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Coronavirus stalls Wood at pinnacle of his career

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SPORT



FOOTBALL

Fate of Euro 2020 to be determined by UEFA today

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GOLF

Woods, Park outside Olympic qualifying as tours halt

However, if the Olympics go ahead, many golfers could opt out like in Rio 2016 due to zika virus concerns

Reuters

Cary, North Carolina

No changes are planned to the Olympic golf qualifying system, the International Golf Federation (IGF) which runs the event said after the sport shut down due to the coronavirus.

This could deal a hammer blow to the chances of Tiger Woods qualifying for Tokyo 2020, and for Park In-bee's hopes of being eligible to defend her title from Rio 2016.

Based on the current rankings, Woods (United States) and Park (South Korea) would not qualify for their respective teams.

However, scrambling the equation is that even if the Olympics go ahead, many golfers could opt out, much as they did from Rio 2016 due to concerns over the zika virus.

Eligibility for the Tokyo 2020 men's and women's events will be determined by world ranking points compiled over almost two years from July 1, 2018 until June 22 (men) and June 29 (women) this year.

The list essentially mirrors the world rankings in determining the 60-player fields, with a maximum of two players from any single country (four if inside the top 15).

But the halting of the professional tour schedules for an undetermined time frame will have winners and losers, because there will be little week-to-week flux in the rankings.

Those on the outside looking in will for the most part continue looking in, and vice-versa.

"This has proven to be a fair and equitable system," the IGF said of the qualifying system in an email to Reuters.

"The IGF is monitoring the challenges faced by our athletes to participate in events, which continues to change daily, and we currently



believe that the system still remains fair to all athletes who are vying for qualification to the Tokyo2020 Olympic Games."

In other words, bad luck if you're outside the qualifying cut line and hoping to play your way in.

Though Park is 11th on the overall women's world list, she is only the fifth-ranked Korean behind Ko Jin-young, Park Sung-hyun, Kim Seiyoun and Lee Jeong-eun.

The LPGA Tour has cancelled three tournaments in Asia, and postponed three US tournaments that were scheduled over the next month.

Even if rescheduled, it is unlikely these American tournaments will be

played before the Olympic cut-off.

LAST OLYMPIC CHANCE

An even bigger question from a global marketing aspect is what the PGA Tour shutdown, at least through next month's Masters, means to Woods's hopes.

He is sixth on the American list, behind Brooks Koepka, Justin Thomas, Patrick Cantlay, Webb Simpson and Patrick Reed.

Dustin Johnson has ruled himself out, citing a busy schedule, though he could be joined by others wanting to keep their travel to a minimum unless the coronavirus abates quickly.

Woods, 44, has often stated his

desire to play in what would likely be his only chance of being an Olympian, though he has more important matters on his mind given that he was unable to enter last week's Players Championship due to a stiff back.

He has played only twice this year.

The 15-times major champion plays such a limited schedule at the best of times that even if, under a best-case scenario, the PGA Tour cranks back up again in mid-April, there are only a handful of events he will contest before the Olympic deadline.

The Olympic golf tournaments are scheduled to take place from July 30-August 2 (men) and August 6-9 (women) at the Kasumigaseki course.



South Korea's Park In-bee (also left).



Tiger Woods of the US.

SPOTLIGHT

IOC's Tokyo Games chief faces mandatory quarantine in Australia

Reuters

Melbourne, Australia



John Coates, the International Olympic Committee's point man for the Tokyo Games, faces mandatory self-isolation when he returns to Australia from Europe this week as part of border controls to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced all international arrivals to the country after midnight on Sunday would need to self-isolate for 14 days to help the country "stay ahead of (the) curve" in containment efforts.

The chairman of the IOC's Coordination Commission for Tokyo, Coates is expected to arrive in Australia tomorrow from Lausanne, Switzerland, where the IOC are headquartered.

The influential Coates, who is also long-serving president of the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC), has no special dispensation to avoid the government's mandatory quarantine period, an AOC spokesman confirmed to Reuters yesterday.

The IOC's Coordination Commission conducts regular inspections of Olympic host cities and works with international sports federations and national Olympic committees to resolve issues in the lead-up to Games.

The Commission's next meeting in Tokyo is scheduled for mid-April, near the 100-day countdown to the Games' opening ceremony.

The coronavirus, which has infected over 160,000 people globally and killed more than 6,000, has thrown the Olympics into doubt, with sports shutting down competitions around the world as part of containment efforts.

Coates said a month ago in Tokyo that there was no need to make contingency plans for the cancellation of the July 24-August 9 Games or for moving them, citing advice from the World Health Organisation.

Infections and deaths from the virus have soared since but Japanese organisers have reiterated the IOC's stance.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said on Saturday that Japan would overcome the spread of the infection and host the Olympics "without problem, as planned".

COMMENT

'Don't sacrifice lives': doubts grow in Japan over Olympics

AFP

Tokyo, Japan

Doubts are growing in Japan about the Tokyo Olympics, with growing opposition to holding them as scheduled and some urging officials not to risk lives by pressing ahead during the coronavirus emergency.

Officials like Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and International Olympic Committee chief Thomas Bach have repeatedly insisted preparations should continue to light the Olympic flame on July 24.

But with events from the Premier League to NBA basketball scrapped, and Japanese sport also at a standstill, even US President Donald Trump has suggested putting the Olympics on hold.

Japan has seen relatively few cases, with 814 testing positive and 24 dead. But some people on

the streets of Tokyo voiced concern for the fans that would pour in from abroad.

