

# The Viral Game: The Global Football Community's Response to Epidemics and Pandemics in the Twenty-First Century

By Patrick H. Salkeld, Independent Scholar

## *Abstract*

The twenty-first century has seen health crises related to SARS, Swine Flu, Ebola, Zika, and COVID-19. Nations cooperated with supranational groups when deciding what to do with football operations in these crises except during the COVID-19 pandemic when the “Ostrich Alliance” viewed it as interference with their sovereignty.

**Keywords:** *pandemics, football (soccer), SARS, COVID-19, Ebola, FIFA World Cup, Zika, 2016 Rio Olympics, Swine Flu, 2015 African Cup of Nations*

Fifty-two thousand supporters, including 3,000 fans from Spain, watched Liverpool play Atlético Madrid in a Champions League match in Anfield the same day the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020.<sup>1</sup> Two days later football operations in the United Kingdom were suspended until further notice, but the damage had already been done. Evidence showed the Liverpool area “became a key hotspot” because “such a large gathering [gave] the virus a chance to spread quickly” to Liverpool from Madrid, an early epicenter of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> A crowded stadium, or even a pub, where spectators interact closely enough to rub elbows is a perfect venue for disease transmission. After the game in a private message to Everton Manager Carlo Ancelotti, Liverpool Manager Jürgen Klopp called the decision to go ahead “a criminal act,” and Ancelotti echoed Klopp when he said, “Today, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Mick Tucker and Adrian Goldberg, “Coronavirus: Sports Events in March ‘Caused Increased Suffering and Death,’” *BBC*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52797002>.

<sup>2</sup> Tony Evans, “The Bleak Anfield Night in Liverpool’s History at the Centre of a Massive COVID-19 Spread,” *South China Morning Post*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/sport/football/article/3080375/bleak-anfield-night-liverpools-history-centre-massive-covid-19>; Isobel Frodsham, “Liverpool Game Blamed for Mammoth ‘Spike’ in UK COVID-19 Deaths,” *Fox Sports*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.foxsports.com.au/football/uefa-champions-league/liverpool-game-blamed-for-mammoth-spike-in-uk-covid19-deaths/news-story/fff2a7b7c800c30f012a3581fbbdada7>.

priority is health, limiting the contagion.”<sup>3</sup> Three weeks before the Liverpool-Atlético match, 40,000 Bergamo-based Atalanta fans traveled to Milan for a game against Valencia, which the Bergamo mayor later called “a biological bomb.”<sup>4</sup>

Twentieth-century tragedies like the World Wars cancelled the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) 1942 and 1946 World Cups and the 1916, 1940, and 1944 Olympic Games. Great Britain had suspended football because of the First World War, which partially minimized the effect of the influenza pandemic on the sport. The British government also chose not to enforce precautions during football matches when they resumed out of a desire to return to normalcy after the First World War ended. The 1918 influenza pandemic was the first health crisis to affect soccer operations and offered lessons for twenty-first century football organizations: should they prioritize public health or sporting events? The medical community started to recognize the threat that globalization and mass gatherings posed for spreading diseases over the following decades. From SARS to Zika, football organizations strategized soccer operations in order to avoid spreading diseases. Football organizations risked endangering global public health when they staged major tournaments during twenty-first century health crises for profit maximization until the COVID-19 pandemic when most of the football community stopped playing. The “Ostrich Alliance” of dictatorial nations refused to suspend football operations despite the recommendations of supranational groups, like the WHO and FIFA, which they viewed as undermining their sovereignty.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Joanna Durkan, “Jürgen Klopp Denounces ‘Criminal Act’ of Liverpool vs. Atletico Receiving Green Light,” *This Is Anfield*, March 28, 2020, <https://www.thisisanfield.com/2020/03/jurgen-klopp-denounces-criminal-act-of-liverpool-vs-atletico-receiving-green-light/>.

<sup>4</sup> Evans, “The Bleak Anfield Night in Liverpool’s History at the Centre of a Massive COVID-19 Spread.”

<sup>5</sup> Andres Schipani (São Paulo), Henry Foy (Moscow), Jude Webber (Mexico City), and Max Seddon (New York), “The ‘Ostrich Alliance’: The Leaders Denying the Coronavirus Threat,” *The Financial Times*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/974dc9d2-77c1-4381-adcd-2f755333a36b>; “Editorial: The People v. The Ostriches,” *The Continent*, Issue 2, April 25, 2020, 2, <https://bucket.mg.co.za/wp-media/2020/04/cde32558-thecontinentissue2-2.pdf>.

The twenty-first century's first pandemic, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), occurred in 2003 and disrupted FIFA's original plans for the 2003 Women's World Cup. In 2000, China won the bid to host the 2003 Women's World Cup from September 23 to October 11, 2003, after successfully hosting the first edition of it in 1991, but no one expected a SARS outbreak in 2002. It forced the Asian Football Confederation to postpone the Asian Women's World Cup qualifying tournament originally scheduled to be held in April 2003.<sup>6</sup> A week later, FIFA indefinitely postponed the ceremonial draw to determine the groups for the World Cup scheduled for May 24 in Wuhan, China.<sup>7</sup> After consulting with the WHO and other medical experts, the FIFA Sports Medical Committee unanimously recommended the tournament be moved. On May 3, FIFA officially announced its decision to relocate the 2003 Women's World Cup to be played during its original schedule.<sup>8</sup> By the time FIFA made its decision to move the 2003 Women's World Cup, SARS had killed one hundred people, and it would kill another eight hundred and infect 8,000 people total worldwide by September.<sup>9</sup>

In April, U.S. Soccer (USSF), told reporters "there was no chance [it] would agree to host" the tournament.<sup>10</sup> It had two interrelated concerns: profit maximization "because of the potential liabilities in becoming a last-minute host of a fall event," which would force the 2003 Women's World Cup to compete with other sports for television viewers and stadium

---

<sup>6</sup> Grahame L. Jones, "SARS Threatens Staging of Women's World Cup," *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 2003, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-apr-07-sp-socrep7-story.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Hersh, "SARS Threat May Move World Cup," *Chicago Tribune*, April 11, 2003, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2003-04-11-0304110230-story.html>. In 2019, Wuhan would be the location of the COVID-19 outbreak.

