



Changes inevitable when playing with the virus

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"Football, like life in general, I think will never be the same," Lionel Messi told Spanish daily El Pais as he discussed La Liga's impending return to action after the coronavirus pandemic earlier this week. Messi's words hold true not only for football, but all sport, and some would say life in general, in the post-pandemic era.

While playing behind closed doors in empty stadiums -- save a few members of management and groundstaff, fully equipped in protective gear -- is now a reality, drastic changes will also be seen in training protocols, celebrations and even in the financial aspects.

Postponement of sporting events have impacts ranging from a plunge in teams' revenue to economic troubles of athletes and stakeholders. Therefore, it was never viable that there would be a long-term halt and so it inevitably

brings the sporting world, much like the world in general, to a new reality -- living and playing while fighting with the virus. Addressing this new reality, sporting bodies around the globe have chalked out guidelines for resumption.

Almost all major European football leagues have now set dates or are in talks about resumption following a halt since March. The Bundesliga was the first major league to resume on May 16 but only after the German Football League (DFL) set a 51-page safety guideline.

The Premier League, set to return on June 17, has also laid down a strict testing and training regime for players. Starting from the need to sanitise corner-flags, balls, cones, goalposts and even playing surfaces to twice-weekly testing, a daily pre-training questionnaire and temperature check of players -- football seems now to have more activity off the field than on it.

It will not just be injuries that

will see players missing games in the post-pandemic era. Headlines reading, "Hattrick hero sidelined after showing symptoms of coronavirus", may be the new normal as rules include isolating positive players for seven days.

Players also have to comply with protocols on the field. Goals in football or fall of wickets in cricket may not see players converging for a traditional team celebration for the foreseeable future.

Cricketers may just have to give up the age-old trick of shining the ball with saliva and sweat. The sport will see many more changes, with the ICC's 16-page guideline for the safe resumption of cricket also discouraging the shared use of drink bottles, towels and equipment.

In terms of revenues, Premier League clubs are set to lose up to an estimated 350 million pounds despite finding a way to finish the season. Elsewhere, Cricket Australia has projected a nearly 50 per cent

dive in revenue, which was forecast to be around 400 million USD.

Financial constraints of boards may in turn impact players in the form of pay cuts. After accepting to tour England in July, Cricket West Indies has mentioned that all players and staff will have to accept a 50 percent pay cut.

Sporting bodies also need to arrange extended schedules as travelling players and management may have to go under quarantine. Such measures have already been taken for the West Indies' upcoming tour of England. The West Indies are set to arrive in England on June 9 and will then be based at Old Trafford for a three-week period of quarantine and training before travelling down to Southampton.

Not only in football and cricket, adhering to norms and the emphasis on 'social distancing' will be seen in every sport and sporting culture in the post-pandemic era will, like Messi said, not be the same.

NEYMAR GETS LUCKY

Neymar, the world's most expensive footballer, was approved to receive a \$120 welfare payment meant for low-paid Brazilian workers affected by the coronavirus pandemic, in an apparent case of identity theft, a report said Thursday. The star's name, date of birth and Brazilian ID number were used to register for the stimulus payment from the federal government. With a contract at PSG and estimated earnings of \$95.5 million this year Neymar does not qualify. Yet according to UOL, the application in his name "was initially approved and scheduled for payment... before being frozen and placed 'under evaluation' due to indications it failed to meet the requirements."

—AFP



A decade on, fixing still haunts Pakistan

AFP, Karachi



When Mohammad Amir bowled a no-ball against England on the opening day of the 2010 Test at Lord's, no one could have imagined his long stride past the crease marked the first step in a historic fixing scandal.

Two days later it was revealed that three no-balls -- two by Amir, and one by his pace partner Mohammad Asif -- had been part of a shady betting deal.

Pakistan's captain Salman Butt had orchestrated the deliberate no-balls in return for money offered by undercover journalist Mazhar Majeed posing as a bookmaker. The scandal, exposed in the sting by Britain's now-defunct News of the World tabloid, rocked the cricketing world, and aftershocks can still be felt a decade on in Pakistan.

Not only did that dark morning at the revered 'home of cricket' derail the careers of three players who were banned and jailed, the saga also led to calls for Pakistan to be booted from international cricket.

reintegrated into the team.

Asif, who received a seven-year ban and a one-year prison sentence, is now 37 and in the twilight of his career. Butt, 35, still harbours hopes of a comeback after consistent domestic performances.

As the orchestrator of one of the darkest episodes in the cricket-mad country's history, that seems unlikely, especially with match-fixing still haunting the game.

Sharjeel Khan and Khalid Latif were banned after a PSL spot-fixing case in 2017. And in April this year, Umar Akmal was banned for three years for failing to report fixing offers. The cases have led to calls for the country to criminalise fixing, a campaign taken up by the PCB.

"We need to make match-fixing a criminal offence... I have talked to the government to bring in this change and make a law related to match-fixing," PCB chairman Ehsan Mani said.

Former Pakistan captain-turned-commentator Ramiz Raja went a step further, recommending tainted players should not play again for the national team.



Butt, Amir and Asif were tried in a London court for offences under the Gambling Act and were jailed in November 2011. Announcing the sentences, the judge underscored the severity of the crime.

"The image and integrity of what was once a game, but is now a business, is damaged in the eyes of all, including the many youngsters who regarded three of you as heroes," Justice Jeremy Cooke said.

It marked a new low for Pakistan cricket, already reeling from the aftermath of terror attacks in Lahore on the Sri Lankan team a year before, which triggered the suspension of home internationals.

