

COVID-19: Wishful Thinking, Sports Fans, and Empty Stadiums

by Phillip W. Weiss

If anyone seriously believes that the opening of the economy means return to business as usual, they will be seriously disappointed. There can be no true return to business as usual while the COVID-19 virus is alive. No way can that happen; to suggest otherwise is pure Fake News.

Nor is it not likely that we will be ridding ourselves of the COVID-19 virus anytime soon, if at all. It took many years for science to develop a vaccine against the polio virus, and even that failed to eradicate in the disease. Indeed, all the infectious diseases – smallpox, cholera, diphtheria, meningitis, tuberculosis, just to name a few – that have plagued humans for thousands of years are still out there. They are merely being held in check by prophylactic measures that, as the COVID-19 crisis is proving, are far from perfect and offer no absolute guarantee of protection.

Staging sports events in empty stadiums defies common sense. The idea of major league professional athletes playing before empty houses is just too ludicrous to warrant serious consideration. It is true that the players will be paid a lot of money to engage in this travesty, but even the money will not make up for the embarrassing silence when someone hits a walk-off home run to win a game or scores a last-second touchdown to pull out a come from behind victory. Without the cheers and applaud from admiring fans, the games will be nothing but a pathetic and embarrassing sham.

The fans are an integral part of sports. It is more than mere coincidence that sports announcers routinely allude to the size and excitement level of the fans in the stadium. “The place is really rocking.” “The fans are ready to explode.” “You can feel the tension mounting.” “The fans are making a lot of noise.” Fan excitement is part of professional sports. To deny that fact is to seriously misunderstand the nature of professional sports.

Game six of the 1986 World Series, possibly the greatest single come from behind victory in the history of major league baseball, would have been just another game without the reaction of the fans. The players played the game, but it was the fans who made the stadium shake with excitement. A few years ago, I attended a Mets game in which Ike Davis hit a grand-slam home run. The fans erupted with a standing ovation that lasted at least five minutes. It was so loud that the game was briefly halted until the fans quieted down. A few years later I attended a Yankees game in which Gleybar Torres hit a walk-off three-run home run to cap a late-inning four-run come from behind win for the Yankees. This was one of the most remarkable wins in the history of the New York Yankees. The fans were delirious with joy. Without the fan reaction, Ike Davis’s grand-slam home run and Gleybar Torres’s walk-off home run are reduced to archival notations buried in the record books.

Home field advantage does exist. Fan support gives a team an edge in a contest. The players play to the fans and the fans respond. Empty stadiums will deny the players that extra emotional lift. They might as well play the game on a movie stage furnished with a sound-effects machine. But the sounds of pre-recorded

cheers would just drive home the phoniness of it all and prove that without a live audience, professional sports lose all meaning. That would be a shame because sports are about competition and achievement, and the glory that comes from winning.

Sports is not theater. It is live, real, and unrehearsed. It is people excelling at activities that few can do, and even fewer do well. The home run, the touchdown, the dunk, and the goal scored having immense symbolic importance. They inspire admiration. Without the fans, the significance of all of that would be lost. It would be like singing a beautiful song and nobody is there to hear it. Can we afford yet another loss?

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