

America's Addiction to Sports

Luke T. Carter

A Deeply Embedded Pastime

The coronavirus pandemic, in all its crippling destruction and sweeping devastation, unveiled many unwelcome truths of modern-day society across the United States and the world. Over the course of a five-month nation-wide lockdown, people throughout the country were enlightened on many topics, such as the importance of public health and national security, the presence of social injustices, and the importance of a healthy economy. Many institutions that have been so deeply embedded in the fabric of American society for over a century have proven to be the cornerstone to the country's culture, and one of the first that may come to the minds of many are sports. In a pastime that runs with such great emotion and passion, sports have provided an outlet for people to heal, escape, relax, and unwind. This outlet can give hope in an otherwise hopeless situation. And even if it be for a few hours, it can unite American citizens as one, regardless of the team they support.

In the wake of the unimaginable events that took place on September 11, 2001, Major League Baseball served as one of the major outlets for mourning families and friends when the New York Mets faced the Atlanta Braves on September 17. Just one week following the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, this game was the first opportunity for the country to move forward and heal. The Mets won the game off a Mike Piazza two-run shot that resulted in the eruption of nearly 42,000 mourning New Yorkers in Shea Stadium. In recollection of the event, Piazza told MLB.com in a post-game interview, "I'm just so happy I gave the people something to cheer for. There was a lot of emotion. It was just a surreal sort of energy out there" [1].

More recently in 2006, the state of Louisiana, specifically New Orleans, was crippled by Hurricane Katrina. Communities were literally washed away, the regional economy was destroyed, and thousands of lives were lost. The tragedy left American citizens feeling hopeless, with little to look towards for comfort. Yet another outlet was found in the New Orleans Saints, the city's professional football team. The natural disaster nearly forced the franchise to relocate to another city, and one New Orleans professional sports franchise, the New Orleans Hornets, were forced to relocate to Oklahoma City for one season. However, players pleaded with the National Football League to allow the Saints to remain in the city of New Orleans. One Saints player, Scott Fujita, noted the importance by saying, "The community needed us...We needed the community. And it worked. This is why the marriage is so special between the team

and the town, why the Saints are now so deeply rooted in the community and you just can't imagine New Orleans without the Saints" [2].

Along with its ability to provide emotional comfort to those in pain and suffering, the sports industry has shown to be the backbone of regional economies throughout the United States. It is an industry that brings in approximately \$90 billion each calendar year across all sports and provides work for almost 500,000 people. This titan of an industry has shown throughout recent history that it can withstand nearly any tragedy that may unfold, and Andy Dolich (former director of business operations for Memphis Grizzlies, Golden State Warriors, Oakland A's and the San Francisco 49ers) said in an interview with The New York Times, "Sports has always been the arm around the shoulder at the end of major trauma". Just as Dolich and many others had thought, this always seemed to be true until March 2020 [3].

How It All Started

The uprooting of the sports world caused by the coronavirus pandemic can be traced back to late January when Miami University of Ohio indefinitely postponed their men's and women's basketball programs. The first global impact of the novel virus came when the World Indoor Track and Field Championships, which were scheduled to be hosted in China on the weekend of March 13, were postponed. Following these initial precautionary measures, leagues all over the United States and the world were impacted, and eventually postponed or cancelled their seasons [4].

The Olympics, which was scheduled to be hosted by Japan in the summer of 2020, was postponed to the summer of 2021 on March 24, 2020. The economic impact was staggering for the Japanese economy, which was estimated to be around \$12.6 billion and contribute to 1.4 percent of the nation's GDP. Since the inception of the modern Olympic Games in 1896, the iconic sporting event has only been cancelled or postponed three times before the 2020 Summer Games: 1916, 1940, and 1944. The only previous times that the Olympics had ever been postponed in the modern era were due to two world wars; however, these games faced a never before seen adversary [5]. Pleas from members of the International Olympic Committee, along with individual federations, ultimately led to the postponement of the games.

On March 12th, just two weeks prior to the postponement of the 2020 Summer Olympic Games, several major sporting institutions decided to close the curtains on their respective operations in reaction

to the rapidly spreading virus. On the eve of its most coveted and beloved sporting tournament, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) announced that it would cancel both the Men's and Women's national basketball tournament, *March Madness*, along with all other collegiate sporting events. Following the positive test of Utah Jazz's All-Star Center, Rudy Gobert, the National Basketball Association's league commissioner, Adam Silver, decided to halt league play indefinitely. The final major blow to the American sports market was dealt when Major League Baseball decided to postpone Opening Day, which was scheduled for March 26 [6,7,8].

