

Revamped Davis Cup is more open: Prajnesh

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
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INDIA'S NO.1 singles player Prajnesh Gunneswaran on Tuesday said beating formidable sides is a possibility in the new Davis Cup format as he looks forward to cash in on his stupendous form in the Qualifier match against Italy.

Best of three set matches would be played inside two days as 24 teams will lock horns around the world on Friday and Saturday in their bid for the World Group Finals in Madrid in November.

"Honestly, the change in format would not really matter to me. It's a bit more physical if we play five sets and in best of three three days so I don't really see too much of a difference," Prajnesh told reporters at the Calcutta South Club.

Prajnesh on Monday jumped seven places in the world ranking to be on a career-high rank of 102 as he attempts to build on a successful 2018 where he won two Challenger titles in four finals and also upset now world number 27 Denis Shapovalov on grass at the Stuttgart Open.

"I've had enough tournaments and over the last couple of years and I've had a very good run in the last six months and I'm looking forward to using the momentum and trying to do as well as possible here," he said. "I'm just going to approach it like every other match. I focus, prepare for my match and then I try to execute my game plan and don't worry too much about the situation or what's on the line and all of that."

Aiming to break into top-100, Prajnesh said: "I am playing a few few Challengers, first one in China and then there are two in Bangkok so I will be playing those."

Indian coach Zeeshan Ali said Calcutta South Club was slower than they expected.

"There are bad bounces which is normal, the ball is staying low. But also having said that, it is still slower than what we expected," Ali said.

India have chosen grass keeping in mind of the Italians strong advantage over clay or hard courts. But the fact remains that grass is not a familiar surface for both the India and Italy sides.

The hosts checked in about a week prior to get acclimatised to the conditions and Ali said, "In terms of having settled in and gotten more practice on grass, we would be a lot more comfortable. But we are playing against a team that has three top 60 players in the world. So we are still very much the underdogs here. Our players need to go out there and play their A game to have a chance of upsetting a strong team again, like Italy, so every match is going to be very tough for us, regardless of who's playing for them. It doesn't matter whether it's on grass, clay or hard...it was always going to be a difficult for us," he said.

Meanwhile, Tournament referee Wayne McKewen said the grasscourts are in great shape but it's a work in progress in the stands.

Hosting the premier men's tennis event after 16 years, the Calcutta South Club is racing against time as the 2600-capacity makeshift galleries are still being erected with just two days left for the tie.

"I've been told they're going to be completed by Friday. It's always difficult when you come to a venue like this where a lot of the infrastructure is temporary," McKewen, fresh from officiating in the Australian Open, told reporters.

Zeeshan said the grasscourt appeared to be slow but McKewen said it's just in perfect condition. "My main concern is the court and it looks in good shape. It's just the stands that are being built that are a work in progress at the moment. I don't see a problem," he said adding that both the teams will get one hour each practice time on the actual court.

He also defended the revamped Davis Cup format.

With a little help from former mates, Martin out of ICU

DEVENDRA PANDEY
MUMBAI, JANUARY 29

AFTER BEING on a ventilator for nearly a month, former India cricketer Jacob Martin has been shifted to the general ward from the ICU (Intensive Care Unit). Martin had an accident in Baroda, which caused serious injuries to his liver and lungs. However Martin is now out of danger and can talk. His wife Khyati said that though financial assistance has been received from several sources, she will be needing more money in the coming days.

In the last few weeks, help has come from Baroda and Indian cricketing circles. Khyati said she has received calls and financial support — from as little as Rs 500, to over a lakh— from various quarters.

There have also been umpires and match referees who have sent their contribution as has the Baroda Ranji Trophy team. There were some who couldn't support financially but were present personally.

"There are people who donated big and there were some who donated small depending upon their capacity. I got help from Indian cricketers, BCCI, Baroda Cricket Association and even Chennai Super Kings but I will be needing more financial assistance in the coming days as chances are that



Jacob Martin played 10 ODIs for India.

Jacob will be in hospital for two more months," Khyati said.

