

Tennis needs money, innovation but home and away format is DNA of Davis Cup: Bhupathi



NEW DELHI, APRIL 30/- A three billion dollar deal is too big to ignore as authorities target revamp of the Davis Cup but doing away with the home and away format is not 'ideal' since it is the DNA of the competition, says India's captain Mahesh Bhupathi.

The International Tennis Federation (ITF) will put to test a proposal to create a season-ending

World Cup of Tennis, featuring 18 nations. The matches will be played over a week at a single venue in the traditional week of the Cup final in November, abolishing the home and away format for ties in the elite World Group.

The idea, approved by the ITF Board of Directors, will be put to vote in August in Orlando and needs two-thirds majority to become a reality.

The revamp idea has come after the ITF struck a deal with investment group Kosmos, founded and run by Spanish international and FC Barcelona footballer Gerard Pique. It is expected to pump in USD three billion into the tournament in a 25-year period.

It's being speculated that sponsors and corporate lobbies are putting pressure on the ITF to get more top players to participate in Davis Cup. There are instances when top players, in the wake of an already crammed schedule, have skipped ties.

Bhupathi said, Davis Cup was still "relevant".

"Davis Cup is special and all the top players have committed to it at some point. Like every sport, tennis needs to be driven by innovation and revenue and

if there is a three billion dollar opportunity there is no way it can be ignored regardless of the sentiment," Bhupathi told PTI.

"Top players always play for their country when they are fit and healthy. A case in point is Rafa (Rafael Nadal) who just played even when he missed Indian Wells and Miami (Masters events). It's not about Davis Cup. If a player is injured or tired they miss the biggest events in the world as well like you saw at the London Masters few years in a row," he argued.

However, Bhupathi, winner of 12 Grand Slam titles, said doing away with the home and away ties is not a great idea.

"It will not be ideal because playing at home and dealing with the challenges in away ties is part of the Davis Cup DNA that makes the competition exciting," Bhupathi said.

The tennis world is split on the issue with some of the top players such as Nadal voicing their support for it while a few like Nicolas Mahut, Greg Rusedski and Todd Woodbridge saying it will kill the very essence of the tournament.

India's top player Yuki Bhambhani differed from his captain and said having a World Cup was not a bad idea.

"If it is a World Cup then yes, doing away with home and away format, is okay," Yuki, a key member of Indian team, said.

"Everyone has opinion. Some say it might benefit some say it won't. I think a lot more ATP points need to be added and it always helps to increase the prize money. Another idea could be to have Davis Cup every two or three years. Right now a country wins in November and is back in February to play the first

round again," Yuki made his point.

Former national champion Ashutosh Singh, also a former member of Indian Davis Cup squad, though was not supportive of the changes.

"On one hand, ITF president David Haggerty says we want to popularise the sport and expand it further, bring in more numbers but on the other hand, he proposes to take away the viewership and hosting possibilities from a majority of nations, in effect limiting its outreach. It will be death of Davis Cup."

"I don't understand why the ITF wants to compete with ATP in every aspect? ITF has a much bigger role and an even bigger responsibility than ATP in maintaining the essence of sport."

The International Olympic Committee counts ITF as a stakeholder and not

ATP. So, the current president wants to go opposite to what the Olympic charter says," he asked. He further said the money should not be a factor in every decision.

"If money is what makes you happy, you'll never be happy, as money is just numbers and numbers never end. But hopes, dreams, aspirations do crash at some point if one sees the ways blocked in front of him."

Singh also criticised the move to limit the number of ranked players on ATP to only 750. "ITF will need to co-operate with ATP and WTA at some levels since these three bodies are responsible for governing and running the sport but if you've only 750 ranked players, the relegation and qualifying ties at zonal levels will have only amateur players representing the countries," he feared. (PTI)

Fit-again Jayaram, Sourabh eye good run at NZ Open

AUCKLAND, APRIL 30/- After recovering from their respective injuries, Indian shuttlers Ajay Jayaram and Sourabh Verma will look to regain fitness and momentum when they compete at the USD 150,000 New Zealand Super 300 tournament starting here tomorrow.

Jayaram, who returned to action at the China Masters early this month after recovering from a hamstring injury that took nearly eight months to open his campaign against fourth seed Hsu Jen Hao from Chinese Taipei.

"It's been very long recovery process for me. I played in China but it didn't go well. But my leg seemed fine. Last two weeks training has gone better. So, hopefully these two tournaments would turn out better for me," Jayaram, who was world no. 15 in July last year, told PTI.

"I am trying not to expect too much and just enjoy the game. I've been in this situation before and know that it's important to give yourself time to get back to form."

Sourabh, who had suffered an ankle injury after Swiss Open, will make a comeback at the event taking on Australia's Abhinav Manota in the opening round.

"After Swiss open, I got injured while training in India. It was an ankle injury. I had to miss Orleans and Finland (events) last month. But again I'm going to play. So let's see how it goes," he said.

Singapore Open champion B Sai Praneeth, who had lost to Olympic champion Chen Long in the second round of Asia Championship last week, will face Israel's Misha Ziberman, while former national champion Sameer Verma will square up against Indonesian Sony Dwi Kuncoro in another men's singles match.