<sup>8</sup> "SARS: FIFA Executive Decides to Relocate FIFA Women's World Cup 2003," *FIFA*, May 3, 2003, <https://www.fifa.com/news/sars-fifa-executive-decides-relocate-fifa-women-world-cup-2003-87152>. Relocating the World Cup was not unprecedented. In 1982, Colombia had given up its hosting rights for the 1986 Men's World Cup because of economic concerns, and FIFA replaced Colombia with Mexico.

<sup>9</sup> Caitlin Murray, *The National Team: The Inside Story of the Women Who Changed Soccer* (New York: Abrams Press, 2019), 98.

<sup>10</sup> "FIFA Pulls Women's World Cup from China over SARS," *Soccer America*, May 3, 2003, <https://www.socceramerica.com/publications/article/4581/fifa-pulls-women39s-world-cup-from-china-over-s.html>.

availability, and public relations because it feared “women’s soccer could suffer ... damage in comparison with the 1999 Women’s World Cup.”<sup>11</sup> Former women’s national team coach Tony DiCicco considered it a “greater risk...for the tournament not to take place” because of the attention on women’s soccer it would create.<sup>12</sup> The USSF Board changed its mind after FIFA gave China the 2007 Women’s World Cup and delayed the United States’ chances at hosting another World Cup to 2011 if it did not bid for the 2003 Women’s World Cup.<sup>13</sup> Protecting public relations because the tournament would not be as exciting as the 1999 competition primarily motivated the USSF board not to want the tournament rather than protecting public health (including the United States Women’s National Team players’ health who already qualified to compete), while Major League Soccer officials pushed for the tournament because the league stood to gain financially from it and the bid asked FIFA to shoulder some of the financial losses.<sup>14</sup> Throughout May, FIFA executives debated bids by Sweden, Brazil, Australia, and the United States.<sup>15</sup> Nearly a month after China relinquished its rights, on May 26, 2003, FIFA chose the United States to host the 2003 Women’s World Cup.<sup>16</sup> After the announcement,

---

<sup>11</sup> Philip Hersh, “SARS Costs China Women’s World Cup,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 2003, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2003-05-04-0305040511-story.html>. U.S. Soccer spent US\$30 million to host the 1999 World Cup and made a profit of US\$2 million.

<sup>12</sup> Hersh, “SARS Costs China Women’s World Cup.”

<sup>13</sup> “China Paid \$1.5m for losing Women’s World Cup,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 20, 2003, <https://www.smh.com.au/sport/soccer/china-paid-1-5m-for-losing-womens-world-cup-20030920-gdhfba.html>. FIFA still allowed China to compete and to retain its automatic qualification despite no longer being the host, and it also gave China \$1.5 million dollars to help defray the organizing costs the country had incurred preparing to host the 2003 Women’s World Cup.

<sup>14</sup> Scott French, “Women’s World Cup: Coming to America?” *Soccer America*, May 12, 2003, <https://www.socceramerica.com/publications/article/5217/women39s-world-cup-coming-to-america.html>. The World Cup games would “be run by MLS personnel, take place in MLS facilities and be beamed around the world through the auspices of a company owned by MLS’s chief benefactor.”

<sup>15</sup> Hersh, “SARS Costs China Women’s World Cup;” Jeré Longman, “SOCCER; U.S. Replaces Chinas as Host of Soccer’s Women’s World Cup,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/27/sports/soccer-us-replaces-china-as-host-of-soccer-s-women-s-world-cup.html>; French, “Women’s World Cup.”

<sup>16</sup> Longman, “SOCCER;” “China Paid \$1.5m for losing Women’s World Cup.” U.S. Soccer and the United States Women’s National also dealt with the demise of the Women’s United Soccer Association (WUSA), the first professional women’s soccer league, five days before the 2003 World Cup started. See Caitlin Murray, *The National Team: The Inside Story of the Women Who Changed Soccer* (New York: Abrams Press, 2019) and Timothy F.

USFF President Robert S. Contiguglia told reporters, “We went after this event because we believed it was the right thing to do.”<sup>17</sup>

Staging the 2003 Women’s World Cup in China would have risked the possibility of “an infectious patient coughing or sneezing, propelling infectious particles over distances of about three feet” in a football stadium surrounded by thousands of others for another 1918 influenza pandemic to occur.<sup>18</sup> By the end of the SARS epidemic, the disease had infected people in thirty countries, with 5,327 cases in China out of 8,422 total and 916 deaths worldwide. Had other countries not bid to host, it would have forced FIFA either to postpone the competition and lose the revenue for which it had budgeted or to mount the 2003 Women’s World Cup as planned. China’s “‘fairly draconian’ public health measures, such as home isolations and mass quarantines” helped FIFA and U.S. Soccer.<sup>19</sup> Luck also factored into the lowered disease transmission because SARS did not spread widely across the world; otherwise, relocating the tournament to the United States might have done little to prevent its transmission and might even have caused an opposite effect and increased its dissemination. Six years after SARS, the swine flu pandemic threatened the 2009 FIFA Confederation Cup and the 2010 Men’s World Cup as the virus spread across the globe.

In April and May 2009, the first cases of swine flu, a “[reassortment] of two well-known H1N1 swine-lineage viruses that had circulated separately for over a decade,” were found in Mexico and the United States. Governments and the WHO panicked about this strain of swine flu because it was “an H1N1, just like the Spanish flu.”<sup>20</sup> In 2004, FIFA had selected South

---

Grainey, *Beyond Bend It Like Beckham: The Global Phenomenon of Women’s Soccer* (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Longman, “SOCCER.”

<sup>18</sup> Honigsbaum, *The Pandemic Century*, 269.

<sup>19</sup> Honigsbaum, *The Pandemic Century*, 275.

<sup>20</sup> Honigsbaum, *The Pandemic Century*, 368.

