

Virus threat: Phogat bout in Singapore behind closed doors

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
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WRESTLER-TURNED-fighter Ritu Phogat's will compete in her second Mixed Martial Arts bout in front of an empty arena due to concerns about coronavirus outbreak. Phogat (1-0), is set to take on Chin'a Wu Chiao Chen (2-1) at One Championship's 'King of the Jungle' event on February 28 in the promotion's home base of Singapore.

Chatri Sityodtong, founder and CEO of the Asian MMA promotion, said that he decided against cancelling the event in favour of a behind-closed-doors bout, and all tickets bought for the 12,000-capacity Singapore Indoor Stadium will be refunded. The event will be available globally on broadcast and streaming.

"In light of the coronavirus situation in Singapore, I have made the decision to convert ONE: King of the Jungle on February 28 into a closed event for broadcast only. The Singapore Indoor Stadium will not be open to the general public, but the event will proceed behind closed doors as scheduled live on all TV and digital platforms across 150 plus countries around the world," Sityodtong said in a statement. "If you purchased tickets to attend the event at the Singapore Indoor Stadium, you will receive a full refund... My team and I had the option to cancel the event altogether, but we chose not to cancel it. More than ever, the world needs hope and strength right now."

As of Monday midnight, China's health authorities have reported a total of 72,436 coronavirus cases and 1,868 deaths on the mainland. Singapore's tally of 77 cases is only behind China and Japan (619 cases and 1 death). The outbreak forced the Singapore government to raise the alert level to orange last week, and the Ministry of Health urged organisers to defer non-essential events.

Masks and home-cooked meals

Since signing with One Championship last February, Asian and Under-23 Worlds medalist Phogat has been living and training in Singapore. Speaking with *The Indian Express* on the sidelines of an open workout last Wednesday, the 25-year-old who made her MMA debut last November, said she "hadn't been thinking about the virus outbreak" and added that she relies on masks and home-cooked food as precautions.

A fighter training at the Evolve MMA gym in Singapore told this paper that fellow One Championship athletes have also been barred from attending the fights next Friday.

"The conditions aren't that bad in Singapore, and we've only been wearing masks for two days," said the martial artist on condition of anonymity. "However the precautionary measures have been raised at our gym too, including daily check-ups."

One Championship has already had to relocate an event from Chongqing, China on April 11 to Jakarta.

"Safety is our number one priority... We will take all the necessary precautions for the athletes, fans, employees feel safe, distribute masks," chief commercial officer Hari Vijayarajan had said when asked about the disruptions due to the outbreak. "We choose to take this as an opportunity... Because others have cancelled, the viewership numbers have doubled as people want to be entertained."

"This is an opportunity to go big in China, even though we may not physically organise matches there. The benefit of having a big audience in the same time zone is that apart from the 10,000 people in the stadium, nobody needs to know where you are."

Rival promotion UFC has also been affected by coronavirus. Ahead of her title defence on March 7 at UFC 248, women's strawweight champion Weili Zhang of China first moved her training camp from Beijing to Thailand, and later to Abu Dhabi.



CRASH ON THE LINE

Ryan Newman was involved in a ghastly crash on the final lap of the Daytona 500 that hospitalised him with non-life-threatening injuries. *USA Today*

■ Ryan Newman has rolled his way through many crashes over a 20-year NASCAR career. This one, though, caused the sport to pause. Newman slid across the finish line in a crumpled heap of metal, sparks flying as his car skidded to a halt with fuel pouring onto the track, close to open flames.

■ The 42-year-old, nicknamed 'Rocketman' was involved in a crash on the final lap of the Daytona 500 on Monday night and everyone feared the worst. Newman has not had a fatality in its elite Cup Series since 2001, but this wreck just looked different.

■ Everyone gasped as track workers placed large black screens around his car and worked to get him out. They had to wait two excruciating hours to exhale, after NASCAR announced Newman had non-life-threatening injuries and was in serious condition at Halifax Medical Center.

■ Breathtaking crashes are common at Daytona International Speedway, where drivers racing for position at 320kph often make contact. There have been no fatalities since Dale Earnhardt's death following a crash on the final lap of the 2001 Daytona 500. *Text: AP*

T20 league owners threaten boycott, want MCA's partner out

DEVENDRA PANDEY
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 18

THE MUMBAI Cricket Association will decide whether it should snap ties with its partner Probability Sports which had marketed and run the franchise-based T20 Mumbai League.

All the eight franchises had officially complained to MCA about their displeasure with functioning of Probability Sports and have threatened to boycott the tournament if MCA doesn't shed its partner and takes full charge of the league. The MCA, which had discussed the issue on February 18, will let its Apex Council take the final call on February 24. Probability Sports is a consortium led by IIFL Investment Managers and Wicraft Groups that was formed in 2018 to partner MCA to launch and run the T20 league.

In a letter signed by all team owners, and representatives and submitted to MCA president Vijay Patil, the franchises stated their decision.

