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SHOULD THE FOOTBALL LEAGUES START IN THE SHADOW OF COVID-19? PANDEMIC POLICIES OF NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

With the emergence of Covid-19 disease in Wuhan, Hubei province of China in December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) began to monitor the process very closely. As a result of the spread of the disease in many different countries, the WHO declared Covid-19 disease as "Pandemic" on 11 March 2020. Preventive measures have come into prominence as the cure of the disease has not found yet. In countries where the Covid-19 outbreak is detected, the regulations implemented by the governments within the scope of the measure are of vital importance for the sports community and sportive stakeholders including international and national institutions that direct countries' sports organizations. The aim of this study is to evaluate the decisions taken and the regulations implemented by international and national football institutions, and opinions about possible scenarios within the scope of the football pandemic policy within the Covid-19 pandemic process that will affect the future of football. Qualitative patterns were used as the research method. As a result of the research, it was determined that football organizations had to between economy and athlete health.

Keywords: Covid-19, Pandemic, Football, Football management.

Introduction

With the emergence of Covid-19 disease in Wuhan, Hubei province of China in December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) began to monitor the process very closely. As a result of the spread of the disease in many different countries, the WHO declared Covid-19 disease as "Pandemic" on 11 March 2020[54]. Preventive measures have come into prominence as the cure of the disease has not found yet[30]. The WHO made basic recommendations under

the headings of giving importance to hand cleaning, protecting and maintaining social distance, avoiding touching our face, closing mouth during coughing or sneezing in order to protect from Covid-19[53]. As part of these recommendations, governments have taken extraordinary measures to reduce the spread of the this disease, which can be transmitted from person to person very quickly, by closing commercial businesses, stopping education in schools and switching to distance education, restricting social and cultural activities, and even a curfew[25]. Sport has also got its share from these restrictions and sports tournaments of almost all levels and all ages are either canceled or postponed for a limited or indefinite period.

As the spread of the Covid-19 disease began to decrease, different opinions began to emerge in the world regarding the resumption of the postponed sports activities. While the current pandemic has not yet ended, there is an orientation in early decision making process for the continuation of sports organizations. However, in current situation where social coordination and social distance are of paramount importance to alleviate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a debate between those who see 'athletes as commodity' and those who see 'athletes as a community' within the high-profit industry[24]. In this study, it was aimed to evaluate the decisions taken and the regulations implemented by international and national football organizations and opinions about possible scenarios within the scope of the football pandemic policy, in the Covid-19 pandemic process that will affect the future of football.

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Methodology

This study was completed using qualitative research methods. In this study, which focuses on the critical paradigm, action-oriented, problem-solving research, which a qualitative research type, was used. In studies using this type of research, it focuses on a particular problem or situation within a particular program, organization or community and aims to provide solutions to these problems[27(p221-222)]. Data collection and data analysis of this study were carried out with the method called fast discovery or fast evaluation. This method is effective in understanding the problem more quickly and producing solutions more quickly, especially in crisis environments. In addition, this method is in great harmony with action research. Fast discovery has also been used in research before the identification of the HIVvirus[27(p193-195)].

Themes

The Destructive Effect of Sport in Pandemic

There are several sports events that have a strong evidence and are thought to be a part of the spread of Covid-19. The first of these is the UEFA Champions League competition, which was faced by Atalanta and Valencia teams, which brought together the teams of the two countries that suffered the most damage from Covid-19 in Europe on February 19. This match was played in the city of Milan, because Atalanta's current stadium does not meet UEFA criteria. The competition with 45.792 spectators played an active role in the spread of the disease, with the arrival of Atalanta fans coming from the city of Bergamo and Valencia fans coming from Spain to Milan in the Lombardia region. As of February 19, there were only 3 Covid-19 cases in Italy. The loss of more than 2.290 people in the region of Bergamo with a population of 120.000 is one of the most painful results of this competition. Francesco Le Foche, who is scientist from Rome Epidemic Diseases Center, stated that the competition had a great share in the spread of the disease. The Mayor of Bergamo, Giorgio Gori used the

