

## Sports

# NFL chief sees fans back as 17-game schedule confirmed

## 'Football is simply not the same without fans'

LOS ANGELES: NFL chief Roger Goodell said Tuesday he expects stadiums to operate at full capacity next season as the league confirmed plans for an expanded 17-game schedule. Speaking on a conference call during the NFL's owners meeting, Goodell said the league wanted fans back following a 2020 campaign in which stadiums were often empty due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We are also discussing our plans to welcome back all of our fans for the 2021 season across the country at all NFL stadiums," Goodell said. "All of us in the NFL want to see every one of our fans back. Football is simply not the same without fans, and we expect to have full stadiums in the upcoming season."

Spectator policies varied across the league's 32-clubs last year, with some shutting out fans altogether while others operated at a reduced capacity. Goodell's comments came as the NFL confirmed that the regular season will be expanded to include 17 games from 2021.

The much-anticipated move follows the league's record-breaking media rights deals announced earlier this month. Each NFL team will now play 17 regular season games and three preseason games for the first time, the first change to the season's structure since 1978.

A 17-game season had been on the cards since the 2020 collective bargaining agreement between the NFL and the NFL Players Association. On March 18, the NFL announced a raft of media rights deals expected to generate more than \$100 billion over the next 11 seasons, which included an agreement with Amazon Prime Video for rights to Thursday night games.

"This is a monumental moment in NFL history," Goodell said. "The CBA with the players and the recently completed media agreements provide the foundation for us to enhance the quality of the NFL experience for our fans. And one of the benefits of each team playing 17 regular-season games is the ability

for us to continue to grow our game around the world."

The 17th game will see teams from opposing conferences playing the team that finished in the same place from the corresponding division in 2021, with AFC teams being the home team for the new seasons.

For example, the Buffalo Bills, who finished top of the AFC East last season, will take on the Washington Football Team, winners of the NFC East, in their 17th game in 2021. NFL clubs will host 10 games per season overall — either nine regular season games and one preseason game, or eight regular season games and two preseason games.

Each team will play divisional rivals home and away and four teams from another division within its conference on a rotating three-year cycle. Although some players have been critical of the move, questioning the physical toll that an extra regular season game may take, Goodell insisted the league had taken safety considerations into account.



LOS ANGELES: In this file photo taken on August 24, 2020 the NFL logo is seen on a football packaging in Los Angeles. — AFP

"What we are actually doing is following the data and following the science to make sure that we are doing things well both from a health and safety standpoint as well as seeking to get better in every way," Goodell said. —AFP

## Nuggets punish sluggish Sixers

LOS ANGELES: Jamal Murray scored 30 points as the Denver Nuggets put on a show for returning fans on Tuesday with a 104-95 defeat of the Eastern Conference-leading Philadelphia 76ers. Murray's haul included five-of-11 three-pointers in a one-sided victory for the Nuggets, who roared into a 44-22 first quarter lead at Denver's Ball Arena and never looked back.

Murray added six rebounds, four assists and three steals while Nikola Jokic delivered a towering all-round display, with 21 points, 10 rebounds and five assists. Michael Porter Jr had 27 points with 12 rebounds while Paul Millsap (10 points) also chipped in with a double-digit performance off the bench.

Denver's third straight victory, which followed wins over the in-form Atlanta Hawks on Sunday and the New Orleans Pelicans last week, leaves them in fifth place in the Western Conference with 29 wins and one loss.

The game was watched by a crowd of just over 4,000 fans, mostly frontline workers and first responders. It was the first time fans have attended a Nuggets game since the Covid-19 pandemic erupted last year. In on-court remarks following the win, Murray said the support had swept Denver to Tuesday's victory.

"We missed you guys so much," he told the crowd. "You guys bring a whole different energy to the game. Every time the fans are in the building it gets to me, I get a little excited. When we're into it and the crowd's into it, we're a hard team to beat. We haven't had a home court advantage in over a year."

### 'Running in quicksand'

Nuggets coach Michael Malone however was unhappy that his team allowed the Sixers to creep within six points late in the fourth before finally



DENVER: Michael Porter Jr of the Denver Nuggets dunks the ball during the game against the Philadelphia 76ers on Tuesday at the Ball Arena in Denver, Colorado. — AFP

pulling away. "I'm getting tired of watching us build big leads, play the right way, and then just for some reason relax and allow the game to become more interesting than it should have been," Malone said. "We have to somehow develop a killer instinct."

Jokic admitted the Nuggets' concentration had strayed towards the end of the game. "We didn't have the focus to finish the game," he said. "We thought it was going to be easy. We had a big lead, and started playing loose. We won the game which is the most important thing but we need to have better focus."

The Sixers meanwhile were left reflecting on a second straight loss following their 10-point defeat to the Los Angeles Clippers last week. Australian star Ben Simmons was restricted to just 11 points while Tobias Harris added 12. Tyrese Maxey led the Sixers scoring with 13 points from the bench.

"It was one of those games where it looked like we

were running in quicksand," Sixers coach Doc Rivers said afterwards. "They attacked us early and we never really recovered from it. They were better prepared and definitely more ready as a group. They were better. No excuses, we just didn't play very well."

