

TRACKING THE VIRUS

Five Valencia squad members test positive

Five members of the playing squad and staff of La Liga club Valencia have tested positive for the coronavirus, the Spanish side said on Sunday. "Valencia CF inform that five positive cases of the COVID-19 coronavirus have been detected amongst first team staff and players," the club said in a statement. "All of these persons are now at home, in good health and obeying self-isolation measures." Earlier on Sunday Valencia and Argentina defender Ezequiel Garay became the first La Liga player to confirm he has the virus. "It's clear that I have got off to the wrong start in 2020. I've tested positive for the coronavirus, I feel very good and now I just have to listen to the health authorities and for now remain isolated," he wrote on Instagram. The 33-year-old was already ruled out for the remainder of the season after suffering a knee injury in February. Valencia travelled to Milan last month for a Champions League match at Atalanta played in front of a packed San Siro stadium, before restrictions were placed on sports events in Italy. A Valencia-based radio journalist who travelled to the match tested positive for the virus the following week. The second leg of the tie, which Valencia lost 8-4 on aggregate, was ordered to be played without spectators at the club's Mestalla stadium. In line with most major sports worldwide, all organised football in Spain has been postponed for at least two weeks in a bid to prevent further spread of the virus. Spain is the second worst-affected country in Europe after Italy.

Friday, along with a club physiotherapist. Seven Sampdoria players have tested positive, including Italian midfielder Depaoli and Polish defender Bereszynski on Saturday, along with Juventus defender Daniele Rugani this week. Vlahovic, 20, revealed that he had not realised anything was wrong until he became feverish and his temperature rose to 39 degrees, and he went to hospital. "Anyway, I'm fine now," he said on Instagram. "What to do now? Nothing, just rest. I just have to stay away from people." Serie A as well as all sport in Italy has been suspended until April 3. But the Italian Players' Association (AIC) on Saturday slammed a "paradoxical situation" whereby pressure was being put on players by some clubs to return to training. "Today in Italy there are still football clubs which are either shamefully irresponsible, or live on Mars, or lack a minimum of dignity," the AIC wrote

MLB: Astros' Springer, Bregman pitching in

Houston Astros stars George Springer and Alex Bregman joined the ranks of US sports figures stepping up to help out stadium workers and others impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. Astros outfielder Springer, the 2017 World Series MVP, is donating \$100,000 to Minute Maid Park workers who stand to lose wages after Major League Baseball pushed back the start of Opening Day, scheduled for March 26, "at least two weeks." "These are the people that help take care of my family when I go to work," Springer said through his agency, Excel Sports Management. "Now I want to help take care of them when they're in a time of need." Bregman donated 1,000 quarantine food kits which the Houston Food Bank said would make sure students who normally receive free lunches at school will get 28 meals per kit while their schools are closed. The Astros players swell the ranks of athletes and teams who have pledged to provide financial assistance to hourly wage workers who will be hard-hit by the disruption to the sporting schedule. The Los Angeles Clippers, Lakers and Kings, along with Staples Center, have established a fund to provide financial assistance to all hourly employees at the arena impacted by the pandemic.

Serie A doctors warn against training return

Serie A doctors have issued a joint warning advising against a return to club training after four more players tested positive for coronavirus, bringing the tally in the Italian top flight to 11. Fiorentina's Patrick Cutrone and German Pezzella contracted the virus, the Tuscan club said on Saturday, with Sampdoria's Fabio Depaoli and Bartosz Bereszynski later confirming they had also been diagnosed. Serie A doctors said they had "strong concerns" and "unanimously advise not to resume training until a clear improvement" in the situation. Four Fiorentina team members were diagnosed with Serbia forward Dusan Vlahovic also testing positive on



SELFIE-HYGIENE

Two women take a selfie with the Olympic rings in the background in the Odaiba section of Tokyo. While many international sporting events have been postponed or cancelled, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe promised on Friday that Tokyo would host the Olympic Games as planned in July and August. AP

Dominant show, weak season finale

Liverpool could have won first top-flight title in 30 years on Monday. Instead, they're left to wait and wonder

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LONDON, MARCH 15

LIVERPOOL COULD have been crowned Premier League champions on Monday for the first time in a generation. Instead the stadium will be silent and the streets empty.

Jurgen Klopp's team needed Manchester City to lose to Burnley on Saturday to give them a chance to seal the deal at their local rivals Everton two days later.

Regardless of whether it would have happened at Goodison Park or over the coming weeks, their first top-flight title for 30 years was a mere formality. But now fans are wondering when, or even if, they will be crowned champions after the coronavirus laid waste to the global sporting calendar. The message coming from Liverpool is that there are more important issues than football to talk about, even with the club tantalisingly close to glory.