"We all team owners of the T20 Mumbai League have decided that unless MCA is not taking charge of the league, we owners will not be participating in the league henceforth under probability sports. We hope you will appreciate of harsh decision on behalf of us and the positive decision for the interest of Mumbai cricket." The most recent cause for turmoil was the termination of two teams by Probability Sport for allegedly failing to clear outstanding dues.

"Recently two teams' contract were terminated and MCA didn't know about this. How can they take such decision? We all bought a team looking at MCA and probability sports. We now feel that its high time MCA takes full charge of the tournament. Let them deal with us and not some other company," Mallik said. The Apex Council of MCA will decide on the issue on February 24.

Family selection race ends with Asian gold

Wrestlers' aura prompted Sunil's father to put his son into the sport, a decision vindicated more than a decade later

MIHIR VASAVDA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 18

THE STORY begins at a wedding reception, sometime in the late noughties.

Ashwini Kumar, a small-time farmer from Haryana's Dabarpur village, was at a relative's reception when he first came across wrestlers. Dabarpur, they say, had no wrestlers or even culture for the sport in a radius of 30-40km. It was at the function that Ashwini witnessed first-hand the aura wrestlers have and the respect they command, especially in Haryana.

At that moment, he decided to make one of his two sons a wrestler. "It was impossible that both of us would get into the sport. It's expensive enough to take care of the dietary requirements of just one wrestler. For us, it was unaffordable to have two wrestlers in the family," says Sumit Kumar, Ashwini's elder son.

So, Ashwini came up with an idea. "He held a 5km race and laid down a condition: the one who would finish first would get wrestling training and the other will have to tend to the family's farms," Sumit says.

The elder brother lost the race to his muscular, quicker and eight-year-younger sibling. A little more than a decade later, after the most unusual initiation to the sport but following years of toil and training, Sunil – the younger brother – ended India's 27-year wait for an Asian Championship gold medal in Greco-Roman, a wrestling style that's ignored and an afterthought in the country.

Sunil, 20, wasn't even born when India last won an Asian gold medal in Greco-Roman – in 1993, when Pappu Yadav won the 48kg



Sunil Kumar beat Azat Salidinov of Kyrgyzstan 5-0 in the 87kg Greco-Roman final to clinch gold at the Asian Wrestling Championships. *Abhinav Saha*

class. But in all these years between Tuesday's gold and the one before that, not much has changed in terms of India's outlook towards this style. "During our time, Greco-Roman wrestlers were considered outcasts; failures in freestyle," Yadav, who watched Sunil's bouts from the stands at Delhi's KD Jadhav Stadium,

says. "That mindset hasn't changed till today."

In Haryana's endless swathes of mud pits and cushioned mats, Greco-Roman is not a priority. For some, the style in which holds below waists are not permitted isn't intricate enough compared to freestyle while the majority doesn't care because of India's pitiful international

record. And since dangals, a major source of income for wrestlers, have just freestyle wrestling, Greco-Roman never became popular.

Most every Indian wrestler begins with freestyle as the first choice, and Sunil was no exception. After winning the 'selection trial' his father held, he began freestyle training at a sports school in Haryana's Jind. But soon, the coaches realised his lower body did not have the strength to withstand the strong demands of freestyle wrestling, in which nearly every move begins with a leg hold.

Considered not strong enough for freestyle, Sunil was sent to Greco-Roman. "And it came naturally to him. What he lacked in legs, he made up with shoulders," Sumit says, referring to his brother's physical strength.

While Sunil's move was out of compulsion, in the case of Arjun Halakurki – who won a bronze medal on Tuesday – the shift from freestyle to Greco-Roman was due to desperation. Like Sunil, Halakurki, too, came from a village with very little wrestling pedigree. The Bagalkot native took up the sport after being

inspired by his father, a dangal wrestler. But it was freestyle that attracted Halakurki.

For a decade, he competed in freestyle events across India. But he wasn't good enough to get into Karnataka's state team. "It was very frustrating. My career was heading nowhere despite working so hard," Halakurki says.

Hargobind Singh, India's Greco-Roman coach, says Halakurki was not strong in leg attacks but instead, used his upper body to initiate moves. "It's a style that would have suited him in Greco-Roman, so it was suggested that he shifts categories," Hargobind says.

The Asian Championship was Halakurki's senior international debut. The inexperience cost him as he conceded a six-point advantage to lose to Iran's Pouya Naserpour 8-7 in the semifinals of the 55kg category.

Sunil did the opposite. He gave ample evidence of his prowess during his 5-0 rout of Kyrgyzstan's Azat Salidinov in a one-sided final in the 87kg class. But before that, he staged an improbable comeback in the semifinal, rallying from a six-point deficit to beat Kazakhstan's Azamat Kustubayev 12-8.

The gold also means Sunil would be among the favourites for an Olympic berth in the continental qualifiers next month. "Our father wished for something bigger, we even dreamt of a medal at the Olympics," Sumit says.

