

Plans afoot but restart uncertain

Even with the world still in the throes of the coronavirus pandemic, cricket is preparing to make a return to the field of play. West Indies are all set to tour England for a three-match Test series next month while Sri Lankan have also begun training in Colombo. How and when training will resume in Bangladesh has become a point of interest as the safety of players amid the outbreak of the highly transmissible virus has taken centre stage. There are a few other issues such as when the national coaching staff will join the team, the future of the Tigers' international commitments and the potential resumption of the Dhaka Premier League. The Daily Star tries to analyse the current situation and the steps that the BCB are mulling on their way to making a return to cricket in the coming days.

MAZHAR UDDIN

THREE PLANS TO APPROACH RESUMING ON TRAINING

The International Cricket Council (ICC) has already published guidelines for the safe resumption of cricket.

The BCB are looking to come up with plans to start training activities while maintaining safety standards. The BCB's Chief Physician Debashish Chowdhury has chalked out three approaches to resuming training.

"It's becoming a challenge to keep cricketers fit. The situation hasn't improved much. BCB asked for plans and I have prepared three and will submit them and then the BCB will decide when they can start enacting them," Chowdhury said.

Wicketkeeper-batsman Mushfiqur Rahim had applied to the board to start individual training, but the board had refused, reasoning that even with individual training, there are other people involved in the process.

RETURN TO INTERNATIONAL SERIES

Bangladesh's third and final phase of the Pakistan tour was scheduled for the first week of April before being postponed. The series against Ireland, scheduled in May, along with the home series against Australia in June has been cancelled due to the pandemic.

Sri Lanka however seems optimistic about the Tigers' upcoming tour to their country in July. According to BCB CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury, the board are in constant touch with the players and also the Sri Lankan board.

"Look it's a huge challenge for both boards as we are in constant touch with the Sri Lankan board and also with our players and we are expecting to get a decision by next week," Nizamuddin said.

He also said that the board will work on a priority basis on deciding upon their international commitments and as per the



As cricket inches towards resumption after being halted due to the coronavirus outbreak, the new guidelines should be encouraged so that the Tigers can maintain social distancing in the dressing rooms when they return to training.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

ICC guidelines.

RETURN OF NATIONAL COACHING STAFF

According to the BCB CEO, whenever international flights resume Bangladesh's coaching staff are expected to join the Bangladesh team.

"It depends on when the international flights resume. The physios and trainers are the ones to join the team first as they will work on the fitness aspect of the players initially. The board are in constant touch with the coaching staff and they are also monitoring the guidelines given to the

players. There were also talk about salary cuts of the coaching staff and I would like to make it clear that only the board can take that decision but at the moment things are going as it was previously. There are a few who work on a day-to-day basis and it will also be worked out according to the situation," Nizamuddin said.

RESUMPTION OF THE DHAKA PREMIER LEAGUE

There has also been talk about whether the Dhaka Premier League (DPL) is expected to be the first to resume cricket in Bangladesh. The DPL was postponed

after the first round due to the coronavirus but despite talks over the return of cricket through DPL, it is not going to be an easy task for the BCB.

"The priority will obviously be to start domestic competitions initially but it will all depend on the local situation. The most important aspect will be whether the players and the clubs are ready or not, as it's not just about ground facilities. It's not going to be easy as there are international players along with our local cricketers involved and we have to make sure about their safety as well," said Nizamuddin.



Spinners have chance to shine: Kumble

AFP, NEW DELHI



Cricket chief Anil Kumble hopes a ban on using saliva to shine the ball after the coronavirus shutdown could see a resurgence of spin bowling in Test cricket.

The International Cricket Council is expected to order a temporary ban next week on using spit as a shining agent, as part of measures to get the sport restarted.

Fast bowlers could struggle to swing the ball under the new rules with Australian quick bowler Mitchell Starc saying the game could be come "boring" if batters dominate.

But Kumble, the former Indian Test captain and now chairman of the ICC cricket committee that recommended the ban, is hoping spinners could play a bigger part as a result.

"You can probably leave grass on the surface or even rough it up and have two spinners," he told an online forum on Wednesday.

"Let's get spinners back in the game in a Test match. Because if it's a one-day or T20 game, you're not worried about the ball or shining of the ball."

The former leg-spinner said he would love to see "two spinners playing in Australia, two spinners playing in England, which never happens."

And he said that ground staff could create pitch conditions to favour spinners.

"In cricket you have the surface you can play around with and bring about a balance between bat and ball," he said.

"All of us are yearning to start the game and not really worried about saliva or sweat or condition of the ball -- we just want to play cricket."



Famalicao players celebrate their surprise 2-1 win at leaders Porto as the Portuguese Primeira Liga became the second top European football league to return on Wednesday, following the coronavirus lockdown. [Inset] Supporters wait outside the Municipal Stadium despite the match being played behind closed doors.

PHOTO: AFP

Japan to explore 'simplified' Olympics?

REUTERS

Japan will consider various options such as having fewer spectators and mandatory coronavirus testing for a "simplified" Olympic Games next year to avoid the outright cancellation of the event, the Yomiuri newspaper reported on Thursday.

John Coates, the head of the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) inspectorate for Tokyo, has said a lack of a defence against the new coronavirus threatened the Games and organisers had to start planning for what could be a "very different" Olympics if there were no signs of COVID-19 being eradicated.

