


Fan's perspective on professional leagues and sporting events during COVID-19 confinement period

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ABSTRACT

The restriction imposed by COVID-19 pandemic has caused a great social change in the world and has affected many sectors, including the sport industry by having an impact and altering the normal development of the sport competitions and events. Therefore, it is fundamental to know sport fans' opinions about the professional championships during the confinement period. The sample is composed by 1025 professional sports leagues fans and major sporting events celebrated in Spain, with people in the age range 18-70. The instrument used to collect data was an adaptation of the American questionnaire designed by Seton Hall University. The results show that 55% of fans thought that sport leagues and events were cancelled on time. Furthermore, 92.8% of the survey respondents would not attend a live match without social distancing measures or without the existence of a vaccine; 67.4% would follow it through mass media resources with the same interest. The population group under 25 feels safe attending sports leagues or events (9.7%). These results might help to take decisions based on preventive measures to guarantee security within the sport context.

Keywords: Football; Spectator; Assistants; Social distancing; Restrictions.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 outbreak that started in mid-December 2019 in Wuhan (China) has already infected more than 3.2 million people in the world in early May 2020 (Johns Hopkins University of Medicine, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic situation on the 11th of March 2020, when Europe was its greatest focus of infection with an estimated mortality rate of 3.6% affecting 114 countries (WHO, 2020).

The high risk of transmission of this virus resides on the physical contact with people, being isolation and social distancing measures the routinely recommended (Anderson, Heesterbeek, Klinkerber & Hollingworth, 2020). Many countries around the world had to impose restrictive measures which have affected thousands of million people due to the high rate of propagation and contagion as well as to the difficulty to control it. By the end of March 2020, more than 100 countries ordered the total or partial closure of their borders and restricted the movement of people to strictly necessary reasons of food supply, work and health (Lazzerini & Putoto, 2020). Therefore, daily movements of people from big cities such as New York, Paris or Madrid decreased at least to a tenth part (BBC, 2020). These measures have important consequences for a global society and economy by affecting every sector, especially the hotel industry, trading or tourism (Llorente, 2020).

The sport industry is also one of the most affected sectors since it has gone through many changes due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Sport is a great social phenomenon (Gálvez, Fernández, García & García, 2016) that directly influences the economy, with a high ability to generate wealth and job positions, being sporting events the main protagonist of these benefits (Dwyer, Forsyth & Spurr, 2005).

The organisation of sports events has been fully affected by this pandemic, and the restrictions imposed by the authorities have led to the cancellation or postponement of major sporting events such as the UEFA European Championship, the America's Cup, the Giro d'Italia and the Wimbledon tennis championship (France 24, 2020); these major events influence the number of infected people in this pandemic contributing to the spread of infectious diseases (Memish et al., 2019; Parnell, Widdop, Bond & Wilson, 2020). On the 24th of March 2020, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced that the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games will be postponed to summer 2021 to protect athletes' health and the international community which is involved in this mega-event (Olympic, 2020). This cancellation means the 4th cancellation of the Olympic Games in a modern era and also the first cancellation that has being caused by a pandemic, since the three previous editions (Berlin 1916-Helsinki 1940 and The United Kingdom 1944) were cancelled by military confrontations.

Other world's major sporting events were not finally cancelled by other global health emergencies; for instance, during the H1N1 flu pandemic in Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games and the FIFA World Cup in 2010, with its headquarters in South Africa (Parnell et al., 2020). In Brazil, the Zika virus was detected for the first time in 2015 and it was estimated that more than 1.5 million of Brazilians had been infected by this virus after a year (WHO, 2016) and in spite of its fast propagation (Petersen, 2016), the Olympic Games were held that year in Brazil. The change of date of Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games reflects that the world of sport is going through a difficult situation due to COVID-19 pandemic.

In Spain, the government decided that every match had to be played behind closed doors for at least two weeks (Concejo, 2020). Shortly after, at the beginning of March 2020, all the leagues and sport tournaments were cancelled in Spain without a resumption date (Brett, Toresdahl, Irfan & Asif, 2020). This affected the

Spanish professional sports leagues (La Liga football league, ASOBAL handball league, ACB basketball league and The National Futsal League). It is essential that sport event organisers, in collaboration with doctors, know the prevention strategies and the treatment of the virus to protect athletes' security and the different agents who participate in the world of sport (Brett et al, 2020).

