

Sports

Coronavirus shutdown has exposed 'inequities' of tennis: King

Nadal frustrated by lockdown, Federer happy with surgery recovery

MUMBAI: Tennis great Billie Jean King says the financial fallout from the coronavirus shutdown has exposed the unfairness of the sport and that it is important for the top players to lead the cause for change.

The tennis season was suspended in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the shutdown will continue at least until mid-July, depriving lower-level players, who depend solely on tournament winnings, of the chance to earn a living.

The sport's governing bodies have joined forces to devise plans to provide relief and 12-times Grand Slam singles champion King said the sport had the chance to emerge stronger from the health crisis.

"This is a good time to reset and to have one voice in the sport, which we really never had. We need that desperately," King told the Tennis Channel. "I hope they will all work together more after the COVID-19 situation calms down."

"Maybe some day, and I didn't think it is possible, we might have a Commissioner. I don't know. We are not the biggest sport in the world, we don't have as much money as say soccer. So we need to stick together and everyone needs to help each other. The thing that's also good is it shows the inequities that go on. So this is a good time to reset and think about how we want our sport to look in the future. What can we do to make it better, stronger and more secure?"

"This is a really good chance to have a new normal for tennis." While tennis is a lucrative sport for those at the top, those in the lower echelons often struggle to make ends meet. The men's ATP, the WTA, which runs the women's circuit, the world governing body International Tennis Federation and the organisers of the four Grand Slams have come together to work on creating an emergency relief fund.

World number one Novak Djokovic has said he had

been in touch with fellow men's Player Council members Roger Federer and Rafa Nadal and the players were looking to contribute collectively to assist those in the lower rankings.

King said the WTA was also working on ways to provide financial relief for its players. "Some money has gone out to the players but we need to think about more," said the 76-year-old American.

"The people who have to drive that are the top players. Because they have the big box, they have the money, it's really important for them to step up."



Tennis is a lucrative sport

Meanwhile, Rafael Nadal on Monday expressed his frustration that tennis players remain unable to practise due to the coronavirus pandemic, while Roger Federer revealed he was happy with his recovery from knee surgery.

The Spanish government has extended the country's state of alarm until May 9, with the entire population confined to their homes except a small number working in specific sectors, leaving Nadal perplexed as to why he can't train. "It's true I don't understand very well because we cannot play tennis when many people are going to work and even more so in our sport, where we keep at a large and safe distance and we play on opposite sides of the court," world number two Nadal said during an Instagram Live.

"But I understand that we are in a very critical situation, that the government is dealing with something unprecedented and I also understand that the last thing they think of is who can train and who cannot train. I understand the situation and obviously there are many



Billie Jean King with Serena Williams

things that are not logical but you have to accept the rules." Nadal treated tennis fans to an Instagram Live in which he spoke to both Roger Federer and Andy Murray about their experiences during lockdown.

The men's and women's tours have been halted due to the virus, while Wimbledon was cancelled last month for the first time since World War II and Nadal's favourite Grand Slam the French Open was pushed back to September 20.

"I am not playing tennis, I do not have a court at home and I miss it a little," Nadal said. "I am sticking to my physical routines. From the gym of my academy they were able to bring me some machines when lockdown began so I try to work a little in the morning, a

little in the afternoon.

"It is very important to have both the head and the body focused and it is what I am trying to do at all times." Federer meanwhile gave an update on his right knee after the 20-time major winner decided to undergo surgery in February.

"I've been hitting a bit against a wall, (doing) rehab with the knee," Federer said. "It's OK, I had a really good first six weeks, then it was a bit slower, now it's getting better again but I have plenty of time."

"There is no stress, no rush. If there is anything positive (about being in lockdown) that's the only thing really. I just want the knee to be good, it doesn't matter when I return." — Agencies

Rugby's Kirwan tackles COVID-19 mental health

WELLINGTON: After years battling his own demons, All Black legend John Kirwan is attempting to help fellow Kiwis struggling through COVID-19 lockdown by releasing a mobile phone app he calls "a mental wellbeing coach in your pocket".

