The Sports World Responds to COVID-19

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Collegiate & Professional Sports Law Blog

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Thursday, March 12, 2020

As the world responds to COVID-19/Coronavirus, the world of professional and amateur sports is responding as well. The virus had already begun impacting the sports world and its impact with likely increase. The spread of the virus throughout the United States has led to growing concerns about sporting games and events. As a result, we will be seeing a very unique March Madness tournament – one without fans present.

NCAA President Mark Emmert has announced that only essential staff and limited family will be permitted to attend tournament games. This announcement came after the news that, the “First Four” NCAA tournament games, which are to be played in Dayton, Ohio, and the first and second round tournament games in Cleveland, Ohio, would be played without spectators. Ohio Governor Mike DeWine had provided that he would be issuing an executive order that these games would be played without spectators, but media would be permitted to be present.

There have been particular concerns in the world of college sports because Division II and III college basketball conference tournament play has begun, and Division I
conference tournament play and the NCAA tournament are quickly approaching. The NCAA assembled a Coronavirus Advisory Panel, led by NCAA Chief Medical Officer Dr. Brian Hainline. The panel is working with local, state, and federal authorities to better understand COVID-19. Initially, the NCAA was considering limiting locations that tournament games would be played and having games without public attendance but was not recommending cancellation or public spacing of athletic and related events. However, following Governor Dewine’s announcement, the NCAA limited fan attendance.

Member schools and conferences, which have the power to make their own decisions when it comes to regular season and conference tournament games, were already taking a more cautionary approach. This past weekend Johns Hopkins University prohibited spectators from attending the men’s Division III conference tournament games after a case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Maryland. The Ivy League has gone a step further and recently announced it is cancelling the league’s men’s and women’s conference tournament games, as well as all out of season practices and games. Other measures include the Big East Conference limiting locker room access to only athletes, coaches, and essential team personnel, and the Atlantic 10 Conference suspending handshakes during its conference tournament.

The professional sports world is also feeling the effects, as the BNP Paribus Open at Indian Wells was canceled. Initially preventive measures were contemplated including, ball boys and girls wearing gloves and not touching players’ towels, as well as the installation of over 250 hand-sanitizing stations. However, after a local case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Coachella Valley, the tournament announced it was too great a risk to public health to hold an event of its size.

The four major sports leagues (MLB, NBA, NHL, and MLS) have made major changes to their media policy in response to the virus. A joint statement from the leagues provided that “team locker rooms and clubhouses will be open only to players and essential employees of teams and team facilities until further notice.” Media access will now be limited to designated locations outside of these areas. Additionally, after San Francisco’s Public Health Office issued an order prohibiting events with more than 1,000 people attending, the Golden State Warriors announced the team will be playing its Thursday night game against the Brooklyn Nets without fans. Many states and localities have issued similar recommendations. The NBA had previously asked its teams to prepare contingency plans for spectators being banned from games, and Lebron James had stated that he would not play without fans in attendance.

Moreover, as this situation continues to develop, it is likely that state and local measures prohibiting or limiting large public gatherings will continue, which will substantially impact the sports world. Although games may continue without spectators, other sports related events will likely be canceled to comply with bans on large public gatherings.

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