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The Sports Tsunami

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - THE SPORTS TSUNAMI
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It was March 11 when the NBA cancelled the regular season game between the Utah Jazz and the Oklahoma City Thunder after Jazz players Rudy Gobert and Donovan Mitchell tested positive for Covid-19. The next day the NBA suspended its regular season. This decision rolled across the world of sport and soon most other sports in the United States followed the NBA lead.

A little over a month later, fans of nearly all sports were lamenting the loss of the games. The April 17 "Sport and Society" posed the question, "what is it that we miss when we say we miss sports?"

Now, six months later, most sports have returned to start, resume, or finish their seasons and the question has been rendered moot. Major events have been rescheduled on unfamiliar dates. We are no longer suffering from sports withdrawal, rather we have just passed through a sports tsunami when seemingly everything is happening at once. The new problem has been to choose which sports to follow.

In May and June, golf and tennis commanded the TV screens, even though some of the big events like the Masters and the French Open were postponed. The first Saturday in May came and went without the Kentucky Derby.

Although there were many delays over pay and other technical issues, in June Major League Baseball announced that its training camps would reopen on July 1, and a 60-game regular season would begin July 23 or 24. Active rosters were enlarged, and a reserve roster would be available for activation. All games were played within new geographic divisions regardless of the AL and NL structure.

Several rule changes were announced. The most significant of these was the use of the Designated Hitter for all games, including the playoffs. Also put in place was a requirement that a relief pitcher must face three batters before being replaced, except when an inning ended. Extra innings would begin with a runner placed at second base creating a new term in baseball, "the leadoff two-run homer."

The playoffs were expanded to four rounds involving sixteen teams, playing in four series growing in length from three, to

five, and then seven games for league championships and the World Series. The regular season games and the first-round games of the playoffs were played on home fields without fans. All other rounds were played on neutral fields in a "bubble." A limited number of fans were allowed in games played in Texas.

The NBA announced that practices would begin in home facilities on July 1, and all teams would move to the Wide World of Sports facility at Disney World in Orlando no later than July 7. Once in Orlando, all players and team staff were in isolation within what was termed "the bubble." The season was to resume on July 31, with playoffs scheduled to begin on August 25. Each of the three rounds of playoffs were best of seven.

The National Hockey League decided not to resume the regular season but started with what amounted to a two-tiered first round playoff. Twenty-four teams played in a Byzantine structured playoff which led into a standard four rounds in a best of seven-game format. All of this began on August 1. As with the NBA, the NHL teams would be in a bubble. The Eastern Conference teams played in Toronto and the Western Conference teams played in Edmonton. Conference finals and the Stanley Cup Finals were all played in Edmonton.

No one was sure how effective the bubble concept would be, although it was clear that baseball was the most likely to have its schedule disrupted by the quarantines resulting from Covid-19 positive tests. Predictions by many, including myself, were that baseball was not likely to make it to the finish line at the World Series.

The most unanticipated development came in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Brianna Taylor, and Jacob Blake. In response to these shocking events, the racial consciousness of players was raised. In-game protests developed with the NBA leading the way. Across sports and across the world, players publicly expressed their views through various forms of protest. At one point following the Jacob Blake killing, NBA and WNBA players refused to take the court, and the continuation of the season was in doubt. Player activism at this level was unprecedented. In the end, the games went forward along with the protests.

Sportsworld had gone from a lack of action to more action than anyone could have anticipated. The sports calendar was now in disarray with events being cancelled and moved, traditions falling by the wayside, and major events competing with one

another for fans. All of that was happening before college football programs across the country made their decisions to go forward with football season. And, of course, the NFL never even blinked insisting that all was well as they moved forward to the season openers apparently believing that the NFL was far stronger than any human or natural force.

For fans, suddenly, the famine became a feast and difficult choices had to be made. Without multiple screens you could not enjoy both the NBA and NHL playoffs. Baseball, not as demanding of undivided attention, could be followed out of the corner of your eye. I chose to follow the Stanley Cup, and, in particular the Tampa Bay Lightning. This meant that I was going to miss a "bubble's worth" of great NBA basketball. It was a difficult choice.

The Stanley Cup ended on September 28, and, within a few days, the NBA Finals between the Lakers and the Heat was underway. By then, the baseball playoffs were in full swing, with the World Series set to begin Tuesday, when the highest payroll in the National League will take on the second lowest payroll in the American League. The NFL opened play, and college football was off and running without the Big Ten and Pac-12. The Big Ten joins the madness next weekend.

Now, the challenge is to keep up with the cancellations and postponements of games. How this plays out over the new few months remains to be seen.

If you tried to take all this in, the threat of a nervous breakdown was looming. Faced with this tsunami of sports after the springtime of famine, which do we prefer? I suspect most would say the tsunami, but there were days and nights when in deep obsessive mode attempting to follow too many things at once, I might have said, I'll take the famine, thank you.

Well, maybe not.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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