

The Rush to Return to Live Sports Events: A Political-Economic Analysis of Sports Entertainment in the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract

This article employs a political economy approach to examine the interests of the major players involved in decisions to reopen US-based sports during the COVID-19 pandemic. They include owners, politicians, and media outlets involved in full-contact combat sports entertainment, specifically Ultimate Fighting Championship and World Wrestling Entertainment. Though the push to resume sports was often attributed to the fans who were “starving” for content and athletes who wanted to fight or wrestle, these decisions were, and are, closely linked to the political-economic interests of the individual politicians, sports owners, and media corporations. The symbiotic relations among them also require examination.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the COVID-19 pandemic began in December 2019 with reports from Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, of a number of cases of pneumonia with an unknown cause (WHO, 2020). At the time of writing, the virus had infected more than 181 million people and killed nearly 4 million people worldwide (“Coronavirus,” 2020). The geographic extent of COVID-19 and its effects on people’s lives worldwide have often been compared to the 1918 influenza pandemic, the deadliest of the 20th century. It infected approximately 500 million people and killed at least 50 million globally with about 675,000 deaths in the United States alone (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

During the 1918 pandemic, American sports, including baseball, college football, boxing, and hockey, were considered a diversion from World War I and the deadly influenza and were thought to create “the illusion of business as usual.” However, such activities were interrupted or affected, as players, owners, managers, umpires, sportswriters, promoters, and fans succumbed to the flu (Archdeacon, 2020, para. 18). However, in Minneapolis, MN, for example, “Many sporting organizations responded negatively to closing orders” (Ott et al., 2007, para. 23).

Ignoring the events ban, football teams continued to play in front of crowds until the “[p]olice were called in to disperse the crowds and halt the games” (para. 23). Boxing shut down for a brief time but started again before the end of the pandemic despite the illness and deaths of boxers and club owners. Zidan (2020) noted that it is “unclear how many boxers contracted the virus while competing during the pandemic” (para. 11). The business of sports has evolved since the early 20th century—particularly in terms of its political economy, which entails a symbiotic relationship between sports and media. Yet the stakes remain the same today regarding the opening of sports and the spread of the new virus.

In response to the outbreak of COVID-19, many US sports leagues either abruptly ended or postponed their seasons’ events. For example, the NBA [1] suspended its season beginning March 12, shortly after the Utah Jazz’s Rudy Gobert tested positive for the virus; MLB cancelled spring training and postponed the regular season; the NHL, the NNASCAR, and MLS suspended their seasons; the WNBA and NWSL postponed the start of their seasons. Wimbledon 2020 was cancelled for the first time since World War II and the French Open was postponed until September 2020; the Masters golf tournament was postponed until November 2020; the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games were moved to 2021; and the NCAA cancelled all spring sports including the March Madness tournaments. However, spurred on by politicians and business interests, including broadcasters and cable sports networks, in late April/early May 2020, what is considered sports entertainment opened once again. This included WWE and UFC, despite concerns from top medical professionals and scientists about opening the economy without a vaccine or treatment for COVID-19. This is particularly problematic with full-contact combat sports entertainment like professional wrestling or mixed martial arts (MMA) because social distancing is impossible. Though there were no plans in May 2020 to include fans at these events, uncertainties about the health of athletes and other support personnel remained.

From 1997, MMA and WWE became intertwined, when Ken Shamrock, known for his connection to the MMA promotion, joined the WWE, which was known then as the World Wrestling Federation (WFF) (White, 2020). Ronda Rousey participated in a similar crossover from the UFC to the WWE in 2014, winning the 2018 WWE Raw Women’s Championship. Others are also considering a similar move including Colby Covington and Conor McGregor, to name a few. Further, WWE contenders, such as Brock Lesnar and CM Punk, have moved on to compete in the UFC.

Like WWE, the UFC has sparked debate as to whether it can be considered sports or entertainment, but it has moved into an area defining itself as sport entertainment by combining martial arts with dramatic stories about the fighters taking the ring (Fusco, 2012). As Fusco states, “The UFC is a sport and a show” (para. 10), noting how competitors jump into the crowd, climb the cage and then drop to the mat as if they are “overcome with emotion” (para. 10). Furthermore, Meltzer (2016) classifies combat sports, such as UFC and WWE (see Snowden, 2013), as sports, business, and entertainment and suggests that to maintain their popularity, they must be all three. Such competition programming draws on the entertainment aspects of the show by giving audiences a chance to learn more about the athletes, find competitors to root for or against, and familiarize themselves with the sport (McClearen, 2017).

Using a political economy approach, this analysis explores the interests involved in the early clamor for reopening sports entertainment during the COVID-19 pandemic through a case study of WWE and UFC. Trade and popular press were chosen for this case study to determine who benefits from the reopening of sports entertainment and to explain the clamor and its potential effects. The

worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and the connections between sports, political elites, mainstream media, and the reopening of capitalism bring to light how the political and economic interests of a few affect the lives of the many, including athletes and fans.

