

The IWBI Special Report Chapter Series: “Sports and Entertainment Sector Scales Health and Safety Approaches to Protect Talent, Staff and Fans”

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Northampton, MA | December 09, 2021 04:36 PM Eastern Standard Time



In September 2021, IWBI released an in-depth report that lays out research approaches and specific operational strategies as the world continues to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and prepares for acute health threats into the future.

Over the next few months, we will repost a chapter from the report every week to help highlight specific themes and insights. The IWBI Special Report Chapter Series continues with “Sports and Entertainment Sector Scales Health and Safety Approaches to Protect Talent, Staff and Fans,” authored by Melanie Koch, MSPH, WELL Faculty, Director, Commercial and Liz Miles, WELL Faculty, Vice President, Stakeholder Relations.

Excerpt republished from: Prevention and Preparedness, Resilience and Recovery: An IWBI Special Report

When it shuttered live event venues, COVID-19 extinguished some of our greatest sources of communal celebration. We could no longer high-five nearby strangers after a

hometown player blasted a grand slam or join thousands of fellow fans in singing along to a beloved anthem from our favorite band.

To make matters even worse, the pandemic devastated people who depend on our public venues to earn a living, from ushers to concession vendors, security guards to sound engineers. In the United States, the four major professional sports leagues—which draw roughly 130 million spectators annually—may lose up to \$14.1 billion in revenue from ticket sales during 2020. COVID-19 may also cost the live music industry \$9.7 billion in revenue in 2020. According to Pollstar, if you take into account the multiplier effect of economic impact generated per ticket, the full impact is closer to \$30 billion. But it is the staff of arenas, stadiums and music halls who are among those hit the hardest.

Sports leagues have tried to adapt to the realities presented by the virus. The NBA, for example, held its 2020 season in a Disney World “bubble” with only athletes, essential personnel and limited guests of players. The NHL took a similar approach.

However, other organizations encountered greater obstacles to resuming operations. In 2020, and into 2021, Major League Baseball dealt with COVID-19 outbreaks among multiple teams. Meanwhile, several college football conferences postponed or canceled games during the 2020 season, and are approaching the 2021 season with caution. And the Tokyo Olympic Games were carried out with no spectators to cheer on the athletes.

Without a doubt, the greatest priority of every social institution at this moment is safeguarding our communities against the spread of the COVID-19. And almost every group prepared to make sacrifices in order to do so...

Excerpt:For major sports leagues, the first phase of resuming operations focused on protecting players, coaches, medical trainers and other team personnel. To do so, they worked closely with public health experts to establish strong safety protocols. Dr. Anthony Fauci backed the NBA’s plan, while the MLB consulted former Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) senior official Dr. Ali Kahn. On a global level, the International Olympic Committee partnered with the World Health Organization (WHO) to provide guidelines for athletic institutions across the world.

Now, as they begin to admit spectators, leaders in sports and entertainment are turning once again to healthcare professionals. In order to safely hold live events, arenas, stadiums and theaters collaborating with and seeking guidance from healthcare professionals and hospitals is an imperative...

Excerpt:Some sports and entertainment venues started with resuming limited operations, albeit with significant precautions in place. For example, the Jacksonville Jaguars of the

NFL filled their home stadium at only 25 percent of its usual capacity in 2020 in order to comply with physical distancing guidelines. As the 2021 football season got underway, filled stadiums were more the norm.

In the realm of live music, the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, demonstrated leadership and creativity, presenting a range of programs for small in-person audiences of 50 or less (On Stage at the Opera House, Sunset concerts, Frontline Worker Appreciation Nights, and community programs throughout the region) and invested in original video content that has been watched more than 100 million times. And Jazz Alley, a venue in Seattle, enacted its own health-focused protocols in anticipation of re-opening, such as installing touchless faucets in its restrooms, a new air ventilation system and a plexiglass barrier between musicians and fans...

Excerpt: Performers and athletes understand they have a responsibility to make an impact beyond the stage or field of play. It's why, before COVID-19, they routinely visited schools, donated time and money to charities and volunteered for projects like building playgrounds. And it is why they often champion social change—such as when the cast of Hamilton proudly proclaimed, “Immigrants, We Get the Job Done.”

Moving forward, sports and entertainment venues can continue to set an example for their wider communities. Major professional organizations aren't the only ones who have suffered because of the pandemic. Groups like community theaters and neighborhood recreation centers have lost significant revenue as well.¹⁸ These smaller entities may lack the resources and ability to consult leading public health experts. Therefore, they will look to the practices of larger institutions in restarting their own activities...

Conclusion The return of live events can offer a powerful source of comfort and community during these uncertain times. Moreover, it restores much-needed income for people who work at sports and entertainment facilities.

Venues can more safely reopen their doors for fans and spectators by teaming up with healthcare and public health professionals, the members of their community and experts in fields such as resilience and sustainability. Together, we can entertain, educate and build a better world for years to come.

In the words of Greg Norman, legendary golfer and current Chairman and CEO of the Greg Norman Company: “Never has there been a more pronounced need as there is today for cutting-edge wellness solutions which are rooted in science and technology. I love partnering with thought leaders like IWBI who are challenging conventional environments and enhancing the future.”

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