



Challenges professional sports faced during Covid-19 pandemic with no fans in attendance

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the financial and socio impact on professional sporting organizations during the unprecedented times of COVID-19, where the entire global sports ecosystem, competition organizers, owners, athletes, broadcasters, sponsors, suppliers, and fans were affected by the shutdown of sports during the pandemic. The research analyzed the pandemic's severe economic and social impact on significant sports, along with the new normal of business at stadiums without fans in attendance. The study utilized documentary research citing past academic research and documented articles from recognized print and digital media sources. The analysis in the research showed that throughout the pandemic, the ability to plan, adapt, and innovate, major sporting organizations to successfully returned sports to screens without fans in the stadiums. In conclusion, the research aimed to conduct a brief analysis of the overall impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the world of professional sports.

Keywords: sporting organizations, sports, covid-19



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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Living through unprecedented times was an understatement as the global lockdown began to unfold; in March of 2020, due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, sports, across all platforms, were a high-profile casualty of the global onslaught of the pandemic. Sporting events across the globe spent the first couple of months mothballed. When they did return, they returned to empty arenas and stadiums the world over. This unheralded phenom highlighted how valuable, in terms of monetary and social value, spectators have on the impact of professional sports (Edgar, 2021). According to (Bond et al., 2020)), elite football, with a concentration on the most viewed league in the world, the English premier league suffered massive financial losses in revenues during the Covid-19 Pandemic with the cancellation and postponement of major tournaments and the restrictions on not allowing fans in attendance at vast stadia's, in turn showing up the weaknesses and of the financial ecosystem of the business of professional football. (Reade & Singleton, 2021) stated that major sporting events, held in a behind closed doors system, affected the finances of the sporting organizations and harmed the on the field performances of the athletes, with a host of academic studies showing that without crowds in attendance, athletes' performances were affected. The pandemic showed no mercy to major sporting events with turmoil witnessed the world over with the disruption, not seen in almost 50-years. Sporting events were canceled in their entirety, like the world-renowned Boston Marathon, or some were rescheduled to a later date, with no fans in attendance, such as the NBA, which finished its season in a bubble isolation zone, at Walt Disney World, with zero fans in attendance. 2020 was such a unique year for professional sports across the globe with the forced timeout for events and, more importantly, when events resumed, stadiums were empty, with no fans in attendance. The sport continued throughout the year, but the financial impact on teams and organizations was extreme, with the continued impact of fans not being allowed to attend sporting events (Horky, 2020). The loss of fans at stadiums during the Covid-19 pandemic also had a significant effect on the psychological performance of the players on the pitch and on the courts without the roar of fans where scenes such as Liverpool Football Club winning their first premier league trophy was celebrated in an empty stadium (Olley, 2020).

1.2 Research Problems

The shutdown of allowing fans in sporting arenas the world over caused a significant problem not just for the arena owners and fans but also for the athletes who thrived on the roar of the fans to motivate and incite. It was a weird situation that faced sports teams during the pandemic. They had to invent new ways of creating atmospheres with fake noise blared across speakers and mockups of cardboard cutouts of fans behind goals; virtual crowds brought a whole new meaning during the pandemic (Wharton, 2020). The initial shutdown of all sporting events for the first couple of months of the pandemic was estimated to have cost \$5 billion, given the loss in ticket sales, concessions, TV broadcasts, and sponsorships. Revenue losses continued to worsen with the return of spectator-less events, with shortened seasons continued significant revenue losses (Birnbaum 2020). The loss of earnings for the National Basketball League was staggering, with an estimated \$800 million in ticket sales when they were forced to move their season to the spectator more minor bubble at Walt Disney World in Florida (Kochkodin, 2020). Sports broadcasters faced such a unique challenge in engaging with the problem of hosting events in empty and soulless stadiums. This problem witnessed the innovative usage of virtual crowd noise. However, capturing the emotional resonance of fans in the stadiums was an unsurmountable challenge as the fans make the stadium come alive on game day (Majumdar & Naha, 2020). Another major issue facing sports to return fans to stadia is the risks of spreading and contracting. Teams at Reading University found an enormous risk to those attending sporting events (Reade, 2020). Getting fans back into stadiums during the continuation of the pandemic has come with varied results; researchers at Washington University developed a model to better understand the risks of re-opening stadiums to fans with the findings stating that to reduce the risks of spreading the virus, mask-wearing and proper social distancing would have to be adhered too, with temperature checking at the turnstiles another factor to help reduce the risks involved (Gaskell, 2020). Sporting organizations have been forced to source innovative ways to create other sources of revenue without fans in attendance during broadcasts of major sporting events, with many turning to social media platforms to gain fan retention and by building on these audience bases, there is potential to generate sponsorship revenues. However, this task risks generating a large audience base; content creation needs to be consistent and highly innovative (Neureiter, 2021).

