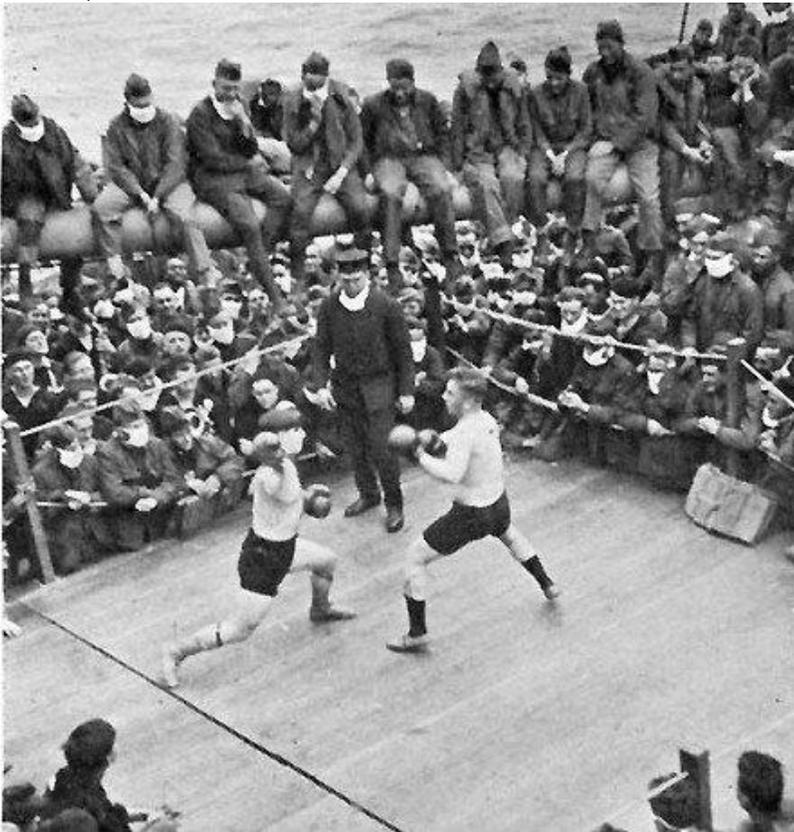


Sports in the Last Pandemic

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Sailors boxing during 1918 pandemic. By Sherri Middleton

As sports events prepare to return this summer, reports have begun to circulate about athletes testing positive for COVID-19 at some college campuses. Major league athletes are also being affected by the virus as they try to practice or remain fit for what might be a limited season of play. In the last pandemic, the Spanish flu of 1918, athletes also faced similar struggles according to reports from that time. Soldiers were returning to the U.S. from World War I and the first case of the flu of 1918 was recorded in Kanas at a military base. Sports were already struggling to compete because the nation's young soldiers were fighting around the world.

Boxing was a favorite sport among soldiers and the public in 1918. A fight between Jack Dempsey and the Battling Levinski was postponed, according to the World Boxing Association. That bout was eventually held in November 1918 in Philadelphia. Everyone at the bout wore face masks except the boxers. At that point, according to published reports, all public gatherings were banned. Schools were closed. Citizens were encouraged to stay home. It sounds all too familiar now. The pandemic also affected baseball, hockey, European football and other sports.

In the major leagues, Silk O'Loughlin, one of the most well-known umpires died from influenza, and the sports world noticed. "Shoeless" Joe Jackson played for Bethlehem Steel's six-team league during the war. Apparently, he was a draft dodger because those young men who played baseball instead of working for the war effort or enlisting were not doing their part. And reportedly, this is when Babe Ruth had his chance at the Big Leagues.



Babe Ruth battled the flu twice. The Red Sox held batting practice for troops in Little Rock, Ark., where Ruth, a 23-year-old pitcher hit five home runs. The next month, several Red Sox players developed flu-like symptoms and after losing 13 players to the mysterious illness, the Red Sox manager called on Ruth to pitch. In May, Ruth got the flu and the team doctor treated him with silver nitrate, Ruth Almost died.



After his recovery, Ruth hit 11 home runs during games in May and June.

Baseball players wear gauze masks during the 1918 Pandemic.

The Spanish Flu came in three waves – spring, fall and winter. More than 500 million people were infected around the world with an estimated 50 million deaths. More than 675,000 U.S. citizens died, according to historical reports during the two years of the virus.

By the second wave of the flu, the virus mutated because of troop movement around the world, and when it returned in the fall, healthy 25- to 35-year-olds were struck with high fever, pneumonia, nasal hemorrhaging and inflammation. Reports stated that victims died within hours or days of developing symptoms. Their skin turned blue as their lungs filled with fluid.

THE "FLU" IS INCREASING

No one knows the cause of this disease.
It killed twice as many people in the United States
last year as our armies lost in France.

IF YOU WANT TO PLAY SAFE:

1. Keep away from sick people, especially if they cough or sneeze.
2. Use your handkerchief when you cough or sneeze.
3. Avoid crowded street cars, trains, or houses.
4. Don't spit on the floor.
5. Wash your hands before eating.
6. Keep your fingers out of your mouth.
7. Avoid common drinking cups.
8. Keep out of dusty places.

9. SEE THE PLANT DOCTOR IF YOU ARE NOT FEELING RIGHT

Deaths and infections in the third wave were as high as the second, but with the end of the war, as troops returned home, the spread of the virus slowed. Many historians and scientists believe the end of the war and the public's desire to watch or play sports may have contributed to the spread of the virus in some way.

Even though fans could watch football games in person, they had to wear masks. Social distancing was not followed and that was thought to have contributed to the rapid spread among more people.

At least today we have more understanding of influenza and social spread because of previous deadly outbreaks. Hopefully, we learned something from the past.

We're ready for sports to return to the U.S. and around the world. Hopefully, we will heed warnings and stop the spread of the virus. I'm glad to see most organizers are taking this pandemic seriously and implementing plans to keep athletes and fans safe. Sports will return and we'll be more than ready to cheer on our teams.