

# IOC moves to ease fears

Japan insists on going ahead even as many athletes voice concerns

**TOKYO 2020**

REUTERS  
LAUSANNE

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Thomas Bach moved on Wednesday to ease fears after complaints by athletes as Japan insisted it was not preparing for a postponement of the Tokyo Olympics.

With the Olympic flame about to be handed by Greece to Japan, Bach said the IOC heard the athletes' concerns on health and preparations as the virus, which has infected over 200,000 and killed more than 8,000 worldwide, continues to spread.

"Everybody realised that we have still more than four months to go and we will address this action, and we will keep acting in a responsible way in the interest of the athletes," Bach said after a conference call with 220 athletes representatives.

Meanwhile, Japan is still planning to host the Olympics as scheduled from July 24-Aug. 9.

## No adjustments

"We're not making any adjustments to postpone the Games," the government's top spokesman, chief cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga, told parliament when asked by a lawmaker whether the government was making plans to cancel or postpone the event.

Many sports events, some



**Suspense continues:** The picturesque setting notwithstanding, the uncertainty over the Summer Games looms large. ■ CLIVE ROSE/GETTY IMAGES

scheduled as far ahead as early June, have been cancelled or postponed, raising concerns among athletes.

Several, including reigning Olympic pole vault champion Katerina Stefanidi, said the IOC decision was putting athletes' health at risk, urging them to train as normal when entire countries have shut down to contain the virus spread.

## Risking it

"There is no postponement, no cancellation. But it (the

IOC) is putting us at risk," Stefanidi said in an interview with Reuters.

## Modified qualifiers

Tokyo is set to host about 11,000 athletes and 57% have earned their spots at the Games. The remaining 43% will clinch their places through modified qualifiers, or previous performances based on ranking.

The lead-up to the Tokyo Olympics has already been disrupted as little-known retired swimmer Naoko Imoto

will be a last-minute stand-in to receive the Olympic flame during a scaled back handover in Athens on Thursday.

Due to travel restrictions in Europe, Tokyo 2020 announced on Tuesday it would not be sending a delegation to Athens to receive the Olympic flame, as is customary for a host city.

The Japanese ambassador to Greece will instead receive the flame on behalf of Tokyo 2020 during a ceremony set to take place in an empty stadium.

# Meagre returns for openers in Ranji Trophy

Wasim Jaffer attributes it to delayed start and lack of adaptation time

**CRICKET**

AMOL KARHADKAR  
MUMBAI

From Arun Lal to Wasim Jaffer, Abhinav Mukund to Vikram Rathour, Shiv Sundar Das to Surendra Bhawe, opening batsmen have emerged as run-machines in the Ranji Trophy over the years. But the recently-concluded edition threw up a startling fact – not a single opener featured in the top-20 run-getters.

In fact, the highest tally by an opener came from Goa's Sumiran Amonkar (24th with 646 runs), who played in Plate Group, the lowest rung. Each of the last 20 editions of the tournament has seen at least one opener in the top-five run-getters.

So what has led to the drastic change in the openers' numbers? Jaffer believes a delayed start to the tournament is a "major reason".

## Aiding the bowlers

"Since the tournament started in December this time around, the conditions were in favour of pace bowlers. Earlier we used to start in October and the conditions would be even," Jaffer, the former India opener who retired recently as the highest run-getter in Ranji history, tells *The Hindu*.

"Now it's a one-way traffic for pacers. Even if the wicket has a little bit of help, because of the weather, the bowlers are always on top. Not just in the north, but a



**Wise reasoning:** Wasim Jaffer feels that the top-order batsmen struggled this season because of the moving ball and no lead time between change in formats. ■ FILE PHOTO: SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

majority of places are so cold that it works against batsmen, especially openers. Add to that the SG ball that aids bowlers and has made life difficult for openers."

## India-A players struggle

Vijay Dahiya, the former India wicketkeeper-batsman who also coached Delhi to its last Ranji title in 2007-08, doesn't see the late start as a factor, but is worried about the lack of runs from the likes of Priyank Panchal and Abhimanyu Easwaran.

The duo, a regular with India-A for the last couple of seasons, had a miserable season.

While Panchal, who plays for Gujarat, tallied 457 runs from 17 innings at 28.57, Abhimanyu, who led Bengal to the final, scored just 258 runs from the same number of innings at 17.20.

"A worrying trend is that some of the regular openers who have been playing for India-A haven't been able to score runs in the Ranji Trophy. I am not sure on what basis will they be persisted with the next time an India-A or Rest of India squad is picked," says Dahiya, a regular in commentary crew for domestic cricket.