The World Cup winning winger broke one of sport's great taboos after a stellar international career when he revealed his struggles with depression, helping explode the myth that on-field glory equates to happiness off the pitch. "I had medical depression. I was on anti-depressants — I wanted to jump out of a window one night," Kirwan told AFP in a telephone interview.

"I've got learned experience in this space." Such is Kirwan's passion for speaking out about mental health that when he was knighted in 2012 it was his pioneering advocacy, not his exploits in a black jersey, that earned him the award.

After writing two memoirs on the topic, Kirwan has in recent years devoted himself to a more hi-tech means of communication, a mobile phone app called Mentemia. The app uses personality tests and cognitive games to build up a picture of the user and provide tips for reducing stress.

These include breathing techniques, mood tracking, action plans for boosting mental wellbeing or simple reminders to take some time out during a busy day.

While it may sound warm and fuzzy, Kirwan points out that it was developed with a team of clinical psychologists using evidence-based techniques.

"The journey I went on was very much about listening to professionals and understanding what they were telling me," he said. "This information is already out there, it's about getting that science and



John Kirwan

knowledge and delivering it to people in a way that's engaging."

'I KNEW WHAT WAS COMING'

Mentemia — meaning "my mind" in Italian — was originally envisaged as a tool to help large corporations reduce stress in the workforce. But as the coronavirus crisis deepened, Kirwan and his business partners became convinced it could play a positive role in helping New Zealanders cope during the pandemic.

"I've got family in Italy and I knew what was coming up, so we sat down as a business and said 'What should we do?'" said Kirwan, whose wife Fiorella hails from Italy and whose son Niko plays for Serie C football club Reggina.

"The right thing to do was to gift it to the whole of New Zealand." Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government proved receptive to the idea and last week the app was made available free to all New Zealanders as

part of the COVID-19 health response.

"It provides users with practical tips and techniques to help them take control of their mental wellbeing," Health Minister David Clark said. Kirwan, now 55, said his personal situation had long since transformed "from surviving to thriving" thanks to the techniques available on the app.

"I've got a very simple mental health plan — this morning I got up and had a shower, but the secret to the shower was being able to stop and enjoy the water," he said. "Then I had a little half-hour workout and after that I sat down and had a coffee. Already today I've done three things to contribute to my mental wellbeing."

Kirwan, a World Rugby Hall of Famer with 63 Test caps, said he was one of many keenly missing the absence of sport as a distraction during difficult times. "I think it's having an incredible impact. I love my rugby, I love my football — sport to me is part of my mental health, so I'm missing it hugely," he said. —AFP

CA board chief Roberts defends staff pay cuts

MELBOURNE: Cricket Australia (CA) Chief Executive Kevin Roberts has said deep staff pay cuts were necessary to shore up the game's finances amid the coronavirus shutdown, despite the governing body holding tens of millions of dollars in stock investments.

CA announced plans to furlough almost 80% of staff last week, putting them on 20% pay until June 30 when it is hoped more will be known about how long government curbs to control the coronavirus will last.

The cuts, which will save A\$3 million (\$1.89 million), have drawn criticism from media pundits, given CA had some A\$90 million in reserves at the end of March including A\$36 million in stock investments.

Roberts, however, said CA had to be prepared for further blows to the game's finances if a sustained shutdown put paid to all cricket in 2020, including the Twenty20 World Cup on home soil in October and hosting India in a lucrative test series.

"It wasn't an over-reaction because we're dealing with a situation that's hitting us unfortunately at the low point of our cash cycle over four years," Roberts told reporters in a video

conference call yesterday.

"In early September ... if there's more shots (to CA's finances) as we've had over the last month or more, that in fact would effectively chart a path to zero if we weren't to take drastic action."

"Then you layer on top of that the possibility that the international season doesn't go ahead, that's an issue of hundreds of millions of dollars."

Players, who are paid a share of total revenues generated by the game, also face significant pay cuts if the shutdown continues deep into the year. Roberts was CA's lead negotiator in acrimonious talks for a new collective bargaining agreement with the players union in 2017, and was ultimately defeated in his attempts to have them agree to abandon a long-standing revenue-sharing model.

