

COVID-19 and Sports Consumption

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The World Health Organization first published information about Sars-COVID-19 on the 5th of January 2020. It was not until March 11th, 2020, that sport leagues and competitions started responding to the growing crisis by postponing or cancelling play. Moving first, the National Basketball Association (NBA) suspended its 2019-2020 season “until further notice” on March 11th (Zucker, 2021). On March 12th, this was followed by the postponements of Spain’s La Liga, the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) Tour, North America’s National Hockey League (NHL), and the Professional Golfers Association (PGA) Tour – to name but a few. By the end of March 2020, most professional sporting leagues had been temporarily postponed (e.g., The English Premier League (EPL) or cancelled (e.g., Dutch Eredivisie), with some exceptions (Weimar et al., in press). The COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, created a somewhat unique situation for sport fans and spectators because the teams and players with whom they identified were no longer able to produce live content.

League postponements are not new. During World Wars I and II whole sporting leagues were cancelled (Suneson, 2020). In 1972, Major League Baseball (MLB) was postponed for 13 days due to a player strike over pay, and again in 1981 when disputes about free agency led to the cancellation of 718 games (Suneson, 2020). In 2004-2005, the NHL sought to impose a salary cap on players, which led to a fractious negotiation with the NHL Players Association, subsequent disagreements, and – as a result – the loss of an entire season of play (Winfrey & Fort, 2008). In the absence of the NHL, Winfree and Fort found that demand increased for minor and junior league hockey competitions, which featured some NHL players during the lockout. In short, fans satiated their desire to watch ice hockey by consuming other competitions. Yet, the nature of each of these postponements (e.g., player

disputes) meant that once the issues had been resolved with administrators or between conflicting nations sport was able to return normally.

COVID-19 created profound impacts on the production of live sport which, have affected fans because of an inability to watch live sport and, as sport has returned, due to a total or partial reduction of venue capacity due to social distancing and other governmental safety precautions. In this chapter, we intend to explore how the postponement of live sport and subsequent return without, or with limited spectators, impacted fans and spectators in four ways.

1. We begin by discussing how sport organisations, broadcasters, and digital platform providers augmented, or altered platforms to cater to consumer needs in the absence of live matches or attendance.
2. Drawing together literature on COVID-19 and fandom, we consider the social, psychological, and economic impacts created by the absence of live sport during the COVID-19 shutdown.
3. We discuss how fans and spectators coped with the absence of live sport.
4. We discuss key issues facing the sport industry moving forward.

Consuming sport during a pandemic

In March and April 2020, the postponement of competitions created issues for sport leagues, organisations, governing bodies, and fans. These issues did not abate when live sport returned, as fans were initially prohibited from attending due to Governmental restrictions in some countries and competitions (Parnell et al., in press). The absence of fans in venues (i) damaged the spectacle of live sport, and (ii) had financial implications for clubs. First, fans play a fundamental role in co-creating the live spectacle of sport (Bond et al., in press). Furthermore, the presence of fans in stadiums enables broadcasters to convey the “emotional

resonance” of what is happening in a game to television or digital viewers (Majumdar & Naha, 2020, p. 1092). For sports such as Darts, the absence of fans – a central feature of the atmosphere and performance of the sport – was particularly detrimental (Davis, in press). Second, without fans, sport organisations (football clubs in Bond et al. article) experienced the double whammy of losing income due to the postponement or voiding of competitions, coupled with the absence of fans when live matches resumed. The revenues generated through fan spend on tickets, merchandise, food, and beverage etc. are key to the survival of many sport organisations – especially in lower league competitions (Bond et al., in press). An illustration of this challenging situation is evident in the largest pre-tax loss in the history of the EPL. The decline in revenue had a significant impact on the league’s operating profits, which fell by 95% from £800 million in 2018-2019 to £42 million in 2019-2020 (Deloitte., 2021). Hence, the postponement of competitions, and the prohibition of fan attendance in when sport returned, created profound issues for many organisations and spectators.

Sport organisations and broadcasters sought to adapt to the circumstances created by COVID-19 to engage with consumers in novel ways because of the absence of live content. It is relevant to note, that most sport consumers – in some markets – consumed sport primarily through digital or broadcast sources before COVID-19 (Karg et al., 2019). Therefore, rather than fans and organisations seeking new platforms to consume sport, the pandemic led to innovations in the way platforms were offered or used to access content. In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic added impetus to the “sport-media-technology dynamic” (Stavros et al., in press, p. 14) which has been developing since the early 2000s (Filo et al., 2015), rather than reinventing the sport industry and how it is consumed.

