What's a sporting event look like in an empty stadium?

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Newsela Editor's Update as of March 14: Before we could run this story, the NBA suspended all games as did the NHL. Other leagues quickly followed suit including Major League Soccer and the PGA Tour. Baseball's opening day has been postponed. The NCAA basketball tournaments for both women and men have been canceled.

It was a baseball game, but without the smell of hot dogs or popcorn. The silence at the game was so pure you could hear the bullpen phone ringing from the dugout. Nothing but empty, green seats as far as the eye could see. The game at Oriole Park at Camden Yards in Baltimore, Maryland, on April 29, 2015, was still a baseball game, but a distorted version that no one who was there ever wanted to witness again.

"Fans play such a big part in generating the intensity when you're playing at home," said Jim Palmer. Palmer was the announcer for the game at Camden Yards that day. "All of that was gone,"
The 2015 game between the Baltimore Orioles and Chicago White Sox was played to an empty stadium. It took place amidst civil unrest in Baltimore. A resident of the city, Freddie Gray, had died in police custody and protests became violent. Due to security risks, MLB decided to host the game with no fans in attendance.

**Contingency Plans For Coronavirus Outbreak**

The question of whether a sporting event is still a sporting event if played without fans is suddenly relevant again this week. Major North American leagues, including the National Basketball Association (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL) and MLB, are preparing contingency plans for the growing coronavirus outbreak.

Steps have already been taken in Europe. Soccer matches in Spain, Portugal, France, Germany and Slovakia have been or will be played in empty stadiums. Italy, one of the countries hardest-hit by the coronavirus, has canceled all matches for the next month. Baseball leagues in Japan and South Korea have pushed back the starts of their regular seasons indefinitely.

American teams have been deciding whether to postpone or relocate games, or play them without fans. It has already been a reality for the NHL's San Jose Sharks playing in Santa Clara County in California. Public health officials in the county have banned public gatherings of more than 1,000 people for three weeks.

Both the NHL and NBA are near the end of their regular seasons. The playoffs are just around the corner. On March 9, the NBA instructed teams to prepare for the possibility of games in empty arenas. The prospect of this disappointed star player LeBron James.

"Obviously I would be very disappointed, you know, not having the fans because that's what I play for," James said. "I play for my family. I play for my fans."

"They're saying no one could actually come to the game if they go to that point, so I'd be disappointed in that, but at the same time, you got to listen to the people that are keeping track of what's going on. If they feel that it's best for the safety of the players, safety of the franchise, safety of the league to mandate that, then we'll all listen to it."

**NBA And NHL Suspend Seasons**

On March 11, the NBA announced the suspension of the rest of the season. On March 12, the NHL announced that it, too, is suspending its season. Major League Soccer announced on March 12 that it has suspended its season for 30 days. Opening day for the MLB season was supposed to be on March 26 this year. On March 12, the league announced it would delay its opener by at least two weeks. Earlier, it had looked like MLB was more likely to move games than to play them in empty stadiums.
The notion of games played in empty stadiums or arenas, however, goes against the very nature of sports as entertainment. If it was impossible to bring crowds to a concert, for example, the event would be canceled, rather than performed to an empty audience. The Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival is a three-day music festival that takes place in the California desert every year. Organizers announced on March 10 that the festival will be postponed until October of this year, amid coronavirus concerns. It was supposed to take place in April.

"It would be awful," Washington Nationals first baseman Ryan Zimmerman said, about the possibility of playing in empty stadiums. Zimmerman spoke before a spring training game in West Palm Beach, Florida, "That's why it's so hard to play down here. You know the games don't count and there is no atmosphere. So having to play games that don't count in no atmosphere, I think the product would be tough. We're all professionals, and I'm sure we would do it, but I don't think it would be good."

**Nature Of Sports As Money-Making Enterprise**

Staging games without fans also goes against the nature of sports as a money-making enterprise. Broadcasting games on television has long brought in more revenue than ticket sales within professional sports. However, teams and leagues stand to lose millions of dollars with each game that is played to an empty stadium.

That helps explain why, to this day, the 2015 game between the White Sox and Orioles in Baltimore remains the only game in major North American professional sports to have been played to no fans in attendance.

"It was surreal," Palmer, the announcer, said. "People [later] told me they could hear my voice in the dugout. Normally we have to talk over the crowd. It's in our headphones. But that day you could hear everything."