

19 SPORT

BRIEFLY

Candidates tourney stopped after Russia bans flights

The world governing body of chess (FIDE) on Thursday stopped the Candidates tournament in Yekaterinburg, Russia at halfway stage after the hosts decided to ban all flights into and out of the country owing to the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. The prestigious tournament was stopped after seven rounds. The eighth round was scheduled to be played on Thursday. "Today, the government of the Russian Federation announced that starting March 27, 2020, Russia interrupts air traffic with other countries without indicating any time frames," FIDE president Arkady Dvorkovich said in a statement. "FIDE can not continue the tournament without guarantees for the players' and officials' safe and timely return home. In this situation and on the basis of clause 1.5. Rules of Candidates Tournament, the FIDE President decided to stop the tournament." Eight players fight it out in the Candidates tournament to determine the worthy challenger for world Champion Magnus Carlsen.

Tour de France may go ahead without roadside spectators

It is too soon to decide whether the Tour de France can go ahead amid the coronavirus pandemic, but if it does it may be without roadside spectators in order to minimise infection risk, the French sports minister said. Following the postponement of the Euro 2020 soccer Championship and the Tokyo Olympic Games, the Tour de France – which takes place in June and July – is one of the last major global sporting events that has not yet been cancelled or postponed. "The Tour is a sports monument. It is too soon to decide. There is a time for everything. For now, we have a more urgent battle to fight. Let us focus on this mountain in front of us and then consider what's next," French Sports Minister Roxana Maracineanu wrote on Twitter. Since the Tour's inception in 1903, only the two world wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 have forced organisers to cancel the race.

McLaren F1 staff back home after quarantine

All the McLaren Formula One team members quarantined Melbourne since the cancelled Australian Grand Prix have returned home, the UK-based outfit reported on Thursday. "We are pleased to confirm that as of yesterday (Wednesday) evening, all team personnel who were in self-isolation in Melbourne, as well as management who had stayed with them, have now safely returned home," a spokesperson confirmed. A total of 16 McLaren staff were placed in quarantine for two weeks at the request of the Australian medical authorities. One because he had tested positive for the coronavirus, another because of developing virus-like symptoms and the remainder because they had been in close contact with the British mechanic who had tested positive. Three management personnel remained in Australia to support them. McLaren announced last week that the mechanic was symptom-free. **AGENCIES**

Wimbledon ponders next move – cancellation an option

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MARCH 26

A UEFA CHAMPIONS League Round of 16 game, on March 11 between Liverpool and Atletico Madrid at Anfield, was the last high-profile sporting activity to take place in England. In hindsight, it was a match that should not have been played, or at least, should have taken place behind closed doors, for on that same day, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 as a pandemic.

Instead, at least 3,000 fans from Madrid – a city already in lockdown at the time – were allowed to enter the stadium, pubs, restaurants and hotels in Liverpool, and a day later, the host city faced 10 new cases of people testing positive for the coronavirus.

The situation has become much worse all over the world ever since. But in the United Kingdom, that one fortnight in June-July, when the biggest stars in tennis – some who transcend sport – flock to the grass courts of Wimbledon, now hangs in the balance. The coronavirus has already forced the organisers of the French Open to reschedule to September, but by next week, the fate of this year's



A Wimbledon cancellation could also delay Roger Federer's comeback. AP

Wimbledon Championships will be decided. "The unprecedented challenge presented by the COVID-19 crisis continues to affect our way of life in ways that we could not have imagined, and our thoughts are with all those affected in the UK and around the world. The single most important consideration is one of

public health, and we are determined to act responsibly through the decisions we make," All England Lawn Tennis Club chief executive Richard Lewis said in a statement. "We are working hard to bring certainty to our plans for 2020 and have convened an emergency meeting of the AELTC Main Board for next

For Wimbledon, the only grass-court major in the calendar, a drastic shift like French Open's is not an option since the amount of sun required for the surface will not be suitable in the latter months of the year.

week, at which a decision will be made."

When the Fédération Française de Tennis made the unilateral decision earlier this month to postpone the French Open from its usual spot in the last week of May and first week of June to a week after the US Open in September, players in particular were annoyed by the sudden change in schedule. Yet, given the clay surface used at Roland Garros, it was a shift that could have been made. For Wimbledon, the only grass-court major in the calendar, such a drastic shift is not an option since the amount of sun required for the surface will not be suitable in the latter months of the year.

"At this time, based on the advice we have received from the public health authorities, the

very short window available to us to stage The Championships due to the nature of our surface suggests that postponement is not without significant risk and difficulty. Playing behind closed doors has been formally ruled out," read the statement on Wimbledon website.

One possibility for the organisers is to make use of the now vacant spot made available by the postponed Tokyo Olympic Games. The main draw for Wimbledon is scheduled to start on June 29 and continue till the men's singles final on July 12, while the Olympics were scheduled to start two weeks later on July 25.

