



SportBusinessReview

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THE GAME HAS CHANGED

HOW THE BUSINESS OF SPORT IS
ADAPTING TO LIFE UNDER LOCKDOWN

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

“Stop broadcasting, start interacting.” The digital response to the crisis

F1’s virtual grands prix – a silver lining in dark times

Eni Aluko, building a truly professional culture at Aston Villa Women

Georgiou targeting further growth for Eurosport Events after UCI tie-up



How is sport adopting immersive/virtual realities to engage with Gen Y and Gen Zs?

Will live streaming and mixed-realities attract different types of spectators?

Will bidding cities take a new hosting approach to address climate change?

Will older stadia be capable of delivering the infrastructure needed for new technology?

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10



16



38



46



55

Worldview

- 5 After Covid, sport will be back.
- 6 Global pandemic requires leaning on sports in a different way
- 7 Covid-19, globalisation and its limits
- 8 Six questions facing the US sports betting industry

Covid-19

- 10 The importance of digital engagement during the lockdown
- 14 Duty of care considerations take priority as sports seeks legal advice
- 16 US sports leagues eye potential return
- 20 Dainton: "Instead of a draw ceremony we had an emergency meeting"
- 29 Mixed fortunes for Australian rights-holders amid Covid-19 crisis
- 34 Exeter City's turbulent past equips it to cope with pandemic

Interview

- 18 Interview with Octagon's John Shea

Esports

- 26 Formula One's virtual grands prix are a silver lining during dark times

Sponsorship

- 38 Formula 1 could have up to seven different regional betting sponsors, says ISG

Sports Betting

- 44 Legalized US sports betting creates robust opportunities for agencies

Development

- 46 Eni Aluko | Women's sport is a great vehicle to tackle social issues

Events

- 55 Georgiou targeting further growth for Eurosport Events after announcing UCI tie-up
- 65 Barcelona shifts focus as Olympic legacy lives on

Governance

- 59 Sun Yang's downfall highlights China's failure to develop individual stars

Venues

- 61 Hail to the new stadium? Redskins' long search for new facility taking many detours



After Covid, sport will be back. And it will be celebrated like never before.



It's now more than a month since the world's theatres of dreams began to go dark.

What started as a trickle of cancellations and postponements became a flood until, inevitably, the year's marquee events – including the Tokyo Olympic Games and Uefa Euro 2020 – were canned.

Covid-19 is a silent killer and sports events run completely contrary to the social isolation measures introduced to combat its spread.

With thousands dying around the world, Covid-19 gives the lie to that over-used Bill Shankly quote: “Some people think football is a matter of life

and death. I can assure you, it's much more serious than that.” It's not, nor is any other sport.

Football journalist Henry Winter captured the mood in an article for *the Times*: “It is patently wrong to keep chasing a ball and pursuing the broadcasters' billions when the illness invades the sport and the country.”

So here we are. There is no live sport and the business of sport is facing up to a whole new reality.

I once worked with Nigel Rushman, head of the eponymous company, on a series of conferences focused on event management and all that goes with it.

He was fond of describing events as

both the lifeblood and the raw product of the sports industry.

He was right on both counts. Without events there's nothing to sell tickets to, nothing to point a camera at, nowhere for brands to display their messages and nowhere to impress clients over a glass of champagne with a great view of the action.

That's the direct hit the sports sector has taken. And as days have become weeks our SportBusiness 24 news service has reported from London, New York and Singapore on the impact of the shutdown on leagues, broadcasters, agencies, and right along the supply chain to the catering companies,

security companies, travel operators, programme printers, merchandise suppliers and vendors. The list goes on.

Without events there is no sports business and, as the crisis has evolved through predictable phases, it has been painful to report a news cycle that has seen cancellations lead to the restructuring of financial agreements and the laying-off of staff.

But in these changed times we have also seen the sports sector begin to think in new ways. While there can be no substitute for live events, we have seen some tremendous examples of creative thinking as clubs, leagues and individual athletes have turned to digital and social media to maintain the connection to fans and stakeholders.

We have seen new esports competitions created to keep engagement alive and we have seen sports organisations reach out to their communities to provide comfort and assistance to those most in need of it as their lives are turned upside down.

SportBusiness has been part of the sports sector for close to a quarter of a century and we aim to play our part to support the industry at this time of crisis.

By providing a source of news, analysis and opinion – in written form and now on video – about the ways in which the industry is responding to Covid-19, our content hub at sportbusiness.com remains more than ever the go-to destination for insight and knowledge sharing.

We're all suffering from the

uncertainty caused by something we can't see, and which experts are still only beginning to understand, but with China reporting falling rates of infection we are slowly getting a better idea of the likely longevity of the pandemic and we understand that the sports sector faces a hiatus and not the final curtain.

What has been underscored in recent weeks is the importance of the role of sport in the lives of many millions of people around the world. It's not just about being at the game or watching on television. It is about sport's role in our lives 24/7.

It's about how sport injects excitement as we share drama and jeopardy, it's about how it fuels the most passionate conversation and debate and provides an instant connection between us.

The absence of sport leaves a gaping hole in society and while the current hiatus is the inevitable result of something we can't control, it's a safe bet that its absence is making the public's heart fonder by the day.

Sport will be back. And when it is, it will be celebrated like never before as a mark of a return to normal life for the public and for all those who work in sport.

That's something to bear in mind when planning for the future as well as trying to navigate an uncertain present. And be assured that, in our own way, SportBusiness will be working to support the industry we serve in these tough times as well as the better ones that await. ○



Editor
Ben Cronin
ben.cronin@sportbusiness.com
+ 44 (0)20 7265 4232

Deputy Editor
Adam Nelson
adam.nelson@sportbusiness.com
+ 44 (0)20 7265 4234

US Editor
Eric Fisher
eric.fisher@sportbusiness.com

Asia Editor
Kelvin Tan
kelvin.tan@sportbusiness.com

Head of Content
Richard Welbirg
richard.welbirg@sportbusiness.com
+ 44 (0)20 7265 4233

Editorial Director
Kevin Roberts
kevin.roberts@sportbusiness.com

Senior Designer
Alex Smith
alex.smith@sportbusiness.com

Designer
Jacklin Kuneva
jacklin.kuneva@wedodigitalsolutions.com

Production and Distribution Manager
Craig Young
craig.young@sportbusiness.com

Commercial Director
Paul.Santos@sportbusiness.com
+ 44 (0) 2072 654183

Subscription/Information Sales
Max Frew/Scott Longhurst/
Laurence Burton
info@sportbusiness.com

Head of Media Sales
Robin.Hume@sportbusiness.com
+ 44 (0) 2072 654182

www.sportbusiness.com

Published by:
SportBusiness, a division of SBG
Companies Ltd, Park House, 116 Park
Street, London, W1K 6AF

T: +44 (0) 20 7265 4100
F: +44 (0) 20 7265 4220

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Global pandemic requires leaning on sports in a different way

It seems a sure bet that, even decades from now, we're all going to remember where we were on March 11, when we heard the National Basketball Association had suspended its 2019-20 season indefinitely due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Of course it likely won't be a particularly exciting recollection, given many of us were already at home beginning to heed the then-growing calls to practice social distancing.

But the NBA's move, which followed a growing series of announcements around the sports industry that day, to suspend certain games or play them in an empty arenas, has seemed to serve as a something of a line of demarcation for all of society.

Since Utah Jazz center Rudy Gobert tested positive for Covid-19, in turn prompting the NBA's rapid suspension decision, it's been a seemingly endless series of postponements, cancellations, layoffs and wage reductions around the sports industry, plus broader societal news of stay-at-home orders, rising numbers of Covid-19 cases, and extreme stress on medical systems.

And instead of sports helping to lead society out of a tragedy by providing relief, staging games and raising charitable funds, as it does following a natural disaster or something like the September 11 terrorist attacks, sports this time played a prominent role in galvanizing public attention into the severity of the ongoing pandemic.

That makes for an unbelievably tough, unprecedented situation, where one of the most powerful properties of sport – uplifting people by bringing

them together in shared experience – is the very thing that can't be done.

So that now requires leaning on sports in a very different way.

Top athletes for many years have used various visualization techniques to achieve peak performance, deeply imagining and focusing senses on an

“There are already reports of a deeply changed sports business – one that has in many pockets grown kinder, more considerate, less cutthroat and in some ways actually more connected.”

intended on-field scenario to reach a heightened state of calm, create an effortlessness to their movement, and help that performance to occur.

Phrases like ‘being in the zone’ are now overused to the point of being trite, but they indeed reference reaching that elevated mental state.

Operating a sports business during a global pandemic is obviously not a direct parallel, and in this horrific situation, there are certainly fewer things actually in any of our direct control.

But given that attending live sporting events again will undoubtedly be a bellwether for the overall societal recovery, many industry executives have already begun to focus strongly on that anticipated future, and use that as a crucial rallying point both internally and externally.

“The one thing I know for sure

is baseball will be back,” said Rob Manfred, Major League Baseball commissioner, in a widely viewed ESPN interview. “Whenever it’s safe to play, we’ll be back...We will be part of the recovery, the healing in this country from this particular pandemic.”

In the meantime, as social distancing is the law of the land and employees of all stripes seek to master the nuances of working from home, there have already been widespread reports of a deeply changed sports business – a business that even with the current difficulties of physical separation and growing financial pressure has still in many pockets grown kinder, more considerate, less cutthroat, more communicative, and thanks in part to video-conferencing bringing us directly into each other's homes, in some ways actually more connected.

“The daily conversations we’ve been having remotely, with the ability to analyze different pieces of the business, this situation has opened up a new level of dialogue and allowed us to discuss things that we wouldn’t have had the opportunity to do otherwise, particularly because of where things normally are at this point in the calendar,” said Ken Babby, founder of Fast Forward Sports Group, which operates a pair of minor league baseball teams. “We’ve had a lot of great ideas emerge out of all that.”

Everybody's collections of great ideas, to whatever part of the industry they apply, will serve a critical purpose focusing all of our attention on that hopeful future when it's game on again. ○



Covid-19, globalisation and its limits

The last couple of months have been a reminder of something often easy to forget: that despite our globalised, internet-connected world, the physical distances between countries and people really matter.

That connectedness allowed Covid-19 to spread with breath-taking speed. The distances seemed to prevent comprehension of what was happening.

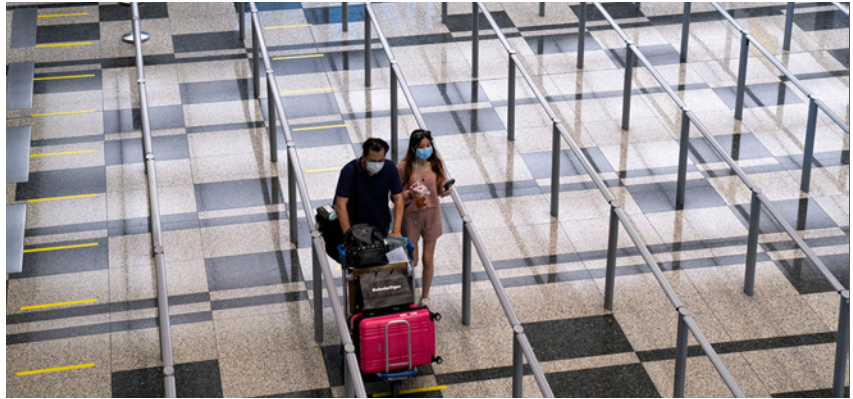
From Asia, many watched Europe and America's sluggish responses to the Covid-19 outbreak with incredulity. Did they not see what had happened in China? Everyone did, of course, but for most China is still a distant land. What happens there couldn't happen here...

At the start of this month, Inter Milan chairman Steven Zhang launched a blistering attack on Italian football authorities for continuing to play despite growing numbers of Covid-19 cases in the country.

At the time, his alarm sounded shrill and perhaps unnecessary – the case count in Italy was still relatively low and China seemed somewhat alone in terms of the large numbers of cases and deaths. But for Zhang, the crisis had already hit home and the danger was clear. For most Italians and other Europeans, it was a distant problem.

Media, ideas, trends, memes, and – unfortunately – diseases, can travel the planet with astonishing speed today. But we can often barely explain why. Most people in Italy don't understand or know much about people in China. Just because you laughed at Gangnam Style doesn't make you an authority on Korea.

It's possible to share interests and passions – including sporting passions – with people on the other side of the planet and still not really understand their cultures, backgrounds



or, in business terms, their potential as customers. In the sports industry, all the major international properties know by now that having X million fans – however that is defined – in overseas markets does not automatically translate into Y million dollars of revenue.

Building sports businesses in overseas markets is usually a slow, expensive process, requiring specialist local knowledge and partners, and with each market needing careful research and nurturing. Even then, luck, such as the emergence of a local star, is often needed to really move the needle in terms of audience interest and revenue.

I moved to Singapore six months ago. It's a very 'Westernised' place, as far as Asia goes. Some jokingly dismiss the fact that it's even 'Asian' at all. But scratch beneath the surface of the recognisable shopping brands, the English language, and other Western features, and there are profound cultural and societal differences between here and where I moved from in the UK.

As the Covid-19 crisis grew in Europe, Asian colleagues commented that it would be more difficult to convince European populations to submit to movement controls than it would be

more compliant Asian populations. I argued that the differences wouldn't be great, once the danger became clear and people started dying. It appears my colleagues' cross-cultural understanding was stronger than mine.

The source material is sobering, but there are potentially lessons from this worth bearing in mind for the sports sector. Many sports organisations and businesses are engaged in selling their wares and messages overseas.

How well do they actually know the places they are trying to sell to or communicate with? What do they know about the people and culture? Do they have staff from these places in their organisations that can help them understand? If they don't have the resources internally to understand the target market, are there external resources that can help, like consultants and agents? Without bridging the gap in understanding, success in overseas markets could be elusive or fleeting.

The Covid-19 crisis has shown us how connected we are to other parts of the world, and simultaneously that there are yawning gaps in our understanding of other lands and peoples. It's perhaps a useful reminder of the limits of our knowledge and abilities. ○

Inside track

Chris Russo, chief executive, Fifth Generation Sports



Six questions facing the US sports betting industry

US sports betting has been dramatically impacted by the current medical and economic crises created by the Covid-19 outbreak. While professionals in the space are correctly focused on the health and safety of their families, employees and customers, some executives are beginning to consider the key questions facing the betting sector, once professional sports resume. Although the questions are fairly obvious, the answers are far less clear.

Will the current crisis ultimately accelerate the legalisation of sports betting across the US?

Cash shortfalls facing many states could propel a faster path to the legalisation of sports betting, as states seek additional tax and licensing revenues. Also, given the potential need for social distancing, the move to mobile platforms could accelerate in certain states which have only legalised land-based sports betting to date.

While this hypothesis has merit, there are other factors to consider. Perhaps most importantly, many state legislatures will be consumed with more pressing matters in the near-term (or may be out-of-session, due to health concerns about assembling). Also, for some states, the potential sports betting revenues may be relatively insignificant compared to their massive cash shortfalls. Finally, if states are overly aggressive in their fees and taxation, these actions may actually dampen the growth of US sports betting.

Will economic challenges faced by sports leagues lead to a more aggressive deployment of sports betting?

Major US sports leagues have prudently managed the roll-out of US sports betting, developing a range of policies regarding local team activities, in-arena betting, in-game broadcast promotion, and other related initiatives. In order to boost revenues, some team owners could seek a speedier deployment of new betting products and marketing initiatives.

While this is certainly a possibility, the major US sports leagues are generally healthy, vibrant businesses that can effectively weather the current crises. Moreover, while betting is a key new engagement tool and revenue stream, there is significant risk in over-saturation, as was seen in the early days of daily fantasy advertising.

What types of betting companies will be best positioned, once sports resume play?

In difficult economic times, those companies that are well capitalised and generate diversified revenue streams tend to be best positioned. As such, large betting conglomerates and those companies with alternative products such as horse racing or online casino/poker may have an advantage.

However, this analysis is complicated by the challenges faced by companies that operate land-based casinos. It is not clear how quickly these casino properties can rebound or the degree to which they will receive government assistance. Also, since many betting operators are global enterprises, the

environment in the US may be one of many factors in determining the health of these businesses.

Finally, individual company strategies, resources, and management talent may ultimately outweigh macro-trends, given the dynamic nature of the sports betting ecosystem.

Will betting operators change their approach to marketing?

Conventional wisdom suggests that betting operators will be more cautious about their marketing expenditures, given the economic downturn. Also, the types of marketing deals could be impacted. For example, instead of sponsorships and media deals, operators could increase their focus on performance-based customer acquisition (e.g. CPA deals).

While some operators will likely adopt this conservative approach, others may view the “pent-up demand” among sports bettors as an important opportunity to secure new customers, once sports resume. In addition, some operators may choose to spend heavily in order to gain market share from competitors weakened by the crisis. Finally, if state legalisation accelerates, these betting operators may be “forced” to spend additional marketing dollars in order to establish themselves in important new markets.

Will investment and merger-and-acquisition activity in sports betting be negatively affected?

During an economic downturn, M&A activity and private equity/venture capital investment tends to decline. Also, to the extent that investments

are made, they are often focused on shoring up existing portfolio companies versus investing in new companies or sectors. As such, the sports betting industry could experience lower deal volume in the coming year(s).

On the other hand, the potential need for scale and financial stability could result in a number of M&A consolidation transactions. Also, given that sports betting has significant growth potential, it may be the one area that continues to receive substantial investment dollars, even when investors exhibit extreme caution overall. While there will likely be a period of pause and reflection over the next few months, it is possible that robust deal-making in sports betting could return sometime during the second half of 2020.

Will US sports fans embrace betting, despite economic hardships?

Sports betting was not broadly legal in the US during past economic crises, so there is no direct, historical data regarding consumer behavior. However, it is reasonable to assume that a loss of jobs and disposable income among fans could reduce expenditures on sports betting. During the Great Recession, certain types of gambling activities were negatively impacted (e.g. trips to casinos).

Other gambling activities appear to be more recession resistant (e.g. state lotteries). More broadly, the major sports leagues that drive US sports betting appear to be recession-resistant, based on the 2008 – 2012 experience. Given the loyalty and passion of sports fans, it is possible that game viewership and sports betting could become an important diversion for American consumers, even when vacations and other forms of entertainment are sacrificed.

While questions regarding the sports betting industry pale in comparison to the more important and imminent medical crisis, there will be a time when fans celebrate the return of professional sports and the opportunity to wager. Like all industries, sports betting is operating in uncharted waters, as it relates to the current macro-conditions. This uncertainty is compounded by the nascent nature of the US sports betting marketplace.

Nevertheless, there will surely be significant opportunities for those companies that best address the key questions and optimise their operations with thoughtful strategy and effective execution. ○

Fifth Generation Sports is a sports consulting firm focused on the intersection of sports, technology, and digital media.



(Barry Chin/The Boston Globe via Getty Image)

‘Stop broadcasting, start interacting’ | The importance of digital engagement

Rights-holders are attempting to fill the gap with humorous and archival content, but may need to go further

Esports and streaming platforms like Twitch allow fan engagement to take place even during isolation

Players need to take an active role in engaging with fans and providing content



(Getty Images)

Adam Nelson

From Formula 1 launching a Virtual Grand Prix series to Fifa opening its archives and Leyton Orient hosting the UltimateQuaranTeam global esports tournament for football clubs, rights-holders and teams have already begun to think creatively about how they can continue to provide content to fans starved of live sporting action.

While almost every aspect of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has seen most major sporting competitions cancelled or suspended indefinitely, is unprecedented, football clubs in particular are having to rapidly adjust to the alien scenario of the football news cycle falling silent.

“Digital engagement is usually quite secure across sport and especially in football, because it’s governed by a very uniform and consistent calendar,” says Charlie Beall, consulting partner at

digital agency Seven League. “You have a match every few days, so you’re doing preview, then match coverage, then analysis. The schedule looks after itself in a lot of ways. There’s never really a time when there’s not something for them to be posting about and keeping fans engaged with.”

When a team does put out a piece of creative content, it is usually part of a long-term planned activation, often with support from a brand and an agency. Now, clubs are being forced into activating creatively at short notice, and with relevant parties isolating in different locations often making co-ordinated effort challenging.

Complicating that further is the fact that club sponsors, who have paid huge fees for the rights to assets that are now inaccessible or invisible, are going to be attempting to get some of the value of their deals through digital content, increasing demand for both quantity and quality of social media output.

Boom in archival content

“It’s a period of reckoning right now, about how do you keep those commercial brands happy, and how do you keep fans engaged,” says Beall. “Without the structure of the calendar, there are only a certain number of levers there for you to think about in terms of creative executive and engagement. And those levers are the same ones you’ll also need to use to fulfil your commercial obligations.”