1.3 Objective of the study

The overviewed purpose of the study is to investigate and investigate the daunting challenges faced by the world of professional sports during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This phenom has affected sports across the globe in an unprecedented manner. The Study will examine how sports organizations and broadcasters have had to forcefully adapt to a whole new business environment during these times. In addition, we will look at the seismic economic crash the pandemic has caused in the world of sports. Moreover, this study will look at recommendations and policies of implementation that were and are continued to be needed for professional sports to survive without crowds in attendance.

1.4 Scope of the study

The study focuses on the financial and social impact of the loss of having audiences in sporting arenas during the COVID-19 pandemic and look at how professional sports organization survived during this period. In addition, the study will also look at the lessons learned for significant sporting brands with the exponential financial losses of hosting events with fans in arenas. The documentary research carried out in the literature review used well-sourced and published academic articles and credible media outlets and global governmental documents reviewed and quoted in the Study.

1.5 Research Significance

The Study will highlight the financial and social pitfalls for major sporting organizations during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research will revise the practices put in place to safeguard the return of fans to attend sporting events. The Study will also illustrate strategies that were put in place to adapt vast financial shortfalls of the organizations affected by losing fans in attendance.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Unprecedented circumstances

In March of last year, the world awoke to dawn when the sporting world, like so many other regular facades of daily life, was put on hold with the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic. Many of

the biggest and most popular sports were suspended, such as the NBA and the Tokyo Olympics, due to the perception that people became a risk to each other when gathering in groups or large crowds. In the second half of 2020, significant sports had resumed under a bubble mindset where practices were put in place to host major sporting events in safe and secured environments without fans in attendance (Cohen & Radnofsky, 2020).

In the UK, where the English Premier League is an iconic sporting fixture for ten months of the year, in cities up and down the country, the first match to be postponed in March of 2020 was the Manchester City versus Arsenal fixture, a game which is played in front of 55,000 fans. This was the first sign that alarm bells were ringing. With that, the entire league shut down for 100 days forcing a sudden loss of revenue and, in turn, caused a runaway knock-on effect to the organizations which rely on game day, in-stadium revenues, and TV broadcast deals (Mallows, 2020).

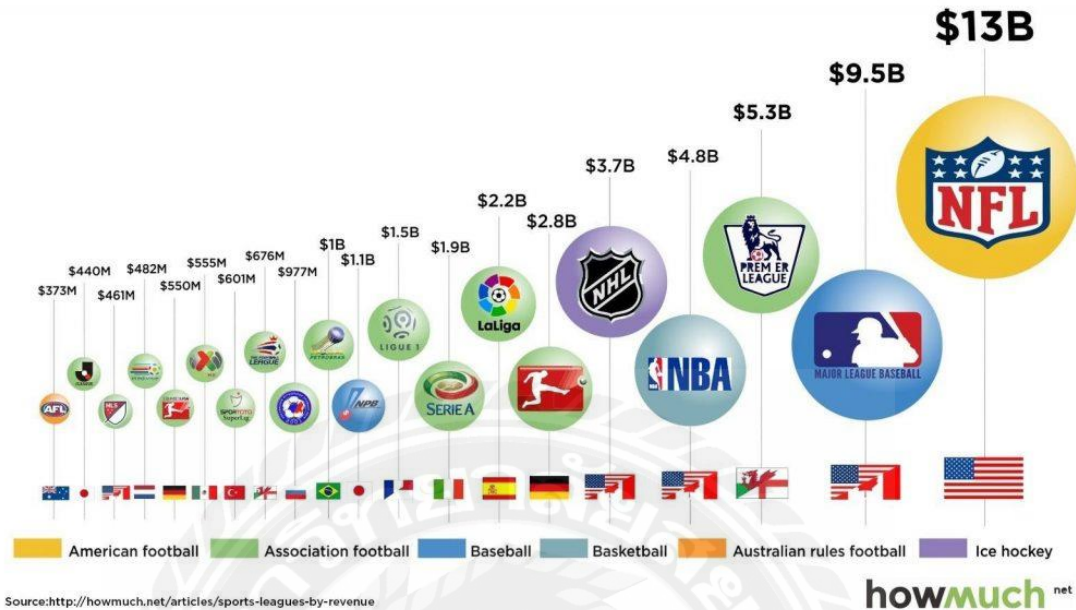
An article in CNET sports stated that as the most-watched sporting league in the world, the shutdown of the English premier league has reverberations across many other sporting leagues, with FIFA (the world governing body for soccer) also announcing blanket postponement on international football matches due to the growing fears of the pandemic (Trenholm, 2020). The 2020 Tokyo Olympics was the biggest sporting event victim of the pandemic when the Japanese government and the IOC decided to postpone last summer's Olympics games. In terms of a blow to everyone involved in the postponement, the Japanese economy was to be struck as the host country had spent an estimated \$12bn on the buildup to hosting the showpiece of the summer sporting calendar (McCurry & Ingle, 2020). In a published report from The World Economic Forum, the upending of the global sporting calendar had far-reaching financial and social ramifications with a value on the global sports industry set at \$471bn in 2018, up from 45% in the previous eight years. The Coronavirus pandemic halted that upward trajectory like never seen before (Hall, 2020). March 11, 2020, saw the sporting juggernaut of the National Basketball league (NBA) come to a shuddering halt as teams, on the advice of public health officials, either began postponing all NBA games (Lacques, 2021).