Africa as the first African nation to host the 2009 Confederations Cup and the 2010 World Cup, which resulted from bribery as the 2015 FIFA Corruption Case revealed.<sup>21</sup> The South African World Cup Organizing Committee predicated its bid as a message of progress, change, economic bonanza, and “nation building”—in essence, cultural diplomacy.<sup>22</sup> The country had only been a FIFA and Confederation of African Football (CAF) member since 1992 after being expelled in 1976 because of Apartheid.<sup>23</sup> South Africa put much at risk with the tournaments in addition to the spread of disease. FIFA Secretary General Jerome Valcke said, “We will cancel only if we feel that we have to. If there are no risks and if we have all the necessary assurances, the competition will go ahead.”<sup>24</sup>

With just two months before the 2009 FIFA Confederations Cup, the South African government, FIFA, and the South Africa World Cup Organizing Committee rushed to work with the WHO on preventative measures against the swine flu.<sup>25</sup> Officials installed thermal scanners at the airports to detect travelers with fevers and stockpiled “enough Tamiflu for 100,000 patients” with “private sectors...[stockpiling] 200,000 units,” which only constituted enough to

---

<sup>21</sup> For more about the 2015 FIFA Corruption Case or the history of corruption in FIFA, see “The FIFA Case Explained,” *The New York Times*, December 3, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/04/sports/soccer/fifa-investigation.html>; Mary Papenfuss and Teri Thompson, *American Huckster: How Chuck Blazer Got Rich and Sold Out the Most Powerful Cabal in World Sports* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016); Ken Bensinger, *Red Card: How the U.S. Blew the Whistle on the World’s Biggest Sports Scandal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Andrew Jennings, *The Dirty Game: Uncovering the Scandal at FIFA* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016); Heidi Blake and Jonathan Calvert, *The Ugly Game: The Corruption of FIFA and the Qatari Plot to Buy the World Cup* (New York: Scribner, 2015); Alan Tomlinson, *FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association): The Men, the Myths, and the Money* (New York: Routledge, 2014); and John Sugden and Alan Tomlinson, *Football, Corruption, and Lies: Revisiting Badfellas, the Book FIFA Tried to Ban* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> *FIFA Confederations Cup South Africa 2009 Report*, <http://pmg-assets.s3-website-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/docs/2009/090805fifa-edit.pdf>; Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu, “Sports as Cultural Diplomacy: The 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa’s Foreign Policy,” in *South Africa and the Global Game: Football, Apartheid, and Beyond*, eds. Peter Alegi and Chris Bolsmann (New York: Routledge, 2010), 144-154.

<sup>23</sup> For more information about the history of football in South Africa, see Peter Alegi, *African Soccer: How a Continent Changed the World’s Game* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010); Peter Alegi, *Laduma!: Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa, from its Origins to 2010* (Durban, South Africa: University Of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010); Peter Alegi and Chris Bolsmann, eds., *South Africa and the Global Game: Football, Apartheid and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> “No Swine Flu Threat to Confed Cup,” *Brand South Africa*, May 4, 2009, <https://www.brandsouthafrica.com/people-culture/sport/sport-health/swine-flu-confed-cup-040509>.

<sup>25</sup> “No Swine Flu Threat to Confed Cup.”

help tourists, not the general populace.<sup>26</sup> On June 11, 2009, the WHO declared swine flu a pandemic virus, just three days before the Confederations Cup commenced. The tournament served as a trial tournament to see how well precautions worked, and it produced few swine flu cases.<sup>27</sup>

The 2010 World Cup in South Africa coincided with the country's winter in June 2010 which, combined with 450,000-500,000 expected tourists, heightened the possibility of a swine flu outbreak in South Africa.<sup>28</sup> FIFA ultimately left the decision to postpone or cancel the 2010 World Cup to the local organizers since they had the most to lose, and the country's department of health had already implemented a national influenza preparedness plan it had created in response to the 2007 avian flu scare.<sup>29</sup> In November 2009, South Africa opened emergency response centers across its provinces, and in early 2010, the country received almost five million doses of the H1N1 vaccine to protect its population, and recommended tourists attending the tournament be vaccinated beforehand.<sup>30</sup> World Cup staff and frontline workers were prioritized for vaccination over high-risk South Africans, which resulted in a shortage across the country.<sup>31</sup> The government also implemented other precautions, such as closing schools to reduce traffic

---

<sup>26</sup> "No Swine Flu Threat to Confed Cup."

<sup>27</sup> Peter Pedroncelli, "World Cup 2010: Swine Flu Threat in Mind," *Goal*, February 16, 2010, <https://www.goal.com/en/news/1863/world-cup-2010/2010/02/16/1793220/world-cup-2010-swine-flu-threat-in-mind>.

<sup>28</sup> "South Africa Worried by Possibility of World Cup Swine Flu Outbreak," *The Guardian*, February 15, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2010/feb/15/world-cup-swine-flu>.

<sup>29</sup> Stéphanie Plasse, "Swine Flu – A/H1N1 Influenza: 2010 World Cup Threatened?," *Afrik-News*, July 31, 2009, <https://www.afrik-news.com/article15991.html>; "No Swine Flu Threat to Confed Cup."

<sup>30</sup> "South Africa Worried About Possibility of World Cup Swine Flu Outbreak," *The Guardian*, February 15, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2010/feb/15/world-cup-swine-flu>; Kashiefa Ajam, "World Cup Swine Flu Threat is Very Real," *Independent Online*, May 22, 2010, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/world-cup-swine-flu-threat-is-very-real-484766>.

<sup>31</sup> Ajam, "World Cup Swine Flu Threat is Very Real."

congestion, and medical screenings for spectators and players.<sup>32</sup> These actions, and the outdoor stadiums, minimized the effect of swine flu on the 2010 World Cup.

While South Africa's cooperation with the WHO demonstrated a change in South Africa's government after decades of refusing to follow the recommendations of international organizations during Apartheid, it was motivated by profit and opportunism. South Africa disregarded its general populace, which had been an ongoing issue during preparations for the 2010 World Cup. Taxpayers funded most of the US\$6 billion tournament preparations and faced a budget deficit the following year, and the promised economic bonanza failed to materialize. The country also experienced an increase in swine flu cases in July after the 2010 World Cup ended, though in October 2010, the WHO had not yet determined "why [it] occurred and" if it resulted from "the World Cup specifically or the re-opening of schools" afterwards.<sup>33</sup> The President of the South Africa Football Association, Dr. Danny Jordaan wrote, "The images we have seen...that have gone around the world are pictures of our rainbow nation like we have never seen before.... We have come together as a nation and showed the world that we truly are a soccer-loving nation."<sup>34</sup> South Africans suffered due to the government's desire to be the first African nation to host the World Cup and to show off the country post-Apartheid, which post-

---

<sup>32</sup> World Health Organization, *Public Health Measures During the Influenza A(H1N1) 2009 Pandemic: Meeting Report, WHO Technical Consultation 26-28 October 2010, Gammarth, Tunisia* (World Health Organization, 2011), 6,

[https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/70747/WHO\\_HSE\\_GIP\\_ITP\\_2011.3\\_eng.pdf;jsessionid=8193DF3A23A85A66FFDF1BF0705B34F7?sequence=1](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/70747/WHO_HSE_GIP_ITP_2011.3_eng.pdf;jsessionid=8193DF3A23A85A66FFDF1BF0705B34F7?sequence=1).

