

How Indian shuttlers' qualification chances are affected

BRIEFLY

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WITH HIGH morbidity striking the world at a tragic pace in the form of Covid-19, sport is but a trifle. But caught in the uncertainty just six months before the Tokyo Olympics, are the qualification campaigns of India's shuttlers. With German Open cancelled and the outbreak threatening to disrupt even more tournaments upto cutoff of April 30th, precious qualifications are on the line. Here's a look at how the gloomy picture looks:

Worst-case scenario: No events take off. What happens then?

India will then be limited to those who are in the safe zone at this moment: Sindhu is at No. 6, Sai Praneeth is at No 11, Satwiksairaj Rankireddy-Chirag Shetty are at No. 8. Those losing out will be Saina Nehwal at No 22 who needs around 12000 points and Kidambi Srikanth at No. 23, needing approximately 15000 points from whatever tournaments

they can turn up at to be in Top 16 for automatic qualification. The permutations concern far too many variables of other players to be exactly computed.

What is the status of upcoming tournaments?

While German Open was crucial (Polish, Vietnam & China Masters where top Indians weren't playing were also cancelled), the real massive point hoarding (defending) is to start with All England, which was scheduled to go ahead at the time of writing though developments are being monitored closely every hour. The Asian Championship in China is sure to be cancelled, while Malaysia and Singapore will be on the edge. The Swiss Open is not affected as of now. The Indian Super 500 has resolutely attracted its best field in several years. Should international players from China and affected areas undergo quarantine ahead of All England, there should be no problem for the Indian event thereafter, according to Indian organisers.

Why is it crucial for Srikanth and Saina?

Both are camped in Denmark currently and videos emerging from the national centre show both are looking sharp and raring to go. However, both will bleed points in case of more cancellations. Srikanth needs to defend his semifinal place from last year, especially and Verma and PKashyap are in fact in better striking distance of qualification (at 20 & 22 respectively) and marginally ahead of Srikanth, and with all the cancellations might sneak ahead in a freak leap should a good result jump up, though both are nursing niggles.

SIMPLY PUT

What's the deal with Swiss Open?

Though Sai Praneeth is defending points from finals last year, he won't get dumped out of 16 if the event faces a cancellation. After a positive case of a person in Geneva returning from north Italy, the Federal Council has categorised the situation in Switzerland as particular in terms of the Epidemics Act. Large-scale events involving more than 1000 people are to be banned. The ban comes into immediate ef-

fect and will apply at least until 15 March 2020. However, Swiss Open starting two days later on March 17, is on. Geneva motor show was postponed by six months. However, the organisers of the Swiss Open and Swiss Badminton "are in close contact with the relevant national and cantonal authorities and will provide information should there be any changes to the current situation or to the requirements imposed by the authorities," according to the website.

What about All England?

Currently authorities are not advising changing plans, though the evolving situation is prone to quick changes. While two Badminton England medical officers will attend to teams in two different hotels, a fully serviced medical centre is readied. The tournament and good results there can propel Srikanth and Saina into a relatively safe zone as this is a Super 1000. Kento Momota is absent, and the Chinese have agreed to a 15-day quarantine ahead of the tournament. In the middle of all this, PV Sindhu is being talked

up to win the event if she's primed for it in preps.

What is BWF's conundrum?

While the world body insists it will not change qualification criterion, it might come under pressure to review its process should no event take off from here on due to cancellations. While Indian interested is hooked to Nehwal and Srikanth, Chinese Shi Yuqi returning from injury, is also gasping at No 21 in ranking point race during qualification period. The world body isn't risking disturbing the existing method as of now though.

Why are Indian organisers punch pleased?

India has lucked out with shuttlers thronging the Super 500 to pick points on the home straight. Eight of women's Top 10 singles shuttlers — Chen Yufei, Akane Yamaguchi, He Bingjiao, Carolina Marin, An Se Young, Ratchanok, Michelle Li besides Sindhu and Saina will be in action making it the best field in India since the 2009 World championships. Viktor Axelsen is here to prop up his points along with a desperate Shi Yuqi of China and Son Wan Ho, making life tougher for Srikanth.

