and honour."