

## IN BRIEF



## Japan to end display of Olympic Flame

**TOKYO**  
The Olympic flame, kept for public display in the Fukushima region since last week, will be removed, officials said on Tuesday. The country is bracing for a state of emergency due to the coronavirus pandemic that has forced the postponement of Tokyo 2020 to next year. AFP



## Italy and Catalonia MotoGPs postponed

**PARIS**  
The start of the MotoGP season has been pushed back to June-end at the earliest after organisers on Tuesday postponed the Italian GP (May 31) and Catalan GP (June 7) due to the coronavirus. The first race of the season is now scheduled for Germany on June 21. AFP

## Former Real and Barca coach Antic passes away

**MADRID**  
Serbian coach Radomir Antic, the only person to manage Atletico Madrid, Real Madrid and Barcelona, died on Monday at the age of 71 following a long illness. His first stint at one of Spain's big clubs came during a 10-month spell with Real in 1991-92. Antic managed Atletico across three different spells between 1995 and 2000 and Barcelona during the second part of the 2002-03 campaign. AFP



## La Liga eyeing May return, says Tebas

**MADRID**  
La Liga could return to action as early as next month, its president Javier Tebas said on Tuesday, following the coronavirus shutdown. Tebas also warned clubs could lose as much as €1 billion if the season is not completed. AFP

## New dates for World Team TT Championships

**LAUSANNE**  
The World Team Table Tennis Championships, originally scheduled for March 2020, will now be held from September 27 to October 4, the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) announced on Tuesday. PTI

## World Athletics suspends Olympic qualification period

**LONDON**  
World Athletics on Tuesday suspended the qualification period for the Tokyo Olympics until December 2020. "Qualification for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games is suspended effective from 6 April 2020 until 30 November 2020 included," World Athletics said in a statement. "Subject to the global situation returning to normal, the qualification period will resume on 1 December 2020 and continue to the new qualification deadline in 2021 set by the International Olympic Committee." PTI



## No NBA decisions likely until May: Silver

**LOS ANGELES**  
NBA Commissioner Adam Silver says he thinks it will be at least May before any decision can be made about resumption of the 2019-20 season that was shut down amid the coronavirus pandemic. Silver also said the league was considering resuming play without fans, whether in NBA arenas, at practice facilities or in a single site tournament-style playoffs. AFP

## Nick Kyrgios offers to personally drop off food

**SYDNEY**  
Controversial tennis star Nick Kyrgios has offered to deliver food personally to people finding themselves hungry during the coronavirus lockdown. "Please don't go to sleep with an empty stomach. Even just for a box of noodles, a loaf of bread or milk. I will drop it off at your doorstep, no questions asked!" he said in an Instagram post late on Monday. AFP



## Real Kashmir signs Siddiqi

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA NEW DELHI**  
I-League team Real Kashmir FC has officially signed former Arsenal youth and Northampton Town player Kashif Siddiqi on loan from Oxford United.

The club also announced an official partnership with Oxford United Football Club, a collaboration that will present a number of football, philanthropic and commercial opportunities.

British citizen Siddiqi, who can operate at full-back or in midfield, was due to join the snow leopards at the start of the season but suffered an Achilles tendon rupture whilst training with his parent Oxford United FC.

"This opportunity means a lot to me and I'd like to thank everyone at Real Kashmir FC and Oxford FC. I have been out of the game due to injury, during which I have been really focused on getting fit but also community work, but that is a prelude to a really exciting new adventure for me in Kashmir with a major team in India," said Siddiqi.

## Spanish contingent waiting to go home

**AMITABHA DAS SHARMA KOLKATA**  
A group of players and coaches from Spain are eagerly waiting for the lockdown to end so that they can go back home.

For Mohun Bagan head coach Kibu Vicuna, the charm of winning the I-League title, with a record four rounds to spare, turned a bit sour as he and his compatriots in the team had to stay back for the tournament to get over. It is the same situation for East Bengal's Spanish coach Mario Rivera and compatriots, who are now holed up in their respective apartments, arranged by the club.

**Protracted season**  
With 23 matches still to be played and all the positions,



Kibu Vicuna. • FILE PHOTO

## 'Football the last thing on my mind'

It's important to take care of physical and mental health, says Chhetri

ASHWIN ACHAL  
BENGALURU

In these tough times, with lockdown in effect and long days passing ever so slowly, one might feel an emotional emptiness deep inside. To best avoid this slippery slope, this downtime should be used to exercise the mind in order to keep spirits high, India and Bengaluru FC (BFC) football star Sunil Chhetri believes.