Political economy of sports and media

Mosco (2009) noted that political economy can be defined as “the study of the social relations, particularly power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources” (p. 2, emphasis in the original). The focus on power relations reveals that the allocation of resources is not merely an economic decision, but also a political one (Hardy, 2014); indeed, the state is necessary to define, sustain, uphold, regulate, and enforce the market economy, including what will be produced, how, and who gets to consume it.

For political economists, a more holistic approach to studying sport or media, in this case sports media, includes both a structural and instrumental analysis. Fairfield (2015: 412) summarizes the distinction as: “Broadly speaking, instrumental power relates to business actors’ deliberate political engagement, whereas structural power stems from investors’ profit-maximizing responses to market signals” (see also Corrigan, 2014; Jhally, 1989b). In other words, it is critical to explore not only the economics of sports—such as the pursuit of profit, broadcasting rights, advertising—but also the politics of sports—such as the power exerted by, and relationships between, the business and power elite (e.g., campaign donations, lobbying, the revolving door between business and government) and the perpetuation of an ideology that promotes and protects capitalist relations. Accordingly, McChesney’s (2004) definition of the study of political economy of communication reflects the importance of exploring both instrumental and structural power. He notes that the approach examines “how media and communication systems and content reinforce, challenge, or influence existing class and social relations...with a particular interest in how economic factors influence politics and social relations” (43). It is also important to consider “how ownership, support mechanisms (e.g., advertising), and government policies establish media systems and communication technologies and (directly or indirectly) influence media behavior and content.” McChesney specifically highlights “structural factors and the labor process in the production, distribution, and consumption of communication” (43). The key here is that the approach explores intersections of power and wealth, including the relationships between owners, regulators, and labor (politics), the profit motive, including the commodification and commercialization of media and sport (economics), and the ideologies that support and maintain the status quo. These include the notion that sports serve as a diversion from tragedy and/or crisis and that televised sports signify to consumers that life is post-crisis and “back to normal.”

Similarly, the political economy of sports literature examines the production, distribution and consumption practices, ownership, and decision-making related to sports and sports leagues (see e.g., Dart, 2014; Nauright, 2005, 2013; Noll and Zimbalist, 1997; Phillips and Hutchins, 2003; Whitson and Gruneau, 2012). For example, Noll and Zimbalist’s (1997) edited collection examined the economic validity of arguments for publicly funded stadiums, which demonstrates the relationships between sports owners and leagues, cities, politics, economics, and financing. Butryn (2012) explored WWE as an exemplar of neoliberalism, finding that “beneath the veneer of corporate citizenship lies a wealth of problematic values and business practices,” such as monopolization of professional wrestling by putting regional wrestling organizations out of business, the practice of labeling talent as independent contractors to exempt the company from

paying for employee healthcare, anti-union behavior, and influence on culture, including the perpetuation of corporate values and militarization (p. 291). Whitson and Gruneau's (2012) edited collection addresses many facets of hockey, including its political economy and the significance of television markets. For example, Bellamy and Shultz's exploration of US broadcast television and the NHL, asks why hockey, though considered one of the top leagues along with the NFL, NBA, and MLB, was marginalized in terms of television rights. They argue that "hockey fared so poorly in the United States" due to "1) cultural barriers, 2) the aesthetics of hockey as a television sport, and 3) the league's failure to grasp the changing nature of the television industry" (167). The importance of the relationship between sports and television markets cannot be understated; sports as entertainment and sports entertainment, like other culture industries, are shaped by market pressures and practices, particularly media commodification and commercialization.

As McChesney (2008) explained, "the staggering popularity of sports is due, to no small extent, to the enormous amount of attention provided it by the mass media" (213). The media in turn are "able to generate enormous sales in both circulation and advertising based on their extensive treatment of sports," thus increasing fans' consumption of sports and sports media (213). McChesney traced the symbiotic relationship between sports and media back to the mid- to late-1800s; as "sports became increasingly organized and commercialized," the "sporting press...actively work[ed] to legitimate sport as a cultural institution" (216). This relationship—and its economic foundation—was intensified with the emergence and popularity of radio broadcasting and once again with the advent of television broadcasting, demonstrating the importance of advertising and programming for both sports and commercial media. That is, sports were introduced to a larger audience and made money from broadcasting rights. And, broadcasters gained hours of programming that advertisers were exceedingly attracted to. In sum, he argued that "Sports has risen to staggering and unprecedented levels of importance in U.S. society, dominating U.S. life in a manner that only a few observers have paused to recognize," in large part due to the "sport-media marriage," which will continue to flourish until advertisers find "some source of programming radically superior to sport" (232).

Relatedly, the interlocking relationships between media and sport in capitalism have been theorized as a media/sport complex (Jhally, 1989a) and as mediasport (Wenner, 1998). Jhally (1989a: 77-78) noted that using the term media/sport complex to explain the alliance between sport and media is fitting because:

- (1) Most people do the vast majority of their sports spectating via the media (largely through television), so the cultural experience of sports is hugely mediated; and
- (2) from a financial point of view, professional, and increasingly college, sports are dependent upon media money for their very survival and their present organizational structure.