<sup>33</sup> Peter Alegi, *African Soccerscapes: How a Continent Changed the World's Game* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 131; Peter Alegi, *Ladouma!: Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa, from its Origins to 2010* (Durban, South Africa: University Of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010), 153; Andrew Zimbalist, *Circus Maximus: The Economic Gamble Behind Hosting the Olympics and the World Cup* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2015), 2; WHO, *Public Health Measures During the Influenza A(H1N1) 2009 Pandemic*, 6; *2010 FIFA World Cup Country Report*, 107, [https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis\\_document/201409/srsacountryreport2013-withcovera.pdf](https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/srsacountryreport2013-withcovera.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> *FIFA Confederations Cup South Africa 2009 Report*, <http://pmg-assets.s3-website-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/docs/2009/090805fifa-edit.pdf>.

tournament surveys of locals and international fans showed it have been “an important event in terms of promoting national unity.”<sup>35</sup>

Five years later, a much deadlier disease caused panic in West Africa that had the potential to prevent the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) from being held, or at least postponed, for the first time since its start in 1957.<sup>36</sup> Between March and April 2014, the Ebola virus outbreak spread through Guinea from the jungles to the urban areas and then reached Liberia and Sierra Leone.<sup>37</sup> After few cases appeared towards the end of April 2014, the epidemic worsened again, so borders were closed and international flights were cancelled to curb the threat. In July, Liberia’s President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf suspended football and used the military to enforce quarantines.<sup>38</sup> The increasing fear and panic about the Ebola crisis created concern that something might need to be done about the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations. Otherwise, “many people [might] not attend or...the players will possibly play in a stadium that is half-empty.”<sup>39</sup> On October 10, 2014, Morocco, the 2015 AFCON host, petitioned the CAF to postpone the tournament, originally scheduled for January 17 to February 8, 2015, until June 2015 or January 2016.<sup>40</sup> Morocco’s health ministry wanted to wait until the Ebola epidemic had passed before it held the tournament because “Sierra Leone and Guinea, two of the worst affected countries,” were participating in the 2015 AFCON qualification process.<sup>41</sup> Both countries had already been

---

<sup>35</sup> 2010 FIFA World Cup Country Report, 83.

<sup>36</sup> Honigsbaum, *The Pandemic Century*, 367, 368; Rebecca Onion, “We’ve Had a Lot of Pandemics Lately. Have We Learned Anything from Them?” *Slate*, January 30, 2020, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2020/01/coronavirus-outbreak-sars-swine-flu-viral-history.html>; “Ebola Outbreak: No Changes to 2015 Nations Cup, says CAF,” *BBC*, October 11, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/29578978>.

<sup>37</sup> Honigsbaum, *The Pandemic Century*, 283.

<sup>38</sup> Edward Mulbah, “Governance and Health in Liberia” in *Governance and Health in Post-Conflict Countries: The Ebola Outbreak in Liberia and Sierra Leone*, ed. Maureen Quinn (New York: International Peace Institute, 2016), 7.

<sup>39</sup> Katrin Mattheaei, “Africa Cup at Risk over Ebola Fears,” *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, September 3, 2014, <https://www.dw.com/en/africa-cup-at-risk-over-ebola-fears/a-17897245>.

<sup>40</sup> “Ebola Outbreak: No Changes to 2015 Nations Cup, says CAF,” *BBC*, October 11, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/29578978>; “Africa Cup of Nations: Morocco Still Want Delay,” *BBC*, November 10, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/29974194>.

<sup>41</sup> “Ebola Outbreak: No Changes to 2015 Nations Cup, says CAF.”

banned from hosting qualifying matches within their borders, which required they find alternative venues for their home matches.<sup>42</sup> Morocco allowed Guinea “to use Casablanca to host two of [its] Nations Cup qualifiers” without explanation despite not wanting to host the AFCON due to the Ebola epidemic should Sierra Leone and Guinea make it to the tournament.<sup>43</sup> The CAF referred Morocco’s request to the organization’s executive committee to discuss the following month.<sup>44</sup> Yet, it remained steadfast in its refusal to postpone the tournament because it would “lose millions ... in revenue should the competition be postponed.”<sup>45</sup> At its executive committee meeting on November 2, 2014, the CAF set a deadline of November 8 for Morocco to decide to host the competition or not, and for “any countries who may want to step in as hosts” to declare their intentions.<sup>46</sup>

Morocco missed the deadline, and the CAF revoked its hosting rights and automatic qualification as host, which expelled it from the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations.<sup>47</sup> On November 14, 2014, the CAF announced Equatorial Guinea as the new host.<sup>48</sup> One of the country’s Women’s

---

<sup>42</sup> “African Football in Disarray Amid Ebola Outbreak,” *France24*, August 24, 2014, <https://www.france24.com/en/20140824-african-football-struggles-play-amid-ebola-outbreak-cup-of-nations>; “Ebola Football Ban on West African Countries to Remain,” *BBC*, September 20, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/29294050>. Sierra Leone had already suspended all football operations. The ban also included Liberia, which had been eliminated in the first round in April 2014, but not Nigeria or Senegal, two other qualification participants who had reported Ebola cases.

<sup>43</sup> “2015 Nations Cup: CAF Gives Morocco a New Deadline,” *BBC*, November 3, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/29870442>. Morocco offered no explanation for this decision that contradicted its reason for wanting a postponement.

<sup>44</sup> “Ebola Outbreak: No Changes to 2015 Nations Cup, says CAF.”

<sup>45</sup> Patrick Kingsley, “Morocco Disqualified from Next Year’s Africa Cup of Nations,” *The Guardian*, November 11, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/nov/11/morocco-disqualified-africa-cup-of-nations>.

<sup>46</sup> “2015 Nations Cup: CAF Gives Morocco a New Deadline.”

<sup>47</sup> “Africa Cup of Nations: Morocco Still Want Delay;” “Africa Cup of Nations: Morocco Will Not Host Finals Over Ebola Fears,” *BBC*, November 11, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/30004279>. In December 2014, Morocco hosted the 2014 FIFA Club World Cup as planned “because it did not expect many supporters to travel from Ebola-affected regions” nor did any teams from those countries participate. In February 2015, the CAF fined Morocco one million US dollars and another eight million Euros to recoup what the CAF lost from relocating the tournament and banned Morocco from taking part in the 2017 and 2019 Africa Cup of Nations. See: “Morocco Banned and Fined \$1m over Africa Cup of Nations Withdrawal,” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2015/feb/06/morocco-banned-and-fined-africa-cup-of-nations>.