He declined to confirm whether CA would ask players to take pay cuts even before the full extent of the financial impact from the shutdown is known.

"We're working through the detail of player payments with the ACA (Australian Cricketers' Association)," he said. "What we've all seen and heard ... they're acknowledging everyone has a role to play here in helping to fight this situation, including the players in Australia's national teams." Roberts added that all options were on the table for domestic and international cricket, including playing the entire India test series at a single venue or at closed stadiums, if required to manage the health risks. — Reuters

China FA proposes minimum 30% pay cut because of virus

SHANGHAI: The Chinese Football Association has proposed clubs slash wages of players and coaches by at least 30 percent to cut costs because of the coronavirus, state media said yesterday.

The People's Daily said that the CFA is now awaiting feedback from teams in the top-tier Chinese Super League (CSL) and the two divisions below. The CSL season was supposed to begin on February 22 but was indefinitely postponed after coronavirus emerged in central China in December, before spreading worldwide.

"After the opinions are collected and revised, the Chinese Football Association will report to FIFA and other relevant departments," the state-run newspaper said. "It is understood that the target of the Chinese Football Association (wages cuts)... does not include youth players and ordinary employees with relatively low salaries," People's Daily added.

The CSL has enticed foreign coaches and players in recent years with vast pay packets. Shanghai SIPG's Brazilian attacking midfielder Oscar is one of the best-paid players in the world on an estimated \$27 million a year.

Temporary wage reductions in football are a hot topic with clubs facing financial challenges because of the pandemic, which has seen most leagues indefinitely suspended. Arsenal became the first English Premier League club to agree a pay cut on Monday with manager Mikel Arteta and players accepting a 12.5 percent reduction in salary. — AFP

La Liga, Spanish FA agree training restart protocol

MADRID: La Liga and the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) have agreed a return to training protocol for professional players in the country after the coronavirus outbreak, the Spanish National Sports Council (CSD) announced on Monday.

Spain's top division has been suspended since March 12 due to the COVID-19 outbreak which has so far killed more than 20,800 people, the third-highest number of deaths in the world after the United States and Italy.

"This decision remains controlled by the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic and by the decisions adopted by the Ministry of Health," the CSD said in a statement.

La Liga clubs will train again "when health conditions allow it, and by following strict health protocols," it added.

According to local media reports La Liga has already outlined a proposition which includes testing players as well as a progression from individual training to sessions with whole squads.

League chief Javier Tebas last week said play could restart as early as next month, although a fortnight extension of the nationwide lockdown until May 9 announced on Saturday appears to have scuppered those plans.

During the weekend's meeting between La Liga, the RFEF and the CSD, which reportedly took more than eight hours, the trio decided television income from football would be used to save other sports.

"The La Liga presidents and the federation have committed to create a contingency fund of 10 million euros (\$10.86 million) to help vulnerable sports, and have invited other entities like the players union to take part," the CSD's statement said.

Serie A insisted Monday that they were committed to finishing the season despite reports seven clubs are against a return to action as the coronavirus pandemic continues to afflict Italy.

"The Lega Serie A Council that met today unanimously confirmed its intention to complete the 2019-2020 season, if the government allows it to take place," Italy's top flight said in a statement

It added that any resumption will take place "in accordance with regulations laid out by FIFA and UEFA" and the Italian Football Federation (FIGC), and "in compliance with medical protocols to protect the players".

Brescia, Torino, Sampdoria, Udinese, SPAL, Genoa and Sardinian outfit Cagliari do not want to play because of the "incalculable risk" of restarting, according to reports in Italy. Six of those clubs are situated in the north of Italy which has been hardest hit by a virus which has killed over 24,000 people.

No football has been played in Italy since March 9 with the current lockdown measures in the country extended to May 3. Sports minister Vincenzo Spadafora will meet with FIGC officials midweek, but he warned he was not sure that Serie A teams can even resume training.

"I am not giving any assurances for the start of the championship or training on May 4, if the conditions for the country do not exist beforehand," Spadafora told Tg2 Post. —AFP