

Letter to the Editor: COVID-19 and Its Impact on the Sports Industry

By: **Fredrick Mulenga Chitangala** 
Chief Executive Officer
OYDC Zambia Sports Development Centre, Lusaka,
Zambia.
Lecturer, University of Lusaka, Zambia.
fredmc@chitangala.org

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Dear Editor,

Allow me to briefly share with the readers of the Journal of Preventive and Rehabilitative Medicine (JPRM) how the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has affected the sporting industry, from both the perspectives of industry's capacity to generate revenue and sustain jobs; and also on the wellbeing of athletes.

One of the most quoted statements in sports literature was uttered during the 1995 Rugby World Cup in Johannesburg in which Nelson Mandela said, and I quote "Sport has the power to change the world, "It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than government in breaking down racial barriers". Every athlete wants to make a contribution to this and they have to put their lives on hold just for the nation. They sacrifice their relationships, friendships, and life in general just so other people can smile. Now there is COVID and athletes have been home. The emotional rollercoaster is real. The constant influx of information, changes to daily routines, uncertainty with personal health and the health of others coupled with rapidly changing reports, is characteristic of the ups and downs of a rollercoaster. All of which is physically and emotionally draining. Some studies have reported certain common feelings among athletes as follows: fear, anxiety, loss, relief, confusion,

disappointment, exhaustion, frustration, and anger. Mandates to stay home and socially distance may cause you to feel physically alone. However, this has made several athletes feel like they are on an emotional island. There are understandable uncertainties and anxieties about when qualifiers will be held, how to maintain fitness and training, and whether the Olympic/Paralympic Games will occur or not. For some, this comes with permanent changes such as unwanted and unplanned pregnancies among female athletes, substance abuse, and overweight. This can never be clearly explained unless you are experiencing it. In Zambia, the year 2020 was as tormenting as it can get, from experiencing the hitherto unexplained gassing of citizens incidences with some dangerous chemicals to the realization of a COVID-19 outbreak and report of first case in March of 2020. Now every journal, media house and story teller has reported how it is no longer a hyperbole to claim that this new virus has left no life, sector or industry unaffected. In the first few months of the pandemic, the world had focused mainly on the effects of COVID-19 on the larger public and businesses, with concerns for athletes' wellbeing hardly hitting the limelight.

Sports penetrate into every person's life, and is itself an industry capable of spinning the world economy. It is one special industry like no other – it comes with passion, feelings, euphoria and also big disappointments — both for fans as well as for athletes trying to do their

best. But the sports industry is also a business — one among the biggest. The Sports Industry Insights, in their 2019 Sports Industry Analytics, did refer to a research done by A.T. Kearney, which reported that the global sports market is worth somewhere between \$480 billion to \$620 billion, with USA claiming the biggest market sector of about \$31.83 billion, surpassing the globally popular soccer filled European market. Revenue is generated from selling naming rights, advertising, shirt/media sponsorships, live sporting events broadcasting, food sales, and material goods. Until COVID-19 appeared, sports industry had enjoyed an upward trajectory, growing at rapid speeds with high competition and a promising future. Currently, with virtually all form of sport affected, every part of the sporting value chain has been affected, from athletes, teams and leagues, food sales, merchandising, to the media that broadcast and cover games.

The disruptions that came with COVID-19 will have long lasting impact on both the industry and the mental wellbeing of not only athletes but also of other interest group such as fans and other stakeholders.

In Zambia, the biggest Sports Centre, OYDC Zambia Sports Development Centre has not been spared by COVID-19 related disruptions. The OYDC had hoped to introduce five more sports to make ten but when COVID-19 hit, everything was brought to a halt, including the already existing programs. The Centre then closed for five months during which the sports facility lost about one hundred and eighty one thousand United States Dollars (\$181,000) potential revenue, the same that would have helped to run the five aforementioned extra sports. Due to public health measures put in place, no one utilized the facilities of OYDC as COVID-19 anxieties plummeted, due to alarming and rising numbers of new cases the country was recording. As much as the institution felt the pinch, the biggest challenge was definitely felt by the athletes, who solely depended on the OYDC's program and facility venues for their training, educational sessions, health checkups and safe space. They lost their safe haven, especially that most athletes hosted by OYDC come from vulnerable communities.

The impact of COVID-19 on the sport industry should also be viewed beyond money lost and consider how the life of a third world country athlete has been negatively affected. This is supported by literature that emphasize the vital role of sports in addressing most mental health issues and its relevance in promoting psychological wellbeing. This is coupled with some empirical data that supports the rationale and importance of good psychological wellbeing among athletes compared to non-athletes. Alas COVID-19 is here and it is a serious “gaudium” disruptor.

Not only sporting activities have been affected, globally everyone has felt the impact of COVID-19

resulting from a range of things including closure/restrictions of workplaces, educational institutions, large-event gatherings and sports activities. Major athletic events and competitive sports at all sport levels have been cancelled or postponed and training facilities have closed to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This will have lasting psychological impact on athletes.

What about the pushing Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics a year back? One of the most watched sports broadcasts has had its main business model upended. Athletes, coaches, parents, sports administrators and other sport stakeholders have been left scuttling to develop new plans to mitigate the potential impact of COVID-19 on sport worldwide and also on the wellbeing and livelihoods of athletes.

Since COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen media and studies reporting the loss of earnings of athletes as a result of salary cuts or being completely furloughed, limits in daily training schedules due imposed public health measures and restrictions. This has the potential to affect the mental performance and physical wellbeing of athletes all over the world Zambia included.

All we can say is our athletes who make us smile, need our support, to pull through these rollercoaster experiences until when they can fully regain their lost fitness and show us what they do best.

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