If we focus on the production aspect of the media/sport complex, it is clear that professional and college sports rely heavily on television rights and corporate advertising and sponsorship for their survival. This was one reason why many universities moved forward with plans to play in fall 2020 despite reports of players testing positive for COVID-19 (see Redden, 2020). Broadcasters and cable sports networks rely on professional and college sports for content that attracts a lucrative target audience for ratings that justify the money they charge for advertising and the amount of money they pay for rights. Networks can also advertise their own programming as they air these events to drive audiences to their non-sports content. It should also be noted that because sports

depend on the media for revenues, they have changed to suit media needs. Television time outs and rule changes, for example, are designed to make games more competitive and exciting. The nature of a given sport is changed in order to sell it to advertisers. While sport has been largely commercialized and commodified since at least the 19th century, the massive amounts of money involved in the media/sport complex, including the rapid development of new media technologies, has raised the stakes. Jhally (1989a) also explained that the state provided the conditions under which sport and media survive and thrive. From antitrust exemptions for sports leagues to tax laws that benefit corporations by making advertising and promotion expenditures tax-deductible, the state supports and protects the media/sport complex.

Wenner (2013: 83-84) argues that,

In its contemporary hypercommodified form, the ideological contours and ethical sensibilities of the mediasportscape dominate the cultural meanings that are associated with sport. As it fulfills its market roles, mediasport strategically reaches out to us to narrate understandings of sport in the context of broader social relations.

As such, media and sport must be seen in relation to “money and power,” including the commodification, globalization, commercialization, and corporatization of media and sport, as well as their maintenance and reinforcement of dominant ideologies, such as competitive individualism and consumer culture (Wenner, 2015).

However, sports entertainment takes this to another level, as, unlike the traditional sports leagues, WWE and UFC are owned by one entity and their talent is not unionized, which means there is no negotiation between the owners of specific teams, the sport leagues’ commissioners, and players unions regarding safety issues, for example. Examining the unique political-economic characteristics of cultural industries, in this case, sports entertainment and their relationships to the state and commercial media culture, helps us to understand why WWE and UFC were the first to open during a deadly pandemic. As Andrews (2019: 1) argued, uber-sport as a culture industry within late capitalism is “defined by the processes of corporatization, commercialization, spectacularization, and celebritization” and situated within neoliberal politics and policies. The extreme commodification of sports entertainment reduces what was once sport to its market value. The traditional sports of wrestling and mixed martial arts are rendered invisible in WWE and UFC, respectively. The overriding spectacle renders athletes as talent that can be easily replaced if their exchange value decreases or if they challenge the current system of rewards and power. This is the case because the talent is not protected by a collective bargaining agreement or policies put in place by sports commissions. The talents’ precarity allows for management decisions that are clearly market driven rather than based on worker’s rights. Fans are reduced to pure consumers, as the purpose of sports entertainment is to entertain them.

Our case study uses a political economy approach to examine the relationships between market forces, political influence, and sports entertainment. Doing this will indicate why the WWE and UFC rushed to open during a pandemic. Political economists tend to use information from various documentary sources, such as corporate documents, Security and Exchange Commission reports, legal decisions, congressional testimony, and the popular and trade press, to analyze such relationships because it is difficult to gather this data otherwise without attending corporate meetings. Such documents also provide insights into corporate and regulatory decision-making, conditions, and practices (Corrigan, 2018). Schiller’s “interpretive empirical” method of “listening in” was employed to analyze these documents in order to “examine the juncture where politics and

economics come together” (Maxwell, 2003: 4; see also Bettig, 2009; Corrigan, 2018). As Bettig (2009) notes, through “listening in” on elite discourses in a variety of sources, Schiller “mastered the art of reading works flowing through official channels against the grain and using the voices of the establishment to damn themselves” (23). As Murdock (2006) explains, Schiller “turned this habit of eavesdropping on the powerful as they talked among themselves and went about their business into the major method he employed in his writings, combing through official reports, transcripts of government hearings, trade publications, and speeches to meetings and conferences for telling phrases and off-the-cuff remarks that revealed their world views and rationales” (215). Thus, one can listen in to the words of the elite and explore the relationships among U.S. politicians, sports media, and sports entertainment owners to find out why sports entertainment was open for business when most U.S. states were locked down in the attempt to curtail the spread of COVID-19.

COVID-19 and the political economy of reopening sports

Reopening the economy, particularly sports, benefits those in political power. The former U.S. President, Donald Trump, for example, not only had a general interest in the economy in relation to his re-election campaign; he also had, and continues to have, direct business interests in sports, specifically golf courses. On May 11, 2020, Trump retweeted a story about his golf course in Los Angeles opening, commenting, “So great to see our Country starting to open up again!” Additionally, the wealthy owners of sports teams and mainstream media owners donate money and lobby political elites to further their economic interests and influence policy. Thus, “nearly all of the owners of MLB, NFL, NBA and NHL franchises were active political donors during [the 2016] election cycle, contributing more than \$26.6m to various political campaigns and political action committees. A total of \$23,378,415.28 was designated for candidates or committees with Republican leanings, while \$2,728,868.70 was contributed toward Democratic causes” (Graham, 2016, para. 2). In another example, businesses linked to New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft (82nd on the 2019 Forbes 400 list of wealthiest Americans with a net worth of \$6.9 billion) and Dallas Cowboy owner Jerry Jones (56th on the 2019 Forbes 400 with a net worth of \$8.6 billion) each donated \$1 million to Trump’s inaugural committee (Kroll and Dolan, 2019; Pramuk and Schwartz, 2019). It is important to note how much money is involved in owning sports teams. In 2019, 42 majority owners or managing partners of major U.S. sports franchises were billionaires and worth a collective total of \$247 billion (Miller, 2019).

