

SURGICAL MATERIAL IN KNEE

World Cup finalist and Atletico Madrid defender Sime Vrsaljko went under the knife to remove surgical material left there in a previous operation, the Spanish club said Thursday. The 28-year-old right-back started in Croatia's run to the World Cup final in 2018 but missed almost all of the following year through injury. Vrsaljko underwent an arthroscopy on his left knee to remove surgical material from a ligament operation he had 16 months ago. Atletico said the operation in Madrid would soon allow Vrsaljko to begin training.



—AFP



With La Liga ideally less than a month from potential restart, Real Madrid stars, including Sergio Ramos (L) and Marcelo, were sweating it out in training, trying to perfect their bicycle-kick skills.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Kante stays away from training

AFP, London

N'Golo Kante has been allowed to stay away from Chelsea's return to training due to his coronavirus fears.

The French World Cup winner joined Frank Lampard's squad on Tuesday as training resumed following a decision to allow socially distanced sessions.

But the 29-year-old missed Wednesday's small group practice with the blessing of the Chelsea manager, who is reported to have allowed him to train at home on compassionate leave.

Kante, who tested negative for the virus this week, is said to be unconvinced it is safe to train with his teammates.

The former Leicester star experienced a health scare when he collapsed at Chelsea's training ground two years ago. Tests at the time did not reveal any heart concern.

BCCI won't push for IPL over T20 World Cup

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's cricket board will not push for the Twenty20 World Cup in Australia to be postponed but would consider staging the Indian Premier League (IPL) in the October/November slot if it becomes available, a senior BCCI official has told Reuters.

This year's IPL, which is worth almost \$530 million to the BCCI, has been indefinitely postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic while the World Cup, which is scheduled to begin on Oct. 18, is also in jeopardy.

Reports in Australian media have suggested India's influential board may look to push for the World Cup to be postponed to open up a window for the IPL.

World Cup contingency plans are on the agenda at next week's International Cricket Council (ICC) board meeting but BCCI treasurer Arun Singh Dhumal said India would not be recommending it be pushed back.

"Why should the BCCI suggest

postponing the Twenty20 World Cup?" Dhumal told Reuters by telephone.

"We'll discuss it in the meeting and whatever is appropriate, (the ICC) will take a call.

"If the Australia government announces that the tournament will happen and Cricket Australia is confident they can handle it, it will be their call. BCCI would not suggest anything."

While Australia has seen new infections of the novel coronavirus slow to a trickle and is gradually easing travel curbs and social distancing restrictions, hosting a 16-team World Cup would be a Herculean task for Cricket Australia.

Dhumal questioned whether the tournament should go ahead if it had to be played without spectators and said the Australian government would play a key role in any decision.

"It all depends on what the Australian government says on this - whether they'd allow so many teams to come and play the tournament," he added.

"Will it make sense to play games without spectators? Will it make sense for CA to stage such a tournament like that? It's their call."

Cricket Australia chief executive Kevin Roberts was guarded about the prospects of staging the tournament as scheduled on Friday.

"We don't have clarity on that one, yet. But as the situation continues to improve, you never know what might be possible," he said. "It's ultimately a decision for the ICC."

The ICC has said it was unlikely to make a final call on the fate of the World Cup until August but some boards are in the process of making contingency plans in the event of a postponement.

While the BCCI recognised an open October-November window would suit the IPL, Dhumal said there was no point in making plans until there was some certainty about the World Cup.

"If we have the window available, and depending on what all can be organised, we'll decide accordingly," he added. "We can't presume that it's not happening and go on planning."

Hertha out for Union revenge

AFP, Berlin



Hertha Berlin will look to build on their winning return to Bundesliga action last weekend following the coronavirus suspension and avenge November's derby defeat by city rivals Union when the pair meet on Friday in the German capital.

Union, the side from the east of Berlin, pulled off a famous 1-0 win over their west Berlin rivals when the teams met for the first time in the top division this season.

The return match at Hertha's Olympic Stadium home would in normal times have been a 74,000 sellout.