Till now, Martin has received around Rs 16 lakh as assistance from various quarters. The hospital expenses incurred so far have

been more than Rs 15 lakh.

Former India captain Sourav Ganguly has provided support and so have former pacers Ashish Nehra and Zaheer Khan, who played with Jacob. Krunal Pandya sent a blank

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cheque. There are many who are about to lend support.

Former India stumper Kiran More said the moment he got to know about Jacob's condition, he and former Baroda opener Rakesh Parikh went to the hospital. "I went the next day itself and I knew the doctor very well. So I was in constant touch with them. It was under me that Jacob made his debut. His condition was not that bad initially, he even spoke to me before going into coma for a brief period. When I received a message that he was out of danger, it was a great sigh of relief. His wife had asked for financial help, and the BCA and BCCI arranged for it soon," More said.

News of the accident shocked the cricketing fraternity in Baroda. Irfan Pathan was playing Ranji Trophy for Jammu and Kashmir when the incident took place. It was his elder brother Yusuf, who drove to the hospital and

later informed Irfan about the incident.

Irfan made his first-class debut under Jacob's captaincy, and the all-rounder regretted that he was not there when his captain needed him the most.

"I spoke to Jacob's wife but obviously she was not in a position to speak too much. Such types of incident can happen to anyone and he is from our fraternity, and we are a family. I will be meeting Jacob soon. As a cricketer, we all have differences at some point of time but what was good to see was that people have come forward to help Jacob. I am told things are fine now," Pathan said.

Munaf Patel was in his village when he got a call from former Baroda secretary and BCCI secretary Sanjay Patel seeking help for Jacob. The former India pacer agreed straightaway.

"I said whatever help I can provide, I will. Other cricketers too came forward, apart from BCCI and BCA, Jacob has helped Baroda win the Ranji Trophy and it was time Baroda repays him during these tough times. Ab use zarorat hai, so how can I say no? This incident has brought all Baroda cricketers together. All have come forward to help. They can be the family in these tough times. There will be ones who will visit the hospital. *Jisko jaisa theek lag raha hai log waise help kar rahe hain*," Munaf said.

England face questions after huge loss

REUTERS
JANUARY 29

A YEAR in which England will host the World Cup and the Ashes started in the worst possible way with an emphatic 381-run defeat by West Indies in Barbados and they face major selection choices for the second Test in Antigua starting on Thursday.

For West Indies, led by one of the game's most exciting talents in all-rounder Jason Holder, the contest at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium, offers a chance to prove they are a team on the rise — capable of more than just occasional triumphs. For all the focus on England's decision to play two spinners and leave out experienced seamer Stuart Broad, the fact remains that England's loss was caused by a shocking first-innings batting effort as they were skittled out for a paltry 77.

Concerns over England's batting increased when part-time spinner Roston Chase took eight wickets in the second innings. Questions are being asked of England's left-handed opener Keaton Jennings who is struggling again after showing his capabilities with a century in Sri Lanka in November.

It would be a surprise, however, if England's selectors decided to immediately jettison him for 32-year-old back-up Joe Denly but Jennings will again be under pressure to show he merits that faith.

Jennings will need to show real toughness to rise to the challenge but that is a quality former skipper Michael Vaughan feels the team is lacking. "They do not have the mental strength to fight through tough sessions by working hard and forcing bowlers into their third or fourth spells. They are fine when they bowl a team out or make a big score batting first themselves but poor when they are under a little bit of pressure," Vaughan wrote in his *Daily Telegraph* column.

Vaughan pointed the finger firmly at Jennings and is worried he won't be able to handle Holder's pace attack. "Keaton Jennings is a good player against spin but every time he faces pace I shut my eyes. He does not know where his off stump is and, as an opening batsman, that is your number one task," he said.

Broad is likely to return to the attack but it is far from clear who will drop out and with Antigua possibly friendly to spin, Joe Root may still need to keep two slow bowlers. The mood in the home camp is buoyant, after all there have only been two other occasions when the West Indies won a Test by bigger margin.