Koki Miura, a 27-year-old employee at an internet company, told AFP: "To be honest, even if Japan overcomes this crisis, we wouldn't receive visitors from the world. I think we'd better not hold it."

"We cannot sacrifice people's lives for it," added Miura, who said the Games should be postponed — if not cancelled outright.

Public opinion in Japan appears to be moving against the Games. A poll for public broadcaster NHK taken March 6-9 suggested 45 percent were opposed to going ahead as planned, with 40 % in favour.

And a new poll of more than 1,000 people released Monday by Japan's Kyodo news agency showed 69.9 % of respondents believe Tokyo will not be able to hold the Games as scheduled.



Pedestrians wearing face masks walk past a board showing the number of days to the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games in Yokohama yesterday. (AFP)

Tokyo governor Yuriko Koike has said it is "unthinkable" to cancel the Olympics but the decision rests with the IOC, which is planning emergency talks with international sports federations on Tuesday, according to an IOC source.

Bach has stressed the IOC will follow World Health Organization recommendations regarding a possible postponement. But he has also acknowledged that the cancellation of qualifying events was posing "serious problems".

At the beginning of March, Bach said the IOC would show "flexibility" regarding qualifications for the Tokyo, and encouraged "all athletes to continue to prepare" for the Games.

'LOOK AT THE PANIC'

Masao Sugawara, a 90-year-old pensioner, told AFP: "Personally, I think it would be safer to postpone the Olympics for a year, just as President Trump said. Look at

the panic."

"Of course it would be disappointing, though," he admitted. Manfred Otto, 45, a half-Japanese, half-German lawyer, said he was "worried" about the Games and stressed: "We really need to be careful."

"If the outbreak does not get controlled by June or July, I think we should postpone it," said Otto.

The betting odds are increasingly shifting towards the opening ceremony not taking place on July 24. Bookmaker Paddy Power is offering 4-1 against the Games opening on time.

This comes as the virus — which has killed 6,400 people worldwide — shreds the international sporting calendar, with almost no elite sporting action taking place last weekend.

Preparations for the Games have already been affected, with qualifiers cancelled, test events scaled back and the Olympic torch arrival and relay altered.

Plans have been scrapped to involve hundreds of children in the torch's arrival ceremony, while an exhibition and three events to display the flame have also been axed.

Cancelling the Olympics would be a heartbreaking decision for Tokyo residents who rushed to buy tickets, and authorities whose preparations have won widespread praise — with the majority of venues ready well ahead of schedule.

Hisaya Suzuki, 47, said he had tickets to see baseball, Japan's most popular sport.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so I really wanted to take my son," he said, but added: "If there will be negative consequences, it may be wiser to pause it (the Games)."

Sugawara said the magnitude of the coronavirus trumped sporting considerations. "I am 90 years old. Except for wartime, I have never felt so worried."

TOKYO 2020

Games handover ceremony stripped down to bare bones

Reuters
Athens

The Tokyo 2020 Olympics flame handover ceremony in Athens this week will be a scaled-down event with only a few Tokyo Games officials and torch bearers inside the stadium to protect everyone from the coronavirus, the Hellenic Olympic Committee said yesterday.

The handover ceremony usually attracts thousand of spectators, officials and ceremony participants in the central Athens' Panathenaic Stadium, site of the first modern Olympics in 1896.

They will traditionally cheer as the last Greek torch enters the stadium after a one-week domestic relay, for the official handover to

the next Olympic Games host city. This time round, however, it will just be a handful of actresses playing the roles of ancient Greek Priestesses, a small Tokyo Games delegation and four torch relay runners – two Greek and two Japanese – in the marble stadium that can seat up to 50,000.

“The Handover Ceremony will take place in the presence of the President of the Hellenic Republic... and of a small delegation of the Tokyo 2020 organising committee,” the HOC said in a statement.

“There will be a dance of the priestesses that will not exceed the number of 10, and a torch relay of two Greek torchbearers and two Japanese torchbearers, that will take place inside the Panathenaic Stadium.”

The stadium, as previously an-

nounced, will be closed to the public to stem the spread of the virus. Greece last week cancelled the remainder of the domestic Olympic torch relay through the country to avoid attracting crowds a day after the Tokyo Games flame was lit in ancient Olympia.

Greece has had four fatalities from the disease and more than 300 cases till yesterday.

Japan is still preparing to host the Olympics, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said on Saturday, despite rising global concern about the viability of the summer Games due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Abe and his government as well as the International Olympic Committee have been adamant the July 24-Aug 9 Games will go ahead, even as other global sporting events have been put on hold.



Actors Billy Zane and Gerard Butler attend a ceremony during the Olympic flame torch relay for the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics on Friday. (Reuters)

Boxing qualifiers for Europe, Americas suspended

The European, American and final world qualifying boxing tournaments for the Tokyo Olympic Games were suspended yesterday due to the outbreak of the coronavirus, the International Olympic Committee said.

The IOC said the European qualifier in London, which was already under way and due to run to March 24, would end after Tuesday's evening session. It said it would provide details on the qualification process for the other regions at a later date.

The IOC's boxing task force (BTF), which is organising the event in the Copper Box at London's Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, had opted earlier on Monday to hold it without spectators but then decided to end it early. “The BTF eventually took the decision to suspend the event today, amid increasing global travel restrictions and quarantine measures, in order to allow the participants from over 60 countries to adjust their travel plans and return home,” the IOC said in a statement. “The BTF will continue to evaluate the situation daily, aiming to complete the distribution of the remaining Tokyo 2020 boxing quota places in May and June.” “The BTF's priority remains the qualification of athletes on the field of play, and it will inform all stakeholders as soon as more information is available,” it said.

