

Pandemic Upends NBA Season



League Seeks to Get Back on Track in July

BY JAHLEN BEVERLEY

Utah Jazz center Rudy Gobert sat at a table during a post-game news conference on March 9 answering questions from reporters about upcoming games and COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. When he got up to leave, he stretched and then proceeded to laugh and joke about the virus, touching all microphones and fake coughing in the air.

A week earlier, the NBA had sent a message to players and fans about ways to protect themselves from contracting COVID-19. At the time, the virus was full blown in China, but merely an emerging threat in the United States.

Soon it was clear that the disease was no laughing matter. While the NBA had been discussing scenarios such as playing games without fans in attendance to protect players, the hypothetical became a reality on March 11 when everything came to a stop.

There was a full slate of NBA games scheduled to be played, and there were some games actually being played, but all attention suddenly turned toward the Utah Jazz vs. Oklahoma City Thunder game. The teams had gone into the locker room and nobody could figure out what was going on until the bomb dropped that Gobert had become the first player in the NBA to test positive for COVID-19. This shocked not only the league as it

decided to suspend all games for the foreseeable future, but also everyone in the world as this became one of the first public figures to test positive for the disease.

On March 12, 2020, Gobert issued an apology via an Instagram post in which he said, “I want to thank everyone for the outpouring of concern and support over the last 24 hours. I have gone through so many emotions since learning of my diagnosis ...mostly fear, anxiety and embarrassment.

“The first and most important thing is I would like to publicly apologize to the people that I may have endangered. At the time, I had no idea I was even infected. I was careless and made no excuse. I hope my story serves as a warning and causes everyone to take this seriously. I will do whatever I can to support using my experience as a way to educate others and prevent the spread of this virus .

“I am under great care and will fully recover. Thank you again for all your support. I encourage everyone to take all of the steps to stay safe and healthy. Love.”

This sent fear all across the league and world as teams that had recently played against the Jazz and others — no one knowing exactly any specific information about how the virus was contracted or how to prevent its spread. This prompted many teams to go into self-

quarantine. After Gobert's teammate Donovan Mitchell also tested positive for COVID-19, the whole league was put on hold as every day more players contracted the disease, including most famously Kevin Durant, Marcus Smart, Christian Wood and many others that have chosen to remain anonymous.

After this, the league was sent into a frenzy, with everyone not knowing any details about when the league would resume playing games or would there be any exceptions. Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James said in an interview that he would not be playing games without fans in attendance.

"We play games without the fans?... Nah, it's impossible," James told reporters. Many people speculated how long the league was willing to go without playing games and how that would affect players. James went on to say, "I ain't playing if I ain't got the fans in the crowd. That's who I play for, I play for my teammates, I play for the fans. That's what it's all about. If I show up to an arena and there are no fans in there, I ain't playing, They can do what they want to do."

NBA owners set a restart date for July 31 with all games to be played in Florida. The proposal was sent to the players union. Under the plan, the league's 22 teams would play eight games to determine the 16 teams that would advance to the playoffs, the New York Times reported.

There are many questions that need to be answered because the events that are occurring are unprecedented. Who would have an advantage with everyone not having a gym in their homes, and with social distancing going on athletes not being able to go outside or to gyms? Basketball is such a momentum sport, and with that being the case, would it be fair to pick up out of nowhere and resume playing? Who would have the upper hand? NBA players are doing many different activities during this break like interviews, Instagram live videos and other things to fill their time.

Something that is hugely impacted by the virus is the financial situation of all parties involved. There is so much money the NBA will lose if the season does not resume such as the television money, endorsement money, financials from actual games and promotions. With the league's collective bargaining agreement guaranteeing the players between 49 and 51 percent of the league's BRI each season there would be a hit of at least half of whatever the profit the league made this year going to the players. The better question to ask is whether players even want to resume playing with so many who seemingly have moved on to an off-season mindset of winding down, relaxing and enjoying their families.

In talking to two college basketball players Dexter Turner and Justin Milstead, both detailed how hard this process has been on them as fans. Turner said he was involved in a set routine where every night he came home he would eat with his family and watch whatever basketball game came so now he has to watch old games which are still entertaining but the outcome is already known.

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Milstead detailed how hard it was for him to continue working out and striving to achieve his dreams of making it to the NBA without his favorite players giving him the motivation and inspiration he needs.

The after-effects of the virus are shocking with the financial loss of the NBA well documented, but also what about the companies that are partnered with the NBA that expect revenue? The Washington Post estimated a projected loss of a billion dollars was expected for the NBA if the season does not resume.

ESPN already has gone through rough times with the cable sports network having laid off many workers during the offseason. On top of that, the network has been hugely impacted by the economic effects of the virus as well. Even so, it decided to air a Michael Jordan and Chicago Bulls documentary titled, “The Last Dance,” earlier than planned. This was the perfect time to air the 10-part documentary as pro basketball fans have gone weeks without games and the company is seeking much needed revenue. The documentary was aired through five weeks two parts each week. The documentary was a slam dunk with episodes three and four alone averaging 6.1 and 5.7 million viewers, respectively. The ratings were through the roof with the series’ rare behind-the-scenes stories of the iconic Chicago Bulls dynasty and the greatness, pressure and obstacles that the widely considered greatest basketball player to ever play dealt with.

ESPN also aired a horse competition featuring current and former NBA players Chris Paul, Trae Young, Zach Lavine, Chauncey Billups, Paul Pierce, and Michael Conley, as well as WNBA players Tamika Catchings and Allie Quickley. This gave the fans some

entertainment. Sports companies still go with their regular scheduled program sports shows live streaming everything from their homes, but instead of having their usual setup, instead, they’re all on split screens with the moderator in the middle as usual, and the two debaters on the different sides.

For example, Skip and Shannon’s show “Undisputed” has moderator Jenny Taft on the middle screen, with Shannon on the left side as usual with LeBron jerseys hanging in the background, and Skip on the right side with Dallas Cowboys, Oklahoma Sooners, Los Angeles Dodgers and Vanderbilt university hats in his background.

In an interview with USA Today and Lakers insider Mark Medina, NBA leader LeBron James said he doesn't think he would have closure if not given the opportunity to finish the season but also doesn't feel like games can go back right away to being played. USA Today's Mark Medina also interviewed The NBA leader of the players association Chris Paul in which he said, “it was crazy” as he detailed the events of the game the Thunder was about to play against the Jazz on the day the NBA postponed its season. Paul went on to say after talking to the league office officials that everything is a wait-and-see game right now, as player safety is the top priority with the league needing to meet with health officials to get their opinion on resuming play. Paul detailed how tough the virus has been on players, detailing him going home having to wait in his parked car in his driveway awaiting his virus test results and wanting to keep his family safe especially being that he is on the Oklahoma City Thunder team that was about to face the Utah Jazz.

There are tons of unanswered questions that likely will remain that way until public health officials can advise the league that it's OK for them to resume operations. Sports provide stability and entertainment in people's lives and a collective, if momentary, escapes from the pressures of daily living.





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