<sup>48</sup> “2015 Nations Cup: Equatorial Guinea to Host Tournament,” *BBC*, November 14, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/30053859>. This decision brought with it a new controversy. In its May 17,

National Team stars, Genoveva Anonma, wanted the tournament to be cancelled “for the good of humanity and the good of our country” because she feared Ebola could “contaminate” it.<sup>49</sup>

Football administrators disagreed with her and said, “If we didn’t have the means to control Ebola we would never have accepted to host.”<sup>50</sup> Equatorial Guinea worked with the WHO to “carry out temperature screenings at airports and stadiums [and] disinfecting spectators’ hands with hand sanitizing gel as they enter.”<sup>51</sup>

Similar to the risk with the SARS epidemic, Ebola might have spread further into Africa and become a greater worry for Equatorial Guinea. Isolated cases in Italy, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Spain “drove home the risks that the emergence of novel pathogens in previously remote regions posed in an increasingly interconnected world.”<sup>52</sup> While the Equatoguinean Football Federation took strides to minimize the potential spread of Ebola, the Confederation of African Football prioritized profit maximization over public health in its insistence to hold the 2015 Africa Cup of Nations as planned. Profit maximization likely factored into Morocco’s refusal to hold the tournament during the epidemic because it hosted the 2014 FIFA Club World Cup the following month.<sup>53</sup> Ebola cases within its borders might have caused FIFA to rethink its decision to host the Club World Cup in Morocco, which would have resulted

---

2014, qualification match against Mauritania, Equatorial Guinea “fielded an ineligible player...Thierry Fidieu Tazemeta, who was born in Cameroon,” and had not provided evidence that he “had successfully changed associations” ahead of the game. The violation resulted in Equatorial Guinea’s disqualification from the tournament which, with the country hosting, reversed the earlier decision of Equatorial Guinea receiving an automatic qualification to the group stage.

<sup>49</sup> Sam Sheringham, “Africa Cup of Nations: Genoveva Anonma Raises Ebola Concerns,” *BBC*, December 17, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/30452171>. By December 15, the death toll was at 6,856 with 18,000 total cases.

<sup>50</sup> Sheringham, “Africa Cup of Nations.”

<sup>51</sup> “Protecting Fans from Ebola at the Africa Cup of Nations in Equatorial Guinea,” *World Health Organization*, January 2015, <https://www.who.int/features/2015/africa-cup-ebola/en/>.”

<sup>52</sup> Honigsbaum, *The Pandemic Century*, 311.

<sup>53</sup> Xenophobia towards peoples from the countries where diseases supposedly originate is a common thread in the history of health crises, epidemics, and pandemics. See Samuel K. Cohn, “Pandemics: Waves of Disease, Waves of Hate from the Plague of Athens to A.I.D.S.,” *Historical Research* 85 (November 2012): 535-555.

in lost tourism profit for the country. Amidst the Ebola crisis, the Zika virus created international panic ahead of the 2016 Olympics in Brazil.

In 2016, an outbreak of Zika fever concerned athletes, their families, and traveling fans as they prepared for that year's Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The Zika virus, "transmitted through mosquito bites, from mother to [her unborn] child, and sometimes through sexual intercourse" by men, presented a concern for couples wanting to become pregnant or already expecting because of the birth defects it could cause.<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately, eighty percent of all Zika virus cases present zero symptoms, which makes infection more difficult to detect.<sup>55</sup> The United States' Center Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) "warned pregnant women [or those considering becoming pregnant] to avoid traveling to more than twenty countries...where Zika cases have been registered," and the United States Olympic Committee told its athletes to stay home if they had any concerns about the virus.<sup>56</sup>

In February 2016, United States Women's National Team Goalkeeper Hope Solo told *Sports Illustrated*, "If I had to make the choice today, I wouldn't go [to Rio]" after the WHO declared a state of emergency.<sup>57</sup> Her desire to have a child in the future made her worry about contracting Zika.<sup>58</sup> Solo ultimately decided to compete in Brazil after learning more about the Zika virus but contemplated not leaving the hotel except to attend practice and matches and to

---

<sup>54</sup> Niko Besnier, Susan Brownell, and Thomas F. Carter, "Sport, Nation, and Nationalism," in *The Anthropology of Sport: Bodies, Borders, Biopolitics* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 225. By October 2016, four thousand babies had been born with microcephaly in Brazil. See: "Zika Virus Triggers Pregnancy Delay Calls," *BBC*, January 23, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-35388842>.

<sup>55</sup> Dr. Ford Vox, "What Real Threat Does Zika Pose to the Rio Olympics? History Has an Answer," *CNN*, February 12, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/02/12/health/zika-olympics-threat>.

<sup>56</sup> "Zika Virus Triggers Pregnancy Delay Calls," Daniel Bases and Joshua Schneyer, "Exclusive: U.S. Athletes Should Consider Skipping Rio if Fear Zika – Officials," *Reuters*, February 8, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-zika-usa-olympics-exclusive-idUSKCN0VH0BJ>.

<sup>57</sup> Grant Wahl, "Solo: As of Now, I Wouldn't Go to Olympics over Zika," *Sports Illustrated*, February 9, 2016, <https://www.si.com/soccer/2016/02/09/hope-solo-olympics-zika-virus-brazil>.

<sup>58</sup> "Hope Solo Will Limit Time Outdoors at Rio Olympics Due to Zika Concerns," *Sports Illustrated*, May 11, 2016, <https://www.si.com/soccer/2016/05/11/hope-solo-rio-olympics-zika-virus-concerns>. USWNT teammate Alex Morgan also expressed concerns in an interview with *Health Magazine*.

stay away from standing water as a precautionary measure.<sup>59</sup> Prior to leaving for Rio, she created controversy when she tweeted two images “of the mosquito repellent and mosquito nets she planned to bring to Brazil...with the hashtag #ZikaProof.”<sup>60</sup> The net and repellants were precautionary measures doctors had advised her to take.

