



All kinds of sporting activities have been suspended in the country since mid-March following the coronavirus outbreak, and although some youngsters still gather in the fields, most budding young cricketers, like 13-year-old Khondokar Sharzil Sahed (R), are counting the days until they can resume their favourite activities.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED/COLLECTED

From loudmouth to voice of reason

AFP, Sydney



The coronavirus has turned sport on its head and nowhere more so than in tennis, where the often-controversial Nick Kyrgios has been anointed "St. Nick" for his moral leadership during the pandemic.

Best known for his flamboyant persona and spectacular tantrums, Kyrgios has long been a provocative and polarising figure as he racked up a string of fines and bans.

But the combustible Australian has shown a different side in recent weeks as he took Novak Djokovic and other top players to task for their "stupidity".

It followed the World No. 1's decision to press ahead with an exhibition tournament in the Balkans, where social distancing was minimal. Djokovic, Grigor Dimitrov, Borna Coric and Viktor Troicki all tested positive for COVID-19.

"Don't @ me for anything I've done that has been 'irresponsible' or classified as 'stupidity' -- this takes the cake," Kyrgios tweeted. He also lashed "selfish" Alexander Zverev after he was spotted partying despite vowing to self-isolate following Djokovic's Adria Tour, while questioning Dominic Thiem's intellect after the Austrian hit out at his criticism.

The exchanges follow Kyrgios's admirable, and often emotional, efforts to drum up support for victims of the devastating bushfires that ripped through Australia this year, earning him new respect.

Often lamented in the media as a loud mouth and wasted talent, Sydney's Daily Telegraph is now calling 40th-ranked Kyrgios the "voice of reason".

"Crazy events are happening every day in sport but the wackiest of all is Nick

Kyrgios becoming a COVID crusader and the clear-thinking conscience of a twisted tennis world," it wrote recently. "St Nick. Moral guardian. Who'd a thunk it?"

Tennis great John Newcombe also praised him for calling out players flouting COVID-19 protocols, but suggested he should do so less publicly.

"I know when we were playing, if you had a problem you took it to the person. You didn't make it public. But it's a different world, I guess," he told reporters.

The "new Nick" is not to everyone's liking, with some on social media suggesting he was using the pandemic to raise his profile and re-ignite feuds with players he doesn't get on with.

"He's trying to be relevant off the court cuz everyone knows he can't ever deliver on the court," said one user, while another suggested: "He's using the virus as an excuse to do what he's always done which is criticise other players on social media."

That criticism includes Djokovic, after last year Kyrgios said of the Serb: "I just feel like he has a sick obsession with wanting to be liked. This whole celebration thing (blowing kisses to the crowd) that he does after matches, it's like so cringeworthy."

While Kyrgios, 25, will always have his knockers, he also has a big fanbase with 1.4 million Instagram followers.

As Serena Williams' coach Patrick Mouratoglou noted this week: "He (Kyrgios) is one of the only guys beside the top three who fills up the stadiums. He is provocative and he exaggerates but that's how he is and that's why he is an interesting character and a lot of people like him."

The Sydney Morning Herald suggested Kyrgios' COVID-19 criticisms were "part of an image-rebuild" that started with his bushfire fundraising after a series of on-court scandals last year.



A wistful longing felt across all levels

MAZHAR UDDIN



Like any other day, 13-year-old Khondokar Sarzil Sahed rushes towards his balcony and searches for something. After standing still for a few minutes, the young boy asks the same question to his father every day: "Baba, when will you take me to the cricket ground again?"

Cricket in Bangladesh has been halted since mid-March due to the coronavirus outbreak and, sharing an experience that extends to professionals and hobbyists, Sarzil has had to stop learning cricket, which he used to practise four days of the week at the Bangabandhu National Stadium's outer stadium in Gulistan.

Similar to those professional cricketers, several aspiring youngsters like Sanjidul are counting the days to when they can return to play their favourite sport and chase their dreams of

becoming the next Shakib Al Hasan or Tamim Iqbal.

There are a total of 82 cricket academies in Dhaka registered with the Bangladesh Cricket Board and another fifty to sixty academies across the capital but there have been almost no activities since the pandemic. Parents are now reluctant to send their children outside to play and academies across the city remains empty every day.

There are more than 150 coaches who are associated with those academies, earning a living by teaching cricket to the youngsters. But, as things changed dramatically over the past four months, those coaches are going through tough times due to a lack of cricketing activities.

"The situation is not the same as before. We are unable to resume training for the boys due to the coronavirus. Parents are afraid of sending their children to practise and rightly so. I used to have around fifty students, the majority

As a parent I have to think about the safety of my child, but the matter of fact is that they also need to have some mental relief by going outside, playing and breathing fresh air. I don't know how long it will take for things to get back to normal, but if things continue like this it will surely harm the next generation.

KHONDOKAR SAIFUL ISLAM

of whom were from nine to 14 years old, but now none of them are coming. As schools are also closed, we are unable to resume cricketing activities in the academy because we can't take any risks. Our financial situation is very critical," Rezaul Islam Rajon, who runs a cricket academy in Gendaria, told

The Daily Star.

The situation is similar for other cricket coaches who are not associated with the BCB or any club. They solely rely on their incomes from academies.

While coaches are financially stretched, parents are worried about their children's mental health as they have been confined at home and have been out of physical activities for months now.

"The situation in our country is not good, which is why we are afraid to take our children outside. I can assume how difficult it has been for them to be stuck at home day after day. As a parent I have to think about the safety of my child, but the matter of fact is that they also need to have some mental relief by going outside, playing and breathing fresh air. I don't know how long it will take for things to get back to normal, but if things continue like this it will surely harm the next generation," Khondokar Saiful Islam, Sarzil's father, said.