At this early stage, content has focused on simply replacing the void left behind by sport. Videos of marble racing and bowls, overlaid with crowd noise, have gone viral over the past week, while last weekend English football team Hull City and German side Bayer Leverkusen played out a game of Connect Four over Twitter.

“So at the moment it’s just been about, ‘what kind of fun can we have, how can we replace that thing that sports gives our audience?’” says

Niall Coen, chief executive of Snack Media, sports digital publishers and fan engagement experts. “It plays to that community role sport plays, just bringing people together and providing a focal point. But that won’t last long, at some point it is going to have to move into providing content that both engages fans more deeply, and is able to offer something sponsors can latch on to.”

Archival content has provided one such avenue. Fifa is allowing fans to access over 30 full matches from past World Cups, the French Football League has opened its archives to broadcasters, and individual clubs have been churning out highlights compilations – usually reserved for notable anniversaries or the downtime of an international weekend – at an ever-faster rate.

Elliot Richardson, founder and president of the club-owned digital publishing company Dugout, which specialises in the production of archival content, says he expects an extra 70 million video views via the platform in March than February, largely as a result of the shutdown.

“We’re seeing massively increased demand,” he tells *SportBusiness*. “If publishers were taking 10 videos a day before, they’re now taking 20 to 30. We’re seeing newspapers and other online outlets taking far more content to make up for the shortfall they’re seeing elsewhere. Because of the relationship we have with the clubs, we are able to meet that demand.”

Stop broadcasting, start interacting

Beall feels that while nostalgia content can help maintain engagement in the short-term, it is unlikely to hold fans’ interest over a period of weeks and months, while its commercial potential is also limited. “The problem is that everyone is doing it,” he says. “Every single sports network is relying on re-runs, every social media account is posting throwbacks, so how engaging is that going to be? You’ve got a population hungry for sports content but, with no live matches available, you’re competing more than ever with Netflix and with video games. I think the success stories during this period are going to come down to creative

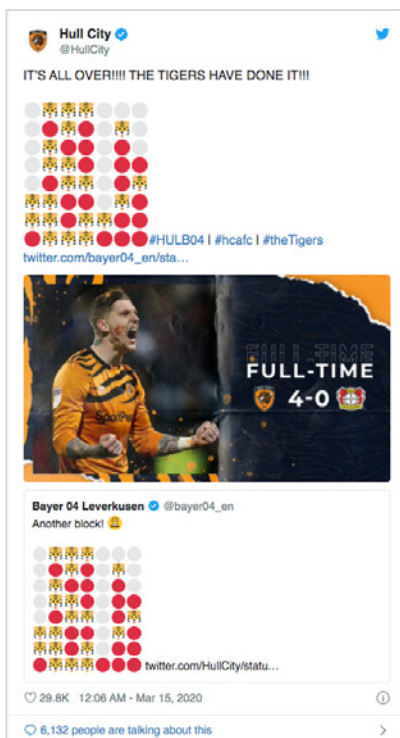
execution around the use of the assets that people do still have access to.”

Where the real value could lie, Beall suggests, is in utilising this time to forge closer connections with audiences, turning to emerging platforms such as Twitch to facilitate direct communication between players and fans. “It’s a time to stop broadcasting and start interacting,” he says. “Teams and rights-holders who go that extra mile to foster a community, keep people’s spirits up – people will be grateful for that in the long-run.”

Twitch has traditionally been associated with esports and video games, but its hook – allowing direct, real-time interaction between broadcasters and audiences – has begun to be adopted for sports already, with the NFL using it to provide alternative Thursday Night Football coverage, and is something that is easily translatable across media.

“The problem is that everyone is doing it...Every single sports network is relying on re-runs.”

Charlie Beall | consulting partner, Seven League



Hull City/ Twitter

“So instead of just rewatching an old match on ESPN Gold, you could stream a classic game and have a player who played in it providing commentary, talking about big moments, answering questions that the fans are asking directly in the live chat section,” Beall says. Streams can be packaged with pre- and mid-roll advertising, but there is nothing to prevent content creators “branding their videos, giving shout-outs to sponsors, having a studio set-up where you can see partners’ logos”.

He adds: “It’s never going to replace the assets sponsors purchased as part of a match day, but if you can imagine giving fans the chance to directly interact with a star player, I think there’s potentially a lot of value in that for brands. You also have to consider the fact that if you’re doing live programming on Twitch or YouTube, the sweet spot is an hour and a half, two hours. That’s a lot more exposure for a brand than a 30-second social media clip, you can build far longer engagement times for a brand.”

Coen cautions, on that front, that there is a balance to be struck between fulfilling sponsor obligations and keeping fans engaged and entertained. “Fans know when they’re being marketed to and they know when something is organic,” he says. “If something is obviously just being done to help give a sponsor some of their value back at this time, that’s not going to be engaging content and could backfire. It’s important to make sure you’re creating content fans want to engage with first and foremost, and then you can think about how it fits into your sponsor’s strategy.”

Rupert Pratt, director of sales marketing at Snack Media, agrees that active player involvement is going to form a central part of how clubs can be creative. “I’m not seeing a huge amount from the players at the moment, apart from a few isolated examples,” he says. “If I was a club right now, I’d be looking across the inventory that I can still use, and I’d be looking at what access I can get to the players and start thinking about creating more creative content with them remotely. It doesn’t even have to be explicitly football-related; in fact, I’d say that the best examples

might well not be.”

Juventus forward Paulo Dybala set an early example to follow in this regard, taking to Instagram to post a review of his fitness regime while in isolation and, more interestingly, a video of himself making empanadas, a traditional food in his native Argentina. Again, this was an ad-hoc, personal use of social media from the player, but Pratt says it points toward a potential area of opportunity for clubs to use their available assets in a way that might work for sponsors.

“I use the word ‘opportunity’ in the loosest sense of the word, but what’s going on does create an opportunity to try and do things differently, which is what everybody’s thinking about right now,” he says. “You might have restricted access to players, but suddenly these guys have got time on their hands – how can clubs and sponsors try to make the most of that? They’re still contracted assets and they’re contracted assets that even the club normally has very limited access to.

“The benefit of social media is its viral nature. Small but creative ideas like the ice bucket challenge or the dab can quickly become global after starting off with one person. I can see a situation where something goes from player to player or club to club, generating that engagement across platforms and

between rights-holders, because time is a great thing for creativity.”

Time for reflection

This period also offers an opportunity to take stock and reflect on the kinds of non-matchday-related content which has worked well in the past, and for clubs to work out how they can reappropriate those ideas for the coming weeks.

“We’re doing a lot of auditing at the moment, working with clubs to see where their engagement has spiked in the past and how we can try to recreate that now,” says Beall. “The analogy we usually use for digital is ‘fixing an aeroplane in mid-air’, because you’re trying to react to things immediately as they happen, there’s not a lot of downtime in which to reflect. Now that aeroplane is grounded, but we can still use this time to make sure it’s in the best condition possible when it takes off again.”

Beall also suggests that clubs should not treat this period as wholly unique, and should try to avoid sinking

“Fans know when they’re being marketed to and they know when something is organic.”

Niall Coen | chief executive, Snack Media

resources into anything that doesn’t fit into part of an existing long-term strategy. “I would caution against bandwagon-jumping and encourage people to think about whether a platform helps them reach a community that is already part of their planning,” he says.

“If you start investing into a platform like Twitch and then drop it after two months when things go back to normal, it’s a bit of a wasted opportunity. If you can use this opportunity to build new audiences and engage with your audiences a bit differently, and then keep that going, you’re going to be even stronger for it.”

The question of how sport should broach the subject and what part it has to play in the ongoing crisis has been much-debated. Coen says that while rights-holders and players alike should consult with their PR teams and agency partners to avoid any “major gaffes”, they also shouldn’t worry too much about adopting a reverential tone.

“I think everyone understands the seriousness of what’s going on,” he says. “Of course they will be sympathetic and respectful, but this is a rapidly-evolving situation in which people will be very grateful for people that try and entertain and provide them with a break. That, after all, is what sport is for.”



Paulo Dybala/ Instagram

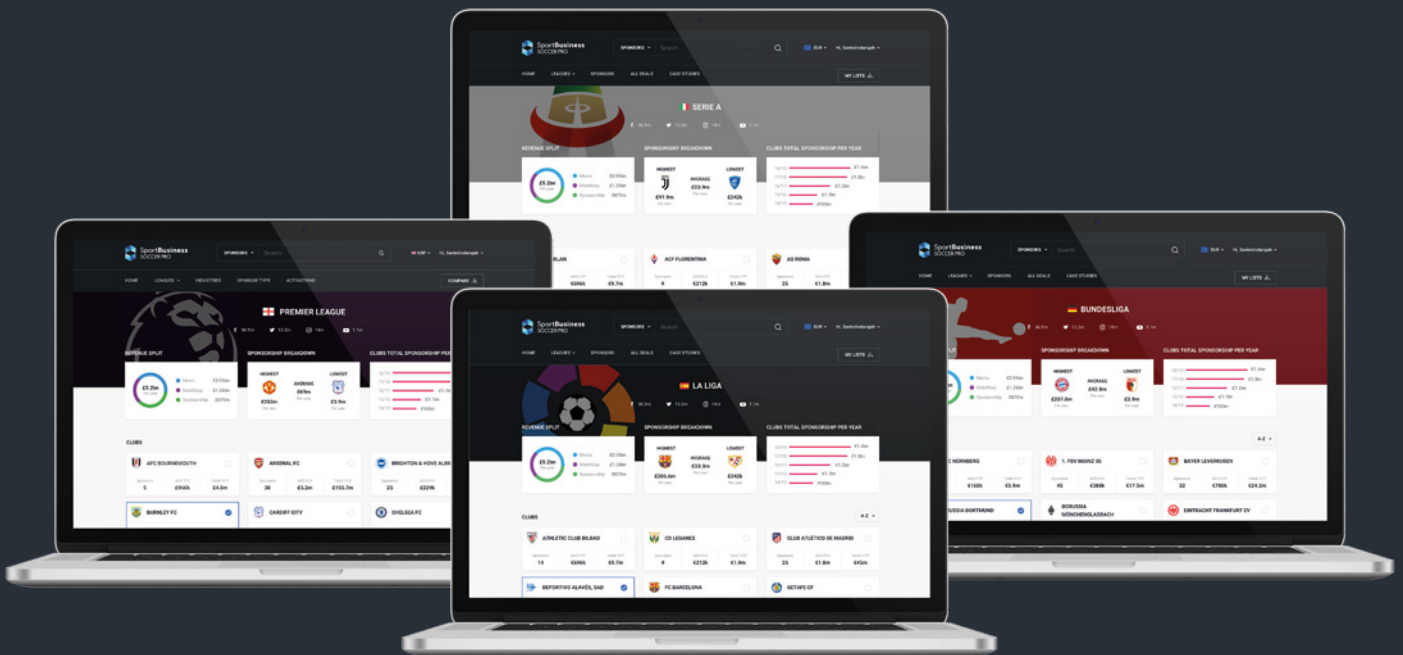


Stephen Curry/ Instagram



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Health and duty of care considerations are a priority as sports seek Covid-19 legal advice

Legal firms seeing unprecedented demand for advice

Rights-owners ‘anxiously checking’ *force majeure* definitions

Legal experts counsel collaborative approach in crisis



Teams line up in front of an empty stadium ahead of the Serie A match between Parma and SPAL at Stadio Ennio Tardini. (Gabriele Maltinti/Getty Images)

Ben Cronin

UK law firms acting for clients in the sports industry say they are dealing with an unprecedented demand for advice after the Covid-19 outbreak caused the widespread cancellation of sporting events.

One UK law practice said it has been running daily surgeries with sports stakeholders in order to understand their exposure to the crisis and to help them decide on an appropriate response.

But the global scope of the problem and the often-conflicting guidance offered by different local and national governments has only increased the

complexity of the situation for sports organisations.

While leagues and federations are conscious of the financial implications of the outbreak, one expert said duty of care obligations to fans and athletes, together with the importance of adopting a respectful tone in what is a public health emergency, have tended to take precedence in decisions to postpone or cancel events.

“The political and health considerations are often taking priority over any strict legal or liability considerations or even contractual considerations,” explains Nic Couchman, head of the sports practice at Charles Russell Speechlys. “Event owners and sports businesses have both

moral and legal duties of care and other legal obligations to staff, contractors, athletes and fans, which have to be at the top of their agenda.” He adds that the vastly differing problems faced by stakeholders, and the evolving nature of the crisis, also make it dangerous to offer any broad-brush advice.

The one pattern to have emerged so far is that rights-holders have favoured postponing events rather than cancelling them outright, where the calendar allows. At this stage, the consensus is that it is preferable for them to delay the performance of their rights obligations while the crisis evolves, rather than confront the repercussions of non-delivery straight away.

Media, advertising and entertainment lawyer Nick Breen, senior associate with London-based legal practice Reed Smith, says stakeholders will be “anxiously checking” the *force majeure* provisions in contracts that govern liability in the event of failure to fulfil rights obligations.

“The basic concept is that a party to a contract will not be liable for a delay in performance or non-performance of its obligations where such delay or failure is caused by a *force majeure* event,” he says.

He suggests that the most sophisticated sports promoters and sponsors will carefully detail what constitutes a *force majeure* and add contractual provisions for pandemics. But these clauses are often overlooked or omitted completely by other rights-holders. In countries with common law legal systems – such as the UK, the US, Germany and Australia – Breen says the law will be likely to look for specific reference to epidemics or diseases in *force majeure* provisions to relieve organisers of any liability for failure to deliver an event.

“Any party that wants to try and rely on a *force majeure* provision is either going to have to hope that their provision already covers an appropriate or analogous position, such as epidemics,” he says. “Or they are going to have to hope that their *force majeure* provision provides for the consequence of that epidemic, for example actions or instructions given by government agencies to stop sporting bodies from holding events.”

Breen suggests the reason a handful of rights-holders have resisted postponing or cancelling sporting events until the last-minute is because they were waiting for governments to explicitly prohibit such activities, thereby indemnifying them against non-delivery.

“The party wishing to rely on a [*force majeure*] clause will also need to show that they cannot perform their obligations because of the circumstances that are beyond their control. They also need to demonstrate that no reasonable steps could have been taken to avoid the *force majeure* event,” he says.

However, all the legal experts spoken to by *SportBusiness* recommended

against an adversarial response to the crisis given its human dimension. The changing picture and the possibility governments will create emergency laws to deal with the problem, or compensate industries affected by it, also ought to dissuade anyone from going on the legal offensive straight away.

Responsible

“In one sense they [rights-holders] ought to be applauded for taking responsible actions, irrespective of what their contractual arrangements might or might not lead them to be doing,” says Couchman. However, he predicted industry cash flow problems will inevitably create friction further down the line.

“It will be interesting to see whether the stakeholders in sports do dig deep and cooperate in a pragmatic way to achieve solutions,” he says. “Sport is built on long-term mutual relationships, so trying to protect yourself at all costs has the potential to create an inverse effect in the long-run as people work out who’s behaved in the right way and who hasn’t. The sports world is very small and hugely interdependent.”

Uefa and Fifa have already been commended for putting their turf war to one side in working together to rejig the international match calendar now that the Euros have been postponed until next year. Uefa president Aleksander Čeferin thanked Fifa president Gianni

Infantino personally in a statement and has commended Conmebol for agreeing to move the Copa América.

In contrast, tennis stakeholders have accused the French tennis federation (FFT) of acting unilaterally and appearing to protect its own interests in postponing the French Open to September.

Breen suspects that it will be easier to ‘recast’ sponsorship rights to compensate brands but that broadcast agreements would prove trickier to adapt.

There is already evidence of sponsorship agencies trying to provide alternative inventory and assets to help brands gain a return on their sports investments in the absence of live content.

Joel Seymour-Hyde, head of Octagon UK, tells *SportBusiness*: “The biggest question we are asking at the moment as a business is: How can we solve our client’s problems and create different opportunities? The simple one is: if we have assets that we were creating for a live or experiential purpose, can they be repurposed for a digital ecosystem?”

There is a suggestion that broadcasters will not want to damage long-term relationships with rights-holders and jeopardise future negotiations by taking an adversarial approach, although some parties might take advantage of the crisis to exit unfavourable deals early. ○



Nic Couchman, head of the sports practice at Charles Russell Speechlys.

US sports leagues eye potential return from pandemic, but with few known details

NFL has 'luxury' of September start, though Draft goes online; NHL and NBA seek time to conclude 2019-20 seasons, intend for 2020-21 to be unaffected; MLB focuses on playing 'as many regular-season games as possible' in 2020.



Dodger Stadium on what was supposed to be Major League Baseball's opening day, now postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Mario Tama/Getty Images)

Eric Fisher

In some ways, operating a sports league can mirror a math equation, even given the emotional nature of the business and fan passion that exist at its core. There are certain business goals to reach, and finite numbers of games and potential victories, seats to sell, television households and budgetary resources in existence.

From there, it's largely a matter of trying to hit those goals within the confines of those and other known parameters. Most, if not all, of the variables in the metaphorical algebra equation are known.

For many US sports properties, however, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic resembles trying to solve that equation when it's essentially nothing

but unsolved x's.

"Baseball guys don't like the unknown," says Minor League Baseball president Pat O'Conner, making a comment that could easily apply to almost any another sport. "We can deal with pretty much everything – and have. But we don't like the unknown. And this is right in the wheelhouse of that uncertainty, and with about as much seriousness as can be."

That said, each of the major US sports properties is still trying to lay the groundwork for a potential return, despite not knowing when that could be and what the conditions will be to do so safely for all concerned.

Within each league, schedulers and other executives are feverishly working on one contingency plan after another, seeking to create sets of guidelines that will allow each property

to move as quickly as possible once some semblance of certainty arrives from government officials to this most uncertain situation.

That desire for certainty is battling hard up against the US becoming the country with the most reported Covid-19 cases in the world. But the planning work nonetheless continues among the various sports leagues.

The National Football League is preparing for a full 2020 season, and has the current relative luxury of its regular season not starting until September, with the public health crisis currently hitting in the middle of its offseason.

But the NFL is already converting its 2020 Draft – which was planned for Las Vegas with a massive extravaganza along the city's famed Strip drawing hundreds of thousands of fans – into a virtual event.

The league is also considering shifting some offseason player workouts and other functions into a similar remote format, and already did the same with its recent Annual Meeting for owners.

“Our planning, our expectation is fully directed at playing a full season and starting on schedule,” says Jeff Pash, NFL executive vice-president and general counsel. “Just as we did in 2019. Am I certain? I’m not certain I’ll be here tomorrow, but I’m planning on it.”

The NFL’s 2020 plans even include maintaining previously-booked international games set for England and Mexico.

“I expect that international games will be part of our schedule for this year,” Pash adds. “We’re optimistic, just as we expect conditions in the United States to permit playing a full season...that will be the case for our international partners as well.”

Major League Baseball, which saw its Spring Training cut short and the start of the 2020 regular season delayed, is following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance recommending against staging any large public gatherings until at least mid-May, as are many other US sports properties.

From there, MLB is eyeing several resumption scenarios for not long after that point, though will take heed of advice from public health officials.

“My optimistic outlook is that at

some point in May, we’ll be gearing back up,” Rob Manfred, MLB commissioner, told ESPN.

“I think the goal would be to get as many regular-season games as possible and think creatively about how we can accomplish that goal.”

In the meantime, MLB has struck a vital deal with the MLB Players Association covering a wide range of pandemic-related logistics, including player payments in the interim, service time accrual for players, and revenue-sharing components.

An important part of that agreement is for both sides to maintain an open mind and open dialogue about potential schedule scenarios, and both sides are considering more radical ideas that will also take that sport well beyond its normal timeframes, with neutral-site postseason games potentially in the mix.

“We would play as long as we possibly could,” said Tony Clark, MLBPA executive director. “Obviously, the weather becomes a challenge the later you get in the calendar year, but we would do our best to play as many [games] as possible, regardless of when we start.”

Major League Soccer, meanwhile, is similarly looking at a potential staging of its championship game, the MLS Cup, in December, and also possibly in a neutral, warm-weather site.

“MLS remains focused on playing the

entire 2020 season and is evaluating all options,” the league said.

