

Paes, 46, says 2020 will be his last year as professional

SHAHID JUDGE
MUMBAI, DECEMBER 25

“ONE LAST roar,” pens Leander Paes, along with the customary hashtag that dominates social media. It’s the language of new-age netspeak that the 46-year-old – a man born in an era where colour televisions were a novelty and the sport of tennis wasn’t even a part of the Olympic programme – has kept up with. It’s been the same with how he has handled his tennis, staying abreast with new developments in racquet technology and sport science to aid his longevity. But the wear and tear of the 28 years of playing as a professional was inevitable. What wasn’t surprising was that Paes, the oldest player currently on tour, chose twitter to announce his intention of hanging his racquet at the end of the 2020 season.

“I want to announce 2020 as my farewell year as a pro tennis player,” he writes. “I am looking forward to the 2020 tennis calendar where I will be playing a few select tournaments, traveling with my team and celebrating with all my friends and fans around the world. It is all of you who have inspired me to become me and I want to take this year to say ‘thank you’ to you.”

The last few years have been tough on Paes. He won his last Grand Slam in 2016 (mixed doubles with Martina Hingis in French Open) and last tour title at Auckland with South African Raven Klaasen a year earlier. He reached the final of two Challenger events this year, but for the first time in 19 years, the former world no 1 dropped out of the top 100 – he currently sits on 105. Regardless of the slump, his career has been the most decorated among all Indians. Just under a month ago, the veteran ex-



tended a Davis Cup world record, winning his 44th doubles match in the tournament. And it was in that elite competition where Paes had first announced himself, back in April 1990, a few months short of his 17th birthday. When he burst onto the scene, his strokes didn’t quite have the technical grace associated with Indians like the Krishnans

and Vijay Amritraj. But he had the energy to propel his chip-and-charge game to a level that would see him beat stalwarts like Henri Leconte and Goran Ivanisevic. And those lightning-quick reflex volleys at the net is what fans came to see.

A year after turning professional, he played his first Olympics in Barcelona 1992. Four years later, at Atlanta 1996 he became only the second Indian, after KD Jadhav in 1952, to win an individual Olympic medal for independent India. Coincidentally, India has won at least one individual medal at all the Games that have followed. And Paes, who has competed at seven editions of the Olympics – the most for any tennis player and for an Indian – has been present for all.

What truly made him one of the sport’s greats was when he shifted to playing doubles full time in the early 2000s. Till date he has won a total of 18 Grand Slam titles – eight

in men’s doubles and 10 in mixed doubles – which is the most by any Indian. Then there were also the two junior singles titles he won at Wimbledon 1990 and the US Open in 1991.

It’s been three years since he won his last major, and the period in between has been marred by a dip in form and personal problems. But when he finally draws the curtains on a career that has spanned almost 30 years, Paes, ‘Lionheart’ as he calls himself, boasts a CV like no other Indian player has ever had.

An Olympic medallist, just like his father Vece Paes (field hockey bronze at the 1972 Munich Games), the only Indian to win all four Grand Slam in men’s doubles, a holder of 65 titles including 18 majors and a singles win in 1998, and record holder for most doubles wins at Davis Cup. Actor, Arjuna Award winner, Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan, the most successful tennis player India has produced. And now he’s ready for one last roar.

BRIEFLY

Fraser-Pryce to go for sprint double at Tokyo Games

Jamaican Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce will run in both the 100 metres and 200 metres events at the Tokyo Olympics next year. Fraser-Pryce is a two-times Olympic 100 metres champion and she won gold at this year’s world championships in Doha. The 32-year-old, who has four world 100m titles to her name, did not compete in the 200 at the 2016 Rio Olympics to focus on the shorter event in which she finished third despite a toe injury. “I will be doubling up definitely,” Fraser-Pryce was quoted as saying by website *insidethegames.com*. “Last year I really wanted to attempt the double but coach had other plans so I just worked with that plan. He knows best.” Fraser-Pryce, who won the 200 metres gold medal at the 2013 world championships and silver at the 2012 London Olympics, said her aim was to run under 22 seconds for the first time in what will be her fourth and final Olympics. “I am definitely looking forward to running the 200 metres, especially because I believe in my heart that I can run 21 seconds,” she added. “It’s a big passion of mine so I am working really hard towards that.”

Mandzukic leaves Juventus, joins Qatar's Al-Duhail

Croatia striker Mario Mandzukic has joined Qatari club Al-Duhail on a free transfer from Juventus. Al-Duhail announced the signing on their official website on Tuesday. The move ends speculation that the 33-year-old Mandzukic was a possible target for Manchester United. “The team’s management succeeded today in contracting with the Croatian striker Mario Mandzukic of Juventus in a free transfer deal after the end of his contract with his Italian team,” Al-Duhail said. Mandzukic was a World Cup runner-up with Croatia in 2018. He scored in the 4-2 defeat to France in the final along with an own-goal in the first half. He has been frozen out at Juventus as he neared the end of a four-year deal, which he signed when joining from Atletico Madrid in 2015.