In Goa, a waiting game

National games, which were to be held in 2016, postponed again because of polls; IOA mulls Rs 10 crore fine

ENS/PTI
PANJIM, JANUARY 29

THE 36TH National Games, scheduled to be held in Goa from March 30 to April 14, was postponed to September-October, officials from the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) confirmed on Tuesday. However, a suitable window has to be found to conduct the event. The games, which were to be held in 2016, have been postponed time and again and the latest setback has not gone down well with IOA officials.

Earlier this month, the Goa government had written to the IOA and the sports ministry and cited a "peculiar situation" with the state gearing up for two by-polls between February and March, followed by the general elections. Organising volunteers would also have been a challenge with school examinations scheduled to be held in March.

On Tuesday, Mukesh Kumar, chairman of the Games Technical Conduct Committee, confirmed that following a meeting with Goa chief minister Manohar Parrikar, the games had been posted and new dates have to be finalised.

Kumar said that all issues were discussed. "We have to again look at the sports calendar as it affects the athletes. But the reasons cited are genuine. The government said there are two sets of elections, plus they also cited security concerns when the elections are on as security officers have to be deployed elsewhere. Further, the second set of dates we came up also was an issue because of school exams. The government has suggested that any other date is now possible only after the monsoons and we are now looking to see if a period between September and October was feasible," Kumar said.

IOA secretary general Rajeev Mehta said that it will consider shifting the Games out of the coastal state if it does not show commitment to host them. Mehta also said that the IOA will impose a penalty of Rs 10 crore on Goa if it does not hold the Games as scheduled. "We are not happy. It seems they (Goa) lack in commitment. We have already started discussions with the Chhattisgarh government on whether they can host the Games this year. We will call a meeting of the IOA executive committee in the coming days to decide on this National Games issue," Mehta said on Tuesday.

"We will impose a penalty of Rs 10 crore on Goa. There is no escaping from that this time. They have been given enough time to host the



The Goa National Games could tentatively be held in September-October this year. Sports Authority of Goa

Games. The repeated delays have been a loss for the athletes of the country," he added.

After Goa hosts the 36th edition, which was earlier to be held in November last year, the IOA has already decided to allot the next editions to Chhattisgarh (2019), Uttarakhand (2020) and Meghalaya (2022).

The Goa government has proposed a new window of October-November but Mehta said the state will have to show commitment to host the Games.

"They have proposed postponement to October-November but what would be the guarantee that they (Goa) will host the Games? We are not simply going to agree with whatever they say. They have to show commitment to host the Games," he said. "They cannot keep saying that they will host the Games and later give some reasons to postpone them. We came to know that the sports ministry has given Rs 100 crore for the hosting of the Games but we don't know whether the sum has been used," Mehta said.

Why top athletes could stay away from Games if it is held in Sept-Oct

THE GOA National Games, which were originally scheduled to be held in November 2016, have been postponed yet again. After numerous delays due to various reasons — ranging from state elections to overall unpreparedness — the Games organisers have expressed their inability to conduct the event in March and April owing to the Lok Sabha polls.

The Games, held under the banner of Indian Olympic Association, were awarded to Goa in 2011. It must be re-

called that the previous multi-discipline event held in Goa — the Lusofonia Games, an event for Portuguese-speaking regions — was also mired in several delays and controversies. Whether the revised dates will force a change in programme is not yet known. It also remains to be seen if the country's top athletes will compete in the Games, since September and October will be crucial months for most as several

World Championship and 2020 Olympics qualifying events will be held around the same time

EXPLAINED
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[SPORTS BAR]

Rao assures archers' participation at Worlds

The participation of Indian archers at the upcoming World events will not be affected, ensured Federation President BVP Rao amidst fears that India may not be allowed to send entries at the prestigious competitions due to questions over validity of the recent AAI elections. The Sports Ministry has filed an application before the Supreme Court, seeking fresh election of the office-bearers of the Archery Association of India (AAI). "World Archery is conscious of the interest of archers and will not harm them (archers) in any way. You should focus on practice and competitions " Rao was quoted as in a press release following a meeting with the archers.

