

Sport



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Premier League's risky reboot

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JAVIER GARCIA/BPI/SHUTTERSTOCK

Watford join rising angst over neutral venues plan

Paul Wilson

Watford have joined Aston Villa and Brighton in objecting to the Premier League's plan to play out the season at neutral grounds, claiming it would be unfair to relegate clubs on the basis of a competition that "bears no resemblance to the one that was started".

Sitting just above the bottom three when the league was suspended and aware Villa could leapfrog them if they play and win their game in hand, Watford were due to play five of their remaining nine fixtures at Vicarage Road and feel that being deprived of home advantage could affect the number of points they gather.

The club chairman and chief executive, Scott Duxbury, will tell other Premier League clubs at a crucial conference call meeting tomorrow that several clubs are unhappy at the prospect of finishing the season under new conditions.

"I absolutely accept that we cannot have supporters in the stadium in the present situation, but being unable to play our remaining home games at Vicarage Road, with the familiarity and advantage that brings, could end a small club like Watford's time in the Premier League. Would that be fair? Or have any resemblance of sporting integrity? Of course not."

No vote is expected to be taken tomorrow, but one is likely to be held a week later. A minimum of 14 clubs must be in favour of any proposal for change, so it would take at least seven dissenting voices to prevent Project Restart being adopted. Every club would prefer to play the remaining home games at their own stadiums, though most are willing to bow to police advice and health considerations.

The advantages of neutral venues from a policing point of view are that supporters are less likely to congregate outside, and several games can be played in succession at the same ground, speeding up the rate at which the remaining 92 games can be completed.

While only three clubs have gone public with their concerns, it is feasible that the present bottom six, if not more, will share Duxbury's fear of being relegated through an artificial process. West Ham were thought to be in favour of

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Players and clubs face hard choice over waivers on rugby's return

Exclusive
Gerard Meagher

Premiership players face having to sign disclaimers before returning to training due to fears clubs and their doctors will not have the necessary insurance policies in place to cover against coronavirus claims, a leading sports lawyer has warned.

World Rugby has issued guidelines urging clubs and unions to ensure they are "adequately insured", but there is considerable doubt as to whether insurance companies would offer that level of indemnity before players return to their clubs.

Richard Cramer, of Front Row Legal, believes there will also be serious concern among club doctors, who would want full insurance cover before players return – with the Premiership hopeful they can resume training on 1 June. Without that level of protection, players could be required to sign waivers.

"Clubs need to be very wary of

exposing themselves to claims," Cramer told the *Observer*. "Where I would be nervous if I was a club is just seeing what the insurance market is doing. As a club, I don't think you can have any high degree of confidence that the existing insurance policies would indemnify the club. So, potentially, the clubs are taking a risk getting back on the playing field and exposing players.

"If I was in that situation I would certainly be wanting to make sure that full insurance is in place, but they might not get a decision from insurers for some time. In which case, doctors and medical teams will have to cover their own backs and there may have to be new types of disclaimers signed by the clubs and the players, because certainly a doctor would not want that level of responsibility.

"I'm not saying that a disclaimer would get a club out of trouble but it does make it more difficult to bring a claim. But it may be regarded as an unfair variation of a contract to sign a

disclaimer to waive any claims arising from Covid-19."

World Rugby has advised players to complete a daily questionnaire as part of a screening process on returning to training. The governing body also stated that "all unions should ensure that their policies require written confirmation from players and staff that they understand the risks involved in returning to training and playing".

Signing disclaimers would raise serious legal concerns, however, with the World Players' Association, which represents around 85,000 sportsmen

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Itoje and Mako Vunipola will make right decisions for England futures, says Mitchell
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and women including rugby players. "We have seen some research that athletes may be particularly vulnerable to serious symptoms," said the union's executive director, Brendan Schwab. "We are concerned that some sports bodies are trying to place the economic and legal risk of contracting the disease on to players and that is something we think should not be tolerated."

While the issue has already reared its head within the Premier League's Project Restart, Cramer believes it is all the more complicated in rugby. "It's a bit easier in football because there is less physical contact," he said.

"It's very different in rugby and that's why there has been talk of disbanding scrummaging. The biggest danger is that with players who are training at their maximum peak, often their immune systems are lower because of the physical exertions they put on their body.

"I think players might quite like the idea of getting back to work and training, but when it comes to that key moment of no turning back, they'll want that high degree of comfort that they're medically safe. If I was advising a player I would want to know exactly what level of insurance is in place and what the player is covered for."