

SHOULD ALL FOOTBALL IN THE UK BE CANCELLED?

THE DILEMMA

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a total shutdown of professional sport worldwide. Most sporting events and leagues stopped in March, and some events – such as the European Football Championships and the Olympics – have been postponed until next year. The Wimbledon tennis championships, due to take place in July, have been cancelled.



Anfield, the home of Liverpool FC, lies empty



Manchester City against Sheffield United in the Premier League, from earlier in the season

"We all agreed that we will only go ahead if it is safe to do so and the health and welfare of players, coaches and staff comes first."

– Oliver Dowden MP, UK Culture Secretary

"I can just imagine people at home saying: 'Well, they earn that amount of money so they should be going back'. For stuff like that I think 'is it worth the hassle?' I could be potentially risking my health for people's entertainment, and that's not something I want to be involved in if I'm honest."

– Danny Rose, Newcastle United footballer

"I can't get a haircut until mid-July, but I can go and get in a box with 19 people and jump for a header. I don't know how that works."

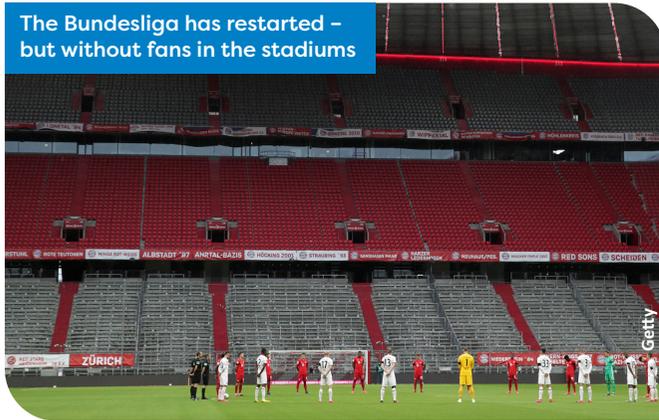
– Troy Deeney, Watford captain

Yet some football leagues, including England's Premier League, have been desperate to get their teams back onto the pitch before the summer is over. In South Korea, the K-League finally started on 8 May – almost three months after it was due to begin. But there are strict new rules: no fans are allowed in stadiums, players must have their temperatures taken and coaches and substitutes must wear face masks.

Not everybody who is infected with COVID-19 knows they have the virus because symptoms can take up to two weeks to appear. In some cases, sufferers don't show any symptoms at all. Football is a close-contact sport, so it's obviously impossible to have social distancing in place during a match. Might league football cause the coronavirus to spread among teams?

Germany's Bundesliga resumed on 16 May (without any fans), while the top league in Italy, Serie A, wants to resume matches on 15 June, also without spectators allowed in the stadiums. The Italian government has banned all sporting events until 14 June at the earliest.

The Bundesliga has restarted – but without fans in the stadiums



In England, Premier League players have begun training and organisers will resume the season on 17 June. North of the border, however, the Scottish football authorities have cancelled the season. Celtic were declared champions of Scotland as they had the most points per game on average.



Celtic, celebrating last year's title win

Is kicking off the Premier League again far too risky? Studies have shown that black and minority ethnic (BAME) men are far more at risk of developing complications from COVID-19 than other groups. There are significant numbers of BAME players in the Premier League, and some are very concerned about the risk of catching the virus. Similar concerns have been raised by players who suffer from asthma, a breathing condition that could make COVID-19 worse.

Some football leagues have been cancelled completely. In France, the league was called off and Paris St-Germain, who were leading the table when play was suspended, have been crowned champions. In Belgium and the Netherlands, leagues have also been cancelled.

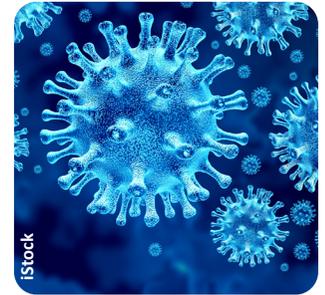
Is it time all football leagues and competitions across the world were cancelled?

DEFINITION

SYMPTOMS – Signs of illness. For example, the symptoms of COVID-19 include a cough, fever and extreme tiredness.

COVID-19: THE FACTS

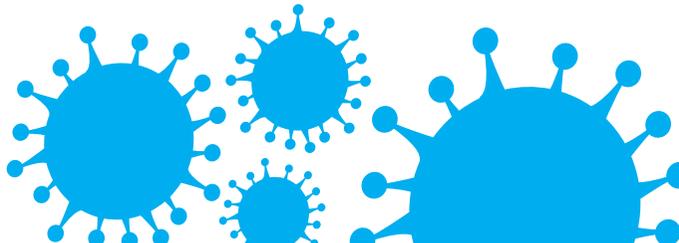
COVID-19 is a virus that belongs to a family of similar infections called coronaviruses. It was originally found in animals but jumped to humans last year.



