

Sports

Brazil leader wants football season back despite pandemic

Smaller regional leagues players have to survive somehow

RIO DE JANEIRO: The right-wing populist president of Brazil wants the football season to resume even though the five-time World Cup winning country is a hotspot of the coronavirus pandemic.

Brazil is for many synonymous with football and many of the all-time greats, from Pele to Neymar, hail from the nation. But Brazil is also the epicentre of Latin America's coronavirus outbreak.

The death toll from coronavirus in Brazil has hit 27,878, official figures showed on Friday, surpassing the toll of hard-hit Spain and making it the country with the fifth-highest number of fatalities.

Football has been suspended in Brazil since mid-March but President Jair Bolsonaro recently told Radio Guaiba that footballers would likely not fall very ill with COVID-19.

"As footballers are young athletes the risk of death if they catch coronavirus would be dramatically reduced," Bolsonaro said. Back in March Bolsonaro also claimed that thanks to his own sporting past he would only suffer a slight cold if he caught the virus.

The president says his chief motivation for wanting football to get back underway is to curb unemployment and the misery that accompanies it.

"The players have to survive somehow," he said, explaining that while some top footballers earn a fortune, those from smaller regional leagues need to play "to feed their families".

The way Brazilian politics works, it is not in

Bolsonaro's remit to restart football. This must be done by the regional states and municipalities.

When football was suspended, seasons at the regional level were underway, but the national championship had been due to start in May and as yet there are no solid plans to begin.

Bolsonaro and his son held meetings on May 19 with the presidents of two Rio superclubs, Vasco da Gama and Flamengo. Photos of Bolsonaro and his son wearing the shirts of the two clubs stunned social media, with official supporter groups claiming their image had been sold out to politics.

"This is just political intolerance," said Flamengo president Rodolfo Landim, explaining that Bolsonaro just wants football back as soon as possible and he himself "is defending the interests of Flamengo."

The day after the meeting Flamengo were filmed by a TV Globo helicopter breaking the Rio lockdown rules by training without permission.

Rio state health secretary Ana Beatriz Bush said the act of defiance set a terrible example.

"Imagine all the young people who see Flamengo training, they'll want to go out of their homes and that is not possible," she said.

Rio mayor Marcelo Crivella, however, has authorised training to resume in June and sees matches taking place behind closed doors sometime in July.

Rio's two other major clubs, Fluminense and Botafogo, are on record as saying this seems pre-



PORTO ALEGRE: Handout picture released by Brazil's Gremio football club player Everton Soares (Cebolinha) undergoing tests before a training session at Arena do Gremio in Porto Alegre, Brazil on May 6, 2020. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has urged football clubs to begin league competition as soon as possible. —AFP

mature. One of Brazil's top sports journalists, Mauro Cezar Pereira, of ESPN Brazil also feels it is too soon.

"It reflects the fact that some clubs are deeply in debt and dependant on broadcasting income. The Bundesliga restart intensified the rush. But

unlike in Germany, the infection curve is still climbing in Brazil."

Players may have little say in the matter, with the president of the Internacional club saying any player refusing to come back to training should instead resign. —AFP



Political intolerance

Hansie Cronje, flirted with greatness but succumbed to temptation

JOHANNESBURG: All-rounder Hansie Cronje, who died on this day in 2002, flirted with greatness but succumbed to temptation, exposing the dark world of bribery in cricket before his tragic death in a plane crash at the age of 32.

The perennially scowling South African averaged above 36 with the bat both in tests and one-dayers and was more than a handy medium pacer. But it was his inspirational skill as a leader which stood out.

Under the Bloemfontein-born Cronje, South Africa registered series victories against every other major cricketing nation except Australia.

In his 53 tests in charge, the Proteas won 27 and lost only 11 matches, although his hopes of leading South Africa to a World Cup title never materialised. "Hansie was a great leader," team mate Gary Kirsten said in his tribute after Cronje's tragic early death.

"He was an inspiration to me when I first came into the national team and he gave me confidence. It was impossible not to respect him."

Succeeding Kepler Wessels in the job, Cronje forged a fruitful partnership with Bob Woolmer, a coming together of an uncompromising leader and an innovative coach.

Their chemistry and tough-minded approach to the job was best illustrated in the 1999 World Cup.

In their tournament opener against India, Cronje had to be asked by the match referee to remove an earpiece he wore to communicate with Woolmer. But together they led the side through to the semi-final, where they were eliminated after a tied match against Australia.

Two years before his death, Cronje's admission that he had taken bribes from an Indian bookmaker



Hansie Cronje

to fix matches shook the sport to its foundations.

Delhi Police had been probing an unrelated extortion case when they stumbled upon a tape that eventually led to the unearthing of the scandal.

After initially denying fixing charges, Cronje confessed his role in an inquiry commission in South Africa and was subsequently banned from the game for life.

"In a moment of stupidity and weakness I allowed Satan and the world to dictate terms to me," Cronje, a devout Christian, said in a confession to a church leader, couching it in Biblical terms.

"The moment I took my eyes off Jesus, my whole world turned dark."

The lapse of judgment was all the more damag-

ing coming from a charismatic leader who commanded absolute loyalty in his team mates.

