

Sports

West Ham, Crystal Palace postpone Australia tour due to pandemic

Spurs' Aurier, Sissoko apologise for social distancing breach

LONDON: West Ham United and Crystal Palace have indefinitely postponed their July tour to Queensland, Australia because of the novel coronavirus outbreak, both Premier League clubs announced yesterday.

West Ham United and Palace were scheduled to meet A-League side Brisbane Roar, coached by former England striker Robbie Fowler in the inaugural Queensland Champions Cup. The exhibition event was set to take place in three cities — Townsville, Gold Coast and Brisbane — along the Queensland coast from July 11 to 18 with each team playing two matches.

"It is bitterly disappointing not to be able to make the club's landmark trip to Queensland this July," Palace chairman Steve Parish said in a statement <https://www.cpfcc.co.uk/news/2020/april/tour-to-queensland-postponed> on the club's website.

"We'll do everything we possibly can to try to rearrange the tour for 2021, once things become clear with the Premier League schedule for the remainder of this season, and next year's provisional timings, too."

Soccer in England was suspended indefinitely last month due to the flu-like virus, which has infected 2.5 million people globally causing over 172,900 deaths. West Ham manager David Moyes said the clubs had

made the right decision to postpone the tour.

"This is a situation that has affected the entire world, though, and the only thing that matters at this time is that people stay safe and well," Moyes said in a statement <https://www.whufc.com/news/articles/2020/april/22-april/eva-air-queensland-champions-cup-postponed> on West Ham's website.

"We hope the tournament can be rearranged at a later date once things are back to normal and we look forward to visiting Australia in the future."

Earlier, Tottenham Hotspur defender Serge Aurier and midfielder Moussa Sissoko have apologised for breaching government guidelines on social distancing during the novel coronavirus outbreak after posting a video of themselves training together.

Ivorian Aurier shared a series of videos on social media of himself and Frenchman Sissoko doing shuttle runs together but later deleted them. "We wish to apologise for not setting the right example here," the pair said in a joint statement released to the British media.

"We recognise that as professional footballers we have a responsibility to be role models, particularly during this uncertain period that everyone around the world is facing."

"We must all respect the government advice to

minimise the number of lives lost during this pandemic. We cannot thank NHS staff enough for their tireless work... and we shall both be making a financial donation to show our support."



LEICESTER: File photo shows West Ham United manager David Moyes and Marko Arnautovic celebrate after the victory over Leicester City.

The Premier League was suspended last month because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the government has asked the public to stay at home to help slow the spread of the virus. Reported cases of the

virus have crossed 2.5 million globally and more than 172,900 people have died.

Spurs boss Jose Mourinho was photographed at an outdoor training session at Hadley Common with midfielder Tanguy Ndombele earlier this month. Defenders Davinson Sanchez and Ryan Sessegnon were also filmed by passers-by running together through the park. — Reuters

Swiss showjumper takes stock after Olympic delay

LONDON: Martin Fuchs was dreaming of celebrating Olympic showjumping gold on his grey gelding Clooney 51, soaking up the atmosphere in the Japanese heat as the Swiss flag was raised.

Instead, the 27-year-old rider, who competed in Rio four years ago, has been forced to play a waiting game by the global coronavirus pandemic. The European champion and world silver medalist began the year as world number one ahead of compatriot Steve Guerdat and was gunning for Olympic gold in Tokyo.

But Fuchs is confident that his horse will be up to the challenge at the postponed Games next year, and is enjoying aspects of the enforced break from his usual relentless schedule. "It is obviously a disappointment as I was very excited and looking forward to the Olympics this year," he told AFP by phone from his stables in Wangi, Switzerland.

"But I think even next year Clooney will still be in a good shape as he won't be doing much this year because there is not much happening," Fuchs hails from a family whose showjumping pedigree spans generations.

His grandfather was a showjumper and his father, Thomas, and uncle both represented Switzerland at the Olympics. His uncle, Markus Fuchs, won silver in the team event at the 2000 Sydney Games.

Fuchs said the postponement of events had meant a big upheaval but not to his routine at home, where he rides "four or five of his eight good horses daily".

"We have our staff and grooms working," he said. "My Dad mostly is still riding a lot or training and putting up fences. Not going to shows is not such a big difference to daily life."

