Discussion: COVID-19’s impact on sports and athletes

Introduction

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic lays bare the vulnerability of society; it has no regard for countries, continents or borders (WHO, 2020). In the absence of availability of no-specific drug or vaccine, global spread has the potential to overburden health systems. Mass gatherings whether music, religious or sport contribute to the spread of infectious diseases (Memish et al., 2019); therefore, in this scenario, mitigation measures are paramount. Given the networked nature of the global sport industry and its associated events programme which brings together athletes, employees and fans only served to heighten sustained global spread at the beginning of the pandemic. While sports mass gatherings have been delivered during several Public Health Emergencies of International Concern (McCloskey et al., 2020), such as the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics and the 2010 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup in South Africa, during the H1N1 influenza pandemic and the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations (in Equatorial Guinea) during the outbreak of the Ebola virus disease (McCloskey et al., 2014), COVID-19 offers a different challenge and has provided a polarised focus on global mass gatherings and events.

As major sport events have been cancelled and postponed in response to COVID-19, the rhetoric emerging from international sporting organisations, such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), has emphasised the importance of protecting athletes’ health (Engbersten, Bahr, & Cook, 2014). The negative consequences for all athletes in relation to the cancellation and postponement of such events during these fraught times need to be taken seriously. The current COVID-19 crisis requires a rigorous system that ensures greater accountability on the part of event organisers, while ensuring that the athletes’ voice is heard (Mann, Clift, Boykoff, & Bekker, 2020).

This commentary begins with a description of how athletes were affected during the current COVID-19 pandemic. It will also discuss the role of the athletes during a pandemic. In this age of social media, athletes have a key role to play. News of inappropriate behaviour can spread very quickly, particularly when the behaviour evokes an emotive response. However, social media can also be leveraged to spread positive messages. During this pandemic, athletes like other celebrities can act as role models. They can encourage appropriate behaviours including social distancing to help stall the spread of the virus through social media. Hence a short discussion on the future of athletes as role models during a pandemic is merited. The paper ends with a short discussion on the resumption of sports after lockdown. In such a context of uncertainty, maximum caution is needed for resumption of sports to ensure a smooth return to previous high levels of training and fitness.

Dysfunctional impact on athletes’ performance during COVID-19

During these turbulent times, high levels of stress have a negative effect on our sense of well-being (Weinberg & Cooper, 2012). The mitigation measures of social distancing further exacerbate the negative effects of stress. It is well documented that an overall lack of social interaction with others hinders general well-being (Seigrin & Rynes, 2009). Given the detrimental effects on the individual’s emotional and bodily experience (Weinberg & Cooper, 2012), the impact of this worrisome and stressful situation could also extend to “athletes’ emotional experiences and emotion-related psychobiosocial states, exerting a functional or dysfunctional impact on performance” (Chen et al., 2020a). Absence of organized training and competition, lack of adequate communication between athletes and coaches, inability to move freely, and inappropriate training conditions are negative consequences of social isolation or quarantine (Chen et al., 2020a). Staying in quarantine can have deleterious effects, not only on most physiological systems, but also in the players’ lives. Although it is difficult to predict the duration of the global COVID-19 crisis at this time, it is possible to anticipate the loss incurred with training-induced adaptation. In this scenario, it is therefore extremely important to identify the effects and to understand the mechanisms and effects on all physiological systems, as well as their impact on athletic performance.

Reductions in maximal and submaximal exercise performance occur within weeks after the cessation of training and the losses in aerobic performance have shown that they decrease cardiovascular function and muscle metabolic potential. Reduced or complete absence of strength training can also cause loss of muscle mass while periods of prolonged inactivity negatively affect the anti-gravitational...
The athletes’ role during the pandemic

In March 2020, National Basketball Association (NBA) player Rudy Gobert mocked prevention measures rules set up by NBA during the COVID-19 pandemic by touching every microphone and recorder intentionally during a media event. Off camera, Gobert also adopted a cavalier attitude towards the possibility of spreading the virus by exchanging high fives with his teammates and touching their personal belongings (Raskin, 2020). When Gobert tested positive for the COVID-19 virus days later, it led to the league-wide suspension of the NBA games for the remainder of 2019/2020 season (Aschburner, 2020). His teammate, Donovan Mitchell, was also subsequently infected with the virus. Gobert’s actions were met with fierce criticism. As a professional athlete, Gobert was expected to be more responsible and act as a role model during this period. In trivialising the pandemic, his behaviour seemed to encourage both fans and the general public to disregard mitigation measures to prevent an escalation of the outbreak.

