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Sports world found silver linings amid medical, social turmoil

It goes without saying that 2020 proved to be a year like no other. The COVID-19 pandemic upended the sports world, forcing leagues and governing bodies to shut down in March and cancel or delay their events and entire seasons.

Last year also saw athletes, teams and leagues joining (and in a few cases opposing) the social justice protests roiling the country and participating in a highly contentious presidential election.

2020 did have some silver linings. The pandemic led to sports organizations, athletes and brands digging deep to develop innovative responses to keep fans engaged and recoup what revenue they could. These new strategies may serve them well long after the shutdown is over. At the same time, social and political activism in sports reached new heights, resulting in several progressive developments that many thought we might never see.

The year kicked off with the usual hype surrounding the Super Bowl and its must-see roster of television commercials for beer, soda, fast food, avocados, and auto brands. Back then, fans were still allowed in the stands. Then-New England Patriots QB Tom Brady still commanded the spotlight, despite his team not playing in the big game, as he assured viewers in a Hulu commercial that he wasn't going anywhere. (We were so naïve.)

The early part of 2020 also saw increasing concerns about the impact of facial recognition technology in sports, particularly regarding individual privacy and regulation. Notably, the technology was slated to be on worldwide display at the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, where facial recognition would be used to screen and store images of 300,000 athletes and staff as part of the event's security measures.

But that was all pre-pandemic. We had no idea the Olympic Games weren't going to happen in 2020.

By mid-March, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak to be



SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

DOUGLAS N. MASTERS and SETH A. ROSE

DOUGLAS N. MASTERS is a partner at Loeb & Loeb LLP, where he litigates and counsels clients primarily in intellectual property, advertising and unfair competition. He is co-chair of the firm's intellectual property protection group. dmasters@loeb.com
SETH A. ROSE is a partner at the firm, where he counsels clients on programs and initiatives in advertising, marketing, promotions, media, sponsorships, entertainment, branded and integrated marketing, and social media. srose@loeb.com

a full-blown, worldwide health crisis. In the United States, sports organizations postponed or canceled games to slow the spread of the highly contagious virus. Then, leagues began shutting down entirely to protect their athletes, employees and fans.

The National Basketball Association suspended all games after a Utah Jazz player tested positive for COVID-19. The NBA resumed its season several months later, holding the playoffs without fans in attendance in a unique, protective "bubble" at Disney Co.'s ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex in Florida. The complex served as the NBA's site for games, practices and housing.

Major League Baseball canceled spring training and delayed the start of its season, which eventually happened but also without fans in the stands. The NFL canceled all public events related to the 2020 draft. The National Hockey League delayed its season and held its Stanley Cup playoffs in two fan-less bubbles. The National Collegiate Athletic Association cancelled March Madness, while golf's Masters Tournament and horse

racing's Kentucky Derby were pushed back several months. Events were televised, but fans were shut out from attending in person.

The leagues' front offices began scrutinizing their advertising, sponsorship and broadcast contracts' force majeure clauses as sports remained in a state of limbo. Billions of dollars in marketing were at stake, but the pandemic death toll continued to climb.

The International Olympic Committee announced in late March the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games until 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a first in the event's 124-year history. However, the IOC also decided to retain its 2020 trademarks, a forward-thinking branding move that indicates the Olympics are a sports institution.

Faced with losing hundreds of millions of dollars in advertising, major Olympic sponsors also pivoted, reworking their advertising campaigns to address the pandemic, according to Digiday. Toyota skillfully revised its advertising to honor health care workers on the COVID-19 front lines as "Heroes of Today," while acknowledging the wait to recognize Olympic athletes as tomorrow's heroes. Visa's new social media campaign "Do Your Part Like An Olympian" featured Olympic athletes at home, washing their hands, just like everyone else during the pandemic.

The NBA, which led the way in responding to the pandemic, restarted its interrupted season by collaborating with the parent company of its biggest media partner, ABC/ESPN. The Walt Disney Co. provided its ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex in Orlando, Fla., to serve as a pandemic bubble for the league's playoff games, practices and housing.

