

Sports

Rugby Australia posts big losses, warns of 'significant cuts'

Players complain of being locked out of critical talks about their future

SYDNEY: Rugby Australia's alarming financial state heading into the coronavirus shutdown was revealed yesterday with the organisation posting a near Aus\$10 million (US\$6.0 million) deficit, not helped by a hefty payment to the sacked Israel Folau.

The 2019 numbers were released as the governing body struggles to navigate a way through the COVID-19-enforced halt to sport, and with players complaining of being locked out of critical talks about their future.

RA said it was unable to produce a set of audited financial accounts due to uncertainty surrounding its business into the 2020 season and beyond as revenues dry up because of the pandemic.

But after its annual general meeting it reported a provisional Aus\$9.4 million operating deficit, compared to a Aus\$5.4 million profit in 2018. Revenues are ordinarily hit in a World Cup year, with fewer home Tests, but expenditure also increased by Aus\$6.6 million.

Part of the extra spend was the undisclosed settlement with Folau, an ardent Christian and former poster boy of Australian rugby who was fired over homophobic social media posts. The two parties avoided a costly court battle over the legality of the sacking by reaching a mediated agreement in December.

The governing body's perilous position comes

with rugby on hold indefinitely after the Australian government put tough restrictions on public gatherings as it battles to contain the coronavirus.

The country has so far confirmed more than 4,000 coronavirus cases, with 18 fatalities. Rugby Australia chairman Paul McLean said "significant cuts across the business" would be needed to keep the sport financially viable in the short term.

Specific action was not outlined, although talks are underway to tap funds from the government and World Rugby.

EXECUTIVE PAY SLASHED

Whether players will need to take pay cuts has yet to be decided, but chief executive Raelene Castle's salary has been halved and other senior executives are taking a 30 percent cut. "To put it simply, there is no way of knowing what damage this crisis will have on our

“ Significant cuts across the business ”

game, or for how long it will continue to impact us," said McLean.

"It has forced us to make some extremely difficult decisions, and there will be even harder decisions to come as we continue to navigate the implications of the virus on the game's finances." The organisation is set to lose broadcast rights money imminently with a proposed domestic tournament to replace the suspended Super Rugby competition shelved, and serious doubts about whether home



Rugby Australia chairman Paul McLean

Tests against Ireland and Fiji in July will take place.

Ahead of the AGM, the Rugby Union Players' Association (RUPA) slammed the governing body for sidelining it on discussions about the future, complaining about "a vacuum of information".

"While our colleagues in the other major football codes across Australia have been meeting with their governing bodies for weeks, RA has refused to share any information about the future financial direction of the game," said RUPA chief Justin

Harrison.

Castle said talks would begin with players today. "I understand from their point of view that there is a level of frustration that they haven't had a deeper engagement earlier," she said.

"But the reality is Rugby Australia didn't want to enter into those conversations until it had the chance to give them accurate information so we could enter into a solution-based scenario for the next three months." —AFP

Cash-strapped NZ cancels lower tier competitions

WELLINGTON: Rugby powerhouse New Zealand cancelled a string of this season's lower tier provincial competitions yesterday "to help secure the future of the sport" after the coronavirus lockdown.

All rugby in New Zealand has been called off indefinitely because of the government measures put in place to halt the spread of the virus, which has infected 589 and killed one person in the island nation.

New Zealand Rugby (NZR) chief Mark Robinson said last week the game was "fighting for survival" after the intercontinental Super Rugby competition was brought a halt and plans to put on a domestic tournament in its place were scuppered.

Starved of match day revenue and television money, as well as facing the possible cancellation of the money-spinning July tests against Wales and Scotland, NZR has cancelled all provincial competitions below the national championships for men and women.

The Heartland Championship, which features the 12 weakest provinces, the Jock Hobbs Memorial national under-19 tournament, the National Sevens Tournament and all other "Provincial Union representative rugby tournaments" have been axed.

"It's surreal how much this has impacted everyone in just seven days and we've needed to act swiftly, decisively and together," Robinson said in a statement. "We are united in what we want to achieve and that's to secure the future of rugby."