The absence of live sport coupled with many countries and regions implementing strict lockdown conditions meant that many fans also had greater available time in which to consume sport. As such, some sport organisations sought to capitalise on an increased hunger

for sporting content that offered some escape from the harsh realities of the pandemic (Feder, 2020). There was considerable innovation using digital technologies to connect with fans when competitions were initially postponed. The Women's NBA (WNBA) and National Football League (NFL) both changed their drafts to a completely online format to enhance fan appeal in the absence of possibilities to host the event in a physical space. Furthermore, the NBA and WNBA delivered games of HORSE (a game where players take turns to shoot from different locations and gain letters (i.e., H, for missing)) remotely that featured players from each league competing against one another from their own home spaces (Simmons et al., 2020).

Goldman and Hedlund (2020) provided one of the most detailed expositions of how U.S. sport organisations and leagues responded to the immediate effects of the COVID-19 postponement. Through a commentary exploring how different American sport organisations responded to the COVID-19 shutdown, they argued that organisations produced content in three ways: (i) offering new platforms and content, (ii) rebroadcasting old content, and (iii) simultaneously rebroadcasting old content with new features. The NBA and NASCAR capitalised on growth in eSports (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2018) to offer new content that included existing players / drivers. eNASCAR included online competition between existing NASCAR drivers, administrators, and leaders (Goldman & Hedlund, 2020). In Basketball, the NBA pushed NBA 2K20 and engagement apps with new features such as chat-based watch parties and 'Tap to Cheer' options that helped fans to feel as if they were part of a community. Many top-ranking chess players (e.g., Hikaru Nakamura, the American GM ranked the #1 blitz player and #4 rapid player in the world) participated in online chess tournaments and streamed their matches through Twitch. There was a huge activity boom in online chess platforms such as Chess.com where fans of the sport could play with people from around the world and watch their icons play.

NBA teams, such as the Phoenix Suns used members of their roster to participate in online gaming distributed via Twitch and YouTube, which was designed as a substitute offering to draw fans into engaging with alternative forms of team and league content during the pandemic. Seeking to produce compelling content for fans, the major American sports also released archival content or rebroadcasted old matches. As Goldman and Hedlund (2020) note, this was the most common form of content because it was easy to distribute and cost effective. Rebroadcasted footage sought to arouse feelings of nostalgia in fans.

The final form of content included a couple of broadcast types that used old footage and merged it with new features. First, broadcasters distributed previously unseen content mixed with rebroadcasted highlights and player / coach interviews (e.g., The Michael Jordan and Chicago Bulls Documentary produced by ESPN: The Last Dance). In this example, fans were offered behind the scenes access to what happened behind iconic moments (e.g., The Chicago Bulls last NBA championship). Second, broadcasters offered fans with opportunities to rewatch old content with new commentaries or interactions on social media as it was displayed, such as Tiger Woods commentating on key moments of his 2019 Masters win. This second form of mixed content sought to give fans additional insights into what was happening at key moments of major sporting moments.

When live sports returned, albeit without spectators, several of the above technical advancements continued, or were adapted to simulate the regular spectacle of sport. The NBA successfully piloted virtual viewing technology with Microsoft Teams, installing video boards around the courts on which fans could appear from the comfort of their own homes (NBA Communications, 2020). MLB took a similar strategy, but instead of real people, they used fans' online avatars (digital images used to represent a person's online identity). These innovations were designed to give supporters the experience of sitting next to one another at live game while also allowing players to feel the support and excitement of their fans. In

broadcast coverage of the EPL in England and Wales, viewers could turn on artificial crowd noise to improve their viewing experience during matches broadcasted by Sky and BT Sport. In Denmark, FC Midtjylland erected two cinema screens in their car park so that their fans could [safely] get as close as possible to live matches when they restarted (Bond et al., in press).

The effects of the COVID-19 shutdown

There is a well-established link between sport fandom, and social and psychological well-being (Inoue et al., 2020; Wann, 2006). The identities that fans share through consensual support of the same team offer greater access to social resources, such as support from other spectators (Inoue et al., 2020). Many of the social and psychological benefits shown in previous work have been linked with establishing temporary and enduring social relationships with other fans while at games or through interactions in relation to the team in local communities (Wann, 2006). Obviously, then, the shutdown created by COVID-19 presented some considerable challenges for fans in achieving the social benefits attributable to consumption. While there are limited insights into the social and psychological effects of the postponement, existing work does indicate that the shutdown created negative experiences for some fans and fan groups.