"It is important that everyone exercises their minds. These are unprecedented times; it's easy to get bogged down. The key is to stay calm, take care of your physical health and, more importantly, your mental health.

"Find things to keep yourself busy, hoping that these days will pass soon," Chhetri told *The Hindu*.

The striker appealed to everyone to stay indoors in the fight against the coronavirus outbreak, while offering some advice on how to spend time wisely.

"Now is a great time to read that book you've been putting off, finally getting down to cooking something you've been wanting to put together, learning a language, taking a short course online – the options are plenty.

**You have to think about the battle faced by people who will be beginning from scratch. You have to be grateful**

"And if you can squeeze in a little basic workout at home, that would be ideal. Most importantly, whatever it is you choose to do, make sure you're exercising your mind," he said.

## Raising funds

Chhetri led the effort to raise funds from current and former Indian footballers to donate an undisclosed amount to the PM-CARES Fund.

"All the national team boys came together and decided we needed to help. It didn't take any forcing or coaxing. Everyone came forward willingly, and that was heartening. Even some of the former players, when they heard of this, jumped right in with their contributions," Chhetri said.

He is not concerned about the lack of football action, as there are far bigger concerns to tackle.

## Fortunate

"Football is the last thing on my mind. It's easy for us sitting in homes to talk about what we miss doing. We're fortunate. There are so many out there who are struggling to get meals, and don't have a roof over their heads.

"When things get back to normal, football will happen again. But you have to think about the battle faced by people who will be beginning from scratch.

"You have to be grateful," he said.



The bigger picture: Sunil Chhetri feels that keeping active and staying fit will work wonders in these tough times.

• FILE PHOTO: K. MURALI KUMAR

## Ready to play in empty stadiums: Harbhajan

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
MUMBAI

Veteran off-spinner Harbhajan Singh says he won't mind an IPL played in empty stadiums but the event should go ahead when the COVID-19 pandemic is brought under control as several livelihoods are dependent on it.

"Spectators are important, but if the situation arises, I don't mind playing without them. Yes, as a player I won't get the vibe, but this will ensure that every fan will get to watch IPL on television," Harbhajan, who plays for Chennai Super Kings, told Star Sports' Cricket Connected.

## Priority

"We will have to be cautious about everything and should prioritise players' safety by ensuring that the match venues, team hotels, flights are properly sanitised. A lot of lives are on the line so we should organise



Harbhajan... optimistic.

• FILE PHOTO: K. PICHUMANI

the IPL when everything is fine," he added.

The BCCI has suspended the IPL till April 15.

Harbhajan said he is keeping himself fit for the league as and when it happens.

"I hope that the IPL happens soon, till then I will keep myself fit," said the 39-year-old veteran of 103 Tests.

## A ploy to limit ways of getting out: Smith

The run-machine explains rationale behind his unusual batting stance

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
NEW DELHI

His unorthodox batting stance has left many befuddled, but Steve Smith says though it depends on a number of factors, he generally positions himself outside the off-stump to limit ways in which he can be dismissed.

Smith, the World's No. 1 Test batsman, has amassed 7227 runs in 73 Tests and 4162 runs in ODIs with an unconventional technique, which many have failed to decode.

During a podcast organised by his IPL team Rajasthan Royals, Smith opened up about the unusual technique to New Zealand spinner Ish Sodhi.

The Royals' skipper said: "It depends on who's bowling, how is the wicket playing, how I gonna score and stuff like that or how people are trying to get me out,

probably that determines how open I am or otherwise how closed I am.

## Visual judgement

"But my general stance where my back foot is going to almost off stump, or may be even outside at stumps, I know that anything outside my eyeline isn't hitting the stumps," he said.

"For me, you shouldn't get out if the ball is not hitting the stumps, so that is just a trick from me when I first started doing it, just limiting the ways I get out," he explained.

The 30-year-old said his off-stump stance helps him to leave the ball which are outside his line of sight.

"Sometimes, I get trapped in front but I'm okay with that at stumps, knowing that if it is outside my eyeline, I don't need to try and play the ball, I can just leave that," he said.

## Aussies went soft on Kohli and India: Clarke

'Were too scared to sledge players to protect their IPL deals'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
MELBOURNE

The Australian cricketers were so keen on protecting their lucrative IPL deals that they felt "scared" of sledging India captain Virat Kohli and his teammates during a particular period, former skipper Michael Clarke has claimed.

"Everybody knows how powerful India are as regards the financial part of the game, internationally or domestically with the IPL," Clarke told *Big Sports Breakfast*.

"I feel that Australian cricket and probably every other team over a little period were too scared to sledge Kohli or the other Indian players because they had to play with them in April," the World Cup-winning Australian skipper said, dropping a bombshell.

