

sports

Players to battle online in virtual Madrid Open

Reuters | Madrid

The world's top tennis players will swap rackets for game controllers this month after organisers of the cancelled Madrid Open said they will stage a virtual competition to raise funds for struggling professionals amid the coronavirus shutdown.

The tennis season was halted in early March due to the pandemic, leaving players in the lower tiers, who solely depend on tournament winnings, without any chance to earn a living.

The men's ATP Tour and the WTA, which runs the women's circuit, suspended all tournaments until at least mid-July after countries started locking down their borders.

The Madrid Open, an ATP Masters 1000 and a WTA Premier Mandatory event in early May featuring total prize money of \$8.3 million, was one of the events called off.

However, the tournament will now take place on the Tennis World Tour videogame and run from April 27-30, "with the world's biggest tennis stars squaring off from their



Spain's Rafael Nadal hits a feather with his racket during a match (file photo)

own homes," the ATP Tour said.

"We have organised a tournament for the professional players that is as true to the conventional Mutua Madrid Open as possible, without them having to leave their homes," Madrid Open director Feliciano Lopez said in a statement.

"And its goal is not just to entertain; we want to do our bit during this period, which is so difficult for everyone."

With sport across the world virtually at a standstill due the spread of the novel coronavirus, some have gone online to raise funds and provide entertainment for fans.

La Liga organised an online soccer tournament recently while Formula One has also held virtual races.

The online tennis tournament, which has yet to confirm participants, will have 16 men's and women's singles players in each draw and offer a purse of 150,000 euros (\$162,000) for both.

The winners will decide how much they want to donate to their fellow professionals while an additional 50,000 euros will go towards reducing the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Alongside the official competition, more funds will be raised from charity matches that will see some big names from the gaming world face professional tennis players.

Both the WTA and the ATP welcomed the concept and said it would provide some much-needed help to lower-tier professionals.

"We look forward to the virtual game, which can serve as a fun source of entertainment while at the same helping to bridge a gap until live tennis returns, while also providing opportunities to help those players in need during this challenging time," WTA CEO Steve Simon said.

Dutchman Van Dijk wants to become 'Liverpool legend'

Reuters | London

Dutch defender Virgil van Dijk wants to become a "Liverpool legend" and says there is nothing stopping the Premier League club achieving "incredible things".

The 28-year-old, who joined Liverpool in January 2018, has helped the club win the Champions League, UEFA Super Cup and Club World Cup. They were also just two wins away from their first English league title in 30 years when the season was halted due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Premier League has been suspended indefinitely due to the pandemic, with 1.27 million people infected globally and over 70,000 dead, according to a Reuters tally.

Asked how he would like to be remembered for his spell at Anfield, Van Dijk told Spanish newspaper Sport: "As a Liverpool legend. I want to achieve in-

credible things here.

"I would like to be one of those players that return to Anfield after retiring. I see club legends at games and I feel part of a really big family," added Van Dijk, who finished runner-up to Lionel Messi in Ballon d'Or voting last year.

"We have a fantastic team, we don't lack anything, we have all the tools necessary to go on winning: A coach we identify with, a versatile squad, a style of play that breeds victories, a stadium and supporters that play their part."



Liverpool, who have lost only once in the league this season, have collected 82 points from 29 games and sit 25 points above holders Manchester City, who have played a game less.

Virgil van Dijk

FIFA bribe allegations raise more questions over Qatar World Cup

Reuters | New York

The 2022 World Cup in Qatar, the only major scheduled football event left unchanged after this year's calendar was wrecked by the coronavirus, has become the focus of fresh FIFA corruption allegations after the release of a new U.S. Department of Justice indictment.

Suspicion and rumours have long surrounded the 2010 vote by FIFA's executive to hand the 2018 World Cup to Russia and the 2022 tournament to Qatar. But on Monday, for the first time, prosecutors set direct, formal allegations down in print.

According to the prosecutors, representatives working for Russia and Qatar bribed FIFA executive committee officials to swing votes in the crucial decision of world football's governing body.

