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Palermo Open will bear losses to get Tour going again

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MUMBAI (Reuters) - The Palermo Ladies Open will lose money when it gets the WTA Tour going again next month but tournament director Oliviero Palma says they will carry that burden to prove professional tennis can resume safely.

When action on the clay courts of the Sicilian capital gets underway on Aug. 3, it will mark the first time a tennis ball has been hit in anger across the WTA or ATP Tours since they were suspended in early March because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Palma, the chief executive and director of the event, told Reuters he was proud to be in charge of the tournament that will end the five-month shutdown.



FILE PHOTO: Tennis - Australian Open - Semi Final - Melbourne Park, Melbourne, Australia - January 30, 2020 Romania's Simona Halep reacts during her match against Spain's Garbine Muguruza

REUTERS/HANNAH MCKAY/FILE PHOTO

"I honestly feel the responsibility to show the world that you can play tennis, but using all kinds of precautions," he said by email.

The WTA International tournament offers 280 rankings points to the champion, compared to 1,000 for the winner of a Premier level event, and would usually attract only a modest field.

Not this year, however.

"The draw is insane, almost like a Premier," said Palma, with a host of players in the top 20, including two-times Grand Slam champion Simona Halep, set to participate.

"I believe players and the WTA have faith in us, but also in Sicily, a place that, touch wood, we can affirm is COVID-19 free."

Italy was the first European country to be hit hard by the novel coronavirus but the number of daily new infections being reported is a fraction of those seen in late March. Over 3,000 people contracted the virus in Sicily but most have recovered.

Several exhibition events have been staged during the shutdown, including Novak Djokovic's Adria Tour charity event, which was played in front of big crowds in Serbia and Croatia.

Palma said he was "disappointed" with images of players embracing at the net and partying during that event, which was heavily criticized after a lack of health precautions saw Djokovic and several other players tested positive for COVID-19.

In Palermo there would be strict health protocols for players and the number of spectators at the 1,500-seat centre court would be restricted to 350, he added.

"All players and coaches will undergo ... tests before they come, as they arrive and every four days," said Palma, adding there would be a smaller team of ball boys and girls, and linesmen.

Even with a reduced prize pot -- down \$27,500 from last year's \$250,000 -- organisers face a financial shortfall from hosting the tournament.

"The tournament will incur economic losses this year, but we will do an evaluation over 2020 and 2021, hoping to recover the losses next season," said Palma.

“However, we knew we couldn’t lose such an opportunity.”

(Editing by Nick Mulvenney and Peter Rutherford)

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