

Canceled matches and growing turmoil: The impact of COVID-19 on the sports industry

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In recent weeks, sports organizations around the world have been forced to confront the reality that the coronavirus COVID-19 is likely to have a

significant impact on the industry—not just in the short term, but also the long term.

As the virus has spread, an increasing number of matches and events have either been staged behind closed doors, postponed or, increasingly, canceled outright. Among the most recent developments was the suspension of the entire NBA basketball season in the United States after Utah Jazz center Rudy Gobert [tested positive for the virus](#). For the foreseeable future, such decisions may well be the "new normal" for the sporting world.

The process started in Asia, the epicenter of the epidemic. Chinese football's Super League, which was supposed to start at the end of February, [won't begin until at least April](#). UEFA Champions League matches have become ghost games, staged in stadiums bereft of people and atmosphere. The virus has even risen to top management—Evangelos Marinakis, owner of Greek team Olympiakos, [tested positive](#), giving rise to responses from across European football.

In tennis, the Indian Wells tournament in the United States [has been canceled](#), and more tournaments could follow. When members of F1 team crews at the Australian Grand Prix tested positive for COVID-19, the [race was canceled](#), and the Bahrain and Vietnam F1 races [won't take place anytime soon](#). The Tokyo Marathon took place as scheduled on March 1, but [amateur runners did not participate and there were few spectators](#).

Reason for caution—with heavy consequences

There are obvious reasons for the caution, as the COVID-19 virus can easily be transmitted between large numbers of people congregated in close proximity to one another—yet that is the very heart of the experience of mass sporting events.

The suspension of the NBA season is just the first of what are no doubt many more significant decisions—more leagues, matches and races will be affected. Pep Guardiola, manager of Manchester City, believes that rather than playing matches behind closed doors, authorities should [postpone or cancel them](#): "You have to ask is it worse to play football without the spectators. We do our job for the people and if the people cannot come to watch us, there is no sense."

But postponements would take us deeper into a year that is already crowded, with the Olympic and Paralympic Games as well as the UEFA European Championships. Scheduling and venue congestion will become an issue, as will the impact upon the start of next season's competitions. Cancellation would be ground zero for many, as there would be all manner of ramifications: In essence, competitions would have to be designed and implemented from scratch in a matter of days and weeks in order to draw this season's competitions to a close.

Options for ending seasons early are [already being considered](#), ranging from special play-off games to the use of current points scores or league positions as the basis for identifying winners and losers, and those who are or aren't promoted.

Sporting officials and leaders are in a difficult position. Faced with a global pandemic and major public health issue, they have to take action. At the same time, broadcasters and commercial partners will be watching carefully to ensure they still get what they paid for. Individual players as well as teams will also strive to ensure they do not suffer the adverse consequences of decisions over which they have little control.

Olympic-sized headaches

The biggest challenges arguably lay ahead, with the summer Olympic and Paralympic Games looming, as well as European football. The

respective governing bodies—the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) – initially appeared intent on going ahead with their events. UEFA implored governments across Europe to help protect its showcase national team competition, but is [now discussing postponement](#) of the tournament to 2021. For now the IOC has indicated that it doesn't want to postpone the games.

The initial determination to forge onward is unsurprising given that both are "mega-events"—the scale, complexity and stakes are immense. For such events to be postponed or canceled would be a logistical, legal and economic minefield. Even trying to comprehend of the consequences is mind-boggling. To cite just one example, Tokyo has spent 26 billion US dollars on its preparations and will certainly want to get the anticipated return on investment.

In the case of UEFA, this summer's competition is a 60th anniversary event unusually being staged across twelve different venues. Trying to replicate this model at a later date would be very difficult, hence postponement was always going to be one of the lines of last resort.

Uncharted territory

In short, sport is encountering challenges that are unique and have never before been encountered. There have been [natural disasters](#) that have led to venues being changed—for example, in 1989 the Loma Prieta earthquake disrupted the World Series between the Oakland A's and the San Francisco Giants. Yet earlier events were geographically specific, less far reaching and therefore more easily dealt with. One has to look back as far as World War II for anything remotely comparable to the currently situation. However, sport back then was entirely different—now it's a global industry with a complex network of interrelated economic and political interests.

The protection of public health is of paramount importance, and should be, but sports authorities are also acutely aware of the significant costs that are likely to be incurred by any major disruption to this year's sporting calendar. Indeed, some of the tensest sport battles this year are likely to be staged not in Tokyo or London, but in courtrooms across the world.

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