

Identifying and addressing sport specific risks in COVID-19 era

- Dubai, UAE

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N.B. Elements of this article were first published on www.lawinsport.com on Wednesday, 12 August 2020.

As sporting activity recovers from the pandemic and resumes in the UAE, and indeed globally, it remains imperative to be mindful of potential COVID-19 transmission risks inherent in each sport. These risks should be appropriately identified, accounted for and addressed. This article examines some such risks and considers measures being taken across the sports industry to facilitate safe resumption of activity.

Identifying sport-specific risks

While pandemic-induced shutdowns in the sports sector were relatively ubiquitous, each sport is different and there are specific risks of which we should be mindful in an effort to minimise the risk of exposure to the unforeseen enemy. Specifically, understanding what fundamental and unique features in some major sports may exacerbate or reduce the risk of participants and stakeholders contracting COVID-19 will be useful in determining appropriate restrictions in a safe and sustained re-emergence, as well as perhaps introducing systemic resilience against potential future challenges.

1. Cricket:

Even the shortest format in cricket, T20, lasts approximately three hours. In the case of a test team, in addition to management, trainers, physios, and related support staff and officials, each team includes up to 18 players, whether selected to play or not, together for up to five consecutive days. The added risk here is the length of time for which the players occupy shared facilities in close proximity for the full duration of each day's play, not to mention travel and accommodation logistics. This alone creates a COVID-19 transmission risk owing to sustained exposure amongst players, fans, staff, officials, media personnel for the duration of a match.

2. Tennis:

Commercially, most popular in its singles format, tennis alleviates some concerns regarding the large numbers of participants in other sports such as cricket; however, by ratio, tennis is one of the most heavily officiated sports. At any given stage of a tennis match, the presence of a dozens of officials and support staff (chair umpire, line umpires, ball persons) in close proximity. While the total number of persons involved in play is relatively low compared to team sports, the smaller dimensions and frequency of indoor facilities need to be taken into account, as indoor facilities pose an appreciably greater risk of contracting the coronavirus. Additionally, the predominance of the single-elimination tournament format with tightly coordinated competition schedules at professional levels (e.g., ATP schedule, featuring over 60 tournaments in a calendar year), with all related travel and accommodation interactions will increase potential exposure and transmission threat.

3. Football:

One of the most cherished features of the English Premier League ('EPL') is one that increases the potential for virus transmission, i.e., that the matches are often played in packed stadia before capacity crowds, especially matches featuring top clubs, derby rivalries, and relegation battles. Such matches

are quintessentially spirited environments with a good measure of camaraderie and vocal exchanges. Statistics for the recently completed 2019-2020 premier league season confirm that average attendance by home fans (pre-COVID-19) for each of the twenty top tier clubs was in excess of ninety per cent, with the highest average over 97 per cent recorded at Old Trafford (Manchester United) and the lowest at St. Mary's Stadium (Southampton) at under 92 per cent. In an environment with over 70,000 fans at Old Trafford, in the absence of necessary health and safety protocols being strictly adhered to, COVID-19, quite literally, looms in the air.

4. Rugby

Rugby is quintessentially physically demanding and contact prone with aggressive tackling and forceful physical confrontation. Another seminal feature of the game is the scrum. This highly skilled and much misunderstood dynamic occurs with up to eight players from each team interlocked in a formation with their heads down and arms joined, in a mechanism that concentrates great force, to vie for possession of the ball and to gain advantageous field position. In a scrum, players collide and remain in close proximity during the heat of battle thus, creating a potential conduit for on-pitch virus transmission. Quite apart from the fans' experiences, team logistics, and related conditions noted in respect of other sports, this element within the sporting dynamic enhances the risk of exposure and transmission.

5. American Football:

Apart from the features and elements typically found in a contact team sport American Football is another team sport with higher susceptibility to the virus in the inherent dynamic of the line of scrimmage. The commencement of play formation increases close contact and resulting vulnerability of the players to contract and/or transmit the virus. The offensive and defensive linemen square off – literally breathing down each other's necks – and make aggressive contact on almost every play of the game, thus compromising the players' safety and multiplying the threat of contracting or transmitting the virus through frequent contact.

