

Not an open and shut case

Roland Garros' postponement has triggered widespread criticism from other Grand Slam tournaments and players

AFP/REUTERS
LONDON, MARCH 18

THE GLOBAL tennis calendar has been thrown into further chaos after a decision by French Open organisers to postpone the Grand Slam, with players and rival tournaments critical of the apparently unilateral move. The event at Roland Garros, traditionally the second major of the season, was on Tuesday moved from a May 24 start date to September 20.

Organisers said strict confinement measures imposed by the French government to tackle COVID-19 had made it impossible to continue with preparations. FFT (French tennis federation) president Bernard Giudicelli said: "We have made a difficult yet brave decision in this unprecedented situation, which has evolved greatly since last weekend."

But the new dates mean the tournament would start just one week after the US Open, if that event remained in its original slot.

The rescheduled French Open would also clash with the start of the Asian swing and the Laver Cup team competition, due to take place in Boston from September 25 to 27.

The men's ATP tour and the women's WTA tour are both currently suspended due to the coronavirus pandemic. British doubles player Jamie Murray queried the apparent lack of coordination at the top of the game. "Strong Move by French Open/FFT to move to end of September," he tweeted.

'Excusez Moi?'

It also caught WTA chief Steve Simon by surprise, as well as former US and Australian Open champion Naomi Osaka. "Excusez moi???" tweeted Osaka, while Romania's Sorana Cirstea took issue with the method of communication. "What??? Again finding out through twitter..." she wrote.

The revised dates will leave players contesting a clay-court Grand Slam in the middle of the traditional hard-court season, with limited opportunities to adjust to the slower surface. Roland Garros will also now clash with a number of tournaments, including the Laver Cup, where Europe's top players take on a World team. Roger Federer has already committed to the event and Rafael Nadal — the 12-time French Open champion — is another key figure at the tournament.

"This announcement came as a surprise to us and our partners — Tennis Australia, the USTA (US Tennis Association) and the ATP," said Laver Cup organisers.

"It raises many questions and we are assessing the situation. At this time, we want our fans, sponsors, broadcasters, staff, volunteers, players and the great city of Boston to know that we intend to hold Laver Cup 2020 as currently scheduled."

Halep donating equipment

Wimbledon champion and world number two Simona Halep said she was donating money to pay for medical equipment in Romania as the country deals with the coronavirus pandemic. In a message posted on her Facebook page, the 28-year-old said she hoped to help hospitals in Bucharest and Constanta and encouraged people to follow self-isolation guidelines. "Unfortunately, we are going through a very difficult period that we could hardly have imagined a few months ago," she said.

"On the other hand, it is the perfect opportunity to show that we know how to be supportive and responsible with our lives and those around us. While we are at home, doctors and medical personnel make huge efforts to treat and save each life by exposing themselves for the general good. Let us strictly follow the instructions from the authorities and thus contribute to solving this problem of nature that is dramatically affecting our lives."



The French Open will begin six days after the US Open final, leaving players to contest the clay court Grand Slam in the middle of the hardcourt season. Reuters

SIMPLY PUT QUESTION & ANSWER

What the French Open rejig means for players

SHAHID JUDGE
MUMBAI, MARCH 18

THE FÉDÉRATION Française de Tennis made the unexpected decision of postponing this year's French Open from its usual spot, in at the end of May to a week after the US Open. It's a move that has not gone down well with the players who have been reeling because of an already altered calendar year. *The Indian Express* looks at why this move has left the players concerned.

Why has the French Open been pushed back to September?

The ATP and WTA tours have been suspended for a period of six weeks because of the outbreak of the coronavirus. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recently declared Europe as the new epicentre of the pandemic, putting the clay season, which starts in April and ends with the French Open on June 7, in doubt. As a result, the organisers at Roland Garros took the decision to shift the event to September.

Why are the players upset at the change?

The proximity of the US Open to the new dates of the French Open has been the main concern. The main draw of the French Open

will start on September 20, which is just a week after the US Open men's final that will take place on September 13. In the week between the two majors is the qualification round for the French Open and also Group 1 and 2 Davis Cup ties.

This rescheduling of one of the four majors of the year causes disruption to the players' individual schedules, which have already been affected by the suspension of the tour due to the coronavirus outbreak.

One of the tournaments clashing with the new dates is the Laver Cup, of which 12-time French Open Rafael Nadal has been a keen participant, and a Premier 5-WTA event in Wuhan. Furthermore, the players were allegedly not informed about the decision to shift the elite event until after the change was made.

"These are really rough times, unprecedented times, and this just goes against the whole idea of the tour working together. We have a calendar. We have discussions and negotiations between the Grand Slams and the ATP. We are always trying to make it work for everybody, and they just haven't consulted the ATP, the players or the other tournaments. It's just a very selfish move. They are basically doing a power play right now, and it's quite arrogant," Canadian player Vasek Pospisil, who is a part of the Players'

Council told *The New York Times*.

Why does the close proximity to the US Open matter?

Players do not get much time to physically recover for the French Open, especially those who reach the latter stages of the US Open. Also, since Roland Garros will now be scheduled in the middle of the hard court season, players will not have the option of playing in clay court events to warm-up for the major.

Why does the French Open need a clay court season build up?

Usually, the clay court season lasts for two months, ending with the French Open. The surface plays much different from the hard and grass courts, in that the ball drops in pace when it hits the surface and bounces higher, making for longer rallies.

