

RECKLESS

Djokovic courts controversy



Novak Djokovic stunned international media as his tournament in Danube observed barely any of the protocols required to curb the spread of coronavirus. Here, tennis' World No. 1 celebrates by bumping his chest with Filip Krajinovic.

PHOTO:AFP

AGENCIES, DANUBE



There was no social distancing and few among the thousands of fans wore face masks -- all with Novak Djokovic's approval.

The fans filled the makeshift stands on Friday at Djokovic's Belgrade tennis club on the banks of the Danube River for the opening day of his charity tennis tour organized by him and his family. Other top players in attendance included Alexander Zverev, Dominic Thiem, Grigor Dimitrov and Jelena Jankovic.

The Serbian government recently lifted lockdown restrictions from the coronavirus pandemic, only recommending people stay one metre apart. On Wednesday, there was a 20,000-strong crowd for a soccer cup semifinal in Belgrade.

Djokovic defended the freedoms of the crowd. "We have different circumstances and measures so it's very difficult to think of international standards," he said before the ceremonial opening of his Adria Tour.

He said Serbia has "better numbers" (12,000 cases and 252 deaths) compared to other countries regarding infections. "You can also criticize us and say this is maybe dangerous but it's not up to me to make the calls about what is right or wrong for health," Djokovic said. "We are doing what the Serbian government is telling us and hopefully we soon will get back on tour collectively."

"Of course, lives have been lost and that's horrible to see, in the region and worldwide. But life goes on, and we as athletes are looking forward to competing."

But this week, the top-ranked Djokovic said he was thinking of skipping the U.S. Open -- if it is played -- because he described precautions put on players as "extreme" and not "sustainable." These included a 14-day quarantine for foreign players; a limit of one person per competitor at matches; limited ability to move around New York.

Karunaratne raring to go

MAZHAR UDDIN



Sri Lanka are one of the few cricket teams to have restarted their training sessions, which had been halted in March due to the coronavirus pandemic. With home series against England and South Africa cancelled due to the pandemic, Sri Lanka Cricket is desperate for its team to return to action. While India postponed their scheduled tour of the country, SLC is optimistic about Bangladesh's tour in July.

The island nation is among the very few countries in the sub-continent which has managed to ably fight the pandemic. While other cricketing nations are still trying to get their affairs in order, Sri Lanka successfully finished a 12-day residential training programme under head coach Mickey Arthur.

Thirteen players, mainly fast bowlers, stayed at a hotel with four-man coaching and support staff and players were not allowed to go outside hotel premises or the practice venue.

SLC ensured that everyone strictly followed health regulations and, according to Test and ODI skipper Dimuth Karunaratne, things have changed rapidly.

"The first few days was mind-boggling; sort of confusing put it mildly. Soon the tide turned and it was rapidly becoming a sort of new normal and you had to take it head on. Exactly what I did helped the process for me.

A change in life is a normal phenomenon. The challenges or adjustments are in reality what we took for granted in the past versus

basic hygiene. Perhaps social distancing is tough and cumbersome, it's a team game after all and that entails loads of communication," Karunaratne told The Daily Star.

Although the new rules from the ICC will be a big challenge, the 32-year-old believes the game will change by about 30 per cent compared to before.

"For a start, the new rules will be a challenge. I am good with rational controls based on hygienic necessities as long as the bat versus ball challenge remains. Traveling and quarantining will require a huge mindset change and I am sure that team Sri Lanka will face it head on," he said.



However, the situation in Bangladesh is quite different compared to the scenario in Sri Lanka.

Here, coronavirus cases and casualties are increasing, making it difficult for the Bangladesh Cricket Board to think of resuming any sort of training programme at the moment.

Cricketers have been out of touch for over two months now, which means it will be extremely difficult for Bangladesh to prepare themselves in such a short time if the tour goes on as scheduled.

"Sounds tough and yes, these kinds of unplanned disruptions don't help but if you flip a coin, you would have to say national cricketers are generally as strong as rough riders. Therefore, clear up the rust and we have to move on," said an optimistic Karunaratne.

When asked about his take on the Tigers upcoming tour, Karunaratne added: "For me, any series is a good series. So, welcome Bangladesh."

Zidane wants World Cup mentality

AFP, MADRID



Zinedine Zidane wants Real Madrid to treat their remaining 11 games in La Liga like a World Cup as they aim to overhaul Barcelona to win their second league title in eight years.

Real sit two points behind Barca and return after three months away against Eibar on Sunday, when they will play in their new training ground home at the Alfredo di Stefano Stadium.

La Liga is due to finish on July 19, meaning there will be fixtures every day while clubs will be in action almost every three days for five and a half weeks.

Asked if felt like the start of a World Cup, Zidane said on Saturday: "I like the comparison, I buy into it. My players know what it's like to play in the final stages of a World Cup or European Championship.

"The important thing is the preparation and I think we have prepared very, very well.

