

18 NFL braces for 'Virtual Draft' amid coronavirus lockdown



18 Gronk ends retirement, joins Buccaneers



19 Swiss showjumper takes stock after Olympic delay



German football plans May return



MUNICH: File photo shows Bayern Munich's players attend a training session at the football team's training grounds in Munich, southern Germany, on April 16, 2020.—AFP

BERLIN: German football authorities are set to announce plans today for Bundesliga matches to restart on May 9 in empty stadiums, but the potential return in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic is meeting some opposition.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's government is slowly easing nationwide restrictions and the resumption of the Bundesliga, which was halted on March 13, would boost morale in football-mad Germany. It would also make the Bundesliga the first top-flight European league to begin playing again.

Large public events are banned in Germany until August 31, yet football could resume without spectators — known as "ghost games" in German. Germany has more testing capacity than other European countries and players could be tested regularly.

The 18 clubs have been back in training for three weeks, albeit in small groups with social distancing observed even on the pitch. Having already been given signs of encouragement by politicians, the German Football League (DFL) is set to iron out details in Thursday's video conference meeting of the clubs.

Final approval could be given by Merkel and regional state premiers at a meeting on April 30. The DFL is desperate for the league season to be com-

pleted by June 30 to ensure payment of the next instalment of television money, worth around 300 million euros (\$326 million).

The cash could keep some clubs alive, with 13 of the 36 clubs in Germany's top two tiers reportedly on the verge of insolvency. With fans across Europe and the world deprived of football, the games are also likely to attract TV audiences far beyond Germany.

With fans locked out and asked to stay at home, only players, backroom staff, stewards, media and officials will be allowed into the stadiums for games with numbers strictly regulated.

Some clubs are being innovative about the problem of potentially playing in near-empty stadiums. Borussia Moenchengladbach have filled their terraces with life-sized cardboard cut-outs of fans.

However, the restart is unpopular in some quarters and criticism has come from some supporters' groups. Critics point to figures of more than 140,000 cases of coronavirus and over 4,500 deaths in Ger-

many as proof that football is inappropriate.

Restarting the season in the middle of the pandemic "would be sheer mockery for the rest of society" according to supporters' group Fanszene Deutschlands, who accuse the clubs of greed. "Professional football has long been sick enough and should continue to be quarantined," it said. Nationwide fan group "Unsere Kurve" has also slammed the move. Football "cannot act in isolation from the situation in society as a whole," it said. "If the game continues like this, we're out!" Even some players are uncomfortable about returning to action in the current situation.

"There are more important things than football at the moment," said Bayern Munich defender Niklas Suele.

In Berlin, Union forward Sebastian Polter said "nobody wants ghost games — no player, no fan" even if they appear to be the only option to complete the season. It will also take around 20,000 tests of players and backroom staff to be able to complete all the remaining matches. Germany has a testing capacity of

550,000 per week, so 20,000 tests spread over the nine remaining Bundesliga matchdays seems manageable. However, the Robert Koch Institute, which advises the German government, sees things differently. "I think the tests should be used where it makes medical sense," the institute's vice-president Lars Schaade said on Tuesday. "I do not see why certain population groups, whether athletes or otherwise, should be routinely screened."

'LEAP OF FAITH'

Nevertheless, it seems highly likely the Bundesliga will return next month. Markus Soeder, the state premier of Bavaria, and Armin Laschet, head of North Rhine-Westphalia — two key German football strongholds — have voiced support.

Christian Seifert, the Bundesliga's CEO, has said the league's clubs and stars have a duty "to repay the trust" shown by the politicians. Senior figures at Bayern Munich, who have a four-point lead at the top of the league, Borussia Dortmund and RB Leipzig have expressed similar gratitude. "This is a great leap of faith," said Dortmund CEO Hans-Joachim Watzke. "Football is an opportunity to give millions of fans a little more zest for life again." — AFP



Soccer to resume without spectators

McIlroy against fan-less Ryder Cup

LOS ANGELES: World number one Rory McIlroy on Tuesday added his voice to the chorus of players opposed to the idea of playing this year's Ryder Cup without spectators.

With the global golf season in chaos due to the coronavirus pandemic, the game's administrators are running through a range of possible scenarios as they attempt to plot a path back to competition.

For organizers of the Ryder Cup, which is due to

take place at Whistling Straits, Wisconsin from September 25-27, that has included studying whether the tournament could be played without fans.

PGA chief executive Seth Waugh revealed earlier this week that officials had looked at the possibility of creating a "virtual fan experience" for the fiercely competitive team clash between Europe and the United States.

Waugh however acknowledged that a Ryder Cup without spectators was "hard to imagine," noting they were an integral part of the raucous and often febrile golfing spectacle.

McIlroy, speaking during an Instagram live event for sponsors TaylorMade, said he would rather see this year's event delayed for a year than played before

empty galleries. "I have a pretty strong view on this. I get the financial implications for everyone involved — there's a lot that goes into putting on the Ryder Cup that people don't probably know or appreciate — but having a Ryder Cup without fans is not a Ryder Cup," McIlroy said.

"For me I would much rather they delay it until 2021 than play it at Whistling Straits without fans. And that's from a European going to America, knowing that I'm going to get abuse!"

"Obviously it would be better for Europeans to play without fans because we wouldn't have to deal with some of the stuff that you have to put up with — but at the same time it's not a Ryder Cup."

"It wouldn't be a great spectacle, there'd be no at-

mosphere, so if it came to whether they had to choose between not playing the Ryder Cup or playing it without fans, I would say just delay it for a year and play it in 2021."

McIlroy added that a year's delay would also work in favor of 2022 Ryder Cup hosts Italy, one of the worst affected countries in the coronavirus outbreak.

"If they do delay it until 2021, the next Ryder Cup is supposed to be in Italy, and we know how badly affected Italy was by coronavirus, so it gives that country an extra year to prepare for the Ryder Cup in 2023 instead of 2022," McIlroy said.

"This is only one opinion but if we have to play the Ryder Cup behind closed doors this year, I'd rather just delay it." — AFP