Sources, however, told *The Guardian* that Wimbledon is unlikely to utilise the window made available by the Olympics, due to the "thinking (that it) is safer – and more convenient – to stick with existing arrangements, however perilous in terms of planning, than disturb a system that has been in place for years."

Due to the current lockdown in place in the United Kingdom, only a small number of staff is presently permitted to continue work on site to maintain the grass courts and security.

Should The Championships be called off this year, it will be the first time for it to have happened in 75 years, after it was not held from 1940 to 1945 due to the Second World War.

Cricket ready with eraser

World Test Championship might see a major rewrite, T20 World Cup likely to be scrapped

SHAMIK CHAKRABARTY
KOLKATA, MARCH 26

FOLLOWING THE postponement of all qualifying events for the 2021 T20 World Cup and the 2023 World Cup, the International Cricket Council (ICC) has decided against discussing the future of the ongoing World Test Championship (WTC) during its Board meeting on March 29. The game's global body is still optimistic about holding this year's T20 World Cup in Australia as per schedule – in October-November – but given the global spread of coronavirus, uncertainty remains.

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) has suspended all professional cricket in the country until May 28 and with England scheduled to play their first Test of a three-match series against the West Indies on June 4, at the Oval, reworking the WTC calendar appears highly likely. Bangladesh, too, are scheduled to host Australia for a two-Test series in June and if those series are deferred, there might not be enough time to accommodate the Tests featuring all nine teams by March 2021. The first cycle of the WTC ends in March next year, with the final due in June. Teams are supposed to play six series each.

When contacted by *The Indian Express*, a top ICC official said the upcoming Board meeting, via conference call, is unlikely to discuss a WTC rescheduling. "Those matters will not be taken up now. The upcoming meetings will deal with urgent matters like approval of the accounts, audited statements etc. that are required for Annual Conference," the official said.

Asked if the ICC would deal with the issues during its meetings in May, the official said: "Let's see what happens. It depends on the situation of the globe (with regards to the coronavirus outbreak)."

At the moment, India top the WTC table with 360 points. But Australia breathe down their neck with 296 points and all other teams have the opportunity to climb up the ladder, given that they have enough games in hand. With no timeline available for the coronavirus problem to run its course, the ICC, it is learnt, will think about the future only after cricket resumes.

According to Dr Frank Atherton, the chief medical officer for Wales, the coronavirus outbreak might peak in UK in May-June. "The best guess is then a period of six to eight weeks of quite significant levels of transmission in the UK, with a tapering perhaps in July



CLOSE-OF-PLAY

Action from a cricket match at a closed-market during the lockdown in Srinagar. AP

and August... So an upsurge in April, possible peak in May-June and a downturn later in the year," Dr Atherton told reporters at Cardiff earlier this month. Little wonder then that the All England Club has called an emergent meeting next week to decide if it is even viable to hold this year's Wimbledon, due to start on June 29. The International Olympic Committee in agreement with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has already decided to defer the 2020 Tokyo Olympics – due to begin on July 24 – until the summer of 2021.

Against this backdrop, the ICC might have a race against time to complete the first WTC cycle within the scheduled March 2021 deadline. This paper understands that if there's not enough time to accommodate all the series, the entire cycle can be stretched. Then again, with the current Future Tours Programme (FTP) ending in 2023, an exten-

sion of the ongoing WTC cycle might create a serious problem in terms of holding the second edition of the Test Championship, due from 2021-2023, inside the current rights cycle. As every team still has a fair chance to reach the WTC final – top two teams will get there – picking the finalists based on current standings is not an option. In worst-case scenario, declaring the entire first cycle null and void, subject to the ICC Board's approval, is not ruled out.

"I think it is too soon to make a call on what happens," a Pakistan Cricket Board official told this paper.

2020 T20 World Cup

The 2020 ICC T20 World Cup is scheduled to be held in Australia from October 18 to November 15. However, the Scott Morrison government in Australia has imposed a Covid-19 travel ban for all non-residents and

non-citizens, which could remain for six months or longer. And this puts a question mark over the T20 World Cup, although the tournament is still seven months away.

"We are monitoring the situation closely with relevant authorities and will continue to do so. We are planning for the event to go ahead as scheduled," an event spokesperson told *The Indian Express*.

Meanwhile, in a press release the ICC stated: "After careful evaluation of the current situation and with the health and well-being of the global cricket family the priority, all ICC qualifying events due to take place before 30 June will be postponed subject to further review. The decision has been taken in conjunction with Members and in line with the relevant government and public health authority advice." This puts on hold eight qualifying tournaments involving Associate members.

Buttler hoping for curtailed IPL, Stokes training but unsure of trip to India

London: ENGLAND WICKETKEEPER-BATSMAN Jos Buttler is hoping for at least a curtailed IPL this season, aware that it would be difficult to conduct the "massive tournament" in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. The league was scheduled to start on March 29 in Mumbai but it was postponed to April 15 to contain the spread of the coronavirus, which has claimed more than 21,000 lives across the globe.