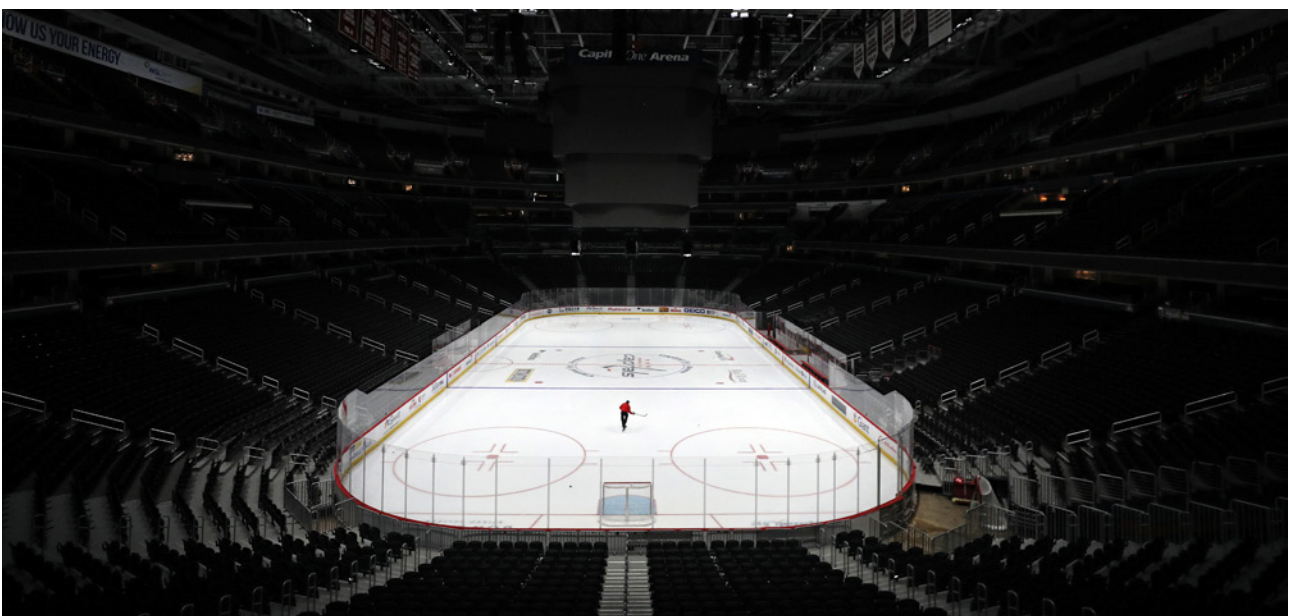
Both the National Basketball Association and National Hockey League, which need to finish the tail ends of their 2019-20 regular seasons and begin playoffs, have similarly eyed several potential late spring and summer possibilities to return to play, both with and without fans in attendance, and staging games well beyond the normal June endings for their seasons.

Of course, all is still conjecture at this point.

“The form and format of resumption-of-play scenarios will depend entirely on what transpires between now and when we are permitted and able to resume – and ultimately, on timing and taking into account logistical constraints,” the NHL said. “We are going to have to be flexible and react to events as they unfold.”

But at least in the case of the NHL, one thing has already been made clear, or at least as clear as it can: the league does not see the ongoing crisis as a threat to playing a full, uninterrupted 2020-21 season.

“We do not anticipate a scenario in our resumption of play format that would endanger or interfere with the league’s ability to stage and execute the 2020-21 NHL season in its entirety,” the league said. ○



An empty NHL arena; the league is similarly on lockdown indefinitely (Patrick Smith/Getty Images)

Octagon's John Shea: The pent-up demand from a consumer standpoint will be there

SportBusiness talks to the global president of marketing and events for Octagon Worldwide as he looks to work through current public health crisis, and plan ahead for the return of the sports industry to full activity.



John Shea, global president of marketing and events for Octagon Worldwide

Eric Fisher, US Editor

With a global footprint and a prominent role influencing more than \$3bn (€2.8bn) in annual global sports and entertainment sponsorship, Octagon has a particularly broad view on the impact of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic upon the sports industry.

Holding client relationships with top-tier corporate brands such as Bank of America, Budweiser, Mastercard and MGM, as well as divisions in media

consulting, athlete representation, and event management, the agency has a breadth and depth in the space enjoyed by few others in the business besides the major sports leagues themselves.

John Shea, a longtime agency veteran, was promoted late last year to global president of marketing and events for Octagon Worldwide, and now oversees more than a thousand employees spread over 50 offices in 22 countries. He recently spoke with *SportBusiness* on the effects of the public health crisis, and how and when the industry might be able to resurface.

The obvious first question is how you and your team are doing, and what are you doing to stay active?

Relatively speaking, our employee base and clients are holding up about as well as can be expected. These are uncharted waters for all of us. So every organisation is focused first and foremost on the health, safety, and well-being of their employee base, their extended families. So by and large, we're good. We're working through it. Technology is largely allowing us to do work from home or remotely. So we're able to establish and keep up with work

that is consistent with what we'd be doing in the office.

The best guidance we have in the US currently is not to have crowds upward of 50 people for the next eight weeks. Amid this and all the uncertainty, how are you able to operate and conduct business? What kind of timing template are you working from?

We're using those CDC guidelines to the best extent possible. It's a phrase I've been using frequently, really in all discussions. But we're helping clients minimise and mitigate initial risks, help manage their assets, programs, budgets, and then prepare for the eventual return, whatever that is. Different properties and different clients have different time periods. So we're trying to ask the hard questions of one another and each other, recognise there are really very few certainties at the moment, and do our best to present flexible plans and solutions so that when things do come back, clients can act appropriately, swiftly, and authentically, recognising that we really don't know what the outcome of all this will be in the end, what the impact will be to peoples' families, livelihoods, and so forth. So planning for the unknown obviously is almost impossible, so you try to plan for a number of scenarios and see how things play out over time.

What is your sense of brands' marketing budgets within sports? Certainly there's going to be a retreat in spending in the immediate-term, but what do you see corporate behaviour looking like in the aggregate?

It's going to vary. Different businesses, different sectors will be hit more harshly than others. But ultimately, I think businesses will recognise that peoples' passions for sports and entertainment are likely to remain very consistent. And that in the interests of serving their customers and fans, I believe spending will follow that trend and opportunity. What that looks like on a percentage basis, I wouldn't even speculate.

But businesses are going to want

to speak to their customers in meaningful and authentic ways, and history will have told us that sports and entertainment are places where people want to spend their time for enjoyment, for entertainment, for escapism. It's where their passions really lie. So I think brands, companies, corporations will want to be able to serve their customers in meaningful ways as we come out of this. Some will go slow. Others will be positioned to go more assertively. But the opportunity to speak to fans as things come back will be paramount. We're all really looking forward to a really big cultural moment when that time comes. The pent-up demand from a consumer standpoint will be there, and brands will act with interest and responsibility.

“Businesses will recognise that peoples' passions for sports and entertainment are likely to remain very consistent.”

There is a potential glut of sports events in the late summer and fall, with spring events played at the same time as events that already occur at those times of year. Is that a potential problem, particularly for your corporate clients? How do you view that?

We're going to look at it, and our clients are going to look at it, as an opportunity. Yes, there will be a potential for an abundance, or an overabundance, of activities. But I think each league, each property will be creating and looking for opportunities for their partners to engage in meaningful ways. We talk a lot about what the value-add is. So it'll be about how can our clients enhance the fan experience.

So I definitely look at it as an opportunity rather than any burden.

As we go through the depths of the crisis, is there an opportunity for your clients to get behind things like esports, other virtual events, backing the distribution of

archival or documentary content? More broadly, is there a brand opportunity in the immediate-term, or is that really in poor taste?

I think there are opportunities. Pursuing those opportunities has to be done in a tasteful and meaningful way. People are still looking for things with an enjoyment factor. They need and want a distraction from many of the realities that we all face. So if done tastefully, if done authentically, and perhaps done in a manner to help the situation, I think there are opportunities. It's about finding that right message for the right audience.

As you map out the next 10-to-40 days, what is at the top of your priority list?

I'm probably looking more at 10 hours than 10 days or 10 weeks. But it comes back to understanding our clients' businesses. What do they need to do? How are they being impacted? From there, it's about planning for the short-term, with no live games happening and things on hiatus, what assets can be redeployed? And then it's about moving toward a fuller relaunch. Each client, each brand, each situation is different. But it's about managing the upside as well as the downside and looking forward to an eventual return and some level of 'normalcy', if I can use such a word.

Given your global scope, are there best practices in your world from Europe or elsewhere than be applied to the US, or vice-versa?

We have internally rallied a global working group across our senior management, looking to identify best practices, and right now maybe more so to identify a consistent approach to helping our employees to understand the implications of what's going on and how one market might relate to another. We're using technology and time zones and people in different markets to help each other to learn. I don't know if there's any one key element or learning. But we are in a global taskforce meeting daily to learn from one another, to collaborate, to share information, and to help inform our people and our clients. ○

Dainton | “Instead of a draw ceremony we had an emergency meeting”

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the world of sport, with many events being postponed or cancelled. *SportBusiness* takes a closer look from the perspective of the International Table Tennis Federation.

Kevin McCullagh

Steve Dainton, chief executive of the International Table Tennis Federation has a busy year ahead of him dealing with the effects of Covid-19 on his organisation. Here he speaks exclusively to Kevin McCullagh.

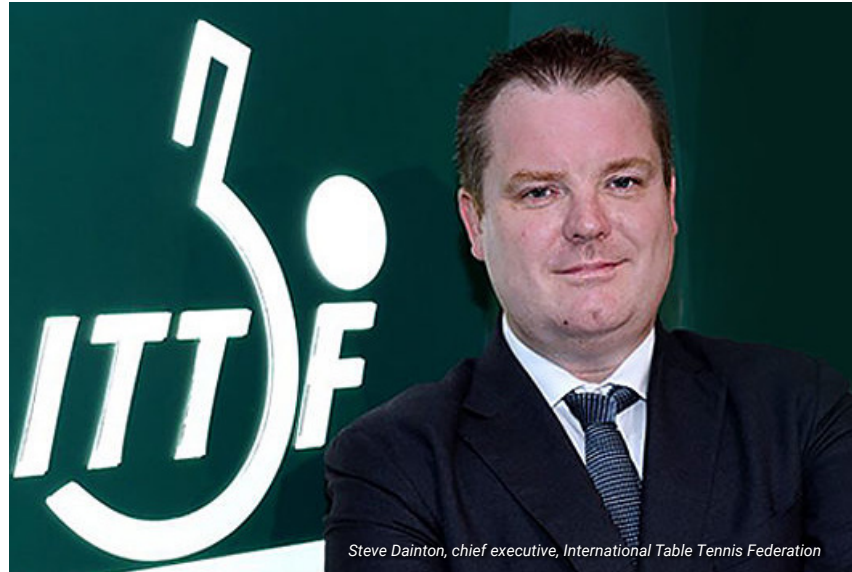
How has the ITTF been responding to the pandemic?

We're very much learning on the spot. It's a situation that's evolving day-by-day and hour-by-hour, and I don't think any of us here at the ITTF and in other sports have been in such a fast-evolving crisis situation. The things that are now starting to come into play are qualification for the Olympics, the financial effects of postponing events, how these events being postponed to post-Olympics affect seedings and rankings.

We called a management meeting about 10 days ago and re-looked at our finances and budgets. We took a prudent approach...Where we look at some of the less essential things that we were planning to go forward with in a normal 2020. We've done that as a prudent measure, with a date of the end of June that, if things aren't picking back up, then we'll have to take more drastic measures...We're just scaling back a bit on some of the growth projections, while we take a little bit of a 'wait and see' approach.

However, even during this difficult time, we are pushing forward with our commercial plans and the launch of World Table Tennis.

The first half of 2020 is going to be a lot about 'compromise' and 'sacrifice'. I use these words quite a lot with the guys. That's just how it is. Our president from Germany, Thomas Weikert, he's often using the word 'solidarity'.



Steve Dainton, chief executive, International Table Tennis Federation

I think these three words fit together quite nicely at the moment. Everyone needs to compromise. There will be some sacrifice. But let's keep solidarity.

Tell us about the postponement until June of the World Team Table Tennis Championships in Busan, South Korea.

A whole bunch of our team were in Busan around February 21. We were having an inspection to prepare for the World Championships, which were originally scheduled for 22 to 29 of March. It was on that day that the news started to break that in the city of Daegu there was an outbreak of the coronavirus. That is about 100km away from Busan. I said to the guys, 'This is not good news for us'.

We were actually having a press conference that day to say we were confident to go ahead. We had the press conference, we tried to give positive signals, but as the day went on the news became bigger. It was becoming international news and suddenly there was a lot of pressure on us. Then there

was news that the first case or two in Busan had been detected. And, instead of having a draw ceremony the next day, we ended up having an emergency meeting to discuss postponing the event.

That's our biggest event of the year – the most revenue, the most-viewed event, the most interest worldwide that we get. The last time we had to postpone or change the World Championships was when it was due to be held in 1999 in Serbia, and then the [NATO bombing of Yugoslavia] broke out. So that's been a pretty tough one for us.

Has the ITTF been favouring postponing events, as opposed to cancelling them?

[Postponement has] been the approach of most sports. From our side [that's what] we've been trying to do. Of course, postponing is much smoother than cancelling. It just means that we add some costs, such as having staff for longer – they have to stay and wait a little bit longer and support [the event]

a little bit longer. The financial cost is relatively minimal with postponement. If it starts to come to cancellations that will be a different story.

There have been some reports of increased TV and online video consumption of sport. Have you seen this?

It's clear that TV numbers are up massively...We were just tracking the numbers of a recent event we had in Hungary – the Hungarian Open, part of our World Tour. It is not normally in the top 10 in terms of TV viewership, but suddenly it's having three-to-four times the usual numbers. Without even having the China team play, it's having huge numbers in China.

If that's a positive or not, I'm not sure. But in terms of TV viewership, it's definitely way, way up. We have our Qatar Open this week, and it will be very interesting to see if the numbers increase for that as well.

“Everyone needs to compromise. There will be some sacrifice. But let's keep solidarity.”

Steve Dainton | chief executive, International Table Tennis Federation

The ITTF's media-rights partners in China are state broadcaster CCTV and streaming platform Zhibo. Have there been any other positives for the ITTF amid the crisis?

If you look at our website, there's a video about how we helped the Chinese team. I think it's a pretty nice story...We worked hard to find a place for them. It happened to be in Qatar because the Qatar Open was happening, and there are good sports facilities there. The Chinese team has now spent a month there. We worked to make sure they had a solution – we didn't want them to get stuck in China and find it difficult to travel to events – including, hopefully, our World Championships and then the Olympic Games.

We're now in same light trying to help our Korean friends...They're not able to go to the Qatar Open because

of restrictions Qatar has put on Korea recently.

We also helped source 600,000 face-masks that were donated to Wuhan.

Whilst it's a costly exercise at the moment, I think that due to the good will and good spirit in these difficult

times, potentially it can help us to have a more favourable outcome at the end. Helping our international friends from countries that are more affected – I think that's the best thing that we can do at the moment as an international federation. ○



(VCG/Getty Images)

Queensland ambitions built on enduring innovation

Queensland is building a persuasive proposition as a potential Olympic host on the back of its reputation as an endurance sports hub, outstanding infrastructure and an innovative approach to partnerships and events.



(Jason O'Brien/Getty Images)

In December, Queensland Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk confirmed that the proposal to host the 2032 Games would progress to the next stage of the process.

The Games would not only feature Brisbane, but also Sunshine Coast and Gold Coast, which hosted the 2018 Commonwealth Games to great acclaim, as well as some key regional centres, incorporating state-of-the-art sporting facilities and destinations from across the state.

While the 2018 Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast – swiftly followed by the success of the SportAccord World Sport & Business Summit 2019 in the same city – proved Queensland’s hosting capabilities to a

global audience, the state’s credentials as a major sports destination were already recognised worldwide.

Collaborations

Over the years, Queensland has developed fruitful partnerships with international federations, national associations, promoters and properties, with such collaborations focusing on the goal of enhancing the appeal of events for participants, officials, spectators, commercial partners and members of the media.

One event that has elevated the fan experience is the Australian PGA Championship, which has taken place in Southeast Queensland since 2000, shifting from Brisbane to the Sunshine

Coast to the Gold Coast and returning to Brisbane in 2020.

Michael McDonald, the PGA of Australia and European Tour’s commercial director for Australasia, highlights the positive working relationship with Tourism and Events Queensland (TEQ) as key to the success of the tournament’s growth. TEQ is the Queensland Government’s lead marketing, destination and experience development and major events agency.

“Queensland offers excellent infrastructure, a wonderful climate and world-class golf facilities to host an event such as the Australian PGA Championship,” McDonald says.

“TEQ not only supports our vision for the tournament but plays an active

role in assisting to deliver an innovative sporting event. With TEQ, we aspire to engage fans with first-of-its-kind experiences by creating new on-course precincts that celebrate the city we host in, and will engage new and existing fans of all demographics to our great game.”

McDonald refers to the Soniq Million Dollar Hole, an initiative for professionals and amateurs that grew with the support of TEQ from a humble secondary hospitality and activation zone to one of the championship’s most popular features, including multiple marquees and a beach club precinct with live DJs and music.

“This level of cohesion elevated the fun and fresh tone TEQ has helped us establish,” McDonald adds. “TEQ has also made the Australian PGA Championship a sought-after event for our players by creating unique and tailored tourism experiences for them and their families.

“Many athletes take part in these coordinated tourism activities, which are integrated into the broadcast coverage and promoted to millions of viewers around the world. The additional benefit is that these ‘bucket list’ experiences are shared with friends and loved ones back home, and they assist with future player procurement and takes our players’ tournament experience to another level.”

Event-friendly authorities

According to Grant Baldock, director of Beyond the Break Consulting, which works for Water Polo Australia, Queensland also offers appealing recreational activities and “event-friendly government authorities” that can help to enhance the event experience.

“TEQ is always looking at adding value to events and looking at how our event can be more engaging to participants and spectators,” says Baldock, who highlights the example of how the USA v Australia test series took place in conjunction with the 2020 Australian Youth Water Polo

Championships as part of a joint initiative in January. The contests took place at the Brisbane Aquatic Centre, hailed by Baldock as one of several world-class facilities on offer.

Similarly, Volleyball Australia has enjoyed positive collaborations with the state on various events.

“TEQ genuinely enters their relationship with an event owner as a partner and invests time and effort into understanding the event and owning the outcome,” Volleyball Australia chief executive Andrew Dee says. “As a result, conversations about challenges and opportunities are always constructive with a sense of mutual ownership.

“TEQ understands that moving events from one location to another can be challenging in the first year and provides the benefit of their experience and network to smooth out any bumps. TEQ is also committed to adding economic value to the events for the relevant region by finding new markets and growing the event over time.”

Whilst acknowledging the “obvious” benefits of staging events in Queensland – such as the climate, attractions and facilities – Dee says that some of the most important factors are “some of the intangible things you don’t know about

until you’re there that really make a difference to the atmosphere and ease of running an event”. He includes in this list, as examples, the proximity of the facilities to each other, accommodation options and the helpful and relaxed nature of the people.

State of endurance

The local appetite for sport is fuelled by Queensland’s outdoor lifestyle and natural assets, which allow a series of endurance events to take place in stunning destinations across the state.

In 2017, an online survey was commissioned by TEQ to explore what motivates endurance athletes and to gauge their impression of Queensland as a host of endurance events, in order to give the state a greater understanding of a key target market.

The results found that an overwhelming majority of respondents rated Queensland’s welcoming and inclusive nature, atmosphere and climate, whilst the opportunity to compete in a bucket-list destination and enjoy a holiday after the event whilst spending quality time with family and friends were also raised.

As an undisputed ‘state of endurance’, Queensland stages numerous such



(Tourism and Events Queensland)



The Australian PGA Championship in Gold Coast (Bradley Kanaris/Getty Images)



Mixed Team Relay during the Triathlon at the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games (Chris Hyde/Getty Images)

events every year, including Ironman triathlon and the Gold Coast Marathon.

Cam Hart, chief executive of Event Management Queensland, which operates the annual marathon, says: “Queensland offers an ideal environment in which to deliver world-class endurance events.

“An abundance of fine weather, world-famous holiday destinations as host cities, flat scenic courses and a mature and experienced major events industry means Queensland sets the benchmark that other event destinations around the world are striving to reach.”

According to Hart, the locals also understand how major endurance events can deliver significant social and economic benefits to communities, with the 2019 edition of the marathon having injected some A\$32.5m (€18.2m, \$19.9m) into the local economy and generated more than 114,000 visitor nights.

“They love to come out to cheer on visitors from around the world as they participate at our events,” Hart says. “Feedback from international visitors

on our Gold Coast Marathon suggests that the enthusiastic support from locals is a major influencer in choosing our event over others.”

Infrastructure

Queensland’s natural scenery, which provides a perfect platform for sporting events in the great outdoors, is complemented by state-of-the-art sporting infrastructure.

Aside from Gold Coast’s impressive line-up of facilities following the Commonwealth Games, recent upgrades and new facility projects across the state have ensured Queensland’s reputation as a golden destination for arena and stadium-based sports is renowned worldwide.

The Anna Meares Velodrome – named after the most decorated female track cyclist of all time and opened ahead of the 2018 Games – is one such venue in Brisbane.

To demonstrate the post-event legacy following the Games, last year, the International Cycling Union (UCI) Track Cycling World Cup took place

at the velodrome after having been secured by the Queensland Government via TEQ in partnership with Brisbane City Council via Brisbane Marketing and Cycling Australia.

