

Sports

Photo of the day



GLEINALPE: Miguel Oliveira races during MotoGP goes in Gleinalpe, Austria. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Thiem, Kyrgios to play July grass, hard-court

BERLIN: Dominic Thiem, Nick Kyrgios, Elina Svitolina and Kiki Bertens will compete in grass and hard-court events in Berlin in July featuring both men's and women's fields.

The behind-closed-doors competition will be held on grass at the Steffi Graf Stadium from July 13-15 and then switch to hard court in a hangar at Berlin's Tempelhof Airport from July 17-19.

With Wimbledon cancelled for the first time since World War II due to the coronavirus pandemic, this will be the first grass-court tennis of 2020. Six men and six women are set to take part.

"I am curious to see where I stand with my tennis," said Germany's Alexander Zverev, who joins Austria's Thiem, the highest ranked at third in the world, and Australia's Kyrgios in the men's event.

"I've been practising hard, but it's going to be my first time playing a competitive event in a long time. It's going to be exciting to play on two different surfaces in seven days."

In the women's field, Germany's Julia Goerges and Andrea Petkovic will join Svitolina of Ukraine and Bertens of the Netherlands, who are both in the top 10.

There will be no live spectators, electric line-calling will be used instead of judges and the matches will be played over two sets with a possible third as a tie-breaker.

The matches will be broadcast with prize money of 200,000 euros (\$222,000) at stake — 100,000 each for the men's and women's events.

The ATP and WTA tours are both suspended until late July due to the global health crisis.

The Steffi Graf Stadium was due to host the first WTA event of the grass season from June 13-20, but this year's tournament was cancelled following the virus outbreak.

Historic Tempelhof Airport has been closed since 2008, but the grounds remain open as a public park and was where planes landed during the Berlin Airlift in 1948-49. —AFP

F1 season to open in Austria after govt backs Spielberg double act

Plan involves regular testing and health check-ups for teams

VIENNA: Formula One's truncated coronavirus-hit season will finally get underway with the Austrian Grand Prix on July 5, the Austrian government announced on Saturday.

The Spielberg circuit has also been given the green light to stage a second race the following weekend. "The two Formula One races on July 5 and 12 at Spielberg will be staged without spectators," announced Austrian Health Minister Rudolf Anschöber.

He said that the two races had been approved after F1 organisers "had presented a complete and professional plan" to combat the spread of COVID-19.

The F1 season was thrown into chaos with the cancellation of the traditional curtain-raising Australian Grand Prix in March only hours before practice was due to begin.

Melbourne was one of 10 races either cancelled or postponed, yet F1 boss Chase Carey believes a 15-18 race season is still possible. But Silverstone's hopes of also staging back-to-back races after Austria are in the balance after the British government insisted that all arrivals in the country undergo a two-week quarantine period.

Anschöber added a caveat to Saturday's statement, insisting the season's belated restart would only go ahead if all the health assurances made by F1 were fulfilled.

"In addition to strict hygiene measures the plan also involves regular testing and health check-ups for teams and all the other employees," he said.

"The crucial element will be the close coordination between the organisers and the regional and local health authorities," he added.

Its remote location made the Red Bull Ring circuit a "logical" location to stage the season's first two races, F1 managing director Ross Brawn said this month.

With a local airport, the races can be held in an isolated environment, essential in the fight against the pandemic that has killed less than 700 people in Austria, and more than 364,000 worldwide.

"One of the logistical challenges is getting everyone tested and cleared to enter the racing environment," Brawn explained in an F1 Nation podcast.

"Once we do that, it's very attractive to keep everyone in that environment, within that biosphere that we want to create, for another race. Austria fits that bill very well. It has a local airport right next to the circuit, where people can charter planes into. It's not too close to a metropolis."

The 2020 F1 season was to have featured a record 22 races, now it is set to be one of the shortest campaigns for over a decade.

Carey outlined the blueprint for the rebashed season this month, involving additional European races through the traditional August break.

"We will then plan to race in Asia and the Americas in September, October, November before finishing in the Gulf in Bahrain and Abu Dhabi in December," he said.

He added: "We expect the early part of the calendar to be races without fans, but we hope to be able to allow fans to attend in the latter part of the year."