CRICKET

Sultans, Zalmi, Kings and Qalandars to fight for PSL final berths

‘WE HAVE CHASED WELL, BUT I BELIEVE OUR STRENGTH LIES IN BOWLING’

PSL
Lahore

After a high-octane double round-robin league, which was embellished by scintillating on-field performances, four teams will be vying for the two berths for the final of the HBL Pakistan Super League 2020 when the two semi-finals are played at Gaddafi Stadium today.

This year's edition has brought forward two new contenders for the coveted title as Multan Sultans and Lahore Qalandars have gone beyond the group stage for the first time in the history of the event.

In the first semi-final, Sultans will face Peshawar Zalmi, the 2017 edition's winners and two-time runners-up, at 2pm, while the biggest rivalry of the event will be ignited once again when Karachi Kings and Qalandars play in the second semi-final, which will commence at 7pm.

Prior to this edition, only three teams – Zalmi, Quetta Gladiators and Islamabad United – had featured in the HBL PSL finals, which mean that there will be at least one new finalist in the tomorrow title showdown.

Multan Sultans were the most successful side in the group-stage with six wins from 10 matches. They were perched at the top of the points table for the most part of the tournament and were the first ones to secure a semi-final spot. Zalmi, on the other hand, oscillated from wins to defeats over the course of their 10-match journey to date.

They enter the semi-finals ranked fourth with four wins and one of their matches getting washed-out. Sultans came out on top on both occasions when the two teams met in the group matches. They won the first match by six wickets with as many as 31 balls remaining at Multan Cricket Stadium, their home, and secured a three-run win in a closely-fought match at Karachi's National Stadium. For Sultans, travelling to Multan played a huge role where they won all three matches and got the desired momentum. Their captain Shan Masood has been leading the batting unit from the front. The left-handed



Lahore Qalandars Fakhar Zaman plays a shot during the Pakistan Super League (PSL) match against Multan Sultans at the Gaddafi Cricket Stadium in Lahore on Sunday. (AFP)

top-order batsman has piled up 253 runs, which include a half-century, at an average of 32. He is the highest run-getter for his side and sits sixth in the chart for the highest overall run-getters.

Zalmi, on the other hand, boast Pakistan's leading T20 players. Kamran Akmal, the highest run-getter in the history of HBL PSL, continues to live-up to the expectations of the fans and is the top-scorer for Zalmi in the ongoing tourna-

ment. The wicketkeeper-batsman has piled up 251 runs at a strike rate of 162 and struck his third HBL PSL century in Zalmi's second match of the tournament.

The biggest inter-city rivalry in the country will come alive once again as Gaddafi Stadium will stage the second semi-final between arch-rivals Karachi Kings and Lahore Qalandars.

The two teams are locked at 1-1 in this edition after defeating each other on

their home grounds. Qalandars secured a comprehensive eight-wicket win against Kings at Gaddafi Stadium and Kings avenged it with a commanding 10-wicket win at the National Stadium.

That the semi-final line-up was decided on the very last group match was largely due to Lahore Qalandars, who have progressed beyond the group-stage for the first time after four attempts. Qalandars finished at the third spot, while Karachi Kings were ranked second at the completion of the group-stage.

It was their three consecutive wins in the middle-phase of their HBL PSL 2020 campaign which gave Qalandars' the hope of their qualification to the next round and that it happened was due to the thunderous bat of Ben Dunk – who has smashed 23 sixes this tournament, the most for any batsman. Dunk leads Qalandars' batsmen with 266 runs at an impressive average of 53. But it is his blazing strike rate of 186 which makes him a nightmare for the opposition bowlers. The Australian batsman has struck two half-centuries – against Quetta Gladiators and Kings (93 and 99 not out) – and that both have come at the Gaddafi Stadium will be a concern for Kings.

What augurs well for Qalandars is the fact that Fakhar Zaman and Sohail Akhtar have picked form at the right time. In his last three matches, Fakhar has scored two half-centuries, both coming at the Gaddafi, while Sohail's last four scores are 68 not out, 21, 68 and 19 not out.

Lahore Qalandars captain Sohail Akhtar said: “I am very happy with how the team has performed over the course of this tournament and the whole unit is motivated and ready to perform.

“A semi-final is always a big match, but there is no extra pressure on us because of the fact that we are playing against Karachi Kings. All teams that have progressed this far are quality sides. Though we have chased well, but I believe our strength lies in bowling.”

Kings are bolstered by the presence of Babar Azam at the top of their order. The top-ranked T20I batsman has been in red-hot form with 345 runs at an average touching 50. He has smashed three half-centuries.

for 60 days after the government banned gatherings larger than 100 people in response to the threat of the coronavirus outbreak. The suspension applies to first-class, limited-overs, semi-professional, junior and amateur cricket, with the country's domestic 50-over championship at the semi-final stage.

The men's national side have no fixtures scheduled until a tour of the West Indies in late July. The West Indies board has suspended cricket activities for at least 30 days, it said on Saturday.

The start of the Indian Premier League has been moved to April 15 and the final two rounds of New Zealand's domestic competition have also been cancelled.