Serious Financial Blows

The economic loss from the cancellation of American sporting events is staggering; CBS sports predicted that over \$12 billion would be lost [9]. ESPN Staff Writer David Purdum reported that sports betting alone was severely impacted in the month of March, which saw a 60 percent decrease in bets that totaled "\$187 million, a small sum compared to February's \$372 million in bets. Additionally, Purdum reported that the American Gaming Association predicted that 650,000 workers would be directly impacted from the national lockdown, which would contribute to a \$43 billion hit on national sports markets [10].

What is often neglected through the analysis of lost revenue from these sporting events is the non-economic impacts. Although the previously discussed events involved multi-million-dollar losses in their respective institutions, the effect on everyday life for American families proved to be much more devastating. Gwen Burrow, an analyst for economic remodeling, predicted on March 28, 2020, "[S]ports occupations could lose a total of \$12.3 billion in earnings by mid June. That's an average of \$133.4 million in earnings every day, or \$92.6K every minute." Burrow then took the liberty of estimating the total number of American jobs at stake solely in the sporting industry. The estimated number of jobs that would be directly impacted by the cancellation of amateur sports was 1.3 million [11].

These numbers prove an apparent reliance on the sports industry across the country. Unfortunately, cancelling these events was only half of the battle. The uphill battle that is currently unfolding throughout the country is how to reopen the American economy effectively and safely in the absence of a coronavirus vaccine. The summer proved to be challenging for American families because, for one of the first times in history, the world was left without the outlet that the sporting industry

had always provided. Families across the nation and the world were left alone in lockdown to face the pandemic and its wake of destruction.

What Now?

An unorthodox channel of sports emerged from the live sporting hiatus that began in March: e-sports. Professional athletes like NBA star Kevin Durant and former NFL quarterback Michael Vick led the charge in reviving the sports world through sports video games. The money gained from advertisements and donations was donated to coronavirus relief organizations [12]. Additionally, sports fans took it upon themselves to organize and simulate a virtual *March Madness* basketball tournament using EA Sports 2009 NCAA Basketball video game, which was presented on YouTube.

Across all e-sporting events that were hosted during the coronavirus pandemic, various platforms such as *Twitch* witnessed a nearly 31 percent viewership increase in lieu of live sports. Other e-sport streaming services, such as *G2* and *Team Liquid* experienced similar viewership increases of 20 and thirty percent, respectively, in the initial months of the national lockdown [13].

The virtual world of sports went one step further, beyond what even I imagined to be possible: virtual summer camps. These camps offered an alternative and far more versatile option for youth sports to develop stronger, more confident, and well-rounded children. Children of all backgrounds and ethnicities could partake in a free virtual camp that would allow them to perform multi-disciplinary activities that the children could incorporate into their respective sports. Additionally, these programs served academic and nutritional purposes, reshaping the traditional view of summer camps that millions, such as myself, have grown to know so well [14].

The Restart: An Ongoing Battled

In spite of the aforementioned problems, the battle will not be over until fans regain what they have lost, part of this being live sports. Nothing can compare to fan-filled stadiums and arenas contributing to the outcomes of sporting events and the level of excitement that accompanies them. The Korean Baseball Organization (KBO) was the first league to reopen its operations following the worldwide shutdown and attracted the attention of national sports broadcasting company *ESPN*. The first glimpses of American sports following the three-month hiatus came shortly thereafter with the resumption of the NBA and MLB seasons in late July. These resumptions were then followed by the

presentation of NFL and NCAA football seasons. Unsurprisingly, the resumption of these sports entailed serious league operation adjustments to maximize their safety and success.

Each league has taken a different approach to their respective restart campaigns, but the NHL and NBA's plans are the most unique. To safely resume the season and crown their respective champions, commissioners Gary Bettman and Adam Silver (of the NHL and NBA, respectively) announced that each league would complete their 2019-20 seasons in a *bubble*. In these secluded environments, players were subjected to testing every other day for the entirety of the season, and, after three-month-long restart campaigns, both seasons were completed with zero positive tests [15,16].