Because he pleaded guilty earlier than his two teammates, and on account of his youth, the 18-year-old Amir received worldwide sympathy. He was allowed to play international cricket again in 2016 and, now 28, has been successfully

"We have suffered numerous times from bringing back tainted players yet we continue to welcome them just because of their talent," Raja told AFP. "We should avoid being desperate and rather give new talent a chance to prosper. Cricket cannot condone such behaviour and fans need to realise that rooting for tainted players is harming Pakistan cricket and its image."

On the field at least, Pakistan have managed to lift the clouds. They found an astute skipper to replace Butt in Misbah-ul-Haq, who had been contemplating retirement after being left out for the infamous England tour. He led Pakistan to number one in the Test rankings in 2016.

A tentative return of international touring sides has followed, culminating in Azhar Ali having the honour of leading Pakistan in their first Test on home soil in 10 years when Sri Lanka played in Rawalpindi in December.

Werner heading to Chelsea for £53m?

AFP, London



Chelsea are closing in on a deal to sign striker Timo Werner from RB Leipzig, British media reported Thursday.

The 24-year-old had been thought to be attracting interest from Premier League champions-elect Liverpool but it appears Chelsea have in fact met the German's reported release clause of some £53 million (\$67 million).

Were Chelsea to bring Werner to Stamford Bridge it would be a major feather in the cap of the west London club.

For the past year there has been speculation linking Werner with a move to Anfield but time appears to be running out for the Reds, with the forward's release clause expiring on June 15 -- two days before the Premier League is set to restart after a coronavirus-enforced break of several months.

The Germany international has scored 31 goals for Leipzig in all competitions.

Chelsea have already agreed a deal to sign Ajax winger Hakim Ziyech.



'Bale could finish career at Real'

REUTERS

Real Madrid forward Gareth Bale does not want to return to the Premier League and could finish his career at the Spanish club, the Welshman's agent Jonathan Barnett has said.

Despite winning four Champions League titles with Real, Bale divides opinion due to a perceived lack of commitment and a poor injury record.

"He has a very nice lifestyle. I don't see why he doesn't see his career out at Madrid probably," Barnett told the BBC. "... To come back and play (in the Premier League) would be unbelievable -- a big thing. I don't think he wants to do that at the moment. He's quite happy to play at Real."

Real host Eibar on June 14 when La Liga resumes.



Benfica goalkeeper Odisseas Vlachodimos (C) clears the ball with a header during their Portuguese Primeira Liga match against Tondela at the Luz stadium in Lisbon on Thursday. Benfica, the league leaders, were held to a goalless draw.

PHOTO: AFP

Benfica bus stoned

REUTERS, Lisbon

A bus carrying the Benfica team was stoned on Thursday, breaking the glass and injuring two players, after they had played their first game since coronavirus halted the season, broadcaster RTP reported citing Portuguese police.

German midfielder Julian Weigl and Serbian winger Andrija Zivkovic were taken to hospital to be treated for injuries as a precaution. The attack on a major motorway between the club's Estadio da Luz and training ground followed Benfica's first game in three months.

The Portuguese champions missed the chance to move clear at the top of the table after being held to a 0-0 draw by lowly Tondela. The top two are now level on 60 points with nine rounds of matches remaining.



Barcelona players continued to sweat it out at the Joan Gamper training ground ahead of La Liga's slated June 11 restart, but Lionel Messi has sat out training since Wednesday with a thigh strain.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

AFC Cup at centralised venue from Sep?

SPORTS REPORTER

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) is planning to resume the AFC Cup from late September or early October and playing all remaining matches at a single venue, officials said after an online meeting between the AFC Competition Division and representatives from the four clubs that make up Group E of the tournament as well as three member associations -- Bangladesh, India and Maldives.

On March 9, the AFC had issued a letter to its member associations to consider suspending fixtures of the AFC Cup as well as the World Cup and Asia Cup Qualifiers following travel bans due to the coronavirus pandemic. In light

of that, the Bangladesh Football Federation suspended all fixtures in March and June.

However, Bashundhara Kings still went ahead and hosted TC Sports Club of Maldives at the Bangabandhu National Stadium on March 11, thrashing them 5-1. They currently top Group E with three points, followed by Maziya SRC of Maldives and Chennai FC of India, who have one point each. TC Sports are bottom with no points.

The domestic seasons in Bangladesh and India were called off due to the pandemic and the Maldivian league was completed beforehand, leaving teams struggling to retain services of players.

"Some proposals were presented to complete the rest of the AFC

Cup but no concrete decisions were taken. The Competition Division discussed three points while clubs gave their opinions," BFF Competition manager Zaher Bin Taher Ansari told The Daily Star after attending the meeting yesterday.

"Participating teams were informed that they are planning to restart the AFC Cup in the third week of September or in October, with all remaining matches taking place in a single venue. The Competition Division gave their nod to the clubs' demand of a new registration window as clubs either released their players following the cancellation of leagues or the players' contracts expired," Ansari added.

"The Competition Division proposed playing at a centralised/

neutral venue and all four clubs agreed," Ansari said, adding that they did not specify a venue.

"We were also informed that new rules and regulations would be introduced for the 2021 AFC Cup. There may be some relaxation following an incomplete season."

The details of the AFC Cup are to be ironed out within this month so that each club gets time to prepare and sign new players for the remaining matches.

"The matches have to be completed within 13 days because it will be tough to play home-and-away matches while maintaining the guidelines of 14-day quarantine periods. It will take too much time," Bashundhara Kings president Imrul Hasan said.