

COVID-19 Impacts: Scottish Football - where next?

“Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I don't like that attitude. I can assure them it is much more serious than that.”

Bill Shankly, Manager of Liverpool FC, 1959-1974

The above quote from Bill Shankly often re-appears at times of crisis where, very clearly, football is shown not to be more important than life itself. If Mr Shankly was alive today, as the Coronavirus pandemic extends its ghastly tentacles to every country and society across the globe, he of course would have put football in its rightful place. The health and wellbeing of our people – especially those older and most vulnerable, is the most important consideration for the world today.

However the football industry is in the same dilemma as all other industries and sectors of the economy. It has to look and plan ahead and decide how to proceed when the impacts of COVID-19 start to decline and we can return to some form of normality. So, there is nothing wrong with debating the impacts on football at the moment – whilst recognising that much bigger and more important decisions have to be made around containment of the virus and the welfare and health of our society. Here, Jim Eccleston, 56 Degree Insight partner and Scottish football fan, offers his own thoughts as we sit in the eye of the COVID-19 storm....

On Friday, the Scottish football authorities, in common with their counterparts in other parts of the UK and across much of Europe and beyond, took the decision to suspend all senior and grassroots football. This means that in the Scottish professional game, the league season has been suspended – with around 8-10 matches still to be played by each club, as well as the last two rounds of the Scottish Cup. There are very few commentators or fans who believe this was the wrong decision - it was inevitable and simply had to be done.

At this stage, none of us know how long the COVID-19 pandemic will govern how we run our lives in the UK – but we all know that major disruption will continue for many weeks and several months to come at the very least. So where does this leave the 2019-2020 football season and what happens next? We must, of course, acknowledge the financial difficulties the suspension of professional football is going to create for all clubs – and many, already operating on a tightrope, will require a great deal of help and assistance from fans, sponsors, local businesses etc to survive the loss of income. This is a separate debate, and for the sake of clarity, this article focuses on some of the choices facing the football authorities on how to deal with the professional competitions that make up the 2019-20 football season.

I have huge sympathies with the Scottish football authorities here –

damned if they do, damned if they don't. There are no 'right answers' and far too much uncertainty at the moment to be definitive in any decision-making. Already, various club spokesmen and commentators of the game have put forward many suggestions about what should be done – and not always it would seem, from an objective standpoint.

Before I provide my views and suggestions, I need to be fully transparent. I am a St Johnstone FC supporter. The main thing left for my team to compete for over the rest of the season is whether or not Saints end up in the Top 6 or Bottom 6 of the Scottish Premiership before the split. On a fairly minor level, it's important – but crucially, my team is not in the running for titles or in any relegation trouble. I feel that, as far as any football supporter can be (!), I can look at the wider picture from a fairly objective standpoint without any prejudice around my own team.

There are a number of potential routes that could be followed, but I will focus on the three most obvious possibilities below:

1. **Declare the 2019-2020 season 'null and void'.** This would mean that when we restart, it would be as if this season never happened – and we'd start again with the same teams in each league. There is a precedent – when the UK entered World War Two, the league season was declared null and void. But this was in early September 1939 after only 5 rounds of games. If we were only a dozen or so games into the



2019-20 season, this might be an obvious and pragmatic option, but with 75-80% of the season completed, declaring everything that had gone before as null and void be a much tougher decision and I would argue that it would compromise sporting integrity. Several teams across our leagues have had extremely successful seasons to this point – and it would all be for nothing. Furthermore, supporters could demand repayment of season tickets, and the TV companies and sponsors could also demand financial recompense. A legal minefield meaning that surely, this is not really an option at all.

2. **Declare the season over now and decide titles and relegations based on current placings.** Some outcomes in the 4 Scottish leagues look to be almost certain already – Celtic to win the Scottish Premiership, Dundee United to win the Championship and Cove Rangers to win the Second Division. So, some are suggesting that we should end the season on this basis now. But this has huge flaws. Whilst it is almost inconceivable for example that either Celtic or Dundee United won't win their respective divisions given the small number of games left to play, there is no mathematical certainty that this will happen in either case – so surely that can't be allowed to happen. And these are the relatively 'easy' cases – what about relegation from the Premiership – it now looks like a mini competition to avoid the drop between four teams separated by a relatively small number of points. It would be wrong to assume that the team currently 12th – Heart of Midlothian – would remain in this position across all of the remaining games. Similarly, at the bottom of the Championship, there is much to play for among a cluster of clubs – and promotion from League 1 is also being hotly contested between Raith Rovers and Falkirk. Teams have played different numbers of games within each league and even if an average points per game approach was applied, awarding titles, and deciding promotions and relegations based on an incomplete season would seem to be flawed and as much open to accusations of lacking sporting integrity as option 1.

3. **Complete the 2019/20 season as soon as it is safe to do so.** To me, this is the only solution that should be considered. All of the existing fixtures – league and cup – should remain on hold until a time when it is deemed appropriate and safe to resume football and other 'mass gatherings'. Of course, the question remains, when will this be? Realistically, it seems highly unlikely that this will be anytime soon – it could be well into June, July or even August before this becomes an option. And of course, there will have to be a period to give players the chance to get match fit again – a mini 'pre-season'. Let's assume,

worst case scenario (hopefully), that the 2019-20 season cannot resume until July or August. Even if we play two games per week, it will still take 6 or 7 weeks to complete the season. This will take us into September. We then finish the season with the traditional finale of the Scottish Cup Final at the end of the month. Titles, promotions, relegations decided in a way that is fair for everyone.

If a version of Option 3 is followed, where does that leave next season? I would suggest that we take a break during October and resume at the end of that month with a shorter version of the normal league season. Clubs simply play each other home and away in each of the leagues to decide the silverware for 2020-21. If this leaves gaps in the calendar, they can be filled by the Scottish League Cup and Scottish Cup competitions. If available dates make running both competitions a challenge, I would suggest we put the League Cup in mothballs for one season only.

One final thought – **does the enforced break in football provide an opportunity to restructure our seasons longer term?** Many have called for 'Summer football' in Scotland as the best way to revitalize our game and improve our standards by playing football on better surfaces – and indeed bringing us into line with many other European countries in our latitudes who play summer football. What if we play out Season 2019-20 as described above, then take a break for a few months (possibly with a cup competition to tide clubs over, or indoor football tournaments) and then resume towards the end of February 2021 with a new season that runs from March to December? Also, maybe an opportunity to restructure our leagues in terms of composition – perhaps extending the top league to 16 clubs playing each other twice a season, home and away – a 30-game season. This may all be too radical for many – but if there was a will for changing the timing of our seasons on a longer term basis, maybe this enforced stoppage just now provides a mechanism to make this happen. Just a thought!

56 Degree Insight are a research and insights consultancy based in Edinburgh. Over the years, the team have undertaken a great deal of research in the football, and wider sports sector for governing bodies and clubs. These views are our own and placed 'out there' for discussion and debate – and we would be happy to discuss them further:

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