In contrast, other leagues across the country have attempted to resume league play without the bubble environment. The NFL has found some success with a non-bubble sporting environment; the league has not been forced to cancel a single game due to the pandemic. Of the nearly 8,000 NFL players and staff members tested, only 218 have tested positive. [17]. Conversely, the college football restart campaign has experienced extreme difficulties. In the FBS division of the NCAA, many schools of Power 5 conferences (ACC, SEC, Big 10, Big 12, Pac 12) have decided to keep the number of positive tests of each program non-disclosed to the public, so it can only be assumed how many of their players have tested positive for coronavirus. However, several schools such as Virginia Tech and Florida State could be used as references for the rest of the FBS. have been forced to postpone games amid concerns over the numbers of players and staff who had tested positive for COVID-19.

However, officials across the country are striving for the complete resumption of athletic events with or without spectators. Most notably, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has been vocal about his desire to have Florida be the state that leads the efforts of resuming *normalcy* in sporting environments.

To support his desires, DeSantis issued the following statement in a press conference in Tallahassee: "What I would tell commissioners of leagues is, if you have a team in an area where they just won't let them operate, we'll find a place for you here in the state of Florida." DeSantis also approved the highly anticipated golf match between Tom Brady and Phil Mickelson versus Tiger Woods and Peyton Manning to be played while the country was still in lockdown [18]. Most recently, the NBA's Toronto Raptors have announced that the franchise will begin their 2020-21 NBA campaign in Tampa, Florida.

Additionally, Governor DeSantis recently announced that he expects 100 percent capacity at

sporting events in the state of Florida by the end of the calendar year. Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Florida, home of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, can hold 75,000 fans and is the venue for Super Bowl LV [19]. These are certainly optimistic strides from the governor, and they have left sports fans across the country buzzing with optimism towards the prospect of witnessing a sporting event where fans are in the arenas. Unsurprisingly, these statements have also left public health officials concerned about whether the governor has the interests of public health in mind when making these statements.

Is It An Addiction?

Amid these ongoing concerns over the coronavirus pandemic and its relation to sports, there has been an ongoing debate on whether sports should continue and to what extent they should be allowed. There are ultimately two schools of thought when formalizing this debate: the first being whether it is unethical to subject athletes to the present dangers in the name of entertainment; the second being whether players, fans, employees, or institutions could endure another multi-month-long hiatus on a financial and mental level.

To examine the initial concern, the simple answer would be to conduct all sporting environments in a bubble setting that would mimic the success seen by the NBA and NHL. However, it is not that simple. Although logistically these operations could be done and carried out effectively, there is little precedence for how those within the bubble would manage to cope with several negative externalities that mostly impact the athletes' mental health. Although few accounts have been leaked on the overall impact on mental health within a bubbled environment, NBA All-Star small forward Paul George opened up during a press conference about his battle with mental health while in Orlando. No matter the amount of wealth and fame one has, prolonged isolation and separation from family can have serious effects on a person's state of mental well-being, and this was the case for George [20]. Depression and anxiety have been a common battle for millions of Americans during the national lockdown, and these conditions do not discriminate based on profession, wealth, race, ethnicity, nor sex.

The NFL Players Association (NFLPA) and the NFL came to an agreement on conducting a market bubble technique where each team would be responsible for the safety of their franchise and all visiting franchises. However, the previously reported data shows that even this strategy for mitigating the spread of the virus is penetrable. The MLB took on a similar strategy, but saw even less success in controlling the rate at which the virus spread.

From the beginning of the national lockdown through the present, no sporting organization has been under heavier scrutiny than the NCAA. President Mark Emmert faced heavy backlash on the delayed cancellation of *March Madness*, with accusers claiming the NCAA had no concern for the safety of players and was simply looking to find ways to profit off of its most lucrative sporting event. When discussing whether college athletics should resume, the NCAA faced further scrutiny for not proposing a bubble-scenario for participating teams. In response to the backlash, the NCAA allowed conferences and schools to take matters into their own hands with regards to season postponement. Additionally, the Association announced that all national athletic tournaments except the College Football Playoffs and the Football Bowl Series would be cancelled for fall sports.

It could easily be argued that by allowing players to partake in athletic events against other schools, the idea of a sustainable, bubble-like environment is impossible. Not only does it seem financially insurmountable to have every collegiate athletic program travel to several regional locations to complete a season, but it would also place athletes at a great disadvantage in terms of academic capabilities. The only form of resistance against the virus, until a vaccine is released, would be to require players to be tested on a consistent basis throughout the season, which is the route that many schools have chosen to follow. Why not simply postpone all fall athletics?

