



Industry Confident Sporting Events Will Return in Fall, Winter

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By Sherri Middleton

More than 90 percent of sports rights holders, national governing bodies and planners say events will return this year. Since March, the *SportsEvents* team has been surveying sports events planners, including those with National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and rights holders of their own self-grown sports organizations.



Photo Credit: Visit Redding

Through multiple surveys about the impact of COVID-19 on sports events in the United States and telephone calls and email responses, planners are looking to late summer, fall and winter as a time when games will be scheduled, and play will return. Positivity tempered by the unknown about when governments will ease stay-at-home restrictions and the safety of hosting events during a global pandemic after the Coronavirus moved across the world and created uncertainty in mid-March as we began speaking with planners.

Over time, responses became more positive as planners and rights holders worked with sports commissions, CVBs, and their athletes to postpone or reschedule events to a later date. What we learned, as one state after another, rolled to a stop — those hardest hit events were, of course, the sports already scheduled in the days and weeks immediately following the shutdown of business along with travel restrictions and isolation mandates.

The first significant news was the cancellation of the Indian Wells Tennis Tournament in California as soon as the first Coronavirus case was identified in the area. Organizers considered hosting the Masters 1000 tournament, a premier two-week tennis tournament without fans since most athletes were already in the Riverside community preparing and practicing for what would have concluded on March 22.

Then the NCAA made the tough decision to cancel all men's and women's athletic events, including the March Madness basketball tournament and other NCAA collegiate events.

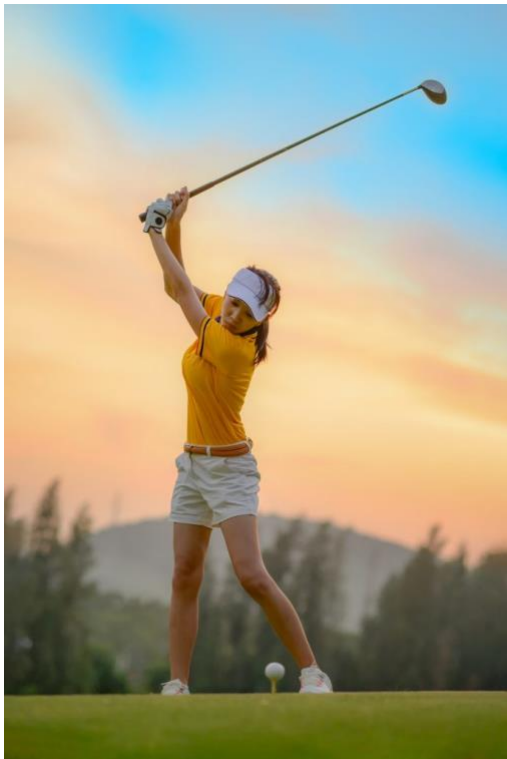
Professional basketball and hockey – the NBA and NHL – then spring training for MLB were all disrupted. The Olympics were postponed to 2021, and the rest of the smaller level sports organizations were forced to follow suit.



My first call was with Mary Kimball, executive director of U.S. Quidditch, about a completely different topic. She told me that quidditch events would hopefully be rescheduled to late spring or summer. Laura Balestrini, president of the American Footgolf Federation said the two events scheduled for April 2 in Northern California had been canceled because the State of California was hit hard and fast with stay-at-home orders to all residents. Another event in May in Panama City Beach, Fla., was also postponed.

Hopes for other events that would bring athletes from Australia and other countries were on hold as Australia was looking for ways to alter competition during their winter season. By offering twosomes instead of foursomes the hope was that Footgolf would go on and adjustments to play would help with separation and social distancing.

Even less traditional events such as lawnmower racing believed the season, which starts in March, had already had to cancel one event due to rain in Arizona. Another event in Florida was temporarily postponed, and other events in April in South Carolina had to be canceled until further notice.



Even the Symetra professional women's golf tour under the LPGA was working with tournament directors, sponsors, and others to move the 20 or more events it holds until later in spring, summer or fall. As the Symetra Tour realigned its way of doing business, according to David Lafrennie, VP sales, the organization was waiting to see when schedules could be finalized.

As I stated earlier, the initial days of the lockdown and subsequent panic had planners on the phone negotiating with venues and facilities to reschedule or cancel events indefinitely. They were working with hotels on room contracts, refunding or holding registration fees, and working with airlines to keep or rebook flights for events that could not be held.

Today, there is much more positivity in the sports tourism industry. Destinations and sports commission staff who have been busy with outreach, social media and work with planned events are now reporting new bookings, a return of event schedules and hope that when the governments allow people to return to work and life, events will be ready again.

Many rights holders and even NGBs have shifted focus to provide online resources, mental health support and outreach for Olympic and Paralympic athletes who will have to wait another year to compete and they are challenging their members to remain active and healthy alone safely.

One planner responded to our survey saying:



“We are looking at ways to help our players and teams during this unusual time of quiet athletics and help promote them through social media, videos, etc. There are hundreds of thousands of student-athletes not playing and coaches not coaching, so why not put them in touch with each other for free.”

As planners responded to the survey, 61 percent said they planned to have events back on schedule this summer, while 22.22 percent said fall and 5.6 percent predicted dates would change to winter.

About 43 percent of planners said they hoped to host events two to three months after they were initially scheduled, with 50 percent of respondents saying events had been postponed with 11 percent canceling all events outright.

Many survey participants indicated that they are moving to smaller venues or teaming up with other sports events on later open dates so that play can return to normal.

Most of the responses say virtual experiences were already available or they have now adapted to online outreach and training. This one crisis will now force planners to have more robust contracts with hotels, venues, and others to ensure all is not lost in the future.

For the most part, if the responses from our survey of planners of sports events is correct based on the current information available, the majority of events will take place this year if the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and government agencies relax policies. In essence, sports will return in some form by fall or winter this year with many ready to jump into action this summer if allowed.



These are unprecedented times in our industry and our lives. We will continue reaching out to you, and the survey will remain open so that we can compile data about the sports events industry on an on-going basis.

As we gather data and your comments, we hope to provide all of our industry partners with an up-to-date gauge of expectations and ideas that others are using now. Things are changing rapidly, and as you ramp up your schedules and head back to the fields and courts across the country, please continue to add your comments and responses to the COVID-19 survey by *SportsEvents*. As you saw from this blog, I'm only quoting the respondents who said it was okay to mention them. Many others of you have given permission to be mentioned in online posts or the magazine, and I may call on you again at a later date. Just know that you may remain anonymous if you wish. [CLICK HERE](#) to complete the survey.

Stay well and keep in touch. We are all in this together.