2.2 Economic Impact

At the start of 2020, the global sporting market was valued a whopping US\$756bn, on an annual basis, divided up into the power markets of the USA, Europe, and China with a trend of an upward trajectory year on year. Global sports are a huge financial windfall for those involved. The Rio Olympics welcomed over 1 million foreign and domestic spectators. The graph below shows the world's wealthiest sports by annual revenues (Svensson & Radmann, 2021).

One of the biggest draws of professional sports is its ability to attract large crowds of people into arenas the world over, bringing direct and indirect revenues as a value chain to bring economic prosperity to many ecosystems within the value chain. It is estimated that the stadia market is worth an estimated US\$ 50bn dollars per annum, with the onslaught of the Coronavirus. Moreover, with the shuttering of stadiums, losses would be seismic and inevitable (Somoggi, 2020). A Forbes publication states that English premier league teams will incur upwards of millions of US dollars of losses during the pandemic (Nicoll, 2021). Deloitte's Sports Business Group reported that the English Premier League lost in the region of 1.6bn euros during the season postponement and with no fans in attendance with the season restart. Football clubs in the UK base their earning calculations on having half of their season (estimated 25 games) played at home, where spectators come through the turnstiles and in turn spend large amounts of disposable income with the stadia on food beverages, and merchandise. With the onset of Covid-19, all these revenues disappeared (Wright & Bate, 2021). The economic impact on professional sports not only erased millions in revenue but also caused an incredible amount of job losses within the industry among major US sporting organizations. The impact on industry job losses was staggering, with an estimated 3 million jobs reliant on sports. The knock-on effect had far-reaching impacts with the loss of revenues for sports travel and hospitality (ESPN, 2020). Penn State University in the United States witnessed losses of up to \$60 US Dollars in the fiscal year with operating losses of \$35US Dollars. A staggering \$45 million was lost in ticket sales with the ban on fans attending games and the shortened season due to the pandemic. The remaining financial losses came in the form of media rights, sponsorships, and game-day revenue (Meyer, 2021).

Top Professional Sports Leagues by Revenue



2.3 New Normal

According to Forbes, the National Basketball Association (NBA), to get their league back running, in a behind closed doors system, spent approximately \$180 million US Dollars to set up and run its so-called bubble at Florida's Walt Disney Resort. Doing so enabled the league to play a total of 172 games, which enabled the organization not to lose a projected \$1.5bn US Dollars if the league could not resume operations. The bubble was a well-orchestrated and executed operation involving stringent testing, social distancing, mask-wearing, quarantine, and cooperation from the players, the teams, and the operational staff. Incredibly, not one single or coach tested positive during the 100-day bubble (Beer, 2020). In Thailand, where the country's national sport of MuayThai was forced into a four-month-long hiatus due to a cluster of infections from an event at one of Bangkok's major MuayThai stadiums, the competitive sport returned to action under strict safety protocols and guidelines. The sport, which employs over ten thousand people, had to adhere to a new standard system of no spectators allowed in venues, apart from the crew, fighters, ring officials, and TV broadcasters. All fighters were required to isolate 14-days before and after an event (Chuenudomsavad, 2020). According to a report in ESPN, professional boxing in America resumed in the fight capital of the world, Las Vegas, under a 'bubble' which took months of planning under the team at Top Rank Boxing promotions who prepared a five-pronged plan to the authorities and