This question segways into the second concern. Throughout the entirety of this article, data has been presented discussing the drawbacks of the initial absence of major sporting events. The sports industry has finally had a chance to regain its stride over the past months, but dubitably enough to sustain another multi-month hiatus of activity. As projected by Gwen Burrow of Economic Modelling, another pause on all sporting operations throughout the United States could cost families, businesses, and the industry billions of dollars. Along with this loss of revenue comes further health related implications. People throughout the United States and the world dealt with battles of depression and anxiety similar to those faced by people in the NHL and NBA bubble as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

These internal struggles seem nearly impossible to avoid in the event of another national lockdown, and it is certainly a daunting prospect for the many people who would be directly impacted. Collegiate programs are at risk of losing millions of dollars in revenue due to the postponement or

cancellation of seasons. An event that is so economically devastating could also have implications on whether student athletes would be granted scholarship funds from their respective programs.

In short, the consequences of another halt in sporting operations could show endless repercussions, most of which are undesirable for a majority of those involved. Unfortunately, these scenarios seem unavoidable in the case of a global pandemic without a vaccine to combat its effectiveness. Considering the data presented along with the two growing concerns, there is one final question that should be considered: With how reliant the American economy has become on sports, and how deeply rooted these pastimes have become in American lives, would it be reasonable to say that there is an inherent addiction to sports throughout the country?

REFERENCES

- [1] Brown, Thomas J. "September 21, 2001: Piazza Homer Leads Mets in New York City's First Baseball Game after 9/11." *Society for American Baseball Research*. 18 July 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.
- [2] King, Peter. "Ten Years Later: The Saints and Katrina." *Sports Illustrated*. 26 Aug. 2015. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.
- [3] Futterman, Matthew, Kevin Draper, Ken Belson, and Alan Blinder. "The Financial Blow of the Coronavirus on Sports." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 14 Mar. 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.
- [4] Yang, Avery. "Timeline: How COVID-19 Upended Sports." *Sports Illustrated*. 12 Mar. 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.
- [5] Roache, Madeline. "Have the Olympics Ever Been Canceled? Here's the History." *Time*. Time, 24 Mar. 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.
- [6] García-Hodges, Ahiza. "NCAA Cancels March Madness Tournaments, All Other Winter and Spring Championships." *NBCNews.com*. NBCUniversal News Group, 13 Mar. 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.

[7] Aschburner, Steve. "Coronavirus Pandemic Causes NBA to Suspend Season after Player Tests Positive." *NBA.com*. NBA.com, 10 Oct. 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.

[8] Kepner, Tyler. "M.L.B. Pushes Back Opening Day Over Coronavirus Concerns." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 12 Mar. 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.

[9] Bengel, Chris. "Sports Leagues Will Lose at Least \$12B in Revenue Due to Stoppages Cause by COVID-19 Pandemic: Report." *CBSSports.com*. 1 May 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.

[10] Purdum, David. "Sports Betting Numbers Show Coronavirus Pandemic's Impact." *ESPN*. ESPN Internet Ventures, 15 Apr. 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.

[11] Burrow, Gwen. "The Economic Impact of COVID-19 on US Sports." *Emsi*. 20 July 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.

[12] Russo, Donovan. "'Play Ball!': Pro Athletes like NBA Star Kevin Durant Turning to Esports during Coronavirus." *CNBC*. CNBC, 03 Apr. 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.

[13] Gault, Matthew. "As Stadiums Go Quiet, Esports Are Having a Moment." *Time*. Time, 31 Mar. 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.

[14] Lee, Bruce Y. "Virtual Summer Camp: How Sports Are Changing For Good With Covid-19 Coronavirus." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, 20 July 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.

[15] Washburn, Gary. "How the NBA Created a COVID-free Bubble and Made It the Safest Place on Earth - The Boston Globe." *BostonGlobe.com*. The Boston Globe, 03 Nov. 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.

[16] Gregory, Sean. "NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman On COVID-19, Hockey's Future." *Time*. Time, 29 Sept. 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.

[17] Butler, Alex. "NFL Reports Largest In-season COVID-19 Surge with 56 Positives." *UPI*. UPI, 11 Nov. 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.

[18] Wolfe, Cameron. "Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis Says State Open to Pro Sports Teams." *ESPN*. ESPN Internet Ventures, 13 May 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.

[19] Gaydos, Ryan. "Gov. DeSantis Expects 'full Super Bowl' in Tampa in 2021 despite Coronavirus Unknowns." *Fox News*. FOX News Network, 27 Sept. 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.

[20] Youngmisuk, Ohm. "Clippers' Paul George Says He Dealt with Anxiety, Depression Inside the NBA Bubble." *ESPN*. ESPN Internet Ventures, 26 Aug. 2020. Web. 25 Nov. 2020.