“The Anna Meares Velodrome has been a perfect venue for events hosted in Brisbane from a UCI World Cup, UCI Para-cycling events and National Championships,” says Kipp Kaufmann, general manager of sport at Cycling Australia. “The venue has allowed us to attract and deliver these events to the highest international level.

“Queensland is the perfect place for an event. From world-class venues, highly trained volunteers and perfect year-round weather, any event can be successfully hosted in Queensland. Local and state governments are also highly knowledgeable and supportive of hosting events which helps us to deliver highly successful events in Queensland.”

In fact, the state’s sporting infrastructure has been widely respected for many years, offering the likes of the 42,000-seat Gabba, the



(David Spencer Photography)

52,500-capacity Suncorp Stadium, the 27,400-seat Cbus Super Stadium, the 25,000-capacity Metricon Stadium, the Queensland Sport and Athletics Centre, which holds 48,500 spectators, the Sleeman Sports Complex, Queensland Tennis Centre and the Brisbane Entertainment Centre.

The most recent addition to the landscape – the 25,000-capacity Queensland Country Bank Stadium, which opened in March 2020 – will bring international rugby union back to North Queensland for the first time in 17 years on July 18.

The Townsville venue will host an historic match as the men’s national team, the Wallabies, takes on Fiji.

Engage

The stadium is a joint project of the Queensland Government, Australian Government and Townsville City Council and is supported by the National Rugby League and North Queensland Cowboys. For Rugby Australia, the venue will provide a further opportunity to engage with a

sports-hungry public in Queensland.

“Queensland has been a long-standing host of rugby Test matches with many rugby fans in that market,” Rugby Australia’s general manager of commercial partnerships, Peter Sciberras, says.

“There are excellent facilities for Test matches in many parts of Queensland, and this allows us to take elite level rugby to the rugby community and fans in those parts.

“Test matches predominantly take place in Brisbane, but we have world-class options on the Gold Coast and now Townsville where we will have a Test match double header featuring the Wallabies and the Wallaroos against international opponents in July.

“Rugby has also enjoyed the infrastructure of the Gold Coast area prior to the Commonwealth Games, utilising the Robina complex for international sevens tournaments and Test matches.”

Like numerous other major sports organisations, Rugby Australia has benefited from the backing of TEQ

in delivering elite sporting occasions across the state.

“Rugby Australia has had a long-term relationship with TEQ and we are very appreciative of their supportive approach in promoting our events and rugby in general,” Sciberras adds.

“We always look forward to kicking off our international season at Suncorp Stadium, a ground where the Wallabies have had the most success in recent years, and taking major events to the market including Bledisloe Cup matches. With a mix of great facilities and ideal weather for rugby during the winter months, Queensland is an excellent destination for fans.”

Whether those facilities welcome back rugby sevens as an Olympic sport in 2032 remains to be seen, but it is clear that Queensland’s ambitions to stage sport’s biggest global event are being underpinned by solid infrastructure, a natural platform and appetite for endurance sports and an innovative strategy that will continue to drive the state’s impressive sporting outlook. ○

Formula One's virtual grands prix are a silver lining during dark times

The Bahrain Virtual Grand Prix rated well on linear and digital platforms

Temporary focus on esports could boost F1 youth following

Charismatic young drivers like Lando Norris have been key to making it work



Callum McCarthy

In a sports industry now dominated by digital, interactive content, Formula One can sometimes feel like the crown jewel of an analogue world that is fading in the rear-view mirror.

According to statistics released by Formula One Management's research department in 2019, 17 per cent of F1 fans are over the age of 55 and just 14 per cent are under 24. The percentages skew even older in established markets such as the UK, Italy and Germany – an indication that the sport has been failing to capture young imaginations for a decade or more.

For rights-holders across the sports industry, the Covid-19 crisis has compounded existing problems and the global nature of F1 means its 2020 season looks increasingly likely to be cancelled outright.

It is difficult to see how such dark clouds could have silver linings, especially for a sport that appeals to a older fanbase. But F1 is perhaps the only traditional rights-holder to have turned the crisis into an opportunity to create innovative content.

The Bahrain Virtual Grand Prix – which replaced the postponed Bahrain Grand Prix – saw a mix of professional racing drivers and celebrities race each other on the official F1 2019 video game. The race was shown live on Twitch, YouTube, Facebook and across F1's linear media partners, producing a blend of high-quality racing and chaotic fun.

The race featured golfer Ian Poulter, One Direction star Liam Payne and ex-F1 driver and Sky Sports presenter Johnny Herbert. But the star of the show was Lando Norris, a 20-year-old driver for McLaren F1 who has cultivated a large and loyal following on

Twitch due to his love of motorsport video games.

Underlining the chaotic element of the race, Norris failed to connect to the game, leaving his car to be controlled by AI. The hashtag #LandoBot swept across Twitch and became the event's central narrative, all while Norris held an online viewing party that included phonecalls with F1 drivers Max Verstappen, Alexander Albon and George Russell.

Norris, who gained 150,000 Twitch followers in March alone, attracted a peak of 104,229 viewers for his personal stream of the race.

For Julian Tan, head of digital business initiatives and esports at Formula 1, drivers like Norris are a godsend during such a lean period: "Lando is a fantastic hero and protagonist for our sport, and esports in particular. He spends a lot of time sim

racing across multiple different games and it was so great to have him join us for the race, as it was with [F1 driver for Williams] Nicholas Latifi.”

Putting it together

After the postponement of the Chinese Grand Prix in February, Tan and his team began working toward replacing it with a virtual race. They initially anticipated that the Covid-19 crisis would be contained to China, giving the digital and esports team two months until the April 19 raceday to put something together.

“We had come up with a proposition for the Chinese Grand Prix, approached all the teams and we were starting to work toward that. But then the situation deteriorated very rapidly,” Tan says. “We had to mobilise and tweak the concept we initially had for China in a more scalable way. Everything you saw for the Bahrain Virtual Grand Prix was put together over the course of five days.”

Tan’s team worked day and night to organise the race. The real-world Bahrain Grand Prix was postponed on March 14, six days before the first practice session on March 20. The short notice switch to the Virtual Grand Prix left many drivers unable to compete, either due to a lack of equipment or a lack of familiarity with

the F1 2019 video game.

Tan is now working hard to ensure more F1 drivers will be available to compete at the Vietnam Virtual Grand Prix on April 5.

“Everything you saw for the Bahrain VGP was put together over the course of five days.”

Julian Tan | head of digital business initiatives and esports, F1

“As it relates to driver participation, the timelines are very tight. The drivers are based all over the world [causing connection problems to the server that hosts the race] and some of them don’t have racing simulator equipment, so we will do the best we can in the circumstances. We’re hopeful that for the next few Virtual Grands Prix, we’ll see a few more of their faces on the grid.”

In a perfect world, Tan would have all 20 F1 drivers competing, but understands this will likely be an impossibility. Some drivers will be unable to compete, while others simply don’t want to.

“I think this is quite challenging to navigate. As a professional athlete, the job first and foremost is to perform on

the track. Some of them, like Lando, really enjoy sim racing. Others, when they’re not racing, they want to do something else. All of us understand the opportunity we have here, but you just have to do what makes strategic sense within your capabilities.”

A big part of Tan’s job is now to win round drivers that aren’t motivated to take part. Norris’s rising star will be a key part of his pitch.

“It’s been beneficial for McLaren that Lando has been able to lean in as much as he has, and it’s obviously been very beneficial for Lando, too.”

A chance to shine

The virtual race plugged the gap left by Bahrain’s postponement to a degree, going some way to keeping F1’s media and sponsorship partners satisfied. Every F1 broadcast and steaming platform partners received rights to the race at no extra cost, while the tracks featured in game are exact replicas of those in real life, offering sponsors exposure at a time when other rights-holders cannot.

But the race’s popularity among young fans, both new and existing, has shown F1’s senior executives that video games and esports can be central to engaging under-25s. And during a time almost all traditional sport has been





McLaren F1 driver Lando Norris (centre) at the F1 New Balance Esports Series Pro Draft in July 2019 (Bryn Lennon/Getty Images)

cancelled, F1 is grasping its opportunity to sell the legitimacy of its esport not just to its fanbase, but also to media partners and brands.

Tan has been evangelising for F1 esports since its first official series began in 2017. After proving its concept three years ago, The F1 Esports Pro Series – which runs separate to its new Virtual Grand Prix – is now title-sponsored by sportswear company New Balance and is also partnered with logistics company DHL and sim-racing equipment manufacturer Fanatec.

Selling sponsorships around esports properties can be a painful process, especially esports that replicate real-life sports like F1. The Virtual Grand Prix is serving as the perfect advert for Tan to start more conversations ahead of the 2020 Pro Series, which is set to start this autumn.

“Brands often need time to become more familiar with esports, particularly when it comes to sim racing. Esports is a huge industry and it’s growing, but sim racing is a very specific type of esports within this ecosystem. A brand may understand how esports works, but sim-racing and esports are actually quite different.”

Tan continues: “There’s an education process, there is an understanding process, and then there’s an element of just making sure that you focus on delivering a kick-ass product.”

Viewership for the 2019 esports season grew 75 per cent year-on-year,

“Lando is a fantastic hero and protagonist for our sport, and esports in particular.”

Julian Tan | head of digital business initiatives and esports, F1

indicating that the product is indeed kicking ass in the eyes of young fans – not least because of its crossover appeal between F1 and sim racing fans.

Breaking down barriers

The crossover appeal concept – the hypothesis that fans watching a real-life sport will become fans of its virtual counterpart – is often oversold, especially in relation to controller-based games such as Fifa or NBA 2K.

In F1 esports, the skills required to excel are very similar to those required in real life. Players use advanced racing wheels and pedals that simulate the effects of driving an F1 car, providing a more immersive and believable experience than most sports simulation games.

Tan says: “[People] tend to look at F1 esports as within the context of gaming and the traditional definition of esports, but I think we – well, certainly I – look at F1 esports more widely, as something that transcends the traditional definition of what an esport is. Ours is a proposition that is very similar to the real world, and that chasm between the real and virtual is

continuously being blurred.

“The ability to break down the barriers to our sport is really important because ultimately, motorsport isn’t the most accessible sport. It’s not like other sports where you can pick up a ball and play – you can’t just jump into an F1 car. Esports is a really important way to do that.”

The sense of realism offered by F1 esports is no small factor in why the Bahrain Virtual Grand Prix proved such a success. Esports and gaming fans enjoyed its light-hearted nature, while F1 fans coming to esports for the first time immediately respected the skill required to take part.

The race featured F1 drivers Norris and Latifi, but also included ex-F1 and current Formula E driver Stoffel Vandoorne; ex-F1 driver Esteban Gutiérrez; ex-F1 driver and current Sky Sports presenter Herbert; and Formula 2 driver Guanyu Zhou, who won the race.

Likewise, the skill of esports drivers has been proven outside the virtual world. In the 2019 Race of Champions – a real-life racing event – esports driver Enzo Bonito defeated three-time Indianapolis 500 winner Ryan Hunter-Reay as well as former Formula E world champion Lucas di Grassi.

Now, in these darkest of times, F1 has a golden opportunity to preach its esports gospel. The extent to which its senior executives, teams and drivers lean into esports during the season’s postponement could have huge bearing on the sport’s lasting relevance to young people, as well as its ability to earn revenue during a lockdown of uncertain duration.

However, Tan understands that opportunity extends beyond the world of revenue and ratings. There is a deeply human element to F1’s Virtual Grand Prix; a feeling that F1 is trying its best to entertain us when we need it most, even if that entertainment product isn’t quite ‘on-brand’.

“We were like... let’s just throw it all together,” Tan laughed. “It’s just a bit of fun at the end of the day, just to lift people’s spirits. There are no championship points being awarded, it’s purely for fun. It’s something to watch, to laugh along with. Something to feel good about.” ○

Mixed fortunes for Australian rights-holders amid Covid-19 crisis

AFL and NRL shut down within a day of each other in March; slashed salaries 50% and 75% respectively

Australian cricket relatively lucky, with 2019-20 season close to completed before virus hit

Bad timing for Rugby Australia, forcing postponement of already-difficult domestic rights tender



The Australian Football League called a complete suspension in March, after playing a week in front of empty stands (Michael Willson/AFL Photos via Getty Images)

Jason Dasey

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit Australia's major sports with varying degrees of severity.

The country's sports were in markedly different positions when they were shut down, depending on their calendars and the financial health of their businesses.

The two major football codes – Australian rules football and rugby league – had barely begun their 2020 seasons when they ground to a halt in March. The Australian Football League season was suspended on March 22 after a week of matches in empty stadiums,

while its female equivalent, the AFLW, was cancelled midway through its finals' series. The following day, the National Rugby League pressed the pause button after only two rounds.

Both leagues have announced massive wage cuts, with AFL salaries slashed at least 50 per cent and NRL players facing a 75-per-cent cut.

The AFL won't restart until June at the earliest, with the date to be reviewed at the end of April. The season will be cut from 22 games per team to 17. A proposal that games will be composed of 16-minute, instead of 20-minute, quarters is under consideration.

The NRL is planning to extend the

current season until late December if necessary. League boss Peter V'Landys has warned that cancelling the season would cause a financial crisis for the sport, including the loss of an estimated A\$13m (€7.4m/\$8.1m) of media rights revenue for every round unplayed, and A\$500m in commercial revenue for the entire year.

On March 15, V'Landys pleaded for help from the government, saying it must "assist us in this crisis because it is not our own doing". Prime Minister Scott Morrison, a fan of NRL team Cronulla Sharks, brushed aside the plea.

On March 30, the NRL announced its own rescue package. V'Landys and league

chief executive Todd Greenberg pledged A\$40m to the 16 clubs – about A\$2.5m each – to be paid between April and October to help cover their operational costs. The NRL has also cut its operating budget by more than half, put 95 per cent of its staff on three weeks' leave, and is targeting a 20-week season beginning on July 1.

Lou Sticca, managing director of sports marketing agency Tribal Sports Group, told *SportBusiness Review* he thought the AFL had handled things much better than the NRL, which had initially acted “almost like a spoiled brat” by looking for outside help. “I think they lost a lot of credibility by blaming everyone else, instead of simply looking after business,” Sticca says.

“AFL is no doubt the biggest and best-run sport in Australia, and they've continued to underpin the very existence of clubs through their cashed-up head office.”

Cricket's narrow miss

Due to its calendar, cricket was the sport most exposed during this summer's

bushfire emergency but has been the least impacted by Covid-19. The majority of the 2019-20 international season was completed by the time the pandemic stopped play.

“TV companies may see this as a way of cutting rights costs, which were out of control.”

Lou Sticca | managing director, Tribal Sports Group

There were some cancellations. Only one match of the three-match one-day international series between Australia and New Zealand – played behind closed doors at the Sydney Cricket Ground on March 12 – was possible before Cricket Australia called it off. The follow-up three-game T20 series in New Zealand was also cancelled.

But the 23-match International Cricket Council Women's T20 World Cup, held between February 12 and March 8, was completed with barely a hitch, including the final between

Australia and India at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, played before an enormous crowd of 86,174.

“Cricket Australia is relatively fortunate in that we had completed the majority of the 2019-20 season when quarantine measures came into effect,” CA's head of communications Alex Brown told *SportBusiness Review*.

“We won't know the full answer [of how cricket will be affected commercially] until quarantine restrictions have been lifted. As with most industries, the faster we as a society can ‘flatten the curve’, the lesser the financial and commercial impact.”

CA's digital team has been keeping fans engaged on its social and digital platforms with classic match videos, deep-dive interviews and breaking news.

The next major international cricket event on Australian soil is the men's ICC T20 World Cup, from October 18 to November 5. The event will feature 16 nations, and six Australian states will stage 45 matches.

“Cricket Australia is planning for all possible outcomes for the 2020-21 season,” Brown says when asked about contingency plans for the T20 World Cup. “We will continue to take advice from relevant government agencies, infectious diseases experts and our own medical team as we chart the course ahead.”

Bad timing for rugby and football

Both the Super Rugby rugby union and A-League football seasons were interrupted at inconvenient times in terms of their match schedules and commercial activities.

The five-nation Super Rugby club competition was suspended on March 14 after seven rounds. Rugby Australia has also suspended talks with media companies for the media rights for Super Rugby and other domestic properties for 2021 onward.

The organisation has been attempting to sell the rights since last year and is facing an end to its 25-year partnership with Fox Sports. Fox is understood to have turned its back on the sport after RA rejected a A\$40m-per-year offer in February.

Fox's current deal runs 2016 to 2020. Telco Optus and free-to-air broadcaster



NRL chief executive Todd Greenberg at an NRL press conference on March 23 (Matt King/Getty Images)



An empty ANZ Stadium. No events are being held at the venue under coronavirus-related restrictions (Matt Blyth/Getty Images)

Network Ten are understood to be among the media companies interested in acquiring the rights. But, ultimately, the lack of competition from Fox means that RA is expected to see a drop in its media rights income in the next cycle.

Football's A-League, which also has a media rights deal with Fox, is almost as precariously placed as rugby union. The league was due to finish its 2019-20 season a little more than a month after it was suspended on March 24. Like rugby union, the A-League has experienced dwindling television audiences. Fox recently trimmed staff in its football department and appears to have lost some enthusiasm for the sport.

Fox's media rights deal with Football Federation Australia is worth an average of A\$58m per season over the six seasons from 2017-18 to 2022-23. The deal covers rights for the A-League, women's W-League, and home national team friendlies.

Also in football, a May 23rd 'legends' football match in Sydney aimed at raising money for bushfire victims – the '#FootballForFires' match – is being postponed, according to organiser Sticca. The game was to feature retired international stars including Didier Drogba, Park Ji-sung and Dwight Yorke, alongside local stars like Mark Bosnich and John Aloisi.

"It's unfortunate, but we will reschedule the #FootballForFires game for later in the year," Sticca says. He has also pushed back his annual Money in Sport conference in Brisbane from April to September 8-9.

From the ashes

The more forward-looking in the Australian sports industry are already considering how the landscape will look after the pandemic passes.

He expects several stakeholders to take the opportunity to reduce costs: "I think everyone will use this

disaster to reset or recalibrate their sports businesses. Player wages and administrators' salaries had blown out of all proportion, so that might change.

"Television companies may also see this as a way of cutting TV rights costs, which were also way out of control."

Sticca thinks Australia's less high-profile sports, who have had to fight the hardest for their position in recent years, may weather the storm better than the bigger properties. "Sports like A-League football and NBL [basketball], which have traditionally struggled hand-to-mouth, could be best placed to survive comfortably...Both have seen massive grassroots growth, while their bigger competitors have concentrated on their top-end games.

"Everyone in the Australian sports industry is hurting right now," Sticca says. "But like all downturns, some of us will come out stronger, while others will sit there and wait for someone else to solve their issues." ○

GeniusLive creating new streaming opportunities for world basketball

Genius Sports commercial director Sean Conroy on what rights-holders stand to gain from the automated production solution, and how it builds on the firm's data and integrity expertise.

Genius Sports recently launched your first basketball streaming solution. What motivated you to enter this space?

Through our partnership with FIBA, we have been working alongside basketball leagues and federations around the world for over 15 years. These partnerships have centred on enabling FIBA's members to control and maximise the value of their live statistics from courtside collection through to the digital fan experience.

Our basketball partners had been calling for us to enter the streaming space, recognising the difference it could make to their fan engagement strategies, performance analysis tools and potential new revenues.

The key for us was being able to launch a reliable and high-quality solution that could be rolled out to basketball leagues and federations at every level. Especially at challenging times like these, being a trusted partner to sport is a core part of Genius Sports' ethos and we wanted to remove the onerous hardware and production costs that prevent many basketball rights-holders from showcasing their competitions to the world.

We developed and launched our automated production solution GeniusLive toward the end of last year and are now enabling leagues and federations across Europe, Asia and Latin America to launch their first live streaming solutions.

Did you notice a gap in this increasingly competitive market to launch GeniusLive?



Genius Sports commercial partnerships director Sean Conroy

Every modern basketball league wants to be able to control and distribute their live data and video content through one ecosystem. This principle was central to our move into streaming, so that we could provide all levels of world basketball with the greatest amount of flexibility possible, meaning they can power everything from third party coaching tools to highlights clipping applications using their core assets.

A huge wave of streaming innovation in recent years means that now regardless of their size, resources, location or existing tech infrastructure, any league or federation can stream

their games to fans around the world.

GeniusLive is AI-powered software that can be run off any mobile camera system, including smartphones. Our partners can forego the need for expensive hardware or the cost of in-venue camera crews and personnel by automatically tracking, panning and zooming with every play.

Genius Sports announced an extension of your historic FIBA partnership last summer. What does this partnership entail?