KG's Kingfishers' Janneman Malan (C), a player of the opposition AB's Eagles team and a field umpire take a knee in solidarity with the global Black Lives Matter movement at the start of the 3TC Solidarity Cup cricket match at the SuperSport Park in Centurion on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Graeme Smith voices support for BLM

AGENCIES



Cricket South Africa (CSA) Director of Cricket and former skipper Graeme Smith was to take a knee to show his support to the 'Black Lives Matter' movement at Solidarity Cup match at SuperSport Park, Centurion.

The former cricketer said that there is no room for neutrality on this topic. Smith backed bowler Lungi Ngidi and said that he would join the teams in taking the knee.

Earlier, 31 former and current Proteas cricketers had signed a letter showcasing their support towards the Black Lives Matter campaign and pacer Ngidi.

"As director of cricket at Cricket South Africa, a former Protea and captain, a

teammate, a father, a brother, a friend and most importantly fellow South African, I am proud to support this incredibly important movement," said Smith in his Twitter post.

"There is no room for neutrality on this topic. I stand with Lungi Ngidi and our brothers and sisters around the world. I will join the team tomorrow in taking the knee at the 3TC Solidarity Cup," he added.

Earlier, Ngidi had urged the CSA board to show solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement and this came under criticism from former players such as Pat Symcox, Boeta Dippenaar and Rudi Steyn.

The movement gained momentum following the death of an African-American man named George Floyd, after a police officer pressed his knee on Floyd's neck.

The madman is now a Leeds legend

AFP, London



For a man nicknamed 'El Loco' (mad man) and with little silverware in his long managerial career, Marcelo Bielsa is an unlikely hero to a younger generation of coaches including Pep Guardiola and Mauricio Pochettino.

However, hordes of Leeds fans will now treat him with similar reverence after he guided one of English football's sleeping giants back to the Premier League after a 16-year wait.

The Leeds bust that followed a boom time of big spending and a Champions League semifinal at the turn of the century lasted far longer than many people anticipated.

Leeds last played in the English top-flight in May 2004. A further relegation and three years in the third tier followed before a decade stuck in the mud of the gruelling 46-game a season Championship.

There was plenty of heartbreak along the way but perhaps none more so than in Bielsa's eventful first season at Elland Road.

After being caught sending a spy to Derby's training ground last year, Bielsa revealed the exhaustive scouting he does of every opponent he has ever faced amid accusations of underhand tactics.

"I think he is the best-prepared manager I've ever seen in my life," said Guardiola, who went to visit Bielsa in Argentina before setting out as a coach at Barcelona.

A FIFA fair play award also came his way last season for allowing Aston Villa to equalise after Leeds scored with a Villa player down injured.

However, that was the only trophy Leeds won as, in keeping with Bielsa's sides of the past, they faltered down the home straight, with many pointing to the physical demands he puts on his players.

Bielsa made his name winning three league titles in Argentina with Newell's Old Boys and Velez Sarsfield, where the season was divided into two leagues of 19 games.

"If they had been 38-game seasons I don't know if the players physically and mentally could stand another 19 games," Ricardo Lunari, a former Bielsa player, told Sky Sports.



Bielsa's sides in Bilbao with Athletic Club, where he reached the Europa League and Copa del Rey finals in 2011/12, and Marseille, where he led Ligue 1 at the halfway stage in 2014/15, were also admired but ended up empty-handed.

Last season, Derby and their manager Frank Lampard had the last laugh, beating Leeds 4-3 on aggregate in the play-off semifinals, prolonging their agonising wait to return to the Premier League.

Many expected Bielsa to walk. But in his second season he has managed

to leave a legacy similar to that he left at Newell's -- where the club's stadium now bears his name -- and with the Chilean national team, whom he led to a first World Cup in 12 years.

Coronavirus may have delayed Leeds' title party, but it may also have played its part in getting them over the line. The three-month break meant there was no burnout down the stretch this time as Leeds have lost just one of their seven matches since the restart.

Born into a bourgeois family in Argentina, there are few airs and graces with Bielsa -- despite a reported £3 million-a-year salary. He lives in a one-bedroom flat in the market town of Wetherby so he can walk to the club's Thorpe Arch training base and is regularly photographed with locals in coffee shops and supermarkets.

"For me, he's a person I will always admire," said former Tottenham boss Pochettino. "He's a genius. A person with charisma and a personality very different from us normal coaches, and that's what makes him special."

Guardiola will get the chance to go head-to-head with the man he calls "the best coach in the world" next season despite the Manchester City boss being the one with a stunning array of titles to his name.

"To be loved is this biggest title, bigger than the Champions League or Premier League or whatever. To be loved is the most important thing and I think Marcelo has that more than any other manager in the world," said Guardiola.

"I know how he is still loved in Bilbao, I know he's an icon in Chile." Now Bielsa is also a legend in Leeds.

Archer fined and warned

REUTERS, Manchester

England fast bowler Jofra Archer was handed a fine and an official warning on Saturday by the England and Wales Cricket Board for breaching the team's bio-secure protocols but was cleared to play the third Test against West Indies.

England dropped Archer from the team for the second Test against West Indies, announcing the decision hours before the start of the match at Old Trafford on Thursday.

"Archer has been fined an undisclosed amount and received an official written warning after admitting to breaching the team's bio-secure protocols," the ECB said.

ECB director of cricket Ashley Giles said Archer's mistake could have cost the board "tens of millions" of pounds but England vice-captain Ben Stokes said the team would be there to support the player.

Rain delays third day

REUTERS, Manchester

Poor weather in Manchester delayed the start of the third day of the second test on Saturday with the West Indies trailing England by 437 runs at Old Trafford.

England had declared their first innings on 469 for nine, seeking to level the series after losing the first test in Southampton last week.