

Sports

Photo of the Day



Aerobatic paragliding world record holder Horacio Llorens trains in El Hierro, Canary Islands on March 12, 2020. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

MLB players union rejects owners restart plan

NEW YORK: The Major League Baseball Players Association has rejected the latest plan from team owners to start a coronavirus-reduced 2020 season and asked for them to produce a schedule.

Tony Clark, the players' union executive director, said in a statement Saturday night that it was time to halt negotiations and set a start date for an MLB campaign played in empty stadiums.

"It unfortunately appears that further dialogue with the league would be futile," Clark said. "It's time to get back to work. Tell us when and where." The MLB season was to have started in late March but the league shut down games with two weeks remaining in the pre-season due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The last MLB proposal to the union called for 72 games with 70% of prorated salaries. A March 26 deal between MLB and the union allows the league to set a schedule. MLB has indicated it would impose a schedule of about 50 games and pay full prorated salaries to the players worth about \$1.25 billion.

Multiple reports said MLB games would be played in home stadiums without spectators.

Players have been steadfast in talks for a start plan that they be paid full prorated salaries while owners have sought to trim that percentage even as both sides sought to play a longer campaign.

"Our No. 1 focus is playing the fullest season possible, as soon as possible, as safely as possible," Clark said. "Players agreed to billions in monetary concessions as a means to that end."

"We made additional proposals to inject new revenues into the industry... it has now become apparent that these efforts have fallen upon deaf ears." ESPN reported the union sent a letter to the league demanding to be informed of MLB's plans no later than Monday. — AFP

Schauffele seizes one-shot lead in PGA Tour return at Colonial

World number one McIlroy shot 69 to join a pack on 200

WASHINGTON: Xander Schauffele closed with a birdie to fire a four-under par 66 and seize a one-stroke lead after Saturday's third round of the Charles Schwab Challenge, the first PGA Tour event since the coronavirus shutdown.

The 26-year-old American stood on 13-under par 197 after 54 holes at Colonial Country Club in Fort Worth, Texas, with five rivals deadlocked behind him on 198. South Africa's Branden Grace and Americans Gary Woodland, Justin Thomas, Collin Morikawa and Jordan Spieth were one adrift with Americans Daniel Berger and Harold Varner on 199.

"All of us, everyone, it's like six guys are tied for the lead," said world number 12 Schauffele, who is bidding for his fifth PGA Tour title but first since January 2019. "Birdies are important but bogeys are bad. It's really unique because everybody is so bunched."

World number one Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland shot 69 to join a pack on 200 that included England's Justin Rose, Mexico's Abraham Ancer, Canadian Corey Connors and Americans Patrick Reed and Bryson DeChambeau. The tournament marks the return of the US golf season after a 91-day layoff since early March due to the coronavirus pandemic and is being played without spectators.

"It really was quiet out here," said Schauffele. "I prefer fans." Schauffele has made 16 birdies and only

three bogeys through the first three rounds. "I was playing really well at home. I was making a ton of birdies," Schauffele said. "I don't see why it should change out here."

Schauffele, who shared second behind Tiger Woods at last year's Masters, credited his strong start from the long break to playing practice rounds with Charley Hoffman and Phil Mickelson during the layoff.

"It knocked off a lot of the rust that was there during quarantine," he said. "I have to attribute it to that." Schauffele opened with a tap-in birdie but missed the green and a six-foot putt to bogey the par-3 fourth. He answered with another birdie at the par-4 seventh and tap-in birdies at 10 and the par-5 11th.

A 17-foot birdie putt at the 15th was wasted when he missed the green at the par-3 16th and made bogey, but his closing birdie gave him a nose ahead of the pack entering the last round.

'KIND OF A WEIRD DAY'

Thomas also fired a 66 despite struggling much of the day to find a rhythm. "It was kind of a weird day," he said. "I definitely didn't have my best stuff. Hit a lot of my best drives that bounced into the rough."

"I wasn't quite sharp enough to get everything going with my approaches and putts so I'm glad to get to four-under." Woodland and Grace also shot 66s with Morikawa firing a 67 and Spieth a 68.



FORT WORTH: Xander Schauffele of the United States plays a shot on the 17th hole during the third round of the Charles Schwab Challenge on June 13, 2020 at Colonial Country Club in Fort Worth, Texas. —AFP

"Happy with my game now and the way I played," Woodland said. "The key around here is put it in the fairway and keep moving forward." Varner, trying to become only the eighth African-American winner on the PGA Tour, led after 36 holes but fell two back with a third-round 70.

McIlroy, a top-five finisher in his past seven events worldwide, opened with a tap-in birdie but made bo-

geys at seven and eight. Birdies at the 11th and a 23-foot birdie putt at 14 only left him on 69 and three back.

Rose had six birdies but a double bogey at the par-4 fifth and bogeys at 16 and 18 also put him three shots off the pace. "It has been a mixed bag for me. It has been exciting," Rose said. "In with a chance tomorrow. Going to have to attack. It's a great leaderboard." — AFP

Djokovic's tennis capital shrugs off trouble on border

BELGRADE: Novak Djokovic's Balkans charity tennis tournament suffered an embarrassing setback on Saturday when the planned Montenegro leg of a four-nation tour was cancelled over coronavirus protocol rules.

However, that blow didn't deter fans from hailing the 33-year-old, 17-time Grand Slam title winner's brainchild as having made Belgrade into the temporary "capital" of world tennis.