public health officials to allow boxing to resume under strict safety protocols which got governmental clearance. Fighters, trainers, and crew had to undergo strict testing, social, distancing, and quarantine to keep the process flowing (Rothstein, 2020). For the multimillionaire stars of the National Basketball League, the concept of eating, sleeping, and working inside a dedicated, secure bubble in Florida to get the NBA season back on track over 100 days. The league and its stars had to adapt to new ways of opening under a cloud of the COVID-19 pandemic to keep a multibillion-dollar industry operating (Tennery, 2020). Fake crowd noise and cardboard cutouts of fans in the stands became part of the new normal for professional sports; they returned amid the pandemic, with no fans in attendance, teams such Germany's Borussia Dortmund, which usually hosts a whole house for all its home games in the 81,000-seater stadium, installed a digital system to over the stadia's loudspeakers with artificial crowd noise throughout the games. This concept followed suit in almost every major football game, were played in a behind-closed-door system. German teams went one further, offering fans the opportunity to pay \$20 to purchase life-size cardboard cutouts of themselves superimposed onto the cardboard to give the aesthetic impression of fans in the stands (Smale, 2020). The National Football League (NFL) implemented extensive quarantine, testing, and social distancing to allow the league to resume. The league made a series of changes to operations to reduce the dangers posed by the virus. Adapting practices were critical to the resumption of activities where no team get-togethers were permitted, meetings were held and conducted via virtual platforms, everyone on the field would wear face coverings when not playing (Volin, 2020).

3. Past Research

The Olympic Games, in its 124-year history, has only been postponed by tragic worldwide events such as both world wars and, in 2020, by the Coronavirus pandemic, which swept the globe without a shadow of concern for human life, causing the entire sporting world to come to a standstill. With considerable debate during 2020 as to how to safely restart major sporting events, a sign of socio and economic relief was breathed as most sports were able to return without fans in attendance, months after they were forced to shut down, with strict safety protocols in place. Grassroots level feeder sports suffered immensely, as most if not all training facilities were shuttered for most of 2020 (Beneke & Leithauser, 2021). Svensson & Radmann (2020) found that the Covid-19 pandemic

had been a financial disaster for sports in Sweden, with an almost complete shutdown of all sources of revenue during the pandemic. This also led to severe social challenges with a sense of social membership and integration with the shutdown of sports and mentioned that sports are an escape mechanism for people during times of crisis but with sports shuttered, what were the alternatives with all the lockdowns and restrictions on gatherings in place. In their research, Lim & Pranata (2021) studied the effects of the suspension of sporting events and fitness centers, which forced athletes to focus on modifying training programs at home without the close supervision of experts. However, modern technology was implemented to monitor progress and help avoid the prolonged risk of injury while training without close supervision. Yanguas & Dominguez (2020) studied that early data from La Liga, the governing body for Spanish football that includes all professional football players in Spain, reported that approximately 16% had favorable antibody rates (IgM/IgG) right after the end of the lockdown with a significant variation between different teams. In Spain, different sports federations, medical associations, and societies related to sports had developed different protocols to minimize the COVID-19 impact during the return to training and before they returned to competition. Specifically, the highest authority, La Liga, implemented a mandatory protocol for professional teams to minimize the risks of infection of COVID-19 during training, considering factors that could put athletes' health at risk, protocols endorsed by the Spanish Health Ministry. Schellhorn, Klingel & Burgstahler (2020) found that the long-term consequences to the health of athletes who contract COVID-19 are unchanged. However ever, they stated that from the previous research, it was found that elite athletes who made complete recoveries had an excellent long-term prognosis of a return to normalcy, but further data collection on the current form of Coronavirus was essential.

