

SPORTS

NBC says 2.35 million viewers for live golf's return to TV

US Open no longer 'open', eliminates qualifying for major

NEW YORK, May 19, (AP) — The U.S. Open might feel more like a closed shop this year.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which already has postponed the U.S. Open at Winged Foot from June to September, has forced the USGA to do away with qualifying for the first time since 1924.

Open qualifying is the hallmark of golf's second-oldest championship. The USGA often points out that typically half of the 156-man field has to go through either 36-hole qualifying or 18-hole and 36-hole qualifying.

It even invested in a marketing campaign that was rolled out in February titled, "From Many, One," to illustrate that more than 9,000 people apply to play in the U.S. Open, eventually yielding to one winner.

The USGA did not announce Monday how other players would become exempt.

Among those who have yet to qualify is Phil Mickelson, a runner-up six times in the only major he hasn't won.

Mickelson said in February he would not ask the USGA for an exemption, and that if he didn't qualify or become exempt, he wouldn't play. Winged Foot is where Mickelson made double bogey on the

final hole in 2006 to lose by one. The field presumably will be smaller because of the later date, though the USGA did not mention the field size in its April 6 announcement that the U.S. Open was moving to Sept. 17-20 at Winged Foot, in Mamaroneck, New York.

"As you can imagine, this was an incredibly difficult decision, as qualifying is a cornerstone of USGA championships," said John Bodenhamer, senior managing director of championships for the USGA. "We take great pride in the fact that many thousands typically enter to pursue their dream of qualifying for the U.S. Open and we deeply regret that they will not have that opportunity this year."

Bodenhamer said no qualifying provides "the best path forward" to holding the U.S. Open.

The USGA said there would not be qualifying for three other championships it will hold this year - the U.S. Women's Open (moved to December in Houston) and the U.S. Amateur and U.S. Women's Amateur, both still scheduled for August.

The U.S. Open, which dates to 1895, had so many players wanting to compete in the years after World

GOLF

War I that it introduced qualifying in 1924. Then, it went to two stages of qualifying in 1959 - 18-hole local qualifying and 36-hole sectional qualifying.

Ken Venturi in 1964 and Orville Moody in 1969 are the only U.S. Open champions who got through both stages. Lucas Glover in 2009 was the last U.S. Open champion to go through 36-hole qualifying.

The USGA had 108 local qualifiers planned in 45 states and one in Canada, followed by 12 sectional qualifiers - nine in the U.S., one each in Canada, England and Japan.

When the U.S. Open was postponed, 50 players were exempt through various categories, such as past champions the last 10 years or top 10 from last year's U.S. Open, major champions from the last five years and the top 30 players who reached the Tour Championship last year.

The pandemic shut down golf on March 13, two months before the top 60 in the world ranking would have been exempt for the U.S. Open. The world ranking has been frozen since the shutdown. It was unclear when it would resume because while the PGA Tour is to resume on June 11, circuits in Europe, Japan and Asia have not said when they would return.

The USGA, meanwhile, has lost 10 championships to the coronavirus. It said Monday that four more were canceled - the U.S. Mid-Amateur and Women's Mid-Amateur, and the U.S. Senior Amateur and U.S. Senior Women's Amateur.

Meanwhile, the return of live golf to television brought 2.35 million viewers across all platforms, which NBC Sports says was 16% higher than the final of the Dell Match Play last year.

The TaylorMade Driving Relief on Sunday from Seminole Golf Club was shown from 2 p.m. to just after 6:30 p.m. on NBC, Golf Channel, NBCSN, along with NBC Sports and PGA Tour streaming outlets.

Rory McIlroy won a closest-to-the-pin playoff worth six skins valued at \$1.1 million as he and Dustin Johnson defeated Rickie Fowler and Matthew Wolff. More than \$5.5 million was raised for COVID-19 relief funds, with more donations being accepted through Tuesday.

NBC used the Match Play as a comparison because only four players were on the course in both formats. Kevin Kisner beat Matt Kuchar in the Match Play last year that had a total audience delivery of 2.03 million.

The Seminole exhibition was up against the official return of NASCAR. The Match Play last year on March 31, however, was part of a TV lineup filled with sports, including NCAA basketball tournament, Major League Baseball and a NASCAR race.

NBC says the Skins game at Seminole was roughly the same as viewership for network coverage of the PGA Tour in the second quarter of 2019.



Celtic soccer team fans celebrate outside Celtic Park in Glasgow, Scotland after Celtic were crowned champions of the Scottish Premiership, on May 18. (AP)

Celtic crowned champions again after 'Scottish league' called off

Final season placings determined by average points per game

GLASGOW, Scotland, May 19, (AP) — Celtic won its ninth straight Scottish title on Monday after the country's top soccer league was cut short because there was no immediate prospect of play restarting amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Scotland joined France, the Netherlands and Belgium in calling off the season early, with Scottish soccer at all levels suspended until June 10 at the earliest. There have been no games in the Scottish league since March 13.

Celtic dedicated the club's latest league title - its 51st, only three behind the national record held by Glasgow rival Rangers - to "key workers who are saving lives, cleaning hospitals, stacking shelves and shielding loved ones at home."