Sunil's father passed away in a car accident when he was 10. But Sumit says it took years for Sunil to move on. On Tuesday, Sunil did not dwell on it much. He was surrounded by teammates, coaches and federation officials, everyone trying to be in his vicinity. "This aura and respect is what attracted our father to wrestling," Sumit says. "This is just the beginning."

[SPORTS BAR]



Tears of joy for Reinier at Real presentation

Brazilian teenager Reinier couldn't hold back the tears when he was officially introduced by Real Madrid on Tuesday. The 18-year-old Reinier had to compose himself a few times while speaking about his family's sacrifice to help him make it to the Spanish club. He also cried when the club showed a video of his highlights with Brazil's youth squads and former club Flamengo. "It's thanks to my family that I'm here," Reinier said, wiping away tears. "It was hard, to leave everything behind when I was young just so I could play." The sacrifice has been justified, for now. For a reported fee of more than \$32.5 million, Reinier has signed with Madrid until 2026. He is expected to initially play for the B team. "I'm available to do whatever the club wants me to do," he said. "I'll always be giving my best."

Roland Garros Jr wild card Series from Feb 24

The sixth edition of the Roland-Garros Junior Wild Card Series will be held at the clay courts of the Delhi Lawn Tennis Association (DLTA) from February 24-26 with four-time Grand Slam winner Mary Pierce as event ambassador. The announcement was made by the French Tennis Federation, organisers of French Open, and the All India Tennis Association. Pierce will be present in Delhi to motivate the players during the event. The tournament provides young Indian players with a unique opportunity to qualify for the Roland Garros Junior Main draw to be held in May 2020.

Sania sails into doubles pre-quarterfinals

Sania Mirza and her partner Caroline Garcia registered a hard-fought win over Russia's Alla Kudryavtseva and Slovenia's Katarina Srebotnik to advance to the women's doubles pre-quarterfinals at the Dubai Open here on Tuesday. The Indo-French pair beat their Russian opponents 6-4, 4-6, 10-8 in the first round match. The Sania-Garcia combine will now meet the fifth seeded duo of Saisai Zheng of China and Barbora Krejickova of Czech Republic in the round of 16. The 33-year-old Sania was returning to action at the Dubai Open after recovering from a calf injury which had cut short her campaign at the Australian Open in January.



Manpreet Singh and Co play Australia on February 21 and 22 in Bhubaneswar.

Manpreet to lead India vs Australia in Pro League

Manpreet Singh will lead India in the upcoming FIH Pro League matches against world no.2 Australia, a 24-member team for which was announced by Hockey India on Tuesday. Harmanpreet Singh will shoulder the duties of the vice captain in the matches, scheduled to take place on February 21 and 22 at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar. The Indian team, which recently climbed to no.4 in the FIH World Rankings, had posted a 2-1 win over World champions Belgium in the first Pro League match, while losing 2-3 in the second game. The 24-member squad will comprise goalkeepers PR Sreejesh and Krishan Pathak, besides outfielders Amit Rohidas, Surender Kumar, Birendra Lakra, Harmanpreet Singh, Varun Kumar, Gurinder Singh and Rupinder Pal Singh. Vivek Sagar Prasad, Hardik Singh, Chinglensana Singh, Raj Kumar Pal, Akashdeep Singh, Sumit, Lalit Upadhyay, Gursahibjit Singh, Dilpreet Singh, SV Sunil, Jarmanpreet Singh, Simranjeet Singh, Nilakanta Singh, and Ramandeep Singh, are also part of the squad. "After having two high intensity matches against the World Champions, we will be facing another strong team in Australia," Chief coach Graham Reid said.

Vietnam GP on track despite virus fears

Vietnam's inaugural Formula One Grand Prix will take place in Hanoi in April as planned, organisers told AFP Tuesday, avoiding the fate of the Chinese Grand Prix which was postponed over the deadly coronavirus. The race will be held as "scheduled" on April 5, Le Ngoc Chi, CEO of Vietnam Grand Prix told AFP. The virus, which has killed more than 1,800 people in China, has trashed Asia's sporting calendar, forcing the postponement of top events including the Shanghai grand prix and the Hong Kong Sevens rugby. But Vietnamese authorities said the country's inaugural Formula One race would go ahead on schedule.



Women's golf great Wright dies at 85

Thirteen-time major winner Mickey Wright, often described as the greatest woman golfer of all time, died aged 85. Wright, who accumulated 82 LPGA Tour titles during a professional career which stretched from 1954 to 1969, died in Florida after a heart attack, reports said on Monday. "We're saddened to learn today of the passing of Mickey Wright, a 13-time Major Champion and 82-time winner on the @LPGA, just three days after celebrating her birthday," the World Golf Hall of Fame announced on Twitter. Born Mary Kathryn Wright in San Diego, California in 1935, Wright won the 1954 World Amateur Championship before turning professional the following season. Her retirement in 1969 shocked golf, coming at the early age of 34. Wright would later cite the pressure of the spotlight as influencing her decision.