"These decisions have all been about ensuring when the time comes our communities can be up and running club, community and school rugby as quickly as possible."

A decision on whether to hold the national provincial championships would be made at a later date, the statement said. Rugby is New Zealand's national sport but even with the huge success over the years of the All Blacks national team, a relatively small domestic market means the game has often had to survive on a shoestring.

All Blacks coach Ian Foster and his staff have taken pay cuts and twice World Player of the Year Beauden Barrett confirmed at the weekend that the top players would soon be following suit.

"As an employee of New Zealand Rugby, we're all facing some tough times and we're all in this together," the All Blacks back told Newstalk ZB radio.

"As players we're working through that with ... the Players' Association. That will come out in due course, but yes we will be at some stage," he said of pay cuts. —Reuters

British fighter Yarde's father dies of virus

LONDON: British boxer Anthony Yarde urged the public to stay at home after revealing his father has died of the coronavirus. Yarde, who fought Sergey

Kovalev for the Russian's cruiserweight world title last year, said his father had been "fit with no health issues".

Like many parts of the world, Britain is under a lockdown in a bid to stop the spread of the pandemic. There have been over 17,000 confirmed cases in Britain and Yarde, 28, called on people to respect the situation and stay at home.

"I'm a very private person and tbh I'm still in shock but maybe this can help

people stay at home," Yarde wrote on Instagram. "My dad passed away from this virus yesterday and he was fit with no health issues. The more people go out and mingle the longer this isolation will last and the more it will spread."

"I'm not a doctor but I do know if you stay home you are less likely to catch it or pass it on. It's seriously not worth the risk."

A statement from Yarde's promoter Frank Warren said: "Frank Warren and

everyone at Queensberry Promotions would like to express sincere condolences to Anthony Yarde and his family after the untimely passing of his father."

"Coronavirus is an issue affecting all of us, but that doesn't make the individual casualties any less tragic. "We hope that his fans listen to Anthony's heartfelt plea for people to take the government's advice seriously so we can try and minimise the suffering of others." —AFP

Kuwaiti champion thrives on fitness

KUWAIT: World Champion and Kuwaiti watersport athlete Mohammed Burbayea is inspired by his own lifestyle, and his home country. In his over a decade presence in the sport, it appears in everything he achieves.

Along with practice on the jet ski, his main focus remains on his weekly fitness routine. "The biggest challenge is endurance and cardio capabilities," said Mohammed Burbayea, which is vital to his sport. He maintains a high level throughout the year, and averages 4 to 6 workouts a week. He continued by saying, "Riding a jet ski is one thing, and pro racing is a whole other thing. It requires a lot of effort and high energy levels."

Professional jet ski athlete Mohammed Burbayea improves his cardio by running. He attributes his success to his devotion to the sport. Rarely is there a time where he isn't trying to learn and improve. He actively trains in one aspect or another, to keep his fitness race ready.

