

COVID-19 and combat sports: to fight or not to fight?

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Professional boxing and mixed martial arts (MMA) are popular sports with a worldwide fanbase. COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) is the infectious respiratory disease caused by SARS-CoV 2 virus (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus 2). On March 11th, 2020 The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic considering the over 118,000 cases of the coronavirus illness in over 110 countries and territories around the world and the sustained risk of further global spread.¹ As per the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus tracking center on May 16th, 2020 there are more than 4.5 million cases worldwide and a total exceeding 300,000 global deaths.² In order to control the spread of COVID-19, health care authorities in different countries recommended isolation of sick persons, quarantine for those who may have been exposed to the virus and social distancing.³ Social distancing also referred to as physical distancing meant keeping space between people outside of their homes. A distance of at least 6 feet (2 meters) was recommended and people were asked not to gather in large groups, avoid crowded places and mass gatherings. Widespread cancellation or postponement of sporting events including boxing and MMA bouts followed. The most common cited cause for cancellation was fear of contagion. The encyclopedia describes contagion as the communication of disease from one person to another by close contact. By canceling events, State Commissions, promoters and combat sport's governing bodies made the tough but responsible decision to protect all the concerned parties namely the athletes, their camps, Commission officials, production crews and the fans at the venue.

Some promoters have explored the possibility of holding a combat sports event "behind closed doors". Only the athletes, cornermen, referee, judges, Commission officials, ringside physicians and TV production crew would be present at the venue. The rationale for holding an event behind closed doors is to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission from person to person at the venue. It was further proposed that all athletes be tested for SARS-CoV2 before entering the ring or cage. The term "behind closed doors" is used primarily in association with football (soccer) to describe matches played where spectators are not allowed in the stadium to watch. Soccer matches are played behind closed doors to punish a team when its fans display rowdy behavior and clash with the rival team supporters and is included in the FIFA Disciplinary Code.⁴

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic should combat sports events be held behind closed doors? Crowd less bouts are rarely heard of in combat sports. Passionate frequently blood hungry fans vociferously and voraciously support their prizefighter and are as much a part of the sport as the athletes themselves. Combat sports athletes fight not

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just for fame and money, they fight for their fans in the venue. Holding a crowd less event takes the very essence and vibe out of a combat sports event. Just like water is the elixir of life, so is the combat sports fan to the sport itself. Even if an event is held behind closed doors and all those present (not just the athletes) are tested for the coronavirus, the risk of transmission from person to person remains. Controlling the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic is far bigger than any boxing or MMA event. It is a matter of social responsibility and an obligation to act for the benefit of the society at large.

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