Pardew appointed manager of Dutch side Den Haag

Former Newcastle United and West Ham United manager Alan Pardew has been appointed head coach of ADO Den Haag until the end of the season, the Dutch Eredivisie team announced. Pardew, who has been out of a job since being sacked by West Bromwich Albion in April last year, has been tasked with getting Den Haag out of the relegation zone with the struggling top-flight side second from bottom after 18 games. “I am glad ADO Den Haag came my way during the search for a new challenge,” the BBC quoted 58-year-old Pardew as saying. “The team is in a difficult phase, but we will do everything we can to turn the tide. We have to do that together. Together we have to achieve a comeback.” Pardew, who has also managed Reading, Charlton Athletic, Southampton and Crystal Palace, replaces Alfons Groenendijk who left Den Haag earlier this month. Den Haag later appointed former Tottenham Hotspur and Ajax Amsterdam manager Martin Jol as their new technical adviser.

AGENCIES

RORY SMITH
MILAN, DECEMBER 25

ROMELU LUKAKU was planning on a relaxing evening in front of the TV. He might now find himself playing in Italy, but he was looking forward to following the fortunes of two of his former teams in the Premier League.

His hopes of a quiet night ended long before the games did. Not for the first time this season, he found himself composing a message for his Twitter and Instagram feeds. Not for the first time this season, he felt compelled to speak out against racism.

The cause, in this case, was the front page of the next day’s *Corriere dello Sport*, one of Italy’s sports newspapers. Its cover had been posted on Twitter late that evening with images of Lukaku, a Belgian striker whose parents were born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Chris Smalling, a former teammate of his who is of Jamaican descent and is now playing for Roma, to tease their teams’ weekend matchup. The headline read: “Black Friday.”

When Lukaku saw it, he was staggered. “It’s crazy,” he replied when he was sent an image of the front page over WhatsApp. He then criticized the paper publicly, saying it was the “dumbest of headlines.”

The mix of disappointment and frustration is a feeling Lukaku has had with dispiriting regularity in recent months. From England’s national team threatening to walk off the field during a game in Bulgaria to a match stopped by racist chants in the Netherlands to more recent incidents at Manchester City earlier this month and at Tottenham on Sunday, black players have reported being targets of racist incidents on what has seemed like a weekly basis in Europe this season.

In Italy, it has been particularly virulent. Lukaku was racially abused in his second game after moving to the country this season, a chorus of monkey chants greeting him as he prepared to take a penalty during his Inter Milan team’s game at Cagliari. As he listened to the abuse in a stadium with a long, grim record of such incidents, he said he thought what he has always thought in these situations: “I’m going to score. I’m going to win. I’m going to go home. I’ve been confronted by it many times in life,” he said. “You build a type of shell. I take my anger out on the field.”

He is not the only one to have been placed in that invidious position. Fiorentina’s Brazilian left back, Dalbert, heard racist chants at Atalanta and Sampdoria’s Ronaldo Vieira was targeted by Roma fans while playing at home. Mario Balotelli, now at Brescia, was so incensed at the abuse he received during a game in Verona in November that he picked up the ball and kicked it into the upper deck. Like Lukaku, Balotelli then had to endure a group of his own team’s fans publishing a verbose statement explaining away the incident. And he is not alone in feeling that the re-



Romelu Lukaku was racially abused in his second match with Inter Milan. AP

sponse of the country’s authorities has been lacking. Cagliari, whose officials initially denied anything had happened to Lukaku, escaped punishment from Serie A.

Outbursts of racism have long disfigured games in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, but the frequency with which they have occurred this season is especially alarming, given the rising nationalist tide across the continent. Italy, for example, saw racially motivated attacks triple after the populist Five Star movement entered into government with the Lega, a far-right party, in 2017. That increase is reflected in the experience of black players in the country’s stadiums.

The situation has grown so troubling that the Italian league’s clubs were moved to action themselves. In November, all 20 released a public statement admitting they had “not done enough” to address racism in Italian soccer, and informing the country’s authorities that now was the time for “serious change.”

In the weeks after that statement came the *Corriere* front page, which the newspaper defended, saying the criticism of it was like a “lynching.” Then Serie A’s general manager was caught on tape suggesting the solution might be muting stadium microphones, so at least the abuse is not broadcast. This week, Serie A unveiled a new anti-racism initiative featuring three paintings of chimpanzees, provoking a heated backlash that it was tone deaf.

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ROMELU LUKAKU

ON DEALING WITH RACIST COMMENTS

There have been so many incidents, so many low moments, that it has been hard to keep up. Lukaku has found himself talking, and thinking, about the issue far more frequently than he would have hoped. Education is critical, he said, but he is not prepared to wait for others to address the issue. “I say what I think,” he said. “If something is on my mind, I will stand up and speak.”

Pace and power

Lukaku wanted Paul Pogba, a friend long before he was a Manchester United teammate, to be the first to know. Last summer, while they were in Australia on a preseason tour, Lukaku pulled Pogba aside and told him he had decided to leave England. “I told him I was done,” Lukaku said.

