UK: Allowing mass-attended sporting events to go ahead led to COVID-19 deaths

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Scientific research established that the decision of the Johnson government to permit mass-attended sporting events to go ahead in March directly contributed to the spread of the coronavirus and the number of fatalities.

On March 10, the Cheltenham horse racing festival opened, attracting crowds of 250,000 over the four-day event. The following day in the north of England, Liverpool hosted a football match against Atletico Madrid at its Anfield stadium. Some 52,000 fans watched, including 3,000 Spanish fans from Madrid.

Speaking to BBC Radio *File on 4* programme, "Game Changer: How the UK played on during coronavirus," Professor Tim Spector said, "I think sporting events should have been shut down at least a week earlier because they'll have caused increased suffering and deaths that wouldn't otherwise have occurred." Spector is Professor of Genetic Epidemiology at King's College London.

Ignoring the World Health Organization's (WHO) announcement on January 30 that the emergence of the novel SARS-Cov-2 (coronavirus) represented a "public health emergency of international concern," the Conservative government made no preparations to stop its spread in Britain. Valuable weeks were lost while the virus took hold in the UK in February and early March.

When countries on the continent were banning mass gatherings in early March, Tory Prime Minister Boris Johnson said it was "business as usual." Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden agreed, "There's no reason for people not to attend such events or to cancel them at this stage."

In Ireland, the planned Six Nations rugby match in Dublin was called off by the authorities, as well as St. Patrick's Day celebrations. Football matches in northern Italy, where the virus was running rife, were banned. In China, the Grand Prix had been postponed as part of virus containment.

The first weeks of March was a busy time in the UK for sporting events and provided an ideal vector for the spread of the virus. Professional league football went ahead as planned in England and Scotland. The government's main scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, insisted it was fine to attend events in stadiums on the basis that transmission of the coronavirus occurred mainly within families and between friends.

On March 7, Johnson and his heavily pregnant partner Carrie Symonds, joined the 81,000 crowd at the Six Nations Rugby tournament between England and Wales in Twickenham. The same day, Leicester City football club played Aston Villa with 32,000 fans in attendance. Both Johnson and Symonds both later contracted the virus, and Johnson—who was rushed into hospital on April 5 after being ill for weeks—almost died.

Journalist Melanie Finn, visiting from Ireland, described the atmosphere at the races, "It was like the last days of the Roman Empire, and I think there was a little bit of a sense that if it was open, by God they were going to party." Afraid there "could be an unmitigated disaster and the crowds were huge," Finn left for home two days into the event. A week later, she developed COVID-19 symptoms and had to take two weeks off work.

At the time, the Department of Health and Social Care reported 373 cases of COVID-19. Imperial College London and the University of Oxford, however, estimated there were 640,000 cases in Spain, and already 100,000 in the UK, but this was no matter, as far as the government was concerned.

On March 11, the WHO declared coronavirus a global pandemic. WHO Director-General Doctor Tedros Adhanom said he was "deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity and by the alarming levels of inaction [by governments]."

That evening, the gates opened at Anfield football ground—located in a densely populated area of Liverpool—and the fans crowded in. The 3,000 visiting fans from Madrid joined Liverpool supporters in bars and restaurants. At that point, Madrid was the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak in Spain, and the Atletico football club and the Spanish government cautioned against travelling to the UK for the match.

The only concession to the pandemic was the absence of pre-match handshakes.

Liverpool supporter Joel Rookwood believes he contracted the virus that night and was ill for eight weeks. "The celebrations were some of the most physical that I've experienced," he told the BBC. "People were jumping all over each other."

From an analysis of NHS statistics, data modelling group

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Edge Health concluded 41 people died after attending the game, 25–35 days after the match.

One victim was Liverpool fan, Richard Mawson. Aged 70, Mawson went to the game and began experiencing symptoms two weeks later. He died in Anfield Hospital on April 17. His wife Mary and son Jamie are demanding a full inquiry into why the game was allowed to go ahead. Mary told BBC News that her husband was a fit and healthy man, who went to the gym two or three times a week.

She said, "Obviously, the coronavirus was going around, but when your government is standing up and saying, 'Oh it's fine, go ahead' and you're a lifelong supporter and you feel so passionate about them, you go with what your government tells you.

"Cheltenham was on, so everything was alright according to the government, which then, the following week, they decide they were going on lockdown. But the government acted too late; they knew this was coming up, but they didn't do anything about it."

Jamie commented, "My dad seldom went out, maybe to pick my daughter up from work. Given the time when he developed the symptoms and then he became really ill, then two weeks after that he passed away, I'm 99 percent certain he did pick it up from the game.

"He had to walk past the away fans, the Atlético fans, and I'm 99 percent certain he did pick it up from that game. But for us as a family it's so difficult to take because ... he was 70, but he was fit and healthy, he had no underlying health issues, and for him to deteriorate in such a fashion, it's very hard for us to take."

The Liverpool supporters' club, Spirit of Shankly, had voiced concerns at a safety meeting two days before the match, which was chaired by Labour-led Liverpool City Council. But the meeting declared that only football's governing body UEFA could stop the match, which should go ahead anyway because of government advice.

The Jockey Club said it was following "clear and ongoing guidance" from the government, so horse racing at Cheltenham continued according to schedule, as well as other public events.

Former chief scientific adviser (2000–2007) Sir David King condemned the decision to proceed with Cheltenham as "reckless" and "foolhardy," saying that the event contributed to the appalling number of COVID-19 deaths. He told *File on 4*, "If you think of the best way to spread a virus—bring 250,000 people from around the country, get them crowding together to watch a horse race ... and afterwards … go all round the country to spread it."

Evidence for his assessment was provided by research results of a "COVID Symptom Study" by Professor Spector. In collaboration with an Austrian-based software company, Spector devised an app to track people with COVID-19 symptoms—downloaded by three million since March. Described by Spector as the largest citizen health project in the world, the data collected flagged up coronavirus hotspots around Cheltenham and Liverpool that coincided with the incubation period after the above events. Hospitals in the two areas also reported a surge in cases. In the last week of March, Liverpool and Cheltenham were among the areas with the highest number of suspected cases. The COVID-19 Symptom Study found an estimated 5–6 percent of the population, aged 20 to 69, having symptoms in those two regions.

Sporting events and other mass gatherings were allowed to continue over the next days. On March 14, European boxers met in London for an Olympic qualifier, while the following day the all-England badminton six-day event attended by 300 players ended in Birmingham. Some 25,000 fans from around the world watched the matches. Finally, despite protests from doctors, the popular band Stereophonics played before 15,000 music fans at Cardiff's Motorpoint Arena March 14 and 15.

It was not until March 16 that large sporting events were banned in the UK, by which time community transmission was out of control. A full lockdown of the economy to contain and dampen the virus's spread was not imposed until March 23—fully 12 days after the WHO declared a global pandemic.

These actions have led to Britain having the second highest COVID-19 fatality rate in the world. It also has the highest number of fatalities in Europe, at more than 63,000 according to a *Financial Times* estimate last week.

Other countries, such as South Korea and Norway, with low death rates, introduced lockdowns at a much earlier stage in the pandemic, resulting in tens of thousands of lives being saved.

What happened in Britain was not down to a mistake or incompetence on the part of the Johnson government, but the deliberate application of its pseudo-scientific "herd immunity" policy to tackle the virus. At a March 12 press conference Chief Scientific Advisor Sir Patrick Vallance declared, "Our aim is not to stop everyone getting it, you can't do that. And it's not desirable, because you want to get some immunity in the population."

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