Advancing Towards Normal Operations for Sporting Venues

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Introduction

From an operational perspective, the 2019 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic has resulted in pervasive disruption to business operations and supply chains around the globe, leading some businesses, including sporting entertainment venues, to cease operations. By early March, 2020, local and state authorities across the U.S. began enacting restrictions to ban public gatherings, including sporting events, concerts, festivals and award shows. Accordingly, all four major athletic leagues suspended their competitive seasons and shuttered sporting venues in an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19.

As rates of new COVID-19 cases have begun to level off in the U.S. – and decline in some areas – policymakers and business leaders have cautiously shifted their attention toward planning safe return to normal business operations. Some states, such as California, have proposed phased reopening plans that allow for an incremental increase in business activities based on factors representing risk and need.

Sporting venues introduce unique challenges to COVID-19 mitigation due to the sheer size of staffing operations and attendance, the seating proximity, the generally high level of contact among athletes, and the intensity of spectators’ reaction including physical contact, cheering, etc. The reopening of sporting venues should be approached on a case-by-case basis, with attention to local, state, and federal guidelines. In addition, this process should be one component of an overall Return to Normal Business Operations Plan that should be implemented alongside a Case Management Plan, Enhanced Disinfection Protocols, Worker Hygiene, and Best Practices.

Owners and administrators of these businesses can begin the reopening process by addressing some fundamental questions such as:

> What actions can we take to best maintain and protect the health of staff, visitors, and athletes who work in or visit our venue?
> What health and safety needs should be considered prior to reopening buildings/facilities?
> How do we effectively communicate with staff, visitors, athletes, and communities to promote transparency, and ensure that all groups are fully informed of our ongoing efforts to prevent COVID-19 transmission within our venue?
> What is our plan for case management when a) any of our staff or athletes report close contact with someone testing positive for COVID-19; b) individuals diagnosed with or suspected to have COVID-19 visit our establishment; or c) someone falls ill with or exhibits symptoms of COVID-19 while on our premises?
> What additional supplies and/or medical support should we have in place due to COVID-19 prior to opening?
> What contingency plans should we have in place if our venue is required to close again by law or a resurgence of COVID-19 cases?
> How can we effectively manage and mitigate crowds; how do we put protections in place for athletes and support staff; and how do we identify all the high-touch surfaces for proper disinfection?

The information herein provides general guidance in line with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations and provides specific examples that sports venues can consider when developing their reopening plans.
General Guidance

The reopening of sporting venues should be approached on a case-by-case basis, with attention to local, state, and federal guidelines. Although each venue and/or sport will have unique challenges, the following can be used as general guidance:

> The number of spectators at each venue should be limited and their movement and positioning managed so that likelihood of contact between individuals is decreased.

> Mass entry and exiting from sports arenas should be controlled and scheduled using announcements, visual aids, ushers, and/or electronic forms of communication.
  - Instruct patrons to arrive at different stages, with designated areas for standing to promote adherence to physical distancing requirements.
  - For exiting, sections should be dismissed separately, allowing patrons to leave via a designated path with an usher-guided exit.

> Food and beverage services should be modified to provide enhanced health protections.
  - Food service practices should be aligned with guidelines outlined the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).
  - Consider encouraging electronic ordering and/or limiting in-person ordering.
  - Provide no-touch refuse and recycling bins.

> Electronic forms of payment should be requested over physical currency if possible

> Employees for all sporting venues should wear masks/coverings and gloves while working. Patrons are encouraged to wear masks/coverings when attending sporting venues.

> Disinfection measures should be enhanced:
  - Identify high-touch surfaces and ensure disinfection is completed routinely.
  - Equipment should not be shared, and, when possible, equipment should be disinfected with Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved disinfectants between uses (EPA List N).
  - Consider appointing full-time restroom attendants.
  - Consider replacing hand dryers with disposable paper towels.
  - Ensure access into and out of restrooms can be done hands-free (if not, keep a trashcan by the door so individuals can use a paper towel to open the door and then dispose of it readily).