Bains lowers Chitra's 1500m record

Bhubaneswar: Punjabi University's Harmilan Kaur Bains improved upon PU Chitra's All-India Universities women's 1500m record to steal the limelight on the opening day of the athletics competition in the inaugural Khelo India University Games 2020 at the Kalinga Stadium here on Friday. Harmilan led from start to finish to complete her victory in 4:16.68. The 21-year-old from Patiala, who had shaved a hundredth of a second from PU Chitra's record time of 4:24.87 earlier, left none in doubt on Friday that she was rising as one of the nation's metric mile prospects with the fastest time of the year by an Indian woman, over eight seconds faster than her personal best. Harmilan's gold was one of the three that the Punjabi University won on Friday to rise in the medal tally to the fourth place with seven gold behind Savitribai Phule Pune University (14), Panjab University (9) and Jain University (8).

Chennaiyin-FC Goa clash in ISL semis

Chennai: Having made a superb turnaround after a poor start, two-time champion Chennaiyin FC will look to continue the good run when they take on FC Goa in the first leg of the ISL semifinal here on Saturday. The Blues entered the 2019-20 season after a nightmarish performance in the previous one, having finished with the wooden spoon and fewest points (nine). Things didn't get better at the start of season as they were languishing at the bottom before they witnessed a change in fortune after Owen Coyle replaced John Gregory as the head coach. The transformation under Coyle has been remarkable and in 12 games, Chennaiyin has got 24 points — from 7 wins and 3 draws — to sealed a play-off berth.

Miranda, Katsumi score in Chennai's win

Mumbai: Courtesy two goals from Fito Miranda and Katsumi Yusa in quick succession, Chennai City garnered three points against Indian Arrows in their I League game here on Friday. With this win, Chennai City go third in the points table with 19 points from 14 games. Indian Arrows, on the other hand, remain at the 11th spot with eight points from 14 matches.

Chawrasia makes cut in Oman

Muscat: SSP Chawrasia suffered a mid-round lapse to score a three-over 75 in the second round, while Shubhankar Sharma and Gaganjeet Bhullar missed the cut at the Oman Open here on Friday. Chawrasia, who dropped two bogeys and a double bogey between sixth and ninth, is now one-under 143 and was the only Indian to make the cut at the event. Shubhankar (74-74) and Bhullar (74-76) had a two-day total of two-over 148 and four-over 150 respectively to miss the cut, which fell at even par.

Tasnim, Treesa march into 3rd round

Haarlem: India junior No. 1 Tasnim Mir and rising star Treesa Jolly notched up convincing victories to enter women singles third round at the Dutch Junior International badminton tournament here on Friday. After winning the first game easily, Gujarat girl Tasnim faced some resistance from Lui Lok Lok of Hong Kong Chinabut won 21-14 21-17.

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Home 2, Visitor 1, Spectators 0

In Italy, where coronavirus has infected hundreds, Inter's Europa League match is played in an empty stadium

NEW YORK TIMES
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THE STANDS didn't fill and the crowd didn't roar, but there was an important soccer match scheduled in Milan on Thursday, so Internazionale, the home team, and Ludogorets, the visitors from Bulgaria, set aside their fears about the coronavirus and dutifully went about playing each other.

Italian health officials had set the bizarre stage for the game by ordering the stadium closed to spectators. In Italy, where the number of confirmed coronavirus cases soared past 600 this week, the authorities have restricted public gatherings in an attempt the slow the spread of the outbreak.

But the Europa League schedule was inflexible, and so the round-of-32 game went on, with only the players' shouts, the coaches' instructions and the referee's whistle as a soundtrack. Ludogorets arrived more than an hour before kickoff but was clearly wary: When its players filed off the bus and entered the stadium, they were wearing face masks.

While the tens of thousands of fans who had bought tickets were absent, attempts at pageantry were preserved: The teams walked out of the tunnel side by side as normal, then stood stoically while the Europa League anthem boomed out of the loudspeakers in the empty stadium. The players posed for team photos, and the captains exchanged handshakes and team pennants.

Ludogorets scored first, on a timely shove and a tight-angle finish by the Brazilian Cauly. Inter's defenders protested, saying Cauly had shoved down center back Diego Godin to free himself, but even in the silence the referee wasn't inclined to listen. Inter equalized on Cristiano Biraghi's shot to the near post in the 31st minute, and then took the lead on Romelu Lukaku's rare double header just before halftime. Lukaku didn't know much about the goal — his first attempt was saved, and the ricochet went in off his forehead as he lay on the turf. It was, though, the first time it would have been nice if a crowd had been there to rise as one and scream for something, especially something that doesn't happen very often.

