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## EPL gets green light for June re-start



**LIVERPOOL:** File photo taken on January 02, 2017 show fans shield their eyes from the Sun during the English Premier League football match between Everton and Southampton at Goodison Park in Liverpool. The Premier League is adamant that it can overcome huge logistical challenges to get players back on the pitch during the coronavirus crisis but has long since accepted there will be no fans in the stadiums. — AFP

**LONDON:** Premier League clubs received a boost to their hopes of completing the season on Monday as the government published a "roadmap" that could see the return of elite sport in England from June 1.

As the 20 English top-flight clubs met for further talks on "Project Restart", ministers announced plans to ease the coronavirus lockdown. Under step two of that process, which cannot begin any earlier than June 1, sporting events would be allowed "to take place behind closed doors for broadcast, while avoiding the risk of large-scale social contact".

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he believed the return of sport on TV would "provide a much-needed boost to national morale."

Supporters face a long wait to be allowed to attend matches, though, with the latest guidelines recognising a return to sport in front of a crowd "may only be fully possible significantly later depending on the reduction in numbers of infections".

Premier League clubs had been planning for a return to action no earlier than the week beginning June 8. Before the resumption of matches can be considered, protocols need to be agreed on how to return to group training safely and on how the Premier

League would deal with positive tests.

Brighton confirmed on Sunday that a third member of their squad had tested positive. Cases have also been found in squads in Germany, where the Bundesliga is due to restart this weekend, as well as Italy, Spain and Portugal in recent days.

"We have protocols created and reviewed, we have a testing company appointed, but the important consultation with players and managers is the next step," said Premier League CEO Richard Masters.

"No decisions will be made until after we have talked to players and managers and those meetings are scheduled for later this week."

Players have voiced their concerns at the prospect of being rushed back into training and, eventually, into playing a contact sport at a time when the rest of the public remain encouraged to abide by social-distancing guidelines.

The UK has been one of the worst-hit countries in

the global pandemic, with the government officially recording nearly 32,000 deaths of people who had tested positive for COVID-19.

"We are just people too," tweeted Norwich midfielder Todd Cantwell on Sunday. There is also disagreement over where the remaining 92 matches of the season would be played.

League chiefs believed they would only get the government's green light to restart if matches were held at a limited number of neutral venues to reduce the medical, police, security and broadcast personnel required.

A number of clubs near the bottom of the table have spoken openly of their opposition to the plan as they believe it would increase the risk of being relegated.

"With all these compromises and health risks we are asked to finish a competition that bears no resemblance to the one we started," Watford's chairman and chief executive Scott Duxbury told the club's website. Those higher up the table are also concerned at the

prospect of having to reimburse sponsors who have paid for naming rights on their stadiums.

"I think everybody would prefer to play home and away if at all possible. And I think it's clear to see that some clubs feel more strongly about that than others," added Masters. "We are in contact with the authorities and listening to that advice while also representing club views in those discussions."

The prospect of appeasing the clubs struggling at the bottom by ruling out relegation this season also appears over after the English Football Association rejected that idea and told the Premier League that final standings must be based on "sporting merit" if no more games can be played.

Masters admitted the Premier League had for the first time held discussions on how the league would be decided if matches cannot restart, but said no definitive formula had been approved.

"It was the first time we discussed curtailment - it's still our aim to finish the season obviously but it's important to discuss all the options with our clubs," he said. "No conclusions were reached on any other models. Those are future conversations we may need to have." — AFP

## MLB owners approve 2020 season proposal for players: Reports

**NEW YORK:** Major League Baseball team owners have approved a proposal for starting the coronavirus-delayed 2020 season in early July in ballparks without spectators, according to multiple reports Monday.

The campaign was shut down two months ago while pre-season games were underway and the proposal for an 82-game season, about half the normal length, must still be approved by the players union.

Negotiations were expected to begin today, according to ESPN, USA Today, The Athletic and NBC Sports. The MLB plan becomes the first formal proposal for a major US sports league to exit a coronavirus hiatus, with the NBA, Major League Soccer and the National Hockey League seasons having

been halted by the deadly outbreak.

The proposal would have players report to training camps starting in mid-June for about three weeks, either at home ballparks or training sites in Florida and Arizona, where stay-at-home rules have been eased.

The season would launch between July 1-4 and playoffs would expand from 10 to 14 teams, with two extra wild-card clubs in both the National and American Leagues. The playoffs would end in early November, only slightly later than normal.

Teams would mostly play against clubs from their own division, minimizing travel and expenses. They would also face clubs from the same division in the opposite league. Designated hitters would come to bat instead of pitchers for National League teams for the first time in history. AL clubs have had the rule in place for decades.

Teams would play at their own home ballparks where allowed by state and local governments. Teams whose home stadiums are unavailable would play out of their spring training facilities.

Due to border crossing issues with Canada, the Toronto Blue Jays might have to play out of their Florida training headquarters. Playing without tick-

etbuyers would be expected to trim 40% off MLB revenues and the owners reportedly would seek a 50-50 revenue-sharing deal similar to what the NFL and NBA have used.

That might cause an issue with players, who are looking at losing half a season of their regular salary already in a shrunken campaign and could worry about owners pushing for a salary cap in the next collective bargaining agreement when the current one expires in December 2021.

MLB team owners have never offered to share extra profits with players so the union might very well object to having to share losses with the team owners this time.

Teams would expand rosters from 26 to 30 players with a support squad of 20 players available as replacements in case of injury or illness, including presumably positive coronavirus tests.

Health issues would also have to be solved to the players' satisfaction, as tweets from Washington Nationals pitcher Sean Doolittle noted health issues that got little mention in early details on the MLB proposal. "Bear with me, but it feels like we've zoomed past the most important aspect of any MLB restart plan: health protections for players, families,

staff, stadium workers and the workforce it would require to resume a season," Doolittle tweeted.

Doolittle, who helped the Nationals beat Houston in last year's World Series, wondered how many COVID-19 tests would be needed for the league during the pandemic.

"Baseball requires a massive workforce besides the players: coaches, clubhouse staff, security, grounds crews, umpires, gameday stadium staff, TV & media... we need to protect everyone," he tweeted.

"And that's before we get to hotel workers and transportation workers... They are essential workers. We wouldn't be able to play a season without them, and they deserve the same protections."

He also asked how much risk players are willing to assume to even play a season knowing that anyone involved with a game could be among the 20% of cases with severe symptoms — and if added health-care benefits would be available for people with long-term health issues after catching the virus. "We don't have a vaccine yet, and we don't really have any effective anti-viral treatments," Doolittle asked. "What happens if there is a second wave?" —AFP

“Project Restart”