FIFA did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Although FIFA have responded to previous media allegations about the Qatar bid process by insisting the tournament will be unaffected, the U.S. allegations will lead to further questions over the hosting of the competition, which is scheduled for November and December of 2022.

The allegations made by the Department of Justice are that then FIFA vice-president Jack Warner was paid \$5 million through various shell companies to vote for Russia to host the 2018 World Cup.

Warner has been accused of a number of crimes in the long-running U.S. probe, and



A general view shows the Education city stadium built for the upcoming 2022 FIFA World Cup in Doha



The Qatar World Cup organizers have been in suspicion of corruption ever since the tiny Gulf state was awarded the 2022 tournament

he is fighting extradition from his homeland of Trinidad and Tobago. Warner, who was not immediately reachable for comment, has always denied any wrongdoing.

The indictment also states that the three South American members of FIFA's 2010 executive - Brazil's Ricardo Teixeira, the late Nicolás Leoz of Paraguay and an unnamed co-conspirator - took bribes to vote for Qatar to host the 2022

tournament.

"Ricardo Teixeira, Nicolás Leoz and co-conspirator #1 were offered and received bribe payments in exchange for their votes in favour of Qatar to host the 2022 World Cup."

Qatar and Russia's World Cup bids have always denied paying bribes. Qatari organisers did not provide immediate comment when contacted by media.

Alexei Sorokin, CEO of the local organizing committee for Russia's 2018 World Cup, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Asked if the Kremlin was aware of the U.S. indictment, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said: "We read the media reports. We don't understand what they refer to. Russia received the right to host the World Cup completely legally. It is in no way linked to any bribes. We reject this. And Russia hosted the best soccer World Cup in history, which we are proud of."

Euro 2020 delay could work in Italy's favour: Mancini

Reuters | Rome

Italy coach Roberto Mancini believes that the postponement of Euro 2020 could work in his team's favour although a gap of 10 months between working with his players will create difficulties.

Mancini has revived Italy's fortunes since taking over in 2018 after they had failed to qualify for the World Cup.

Under his leadership, they finished their Euro 2020 qualifying group with a 100% record and are on a run of 11 successive wins.

"If we had played European Championship in June, we would have had a good chance but maybe we would have faced national teams who are better prepared because they started to rejuvenate the squad before us, or have a long-established team like France," he said.

"But with another year, the lads will have the opportunity to improve in every respect, they will gain experience."

He added: "Our national side can compete among the best. I hope to be coach of the (Italy) team that will win the European Championship for the first time since 1968."

Italy's last match was a 9-1 win over Armenia in November. Their two friendlies scheduled for March were postponed because of the coronavirus outbreak and all matches due to be played in June and July have also been called off with Euro 2020 moved back by one year.

Mueller extends Bayern stay until 2023

AFP | Berlin

Bayern Munich forward Thomas Mueller has signed a new deal that will keep him at the club until 2023, the Bundesliga champions announced yesterday.

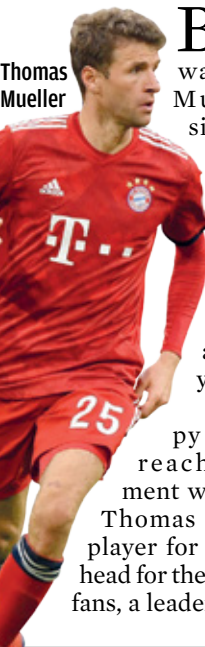
"I'm happy that we've reached agreement with Thomas. Thomas is a special player for us, a figurehead for the club and our fans, a leader who shows

the way on the pitch and has achieved a lot with FC Bayern," Bayern's sporting director Hasan Salihamidzic said in a statement.

Mueller, 30, has played more than 500 times for Bayern since rising through the youth ranks to reach the first team in 2008, winning eight league titles, five German Cups and the 2013 Champions League.

The new deal comes after he worked his way back into the team under coach Hansi Flick after being frozen out by previous coach Niko Kovac.

Flick himself signed a deal last week to become permanent coach until 2023 after guiding the reigning champions back to the top of the Bundesliga.



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