

Sports

Photo of the day



TEAHUPOO: Arthur Arutkin windsurfs in Teahupoo, Tahiti, French Polynesia. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Door still open for Sunwolves: Rugby Australia

SYDNEY: The door was not quite closed on Japan's Sunwolves joining an Australian domestic competition involving Super Rugby teams, while negotiations for a new broadcast agreement had been "fruitful", Rugby Australia (RA) said yesterday.

Super Rugby was postponed after seven weeks in mid-March as governments imposed travel bans due to the novel coronavirus, and Australia have announced plans for a domestic competition starting in July that could include the Sunwolves.

"We are still in discussion with the Sunwolves and the Australian government on that," RA interim chief executive Rob Clarke told reporters on a conference call when asked if the Japan based side had been ruled out of the competition.

"It's not a quick process," Sunwolves, who have already said they are eager to participate in the competition, said in a statement yesterday that negotiations between RA and the Australian government are currently going on about the team being allowed to take part. The competition is something of a stop-gap measure to help RA through a financial crisis that has been exacerbated by the shutdown caused by the pandemic. The organisation is also yet to secure a new broadcasting agreement from next year, but Clarke said that was his top priority and he had been in active discussions about a new contract with current broadcaster Fox Sports.

"Those discussions will continue next week," he said. "I'm confident we will get some clarity fairly soon (especially) given we are trying to kick off a domestic Super Rugby competition."

"Time is of the essence and those conversations are well advanced," Clarke added that RA was "open minded" about talks that southern hemisphere rugby body SANZAAR and the Six Nations organisers have entered into about potential realignment of the global calendar. "We should be open minded to any solution that potentially brings in better commercial outcomes as long as it doesn't compromise the high performance outcomes of the Wallabies," he said. —Reuters

NASCAR back on track as F1 and IndyCar stuck in virtual world

Coca Cola 600 set for this weekend at Charlotte Motor Speedway

NEW YORK: NASCAR will have a clear run this Sunday on what would normally be motor racing's most glamorous and busiest day, with Formula One and IndyCar remain stuck in the virtual world.

While the Formula One and IndyCar seasons remain stalled by the novel coronavirus outbreak, NASCAR returned to live racing last Sunday and has its foot on the gas.

The popular North American stockcar series has staged two Cup races and an Xfinity series race over a five-day stretch and is looking ahead to one of its biggest events — the Coca Cola 600 set for this weekend at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

The US Memorial Day holiday weekend usually provides a glorious high-octane feast for motor racing fans, with Formula One, IndyCar and NASCAR staging signature events on the Sunday. It begins with the Monaco Grand Prix, which is followed by the Indianapolis 500 and concludes with the Coca Cola 600, NASCAR's longest race of the season. But this Sunday NASCAR has the spotlight to itself, running the 600 mile race in prime time with no competition other than a virtual Monaco Grand Prix and an esport race on the Indianapolis Motor Speedway's famed 2.5 mile oval featuring seven former 500 winners, including 80-year-old Mario Andretti.

In fact, NASCAR will just about be the only show

in town, with the NBA and NHL, which would in the thick of the playoffs at this point of the season, and MLB all on the sidelines muddling through various return to play scenarios.

INCREDIBLE OPPORTUNITY

"This is an incredible opportunity for NASCAR to have an exclusive foothold on the day," Neal Pilson, former president of CBS Sports and now head of Pilson Communications Inc., told Reuters.

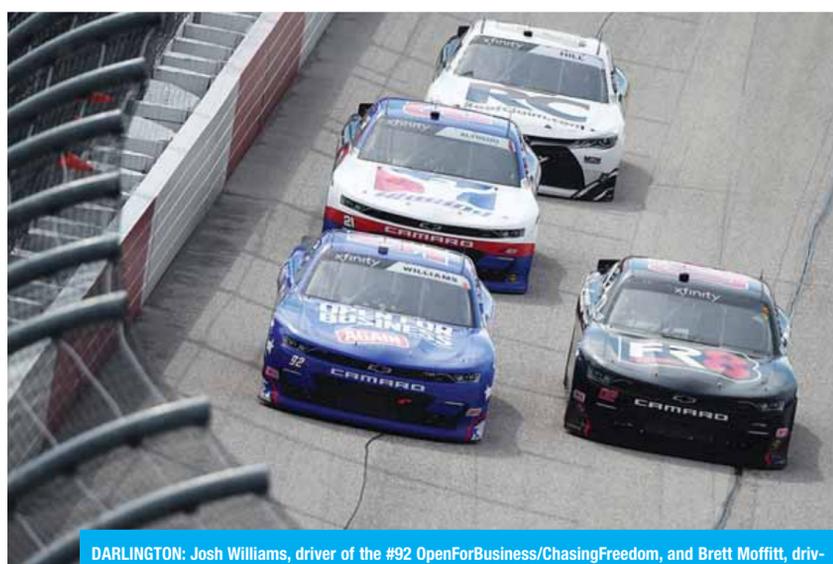
"On a day that usually has baseball, the NBA post-season and NHL Stanley Cup playoffs and golf they have the weekend pretty much to themselves." Aside from forlorn scenes of races run against the backdrop of sprawling empty grandstands, NASCAR's return has been well received by sports-starved fans, who for near-

ly two months had survived on virtual action and reruns of historic contests.