Elsewhere on Tuesday, the Los Angeles Clippers saw their six-game unbeaten streak halted with an upset home loss to the Orlando Magic. Kawhi Leonard's 28-point display was not enough to stop the Clippers from slumping to a 103-96 defeat against an Orlando side that relied on big contributions from the bench, with Terrence Ross (15 points), Otto Porter Jr (13) and Mo Bamba all making double figures. In Arizona meanwhile, the Phoenix Suns were 117-110 winners over the Atlanta Hawks. Devin Booker finished with 21 points for Phoenix while team-mate Deandre Ayton had 13 points and 14 rebounds. — AFP

## Barty, Medvedev march on in Miami, Korda run continues

MIAMI: World number one Ashleigh Barty advanced to the semi-finals of the Miami Open on Tuesday as Russian top seed Daniil Medvedev booked his place in the quarter-finals of the men's tournament. Barty battled through her third three-setter of the fortnight to oust seventh seeded Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus in 2hr 16min on the Grandstand Court.

The Australian will face Elina Svitolina of Ukraine in the semi-finals following her gruelling 6-4, 6-7 (5/7), 6-3 win. Fifth seed Svitolina advanced to the last four after defeating Latvia's Anastasija Sevastova 6-3, 6-2 later Tuesday.



MIAMI GARDENS: Ashleigh Barty of Australia returns a shot to Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus during the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium on Tuesday in Miami Gardens, Florida. — AFP

After taking a close first set, Barty appeared to be on the brink of victory after grabbing a 3-1 lead in the second set tie-break. Sabalenka staged a superb recovery however to snatch the tie-break 7-5, forcing a decisive third set.

Barty regrouped in the third though and with Sabalenka clearly in pain clutching her stomach, rammed home her advantage to complete a deserved win. The victory leaves Barty one semi-final win away from retaining her world number one ranking, though the Australian insisted she was not preoccupied with holding on to top spot.

"It's an amazing thing to be No 1 in the world at the moment, but I promise you that's not what makes me happy," Barty said afterwards. "It's a focus of course. I want to try to do the best that I can, but it's not a distraction or a pressure in any way."

### Medvedev downs Tiafoe

Medvedev meanwhile had an easier ride in the men's tournament, easing past Frances Tiafoe of the United States in straight sets, 6-4, 6-3. Medvedev hammered down 11 aces in the win, breaking Tiafoe three times en route to victory.

Medvedev will face Roberto Bautista Agut in the last eight after the Spaniard eliminated John Isner in three sets to avenge his 2019 quarter-final loss in Miami. Bautista Agut saved a match point at 5-6 down in the third set tie-break to claim a 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (9/7) win. "I think I played a brilliant set the first set, and then with John you feel always under pressure," Bautista Agut said. "It was a really tough fight until the last point."

The biggest upset of the day saw world number 87 Sebastian Korda continue his giant-killing run by knocking out Argentina's fifth seed Diego Schwartzman, winning 6-3, 4-6, 7-5. "I played an incredible match today," said Korda, the Florida-born son of former Australian Open champion Petre Korda.

"I think mentally I was great out there. I stayed calm. Even when in the tight situations I believed in myself and I went for it," the 20-year-old added. — AFP

## Kuwait bowling championship winners crowned



By Abdullatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Chairman of Kuwait Bowling Club Sheikh Talal Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and Secretary General Mohammad Al-Farsi awarded the winners of the first local bowling championship, which lasted 40 days with 63 players participating. Mohammad

Khalid Habeeb was the winner, Saleh Habeeb the runner-up and third place went to Aseel Al-Roumi.

Sheikh Talal lauded the competitive spirit during the tournament, which is part of preparations of the national team for international events. He said the technical and administrative departments are keen on enhancing the technical and physical

conditions of players according to a plan that includes training and holding local tournaments to create a competitive spirit among players under the current extraordinary circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He said the club is keen on implementing all precautionary measures to safeguard the safety of all.

## Japanese karate champion testifies she was bullied

TOKYO: A Japanese karate champion who will compete at the Tokyo Olympics testified before an ethics commission yesterday, alleging that a federation official hit her in the face with a bamboo sword. Ayumi Uekusa, who will compete in the women's over 61kg kumite category as karate makes its Olympic debut this summer, said she was the victim of a bullying campaign by Masao Kagawa, the technical

director of the Japan Karatedo Federation.

It is the latest "power harassment" scandal to hit Japanese sport, with the country's wrestling federation apologizing to four-time Olympic champion Kaori Icho in 2018 over bullying claims. Uekusa, a world champion in 2016, claimed in a blog post on Sunday that Kagawa began using a bamboo sword as part of her training, with the aim of forcing her to dodge his swings and thrusts.

But Uekusa says she and other athletes suffered bruised eyes after Kagawa hit them in the face with the sword while training without protective headgear. Kagawa has denied the allegations. She also claimed Kagawa frequently shouted at her and admonished her about her private life, damaging her self-esteem and leaving her unable to train because of stress.

"Meeting my instructor became so tough, bursting into floods of tears on my way to the dojo became part of my daily life," she wrote on her blog. "Training was such a stifling environment that I suffered mental stress, and there were times when I couldn't go to training and just stayed at home."

Japanese media reported that both Uekusa and Kagawa testified in front of the federation's ethics committee in Tokyo yesterday, with Uekusa telling reporters she had "talked thoroughly" about what had happened. The Mainichi Shimbun daily said Kagawa denied the charges on Sunday night, telling the paper "I would never do such a thing as jabbing an Olympic athlete in the face and injuring them". — AFP