This incident raises the question of whether the public should hold professional athletes to a higher standard and expect them to be role models. Athletes are perceived to possess positive character traits including perseverance and discipline (Teigen et al., 2020). However, constant appearances in the media, they have also become familiar public figures (Lines, 2002). As a result, many young adults regard athletes as role models. Athletes are expected by the public to behave appropriately both on-court and off-court so that they can be role models for the young.

While there is still debate as to whether professional athletes should be role models, the COVID-19 pandemic creates a situation where athletes should set good examples for their fans and encourage appropriate behaviours. This is especially so in this age of social media where information on the virus can spread faster than the virus itself (De-poux et al., 2020). Today, many people are members of social network sites. As members of a social network site have a relationship with each other in a virtual community, they are more likely to trust information posted and thus share them with other members (Phua & Ahn, 2016). The nature of social network sites favours a quick emotive response rather than a prolonged, conscious and cognitive response (Leng, 2019). Social media can also transmit positive messages and encourage appropriate behaviours during a pandemic (Kim, 2020). Through social influence, celebrities can influence behaviour through normative influence. This is because there is a desire by others to emulate them (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Hence, celebrities can share appropriate behaviours and encourage the public to act responsibly through social media.

Many athletes are already using social media to interact with their fans. These include sharing their training regimes, their activities with their families and friends, and their charity work (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). As such, it is easy for athletes to leverage on this medium and encourage appropriate behaviours from both their fans and the public during this pandemic. As athletes are perceived to be fit and healthy, messages that they post on health-related matters will be deemed more credible and convincing than the average celebrity (Behnoosh, Naylor, & Dickson, 2017). Athletes can thus make a difference in this fight against COVID-19.

Resuming sports after lockdown

The COVID-19 pandemic has had, and will have, profound effects on every one. Measures advocated by the World Health Organisation (WHO), and put in place by national governments, businesses and individuals saved millions of lives; however movement restrictions might have negative effects on professional athletes. Professional sport and its resumption, is a secondary concern in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic globally; however, it still carries significant importance. Substantial planning and work are required for sporting events to resume (Carmody, Murray, Borodino, Gouttebarge, & Massey, 2020). Athletes form part of a larger, more complex system—communities that include other athletes, their multidisciplinary support teams, families, and local, national and
Abstract

As major sport events have been cancelled and postponed in response to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), the necessity to protect and provide a holistic approach to the professional athlete has never been greater. To do so one must understand the negative consequences for athletes in relation to the cancellation and postponement of such events caused by a communicable pandemic. The aim of this paper is to give a brief overview of how athletes were affected during the current COVID-19 pandemic. It will also discuss the role of athletes during a pandemic. Athletes like other celebrities can be role models. They can encourage appropriate behaviours including social distancing to help stall the spread of the virus through social media. The article ends with a short discussion on the resumption of sports after lockdown. In such a context of uncertainty, maximum caution is needed for resumption of sports to ensure a smooth return to previous high levels of training and fitness.

Keywords
COVID-19 pandemic · Impact · Professional sports · Role models

Conclusion

Major sport events can provide hope and unity. Amid an extraordinary public health challenge, optimism and solidarity matter more than ever. One cannot envisage what a return to sport will look like after this pandemic; however, we do already know that the community matters more than ever. Athletes are demonstrating that “social distancing is a misnomer”: in their insistence to physically distance while encouraging others to do so, they show remarkable social interconnection. There has never been a time when athletes and those who worked with them needed to be more flexible and creative (Mann et al., 2020). The current pandemic offers opportunities that athletes and their providers must find. Lessons gained through autonomy, ingenuity, resilience, life balance, mindfulness, and many more possible skills, can and will mould strengthened and more resilient athletes. Moments of quietness present openings to reflect, re-evaluate, revise, and reform plans. These plans will undoubtedly be roads less travelled, but highly valued. The pervasiveness of these life lessons can serve athletes extremely well, as lives are never linear and paths are often circuitous (Schinke et al., 2020). Retrospectively, we can all agree that even when one believes one is standing still due to uncertainties, one never is. The human condition is such that people learn from their circumstances, and they adapt. The days ahead will provide fascinating data, dialogues, and interventions, built as a result of what could easily be dismissed as an isolated and unfortunate moment in human, and also, sport history. However, one cannot underestimate the strength of the human spirit (Schinke et al., 2020). Taking this physically isolating moment to reflect on athletes as whole human beings, situated in communities that they care about, enables us to adopt more of an athlete-centred approach and provide health protection when they resume training in the future. The fierce urgency of this task has never been clearer.

Corresponding address

Mariella Scerri, PhD
Mater Dei Hospital
Msida, Malta
mariellascerri@hotmail.com

Mariella Scerri Medical Humanities candidate

Victor Grech Consultant Paediatrician (Cardiology)
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