HORSE RACING

Kentucky Derby in doubt as racing goes behind closed doors

AFF
Los Angeles

Leading trainer Bob Baffert said Saturday that May's 146th Kentucky Derby could be postponed as racing went behind closed doors at California's Santa Anita track for the first time since it opened in 1934 because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Officials at Churchill Downs revealed Saturday that they were considering the “timing” of the showpiece and Baffert – who has saddled five winners in the “Run for the Roses” – said that the first leg of US racing's Triple Crown could be pushed back from May 2 to later in the year.

“Churchill Downs is saying they're not going to run the Derby without the people there, so I'm hearing may be June or in September,” Baffert said after saddling Charlatan to a big win in an allowance race at a deserted Santa Anita.

Only accredited media, owners, trainers, jockeys, grooms and a limited number of track employees were allowed in. Major professional sport in the United States has been brought to almost a complete standstill by the coronavirus pandemic, with the NBA, NHL and MLS suspending play and Major League Baseball pushing back the scheduled start of their season by “at least two weeks” while suspending pre-season games. The US PGA Tour season

has also been suspended but Baffert said it was the postponement of the season's first golf major, the US Masters at Augusta National next month, that had really caught his attention.

“Whenever they cancel the Masters, that's like the Derby,” he said.

“I've never seen anything like this, it's kind of scary. Hopefully they can get everything under control.” In a statement posted on its website, Churchill Downs indicated it was considering its options for the Kentucky Derby. Derby “We recognise that the impact of this iconic event extends well beyond the historic race-track of Churchill Downs,” the statement said.

“The Kentucky derby is a cherished and important time for the City of Louisville and the Commonwealth of Kentucky. We are mindfully aware of our fans who travel from great distances to join us as well as our valued employees whose most intense preparations to host a world-class event begin now. For these reasons, we have been working carefully and diligently with relevant health experts and authorities to ensure we make the most responsible decision regarding the timing of the 146th Kentucky derby this year.

“We thank you for your patience and are committed to providing regular communication and transparency as we move forward.”

Churchill Downs said it expected to have an update in the coming week.



In this file photo Triple Crown and Belmont Stakes contender Justify is walked in his barn by trainer Bob Baffert after arriving prior to the 150th running of the Belmont Stakes at Belmont Park on June 6, 2018 in Elmont, New York. (AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

British race meetings to go ahead, but no spectators

British horse racing meetings will continue but without spectators until at least the end of March, the British Horseracing Authority said yesterday. Last week's Cheltenham Festival went ahead as planned with around 60,000 fans on the course each day, despite most other sports shutting down because of the coronavirus crisis.

“Racecourses and racing yards are embedded in their local communities and we are acutely aware of our responsibilities to protect public health,” BHA chief executive

Nick Rust said in a statement. “The restrictions we are putting in place to close racing to spectators and limit attendees will reduce demand on public services. We also have a range of measures in place designed in response to the government's guidance on public health and we will continue to update these as appropriate.” “Every effort will be made to notify customers and the betting industry at the earliest opportunity,” it said. Britain recorded another 171 cases of coronavirus on Monday, taking the total to 1,543.

FOCUS

Final leg of Bangladesh's Pakistan tour postponed

Reuters
Lahore

The final leg of Bangladesh's tour of Pakistan, which involved a Test match and a one-day international next month, has been postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic, the cricket boards said yesterday.

Bangladesh were due to reach Karachi on March 29 to play the one-dayer on April 1 and the second Test match which was to begin four days later at the port city. “The two boards will now work together to identify a future opportunity to complete the ICC World Test Championship commitment,” the Pakistan Cricket

Board (PCB) said in a statement.

Bangladesh toured Pakistan in January to play three Twenty20 Internationals before returning last month to play the first test in Rawalpindi which the hosts won by an innings and 44 runs. The PCB has also indefinitely postponed the domestic Pakistan Cup one-day tournament which was to start from March 25.

Earlier yesterday, New Zealand Cricket (NZC) cancelled the last two rounds of the Plunket Shield due to the pandemic and awarded the title to league leaders Wellington Firebirds.

Chief executive David White said NZC took the “difficult decision” after receiving expert medical advice and following the government's move to tighten

border controls. The Wellington Firebirds clinched the 2019-20 title thanks to their 26-point lead over Central Stags.

NZC has also cancelled its March 30 annual award ceremony scheduled in Auckland. New Zealand's schedule upheaval follows Cricket Australia's decision to cancel the final round of the Sheffield Shield season in an effort to reduce travel. CA was yet to decide if the March 27 final will take place as scheduled.

Australia and New Zealand's limited overs tours have been postponed in the wake of new travel restrictions announced by the New Zealand government. Australian limited-overs specialist Chris Lynn will head home after guiding Lahore Qaland-

ars to their maiden semi-finals in the Pakistan Super League on Sunday. “Unfortunately in these circumstances I've chosen to head home. I've always said there is more to life than cricket and this is certainly one of these cases,” Lynn wrote on Instagram after smashing a 52-ball century in an empty Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore.

Meanwhile Ireland's tour of Zimbabwe has been postponed due to the global coronavirus pandemic, cricket chiefs announced yesterday.

The two sides were due to play three Twenty20 internationals and three one-day internationals next month. Cricket South Africa (CSA) yesterday suspended all forms of the game in the country

SPOTLIGHT

Gloomy outlook for sport amid pandemic lockdown

AFP
Paris

Silent stadiums and empty venues made for a gloomy weekend for sports fans but the fear yesterday was it could only get worse amid the widening coronavirus pandemic.

With governments opting for increasingly stringent bans on the size and number of public gatherings, most major sports events across the world have been suspended or scrapped.