The Spanish professional football league agreed on the postponement of the competition to the 12th of March 2020 (LaLiga, 2020) because of the contagion of some players from professional teams, such as Valencia FC (Marca, 2020). This cessation of competitions might trigger devastating economic losses in professional clubs. According to the economic analysis by KPMG Sports (2015), professional national football championships generate millions of Euros annually; hence the cease of sporting events activity might raise to millionaire loses. Clubs seek to reach an agreement among their players due to the lack of planned incomes based on a salary cut. Big worldwide known clubs, such as Real Madrid FC, have already agreed on a voluntary reduction from 10% to 20% of its payment for this season (Real Madrid, 2020). Other clubs are less economically solid and the FIFA is investigating the realisation of a financial rescue plan for the most affected clubs (La Vanguardia, 2020).

One of the possible scenarios for the resumption of the competition is the possibility to do it behind closed doors, without the presence of thousands of fans (Miserachs, 2020). The absence of sport fans would trigger many economical losses for the clubs and related agents. The consumption around the stadium, in the hotel industry, leisure, lodging and transportation rose to 1.072 million of Euros and generated approximately 16.336 job positions since both the number of fans who attend and the activity in the stadiums had increased in the last years; in 2017/2018 season the number of fans who attended matches rose to 14.273.818 million of people (LaLiga, 2018).

Nevertheless, there is an uncertainty feeling about whether or not fans would attend the sporting events fearlessly until a vaccine to neutralize COVID-19 virus is not developed. Certainly, COVID-19 virus could change the sport industry working globally, and the organisation should, in this way, do an analysis of risks with the objective to protect the entire sport domain, in particular the human and the economical ones (Parnell et al, 2020). For all this reason, the objective of the present study is to study fans of the Spanish professional sports leagues and the followers of the main sporting events that are celebrated in Spain during the COVID-19 confinement period.

METHODS

Sample

The sample was formed by 1025 survey respondents (77.5% men and 22.5% women) who were fans of the Spanish professional sports leagues (La Liga, ACB, LNFS and ASOBAL) and the main sporting events held in Spain (ATP Tennis, La Vuelta, Moto GP and other sporting events). The average age of survey respondents was 33.9 (SD = 15.4 years old) and an age range from 18 to 70 years old from all the Spanish autonomous communities.

Instrument

The instrument employed was an adaptation of the questionnaire elaborated by University of Seton Hall (2020) used in a similar study about the National Football League (NFL) in the United States. A Spanish version was adopted by translating the instrument into Spanish and encompassing the leagues and sporting events held in Spain.

The questionnaire was composed by a scale of 8 items, where fans chose the sporting event they felt the most identified with in the first place. Afterwards, survey respondents gave their opinion by answering a series of closed questions. Furthermore, sociodemographic questions were included, for instance age, genre, place of residence, degree of interest, attendance frequency to live events in the last year and the way in which these events are followed.

Procedure

Once the questionnaire had been translated into Spanish, it was available for its fulfilment for a week, from the 16th to the 21st 2020. The realisation of this questionnaire was exclusively done online through a digital platform of the University of Murcia (<https://entrada.um.es/cas/login>). Non-probability sampling for online convenience.

Data Analysis

The statistical analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics software (v 23.0). Descriptive statistics were calculated (frequencies and percentages), and also, contingency tables were done through a chi-square test (X^2) comparing the results by age groups. The level of significance was a value of $p \leq .05$.

RESULTS

Table 1. Fans' sporting habits.

Item	n	%
Event		
<i>La Liga</i>	403	39.3
<i>ACB</i>	50	4.9
<i>LNFS</i>	42	4.1
<i>ASOBAL</i>	33	3.2
<i>La Vuelta</i>	105	10.2
<i>Moto GP</i>	59	5.8
<i>ATP Tennis</i>	123	12.0
<i>Other sports events</i>	210	20.5
Degree of interest		
<i>Very closely</i>	376	36.7
<i>Closely</i>	443	43.2
<i>Not closely</i>	192	18.7
<i>Not at all</i>	15	1.4
Attendance to league/events in 2019		
<i>None</i>	315	30.8
<i>Between 1 and 3</i>	256	25.0
<i>Between 4 and 10</i>	177	17.3
<i>More than 10</i>	277	26.9
Follow the event/league		
<i>Live broadcast</i>	342	33.4
<i>TV</i>	821	80.0
<i>Internet</i>	577	56.3
<i>Press</i>	258	24.8
<i>Radio</i>	237	23.1
<i>Social networking</i>	447	43.6

Table 2. Fans' perspective on professional leagues and sporting events.