"No news at the moment. We saw, initially, that it was going to be postponed. It's very hard to see this changing in the immediate future, so I don't see that as a possibility at the moment," Buttler said in a *skysports* podcast. "Obviously, it's such a massive tournament for world cricket, so hopefully some of it can go ahead – perhaps a shortened tournament."

Asked with whom he would least like to self-isolate with, Buttler quipped: "Ravi Ashwin, probably. It's actually a year ago since I got 'mankaded' because I keep getting tweeted about it, saying 'stay safe, don't go outside' with those pictures of me." Ashwin on Wednesday had cited the Mankading incident involving Buttler to urge people to stay indoor during coronavirus lockdown in the country.

UK too has put its population under a lockdown and Buttler said the break has given him an opportunity to spend time with his daughter and he tries to keep himself fit.

"Obviously, very strange circumstances, but it's actually quite nice to spend some time at home, be with our little girl and actually just be a dad for a bit. I've also been doing some Pilates with my Mrs, in my cricket gear," he said.

'I know I'm probably not playing'

England all-rounder Ben Stokes says he is working hard to stay in shape for next month's IPL, even though he knows the tournament is unlikely to go ahead. "At the moment my next competitive cricket is going to be in the IPL," Stokes – one of the 13 England players due to feature in the league – told BBC Radio 5 Live. "That hasn't changed yet so I have to think I will be playing on April 20. I have to get my head round that I am playing even though in the back of my mind I know I am probably not. I have to build up and get myself physically in a position that if it does happen I am good to go. I cannot take three weeks off and expect the body to be ready because it doesn't work like that."

PTV/REUTERS

KIWI GROUNDED

Former New Zealand pacer O'Brien crowdfunding for flight back home

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
CHRISTCHURCH, MARCH 26

DESPERATE TO reunite with his family in the UK, stranded former New Zealand pacer Iain O'Brien has resorted to crowdfunding to arrange for his tickets after his flights were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 43-year-old from is seeking donations through social networking site Twitter to fund his way back home.

"Ok, so trying to raise some money to pay for this flight back to the UK," O'Brien wrote on his handle. "I have an idea. If anyone would love a 20 min Skype/vid call, one on one, talk about all things cricket, politics, sausages, mental health, Sachin, etc. If you'd like that & can spare a couple of \$, DM me."

O'Brien played 22 Tests, 10 ODIs and four T20Is for New Zealand but now lives with his wife Rosie and two kids in the United Kingdom.

The coronavirus outbreak has so far claimed more than 21,000 lives and in-

fectured over 4,00,000 globally, prompting countries to shut down borders.

O'Brien, who was in New Zealand to deal with some mental health issues, had earlier said that he is worried about his wife's health as she has a lung condition, which puts her at great risk in the rapidly-spreading virus.

"The big bit for me is my wife has a lung condition where if she gets any sort of chest infection it can take time off her life," O'Brien was quoted as saying by the 'stuff.co.nz'.

"This virus could kill her. With a couple of kids for her to deal with, and her mum is 80, there's a fair bit on her plate at the moment. I would be kind of keen to take some of that stress off her but I think I'm just adding to it at the moment."

We've to keep an eye on those who are staying alone: Langer

Melbourne: Australia head coach Justin Langer is worried about the impact prolonged isolation can have on a player's mental health and said they will keep a close watch on those who are forced to live

alone now due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The mental health thing, we talked about it in a conference call yesterday, particularly for any of our staff or players who are home alone basically. We have to keep an eye on those guys and girls to make sure they're ok," Langer was quoted as saying by ESPNcricinfo.

"Hopefully being around their families and having a rest from the pressure of the games at the moment will have an impact. But we're very aware and we've got incredible resources available for all our players and staff at Cricket Australia.

"In leadership we talk about caring about people – it's a really, really important part of any leadership."

The global health crisis, which has so far killed over 21,000 people globally since its spread from Chinese city of Wuhan, has forced shut the sporting world with Olympics being pushed by a year and all cricket events coming to a standstill.

Australia were forced to cancel their home limited-overs series against New Zealand after just one match and their Test tour to Bangladesh in June also looks un-



Stranded in New Zealand, Iain O'Brien is seeking donation for return trip to UK.

certain at present.

Langer appealed to players to remain optimistic during the crisis and consider this extended break as a blessing.

Ok, so trying to raise some money to pay for this flight back to the UK. I have an idea. If anyone would love a 20 min Skype/vid call, one on one, talk about all things cricket, politics, sausages, mental health, Sachin, etc. If you'd like that & can spare a couple of \$, DM me... The big bit for me is my wife has a lung condition where if she gets any sort of chest infection it can take time off her life (sic)."

IAIN O'BRIEN POSTED ON HIS TWITTER HANDLE

"I'm trying to encourage our players to find some silver lining. We identified in South Africa a number of our players were physically and mentally exhausted.

"We had all winter (in England) with the World Cup and the Ashes then into our summer... it gives them (players) a really good opportunity to recharge. We're looking at scenarios to make sure we'll be ready for whatever comes."