As the scoreboard clock ticked down, Inter's two goals, combined with the two it scored in the first leg of the home-and-home tie, effectively assured it would advance to the next round. But the German referee, Daniel Siebert, wasn't up for any stalling. "Take the ball," he shouted to an Inter player at one point. "They need three goals. Come on."

Inter's days playing in empty stadiums are not over. Its match against league-leading Juventus on Sunday, a pivotal and highly anticipated moment in this year's title race, is one of five this weekend that have been ordered played behind closed doors.



Fans were not allowed to enter the San Siro for Inter's Europa League match against Ludogorets over coronavirus fears. Reuters

Newcastle ban handshakes at training

REUTERS
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TRAINING SESSIONS at Newcastle United will be a lot less cordial after manager Steve Bruce said on Friday that players and staff had been advised to avoid handshakes in a bid to prevent spreading coronavirus.

The United Kingdom now has 19 confirmed cases of coronavirus and Bruce said the club were not taking any chances. "There's a ritual here that everybody shakes hands with everybody as soon as we see each other every morning. We've stopped that on the advice of the doctor," Bruce told a news conference ahead of Saturday's match against Burnley. "We're like everybody else. Thankfully, we've got a superb doctor here and he will keep us informed of what we have to do. We're glued to the TV for where it's going to go next and let's hope it doesn't get any worse in this country."

Bruce was given an injury boost with midfielder Jonjo Shelvey — the club's top scorer in the league — and defender Javier Manquillo coming back from injuries, but said they would make a call on whether defender Ciaran Clark needs ankle surgery.

"He's damaged his ankle ligaments badly. He's been excellent this season. He's been one

of our best players, in my opinion, so it's bad news for all of us," Bruce said. "Andy (Carroll) isn't going to make it but Jonjo has trained for the last 10 days or so, Javier Manquillo is back as well so it's good to see them back."

STEVE BRUCE
MANAGER, NEWCASTLE UNITED

chance more or less. But we had to get to the summer first. "As I've said a few times, Rome wasn't built in a day. But the culture, the attitude, the fitness, the camaraderie, the spirit and maybe even the understanding between players have improved. I'm 100% sure we will put in a better performance this time."

United are fifth in the Premier League table, three points adrift of Chelsea in fourth and five ahead of 11th-placed Everton. Solskjaer's side extended their unbeaten run to seven matches in all competitions with Thursday's 5-0 win over Club Brugge to secure a place in the Europa League's last 16.

January signing Bruno Fernandes was again the standout performer in midfield, scoring the opener from the penalty spot before creating goals for Odion Ighalo and Scott McTominay. "He loves football, he wants to be out there and wants to be better," Solskjaer added. "I tried to send him inside (after being substituted against Brugge) because it was cold but he said 'no, I want to watch'. We have missed that box-opener that Bruno is proving to be now. He is a big, big boost for us."

Ighalo found the net for the first time since completing a deadline-day move from Shanghai Shenhua, and he could be asked to step in again at Everton if Anthony Martial misses out through a thigh injury.

Manchester United manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer is convinced his side will not capitulate at Everton on Sunday like they did in last season's 4-0 thrashing.

Solskjaer described the defeat at Goodison Park in April last year as his "lowest point" as United manager and revealed it was the moment he decided to rebuild the squad. "That was the lowest I have been. It was a capitulation. We had nothing about us," Solskjaer told reporters ahead of Sunday's trip to Goodison Park.

"That was when one or two had their last

RANJI TROPHY: SEMIFINALS

Bengal hope to ride on momentum against thoroughbreds Karnataka

SHAMIK CHAKRABARTY
KOLKATA, FEBRUARY 28

THE CRICKET Association of Bengal (CAB) is opening three enclosures for fans at Eden Gardens for the Ranji Trophy semifinal between Bengal and Karnataka, starting Saturday. A message has been conveyed to all first and second division clubs, coaching centres and schools affiliated to the CAB to send their players to watch the game. "We want everyone to come and support our team," CAB president Avishek Dalmiya said.

On the field, KL Rahul was having an intense net session on Friday. After he was done, the opener, along with Karnataka captain Karun Nair and teammate Manish Pandey, went to have a close look at the pitch. The shade of green on the surface suggests help for the fast bowlers.

On the other side, at the home team nets, Ishan Porel was going full tilt. The Bengal team head coach Arun Lal calls Porel "India material" and banks on fit-again Akash Deep's pace. This semifinal, at the country's most storied venue, has a Test match-like feel.

