

Bill Ribbans and Mark Sagers

A

PLAGUE

ON ALL OUR SPORTS

When Covid and Sport Collided



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Chapter 1

The New Beast from the East

The birds have flown the nest

The Bird's Nest stadium in Beijing, China hosted the 2008 Summer Olympics

While the United Kingdom enjoyed its 2019 seasonal festivities and traditional sporting winter fayre, a particular bug became no longer snug in a rug in mid-eastern China.

Wuhan has a rich 3,000-year-old history, with a busy industrial metropolis of 11 million inhabitants and a scientific institute of international repute in coronavirus research. The first Wuhan resident to develop COVID-19 officially became symptomatic on 1 December 2019. It is unlikely he was patient-zero. People were probably infected months earlier.

Cases were linked to the Huanan seafood market which was closed on New Year's Day. By that stage, the virus had flown the nest. Literally. Wuhan is a well-connected transport hub boasting non-stop flights to 117 destinations in 15 different countries. COVID-19 was identified in Italian sewage on 18 December. A Parisian, married to a Charles de Gaulle airport worker, required hospital treatment during Christmas week.

In January, people were travelling ahead of the Chinese New Year on the 25th; 450 million people crisscross China and the globe in the world's biggest annual human migration. Seven million Chinese were scheduled to travel abroad. Sixty

thousand passengers flew from Wuhan to 382 foreign cities in the fortnight before lockdown. Some took the bug with them and created a 'perfect viral storm'.

The die was cast for a global pandemic even before the WHO knew of its existence. It would wreck lives and livelihoods, and wreak havoc with global sport. Starting in China.

In 2020, China had scheduled a wide range of important sporting events. Its reputation as both a global sporting superpower and country capable of hosting varieties of sporting occasions seemed ready to be cemented. The World Athletics Indoor Championships, Olympic qualifying tournaments in football, boxing, wrestling and basketball, Winter Olympic skiing test events, international golf, badminton, motor racing, field hockey, tennis and snooker events were all scheduled to land in China in the first quarter of 2020.

The sporting consequences of the pandemic would commence in China and move rapidly to engulf the world. Rather than ripples spreading from the middle of a pond, the damage resembled the after-effects of a fast-moving tsunami across the oceans.

While we were most aware of the damage to our local sporting scene, the carnage wrought by the pandemic globally reminded us that elite sport calendars are put together like giant jigsaw puzzles. Each piece represents a competition or fixture somewhere. The planning is complex. The repercussions when pieces are lost reverberate widely.

The beginning of the Year of the Rat

By 5 January, a Shanghai laboratory had genetically sequenced the new virus – a close cousin of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome virus) that had killed at least 774 people between 2002 and 2004. The Chinese government released the genetic sequencing information a week later and immediately closed the responsible laboratory for 'rectification'.

On 11 January, the first death in Wuhan was reported – but WHO denied that the virus was capable of human-to-human transmission. Within days the virus had spread to Thailand, Japan, South Korea and Singapore. Nine days later, China finally admitted that the disease might be capable of inter-human spread. It had been obvious in Wuhan for weeks.

It was ironic that the epicentre of the global outbreak, Wuhan, was due to host some of the first of the Chinese 2020 international sporting bonanzas. Olympic qualifiers in boxing and women's football were scheduled. On 22 January, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced that both would be removed from Wuhan. The Chinese government advised people not to travel in or out of the city. Concern was sufficiently high in the UK that SAGE (Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies) met in London the same day.

Boxing was rescheduled for Amman, Jordan. The women's football shifted to Nanjing – 333 miles away. However, within days, that venue was also deemed unsafe. The tournament was switched to Australia.

The next day (23 January), Wuhan went into lockdown. It would not be lifted until April. The virus was reported to be three times more infectious than normal influenza. It was believed that 7 million residents fled the Wuhan area before lockdown was enforced. Southampton University research estimated that 10 per cent of people flying out of Wuhan and other infected Chinese cities carried COVID-19 with them. Many Chinese students were returning to British universities.

From late January, Chinese national and international sporting fixtures fell like dominoes. Important events in rallying, golf, football, basketball, tennis, field hockey and the Chinese National Winter Games were either suspended, cancelled, played behind closed doors, moved abroad or postponed.

On 24 January, COBRA (an abbreviation for Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms) met in London for the first time in

the crisis. Matt Hancock, the health minister, announced that the UK risk was low. Prime Minister Boris Johnson met Chinese dancers outside 10 Downing Street to celebrate the forthcoming Year of the Rat.

Following hasty competition reorganisation and travel rearrangements, the Chinese women's football team landed in Australia and went into quarantine. Despite the chaos, China progressed to the next stage of this Olympic marathon tournament and were scheduled to play South Korea home and away. After numerous postponements, the tie was finally completed in April 2021 – 13 months late.

In the midst of these difficulties, the Australian Open tennis tournament took place from 20 January to 2 February. During the qualifying tournament, there was more concern with the pollution caused by bushfires than COVID-19. The Melbourne air quality was rated temporarily as the worst in the world. It would be the last 'normal' Aussie Open until 2023.

