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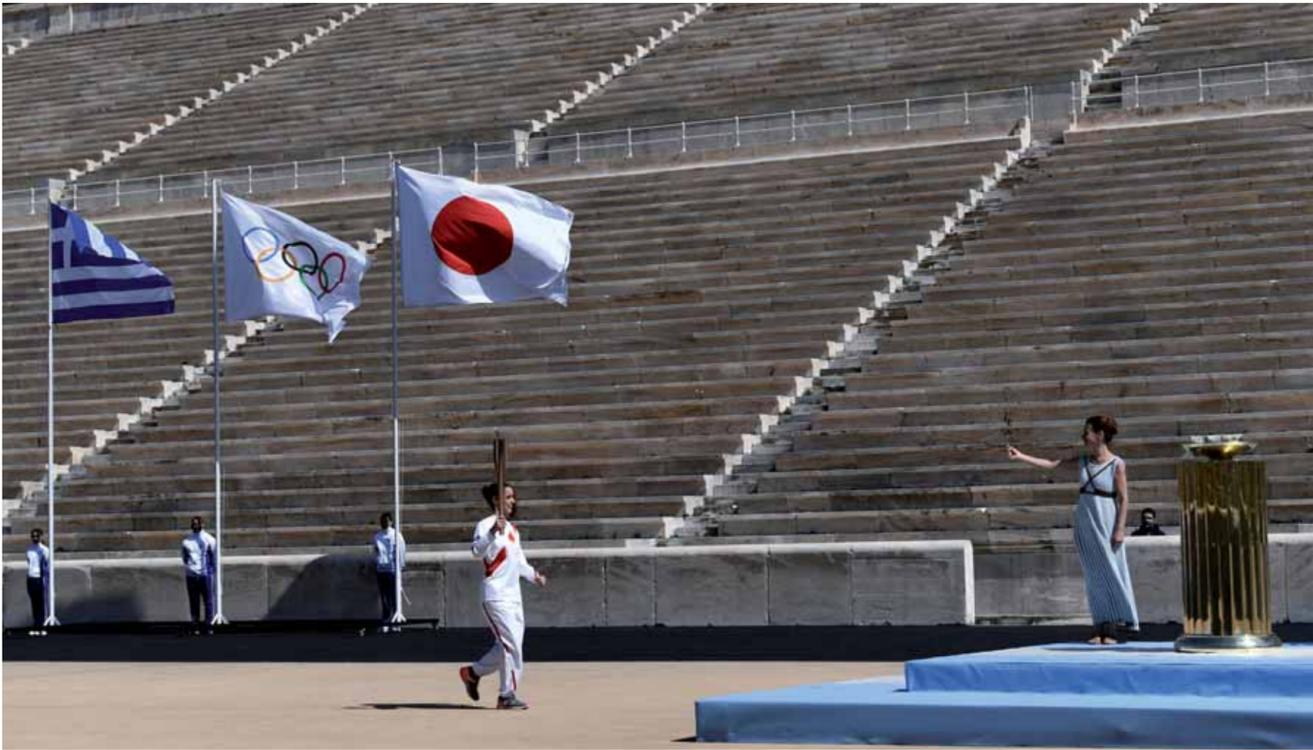
Stokes gearing up for IPL despite lockdown

Page 3

OLYMPIC GAMES

IOC working toward Olympics in July-August 2021: report

The organising committee has launched a taskforce to resolve issues, such as reviewing dates and securing venues



In this March 19, 2020, picture, an athlete carries the Olympic torch during the Olympic flame handover ceremony, which was held behind closed doors due to coronavirus concerns, for the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics at the Panathenaic Stadium in Athens, Greece. (Reuters)

Reuters
Tokyo, Japan

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is working with sports bodies to arrange a July-August window for the postponed Tokyo Olympics in 2021 and hopes to confirm the schedule within a month, Japan's *Yomiuri* newspaper reported yesterday.

John Coates, the IOC's Coordination Commission chief

for Tokyo, told the *Yomiuri* the Games would have to be held between the tennis Grand Slams of Wimbledon, slated to end in mid-July, and the US Open, which starts in late August.

"We want to move or less finalise the dates in four weeks' time," the paper quoted Coates as saying.

Coates, who is also president of the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC), said the summer scheduling would be dependent on avoiding clashes with the world championships for swim-

ming (July 16-August 1) and athletics (August 6-15).

World Athletics boss Sebastian Coe has said the world athletics championships in Eugene, Oregon could be moved back to 2022 if necessary.

Coates told the newspaper the hope was to follow the same arrangements next year that had been planned for 2020, including holding the marathon in the northern city of Sapporo instead of Tokyo to escape the heat.

The AOC confirmed the *Yomiuri* report's veracity and also

told Reuters in a statement that Coates had "proffered a view but confirms a range of options are on the table for the IOC".

The IOC and Japanese government succumbed to intense pressure from athletes and sporting bodies around the world on Tuesday, agreeing to push back the Games by as much as a year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Yesterday, the Tokyo 2020 organising committee launched a taskforce to resolve issues linked to the postponement, such as re-

viewing dates for the Games and securing venues.

No specifics have been discussed yet on the timing of the delayed Games, but a date needs to be decided as soon as possible, Hidemasa Nakamura, a senior official at Tokyo 2020, told reporters after the taskforce's first meeting.

IOC President Thomas Bach said on Wednesday "all options" were on the table for re-scheduling, including holding the Games before the Japanese summer.

Delaying Olympics will involve 'massive' costs, organisers say

Agencies
Tokyo, Japan

Rescheduling the Tokyo 2020 Olympics will involve "massive" additional costs, organisers of the Games conceded yesterday as they convened a taskforce to begin working on the "unprecedented" and complex task.

The historic decision to postpone the Games over the new coronavirus outbreak leaves organisers with a logistical headache as they work to shift the enormous event to an as-yet-undecided date next year.

"One by one, we need to ensure the problems we face can be solved," Tokyo 2020 CEO Toshiro Muto said in opening remarks at the first meeting of the taskforce.

"Additional expenses are going to be quite massive we assume. With regards to our revenues, we need to make a lot of effort there," he added.

Muto gave no estimates for how much the process of postponing the Olympic and Paralympic Games could cost. But according to the *Nikkei* daily, organisers estimate it will cost an extra \$2.7bn, including for venue rentals, rebooking hotels and additional payments for staff and security guards, among others.