## TN coach's take

D. Vasu, Tamil Nadu's coach, feels the absence of established batsmen in a few games has also played a role in the low returns.

"Senior players in a few sides were coming in and going out. Even for Tamil Nadu, we struggled to get an opener. Murali Vijay went out and then Abhinav Mukund didn't play a few games," Vasu says.

"We had issues because of that. Once the senior bat-

smen go out, getting replacements becomes a problem."

Jaffer concludes by pointing out the lack of time to prepare ahead of the tournament after a prolonged white-ball season.

## No breather

For the last couple of years, the inter-State domestic season has started with the Vijay Hazare Trophy and moved to Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, leaving barely a week for the players to prepare with the red ball.

"After playing one-dayers and T20s, if you start Ranji Trophy in eight or 10 days, you are bound to struggle. Even the best find it difficult to cope with the change in the formats and suddenly if you enter Ranji Trophy in that kind of weather, it's bound to be challenging for the openers."

**COVID-19 IMPACT**

## Wimbledon still planning to go ahead

LONDON

Wimbledon organisers are still planning to play the Grand Slam this year, despite the coronavirus chaos that led the French Open to be pushed back until September. Wimbledon is scheduled to run from June 29 to July 12, but All England Club chiefs are aware the sporting schedule has been decimated by the deadly pandemic.

Wimbledon remains hopeful that play at the grass-court tournament will be able to go ahead if the spread of the virus is slowed. But Richard Lewis, chief executive of the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, insisted they would put safety first.

"At the heart of our decision-making is our commitment to the health and safety of our members, staff, and the public, and we are grateful to the government and public health authorities for their advice and support," Lewis said.

## Halep to donate money to fight the virus

BUCHAREST

Wimbledon champion and World No. 2 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. "Let us all take care of ourselves, be responsible



## Dutee worried about Olympic qualification

NEW DELHI

Athlete Dutee Chand is wary of missing out on the Olympics after she was deprived of her training-cum-competition stint in Germany due to the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting her plans to qualify for the Tokyo Games.

Dutee was to train and take part in Olympic qualifying events in Germany from March 2 but despite getting the visa and sponsorship, she could not make it. "I was to go for a

training-cum-competition stint in Germany from March 2. I was planning to run in some quality competitions in Europe and hoping to qualify for the Olympics," Dutee said.

"I have got the visa and other travel documents. But I got the message from the training base in Germany that I should not come due to coronavirus. I am very disappointed." About her qualification for the Olympic Games, Dutee said: "I don't know. I am worried that I may not qualify for the Olympics."

## CCFC's AFC Cup group games put off

CHENNAI

Chennai City FC's AFC Cup group stage matches have been postponed until further notice due to COVID-19, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said on Wednesday. The AFC Champions League has also been postponed. Chennai City drew its opening game 2-2 against Maziya R&C in Group E in Chennai. It was scheduled to travel to Maldives to take on TC Sports Club on April 15.

The AFC had earlier postponed all AFC Cup West Zone Group Stage matches on March 12 and the latest decision applies to all matches in March and April across the five AFC zones.

## South African cricketers asked to self-isolate for 14 days

JOHANNESBURG

The members of the South African cricket team have been told to undergo a 14-day period of self-isolation and social distancing to prevent the spread of coronavirus following their return from an aborted tour of India.

## Hazy future, says Anderson

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
LONDON

England fast bowler James Anderson fears the coronavirus pandemic could see the domestic and international season abandoned completely.

"Cricket and sport is not the be-all and end-all, but it is my livelihood. It's all I know," said Anderson.

"The season is unlikely to start. It's still a little bit hazy as to what's going to happen. There's a chance we might not even bowl a ball this summer.

"My wife's mum and dad live in Spain so they are in lockdown. They are in the age group where there are concerns. The anxiety is building up because of not knowing what will happen in the next few months."



Anderson. ■ FILE PHOTO

## Ganguly gets a much-needed break

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
KOLKATA

With the IPL postponed to April 15 and the BCCI office shut, board president Sourav Ganguly has got a welcome break from his busy schedule.

"Corona virus scare .. happy to sit in the lounge at 5pm .. free... can't remember when I did last," Ganguly posted on Instagram.



Sourav Ganguly. ■ INSTAGRAM/SOURAVGANGULY

# Janani and Vrinda in International Panel of ICC Development Umpires

SPORTS REPORTER  
CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu's Janani Narayanan and Vrinda Rathi of Mumbai were named in the International Panel of ICC Development Umpires on Wednesday. The announcement comes soon after the launch of 100% Cricket, a 12-month campaign to build on the momentum of the ICC Women's T20 World Cup 2020.