The IOC and Japanese government in March took the unprecedented decision to delay the Games.

Broadcasters face screen test

AFP, LONDON

Sport has been forced behind closed doors for the foreseeable future but experts are divided over whether broadcasters will suffer or prosper in the new landscape.

Some believe television rights will either stagnate or decline in value, others think they will be driven up due to increased interest from tech companies such as Google and Amazon.

The sums in play are enormous. American broadcaster NBC's current deal to cover the Olympics until 2032 is worth \$7.75 billion.

The English Premier League's most recent overseas TV rights package for 2019-22 rose a reported 35 percent in value to £4.2 billion (\$5.25 billion) despite a fall in the value of the domestic rights.

European Broadcasting Union executive director of sport Stefan Kuerten is unconvinced that rights deals will continue to soar despite potentially millions being added to viewing figures.

The 61-year-old will on Friday step away after almost 20 years of negotiating global and European rights for events such as World Cups and Olympics on behalf of public service broadcasters.

"They (TV) will be in a strong position but will prices go up because of it? There I

have doubts," he told AFP by phone from Switzerland.

He believes the virus will have an impact on the industry. "Broadcasters have learned now these kinds of pandemics exist and could ask for new exit and security clauses in contracts like a force majeure (unexpected event) or unforeseeable event."

"The virus has placed a safety belt on sports broadcasters as to whether they increase the payment in case something else happens."

Kuerten warns that viewers will tire of watching events without crowds, even if they can watch sport from the comfort of their armchairs.

"Without any fans in the stadium, TV is not sustainable for football or other sports," he said. "When the crowd reacts, then emotions spill over into the screen."

"If one of these elements is missing then there are different sensations and viewers hesitate to have the same interest in the product as before. "I have to say from my experience following matches (in the Bundesliga, taking place behind closed doors), something is missing."

British advertising tycoon Martin Sorrell, who founded advertising giant WPP, is more bullish, though he admits the waters are choppy.

Australian cricket to resume tomorrow

AGENCIES

Cricket returns to competitive action in Australia this weekend with a T20 carnival in Darwin that marks an important milestone for the game amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

And not only will cricket be back on the field, fans will also be in attendance.

Matches will be held at Marrara Cricket Ground, Gardens Oval and Cazaly's Oval, starting at 10am and 2.30pm local time each day.

The return to competition will be keenly watched as Australian cricket's top-flight moves slowly toward normality, while Darwin plays a role as a testing ground for cricket in a COVID-19 environment.

FIFA 'mafia' depicted in Amazon satire

AFP, Los Angeles



over "contact training" schedules and adopting teams from far-flung leagues that play in empty stadiums.

Amazon Prime's new series "El Presidente," out Friday, provides a much-needed football fix -- but its wittingly satirical take on the 2015 "Fifagate" corruption scandal may leave supporters questioning whether the return of the beautiful game is a good thing after all. "It was crazy what was going on, no?" said series creator and writer Armando Bo.

"Not just FIFA... the corruption scandal was so huge, the FBI wanted to show they were the good guys... Everyone wanted to be part of it. So many hands on this super huge business."

The \$150 million bribery scandal that rocked the football world with the arrests of dozens of soccer executives -- many of them Latin American -- culminated in the downfall of FIFA

boss Sepp Blatter.

"El Presidente" tells the story through the eyes of Sergio Jadue, a young Chilean who improbably rose from the front office of a humble local club to the vice presidency of CONMEBOL, South American football's governing body.

Filmed mainly in Spanish with subtitles, its depiction of a naive but ambitious character getting swept up in an international criminal world of bribery, fraud and even violence is reminiscent of Netflix's hit drama "Narcos."

"I guess it's different, football and drugs -- for me, the big challenge was there's not so much blood," joked Bo, who won an Oscar for co-writing 2014's black comedy "Birdman."

"This kind of mafia is more difficult. In 'Narcos,' you can just kill everyone and that's it. It's real. Here, people didn't die -- not too many." Amazon will hope "El Presidente" -- co-produced by Gaumont, the same French firm behind "Narcos" -- enjoys the same global appeal as that show.

Hopping between countries and following a US undercover agent who tracked Jadue and his co-conspirators, the series is "really local but also really

meaningful in every country," said Bo.

"And it's an era when subtitles are allowed, no?" added the Argentine. "We are seeing international content in the American market, after 'Narcos,' after 'Parasite,' even 'Roma'."

"We are seeing that stories need to be told in the language that is more natural, more real, more credible."

A soccer fan who adores Lionel Messi, Bo admits it can be painful to look behind the curtain at the greed and corruption rampant in the world's most popular sport.

The show is narrated from beyond the grave by Julio Grondona, the real-life veteran Argentine soccer boss.

Grondona's character highlights the vast contrast between fans' unadulterated passion for "the World Cup people see" and the true "business World Cup."

Glamorous events like the Brazil 2014 World Cup and Chile's historic Copa America victory on home soil the following year take a back seat to grubby TV rights deals.

When the world is locked down, the success of shows like "The Last Dance" demonstrates a pent-up appetite for the stories behind famous past sporting dramas, Bo said.



PHOTO: AFP

Individual sports like skateboarding become increasingly popular in Germany during the pandemic due to social distancing measures as skateboarder Mack McKelton manoeuvres a ramp in the Kleistpark skateboard area in Berlin on Wednesday.