Our first match starts tomorrow and we will give everything. I have faith what we have done with the players and now we have to show it on the field."

La Liga matches are being played behind closed doors because of the coronavirus

pandemic, although league president Javier Tebas has said stadiums could be allowed to be 10 to 15 per cent full before the end of the season.

"I don't like playing without fans, that's my opinion," Zidane said.

"But as always, we have to adapt. This is the situation. There is a government with people who do their work and we have to do ours."

Real are playing at the Alfredo di Stefano Stadium to allow renovation work to continue at the Santiago Bernabeu this summer.

The capacity is only 6,000 which would mean far fewer fans could attend if the ban is relaxed.

"My players want to play in front of an audience and right now, there isn't one," Zidane said.

"But if those in charge say we can, well then we'll see," he added.

"I have been a player and I prefer to play with fans. But it is not an excuse, we are going to play well."

Eden Hazard has been included in the squad to face Eibar after he was able to use the break to recover from a foot injury.

Marco Asensio is also available again after rupturing his cruciate ligaments last year.



Afridi tests positive

AGENCIES, LAHORE

Former Pakistan all-rounder Shahid Afridi on Saturday revealed that he has tested positive for coronavirus. Afridi took to Twitter to break the news, saying that he had been feeling unwell since Thursday and after getting tested for coronavirus, his results returned positive.

"I've been feeling unwell since Thursday; my body had been aching badly. I've been tested and unfortunately I'm covid positive. Need prayers for a speedy recovery," wrote the former Pakistan skipper on his official Twitter handle.



Juventus superstar Cristiano Ronaldo returned to the pitch as the reigning Italian champions took on AC Milan in the second leg of their Coppa Italia semifinal on Friday night. Unofruntately for the Portuguese, he missed from the penalty spot for the first time this year as he failed to find his groove, as did everyone else in the goalless draw.

PHOTO: JUVENTUS

‘Worse than pre-season’

Sarri says after below-par showing in Italian football's return

STAR SPORT DESK



More than eight million households tuned in to watch the return of Italian football on Friday night, but the empty circumstances surrounding the game, including the empty stands, out-of-sorts players and even the additional two substitutions proved to be a little too much to handle.

Maurizio Sarri's Juventus reached the Coppa Italia final after a goalless draw with 10-man AC Milan in the semifinal, second leg in Turin on the day football returned to Italy after three months away.

Juventus advanced due to their away goal in February's 1-1 draw in a match that saw an under-par display against a Milan side who played 74 minutes with a man less and which featured a missed Cristiano Ronaldo penalty.

Sarri's most telling statement was perhaps when he said "everyone had a strong opening 30 minutes and then faded away." That was meant to portray how much his team had lost in terms of fitness and mentality over the unexpected break.

"Clearly after three months, getting back to the touchline and seeing the teams out there is a good sensation, even if it's not the same without the fans," Sarri said after the game.

"I was very surprised and satisfied with our opening 30 minutes, as we

moved the ball so quickly and totally dominated the game, even before the red card.

He admitted that the team failed to keep up their intensity due to the empty stadium and added that the team looked worse than it did in the usual pre-season, when players come

WHAT TO WATCH
FACEBOOK LA LIGA Athletic Club v Atletico Madrid Live from 6:00pm Real Madrid v Eibar Live from 11:30pm Real Sociedad v Osasuna Live from 2:00am (Monday)
BUNDESLIGA Star Sports Select 2 Mainz v Augsburg Live from 7:30pm Schalke v Bayer Leverkusen Live from 10:30pm

back from their two-month summer break.

"After that, we slowly dropped our tempo, intensity and mental determination, but that is a risk in an empty stadium. We had been doing so well, playing one and two-touch football, but then we slowed down and lost some sharpness, focused

Wenger advocates pay cuts

AFP, LONDON

Arsene Wenger said on Friday football needs to tackle inflated player pay if it is to bounce back from the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic, saying "thousands" of clubs across Europe risk extinction.

Former Arsenal coach Wenger warned a reduction in wages was needed in the wake of the billions set to be lost due to the COVID-19 crisis, which forced the game into a months-long hiatus.

"We calculate it here that overall football will lose 20 percent of its income. Football makes, say, 45 billion turnover in the world -- the loss will be 10 to 14 billion," Wenger told beIN Sports.

"If you look at the wages structure in most of the clubs it's between 60 and 80 percent of the turnover. That means only the players wages can sort that problem out."

Wenger added the outbreak has made "the weak clubs weaker and the strong clubs stronger"



PHOTO: MANCHESTER UNITED

Manchester United fans finally got a glimpse into the near future, as Paul Pogba returned from injury and teamed up with Bruno Fernandes and Co in two friendly matches against West Brom at Old Trafford on Friday. United lost one game 2-1 and won the other 3-1, with Marcus Rashford also having recovered enough to feature.