Brazilians responded to her message with one of their own. On August 3, 2016, the United States team played its first match of the tournament against New Zealand in Manaus, a city with “higher rates than Rio of mosquito-borne viruses.”<sup>61</sup> Brazilian fans “shouted ‘Ooooooh,’ holding the sound as Solo prepared to strike [her first goal kick],” and “then at the moment Solo’s foot hit the ball, they shouted ‘Ziiikaaa!’” Fans booed her each time “she touched the ball” for the rest of the tournament. Solo regarded the boos and chants as Brazilians “having fun” and appreciated the noise “in the stadium.”<sup>62</sup> She also apologized for the images and partially blamed the media for sensationalizing “conditions in Brazil.”<sup>63</sup>

Despite Hope Solo’s misgivings about the media’s Zika representation, 150 health experts wrote a letter to the WHO and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to petition them to reschedule or move the games because they needed to research Zika more “since it harms health in ways that science has not seen before” and “it is unethical to run the risk.”<sup>64</sup> The WHO dismissed their concerns. The Mayor of Rio de Janeiro also deflected the problem when he called it “a Brazil problem, not an Olympic problem.”<sup>65</sup> Months before the tournament started, officials fumigated Rio, and every day during the tournament they made sure to survey the

---

<sup>59</sup> “Hope Solo Will Limit Time Outdoors.”

<sup>60</sup> Murray, 265.

<sup>61</sup> Wahl, “Solo: As of Now, I Wouldn’t Go to Olympics over Zika.”

<sup>62</sup> Murray, 265-66.

<sup>63</sup> “Rio 2016: Goalkeeper Hope Solo Taunted with Zika Chants,” *BBC*, August 4, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36973853>.

<sup>64</sup> “Zika Prompts 150 Experts Call for Rio Olympics to Be Moved or Delayed,” *Sports Illustrated*, May 27, 2016, <https://www.si.com/olympics/2016/05/27/rio-olympics-zika-virus-150-experts-postpone-who-ioc>.

<sup>65</sup> Jules Boykoff, “Green Games: The Olympics, Sustainability, and Rio 2016” in *Rio 2016: Olympic Myths, Hard Realities*, ed. Andrew Zimbalist (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2017), 195.

stadiums to identify any standing water and to get rid of it. The colder temperatures during the competition also helped to decrease the number of mosquitos in the area. The 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio continued as planned on August 5, and the WHO reported “no confirmed cases of Zika among travelers or athletes” after the games.<sup>66</sup> Dr. Margaret Chan, Director-General of the WHO (2006-2017) said, “We have 59 countries reporting Zika infections. You don’t want to bring a standstill to the world’s movement of people for many reasons.... It’s all about...people [taking the] appropriate measures to mitigate, to reduce the risk.”<sup>67</sup>

In contrast to the egalitarian transmission of SARS, swine flu, and Ebola, the Zika virus primarily posed a risk to women and unborn children. Between February and April 2016, four months before the start of the Rio Olympics, Brazil reported “91,387 likely cases of the Zika virus” and almost 5,000 “babies born with Zika-linked defects.”<sup>68</sup> The CDC, IOC, and WHO prioritized profit maximization when they saw no “public health reason” to disrupt the 2016 Olympics over the protection of women and children—especially the female Olympians who competed in Brazil—all the while urging countries to act and fund ways to prevent Zika transmission in pregnant women.<sup>69</sup> For this reason, the lack of action could be attributed to misogyny, the ambivalence towards birth control and women’s health, and a general disregard for women’s sports. The media brought attention to the Zika virus because of its effect on women and children, but unprocessed sewage, hookworm parasites, Chikungunya, and Dengue fever also plagued Brazil and failed to receive the same attention.<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, Brazil worked with the WHO, and both mosquito fumigation and the colder climate during the Olympics

---

<sup>66</sup> “No Zika Cases from Olympics, Says WHO,” *BBC*, September 2, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-37257949>.

<sup>67</sup> “WHO Concerns on Zika Grow, No Plans to Move or Cancel Olympics,” *Sports Illustrated*, May 17, 2016, <https://www.si.com/olympics/2016/05/17/zika-virus-outbreak-united-nations-world-health-organization-rio-2016>.

<sup>68</sup> “Zika Crisis: WHO Rejects ‘Move Rio Olympics’ Call,” *BBC*, May 28, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36401150>.

<sup>69</sup> “Zika Crisis: WHO Rejects ‘Move Rio Olympics’ Call.”

<sup>70</sup> Dr. Ford Vox, “What Real Threat Does Zika Pose to the Rio Olympics?”

allowed the games to be held and prevented a global spread of Zika, a largely unresearched disease with a viral infection rate.

Four years later, a novel coronavirus called COVID-19 caused by SARS coronavirus 2, the successor to the 2002 SARS strain, caused a near complete disruption to global activity and made many countries implement quarantine measures due to its virulent transmission. In 2003, SARS infected about 8,098 and killed around 774 people. As of July 11, 2020, COVID-19 has proven to be more virulent and deadlier with 12,671,592 cases and 563,841 deaths. On December 31, 2019, the WHO China Country Office received news of “cases of pneumonia of unknown...cause detected in Wuhan, Hubei Province” according to a WHO disease outbreak news report on January 5, 2020.<sup>71</sup> Scientists identified the cause as a novel coronavirus and isolated it as a strain from the SARS family.<sup>72</sup> On January 30, the WHO declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Two weeks later the disease received the name, COVID-19.<sup>73</sup> On March 11, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. The need to social distance and to prevent mass gatherings of people created a familiar, yet unique, quandary for football associations because it would be the first time since World War II that football would be suspended globally.

FIFA recommended all international matches be postponed but allowed the individual confederations to decide for themselves.<sup>74</sup> In January, the Chinese Football Association

---

<sup>71</sup> COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University, last updated July 11, 2020 at 7:34 p.m., <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>. When I started researching for this project on March 25, 2020, there were about 468,000 cases of COVID-19 worldwide. Four months later there are 12.2 million cases and 554,304 deaths.

<sup>72</sup> “Novel Coronavirus – China,” *World Health Organization*, January 12, 2020, <https://www.who.int/csr/don/12-january-2020-novel-coronavirus-china/en/>.

<sup>73</sup> “Rolling Updates on Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19),” *World Health Organization*, update June 17, 2020, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen>.