What happens next may become clearer today when UEFA officials meet to discuss whether football's showpiece European championships, the year's biggest sporting event along with the Tokyo Olympics, should go ahead.

UEFA have already scrapped the coming week's mouthwatering round of Champions League and Europe League ties. Any hope that the Euro 2020 would be spared an increasingly Europe-wide virus lockdown was hard to sustain as the death toll and the number of Covid-19 cases spiralled and the continent became the new epicentre of the disease.

The fact was hammered home when Chinese footballers from Wuhan, where the virus first emerged late last year, were seen fleeing back home from Europe, where they had initially exiled themselves to escape the illness.

The public mood has also apparently shifting

from disappointment that sport has been sacrificed, to support for measures aimed at staying healthy and saving lives.

A social media backlash hit organisers for allowing the showpiece Cheltenham Festival to go ahead last week with more than 250,000 spectators attending, one of the few recent events escaping spectator bans. All horse racing in Britain has now been moved behind closed doors.

The shift in mood was illustrated too by the apology from Rudy Gobert, the Utah Jazz centre and the first NBA player to test positive for the coronavirus.

He was guilty of making light of the virus when the subject came up at a press conference a week ago — two days before he tested positive and the entire NBA season was suspended.

"I wish I would've taken this thing more seriously and I hope everyone else is going to do so because we can do it together. Take care and stay safe," the 27-year-old Frenchman said Sunday.

SAVE LIVES

Many European governments are taking no chances about the spread of the virus and there are those who believe football's Euro 2020, scheduled to take place in 12 countries across the continent from June 12 to July 12, should also be postponed.

The head of the Italian football federation, Gabriele Gravina, has expressed that view and Italy coach Roberto Mancini says he is open to the proposal.

"Let's wait to see what UEFA decides, but I adapt to everything, right now the priority is to save lives," he said.

Italy are set to host the opening match in Rome on June 12, but for the moment all sport has been suspended with the nation's 60mn inhabitants in lockdown.

Europe's top football competitions have already suspended their seasons and Liverpool's first stab at winning the Premier League after a 30-year wait passed them by yesterday.

They could have picked up the trophy at Goodison Park if Manchester City had lost to Burnley on Saturday — but the feat remains hypothetical as neither match was allowed to take place.

Meanwhile there were signs of a change of tone in Japan about the Tokyo Olympics, with opposition growing to holding the Games as scheduled.

Until now the International Olympic Committee and Japanese officials have indicated preparations for the event set to be held between July 24 and August 9 should continue as planned.

Public opinion may be wavering, however. A poll yesterday showed 69.9% of the Japanese population believed the Games would not be held as scheduled.

Koki Miura, a 27-year-old employee at an internet company, told AFP they should be delayed or cancelled.

"We cannot sacrifice people's lives for it," said Miura.



A general view of Golden 1 Center where a game between the Brooklyn Nets and the Sacramento Kings has been cancelled following the decision by the NBA to suspend the season in response to the coronavirus outbreak. **PICTURE:** USA TODAY Sports

FOCUS

Coronavirus stalls Wood at pinnacle of his career

The spotlight shifted Saturday, after Wood had a preliminary positive test for Covid-19

DPA
Los Angeles

It was maybe the best week of basketball in Christian Wood's life. In a four-game span, he set a new career high three times: 29 points against the Oklahoma City Thunder, 30 points versus the Utah Jazz and 32 points against the Philadelphia 76ers.

The peak period in Wood's nomadic four NBA seasons was moving toward the spotlight, with him as the breakout centrepiece in the Pistons' impromptu rebuild. The spotlight shifted Saturday, after Wood had a preliminary positive test for Covid-19/coronavirus. He became the third NBA player to test positive, after Utah Jazz stars Rudy Gobert and Donovan Mitchell announced their status this week.

The NBA suspended the remainder of the season on Wednesday night, after Gobert's preliminary positive result. Wood's diagnosis is significant because the Pistons hosted the Jazz on March 7 at Little Caesars Arena and Wood guarded Gobert that night, though it's not certain if that's when he contracted the virus. "He feels 100-percent fine," Wood's agent, Adam Pensack, e-mailed The News on Saturday.

In the aftermath, Wood's name has become more renowned in the NBA, and around the world, for a positive Covid-19 test than his remarkable season — one that should elevate him in the conversation for the NBA's Most Improved Player award.

After pitstops in Philadelphia, Charlotte, Milwaukee and New Orleans, Wood came to the Pistons in the summer, just looking for an opportunity. He's made the most of his chance, going from 10.5 points, 5.3 rebounds and 38% on 3-pointers in about 18 minutes per game in the first 49 games.

When the Pistons moved toward a rebuild after trading Andre Drummond on Feb. 6, Wood moved into a starting role and his numbers jumped: 22.8 points, 9.9 rebounds and 40% from beyond the arc, averaging 34.2 minutes in the last 13 games. "I wouldn't say it's taken me surprise," Wood said last week. "I think I was always been confident with myself before the (Drummond) trade. I think I was doing great then and only getting like 18 minutes."

He was the last player to make the Pistons' roster this season, beating out veteran Joe Johnson at the end of training camp.



Christian Wood of the Detroit Pistons plays against the Sacramento Kings at Little Caesars Arena on January 22, 2020 in Detroit. (TNS)

Wood was on a non-guaranteed contract that didn't fully vest for his full veteran-minimum of \$1.6mn until January.