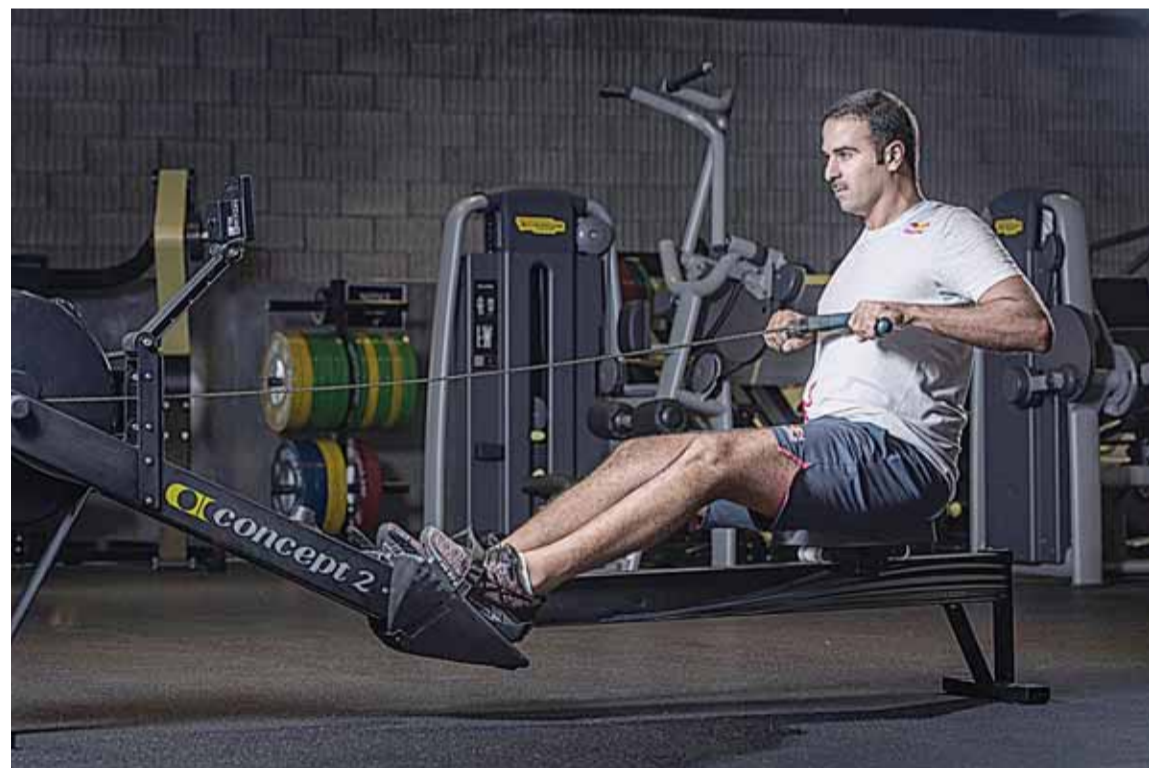
His commitment to cardiovascular training doesn't stop within the limitation of being indoors. Burbayea continues to exercise on the treadmill, bike, rowing machine or even by using the jump rope.

Mohammed is looking forward to competition season returning so he can continue to challenge himself to do better and be at the top of his discipline.

During his training season, should his motivation dwindle, he remembers the bigger picture and looks to other great athletes for a boost. He advises young athletes to do the same. By adding athletic benchmarks, motivation is refreshed, and training can continue once more.

He explains, "I always make sure to have someone I look up to who has achieved success. They serve as my motivator and benchmark to the level I want to achieve. It is essential to keep in mind that we are constantly evolving and in order to continuously grow and improve, you need to provide yourself with the time for development."

Having begun his foray into the sport at age 5, he has since shattered world records, including the number of total championships for a watersport moto-athlete. He hopes to continue to do what is required of him to elevate the sport and Kuwaiti athletics on the world stage for as long as he is able to.



Australian rugby league rolls out rescue package

SYDNEY: Australia's National Rugby League rolled out an emergency rescue package yesterday to ensure all 16 clubs can stay afloat during the coronavirus shutdown, with plans to resume

the season on July 1. The NRL kicked off a fortnight ago, making it through just two rounds — one behind closed doors — before becoming one of the last professional sports worldwide to succumb to the pandemic.

There were concerns that some clubs would not survive the loss of revenue, with many already forced to send staff home, often without pay. But after lengthy talks, funding was agreed that will see each team get an extra Aus\$2.5 million (US\$1.5 million) to cover operational costs

between April and October, paid for by the NRL slashing its staffing levels by 95 percent, cutting the governing body's own expenses by half.

Executives will take a 25 percent salary cut. The funding is separate to player payments, which are still under discussion. "We have a consolidated plan and working with the clubs and the players, are united in our efforts to do all we can to protect rugby league," said Australian Rugby League Commission chairman Peter V'landys. "We had no option but to stop the competition ... but remain

optimistic that the season will restart as quickly as possible, ideally by July 1. "If that isn't possible, then we need to be prepared for that option as well and are making the tough financial decisions now to reduce costs to ensure we get through this crisis."

Rugby league is considered part of Australia's social fabric and the sport's bosses had previously warned closing down the season could bankrupt the sport, with lucrative broadcast contracts at stake. —AFP