"No shows, no dealing or trading going on but still same work going on, just there is no income



ROTTERDAM: File photo taken on August 25, 2019 shows Switzerland's Martin Fuchs celebrates after winning the individual final day at the European Jumping Championships in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. — AFP

anymore." As a result Fuchs, whose hunger for competition began aged seven competing on a pony called Cleopatra, says they have had to dig into their reserves.

"Definitely for us now it is a bit rougher as no prize money or trading," he said. "But we managed over the past years to put money aside so we can touch that now to pay for things."

'A STEP BACK'

Fuchs, who finished sixth in the team event and joint-ninth in the individual competition in Rio in 2016, says spending time at home has been a rare joy.

Showjumping is at times a remorseless sport and at one point last year he spent 17 successive weeks on the road. "Times like this it is good to be open-minded and see other things apart from the horses," he said.

"It is good to take a step back and enjoy my time

going for walks, reading a book or doing a puzzle. It is an interesting time to think about other stuff. "It is completely different to what one is normally used to."

Despite the positive side of the enforced break, Fuchs hopes to return to some form of normality later in the year with the Rolex Grand Slam of Showjumping in his sights after victory in Geneva.

To succeed he has to win the Spruce Meadows "Masters" in Canada in September and at Aachen in Germany, postponed from its original date to later in the year due to the COVID-19 crisis. Winning the Grand Slam — victory at three consecutive majors — brings a one-million-euro (\$1.1 million) bonus on top of prize money.

But Fuchs' task is tough — just one rider, Britain's Scott Brash in 2015, has achieved the feat before. "It would mean a lot to win the Rolex Grand Slam by winning three of the majors," he said. "They are the most prestigious events in our sport." — AFP

Jim Laker remains one of England's finest spin bowlers

LONDON: Jim Laker, who died on April 23, 1986, remains one of England's finest spin bowlers and is best remembered for his record 19 wickets in a single test match in 1956. Not only was that performance against Australia, at Old Trafford, a Test record, it has never been matched even in first class cricket, with only two players coming within two wickets since.

Yet while the memory of the 'Laker Test' remains strong, his impact on the game was much broader — he was a key part of the Surrey team which won seven county championships in a row between 1952 and 1958 and claimed 193 wickets in 46 tests over an 11-year period.

Born in Yorkshire, Laker viewed himself as a batsman and quick bowler but was persuaded to try his hand at off-spin. He realised his potential during war-time inter-service games on matting wickets in Egypt.

Emerging in county cricket with Surrey after World War Two, Laker, tall and with a high, elegant bowling action, showed that his effectiveness was by no means limited to such surfaces.

Having settled in the south of England after the war, he was signed by Surrey and by 1948 he earned his first test appearance, in Barbados. His emergence led to inevitable overtures from his home county but despite Yorkshire's best efforts, he stuck with Surrey.

His greatest achievement was back in the North,

however, during a rainy and blustery test at Old Trafford, eight years after his England debut. England batted first and made 459 all out with Peter Richardson scoring his maiden test century and David Sheppard also making a hundred and there was little indication of what was to come.

With his Surrey team mate, left-arm orthodox spinner Tony Lock, operating at the other end, Laker ran through the Australians taking 9-37 as the tourists were bowled out for 84. His seven wickets after tea were at a rate of one every three balls.

There was anger among the visitors about the surface, with former Australia spinner Bill O'Reilly writing in the press that "This pitch is a disgrace. What lies in store for Test cricket if groundsmen are allowed to play the fool like this?"

Following on, Australia battled through the rain delays into the fifth day, with opener Colin McDonald's 337-minute 89, in such tricky batting conditions, a brave and skilled innings. Yet Laker was too much for them again and he ended with all 10 wickets. Australia captain Ian Johnson put aside concerns about the wicket and was generous in his praise. "When the controversies and side issues of this match are forgotten, Laker's wonderful bowling will remain," he said.

He was right but Laker still had plenty more to offer the game. He caused controversy with his autobiography in 1960, which attacked the last remnants of the amateur-professional divide in the game and led to him losing his pass to Surrey's Oval ground and honorary MCC membership — although both were later restored.