> Communal water fountain use should be discouraged, and individual water bottles should be provided.

> Discourage grouping and gathering of employees during down-time.

> Stagger the number of employees in breakrooms to maintain physical distancing.

The general guidelines and examples of practical measures to consider when planning the reopening of a sporting venue should provide a starting point for planning and preparedness prior to reopening. These measures aim to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission with the understanding that venues still must adhere to federal, state, and local health authority guidance. Beyond these general guidelines, sporting venue leadership and administrators will need to consider venue-specific steps to protect the health of staff, visitors, athletes, and communities. Table 1 lists several examples of venue-specific considerations for various types of sporting venues.
### TABLE: Unique challenges and accompanying infection prevention and control strategies for select sporting venues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected Sporting Venues</th>
<th>Unique Challenges</th>
<th>Infection Prevention Control Options</th>
<th>Enhanced Disinfection and Hygiene</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Stadiums and Arenas</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt; Number of attendees and density of seating arrangements and when traversing the venue</td>
<td>&gt; Reduce number of occupied seats in arenas/adjusting layouts</td>
<td>&gt; Disinfect entire facility after each event and more often for high touch areas such as restrooms</td>
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<td>&gt; Players and fans traveling from other cities, states, and countries</td>
<td>&gt; Consider holding some sporting events without fans</td>
<td>&gt; Provide cleaning wipes and hand sanitizer throughout facility (entrances/exits, seating sections)</td>
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<td>&gt; Social contact (e.g., handshakes, high-fives)</td>
<td>&gt; Reduce number of tickets available</td>
<td>&gt; Consider adding mobile hand wash stations to increase use</td>
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<td>&gt; Player to player contact</td>
<td>&gt; Convert to mobile ticket sales and scanners</td>
<td>&gt; Consider replacing seat side food vendors with order takers and cover all food deliveries</td>
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<td>&gt; Lines and crowding at concessions and restrooms</td>
<td>&gt; Prohibit bags or install contact-free detectors</td>
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<td>&gt; Contact during bag inspection and ticket scan</td>
<td>&gt; Mark distances of six feet in queues (e.g., entrances, concessions, bathrooms)</td>
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<td>&gt; Sharing of food and beverages (high volume of hand foods)</td>
<td>&gt; Consider forgoing prizes and giveaways</td>
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<td>&gt; Stadium ushers and vendor interactions with patrons</td>
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<td><strong>Other Large Indoor Sporting Venues (i.e. Batting Cages, Billiard Halls, Bowling Alleys, etc.)</strong></td>
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<td>&gt; Use of communal items (e.g., shoes, bats, balls, helmets, cues)</td>
<td>&gt; Leave a “dark lane” between bowling teams</td>
<td>&gt; Provide cleaning wipes and hand sanitizer at each lane</td>
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<td>&gt; Food and bar service</td>
<td>&gt; Reservations for lanes only</td>
<td>&gt; Move all equipment behind counter for check-out</td>
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<td>&gt; Game rooms &amp; “redemption stores” (e.g., game prizes)</td>
<td>&gt; Remove dining tables</td>
<td>&gt; Have a designated return area for equipment that needs disinfection</td>
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<td>&gt; Other entertainment within facility (e.g., laser tag)</td>
<td>&gt; Consider closing any entertainment area that cannot be readily disinfected</td>
<td>&gt; Increase time between lane and equipment reuse</td>
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<td>&gt; Indoor and enclosed spaces with potential crowds</td>
<td>&gt; Reservations only</td>
<td>&gt; Disinfect rental bats, helmets, balls in between users</td>
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<td><strong>Golf Courses and Ranges</strong></td>
<td>&gt; Rental clubs</td>
<td>&gt; Distinct clubs and loaned equipment between users</td>
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<td>&gt; Golf carts and push carts</td>
<td>&gt; Reduce number of tee times to distance golfers on the course</td>
<td>&gt; Provide wipes and hand sanitizer to those using golf carts</td>
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<td>&gt; Clubhouse</td>
<td>&gt; Limits on number of people allowed in clubhouse</td>
<td>&gt; Provide equipment and hand cleaning stations for patrons</td>
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<td>&gt; Flags, cups and bunker rakes: Social contact often exchanged (e.g., handshakes, high-fives)</td>
<td>&gt; Only use every other bay on driving ranges</td>
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<td>&gt; Encourage the use of personal clubs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; Robust disinfection of golf carts</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; Remove bunker rakes, flags and cups</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt; Caddies should avoid touching grips, and distance from golfers</td>
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<td><strong>Swimming Pools</strong></td>
<td>&gt; Locker rooms</td>
<td>&gt; Proper chlorine or bromine disinfection levels</td>
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<td>&gt; Shared pool equipment (e.g., equipment rentals, towels)</td>
<td>&gt; Reduced pool and locker room capacity</td>
<td>&gt; Disinfect high touch areas</td>
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<td>&gt; Pool equipment brought in by guests</td>
<td>&gt; No use of rental or personal equipment</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt; Guests must bring own towels</td>
<td>&gt; Require footwear and shower prior to pool</td>
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</table>
Guidelines for Selected Sporting Venues

