

Sports

Serie A hits back over 'bubble' remark

ROME: Italy's Serie A league has hit back at the country's sports minister Vincenzo Spadafora after he said the country's top clubs were living in a bubble and criticised the millionaire salaries of some players.

The exchange came with Serie A, like football around the rest of the world, at a standstill because of the coronavirus pandemic. Italy is Europe's worst-affected country with 10,779 deaths and a total of 97,689 confirmed cases.

In an interview with the Rome-based newspaper La Repubblica on Sunday, Spadafora said that sport was not just about football and that he would propose spending 400 million euros (\$443 million) to develop grass roots sport around the country.

"The big clubs are living in a bubble, beyond their means, starting with the millionaire salaries of the players. They must understand that nothing after this crisis will ever be the same again," he said.

In reply, Serie A said in a statement that football in Italy employs 300,000 people and accounts for one percent of gross domestic product. Serie A "has always played a recognised role as the locomotive of the sector", directly generating 3 billion euros of revenue each year, it said.

The league noted that its solidarity payments to develop facilities and youth football outside the top flight had increased from 93 million euros in 2010 to 130 million euros this year.

"This is not the time to make controversy," said Paolo Dal Pino, the president of Serie A. "The numbers above speak for themselves and there is no need to add anything else to highlight the role of the Lega Serie A in support of grassroots football and, indirectly, of all Italian sport." — Reuters

Photo of the Day



WADI RUM: Gurpreet Singh Sandhu and Ahmad Daham perform at Wadi Rum, Jordan. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

African football date-juggling looms amid coronavirus pandemic

African Nations Championship postponed due to coronavirus

JOHANNESBURG: The May semi-finals and finals of the two annual African club competitions are likely to fall victim to the coronavirus pandemic sweeping the continent.

After two-leg semi-finals in the competitions between May 1 and 10, the Champions League final is set for May 29 in Douala, five days after Rabat hosts the Confederation Cup title decider. But the postponement of both competitions seems inevitable as the full impact of the COVID-19 disease has still to be felt in the continent with the most fragile public health systems.

Already, two rounds of 2021 Africa Cup of Nations qualifiers and the African Nations Championship in Cameroon have been postponed due to the killer COVID-19 disease. Here, AFP Sport considers the date-juggling options in the major African national team and club competitions:

WORLD CUP

Home and away preliminary round ties last September reduced the number of contenders from 54 to 40 for five places at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Next comes 10 six-matchday groups be-

tween October 5, 2020, and October 12, 2021, with the table-toppers paired in five two-leg showdowns to decide who represents Africa. Group dates this October and November may have to accommodate delayed 2021 Cup of Nations qualifiers instead, but there are sufficient international windows next year to catch up.

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

Qualifiers for the 24-nation tournament in Cameroon from January 9 to February 6 2021 have fallen two rounds behind after fixtures scheduled for this month were cancelled. It is hard to imagine the single round set for June 1-9 taking place and there must also be doubts about matches planned for August 31-September 8. CAF will hope they can stage double matchdays between October 5-13 and November 9-17 — dates currently allocated to World Cup group games — and complete qualifying.

AFRICAN NATIONS CHAMPIONSHIP

The April 4-25 tournament in Cameroon, which is restricted to footballers playing in their country of

birth, has been postponed due to the coronavirus. With no foreign-based stars involved, the tournament does not have to fit into a FIFA international window, creating flexibility when it comes to finding new dates. Apart from the football, the Nations

Wydad against Cairo outfits Zamalek and Al Ahly respectively, raising the possibility of a first final between clubs from the same country. While a May 29 conclusion seems unlikely, the matches can be staged until September 6, with the last-32 first legs of the 2020/2021 season scheduled to kick off five days later. The competition could also be shortened by turning the semi-finals into single matches in Douala, the Cameroon port city chosen to host the final.

CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

The semi-finals in the African equivalent of the UEFA Europa League will see Pyramids of Egypt meet Horoya of Guinea and Renaissance Berkane face fellow Moroccans Hassania Agadir. Like the Champions League, the semi-finals are due to be home-and-away affairs, followed by a single-match final in Rabat, giving Berkane or Agadir a distinct advantage. CAF will likely seek new dates, and possibly reduce the semi-finals to single matches, between June and September 6, five days before the 2000/2021 season gets into full swing. — AFP



Fragile public health systems

Championship offers Cameroon an opportunity to test whether they are ready for a much more demanding task — staging the 2021 Cup of Nations.

CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

The semi-finals pit Casablanca clubs Raja and

Xavi wants 'total harmony' to return to Barcelona

MADRID: Xavi Hernandez has reiterated his desire to coach Barcelona in the future but suggests he will not return until a different board brings a new sense of direction to the club.

Hernandez is in charge of Al-Sadd in Qatar and turned down an approach in January after Barca sacked Ernesto Valverde, which led to the surprise appointment of Quique Setien.

In an interview with Spanish newspaper La Vanguardia published on Sunday, Xavi said Neymar would be a "spectacular signing", and singled out former Spain defender Carles Puyol and the one-time Dutch winger Jordi Cruyff as people he would like to work with.

Yet the relationship between Barcelona's board, led by president Josep Maria Bartomeu, and the players has remained tense, with Lionel Messi's public criticism of technical secretary Eric Abidal among a number of off-field controversies.

