



## Return to Football Competitions in Cameroon during the Covid-19 Pandemic: The Key Role of Sports Physicians during the African Nations Championship (CHAN 2021)

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**Received:** March 25, 2021

**Published:** May 22, 2021

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### Abstract

**Background:** The world of sport has been significantly affected with the cancellation of important football events. The disruption of football activities caused by COVID-19 presents a challenge for sport physicians and coaches to discern and implement best practices for a safe return to sport.

**Discussion:** At the time of writing this article, the most imminent challenge in Cameroon is the African Nations Championship which is almost started. Authors present evidence to inform and clarify scientific community about what could be done in Cameroon before return to important international competitions in the setting of COVID-19. The sports physician is at the heart of the management of football teams. Sports physicians involved in the care of competitive athletes should implement all prevention strategies against COVID-19, know the commonest symptoms, potential treatments, and decide when a player can return to normal athletic participation after an infection.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Sports Physician; Football; Competitions

### Background

The first cases of infection related to the severe acute respiratory syndrome virus (SARS), were identified in China, Wuhan, in December 2019. The virus will later be named severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), while the disease it causes will be called COVID-19 for Coronavirus disease 2019 [1]. The Covid-19 pandemic has spread around the world in just a few months, it has affected all areas of life, including sports.

The world of sport has been significantly affected nationally and internationally with the cancellation of events such as the Tokyo Olympics, the European Football Championship and the Copa America, all scheduled for summer 2020 [2]. On March 6, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was officially reported in Cameroon.

As of April 25, 2020, the number of cases had increased to 1569, with 53 deaths, indicating an exponential growth in the number of cases [3]. As a result, Cameroon also went into lockdown and the government applied severe restrictions in an attempt to control disease burden: all football competitions were canceled.

COVID-19 is highly transmittable in contact sports due to its viability, long incubation period, and milder symptoms; especially. The essential preventive measures include minimizing player-to-player contact and practicing proper hygiene [4]. Players on-field own risky behaviors should be avoided to minimize unnecessary infection as close contact with others is unavoidable during contact sports.

At the time of writing this article, many sports leagues around the world have resumed or are about to resume and Cameroon is on the verge of entering the African Nations Championship.

As the restrictions begin to ease, various countries are developing protocols regarding return to sport as it is important to consider how football competitions will reopen and to determine what can be the contribution of the sports physicians in such a context.

## Discussion

Despite the fact that athletes do not belong to the risk group for severe COVID-19, numerous individuals and occasionally entire sports teams have been affected by COVID-19 infections [5]. In a Chinese study, during a 90-minute football match, the average duration of close contact between professional football players was 19 minutes and each player experienced an average of 52 episodes of infectious risk behavior. Contact sports, even without spectators, present a risk of infection; we know that any exercise with face masks considerably increases the physiological demand [4]. Specific recommendations must be followed concerning the type of training, its intensity, the precautions that have to be followed to avoid the possibility of contagion, and the restrictions in accordance with the presence of any symptoms [6].

## Challenges

The most imminent challenge in Cameroon is the African Nations Championship (also referred to as CHAN). It will be the 6th edition of the CHAN, a biennial football tournament organized by the Confederation of African Football (CAF) exclusively featuring players from the respective national championships. It was originally hosted from 4 to 25 April 2020. However, CAF announced on 17 March 2020 that the tournament had been postponed to a later date due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On 30 June CAF announced that the tournament would be held in January and February 2021.

Now, sports physicians involved in the care of competitive athletes should be aware of all prevention strategies for COVID-19, commonest symptoms, potential treatments, and when to return to athletic participation after an infection may be safe.

Prevention of COVID-19 is important for the competitive player to minimize interruptions in training and the adverse effects that COVID-19 could have on his respiratory tract and aerobic capacity. The sports physician is at the heart of the medical man-

agement of football teams, it is in these times to strengthen the surveillance system among players and their families, to confine in a neutral environment 14 days before entry into competition after verifying that the COVID-19 test is negative. Given the difficult context with limited resources in Cameroon, ensure that all staff members wear masks.

The sports physician will ensure that physical preparation is carried out in strict compliance with barrier measures, it is necessary to limit relations with the outside world from the start of the training course and training should be modified accordingly in order to keep it safe and tailored to the new conditions. The players and their staff must be housed in the same place and move in the same buses. They must be able to have a known and traceable agenda. The sports physician will train the medical staff of the teams on the diagnosis, alert and rapid management of COVID-19 cases according to national recommendations.

In the field, the sports physician must have a keen eye to recognize any sign of infection, even unusual (new intolerance to physical exertion, decrease or increase in ventilation, muscle stiffness and injuries that are difficult to explain). Cases of isolation should be considered during the competition phase. At this stage, psychological assistance is crucial. This respiratory pathology puts the players in a state of permanent stress. Psychological follow-up is essential in the follow-up of those who have contracted the virus.

## Conclusion

We strongly believe that returning to international competitions without planning adequate actions to control COVID-19 would be a mistake. The sports physician is the guarantor of the health success of sports events and the health of athletes in times of pandemic crisis. We hope the present document provides adequate information to serve as an example and guidance for all sports professional and athletes.

## Conflicts of Interest and Source of Funding

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest and no source of funding.

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**Volume 5 Issue 6 June 2021**

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