Those costs could still come down depending on the outcome of negotiations, the business daily reported.

Muto said organisers would not rip up their existing plans, but added: "I guess we need to step back a bit."

"Sometimes you need to go back to the drawing board," he said.

TOKYO TO ASK IOC TO SHARE COSTS

Meanwhile, according to Kyodo News, Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike will ask the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to share the costs incurred by the postponement.

The governor said that host Tokyo will call on the IOC to "play a role," Kyodo reported.

Tokyo will "make an estimate promptly," she told Kyodo.

The Olympics have never faced this much disruption in peacetime, and the decision to delay the event has created unprecedented challenges, Tokyo 2020 president Yoshiro Mori said.

Tokyo 2020 staff "will experience difficulties they have never experienced before. I am sure they will rise to the occasion. This is going to be a very difficult task that we are facing," he said.

No deadlines have yet been set for the rescheduling of the Games, which are now due to take place by summer 2021, but Mori said he would ensure "all the decisions are made as quickly as possible".

Muto underscored the scale of the task ahead, saying even he "didn't imagine at all we would be tested to this degree".

"We want to make sure we go beyond this test and that next year in Tokyo, the torch is lit for the Olympic and Paralympic Games. We believe this is the mission we face."

FOCUS

Tokyo postponement could delay retirement for India's Paes

Reuters
Mumbai, India

Veteran Indian tennis player **Leander Paes** is contemplating extending his career by another year to bid for an eighth Olympic appearance following the postponement of the Tokyo Games to 2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Paes, who will turn 47 in June, announced late last year that 2020 would be his "farewell year" as a professional before he hangs up his racket.

The Rio Olympics was his seventh Olympic appearance since he made his first tilt at the 1992 Barcelona Games.

"It's a decision me and my team are thinking about very hard," Paes told ESPN. "My dad has been vociferous in wanting to

push me to play longer. He knows me well. He knows once I retire, I'm done. There's not going to be a return.

"The fitness is still there, so is the mental aptitude and the tennis. I just have to focus on adjusting my training regime now that there's going to be a long hiatus. This time I have might allow me a refreshed look at this."

Born to parents from sporting backgrounds, the Indian turned professional in 1991 as a singles player rising to world number 73 with his serve-and-volley game.

He went on to win bronze at the 1996 Atlanta Games in men's singles, quite a feat in a cricket-mad country starved of individual success in Olympic sports.

Paes started his professional career in 1991 and has won 18 doubles and mixed doubles Grand Slam titles. He has not tasted grand slam success since

he and Martina Hingis won the mixed doubles title at the 2016 French Open.

"I haven't taken a long, hard look at it yet. My team's at me. They tell me I've really got to play that record eighth Olympics and put India in the history books," he said.

"We've been working every day to stay fit and healthy and watch our diet and be careful of not just losing the fitness I've worked on already, but also enhance my fitness. We will make a decision shortly on whether to continue and make this one last roar, a really long roar."

Paes described the IOC's decision to postpone the Tokyo Games as a "brave" call.

"It's very tough. I have trained specifically for this season, just like most other athletes and all of us are having to deal with this shift and movement," he said.



FOCUS

Sadness in scarred Fukushima after torch relay cancelled

'It's a little unfortunate... But with the coronavirus I think it was the correct move'

Reuters
Fukushima, Japan

It was meant to be the start of a triumphant march to the Tokyo 2020 Games: the torch relay would have begun yesterday in Fukushima, battered by the 2011 earthquake and nuclear disaster, as a poignant symbol of the "Recovery Olympics".

But instead, it was like any other day for this prefecture in northeast Japan after the relay was scrapped following the Games' postponement due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Residents were unable to hide their disappointment even though they agreed with the decision.

"It's a little unfortunate. I was looking forward to the torch relay," said Mai Sakata, a 31-year-old homemaker, who had planned to watch the torch pass near her home.

"But with the coronavirus I think the postponement was the correct move in order to make people feel safe," she said outside Fukushima station while holding her one-year-old daughter.

High school student Yu Kurashige, 16, said the decision to delay the Games until summer 2021 at the latest was inevitable given the global health emergency. "I think the torch relay is something that's really important for Japan but this time cancellation was unavoidable," he said. "The most important thing is everyone's safety."

'FLAME OF RECOVERY'

Others, though, took it harder. "I'm 20 this year and I thought this would be a memory to mark that, but it's gone away so I'm sad," said college student Nao



The logo for the Tokyo 2020 torch relay is pictured as the Olympic flame goes on display at the Aquamarine Fukushima aquarium in Iwaki in Fukushima prefecture, Japan, on Wednesday. (AFP)

Nitta.

Having won the Games in 2013, Japan said it would symbolise rebirth after the March 11, 2011, earthquake and tsunami that killed around 18,000 people and triggered a meltdown at a nuclear power plant.

Yesterday, in Fukushima City roughly 80 km (50 miles) from the Daichi nuclear plant on the Pacific coast, many people were working and shopping normally

on a sunny day amid newly-appearing cherry blossoms. The prefecture has had only two coronavirus infections so far and noticeably fewer people wore masks than in the capital Tokyo.

Near the plant, signs of reconstruction efforts are everywhere: new roads have been built, apartment blocks for evacuee families have sprouted up, and an imposing tsunami wall now runs along the coastline. An army of workers

commutes to the wrecked plant every day to decommission the reactors.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has linked the Olympics to the fight against the coronavirus as well, saying the rescheduled Games would serve as a testament to mankind's victory over the pandemic.

The torch did go on a special "Flame of Recovery" tour limited to six locations in the disaster

areas of the northeast, drawing crowds despite concerns about the coronavirus spreading, before the nationwide relay was called off.

Some from Fukushima have already turned the page and are hoping the relay's route will remain the same next year.

"It's better in a situation where everyone can have fun," said Kumiko Saito, a travel business worker.

SPOTLIGHT

British rower Swann ponders return to medicine after Olympics delay

Reuters
Bengaluru, India

British Olympic rower Polly Swann was aiming to return to the Olympic podium in July but is now considering rebooting her medical career to join the battle against the coronavirus.

Swann, who won a silver medal as part of Britain's women's eight at the 2016 Olympics, wanted to round off her rowing career in Tokyo this year before resuming her life as a doctor.

Yet with the Games postponed until next year due to the coronavirus pandemic, Swann is mulling returning to the medical profession.