It's the biggest contract of his career but when Wood becomes an unrestricted free agent in the summer, he's in line for a big payday, possibly in the range of \$10mn or more per season. The Pistons have Wood's early Bird rights, which means they can outbid another team coveting Wood in free agency. "No, I'm not surprised; he's extremely talented," Blake Griffin said. "His talent is unbelievable. It's at a high (level)."

With some of his recent highlights, Wood likely will draw more attention for the dominant player he's become, including a mammoth dunk over Thunder center Steven Adams, which drew praise from coach Dwane Casey. "Wood caught him at the right time and hit his shoulder and I think it was probably more Adams losing his balance as much as Christian knocking him off — but that's the strength he has to develop, to be able to do

that consistently," Casey said. "And not only offensively, but he's got to be able to do it to get him off the boards and box out and hold his spot in a rebounding position." Casey lauded Wood's development this season, noting that he's still making mistakes but his production outweighs those errors. The Detroit News Many of Wood's highlights this season end with a dunk, many of which came against reserves, but in recent weeks, they've come against anyone around the rim, including Gobert, a two-time defensive player of the year. Beyond that, he's expanded his game beyond the 3-point line and has become a driving threat as well.

"My mindset has been to attack and take advantage of the opportunity. With (Derrick Rose) gone, I have to be one of the first options for the team and I've been doing a good job of helping my team score," Wood said. "Dunk it. That's always been my mindset this whole season. Attack the rim with ferocity and keep going until they stop me."

Following two good seasons at Nevada-Las Vegas, Wood left for the NBA Draft at age 19. As a sophomore, he posted 15.7 points and 10 rebounds but even with his 6-foot-10 wiry frame, 7-foot-2 wingspan and pogo-stick jumping ability, he wasn't a first-round pick. In fact, he wasn't drafted at all, a disappointment that Wood called "a stunner."

Wood latched on with the Sixers during their rebuilding "Process" for 17 games, shuttling back and forth from their G League team, the Delaware 87ers, throughout most of the season. He had similar luck with the Hornets and their development team, the Greensboro Swarm and the Bucks (Wisconsin Herd).

That's when things started to come together, but tough roster decisions and "the numbers game" have been tougher for Wood to dodge than the likes of Gobert, Adams or Joel Embiid. "Yeah. After a while, after I was in the G League so much, and down, (not making it in the

NBA) was kind of in the back of my head, but I never wanted to quit," Wood said. "I always believed in myself, always knew what I was capable of doing on the court if given an opportunity. "Even in the limited minutes I was playing, you know with certain teams, with Milwaukee and New Orleans, I think I was doing good, so that was definitely a plus for me to tell me, keep my head to keep going."

The last stint, with the Pelicans, proved to be pivotal for Wood, because he started to get consistent minutes and to show that he could play in the paint and beyond the 3-point arc, with four games of at least 20 points. "It was really a confidence-booster for me. I played against the Warriors and had 26 points to finish off the season. It was huge for me the last eight games because coach (Alvin) Gentry gave me a chance, an opportunity to play," Wood said. "He liked my game; it was just that at the end of the summer, I couldn't really stay because of numbers; it wasn't right for me."

COMMENT

Gobert regrets not taking virus threat more seriously



File photo of Utah Jazz center Rudy Gobert. (AFP)

Reuters
Los Angeles

Utah Jazz player Rudy Gobert, whose coronavirus diagnosis last Wednesday was the first domino that effectively shut down American sports, regrets not having taken the threat more seriously, he said in a social media post on Sunday.

"I've been feeling a little better every single days," the 27-year-old Frenchman said on the National Basketball Association (NBA) twitter feed.

Gobert was diagnosed with the virus two days after playfully touching reporters' microphones and recorders at the end of a news conference.

"I wish I would have took this thing more seriously and I hope everyone else will do so," he said on Sunday.

News of Gobert's diagnosis minutes before the scheduled tip-off of a game between the Jazz and Oklahoma City Thunder led to the surreal scene of a member of the Thunder's medical staff running onto the court to tell the referees, while the players were warming up.

The officials then consulted both coaches in a huddle for several minutes before sending the players back to the locker room, the game cancelled.

Gobert was not at the stadium.

The NBA that night suspended the entire league, and within 36 hours nearly every major American sport had followed suit, including the National Hockey League, Major League Soccer, the PGA and PGA Tours and NCAA college basketball.

A second Utah player, Donovan Mitchell, tested positive for coronavirus last Thursday.

CDC suggests lengthy sports shut-down

AFP
Los Angeles

The NBA and other major sports leagues in the United States could be idle for longer than initially anticipated under new recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

The CDC recommended Sunday that sporting events and other "large events and mass gatherings" be cancelled or postponed for the next eight weeks.

"Large events and mass gatherings can contribute to the spread of Covid-19 in the United States via travellers who attend these events and introduce the virus to new communities," the agency said in a statement.

"Examples of large events and mass gatherings include conferences, festivals, parades, concerts, sporting events, weddings, and other types of assemblies."

The NBA became the first major US pro sports league to suspend its season in the face

of the coronavirus pandemic after Utah Jazz player Rudy Gobert tested positive for Covid-19 on Wednesday.

Three NBA players are now known to have tested positive. The NHL and Major League Soccer have also suspended competition, while Major League Baseball cancelled Spring Training games and pushed back the scheduled March 26 start of its season "at least two weeks."

The PGA Tour and PGA Tour have cancelled tournaments into April, and the Masters, first men's major of 2020 will not take place at Augusta National April 9-12. Tennis, motor racing, figure skating and boxing are also among the sports that have been affected in North America.

