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Cancellation of sport events creates significant void – UCT scientist

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has pulled the rug out from under sport – events have been cancelled or postponed, leaving competitors (and spectators) in a vacuum.

The effects of cancellations can be devastating, said Dr Jeroen Swart, sports physician and exercise scientist at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and medical director for the UAE Team Emirates, one of the top three teams in global cycling.

“Athletes have a primary focus of achieving success and results. The cancellation of events creates a significant void in terms of their drive and motivations. Our process is to redirect their drives towards staying healthy and performing altered training regimes to maintain base levels of fitness.” It’s also an opportunity to work on weaknesses.

“By making the process the focus we can maintain interest and drive and hopefully will be better prepared for when the racing resumes,” he said.

The sudden withdrawal of competitive sport events has been equally devastating for sport-loving fans and followers, many now also in self-isolation, who find themselves with nothing to watch on television.

This certainly creates a great emptiness for many people, said Swart, both in terms of viewing sport and the social interactions and camaraderie engendered around sport.

“Sport provides an important source of entertainment and social interaction ... and it can be an emotional catalyst. Reruns of past events are one way to fill this void but there will be a significant number of people who will be left with a lot of time – and frustration – on their hands.”

He’s hopeful that some events will be able to take place without spectators in six to eight weeks’ time. Spectatorless sport meetings may be required for some time before normal sporting activities can recommence.

While sportspeople and spectators may find the going tough, Swart believes the pandemic poses the greatest challenge to the world in at least two generations.

“We will see an impact that will last for years to decades into the future. We’re still early on in what will be a distressing and challenging period, lasting many months. However, this will illustrate how well humanity can adapt and find novel ways to cope with what can seem like insurmountable problems. I’m confident that we will all rise to meet the challenge and overcome it.”

ENDS

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