

Sports

Olympic events with no fans possible, says British Cycling performance director

Sporting events hit hard across the globe by coronavirus fears

LONDON: British Cycling's performance director Stephen Park has raised the possibility of some Olympic events taking place without spectators if the coronavirus crisis does not subside.

Park, who joined British Cycling in 2016, remains confident that the Games will go ahead, but says it could be 'different'.

"You would struggle to find a day when the Olympics didn't take part for any reason. But will it mean that they might be different? Possibly," he told reporters.

"Look, at the World Cup (Finals) skiing in two weeks time in Cortina, they are doing it on a closed circuit with no fans. And that's going to an area that doesn't currently have infections.

"So might there be some of those things that happen (at the Olympics)? Possibly."

Sporting events have been hit hard across the globe by coronavirus fears, especially in Asia with this month's Thai Moto GP race the latest to be cancelled.

The Tokyo Marathon held at the weekend had a much-reduced field and few fans showed up to watch.

Cycling was also effected last week when the UAE Tour was cancelled with two stages remaining after two Italian team members were suspected of having tested positive for coronavirus.

Denmark's Michael Morkov was forced to self-isolate when he arrived at the Berlin world track championships last week, having taken part in the UAE race.

Morkov was eventually cleared to race, winning a gold medal in the madison.

Park said British Cycling were well-equipped to avoid any possible coronavirus infections with the national velodrome's changing rooms in Manchester getting a deep clean last week.

"We are preparing as if (the Olympics) are going to happen," he said. "That's all we can do. No point wasting our energy worrying about it, but equally we will take the right advice from the NHS and WHO in terms of making sure we can do everything we can to look after our athletes."

"We are making sure that we don't let it become a distraction or overtake the preparation. As soon as you start doing that, start thinking 'it might not happen' what are you preparing for? We are full steam ahead and expecting to be there in July, in Tokyo, having fun."

Morkov, who spent 34 hours in his hotel room before being given the all-clear, said the "whole world was waiting" to see what happens. "Big things could be cancelled, but it's out of everybody's hands," the 34-year-old said.

Norwegian rider Anita Stenberg, winner of the bronze medal in the points race in Berlin, said, given the choice, she would go to Tokyo irrespective of the coronavirus outbreak.

"So many riders have been fighting to qualify for years. If it would be cancelled it would be a shame. If they say it's my responsibility I would go anyway. I



Stephen Park

would take the risk."

Malaysia's Azizulhasni Awang, who won bronze in the men's sprint and keirin, said he was concerned.

"It's spreading into more and more countries and

getting worse in Japan and Korea," he said. "I believe the government of Japan will do something and the Games will have no problem. I hope there's a Plan B, but I'm not sure." — Reuters

Burgan Bank continues support for fencing title holder Tareq

KUWAIT: As part of its continuous support to empowering youth and local athletes, Burgan Bank announced its latest sponsorship of Wheelchair Fencing title holder, Tareq Al-Qallaf, for the sixth consecutive year. Established as a role model among the aspiring special needs segment and young Kuwaiti athletes, Tareq Al-Qallaf will once again be representing Kuwait in the global championships that will be running throughout the year 2020.

The homegrown World Champion Tareq Al-Qallaf will kick off his global tour in several states preceded by training camps in each starting with Colorado for the Pennsylvania championship in February, followed by a week's training for the Detroit championship in March, and the Philadelphia championship in May respectively, after which he will prepare for the 'Kuwait Challenge' in November.

Burgan Bank will maintain its long-term partnership with the national athlete and continue to contribute to the champion's successful road ahead as he raises the Kuwaiti flag high on prestigious international platforms. Driven by the belief that sports plays an important part in improving the overall quality of life in the community, the sponsorship falls under Burgan Bank's CSR strate-



Tareq Al-Qallaf

gy, which places fitness and healthy living at its core.

Falling in line with its community program, 'ENGAGE' - Together to be the change, Burgan Bank sheds light on important aspects affecting every segment of the society by promoting social welfare

through educational, cultural, social and health initiatives. Burgan Bank's approach to 'ENGAGE' begins with a vital principle that as a Kuwaiti financial institution, its conduct and policies should be aligned with the needs and interests of the Kuwaiti society.