Mohun Bagan aim to return to winning ways

Their title hopes all but over after the loss to arch-rivals East Bengal in the last match, Mohun Bagan would look to return to winning ways when they face lower-rung Gokulam Kerala FC in their return leg I-League fixture. Bagan, the 2015 champions, suffered a 0-2 loss to their crosstown rivals East Bengal in the last round on Sunday, which almost crushed their title aspirations this season. Having suffered a successive derby defeat this season, Bagan will look to play for pride, while for Kerala the match would be important to move up from the relegation zone. Kerala find themselves at 10th position with just 11 points .



Rishabh Pant scored an unbeaten 73 in India's six-wicket win on Tuesday.

Pant, Thakur star in India A's win vs Eng Lions

Returning to competitive cricket after the Test tour of Australia, Rishabh Pant slammed a quick half-century while Shardul Thakur starred with the ball to guide India A to a fourth straight win over England Lions in the unofficial ODI series in Thiruvananthapuram on Tuesday. Asked to bowl first, Thakur picked up 4 for 49 as his new-ball spell helped India A topple the visitors' top-order and leave them tottering at 55 for 4 by the 15th over. But half-centuries from Ollie Pope (65 off 103) and Steven Mullaney (58 off 54) helped England Lions resurrect their innings. However, the visitors still could only manage 221 for 8 in 50 overs. India got home in 46.3 overs with six wickets in hand, largely due to the efforts of Pant. The final ODI of the series will be played on Thursday.

BRIEF SCORES: England Lions 221 for 8 (Pope 65, Mullaney 58, Thakur 4/49) lost to India A 222 for 4 (Pant 73*, Jacks 2/35) by six wickets

La Liga: Villarreal sack coach Garcia

Struggling La Liga side Villarreal have sacked coach Luis Garcia Plaza after nine games in charge. Garcia was only appointed by Villarreal, who have not won in La Liga since Nov. 25, last month after Javi Calleja was sacked. However the 46-year-old managed one win in his nine games — a 2-0 Europa League victory over Spartak Moscow. Copa del Rey elimination by Espanyol followed, while no wins in the last six Liga games has seen the 2006 Champions League semi-finalists slip to 19th, four points from the safety zone. The club have not yet announced who will take over but their third coach this season faces an uphill struggle to keep Villarreal in the top division, while they face a tricky tie against Sporting in the Europa League last 32 next month.



PSG sign Argentina midfielder Paredes

Paris Saint-Germain have completed the signing of Argentina midfielder Leandro Paredes on a four-and-a-half-year deal, the French champions announced on Tuesday. The 25-year-old put pen to paper on a contract until 2023 after completing a medical in Qatar. No transfer fee was disclosed, although press reports have put the fee at 47 million euros (USD 54m). The Ligue 1 leaders were looking to strengthen in midfield ahead of their Champions League last-16 tie against Manchester United, with Marco Verratti sidelined with an ankle injury and Adrien Rabiot frozen out after refusing to sign a new contract. PSG go to Old Trafford in the first leg of the Champions League tie on February 12, and they are currently sweating on the fitness of Neymar, who suffered a metatarsal injury last week. The return leg will be later in the month.



Lalremsiami scores a brace in India's 5-2 win

The Indian women's hockey team put up a spirited display to stun World Cup bronze medallists Spain 5-2 in its third match of the tour in Murcia on Tuesday. Young striker from Mizoram, Lalremsiami (17th, 58th minutes) starred with a brace, while Neha Goyal (21st), Navneet Kaur (32nd), Rani Rampal (51st) maintained India's lead after the initial setback in the first quarter. By virtue of this win, India have managed to level the series at 1-1. After having lost the tour opener 2-3, India held Spain to a 1-1 draw in the second game. "I am pleased with the performance. We are working to be more steady in our performance and we are improving match-by-match. This is a process and we need to keep repeating such performances to grow further," said India's chief coach Sjoerd Marijne. "Beating a World Cup medal winning side in its home ground is a big confidence boost for this young team."