<sup>74</sup> “FIFA Statement,” *FIFA*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.fifa.com/who-we-are/news/fifa-statement-x8681>.

postponed all games, followed by the Asian Football Confederation, South Korea, and Japan.<sup>75</sup> On March 3, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) president encouraged the football community to be optimistic and not to overreact.<sup>76</sup> Italy and Switzerland started postponing games in late February, and Italy's Serie A attempted to play behind closed doors or to reschedule games, but it quickly became evident that COVID-19 was transmissible too easily in distances under six feet and many infected people never showed symptoms after the surges in cases worldwide. Other Asian, European, North and South American, and African football leagues suspended indefinitely, postponed, or cancelled all football operations between March and June 2020.<sup>77</sup> Luckily, 2020 was not a World Cup year, but COVID-19 coincided with UEFA's Euro 2020, the sixtieth anniversary of the European Football Championship. It had planned for it to be a pan-European event held in twelve cities. On March 17, almost a week after the WHO declared a pandemic, UEFA rescheduled Euro 2020 for June 11 to July 11, 2021.<sup>78</sup> The majority of football associations chose to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19 and lose money, but several decided to keep the ball rolling.

Only five first division leagues continued operations: the Yokary Liga (Turkmenistan), Ligue A in Burundi, the Tajikistan Higher League, the Belarusian Premier League, and Liga Primera de Nicaragua—all leagues in dictatorial nations referred to as “the Ostrich

---

<sup>75</sup> China later canceled the 2020 Chinese Super League season after COVID-19 cases resurged in Beijing. “Beijing Halts Sports Events After New Covid Cases,” *Sports Business*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.sportbusiness.com/news/beijing-halts-sports-events-after-new-covid-cases/>.

<sup>76</sup> Paul MacInnes, “UEFA's Ceferin Warns Against Fixating on ‘Dark Scenarios’ Over Coronavirus Threat,” *The Guardian*, March 3, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2020/mar/03/uefa-congress-ceferin-coronavirus-dark-scenarios>.

<sup>77</sup> James Copley, “Coronavirus Timeline: How COVID-19 Has Affected Football in Britain and Around the Globe,” *Milton Keynes Citizen*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.miltonkeynes.co.uk/sport/football/international-football/coronavirus-timeline-how-covid-19-has-affected-football-britain-and-around-globe-2517478>.

<sup>78</sup> “UEFA Postpones Euro 2020,” *UEFA*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.uefa.com/insideuefa/about-uefa/news/025b-0f8e76aef315-8506a9de10aa-1000--uefa-postpones-euro-2020-by-12-months/>. For more information about Euro 2020, see: “Euro 2020: All You Need to Know About the Tournament,” *UEFA*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.uefa.com/uefaeuro-2020/news/0255-0d9f2f2c93bf-ad932fd5ee55-1000--all-you-need-to-know-about-uefa-euro-2020/?iv=true>.

Alliance...leaders who stick their head in the sand rather than deal with the threat of the pandemic.”<sup>79</sup> The Yokary Liga in Turkmenistan started its 2020 season on March 6, but postponed games on March 24 until April 19 with a “derby between...FC Altyn Asyr and...FC Kopetdag” attended by five hundred people.<sup>80</sup> The Tajikistan Higher League opened its 2020 season as normal on April 5, but officials instructed fans not to attend.<sup>81</sup> It then suspended play on April 26 until May 10 because of pneumonia and “a suspected swine flu fatality.”<sup>82</sup> Burundi’s Ligue A also stayed active until it suspended games on April 13 until May 21, which made it both the last African country to stop football and the first African country to restart competitions.<sup>83</sup> Fans could attend games, but stadium officials required their temperature to be taken and to use hand sanitizer upon entry.<sup>84</sup>

In Europe, the Belarusian Premier League was the only top division league to continue without interruption until May 11 when the Football Federation of Belarus postponed a match

---

<sup>79</sup> Schipani, Foy, Webber, and Seddon, “The ‘Ostrich Alliance’;” “Editorial: The People v. The Ostriches.”

<sup>80</sup> “Turkmenistan Football Championship 2020 Kicked Off Today,” *Turkmenportal*, March 6, 2020, <https://turkmenportal.com/en/blog/25734/turkmenistan-football-championship-2020-kicked-off-today>; “All Football Competitions Suspended in Turkmenistan,” *Turkmenportal*, March 24, 2020, <https://turkmenportal.com/en/blog/26224/all-football-competitions-suspended-in-turkmenistan>; “FC Kopetdag Escaped Defeat in a Away Match with FC Altyn Asyr,” *Turkmenportal*, April 19, 2020, <https://turkmenportal.com/en/blog/26924/fc-kopetdag-escaped-defeat-in-a-away-match-with-fc-altyn-asyr>.

<sup>81</sup> “Soccer-Khatlon Win as Tajikistan League Season Starts on Time,” *Reuters*, April 5, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-tajikistan-soccer/soccer-khatlon-win-as-tajikistan-league-season-starts-on-time-idUSL8N2BT0SU>.

<sup>82</sup> Will Nicoll, “Tajikistan, Soccer and the Dictatorships Profiting From COVID-19,” *Forbes*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/willnicoll/2020/04/30/tajikistan-soccer-and-the-dictatorships-profiting-from-covid-19/#6730560ad034>; “Tajikistan Suspends Soccer Season Over Coronavirus,” *Reuters*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-tajikistan-soccer/tajikistan-suspends-soccer-season-over-coronavirus-idUSKCN22806B>.

<sup>83</sup> Kiplagat Sang, “Burundi to Become First African Nation to Resume League Football in COVID-19 Era,” *Goal*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.goal.com/en-us/news/burundi-becomes-first-african-nation-to-resume-league/1ovt5vmhdyfvq1umtsbapg7ja8>.

<sup>84</sup> Kiplagat Sang, “Coronavirus: Burundi First East African Country to Confirm Date of Football Resumption,” *Goal*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.goal.com/en-us/news/coronavirus-burundi-first-east-african-country-to-confirm/1a2c4angzip41ju3vn49a3j7c>.

between FC Minsk and Neman Grodno due to FC Minsk players' possible infections.<sup>85</sup> The federation also had instituted precautionary measures such as hand sanitizer, temperature checks, and social distancing, which not all fans obeyed.<sup>86</sup> It reflects the Belarusian president's denial of the crisis and absurd COVID preventative measures, such as drinking vodka, visiting the sauna, working, and playing hockey.<sup>87</sup> He also claimed, "It is better to die standing than to live on your knees" and that "sport 'is the best anti-virus remedy.'"<sup>88</sup>

The Liga Primera de Nicaragua, also in an authoritarian country, continued to play as well, but differed from the Belarusian Premier League in how it protected fans and players. The clubs gave their players the option to play or stay home and promised to pay them—even if the league were to be suspended—and they must have minimal contact with others, but the league banned fans from the stadiums, which meant they could only watch games via local broadcasts and Facebook Live.<sup>89</sup> Diriangén, Nicaragua's oldest and most successful club and one of the few without state funding, disagreed with the league and tried to postpone a game on March 21 because of a coronavirus case nearby. The league forced them to play or face repercussions, so

---

<sup>85</sup> "Serie A Clubs Set to Start Team Training as Coronavirus Hits Belarusian Premier League," *Sky Sports News*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.skysports.com/football/news/11854/11986700/serie-a-clubs-set-to-start-team-training-as-coronavirus-hits-belarusian-premier-league>.