"We all remember the match at the Alten Foersteri. It was a black, black, day. Now we've got the chance to put it behind us just a bit," said Hertha's general manager Michael Preetz.

"The conditions are very different, therefore it's a different sort of derby," added Hertha coach Bruno Labbadia, who started with a win in his first match last Saturday.

The Bundesliga became the first major European league to resume last weekend following the two-month shutdown, with draconian hygiene measures enforced at all matches across the country.

Players are undergoing regular virus tests while games are being played behind closed doors as part of strict guidelines approved by the government.

Germany's top two tiers will pay tribute to the victims of the virus outbreak over the course of the next two rounds of matches. More than 8,000 people have died in the country, which has reported over 175,000 cases of COVID-19.

Players will also wear black armbands and observe a moment of reflection before the start of each match.

Borussia Dortmund will try to keep

pace with leaders Bayern Munich away to Wolfsburg ahead of Tuesday's crucial top-two showdown at Signal Iduna Park, although they could be without captain Marco Reus for the remainder of the season due to a thigh injury.

Bayern, four points clear at the top, host Eintracht Frankfurt, who won 5-1 in the reverse fixture.

Champions League quarterfinalists RB Leipzig go to Mainz on Sunday, having fallen behind in the title chase after three successive draws.

TV TIMES

SATURDAY

Star Sports Select 2
Wolfsburg v Borussia Dortmund
Live from 7:30pm
Bayern Munich v Eintracht Frankfurt
Live from 10:30pm
Star Sports Select 1
Borussia M'gladbach v Bayer Leverkusen
Live from 7:30pm

SUNDAY

Star Sports Select 2
Schalke v Augsburg
Live from 5:30pm
Mainz v Leipzig
Live from 7:30pm
FC Koln v Fortuna Dusseldorf
Live from 10:30pm

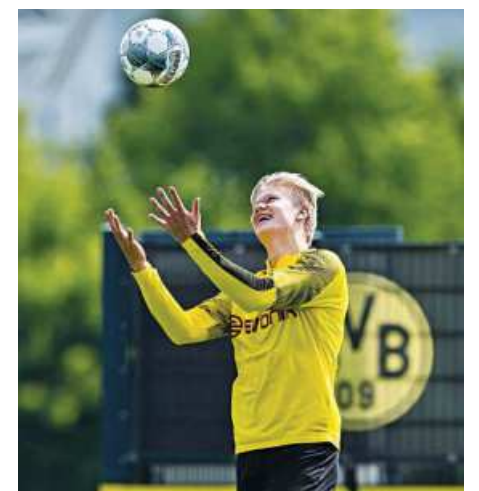
TUESDAY

Star Sports Select 2
Borussia Dortmund v Bayern Munich
Live from 10:30pm
Werder Bremen v Borussia M'gladbach
Live from 12:30am (Wednesday)



Bayern Munich goalkeeper Manuel Neuer poses with a team jersey and the number 2023, indicating the year until which he recently extended his contract. Meanwhile, Borussia Dortmund forward Erling Braut Haaland was all smiles as he aims to continue his scoring streak.

PHOTO: COLLECTED



26 all out

AFP, Wellington

It has been described as New Zealand cricket's darkest day, the 1955 Test against England when the Black Caps were skittled for just 26, a record low that still stands today. 65 years later, the score still rankles with New Zealand fans, who are always on alert during a major Test collapse and death-ride the batting team hoping the record falls.

"Frankly, we'd be grateful for anyone to take this record away from us," Paul Ford, co-founder of Kiwi cricket supporters' group The Beige Brigade, told AFP. "It's ignominious, it's shameful. It would be great if someone came along and scored 25 or fewer."

Cricket's landscape in 1955 was vastly different. India had recorded their first Test victory only three years before, Pakistan debuted in Tests barely two years previously and Sri Lanka were still 27 years away from gaining Test status.

New Zealand had not yet won a Test yet, but they made England toil for an eight-wicket victory in the opening Test in Dunedin and were reasonably placed midway through the second match in Auckland, having conceded a first-innings deficit of 46 runs. But the gulf in class proved telling on a deteriorating pitch in the second innings when only one batsman, Bert Sutcliffe, reached double figures.

