

SPORTS

CONCACAF hexagonal becomes octagonal

US, Mexico, Costa Rica, Jamaica and Honduras receive byes

NEW YORK, July 28, (AP): CONCACAF is changing its World Cup qualifying hexagonal to an octagonal in response to the coronavirus pandemic and delaying the start until next June.

The United States, Mexico, Costa Rica, Jamaica and Honduras received byes directly to the octagonal, the Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football announced Monday.



Montagliani

CONCACAF's other 30 nations will compete for three additional spots in the final round. The octagonal will take place with

four games per team in next June's double FIFA international match window followed by two apiece in September, October and November 2021, and two

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each in January and March 2022.

By staying with a large total of teams in the final round, CONCACAF ensured two high-profile, lucrative qualifiers between the US and Mexico. The format also provides margin for slip-ups, though there were not enough to prevent the US from missing the 2018 World Cup in Russia when it lost to Mexico and Costa Rica at home and at Trinidad and Tobago on the final night.

"It's good that we have clarity regarding the format and scheduling, which allows us to chart the course ahead," US coach Gregg Berhalter said in a statement. "We are looking forward to the challenge that this new World Cup qualifying format will present."

The hexagonal was to have started this September and be based on the June FIFA rankings, in which El Salvador was just ahead of Canada as the region's sixth team. Teams not in the hexagonal would have competed to face the fourth-place team in the hex for the right to represent CONCACAF in an intercontinental playoff. Hugo Carrillo, president of the Salvadoran federation, sent a letter to CONCACAF President Victor Montagliani stating "total and complete disapproval and disagreement" of the decision, and asked for reconsideration to keeping the old format.

FIFA removed the September 2020 window for international matches because of the pandemic. If the October and November 2020 windows take place, the US could have exhibitions in Europe.

Under the new format, nations currently ranked 6-35 will be drawn into six groups of five in a seeded draw next month, with El Salvador, Canada, Curaçao, Panama, Haiti, and Trinidad and Tobago seeded. Each group will compete in a single round robin of four matches per nation this October and November.

Group winners will advance to a home-and-home, total-goals second round next March, and the second-round winners will advance to the octagonal.

The top three teams in the octagonal qualify for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, and the fourth-place nation advances to an intercontinental playoff in June 2022. The first CONCACAF Nations League semifinals and final will be rescheduled for a US site next March. The US play Honduras, and Mexico meet Costa Rica in the semis, which originally were to have been played on June 4 in Houston. The final was to have been on June 7 in Arlington, Texas.

The 2021 CONCACAF Gold Cup will take place from July 10 to Aug 1 next year. The Gold Cup likely will be missing many top players, who will be taking time off and then reporting to clubs ahead of the 2021-22 European club seasons. The tournament originally was scheduled for next July 2-25.

CONCACAF will work to create a Gold Cup preliminary round in the US ahead of the tournament involving Bahamas, Barbados, Bermuda, Cuba, French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Montserrat, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.



Juventus' Cristiano Ronaldo attempts to head the ball at the goal during the Serie A soccer match between Juventus and Sampdoria at the Allianz stadium in Turin, Italy, July 26. (AP)

The idea is right: Van Gundy

Restart likely to 'provide' TV audience new sights, sounds

WASHINGTON, July 28, (AP): During a normal NBA season, the sights and sounds of arenas serve as both a showy backdrop and home court advantage for its teams.

But with no fans allowed in the stands for the upcoming restart because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the league's Orlando-area bubble restart will have a decidedly different feel for both players and coaches, as well as the television audience watching from afar.

The NBA has promised to do its best to bring some of the familiar noises and environment that players are used to playing in and fans have grown accustomed to seeing when the curtain officially drops on Thursday night.

Count former NBA coach Stan Van Gundy, who will serve as an analyst for one of TNT's broadcasts on opening night, among those curious to see how players will be affected by the atypical setup and what kind of previously inaudible insights on the court could be available to fans peering in remotely.

"I think the idea is right," Van Gundy said. "I mean, it's just not what any player or coach is used to."

Visually, the NBA will be taking advantage of the unique setting by trying to bring fans even



In this Feb 24, 2020 file photo, Milwaukee Bucks guard George Hill (3) goes to the basket next to Washington Wizards guard Ish Smith (14) during the first half of an NBA basketball game in Washington. Hill was shooting 48% from 3-point range — well above his career average of 38.5% and light years better than his 2018-19 average of 28% — before the stoppage in play. The 34-year-old guard as well as teammate Donte DiVincenzo could be even bigger factors in the early part of the restart since Bucks teammates Eric Bledsoe and Pat Connaughton have tested positive for coronavirus, though both are now in Florida. (AP)

it can be under the circumstances? And that's what they've attempted to do."

While some on-court interactions will remain muted even with enhanced audio, it certainly won't drown everything out. There's simply no way to account for the lack of the sounds usually created by crowds in NBA arenas that seat anywhere from 18,000 to 20,000.

It could possibly include everything from the occasional curse word getting through to other on-court interactions that teams might want to keep quiet. And the benches could be a factor in providing off-court energy to fill the void created by the lack of fans.

All of it should provide some gifts for players and fans alike, Clippers coach Doc Rivers said.

"I don't think we need scouts right now, because every time a coach makes a call, we're gonna hear it. Every time we make one, they're gonna hear it," he said. "I don't think there will be a lot of secrets, that's for sure. I think players will hear things they've never heard before. Officials, unfortunately, will hear things they've never heard before."

Players know it will be different as well, though some don't expect much of anything beyond good-natured banter — which even referees also join in from time to time.

