

Sports

Australian Open gets February start as virus hits second Slam season

MELBOURNE: The Australian Open was pushed back to February 8 yesterday after weeks of negotiations as coronavirus disruption hits a second Grand Slam tennis season. Men's qualifiers will be held in Doha but Australia will host a series of build-up events including the flagship ATP Cup, the men's ATP Tour said, announcing its early 2021 schedule.

The three-week delay to the season's opening Grand Slam comes after this year's Wimbledon was cancelled — for the first time since World War II — the French Open was postponed and the US Open was played behind closed doors. Fans are expected to be allowed at Melbourne Park, the tournament's venue, as the coronavirus is under control in Australia, but players will need to undergo 14 days of quarantine.

Confirmation of the February 8-21 dates follows protracted talks between Tennis Australia and state authorities in Melbourne, which emerged from a months-long lockdown in October following a second wave of COVID-19.

Originally due to start on January 18, players will now arrive in Australia from January 15 to serve two weeks in a bio-secure bubble, many of them coming from countries where the pandemic is still raging. Earlier reports said they would stay at designated hotels but would be allowed to practice and exercise for up to five hours a day,

shuttled between their accommodation and Melbourne Park.

There was no immediate confirmation of the arrangements from Tennis Australia. The ATP said men's qualifiers for the Grand Slam would be held from January 10-13 in Doha, before players and limited support staff travel to Australia.

A slimmed-down, 12-team ATP Cup, the relocated Adelaide International, and an ATP 250 tournament will all be held in Melbourne ahead of the Slam which is now scheduled for February 8-21. There was no word on where the women will play their qualifiers, with the WTA yet to announce its early-season schedule. But WTA tournaments are also expected to be played in Melbourne before the Open.

'Health and safety paramount'

"The reconfigured calendar for the start of the 2021 season represents a huge collaborative effort across tennis, under challenging circumstances," said ATP chairman Andrea Gaudenzi. "Health and safety will continue to be paramount as we navigate the challenges ahead, and I want to thank everyone involved for their commitment to finding solutions to launch our 2021 season," he added.

World number one Novak Djokovic is expected to be back and

aiming for a ninth Australian Open title after overcoming Austria's Dominic Thiem in a five-set final earlier this year. But there is doubt over Swiss great Roger Federer, 39, who revealed this week he was in a "race against time" to be fit as his recovery from two rounds of knee surgery takes longer than expected. American Sofia Kenin is expected to defend her maiden Grand Slam crown after defeating Spaniard Garbine Muguruza in three sets in this year's women's final.

Australian Open boss Craig Tiley had been hoping that Melbourne Park crowds would be between 25 and 50 percent of normal capacity. But with coronavirus now under control in Australia there are hopes that number could be raised, if there are no more community transmissions of COVID-19.

The men's season will start with the ATP 250 Delray Beach Open alongside a new single-year ATP 250 event in Antalya, Turkey before moving to Doha for the Australian Open qualifying. Details of weeks eight-13 will be announced separately, the ATP said, but the clay-court season from week 14 is due to remain unchanged at this time.

Events cancelled in 2021 due to the pandemic include the ASB Classic in Auckland and the New York Open, while the Maharashtra Open in India is under a cloud. The Rio Open will not take place as originally scheduled, with alternative dates being considered. —AFP

Cavani charged by FA over social media post

LONDON: Edinson Cavani has been charged with misconduct by the Football Association for a now-deleted social media post containing a Spanish phrase that is offensive in some contexts and for which the Manchester United star apologized.

The 33-year-old Uruguayan striker's Instagram post thanked a friend for his congratulations after scoring twice as United came from 2-0 down to beat Southampton 3-2 last month and included the Spanish word "negrito" (small black person). He later deleted the post and apologized when it was pointed out the meaning that could be attached to it.

Both United and the player said at the time that the word was clearly used in an affectionate manner and has different connotations in South America. "Edinson Cavani has been charged with misconduct for a breach of FA Rule E3, in relation to a social media post on Thursday 29 November 2020," read the FA statement.