Karnataka, at least on paper, are superior, given their pedigree in domestic cricket and the players they have. The eight-time Ranji Trophy winners have all the bases covered. Rahul's inclusion has given them an added fillip. Karnataka have domestic cricket thor-

oughbreds in their ranks.

Bengal, on the other hand, are a work in progress. A process has started under Lal this season, which might take a year or two to come to fruition. Bengal still need a seam-bowling allrounder and an impact batsman at the top to complete their regeneration process. Then again, they are the form team, with three outright wins in the last four group league matches to reach the knockouts. In the quarterfinal against Odisha, the way they fought back after being reduced to 46/5 on the first day, spoke volumes for the team's character. The two-time champions have the fighting spirit and a winning momentum to fall back on.

Lal refused to call his team underdogs. "Not at all... I think we are the favourites. We have momentum behind us, played some fabulous cricket. And we have got unquantifiable heroes. Nobody knows about them. We are just getting to hear about them. Tomorrow they could be the finished products. We have three-four players who could go on to play for India within a year or so. We are a team on the zoom. The curve is going up," he said.

Nair counted on experience. Karnataka are one of the elite teams in domestic cricket and they qualify for the knockouts for fun. "It does give an edge that our players are used to playing in pressure situations. At the end, it's about who does well on the given day. It's really important to do well for all five



KL Rahul's inclusion has given Karnataka an added fillip. PTI

days and in all sessions," the Karnataka captain observed.

Talking about 'unquantifiable heroes', Bengal unleashed a wiry spin-bowling allrounder, answering to the name of Shahbaz Ahmed, this season. With 30 wickets and 427 runs, the 25-year-old has emerged as the team's X-factor. "Shahbaz is redefining the Hindi language. Instead of saying janbaaz (daredevil) cricketer, we will say Shahbaz

cricketer. I haven't seen such performances for a long time. Who knows where he will end up but he is one for the future," Lal didn't mind a bit of aggrandisement.

Over to Karnataka and their batting factory — the GRV (Gundappa Viswanath) and RD (Rahul Dravid) school of cricket — rolled out another top talent this season. Devdutt Padikkal is 19 years old, but he has shown maturity beyond his years to make a serious

Gujarat vs Saurashtra: A battle of equals

Rajkot: The bowling strengths of hosts Saurashtra and Gujarat will be put to test on what is likely to be a flat track when the two sides battle it out in the first semifinal of the Ranji Trophy.

Gujarat has built its momentum slowly through the tournament. But last year's runner-up, Saurashtra will look to cash in on the home advantage with an all-round display. Gujarat comes into the game after thrashing Goa by a whopping 464 runs, while Saurashtra made the grade courtesy a massive first innings lead against Andhra.

PTI

impression. With 583 runs from nine matches, he has attested his class as well.

The Ranji Trophy started in full winter this term, with result pitches being laid out aplenty. Given the points system and that only five teams would qualify to the knockouts from a pool of 18 in Elite, Group A and B, going for outright wins during the league stage became en vogue. Both Rahul and Pandey were away on India duty. Nair, despite

playing some important knocks, has been inconsistent. Padikkal stood up to be counted. Karnataka also thrived on collective batting performance, which offset the fact that they had just one century — scored by R Samarth — during their march to the semifinal.

Now Rahul's arrival has given Karnataka the problem of plenty. Padikkal has cemented his place as an opener. Samarth, his opening partner, is one with the experience. Samarth also had a 70-plus score in the quarterfinal against Jammu & Kashmir apart from his 500-plus runs in eight matches. Rahul, of course, is an automatic pick, so it needs to be seen how the visitors alter their playing XI. KV Siddharth is fresh from his match-winning 76 followed by 98 in the quarterfinal and doesn't deserve to be dropped.

Karnataka had a couple of semifinal heartbreaks at Eden. In 2006-07, a Manoj Tiwary special — 151 not out — took the game away from them, as Bengal chased down 307 in the fourth innings. More recently in 2017-18, they lost to Vidarbha by five runs in a humdinger despite Nair's brilliance.

Tiwary is still the mainstay of Bengal batting, ready to hurt the opponents. But the Bengal top-order, especially captain Abhimanyu Easwaran, must step up. Against a team of Karnataka's calibre, the hosts will have little margin for error, as the tourists will be keen to break their Eden jinx.

Live on Star Sports Select 1/3, 9.20am