

COVID-19 disrupts reopening of US professional sports

By Alan Gilman
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US professional soccer, baseball and basketball are beginning to resume play against the backdrop of a pandemic that is surging throughout the country as daily new infections are exceeding 60,000 and deaths are nearing 135,000.

By mid-March all professional sports leagues in the US had suspended play in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. At that time two National Basketball Association (NBA) players had tested positive, and nationally approximately 1,500 people had been diagnosed with the virus and 40 had died.

The suspension of play had been considered to be a temporary measure until the virus could be brought under control. With tens of billions of dollars at stake, the various leagues began designing plans on when and how to “safely” reopen, eventually all of which centered on resuming in the summer with the expectation that the severity of the pandemic would have been greatly reduced by then.

On June 27 the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) was the first league to open, with a month-long tournament being held in Utah in which all players are being confined to a “player village” with mask coverings mandatory and no visitors allowed.

Before the league’s nine teams left for Utah, however, it was announced that the Orlando Pride, considered the league’s premiere team, had to withdraw because six players and staff had tested positive for COVID-19.

As the league scrambled to announce a schedule for what is now be an eight-team tournament, some of the league’s stars announced they were also staying home due to coronavirus concerns including US national team players Megan Rapinoe, Tobin Heath and Christen Press.

“Although I want to be on the field with my teammates doing what I love, because of the uncertainty and risks created by COVID-19, I have chosen not to participate in the NWSL Challenge Cup,” said Heath.

Major League Soccer (MLS) began play on July 8 with its “MLS is Back Tournament,” which is to run through August 11. The tournament is being held at Disney’s Wide World of Sports Complex near Orlando, Florida, in which all players and staff, totaling over 1,200 people, will be confined in two hotels. They will continue to be isolated from outsiders, including their families, in what has been characterized as a protective

“bubble.”

Florida is currently one of the epicenters of the pandemic, averaging close to 10,000 new cases a day, and Orlando has nearly a 20 percent positivity testing rate, indicating that the virus is particularly rampant in that community.

FC Dallas, one of the league’s 26 teams, had to withdraw from the tournament after 10 players had tested positive, and Nashville SC had to postpone its initial appearance when five of its players tested positive.

Vancouver left three starters home for COVID-related reasons and LAFC is without Carlos Vela, the league’s best player and biggest draw, because he chose to stay home with his pregnant wife. At least five teams had their travel delayed by testing concerns, forcing the postponement of their opening-round matches.

Dr. Abraar Karan, a physician at Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women’s Hospital who is working on COVID-19 response in Massachusetts, said that outdoor soccer might be inherently less dangerous than indoor basketball, but it was still a high-risk contact sport, adding that the league’s stance of not considering a Plan B or canceling the tournament was “reckless.”

“If you’re heading into a tournament knowing [about Dallas], you’re in denial if you’re saying that the tournament may somehow magically be safe,” he told ESPN. “You’re actually moving people in and interacting with even more people. You’re basically saying ‘we know that this is dangerous. We know our players are testing positive. We know we’re putting them in high-risk situations where they’re in close contact with one another. And yet we’re hoping for a different outcome.’ There’s no science there. There’s no logic there.”

MLS Commissioner Don Garber, in announcing the tournament last month, estimated the league could lose as much as \$1 billion to the COVID-19 shutdown, and emphasized how important it was to their corporate partners to get the teams back in front of fans as soon as possible, even if they can watch only on TV.

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 reported to Orlando, Florida, on July 7 at the same Disney complex and its players and staff will live in a similar "bubble." Players will not be able to have contact with their families until the playoffs end in late August.

The NBA, which was facing a \$1 billion loss if the rest of the season was canceled, decided, like the MSL, that it would utilize Orlando as its venue. This was because Florida was one of the first states to reopen, it claimed to have had a low infection rate and its governor, Republican Ron DeSantis, had publicly appealed for professional sports teams that were being restricted in their home states to come to Florida to play.

In the initial testing period from June 24 to June 29, 25 of 351 NBA players have tested positive, approximately 7 percent, as well as 10 of 884 team staff members.

Despite the high number of players and staff who have tested positive, and the high incidence of the virus in Orlando, NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said July 7 that even if there were new positives, it would not likely cause the season to be canceled. When asked what would be the threshold for having to shut down, Silver acknowledged, "It's the right question, and I'm not sure yet."

Ten NBA players have opted out of playing and will be forfeiting the remainder of their salaries, approximately 10 to 30 percent, depending upon how many playoff games they would have potentially played. Most cited health concerns for themselves or their families.

Major League Baseball (MLB), which had halted spring training in mid-March, resumed it on July 1 in each team's home city and will begin a compressed 60-game season on July 23–24, with the playoffs and World Series to be completed by early October.

Baseball team owners claim about 40 percent of their total annual revenue, about \$10.7 billion, is derived from ticket sales. Without fans in the stands, they are attempting to salvage the enormous revenues from their broadcast rights.

MLB's safety and health protocols called for all players to be tested beginning last Friday and then begin a rhythm of being tested every other day until the end of the season. The results of this first batch of tests were not delivered within the prescribed 48 hours, forcing eight teams to cancel Monday's practice.

With such a widespread testing breakdown occurring at the beginning of this effort, many are questioning how MLB will be able to conduct and process roughly 14,000 tests a week taken at dozens of sites across the country. Once swabs are taken, they have to be sent to a lab in Utah for analysis and the results returned to each team within the 48-hour window

According to ESPN's Marly Rivera, there were 66 positive tests (58 players and eight staff) among 3,470 initial tests.

"I think there's still some doubt that we're going to have a season now," St. Louis Cardinals reliever Andrew Miller, a member of Major League Baseball Players Association's executive subcommittee, said Sunday. "By no means is this a slam dunk. We're trying, we're going to give it our best effort,

but for me to sit here and say 100 percent would be a lie."

High-risk players can decide to opt out and would receive both their full salary and service time for the season. Players who have high-risk family members may also decide to opt-out, but MLB would leave it up to teams to make the decision of whether or not they would receive salary or service time. High-risk would include people who have heart disease, lung disease, cancer, high blood pressure or diabetes.

Sean Doolittle of the Washington Nationals said that to many players, the opt-out provisions are not great. "There's a lot of players right now trying to make decisions that aren't 100 percent comfortable where things are at right now," he told the press. "That's kind of where I am. I think I'm planning on playing, but at any point I can start to feel unsafe. If it starts to take a toll on my mental health with all of these things we have to worry about this cloud of uncertainty hanging over everything, then I'll opt out."

In the National Football League (NFL), several players and coaching staff have recently tested positive for COVID-19 as training facilities have begun to reopen. There is no plan for an NFL "bubble" even though Dr. Anthony Fauci raised the possibility in a CNN interview two weeks ago.

"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," he said. President Trump quickly attacked that idea in a tweet, saying, "Tony Fauci has nothing to do with NFL Football. They are planning a very safe and controlled opening."

As always, when it is a conflict between profits for the super-rich and the health and welfare of those who actually do the work—in this case, a conflict between the owners and the athletes—Trump comes down 100 percent on the side of the bosses.

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