Lukaku had reached the conclusion a few months earlier. He had spent close to eight years in England by then, blossoming into one

of the world’s best forwards, but his final two, after a \$90 million transfer to United, had been arduous.

“It was always, ‘Yes, but ...’ right from the start,” he said. “I scored against Real Madrid in the European Super Cup but missed a chance. It was: ‘But he missed that one.’ I scored against West Ham in my first Premier League game: ‘Yes, but ...’ From then on, I started to wonder how it was going to go.”

He still scored goals – 96 games, 42 goals – but he bristles at how his perceived poor form affected his reputation in England. “One year at United erased eight years prior to that,” he said. He feels that he and Pogba were “blamed for Manchester United’s fall.”

He wonders, now, if it was because United had paid so much money for him; he is, in cumulative transfer fees, the third most expensive player in history. There is, though, one other possibility.

There has always been a divergence between the player Lukaku is and the player he is perceived to be. One former manager, Roberto Martinez, always regarded Lukaku as a “thinker,” but that opinion was an outlier in discussions about him. As with many black players, analysis of Lukaku’s performance tends to focus on his strength, his athleticism, his physical attributes.

“It is never about my skill when I am compared to other strikers,” he said. “My one-on-one dribbling is good. I can do a step-over. I

TOP-OF-THE-TABLE CLASH

Vardy dilemma for Leicester as they host Liverpool with title hopes in balance

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE
LONDON, DECEMBER 25

LEICESTER CITY face runaway Premier League leaders Liverpool on Boxing Day knowing their own title hopes are very much in the balance. Thursday’s match will see the second-placed Foxes, the shock 2015/16 champions, kick off 10 points adrift of Liverpool, who will arrive in the East Midlands fresh from winning a maiden Club World Cup title following a 1-0 victory over Brazilian side Flamengo in Qatar.

One of the more remarkable statistics in English football is that it is nearly 30 years since Liverpool were last crowned domestic champions in what was then the First Division. But Premier League silverware is now in sight following a successful 2019 that has also seen Liverpool take the Champions League and UEFA Super Cup trophies back to Anfield as well as the Club World Cup.

One of the enduring peculiarities of the English game that has not changed, however, is the packed programme of matches that take place during the Christmas and New

Year holiday period. The congested schedule is again causing headaches for managers, with Foxes boss Brendan Rodgers saying the fixture list is a “nonsense”.

Leicester kick off against Liverpool at 2000 GMT on Thursday before they play West Ham on Saturday.

They then complete four games in 10 days with a trip to Newcastle on New Year’s Day, before hosting Wigan in the FA Cup on January 4. This presents Rodgers with a problem about how often to field Jamie Vardy, the league’s leading scorer so far this season, given the striker is now aged 32.

“The game is about money now. You can’t say it’s about the welfare of players,” insisted Rodgers, himself a former Liverpool manager who added that Vardy, for all he has scored 16 goals this term, had “no chance” of being involved throughout the festive period.

This season sees the Premier League experimenting with a ‘winter break’ that will see all teams get a weekend off in February. But that pales into insignificance compared to the Bundesliga’s long-established winter break.

The German top-flight closes down for several weeks in December and January,

PLAYING TONIGHT

Tottenham vs Brighton (6pm)
Bournemouth vs Arsenal (8.30pm)
Chelsea vs Southampton (8.30pm)
Crystal Palace vs West Ham (8.30pm)
Everton vs Burnley (8.30pm)
Aston Villa vs Norwich (8.30pm)
Sheffield vs Watford (8.30pm)
Man United vs Newcastle (11pm)
Leicester vs Liverpool (1.30pm)

Live on Star Sports Network

with Rodgers saying the English break was a “let’s pretend” version. Liverpool will be without Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain after the midfielder suffered an ankle injury against Flamengo as Jurgen Klopp’s side, unbeaten in the Premier League this season, bid to go 13 points clear and all but end the title-race before by the halfway stage.

“If anyone wants to think things are over

before they are over we cannot stop them doing that, though it is not important to us,” said Liverpool manager Klopp.

‘Man Utd further behind in development than expected’

Reuters: Manchester United have not progressed as much as what manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer had hoped for as they near the halfway stage of the Premier League season, but the Norwegian said his team would become more consistent with experience.

Solskjaer, who took charge of United in December last year, has guided the team to eighth in the standings after 18 games and their tally of 25 points is four fewer than what they had collected at this stage last season.

“At the moment we’re a little bit further behind than what I was hoping for,” Solskjaer told the British media. “We knew this season was going to be a season of some ups and downs.” United have failed to win more than two league games in a row this season but Solskjaer said that they needed time to reach their best form. “This season will be used to find a team for next season, but hopefully we can speed this process up by getting more results.”



Leicester manager Brendan Rodgers has said Vardy, who has scored 16 goals this season, had “no chance” of being involved throughout the festive period. *Reuters*