COVID-19 created a space in many fans lives that was, pre-March 2020, filled by sport consumption. To explore this void, Curry and Good (2020) analysed subreddits in which MLB fans discussed how the absence of sport had affected their lives. Fans discussed a range of emotional reactions to the absence of baseball, which were mainly negative and highly emotive. These reactions, Curry and Good argue, were akin to grief. In line with Wann (2006), some fans described their sense of loss about being unable to visit the 'ballpark', interact with other consumers, and enjoy the relationships with other spectators. The COVID-

19 shutdown, in this example, led fans to experience sadness, a sense of loss, and to mourn the absence of social contact with other consumers.

There is consistent evidence in sport that the degree to which a person is involved, identified, or passionate about a team leads to major differences in their motives to consume, and behaviours (Funk & James, 2006). Schellenberg et al. (2021) surveyed fans about the NBA shutdown to measure how motives to attend sport, and dominant form of passion influenced the consumer stress. Fans that reported high scores for the motives: escape and social interaction, reported greater levels of stress about the shutdown than other participants. Therefore, it appears that the shutdown of sport was particularly difficult for fans that used consumption to get away from stresses in everyday life and to spend time with others. In addition, fans reporting higher levels of obsessive passion – an internalized bond with a team that leads to increased need to engage in behaviours toward it – also found the shutdown more stressful than participants with more harmonious passion for their team.

As previously stated, the pandemic had a significant financial impact on even large organisations, prompting them to take dramatic measures such as job layoffs and wage reductions. Supporters had mixed feelings about their teams' handling of these challenging situations (Campbell, 2020). In the Premier League, Liverpool, Newcastle, Norwich, and Tottenham announced that they would furlough (i.e., pay a reduced wage covered by the government) some non-playing staff. However, following severe backlash from fans, Liverpool, and Tottenham (as members of the 'Big Six') reversed their decision (Sky Sports, 2020). Arsenal's decision to fire its mascot: Gunnersaurus sparked outrage online, with fans focusing on how the club's principles had "changed". On the other hand, teams that allowed the use of their stadiums as testing and vaccination centres were broadly praised (Thompson, 2020). Consequently, we cannot rule out the possibility that these situations have also influenced fans'; however, there is a lack of evidence to confirm this suggestion at present.

Fan coping mechanisms

The ways fans coped with the shutdown of sport can essentially be split into two categories: consuming other sporting content (e.g., Feder, 2020), and consuming a favourite team in different ways (e.g., Curry & Good, 2020). In this section, we discuss different behavioural processes that fans used in the absence of sport.

Though leagues continuing were an exception, numerous fans filled the void of their regular dose of sport by consuming content in relation to of leagues or competitions which they were previously unaware of, or disinterested in. A case in point was the international attention received by the Belarusian Premier League when it persisted with fixtures despite the virus outbreak (Weimar et al., in press). Surprisingly, the Belarusian league's controversial decision not to halt play resulted in a slew of new broadcast deals from international media, increased popularity for the league's teams, and as a result, hopes of fresh possibilities for their players to move to bigger clubs in Europe (this may be one of the few positive tales to emerge from the pandemic for sporting teams).

Discussing fans of individual athletes, Feder (2020) likened the COVID-19 pandemic to the off-season during which athletes produce more content to maintain interactions with their fans. During the postponement, a similar pattern emerged whereby fans satiated their need for content through engaging with athletes to a greater degree. Ruihley and Chamberlin (2020) noted a related point, arguing that many fans sought to fill the gap left by the postponement with consumption of fantasy sport. They discussed how fantasy sports offered fans with a 'distraction' from the stresses created by the pandemic and the absence of live sporting content. However, citing data from ESPN, Ruihley and Chamberlain (2020) noted that most fans supported the return of live sport – even without the presence of fans within stadiums – to restore more typical consumption practices.