"It is alleged that, contrary to FA Rule E3.1, a comment posted on the Manchester United FC player's Instagram page was insulting and/or abusive and/or improper and/or brought the game into disrepute. It is further alleged that the comment constitutes an 'Aggravated Breach', which is defined



SOUTHAMPTON: In this file photo taken on November 29, 2020 Manchester United's Uruguayan striker Edinson Cavani celebrates scoring their second goal during the English Premier League football match between Southampton and Manchester United at St Mary's Stadium in Southampton, southern England on November 29, 2020. —AFP

in FA Rule E3.2, as it included a reference, whether express or implied, to colour and/or race and/or ethnic origin."

The striker — who has been out of action for the past two matches due to a muscle injury though he has now returned to training — has until January 4 2021 to provide a response to the charge. United said they and Cavani would consult over their response to the charge. The striker could potentially be suspended for more than three matches under rules relating to offences of discrimination brought in by the FA this season. —AFP

James, Davis make pre-season bow as Lakers edge Suns

LOS ANGELES: LeBron James and Anthony Davis eased into the NBA's pre-season on

Wednesday as the Los Angeles Lakers scored a 112-107 victory over the Phoenix Suns. James, who barely two months ago led the Lakers to their NBA Finals triumph in Orlando, bagged 11 points with two rebounds and two assists during 15 first half minutes in Phoenix.

Davis added 10 points with four rebounds in 18 minutes on court. Both James and Davis were rested for the second half. New Lakers

Ex-Barcelona star Iniesta vows to play on after surgery

TOKYO: Former Barcelona star Andres Iniesta has promised his glittering career won't be cut short by the thigh injury that has left him facing four months on the sidelines. The World Cup-winning Spanish midfielder, 36, said he planned to be back for his Japanese club Vissel Kobe next season after undergoing surgery in Barcelona on a ruptured tendon.

Iniesta suffered the injury in the knockout stages of the Asian Champions League, where he helped Vissel reach the semi-finals before they were knocked out on Sunday. "The surgery has been a success and I am feeling very well," Iniesta said in a statement posted on Twitter, with a photo of himself giving the thumbs-up from his hospital bed. "My objective is to get back on track as soon as possible and enjoy what I like doing the most. All my energy is already put into the recovery and the work that lies ahead." The Spanish maestro was injured and substituted during Vissel's round-of-16 victory over China's Shanghai SIPG in Doha, a match in which he scored. He made a telling cameo appearance in the quarter-final against South Korea's Suwon Bluewings, coming on as a 113th-minute substitute and scoring Vissel's first penalty in a 7-6 shoot-out victory.

Iniesta clutched his thigh and grimaced immediately

after slotting his kick past Suwon goalkeeper Yang Sang-min, and did not appear in Vissel's 2-1 semi-final defeat by Ulsan Hyundai three days later. Iniesta joined Vissel in 2018 after making 442 appearances for Barcelona, where he was the midfield dynamo in some of the club's greatest ever teams. Barcelona wished Iniesta a speedy recovery in a Twitter post on Wednesday, as did Spanish side Albacete, where Iniesta began his youth career.

Spanish basketball star Pau Gasol, a six-time NBA All-Star and winner of two Olympic silver medals with the Spanish national team, also sent a message of encouragement. —AFP



AL-WAKRAH, Qatar: Kobe's midfielder Andres Iniesta reacts in pain after scoring his penalty during the shootout in the AFC Champions League quarter finals football match between Japan's Vissel Kobe and Korea's Suwon Samsung Bluewings on December 10, 2020 at the al-Janoub Stadium in the Qatari city of Al-Wakrah. —AFP

signing Marc Gasol added three points in a 21-minute appearance. Kyle Kuzma led the scoring for the Lakers with 23 points.

The coronavirus-interrupted 2019-2020 campaign — which shut down for four months between March and July — eventually wrapped up in Florida in October. With the new season tipping off on December 22, it means teams will have the shortest off-season

in NBA history. Lakers head coach Frank Vogel had opted to rest both James and Davis for the team's first two pre-season games against the Los Angeles Clippers. The Lakers have been installed as favorites for the upcoming season, strengthening their squad with the addition of Gasol, German point guard Dennis Schroder and center Montrezl Harrell. —AFP