"I feel really conflicted by the whole thing," the 31-year-old told the *Times* newspaper. "I do feel a real draw (towards starting work in the NHS), I am not essential to the NHS but I could help."

"I see my friends and I have family members who work in the NHS and there is a real sense that they are pulling together to do

this extraordinary work that is incredibly selfless.

"The people who are working ridiculous shifts and dealing with the fact that they don't have enough protective equipment and they are exposing themselves, I find it phenomenal."

More than 470,800 people have been infected by the coronavirus across the world and over 21,200 have died, according to a Reuters tally.

"No one has a crystal ball to know what it will be like next year either," said Swann. "We have not got a vaccine. There are things that are more important than going to an Olympic Games."

Swann believes the rearranged Games will represent "more than just the sport", a sentiment shared by her Rio crew-mate Melanie Wilson, who is now a doctor.

"Mel was really helpful. She said that the Olympics is not just a selfish goal," Swann added. "The Olympics and sport bring so much to society. She told me not to give up on my dream."



South Korea wants age limit raised for 2021 football tournament

Reuters
Bengaluru, India

South Korea's football association yesterday called on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to raise the age limit for the Tokyo Games in 2021 to ensure those players who helped their teams qualify are still eligible to compete.

The Olympic men's football tournament is restricted to under-23 players. For 2020, players born on or after Jan. 1, 1997 are eligible, while squads can also include three players over the age of 23.

But the decision to move the Games to next year due to the coronavirus pandemic has raised concerns that some players would miss out because they will breach the age limit. "We'd like to ask you to take steps to ensure that players who secured the Olympic berth for their country will not be put at a disadvantage,"

Yonhap quoted the KFA as saying in a letter to the IOC, FIFA and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC).

South Korea won the AFC under-23 championship in January to secure Olympic qualification, with his team relying heavily on players born in 1997.

That includes the tournament's best player Won Du-jae and Song Bum-keun, who was named the top goalkeeper. The Australian Olympic Committee has also said the IOC and FIFA would need to work together to iron out the qualification issues.

The KFA has also asked for squads to be expanded in line with other major tournaments hosted by the AFC and FIFA. "Including Olympic qualifying matches, all FIFA and continental competitions are contested with 23 players per side, and only the Olympic tournament is limited to 18 players," the KFA said. "The 18-man roster is archaic."

OPPORTUNITY

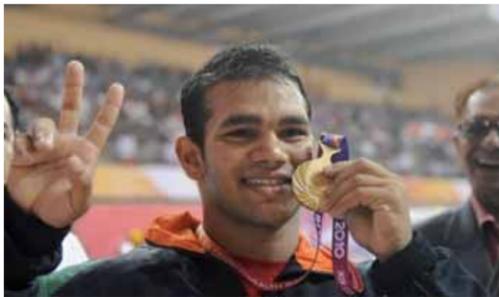
Delay opens door for dope-tainted Indian wrestler

Reuters
Mumbai, India

The postponement of the Tokyo Games to 2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic may have opened the door for dope-tainted Indian wrestler Narsingh Yadav to realise his dream of winning an Olympic medal.

Yadav was handed a four-year doping ban just hours before his first bout at the Rio Olympics after the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) won its appeal against an earlier exoneration.

An Indian anti-doping disciplinary panel had previously ruled the freestyle wrestler was the victim of "sabotage" and cleared him to compete at the 2016 Games.



While the ban would have kept Yadav out of the reckoning for Tokyo, the decision to put the Games back to 2021 may have afforded him another Olympic opportunity.

"It is destiny that this opportunity has come my way," Yadav

told the *Hindustan Times* newspaper.

"This is not the time to feel elated because the world and our country are battling a big crisis. But yes, I will be looking to make a return to the mat the moment the ban is over in July."

Yadav had been slated to compete in the 74kg freestyle category at Rio after securing India a berth at the Games by winning bronze at the 2015 world championships.

However, Sushil Kumar, who won bronze in the 66kg category in Beijing in 2008 and silver in London, moved up a weight class and sought a court order for a bout between the two to determine the Rio spot.

The Delhi High Court ruled against Kumar, the only Indian athlete to win two individual Olympic medals, clearing the way for Yadav to compete in Rio.

After two positive tests in June and July 2016, Yadav alleged his supplements and water had been sabotaged and lodged a police complaint against a junior wrestler, accusing him of contaminating his food.

India's anti-doping agency cleared him but WADA filed an urgent application before CAS to challenge the decision.

Yadav, now 31, said he was determined to get on the podium at Tokyo if given the chance to wrestle for India.

"I have not been in touch with the federation but once things get better I will talk to them about my return," he added.

India's wrestling federation said they would not stand in Yadav's way if he wanted to compete for a spot.

"Now that the Tokyo Olympics are postponed for a year, there will be some time before the qualification tournaments start. We will decide once the picture is clear," Vinod Tomar, WFI's assistant secretary, was quoted as saying in the report.

BOTTOMLINE

Olympic sponsors appear committed to Tokyo Games in 2021

DPA
Berlin, Germany

Olympic sponsors appear committed to the Tokyo Games despite their postponement until 2021, which is good news for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for which they are a major source of income.

The same seems to apply for national partners of the Japanese organisers, who can also expect additional income from being able to sell merchandise.

In all, 14 companies from around the world are so-called TOP sponsors of the IOC, the largest number for one Games.

Each brings in at least an estimated 200 million dollars in a four year cycle, an Olympiad, to gain exclusive advertising rights at the Games and with Olympic symbols such as the iconic five rings.

IOC president Thomas Bach said in a conference call Wednesday that the sponsors have backed the unique decision amid the coronavirus outbreak.

"We have contacted all the sponsors. We have their full support for this decision, and we will now work to implement it," he said.

"These Games are called the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020. Therefore, for me, it is a logical consequence that the sponsors of the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 keep their rights, even if these Games are organised in 2021."

The contracts with four of the 14 sponsors end this year, including General Electric and Procter and Gamble, with solutions needed to be found for an additional year.

That also applies to the other 10 even though they have longer deals with the IOC.

Coca-Cola, associated with the Olympics since 1928 and part of the first TOP programme in 1986, decades-long



In this March 4, 2020, picture, a man looks at his mobile phone next to The Olympic rings in front of the Japan Olympics Museum in Tokyo. (Reuters)

time-keepers Omega and credit card company Visa have all even committed until 2032.