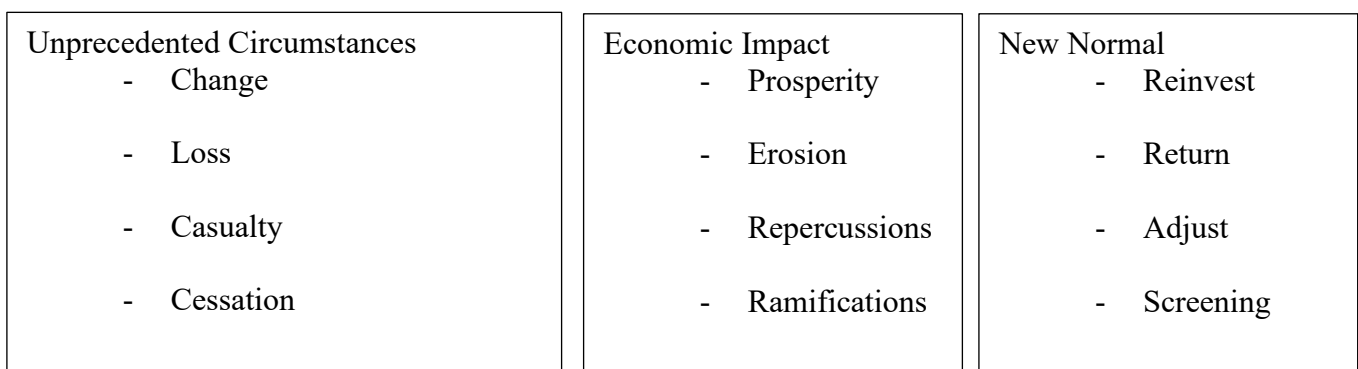


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Model

(Cohen & Radnofsky, 2020), (Mallows, 2020), (McCurry & Ingle, 2020), (Lacques, 2021), (Krnjaic, 2020), (Smoggi, 2020), (Wright & Bate, 2021), (Meyer, 2021), (Beer, 2020), (Rothstein, 2020), (Smale, 2020), (Volin, 2020)

The Study shows how the COVID-19 pandemic brought about seismic disruption to the world of professional sports the world over. The impact was felt both from a financial perspective and was very damaging, from a socio aspect. Another essential coverage from this Study was the ability for professional sporting organizations to adapt and overcome immense risks and protocols to restart sporting events amid the pandemic found that the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic harmed sports, with closures of stadia, athletes becoming ill, and employees losing jobs due to the halt of revenues, it was an apartment that sporting organizations could not maintain staffing levels. Moreover, it highlighted the fact that the global sporting industry was ill-prepared for a crisis of this magnitude and needs to use this current crisis as a tool for change and preparation for any possible future global shutdowns (Keshkar et al., 2021).

5. Recommendations

Results from this study suggest the need for sporting organizations to diversify their approach to coping during a pandemic with significant amounts of revenue streams that halted due to the blockage of having fans in attendance at stadia across the globe. With the onset of lockdowns, teams had to implant strategies to engage with fans through digital platforms and traditional tv media. From an economic perspective, the Study highlighted the mitigating factors faced with the vast financial losses incurred and pointed to the mapping of how diversified planning organizations overcame obstacles to stem the losses and reengage revenue streams. Diversification in creating revenue streams with the pandemic effect on sports organizations is a must; traditional ways of generating income will return to total capacity for some time. Football's world governing body, FIFA, announced that they generated more revenue from video gaming in 2020 than traditional income due to the pandemic. This turn will emphasize the need to diversify with the widespread disruption caused by the pandemic (Owen, 2021). (Laskey, 2021) recommended that sports teams push their digital media engagement more and more with fans and went on to show that the

pandemic had changed how professional sports are marketed in this new normal era. Attending major sporting events is a social experience where people invest their hard-earned money into playing a part in the whole experience. With the landscaped change due to fans being locked out of stadiums, there is a much-needed opportunity for greater social media engagement from the sporting companies to engage with fans.

Limitation of the study

The main limitation of the research carried out in this study is the timeline proximity to the ongoing global pandemic caused by the Coronavirus outbreak in early 2020, called Covid-19. As a result, the academic studies carried out limit the amount of data that is available to assert definite recommendations and solutions to the problems faced by sporting organizations throughout the process of being faced with empty stadia, loss of revenues, and turning around the fortunes of the sporting company's fortunes in the face of this global pandemic. Therefore, more time and research are needed to comprehend the impact and the solutions needed to overcome fully.

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