6. Basketball - the NBA:

The COVID-19 risk, in competing in basketball and expressly in the NBA, is heightened, and some have suggested potentially amongst the highest in sports, as it incorporates multiple high-risk elements, that make the game particularly susceptible to transmission of COVID-19.: it is a team sport involving shared facilities and large periods of group interaction on and off court; it is a contact sport leaving little room for social and physical distancing during competitive play; and it is primarily played indoors, with a higher risk of the virus remaining airborne in close quarters, thus increasing the chances of transmission.

7. The Olympic conundrum:

In late March 2020, the International Olympic Committee President, Thomas Bach, following a consultation with the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, and other relevant stakeholders announced that the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo would be postponed. As it stands, the Tokyo Olympic games have been rescheduled to take place in July and August 2021. The Olympic Games are the single largest and most prestigious global sporting event in the world, with the Tokyo Olympic Games now set for 2021, expected to be host to over 206 nations, attracting more than 11,000 athletes, 5,000 technical officials and coaches and 20,000 media personnel, not including some 4,000 members of the Local Organising Committee and 60,000 volunteers who are already stationed in Tokyo. These estimated figures do not even include the spectators and tourists who are expected to flock from different parts of the globe to witness the games and attend the opening and closing ceremonies. It remains to be seen whether or not the games will be held absent a vaccine capable of being widely administered with sufficient time before the event to guarantee a safe and secure environment for all. Added to this statistical framework, most athletes and officials are normally accommodated in the Olympic Village and could face the prospect of sharing rooms, accessing common facilities such as dining halls. This feature of the athletes' village does not bode well in the present climate where an overarching concern is to create a safe and secure environment for the athletes to minimise the risk of contracting the virus.

Operational rule adjustments directly impacting on-field play

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the sports industry will have to adapt and remain flexible to remain sustainable and reliable when a worldwide crisis strikes. While we have seen a wide array of logistical measures and guideline requirements impacting off-field action being adopted and adhered to by various sports in an effort to restart in a safe and secure manner, it would be useful to look at some specific and practical measures and rules introduced by relevant leagues and sports' governing bodies, directly related to on-field action and designed to promote and sustain the safe re-emergence of sports from an operational, on-field, perspective.

Various considerations are under review and the introduction of several safety measures have impacted the spectacle of sports that we have been used to, brought about by COVID-19 inspired change. For instance, ball assistants have been reduced in football, the number of potential substitutes permitted to warm up on the sidelines at any given point has been reduced, match balls are sanitised (as with NBA game balls), players shaking hands has been discouraged, training staff appear wearing PPE and players routinely now use personal drinking bottles. Elsewhere, in tennis, line judges are being replaced by automated machines where possible and players are using opposite sides of the court for changeovers, in cricket bowlers are prevented from applying saliva to the ball and emergency medical staff and equipment are subject to new PPE requirements.

In addition to these practical and operational changes, we see foreshortened seasons in a number of sports and must consider limitations on previously typical parameters. Would a World Series champion escape an asterisk for an MLB season below 162 games? Would Wimbledon maintain the integrity of tradition without qualifiers? If the NBA survives the bubble, how will we view a season winner with no real home/away game dynamics? These questions will doubtless persist unless and until normalcy returns to the sports industry but the rigor and passion of sporting debate is an honoured tradition that looks set to continue.

Assumption of risks in resuming sports events in the UAE

Health and safety issues are of paramount concern in the UAE, which is host and home to a series of one-off premier global sporting events each calendar year. These events include the UAE Tour (a UCI sanctioned cycling event taking place across the Emirates and incidentally amongst the first international sporting events to fall prey to COVID-19), the Dubai World Cup horse race, The Dubai Rugby 7's, the ITU World Triathlon Abu Dhabi, The Abu Dhabi Formula 1 Grand Prix and numerous professional golf tournaments amongst many more. These sporting calendar favourites attract a legion of fans and travellers from around the world and the resumption of safe and secure sporting activity, in compliance with relevant return to sport guidelines, will require the coordinated efforts of government, the sports authorities, event organisers and all the other relevant stakeholders.

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