Coca-Cola has said it "fully re-

spects" the postponement which was made in the "best interest of the health, safety and security of all."

Another TOP sponsor, South Ko-

rean electronics company Samsung, said: "We will continue to work closely with the IOC and Games organisers to ensure a safe and memorable Olympic Games. We remain fully committed to supporting the Olympic Movement globally."

How exactly things will work next year needs to be sorted out, and some sponsors may also feel the economic backlash from Covid-19, especially if the pandemic carries on for a long time.

One of the newest TOP sponsors, home-sharers Airbnb, has seen a flood of cancellations over the virus, with the *Wall Street Journal* saying earlier in the week Airbnb was confronted with "hundreds of millions in losses".

But Airbnb has reportedly reaffirmed its Olympic commitment.

So have local Japanese sponsors, with the *Japan Times* quoting a Japan Airlines official as saying: "We will continue preparing for the Games."

In Japan meanwhile organizers face

additional costs for many reasons owing to the postponement, while on the other hand they can also expect additional income from their big merchandising initiative. Merchandising rights would have normally ended December 31 but will now obviously be extended.

"They have one year more of time to sell things ... I am sure this will help," the insidethegames portal quoted Swiss historian Markus Osterwalder, who has worked on Olympic issues, as saying.

It is also remains to be seen what happens to major broadcast partners such as NBC, who have spent more than 12 billion dollars for rights between 2014 and 2032, and said recently they have sold 90 per cent of their 2020 Olympics advertising space for some 1.25 billion dollars.

Contracts can likely be carried over to 2021 but the *Los Angeles Times* spoke of "a major blow" and "a significant financial hit" for the network.

SPOTLIGHT

beIN Sports gives viewers chance to vote for their favourite match to watch

By Sports Reporter
Doha

For the very first time, beIN SPORTS (“beIN”) will give viewers the chance to run the biggest TV network in the world. Starting tomorrow, viewers across the Middle East & North Africa will be able to vote for their favourite football match from a shortlist curated by beIN stars such as Mohamed Abutrika and the match with the highest vote will be shown on beIN SPORTS HD1 at 22:30 Makkah Time (GMT+3).

Those who want to vote can visit the official beIN SPORTS Twitter account (@beIN-SPORTS) where a poll will be prepared every day with 4 different matches – and the match with the highest vote will be an-

nounced during the “Allo beIN” programme at 20:30 Makkah Time.

With live sport temporarily stopped across the world following the Covid-19 outbreak, beIN SPORTS will also, for the second week running, broadcast a thrilling thematic sporting schedule of the best competitions and programs for its viewers across 24 countries of the Middle East and North Africa (Mena).

Following the success of last week which showcased the 2018 FIFA World Cup, UEFA Euro 2016, and the best of European soccer leagues, this week beIN will broadcast matches and highlights from one of the biggest Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) to date, AFCON 2019.

The 2019 Africa Cup of Nations was a hugely successful tournament which featured 24

teams for the first time, and saw Algeria lift their first AFCON trophy in 29 years.

AFCON 2019, broadcast all day (01:30-20:00 Makkah Time) tomorrow, will be followed by:

On Sunday 29 March, beIN SPORTS HD1 will have a dedicated 2019 Copa America day with special matches including

Qatar and heavyweights Brazil, Argentina and Colombia.

Monday 30 March will see beIN SPORTS HD1 broadcast the best matches of FC Barcelona’s 2019 campaign, including the best goals of LaLiga throughout history.

During the rest of the week, beIN SPORTS HD1 will

show the best matches of PSG’s 2019 season (Tuesday 31 March), FIFA Club World Cup Qatar 2019 (Wednesday 1 April), English Premier League (Thursday 2 April) and LaLiga (Friday 3 April).

beIN SPORTS will also broadcast an exclusive programme “Allo beIN” on its beIN SPORTS

HD1 channel every night from 20:30 – 21:30 Makkah Time (GMT+3) with beIN stars and guests including Mohamed Saadon al-Kuwari, Mohamed Abutrika, Wael Gomaa, Haytham Farouk, Nabil Maaloul, Hisham al-Khalsi, Hafid Daradji and more. The programme discusses the latest news on sports with live interaction from beIN guests and presenters on social media.

Launching the new initiative for fans to vote for their favourite match, head of sports for beIN Mena, Jonathan Whitehead, said, “We are extremely excited to announce that, for the very first time on beIN SPORTS and in Mena, our viewers and followers on social media will have the chance to control what they want to watch – as our very own stars including the likes of Abutrika and Gomaa will select

4 different matches and the fixture with the highest vote on social media will be shown on beIN SPORTS HD1.”

On delivering beIN SPORTS’ thematic sporting schedule for a second week running, Whitehead said: “Our viewer’s response to last week’s thematic sport schedule was absolutely fantastic, so we decided to keep it going using our world-class archives to show the best sport competitions and matches across our channels. beIN SPORTS HD1 will also broadcast the programme “Allo beIN” which will air every night for our Mena viewers – providing them with inside stories of the latest sport news hosted by beIN talent and guests from around the region. Viewers should continue to look out for more innovative and creative programming in the weeks ahead.”



FOCUS

Still looking forward, fingers crossed for IPL 2020, says Rohit

‘We have got a few good additions to the squad like Chris Lynn, Trent Boult, Nathan Coulter-Nile’



File photo of Rohit Sharma (right) in action during an IPL match against Sunrisers Hyderabad. (IPLT20.com)

FIANS
Mumbai

Star Indian opener and Mumbai Indians captain Rohit Sharma felt that the time he spent with Ricky Ponting at the Indian Premier League (IPL) franchise was “magic.”

Ponting was captain of MI in 2013, when they were yet to win an IPL title. He resigned from the post and handed it over to Rohit but stayed on as part of the coaching staff. His contribution is often seen instrumental in helping MI win their maiden IPL title that year and he would return to the franchise as a head coach, before moving to Delhi Capitals.

“Ricky Ponting to me was magic,” said Rohit yesterday in an interaction with former England captain Kevin Pietersen on Instagram.

“The way he handled the team when he was captain during the first half and then he gave the captaincy to me midway. That takes a lot of guts and after that to be as involved as he was as a support staff member. He was supporting all the younger players in the team and he was guiding me in captaincy,” said Rohit.

Rohit said that he feels MI have made a few good pur-

chases at the auction this year and hopes that the season starts whenever things settle.

“We have got a few good additions to the squad like Chris Lynn, Trent Boult, Nathan Coulter-Nile.