Our partnership with FIBA has been central to the history of Genius Sports.

Since 2004, we've worked alongside the world governing body to equip its members with best-in-class digital and data technologies that underpin their operations.

We announced a long-term extension of this agreement in July 2019 with the remit from secretary general Andreas Zagklis to "continue the joint efforts in creating innovative tools and make sure that our sport is even more attractive to fans around the world."

The innovative tools we've developed together, such as FIBA Organizer and FIBA LiveStats, have helped establish basketball as one of the most technologically advanced sports. At every level and in over 150 countries worldwide, FIBA's members will continue to be provided with these core solutions at no cost to run their competitions, engage their fans and expand their global profile.

How have the tools provided to FIBA members evolved over time?

Our partnership with FIBA began way back in 2004 when, by chance, FIBA observed an early version of our competition management technology (later FIBA Organizer) in action at a tournament in Fiji. At a time when spreadsheets and paper-based systems were still used across world sport, FIBA instantly saw this digital tool would be invaluable in transforming how their members managed their games, players and officials.

Team and player statistics have always been essential to all levels of basketball and, four years later, FIBA requested the development of an intuitive data collection system that could be operated courtside. Since launching in 2008, FIBA LiveStats has been adopted by more than 200 leagues and federations and is now used at more than 100,000 games a year.

We have rolled out seven versions of this solution over the last decade, adding new data points such as shot locations, simplifying the workflows for statisticians to capture the data and

making the feeds suitable for distribution to betting operators, providing a valuable new revenue stream for FIBA members.

Genius Sports has separate betting engagement partnerships with the likes of the NBA & Euroleague – what benefits do these provide to the leagues?

In the last three years, we've seen a global trend of sports electing to proactively engage with the betting industry. This is being driven by several factors, including the spread of legalised betting in major markets such as the US and Brazil and the subsequent strategies of the major leagues.

But the most important change is that sports at all levels are waking up to the fact that, whether they engage with betting or not, wagering will still happen on their competitions.

Obviously, the betting industry is

facing sizeable challenges with Covid-19 at the moment, but when live sport returns so will the demand to bet on game results, player markets and more.

Leagues such as the NBA, EuroLeague and many more have realised they can either ignore betting on their competitions and hope for the best. Or they can proactively invest in official data and integrity products that create new revenues, provide a competitive outlet for new and existing fans and protect the transparency of their games.

Sports and licensed betting operators can benefit from each other's solutions, and Genius Sports sits right at the intersection between the two industries. This means we can help basketball leagues and federations commercialise their live data and video content while implementing a robust integrity programme to combat match-fixing. ○



Genius Sports chief executive Mark Locke (left) and FIBA secretary general Andreas Zagklis

Lower-league football | Exeter City's turbulent past equips it to cope with Covid-19 crisis

EFL League Two club Exeter City left vulnerable without matchday income due to postponement of season

Club's front-of-shirt sponsor, Flybe, collapsed at beginning of Covid-19 crisis

New deal with Carpetright due to club's reputation for loyalty and longevity



From left to right: Julian Tagg, chairman, Exeter City; Wilf Walsh, chief executive, Carpetright; and Nick Hawker, chairman, Exeter City Trust Board. (Cameron Geran/PPAUK)

Callum McCarthy

Exeter City Football Club knows its way around a crisis.

In September 2003, Exeter City Supporters Trust paid £20,000 to acquire the club and its debts, saving the team a week before it was due to be liquidated. The trust still owns the club and current chairman Julian Tagg was a key part of the acquisition 17 years ago.

Having been on the front lines of Exeter's fight for survival in the 90s and 2000s, Tagg and the trust he represents are preparing for the latest test. The outbreak of Covid-19 and the indefinite postponement of the 2019-20 season could be devastating to clubs in the second, third and fourth tiers of English football, as matchday revenue is vital for

keeping them afloat.

Exeter's plight could be harder still. The club's front-of-shirt sponsor and closest business partner, British airline Flybe, collapsed on March 5 after its own long battle against administration and liquidation.

Flybe had been more than just a sponsor. The relationship between club and airline lasted for 17 years – the longest-running commercial relationship in English professional football. Tagg regards the company as a primary reason for the club's continued survival.

"There were occasions, when Flybe were in a really good position, that they brought payments forward. On any number of occasions, when we needed it, it was: 'No problem, get the invoice in to us, we'll pay it now'. We needed it, so

they did that for us right until the death. The relationship at the end was just as good as it was at the beginning."

Flybe, an Exeter-based company, invested in the club at a time when it teetered on the edge of existence. To repay that faith, Tagg and the trust activated the partnership in any way they could, rolling in naming rights to the main stand at St. James Park and even designing a third kit in Flybe colours.

When the airline began to fail in 2017, Exeter made the decision to stick with Flybe, just as it had done with them.

"[The amount Flybe paid] was a very, very small amount at the end, which is not a consideration when you take into account what we received over that period of time," Tagg said. "You could see that there were problems and quietly we would work to be prepared, but there

was never a point where we wouldn't stick by them."

He continued: "And you know what? That's the nature of the club. The nature of our club is not to penny pinch, or to suck the next one dry, and the next one. That's not what we set out to do in 2003 and it's stood us in good stead. A lot of good people stood beside us then, and still do now."

A little help from your friends

Exeter's unwavering commitment to Flybe could have landed them in serious financial trouble after the company's demise. While earning nothing from matchday revenue and having no front-of-shirt sponsor, the club would have had to consider making redundancies across the board.

With the football season suspended indefinitely, finding a new front-of-shirt sponsor would have proved impossible for most other clubs. But the way in which Exeter worked with the airline didn't go unnoticed. The club's loyalty and contribution to the partnership proved incredibly attractive for other companies, especially those local to the club.

"The end of Flybe was a very, very

sad day for us," Tagg said. "But fortune favours the brave...and the trust model is a brave one, there's no doubt about that."

Two weeks after Flybe went bankrupt, Exeter announced it had struck a three-year deal with UK floor coverings and beds provider Carpetright, which will expire at the end of the 2022-23 season. The company's chief executive, Wilf Walsh, is an Exeter City season-ticket holder and has seen first-hand the club's loyalty to its partners.

"I can't tell you how lucky we feel at this point," Tagg said. "Of course, the harder I work the luckier I get! He is a supporter and a season-ticket holder. But whether he was or he wasn't, we'll be doing everything we can to maximise the opportunities."

"The way I used to work with Flybe: If you can give me something, great. It's not a favour or something that has to be given back later. It worked both ways: If they wanted something that I could give, they could have it with goodwill. We will do exactly the same with Carpetright, as we do with all our sponsors."

Carpetright is recovering from its own financial difficulties. The company was rescued in November 2019 and though it is in the process of paying off emergency

loans, it is now able to trade normally. Tagg and Walsh's understanding of financial difficulties means that Exeter and Carpetright have an immediate kinship.

Tagg and the trust's personal commitment to commercial relationships has benefitted Exeter since they took over in 2003, and Tagg believes the club's latest sponsorship deal shows that continues to be true.

"I'm certainly not saying we're better than anybody else or trying to single us out as something special. But I just think that's the right approach to people and business. The [Supporters] Trust has that same ethos, and it works in my opinion. That's why so many people like working with it and for it."

EFL relief package

With Carpetright in their corner, prior experience of managing a long-term financial crisis and a club philosophy geared toward sustainability rather than growth, Exeter City know they might be better equipped to handle the current crisis than some other English Football League clubs.

"It wasn't that long ago when, had we not had money coming in on a Saturday,



The two sides make their way out for the start of the match during the Sky Bet League Two match between Exeter City and Stevenage at St James Park (Harry Trump/Getty Images)



From left to right: Julian Tagg, chairman, Exeter City; Wilf Walsh, chief executive, Carpetright; Matt Taylor, manager, Exeter City; and Nick Hawker, chairman, Exeter City Trust Board. (Cameron Geran/PPAUK)

we wouldn't have been able to pay wages the following Friday," Tagg said. "There are still people at the club that remember that situation and how dire, desperate and uncomfortable that was, in so many different ways. That's probably meant we've probably been slightly more cautious than many clubs. We're not well-placed, but reasonably well-placed, perhaps, in comparison to many others."

For clubs in greater need than Exeter, the EFL has made a total of £50m – £28m in forwarded broadcast rights payments and £22m in interest-free loans – available to clubs in the second-tier Championship, third-tier League One and fourth-tier League Two.

Championship clubs have each received £800,000 and can apply for interest-free loans up to £584,000, while League One clubs received £250,000 and are entitled to a loan of £183,000.

As a member of League Two, Exeter have received £164,000 from the EFL and can take out an interest-free loan of up to £120,000, should it be necessary.

Tagg is happy with the EFL's swift action: "I've been critical of them on many occasions, but from what I've seen behind the scenes, the amount of work the EFL has done to look at different

"It wasn't that long ago when, had we not had money coming in on a Saturday, we wouldn't have been able to pay wages the following Friday."

Julian Tagg | chairman, Exeter City

scenarios and plan for what might happen over various periods of time has been exceptional. I think they have been very sensible in terms of how they've stretched the risk as far as they feel able and capable at this point."

But while the EFL's relief package will help clubs survive in the short-term, pay cuts and layoffs could become the norm if the UK's Covid-19 crisis lasts into the summer. League One club Tranmere Rovers have already asked their players to take a 10-per-cent pay cut, with chairman Mark Palios expressing a hope that wages will be lowered permanently after the crisis.

Tagg believes the Professional Footballers Association, the UK players' union, should be more active in setting guidelines for clubs and alleviating financial loss for players. While he

doesn't foresee Exeter resorting to pay cuts and redundancies just yet, Tagg knows that clubs across the English Football League, as well as their staff, are incredibly vulnerable.

"You don't know how long the storm will be. We can at least cope with it in the short- to medium-term, but the reality is that some will not be able to cope. Whether that's after two weeks, two months, or a year. At every point along the way, there will be any number of clubs that start to struggle. There will be nobody that escapes from this without it being extremely difficult and detrimental."

As a League Two club that nearly went bankrupt, Exeter have worked wonders to put themselves on relatively good footing. Part of that is down to luck, but plenty of it was by design. The long-term partnership with Flybe showed that Exeter are the perfect friend to call upon in a crisis.

"Flybe got value because we worked bloody hard to ensure they did, and we'll do exactly the same for Carpetright because they've showed some faith in us at a difficult time for the industry," Tagg said. "I think this is going to be an exceptional relationship." ○

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Formula 1 could have up to seven different regional betting sponsors, says ISG



Formula 1 managing director of motorsports and technical director Ross Brawn (centre), with former F1 driver Paul di Resta (left) and 188Bet brand ambassador Peter Schmeichel (right) at the launch of the brand's betting partnership with the motorsport.

Digital Replacement technology allows for regional betting sponsorship deals

ISG says regional deals offer more targeted and cost-effective branding opportunities

F1 currently able to differentiate feeds in Asia, Europe and the Americas

Ben Cronin

Digital advertising technology could allow Formula 1 to have up to seven different regional betting sponsors, according to the sport's global data and betting rights partner Interregional Sports Group.

In early March, online betting brand 188Bet was announced as the series' first betting sponsor for the Asia region, in a five-year deal (from 2020 to 2024) brokered by ISG. *SportBusiness* reports the deal to be worth at least \$8m (€7.2m) per season.

The ISG agency, which specialises in virtual advertising technologies, will now seek to strike a series of additional regional deals to make a return on its five-year agreement to market F1's betting sponsorship and data rights from 2020 to 2024, worth about \$100m, or \$20m per year.

The company says digital replacement technology (DRT), which allows sponsor branding to be superimposed on trackside positions so it is only visible in defined broadcast territories, has allowed F1 to target betting brands for the first time.

ISG non-executive director Chris Buckley says the reason F1 has failed to attract a betting sponsor up until now is that few bookmakers operate globally and have the budget or the inclination to sign a worldwide sponsorship deal.

Targeted

The ability to offer regional partnerships, he argues, will make F1 a more cost-effective sponsorship proposition compared with properties like the English Premier League, where betting brands often take out shirt sponsorships or static pitchside advertising to target customers overseas.

"Betting brands all tend to be strong in specific markets," he says. "Brands who want to use the Premier League to target Latin America or Asia, for example, currently have to take physical advertising which is shown all over the world. There's a lot of wastage because they're not interested in most of the territories that it gets broadcast in. But with virtual advertising they can target the region they're actually interested in and just pay for that."

F1's decision to take its broadcast production operations in-house in 2004 has enabled it to segment its sponsorship categories more effectively. It currently provides three different regional feeds: one to Asia, one to the Americas and one to Europe. This means it is already able to create different digital overlays for each of these markets and sell regional betting deals in these regions.

“It’s contemplated that we would have European, Asian and Americas partnerships initially, but we could look to explore more and be more targeted,” Luke Drake, head of commercial partnership accounts at F1, says.

Beyond this, Buckley suggests the sport could have separate betting partnerships in Mena, Africa and Australasia and also create split feeds allowing for separate deals in North America and Latin America. He says the job of providing digital overlay capabilities to seven regional betting partners would be costly and present more of a technical challenge, although these obstacles are surmountable.

“Formula 1 have the technical expertise coming out of their ears, but equally there’s no point activating those feeds until we’re confident the fifth, sixth and seventh regions are ready to go,” says Buckley. “You got to have a betting partner that’s ready and willing to pay what it would be necessary for us to do that. It’s not cheap to do another feed.”

ISG and the F1 broadcast production unit spent last year perfecting the digital overlay technology. The two parties used the trackside positions that will

now be allocated to betting brands to promote F1 Play, the sport’s free-to-play predictor game, during the 2019 season. F1’s favoured DRT provider is Vizrt, a Norwegian company that has developed an unobtrusive solution that does not require additional lenses to be put on cameras.

As reported by *SportBusiness*, ISG pays Formula One Management for the feeds as part of its deal. The amount of trackside inventory available to 188Bet in Asia, and other brands in the rest of the world, depends on the size of each circuit. For smaller tracks, two or three positions will be available for branding. For larger circuits, four or five positions will be available.

Any further regional betting deals could be structured along the same lines as the 188Bet deal, though F1 says it wishes to offer a degree of flexibility.

“With virtual advertising they can target the region they’re actually interested in.”

Chris Buckley | non-executive director, Interregional Sports Group

188Bet focuses on Asia

Having previously targeted the European market with sponsorship deals in horseracing and with Premier League clubs Liverpool, Manchester City, Chelsea, and Everton, 188Bet closed its UK and Irish operations in 2019 to concentrate on its core Asia business. It believes the reach and popularity of F1 will help it to build its brand in the region.

For this reason, the principle focus for 188Bet in the F1 deal is a combination of the digital overlay trackside advertising and static trackside adverts visible in Asia. The deal also gives the company the exclusive rights to the F1 Play predictor game in Asia to offer fans a greater range of gaming options.

Access to F1’s live betting data is not thought to have been an important element of the deal as this is made available to all bookmakers on a non-exclusive basis anyway.

“There’s a pool of rights across hospitality, some on-site event activation rights,” says Drake. “The main spear of the rights is definitely going to be the broadcast rights, the digital overlay. That includes some 2D



Ross Brawn and 188Bet UK representative Tom Earl.



From left to right: Chris Buckley, Ross Brawn, and 188Bet UK representatives Tom Earl and Eugenia Jones.

static graphics, and I think what is a really important part of it is F1 Play, which is the soft game which last year we had on broadcast for the whole of the season in anticipation for a partner, so we know exactly what inventory we're using now."

Betting bans

Southeast Asia has tended to be the strongest market for bookmakers in the region. Betting is illegal in China, but 188Bet's digitally overlaid branding will nevertheless be visible in the country through F1's pan-Asia feed. Regulators in most markets where betting is banned are thought to be sanguine about betting advertising appearing in sports coverage, provided it is not deliberately targeted at local audiences. For instance, English Premier League and LaLiga games are often broadcast in China featuring perimeter bookmaker advertising.

For the same reason, ISG is confident that the patchwork of different betting regulations in the US, and the fact gambling continues to be banned in some US states, will not prevent it from striking a pan-regional North America deal. The company anticipates most bookmakers, as is the case with 188Bet, would use a regional partnership with F1

"Europe is strong for F1 particularly, because it's such a mature market, their biggest TV audience is Europe."

Chris Buckley | non-executive director, Interregional Sports Group

for brand building purposes rather than to present controversial call-to-action betting promotions, something that will also help to placate regulators.

In agreeing the deal with 188Bet in Asia, ISG has started with the biggest betting market in the world and Buckley predicts the deal activation will encourage other brands to sign up.

"Asia is the strongest market, without a doubt," he says. "Europe is strong for F1 particularly, because it's such a mature market, their biggest TV audience is Europe. And then the Americas is the one that everyone is talking about. Five years ago, maybe ten years ago, everybody was talking about Asia, now everybody's talking about North America, because that market will explode."

Personalisation

According to Drake, the ability to

differentiate advertising messages for different regions has also piqued the interest of F1's existing global sponsors, who would like to be selective about the languages they use in their messaging. For now, however, the main driver for the new digital capabilities remains the need to service new regional betting partnerships and the ISG agreement.

There are also limits on the levels of personalisation the motorsport is willing to provide for different viewers. Drake says F1 is a long way from the point where trackside inventory becomes a programmatic advertising purchase and messaging is differentiated based on the preferences of each individual viewer.

"I think it's important that the brands that want to get involved with Formula 1 want to have an association with us," he says. "I think that's where the value comes from sponsorship over advertising: You're there as part of an exclusive club of partners and your presence is meaningful. I think that's what we sell ourselves on, and being associated with the IP of the Formula 1 brand is important.

"But I think the more capable we can be, the more options it gives us and then we can commercialise things in the right way and set the right strategies out." ○



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New look Sportel Miami delivers for the trade

March's new-look Sportel Miami proved a success for buyers, sellers and other stakeholders from across the sports media and technology sector. According to organisers it succeeded in its objective of delivering more content, more networking and more buyers.

The event saw the introduction of a sold-out conference day featuring big name speakers including Matchroom Sports group managing director Eddie Hearn, Golden Boy chief executive Oscar De La Hoya, LaLiga president

Javier Tebas and Ray Warren, president of NBS Universal Telemundo.

The conference was timed and designed to enable participants to focus on a series of discussions of the major issues shaping the sector and to take advantage of structured networking opportunities before getting down to deal-making when the market opened the following day.

Additionally, a series of invitation-only 'Buyers' Breakfasts' helped encourage participation and boost the number of buyers present, enabling

organisers to look back in satisfaction at the response to its new initiatives.

"We pride ourselves on listening to and working with our community and we know the industry is very competitive and ever-changing," said Sportel chief executive Laurent Puons.

"For this reason, I will continue to provide the Sportel community with the best opportunities to do business," he added, announcing that next year's spring market would be a three-day event, with two market days preceded by a conference.



Puons praised how the intimate format of the Miami event offers different but complementary benefits to its bigger brother, Sportel Monaco, which will take place this year from October 26-28.

Ahead of Sportel Miami, he said: “Delegates have more time per meeting to develop business relationships with the key established and emerging stakeholders from across the Americas and globally. In contrast, Sportel Monaco is much larger and very fast paced, with the mission of maximizing

business and delegates having back-to-back 30-minute meetings throughout the three-day event.”

The factor which unites both the spring and autumn events is the focus on innovation to meet the needs of a continually changing industry.

“We were delighted so many of the Sportel community have welcomed this new initiative and engaged with us as speakers, sponsors or signed up to attend and network. This new format of back-to-back sessions with no trade floor in parallel on the same day was a

first for the spring event.

“Buyers are always a high priority at Sportel conventions, with clients requesting to meet more buyers at our spring events and our two-day series of invitation only ‘Buyers Breakfasts’ during the convention was designed to facilitate interaction between select buyers and sellers of sports media content and new technologies that raise the bar for the industry. We believe these two new additions could become a footprint at future events,” he said. ○

Legalized US sports betting creates robust opportunities for agencies

Possibilities for agency involvement span the entire value chain

Key lessons learned in Europe and elsewhere are being applied stateside

The patchwork of US state regulations creates a temporary hurdle



(Ethan Miller/Getty Images)

Eric Fisher

The US Supreme Court's 2018 ruling allowing individual states to make their own rules regarding sports wagering created a frenzy of business activity around the nation.

Billions of dollars have been bet in early-participating US states. Dozens of deals have been struck between major sports properties, sportsbooks and data providers. The entire sports sponsorship landscape has been historically altered with the opening of this major new category.

A less-discussed development has been the impact of legal sports betting on the major sports and entertainment agencies. Whether it be in a sponsorship advisory context representing major betting brands as they gain league and team rights and activate, media rights management helping leagues oversee their data

rights, or in a talent representation context for betting-focused media personalities, agencies are finding the arrival of widespread American betting represents a seismic shift to their businesses.