Item	n	%
Action time in league/event cancellation		
<i>Too quickly</i>	36	3.5
<i>Right time</i>	566	55.0
<i>Not quickly enough</i>	354	34.4
<i>Don't know/No opinion</i>	69	7.1
Next season (2020/21) the leagues/events		
<i>Start up as planned</i>	227	22.1
<i>Start-up but allow players to choose not to play</i>	171	16.7
<i>Not start up to ensure players safety</i>	524	51.1
<i>Don't know/No opinion</i>	103	10.1
Possibility to cancel leagues/events rest of 2020		
<i>Very likely</i>	178	17.3
<i>Likely</i>	457	44.5
<i>Possible</i>	261	25.4
<i>Won't happen</i>	82	8.1
<i>Don't know/No opinion</i>	47	4.7
Would feel safe attending leagues/events without a vaccine		
<i>Safe</i>	74	7.2
<i>Safe but only if social distancing</i>	365	35.6
<i>Not at all</i>	560	54.7
<i>Don't know/No opinion</i>	26	2.5
Obligation to pay athletes/workers		
<i>Yes</i>	647	63.1
<i>No</i>	223	21.8
<i>Don't know/No opinion</i>	155	15.1
In 2020, leagues/events should continue to be held		
<i>Fans present</i>	35	3.4
<i>Restricted attendance</i>	300	29.3
<i>No fans present</i>	336	32.8
<i>Not at all</i>	295	28.8
<i>Don't know/No opinion</i>	59	5.7
If leagues/events are played behind closed doors, I'd follow it on TV		
<i>More interested</i>	63	6.1
<i>Same interest</i>	690	67.4
<i>Less interested</i>	243	23.7
<i>Don't know/No opinion</i>	29	2.8
How much would you say you miss watching league/live event		
<i>Very much</i>	525	51.2
<i>Some</i>	276	26.9
<i>little</i>	134	13.1
<i>None</i>	80	7.8
<i>Don't know/No opinion</i>	10	1.0

Table 1 analyses the sport habits of the fans who did the survey. Regarding the degree of interest, the table shows 43,2% of the survey respondents who are fans of the league and the event, followed by those who

follow it closely (36.7%). 69.2% attended an event or a league match sometime in 2019 and 80% followed the events on TV.

Table 2 shows the results of each of the consulted items to fans. Most of them think that leagues and sporting events were cancelled in the correct moment (55%), followed by those survey respondents who think that the organisers did not act fast enough (34.4%).

44.4% believe it is probable that leagues and sporting events are cancelled until the end of 2020 and think that they should not be restarted to guarantee athletes' security (51.1%).

7.2% would feel safe attending as a spectator in a match league or sporting event. The rest (92.8%) assures to feel insecure without social distancing measures and that would not go as a sport spectator without a COVID-19 vaccine.

3.4% believe that leagues and events should continue to be celebrated without attendee's restrictions, 29.3% with social distancing for attendees, 32.8% claim that leagues and events should continue but without fans and 28.8% think that no league or event should be held in 2020. 63.1% believe that even though match leagues and sporting events cannot be held, athletes should continue receiving their salaries.

51.2% of fans really missed to see a live match from the league or sporting events. If these events are held behind closed doors (without supporters) the 67.4% of fans would follow the league or any sporting event with the same interest using other means such as TV, radio, internet or the press.

Doing a comparison between fans' age groups, there are some significant differences between age group in most of the analysed items. Fans younger than 25 years old think that the league should restart as planned (27.1%) in comparison to the 19% of fans who belong to an adult age group; whereas the group of fans older than 40 thinks that it is better not to restart them to guarantee athletes' security (55.8%). Likewise, adult fans believe that it is more likely that all the league matches and sporting events are cancelled for the rest of 2020 and think that leagues and sporting events should not be held, to a greater extent than young people; however, the majority of young people under 25 prefer that these events are held but without any supporters.

In relation to the insecurity to attend a league match or sporting event as a spectator, the age group between 25 and 40 is the group that shows the highest rates of insecurity, with only 4.8% who would feel safe.

In spite of the fact that the youngest age group really misses to attend live matches (59.2%), if the events were held behind closed doors, every age group would follow the leagues or events on television or any other means of communication with the same interest.

Leagues and any other sporting events fans in Spain also answered the question about the action time by the IOC when reprogramming Tokyo Olympic Games for 2021, 64.3% think that the IOC took action to postpone the Olympic Games in the correct moment; 26.6% believe that it was postponed too late and 5.5% claim that it was postponed too early.