It spreads easily, through droplets from the mouth or nose of an infected person, from close contact with an infected person or from touching contaminated objects and surfaces, such as door handles or tables.

The vast majority of people who catch COVID-19 make a full recovery. Scientists think around 1% of patients die, and most of them have other serious health conditions. It's very, very rare for people under 40 years of age to die. Most children who catch it have no symptoms, or very mild ones.

The main symptoms are a high temperature and cough, but there can be several other signs, including muscle aches, tiredness and a loss of taste and smell.



EUROPE'S TOP LEAGUES



These are the football leagues with some of the biggest and most successful clubs – and where they stand on continuing the 2019-20 season:

Premier League (England)

Number of teams: 20

Champions 2018-19: Manchester City

Date of suspension: 13 March

Restart: Following talks between the clubs, Premier League and Government, the plan is to restart on 17 June

Women's Super League (England)

Number of teams: 12

Champions 2018-19: Arsenal

Date of suspension:
13 March

Restart:
Unlikely – several clubs have said they assume the season will be cancelled



Serie A (Italy)

Number of teams: 20

Champions 2018-19:
Juventus

Date of suspension:
9 March

Restart: Planned for
20 June



Juventus star
Cristiano Ronaldo

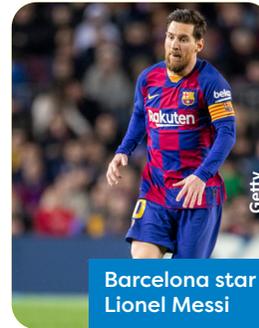
La Liga (Spain)

Number of teams: 20

Champions 2018-19:
Barcelona

Date of suspension:
12 March

Restart: Planned for
8 June



Barcelona star
Lionel Messi

Ligue 1 (France)

Number of teams: 20

Champions 2018-19: Paris St-Germain (PSG)

Date of suspension: 13 March

Restart: **CANCELLED** – PSG DECLARED
CHAMPIONS

Eredivisie (Netherlands)

Number of teams: 18

Champions 2018-19: Ajax

Date of suspension: 12 March

Restart: **CANCELLED** – NO CHAMPIONS,
RELEGATIONS OR PROMOTIONS



Bundesliga (Germany)

Number of teams: 18

Champions 2018-19: Bayern Munich

Date of suspension: 13 March

Restart: 16 May



POSITIVE PLAYERS



As this debate was being written, several players across Europe's top football leagues tested positive for the new coronavirus in the first weeks of May:

- **Twelve** players and coaches in the Premier League, including three players at Premier League side Brighton and Hove Albion
- **Five** players from Spain's top two divisions
- **Four** players from Germany's second division team, Dynamo Dresden
- **Two** players in Russia's Premier League
- **Eight** players and three staff in the Italian Serie A

ALREADY POSTPONED

Several major football competitions this year have already been postponed. They include:

European Championships in Europe, moved from 12 June – 12 July 2020 to 11 June – 11 July 2021

Copa America in Argentina and Colombia, also moved from 12 June – 12 July 2020 to 11 June – 11 July 2021

Women's Under-20 World Cup in Costa Rica and Panama, postponed from August – September 2020 to 20 January – 6 February 2021

Women's Under-17 World Cup in India, originally planned for November, now to take place from 17 February – 7 March 2021

Women's European Championships in England, moved from 2021 to 2022

"The majority of players are scared because they have children and families."

– Sergio Agüero, Manchester City footballer



Madrid fans at Anfield on 11 March

DID SPORT SPREAD THE VIRUS?

Sporting events may be responsible for contributing to the spread of the virus throughout countries in the first place. Data suggests there was a spike in deaths in English hospitals near to where major horse-racing and football events were held in March. But there is no confirmed link yet between sport and any COVID-19 cases.

The four-day Cheltenham Festival of horse-racing, which attracted 250,000 spectators, took place from 10-13 March. At the time, it was thought there were hundreds of cases of the new coronavirus in the UK. We now know there were actually more than 2,000 cases by 13 March. Public health experts have already called for an investigation into whether the festival led to a rise in cases locally. Organisers have defended the decision to hold the event.

But football is also under the spotlight. Edge Health, a

data analysis company, published figures recently that they say showed the Cheltenham Festival, Liverpool v Atlético Madrid in the Champions League on 11 March, and the Manchester derby in the Premier League on 8 March, all resulted in a significant increase of deaths in local hospitals 20-35 days later.

A Champions League match in February between Italian side Atalanta and Spanish team Valencia has been blamed by health experts and politicians for spreading the virus. The match was attended by 44,000 fans. One senior Italian doctor described it as a “biological bomb”.

VIRUS SPIKE 2



Even without fans in the stadium, there are fears of virus spread

There are fears that re-starting football leagues could lead to a surge in new cases of COVID-19 – even if fans aren’t allowed into stadiums.