phrase “a biological bomb” about the competition. Professor Walter Ricciardi said the following about the competition: “I think that match of 19 February, Atalanta-Valencia, played an important role. A third of Bergamo’s population concentrated in a stadium and then celebrated. It is no coincidence that Bergamo is the most affected area and it is no coincidence that Valencia, that is, the citizens have moved from Italy to Spain, have been the transmitter in their country.” In addition, it is another proof of how much influence the competition through the detection of many Covid-19 positive cases among the players, technical and administrative staff of both Atalanta and Valencia teams. Other data that could be evidence of this situation occurred as of March 23, approximately 2/3 the deaths in Italy occurred in Lombardia, one of the 20 regions of the country, and also 27.206 of the total 59.138 cases across the country are seen in Lombardia[1-2,16-19,28].

Another is the UEFA Champions League competition, which confronts England’s Liverpool and Spain’s Atletico Madrid teams, played on March 11. However, after this competition, it is difficult to make an inference because the available data on the spread of the virus is limited. Liverpool Mayor Joe Anderson, who said that about 3000 Spanish fans who came to the competition had to be investigated how effective was in the spread of the Covid-19 virus, said that Madrid is one of the critical cities in the Covid-19 outbreak, and the potential for the audience, who cannot watch the competition in their own country, come to England and watch the competition and be effective in spreading the virus cannot be ignored[19,31].

Covid-19 Management in Some Football Organizations in the World

Many sport organizations were either canceled or suspended with the growth of the pandemic. Although the idea of playing without the audience was introduced in the first few days, this idea was quickly abandoned as a result of quarantine athletes and managers from European football leagues with the diagnosis of Covid-19[4-5,46]. However, in some leagues for one week, the leagues were played without spectators. Among these leagues Italy, Turkey like important leagues draws attention[7,38-39]. In Germany and Spain, the decisions was made to play without spectators, but the decision was changed to postponing before the competitions were played[11-12,20-21].

Table 1. Postponement Measures Taken by Major Football Leagues Against Covid-19

Country	League	First Case	Date of Postponement	Postponement Period	Decision Making Institution
England	Premier League	31.01.2020[47]	13.03.2020[29] (802 Case)	13.03-03.04.2020	The FA
France	Ligue 1	24.01.2020[48]	13.03.2020[22] (3640 Case)	Indefinite	LFP
Germany	Bundesliga	28.01.2020[49]	16.03.2020[12] (6012 Case)	16-03-03.04.2020	DFL
Italy	Serie A	29.01.2020[50]	09.03.2020[6] (9172 Case)	09.03-03.04.2020	İtalian Government
Spain	LaLiga	31.01.2020[51]	12.03.2020[20] (2965 Case)	12.03-26.03.2020	CSD
Turkey	Süper League	11.03.2020[52]	19.03.2020[39] (191 Case)	Indefinite	Turkish Government

When Table 1 is examined, the following data are obtained about Covid-19 response.

- England, Germany, Italy and Spain, the four of the five biggest football leagues except France, have decided to postpone for a limited period with the prediction that they will be able to overcome the pandemic in a short time.
- According to the number of cases, the country that decides to postpone the latest is Italy.
- In other countries except Turkey and Italy, it was observed that the sport structures that govern the league take the decision to postpone the league.
- Turkey has attracted attention both the country that took the decision to postpone the latest after the announcement of the pandemic by WHO and the country that made the fastest postponement decision with the pandemic entering its borders.

Covid-19 Policies of International Football Organizations

FIFA has gathered the issues it covers in its Covid-19 guide in three main titles as contracts, transfer period and other regulatory matters. For the national federations, the most important statement in the guide was the recognition of the Covid-19 pandemic as a force majeure. Another important issue is the statement that FIFA cannot make final decisions in the pandemic process on behalf of any football stakeholders[14].

While UEFA, at the meeting held with the participation of the federation of 55 member states on April 23, wants the leagues to be completed until the new season that starts in August, the main point is that the teams that will participate in the next season should be determined within the scope of 'sporting merit' and the desired format can be used for this[32].

Both FIFA and UEFA provided financial support to its members during the pandemic process[15,34].

