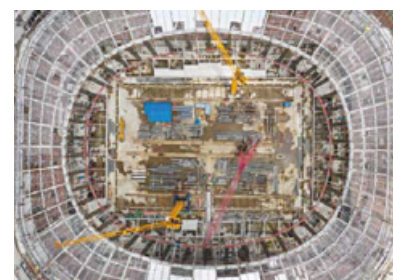


CHINA'S WORLD CUP AMBITION

China is in the throes of a multibillion-dollar splurge on new football stadiums, ramping up ambitions to be a superpower in the sport and host a World Cup as early as 2030. The building spree is taking place despite the coronavirus pandemic. With the outbreak receding in China, where it emerged in December, Chinese Super League (CSL) champions Guangzhou Evergrande last week began construction on their 12 billion yuan (\$1.7 billion) new home. With a capacity of 100,000, the lotus flower-shaped stadium will for a time trump Barcelona's Camp Nou — which is set for expansion — as the world's biggest football arena, once it is completed by the end of 2022.



Former Brazil midfielder Kaka was spending some quality time with his daughter by reading a book to her as the coronavirus pandemic continues to force people to practice social distancing. Across the world, another footballer, Bangladesh's Sohel Rana was pictured getting a haircut.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

Hope mixed with uncertainty, worry as football reawakens

REUTERS, Bern

Football is re-awakening amid the COVID-19 pandemic but the sense of hope at teams which have started training is mixed with worry over whether it might be too soon and the uncertainty of how to keep players safe.

On hold since mid-March, many European leagues are hoping to start up again in the next two or three months, without spectators, and training has begun in Germany and Austria. Yet re-starting remains fraught with difficulties.

"There is a huge logistical and medical/scientific question about testing and protocols but also a social one," said Jonas Baer-Hoffmann, secretary general of the global players' union FIFPRO. "We need guidance and protocols on how to return in a healthy and safe manner."

There was also a moral question. "Are we sending the right message to society, and are we encouraging a healthy return to normal life, or are we sending a bad signal that football has different rules to the rest of the world?" he added.

On the other hand, the Swiss Football League said a successful re-start, under scientific supervision with a risk management concept, could allow football "to send a signal that it is possible to return to something closer to normality".

Several leagues around the world have produced a medical protocol for training, mostly along similar lines. These generally involve thorough testing of players to ensure they are not infected and dividing the squads into groups of six, observing social distancing guidelines.

Yet many details for the re-start of competitions, such as whether teams would have to be isolated until the league is finished and what happens if a player tests positive, remain unclear.

As Christoph Freund, sporting director at Austrian champions Salzburg, said on Tuesday: "It can't be that if one player, or one accompanying person or a trainer, gets the virus that the whole round has to stop, or that things stop again for two or three weeks," he said.

Germany's Bundesliga may well be the guinea pig as it is the closest of the major leagues to resuming. Like other leagues, it can only start with a green light from the government.

On Thursday, the Bundesliga said players will be monitored by an appointed team health official and would have regular testing.

An infection to a player will be reported to authorities who will be in charge of any other steps. The team, however, would not be automatically quarantined.

There was also the question of whether there was enough staffing and resources to deal with ill and injured players — a natural risk in soccer.

Carl Bergstrom, a biology professor at the University of Washington, said one possibility was a 'bubble' strategy where players and staff are isolated for the duration of the season.

"The logistics of this would still be difficult," he told Reuters. "Food has to come from somewhere. Medical care has to come from somewhere. Any contact with the outside world comes at a risk of infection."

When domestic hockey ignited passions

ANISUR RAHMAN

Although the Premier Division Hockey League has not been held for the last two and a half years, the country's top-flight hockey competition had once been a major source of entertainment for sports lovers, who were enthralled to watch high-voltage matches involving the world's big stars like Tahir Zaman, Shahbaz Ahmed, Dhanraj Pillay and many other Asian luminaries.

Every time Bangladesh's perennial foes Abahani and Mohammedan locked horns, the rivalry only seemed to grow stronger. As a win for either the Sky Blues or the Black and Whites was always an issue of prestige, both giants also put in an extra effort to beat their rivals off the field by roping in the best players in their respective sides.

And the competition was not just limited to securing the services of local players, but massive efforts were put in to rope in foreign players. Former national players Mahbub Harun and Rafiqul Islam Kamal told some tales of domestic hockey, which was once considered to hold most potential in Bangladesh after football.

although Abahani won the Club Cup tournament during that time.

The matches between Abahani and Mohammedan were always electrifying and as has become part of the country's sporting lore, it even spread to the gallery sometimes and unwanted incidents took place.

"A crucial encounter between Abahani and Mohammedan is still vivid in my memory as the match was played over two days. With Abahani needing only a draw to become champions, only 32 minutes of hockey was possible because of scuffles on-and-off the field, and then the rest was played the next day with none of us finding the target, and we became champions," said Mahbub, who was however more happy to have been captain when Abahani were unbeaten champions in 1993.

In that time, Usha KS was the third force and, with striker Rafiqul Islam Kamal and Mohammad Sadek, gave Abahani and Mohammedan a run for their money.

"Usha also had four Pakistani players in the premier league, which was really very competitive as all three teams had



PHOTO: KHANDAKER TAREK

Domestic hockey matches in the '80s, like this one between Abahani and Mohammedan at the Paltan Maidan, would draw massive crowds.

Names like Mohammedan, Tahir Zaman and Shahbaz Ahmed were synonymous with Bangladesh hockey league, which the Black and Whites won four times [1995, 1997, 1998, 2000] in a row, riding on the brilliant performances of the legendary Pakistani players.

But not many hockey fans know that Tahir and Shahbaz had promised to wear the Abahani jersey before changing their minds and sporting the Black and White.

