

18 New Zealand sets up committee to review Super Rugby future



19 Before Leicester, Ranieri's brush with glory with his beloved Roma



19 How Anelka, Drogba blazed trail with chaotic season in China



Stars on their sofas compete for fans

'Live' and slightly dangerous



GENEVA: In this file photo taken on Sept 20, 2019, Team Europe's Roger Federer (left) and teammate Rafael Nadal watch a match as part of the 2019 Laver Cup tennis tournament in Geneva. — AFP

PARIS: Across social media, sports stars denied the chance to play in front of a crowd are increasingly going "live" in sometimes surprising ways to connect with an audience.

To the delight of fans, happy to discover some hidden facets of their idols, stars from Karim Benzema to the Brazilian legend Ronaldo and even Rafael Nadal, who initially struggled with Instagram, are dropping their habitual discretion to interact live with their millions of followers. "As competitions are suspended, sportsmen and women are no longer necessarily supervised by the club's press officer," Boris Helleu, an expert on digital strategies in sport, told AFP.

"The athlete becomes his own media and can speak out on subjects that we didn't hear about before."

One of those who has cracked open his armour on a range of topics is the normally prickly Benzema, who posts videos on YouTube as "Nueve Live" — a play on his shirt number, and has more than 33 million Instagram followers.

His broadcasts have attracted as many as 130,000 viewers live with hundreds of thousands more catching

up later. The tone is relaxed and humorous, but the French striker has also been mildly controversial, taking sides in French rap politics and also airing his grudge over being banned from the French team.

Asked about Olivier Giroud, who played centre forward when France won the World Cup two years ago, Benzema replied: "Everyone knows the difference between F1 and karting, and I'm F1."

Benzema also builds his audience by chatting with the type of celebrities who appeal to a young Francophone audience, but when it comes to star guests, no one tops Ronaldo.

Ronaldo, the president of Valladolid in La Liga, has interviewed FIFA president Gianni Infantino and also talked to fellow Real Madrid Galacticos David Beckham, Roberto Carlos, Iker Casillas and Luis Figo.

Switching from Portuguese to English, Spanish and Italian, the Brazilian double Ballon d'Or winner chatted matily with former team-mates as if in a private phone call with an old friend, even though tens of thousands of people were watching. When his turn came, Beckham said he had watched the earlier chats and thought

"Figo talked too much". Ronaldo responded by defending the Portuguese winger with a series of wife jokes. Meanwhile, Novak Djokovic, sharp and articulate in English, has worked his way through the upper echelons of men's tennis in a series of live chats which have moved beyond good-natured banter into the politics and economics of the sport.

Nadal caused great amusement as he struggled with the technology in a three-way Instagram chat with Roger Federer and Andy Murray.

"As you can see I am a disaster," he said at one point. A star aiming for a young audience, Antoine Griezmann of Barcelona, opted for gaming platform Twitch when, along with brother Theo, he hosted a live online combat session.

Contestants included fellow members of the France World Cup team Paul Pogba and Ousmane Dembele as well as the best known French online combat gamers. In 24 hours shooting virtual guns, they raised 29,200 euros (\$31,600) for the Red Cross.

In a medium where he can set the agenda, Benzema, a polarising player, has revealed a "frankness" that

seemed both natural and confusing.

Helleu said the Real Madrid striker was using the medium well. "The mistake would be to consider that he's a loose cannon, when he's not," Helleu said. "On the contrary, the difficulty of the exercise is to be authentic and not a glass of tepid water. And that, for the moment, he does it well," said Helleu, a professor of sports management at the University of Caen.

"Many footballers aim to counter the erroneous image of the guy who's just good at kicking a ball, by showing that they have a personality, a sense of humour and an opinion," he added.

The athletes with their social media are exploiting a void caused by the cancellation of live sport normally shown by television rights holders and are attracting a young audience. "Before, the sportsman's voice only existed and was only possible through the traditional press. Now that's no longer the case," says Helleu. "Once the competition is back on track, it will be interesting to see if Benzema says: 'We had a good time, I'm keeping this going.'" His followers can't wait for that. —AFP

Thiem says struggling players don't deserve his hard-won money

VIENNA: Tennis world number three Dominic Thiem expressed scepticism Sunday about plans to set up a fund to help lower-ranked players struggling because of the shutdown of the sport.

In an interview with Austria's Krone newspaper, Thiem was asked about last week's announcement by world number one Novak Djokovic that he was working with Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal to organise aid for players struggling with the paralysis of the game due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"Quite honestly I have to say that no tennis player will be fighting to survive, even those who are much lower-ranked," Thiem said, adding: "None of them are going to starve."

He said that his experience competing on

the sport's Futures circuit had shown him that there are "many, many players who don't put the sport above everything else and don't live in a professional manner."

"I wouldn't really see why I should give such players money," he went on. "I would rather give money to people or organisations that really need it," Thiem said. The plan proposed by Djokovic would involve raising between \$3 million (2.75 million euros) and \$4.5 million, with the cash coming from the prize money for the season-ending World Tour Finals or the final bonus pools for top players.

"None of us top players got anything handed to us, we all had to fight our way up," Thiem said. "I don't have the guarantee in any job that I will do well and earn lots of money, that's my opinion on the matter," he said. — AFP

Paris 2024 Olympics plans 'obsolete'

PARIS: Plans for the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris are "obsolete and outdated" in light of the coronavirus pandemic, IOC member and former French sports minister Guy Drut said Sunday.

Former Olympic champion Drut, who won gold in the 110m hurdles in 1976 and took silver four years before, added in a column for franceinfo that the Olympic Games needed to be "reinvented" to put them more in touch with reality. "The crisis we're going through has a lasting impact on our daily lives, our way of life, our economy, our social pact, our choice of society," wrote Drut. "It cannot and must not remain without effect on the imperative necessity which is to reinvent ourselves."

"The Olympic and Paralympic Games are no exception to this new context. They too must reinvent themselves."

The International Olympic Committee, jointly with local organisers, has been forced into delaying the 2020 Tokyo Olympics by one year to 2021 because of the COVID-19 outbreak.

But Drut, an IOC member since 1996, argued that postponement of dates was just the tip of the iceberg. "Can the response to this crisis be translated by simply postponing dates, without the Games model — both economic and organisational — also being deeply rethought?" asked the 69-year-old, who served as sports minister in France between 1995-7 under Jacques Chirac.

"The beautiful project that we built and carried in the bid phase for Paris 2024 is now obsolete, outdated, out of touch with reality."

"If the project is to remain un-

changed, we must review its means and refocus on the essential. The first necessity is to make a budgetary reassessment of what Paris 2024 Olympics will cost. "The Games of yesterday will not be the Games of tomorrow. We have to accept that and together imagine a new model. "We have to rethink them to adapt them, to keep them relevant to the changing world. They will not be able to take place at any cost, disconnected from reality, on the 'margins' of the world."

In that context, Drut suggested hosting certain events on a single site "whatever the organising country", citing as an example Tahiti or Hawaii for surfing. He also proposed limiting the number of additional sports. "It is very expensive to build new equipment for an event that lasts only three, four days," Drut argued. — AFP