Covid-19 Policy on Turkey's Football

The first cases in Turkey are explained on March 11 and on the same day it coincided with the WHO's pandemic declaration[52,54]. Turkey Football Federation (TFF) on March 13 has announced a duration of competitions will be played without spectators and the 26th week of the Super League competitions were played in this way. The necessary health measures (not shaking hands at the ceremony, not applying athletes-children, disinfecting every area of the venue etc.) to be taken before the competitions were also regulated by the TFF[38].

The Sports Federation Presidents of all branches, who met with government officials on March 19, announced that it was decided to postpone all sport events[39]. The most important situation in the sport community in Turkey, Galatasaray manager and two executive had positive Covid-19 tests[8].

Part 1 of the 'Return to Football Recommendation Protocol' was published by TFF Health Council on May 1. In the first part of the protocol, the regulations under the headings 'General Principles', 'Preparatory Period – Individual and Group Training Phase' and ' Positive Test Scenarios' are mentioned[37].

Discussion

Prevention of Covid-19 is very important in terms of minimizing the negative effects on respiratory capacity in the short and long term in athletes who continue their training for a long time with limited opportunities. Approaches that increase the risk of contamination and violate the social distance rule, such as doing the training in groups, using the changing rooms as a result of the need for cleaning after the training, are the first stage risk dimensions of the risk of catching Covid-19 if the decision to play is taken. In the second stage of risk, if any athlete or club officials in the team shows symptoms compatible with Covid-19, it will be necessary to quarantine the whole team, including everyone who uses the sports ground and their families at least fourteen days before the symptoms appear. However, everyone who is quarantined will need to be tested[35]. This will cause the training process to stop again. How will stopping this process affect the remaining teams of the league physically and mentally? If this happens during the training process, will the quarantined team be considered defeated while other teams are playing or will the entire league be postponed? For symptoms similar to Covid-19 that may occur after the start of competition, which of the possibilities will be the continuation of the competitions, the postponement or cancellation decisions? Such decisions will need to be taken and implemented very quickly.

When considering the WHO's recommendations to protect against Covid-19, it is obvious that physical contact must be cut off[53]. It is clear that in competitive sports branches that involve physical contact, we cannot prevent competitive athletes from coming into contact with each other. In this case, it is the right for athletes to know that the possibilities they may encounter when exposed to this virus can result in the end of their career and even death. However, the most important issue for sports management is to be able to eliminate these possibilities.

FIFA plays a passive role in the start of football leagues in the Covid-19 pandemic, which it declares counts of force majeure through the FIFA guide. UEFA has shown leadership and played an active role in the decision-making process to finish leagues. However, while UEFA has postponed its own organization, the 2020 European Football Championship, for a year[33], it did not hesitate to ask the national federations to finish the leagues. Process the announcement that the leagues Belgium[3], France[23] and Netherlands[26] will not be played, UEFA firstly kept the 'sporting merit' variable set in a wide spectrum for the determination of the clubs that would participate in the organizations it would organize for the next year and later UEFA prioritized the determination of the clubs that it will organize and that will participate in the organizations to be held next year and has given the governments responsibility for playing the leagues. This situation reveals the following truth. UEFA sees its legitimacy after the pandemic in the first place and the current athlete's health in the second place. UEFA itself, to be able to complete the Champions League and European League and to keep it running next year, to organize the 2020 European Football Championship, as a result of the list of the member countries that will participate in the European trophies next year, as soon as possible, is the most important issue on its behalf. If we take all of these together, it is likely that current situation will result in contradictions in the management of the internal and external dynamics, and that the corporate reputation will result in damages as the decisions taken have a weak image for football management in the environment of uncertainty.

A very important question, especially for FIFA, bother our heads. If this year was the World Cup year, would FIFA change its existing decisions, or would it make the same?

When we came to Turkey special, TFF in the legislation, there is no clear article stating that showing whom will be consulted about what should be done or what to do in case of a pandemic. In fact, this determination is valid for any event that may cause the league to stop completely. However, when the TFF legislation is examined in detail, some management organs that can be pointed out as responsible and authorized can be identified in the instructions of the boards within in the TFF.

