

# US professional sports confront an opponent that may be unbeatable: COVID-19

By Alan Gilman  
27 June 2020

Major League Baseball (MLB) and the Major League Players Association (MLPA) reached an agreement June 23 to play a substantially shortened season. In a news release, MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred said players will report to spring training on July 1 and the regular season is to begin either on July 23 or 24. Instead of the typical 162-game regular season, teams will play just 60 games.

Major League Baseball halted spring training on March 12 because of the coronavirus just two weeks before what was to have been opening day. MLB could have extended this season beyond early October but feared what would happen if coronavirus cases resurged in the fall and how that might affect the playoffs and World Series.

Owners, players and MLB officials have been offering proposals and counterproposals for three months to try to reach an agreement on playing in 2020. The biggest sticking points have been money—the owners eventually agreed to pay pro-rated salaries based on the number of games—and the health and safety of players and team officials.

The main issue of how to play baseball safely amid the pandemic remains. There will be no fans in the stands, but already, at least 40 players and staff tested positive for the coronavirus last week. Among the teams affected, the Philadelphia Phillies and the Toronto Blue Jays, who were holding informal workouts in Florida, had to shut down their training sites.

MLB then announced the closing of all other spring training sites, located in the warm weather states of Florida and Arizona where the coronavirus is now surging. The vast majority of MLB teams are expected to resume spring training on July 1 at ballparks in their primary home cities to avoid the high infection rates in Florida and Arizona.

The proposed schedule will feature 40 games of divisional play, with the remaining 20 games for each team against the opposite league's corresponding geographical division (i.e., National League East vs. American League East, Central vs. Central and West vs. West), in order to minimize travel.

MLB has not explained what the Arizona Diamondbacks, and two Florida teams, Miami and Tampa Bay, are to do, as well as the Los Angeles Dodgers and the Los Angeles Angels who are located in another epicenter of the virus. The Texas Rangers

(Dallas) and Houston Astros are also in acute danger given the explosion of the pandemic in their home cities.

To further complicate baseball's attempt to resume play, New York state, the home of two teams, the Yankees and the Mets, announced on Wednesday that the tri-state area (New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut) will now mandate that all visitors from states with a high positive testing rates are now required to self-quarantine for 14 days.

This would make it impossible for, say, the Atlanta Braves to play a series against the New York Mets, their divisional rivals, at Citi Field in Queens, New York.

One can expect that baseball teams will now be declared an "essential service" to be exempt from this travel ban. A similar complication affects the Toronto Blue Jays, the only major league team from Canada, because last week Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that the border shutdown between the U.S. and Canada would be extended to July 21, and there is no guarantee it will not be extended beyond that date.

MLB has also instituted two rule changes, focusing not on protecting the players from the coronavirus, but rather from the increased risk of physical injuries because of the compressed schedule. The designated hitter, who bats for the pitcher, will now apply to both leagues, and to shorten extra-inning games a baserunner will be placed on second base at the start of every half-inning if a game is tied after nine innings.

There are two factors underlying the push to resume playing professional sports in the midst of a worsening pandemic. One, of course, is money. Last year, MLB revenue was a record \$10.7 billion, the 17th consecutive year that it achieved record growth. A substantially shortened season will significantly decrease this revenue stream, but MLB will be able to mitigate this loss, even with the absence of fans, by receiving revenue from broadcasting rights. If no games were played, the value of each team, ranging from \$1 to \$5 billion, could be significantly diminished.

The other factor, reflected in the all-out support for the resumption of sports on the part of the White House and various state governors, is political. The Roman emperors relied on "bread and circuses" to appease the restive population. The representatives of today's financial oligarchy

seem to rely on “circuses” alone, while keeping all the “bread” for themselves.

The resumption of professional sports is meant to symbolize the return to “normality” when the actual conditions facing millions of people—mass unemployment and mass death—are anything but normal. Sporting contests will be held without a live audience, but they will be broadcast endlessly to provide a diversion from the mounting social and political crisis.

The problems confronting Major League Baseball are replicated in other sports. On Tuesday, top-ranked tennis player Novak Djokovic announced that he and his wife tested positive for the coronavirus after he played in a series of exhibition matches he organized in Serbia and Croatia with zero social distancing. Three other tennis players who participated also tested positive. “We believed the tournament met all health protocols. We were wrong and it was too soon,” Djokovic explained on social media.

Wimbledon, one of four Grand Slam tennis tournaments that was scheduled for July in London, has been cancelled, but the US Tennis Association still intends to hold the US Open in New York beginning on August 31.

The Professional Golfers Association (PGA), which lost millions of dollars in television rights and sponsor fees when it shut down for 13 weeks, resumed tournaments three weeks ago without spectators. The result has been two players and two caddies testing positive and the withdrawal of at least four high-profile players, including fourth-ranked Brian Koepka, who have not tested positive but who have been in contact with others who had.

Most horse-racing tracks have been shut down, but a few have reopened without spectators in order to take advantage of off-track betting, which has become very popular in the absence of virtually any other sports betting. Santa Anita, located near Los Angeles, reopened May 15 and completed its racing season Sunday, totaling 17 positive COVID-19 cases. Belmont in New York resumed racing June 3 after suspending racing on March 19. Since the date of suspension, it had recorded 86 positive cases and one death, with Tuesday being the first day it had no positive cases.

The National Basketball Association (NBA) is planning to resume its nearly completed season on July 31 with an abbreviated schedule before the playoffs begin. The top 22 of the league’s 30 teams will report to Orlando, Florida, on July 7 to prepare for the NBA’s reopening later that month. All of the teams will live in what has been described as a “bubble”: they will be essentially quarantined at the Walt Disney World Resort, and all games will be played at three nearby arenas. Players will not be able to have contact with their families until the playoffs in late August.

The NBA, which was facing a \$1 billion loss if the rest of the season was cancelled, decided on playing in Florida because it was one of the first states to reopen, had a low infection rate at the time, and its governor, Republican Ron DeSantis, had

publicly appealed for professional sport teams that were being restricted in their home states to come to Florida to play.

Having accepted the offer, the NBA is now confronted with playing exclusively in a state that has now become one of the epicenters of the coronavirus, with the county of Orlando reporting last week a shocking high 17 percent positive rate for coronavirus tests.

It also has been reported this week that Denver Nuggets center Nikola Jokic has tested positive, along with three members of the Sacramento Kings. Among the 22 teams going to Orlando, several have coaches or staff members who are 60 years old or older—including Gregg Popovich (71), Mike D’Antoni (69), Alvin Gentry (65), Terry Stotts (62) and Rick Carlisle (60).

In the National Football League (NFL), several players and coaching staff have recently tested positive for COVID-19 as training facilities begin to reopen. The preseason Hall of Fame game scheduled for August 6 has been cancelled, but training camps are still scheduled to open in late July with the regular five-month season beginning in September.

In statements made to CNN last week, Dr. Anthony Fauci said: “Unless players are essentially in a bubble—insulated from the community and they are tested nearly every day—it would be very hard to see how football is able to be played this fall. If there is a second wave, which is certainly a possibility and which would be complicated by the predictable flu season, football may not happen this year.”

College football, which begins its season in late August, has allowed voluntary workouts to begin on June 1. Since then, more than 100 players have tested positive, including 23 from Clemson, 13 from Kansas State, 6 from Houston, and more than 30 players from Louisiana State University, the current national champion, have been quarantined.

These results are occurring when the colleges are virtually empty of the tens of thousands of students that will be attending when campuses are supposed to open this fall.

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