What players, however, try to get used to during the clay court swing is sliding on court. It is very difficult to come to an immediate stop on a clay court, so players slide to a halt. They rush to the ball, stop running a few meters short and play their stroke on the slide. This is different to the hard court where players have to run to the exact spot to meet a ball since sliding is not easy on hard courts.



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VASEK POSPISIL,
ON THE FRENCH OPEN RESCHEDULING

US PGA Championship called off amid Covid-19 scare

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE
LOS ANGELES, MARCH 18

THE US PGA Championship, scheduled for May 14-17 at Harding Park in San Francisco, has been postponed, the second 2020 Major golf championship to be derailed by the coronavirus pandemic. The PGA of America said on Tuesday they hoped to reschedule the event at Harding Park later in the year.

The news came after Augusta National Golf Club announced that the Masters would not be held April 9-12.

The decision by the PGA of America to postpone the PGA Championship comes as millions of San Francisco residents have been ordered to stay home in a bid to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Six counties in the San Francisco Bay Area and the city of Berkeley were part of a lockdown effort after data showed 258 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with four deaths as of Monday.

"Throughout our evaluation process, we have been committed to following the guidance of public health authorities and given the coronavirus shelter-in-place order in effect in San Francisco, postponement is the best decision for all involved," said PGA of America chief executive Seth Waugh. "This is a reflection of a thoughtful process," Waugh added.

"We are and have been working in concert with Commissioner Jay Monahan and

our partners and friends at the PGA Tour to find an alternative date that works for all. We are all very hopeful for a great outcome. "We are also in dialogue with Mayor (London) Breed and her team at the City of San Francisco and look forward to hopefully bringing the 2020 PGA Championship to TPC Harding Park at a date this summer when it is once again safe and responsible to do so." The postponement means a delay for Brooks Koepka's bid for a three-peat. The American lifted the Wanamaker Trophy in 2018 and again last year. Only one man has won three consecutive PGAs, when Walter Hagen captured four straight in a match-play format from 1924-27.

Shortly after the PGA Championship was postponed, the US PGA Tour announced it was extending its own tournament moratorium.

The US tour had announced on March 12 it was cancelling or postponing four weeks' worth of events on all six of its tours through April 5 — the last Sunday before the Masters. Now it will be on hiatus at least up to the May 10.

"With the most recent recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control, the World Health Organisation and the Office of the President of the United States, the PGA Tour will now cancel four additional events: RBC Heritage (April 13-19); Zurich Classic of New Orleans (April 20-26); Wells Fargo Championship (April 27-May 3); and AT&T Byron Nelson (May 4-10)," the tour said.



The postponement means a delay in Brooks Koepka's bid for a three-peat.

'Meaningful conclusion'

The US Golf Association on Tuesday announced cancellation of its first two amateur championships of 2020, the US Women's Amateur Four-Ball and the US Amateur Four-Ball.

In addition, the USGA has cancelled the first stage of qualifying for the US Open and qualifying for the US Women's Open. Both of those Major championships remain scheduled for June.

The US Women's Open is set to be held at Champions Golf Club in Houston June 4-7 and the US Open, the third men's Major on the calendar, is set for June 18-

21 at Winged Foot.

The US PGA Tour said it would work with its own tournament organisers as well as other governing bodies to sort out a schedule for 2020 once play resumes.

"As we receive more clarity in the coming weeks, the tour will be working with our tournament organisations and title sponsors, in collaboration with golf's governing bodies, to build a PGA tour schedule for 2020 that ensures the health and safety for all associated with our sport and a meaningful conclusion to the season," the PGA Tour said.

Europe's Harrington optimistic

Ryder Cup will go ahead despite virus. European captain Padraig Harrington expects the Ryder Cup to go ahead in September despite the sporting chaos caused by the coronavirus.

The European Tour and PGA Tour has suspended tournaments until May. But Harrington believes the eagerly anticipated clash between Europe and the United States remains on schedule to take place in Wisconsin from September 25-27. "September is a long way off so there's no change to the situation at all at this stage," the three-time Major winner said.

"I know there's been some rumours and they had to put out a statement to say there's been no change, but there's definitely no change." It has been reported that the European Tour will hold a board meeting next week, with a Ryder Cup steering committee due to talk a week later.

Chelsea open up hotel to healthcare staff

London: Chelsea will provide free accommodation to staff of Britain's National Health Service in a hotel at the club's Stamford Bridge stadium during the coronavirus pandemic. The Premier League club's owner, Roman Abramovich, will fund the service that will allow medical professionals in London a chance to rest if they are unable to travel home or face long commutes.

The scheme will be put in place for two months, but could be extended if needed. There have been 1,950 confirmed cases of coronavirus and 71 deaths in Britain.

"It was decided the best way Chelsea can assist the NHS is to provide accommodation for NHS staff. Mr Abramovich will be covering the costs of providing the accommodation," Chelsea said in a statement. "Many of the medical staff will be working long shifts and may not be able to travel home or would otherwise have to make long commutes. Local accommodation helps maintain the health and well-being of these crucial personnel at this critical time."

Chelsea do not know when they will next return to the pitch, with the Premier League suspended until at least April 4, although that date is set to be pushed back at a meeting of Premier League clubs on Thursday.

But in the absence of football, the Blues are the latest club to make an offer of community support at a time of crisis.



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Liverpool players contributed to a \$48,000 donation from the club to help keep local foodbanks running. Aston Villa and Brighton were among the clubs to donate food prepared for last weekend's matches to homeless charities. Fourth-tier club Stevenage are preparing a community care-line that will help isolated local residents over 70 with day-to-day needs such as delivery of food and prescriptions. AFP