## Compromised

Clarke believes that some of Australia's ruthless on-field character got compromised because the top-10 draws at the IPL auctions gave an impression that they would never sledge Kohli. "Name a list of ten players and they are



Clarke and Kohli. • PTI

bidding for these Australian players to get into their IPL team," he said.

"The players were like: 'I'm not going to sledge Kohli, I want him to pick me for Bangalore so I can make my USD1 million for my six weeks'

"I feel like that's where Australia went through that little phase where our cricket became a little bit softer or not as hard as we're accustomed to seeing," Clarke said about the time after the ball-tampering scandal when terms like "Elite honesty" were propagated.

India and Australia have always had a fiery on-field chemistry.



Logical reasoning: Steve Smith says his stance depends on the bowler or the playing surface. • FILE PHOTO: V.V. KRISHNAN

## As with so many recent questions, no one knows the answer to the fate of the IPL



## BETWEEN WICKETS

SURESH MENON

The American novelist and short story writer John Cheever said it best, although others too have said something similar: "I can't write without a reader."

It is the reader who makes the writer; the audience which makes the performer. Can you conceive of a concert, for example, in an empty hall, or a cricket match with no one in the stands? A few months ago this would have sounded absurd. Now we are forced to consider it in our virus-induced world of isolation and inactivity.

The UEFA Champions League, Serie A in Italy, the English Premier League, Mexico's football league were only some of the events that experimented with matches in empty stadiums before lockdowns and travel restrictions became the norm. There is something weird about playing in empty stadiums – especially since we call popular sports 'spectator sports'.

Cricket has sometimes been played in empty stadiums – but that was because no one turned up to watch. The expression "two men and a dog" was used so often to describe the turnout at some county matches in England that it has evolved into a sporting cliché. In India in recent years, Ranji Trophy matches would sometimes count as well attended if two men and a dog actually sat in the stands.

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## Immoral feel

There is something almost immoral about sport sans spectators. True, at the top level, it is not the paying spectator at the stadium who keeps the sport alive, but those munching on chips and nuts on their sofas back home lounging before a television set. Cricket has long ceased to be only a game played over 22 yards and become one played on the 22 inches (and more) of the television screen.

I suspect it is possible, thanks to CGI, to put cheering crowds into the background when a game is in reality being played in empty stadiums, and maybe that is where we are headed. I don't know if technology is advanced enough for us to be shown Don Bradman facing up to Jasprit Bumrah or C.K. Nayudu taking on Shane Warne.

However, that is a discussion for another day. Meanwhile, the IPL. It hasn't been formally called off yet

nor have fresh dates been announced. That's understandable. It certainly can't take place this month nor does it seem likely it can in the near future.

As with so many issues relating to the current situation, no one knows. Can India squeeze in a small window for a truncated tournament in September? No one knows. By when should a call be taken? No one knows. Contact-tracing and curve-flattening enter the discussion – two terms few had heard of till recently.

Already the World T20 in Australia in October-November is looking shaky, while the World Test championship is stuck in limbo and the ODI league (scheduled to begin next month) might have to be cancelled.

## 'Has the weight'

Not surprisingly, players and those involved with the tournament are hoping the IPL is held this year. England's Jos Buttler told ESPNcricinfo that the IPL "has the weight" to force changes in the calendar. Sanjay Manjrekar thinks it will kick start the economy. These are positive thoughts even if built on nothing more substantial than hope. The International Cricket Council meeting May 8-10 might provide some answers, or at least a set of alternatives.

Star India acquired the rights for IPL for five years in 2018 for

₹16,347.50 crore while franchises have paid a king's ransom for some of the players. You can see their dilemma.

It is crass to speak of such huge figures at a time when the country, and especially its poor are in dire straits. Not playing a tournament for one year is hardly in the same league as lives lost and livelihoods deprived in recent weeks. If there is a school of thought which believes that playing a truncated IPL – whenever that might be – at empty stadiums would salvage something from the wreckage of the coronavirus, that is understandable too.

But this is not like transporting the whole tournament lock, stock and barrel to South Africa as the second edition was. There was no treacherous virus then, no travel restrictions, no danger in crowds and no need for social distancing. The 13th edition faces something sport hasn't had to deal with in such numbers and with such intensity.

If Cheever were to return to our midst, he might be surprised to hear a fan has 'heard' all his short stories. 'Readers', in the classic sense may not be necessary in the age of audio books. Perhaps spectators may not be necessary in the age of television and live streaming. Still, the human cost of even a curtailed tournament might be too high.