Within the TFF legislation, it can determined that the clubs and the federation formed by the merging of clubs has competent organ in solving this problem[36,40,42-44]. In addition, in the TFF legislation, it can be concluded that the main burden on athlete's health is on the shoulders of the clubs[48], but because of the pandemic, which is an extraordinary situation, the federation should share the burden of the clubs. Throughout this process, the most important advisory board of the TFF should be determined as the Health Board[43-44]. Again, the TFF and its executive organs, which take their powers from their legislation, should be the ultimate decision- makers in pandemic-based problems that may arise during the training and the competition[36,40,44]. In this context, although it was announced that the 'Return to Football Recommendation Protocol' will be valid in the event of competitions[37], it revealed that the first priority of TFF (there may be those who think differently within TFF) is the economy and the second priority is health.

In the pandemic process, contracted professional football players are undoubtedly the biggest risk-takers in the football community. if competitions continue. Since it will not be possible to change the current football rules in order to make them suitable for the pandemic while the league continues, if the number of players entering the penalty area during the corner kick is at least 12 (twelve), a situation will occur against all the recommendations given by the WHO[53]. In case of free-kick close to the penalty area, a minimum of 3 (three) players are lined up side by side in the wall to be established or bilateral struggles that will occur at any moment in the field are an example of the situation. It is clear that, while these potential situations carry the risk of transmission, these situations violate the social security of football players. In the TFF legislation, unilateral cancellation rights are granted to football players in case of a social security violation[41]. Therefore, football players who do not feel safe or do not feel forced to play have a way out before these risky competitions to protect the football economy.

Different stakeholders of the sport make different statements about the continuation of the leagues and the playing of the competitions. Chairman of Medical Committee of the FIFA, Michel D'Hooghe said (March, 2020) that economic concerns should not prevent human health, while the federations' priority should be athlete's health. Also he suggested (April, 2020) that a yellow card should be given to the players who spit on the ground if a decision to play is taken. On the other hand, Tim Meyer, chief medical professor at UEFA, stated (April, 2020) that all organizations that want to provide adequate procedures for the continuation of the leagues can provide this and end the season, adding that this is 'definitely possible'. While some leagues, especially German Bundesliga, are trying to form a competition calendar[9-10,13], it was announced that football will not be played this season in Belgium[3], France[23], Netherlands[26].

In Turkey, TFF makes planning for the continuation of the league. Some Covid-19 Science Committee Members stated (April, 2020) that leagues can be played in case of continuing trend in Covid-19 cases, but there are risks. In the statement made by the Sports Medicine Association of Turkey, it is stated that restarting leagues is wrong[45]. Abdullah Durak, who is one of the football players who is likely to risk his own health and health of his loved ones by taking part in the field, expressed (April, 2020) his opinion as follows: "Even if there is a risk of one percent, it should not be played.". Ozan Kabak, the Turkish athlete who played in Germany, stated (April, 2020) that his greatest fear is the possibility of infecting others as a carrier.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It seems likely that there will be serious contraction in the world economy due to the covid-19 pandemic. It is estimated that as in all areas (health, trade, security, science, etc.), there may be significant changes in the sports policies of countries. For this reason, new sports policies and new strategies should be developed in order to adapt to new world order. The WHO press officer stated (March, 2020) that WHO's role is not making decisions on behalf of any country, WHO is in a position to recommend rational and science-based public health guidance for the preparation of countries. Therefore, considering the WHO recommendations, countries should establish long-term sports policies that are suitable for the new world caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. These policies, which will be introduced in order to ensure that sports branches, athletes and sports stakeholders are included in a sustainable future, will be of great importance. Suggestions for these policy changes that we think can be covered within the football branch are given below:

- To be able to reorganize football top management structurally and legally so that it can make dynamic and quick decisions.
- Designing a multi-step, dynamic and transparent control structure for the football economy, including officials from each state and international financial organizations such as the World Bank.
- Standardizing the unionization of football players globally and locally in a way to increase its impact in FIFA, UEFA and national federations.
- Designing structures that will make clubs resistant to financial difficulties by determining the range of local athletes' salaries specific to each country (Similar to Salary Cap applied in NBA).

In the pandemic environment, it will be a more logical move to keep the health of the athletes in the foreground, as the continuing football leagues reveal the priority of the sports management. So, our only suggestion for the pandemic process is that the competitions do not start before the number of active cases in the country drops to zero (0).

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