A software engineer, Janani wrote her umpiring exams in 2015 before officiating in the TNCA league.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, she said, "I have not played cricket but always wanted to be associated with the game. I could write my exams only in 2015 because women were not allowed before that."

The 34-year-old said she idolises the late David Shepherd of England and retired India umpire S. Venkatraghavan. Janani has been umpiring in Indian domestic tournaments since 2018.

"It feels great to know that Vrinda and I have been inducted into the ICC's development panel. This gives me the chance to learn from seniors on the circuit and improve in the years to



**Recognition:** Vrinda, left, and Janani look forward to being associated with the sport at a higher level.

come. Cricket has become part of my daily routine since the 90s, and I look forward to being associated with the sport at a higher level," said Janani.

Vrinda, 31, a former varsity player who has kept scores in international matches, has also been umpiring in Indian domestic cricket from 2018. She was inspired to take up umpiring after watching retired woman umpire Kathy Cross of

New Zealand at the Women's World Cup 2013.

"I feel privileged to be named in ICC's development panel as this opens new avenues for me. I am sure I will get to learn a lot from other members of the panel and look forward to future assignments," said Vrinda. "Having played cricket and also been a scorer, this was a natural progression for me and I am happy at the way things unfolded."

## Bangar says no to BCB offer

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
NEW DELHI

Former India batting coach Sanjay Bangar has decided against taking up the Bangladesh Cricket Board's offer to become its Test team's consultant, citing personal and professional commitments.

Bangar was asked to coach Bangladesh in red-ball cricket eight weeks ago, but he could not take up the offer as he had signed a two-year contract with Star Sports in the interim.

"They offered me the post eight weeks ago. I had finalised my contract with Star, giving me the opportunity to balance out my personal and professional commitments. However, I look forward to working with BCB in the future," said Bangar.



Bangar. ■ FILE PHOTO: AP

# PGA Championship, Le Mans postponed

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
LOS ANGELES

The US PGA golf Championship, scheduled to be held from May 14 to 17 at the Harding Park in San Francisco, has been postponed.

It is the second 2020 Major golf championship, after the Augusta Masters, to be derailed by the coronavirus

pandemic.

## Date to be finalised

The PGA of America said on Tuesday it hoped to reschedule the event at Harding Park later in the year.

Shortly after the PGA Championship was postponed, the US PGA Tour announced it was extending

its own tournament moratorium.

The Le Mans 24-hour endurance race, one of the traditional highlights of the motor racing calendar, has been postponed from June to September 19-20.

The race serves as the finale of the FIA's World Endurance Championship.

# Vihari for county cricket

V.V. SUBRAHMANYAM  
HYDERABAD

Indian Test cricketer Hanuma Vihari will play for a leading team in the English county championship in August.

The 26-year-old Vihari, who has played nine Tests so far, scoring 552 runs with a century and four fifties, hoped it would be a "great experience."

"It is obviously exciting to play for the first time in English county which is said to be a rewarding experience. I hope to keep improving, which is the key for longevity at the highest level," Vihari said in a chat with *The Hindu* on Wednesday.

Returning from the just-concluded TNCA first division league in Chennai, where he turned out for Nelson Sports Club, Vihari said he will be playing only the final four games for the County side in view of the Coronavirus threat and the precautionary measures that are in place.



Hanuma Vihari. ■ FILE PHOTO

"I feel that things are going in the right direction right now as far as my career is concerned."

"I am taking a break right now (he led Andhra in the Ranji Trophy before joining the Indian team on the tour of New Zealand). The aim will be to focus on my fitness and try to keep improving," Vihari said.

# Hao stuns Liren

**CANDIDATES CHESS**

SPORTS BUREAU  
YEKATERINBURG

Wang Hao stunned fellow-Chinese Ding Liren in the opening round of the Candidates Chess tournament. Liren was playing with white pieces.

The day's only other decisive result also went in favour of black, as Anish Giri went down to Ian Nepomniachtchi.

The game between the two Russians, Alexander

Grischuk and Kirill Alekseenko, was also drawn.

The tournament is played on a double round-robin basis (the participants will play each other twice). The winner will be eligible to challenge World champion Magnus Carlsen later in the year. **The results (first round):** Maxime Vachier-Lagrave (Fra) 0.5 drew with Fabiano Caruana (US) 0.5; Ding Liren (Chn) 0 lost to Wang Hao (Chn) 1; Anish Giri (Ned) 0 lost to Ian Nepomniachtchi (Rus) 1; Alexander Grischuk (Rus) 0.5 drew with Kirill Alekseenko (Rus) 0.5.



**Good start:** Wang Hao, right, got the better of Ding Liren in the opening round. ■ FILE