While the owners donate money to political campaigns, the players have been told to keep politics out of sports. Thus, Fox News’ Laura Ingram told LeBron James in 2018 to “Keep the political comments to yourselves...Shut up and dribble” after an interview he did with ESPN (Sullivan, 2018, para. 7). ESPN President Jimmy Pitaro, who took over the network in March 2018, also wanted to move ESPN away from politics. As Kafka (2019) reported, “Under his leadership, ESPN has consciously steered away from programming and commentary that touches on Donald Trump, race relations, or anything else that might upset a theoretical viewer who wants the network to ‘stick to sports’” (para. 7). From an economic standpoint, the divisiveness of politics can alienate viewers, advertisers, and sports leagues, which is extremely problematic for ESPN and parent company Disney. ESPN (including ESPN, ESPN2, ESPNU, and the SEC Network) is one of the conglomerate’s most profitable outlets, in part because it demands about \$9 per subscriber from cable and satellite providers based on its ratings and the optimal target audience. However, audience

moves to streaming and cutting the cord have raised concerns about the loss of revenues and profits. This makes it more difficult to keep demanding such subscriber deals (Gaines, 2017). Losing additional viewers by potentially alienating them with political talk would certainly affect how much networks could charge cable and satellite providers as well as what they could charge for advertising. Further, alienating sports leagues could result in the loss of broadcasting rights, which is a possibility when other networks, streaming services, and other new media companies can compete for those lucrative deals.

For media owners, the lack of sports affected programming and advertising revenue. Corporations such as Disney that are conglomerates with broadcast and cable networks which cover sports and have the broadcasting rights to sports events were losing advertising money from the lack of sports to air. Out of all of Disney's cable and broadcast networks, including ABC, ESPN "ha[d] taken the biggest hit in advertising with an 8% decline year-over-year given the lack of live sports and pullback in ad spending by sectors most immediately affected by COVID-19 disruptions: movie studios, restaurants, travel and tourism, retail and domestic autos" (Littleton, 2020, para. 8). For sports owners and leaders, the reopening of sports was essential to their bottom line. According to Soshnick and Bloomberg, (2020), "TV is the No. 1 source of revenue for sports—exceeding the value of tickets, merchandise, beer and peanuts." Broadcast and cable networks pay billions of dollars in TV rights, and broadcast and cable networks make billions from advertising during sports events (e.g., NBCUniversal sold more than \$1.25 billion in advertising for the 2020 Olympics, which was postponed until 2021) (para. 2). A CNBC report asked whether media companies would ask for refunds since they were not receiving the content they paid for (Sherman, 2020). It appeared unlikely, for Sherman (2020) noted, "It's still unclear if networks will push to get money with professional sports leagues, who maintain important long-term relationships with media partners" (para. 2). This demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between sports and media. However, As Dart (2014) stated, "Professional sport has always been about the production of a commodity, typically a live sports event, which is sold at a profit" (530).

An analysis done for ESPN found that "[t]he sudden disappearance of sports will erase at least \$12 billion in revenues." If college and NFL football had not returned, the loss would have more than doubled (ESPN Staff, 2020, para. 1). ESPN called the loss "historic, touching every sector of the \$100 billion United States sports industry" (para 2). The analysis, said to be on the conservative side, also stated that the loss of sports would result in the loss of at least \$2.2 billion in national TV revenue (ESPN Staff, 2020). As will be discussed in detail later, from a structural and instrumental perspective, the money at stake for sports and sports media and political relationships drove the rush to open sports during a pandemic. Here, the first two sports to open were: professional wrestling and MMA.

"People are starved for content:" reopening WWE

One of the sports that opened quickly was WWE. On April 14, 2020, Ron DeSantis, Florida Governor and ardent Trump supporter, defended his April 9 decision to designate WWE an "essential" business, allowing it to continue filming events at its Orlando, Florida, facility without an audience. This occurred despite his 30-day "shelter-at-home" directive announced on April 1 and the fact that two WWE employees had positive COVID-19 results (Wolf, 2020). DeSantis stated: "People are chomping at the bit... If you think about it, we have never had a period like this in modern American history where you've had so little new content, particularly in the sporting realm.

