

JAPAN ENDS OLYMPIC FLAME DISPLAY

The Olympic flame will be removed from display in Japan, officials said Tuesday, as the country braces for a state of emergency due to the coronavirus that also forced the historic postponement of Tokyo 2020. It had been on public display in the northeastern Fukushima region since last week to keep the Olympic spirit alive, but Japanese Olympic organisers decided to shelve it as coronavirus cases climb in the country. The raging pandemic prompted the first postponement of the Games in peace-time, with the opening ceremony now slated to take place on July 23, 2021. "Originally we wanted to hold the public display until the end of April. But considering recent developments, we decided to stop," said a Tokyo 2020 organising committee spokesman. --AGENCIES



An opportunity to reform football

SAMAMA RAHMAN

The sporting world has felt the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on an unprecedented level and responded in kind, with players raising millions and preaching safe practices while stadiums were being donated to aid in the fight against the pandemic. Events such as Wimbledon, the Indian Premier League and most of Europe's top leagues have also been postponed or cancelled to curb the spread of the virus.

Such drastic measures -- Wimbledon had not been cancelled since World War II -- were not taken lightly and they will perhaps have some far-reaching impact, particularly on the beautiful game.

Without any salary caps or prescribed limits other than UEFA's Financial Fair Play guidelines, which clubs have regularly flouted anyway, teams have been struggling for the cash to pay their players.

If the season fails to resume, both Manchester clubs and Liverpool stand to lose over €100 million from matchday revenues, broadcasting deals and commercial deals. Barcelona, who reportedly had a wage bill of €391 million this season, stand to lose just as much and have already gotten their players to agree to a wage cut of 70 per cent.

Such losses could have serious repercussions and potentially scupper plans for big-name signings in the transfer window.

"You can't predict what will happen, but I can't imagine any €100 million transfers in the near future," former Bayern Munich president Uli Hoeness told Kicker earlier this week. "The transfer fees will fall and will not be able to remain at the current level for the next two or three years. Because all countries are affected. We most



likely have a new football world in front of us."

Bayern CEO Karl-Heinz Rummenigge had similar thoughts, saying: "Every crisis implies a chance, though. Since a long time ago, the transfer fees and salaries have ballooned to unhealthy amounts. The coronavirus and the following worldwide crisis will at least put a stop to this 'more expensive, faster, more' tendency. Supply and demand will regulate and balance the transfer market."

European dynasties aside, smaller clubs may find themselves unable to cope with such a staggering and unforeseen fall in their revenues. They may have to resort to raising funds by selling players but the line of buyers may be far smaller than what they have been accustomed to.

There is also the issue that the transfer window is approaching fast and will perhaps need to be reworked completely or extended well past the start of the next season. Where a season ends and begins is also going to come under scrutiny as contracts usually expire at the end of a season.

FIFA President Gianni Infantino said that there would be a deal to extend all contracts automatically, but players, who are used to five- or six-figure signing bonuses, would not be in favour of such a move, especially after having lost out on wages before. Another problem would be that some teams have already inked pre-contracts effective from July 1, such as Hakim Ziyech, who is set to move from Ajax to Chelsea.

Infantino added some more

ideas to the mix in his conversations with Corriere dello Sport, although he did not elaborate far enough to paint a clear picture. "We can perhaps reform world football by taking a step back. With different formats. Less tournaments, but more interesting. Maybe fewer teams, but more balanced. Less games, to protect the health of the players, but more competitive."

Although there could be a silver lining, or so believes Everton manager Carlo Ancelotti.

"We are living through something none of us were used to and which will change us profoundly. TV money will go down, players and coaches will earn less. Tickets will cost less because people will have less money. The economy will be different and so will football. Maybe it will be better."

Reminiscence: My first match

In these times of social distancing, we must be safe while remembering that we do not get too used to the world being at a standstill. We were meant to go watch matches together, agree with a few of our neighbours and disagree with the rest. So, we are taking turns talking about our first live experience at a sports venue.

MOHAMMAD ISAM from Dhaka, 1994



The fact it is now more than 26 years ago, makes me feel old. But cricket did get me early. Playing in the park or watching highlights on TV, I was hooked to the Australian yellow and the New Zealand cool. After carefully following Dean Jones and Martin Crowe, I decided that I wanted to be a batsman who wore a cap and not a helmet. They had to show my face on TV properly, I thought.

This nerdy madness about cricket obviously got stoked a little more

pitch, and neither could the Pakistan openers Aamer Sohail and Saeed Anwar. I remember it took ages for Bangladesh to remove them, but the fall of the first wicket meant Inzamam-ul-Haq's torment was about to begin. Back then, due to his World Cup semifinal innings, my friends and I recognised him as the big threat. He could smash Enamul Haque Moni for straight sixes at will, we reckoned.

Lo and behold, Inzamam got stumped off Moni bhai for 11. Pakistan made 272 for four in 45 overs, to which Bangladesh replied with 210-5 in 45 overs. The fact that they were not bowled out by the world champions was a big deal. Everyone except Salim



Major sporting events around the globe have already been halted in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. And even though the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have not been in action since the upsurge of the pandemic, the duo were seen in the backdrop of a class in Dushanbe in Tajikistan. Tajikistan remains one of the few countries where the football season is being continued despite coronavirus fears. And yesterday, a two-week long coaching course for applicants of certificate "C" have started in Dushanbe. Boir Igamberdiev, an instructor of the Asian Football Confederation, is conducting the course that consists of theoretical and practical classes.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

when it came to following Dhaka Premier League scorecards in the newspapers, and hoping for a glimpse of it in the BTV news. It hardly happened. Around the time I was nine years old, I heard that Pakistan were coming to play two one-day matches in Dhaka. My life was about to get upside down.