“Boult is a good buy on a pitch like Wankhede with the swinging ball, I was looking forward to that. Alongwith (Jasprit) Bumrah he would have made a good combination. Still looking forward, fingers crossed. At some stage if things settle down, it should happen,” said Rohit. Rohit also said that current Mumbai Indians coach Mahela Jayawardene is someone who gives a lot of clarity to his players. “Mahela is very calm, very composed. He only tells you to do things he sees as right or not to do them if they are wrong. His messages are very clear,” said Rohit.

The 2020 season of the IPL was scheduled to start on March 29 with defending champions MI facing Chennai Super Kings at the Wankhede Stadium in what was a repeat of the 2019 final. However the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic forced the organisers to push the tentative starting date to April 15, which itself is now clouded in uncertainty due to the three-week lockdown declared by Prime Minister Narendra Modi throughout the country.

STOKES GEARING UP DESPITE LOCKDOWN

AFP
London

England all-rounder Ben Stokes says he is preparing to play in the Indian Premier League, even though he knows the tournament is unlikely to go ahead. Stokes has signed to play for Rajasthan Royals and is one of 13 English players set to feature in the IPL.

But the Twenty20 tournament has already been delayed until April 15 in response to the pandemic and India entered a three-week lockdown in a bid to contain the spread on Wednesday.

“At the moment my next competitive cricket is going to be in the IPL,” Stokes told the BBC on Wednesday. “That hasn’t changed yet so I have to think I will be playing on April 20.”

Last week, the England and Wales Cricket Board announced that the English county season would not start until at least the end of May, while England’s tour of Sri Lanka was also postponed due to the virus.

With IPL chiefs yet to call off or further delay their event, Stokes



has to continue to keep himself in shape to play in the unlikely event he is asked to travel to India.

“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,” he added. “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 for April 20 because it doesn’t work like that. It might happen and if it does I don’t want to be behind.”

“There will be a lot of advice given to us and if it was an option to go we will have to take the sensible one.”

Stokes said England’s players were initially shocked when the two-Test Sri Lanka tour was cancelled.

But the 28-year-old is well aware it was the right thing to do in the circumstances.

“Everyone was shell-shocked for half an hour in the changing room. It was such a weird feeling because we had been there for 10-12 days. We were building up to the first Test and then we were going home,” Stokes said. “But when you put everything together in terms of where the world was with the coronavirus, and what was being said on tour, it was the wrong place to be at that time and everyone’s health is more important than anything else in the world.”

ANNOUNCEMENT

ICC shuts down WC qualifiers till July

Reuters
Mumbai

The International Cricket Council (ICC) said yesterday that all qualifying events for the 2021 Twenty20 World Cup and 50-overs version in 2023 that were scheduled to be held before June 30 have been postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The flu-like virus has infected more than 470,800 people around the world and killed over 21,200, according to a Reuters tally, since appearing in China at the end of last year.

The pandemic has also brought global sport to a standstill and the ICC said in a statement the World Cup qualifiers would also be impacted.

“In light of the significant global health concerns at the current time and the restric-

tions on movement imposed by governments across the world, the ICC has taken the decision to postpone all events up until the end of June subject to further review,” Chris Tetley, ICC head of events, said. “Work will continue on contingency plans and options for both men’s qualification pathways. We will provide updates in due course on these plans and decisions on the staging of the remaining events this year.”

India host next year’s T20 World Cup and the 50-overs event in 2023. As many as eight events will now be postponed due to the ICC decision.

This year’s women’s T20 World Cup was held in February-March in Australia, which will also host the men’s version starting in October. The World Cup trophy tour for the men’s event, which was scheduled to start next month, was also postponed.

NFL

Saints’ Brees donates \$5mn to help needy face coronavirus



File photo of Drew Brees of the New Orleans Saints. (AFP)

AFP
New York

New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees announced yesterday he is donating \$5mn to help deliver meals to the needy in Louisiana as people struggle to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

The 41-year-old NFL star helped his adopted home city rebound from Hurricane Katrina devastation by leading the Saints to victory in the 2010 Super Bowl.

Brees signed a two-year contract extension worth \$50mn last week with the Saints, then posted on Instagram his plan with wife Brittany to help a region where coronavirus infections and deaths have spiked in recent days.

“Brittany and I are committing \$5,000,000 to the State of Louisiana in 2020,” Brees posted. “The priority now is helping our communities get through this tough time.”

“After considerable research and conversations with local organisations, we will be mobilising our partnerships... to prepare and deliver

over 10,000 meals per day throughout Louisiana as long as it takes to children on meal programmes, seniors, and families in need.

“Let’s all do our part, maintain hope, and get through this together.”

Brees is an investor in multiple restaurants and a food delivery service in the area. Saints coach Sean Payton was the first person in the NFL to be known as testing positive for coronavirus, but says he has been cleared by doctors and feels fine.

New Orleans has been hard hit by the Covid-19 virus in recent days in the wake of last month’s annual Mardi Gras celebration in the city.

Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards thanked Brees for the support, tweeting, “On behalf of the Great State of Louisiana, we are all grateful for your family’s support and generosity through this trying time. We are one Louisiana and we will get through this, together.”

Brees has thrown an NFL record 6,867 completions for league records of 77,416 passing yards and 547 touchdowns as he prepares for his 20th NFL campaign.

RUGBY

Pizza dough, fermented tea: how players keep busy during lockdown

Mbanda has become a volunteer ambulance driver in the city of Parma during the outbreak

AFP
Paris

From perfecting pizza dough to fermenting tea, rugby players in Europe have found different ways to pass their time during the lockdown forced by the coronavirus pandemic.

Australia international Scott Higginbotham, who plays for Bordeaux-Begles, has been busy in his kitchen during the confinement period which started in France on March 17.

"My wife and I take turns in going out and doing a bit of exercise and a lot of cooking. Every meal is made from scratch," Higginbotham told AFP this week.

"I made my own pizza dough the other day which was quite nice. I do love pizza so that was a big one for me going forward.

"I made a chili con carne on Monday which was pretty good if I don't mind saying so myself," he added.

New Zealand-born Dean Budd plays for Treviso in northern Italy where people have been confined to their homes for more than two weeks due to Covid-19.

"I've made some nice pickled eggplant, that was my go-to. I tried to make some fermented hot sauce, but that failed," Budd told AFP.

