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RIGHT TO PLAY

If tipplers can have a field day, why can't sports? This is the question sports training centres are asking the state government as they stare at an uncertain future following the lockdown.

Fearful and anxious, the training centres, which cater to a clientele of over a million in the city, feel it is high time the government allowed them to function again. The coronavirus pandemic, which forced them to shut shop on March 15, has already spelt the doom for some of them, while a few others are struggling to make ends meet.

Salaries, land and property rentals, maintenance, EMIs on the hefty investment made on infrastructure have burned a deep hole in the centres' pockets. With a major share of their revenue coming during the summer vacation, these centres are left with nothing to look forward to in the latter part of the year.

"Karnataka has around 1,500 sports training centres,

COVID-19 CRISIS

with Bengaluru alone accounting for around 650-700. Contrary to the popular notion that we back recreational sports, the centres are primarily used to promote health, fitness and train elite athletes. It is difficult to understand how the government can ignore our claims," sources told TOI.

The centres have only echoed what elite athletes around the country have demanded in the past few days: a chance to restart training. But their fears have doubled with reports doing the rounds that resumption of their activities may be put off until August, when schools and colleges are likely to reopen. What has baffled them further was the sale of liquor that began on Monday with little control over the milling crowds.

"We understand the pressure the government was under in the initial days. But images of long queues for liquor and total disregard for social distancing norms at

Owners Of Training Centres Urge Government To Allow Sports Facilities To Resume Activities In The State



these outlets in the last few days made us wonder why our appeals are being ignored. We cater to people between 10 to 35-40 years of age. We are promoting a healthy practice with the promise that all health norms will be followed. Why aren't we allowed to open our centres?"

Owners of these centres, numbering around 160, plan to make a representation to the government soon.

Explaining the loss suffered in the last two months, the sources said: "Training centres specialise in one or multiple sport, the most popu-

guards to coaches, ours is an industry which employs around 30,000-35,000 people with salaries ranging from Rs 8,000-Rs 40,000. Their livelihood has been badly hit."

The centres said they have methods already in place to ensure that health norms are adhered to. PlayO, the sports community app which is involved in streamlining the centres' daily training and practice schedules, said it can regulate it further to ensure the number of players at each centre is cut in proportion to the facilities available.

"With a registered user-base of around 1.5 million, we can help in streamlining the schedule and educating users on the precautions to be taken to make it a safe environment for playing. For example, bookings for an hour can be reduced to 50 minutes to factor in cleaning and disinfecting the courts," a PlayO official said.

The training centres too have social distancing plans in place for badminton, where games will be played on alternate courts; football fields, where players will mandatorily wear masks and gloves,

and swimming pools amongst others. Hand sanitisers at every entrance and exit, no-contact policy, minimum use of change room and cafeteria are some of the other measures which they plan to implement once they get the go-ahead from the government.

NUMBERS GAME

SPORTS TRAINING CENTRES IN KARNATAKA

1,500

PEOPLE EMPLOYED

35,000

SALARY RANGE

₹8,000

upwards

MONTHLY REVENUE

₹25 cr

GST TO THE GOVERNMENT

₹4.5 cr

(All figures approximate)

TALKING HEADS

"We are all looking forward to some normalcy where our students can come back to train. The return to sport for any individual is important because sport is education. Sport teaches you discipline, integrity and most importantly teaches you how to cope with failure. Through sport we are also building the future leaders of our country and teaching the younger generations the importance of an active lifestyle."

Tarun Sardesai | COACH, TARUN SARDESAI GOLF ACADEMY, ZION HILLS

"It is safe to start playing sport and we should allow competitive athletes to begin training. As sportspeople, they are disciplined and have greater awareness about health and hygiene. Also, in most individual sport, social distancing is maintained."

Anshuman Roy | PLAYER & DIRECTOR SKIES TABLE TENNIS ACADEMY

"It is important for cricketers to be in constant touch with their sport. Allow competitive players to get back to their routine. Also, for academies, the financial losses have been humongous. With business establishments across sectors opening, sport too should be allowed to function. There are jobs and livelihoods at stake."

Irfan Sait | DIRECTOR, KARNATAKA INSTITUTE OF CRICKET

"Competitive athletes have invested a lot of time to get to where they are now and it is only fair that they are allowed to restart training. We are willing to adhere to any guidelines set by the government."

Aravind Bhat | FORMER INTERNATIONAL BADMINTON PLAYER & COACH

"We should get back to sport at the earliest. In an individual sport like tennis, we can maintain social distancing and ensure safety while training. Also, in the current scenario, sport matters more because it builds immunity."

Peter Vijay Kumar | COACH & DIRECTOR, PETER TENNIS ACADEMY



Youth, sport must have been given priority, not liquor

Nihar Ameen

THE past couple of months have been devastating globally. As we continue our battle with the pandemic and look ahead at life post Covid-19, it's baffling that liquor stores are early non-essential businesses to open up. I understand economics is among the driving forces behind that move. But can the government please spare a thought towards youth and health as well? I feel the youth should have been given priority. The government should have thought about what makes people, healthier; thereby improving immunity. Sport is the answer.

Much like the rest of the world, it is devastating times for the sporting fraternity as well, but we have to chart our path back. The sooner the better. It will be foolhardy to say allow everyone into the sporting arenas. But we need to make a start somewhere and that has to be with competitive athletes across age groups. It



is what countries like Italy and Australia are doing.

For example, we have half-a-dozen swimmers with an Olympic qualifying mark, they've already lost precious time and cannot afford to lose anymore. Athletes will take some time to get back into shape before going full throttle with training and practice because they wouldn't have worked out enough. In the case of swimming, you can't replicate in-pool activities on land. I believe most of them will take at least three months to get back to prime competitive shape. In fact, swimming is among the safest sports to get back to right now if we maintain the chlorine level and the social distancing and hygiene norms off it. In an Olympic size

pool, we can have 20 swimmers at a time, which is one swimmer per lane on either side. I interact with my swimmers on video calls regularly and the one thing they always ask me is, "When are we getting back to the pool, sir?" I hope the government has an answer for that question at the earliest.

For those of us who are also entrepreneurs, it has been a nightmare. There has been outflow of money without revenue. We have been paying rents, leases, salaries, manage maintenance expenses and other overheads. But we can't sustain ourselves for long.

Most of us in the swimming fraternity have spent huge sums to keep the pools clean to ensure it is ready when the swimmers return and also, to ensure they didn't turn into health hazards. Stagnant water in pools could have led to water-borne diseases and that's the last thing we wanted.

(Nihar is a national coach, Dronacharya awardee and programme director of Dolphin Aquatics)