I don't know if I begged my parents a lot but before I knew it, on the morning of January 23, 1994, I was on my way to the Dhaka Stadium. It was my first time at the stadium, and entering through Gate No 21, I acted as if I had done this a million times. I had heard so many stories from my uncles about this magical place, that I just couldn't imagine not knowing the place without even being there once before.

We were part of a large group, wearing caps, packed with my mother's sandwiches and a water flask. One of my cousins, who had just broken into a Dhaka Premier League side that season, accompanied us too. I don't remember if we sat on the wooden chairs that they had in weddings in Dhaka in the 1990s, or concrete, but I was in love with the place.

I couldn't peel my eyes off the

Shahed batted reasonably well.

Bangladesh lost the next day too, by seven wickets, but my life was about to get even better. Pakistan were doing this tour on their way to a big series in New Zealand, so the day after the second game, they were off to Auckland from Dhaka, via Singapore. My parents had decided to take me to Singapore too. Coincidentally, we were on the same flight.

My mother told everyone later that I walked around the business class the entire flight, collecting autographs and my father taking my photos with the likes of Sohail, Anwar, Younis and Mushtaq Ahmed. I even have a photo with a sleeping Saleem Malik.

Fast forward to 2015, when Younis was Pakistan's head coach. At the end of the tour, my colleague Umar Farooq introduced me to him, as I wanted to take a photo with him, at the age of 31. I had carried our photo from 1994 with me. Younis took it from me, as he wanted to show his wife a reminder of his handsome youth. My first memory of live cricket came a full circle.

Mohammad Isam is ESPN/Cricinfo's Bangladesh correspondent and a former sports reporter at The Daily Star.

Burundi FA threatens action against BFF

SPORTS REPORTER



Constantin Mutima, manager of Burundi national football team, has threatened to lodge complaint to FIFA against Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) after failing to get promised prizemoney of US\$20,000 for the latest edition of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup, which was completed on January 25.

Burundi finished runners-up after losing 3-1 against eventual champions Palestine in the final and they received a symbolic cheque of the aforementioned amount, but even after two and a half months, neither Burundi nor Palestine have got any prizemoney from the BFF.

Mutima contacted this reporter on Monday and alleged that the BFF officials are not even responding to their calls and that they might inform the matter to the Prime Minister's Office.

"We came to play the tournament for the first time in Bangladesh and we came second in the tournament. We were supposed to get \$20,000. Now is three months after the final. If we send message to the Bangladesh Football Federation, message is read but no answer. Now if they don't pay money by end of this month, we

are gonna take this case to the FIFA and the office of the Prime Minister (Bangladesh) because she is the one presented the trophy and prizes," said Mutima through a text message.

BFF general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag, however, claimed that the file regarding the cash transfer is with the Bangladesh Bank.

"We should have sent their money by March but we could not send the money as we did not focus on this issue due to the coronavirus situation. We expect to pay the prizemoney as soon as the shutdown comes to an end," Shohag said, admitting that they have also not paid the US\$30,000 prizemoney to champions Palestine.

The BFF had earlier made similar delay in paying US\$50,000 to former champions Nepal for nearly two years before being forced to clear the amount after reports regarding the issue came out in local media.

Asked whether they have arranged for the money, Shohag said, "There are instructions to follow for all government procedures regarding sending money abroad. Money is no problem; we will send it as soon as we get permission. We have already got permission from the finance ministry and the file is with the Bangladesh Bank."

La Liga eyeing May return

AFP, Madrid

La Liga could return to action as early as next month, its president Javier Tebas said on Tuesday, as the league awaits a chance to restart following the coronavirus shutdown.

Tebas also warned Spanish clubs could lose as much as one billion euros (\$1.1 billion) if the season is not completed, pushing football bosses in the country to search for a late finish to the current campaign.

"The different scenarios we have been looking at with UEFA to go back to competing are most probably starting on the May 29 June 6-7 or June 28," Tebas said.

"We're not just looking at what happens in Spain... the job is to get all our calendars (in Europe) in line so all the competitions are able to finish together."

However Tebas said no team training could take place until after the state of emergency ends in Spain -- currently set until April 26.

Australian cricketers 'sucked up' to India: Clarke

AFP, Sydney



Australian cricketers "sucked up" to India and Virat Kohli by holding back on verbal sledging to protect lucrative Indian Premier League deals, according to former Australia captain Michael Clarke.

Clarke said players were "too scared" to play a normal game against India because of the influence of the world's wealthiest cricket tournament.

"Everybody knows how powerful India are in regards to the financial part of the game, internationally or

domestically with the IPL," Clarke said on Sky Racing television.

"I feel that Australian cricket, and probably every other team over a little period, went the opposite and actually sucked up to India. They were too scared to sledge Kohli or the other Indian players," he said, referring to the verbal sparring that often takes place on the pitch.

Australian players have attracted big money since the IPL started in 2008. Paceman Pat Cummins is the most expensive overseas star this year with Kolkata Knight Riders paying \$2.17 million.



Russia denies bribing FIFA officials

AFP, Moscow

The Kremlin on Tuesday "categorically" denied allegations that Russia had bribed FIFA officials for the right to host the 2018 World Cup.

"Russia absolutely legally got the right to organise the World Cup," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

He said the decision was "not linked to any bribes, we categorically deny this." "Russia organized the best football World Cup in history. We are proud of it," he added.

According to US Justice Department documents released Monday, FIFA officials received bribes to vote in favor of awarding the 2018 World Cup to Russia and the tournament in 2022 to Qatar.

"We have read the articles in the media. We do not understand what it is about," Peskov said.

The allegations are linked to a 2015 corruption scandal that led to the downfall of then-president Sepp Blatter.