That’s because groups of fans may arrange to get together to watch the matches on TV – or even turn up outside the stadium. Greater Manchester Police has said it is “fearful” of crowds gathering at football stadiums if the Premier League season restarts. Social distancing would be difficult to maintain. Chief

Constable Ian Hopkins thinks police could have a very hard job on their hands. He said: “Liverpool coming to Manchester City I have no doubt would attract crowds whether they’re allowed in the ground or not. It needs very, very careful thinking through.”

WHAT OTHER SPORTS ARE DOING

Some public health experts are calling for football to follow the lead of other sports that have cancelled



Social distancing is impossible in football, so should it all be called off until the autumn?

events. Some of these have been rescheduled for next year, but some have been scrapped altogether. The **Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics** have been moved from this summer to 2021. **Formula 1**, which was due to start its 2020 championship in March, has announced the first ten races have been cancelled or postponed. In **tennis**, the Wimbledon championships have been scrapped, as have several smaller tournaments. **Cycling’s** RideLondon Festival and Tour of Britain have both been cancelled. In athletics, the Anniversary Games in London have been

called off. And in **equestrian**, the 2021 European Eventing Championships have been cancelled – even though they were due to take place next year.

INCREASED THREAT

Data so far shows BAME people are more likely to suffer serious complications and death from COVID-19 than other groups. Doctors aren’t sure why this is, but research is taking place to learn more. There are a lot of black footballers in particular in the Premier League, and understandably some of them are very concerned about resuming training and matches.



Troy Deeney

Watford captain Troy Deeney is one of them. He has said he won’t be going into training, out of concern for his baby’s health. Deeney has a son who is five months old and suffers from breathing difficulties. The footballer said: “I don’t want to come home and put him in more danger.”

Footballers are paid a lot of money, and some people think they should do their duty and play. But they are still doing a job, like everyone else. And right now the advice is for people to work from home if they can, and to remain two metres apart from others. So why should footballers – especially those at higher risk of the disease – put themselves and their families at risk?

YES, ALL FOOTBALL IN THE UK SHOULD BE CANCELLED



1. IT SIMPLY ISN'T SAFE YET –

There are still many people catching COVID-19 in the UK. This puts footballers, coaches and other staff at risk. In Germany and South Korea, football was restarted when the infection rates were much lower. Nothing is more important than health – not even football – so the sensible thing to do is cancel the 2019-20 season, declare Liverpool Premier League champions, and hopefully start the next season in September.

2. IT'S NOT PRACTICAL –

In order to make sure the virus isn't spreading among players and staff, tests will have to be carried out virtually every week. If a single player tests positive, the entire team has to be placed in quarantine. This is all far too complicated.

3. WE SHOULD FOLLOW OTHER COUNTRIES AND SPORTS' LEAD –

The season has been cancelled in Scotland, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, among others. The men's football authorities in England should follow their lead and do the right thing.



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NO, ALL FOOTBALL IN THE UK SHOULD NOT BE CANCELLED



1. OTHER COUNTRIES SHOW IT CAN BE DONE –

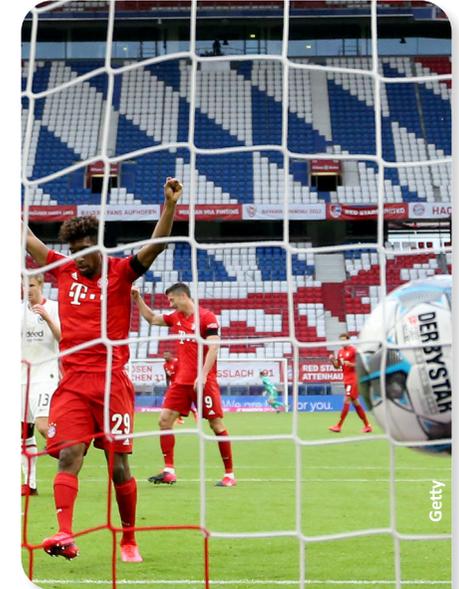
Germany and South Korea resumed their seasons and have shown it can be done successfully. The Premier League is the top football league in the world – and the wealthiest. With proper organisation, it can be safely restarted, just like those leagues in other countries.