Fans also developed new behaviours in relation to the teams they supported. Once internalised as a part of self, supporting teams occupies a considerable amount of time, thought, and conversation for spectators (Lock et al., 2012). In the absence of live sporting content because of COVID-19, fans engaged in retrospective, and speculative forms of consumption (Curry & Good, 2020) that mirrored augmentations in media content (Giulianotti & Collison, 2020; Goldman & Hedlund, 2020). Sports fans' intake of real-time content had already started to drop, pre-COVID, because of a shift to digital platforms. According to a YouGov survey conducted in the United Kingdom, the pandemic accelerated this trend. Thirty-three percent of British sports fans were interested in watching classic replays and highlights to fill airtime during lockdown (Ibbetson, 2020).

In the media sphere, retrospective content was offered to fuel fan nostalgia – at least in the short-term. Therefore, by consuming past wins, championships etc., fans could satisfy their needs for team-related content. Yet, Curry and Good (2020) observed that fans went further than watching old content. They discovered that fans discussed their own memories of key matches and moments during the postponement. In addition, fans discussed holding, interacting, and sorting artefacts and memorabilia that they had accumulated over the lifespan of their support for a team to fill the void created by a lack of live sport. This included handling old ticket stubs, baseball cards, autographed balls etc. Each of these behaviours displayed an intimacy and an attempt by fans to keep their identification with a particular team 'alive'. This fan behaviour gave a boost to nostalgia-inducing messages, especially on social media, which were already part of various sports clubs' media strategies. For example, the Indian cricket team's official Facebook page included a part called "OnThisDay" that highlighted significant moments in the team's history, and this section has seen a spike in fan discussions about how much "those days" are missed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Existing research demonstrates that expectations are important to the experience of fandom. For example, expectations about game outcomes are strongly related to how fans interpret match results (Wann, 1996). In the absence of game results, or live sport, however, fans also discussed their expectations for potential endings to the shutdown (Curry & Good, 2020). This included a range of subjects. Fans discussed where games would be played after the shutdown. Such conversations mirrored media speculation that happened (fuelling considerable anxiety in supporters of teams such as Liverpool) in the UK around the potential cancellation of the Premier League (Liverpool were 25-points clear when the league was postponed) (Ogden, 2020), and conjecture that games would be played in neutral venues to prevent fan misbehaviour (Gardner, 2020).

It is also possible that sport fans turned to cycling and running in the absence of live sport. Analysis of exercise data from Strava shows that outdoor activity levels outpaced expected growth by 82% in the UK between March and May 2020, and by 28% in the U.S. during the same period (Strava, 2020). As many reinvigorated their passion for individual sports such as cycling, governments around the world recognised the positive impacts on individual well-being and environment, and made policy decisions to encourage people to keep the momentum rolling. For instance, the number of people cycling for leisure or sport in the UK increased from 6.1m to 7.2m (+2.5%) from mid-March to mid-May compared to the same period 12 months prior (Sport England, 2020). Consequently, the UK Government announced a £2 billion post-pandemic plan to boost cycling and walking (UK Government, 2020).

The future of sport consumption

The evidence and arguments on the effects of the COVID-19 indicate mixed expectations for the future. On one hand, researchers have spoken about how new modes of

content and platform delivery have satiated fans desire for sport – in the absence of live content (Feder, 2020). However, such innovations are viewed as a temporary patch that enabled fans to get through the pandemic. From this perspective, consumption practices will ‘reset’ as the effects of the pandemic diminish and live sport returns to something more normal. On the other hand, researchers have argued that the pandemic has created more long-term and systemic change (Rojas-Valverde et al., in press). We tend to concur with Stavros and Smith’s (in press) assessment of the pandemic as a jolt that has accelerated the already fast-paced integration of media and sport. In this section, we consider implications for fans at live sport, and structural and safety concerns that affect the inclusion of some fan groups disproportionately.

At the time of writing, fans have returned to many sporting events – albeit in reduced capacity because of social distancing in many stadia. Sport presents many issues in terms of fan safety because of the high degree of shared identity between consumers (Drury et al., 2021). Shared identity increases trust, which in sports arenas can lead to a failure to safely distance from other fans. Scottish Prime minister Nicola Sturgeon admitted in a recent briefing that fan attendances at Scotland’s games, and travel to Wembley for their clash with England had been associated with an upsurge in COVID cases (The Guardian, 2021). Confirming such risks leading to infections, spectators at the Tokyo Olympics 2020 are advised to refrain from loud cheering and high-fives during the games. Thus, even as fans return to stadia in greater numbers (there are plans for Wembley to be at full capacity by the end of Euro 2020), there are still risks of infection for spectators.