"I am clear that I want to return to Barca. I am very excited," said Xavi, who was asked if a change of board would be needed for it to happen. "Obviously I would like to be in tune with everyone," he said. "In the dressing room there can't be a negative or toxic atmosphere." "Everything has to fit," Xavi added. "I would like to come in with people from my environment that could form a good team."

Pushed on whether working with the current board would



Xavi Hernandez

be a deal-breaker, Xavi said: "It wouldn't be definitive but I insist I would like to have total harmony. I don't know if that can happen... I have nothing against anyone and I don't have a bad relationship with Bartomeu. Xavi mentioned the likes of Puyol, whom he played with under Pep Guardiola, and Cruyff, son of Johan and former Barca and Manchester United winger, as the kind of people he would like to work alongside.

"I would like to work with people in whom I have confidence, with whom there is loyalty," said Xavi. "We are talking about Carles Puyol, who was captain of Barca, and Jordi Cruyff, a very good businessman with a lot of experience as a technical secretary." He also said Neymar, whom the Catalans tried and failed to sign from Paris Saint-Germain last summer, would be a "spectacular signing". "Most of the squad seems extraordinary," Xavi said. "The base is very good. I would sign forwards, like Neymar. I don't know if he would fit in a social sense but in football terms I have no doubt he would be a spectacular signing." — AFP

Korean government guidelines.

Son had already spent two weeks in self-isolation in Britain after returning from South Korea at the end of February, having travelled home for surgery.

He will take part in Tottenham's remote training programme, which is set to begin via video call on Monday. Son was not expected to return from injury this season, but the pandemic has postponed English football until at least April 30.

Meanwhile, Son's Tottenham team-mate Steven Bergwijn has travelled to the Netherlands ahead of the impending birth of his child. "The club has given permission for both Heung-Min Son and Steven Bergwijn to return to their home countries," a statement on Tottenham's website said.

"Both players will continue their individual rehabilitation and training programmes during their time away." — AFP

Son returns to South Korea

LONDON: Tottenham forward Son Heung-min has been allowed to fly home to South Korea for "personal reasons".

Although Britain is on lockdown due to the coronavirus, the Premier League club on Sunday said Son has been given permission to return to Asia.

The 27-year-old has been recovering after suffering a fractured arm during Tottenham's win at Aston Villa on February 16. It was reported Son and his parents arrived in Seoul on Sunday and will spend two weeks in quarantine in line with South

Coronavirus may prove virtual sports changer

PARIS: With an unprecedented captive audience of three billion people in coronavirus lockdown virtual sports events are wooing fans after traditional live sports were shut down and public gatherings banned in many countries.

Horse-racing, boxing, cycling, football and motor-racing chiefs are desperate to maintain their fanbase and are scrambling to provide a fix and maintain revenues.

With stadiums closed and events such as the Tokyo Olympics and Euro 2020 postponed, organisers are generating advertising revenue by streaming virtual sports on YouTube, Facebook and Twitch or even broadcasting them on traditional television platforms.

Sports is where the numbers are and fans denied real games are turning to live streaming, watching people play games, and taking part in those video games themselves. Italy's Mugello motorcycling circuit, which would have attracted 200,000 people for its MotoGP weekend on Sunday, may just have pulverised that figure with a live-streamed virtual race promoted as "The stay at home GP".

Honda's world champion Marc Marquez came fifth as the globe's top riders sat uncomfortably on their sofas livestreaming from their living rooms. Alex Rins looked bored playing with his pet dog on his knee.

Alex Marquez, younger brother of the world champion, won the race and asked jokingly "will the points count to the championship?". Millions of fans, credit cards at the ready, are expected to copy them after downloading the app.

Old-school purists will be heartened by veteran Valentino Rossi's refusal to take

part. The seven-time world champion said this week he was "cheering on the people of Brescia and Bergamo, those who usually cheer me on. It looks like a war zone," he said of his coronavirus-stricken region.

"I have seen very bad images, we must hold on," he told Sky Italia, who will also broadcast the virtual race.

'AND HE'S BACK FROM THE DEAD HERE'

Formula One chiefs have also galvanised some of their drivers to grab their gaming controllers, racing a Virtual Bahrain Grand Prix which was abbreviated because of technical difficulties. Boxing legend Muhammad Ali, who died in 2016, was even back in action, beating Sonny Liston again on Friday in a virtual bout with 35,000 YouTube viewers.

Ali will now meet the long retired Mike Tyson after he beats up George Foreman on Saturday. Racing-mad Britain comes to a standstill each year for the Grand National and with the courses all closed, broadcaster ITV will show a virtual race on April 4.

The real race can be a dangerous lottery with horses and riders potentially suffering serious injuries in the many falls, but it makes millions for the bookies, who this time will run online betting for the field of 40 runners.

"We use the latest CGI technology and algorithms and were ready to go ahead as a forerunner to the big race," said executive producer Rob McLoughlin.

As with the boxing, there will also be a race of champions pitting the late Red Rum, who won the National three times in the 1970s, against defending champion Tiger Roll. Baseball staged a four-player video-game tournament called "MLB The Show" on Friday. It also suffered some technical problems before it was won by Amir Garrett, a Cincinnati Reds pitcher, who played at home wearing his team uniform. "A win's a win," said Garrett but he also said: "You've got to realise it's a video game." — AFP