Young sensation Lakshya Sen will fight it out with Malaysian June Wei Cheam in the opening round, Subhankar Dey takes on Indonesia's Tommy Sugiarto, seeded sixth, while Karan Rajan Rajarajan seeds eighth seed against Thailand's K a n a t a p h o n Wancharoen.

In women's singles, Vaishnavi Reddy Jakka will lock horns with Australia's Hsuan-Yu Wendy Chen, while former national champion Rituparna Das will cross swords with Japan's Natsumi Naidara, seeded 8th.

Sai Uttetjitha Rao Chukka and Sri Krishna Priya Kudravalli will face qualifiers in their opening round.

In men's doubles, fifth seeds Manu Attri and B Sumeth Reddy, young Arjun MR and Ramechandra Shlok will be in action.

Also in the fray would be eighth seeds Francis Alwin and K Nandagopal, who had lost to Rohan Kapoor and Shivam Sharma.

Fast-rising women's doubles pair of Meghana Jakkam and S Ram Poorvisha and mixed doubles pair of Rohan Kapoor and Kuhoo Garg will also be in the competition.

Experienced mixed doubles pair of Pranaav Jerry Chopra and N Sikki Reddy will take on Indonesian combo of Hui Naitai and Gloria Emanuelle Widjaja. (PTI)

Struggling MI and RCB eye for survival

BENGALURU, APRIL 30/- Struggling sides Mumbai Indians and Royal Challengers Bangalore will have a fight for survival when they lock horns in an Indian Premier League here tomorrow.

Having beaten Chennai Super Kings in their adopted home ground in Pune, MI will go out with their tails up with confidence to take on a strong batting line-up of RCB, which has the likes of Virat Kohli and Brendon McCullum. On the other hand, the heartbreaking back-to-back defeats at the hands of CSK and Kolkata Knight Riders in their backyard would have devastated the team's confidence, but RCB will have to play out their skins to stay in the competition. It has been an almost identical journey for both teams so far. Mumbai and Dinesh Karthik-led KKR have managed just two wins in seven matches each, but the visitors are ahead at sixth place due to better net run rate. Whichever team that loses tomorrow will find it more difficult to get a shot at play-offs berth.

Mumbai would like to take a cue from their last encounter against RCB, which they had won by 46 runs at the Wankhede Stadium with Rohit Sharma and Evin Lewis hitting 94 and 65 respectively. Barring Suryakumar Yadav, who has 274 runs under his belt in seven matches as an opener, most of the Mumbai batsmen have been inconsistent. Captain Rohit, who has failed to get past 20 runs in five games, will try to play yet another impactful innings tomorrow.

The team would like Rohit, who has scored 196 runs in seven matches, to bat either one-down as he did in the last game or open the innings to give the much needed time for him to settle down at the crease. Pandya brothers - Hardik and Krunal - who have been good in their bowling would like to get a big knock with the bat as they have managed to score just 61 and 113 runs in even-odd matches they have played. JP Dumminy, who came in for Kieron Pollard in the last game, would be itching to be in the thick of things. The South African did not bat in the last match as Mumbai crossed the winning

mark with his services. Mumbai also have been struggling with the ball as they have failed to prosper as a unit. Young Mayank Markande has been a revelation for them and has bagged 10 wickets from seven games with his leg-spin.

Death-over specialist Jasprit Bumrah and Mustafizur Rahman have bagged seven and six wickets respectively so far, and if Mumbai want to restrict the likes of Kohli and McCullum, they will have to play their role to perfection.

On the other hand, RCB are struggling at seventh position after two wins and five defeats. RCB would be praying for the return of AB de Villiers, who did not play the last game due to fever. The South African star has been in prime form this season, smashing 68 off 30 balls against CSK and singlehandedly defeating Delhi Daredevils with his unbeaten 88-ball 90.

Kohli would be keen to produce another special knock in this crunch situation, especially after getting two unbeaten knocks of 92 and 69 against Mumbai and KKR, respectively.

Opener Quinton De Kock, who has scored 194 runs so far, would like to carry on with his good performance.

The Teams (From): Mumbai Indians: Rohit Sharma (Captain), Jasprit Bumrah, Hardik Pandya, Kieron Pollard, Mustafizur Rahman, Adam Milne, Suryakumar Yadav, Krunal Pandya, Ishan Kishan, Rahul Chahar, Evin Lewis, Saurabh Tiwary, Ben Cutting, Pradeep Sangwan, JP Dumminy, Tsjinder Singh, Sharad Lumba, Siddhesh Lad, Aditya Tare, Mayank Markande, Akila Dhanajaya, Anukul Roy, Mohsin Khan, MD Nidheesh and Mitchell McClean. Royal Challengers Bangalore: Virat Kohli (Captain), Quinton de Kock, Brendon McCullum, AB de Villiers, Sarfaraz Khan, Mandeep Singh, Chris Woakes, Washington Sundar, Umesh Yadav, Yuzvendra Chahal, Colin de Grandhomme, Moeen Ali, Pawan Negi, Mohammed Siraj, Corey Anderson, Parthiv Patel, Tim Southee. (PTI)



A general view shows an interior of a railway station in the city of Nizhny Novgorod, Russia April 29, 2018. Picture taken April—REUTERS

Jose Mourinho unsure over Romelu Lukaku's fitness for FA Cup final

MANCHESTER, APRIL 30/- Manchester United's top scorer Romelu Lukaku limped out of Sunday's 2-1 Premier League win over Arsenal at Old Trafford and his manager Jose Mourinho is not sure if he will be fit for the FA Cup final.