"I'm brewing kombucha (fermented tea) so that keeps me busy as well. The problem with fermentation is time so I'm wanting to taste them and starting at them wanting them to go faster because I've got nothing else to do," he added.

Second-row Budd, who has 29 caps for the Azzurri, lives in an apartment with partner and lifestyle blogger Amelia Rogers and said keeping fit has been difficult.

"There's only a certain access to things and only so much you can do with your creative mind by lifting tables, hanging off tables and running up and down stairs. It's very challenging to stay active," he added.

MBANDA THE MAN

Budd's Italy teammate Maxime Mbanda has become a volunteer ambulance driver in the city of Parma during the outbreak.

"He's always been a real team man. He's always put his body on the line but he's now putting it on the line for different reasons," Budd said.

"What Max has done is awesome and symbolises what a rugby player is about. Giving to



File photo of Australia's Scott Higginbotham during a training session.

the greater good," he added.

For Racing 92 coach Mike Prendergast in Paris the task of keeping in touch with work is difficult.

"It's a tricky one because there is no day-to-day training or games to analyse. What I've been doing is working off my laptop, looking at our games throughout the year, little areas we can get better at," he told AFP.

"There's not much more you can do as coaches. You can't even plan ahead because you don't know what's going to happen," he added.

THE WHACKS, THE BUMPS, THE BRUISES

The French Top 14 and the Pro14, which Budd's Treviso compete in, are both postponed without a restart date.

Higginbotham, who won the last of his 34 Wallabies caps in 2017, called for a training period of up to a month before matches take place again.

"There's definitely going to need to be a few weeks of re-conditioning before they think about playing games. That's without question," he said.

"Three to four weeks would be enough to get us back to game playing weight," he added.

Budd, 33, said sessions before getting back on the playing field were essential.

"You need the whacks, the bumps, the bruises, you need to learn how to sprint again," he added.

"With player welfare we need to be doing things in controlled situations before going out there."

RFU to provide relief package for clubs

The Rugby Football Union (RFU) will provide a 7 million-pound (\$8.3mn) relief package to community clubs in England during the coronavirus pandemic, the body's chief executive officer Bill Sweeney said on Wednesday.

The RFU and Wales' governing body WRU confirmed last week the end of the 2019-20 season for all league, cup and county rugby, with the exception of the English Premiership, due to the pandemic.

"My thoughts and those of all of us at the RFU continue to be with everyone impacted by the difficult and exceptional situation we are all facing, both across the country and within our own rugby union community," Sweeney said in a statement.

"(We have) agreed to offer a support package directly funded from the RFU worth £7m to provide support for community clubs in England.

"The RFU had budgeted for a loss-making year within a four-year cycle due to the costs of the 2019 RWC campaign and hosting only two home Six Nations games."

Four Six Nations matches were postponed due to the coronavirus.

"We have modelled three potential scenarios and are working on an assumption based on a medium-term impact with a view to a return to rugby in the autumn," Sweeney said.

NBA

Mavs' owner Cuban says games could return by mid-May



Reuters
Los Angeles

Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban said he's hopeful the NBA can resume playing games on TV, without crowds, by May.

"America needs sports right now. We need something to cheer for. We need something to get excited about. We need a team to root for, and I think the NBA can fill that need," he told Neil Cavuto of FOX Business on Wednesday.

The NBA has indefinitely suspended its regular season amid the current pandemic, and at least 10 active players have tested positive for the coronavirus.

Cuban told the *Dallas Morning News* he thinks the NBA will be the first professional league in the US to bounce back.

"I'm proud of the NBA and the way we've reacted," he said. "We've led the way and hopefully will lead the way out of this. No one has perfect information right now, so all decisions are tough, but if I had to guess based off the people I've talked to at the CDC and other places, I would say that the over-under (for the league's return) would be June 1 and I'm taking the under."

"... Hopefully by the middle of May we're starting to get back to normal and the NBA is playing games, maybe not with fans, but we're playing games."

MOTORSPORT

Indianapolis 500 moved to August 23

AFP
Washington

The 104th Indianapolis 500 was moved from May 24 to August 23 yesterday by IndyCar and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

It will mark the first time the US oval classic on the famed 2 1/2-mile (4km) oval will be staged outside of May in more than a century of races, with Frenchman Simon Pagenaud looking to defend his title.

Organizers also moved the IndyCar Grand Prix of Indianapolis, which had been scheduled for May 9 on the road course at the Speedway, to July 4 — the American Independence Day holiday — as part of a revamped IndyCar season schedule.

"The Month of May at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway is my favorite time of year, and like our fans, I am disappointed that we have had to reschedule the Indianapolis 500," series

and speedway owner Roger Penske said.

"However, the health and safety of our event participants and spectators is our top priority, and we believe that postponing the event is the responsible decision with the conditions and restrictions we are facing.

"I'm confident we will welcome fans with a transformed facility and a global spectacle when we run the world's greatest race."

The Indy 500 will begin with practice sessions August 12-14 and qualifying on August 15-16 with a final practice session on August 21.

"This August, we'll also have a unique and powerful opportunity to honor the contributions and heroism of the doctors, nurses, first responders and National Guard members serving on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19," Penske Entertainment president Mark Miles said.

"We're grateful for the patience of our fans as we've navigated this situation."

CYCLING

Tour de France may go ahead without roadside spectators

Reuters
Paris

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.

A Sports ministry spokeswoman told Reuters yesterday that the ministry was monitoring the pandemic's evolution.

"There is no rush to decide today," she said, 92 days ahead of the Tour's scheduled June 27 start in the Mediterranean city of Nice. It is due to finish in Paris on July 19.

In an interview with radio station France Bleu late on Wednesday, Maracineanu said that one option would be to organise a Tour without roadside spectators.

"The Tour's economic model is not based on ticket sales but on TV rights. During this period of confinement, everybody is aware of the risks and responsible," the minister said.

"People understand the benefits of staying home and watching event on TV rather than live. It would not be too detrimental to follow the Tour on TV."



In this file photo taken on July 25, 2018, France's Julian Alaphilippe (right) seizes the fork of Tour de France fan Didi Senft (left) during the 17th stage of the race in south-western France. (AFP)

The Tour attracts more than 10mn spectators along France's roads every year and

is broadcast globally. However, Marc Madiot, the president of the French cy-

cling league and director of the Groupama-FDJ cycling team said it would be difficult to po-

lice a Tour without spectators. "How would you stop the public from attending?" he said.