2. IT WILL GIVE PEOPLE A BOOST –

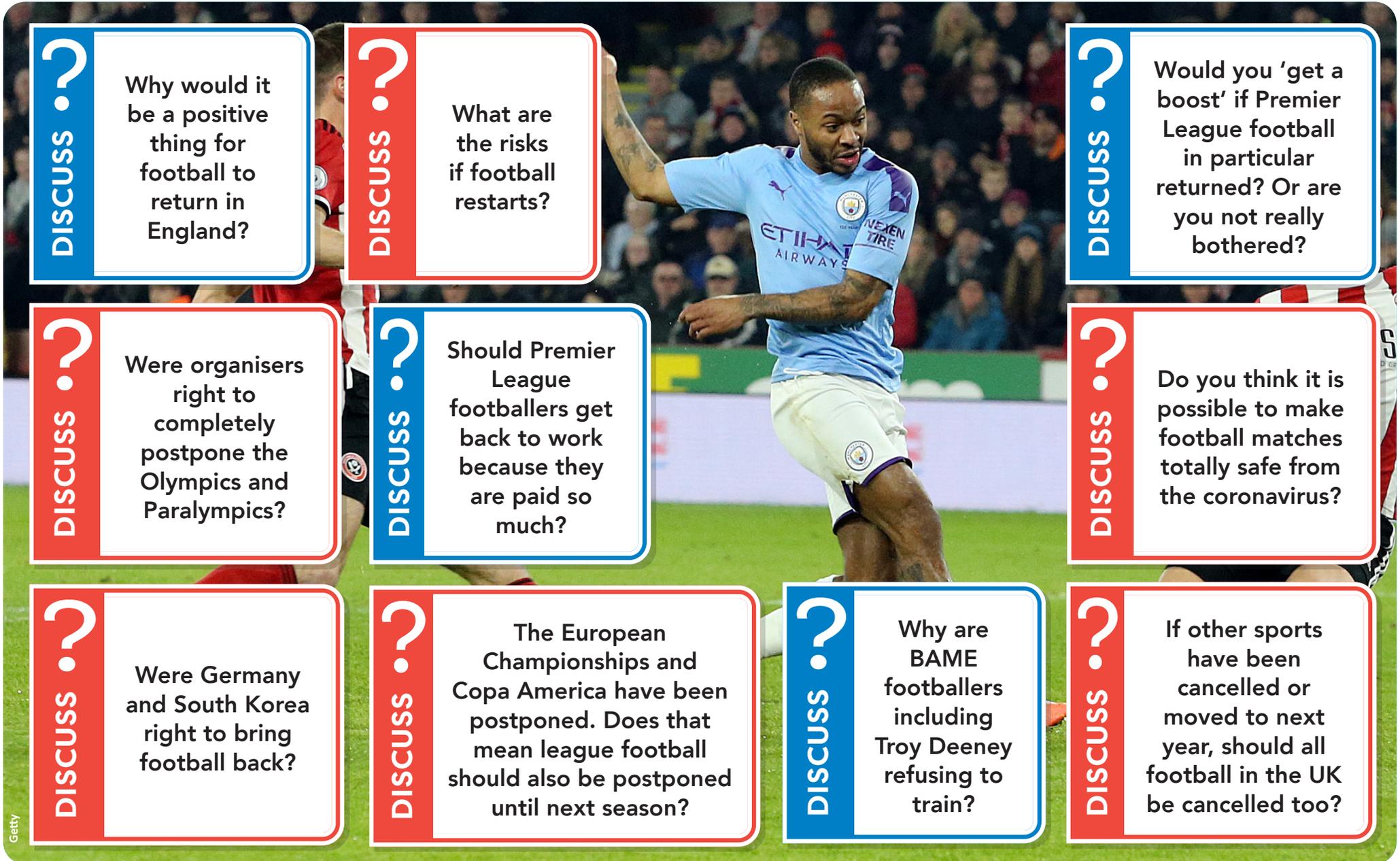
The Government has said that if English league football returns it should be shown on free-to-air TV, so that the largest possible audience gets to see it. If the national sport returns, it will give the country a boost. And it isn't just people in the UK that get to enjoy the Premier League – last season, more than three billion people around the world watched it. After all the misery of the coronavirus, football can unite and inspire.

3. SAFETY PLANS ARE IN PLACE –

The Premier League is planning to have an inspector at every club to make sure safety procedures are being followed. Officials say the "health and wellbeing of all participants is the Premier League's priority". By having no fans in the stadium, the risk of a spread of the virus is minimal.



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DISCUSS 

Why would it be a positive thing for football to return in England?

DISCUSS 

What are the risks if football restarts?

DISCUSS 

Would you 'get a boost' if Premier League football in particular returned? Or are you not really bothered?

DISCUSS 

Were organisers right to completely postpone the Olympics and Paralympics?

DISCUSS 

Should Premier League footballers get back to work because they are paid so much?

DISCUSS 

Do you think it is possible to make football matches totally safe from the coronavirus?

DISCUSS 

Were Germany and South Korea right to bring football back?

DISCUSS 

The European Championships and Copa America have been postponed. Does that mean league football should also be postponed until next season?

DISCUSS 

Why are BAME footballers including Troy Deeney refusing to train?

DISCUSS 

If other sports have been cancelled or moved to next year, should all football in the UK be cancelled too?