

Project Restart: English Premier League puts profit first, players' health a poor second

Paul Bond
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The Johnson government and English Premier League (PL) are pushing ahead with plans to resume the soccer season. They plan to see games played behind “closed doors” from June 12. Several players, angry at being used as “lab rats” have said they will not run the risk of infection.

Eight players have tested positive for coronavirus so far, but despite paying lip service to “transparency” the PL has declared that “no specific details” about affected clubs will be made public. Amid assurances that “safety comes first”, small group training began last Tuesday after a unanimous vote by PL shareholders.

PL's CEO Richard Masters spoke after last Monday night's meeting, outlining various proposals under consideration. Revealingly, he said there had been no discussion of curtailing the season.

In France and elsewhere the season has been ended due to the pandemic. This is the case with the Scottish Premier League, which confronts local health conditions less dire than those in England.

But the PL is pinning its hopes on the German Bundesliga which has already resumed play behind closed doors, televised from empty stadiums. On Saturday, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez announced La Liga will resume on June 8, also behind closed doors—this despite five players in the country's top two divisions having tested positive for coronavirus.

The government aims to use televised play to break down public support for social distancing. It met with PL officials on May 11, one day after Johnson announced the phased reopening of primary schools, with PL officials revealing the government had “signalled the possibility of a return of live sports from 1 June, following on from its announcement on the easing of the lockdown in England.”

June 1 is the government's preferred date to partially reopen primary schools.

In March, the Johnson government criminally promoted major rugby and horse racing fixtures at Twickenham and Cheltenham, creating catastrophic conditions for the spread of coronavirus. With televised football, the government

calculates that fans will congregate—and they will use the resulting media headlines to stampede and shame the public back to work.

Masters' concerns are more directly financial. He responded enthusiastically to the Bundesliga's televised games, with an eye to keeping sweet television companies with broadcast rights to matches. PL clubs could be forced to refund up to £340 million to domestic and international broadcasters even if the season does resume, because matches will not take place as originally scheduled. According to Manchester United chief financial officer Cliff Baty, the club will hand back £20 million in TV revenue to broadcasters even if the Premier League season is completed, as a result of changes in dates and kick-off times.

The subordination of football to the capitalist market is proving disastrous. Four PL clubs could face administration by the autumn unless games are resumed. One club director said, “Football is a business like any other [but] it is not being bailed out. And if we're not producing our product—which is games—we're not earning money. You can't keep paying people indefinitely.”

Premier League soccer is by far the world's richest league. The most watched sports league in the world, its rights are sold to broadcasters in 212 territories with a potential TV audience of 4.7 billion people. The 20 PL clubs were due to earn £9.2 billion from broadcasters in 2019-22. If the current season is not completed, a loss of at least £1 billion has been forecast.

Even the richest clubs have been hit, with Manchester United announcing in their third-quarter results to March 31 that the pandemic has cost them an initial £28 million.

Many players are keen to play again, if it is safe, but club captains are reportedly “unimpressed” with the vague plans so far.

As with every aspect of the government's handling of the pandemic, football's proposed “phased return” has been chaotic. Players have been sidelined from planning discussions, leading to anger they are “guinea pigs” whose concerns have been ignored.

Only the first phase of resumption has been outlined in any detail. Non-contact training in socially distanced groups of five working with three coaches has been accepted, but players are reluctant to sign paperwork in the absence of clearer plans for phase two.

The PL insists later details are sketchy because this is a gradual process, but club officials are driven by economics. One official said, “If [players] don’t play, they will be furloughed.” Several clubs furloughed non-playing staff immediately before reversing the decision in the face of popular anger that this was being imposed by billionaire owners.

Officials may be hoping to win public sympathy given footballers’ large salaries, but the ploy is a cynical one. Tottenham Hotspurs player Danny Rose, currently on loan at Newcastle, addressed this directly. “I could be potentially risking my health for people’s entertainment and that’s not something I want to be involved in if I’m honest.”

Players want reassurance they and their families will be safe. At Brighton and Hove Albion, where three players have tested positive, manager Graham Potter cautioned against a premature return: “The situation is not totally resolved... We are human beings.”

Clubs are implementing a £4 million private programme to test players regularly, although this seems as much addressed at clubs’ legal liability as at players’ health. Longer term safety plans remain typically short on detail. PL director of football Richard Garlick said, “Gradually, we aim to ramp that up so we can have an inspector at every training ground.”

Like other groups in society, footballers are up against the subordination of scientific evidence to the financial requirements of big business. The PL says its testing guidance is drawn from Public Health England, but PHE’s guidelines on personal protective equipment for NHS staff violated World Health Organisation guidance.

Nearly half of PL medical practitioners feel insufficiently consulted about resumption of play, according to a survey by the Football Medicine and Performance Association. Their representative body noted they have not yet even received a copy of the PL’s medical protocol.

Players have laughed openly at being “advised” to turn their face away after a tackle during games!

The PL’s approach has been to argue instead for the setting of acceptable risk thresholds. The Bundesliga’s protocols, promoted as a model, say “the aim is not 100 percent prevention.”

This is in line with the Johnson government’s herd immunity policy, with a government source saying, “There is going to be a wider societal change in the way we think about risk. If players don’t want to play they basically

won’t be playing football until there’s a vaccine. I suspect the rest of society will be back.”

Given this attitude, any pledge that players will not be “forced” to return has little value. Players are correctly unwilling to sign liability waivers before returning, but the threat of furlough—or their inability to find work elsewhere if they refuse to play, as other clubs would be unlikely to employ them—amounts to a direct threat to their livelihood.

The proposed timeframe is widely felt to be too quick. Brighton’s Glenn Murray said, “Why not see how the country deals with stopping the lockdown first before we even start unnecessary sports when people are dying all around us and the death rate is still high?”

Danny Rose said, “Football shouldn’t even be spoken about until the numbers [of deaths] have dropped massively. People’s lives are at risk.” He has called for an assessment of the first stage before making any further decisions.

At Watford, where Troy Deeney is captain, one player and two non-playing staff have tested positive. Deeney has refused to return to training, not least because of the risk to his family. His five-month-old son has breathing difficulties. “I don’t want to come home and put him in more danger,” he insisted.

PL medical officer Mark Gillett expressed the general lack of caution that has characterised the clubs’ official response: “The risk in young fit athletes is still very small and I think that is an important factor.”

Deeney said, “I can’t get a haircut until mid-July but I can go and get in a [penalty] box with 19 people and jump for a header? I don’t know how that works.”

At an online meeting of Premier League captains, Deeney asked officials what he described as “very simple questions”. No answers were forthcoming, with Deeney telling officials, “If you don’t know the information, why would I put myself at risk?”



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