The NBA suspension was opened, with commissioner Adam Silver saying Thursday that the league had determined it would be "most likely at least 30 days."

An eight-week shut-down from Sunday would extend to May 10, past the scheduled end of the NBA regular season and the scheduled April 18 start of the playoffs.

SPOTLIGHT

Fate of Euro 2020 to be determined by UEFA

European football's governing body today will hold a videoconference with representatives from all 55 member associations as well as from clubs and players bodies

AFP
Paris

A decision over whether to postpone football's Euro 2020 by up to a year, with all the sporting and financial consequences that would entail, is set to be made when UEFA holds a crisis meeting today as Europe battles the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

European football's governing body will hold a videoconference with representatives from all 55 member associations as well as from clubs and players bodies. UEFA will then hold an executive committee meeting at 1400 (1300 GMT) at their Swiss headquarters.

The future of the European Championship, due to take place for the first time in 12 different cities spread across the continent from June 12 to July 12, is up in the air along with those of the Champions League and Europa League.

The "dark scenarios" that UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin warned against envisaging when he spoke at the organisation's congress in Amsterdam just two weeks ago now have to be considered. All of Europe's leading domestic leagues ground to a halt last week, while UEFA suspended all Champions League and Europa League games due to be played this week. Both tournaments are still in the last-16 stage.

Europe has become the epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic, with Italy and Spain on lockdown, France gradually following suit, and other countries closing borders to halt the spread of the outbreak. More than 1,800 people have died in Italy, which is supposed to host the opening game of Euro 2020 in Rome.

The head of the Italian football federation, Gabriele Gravina, has already proposed that the Euro be postponed, with Italy coach Roberto Mancini calling for it to be pushed back 12 months. "We would have won the European Championship this summer, we can also win it in 2021," Mancini said.

It is a position that many around the continent are coming round to amid much uncertainty as to when club football can resume. "UEFA has no choice. They have to postpone the Euro and the Champions League," one senior figure in the world game said, although finding agreement across the board may not be easy. "There are people who want to play, and others who don't," French football federation president Noel Le Graet said on Sunday. A German report said that two possible options are on the table for the European Championship.

One is to push it back to 2021, although that is not as simple as it might



A Euro 2020 countdown clock is seen outside Wembley stadium, which is due to host the Euro 2020 final in July. (Reuters)

appear, as it would need FIFA president Gianni Infantino to agree to halting the inaugural edition of his highly lucrative Club World Cup, due to take place in June and July next year in China with some of Europe's top club sides involved. FIFA offered "no comment" yesterday on the matter.

There is also the issue of the women's European Championship, scheduled to run from July 7 to August 1 next year in England, with the final at Wembley. The London venue is also supposed to hold

the semi-finals and final of Euro 2020. The alternative option, according to ZDF, is to maintain a Euro 2020 by playing it towards the end of the year.

That supposes that the crisis will have calmed down by then, and there is also the issue of all the other football that has been suspended. Le Graet said "it is probable" that all friendly matches scheduled to be played at the end of this month will be postponed.

Play-off matches to decide the last four berths at Euro 2020 can be ex-

pected to go the same way. In any case, world governing body FIFA has already moved to say that clubs no longer need to release players for the scheduled international dates.

They may come to a decision to try to complete the Champions League and Europa League by curtailing the competitions, meaning ties up to the semi-finals could be decided in one-off matches. From a financial viewpoint, UEFA would undoubtedly prefer postponing their flagship tournaments to

cancelling them altogether, or playing matches behind closed doors. "The financial stakes are enormous," according to one senior figure in the international game. "We know that FIFA has significant reserves but we don't know about UEFA or the different leagues."

In any case, the European Leagues grouping of almost a thousand clubs in 29 countries across the continent warned that "co-operation, co-ordination and flexibility are going to be essential".

Spanish football coach dies from virus aged 21

Malaga, Spain: A 21-year-old Spanish football coach Francisco Garcia, who worked with Atletico Portada Alta, has died from coronavirus, having also been suffering from leukaemia. He was taken to the hospital with severe coronavirus symptoms.

According to Spanish newspaper *Malaga Hoy*, Garcia was advised to seek further medical help after struggling to breathe, and was told that he had both coronavirus and pneumonia.

He was also told that he had leukaemia, which increased the level of risk that he was exposed to after contracting the virus and died on Sunday. Infectious disease experts said that had Garcia not been suffering from leukaemia, he would likely have survived the bout of coronavirus.

Garcia had been coach of the club's Infantil Aside for the last four years. Atletico Portada Alta released an emotional statement on social media about the death of the young coach.

The club statement read: "From Atletico Cotada Alta we want to express our deepest condolences to the family, friends and relatives of our coach Francisco Garcia who has left us, unfortunately, unfortunately, today. And now what do we do without you, Francis? If you were always with us when it was necessary, helping us and giving your all. How are we going to continue conquering winning in the league? We don't know how, but surely we will, for you. We will not forget you, rest in peace, phenomenon. Forever."

Club president Pep Bueno paying tribute to him after revealing how quickly his condition declined. Bueno said: "Francisco was a great guy and a very talented coach. We are all still shocked. The hospital rang me at 7pm on Sunday to say his condition had stabilised, but then an hour later because of the coronavirus and (cancer) ... I do not believe it. It seems impossible to me."

According to Independent, Garcia is possibly the youngest victim of the coronavirus outbreak.

The youngest individual to die in Italy - the worst-hit European nation - is a 38-year-old man who died last week, while China's youngest victim is a 36-year-old male.