Table 3. Fan's comparison by age groups.

Item	Younger than 25 (n = 369)		Between 25 and 40 (n = 272)		Over 40 (n = 384)		χ^2 (df)	p value
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Action time in league/event cancellation								
<i>Too quickly</i>	12	3.1	14	5.1	8	2.2	8.05 (6)	.234
<i>Right time</i>	209	54.6	145	53.3	209	56.5		
<i>Not quickly enough</i>	127	33.2	96	35.3	131	35.4		
<i>Don't know/No opinion</i>	35	9.1	17	6.3	22	5.9		
Next season (2020/21) the leagues/events								
<i>Start up as planned</i>	103	27.1	52	19.1	70	19.0	15.7 (6)	.016*
<i>Start-up but allow players to choose not to play</i>	72	18.9	46	16.9	53	14.4		
<i>Not start up to ensure players' safety</i>	167	46.9	148	54.4	206	55.8		
<i>Don't know/ No opinion</i>	38	10.0	26	9.6	40	10.8		
Possibility to cancel leagues/events rest of 2020								
<i>Very likely</i>	57	15.0	44	16.2	74	20.1	35.6 (8)	.001*
<i>Likely</i>	140	36.8	124	45.6	192	52.0		
<i>Possible</i>	127	33.4	66	24.3	68	18.4		
<i>Won't happen</i>	38	10.0	24	8.8	19	5.1		
<i>Don't know/ No opinion</i>	18	4.7	14	5.1	16	4.3		
Would feel safe attending leagues/events without a vaccine								
<i>Safe</i>	37	9.7	13	4.8	22	6.0	15.0 (6)	.020*
<i>Safe but only if social distancing</i>	145	38.2	84	31.0	135	36.6		
<i>Not at all</i>	187	49.2	165	60.9	206	55.8		
<i>Don't know/No opinion</i>	11	2.9	9	3.3	6	1.6		
Obligation to pay athletes/workers								
<i>Yes</i>	228	60.0	167	61.6	248	67.2	15.9 (4)	.003*
<i>No</i>	105	27.6	53	19.6	64	17.3		
<i>Don't know/No opinion</i>	47	12.4	51	18.8	57	15.4		
In 2020, leagues/events should continue to be held								
<i>Fans present</i>	20	5.3	4	1.5	9	2.4	49.9 (8)	.001*
<i>Restricted attendance</i>	104	27.4	66	24.4	129	35.0		
<i>No fans present</i>	160	42.1	87	32.1	89	24.1		
<i>Not at all</i>	82	21.6	92	33.9	119	32.2		
<i>Don't know/No opinion</i>	14	3.7	22	8.1	23	6.2		
If leagues are played behind closed doors, I'd follow it on TV								
<i>More interested</i>	26	6.8	9	3.3	26	7.0	9.50 (6)	.147
<i>Same interest</i>	265	69.7	191	70.5	233	63.1		
<i>Less interest</i>	79	20.8	65	24.0	97	26.3		
<i>Don't know/No opinion</i>	10	2.6	6	2.2	13	3.5		
How much would you say you miss watching league/live event								
<i>Very much</i>	225	59.2	134	49.4	162	43.9	31.8 (8)	.001*
<i>Some</i>	88	23.2	80	29.5	108	29.3		
<i>Little</i>	40	10.5	36	13.3	58	15.7		
<i>None</i>	19	5.0	21	7.7	39	10.6		
<i>Don't know/No opinion</i>	8	2.1	0	0.0	2	0.5		

Note: *p ≤ .05.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to analyse fans' opinion and perspective on professional leagues and main sporting events that are held in Spain during COVID-19 confinement period.

Among the analysed events, most of the fans followed La Liga (39.3%), followed by the ATP Tennis (12%) and thirdly, La Vuelta (10.2%). Also, 33.4% of fans attended live matches or events and the 80% watched them on television. In the survey devoted to sport habits in Spain, conducted by the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport (2016), according to the type of sport spectacle, football stands out for being the most followed one, with a lower rate of 39.4% being tennis, motorcycling 36.7%, basketball 36.3% or cycling 30.8%. This survey also determines the in-person attendance to sports spectacles in the 37.1%. In relation to the visualisation of matches and events, this national survey also coincides with our results, as it has been determined that the 79.5% of Spaniards followed sporting events on television, radio or the internet.