"During the Asian Games in Japan in 1994, Tahir Zaman, Shahbaz and Irfan agreed to play for Abahani after getting the offer from me. Later, Afzalur Rahman Sinha bhai [then chairman of Abahani hockey committee] phoned them in Pakistan to confirm their participation for Abahani in the Premier League. Everything was ready and they were supposed to arrive on the 11th, but we phoned them just four days before their arrival and they refused to play for Abahani," recalled Mahbub while talking to The Daily Star recently.

"Later, we learned that someone — a Mohammedan fan or official — who was a friend of Shahbaz and lived in Canada, intervened and convinced them to play for Mohammedan in 1996, and they came to Bangladesh to play for Mohammedan. Despite their refusal to play for Abahani, Sinha bhai invited them for dinner at our club tent," said Mahbub, adding that Abahani could not clinch the league title as long as the trio played for Mohammedan,

equal chances to win the league before Mohammedan clinched the title," recalled Kamal, adding that the standard of play was also high with the local players also holding their own against foreign players.

Kamal, who is very thankful to his coaches Ehtesam Sultan and Pratap Sankar Hazra, also said that during those days, the Inter-University Games was also very competitive as, despite having seven to eight national players, they had to work hard to win the hockey medal for Dhaka University.

Both Mahbub and Kamal still cherish the abundance of memories of playing hockey, especially in times of social distancing.

Mahbub Harun was called Bangla's Shahbaz and he is still fond of that moniker, while Kamal still becomes overwhelmed when recalling that a lot of his fans went outside the capital to meet him and some even wrote him letters.

"When I played for Usha KC, a lot of Mohammedan fans came to watch me from the gallery and they shouted to tell me that Kamal bhai, please score one more goal as we put a bet on you. It really inspired me to score more," said Kamal, the highest goal-scorer in a season with 40 goals in 1995.

However, it pains both former stars to see the state of misery Bangladesh hockey is at the moment and they both blamed the irregularity in holding the league.

Play-offs for CL spots?

AGENCIES, Bern

Play-offs could decide Champions League and Europa League qualification should the impact of the coronavirus pandemic force domestic leagues to be cut short.

UEFA stated that if competitions cannot be completed, the next option should be to restart "with a different format in a manner which would still facilitate clubs to qualify on merit".

It leaves it open to its associations to decide on an appropriate format, but could mean the introduction of mini-leagues or play-offs.

It also seems to clear the way for the Dutch season to be ended after the government prohibited any sporting activity there until at least September 1.

Broad and Anderson eye one last Ashes tilt before retirement

AGENCIES

England's new-ball pair of James Anderson and Stuart Broad have their eyes on the 2021-22 Ashes series in Australia before they consider retirement, the duo have said.

Anderson, England's highest test wicket-taker, will be 38 in July while Broad, second in that list and four years younger, does not expect his career to last as long as that of his bowling partner.

"I don't think I could go until your age," Broad told Anderson during an Instagram Live chat. "Your action's so smooth, it looks a lot calmer on your body whereas mine is a little more forceful through my body I think."

"But I'm loving the environment at the minute. I love playing for England."

"I still have huge motivation to keep playing and you just assess that year by year. And we've got that



carrot dangling over us of Australia in Australia which looks like an achievable carrot to grab."

Anderson felt if he could stay fit and perform at the same level, there was no reason why he could not join England's bid to reclaim the Ashes.

"The big thing is standards. If your

standards feel like they're dropping then yeah you might consider finishing," Anderson said.

"But as long as my standards stay high, my fitness levels stay good and my skills stay where I want them to be and my speed stays pretty good which they have been (I'll keep playing)."



The game that hurt me the most? I'm actually the biggest loser in history. I won a lot, but I lost: 3 Champions League finals, 1 European Super Cup final, 3 Intercontinental Cup finals, a World Cup final and a European Championship final!

FORMER ITALY DEFENDER PAOLO MALDINI DURING A CHAT WITH CHRISTIAN VIERI

'Dhoni won't want to wear blue again'

AFP, New Delhi

Veteran off-spinner Harbhajan Singh said he doesn't think MS Dhoni will play for India again, adding to the guessing game over the future of the superstar former captain.

Dhoni, 38, has not appeared for club or country since last year's 50-over World Cup and India's coronavirus lockdown could threaten his chances of getting back into the national team.

The IPL, the main platform before this year's scheduled T20 World Cup, is uncertain because of the pandemic. Harbhajan, who plays with Dhoni at IPL side Chennai Super Kings, said retirement was on the cards for Dhoni and that he was increasingly being asked about his teammate.

"It's up to him. You need to know whether he wants to play for India again," Harbhajan said in an online forum. "As far as I know him, he won't want to wear India's blue jersey again. IPL he will play, but for India I think he had decided the (2019) World Cup was his last."

Dhoni, who gave up Test cricket in 2014, started training for the Super Kings in March but had not commented on his international future. Dhoni led India to win the inaugural Twenty20 World Cup in 2007. He hit a six to seal the 2011 World Cup final victory and, along with it, his status as a national hero.



Liverpool and Egypt forward Mohamed Salah began to decorate his house yesterday, on the eve of the holy month of Ramadan.

PHOTO: INSTAGRAM

English cricket delay extended

AFP, London

No professional cricket will be played in England and Wales until July 1 due to the coronavirus pandemic, the ECB announced on Friday.

It said attempts would be made to reschedule fixtures in the period from July until the end of September, including the West Indies Test tour of England. The women's series against India will also be moved.

Nine rounds of fixtures will be lost in the four-day county championship, but time slots will remain in a revised schedule. The Twenty20 Blast will be pushed as late in the season as possible while the ECB will discuss the inaugural Hundred competition next week, following a request to dedicate a further session to the competition.