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Perspective

# COVID-19 and Combat Sports: Guidelines for Beginning Professional Bouts and Opening Gyms again

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## Perspective

Professional boxing and mixed martial arts (MMA) are popular sports with a worldwide fan base. COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) is the infectious respiratory disease caused by SARS-COV 2 virus (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus 2). On March 11<sup>th</sup>, 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]. 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 [2,3]. 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.

Governments are now turning to the complex question of how and when to open different states and countries to business and normal life. The following are guidelines which can be followed as decision to reopen gyms and begin professional boxing and MMA bouts is contemplated:

- i. For combat sports to resume this summer we should explore the possibility of initially holding events "behind closed doors". Only the athletes, corner men, 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 will be to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission from person to person by restricting the number of people at the venue to under 50.
- ii. It is proposed that all (not just combatants) who are going to be present at the closed-door event undergo a coronavirus screening questionnaire leading up to the weigh-in. This screener for coronavirus symptoms would be administered via an e-mail questionnaire sent out 1 week leading up to the event. The screener shall include questions such as history of fever, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chills, repeated shaking with chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, new loss of taste or smell. Any individual who answers to the affirmative to any of the questions in the above screener would be requested to get a medical certificate of good health from a registered physician (MD or DO).
- iii. In the past month, many SARS-COV-2 diagnostic test tests have become available. Serology tests looking for I<sub>g</sub>M and I<sub>g</sub>G antibodies to SARS-COV-2 are also becoming available. Testing shall play an integral role as events begin. Different tests have different turnaround time. Serology results are generally available within a few hours to 24 hours. It is the general consensus among experts that detection of I<sub>g</sub>M and I<sub>g</sub>G antibodies to COVID-19 indicates the development of immunity and that this immunity may be life-long (some experts differ on this but feel that antibodies after infection will likely protect from repeat disease or at least assure that the repeat is mild).
- iv. It is recommended that the individual be symptom free for at least 14 days prior to testing for antibodies. All combatants will have to submit the result of a coronavirus serological (antibody) test to the attention of the Commission Medical Team. The antibody test shall help to determine the immune status of that individual. If antibodies are detected that person is immune. If no antibodies are detected, he is not immune
- v. An athlete with coronavirus like symptoms such as fever, cough, body aches, nasal congestion, sore throat, runny nose or diarrhea at the time of the weigh-in would be medically disqualified and not allowed to participate in the event the next day.
- vi. Social distancing would be strictly practiced at the time of the weigh-ins and the event itself.
- vii. Corner men, referee, judges, Commission officials, ringside physicians and TV production crew would wear a surgical face mask (N95 respirator is not warranted), gloves and eye-protection during the entire course of the event.

Gym owners can use some of the above guidelines to ensure the health and safety of their patrons. The following is further recommended:

- i. Gym owners should ensure that everyone wears a mask while in the gym and practices social distance recommendations while training or working out. Masks should be made available to patrons at the entry to the gym.



- ii. Gym owners should consider scheduling time slots for patrons to work out. This shall help ensure that no more than 20 people are in the gym at the same time.
- iii. Gym owners should ensure that all mats, gloves, sports equipment and locker rooms are adequately disinfected with commercially available disinfectants after each use.

We should acknowledge that in spite of following the above recommendations, the risk of transmission from person to person remains. By adopting some of the above practices a cautious start to combat sports events can though be contemplated.

## References

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