The Adria Tour, which features world number one Djokovic, as well as third-ranked Dominic Thiem, number seven Alexander Zverev and Grigor Dimitrov, the world 19, got underway on Saturday.

The Montenegro leg was due to be the third stop on June 27 and 28 after Croatia and before the conclusion in Bosnia.

However, a spokesman for the organisers said the visit to neighbouring Montenegro was called off when it became apparent Serbia did not match strict health guidelines.

"The fact that citizens of Serbia are not on the list of the Montenegrin public health institute, and cannot travel to Montenegro, is an insurmountable obstacle," organisers said in a statement.

Podgorica reopened its borders on June 1 for countries with fewer than 25 people

infected with the coronavirus from 100,000 inhabitants.

The list of those countries is regularly updated. However, Serbia does not figure on it.

Asked to comment on social distancing measures during the Belgrade leg of the event, which has witnessed packed stands, Djokovic said that both Serbia and the region were relatively successful in containing the virus.

"Of course you can criticise, you can also say this is dangerous or not, but it's not up to me to make the calls what is health-wise right or wrong," he told reporters on Friday, stressing he was acting in line with recommendations of the Serbian government.

Balkan countries coped with the coronavirus pandemic with relative success. The region of some 22 million people registered about 24,000 infections and fewer than 800 deaths. The ATP and WTA Tours have been suspended since March due to the pandemic and will not resume at least until the end of July.

Initially, the organisers in Belgrade, respecting the rules in force after the relaxation of the lockdown in Serbia, put 1,000 tickets on sale. They sold out in just seven minutes. Since then, the authorities have further relaxed the lockdown and another 1,000 tickets were put on sale and they sold out almost as quickly.

According to the organisers, 2,000 additional tickets were distributed to various sponsors. "It's fantastic, we are the capital of the tennis world this weekend," said Dusan Bogicevic, 25, a law student

from Belgrade.

Fans watching the action at the Novak Tennis Centre on the banks of the Danube appeared to have little regard for health precautions recommended by the organisers. Each person was given a mask at the entrance to the stadium, but inside only a few wore them.

Amongst the players, Zverev of Germany was happy to be back playing. "To tell you the truth I didn't see that many people in one room in quite a while," Zverev told a press conference.

Since Friday, fans flocked to the centre, taking selfies with the players. Youngsters received tennis lessons. Former Serbian women's world number one Jelena Jankovic came out of retirement after more than two years to play mixed doubles with Djokovic.

The Belgrade action began in earnest on Saturday. Matches are on clay courts. The four headline stars were joined by Serbian ATP players — Viktor Troicki, Filip Krajinovic and Dusan Lajovic.

Two big surprises marked the first day — Djokovic lost to Krajinovic in three sets and Dimitrov went down in two against late call-up Nikola Milojevic. On June 20 and 21, the Adria Tour tournament will move to Zadar, on Croatia's Adriatic coast. Djokovic will be joined there by Croatia's 2014 US Open winner Marin Cilic and Borna Coric. The final stop in Bosnia will be in the northwestern town of Banja Luka on July 3 and 4. The tournament will close on July 5 with an exhibition match in Sarajevo between Djokovic and Bosnia's Damir Dzumhur. The money raised will be donated to various regional charities. — AFP

US Open faces D-day amid player uncertainty

LOS ANGELES: The fate of the US Open is set to be revealed next week when officials decide whether or not the tournament can go ahead as planned amid mounting unease among top players.

The deadly COVID-19 pandemic, which has decimated the international tennis calendar, now has the Flushing Meadows fortnight in its crosshairs.

With New York the hardest-hit city by the US coronavirus crisis, the United States Tennis Association has been scrambling to come up with a plan that allows the tournament to be staged.

But with the French Open postponed to a September 20 start, Wimbledon cancelled and the tennis season in shutdown, the US Open's status has looked increasingly questionable as its August 31 start date looms ever closer.

After considering and reportedly discarding the idea of moving the tournament to either California or Florida, the USTA has settled on staging the event in New York inside a protective "bubble", possibly without fans.

Under safety protocols proposed for the tournament, players would be confined to a hotel outside of Manhattan and would only be allowed to bring one member of their entourage to the event.

Singles qualifying would be eliminated while the doubles tournaments would be drastically reduced from 64 pairings to just 24. The ATP/WTA Cincinnati Masters event could also be shifted to New York as a lead-in tournament.

"This is the world we are living in," USTA's director of player relations Eric Butorac told ATP and WTA players during a conference call on Wednesday.

"We believe this is a good plan and believe it is good for the sport. It's good for the tennis economy, creates jobs for you, for coaches, for commentators, for so many people. "And most importantly, this plan keeps you safe."

MISSION 'IMPOSSIBLE'

So far, however, those words of reassurance have failed to quell unease amongst some of the international tennis circuit's biggest names.

World number one Novak Djokovic said the proposed safety measures and restrictions on the numbers of support staff were problematical.

"We would not have access to Manhattan, we would have to sleep in hotels at the airport, to be tested twice or three times per week," Djokovic said.

"Also, we could bring one person to the club, which is really impossible. "I mean, you need your coach, then a fitness trainer, then a physiotherapist." Djokovic said most players he had spoken to had "a rather negative view" about playing in New York, and predicted some would instead switch to the delayed clay court season instead. — AFP