Or in the case of agencies such as Octagon, which owns and operates many of their own tennis events, it can also mean directly striking betting-related partnerships for themselves.

The agencies' sponsorship advisory work delves heavily into event activation, aiding clients such as MGM to be a fundamental part of industry jewel events such as Major League Baseball's All-Star Game.

"We're all over this from every which way this can be commercialized," says Dan Cohen, Octagon's senior vice-president and head of the agency's global media rights consulting division. The firm's clients include MGM, whose landmark 2018 agreement with the National Basketball Association was

the first major sports deal in which a US league designated an official sports betting partner.

"We're really still just at the tipping point of what betting is going to be in this country. Money is trying to get into the space from a variety of different ways, and there is not a league out there that isn't trying to figure out their own sports betting strategy. There are going to be touchpoints everywhere. So there is lots for us to do and be a part of," Cohen says.

Paris-based agency Lagardère Sports and Entertainment, which carries a sizable US presence and is in the process of a rebranding, has created a specialized sports betting practice within its operations.

"Betting as a category really gives us opportunities across our entire bandwidth, not just in the US, but really worldwide," says Bob Brennfleck, Lagardère Sports senior vice-president of commercial, who oversees the unit.

Lessons learned

Lagardère, like several others, is leaning on its existing international offices and relationships to help guide its activities in the US. Since sports wagering and the commercial activity built on it has been a fixture of sports in Europe for decades, it provides a handy roadmap to guide activities in America.

And the number one lesson learned about sports betting from outside the US, say the agencies? Watch for over-commercialization, as more is definitely not always better.

“What we certainly want to avoid in this space is over-saturation,” Brennfleck says. “The market can’t necessarily protect itself from itself. So you need governance along the way. And we need to have smart limitations and protections so that you know the right things to do and can protect yourself and help protect the industry. We have certainly seen the backlash when things have gone too far.”

Brokerage

As betting brands have increased their sponsorship spend globally over the past five years, sponsorship sales advisory in this space has commensurately increased in importance for agencies.

Industry giant CAA Sports, for example, recently helped Premier League club Manchester City strike its training kit sponsorship deal with Marathonbet.

The deal is just one of several gambling-related pacts CAA has agreed on behalf of property clients and will in part serve a template for future American opportunities.

Many more such deals, brokered in part by agencies, are expected stateside as Major League Soccer last year significantly loosened its restrictions around both jersey and stadium naming-rights sponsorships to allow betting and liquor brands to participate. MLS was the first major US sports property to allow such deals, but is unlikely to be the last.

“The legalization of sports betting and just the changing landscape of social mores...we felt that now was an appropriate time to make some adjustments,” said Carter Ladd, MLS vice-president of business development.

It’s expected more US sports properties will follow the lead of MLS and allow sports betting brands into some of their most high-profile inventory, with agencies playing a key role.

“There is immense opportunity here in the US, and the world is seeing that the US is open for business in this area,” Brennfleck says. “And the interesting thing is that this is still really an immature market. We’re still just at the beginning of all this.”

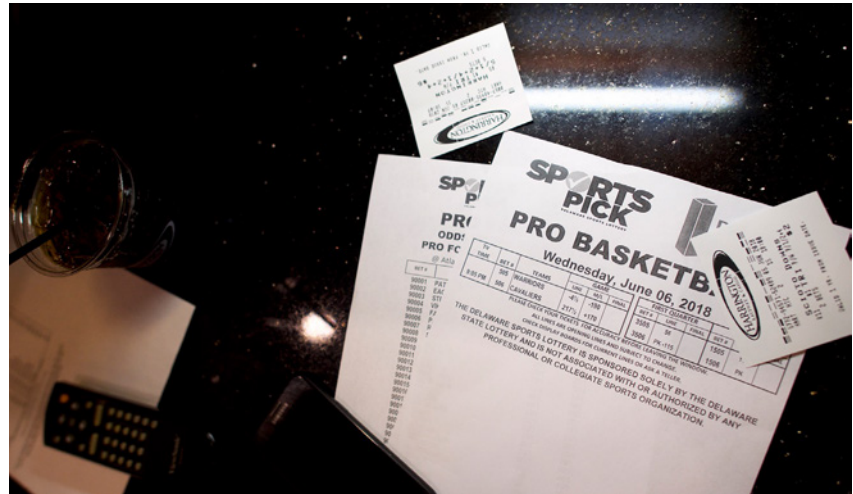
Regulation hurdles

Because the US is still in the early days of legal sports betting, there remains a disparate patchwork of state regulations, with different jurisdictions varying widely between fully legalized betting with an active mobile component to nothing at all, and

everything in between. That situation presents a challenge for how agencies conduct their deal-making in the space.

Many national and league-level deals are struck on an omnibus basis with new states folded in after the fact as they come online with sports betting. But the state-by-state approach still creates many variances when it comes to local activations, particularly when it comes to event management.

“It’s basic math,” Brennfleck says. “There are some high-population states like California and Florida, states with a very high potential customer base, that haven’t come online yet [with gambling]. When they do, it will represent watershed moments, and help get us more to a point where it will truly look like a national marketplace.”



NBA betting tips on a bettor's booth at the Harrington Raceway and Casino. Delaware was the first state to launch legal sports betting after the Supreme Court decision lifted a 25-year old federal ban (Mark Makela/Getty Images)



MGM Resorts, the first mover among betting operators post-legalization, leaned on Octagon to aid with strategy and activation. The agency is one of several to mine opportunities from legal US betting (Alex Trautwig/MLB via Getty Images)

Eni Aluko | Women's sport is a great vehicle to tackle social issues

Former professional footballer has been appointed as sporting director for Aston Villa Women

Aluko aims to use her time in the role to promote the women's game – on both a social and commercial level

Appointment comes at a time when women's football is one of the fastest growing sports properties



Eni Aluko as she is unveiled as the sporting director of Aston Villa Women. (Neville Williams/Aston Villa FC via Getty Images)

Kevin Roberts

It's somewhat ironic that the day the (English) Football Association announced the suspension of professional football was Friday 13th March.

Marked down by the superstitious as a dark day of ill fortune, Friday 13th saw the lights go out on football grounds across the country as both the men's and women's games went off the grid for who knows how long.

Then and since, much of the attention focused on Premier League champions elect Liverpool, whose barnstorming season was due to make

claiming the title a formality. But in Birmingham, England's second city, another team with a near-impeccable record were left to ponder on what was to become of what promised to be their breakthrough season.

Ahead of the suspension, Aston Villa Women had won 13 of fourteen games in the FA Women's Championship, drawing the other. They were six points clear of their nearest challengers, who they had already defeated four times during the season.

The suspension must have seemed a particularly cruel blow to the club's sporting director Eni Aluko, who had only recently taken up the role following

a break which followed a stint of media duties after her retirement as a player.

Now the appointment of a sporting director might not normally pass muster as *SportBusiness* content. But Aluko's decision to take up a job at the heart of an historic football club says a lot about the changing face of women's football and women's sport in general. The expected continuation of a surge in interest in women's sport when we emerge from the Covid-19 chaos is one of the positives that some of the sharpest minds in the sector are hanging onto, and Villa's owners appear committed to investing in the opportunity.

So, the views of a woman who played international football 102 times for England, played top-level professional football in the United States, in England with Chelsea, and in Italy with Juventus are certainly worth paying attention to.

Aluko, who qualified as a lawyer during her playing career and became the unofficial lawyer to the England women's team in their contract negotiations with the Football Association, has an insider take on women's football which few can equal.

Now she is focused on the Villa Women's project being driven by the team led by club chief executive Christian Purslow. And, she says, despite the inevitable stresses and the current situation, she has enjoyed the start.

"Being new to the role, my first weeks were an incredible education about decision-making on everything from player recruitment and contracts, to stadium share agreements, deciding operationally where and when the players train, working on what the fitness programme looks like and speaking to education partners.

"I am not working in isolation as the role also requires me to sit at the centre of the club and really tap into the different areas of operation."

Exactly what she has become central to is a project with very specific KPIs. First, to take Villa Women out of the second-tier FA Women's Championship; second, to become an established Women's Super League club, capable of challenging the giants of Manchester City and Chelsea for honours; and third, competing regularly in the Uefa Women's Champions League – something which should become increasingly achievable when the number of English clubs to qualify increases from two to three.

And in doing so the progress of the team will help advance women's football and opportunities for women in the game. By creating new heroes and role models it aims to build a new and engaged fanbase which itself creates new commercial opportunities, while enhancing the TV product and helping drive rights fees.

According to Aluko, the heightened focus of big brand clubs in women's

football is both a defence mechanism against negative PR and realisation of an opportunity to engage more deeply across a wider fanbase. But, she says, new thinking is needed if mistakes of the past are to be avoided.

"A lot of clubs are now realising that the fanbase is more complex than simply males between 10 and 60. It very much includes women and there is now an expectation from brands that, as their consumers include women, there's a demand for female role models," she said.

"...as their consumers include women, there's a demand for female role models."

Eni Aluko | sporting director,
Aston Villa Women

"Girls football is now one of the fastest growing – if not *the* fastest growing – sports and I think club executives and owners are realising that it helps, not just from a PR perspective but a fan engagement perspective – to have professional women's teams. They also know that the cost of running women's teams is minimal compared to

the cost of men's teams.

"Then there's the fact that if you don't have a women's team there can be PR damage. We have seen that with Manchester United and Dortmund and, until recently with Real Madrid which didn't have a women's team.

"Beyond that, one of the things which brands and corporates want is to advance social objectives, whether that's diversity, the gender pay gap, or general wellbeing. Women's sport is a great vehicle to tackle those social issues.

"So, from Villa's perspective one of the main reasons for its focus on the women's game is being able to have a women's team which can engage with the community in different ways and advance social objectives."

While the global success of the last Fifa Women's World Cup is widely agreed to have elevated the status of and interest in women's football in many markets, there is also a consensus that there is work to be done to give the European club game a leg-up to the next level.

Aluko sees it as a circular issue in need of a circular solution and an injection of fresh thinking.

"In terms of attendance clubs need to do more research into who the fans



(Harriet Lander – Chelsea FC/Chelsea FC via Getty Images)



Eni Aluko during the Italian Supercup match between Juventus Women and Fiorentina Women. (Filippo Alfero – Juventus FC/Juventus FC via Getty Images)

are as part of the wider fanbase for the men's game. They need to really find out who is interested in watching the women's game rather than just assuming it is families.

"Looking at my own social media you'll see that 75 per cent of my fans are men and that broadens out across women's football. A lot of assumptions have been made from a marketing perspective that just don't land. The challenge is being able to say who the fans are, what they want, when do they want to see us play and how does that fit into the habits they have developed over the years watching the men's game.

"A lot of bad decisions have been made for women's football. For example, if you put a women's game on an hour either side of a men's game then of course those men who have been watching the club for 20 years aren't going to come. And because those decisions have been made, our fan engagement is in deficit from the get-go."

She sees increasing attendance as

"A lot of bad decisions have been made for women's football."

Eni Aluko | sporting director,
Aston Villa Women

the key to establishing a virtuous circle of interest, engagement and revenue but the challenge is significant. Despite some eye-catching turnouts at local derbies played at clubs' main stadiums, the reality remains that the average attendance in the FA Women's Super League (for the suspended 2019-20 season) ranges from Tottenham Hotspurs' 8,614 to a little over 1,200 for Bristol City. Even Manchester City has an average of just 3,867. These figures include the Big Game Bonus attendances.

"Broadcasters want to get involved but ultimately there will always be an issue if the attendance is not there. The last thing they want is to be showing games in empty stadiums. We need to figure

that bit out and carve out a day or days where people expect to watch women's football so that we can build more fan engagement around it," Aluko said.

"Ultimately the broadcasters will then pay more for the rights and that (revenue) gets distributed throughout the league to the women's game."

Creativity, she says, is the key to commercial success. She stresses that women's teams can carve out their own identities and develop commercial relationships with brands which share their social values and aspirations.

"We need to identify with the social objectives we can align with and engage with brands who do that (share) and partners who also want to engage with those objectives and want to invest in women.

"I am an adidas ambassador and have just been part of their 'I Fund Women' campaign, which is built around the fact that women are the fastest growing group of innovators in the world. To get behind female business and empowerment is a clever thing to do because that is where the world is going.

"To be able to recognise that and propose to brands the opportunity to align with clubs is important. In the past, women's football has waited to be approached. Now we are in our own space and it's down to people like me to figure out what Aston Villa stands for and how can we align that with brands and how it (our relationship with brands) connects with our player recruitment.

"If I wanted to recruit a player from Germany, I might start looking at brands which have a presence in that country."

While Aluko isn't about to go public on the budget fuelling Villa's ambitions in the women's game, she is clearly confident that it is enough to enable her to achieve her objectives.

"My role is to get the team prepared for promotion to the WSL and then to keep us up and allow us to aim for Champions League football. The budget is commensurate to that of other teams in the FAWSL. We don't have the same pulling power as other teams so we have to be competitive enough to pay players who may be good enough to play for the top three or four clubs but who may not get so much game time as others," she said.

“Christian Purslow has put us in a position to offer competitive salaries and from then on it is down to the players.”

It is often said that being a professional athlete is not simply about being paid to perform, but about a state of mind. And Aluko is determined that her Aston Villa players should benefit from an end-to-end professional experience which goes beyond the training and playing environment.

“Birmingham has some of the best universities in the country and I am trying to build partnerships that would allow us to educate players,” she said.

“I want to be able to be in a position where younger players, who might have an offer to go to the USA on a scholarship, can think twice about doing that because we are in a position to give them support for education for now and in the future.”

She’s also committed to bringing more girls into football and says that the Villa academy is key to the process of recruiting talent and keeping girls in the game.

“When you start a professional women’s team, playing in the locality, it creates an aspiration. Then you must have a pathway, engaging with the girls and making them feel part of the Villa women’s community.

“What does (that pathway) look like for a young girl who starts at Villa when she is 10 and wants to end up in the first team? How are we going to support her and make her aspiration real? We have to make sure youngsters can be part of it and meet the players and see them train,” she said.

“There are a lot of barriers to entry and a lot of research on why they drop out at 16. We need to be empowering young girls and women and make them realise they can do anything in sport and maximise their education alongside football.

“My football career has informed a lot of the decisions I have had to make. It helps that I have just come out of the game. I played abroad, balanced working and playing. America was an intense professional environment. I have had so many different experiences that allow me to understand the players.”

For all the expectation over the

continued growth of women’s football and excitement over unlocking its commercial potential, one recent incident has reminded us that there are still hurdles to overcome.

Legal papers prepared for the US Soccer Federation, designed to defend it against its own women’s national team players who are claiming pay discrimination, revealed attitudes which many hoped were a thing of the past.

Despite the fact that the US women’s team is the most successful in history and commercially outperforms its male equivalent, the papers claimed that: “(The women’s team players) do not perform equal work requiring equal skill [and] effort” to the men because “the overall soccer-playing ability required to compete at the senior men’s national team level is materially influenced by

“I am trying to build partnerships that would allow us to educate players.”

Eni Aluko | sporting director,
Aston Villa Women

the level of certain physical attributes such as speed and strength”.

Aluko, who has played in the US system and against the national team on many occasions, says she was disappointed to read what she describes as “shocking comments” which recently led to the resignation of USSF president Carlos Cordeiro.

“I don’t understand why this is even a case,” she said.

“The women’s team are bringing in more money than the men’s team, they are the most successful national team in the world. I don’t understand why it is a fight and although I do think it will settle now, it has been damaging for US soccer.

“The players are probably disillusioned right now. After all, what does it mean to wear the shirt if you feel so disrespected? We are just talking about equality and accepting that the women are in a much better commercial place than the men’s team.

“Change always takes a while but this really needs to happen. If that’s the US’ take (on the issue) you ask yourself whether that’s also the take of other federations.” ○



(Darren Walsh/Chelsea FC via Getty Images)

Euroleague Basketball: At the forefront of innovation in sport for 20 years

The FANXP startup competition – the latest in a series of such events run by Euroleague Basketball – is a perfect example of how the rights-holder is continually trying to tech-up and evolve all aspects of its business.



In 2000, Euroleague Basketball launched a ground-breaking international competition with a never-seen-before structure. Owned and managed by the clubs, the EuroLeague’s model allowed for agile decision-making and quick adaptation.

Over the past two decades, the innovative spark that brought EuroLeague into existence has matured into a multi-faceted commitment to growth and new thinking. The competition has changed its format, rules and its access criteria on numerous occasions, adapting to new realities and readying itself for whatever the future may hold.

That attitude exists throughout Euroleague Basketball, all the way to Euroleague Basketball president and chief executive, Jordi Bertomeu.

“Every time we launched a major change in EuroLeague, even before it went live, we were already thinking about what was next,” Bertomeu says. “The moment we find ourselves in a comfort zone, thinking that we cannot do any better? That will probably be the moment we are no longer good managers for this league.”

Changes have always been made with a clear direction in mind, building upon previous ones to raise standards, increase quality and promote competitiveness

across the league. All of them were made to deliver the best possible basketball experience to EuroLeague fans.

“There’s no time to relax at Euroleague Basketball,” adds Roser Queralto, Euroleague Basketball’s chief business officer. “The moment you think everything is surprisingly quiet, suddenly someone comes up with a new idea, a new project or a new way of doing things, and the madness starts all over again.”

This commitment to constant evolution means Euroleague Basketball understands the importance of innovation to meeting and exceeding the expectations of fans.

FANXP: Investing in innovation

For sport to keep up with other forms of entertainment, rights-holders must invest time, money and energy into innovations that improve the way fans consume their product. Euroleague Basketball, one of the most inventive sports competitions in the world, continues to do just that.

Euroleague Basketball's 2020 FANXP innovation challenge, at Barcelona's Roca Gallery, saw 10 startups compete for the chance to run a pilot project with the rights-holder. The challenge was to improve the experience of EuroLeague fans at home, on the go, or in the arena.

The competition is the latest example of Euroleague Basketball's wider commitment to innovation in sport. Last year's SACKathon – a partnership between Euroleague and software company SAP – challenged data scientists to create stories and present new insights about what makes winning basketball.

In 2020, that focus shifted away from the court to the arenas and armchairs of Europe and beyond.

Eighty-four startups applied to the 2020 FANXP in the hope of winning an opportunity to develop their fan-focused product at a EuroLeague event, with 10 finalists selected and then judged by a four-person jury of sports industry and financing experts comprising:

- Luis Vicente, chief executive at Eleven Sports
- Stina Lundgren Högbom, research and outreach manager at the Stockholm School of Economics's Centre for Sports and Business
- Sree Varma, founder and chief executive of iSportConnect
- Didac Lee, co-founder of venture capital fund Galdana Ventures.

The finalists included companies pitching a range of products and solutions, from fan engagement platforms to virtual reality, second-screen technology, arena concessions



solutions and mass participation games.

All 10 finalists received private mentoring sessions with Euroleague Basketball executives and jury members, networking opportunities, pitch coaching and the chance to meet potential investors. However, only one could win the competition.

Edisn.ai takes the prize

Edisn.ai, an Indian fan engagement platform that uses AI-powered player recognition technology to create interactive broadcast overlays and monetisation options, won the jury's approval and took first prize. The judges were impressed with the product's core technology, but they were particularly enamoured by its ability to simultaneously serve the needs of fans and rights-holders.

Edisn.ai offers fans an enriched viewing experience by providing video game-esque overlays that display player information and stats, as well as several built-in monetisation options for rights-holders that could incorporate partnerships with brands and betting companies.

The company's co-founder and chief executive, Ashok Karanth, is a sports industry veteran who has sold rights and run marketing campaigns for Indian Premier League franchises and stadia. As the head of an eight-man team running the company, Karanth's understanding of both fan-engagement and rights-holders' needs shone through in the product and proved to be a winning combination.

"I've been in the sports industry for 15 years and my background is in marketing and sponsorship. The world is moving toward digital solutions and technology and I thought that if we don't offer something for that world, we're going to be left behind," he says.

"We were able to show Euroleague something innovative and different, which they can use as a pilot and scale up if they like it."

Lundgren Högbom particularly liked the fan-facing element of the product: "Several companies could have won and the competition was really tight, but the decision has to be intuitive. You could see how edisn.ai can be utilised from different perspectives. As a casual spectator, I would love to be able to watch and immediately see who the players are and see information about them."

A competition unlike others

When professional sport resumes after the Covid-19 pandemic, Edisn.ai will begin developing a pilot project with Euroleague Basketball, to test the product's capabilities in a real-life setting. This project could develop into a longer-term partnership, as it has done with previous entrants to Euroleague Basketball innovation contests.

While winning the contest guarantees the chance to work with the rights-holder, it is not a prerequisite. Alex Ferrer Kristjansson, senior director of marketing and communication at Euroleague Basketball, explains that every finalist in a Euroleague Basketball

innovation contest has an opportunity to show what it can do.