The widespread scandal also resulted in life bans for former India captain Mohammad Azharuddin and ex-Pakistan skipper Salim Malik, while several others were implicated.

The International Cricket Council (ICC) subsequently ramped up anti-corruption measures but traces of the scandal continue to haunt the game.

In February, extradited London-based Indian bookmaker Sanjeev Chawla, accused of involvement in an affair eventually nicknamed "Hansiegate", was taken into police custody in New Delhi. He was granted bail in May but the case continues. —Reuters

S Lanka begin training today

COLOMBO: A select group of Sri Lanka cricketers, mainly bowlers, will return to training on Monday, amid efforts to restart the game after the coronavirus shutdown, the cricket board said yesterday.

Professional cricket has been suspended since March because of the pandemic, with Sri Lanka's home series against England and South Africa among its casualties.

Thirteen players will check into a hotel for a

12-day residential camp at the Colombo Cricket Club, Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) said in a statement. "The players taking part in the camp represent a general squad chosen from across all formats, and primarily consist of bowlers, as they need more time for conditioning before going into active competition," it said.

A coaching and support staff of four will oversee the training, during which players will not be allowed outside the hotel premises and the practice venue.

The SLC would ensure everyone at the training camp adhered to the government health regulations, it added. Sri Lanka are preparing to host India for a limited-overs series in July.

However, India's cricket board has said it will

to Celtic over a number of years," said Celtic manager Neil Lennon.

"Jozo has been part of our great club for some time and has given us some wonderful times, playing a really important part in our success. Jonny, too, has been an important player for the club in recent years.

"Above all, both are great men and everyone at Celtic wishes Jozo and Jonny and their families all the very best for the future. We are sure they will continue to be successful in everything they do. "Both players leave Celtic as nine-in-a-row champions, something they have earned, an achievement they richly deserve and something

wait for more clarity regarding curbs on international travel before making a decision on the tour. On Saturday, South Africa also allowed training and playing of professional non-contact sport, a decision welcomed by its cricket board.

"This is a big boost for the operational side of our cricket," Cricket South Africa's (CSA) acting chief executive, Jacques Faul, said in a statement.

CSA's COVID-19 steering committee will meet on Monday to draw up a protocol for the return to training and playing, he added.

On Saturday, Britain allowed elite competitive sport in England to resume behind closed doors from Monday, in compliance with strict conditions. —Reuters

I know they will cherish dearly." Centre-back Simunovic joined Celtic from Dinamo Zagreb in 2015 and went on to make 125 appearances for the club while managing a knee problem during his time with the Glasgow giants.

The 25-year-old scored the winner against Kilmarnock after 67 minutes while wearing the number five jersey made famous by Billy McNeill — Celtic's captain when they won the European Cup in 1967 — in the first game after the former Hoops manager's death last year. Utility player Hayes, a Republic of Ireland international made 68 appearances after arriving from Aberdeen in 2017. —AFP

Kane warns Spurs they can't slip up in quest for CL

LONDON: Harry Kane believes Tottenham Hotspur will have to win eight of their remaining nine Premier League games if they are to qualify for next season's Champions League.

The north London club were seven points adrift of the top four when the coronavirus shut down the season in March.

Then it was thought the likes of Kane, Son Heung-min and Steven Bergwijn would miss the rest of the campaign through injury.

But the trio, as well as Moussa Sissoko, are all set to be fit in time for the planned restart of June 17, although young striker Troy Parrott will be sidelined after having his appendix removed.

Eighth-placed Spurs face crunch matches against Manchester United, Sheffield United, Arsenal and Leicester. Their hopes of Champions League qualification would also be boosted if Manchester City fail in an appeal against a European ban.

But Kane wants Spurs to take matters into their own hands. "We have got to finish in the top four, there is no doubt about that," he told the club's website. "We have got a massive game against Man United in the first game and realistically we are going to have to win seven or eight to get into the Champions League."

"That has got to be our aim. Of course we want to win every game but we have got to make sure we finish strong if we want to be playing Champions League football next season."

Kane suffered a hamstring injury against Southampton on New Year's Day but with the season suspended, the England captain has been able to recover without the worry of missing matches.

"From the hamstring point of view it is great to be able to give it a bit more rest," the star forward said. "I have not played a game for six months now, it has been a long, long time."

'SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM'

Spurs only sit four points behind Man United in fifth, which could be good enough for a Champions League spot depending on the result of Man City's appeal.

Kane, a two-time Premier League Golden Boot winner, has scored 17 goals for Tottenham in all competitions this season, including 11 from 20 appearances in the league.

"I am feeling good, I am feeling sharp," he added. "It has been good to do some individual training, a bit of finishing, a lot of individual drills to work on my game and improve."

"I am at a stage where I am looking forward to getting some games and hopefully I'll be back playing before too long."

"It is a good shock to the system. It has been very intense... "Hopefully I'll be back in a better place (than) before I was injured and look forward to a busy next year." —AFP

Simunovic, Jonny Hayes leave Celtic

LONDON: Scottish Premiership champions Celtic announced on Saturday they have decided against extending the contracts of both Jozo Simunovic and Jonny Hayes.

"I would like to sincerely thank both Jozo and Jonny, brilliant lads who have given their all