

## Sports

Photo of the day



ROME: Red Bull Sailing led by double olympic gold medalists Roman Hagara and Hans Peter Steinacher compete in Italy. —Photo taken from www.redbull

## Italian golfers swing again as lockdown eases

**FASANO:** One of Italy's best known golf clubs has reopened after two months of lockdown with a handful of players returning to the links under new social distancing rules. San Domenico Golf in Apulia in the heel of Italy's boot and neighbouring luxury resort Borgo Egnazia reopened at the weekend but face an uncertain future.

"We closed at the beginning of March," said Aldo Melpignano, owner of Borgo Egnazia, where Justin Timberlake and Jessica Biel held their wedding in 2012. "But this week the Apulia Region allowed some individual sports to resume and golf is one of them. We jumped at the chance and decided to reopen immediately at the weekend."

The resort and golf club will initially rely on Italian guests but hopes that foreigners will soon also return. "We're resigned to this reality at least for the summer," he said.

Notable changes in the rules on the greens are that players must keep at least three metres apart when hitting the ball and not remove the flag from the hole. European Tour professional Francesco Laporta has returned to training in the open after two months of hitting balls into a net in his garden.

Laporta hopes the season will resume again at the end of July. "There will certainly be new rules to respect," he said, including the lack of spectators. "I think the caddie will be able to keep on following us, working close to us," he said. There are around 260 golf clubs in Italy and the sport remains largely a sport for the rich. —AFP

# Fauci says NFL season hopes rest on virus, test response

## Virus will make the decision for us: Fauci

**NEW YORK:** The NFL's chances of playing out its planned 256-game schedule will depend upon containing the coronavirus outbreak and testing results, according to COVID-19 pandemic expert Dr. Anthony Fauci.

Fauci, a leader among the White House Coronavirus Task Force advising the US government on the deadly virus, told NBC Sports that very little is certain about the NFL's hopes to have a season and a Super Bowl in February at Tampa, Florida, as planned.

"The virus will make the decision for us," Fauci said. "It's unpredictable depending upon how we respond in the fall... It will be entirely dependent on the effectiveness with which we as a society respond to the inevitable outbreak that will occur."

Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, held out hope there might be able to be a limited number of spectators at some NFL games but also warned he was against staging a season if the virus was as widespread in September as it is now.

"Right now, if you fast forward, and it's now September, the season starts, I say you can't have a season — it's impossible," Fauci said. "There's too much infection out there."

The NFL's 2020 season is scheduled to start September 10 with Houston at reigning champion Kansas City.

### FANS WELCOME?

It could be that games are staged in empty stadiums with only players who test negative for the coronavirus. "I think it's feasible that negative testing players could play to an empty stadium," Fauci said. "Is it guaranteed? No way."

Fauci envisions plenty of tests will be available by September to allow for testing players before games, removing any positive-testing talent from the lineup for two weeks of isolation and using contact tracing to seek out others infected.

"There will be virus out there and you will know your players are negative at the time they step onto the field. You're not endangering," he said. "Also, if the virus is so low that even in the general communi-

who had nothing to do with tennis."

"We don't choose where we are born," she said, adding that she loved her parents and regretted that her endless travelling to tournaments meant she saw them so little. "I cherish the day when I'll be able to afford a gift for my parents," said Ibbou, who has made \$27,825 (25,754 euros) on the WTA Tour and had earned \$3,135 this season before play was halted.

She said that, unlike Thiem, she could not afford a coach or entourage and always had to worry about her budget and, as an Algerian, a visa.

"I'm a lonely lady, travelling the world," she said. "Always looking for the cheapest tickets." She listed all the obstacles she faced as a young player in Algeria: poor facilities, no international coaches, no professional tournaments, no guidance on how to plan a professional career and "not a penny" of state aid.

"Sponsors, you say?" she said. "They don't even exist in Algeria." Last week, the WTA and ATP along with the ITF and the four Grand Slam tournaments said they had set up a "Player Relief Programme" to help the players hardest hit by the coronavirus, adding that they had contributed more than \$6 million.

"Helping players is helping the game to survive," said Ibbou, directly addressing Thiem. "We do not ask anything of you except a bit of respect."

While the letter has not yet drawn a response from Thiem, it has brought a reaction from other players. "You're my hero," Venus Williams reacted under Ibbou's Instagram post. Nick Kyrgios, who had already criticised Thiem, added "Respect" and some emoticons and promised his support when Ibbou thanked him. —AFP

ty the risk is low, then I could see filling a third of the stadium or half the stadium so people could be six feet apart."

