

Effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Soccer in Zimbabwe

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The covid-19 pandemic had serious impact in sports in the world in general and in Zimbabwe in particular. This study sought to investigate the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on soccer in Zimbabwe and the remedies adopted to mitigate the effects, from the perspective of local players and soccer coaches. Data for the study were collected from 45 respondents (25 players, 20 coaches) purposively selected from the Zimbabwean super league. These respondents responded to a self-administered open-ended questionnaire. The responses so obtained were summarised into themes based on the research questions and presented graphically as graphs and histograms and pie-charts.

From the perspective of the coaches, the study found that the major effects of the pandemic to coaches were eroded salaries for club officials coaches and players, psychological stress induced on coaches and players because of the uncertain future in soccer, disengagement from soccer in order to pursue other activities for survival, reduced opportunities for career development of coaches and players and loss of fitness due to prolonged inactivity and neglect of sports facilities. Some coach respondents cited more time for individual training as one effect. Other coaches highlighted difficulties in assembling squads for camping, due to travel restrictions and the poor psychological state of players, as having negative effects on team preparations and player selections. Hesitancy to mix with other players due to suspicions of being covid-19-positive and reduced player pools from which to select squads were also infrequently cited as some other effects that the pandemic had on team preparation and selection.

In order to mitigate these negative effects of the pandemic on soccer, most coaches gave players online training tasks in order to keep them both fit and motivated during the pandemic. Other coach respondents also reported that the livelihood of players and coaching staff was sustained by giving them monthly allowances and groceries hampers. A few of the coach respondents could not do anything to sustain the livelihoods of their players because they had no resources.

From the players' perspective, most players reported pursuing other non-soccer activities to eke out a living, engaging more in home-based online training, becoming very uncertain of their future in soccer and losing a lot of revenue due to inactivity. Other player-respondents reported having increased times with families, greater utilisation of technology in training, increased drug abuse, increased injuries incurred from participation in money games to gain a living, weight gain due to decreased activity and expired contracts as other effects of the pandemic on local soccer. Other players cited use of poor non-merit based selection methods for assembling squads, and a very limited pool of players from which to select teams as another consequence of the pandemic on local soccer. In order to reduce the negative impact of the pandemic on their soccer careers players reported that they sought psychological help from psychologists or online motivational platforms to keep in good shape, selling various wares or engaging in fund-raising projects (including poultry-rearing) in order to sustain themselves, engaging in soccer-related consultancies and soccer betting for survival.

In order for soccer to continue during the pandemic, most players recommended strategies including increased player relief and support in the form of continued allowances and grocery supplies, more online coaching and training, and resuscitation of local soccer leagues under strict lockdown protocols. Other players suggested that the establishment a standing national soccer team, availing more personal home-based training for players, investing in the bio-bubble concept and increasing psychological support services for players would ensure continuity of soccer in the pandemic.

It is recommended that soccer managers think outside the box to identify and implement mitigatory measures which will allow soccer to continue to be played even during the challenging environment presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.

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