I mean, we are watching reruns from like the early 2000s.....People are starved for content” (Turner, 2020, paras. 4, 6). Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings noted at a press conference that, although the WWE was not originally included as an essential business in the Governor’s April 1 order, it was, after “some conversation with the governor’s office” (Wolf, 2020, para. 7). The labeling of WWE as an essential business and an announcement from the American First Action PAC, chaired by WWE owner Vince McMahon’s wife, Linda, stating that the super PAC would spend \$18.5 million for pro-Trump television ads in Florida, particularly the Orlando and Tampa markets, reportedly occurred on the same day (Wolf, 2020). Notably, Linda McMahon served on Trump’s Cabinet as the head of the Small Business Administration from 2017 to 2019, stepping down to chair the American First Action PAC. Trump, speaking about her departure, stated: “She’s going to go and help us with a very, very important year and a half that we have coming up...And the re-election as they call it. And we look forward to that” (Restuccia, et al., 2019, para. 5).

Vince McMahon and Trump have had a symbiotic relationship since the 1980s. In August 2015, *Salon’s* DeVega (2015) posited, “Donald Trump, the current Republican primary frontrunner, bomb thrower and nativist iconoclast, is an avid fan and student of pro wrestling, and a close friend and business associate of Vince McMahon” (para. 2). Trump’s forays into professional wrestling began in earnest in 1988, when WWE was still known as the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). In its fourth year, WrestleMania—WWF’s “super bowl”—was held in Atlantic City, NJ, sponsored by Trump Plaza. It was so successful that Trump sponsored WrestleMania V the following year as well, the only time WrestleMania was held in the same building in consecutive years. Throughout subsequent years, The Donald, as Trump was known as, would attend events. He later became a part of the spectacle that is WWF/WWE as he was written into several storylines (Oestrieher, 2019). Trump’s long-term relationship with WWE was immortalized in 2013 when he was inducted into their hall of fame. During the 2000s, the McMahons were the Trump Foundation’s biggest donors, “making even more contributions to the program than Trump himself and almost single-handedly keeping it afloat.” In 2019, rumor had it that the Fox network wanted Trump to appear during its first episode of WWE program SmackDown Live (this had moved from USA Network to Fox that year) (Oestrieher, 2019, para. 4; see also Bump, 2016). The relationship between Trump and the McMahons has remained strong and most likely influenced to the push to open.

The day after DeSantis’ announcement, Vince McMahon (296th on the Forbes 400 list with a net worth of \$2.9 billion) was included in Trump’s list of sports leaders tapped as advisors for Trump’s “Great American Economic Revival Industry Groups”. Others included the heads of the NBA, MLB, NFL, NHL, Professional Golf Association (PGA), Ladies PGA, United States Trotting Association (USTA), MLS, NASCAR, UFC, WNBA, NWSL. There were also three owners: Kraft, Jones, and Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban (177th on the Forbes 400 list with a net worth of \$4.4 billion), in addition to McMahon (“President,” 2020). Similar to DeSantis’s defense of WWE as an essential service, Trump also noted, on the same day, the lack of live sports events: “We have to get our sports back. I’m tired of watching baseball games that are 14 years old” (Evans, 2020, para. 3).

However, the decision to allow WWE to continue filming was not about the fans or the lack of sports on television. As just noted, the decision was in part instrumental, based on the political and personal relationships surrounding Trump, the McMahons, and DeSantis. It was also structural as it was an economic decision as well. As *Forbes* reported:

WWE's continued insistence on running live events is a revenue-driven decision. WWE's current contract with NBCUniversal and Fox reportedly stipulate the promotion run live in 49 out of 52 weeks. Failure to do so could result in a breach of contract or some sort of change in the deal. As a result, WWE would not receive all of its lofty, near-\$400 million per-year revenue between the two networks (Konuwa, 2020a, para. 15).

In 2019, Fox signed a five-year deal worth \$205 million per year for the WWE program SmackDown, and NBCUniversal also signed a five-year deal worth \$265 million annually for the WWE program Raw, which would air on its USA Network (Konuwa, 2019). Live sports programming is extremely important in television economics, especially for broadcasters such as Fox, which uses the popularity of sports to "extract higher retransmission consent fees from pay TV operators," such as Comcast (which owns NBCUniversal), AT&T, and other multichannel video service providers (Farrell, 2019, para. 1). Broadcast retransmission fees have become a larger part of broadcast TV revenues. They were expected to increase 11% from 2018 to 2019 for a total of \$11.72 billion (Jacobson, 2019). As consumers move increasingly to streaming services for their television entertainment, broadcasters continue to benefit from the draw of live sports. In 2020, Fox, for example, had the rights for NFL's Sunday afternoon NFC games, Thursday Night Football, MLB, and WWE. To continue charging for higher retransmission fees, live sports are crucial, especially if there is a decrease in advertiser spending.

After receiving the good news about the "essential" designation, WWE furloughed, laid off, or released hundreds of employees, including 21 wrestlers and a long-time referee, as a cost-cutting measure (Kelly, 2020). And for those who remained, the virus continued to be a threat. An anonymous WWE employee submitted a statement for the record at an Orange County Board of County Commissioners meeting. The employee stated:

My employer, World Wrestling Entertainment, aka WWE, is forcing me to work the TV tapings for its weekly shows despite home orders for coronavirus. I am unable to speak out as I need this job and I know I will be fired if I approach my higher-ups. Despite sanitary precautions, we cannot maintain social distancing and have to touch other people. I request the government to shut down these tapings and enforce the stay-at-home order so my colleagues and I may follow social distancing rules without fear or repercussions of losing our jobs (Negley, 2020, para. 7).