France's 67mn people have broadly respected the conditions of an unprecedented peacetime lockdown but few sports stir the passions of French sports enthusiasts more than cycling.

Moreover, riders often race large parts of a stage in closely-packed groups and team members live in close proximity to one another for nearly a month in hotels, and travel together on buses and airplanes that shuttle them between stages.

Teams are already grappling with how to keep their riders fit after the cycling season was suspended last week. All races up until the end of April have been cancelled.

"As long as we are not allowed to get out on the road, it is hard to think about getting in shape for the event," AG2R-La Mondiale rider Romain Bardet told France Bleu.

Russian cyclists' lawsuit against WADA dismissed

A Canadian court has dismissed a lawsuit against the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) by three Russian cyclists who claimed damages after being banned from the 2016 Rio Olympics.

WADA on Wednesday announced the ruling, which was made last month by the Superior Court of Justice of Ontario following motions heard last May in Toronto, saying the appeal period had expired.

The trio also sued Canadian professor Richard McLaren, whose report unveiled a broad Russian doping scheme and manipulation of testing results.

The court ruled that the issues fell under the jurisdiction of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Switzerland and that filing the claim in Canada was an abuse of process. AFP

FOCUS

IOC criticised after Turkish boxers get coronavirus

Reuters
London

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has been accused of irresponsibility after two Turkish boxers and a trainer caught the coronavirus during a qualifying event in London this month.

According to the Turkish Boxing Federation website, athlete Serhat Güler and trainer Seyfullah Dumlupinar contracted the virus at the European qualifying tournament.

"While the world was taking extreme measures to deal with the virus, I am baffled that an IOC taskforce and the British government allowed the tournament to start even though many of us had concerns and almost every other sport had shut down," federation President Eyup Gozgec was quoted



Serhat Güler.

as saying in the *Guardian*. London's Copper Box arena hosted the official Olympic qualifying tournament, featuring boxers from 40 nations. It continued for three days despite virtually every other sport being suspended because of the pandemic.

In a letter to other boxing federations, seen by the *Guardian*, Gozgec, who is also vice-president of the European Boxing

Confederation, said: "Unfortunately, two of our athletes and our Turkish head coach have tested positive for the new type Covid-19 coronavirus after returning to Turkey from London.

"All of them are in treatment now and thankfully they are in good condition. This is the disastrous result of the irresponsibility of the IOC taskforce.

"This virus has been around since December 2019. Therefore, it is inevitable to ask why the European qualification event was not postponed before it took place? "They did not consider anyone's health, which led them to organise this horrible event."

JOSHUA IN SELF-ISOLATION
AFTER MEETING
PRINCE CHARLES

World heavyweight boxing champion Anthony Joshua has placed himself in self-isolation following a meeting with coronavirus victim Prince Charles.

Khan offers wedding venue to Britain's NHS

Former boxing world champion Amir Khan has become the latest sportsman to help in the fight against the coronavirus, offering his wedding venue for use by Britain's National Health Service.

Khan is ready to hand over the keys to the 60,000-square-foot (5,600-square-metre) venue in his home town of Bolton as concerns grow over bed shortages. The 33-year-old former world light-welterweight champion said in a post on his official Twitter account: "I am aware of how difficult it is for the public to get a hospital bed in this



tragic time.

"I am prepared to give my 60,000 square foot 4 story building which is due to be a

wedding hall and retail outlet to the @NHSuk to help people affected by the coronavirus. Pls keep safe."

Premier League side Chelsea last week said they would provide free accommodation to NHS staff in a hotel at the club's Stamford Bridge stadium. Former Manchester United players Gary Neville and Ryan Giggs have given health workers free access to their hotels in Manchester.

Global sports stars Roger Federer, Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have all made donations to help tackle the health crisis.

Chales, the eldest son and heir to Britain's Queen Elizabeth II, is showing mild symptoms of coronavirus and is self-isolating in Scotland, officials said on

Wednesday.

It remains unclear when Charles caught the illness but on March 9, he spent the day with the Queen, Prime Minister Boris

Johnson and stars of sport and entertainment – including Joshua – at the Commonwealth Day service at Westminster Abbey. A spokesman for Joshua told

the *Daily Mail*: "AJ is at home following government guidelines, he is fit and well. He wishes

everyone affected a speedy recovery and a huge thank you to all the front line key workers."

Joshua is due to defend his IBF, WBA and WBO heavyweight titles against mandatory challenger Kubrat Pulev at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium on June 20. But the coronavirus could delay that bout and push back a hugely anticipated all-British fight with WBC champion Tyson Fury until next year at the earliest.

In a series of Twitter posts on Tuesday, Joshua thanked all those involved in trying to combat the coronavirus by saying: "It's humbling to see people giving their everything right now to keep us safe. Shout to everyone on the front-line. "We see you, we appreciate you, we thank you and we're in awe of you!"

FOOTBALL

Players contracts should be extended: FIFA document

'This work has already started and will be conducted in consultation with all key stakeholders'

Reuters
Manchester

Current contracts for players and coaches should be extended until the end of the delayed domestic soccer seasons, according to an internal FIFA document presented to its Coronavirus Working Group.

The confidential document, seen by Reuters, also recommends allowing transfer windows to be changed in accordance with new season dates and urges clubs and players to work together to find solutions to salary payments during stoppages.

The document is due to be discussed by members of FIFA's Working Group later on Thursday. No decision on the issues has yet been taken by FIFA.

FIFA set up the working group on March 18 and said in a statement that it will "assess the need for amendments or temporary dispensations to the FIFA Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players" to protect contracts for both players and clubs and adjust player registration periods.

"This work has already started and will be conducted in consultation with all key stakeholders, including confederations, member associations, clubs, leagues and players," FIFA added.

Most domestic and international football competitions around the world have been suspended due to the pandemic and national team tournaments such as Euro 2020 and the Copa America have been postponed. While domestic leagues are hop-



General view of the FIFA logo before the start of the official draw for the FIFA Club World Cup 2018 in Zurich on September 4, 2018. (Reuters)

ing to resume when the threat from the virus has receded, concrete start dates have yet to be fixed. That leaves the issue of expiring player contracts, which are usually timed to finish at the end of a given season, as a potential headache.