"I've said before that football always seems the most important of the least important things," Klopp said in a statement on Friday. "Today, football and football matches really aren't important at all. If it's a choice between football and the good of the wider society, it's no contest. Really, it isn't." Klopp's stance won him the support of World Health Organisation chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who thanked him for his "powerful message".

Liverpool supporters, desperate to reclaim their position at the pinnacle of the English game, agree with their German manager, saying the pandemic overshadows football.

Supporters' union Spirit of Shankly is focusing on the damaging fallout from the COVID-19 virus.

"In talks with @lfc we asked for assurances that non-playing staff will not lose their pay as a consequence of shifts being cancelled," it said in a statement. "We also need to keep in mind those most vulnerable. Cancelling football games means (foodbanks) will be hit hard."



Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said, "If it's a choice between football and the good of the wider society, it's no contest"; a stance which won him the support of World Health Organisation chief Tedros Ghebreyesus. Reuters

Liverpool have stumbled in recent weeks, knocked out of the Champions League by Atletico Madrid and dumped out of the FA Cup by Chelsea. But they have been peerless in the Premier League, leaving their rivals in their wake to race 25 points clear of defending champions Manchester City. With Alisson Becker in goal, Virgil van Dijk marshalling the defence and their devastating front three of Roberto Firmino, Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mane, Klopp's men have been irresistible. Paul Hayward, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, said Liverpool should be crowned champions for the 19th time even if no more games are played. "If a season ends too soon, its natural winning line is the point it reached before the halt

was called: emphatically so, 29 games into a 38-match campaign, which is a respectable distance," he wrote. "Voiding" the 2019/20 football season would be nonsense," he added.

"Handing over the trophy at any point where clubs were forced to give up would feel morally correct." Brighton and Hove Albion chief executive Paul Barber said if the season were to be "frozen" it would be unjust on Liverpool.

"Everybody in the game appreciates what a fantastic season they've had and what a wonderful team they are," he told the BBC.

"But equally it would be unjust for teams to be relegated when there are still eight, nine, ten games to play of the Premier League."

'NULL & VOID'

The PL hopes that an interlude of three weeks from today will enable it to restart but that may well be dreamland. So what if the league cannot be finished? As games in both the PL and in the EFL are affected, the only fair and reasonable thing to do is declare the whole season null and void. Who knows who would have gone down or come up if the games have not actually been played in full?

KAREN BRADY, VICE-CHAIRMAN OF WEST HAM UNITED, WHO ARE CURRENTLY 16TH ON THE TABLE

Have a look at Klopp's comments compared to Karren Brady's. What's fair is to finish the season for teams in every league when the football is allowed to start again. The football authorities found a way to put a World Cup in the middle of a season so I'm sure they can sort next season out.

JAMIE CARRAGHER, FORMER LIVERPOOL DEFENDER



PLAYERS TREATED LIKE 'GUINEA PIGS', SAYS ROONEY

Former Manchester United star Wayne Rooney claims the British government and football authorities have treated players like "guinea pigs" during the coronavirus crisis. While the rest of European football was shutting down, Rooney is angry it took several days for the English leagues to postpone their matches until April 3. "Why did we wait until Friday? Why did it take Mikel Arteta to get ill for the game in England to do the right thing?" Rooney, currently playing for second tier Derby, wrote in the *Sunday Times*. "For players, staff and their families it has been a worrying week - one in which you felt a lack of leadership from the government and from the FA and Premier League. After the emergency meeting, at last the right decision was made - until then it almost felt like footballers in England were being treated like guinea pigs. I know how I feel. If any of my family get infected through me because I've had to play when it's not safe, and they get seriously ill, I'd have to think hard about ever playing again. I would never forgive the authorities."

Wayne Rooney, currently playing for second-tier Derby, lashed out against the authorities in his column for the *Sunday Times*.

'EVERYBODY IS PANICKING'

UFC continues to fight on, holds card in Brasilia behind closed doors

ASSOCIATED PRESS
MARCH 15

THE UFC staged a full fight card in an empty arena Saturday night in Brazil's capital city, sticking to its plan to keep fighting in the face of the coronavirus pandemic.

Charles Oliveira stopped lightweight Kevin Lee with a guillotine choke in the third round of the main event in the UFC's first show since many other sports organizations around the world postponed and canceled competitions.

The world's biggest mixed martial arts promotion held 12 bouts in Brasilia with only the fighters, their camps, the television production crew and a few dozen essential personnel inside Nilson Nelson Gymnasium.