The WWE responded that the employee's statement was untrue, but Jon Alba from Spectrum Sports 360 in Orlando/Tampa "noted on Twitter that while it's difficult to verify the complaint, the concern has been voiced privately before" by several people within the company (para. 8). As WWE wrestler Deonna Purrazzo said before she found out that she was cut: "We were told that it was optional to work and if we weren't comfortable, it wouldn't be held against us when normalcy returned... True or not, I did feel as though it was presumptuous to ask someone to make that decision in times like these" (Kelly, 2020, para. 12). After seeing others lose their jobs and the precarity of positions in WWE without union protections, it is unlikely that an employee would directly express concerns about their health or choose to stay home.

In late June 2020, *Forbes* reported that upwards of 30 WWE employees had tested positive for COVID-19, and their wrestlers had been expressing "frustration" and "concern" about protecting their families from the virus (Konuwa, 2020c, para. 5). For example, an anonymous WWE developmental talent spoke out against WWE's handling of COVID-19:

Now that WWE has more talent and staffers starting to test positive, we've been informed by talent relations not to discuss our illness wit [sic] anyone besides those we may live with that may need to know...We are FORBIDDEN to tell anyone else nor can we come out publicly to make any statements. It was stressed that WWE will take care of any medical treatments, should we need them. In the same breath it was made clear the company would handle the PR and only those that needed to know about our condition would know as [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act] HIPPA [sic] laws would prevent them from making our names public. (Konuwa, 2020b, para. 4)

In mid-June 2020, WWE began allowing fans—family and friends of the performers—at the tapings of the show. Reports stated that fans and wrestlers were not permitted to wear masks, but fans had to sign a waiver stating that WWE was not liable if they contracted the virus (Giri, 2020). It was not until June that WWE started testing all employees before tapings, after a developmental talent tested positive, along with numerous other tests (Brookhouse and Silverstein, 2020). Despite the concerns, frustrations, and positive tests, WWE continued tapings.

“It’s gonna get us no matter where we hide”: UFC

Similarly, Dana White’s UFC also benefited from DeSantis’s decision, and White quickly made plans to hold three events in Jacksonville, Florida, in May 2020. White, too, supported Trump once he helped to “reestablish the mixed martial arts (MMA) promotion company in the early 2000s;” White even spoke in support of Trump at the Republican National Convention in 2016 (Bonn, 2018, para. 1). In early 2020, he “told TMZ Sports he ‘doesn’t give a s--- if the MMA firm loses fans because he’s friends with US President Donald Trump” (Dawson, 2020, para. 1).

The first of the three pay-per-view events, UFC 249, was held on May 9, 2020. When asked about the decision, White, who serves as president of UFC, said, “I wanted to keep right on going; we’ll figure this thing out...If this thing is that deadly, it’s gonna get us no matter where we hide or what we do” (DePaolo, 2020, para. 2). Prior to the event, Ronaldo “Jacare” Souza and two of his cornermen tested positive for COVID-19, despite being asymptomatic for the disease. UFC pulled Souza from the event but continued the rest of the event lineup after conferring with the Florida State Boxing Commission (Okamoto, 2020). According to White, “We administered 1,200 tests this week, on 300 people...It’s not unexpected one person would test positive. The system works. And what’s good about this is now we know Jacare tested positive, he’s doing what he needs to do, and we’re in a position to help him if he needs it” (Okamoto, 2020, para. 6).

Souza arrived in Jacksonville (from Orlando) for the event on Wednesday, May 6. He informed the UFC of contact with a family member who had contracted the disease. The UFC tested Souza at this point and allowed him to stay in the hotel. He arrived for the weigh-in the following Friday morning (wearing gloves and a facemask) where he was tested again. During the weigh-in, he was fist-bumped by White, who subsequently made contact with other fighters (Samano, 2020). Dr. Zachary Binney, an epidemiologist, called all of these actions into question when he tweeted, “The UFC and Dana White were negligent...Tried to restart early, the predictable thing happened, & they mishandled it...If this was your system working as designed, your system is bogus” (Samano, 2020, para. 6-7). Fighters have been silent about the safety protocols put into place by the UFC (Manoj, 2020). There had been speculation that it was because of an anti-disparagement clause that fighters are required to sign, which could prevent them from receiving their winning purse. Although White stated that the clause was to keep fighters from speaking untruths about the organization, it has

caused others to speculate that fighters may be afraid to speak up about the mishandling of safety protocols during this and other events. Indeed, Souza stated, “I am afraid to do everything, even to go to the supermarket...But there is something I have to do, there is no escape. I prefer to work and take the risk because these are things we will have to do. But we are very concerned with this business. It is very serious, there are many people dying, it is complicated and sad” (Okamoto, 2020, para. 13).