The return race last Sunday at Darlington Raceway pulled in 6.5 million viewers, making it the most watched non-Daytona 500 NASCAR Cup race since Atlanta on March 5 2017.

After years of declining ratings and the retirement of many of the stockcar's biggest names, NASCAR has been handed a huge opportunity to reacquire the series to the casual fan and turn around television ratings that for years had been in decline.

Only show in town



DARLINGTON: Josh Williams, driver of the #92 OpenForBusiness/ChasingFreedom, and Brett Moffitt, driver of the #02 FR8Auctions Chevrolet, race during the NASCAR Xfinity Series Toyota 200 at Darlington Raceway on May 21, 2020 in Darlington, South Carolina. —AFP

"The ratings were quite good and I expect they will be again this weekend," said Pilson. "NASCAR ratings last year were up from prior years, they turned a corner and had an improved television per-

formance over past years.

"There was a long period of time where they could not match previous numbers. Now it's all positive." —Reuters

WTA pros take the court in Florida mini-tournament

MIAMI: Americans Alison Riske and Danielle Collins and Aussie Ajla Tomljanovic were among the winners Friday on the opening day of a women's tennis mini-tournament in Florida that offered pros a chance to play amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The WTA women's tennis tour cancelled four more events this week and won't resume until at least July 20.

But four women ranked in the top 60 in the world turned out for the UTR Pro Match Series event in Palm Beach, which followed a similar event for men two weeks ago.

World number 51 Collins topped 28th-ranked compatriot Amanda Anisimova in the opening match 4-1, 4-2 and said she was "grateful" to be back on court even with no fans in attendance.

"I'm familiar with playing without fans but I definitely miss it," she said. "One of the things that makes it so special to be a professional athlete is having people supporting you."

Tomljanovic, ranked 56th, defeated 19th-ranked Riske 4-3, 4-1 and in the final round-robin match of the day Riske beat Anisimova 0-4, 4-0, 4-3. The tournament concludes Saturday

with more round-robin matches, a third-place and a championship match.

All are played in a shortened format in which the first player to four games with a two-game lead pockets a set. "Just getting into the competitive spirit again was kind of got me really excited today," said Tomljanovic.

She said her first few weeks off had been a welcome break, but when she felt the need to return to training it was difficult to find motivation with no tournaments scheduled. "I need that competition to keep me going," she said.

Health protocols are in place to protect players from the threat of coronavirus. Players had their temperatures taken upon arrival at the venue and carried their own equipment and towels onto the court.

With social distancing in place, a racquet tap had to suffice for a handshake, and the umpire wore a mask. Each player had her own set of marked balls and collected them herself, with no ballkids in attendance.

While some areas of the United States remain under strict lockdowns, Florida has begun to open up and state officials have specifically welcomed the return of sports without spectators.

The Ultimate Fighting Championship mixed martial arts outfit returned to competition in Florida in May and Tiger Woods will tee it up on Sunday with Phil Mickelson and NFL stars Tom Brady and Peyton Manning in a made-for-tv charity golf event in Hobe Sound, Florida. —AFP

Polish sprinter Irena named as the greatest female athlete of all time

LONDON: To those with only a passing knowledge of athletics it might have come as something of a surprise last month when America's Track and Field News magazine named Polish sprinter Irena Szewinska as the greatest female athlete of all time.

However, in her homeland, and to those who followed the sport in the 1960s and 70s, it was an entirely natural recognition of a woman whose range and longevity made her stand out in a crowded field and who went on to become a respected administrator before dying from cancer in 2018 at the age of 72.

She is Poland's most decorated Olympian and her list of achievements is nothing short of astonishing, starting at the 1964 Olympics when she won silver medals in the 200 metres and long jump and a glorious gold in the sprint relay. She also scooped

up 10 world records over 16 years at the top.

Szewinska took gold in the 200m four years later, as well as bronze in the 100m - though the Games ended on a personal low as she dropped the baton the 4x100m relay.

Giving birth to the first of two sons and an ankle injury stopped her from training for a year, but she recovered for the Munich Olympics in 1972, where she won bronze from the European championships to her name.

Four years later in Montreal she decided to skip 100m and 200m and focus on the 400m, having become the first woman to break 50seconds in 1974. In the final Szewinska won by a street in a world record 49.28 seconds - a time that would have been good enough for gold in almost every Olympics since.

"The combination of winning the Olympic gold medal and

breaking the world record is exactly what everyone dreams about and what I managed to achieve," she told a Polish TV documentary decades later.

Her fifth Games was something of an anti-climax as Szewinska suffered a muscle strain during the semi-final of the 400m in Moscow. She retired soon after with seven Olympic medals and a mountain of gold, silver and bronze from the European championships to her name.

She was later active in several sports organizations, including the Polish Olympic Committee and International Olympic Committee, to which she was appointed in 1998.

"Sport was a great adventure of my life, when I was an athlete and my fate was that I am still connected with sport. I am passionate about it, this is my hobby," she said. —Reuters