These realities will ultimately shape the thoughts and behaviours of some fans. Shapiro and Koesters (2020) surveyed American sport fans about their likelihood to return to live sport arenas in the weeks after the U.S. shutdown ended. Of fans surveyed, 58% reported being unlikely to return to normal attendance, and a further 9% were undecided (Shapiro &

Koesters, 2020). When split by gender, women (65% negative) were less likely to be positive about attending live sport than men (53% negative). Furthermore, fears about returning to live sport increased incrementally with age (except for fans aged 55+). Shapiro and Koesters argued that sport organisations faced a challenge in convincing fans that the large crowds that gather to watch sport are safe in the future. Furthermore, this challenge appears to be more pronounced in populations of women and older fans.

As live sport has returned, with some fans in stadia, there have been concerns raised about the exclusion of groups that are portrayed in the media as being more susceptible to COVID-19. Brown (in press), and Penfold and Kitchen (in press) both discuss how the ableist practices of the EPL and Football League potentially excluded disabled fans. For example, Penfold and Kitchin cited concerns from disability fan groups that all people with a disability were being treated as having underlying health conditions that would prevent their attendance. Brown concurred with this perspective, arguing that the EPL and Football League's actions around the return to stadia had unintentionally disadvantaged disabled fans from accessing live matches. Therefore, a major issue for sport organisations as teams and providers recover from COVID-19 is ensuring that access to watch and consume live sport does not marginalise certain groups of fans.

With stadium capacity set to remain limited in several countries for the foreseeable future, the possibility of ticket prices soaring raise related concerns about exclusion. For instance, numerous ticket holders of the rescheduled Euro 2020 voiced their protests on social media after UEFA cancelled their ballot tickets due to the reduced capacity of host stadia (Mehta, 2021). Such trends will further price out fans of sport with lower levels of disposable income and disadvantage in relation to other socio-economic indicators. Another illustration of this trend was the huge increase in ticket prices of F1 races in 2020. This was on top of the observation that F1 ticket prices accelerated 50% over the past decade (Sylt, 2017). Thus, the

concerns of exclusion from the financial impact of COVID19 needs to be read in connection with the existing criticism that professional sports are becoming more expensive and elitist, pricing out common fans.

Conclusion

In this Chapter, we have focussed on the implications of COVID-19 for sport fans. It is evident that the implications of the pandemic have been far reaching for fans and organisations. As COVID-19 started to impact organisational practices and delivery in March 2020, teams and athletes adopted new and innovative forms of content, and ways of consuming, to further advance the sport-media complex (Stavros et al., in press). This included new draft formats for leagues, engaging competitions that allowed athletes to create content in new ways, and changes to physical environments to make them safer for fans when sport returned.

The lack of live sport – and the absence of spectators when it returned – led to several negative impacts on fans. Without social interaction and opportunities to enjoy social relationships through sport, fans experienced negative emotions. Such emotions were particularly prevalent for individuals that used sport to escape the stresses and strains of everyday life, and for social interaction. To cope with the pandemic, fans – like organisations – innovated. Fans used retrospective and speculative methods to satiate their desire for content in the absence of live matches. Retrospectively, fans took advantage of the various rebroadcasts of old games, including significant victories and championships. This allowed fans to engage with a form of nostalgia that filled the void left by the lack of games. Also, fans spent time discussing the future, pondering questions such as: When will sport return? What will sport look like when it does return? Despite many leagues having returned in the past 12-months, the answers to these questions in the long-term are still unclear.

At the time of writing, Euro 2020 [read 2021] is in full swing and on the 29th of June England thumped Germany 2-0 at Wembley in front of a ‘socially-distanced’ crowd.

Approaches to crowds in the tournament have been disparate – polarised in the public eye because of multiple host nations – with some enforcing strict social distancing and reduced capacities (e.g., 25-50%; England, Scotland, Russia, Romania), and others allowing full crowds for matches (e.g., Hungary). In each example, the realities of COVID in specific countries, and the political environment in which fans consume, have played a fundamental role in the experiences of spectators.

One thing that is evident so far: the experiences of fans will vary from one nation to the next. To date, governments that have responded to COVID more aggressively (e.g., Australia, New Zealand) have created environments where fans have experienced greater normalcy between June 2020 and June 2021. In nations that have introduced more equivocal and loose policy (e.g., Great Britain and the U.S.), the effects of the pandemic have been more profound for fans. The future – and the suppression or spread of COVID-19 – will dictate much of what fans experience from hereon.

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