“After the first two editions of our innovation challenges, we ran a number of pilots and are now in a business relationship with two of the startups that were finalists in those two editions,” he explains. “Hopefully, this year, we’ll get to do more pilots with the startups we just have seen and build lasting relationships for the future.”

For the startups, it wasn’t just the chance of a pilot project with Euroleague Basketball that made them enter. Each startup’s representatives were given one-to-one mentoring by executives and the chance to discuss their product with investors and influential sport business figures.

“I’ve found this startup competition to be unlike several others,” says Víctor Ernesto García Sánchez, co-founder of virtual-reality streaming company YBVR. “When we look at startup competitions, we are competitive by nature and of course we want to win. But we also want a genuine interest from the competition organiser. In this case, we’re getting insights that would

normally be impossible to get.

“We’re able to get close with not just Euroleague Basketball but also the judges and the media surrounding the competition. That’s sometimes more valuable than the prize itself.”

For Eyal Gantz, the competition yielded all this and a little more. As the chief technology officer for stadium food and beverage solutions startup Seatserve, Gantz won the ‘Best Pitch’ award and brought Seatserve close to winning the competition. Regardless, Gantz was delighted with the experience.

“Usually when you go to a pitch contest, you arrive, you pitch and you leave. In this case, we’re hanging out with Euroleague executives!” Gantz says.

“The mentoring started before we even got here, via video conferencing with Euroleague Basketball and the people at [sports technology consultancy] Next Sports. They gave us great pointers on what to pitch, what to show off, and that usually doesn’t happen in other pitch contests. They helped us change the pitch again and again, until it finally got to us winning ‘Best Pitch.’”

Taking responsibility

The FANXP challenge is just one element of Euroleague Basketball’s commitment to accelerating innovation throughout its business. The rights-holder believes that by taking a radical attitude toward integrating technology in sport, changes will be seen and felt by both its business partners and fans.

“We’ve always tried to stay curious and look for new ways of doing things – to not be too comfortable,” Ferrer says. “And Jordi Bertomeu, our chief executive, pushes us a lot when we get comfortable!”

He continues: “We decided to reimagine how we could work to identify the technology out there that could help us improve our business, and how we could identify that in a more organised way. That’s why we put together this competition and involved our mentors from the Euroleague Basketball staff.”

Around a third of all Euroleague Basketball staff are now mentoring in some capacity. Some are mentoring individual executives or entire teams of people at Euroleague clubs, while





others are involved in mentoring external businesses such as those involved in FANXP.

Most of this mentoring is focused toward improving the fan experience when watching EuroLeague in the arena, at home and on the go. Ferrer says this renewed focus has galvanised the entire company.

“Increasing our focus on the way we engage with our fans has changed the culture of the company as a whole and instilled an entrepreneurial spirit throughout Euroleague Basketball,” he says. “Because we are smaller in size and our ownership structure is more agile, it’s a little easier to try new things, test new things and change direction. Being a giant like the NBA has advantages, but being a little smaller also has big advantages that we want to build on.”

“FANXP is an example of this. We really want to get inspired by these startups and bring something into action. We don’t see it as a marketing platform and it’s not just about learning something. It’s about doing things.”

Taking the initiative

Euroleague Basketball understands that data is the key to delivering a rich, personalised fan experience. By understanding fans on an individual level, the sports industry can begin to deliver content that meets and exceeds their expectations – expectations built on the personalised experiences offered in the film, television and music industries.

Euroleague Basketball believes the most effective method of doing this is through initiatives and partnerships of its own making, rather than via social media marketing and networking.

“We would love to have access to the data of our fans. We would love to be able to communicate with them without intermediaries and in a very personalised way,” Ferrer says. “We hope we can build the right tools to be able to collect that data and to act on that. We want to monitor that data effectively and have a much more personalised relationship with our fans.”

“Unfortunately, we’re not there right now. We’ve taken some steps but the social networks – who are partners of

ours because they help a lot in creating these communities, reaching out to them and getting our content out there to where they are – aren’t allowing us to get data from our consumers and monetising it in a serious way.”

Companies like edisn.ai can help Euroleague Basketball and the EuroLeague teams better understand the desires of the individual fan: the players they like; the teams they like to watch; how long they tend to watch for; and which partner brands they could be interested in.

Likewise, competitions like FANXP bring those companies to Euroleague Basketball and allow strong, innovative partnerships to be formed.

“What I like about this competition is that it’s almost a guaranteed thing that Euroleague will look at least two or three companies out of the 10 finalists, and that it will tangibly result in some kind of project,” Karanth says.

“To get a platform like this, that really allows you to implement an idea, it’s a once in a lifetime opportunity. If the partnership works, Euroleague will take you to tens of millions of fans.”



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Georgiou targeting further growth for Eurosport Events after announcing UCI tie-up

Broadcaster's events arm confirmed first partnership outside motorsport in March

Rapid expansion will see doubling of events in portfolio over the next two years

Now in 'unique position' to work as commercial promoter alongside major rights-holders



Andrew Georgiou, Eurosport president, at the press conference to announce Eurosport Events' tie-up with the UCI. (Maja Hitij/Getty Images)

Adam Nelson

In March, Eurosport Events announced a partnership with the International Cycling Union (UCI) that will see it become the commercial promoter for the new Track Cycling World League.

It is Eurosport Events' first contract outside of the world of motorsport, where it has worked exclusively since its foundation as the pan-European broadcaster's events promotion arm in 2005. The announcement came shortly after Eurosport Events revealed it was set to launch a new all-electric racing series, Pure ETCR, later this year.

In December 2019, Eurosport Events won a tender to take over the commercial operation of

the International Motorcycling Federation's (FIM) Speedway Grand Prix World Championship, adding to the stable of motorcycling events it already runs, including the FIM Endurance World Championship.

This rapid expansion – which will lead to a doubling of events on the annual Eurosport Events slate over the next two years, from 30 in 2019 to over 60 in 2021 – was precipitated by the arrival of Andrew Georgiou as president of the wider Eurosport group in July last year.

Georgiou, formerly chief executive of Lagardère Sports and Entertainment, arrived at Eurosport at a time when the Discovery-owned broadcaster was assessing its place in the market, pivoting toward a digital and streaming future and seeking to diversify its

revenue streams. Eurosport Events quickly took a place of prominence in Georgiou's future thinking.

Eurosport's unique offering

"I'd just come into Discovery and started to look at all the pieces that we have within the group, trying to figure out what our competitive advantage is," Georgiou explains to *SportBusiness Review*.

"I've got a background in events, I've seen that the value in events is massive. As I looked across the Discovery network, I could see that Eurosport Events sits in a position where we end up being a really unique partner to the sports and federations we work with."

That unique position is achieved by Eurosport Events' ability to control the

entire ecosystem of an event – from on-ground delivery and organisation through to commercial rights management and broadcast coverage, both through its own channels in Europe and its sublicensing agreements around the world.

François Ribeiro, who has served as head of the division since its inception in 2005, claims: “There are many promoters on the market, but the unique selling point of Eurosport Events is that we can control the entire chain of production – calendar control, event implementation, TV production, broadcast promotions, sublicensing. That’s a very strong position to be in.”

While Georgiou feels that it is unlikely that rights-holders at the “premium end of the events calendar” would turn to Eurosport Events, the direction of the industry in recent years has led to “the long tail getting longer” and a greater proliferation of mid-level events, with more sporting federations who are “underfunded, under-resourced” and lacking the ability to put on events in the way they’d want to.

“We can do things to a level, to a quality, that most federations can’t achieve on their own, because they can’t afford to take the kind of financial risks we can or make the investments that we’re prepared to make,” Georgiou says.

“If you put a federation into the centre of our network, and you said,

‘what is it that you need in order to grow your sport?’, I would say Discovery is the only media platform that has all the ingredients you would need in order to be successful. No one else has got all those ingredients, and Eurosport Events is one of those key ingredients that pull that all together.”

That is why Georgiou – encouraged by Discovery president JB Perette – has begun to step up Eurosport Events’ attempts to broaden its horizons and work with a wider range of rights-holders.

“It’s not just about diversifying revenues,” he says. “It’s about looking at the way the market is changing, at the ability of rights-holders to put on events of their own at a mass scale. We have an audience we need to serve, and if the events aren’t out there for us to broadcast, we can help to create those events.”

This has long been part of Eurosport Events’ strategy. Ribeiro explains that from the start, “the whole idea was to secure long-term IPs to diversify revenues” within Eurosport, which at the time “was looking at what ESPN was doing in the US with the X Games, and wanted to do something similar in Europe under the Eurosport umbrella.

“We identified motorsports because, at the time, the biggest sector of advertising revenue [for Eurosport] was the automotive industry, but there was only two global world championship

in motor racing: Formula One and the World Rally Championship.”

Cycling a ‘key vertical’

That explains why cycling made sense as a next move for Eurosport Events. Cycling fans – particularly fans of track cycling – are presently an under-served audience, says Ribeiro, comparable to motorsport fans in the mid-’00s. One of Eurosport Events’ intentions with the World League is to “revitalise” track cycling, addressing the “lack of narrative between the Olympic Games” in the sport and introducing a simplified new format to appeal to newer fans.

The deal struck to promote the series reflects the UCI’s confidence in Eurosport Events’ ability. Running for eight years and taking in two Olympic cycles, the division, together with Discovery’s digital channel Global Cycling Network, will be responsible for almost every aspect of the league’s organisation and distribution. Eurosport and GCN both have significant experience in producing cycling broadcasts, both road and track, as well as strong existing relationships with advertisers, sponsors and venue operators from across the sport.

Cycling forms one of Eurosport’s key verticals, and track cycling in particular has long been seen as lacking a high-profile, year-round series, despite being a major broadcast draw



Georgiou with UCI president David Lappartient (Eurosport)



Eurosport Events is aiming to "revitalise" track cycling (Foto Olimpik/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

during the Olympics. With Discovery holding Olympic rights across Europe and Eurosport the rights to the UCI World Championships, the new Track Cycling World League represents a way for Eurosport to direct the narrative throughout the Olympic cycle.

"We started looking into this two years ago, when Discovery president JB Perette said we should look to move Eurosport Events to reinforce the strong cycling vertical that we have," says Ribeiro. "We sat down with the UCI and understood that one of the main properties in their portfolio was track cycling – it's their biggest Olympic category, delivers very high audience ratings – but there was not consistency in the sport.

"There was scope for Eurosport Events to improve the storytelling of track cycling. We found that there was a lack of narrative in between two Summer Olympics. Track cycling is very, very strong – really a pillar property of the Olympic Games every four years. It delivers very high audience ratings, it's a great atmosphere on events. It's truly global; you have Europe, Asia, Americas involved in the sport. But you only hear about track cycling at the Olympics and once a year

at the World Championships."

The UCI, he says, "saw in Eurosport Events a perfect partner because we have the ability to take over a property, find individual event promoters locally and, at the central level, keep the calendar definition, the TV production, the media distribution, the promotion, the marketing, the sponsorship. The UCI shares our vision to bring track cycling to the next level, and that's why we've signed a long-term contract beyond the Los Angeles Olympics."

The Track Cycling World League's format has been devised by Eurosport Events in collaboration with the UCI, and is built from the bottom-up to be a fast-paced, engaging TV product. No team, pursuit or endurance disciplines will be included, with Ribeiro describing them as "sometimes hard to understand even for cycling fans", while each event will last a maximum of two-and-a-half-hours, "so that when we go on air, it is easy to be very dynamic, very compact, very easy to follow and very engaging for the viewership."

Events increasingly important to Eurosport

While Georgiou declines to comment on where Eurosport Events may look

to expand in the future, he does outline motorsport, winter sport, golf and tennis as Eurosport's "key verticals", which would appear to be the most likely areas of potential expansion. The UCI partnership is a toe in the water outside Eurosport Events' comfort zone, and will, Georgiou hopes, help to present a calling card to other rights-holders to demonstrate the "unique proposition that we've created."

Eurosport Events' niche within the wider group is, he believes, "only going to grow in importance" as it continues to expand its reach.

"I'm looking at Eurosport Events and I'm thinking, 'how do we double down on this?'" Georgiou says. "How do we use this as the centre of our relationship with federations, to help drive new IP and new events, and grow these things throughout our network over a long period? And I think that once we demonstrate properly what we are able to do, then I think it's a more interesting proposition for rights-holders to say 'right, how do we tap into that capability moving forward?' So there is real focus, a real intent, and there will be the opportunity for real investments for the right projects with the right vision." ○

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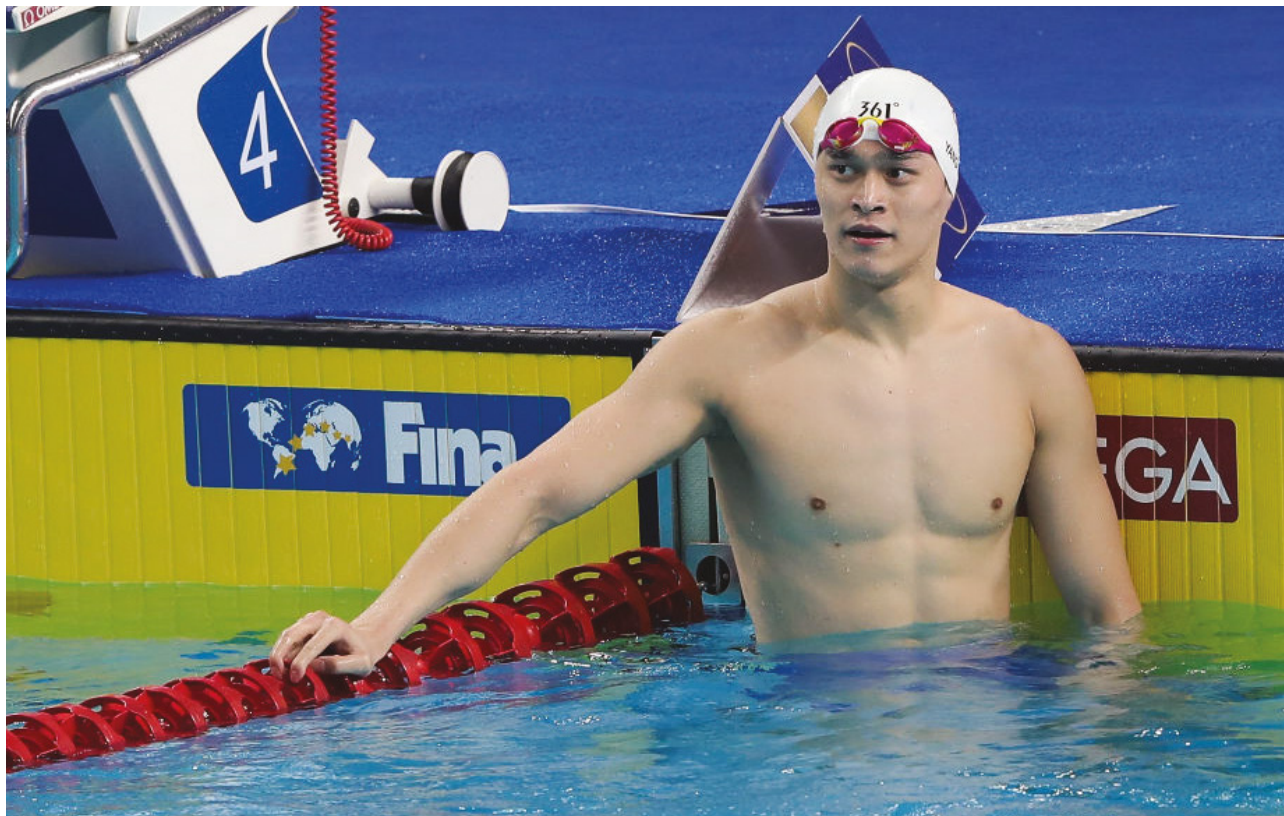
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Sun Yang's downfall highlights China's failure to develop individual stars

When the Court of Arbitration for Sport handed an eight-year ban to the six-time Olympic medallist Sun Yang, the Chinese sport hierarchy lost its most valuable individual star. Zhang Dan reports.



Sun Yang after competing in the Men's 200m Freestyle Final of the Fina Champions Swim Series 2020 in Beijing. (Lintao Zhang/Getty Images)

Zhang Dan

When the Court of Arbitration for Sport handed an eight-year ban to the six-time Olympic medallist Sun Yang earlier this year, for failure to cooperate with doping sample collection, there was an uproar on Chinese social media.

Millions sent spiteful curses against Western double standards and urged the Chinese national hero to appeal. “China will never accept this,” vowed an angry post on Weibo. “Sun Yang’s rivals in Australia, Korea, Japan, United States, and UK are only to cheer their wins in Tokyo Olympics in guilt.”

Chinese people refuse to see Sun

Yang’s fall from grace for an obvious reason. As the first Chinese male athlete to win a gold medal in Olympic swimming, the 28-year-old would be one of China’s surest hopes – for at least two medals – at the upcoming Olympic Games in Tokyo.

“The outlook for China in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics is already bleak enough. It is hardly possible to defend a place in the top-three on the medal board,” says Dr Lingling Liu, managing director of China Sports Business Consulting. “The ban of Sun Yang almost wipes out any possibility. China’s best hope is to reach for fifth position but it will lag behind the host country Japan.”

Given the nationalist resentment

between the two nations, the prospect of trailing Japan at the Olympics would be a stiff blow to Chinese pride.

But for the Chinese sports hierarchy, the biggest ramification is the loss of its most valuable individual star.

Since 2012, when 110-meter hurdler Liu Xiang crumbled out of the London Olympics, Sun Yang has been the male lead of Chinese sports. *Forbes China* estimated his commercial value at CNY30m (€3.9m/\$4.3m) in 2013, and Titan Sports at CNY69m in 2017. In early 2019, ESPN ranked him as the 43rd highest-paid athlete worldwide.

Sun's difficult image

Despite this, Sun Yang holds no deals with the world’s top-tier brands. His

biggest deal is with Chinese sports apparel manufacturer 361°. “Sun Yang and people around him are known for being difficult to work with,” says an unnamed source at Tencent, which struck a short-lived agent deal with Sun in 2017.

Sun’s mother, Yang Ming – a former volleyball player and now a professor with the PE Department of Hangzhou Normal University in Zhejiang Province – is his *de facto* agent.

“Her decisions were constantly changing, and she questioned every decision made by the agencies. It is simply impossible to work with them,” adds the Tencent source.

Upon the news of the CAS ban, Yang posted on social media to attribute the loss of the case to the incompetent lawyer appointed by the Chinese Swimming Association and an equally incompetent interpreter.

Sun has long carried a poor public image. On top of his three-month slap-on-the-wrist ban for testing positive for Trimetazidine in 2014, he has trailed a string of incidents including drink driving, sponsor presentation disputes and publicly humiliating competitors.

He has often tapped Chinese nationalism in response: in 2019 he told Mack Horton, an Australian swimmer who refused to stand with

him on the podium at the Fina World Championships: “You do not have to respect me, but you must respect China.” In return, Chinese media has been tight-lipped over any infractions.

But there are signs the state is giving up on him. On the day of the CAS verdict, Hu Xijin, chief editor of the *Global Times*, a political tabloid under the *People’s Daily*, posted his opinion that “the issues facing Sun Yang should not be linked with the glory and humiliation of our country”. Hu, through his feisty social posts, has acted as the non-official spokesman of the government. His opinion was understood as Team China’s preparedness to abandon Sun Yang.

But who comes next?

It will not be easy for Chinese sport to call forth another talented athlete to replace him.

Sun is often compared with three other top Chinese athletes of the 21st century, namely Li Na, the two-time tennis grand slam winner, Yao Ming, the former Houston Rockets basketball player, and Liu Xiang, who won Olympic gold in 2004.

But the comparison leads to disheartening conclusions: those who strayed furthest from the Chinese sports systems achieved the greatest success.

None of Team China’s other stars can step straight into Sun’s shoes. Table tennis player Zhang Jike and ex-NBA basketballer Yi Jianlian are contenders, but both are past their career primes. On the women’s side, two contenders are at opposite ends of their careers: Feng Shanshan, 30, the first player from China to play in the LPGA Tour, and American-born Eileen Gu, 16, who was naturalised to represent China at the 2022 Olympic Winter Games in skiing events.

It is open for debate whether the Chinese sports administrative system has mismanaged its strategies to develop and sustain world-class individuals. In his reflection to Sun Yang’s crisis, professor Yi Jiandong, an Olympic expert at Wenzhou University, laments that the China sports system is plagued by complacency, bigotry, collective unconsciousness, and emotional reactions to external stimulants.