Mako Vunipola back in England squad for Wales clash

LONDON: England prop Mako Vunipola will be available for this weekend's Six Nations clash at home to Wales after being named in an extended 34-man training squad yesterday. Eddie Jones, the England coach, had indicated that Vunipola was unlikely to be in contention for Saturday's match against the Grand Slam champions at Twickenham after travelling to Tonga for unspecified personal reasons.

But the Saracens front row is now back at England's training base in Bagshot, southwest of London, and will compete for the loosehead prop berth with Joe Marler and Ellis Genge. Veteran coach Jones also included wing Anthony Watson and hooker Luke Cowan-Dickie in his latest training squad following a win over Ireland last time out that revived World Cup finalists England's hopes of winning this season's Six Nations.

Watson has yet to feature in this season's Championship because of a calf injury but is now fit to push for a place while Cowan-Dickie has been in and out of the squad this season, with the Exeter forward missing the victory over Scotland due to the premature birth of his son.

Yesterday saw Jack Mauger join the squad as Jones selected a third scrum-half for the first time this Six Nations in addition to Ben Youngs and Willi Heinz. Mauger won his lone England cap during the 2017 tour of Argentina and he now has a chance to force his way into a matchday 23 set to be announced by Jones on Thursday.

Meanwhile Mark Wilson, who came through last week's training camp in Oxford, is vying for a back-row place as he continues his return from a knee injury. Grand Slam-chasing France, the only unbeaten side left in this season's Championship, lead the table with three wins from as many matches.

But if they slip up in the final two rounds and England, beaten by France in their tournament opener, finish with four wins from five then Jones' men could yet take the title. — AFP

Coronavirus leaves Six Nations' fate in balance in Paris

LONDON: The future of the 2020 Six Nations Championship is set to be decided at a meeting in Paris yesterday amid fears the coronavirus could wreck this season's edition. An already scheduled World Rugby gathering in the French capital will now also see officials consider if more alterations are needed to the final two rounds of the Championship, with the March 7 meeting between Ireland and Italy in Dublin already postponed by the global COVID-19 outbreak.

No replacement date has yet been set, with the Championship scheduled to conclude with matches involving all six teams on March 14. The Irish Rugby Football Union postponed their match against Italy following consultations with Simon Harris, Ireland's health minister.

Harris had expressed his misgivings about the game going ahead due to deaths from the new coronavirus in Italy, the European Union country that has been hit hardest by the outbreak.

Table-toppers France are the only team left in this season's Six Nations that can complete a Grand Slam. But even if they win their remaining fixtures, away to Scotland this coming weekend and at home to Ireland on March 14 to put the destiny of the title beyond doubt, administrators will still want the Ireland-Italy match, and any other postponed fixtures, to be played rather than called off completely.

The IRFU could lose an estimated 10 million euros (£8.6 million) in revenue if the Italy match is not played. And with the window for earning ranking points ahead of the draw for the 2023 World Cup in France closing in November, there is a further incentive beyond purely financial concerns to play any held over matches.

There is a precedent for rescheduling Six Nations fixtures due to health concerns. In 2001, due to the highly contagious livestock foot and mouth outbreak, Ireland had three matches (against Scotland, Wales and England) rescheduled to September/October of that year.

At the time of the postponements, England were one win away from the Grand Slam but lost 20-14 to Ireland when their delayed fixture was eventually played in Dublin, although they did still win the title despite that defeat.

'MOMENTUM'

Former utility back Austin Healey, a member of that England side, said he feared France could suffer a similar fate after the gap between the initial four matches and the delayed fixture in October "undoubtedly cost us the chance of a Slam".

"When you are playing in the Six Nations, you become a really tight-knit group and get on a roll, gaining momentum," wrote Healey in a recent Daily Telegraph column. "Then you disband for a few months and have to get everybody back together for almost a reunion tour."