Five players ended the session with ducks and Sutcliffe lamented: "It seemed hardly fair that we should have been so humiliated after putting up so stout-hearted a performance for two-and-a-half days."

Reaction in New Zealand was ferocious, although captain Geoff Rabone continued to defend his side.

"It was many things, that batting display, but it was never disgraceful," he later wrote.

"Everyone gave their all and we were outgunned on the day. Everyone tried as hard as they could -- how could that be seen as disgraceful?"

De Jong not ready to play yet

AFP, Madrid



Dutch international Frenkie de Jong said Thursday he was glad to resume training with Barcelona but is "not ready to play a game yet" after a two-month stoppage because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Spanish clubs began training in groups of 10 players on Monday, in line with health protocols, as La Liga took another step towards a planned resumption next month.

"I was missing training, my teammates, playing football and all that," De Jong said in an interview. "Two or three months is a long time. It is always nice to meet up again after a separation for holidays or whatever, but it's normally just three weeks or so and this was

almost three months."

Teams in the top two divisions in Spain returned to training earlier this month, with players initially working individually as part of La Liga's staggered programme.

"I don't think I'm ready to play a game yet. We still need a few weeks of training. First individually, then in small groups and then as a whole team. We'll be ready to play again in a few weeks' time," said De Jong. "I think it was good to start by training separately because everyone worked at their own pace and could see how their fitness was before working with the rest of the group. I think everything felt good enough! It was a good build-up."

La Liga chief Javier Tebas is hopeful matches will return from June 12 but admitted the exact timing will

depend on the health authorities in Spain and the trajectory of the virus.

De Jong is held in high regard and former Dutch international Ronald de Boer said he had the potential to successfully replace Sergio Busquets.

"People said he didn't reach the level he reached with Ajax last season in Europe or with the national team," De Boer told BarcaBlog. "But not everyone can say that they play so many minutes with such a strong team, so I think he's doing well. You see how another young player like De Ligt had a harder time, while everyone thought he would play regularly from the start."

"He is a controller, you should not ask him to score 20 goals, he is not such a player. I am sure he will be a great successor to Busquets in the future."



Barcelona midfielder Frenkie de Jong was happy to finally be back in training with his teammates but admitted that he was not ready to play a competitive game, saying that would take a few more weeks.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Woakes enjoys 'normality' of training

AFP, London



England paceman Chris Woakes is glad to be suffering the "normality" of familiar aches and pains following his first bowling net practice since the coronavirus lockdown.

Warwickshire's Woakes was back at his Edgbaston home ground in Birmingham on Thursday for an hour-long stint after being chosen for an individual session.

Batsmen and wicketkeepers are due to return from June 1. The players are seeking to build up their fitness ahead of a three-Test series at home against the West Indies, which looks set to be rescheduled for July behind closed doors.

"It's what we know, it's what we do," Woakes said on Friday. "Obviously it's the job, so it was nice to have some form of normality going back to some training."

England have selected 18 bowlers to take part in individual training sessions across seven grounds, with just a physiotherapist in attendance.

Under strict health measures they are not allowed to use changing rooms and must work with a set of balls they alone can pick up.

"It looks a lot different to what we're used to," said the 31-year-old Woakes, an allrounder and veteran of 33 Tests.

"But at the same time, with what's everyone's been through, it was quite nice to be out there and do a bit of training and get the ball back in hand," the World Cup-winner added.

"Obviously not having bowled for two months, there's a few things that are sore. The sides definitely woke up this morning knowing I'd had a bowl yesterday but it was nice to be back out there."

Despite the pandemic, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) still plan to stage a full international home season that also includes three Tests against Pakistan as well as limited-overs internationals against Australia and Ireland.

Officials from touring teams have made optimistic remarks about wanting to come to England, subject to health advice, and Woakes said: "First and foremost we just hope there's going to be some form of cricket. Obviously it's going to look different, with it being behind closed doors."