Laker went on to be a respected television commentator for the BBC, for whom he had become the first cricketer to win the Sports Personality of the Year award after his exploits in Manchester. — Reuters

Whitlock eyes return to action in New Zealand

WELLINGTON: All Blacks veteran Sam Whitlock hopes to return to rugby in New Zealand at some stage this year after the COVID-19 pandemic put paid to his stint in Japan's Top League.

The 115-test lock had planned to skip the Super Rugby season while completing a short-term contract with Robbie Deans's Panasonic Wild Knights but has returned home after Japan's domestic competition was cancelled last month.

Super Rugby, along with all competitions in New Zealand, has been suspended as part of measures aimed at curbing the spread of the virus, but if action resumes Whitlock hopes to play for Scott Robertson's Crusaders or the Canterbury provincial side. "We are pretty gutted the Japan competition has been cancelled, we understand, but we were sitting pretty well on the table," the 31-year-old told New Zealand broadcaster Sky Sports.

"But we are back in New Zealand at the moment and we will make our way back to Christchurch once we are allowed to travel a bit further. "We will head back there and hopefully meet back up with the Crusaders or Canterbury, whatever competition kicks off first." As a board member of New Zealand's players union, Whitlock has been heavily involved in scenario planning with governing body New Zealand Rugby and local teams as to how a restart of the season might unfold.

The All Blacks international season is scheduled to start in July with two tests against Wales and one against Scotland but the matches are in doubt due to travel restrictions and border controls to contain the new coronavirus. Players would also need a three to four week lead-in before any restart to get match-fit, Whitlock said. "There are a number of calendars out there that we are debating. As players, we just have to be ready to go when we do get the information from the government saying we can get into it at this level," he added. — Reuters

County cricketers play waiting game during lockdown

LONDON: County cricketer Tom Alsop is kicking his heels because of the coronavirus pandemic but says his mother's job on the front line in a British hospital puts his frustrations into perspective.

Global cricket is on hold, including the start of the English season and the lucrative Twenty20 Indian Premier League, with dire warnings sounded over the potential financial fallout from a prolonged shutdown.

Alsop has been placed on the furlough scheme — which sees 80 percent of wages up to a certain level covered by the British government. The players are in talks with the club about the remaining 20 percent.

The 24-year-old, who says county cricketers' wages are "very good for what we do", said the issue pales into insignificance compared with the work his mother and other National Health Service staff are doing.

"My morale is as positive as it can be during these uncertain times. With my mother's job in intensive care (working as a senior critical care nurse) at RUH (Royal United Hospitals) Bath, it really puts things in perspective," the wicketkeeper-batsman told AFP.

Alsop, who has represented England at Under-19 and Lions (England's second-tier) level, says he is fortunate as a professional sportsman. "At the end of the day it's a game. I don't drive into work every day wondering how many lives I might need to save or are there going to be enough beds for everyone," he said.

He hopes one positive outcome of the coronavirus will be that it will make people rethink their priorities. "What really matters in life is family and loved ones," he said. "Not being upset over not having the newest Mercedes or that your stock portfolio has fallen by a few points."

Alsop's father was responsible, along with his older brother Owen, for sparking his interest in cricket, with fiercely fought games in their back garden. "That often ended in argument, mostly down to me only wanting to bat and not bowl," he said. He has gone on to enjoy "exhilarating highs" including his maiden first-class century and seeing different cultures on tour, including Sri Lanka.

TRAINING IN ISOLATION

Alsop said county players, being on 12-month contracts, were required to continue training and take part in strength and conditioning during the off-season, making it a "full-time job".

The relative monotony of that has been alleviated with two spells playing in Durban, South Africa, and one training in Perth, Australia. County cricketers in England and Wales are now being forced to work out alone as they wait to see if and when the season starts due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

"Training is difficult at the moment in respects to batting and 'keeping'," said Alsop, who is currently living with his parents. "At Hampshire we've all been given home fitness programmes so I've been following mine so far," he said. "The club's WhatsApp has been very busy, everyone is staying in touch. "There's been lots of quizzes, pictures and videos shared, all aimed at making each other laugh and to keep each other sane." He and his team-mates would love to be playing the sport they are paid for but like everyone else they are in the dark over when or whether the season might start. — AFP