But rescheduling matches is now an even harder task, given how much more congested the rugby union calendar has become in the intervening 19 years.

For example, every weekend between now and mid-July features existing club matches across European leagues or already scheduled internationals. The first weekend without matches in the English Premiership or the Pro14, the former Celtic League, is June 27.

But that is when summer tours begin, with England meant to travelling to Japan that day, and Ireland to Australia. Premiership Rugby Limited has an agreement with the Rugby Football Union to release England players for any reschedule international fixtures, but that does not apply to representatives of other nations.

Sergio Parisse saw his planned farewell to Test rugby wrecked last year when Italy's final pool game of the World Cup in Japan was cancelled as a result of Super Typhoon Hagibis.

That led the 36-year-old, a veteran of 142 Tests, to target the Six Nations match against England in Rome on March 14 as a new date for his swansong, even though the Toulon back row, arguably Italy's greatest player, has yet to feature in this season's Championship.

The last time the tournament failed to be completed was in 1972, when Scotland and Wales refused to travel to Ireland for matches in the then Five Nations, because they feared they would be a target for terror-group violence. — AFP

Thailand MotoGP postponed as virus wrecks start

BANGKOK: Thailand's MotoGP was postponed over the new coronavirus yesterday as motorcycling's premier championship took its second hit in two days from the deadly outbreak. A day after the season-opening Qatar MotoGP was axed, Thailand organisers postponed the March 20-22 race in Buriram without setting a new date.

"I don't say it's cancelled. I just say it is postponed until time allows us to do (the event)," Anutin Charnvirakul, chairman of the Thailand MotoGP organising committee, told AFP. "It's because of the coronavirus," added Anutin, who is also Thailand's deputy prime minister and health minister.

"We need to postpone it today until further notice." The move means both of the season's first two races have been shelved. The next race on the schedule is in Austin, Texas on April 5. It could also put renewed focus on Formula One, whose season starts with the Australian Grand Prix on March 15.

The Chinese F1 Grand Prix has already been postponed, and Vietnam is due to host its inaugural race in Hanoi on April 5. However, Hanoi's mayor said last week that the city was "ready to cancel it in case of the epidemic's progression".

The virus originating from China, which has killed more than 3,000 people worldwide, has had a heavy impact on sports events, forcing a long list of postponements and cancellations.

"The committee decided to postpone the race due to the wide spread of COVID-19 around the world," Anutin said in an organising committee statement. "People who attend, racers and teams could come from at-risk countries. Thailand has to postpone for the safety of Thai people until the situation is better."

Even last week Thai MotoGP organisers were upbeat, pledging extra health measures such as temperature checks, face masks and hand sanitisers. Anutin himself had vowed "no cancellation" on Friday. But on Sunday, Thailand's health ministry said a 35-year-old Thai man passed away due to complications caused by the coronavirus. "Things change every day and it has become pandemic," Anutin told AFP yesterday.

"We have to go along with the circumstances worldwide and it (postponement) is in the best interests of the nation as well as the participants," MotoGP's official website confirmed the postponement yesterday afternoon.

"FIM (the International Motorcycling Federation), IRTA (International Road-Racing Teams Association) and Dorna (the commercial rights holder to MotoGP) are currently evaluating if an alternative date is possible for the event later this season," MotoGP said in a statement.

World motorcycling champion Marc Marquez — who last year won his sixth MotoGP world title in Buriram's event — tweeted: "I hope to see all the Thai fans soon!" As the coronavirus has spread, Italy has become the hardest-hit European country with 34 deaths and more than 1,600 confirmed cases. Italian drivers play a "vital role in the championship", said the international motorcycling federation on Sunday following the cancellation of the race in Qatar, which is restricting arrivals from Italy.

Six riders in the elite class are Italian, including seven-time world champion Valentino Rossi as well as 2019 runner-up Andrea Dovizioso, while Ducati and Aprilia are leading Italian manufacturers. Thailand currently has 43 confirmed cases of COVID-19. The bulk of those infected are Chinese tourists or Thais who have come into contact with travellers. — AFP