"Honestly, everybody's so worried about the trash talking," Utah guard Donovan Mitchell said. "There's a lot of just jokes being made on the floor. Obviously, come playoff time that kind of goes out the window."

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closer to the action on the court via a 31-camera setup, the majority of which will be operated robotically.

NBA head of Next Gen telecast Sara Zuckert said the league will be employing an "audio soundscape" that will try to mimic — at least as much as possible — teams' home arenas.

The league began testing some of their new enhancements during scrimmages last week, though they are saving a lot for when games officially count.

"Amplifying microphones in the arena can really lead to an enhanced feel and sound. You'll hear a lot of sneaker squeaks and ball bounces," Zuckert said.

The league has also worked with Microsoft to digitally bring actual fans' faces and voices of fans into broadcasts via their Microsoft Teams platform. These select fans, which will be determined by the home team each game, will be both seen on screens inside the arena and heard on the telecasts.

Van Gundy said accounting for the fan variable is about necessity as much as innovation.

"It's not like (NBA Commissioner) Adam Silver sat down and said, 'Hey, you know, let's do some of these things. They'll be better than having fans at the game.' That's not what happened," Van Gundy said. "It was we can't have fans at our game, how can we make the atmosphere the best

Officials exchanging accusations and clubs demanding justice

Spanish soccer still in turmoil over suspended game

MADRID, July 28, (AP): Chaotic, contentious and comical — the end of the Spanish soccer season hasn't gone smoothly at all.

Officials have been exchanging accusations, clubs have been demanding justice and local authorities are upset.

The turmoil was created by the suspension of a match in the final round of the second division because of the coronavirus. Official statements are being released almost by the minute, with stances apparently being changed by the hour.

"We ask that the second division be expanded to 180 clubs and that we gain promotion, just because," amateur club Racing de La Guía wrote on Twitter on Sunday. "In addition, we also demand a couple of cider boxes per person, and several chorizo-stuffed bread rolls to help us withstand the pressure. (Let's see if it sticks...)"

Everyone was asking for eve-

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rything after officials decided to suspend the July 20 match between Deportivo La Coruña and Fuenlabrada after players and some staff members of Fuenlabrada tested positive for COVID-19.

Most clubs wanted the entire final round to be suspended, but officials postponed only the game affected by the outbreak to avoid the risk of more infections.

Even more complaints and demands were made after the Spanish league decided to cancel the game altogether, saying it would be nearly impossible to wait for all Fuenlabrada players to recover. The team had 28 people infected by the weekend.

Fuenlabrada, fighting for a berth in the promotion playoffs, said in an initial statement that it would accept the officials' decision. That prompted the league to release another statement thanking the club, which later denied that it had agreed with the decision by the league, which eventually said it was the club that offered to cancel the match.

Numancia on Monday used their own official statement to complain about the "unusual succession of statements" released by the league and Fuenlabrada. They expressed their "indignation" with the league's recent decisions and called for an expanded second division next season.

Deportivo, the 2000 Spanish league champions, had already asked for a second division with

Bahrain buys 20% stake in Paris FC

PARIS, July 28, (AP): The country of Bahrain has bought a minority stake of 20% in second-division French club Paris FC with its sovereign wealth fund.

With its new investment, Paris FC hope to achieve promotion to the first division within three seasons and to make the women's team among the best in France.

"The transaction was carried out through an increase in capital shares to strengthen the club's own capital and allowing sovereign funds to own 20 percent," Paris FC said Monday in a statement. "On top of this investment, Bahrain becomes the club's main sponsor with the objective of increasing the country's image."

Explore Bahrain will be the sponsorship name. Paris FC chairman Pierre Ferracci will remain the main shareholder with a 77% stake.

Paris FC finished 17th in the

second division last season and narrowly avoided relegation. The new campaign starts on Aug. 22.

The club's youth academy will also be expanded in a bid to develop more players from the sizeable Paris region, while the French club will help oversee the development of young players in Bahrain.

Paris FC added that they expect further foreign and domestic investment over the coming months.

Veteran coach Jean-Marc Nobilo will run the club's academy. He won the second division with Le Havre and was voted the league's best coach that year. Nobilo also won the French Cup at youth level with Auxerre in 2015.

Bahrain has hosted a Formula One race since 2004 and is a shareholder in the McLaren team.

Qatari investors QSI bought French champions Paris Saint-Germain nine years ago.

more clubs next season, which would allow them to avoid relegation.

Rayo Vallecano were another team releasing a statement on Monday, demanding that they are given a chance to play in the promotion playoffs following the cancellation of the Deportivo-Fuenlabrada match. Fuenlabrada had a chance to make it to the playoffs if the game was played.

The Spanish league had already been at odds with the country's sports council, which accused the league and Fuenlabrada of breaching health and safety protocols. They both denied any wrongdoing — through statements, of course.

The back-and-forth accusations also put Spanish League President Javier Tebas under

scrutiny, with clubs hinting that he might have favored Fuenlabrada because his son works at the Madrid-based club. Other allegations against the league official also surfaced in local media, though none have become formal accusations.

Tebas and Spanish soccer federation president Luis Rubiales, the top soccer officials in Spain, were often at odds until the sports council intervened to call for a peace treaty between them amid the coronavirus pandemic.

It had worked, and soccer in Spain had been at peace for a while. The Spanish league finished successfully with Real Madrid winning the title.

But at the first sign of trouble amid the pandemic, it was all back to the Spanish chaos from before.



Manchester City's Raheem Sterling scores his side's third goal during the English Premier League soccer match between Manchester City and Norwich City at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, England on July 26. (AP)