F1's tentative emergence from coronavirus lockdown follows the path trodden cautiously by other sports.

Germany's Bundesliga became the first of



VIENNA: Two Formula One races on July 5 and 12 at Spielberg will be staged without spectators.

Europe's top football leagues to return this month with Spain's La Liga, Italy's Serie A and England's Premier League kick-starting their interrupted seasons over the next few weeks.

While there may have been no racing up to now there has been plenty going on behind the scenes, with Carlos Sainz replacing Sebastian Vettel at Ferrari for 2021 and Daniel Ricciardo joining McLaren.

Given the massive financial hit teams have taken

and the worry that some might go bust, the proposed all-new technical landscape due to be implemented next season has been pushed back to 2022.

And a spending cap of \$145 million has been introduced for next year in an attempt to stem the bleeding, with teams like McLaren making significant job cuts.

One man itching for the season to begin is Lewis Hamilton, who is hoping to equal Michael Schumacher's record of seven world titles. —AFP

English racing under starters orders on road to redemption

LONDON: English racing will today offer a beacon of hope after months of nationwide gloom when it becomes the first sport in Britain to emerge from coronavirus lockdown.

Criticised for pressing ahead with the Cheltenham Festival as the pandemic took hold in March racing now finds itself in the news in an altogether more positive light.

It returns at Newcastle with a surreal feel with no spectators to watch the 10 flat races restricted to 12 runners per contest and trainers, jockeys and grooms wearing masks.

There will be none of the usual celebratory hugs or shake of the hands between jockeys and trainers as social distancing officers will be on hand to ensure people stay two metres apart.

However, leading flat trainer Hugo Palmer told

AFP morale at his Kremlin Cottage Stables in Newmarket has been high due to the "sunniest spring for years" but admits it might have dipped had racing "not been around the corner".

The genial Englishman — who established himself among the top rank with champion miler Galileo Gold in 2016 — says racing resuming for the first time since March 17 is a "tremendous opportunity" for the sport.

"There is precious little else to watch although it coincides with the day the Government allows more people to meet outside," Palmer said. "My mother would have been furious if she caught me watching TV on a sunny day!"

"However, we have to hope people will stay inside and watch the racing."

"It is a real opportunity to pick up new followers," Palmer says racing owes a huge debt to the loyalty of owners through the crisis.

Palmer — who has around 100 horses — said they could have cut their training costs by taking them away whilst the sport was shut down. "People largely own racehorses for pleasure and amusement," he said.

"The sport is only able to go ahead today because of the thousands of horses owners have continued to pay to have in training. "The overwhelming majority of staff were not furloughed and we have not existed on government handouts."

"We all owe them (the owners) a huge debt of gratitude. "If they had pulled them out of training then we would not have been in a position to put sport on at all."

'AN INHERENT OPTIMISM'

Phoenix Thoroughbreds — who have over 60 horses in the United Kingdom — will have one runner on Monday, Luck on Sunday trained by John Quinn. "We made a commitment at the start of the lockdown not to take any of our horses out of training and we stuck to that," Phoenix Thoroughbred's CEO Amer Abdulaziz Salman told AFP.

"For us, we need to race not just for the prize money but also for the breeding side of our operation." Salman takes the same view as Palmer that it could be a new dawn for the sport.

"This is an unprecedented opportunity for racing in the UK to raise its profile," he said. "With no oth-

er sport to watch, you would hope a whole new audience and even generation will tune in."

Palmer has two runners at Newcastle — the racecourse where two-time Arc de Triomphe winner Enable opened her account in November 2016 — but will not be gracing the track with his presence. "I have a very experienced team of people who are very good at their jobs," he said. "With restricted numbers my presence would be unnecessary."

"Besides there is nowhere to get lunch, nowhere to get a drink. "People will be just going back to their cars (when they don't have runners involved in a particular race) and listening to the radio or watching the racing on their phones."

Palmer says it has been perhaps easier for trainers to keep going because equine viruses are the bane of their lives.

"There was a biography titled 'Months of Misery and Moments of Bliss (late trainer Bill Wightman)," he said. "To train horses you need an inherent optimism and a spring in your step to drag yourself out of bed long before the cock crows and to keep doing it because nobody is forcing you to do it." —AFP