Sports are coming back–but there's more at stake than who wins or loses

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When major sports leagues and events shut down or were postponed earlier this year, the move was a powerful message for many that the COVID-19 pandemic needed to be taken seriously—even these bastions

of social life around the world were taking measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Their reopening could also serve to amplify a powerful message: this time, for racial justice, says Dan Lebowitz, executive director of the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern.

"Sport is so much bigger than just compartmentalized entertainment, it's a transcendent platform for social justice that allows for the promise and possibility of true structural change that can be built around communal engagement for common cause," Lebowitz says.

"It offers a pathway to change, it gives voice to the movement for that change, and it's a platform that keeps that voice clear, constant and challenging of systemic racism and injustice," he says

Sporting events around the world are beginning to re-emerge after strict public health guidelines that cautioned people against large gatherings and close quarters. In the United Kingdom, professional soccer teams have begun playing to empty stadiums under a plan called "Project Restart." The Australian Football League also started playing to empty stadiums in June, but recently called off a game after a player tested positive for COVID-19.

Sports in the U.S. are also starting to get off the ground—PGA Tour golf tournaments, have been held since June without fans, though at least six players have since tested positive for the disease.

Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, and the Women's National Basketball Association are set to return at the end of July, and the National Football League will likely start its regular season as scheduled on Sept. 10.

Still, the pandemic is far from over. And Lebowitz says the fact that professional sports are returning amid an international health crisis doesn't mitigate the urgency of containing the spread of the coronavirus, instead it offers a "unique opportunity to change the depth and scope of the public health conversation."

Leagues are returning during a massive movement to address systemic racial inequality in the U.S. in particular—a movement that was sparked by the death of George Floyd, a black man, in police custody in May.

"Racism is also a public health crisis, one that is intentional, institutionalized, and cross-generational," Lebowitz says. "It's outgrowths are clear and undeniable systemic inequity, that can be measured in terms of economic, employment, education, health, wealth, and nutrition exclusion—and in alarmingly disproportionate incarceration rates."

Sports are a common ground for all types of people, Lebowitz says, and their wide appeal and diverse audiences give them a platform that is well-positioned to amplify the call for racial equality and to motivate concrete action against racism in the U.S. Sports are a way to reach people who may not otherwise hear the message.

"Sport is the common ground of belonging to something that transcends the individual 'I' and has the power to move us to the collective 'we,'" Lebowitz says.

And there's a long history of sports being used in exactly this way.

While it was under apartheid, South Africa was subjected to a variety of international boycotts, including in the realm of sports. The country was barred from competing in the Olympics for decades because of its national policy of segregation and its legislatively entrenched racism.

The boycott was a powerful statement from the international sporting community that the world was watching, Lebowitz says. The ban infused an already active racial justice movement in the country with renewed attention, and helped change a country, he says.

"South Africa's exclusion from the Olympic stage did what economic sanctions and other measures could not: It made South Africa rethink its view of patriotism," Lebowitz says. "The country's exclusionary policies caused them to be excluded from a worldwide platform they coveted. Inclusion brought them back to that stage."

Or, consider the U.S. Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos raising black-gloved fists in a Black Power salute during the medal ceremony at the 1968 Olympic Games. The athletes, both Black, were protesting systemic racism, and the moment became one of the most iconic sports images of the 20th century.

Or for a more recent example, consider NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick's kneeling protest of the national anthem in 2016. Kaepernick started kneeling, instead of standing, during the playing of the national anthem before football games, in protest of racial injustice, police violence, and systemic racism in the U.S. Since then, other athletes have also taken a knee during the national anthem in support of the cause.

Athletes including NBA superstar LeBron James, NFL quarterback Russell Wilson, NWSL captain Megan Rapinoe, and WNBA star Sue Bird, and many others have used their platform to call for racial justice—Wilson, Rapinoe, and Bird did so most recently at the 2020 ESPY Awards.

People across the country (and indeed, around the world) are engaged by sports—they attend events and watch on TV—and Lebowitz says their

engagement creates an opportunity to spark conversations that they might not have otherwise had.

Sports offer a way in.

"Those conversations can turn into change agency, and then ultimately, to change," he says. "We are in a great moment of change and sport not only has the ability to accelerate that change, it has the ability to lead us to better, beyond the public health crises of both COVID and racism."

Provided by Northeastern University

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