Lukaku, who has netted 27 goals in all competitions this season, was replaced in the 50th minute by Marcus Rashford and United face Lukaku's old club Chelsea in the final at Wembley on

May 19. "I don't know if he is going to be out or if he's not okay," Mourinho told reporters.

"He is never tired and when he has small things, he doesn't care.

He still wants to go. So, for him to say immediately to change him, it is because he couldn't play but there are three more weeks until the final, so let's see. I know it was on his foot but I don't know more yet," Mourinho said.

"I don't think it's something, or I hope it's not, that in this moment keeps him immediately out of a game that is in three weeks time. But I don't know. I never, when I finish a game and a player is injured, immediately go for good or bad news. I wait a bit more," he added.

Longer term, Mourinho said the club was close to agreeing a new contract with Lukaku's compatriot

Marouane Fellaini, who headed in the stoppage-time winner against Arsenal. "I want him to stay, the club wants him to stay. I think he will stay, it is nearly there," he said.

"The position is that we are almost there but in football almost is not enough. I want to see the white paper with the United's crest and Ed Woodward's signature and Marouane Fellaini's signature," he said.

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Simona Halep maintains top spot in WTA rankings

MADRID, APRIL 30/- Romania's Simona Halep continued to lead the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) singles rankings released on Monday despite exiting the Stuttgart Open in the quarter-finals. Although Karolina Pliskova of the Czech Republic clinched the Stuttgart Open title on Sunday after defeating the United States' wildcard Coco Vandeweghe 7-6 (7-2), 6-4, her ranking has not changed from the sixth place, reports Efe.

This week's ranking list brought no changes in the top 10, as Denmark's Caroline Wozniacki comes one spot ahead of Halep, while Spain's Garbine Muguruza followed in the third place.

The current WTA rankings and point scores are as follows:

1. Simona Halep (Romania) 8,055
2. Caroline Wozniacki (Denmark) 6,790
3. Garbine Muguruza (Spain) 6,065
4. Elina Svitolina (Ukraine) 5,450
5. Jelena Ostapenko (Latvia) 5,382
6. Karolina Pliskova (Czech Republic) 5,100
7. Caroline Garcia (France) 4,700
8. Venus Williams (US) 4,276
9. Sloane Stephens (US) 3,939
10. Petra Kvitova (Czech Republic) 3,271.



Table Tennis - World Team Table Tennis Championships - Group A - Germany v Romania - Halmsstad Arena - Halmsstad, Sweden - April 30, 2018. Patrick Franziska of Germany celebrates his win over Hunor Szocs of Romania—REUTERS

Barcelona clinch La Liga title in style

*Lionel Messi treble downs Deportivo

CORUNA, APRIL 30/- Lionel Messi scored a hat-trick as Barcelona clinched a 25th Liga title on Sunday after winning 4-2 at Deportivo La Coruna despite throwing away a two-goal lead in a thrilling game which also confirmed Depor's relegation.

Barca only needed a draw to seal the title and they made a perfect start when recon signing Philippe Coutinho scored with a stylish chipped shot in the seventh minute while Messi doubled their lead in the 38th by volleying home an outrageous cross by Luis Suarez.

Deportivo had been unlucky to go two goals down and they deservedly pulled one back through Lucas Perez five minutes before halftime before Turkish midfielder Emre Colak equalised in the 68th. Clases Sedoroff's side needed victory to survive in the top flight for another week and they came close to finding a third goal and becoming the first team to beat Barca in the league this



King's Cup final last week. "When you have been chasing the title for so long you feel a lot of happiness at winning it at last but as well as that we feel satisfied," Barca coach Ernesto Valverde told reporters. "The season is very long, it starts in August and here we are after everything that has happened. The title is not decided by a couple of games but by many, we have been chasing it since the start and we have been top of the table since the start. "We have won it with a very big margin and in the end we were the best in the

league." Valverde's unbeaten side have 86 points after 34 games, second-placed Atletico have 75 from 35 and third-placed Real Madrid 71 from 35. Deportivo are 18th on 28th, 12 points adrift of 17th-placed Levante with three games left. While Deportivo's players and supporters mourned their return to Spain's second tier for the first time since 2014, Barcelona's squad formed a human chain and danced around the centre circle. "This double takes glorious," midfielder Sergio Busquets said. "Winning seven league titles out of the last 10 is outrageous and just look at how we did it this year, with four games remaining. We have had an almost perfect Liga campaign," Busquets added. "We haven't lost all season and we have won the league by having a very good start, which gave us a lot of confidence and then after beating Atletico Madrid (in March) we continued to perform at a very high level."