But Fauci warned that if four players on a 53-man NFL roster tested positive on the eve of a Sunday game, it might hint that more cases are present among those still testing negative.

"It's likely that if four of them are positive and they've been hanging around together, that the other ones that are negative are really positive," Fauci said.

No player testing positive for the virus could be allowed to play, Fauci said, adding, "It would be malpractice in medicine to put him on the field, absolutely."

That's because the NFL's close contact would be an easy environment in which to spread the virus.

"If people are in such close contact as football players are on every single play, then that's the perfect set up for spreading," Fauci said.

I think it's feasible

## Algeria tennis player wins support with emotional video

**ALGIERS:** Ines Ibbou, a young Algerian tennis player who hit back at Dominic Thiem for saying he did not want to give money to lowly-ranked players, has drawn support from Venus Williams as well her country's government.

"Dear Dominic," Ibbou, who is 620th in the WTA singles rankings, said in an emotional nine-minute video posted on social media, "what would have been my career if I was in your shoes?" In April, Thiem, an Austrian ranked third in the men's game, said he was not happy with a plan supported by Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal for top players to help those lower down the rankings who had lost their tournament income because of the coronavirus shutdown of tennis.

"None of them are going to starve," Thiem told an Austrian newspaper, explaining that "many, many" of those players had not made it to the top because they "don't put the sport above everything else".

"I wouldn't really see why I should give such players money," he went on. "I would rather give money to people or organisations that really need it."

In her response, the 21-year-old Ibbou said life was tough for an African tennis player. "You know that in a country like mine it's not easy for a woman to be a high-level athlete." She said that Thiem grew up in a "magical world" and while both his parents were tennis coaches, "I grew up in a very modest family with parents



WASHINGTON: File photo of director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Anthony Fauci listens during the daily briefing on the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, in the Brady Briefing Room at the White House on April 6, 2020, in Washington, DC. —AFP

"As soon as (an infected player) hit the next guy, the chances are that they will be shedding virus all over that person." Fauci has called a coronavirus return later this year "inevitable" and that it could set up a "bad fall and a bad winter," adding, "There's no chance we're going to be virus-free." —AFP

## Australia eyes July rugby restart

**SYDNEY:** A competition between Australia's four Super Rugby teams could be launched in early July as coronavirus restrictions ease, with the axed Western Force and Japan's Sunwolves as possible participants, officials revealed.

Governing body SANZAAR suspended Super Rugby in mid-March as the pandemic closed international borders, but two plans have been drawn up to restart rugby in Australia, said the official rugby.com.au website.

The first option is a five-team championship featuring Australia's four Super Rugby teams, Queensland Reds, NSW Waratahs, ACT Brumbies and Melbourne Rebels, plus Western Force. The second is a six-team version including the Sunwolves.

Rugby Australia's high performance manager Ben Whitaker said the Brumbies and the Waratahs were due to begin limited workouts this week.

All teams should be back to full training by June 8 with the competition planned to begin four weeks after that. "The draw we are looking at is a 12-week competition (with) 10 weeks of regular round matches and depending on the number of teams," he said.

The move comes after New Zealand Rugby on Monday unveiled plans for a domestic competition, Super Rugby Aotearoa, kicking off on June 13.

The Perth-based Western Force were axed from Super Rugby at the end of the 2017 season and now compete in the National Rugby Championship and Global Rapid Rugby, the Asia-Pacific competition founded by Australian mining magnate Andrew Forrest.

The Sunwolves are in their final season of Super Rugby after southern hemisphere governing body SANZAAR decided to drop them due to skyrocketing costs and poor on-field performances.

Including the Force in a domestic competition would be relatively straightforward, but Whitaker conceded that virus-induced border shutdowns made the Sunwolves a more difficult proposition. "The Sunwolves' situation is a bit more complicated than the others with their team, not just coming from Japan but a variety of countries having to assemble in Australia to take part," he said.

"We're working closely with government on the opportunity for them to do that."

Whitaker suggested the Japanese team could be based in Queensland or New South Wales for the duration of the competition.

Authorities in Canberra have already set a precedent for allowing overseas sporting teams into the country, with the National Rugby League's New Zealand Warriors basing themselves in Tamworth before a competition restart scheduled for May 28.

Whitaker also hoped that Australia's home Tests in July against Ireland and Fiji could be rescheduled to later in the year, along with Rugby Championship fixtures against New Zealand, South Africa and Argentina. —AFP