

After weeks of delay

Major US professional sport leagues shut down seasons

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13 March 2020

All major US professional sports leagues halted games and then suspended their seasons Thursday after the nightmare scenario—a top athlete testing positive for coronavirus—came to fruition on Wednesday night. Utah Jazz all-star center Rudy Gobert tested positive for the coronavirus, the game he had been scheduled to play was postponed, and within hours the National Basketball Association announced it was suspending its season.

After the game was postponed, members of both the Utah Jazz and the Oklahoma City Thunder, as well as some media members, were waiting to be tested for the coronavirus and the Jazz were quarantined in Oklahoma City. By Thursday morning it was announced that Jazz guard Donovan Mitchell had also tested positive.

Players from teams who played against the Jazz in recent days, including the Toronto Raptors, Detroit Pistons, Boston Celtics, New York Knicks, and Cleveland Cavaliers, were told to self-quarantine. In addition it will be necessary to test and potentially quarantine the teams recently played by the Jazz's opponents, as well as the dozen or so referees who had worked Jazz games over the past two weeks, as well as those other teams whose games they had officiated.

By Thursday, in the immediate aftermath of the NBA's shutdown, all other major US sport leagues and organizations belatedly announced their response to the pandemic:

- Major League Baseball (MLB) will suspend spring training games and delay the start of the regular season by at least two weeks.
- The National Hockey League (NHL) will “pause” its season.

- National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) will hold its next two races without fans in attendance.

- The Professional Golfers Association (PGA) tours will continue to be played but without fans present.

- In college basketball the Big 10, ACC, SEC, Big 12, American Athletic Conference, Pac-12 and Atlantic 10 all canceled their men's basketball conference tournaments.

- The NCAA announced Wednesday that the Men's (March Madness) and Women's national basketball tournaments would be played without fans. On Thursday both tournaments were cancelled.

- The Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) tour has suspended tournaments for six weeks.

- Major League Soccer (MLS) has suspended all games.

The US professional sports leagues had been a glaring exception in a world where most countries had either cancelled professional sporting events since the beginning of March or were staging the games without fans.

Throughout China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, all such events had been cancelled or postponed. In Europe, Italy had banned all sporting events, and most other European countries had either cancelled or postponed their events or mandated that they take place without fans in attendance.

Professional sports in the US is a multibillion-dollar business whose revenue is generated by broadcast rights, attendance, and merchandising. The billionaire owners and the media conglomerates that broadcast these games have deemed their financial health to be paramount over the health of players, fans, and the

public at large, by insisting that its business continue as usual.

In Seattle March 7, in the area that was the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in the US, the Seattle Sounders, a professional soccer team, played before 33,000 fans at Seattle CenturyLink Field. On Thursday, March 5, two days before the game, Seattle health officials had reported there had been a total of 51 cases of coronavirus and 10 deaths in the area. Moreover, a part-time employee, who had worked as a concession vendor at the same stadium during the Seattle Dragons professional football team's home game against the Dallas Renegades on February 22, had tested positive for the coronavirus.

A National Hockey League (NHL) hockey game was also played last Thursday in San Jose, California under similar circumstances. Just hours after Santa Clara County public health officials recommended that large gatherings like sporting events be cancelled in light of the ongoing coronavirus outbreak that had then included six new cases, bringing the total to 20 in the area, the San Jose Sharks played their game against the Minnesota Wild with 14,500 fans attending, 2,000 below the season average.

In the NBA, the Golden State Warriors, playing in San Francisco's Chase Center, said in a statement last Friday that their Saturday game, broadcast nationally on ABC, "will continue as scheduled." But the team advised fans who are feeling under the weather to not attend.

"Any guest who is feeling sick, regardless of their symptoms, should not attend public events. In addition, the Warriors are also encouraging vulnerable populations, including persons with underlying health conditions, not to attend tomorrow night's Warriors game at Chase Center," the statement read. A capacity crowd of over 18,000 fans attended the game.

On Sunday the NBA played 10 games that were attended by approximately 180,000 fans, all in indoor arenas.

In college basketball the primary concern was the upcoming NCAA tournament commonly referred to as "March Madness," set to begin March 17. It is the NCAA's most important moneymaker, generating about \$1 billion in television and marketing rights.

The first cancellation of a major US sporting event was announced Sunday: the BNP Paribas Open tennis

tournament that was scheduled to begin the next day in Indian Wells, California. It was called after a case of the coronavirus was confirmed in the nearby Coachella Valley in Southern California.

One of tennis's major tournaments, the BNP Paribas Open typically draws upward of 450,000 spectators. This year's field was expected to attract tennis's most prominent players, including Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic, Serena Williams, Naomi Osaka and Coco Gauff, with prize money of \$17 million.

The Riverside County Public Health Department declared a public health emergency Sunday for desert cities 110 miles east of Los Angeles, including Indian Wells. "There is too great a risk, at this time, to the public health of the Riverside County area in holding a large gathering of this size," Dr. David Agus, professor of medicine and biomedical engineering at the University of Southern California, said in a statement.

On Monday recognizing that the magnitude of the severity of the health crisis could no longer be concealed, the NBA, NHL, Major League Baseball and Major League Soccer announced in a joint statement that they were closing access to locker rooms and clubhouses to all nonessential personnel, including media, in response to the coronavirus crisis. Moreover, players had been instructed not to shake hands, sign autographs, and to avoid other forms of physical contact with fans.

This stopgap measure collapsed, however, after the revelation that Rudy Gobert had become the first professional athlete in the United States known to have contracted the coronavirus.



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