Faced with partial or entire seasons without fans in attendance, leagues offered sponsors new advertising real estate to make up the revenue from ticket sales, venue concessions and other on-site sources. NASCAR, for example, allowed approved sponsor logos on the masks that racing teams were mandated wear due to COVID-19.

NASCAR also made headlines in July for an entirely different reason when it banned the Confederate flag at its events. The stock car racing authority responded to a call by Bubba Wallace, its lone full-time Black driver, to remove the highly controversial flag from its tracks. It was a remarkable move for a sport so firmly rooted in the South.

Across the country, athletes, teams and leagues issued statements and took definitive stands against racial inequity and police misconduct.

The NBA's Milwaukee Bucks protested the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Wisconsin by refusing to leave their locker room before Game 5 of their first-round playoff series against the Orlando Magic in Orlando. The players then issued a statement calling for immediate action on criminal justice reform. The boycott movement spread to other leagues, canceling three WNBA games, three MLB games and five Major League Soccer matches.

The team formerly known as the Washington Redskins also made a long-awaited decision to jettison its name. Currently known as the "Washington Football Team" until a permanent name is chosen, the team dropped both the "Redskins" name, which it had been using since 1933, and the image of a Native American man as its logo. For a team that defended its Redskins intellectual property in court all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court just a few years ago, the reversal was a significant development.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell delivered another surprise when he admitted that the league should have listened to players' concerns about racism and wouldn't discipline players for taking a knee during the national anthem when games resume. San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick first took a knee during the national

anthem at games in 2018 to protest racial injustice. A handful of other players and athletes in other sports followed Kaepernick's lead amid a storm of criticism.

If a national health crisis and social unrest weren't enough, then-President Donald J. Trump's tumultuous term culminated in a highly polarized presidential election in November. To its credit, the embattled sports industry made lemonade out of lemons, lending its unused venues for election activities while athletes encouraged voting and urged change.

A total of 40 professional stadiums and arenas across several leagues were used as polling locations, enabling more than 298,000 people to vote, either on Election Day or by dropping off mail-in ballots, reported USA Today. Some of those arenas and stadiums also hosted voter registration drives and vote counting. The NBA players union even made hosting election-related activities part of an agreement reached with the league after the Milwaukee Bucks boycott.

The NBA and Women's National Basketball Association also partnered with Rock the Vote to encourage fans to register, while the NFL and the NFL Players Association created the NFL Votes initiative to provide non-partisan information and support to increase voter engagement.

In an unprecedented partisan move by a professional sports organization, the WNBA's Seattle Storm officially endorsed Joe Biden and Kamala Harris for president and vice president in October. The political views of the team's three co-owners lined up with social justice demonstrations by players, who used their national platform to support the Black Lives Matter movement and protest racial violence.

Meanwhile, another WNBA team actively worked to counter the views of one of its

owners. Atlanta Dream players and the WNBA Players Association called for co-owner Kelly Loeffler, a Republican senator in Georgia to step down as an owner and campaigned for Loeffler's Democratic opponent Raphael Warnock in a run-off election.

Amid all this medical, social and political turmoil, the sports world worked hard to maintain a sense of community for fans in a time when seasons were suspended or in-person attendance was impossible, and polarized viewpoints on a range of issues continued to divide the country.

Social media became an even more important way for teams and athletes to stay connected with followers and help fans interact with each other. Newer platforms like TikTok emerged as a way to attract younger viewers while sports organizations pushed out new content on social media to fill programming voids and add value to existing content.

The NBA also took the opportunity to get bored fans excited about sports betting, which the United States legalized in 2018. The league became the first to offer specialized broadcasts of certain games designed to appeal to gamblers, an innovation that could have staying power long after the pandemic is over. Called NBABet Stream, the broadcasts display point spreads and odds on screen, and feature betting analyses, reports ESPN.

It's now a new year, with a COVID-19 vaccine rolling out and a new presidential administration. Sports organizations remain in a wait-and-see mode for now, and the uncertainty ahead means anything but smooth sailing as the industry eyes a return to some sense of normalcy. Yet the lessons learned and innovative responses crafted in an extraordinarily challenging year bode well for the sports world's recovery and ability to respond to future adversity.