On 29 January, the first official cases in the UK were reported. A Chinese student and family had travelled from Wuhan to York. With reported cases in at least 17 countries, including several European nations, WHO declared a global Public Health Emergency of International Concern the next day. It would last over three years.

The escalating health crisis required more extensive action to be taken by the Chinese and international sporting authorities.

Nanjing's World Indoor Athletics Championships were postponed and rescheduled for 2021. It would be put off again until March 2023 and, for a third time, until 2025. The first alpine test events for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics were cancelled. The Beijing-hosted China Open snooker was the last ranking event before the World Championships in Sheffield with prize money of over £1m. It was cancelled and not rescheduled.

For the UK, 31 January represented Brexit day. Boris Johnson signed the withdrawal treaty from the European

Union. Three days later, the prime minister gave an upbeat speech at Greenwich warning that ‘there is a risk that new diseases such as coronavirus will trigger a panic’. Privately, SAGE was warning the government that Chinese cases were likely to be 200,000 to 300,000 and doubling every four to five days. Hancock reassured parliament the next day that the UK had ‘50 specialist beds and a further 500 beds are available in order to isolate people’.

Spreading its tentacles

January 2020 had seen a significant proportion of Chinese sport brought to a halt. February would see more postponements and spread to engulf most of the Far East.

On the first weekend of February, Chinese cases jumped by 50 per cent. In the Philippines, a man became the first to die outside of China. On 11 February, WHO officially named the disease COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) and the virus responsible as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).

The Chinese Lingshui Masters Badminton tournament was cancelled. It was a prestigious tournament with Olympic qualification on offer. It would not reappear until 2023 because of the persistent virus.

Chinese motorsport events stalled. Most importantly, the Shanghai Chinese Grand Prix set for April was axed. It would have no new place in the shortened and revised 2020 schedule. It was omitted altogether from the 2021, 2022 and 2023 Formula 1 calendars.

Travel bans on Chinese athletes abroad affected their participation in Olympic qualifying tournaments. The Yangzhou-hosted April beach volleyball tournament was buried in the sand by mid-February.

By late February, and before most countries abroad had even contemplated severe restrictions of personal liberties, China had started to bring the pandemic officially ‘under control’ in most of its regions. On 25 February, the incidence

of new cases from the rest of the world exceeded China's for the first time.

By early March, China was 'reporting' less than 100 new cases daily. It had witnessed thousands daily at the peak of the crisis. Pockets of infection would arise subsequently. These would be subjected to stringent containment policies as part of the country's 'zero-COVID' policy that would not be lifted until December 2022.

Postponements, rescheduling and cancellations were taking their toll. Finally, in early July, the Chinese General Administration of Sport announced that no further international sporting events would be held in China for the rest of 2020. The exception was trial events for the 2022 Winter Olympics. Later, table tennis would reappear with four international tournaments in November. All the events were dominated and won by Chinese players.

Coming to a country near you

By early February, sporting fixture chaos began to spread beyond China's borders.

The European golf men's tour only reaches its own continent in May. Prior to that, it meanders around the sunnier spots of the globe. Three Asian tournaments – Malaysia, India, and China – were cancelled. Only the Indian Open had reappeared by 2023. Women's golf tournaments scheduled for Thailand and Singapore for late February were cancelled.

The Asian Champions League football tournament was suspended in March and not restarted until mid-September. Remaining group matches and knockout stages were centralised in Qatar. It took two months to complete the tournament – one month later than originally planned. The Malaysian government denied their representatives, Johor Darul Ta'zim, permission to leave their country. Al-Wahda could not leave Abu Dhabi because of COVID-19 afflicting their squad. Even worse, the defending champions, Al-Hilal

from Saudi Arabia, made it to Qatar but could not complete their fixtures when the virus swept through their team. They were unbeaten at the time. Eventually, Ulsan Hyundai from South Korea took the title.

Asian Football Confederation (AFC) international cup games were suspended in mid-March and cancelled completely in September. Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup qualification began in June 2019 for the AFC. By early March 2020, the whole continent's qualifying tournament was halted and, eventually, postponed for 14 months until summer 2021. The final Qatar qualifiers, Australia, would not be known until June 2022 – three years after it started.

Rugby union suffered next. The world-famous Hong Kong and Singapore Sevens tournaments tried in vain to move from April to October. The World Rugby Sevens Series for 2019–20 was intended as a ten-tournament competition. The sixth leg was played in Vancouver in early March. In June, World Rugby cancelled the remaining four tournaments. New Zealand were awarded the overall title. The Sevens Series did not appear again until September 2021 and contained only two Canadian events.

The FIBA quadrennial men's basketball Asia Cup was due to be hosted by Indonesia in August 2021. Qualifying games had commenced three years earlier. The tournament finale would be delayed by a year. The Asian weightlifting championships were moved from Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan but postponed and rescheduled for 2021. The Asian Olympic wrestling qualifiers in Bishkek were postponed indefinitely on the insistence of the Kyrgyzstan government, who had postponed all sporting events. The event had already been moved from the Chinese city of Xi'an because of the epidemic.