“For a top athlete as talented as Sun Yang, there needs to be a professional network to look after other issues for him than swimming for medals,” he says. “Those are scientific research, competitions, finances, businesses, legal matters, medical and health, public, media, and government relations. You name it.” ○



Court of Arbitration for Sport secretary general Matthieu Reeb arrives to read the sentence on the case of Sun Yang for missing a drug test. (Fabrice Coffrini/AFP via Getty Images)

Hail to the new stadium? Redskins' long search for new facility taking many detours

Many fans wish to return to the fabled RFK site that sits empty along the Anacostia River

Three different jurisdictions have shown middling ability and interest in helping construct a new stadium

Lease for the NFL team's current Maryland home, FedEx Field, runs out in 2027



FedEx Field, current home of the NFL's Washington Redskins. (Patrick McDermott/Getty Images)

Rick Snider

The Washington Redskins were once the sole unifying factor in a US capital all too well known for polarisation.

Democrats talked football with Republicans. Maryland, Virginia, and District of Columbia residents all bonded over the football team's success that included three Super Bowl victories from 1983-92, at the time cementing the Redskins as one of the National Football League's iconic franchises.

The civic goodwill spilled over into the Maryland suburbs when the Redskins in 1997 moved from RFK Stadium in the District to Landover and what would be known as FedEx Field.

The Redskins were always a conversational icebreaker, and a way

to help forge relationships. Hail To The Redskins, the team's beloved fight song, was a key part of the region's soundtrack. But the good old days are gone, just as the team is looking to find the successor facility to FedEx Field, which now after a generation of use is quickly falling out of date amid more modern NFL facilities.

And shockingly, an NFL team with that trio of championships and three political jurisdictions to play off each other – assets many other teams seeking help on a new facility would love to have – faces a decidedly uphill climb for its next venue.

Just a few years after all three local jurisdictions eagerly competed for the team's next stadium – expected to open in 2027 when the current FedEx Field lease agreement expires – response of

late has been lukewarm by each over hosting the team.

The District appears all but out after failing to gain long-term control over its only potential site, the old grounds of RFK Stadium.

Virginia is considering two sports wagering bills to support a new stadium should any major professional team relocate to the state. But the commonwealth has no suitable stadium site in Northern Virginia near the city.

Maryland statehouse leaders, meanwhile, recently listened to Redskins owner Dan Snyder's bid for a sports betting operator's license in exchange for remaining in Landover, not a surprising move given how prevalent legal sports wagering has become in the last two years. But no sports gambling bill in that state has been submitted.

Essentially, everybody's one-time favourite dinner guest is now cold, hungry, and alone.

The Redskins have long marketed their glory days and sustained success of RFK Stadium, which lies near Washington's eastern border. In 21 seasons before Snyder's 1999 purchase, the Redskins made the playoffs 13 times, with five NFC Championships and three Super Bowl crowns. In 21 years since under Snyder – all at FedEx Field – the team has made just five postseasons with two victories, and is 51 games under the .500 mark under his leadership.

As the losses have mounted, fan support and interest in the Redskins has cratered. FedEx Field has often been half-empty for Redskins games, or overrun by visiting fans feasting on cheap tickets on the resale market, or both, in turn creating an often grim atmosphere. A season ticket waiting list the team once boasted to be in excess of 200,000 names is entirely gone.

And a recent *Washington Post* poll showed the crosstown Nationals, Major League Baseball champions in 2019, are now the region's most popular sports team, ending years of local dominance by the Redskins.

Changing dynamics

Sentimental fans ache to return to the fabled RFK site that sits empty along

the Anacostia River, two miles due east of the US Capitol building. The nation's first multi-use stadium was built in 1961 for both the Washington Senators of Major League Baseball and the Redskins. The Senators departed after 1971 to become the Texas Rangers, leaving the Redskins to turn the 56,000-seat bandbox into a legendary land of stands that bounced with gleeful fans under coaches George Allen and Joe Gibbs.

“Stadiums do seem to cause some neighbourhood effects, but those effects are limited.”

Victor Matheson | economics professor, College of the Holy Cross

Former Redskins owner Jack Kent Cooke, Snyder's predecessor, only left the city-owned stadium to earn bigger money in his own venue. Ironically, he died five months before FedEx Field opened in September 1997. Cooke spent his last day alive sitting in his car at midfield, watching construction progress on essentially a knockoff of the now-departed Giants Stadium in New Jersey that he greatly admired.

But a Redskins storybook return back into the District and where they once called home very likely isn't happening,

and for a variety of reasons.

Nearly 23 years later, RFK Stadium's parking lots are overgrown with weeds while rust rings along the upper deck's exterior. The District is currently reviewing demolition bids that should see the beloved stadium razed in a little more than a year's time.

The days of District politicians financing the entirety of a pro sports facility, as they did across town for Nationals Park to the tune of more than \$1bn when including interest costs, are long gone. Add in a generation of losing Redskins teams and the nation's capital now seems more in love with baseball and hockey than the Redskins who ruled the market for 50 years.

District leaders long waited for a deal with the Redskins. But the recent failure to extend the city's lease on the federally-controlled property ending in 2038 has instead brought several alternate plans for the 190-acre site.

Meanwhile, residents in a neighbourhood adjacent to RFK Stadium are resolute over blocking the Redskins' return, and now have harnessed political power unheard of in 1961 when the facility was forced upon them.

“[The Redskins are] not coming back,” says Denise Krepp, an Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner representing 2,500 residents on the stadium's border. “We need affordable housing. Why would we give away land and pay the Redskins millions to come?”

“The city uses these properties as shiny rocks. The underlying frustration is you have to talk to us. You can't manipulate us anymore,” Krepp says.

Furthermore, the Redskins now lack a powerful political advocate, following the recent resignation of District Councilman Jack Evans over alleged ethics violations. Evans, along with the late Councilman and former District mayor Marion Barry, essentially strong-armed fellow council members 15 years ago into financing Nationals Park, largely through increased business taxes. But no such leadership has lined up behind the cause of Snyder and the Redskins.

At the same time, industry-wide development of new major league stadiums in the US has slowed after two decades went by between 1998 and



Washington Redskins owner Dan Snyder, who has held the club since 1999, but amid long stretches of on-field losing has become one of the most unpopular owners in US team sports

2017 with more than a hundred new venues opening.

Since then, the National Basketball Association added the Milwaukee Bucks' Fiserv Forum in 2018 and the Golden State Warriors' Chase Center in 2019. The NFL will open two stadiums this year – SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California for the Los Angeles Rams and Chargers, and Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas for the Raiders. Major League Baseball has the Texas Rangers' Globe Life Field opening next month.

Instead, retrofitting and expanding current facilities with nearby developments has been increasingly in vogue, such as what the San Francisco Giants are now doing at Mission Rock.

As those trends continue to manifest themselves, large-scale public financing of new stadiums is no longer automatic, says Victor Matheson, an economics professor at the College of the Holy Cross.

“Between 1992-2007, we had this massive wave of new stadiums,” he says. “Huge amounts of monies were spent and two thirds were public money and one third private sources. In 2008 was the great recession. People started looking and saying ‘Why are we spending hundreds of millions of dollars for billionaire owners and millionaire players when laying off teachers and firefighters?’ The funding stream has inverted. One third of stadiums since the great recession [of 2008] has been funded by public sources and two thirds are private.

“Stadiums do seem to cause some neighbourhood effects, but those effects are limited and disappear a half kilometer from stadium. We very rarely see citywide effects so you're pouring a lot of money at the expense of the city... There's no reason to be extorted here,” Matheson says.

Owner echoes

Ironically, Snyder is largely following the long, winding path that frustrated Cooke for nearly a decade, and also took that owner across multiple jurisdictions.

The previous owner held press conferences announcing plans to build a stadium in Virginia and Maryland after failing to gain a new venue next to RFK Stadium. All of those lauded venues also



failed to happen. Indeed, Cooke even briefly considered moving the team to Los Angeles before finally succeeding on his fourth try at an old dairy farm just inside the Maryland beltway, but several miles outside the city.

“This is an opportunity [for Snyder] to rebrand himself with this new stadium.”

John Boyd | principal, The Boyd Company

As Snyder retraces many of Cooke's steps, there has been a recent and significant executive shift within the team. Snyder recently fired team president Bruce Allen, who was his lead stadium negotiator with politicians, leaving the owner himself, at least for now, to run point on the new facility talks.

Allen was considered close to Virginia leaders, given his brother, George Allen, was the governor there from 1994-98. But Virginia seems unwilling to invest in a stadium, after spending \$573m to attract Amazon's new East Coast headquarters.

At best, the commonwealth's latest bill will help any potential team build its stadium through sports wagering profits rather than taxes. But it remains uncertain whether the measure will pass, or if it does, generate sufficient funds.

Maryland for many months also seemed out of the Redskins stadium chase after a recent failed land swap for federal land just 14 miles from FedEx Field that's close to the Virginia and Washington borders. Legislators in the Maryland capital of Annapolis now are largely more politically and emotionally aligned with the Redskins' regional rival, the Baltimore Ravens, who have enjoyed far more on-field success, and whose owner, Steve Biscotti, is largely low-profile, but not reviled like Snyder among fans.

And there's also Maryland's pending bill to invest \$375m in the state's two thoroughbred racing tracks that could largely serve to represent that jurisdiction's public-sector investment in sports for the time being.

But lady luck may have suddenly become Snyder's ally. A Maryland sports wagering bill hasn't been filed, but is considered inevitable following the sweeping growth of betting after the 2018 US Supreme Court ruling allowing states to forge their own rules in this area.

Maryland legislators are weighing whether to have a state referendum in November regarding betting. In the meantime, Snyder sweetened his position by reportedly offering to use minority-owned businesses and build his new stadium near his current one without significant state subsidies.

FedEx Field was geographically isolated when opening in 1997. It's



Fans sit in the stands at FedExField. (Patrick McDermott/Getty Images)

now bordered by housing on one side, but still offers potential commercial development on the northern edge. That's the key selling point to building a new stadium adjacent to the current facility, much like several NFL teams have done in recent years in markets such as Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, New York, and New England.

"The national trend is stadiums are viewed as a new frontier of economic development and mixed use to make the case of serving the public good," says John Boyd, whose The Boyd Company of Princeton, New Jersey, consults on site locations. "The stadium of the future is mixed-use, including Class A office space. This could be state-of-the-art for corporate events."

Snyder declined to comment on his stadium plans through a team spokesman. The owner's approval rating is historically low among fans after amassing that 142-193-1 record during his ownership. But Boyd says a new stadium could reverse that.

"This is an opportunity [for Snyder] to rebrand himself with this new stadium," Boyd says. "Few owners in sports have been maligned like Snyder. To rebrand himself and work

with the legislature to do a stadium without public financing, which is the exception in how deals are done today, in exchange for the betting license would position this new stadium as a cutting-edge mixed-use development analogous to what we saw with [Truist Park] in Atlanta, the Raiders in [Las Vegas with Allegiant Stadium], and in Milwaukee with a beer district.

"The world is looking at Dan Snyder. But this is an awesome opportunity for [Maryland] Governor [Larry] Hogan and Prince George's County Executive Angela Alsobrooks. A lot of executives are on the clock. The political stakes for this are enormous. A big part of their resumes are projects like this one that come along once in a generation," Boyd says.

Details on the Redskins' vision for the sought-after stadium are scant, aside one leaked sketch last year that showed a moat encircling the facility, a visual that quickly engendered widespread mocking on social media. Snyder has indicated a desire for a smaller facility of nearly 65,000 seats, roughly 17,000 fewer than FedEx Field, while a domed venue was discussed with state legislators.

Such downgraded facilities compared to NFL historical norms are now in

favour, as Allegiant Stadium will seat 65,000, while the SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles will have a capacity of 70,240.

"It's less to do with number of seats than monetising the experience," Boyd says. "The stadium experience is so radically different. They're designed of what I can do during the four-hour experience aside watching the game. It's about bars and experiences. The game is secondary."

For now, though, the experience is secondary to finding a location. Snyder's best bet now appears to remain on the same site after missing a window to other venues. A sports betting license makes it look perhaps more than doable than ever should legislation be approved.

Yet, nothing is decided. Virginia's bid in a distant suburb near Dulles International Airport where the team has trained daily for nearly 50 years still has a weak pulse, given its potential sports gaming bill, and the team's history there. Maryland might move more quickly because of Virginia's sudden legislative push. But there has been no signed deal anywhere, and the wait continues.

Somehow, Snyder's path still has a little longer to go. [O](#)

Barcelona shifts focus as Olympic legacy lives on

Barcelona's blueprint for Olympic legacy is widely respected. But how is the city's approach evolving nearly three decades after the transformational Games? Bradley Rial reports.



FC Barcelona's Espai Barça project is the most significant current sports construction project in the city. (Rubén BCN)

Bradley Rial

In a sporting context, Barcelona is synonymous with the famous Blaugrana of its most successful football club and the 1992 Olympic Games, which proved transformational for the city and are still seen as a benchmark to which other hosts aspire.

With the Games acting as the catalyst, the city revamped its transport, telecommunications and even sewage systems, whilst the previously run-down harbour was converted into a plush \$2.4bn (€2.2bn) waterfront development.

Unemployment halved in the six years prior to the Games, despite broader economic challenges in Spain and across Europe. Whereas tourism accounted for less than two per cent of the city's pre-Olympics GDP, the figure increased to 12 per cent in the afterglow of the Games and has remained fairly consistent ever since. Visitor numbers roughly doubled decade-on-decade from 1990 to 2010. As a blueprint for the

Olympics' game-changing credentials, Barcelona takes some beating.

Blueprint

However, the city's focus since 1992 has not been on attracting the mega-events that its infrastructure was built to accommodate. Instead, as explained by Barcelona City Council's sports commissioner, David Escudé, smaller, annual events have provided a sustainable post-Games legacy.

"Barcelona wants to ensure that these sporting events are not one-off events, but are repeated, without closing the door to any other events that may be of special interest to the city, provided that they adapt to the criteria the city has set out in terms of environmental and economic sustainability," Escudé says.

Examples of such events include the Barcelona Marathon, Barcelona Triathlon, the International Equestrian Federation's (FEI) Jumping Nations Cup Final and the Barcelona Open tennis tournament, which forms part of

the men's ATP Tour.

"Barcelona City Council doesn't seek the success of one single edition, but rather wants to ensure that these events can be put on year after year," says Escudé, who adds that "economic return and the positive effect on the Barcelona brand" are always key considerations of whether to submit a bid.

"The main target of these events are city residents, who enjoy seeing the world's leading sportspeople in their city, and they also generate enthusiasm, especially among young people, which helps to promote sport and its values. These events are also a magnet for sports tourists."

Paradigm shift

While many cities will stage a series of smaller sporting events to work their way up to consideration as a potential host of a major multi-sport spectacle like the Olympics, Barcelona's approach has been the exact opposite.

The Games were used to establish

a network of facilities – backed up by improved transport links and accommodation options – that have gone on to handle smaller, less costly events, creating a wide-ranging, vibrant sporting scene. Major one-off sporting occasions have still taken place in the city, but they have more commonly been part of Spain-wide events like the 2013 World Men’s Handball Championship and the 2014 International Basketball Federation (Fiba) World Cup.

“The paradigm of big international sporting events has changed a lot,” Escudé says. “Big European or even world cities no longer choose to organise major world championships, because the cost is prohibitive. Nowadays, major sporting events are in the hands of the world’s economic powerhouses and emerging economies.

“You also have to guarantee the good management and economic viability of the event right from the word go. The more municipal involvement in the organisation of the event, the fewer the risks when the event is actually taking place.”

The political strategy for organising events in Barcelona is set out by the city government at the start of a four-year mandate. This strategy is in line with the municipal government’s roadmap, and the city council insists that sport must be linked to the city’s economic and growth policy.

“The more municipal involvement in the organisation of the event, the fewer the risks.”

David Escudé | sports commissioner, Barcelona City Council

The city council is in the process of fine-tuning proposals, with input from sporting stakeholders, organisations and residents, for a broader sporting strategy that will extend until the end of 2023.

“Barcelona City Council’s political objective is universal access to the practice of sport to ensure that for social,

economic, physical or psychological reasons nobody is left unable to do sport in the city,” Escudé says.

Facilities

Last year, the International Olympic Committee published a report on how Barcelona 1992 was a “model of Olympic legacy”, pointing to youth-focused ‘Sport for All’ programmes that are still in place now as evidence.

There was no Olympic Park created for the Games, with a focus instead on spreading facilities across Barcelona and a new ring-road that significantly reduced traffic congestion in the city centre. Unlike so many other Olympic host cities, Games facilities have avoided the ‘white elephant’ tag, and sporting infrastructure improvements continue to this day.

“Barcelona City Council prioritises the construction of new, permanent sporting facilities that, after the event, become an asset for the city, rather than using temporary facilities that are taken down after,” Escudé says.

The most significant current sports



The opening ceremony of the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona (Getty Images)



Barcelona's 18,000-seat Palau Sant Jordi was home to matches during Spain's hosting of the 2013 Men's Handball World Championship (Christof Koepsel/Bongarts/Getty Images)

construction project in the city – the ongoing Espai Barça project – is not costing the city council at all, under the terms of an agreement struck with the club in 2016. At a cost of at least €685m, FC Barcelona's various arenas and facilities will be revamped into some of the most technologically advanced in world sport, with the capacity of the already cavernous Camp Nou increased to 105,000.

The city's other Primera División football club, RCD Espanyol, moved just over a decade ago to the acclaimed 40,000-seat RCDE Stadium from the 60,000-capacity Estadi Olímpic de Montjuïc, which served as the centrepiece of the 1992 Games and the 2010 European Athletics Championships.

One of the priorities in the current four-year strategic cycle is to boost the amount of sport that takes place at the Estadi Olímpic to complement numerous cultural events at the

“Barcelona is an international benchmark in terms of the good management of the legacy of the 1992 Olympic Games.”

David Escudé | sports commissioner, Barcelona City Council

venue. The 18,000-seat Palau Sant Jordi indoor arena also stages various concerts and gatherings, aside from sport, while there are plans to convert the Palau Municipal d'Esports, situated in the northern municipality of Badalona, into a more prominent sporting hub.

“Barcelona is an international benchmark in terms of the good management of the legacy of the 1992 Olympic Games,” Escudé explains. “All the Olympic installations are still in a good state of repair and operate perfectly, and they don't just host

sporting events and practice sessions.

“Barcelona has a huge network of sports facilities and installations, ranging from the local neighbourhood facilities to the major Olympic ones. Involvement in sport in the city is on the increase at all life stages, from birth to old age, so the city council must guarantee that city residents have spaces where they can do sport.”

Although Barcelona has favoured more manageable competitions over mega-events in recent years, a potential bid for the 2030 winter Olympic Games is under consideration.

In 2017, the city opted against a bid for the 2026 Games, which were eventually awarded to Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo in Italy, after deciding that it did not have enough time to develop a winning proposition. At the time, with Spain struggling to recover from the global financial downturn of the late 2000s, Barcelona's deputy mayor Jaume

Collboni said the decision reflected “the current social and economic circumstances, not only in Barcelona but in the whole country”.

After Spain’s economic outlook finally improved – albeit before the unknown inevitable economic fall-out of the ongoing coronavirus outbreak – Olympic ambitions were revisited. In January of this year, the IOC confirmed that it was in talks with Barcelona, Sapporo in Japan and Salt Lake City in the US about hosting the 2030 Winter Olympics.

Political climate

However, political complications lurk in the background despite the city’s Olympic credentials.

As author John Hargreaves argued in *Freedom for Catalonia? Catalan Nationalism, Spanish Identity and the Barcelona Olympic Games*, the 1992 event raised tensions between the Spanish government and the region of Catalonia, with both wrestling to ensure their

identity was represented on the world stage. In the event, an uncomfortable compromise was found, allowing both identities to be represented, but relations have been strained further in recent years.

When nine independence leaders were sentenced by Spain’s Supreme Court last year for their role in organising the 2017 Catalan independence referendum – one never approved by the central government – there were protests across Barcelona. Sporting contests were postponed at the height of the unrest, with major transport interchanges brought to a standstill.

With the prospect of the 2030 Games on the table – possibly in a partnership with the nearby Pyrenees – Spanish IOC vice-president Juan Antonio Samaranch said late last year that “political unity” was crucial or such a proposal would “freeze”.

Whether such matters can be

sufficiently resolved remains to be seen. However, for Escudé, a successful sporting strategy for the city is underpinned by continuing to build on the legacy of the Olympics which, remarkably, is still alive and kicking after nearly three decades.

“Barcelona has always been a city that has invited and welcomed all types of big sporting events,” Escudé says. “We are a city with the capacity, knowledge, experience, and most of all passion and enthusiasm for events, and especially sporting ones. We have also proven our expertise in organising and managing major sports events like the Olympic Games and the world championships of different sports.”

An official tilt at the winter Olympics would certainly represent a change in direction for the city. However, few could argue against the city’s infrastructure and track record, which make it a credible destination for sporting events of any size. ○



Protesters take to the streets of Barcelona on October 17, 2019. (Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images)



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