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Opinion Piece

Sport in the tracks and fields of the corona virus: Critical issues during the exit from lockdown[☆]

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COVID-19 is the clinical disease that results from an infection with the new Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).¹ In early 2020, the SARS-CoV-2 made its way around the world, with nations having to adopt measures to stop the virus overwhelming hospitals and causing casualties. Social distancing and case isolation have been the foundation of most national strategies, while border restrictions have been used to decrease international travel. These lockdown measures have come at significant cost. Individual citizens' lives and whole economies have been paused. Globally, sport has also been harshly affected by the pandemic lockdown. The Tokyo Olympics 2020 have been moved one year later, with recent comments by global health and infectious disease experts cautioning that even hosting the Olympics in 2021 may be unrealistic.² The International Olympic Committee (IOC) stated that in a worst case scenario, both the 2020 and 2022 Olympics, in effect, an entire Olympiad, will suffer from the pandemic.³ The aim of this extended letter is to examine the immediate consequences of the pandemic for sports and to discuss some critical issues during the exit from the initial lockdown.

In late April 2020, most countries were continuing to record increasing daily case numbers, while others seemed to have managed to curb the virus transmission. There is a growing hope in these countries that the pandemic restrictions can soon be relaxed. Seeking a path forward, public health agencies and governments are balancing considerations for the health of their populations, the freedom of their citizens, and the ongoing impact of economic constraints. In Europe this has resulted in different timelines and strategies; France has decided that its lockdown will remain in place until 11 May, while Austria opened small shops on 14 April, and Germany has planned for slowly reopening schools, starting with the youngest children first.⁴

In sports, most of the major professional leagues were halted early during the pandemic. For instance, the Italian Serie A football league was paused March 9, but may recommence play again in late May or early June.⁵ Before the league resumes, all players have to be tested for the SARS-CoV-2. In Germany, the Bundesliga

is planning to resume in May, but the games will be played in front of empty stands, as no major public spectator events will be held until at least September.⁶ In the English Premier League, players have had their April wages cut by up to 25 percent, and the clubs have reached an agreement with the players' union to cut some levels of future salaries.⁷ In women's football, the situation is even more serious. Fifpro, the international players' union, report that many clubs are so badly affected by the pandemic that their existence is threatened.⁸ In consequence, many female soccer players run the risk of not being able to sustain themselves financially as a result of the sport ceasing during the lockdown. The Fifpro has asked for directed efforts to avoid irreversible consequences for women's football.

Also individual player sports have been significantly affected by the pandemic lockdown. In France, the Tour de France cycling competition has been postponed, with a new start date (August 29) two months later than planned.⁹ In the United States, the men's PGA Golf Tour has been rescheduled to resume activities in June, but at least the first four tournaments will be played without an audience.¹⁰ A few individual sports have managed to continue activities during the lockdown by pivoting to create new forms of competition. Some of the world's leading dart players have taken part in the "Home Tour", a tournament where players throw their darts at home instead of together in an arena.¹¹ To support the sustainability of the sport, completely virtual competitions have also been arranged. A number of tennis stars competed in the Madrid Open virtual competition at the end of April. The winners were being encouraged to donate some of the prize money to the lower ranked players, who suffer the most from the pandemic lockdown.¹²

Four months into the first pandemic year, the critical matter for the most affected sports is thus not exit from the lockdown, but continued existence. Many governments have understood the dire situation for these sports communities during the lockdown and developed comprehensive support plans. For instance, in Sweden (pop. 10 million), the government has assigned half a billion SEK (USD 50 M) to the sports movement.¹³ The criteria used to distribute the funds are solidarity with the sports that suffer the most, continued existence of community sports clubs, and support of child and youth sports. Also non-government organisations have volunteered to help sports manage the consequences of the

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lockdown. In Sweden, Svenska Spel, a sports gambling company, distributes every year about SEK 50 million (USD 5 M) to sports clubs. In normal years, the money is paid out in November, but this year half the funds have been distributed already to about 3600 sports clubs.¹⁴

Having endured the lockdown, reopening societies is likely to be a long-term process around which little scientific consensus yet exists. To choose lockdown exit pathways is challenging, because the present knowledge about the effectiveness of the different social distancing measures is mainly limited to that of influenza.¹⁵ The lockdown exit strategies will in consequence differ between nations and be marked by trial and error. In many countries, a suppression and lift scenario can be expected to occur, i.e. easing social distancing measures when it is possible, then clamping down again when case rates climb back up. In a recent simulation analysis, where it must be noted that many parameters were assigned assumed values, the COVID-19 incidence over the next five years was found to depend upon whether or not the SARS-Cov-2 enters into regular circulation.¹⁶ The probability of regular circulation of the virus was suggested to be associated with the duration of immunity that the SARS-CoV-2 infection induces, but also on the time of year when the virus is reintroduced and, to some extent, the level of cross-immunity that exists between coronaviruses. The researchers conclude that it is reasonable to expect SARS-Cov-2 circulation in parallel to existing infectious diseases, such as influenza. This implies that there is a need for consideration of long-term precautionary measures, such as programmes for regular vaccination, both in the general population and among athletes.

Until such measures for sustainable control of SARS-Cov-2 can come into play, countries have to continue adopting social distancing policies. During this intermittent period, it is imperative that sports authorities plead for individual responsibility in avoiding unnecessary risks for spread of SARS-CoV-2. During this, potentially extended, period of time, positioning with regard to personal freedom and social responsibility will be put to the test. As the risk of becoming infected with SARS-Cov-2 is dependent on other people's compliance with the social distancing regulations, unwillingness to contribute to the joint effort is unfair on other members of society and other sportspersons.¹⁷ During periods of extended social distancing, most sports people can be expected to act in a socially responsible way and in solidarity with the greater community, thus contributing to a decreased infection risk. However, some sportspersons, by ignoring pleas for protective and preventive behaviour, may choose to take advantage of the benefits of the majority complying with health recommendations. During a prolonged lockdown exiting process, such behaviour is highly problematic and must be restrained, taking into regard the consequences for high-risk groups and other athletes as well.

Thinking beyond personal interests, taking social responsibility, and understanding how other people make choices, will thus be critical for the governing bodies of sports communities when exiting the pandemic lockdown. It may be argued that if sports people know they are taking risks but accept them as the price of pursuing goals to which they assign higher priority, then it is not motivated for sports governing bodies to insist that health matters be valued above anything else.¹⁸ However, non-compliance with lockdown exit policies, which might be founded upon misperception of risks or other personal priorities, creates the free rider problem.¹⁹ This problem has been analysed at length in the vaccination context, and can be avoided during a prolonged lockdown exit by strongly pointing out the negative effects of deliberately neglecting precautions and protective behaviour.²⁰

The SARS-Cov-2 pandemic has revealed a unique ecology of health-related consequences that require attention, among sportspeople and in the general population alike.²¹ The most affected

groups are often those who are already the most vulnerable. Solidarity and social responsibility should, therefore, not only be accounted for by governments and public health agencies, but also by the sport's governing bodies that formulate lockdown exiting protocols. All sportspeople, from members of governing bodies to coaches and athletes, need to strike the right balance between contributing to protecting the vulnerable by keeping the transmission of SARS-Cov-2 in the community at bay, while easing discontent and economic damage in the sports community.

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