Organisers tried to rescue events by moving to behind-closed-doors events. In Singapore, the One Championship 'King of the Jungle' in mixed martial arts survived by this manoeuvre in late February. It would be the last such

hostilities until the aptly named Bangkok ‘No Surrender’ event in July.

South Korean national and international sport was next in line for the fast-spreading virus. Its football K-league season was delayed and eventually shortened. Busan was due to hold the World Team Table Tennis Championships in March. After serial rescheduling, it was finally offered the event in 2024. The World Short Track Speed Skating Championships in Seoul were abandoned by the International Skating Union.

Japan reported its first COVID-19 case on 15 January in a patient who had returned from Wuhan. The disease appeared to be relatively well controlled. By the end of February, only 230 cases and five deaths had been announced. Despite low numbers, Japanese schools were closed.

A second outbreak in mid-March was brought into the country by travellers from abroad and proved more deadly. A state of emergency was declared in Tokyo in early April and soon extended to the whole country. This state was not lifted from the whole country until late May.

The centre of sporting attention for the country was the hosting of the XXXII Summer Olympiad from 24 July to 9 August. The Paralympics were due to follow from 25 August to 6 September.

This great sporting event came hot on the heels of the successfully hosted autumn 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan. The success of the national team in reaching the quarter-finals for the first time, losing to eventual champions South Africa, boosted the sport in the country. Sadly, the national team, the Cherry Blossoms, would not be able to play any games in 2020. Critical momentum to the development of the game would be lost.

The Japan Rugby Top League (JRTL) announced in late March that the 2020 season which had been halted mid-season would be cancelled completely for the year. The 2021 JRTL season was delayed from its planned mid-January start after 62 players and staff from six teams tested positive for

COVID-19. It started five weeks late, reformatted, and was completed within three months.

In late February 2020, the IOC stated that it was 'business as usual' for the Tokyo Olympics. On 24 March, the IOC announced that the Olympics and Paralympics would be delayed for one year. On the day of the announcement, from a Japanese population of 126 million, the country had recorded a total of 1,128 cases and 42 deaths. In comparison, the UK's population of 68 million had had 8,077 cases and 694 deaths identified up until then.

The Japanese football J1-league season lasted four days in late February. It did not restart until July behind closed doors. After two rounds of matches, a maximum of 5,000 spectators were admitted. This was increased to 50 per cent stadium capacity in August. Away fans were banned. The season was completed before Christmas with all 34 games played.

The Japan Racing Association made all horse racing behind-closed-doors events and stopped off-track betting except for phone and online wagers.

The baseball season was due to open in March. As the virus reached Japanese shores, the Nippon Professional Baseball League teams were in pre-season training and fans banned from these sessions. The season finally started in mid-June behind closed doors. Some fans were admitted in July, and this rose to 30,000 by the end of the season. The scheduled 143 games were reduced to 120 for each of the 12 sides. The season finished a month late in November. Yomiuri Giants beat Hanshin Tigers 4-0 in the Japan Series finale. It was the eventual winners who had caused concern earlier when two of their players tested positive in June, creating worries about the viability of the season. Fortunately, the fears were not realised.

The professional sport of sumo is organised in a series of six *honbashi* tournaments from January to November. In 2020, there was to be an additional Olympic exhibition in July. The first tournament, the Hatsu *bashi*, took place

without interference. The Haru *basho* in March took place without spectators. The May Natsu tournament became only the second *basho* to be cancelled since 1946 – because of the state of national emergency. The Olympic exhibition had already been stopped following the Games postponement. However, the remaining three events in July, September and November took place – but all in Tokyo. Nagoya and Kyushu were deemed unsafe. In July, limited numbers of spectators were admitted to the *basho* but all socially distanced and masked. The final November *basho* had 5,000 spectators admitted – half of the venue’s capacity.

Sumo did not escape COVID-19. The first case was announced in April. The next month, a 28-year-old sumo wrestler died from complications of COVID-19. He was the first Japanese person in their 20s to die. Apart from his weight, he was also diabetic. Five days later, the Sumo Association announced regular testing programmes. In September, the whole of the Tamanoi stable of wrestlers were withdrawn three days before the *basho*. Out of 19 cases, 11 needed hospital admission. Two more stables would report outbreaks in December.

The lands of the sporting setting sun

By the end of February, the sporting landscape in the Far East had been devastated. It would not be long before Australasia would suffer. Competitions which had been years in the planning were swept away. Some countries’ pandemic policies were infinitely tougher than the UK and Europe. Consequently, many sporting seasons and events were delayed, shortened or cancelled. Some international events remained un-resurrected for years.

Organisers and athletes had had to learn to become adaptable and reactive. They had to contend with rescheduling, quarantining, altered travel arrangements and missed competitive opportunities. Elite sports people are used to working to carefully developed training programmes

geared to peak performance on a certain planned future date. All that was thrown into confusion and doubt. Most importantly, it became apparent that even elite athletes were not immune from the serious health effects of COVID-19.

Soon the whole sporting world would follow suit and experience similar setbacks, misfortunes and, in time, tragedies.