"DO NOT come to Celtic Park," Celtic urged fans, with Scotland still under strict lockdown restrictions during the pandemic.

Final season placings were determined by average points per game, which left Celtic with 2.66 after collecting 80 points from 30 games. Rangers finished second with 2.31 points per game.

The only change to the standings under the points-per-game scenario saw St. Johnstone jump above Hibernian into sixth place.

Last-place Hearts was relegated but the Edinburgh club, which had been one of the teams opposing the controversial decision to allow the season to finish early, said it will "continue to fight against what we believe is an unjust outcome."

SOCCER

"We have stated from the outset that we don't believe it is right that any club should be unfairly penalized because of the COVID-19 pandemic," Hearts said. "Legal action would be both time-consuming and expensive. However, the cost to the club of relegation would outweigh these considerations."

The Scottish Professional Football League said clubs in the top division expressed a unanimous view on Friday that there is no prospect of completing the remaining matches.

Confirmation that the season was curtailed by the SPFL came Monday.

"This is not the way anybody involved with Scottish football would have wanted to conclude the league season but, given the grave and unprecedented circumstances that we are facing, the board has agreed that it is the only practical way forward," SPFL chairman Murdoch MacLennan said.

"COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on sporting competitions around the world and the repercussions will be felt for a long time." Along with the government restrictions, MacLennan said "deep concerns for both player and spectator safety" were behind the decision to cut the season short.

The SPFL will now pay out \$8.5 million in fees "to help clubs stay afloat," chief executive Neil Doncaster said, adding that the next league season is due to start on Aug. 1.

"Nobody should be under any illusion," MacLennan said, "as to how complicated and difficult a challenge it will be to return Scottish football to normality."

Babar hopes T20 WCup goes ahead even without spectators

BCCI to wait further before organizing training camps

NEW DELHI, May 19, (AP) — The Board of Control for Cricket in India says it will "wait further" to organize training camp for its contracted players despite the government relaxing restrictions on sporting events, allowing them to resume without fans.

The Indian Premier League - the BCCI's marquee event -- was postponed last month due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Twenty20 tournament will only take place this year once travel restrictions are eased and the cricket board can find a suitable window for it in the schedule.

"Taking into account the restrictions on air travel and movement of people till May 31, the BCCI will wait further before organizing a skill-based training camp for its contracted players," cricket board treasurer Arun Dhumal said in a statement.

"The board reiterates that the safety and well-being of its athletes and support staff is paramount and will not rush into any decision that can hamper or jeopardize India's efforts in containing the spread of the virus."

Maharashtra and Karnataka are among several prominent states in India in complete lockdown. Cricket activities have been stopped around the coun-

CRICKET

try, but the BCCI wanted to try organizing training camps at local levels.

The Indian government extended the lockdown for two weeks on Sunday but said that sports complexes and stadiums will be permitted to open without spectators.

The Ministry of Home Affairs said all large gatherings will continue to remain prohibited, as will air travel "except for domestic medical services, domestic air ambulance and for security purposes or purposes as permitted by MHA."

Also:

ISLAMABAD: When cricket resumes, no team will be better prepared for playing in front of empty stands than Pakistan.

Pakistan did it for more than 10 years until last year.

The United Arab Emirates became Pakistan's home away from home after the 2009 terrorist attack against the Sri Lanka team convoy in Lahore. No teams were willing to go to Pakistan to play a test until Sri Lanka last year in Rawalpindi.

"It's ironic that we played our home cricket in front of almost empty stadiums for 10 years and now the world is heading in that direction," Pakistan limited-overs captain Babar Azam said on Monday in a video news conference. "No team knows what it feels like playing in front of empty stands more than Pakistan."



In this, March 5, 2020, file photo, Peshawar Zalmi pacer Hasan Ali, center, celebrates after taking the wicket of Quetta Gladiators batsman Shane Watson, left, during a Pakistan Super League T20 cricket match, in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. (AP)

Definitely not giving up on the season: LeBron

LOS ANGELES, May 19, (AP) — LeBron James reiterated Monday that he is hopeful the NBA season can resume, with the caveat that the health and well-being of players won't be jeopardized by a return to play.

The Los Angeles Lakers star, speaking on the Uninterrupted platform's "WRTS: After Party" show that was released Monday, said it remains his wish that the season comes back "soon-

idea (about). We can't control it," James added.

James was among a group of some of the league's highest-paid players, National Basketball Players Association president Chris Paul of the Oklahoma City Thunder also part of the group, who met last week to talk about the season. Those players affirmed to one another on that call that they would like to see the season resume.

N B A Commissioner Adam Silver told players' union members on May 8 that he was hoping to make some sort of decision about the future of the season within no more than a four-week window. By that timeframe - barring any adjustments based on what's happening with the pandemic - Silver and the NBA would be hoping to decide upon some course of action by June 5.

That said, there has been no defini-

tion members on May 8 that he was hoping to make some sort of decision about the future of the season within no more than a four-week window. By that timeframe - barring any adjustments based on what's happening with the pandemic - Silver and the NBA would be hoping to decide upon some course of action by June 5.

That said, there has been no defini-



James