The Solo-Social Spectrum of Sport: COVID-19

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The world of sport in the UK and globally, has been fundamentally challenged by the deadly pandemic of COVID-19. Both individually and as part of a society - whether one likes it or not - sport is a marker of community and driver of the economy.

In at least two ways sport became intimately intertwined in the unfolding drama as the coronavirus gripped societies across the planet: 1. The impact on elite, globally consumable sport, and 2. the contribution of sport and physical activity as permissible response by families and individuals, while virtually all other activities were locked down.

In the UK one of the first major signals of the approaching challenge was the postponement of the Premier League fixture on 11th March 2020 between Manchester City and Arsenal as the Arsenal manager, and former player, Mikel Arteta tested positive and the multi-billion-dollar edifice of one of the world’s most successful leagues ground to a halt. The Premier League’s efforts at ‘Project Restart’ face huge logistical question marks, not least the ethical one over the focus and resources needed for elite sport, while vast swathes of British society face existential challenges. Morality plays and sport are not new, needless to say, but when a Nielsen survey of sports fans reveals: ‘45% of sports fans would stop watching a sports league based on how they conducted themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic’, the likes of the Premier League need to think carefully.

Globally, the guardians of world sport in the form of the International Olympic Committee were seen as slow to react, hoping that the quadrennial summer sporting jamboree could take place in August 2020 in Tokyo before the directives of the Japanese government in seeking to control COVID-19 meant it was postponed to the same dates 2021, but retaining for branding purposes the title “Tokyo 2020”.

While the realm of global elite sport is something that most people will only access as a spectator, grassroots sport is something that is interwoven into the social fabric of local communities. The onset of COVID-19 has seen sport and physical activity have an increased prominence. These activities are one of the few things that governments - to varying degrees - have allowed people to do. There are clear health benefits here which contribute to physical and mental wellbeing but also reduce risks of exposure and increase chances

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of recovery from COVID-19. The emphasis has been on participation in ‘solo’ and now, in England at least one on one participation, enterprises running/cycling/walking/in-house workouts while team sports remain off limits. From people running marathons on apartment balconies, to participating in live broadcast fitness session with the likes of fitness coach Joe Wicks (aka the Body coach), who reaches a million households daily and has had 6 of the top 20 live broadcasts ever on YouTube. As lockdown measures ease, different sporting activities - such as tennis and golf - are one of the first signs to many of a return to normalcy. What that ‘normal’ ultimately looks like will remain to be seen, but sport both in terms of participation and consumption will be part of the much talked about new normal.

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The focus on sport is huge; and therefore so is the opportunity for the transition to a COVID-19 managed world to embed good habits and engage in practices across the sportscape that forefront wellbeing, access for all sectors of society underpinned by good governance in the solo and social reams of sport.

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