In keeping with COVID-19 guidelines for the UFC 249 event, no interviews were to be conducted in the Octagon after fights ended. Instead, the winner was to be escorted to an isolation area, given a sanitized headset and then interviewed remotely by Joe Rogan, a UFC interviewer and commentator, who would remain cageside (Raimondi, 2020a). However, Rogan ignored these rules, entering the Octagon to conduct his interviews with the winners, while also shaking hands with the fighters during each interview (Owens, 2020b). It is unclear as to whether or not Rogan was making a statement with his actions. However, as one observer pointed out, “[a] calculated decision to shake hands would reflect the behavior of his boss Dana White, who publicly flouted safety protocols in the preparation for the event, only to see a fight canceled after a fighter tested positive” (Owens, 2020b, para. 8).

Interestingly, Trump took time during an ad break within the preliminary matches to voice his support of the event and of White’s decisions to proceed: “We love it... We think it’s important. Get the sports leagues back. Let’s play. You do the social distancing and whatever else you have to do. But we need sports. We want our sports back. And congratulations to Dana White UFC” (Owens, 2020a, paras. 5-6). White stated that he had followed Trump’s suggestions regarding how to proceed with sports events. As such, he tried to carry on with business as usual, having continued events for UFC Brasilia into March, after other sports were shut down. He also tried to overcome state mandates by hosting UFC 249 on tribal land in California, before being shut down by ESPN. In 2018, Disney’s ESPN purchased the rights to 30 non-pay-per-view UFC fights a year for \$300 million annually for five years for a total of \$1.5 billion from 2019 (Wallenstein, 2018). Further, in 2019, ESPN+ made a deal for the exclusive streaming rights to UFC pay-per-view fights. Anyone who wanted to purchase a pay-per-view event had to be an ESPN+ subscriber. This allowed ESPN to obtain content for its new streaming service. Although the financial details are unclear, it appears that the deal allowed UFC to hold onto more pay-per-view revenues than before (Bonesteel and Strauss, 2019). For UFC and ESPN, holding these events are critical for the bottom line, but Disney had more at stake because of its conglomerate status and family-friendly reputation. Flouting stay-at-home orders was a step too far. The Florida Governor approved the continuation of events, but this was much more acceptable than holding events on tribal lands to thwart federal guidelines. White made it clear that he was asked to cancel the event: “I was ready to go on Saturday, but Disney and ESPN asked me to step down...I love and respect my partnership with them so I postponed the event” (Associated Press, 2020, para. 3). The cancellation prompted ESPN to issue a statement to the Associated Press: “ESPN has been in constant contact with the UFC regarding UFC 249. Nobody wants to see sports return more than we do, but we didn’t feel this was the right time for a variety of reasons. ESPN expressed its concerns to the UFC and they understood” (para. 6). Florida became an epicenter of COVID-19 infections by mid-July, and fighters certainly noticed. Gilbert Burns, a welterweight contender, was supposed to fight at UFC 251, which was held in Abu Dhabi via Las Vegas. When Burns arrived in Las Vegas from Florida, he tested positive for the virus as did several of his team members, so he was pulled from the card. Burns blamed Florida’s reopening for his positive COVID-19 test:

The thing is that Florida opened up, that was the thing...In Florida, people are not wearing masks, people are everywhere walking. So, I think that's how we got it. I think the first person that got it was Kenny, a Brazilian coach. After that we got Aung La Nsang—ONE championship champion. And then, a couple of heavyweights, and then it was me. And another guy just texted me; he's out of an LFA fight because he tested positive, too.

I just think it's a Florida thing. We're not safe anywhere. We have to stay home. I believe the training is going to close...we have to close the gym a second time, wait, and get everyone tested, and then open again. I think it's not a gym thing, I think it's a Florida thing, because here it's all over. The numbers are getting up, and we end up getting caught (Segura, 2020, paras. 11-12).

With Florida's surging numbers in mid-2020, it was likely that even more athletes would be infected, especially those at close quarters in combat sports. Fortunately for the UFC athletes, the move to Yas Island, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, for a series of events dubbed, "Fight Island," came with more robust COVID-19 testing and quarantine protocols (Raimondi, 2020b). The move was about the threat of COVID but was mainly an economic decision, as travel restrictions prohibited international fighters from entering the United States. However, the move to "Fight Island" did include a six-square-mile bubble for staff, fighters, and members of the media that was closed off to visitors (Collins, 2020; Raimondi, 2020b).

Conclusion

As sports leagues across the United States and worldwide resumed their seasons amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a political-economic approach helps us to understand why there was a rush to open sports. As presented here, such critical decisions are in fact closely linked to political and economic interests. Evidence from the trade and popular press was used to trace the story of how sports entertainment—particularly WWE and UFC—was being produced during the pandemic. We have also considered the arguments for bringing them back amid the pandemic threat. Though politicians, commentators, and owners have suggested that it was important for sports to reopen because people were "starving for content," the real reasons, before mass testing and tracing were viable and a vaccine was widely available, were actually political and economic. From a structural perspective, there is a massive amount of money involved in sports and sports media, and each depends on the other for revenues. Further, in instrumental terms, Trump, DeSantis and others pushed for the reopening of sports for their own political interests.