"It was a bit weird not having any fans inside the arena," said Beate Malecki, a Swedish bantamweight who won a decision over Veronica Macedo in the show's opening bout. "But I was able to hear everything my coaches were saying, and it was good. Sometimes it is so loud out there. It was a crazy week. We didn't know if the fight was going to happen or not, but we stuck to the plan. It was really emotional."

The UFC has not canceled any events in the

wake of the pandemic, going against the plans of nearly all major sports leagues and organizations. UFC President Dana White has claimed the sports world is "panicking" with its cancellations, and he remains determined to stage four more shows over the next five weekends.

But White announced Saturday night that all four shows must take place at new, currently undetermined venues — including UFC 249, the promotion's next pay-per-view event headlined by lightweight champion Khabib Nurmagomedov fighting top contender Tony Ferguson.

"We're not stopping," White said on ESPN, his promotion's broadcast partner. "We will keep finding a way to put on the fights. I'm in the fight business. I've been doing this for over 20 years, and this stuff happens to me every weekend — obviously not at this level."

The UFC had scheduled a show with fans inside London's O2 Arena on March 21. The U.S. government's new travel restrictions regarding the United Kingdom have forced the UFC to move the show, White said.

The London show is likely to be held in the U.S., but Europe-based fighters are unlikely to be able to compete on the card. White's matchmakers are putting together a new undercard for the show, which is slated to be headlined



by American welterweight Tyrone Woodley against Britain's Leon Edwards.

The UFC also intended to hold fan-free shows in Las Vegas on March 28 and April 11, but White said the Nevada State Athletic Commission's decision to suspend any combat sports competition in the state until March 25 have made it impossible to stick with that plan. He intends to find new homes for those shows, which were initially scheduled for Columbus, Ohio, and for Portland, Oregon.

We're not stopping. We will keep finding a way to put on the fights. I'm in the fight business. I've been doing this for over 20 years, and this stuff happens to me every weekend — obviously not at this level.. Unless there's a total shutdown of the country where people can't leave their houses and things like that, these fights will happen. We will find venues and we will figure this out. The only thing that's going to stop us is a complete government shutdown where people are confined to their homes"

DANA WHITE, UFC PRESIDENT

The UFC broadcast from Brasilia included constant promotion of the UFC 249 would be headlined by lightweight champion Khabib Nurmagomedov against Tony Ferguson in a matchup that has been booked four previous times, but canceled each time due to injuries or other circumstances.

"Unless there's a total shutdown of the

country where people can't leave their houses and things like that, these fights will happen," White said. "We will find venues and we will figure this out. The only thing that's going to stop us is a complete government shutdown where people are confined to their homes."

The show in Brasilia was likely a boon for ESPN, as it filled a yawning void of live sports during what's usually one of the busiest weeks of the international sporting calendar. The fights were initially scheduled to be aired in the U.S. on the ESPN+ subscription service, but instead filled nearly six hours on ESPN.

Oliveira (29-8) ended the show by finishing Lee (18-6), a former lightweight title contender who missed weight for the bout. Oliveira has won seven straight fights by stoppage, and the Brazilian veteran's celebratory screams echoed through the empty arena after his UFC-record 14th submission victory.

"We spent the whole week not knowing if this was going to happen," Oliveira said. "I came to make history again, this time without anyone cheering. Of course I wanted everyone to be there, but I'm sure that an audience that didn't know me yet had the opportunity to meet me today."

The absence of fans led to a unique atmosphere. The UFC still played its fighters' walk-in

music as they walked to the cage, and ring announcer Joe Martinez declaimed the fighters' names with no fans in attendance to hear it. After conducting an in-cage interview, UFC broadcaster Michael Bisping instinctively exorted the absent crowd to "Make some noise!"

The absence of crowd energy perhaps played a role in the card's first nine fights all going to decisions. Brazil's Jussier Formiga lost a narrow unanimous decision to Mexican lightweight Brandon Moreno in the type of close bout that might have been influenced by thousands of fans cheering for the home fighter.

Lightweight contender Renato Moicano got the card's first stoppage victory nearly 4 1/2 hours into the show, finishing Damir Hadzovic in 44 seconds with a rear naked choke. "I'm very frustrated because today I fought in my hometown, and I don't see nobody," Moicano said. "I didn't see familiar faces. I didn't see my family over here. I don't know what to say."

The atmosphere outside the arena was equally strange. The UFC had already erected signage and cordoned off gathering areas normally placed outside venues for fans, but the areas sat unused and empty.