The key suggestion to the working group in the document seen by Reuters is that "where an agreement is due to expire at the original end date of a season, such expiry be extended until the new end date of the season"

SHIFTING CALENDAR
The same approach would ap-

ply to deals for next season, with their start date delayed in accordance with the shifting calendar.

The risk of some domestic divisions starting and finishing earlier or some national leagues having a different start date to other countries is also tackled in the document.

"In case of overlapping seasons and/or registration periods, and unless all parties agree otherwise, priority be given to the former club to complete their season with their original squad, in order to safeguard the integrity of a domestic league champion-

ship".

Transfer payments between clubs, scheduled around league start and end dates should also be delayed until the new start date of a season or its first registration period, the document states.

The working group will also examine the issue of clubs' responsibilities to pay their staff when leagues are suspended.

The document states that clubs, players and coaches should be encouraged to work together to agree on salary reductions and deferrals.

Yet they should consider the

alternative, where possible, that agreements between clubs and employees are suspended when teams are not playing or training.

It is also recommended that FIFA use its newly-created 'Fund for Professional Players' to help ease any difficulties that clubs are facing.

Transfer windows, fixed around the end and start of the seasons, will also need to be adjusted to fit in with altered season dates and the document suggests such changes should be allowed, so long as they do not exceed the maximum 16-week period.

SPOTLIGHT

Save the Dream and its athlete ambassadors support WHO's efforts to curb Covid-19

In support of the World Health Organization's (WHO) efforts in the fight against the Covid-19 virus, Save the Dream and its athlete ambassadors took part in the #SafeHands Challenge, a campaign launched by WHO to raise public awareness about the Coronavirus and a global call for action to raise money for the Covid-19 Solidarity Response Fund.

Emphasising on the importance and the power of sport to bring hope during difficult times and its role in helping to build inclusive societies, as well as improving physical and psychological health of people, Save the Dream kicked off the challenge on its social media channels with a message from one of its athlete ambassadors, the football legend David Trezeguet, former French Striker and the 1998 World Cup Champion.

In his video message, Trezeguet urged people to stay connected and adhere to the safety standards set by WHO without forgetting to keep their children informed and active while staying at home and practising safe social distancing.

Other Save the Dream ambassadors such as the Former Real Madrid Star football player Fernando Hierro and double Olympic Gold winning swimmer Penny Heyns also supported the campaign with their video messages where they stressed the importance of proper hand washing for 20 seconds and how a simple act of cleaning one's hands properly can have a significant im-



pact on fighting the spread of the virus.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of WHO praised Save the Dream through his social media channels for their support of WHO's campaign in the fight against Covid-19.

"Well done David Trezeguet for setting a great example for parents and children everywhere as we fight the Coronavirus, by promoting hand washing and being healthy at home. Thank you and Save the Dream for supporting WHO's #SafeHands Challenge," he said.

Commenting on the involvement of Save the Dream in the campaign, Massimiliano Montanari, Executive Director of Save the Dream said, "As a long-standing partner of WHO, we are fully committed to supporting WHO's efforts, in their fight against the Covid-19. We are mobilising all our ambassadors to spread information and raise awareness in many communities on the significance of staying connected and keeping children and people physically active while staying at home and that no one should feel isolated and alone during this difficult time."

PSG unveil 'All Together' jersey to raise funds for hospital staff

Paris Saint-Germain will sell a limited edition jersey branded 'Tous Unis' (All Together) to raise money for supporting healthcare professionals battling the coronavirus, the Ligue 1 champions said yesterday. "Faced with the crisis we are going through, Paris Saint-Germain is taking action alongside its partners and supporters," club chief Nasser al-Khelaifi said. "We cannot be grateful enough for the tremendous and courageous work that healthcare staff are doing every day to deal with this emergency." The 1,500 jerseys include the logo of the Paris hospital authority and will sell at 175 euros (192 dollars). Al-Khelaifi said "further planned initiatives will be announced shortly."

Italian FA head refuses to write off the Serie A season
Italian soccer boss Gabriele Gravina is refusing to write off the Serie A season due to the coronavirus outbreak, saying the league could extend into July and August if necessary, Italy has seen more corona-

virus fatalities than any other country, with latest figures showing that 7,503 people have died from the infection in barely a month.

The northern region of Lombardy, by far the hardest-hit, showed a steep decline in the number of deaths and new infections in the latest figures on Wednesday, raising hopes that the epidemic may be slowing at its original epicentre. However, optimism was tempered by warnings from the south, where contagion and deaths are far less widespread but are rising steadily. Serie A has been suspended since March 9 and players from several clubs have tested positive for the virus. "I don't give up easily," Gravina, the president of the Italian Football Federation (FIGC), said in an interview with *Radio Marte*.

"As long as there is a chance, I will keep alive the hope of restarting the championships. I am aware that it is premature to think about a date, but we must think positively, also for the health of the Italians, and hope that this situation ends as soon as possible."

DEMISE

France's Euro 84-winning coach Hidalgo dies aged 87

AFP
Paris

Michel Hidalgo, the coach of the great France team that won the 1984 European Championship, has died at the age of 87, the French players union and the French Football Federation said yesterday.

Hidalgo, who had been ill for a number of years, died "of natural causes" at home in Marseille, his family told radio station France Info.

He is best remembered for his eight years in charge of Les Bleus, which culminated with the stylish team of Michel Platini, Alain Giresse and Jean Tigana winning Euro 84 on home soil,

beating Spain 2-0 in the final in Paris. It was their first ever tournament success. Prior to that, he took France to the 1978 World Cup, their first appearance at the tournament in 12 years, and then led them to the semi-finals of the 1982 World Cup, where they lost on penalties to West Germany.

"As coach, Michel took the France team to its greatest heights, opting for a beautiful style of football which allowed each one of us to fully express our individual talents," said Platini in a statement.

"Michel Hidalgo left a considerable legacy. He rebuilt French football at international level. His vision and his work still resonate today in every match our national team plays."

Born in 1933, Hidalgo – whose father was a Spanish immigrant – also enjoyed a richly successful playing career. After starting at Le Havre, he played for the great Reims side of the 1950s, featuring, and scoring, when they lost 4-3 to Real Madrid in the first ever European Cup final in 1956. Hidalgo went on to win two league titles and two French Cups with Monaco in the early 1960s.

"Michel Hidalgo is one of the great names in French football," said French Football Federation president Noel Le Graet.

"Through his footballing philosophy, his personality, his exemplary passion, he helped raise the standing of our sport internationally and its popularity in France."