Nearly 300 people have died from the Covid-19 outbreak in Spain.

FOCUS

Serie A campaign could be spread over two seasons

Reuters
Rome

The President of the Italian football federation (FIGC), Gabriele Gravina, said that the 2019/20 Serie A campaign could be spread over two seasons in order to bring the league to a conclusion. All sports events in Italy have been put on hold until April 3 due to the coronavirus outbreak, putting the completion of the Italian football season in doubt.

At a FIGC meeting on March 10, the body confirmed that the option of holding playoffs to decide the champion and relegated teams was being considered, as well as declaring the current standings as final or not declar-

ing a champion at all.

But with Italy in complete lockdown to fight the spread of the virus, it is looking ever-more likely that the suspension of football matches will be extended. There are currently 12 rounds of league action left to be completed, although eight Serie A teams have 13 fixtures remaining.

"If it isn't possible to bring the leagues to a conclusion, we will opt for other decisions," Gravina said. "It isn't ruled out that the current season could be spread out over two different seasons. I understand that there is a lot of curiosity, but today nobody is in a position to say what our future holds."

Gravina also revealed that he will back calls for Euro 2020 to be postponed when representa-

tives of national federations, European leagues and clubs hold an emergency video-conference call on Tuesday.

European club football has ground to a halt as countries across the continent look to stop the spread of the virus.

Euro 2020, which is set to start on June 12 and take place for a month across 12 different nations, could be pushed back by a year to give the national leagues a chance to finish. "The postponement of the European Championships is the idea to follow," said Gravina.

"Tomorrow we will ask for an act of responsibility from UEFA and all the Federations, to follow a path that seeks to protect the health of the athletes and fans across the world."



Juventus and Inter Milan played their game behind closed doors in Turin on March 8 but since then Serie A has been suspended with 12 rounds of fixtures remaining. (AFP)

BOTTOMLINE

After fleeing abroad, Chinese teams rush home

AFP
Shanghai

Most Chinese Super League (CSL) clubs fled abroad when the deadly coronavirus hit the country but they are now rushing back again as it takes hold elsewhere. The national side is still training in Dubai - where many CSL teams also went in recent weeks - but they too are now making hasty arrangements to get home as soon as possible.

Wuhan Zall, from the city at the epicentre of the outbreak, had been training in Spain since late January but left at the weekend because of the worsening situation in Europe, now the focal point of the pandemic. Wuhan will reportedly continue their chaotic pre-season preparations in Shenzhen.

Wuhan itself is still in lockdown, despite virus numbers in China reducing.

The CSL season was supposed to begin on February 22 but was indefinitely postponed. It could start behind closed doors in May, according to reports. Leo Baptistao, Wuhan's Brazilian attacker, told Chinese media before departing Spain that the situation "has flipped". "We are more in danger (here). It now appears... better to leave," he said.

Fabio Cannavaro's CSL champions Guangzhou Evergrande, who were in Dubai, and runners-up Beijing Guoan are among the clubs that have recently returned to China. Guangzhou R&F, coached by former Arsenal and Barcelona star Giovanni van Bronckhorst, yesterday became the latest club to say they were cutting short their Dubai training camp.

However, getting back to China is not straightforward because of flight disrup-

tions and strict quarantine rules when coming home. Wuhan Zall were stranded in Frankfurt, Germany on Sunday, according to Chinese media, and their current location was not immediately available.

The *Beijing News* reported that Li Tie's national team were curtailing their stint in Dubai and had planned to fly back to the Chinese capital from Dubai. However, their return is also becoming complicated, as Beijing authorities are now sending all international arrivals in the capital to quarantine facilities. After declaring it had "basically" curbed the spread of the disease within the country, China is now worried about an influx of infections from other countries. There have been more than 6,400 confirmed deaths globally from the coronavirus, which emerged in Wuhan in December. Many prominent sports competitions across the globe have been halted.

ROUND-UP

Chelsea's Mount defies self-isolation protocol

Chelsea midfielder Mason Mount was spotted playing at a football park along with West Ham's Declan Rice on Sunday, defying the club's self-isolation protocols which came into place last week. Chelsea's first-team players and coaching staff are all in self-isolation after winger Callum Hudson-Odoi tested positive for the coronavirus last week.

Mirror reported that Mount and Rice, both England internationals, were playing a five-a-side game at the Trent Park Football centre near Barnet. It is understood that Chelsea players have been reminded about the self-isolation protocols and they are expected to resume training only when they are out of isolation on March 22-23.

West Ham said last week that some club personnel are self-isolating after making direct contact with Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta - who also tested positive for the virus - but the players were not self-isolating. The Premier League has been suspended until April 4 due to the coronavirus pandemic. The United Kingdom has nearly 1,400 cases with 35 deaths.

MANGALA TESTS POSITIVE

France international Eliaquim Mangala said that he is one of the five players and staff of La Liga side Valencia who have tested positive for the coronavirus. The 29-year-old's team mate Ezequiel Garay on Sunday became the first La Liga player to

contract the virus that has affected a host of global sports events. "I knew today that I am #coronavirus positive," Mangala said on Twitter. "I'm feeling good and I have no symptoms associated with the virus. However, I am confined in house and separated from my family. I learned we can carry the virus without having symptoms, that's why I recommend everyone to follow confinement measures and avoid contact with other people, as much as possible, even if you feel well." Valencia had travelled to Milan last month for a Champions League match against Atalanta, which was played in front of a packed San Siro stadium, before restrictions were placed on sports events in Italy.