The following additional details provide examples of a more thorough approach for two selected sporting venues, one representing venues where patrons are predominantly spectators and another where patrons are predominantly participants in the sport. These additional details are intended to be used in conjunction with the examples in the TABLE above. In addition, these guidelines are not exhaustive, but may be used as a starting point for owners and managers drafting plans to reopen.

SPECTATOR EXAMPLE: STADIUMS AND ARENAS

Stadiums and arenas intended for sporting events face many unique challenges in terms of safely reopening. The guidelines below should be used as a starting point when designing plans for reopening and operation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

> Mobile ticket sales and scanners should be used to minimize contact between fans and employees. The capacity of the venue and the number of ticket sales should be reduced.

> A no-bag policy should be considered in order to avoid contact between security and guests.

> Phone applications should be used for food ordering and pick up when possible. When not possible, tape or paint should be used to indicate lines and proper distances guests should adhere to while waiting for food and drinks.

> Signage should be displayed discouraging exchange of high fives and other physical celebratory movements.

> Automated hand sanitizer dispensers should be available throughout the facility for guests and employees.

– Signage should be posted at each hand sanitizer station encouraging its use, and illustrating proper hand sanitizing technique.

> In between sporting events, stadiums and arenas should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.

– Food service areas, bathrooms, locker rooms, shops, and any other areas where people are consistently present should be disinfected routinely.

> Employees should wear masks and gloves, and guests should be encouraged to wear masks as well.

> Signage in bathrooms should be posted encouraging handwashing and illustrating proper handwashing technique.

These guidelines can be further optimized by incorporating operational and facility knowledge and creative thinking to create facility-specific solutions for these unique problems.

PARTICIPANT EXAMPLE: BOWLING ALLEYS

Bowling alleys need to safely address the challenges of shared equipment and crowded areas. In order to minimize patron contact with shared items, the following steps are recommended:

> All shoes, bowling balls, and other equipment should be kept behind the counter, and disinfected thoroughly between uses using a disinfectant mentioned on EPA's List N.

– In addition to disinfection, employers and managers should consider increasing the amount of time between rentals for rental equipment.

> An unused “dark lane” should be considered between bowling groups, and the pin spotter and computer system should be sanitized between uses.

> In order to minimize contact between customers, lanes should be reserved ahead of time.

> Automated hand sanitizer dispensers should be provided at each lane.

– Signage should be posted at each hand sanitizer station encouraging proper use, and illustrating proper hand sanitizing technique.

> Food and bar service should follow practices outline by the FDA and local and state guidance.