The temporal suspension of the leagues and the sporting events has been one of the restrictions applied by the government to stop the spread of COVID-19. In the results, it was revealed that the majority of the survey respondents (55%) shares that the cancellation was made on time; however, Aguilar-Gamboa (2020) explains that one of the main triggering of the fast spread of COVID-19 has been the decision-making delay to control the virus. Additionally, a date for the cease of the restrictions is not known and therefore, the resumption of sport competitions is ineffective. 44% of fans thought that the leagues will not be restarted until 2021, with the objective to guarantee athletes' security (51.1%). Likewise, the FIFA claims that health is the most important factor when taking such an important decision, and that the resumption of professional football depends on the agreement between the FIFA member association of each country with the national health authorities (FIFA, 2020). For instance, the French government has already announced the prohibition of sporting events until the 1st of September with the consequent definite cancellation of the professional football league "*Ligue-1*" (Viñas, 2020).

Regarding COI's intervention by reprogramming Tokyo Olympic Games to 2021, 5.5% of Spanish fans think that the COI took the action by cancelling the games too early, in comparison with the 14% of American fans who believe that it was a hurried decision (Seton Hall University, 2020).

In the present hypothesis to resume the leagues and events, the 92.8% of fans would not feel safe attending to a match without social distancing measures and would not go as a spectator without a COVID-19 vaccine. Likewise, in the study conducted by Seton Hall University (2020) only the 13% of supporters would feel totally safe attending NFL matches without a vaccine. Cuestas (2020) reaffirms the anxiety and fear feeling towards the evolution of this pandemic. Shigemura, Ursano, Morganstein, Kurosawa & Benedek (2020) explain that the fear to the unknown raises anxiety levels on people and negative social behaviours will be conditioned by fear and distorted perceptions of the risk. Thus, the existence of a vaccine, antiviral drugs and enough health resources are essential to stabilise the current situation (Kelvin & Rubino, 2020). According to Yokokura (2020), president of the Japan Medical Association (JMA), "*it would be difficult to held Tokyo Olympic Games unless efficient vaccines are developed*".

Every population group analysed showed insecurities if they had to attend a match or a sporting event before a COVID-19 vaccine was not found. In particular, these insecurities were manifested by 25-40 years old fans, which only 4.8% would feel safe. Equally, 55.8% of fans over 40 thoughts that it was better not to start the league to assure athletes' security; this number was lower in people under 25 (46.9%). It is important to remark that one of the triggering factors of this social opinion is based on the development of cases in elderly

people. In the update of COVID-19 disease, emitted on the 27th of March 2020 by the Health Alert and Emergency Coordination Centre (2020) it is exposed that in the 70+ age group, the highest number of deceases has been registered (86.5%). On the contrary, the population sector that is between 0 and 40 years old presents a 0,4% of the total sample. This might justify a possible feeling of anxiety and fear in this public objective.

Lastly, even though fans have developed this feeling, 51% really missed to see live sport. Sport supporters are certainly the active co-creators of the sport value (Kolyperas, Maglaras and Sparks, 2019) and this is a social demand that is the key for the sport to have become one of the current phenomena with a greater impact (Rodríguez, 2012). If these fans could not see live sport, most of them would keep their interest (67%) and would follow them through different means of communication such as television. American fans who follow the league and sporting events would not lose their interest and the 76% of them would see these broadcasts by other means (Seton Hall University, 2020). Sport is, undoubtedly, a cultural and universal phenomenon (Corrales, 2010) and through sporting events, a strategy to promote both growth and economical and social development strategy can be conducted (Oliveira, 2011) and even, a country's identity (De Assis, De Freitas, Montibeler & da Silva, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The main conclusions that can be drawn from this research is that fans will not attend professional leagues and sporting events without prevention measures that respect social distancing and the existence of a COVID-19 vaccine; however, they will maintain their interest through the visualisation of matches through different means of communication. Likewise, most of the fans think that competitions will not resume until the end of 2020 with the objective to guarantee athletes' security. This way of thinking prevails in adult population sectors, being under 25 the group that shows a more decisive opinion to attend live competitions.

Finally, the future designed for the professional leagues and sporting events is conditioned by the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore, some preventive measures should be adopted to guarantee the safety of both internal and external agents of the world of sports.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Vegara-Ferri and López-Gullón, research design. Carboneros and Vegara-Ferri, article writing. Vegara-Ferri and Díaz-Suárez, analysis of the results. Deliautaite, Carboneros and Díaz-Suárez, writing conclusions. Deliautaite, translation of the article. Carboneros, Deliautaite and López-Gullón, revision of the article.

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