To understand the tensions at play concerning the resumption of sports during the pandemic, we must note the political-economic interests of those involved in such decisions. The reopening of sports benefits those who are in power in numerous ways. The return of sports to television appeared to signify that life was getting back to normal and that the worst was over, even though health leaders and professionals warned that opening too soon would have deleterious effects. These included the high possibility of an outbreak that could be extremely difficult to control, leading to more "suffering and death" (Goldiner and Sommerfeldt, 2020, para. 2). Reopening sports also signified the reopening of the economy and a license to spend, which certainly helps those in power, as a strong economy is critical to election and re-election of political incumbents. That is why Florida Governor DeSantis was actively recruiting sports leagues to reopen in Florida (Sarkissian, 2020). That would help jump-start the economy and convince people that everything

was okay when it was not. Whether fans were in the stands or not, the influx of athletes and support personnel in the state also added to economic recovery. President Trump would also benefit from a strong economy in an election year as well as support from the wealthy sports team owners who supported his 2016 campaign. He thus had a vested interest in meeting the wants and needs of his donors.

Sports owners, too, wished to see events continue as their economic interests are tied to media rights, advertising revenue, and fan support. Media conglomerates, such as Disney, which owns ABC and ESPN, benefited from the reopening of sports, for broadcast and cable networks faced large losses in advertising revenue the longer sports events were cancelled.

Sports entertainment events such as those held by the WWE and UFC exemplify the rush to reopen sports during the midst of the pandemic. Wrestling events resumed once DeSantis deemed the WWE an “essential” business, as fans presumably needed the diversion from pandemic isolation. But the more accurate reason for designating WWE as essential and allowing live events to continue concerns the threat of significant financial loss for the company. We saw a similar rush to continue events with the UFC competition held in May 2020. Despite attempts to follow public safety protocols, one fighter attended the event and tested positive for the disease, potentially infecting others at the event. Even one of their own commentators, Joe Rogan, broke social distancing rules by entering the Octagon for interviews and shaking hands with the winners.

There is certainly no doubt that people were feeling the stress of being isolated during the pandemic. And, although we look to entertainment for a sense of normalcy, one cannot ignore the fact that the rush to resume sports entertainment amid a pandemic was tied to economic and political interests. As mentioned, this kind of action led to potential safety risks for those involved and helped spread the disease. While the major sport leagues have commenced their seasons, concerns remain about how to protect players and fans. For example, in July 2020, both MLS and NBA continued their seasons in Orlando at the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex on Disney World property. However, 10 players and one staff member of MLS’ FC Dallas tested positive. Nashville SC had five players test positive and four received inconclusive results, all shortly after arriving in Orlando. Several other teams delayed travel to Orlando because of positive tests at home. At least five NBA practice facilities were shut down for this reason (Romero and Poe, 2020). But, as Romero and Poe (2020) reported:

‘The media value associated with hosting MLS for its tournament and the remainder of the NBA regular season and playoffs eclipses the media value of hosting a Summer Olympics,’ said Jason Siegel, president and CEO of the Greater Orlando Sports Commission (para. 4).

There was certainly value for ESPN and Disney to both host and air sporting events, but with so many positive tests, players and staff continued to be at risk.

This article reveals the political-economic forces at play in the decisions of sports owners, politicians and media elites to reopen sports events, particularly sports entertainment events. Future research in this area should closely examine the media portion of this process by analyzing actual news coverage. This would reveal differences in how the various news outlets have covered the story in light of their own parent company’s economic interests. Research into the rush to open sports amid a pandemic is critical. Such decisions were a matter of life and death.

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Endnote

- [1] The US sports and network acronyms referenced in the article include, in order of appearance: NBA—National Basketball Association; MLB—Major League Baseball; NHL—Hockey League; NASCAR—National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing; MLS—Major League Soccer (MLS); WNBA—Women’s National Basketball Association; NWSL—National Women’s Soccer League; NCAA—National Collegiate Athletic Association; WWE—World Wrestling Entertainment; UFC—Ultimate Fighting Championship; MMA—mixed martial arts; WWF—World Wrestling Federation; NFL—National Football League; ESPN—originally an acronym for Entertainment and Sports Programming Network, a cable network now majority owned by The Walt Disney Company that focuses on sports; ESPNU focuses on college sports; SEC Network—a cable network that focuses specifically on the sports teams of 17 universities known collectively as the Southeastern Conference, including the University of Georgia, the University of Florida, and the Alabama Crimson Tide, among others, also owned by ESPN; ABC—American Broadcasting Company, a broadcast network owned by The Walt Disney Company; NBC—National Broadcasting Company, a broadcast network owned by cable giant Comcast; CNBC—a cable network that focuses on business and financial markets owned by Comcast; PGA—Professional Golfers’ Association; LPGA—Ladies Professional Golf Association; USTA—United States Tennis Association; NFC—National Football Conference, one of two conferences of the NFL; and LFA—Legacy Fighting Alliance.

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