> Any other attractions (e.g., arcades, laser tag) should be reopened with caution, increased sanitation practices, and decreased capacity. For example, reopening of arcades may include limitations on the number or types of games open (e.g., no multiplayer games; open only every other game).

– Frequently touched surfaces (e.g., arcade games) should be disinfected between each use. If doing so cannot be accomplished, then the owner and manager should consider leaving these areas closed.

> Signage in bathrooms should be posted encouraging handwashing, and illustrating proper handwashing technique.

As host to an indoor sporting event requiring the use of shared sporting equipment, bowling alleys pose unique reopening and operating challenges in a manner that does not increase the risk of infection transmission for both employees and customers.
EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL CREATIVE SOLUTIONS USED BY SPORTS VENUES

Given the unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the concern about transmission to both workers and patrons, sports venues and organizations have already begun applying unique solutions. Selected examples of these creative solutions include the following:

National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR)

In response to the postponement of real-life racing events through May 3, the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) created the eNASCAR series, a virtual racing experience involving actual drivers. According to a *New York Times* article, the event has been broadcast on national television, and attracted 903,000 viewers in the first week and 1.3 million people in the second week. Through virtual racing, NASCAR has created a temporary unique solution allowing drivers and fans to stay engaged during the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic.

National Basketball Association (NBA)

At this time, the National Basketball Association (NBA) has not yet publicly announced when the league will resume normal games. However, as reopening guidance begins to be released by local, state, and federal governments, the NBA has begun to evaluate its options. Attempting to engage with players, the NBA has drafted plans to allow for practices to begin. According to an article released by National Public Radio (NPR), NBA facilities may reopen to allow for players to practice while still maintaining certain restrictions. No more than four players will be allowed at a facility at one time, for example, team practices and scrimmages are prohibited. These modifications are the NBA’s first steps toward returning to normalcy without opening facility operations or allowing fans physical access to arenas.

Conclusion

Sporting venues present unique challenges to COVID-19 mitigation because of factors such as sheer size of attendance, seating proximity, the number of high-touch surfaces, the generally high level of contact between athletes, and the intensity of spectators. Owner and managers of sporting venues should start their reopening process, as part of a larger Return to Normal Business Operation Plan, by focusing on aspects of crowd control and mitigation, as well as disinfection and hygiene. In addition, plans to reopen should include multiple layers of protection (e.g., physical distancing; disinfection; communication; and crowd control), as well as the ability to be flexible regarding potential changes that may occur as business life progresses amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Combining layers of protections with such flexibility can position sporting venues to effectively respond, adapt, and adjust, rather than simply react, to ongoing COVID-19 risks.

Resources

**GENERAL**

The EPA has published a frequently updated list of disinfectants for use against SARS-CoV-2: [https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2](https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2)


The CDC and White House have released a phased approached for workplaces: [https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/)

**GOLF**

The Golf Course Superintendents Association of America has provided this guide to members: [https://www.gcsaa.org/docs/default-source/resources/covid-19_gcsaa_v4.pdf?sfvrsn=2f7dfa3e_0](https://www.gcsaa.org/docs/default-source/resources/covid-19_gcsaa_v4.pdf?sfvrsn=2f7dfa3e_0)

The Professional Golfers Association has provided this resource for best practices: [https://www.pga.org/coronavirus-resources/Best-Practices-for-Golf](https://www.pga.org/coronavirus-resources/Best-Practices-for-Golf)

**BOWLING**

The Bowling University, Bowling Center Education & Training Reopening Resource Center: [https://bowlinguniversity.net/opening](https://bowlinguniversity.net/opening)

**POOLS**

The Pool Management Group has created an online resource for public and private pools: [http://www.poolmanagementgroup.com/research/detail/pools_can_open_safely](http://www.poolmanagementgroup.com/research/detail/pools_can_open_safely)

**BASKETBALL**

The NBA has released information addressing what how they are responding to COVID-19: [https://cares.nba.com/coronavirus/](https://cares.nba.com/coronavirus/)
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