<sup>86</sup> Paul Gilmour, "Coronavirus: Why the Belarus Premier League Kept Playing During Pandemic," *Sky Sports News*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.skysports.com/football/news/11095/11987900/coronavirus-why-the-belarus-premier-league-kept-playing-during-pandemic>.

<sup>87</sup> Robyn Dixon, "No Lockdown Here: Belarus's Strongman Rejects Coronavirus Risks. He Suggests Saunas and Vodka," *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/no-lockdown-here-belarus-strongman-rejects-coronavirus-risks-he-suggests-saunas-and-vodka/2020/03/27/7aab812c-7025-11ea-a156-0048b62cdb51\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/no-lockdown-here-belarus-strongman-rejects-coronavirus-risks-he-suggests-saunas-and-vodka/2020/03/27/7aab812c-7025-11ea-a156-0048b62cdb51_story.html); Michael Hincks, "A League on Its Own: An Afternoon Watching the Defiant Belarusian Premier League," *EuroSport*, May 5, 2020, [https://www.eurosport.co.uk/football/vysshaya-liga/2020/football-news-belarusian-premier-league-a-defiant-league-which-shows-no-sign-of-stopping\\_sto7720161/story.shtml](https://www.eurosport.co.uk/football/vysshaya-liga/2020/football-news-belarusian-premier-league-a-defiant-league-which-shows-no-sign-of-stopping_sto7720161/story.shtml); Gilmour, "Coronavirus: Why the Belarus Premier League Kept Playing During Pandemic."

<sup>88</sup> Dixon, "No Lockdown Here: Belarus's Strongman Rejects Coronavirus Risks. He Suggests Saunas and Vodka;" Hincks, "A League on Its Own: An Afternoon Watching the Defiant Belarusian Premier League;" Gilmour, "Coronavirus: Why the Belarus Premier League Kept Playing During Pandemic."

<sup>89</sup> Omar Flores, "Mexican Players in Nicaragua Play Through Coronavirus Outbreak as Fear, Uncertainty Linger," *ESPN*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.espn.com/soccer/mexico-mex/story/4079002/mexicans-players-in-nicaragua-play-through-coronavirus-outbreak-as-fearuncertainty-lingers>; Andrew Downie, "Soccer-Nicaraguan Footballers Playing on but Players Fear Virus," *Reuters*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-nicaragua-soccer/soccer-nicaraguan-footballers-playing-on-but-players-fear-virus-idUSL1N2BS06G>.

the players wore masks and gloves during the match. *The Guardian* reporter Nick Ames wrote, “It is virtually impossible to find anyone elsewhere in the division who will go on record” to disagree with the league. Journalist Camilo Velásquez, who received private messages from players, told Ames, “When their income is football and the state is paying their salary, you can understand why they’ll remain quiet” and continue to play.<sup>90</sup>

From the 2002-2004 SARS epidemic to the COVID-19 pandemic, the football community struggled with how to balance profit maximization and risk mitigation during global health crises. The 1918 influenza pandemic showed the need for preventative measures at sporting events due to the proximity in which fans interacted with each other in stadiums. In the twenty-first century, football organizations coordinated their responses to the viruses with the WHO. The United States, China, South Africa, Equatorial Guinea, and Brazil all welcomed cooperation with supranational groups like the WHO, FIFA, and the IOC. Until the COVID-19 pandemic, they successfully found ways to maximize their profits by continuing to stage football matches whether it meant relocating tournaments, playing behind closed doors without fans, or drastically increasing preventative measures, such as mosquito fumigation, extra hand sanitizers, and medical screenings at stadiums and airports. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all leagues postponed indefinitely or outright cancelled their football activities, except for “the Ostrich Alliance” of Burundi, Nicaragua, Belarus, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan who continued to make money from gate receipts and television broadcast deals at the expense of further spreading the coronavirus. While some of the “Ostrich Alliance” football federations implemented some measures to stop COVID-19, they refused to listen to the supranational groups and suspend football indefinitely because it undermined their sovereignty and went against the opinions of

---

<sup>90</sup> Nick Ames, “Our Players are Afraid’: Nicaragua Football Ploughs on Amid Crisis,” *The Guardian*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2020/apr/01/players-afraid-nicaraguan-football-continues-coronavirus-crisis>.

their dictators. As of July 11, these countries have a combined 74,310 COVID-19 cases and 606 deaths, with Turkmenistan refusing to report any infections or deaths.<sup>91</sup> In contrast, UEFA chose to protect “the health of all those involved in the game...[and] to avoid placing any unnecessary pressure on national public services.” It lost an estimated €300 million (US\$340 million) when it postponed Euro 2020. “Europe’s top five football leagues...lost an estimated €4.14 billion (US\$4.5 billion) in broadcasting revenue.”<sup>92</sup> These extreme measures, combined with stay-at-home lockdowns, flattened the COVID-19 curve. As Daniel Parnell, Alexander John Bond, Paul Widdop, and David Cockayne wrote, “The Football World cannot simply be reduced to economic interests. It must consider too the dynamics of how football is culturally produced, how it is anchored in local and global communities and social practices, as well as aspects of its performance, science, and medical components.”<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>91</sup> Here is a breakdown of the COVID-19 cases and deaths per country with deaths in parentheses: Belarus, 64,767 (459); Nicaragua, 2,846 (91); Tajikistan, 6,506 (55); and Burundi, 191 (1), according to the COVID-19 map on the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

<sup>92</sup> Daniel Parnell, Alexander John Bond, Paul Widdop, and David Cockayne, “Football Worlds: Business and Networks During COVID-19,” *Soccer & Society* (2020): 3.

<sup>93</sup> Parnell, Bond, Widdop, and Cockayne, “Football Worlds,” 6.