

Coronavirus may prove virtual sports game changer

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Racegoers attend the final day of the Cheltenham Festival horse racing meeting in Gloucestershire, south-west England, on March 13, 2020

With an unprecedented captive audience of three billion people in coronavirus lockdown virtual sports events are wooing fans after

traditional live sports were shut down and public gatherings banned in many countries.

Horse-racing, boxing, cycling, football and motor-racing chiefs are desperate to maintain their fanbase and are scrambling to provide a fix and maintain revenues.

With stadiums closed and events such as the Tokyo Olympics and Euro 2020 postponed, organisers are generating advertising revenue by streaming virtual sports on YouTube, Facebook and Twitch or even broadcasting them on traditional television platforms.

Sports is where the numbers are and fans denied real games are turning to live streaming, watching people play games, and taking part in those video games themselves.

Italy's Mugello motorcycling circuit, which would have attracted 200,000 people for its MotoGP weekend on Sunday, may just have pulverised that figure with a live-streamed virtual [race](#) promoted as "The stay at home GP".

Honda's world champion Marc Marquez came fifth as the globe's top riders sat uncomfortably on their sofas livestreaming from their living rooms.

Alex Rins looked bored playing with his pet dog on his knee.

Alex Marquez, younger brother of the world champion, won the race and asked jokingly "will the points count to the championship?".



eSports are on the rise

Millions of fans, credit cards at the ready, are expected to copy them after downloading the app.

Old-school purists will be heartened by veteran Valentino Rossi's refusal to take part.

The seven-time world champion said this week he was "cheering on the people of Brescia and Bergamo, those who usually cheer me on. It looks like a war zone," he said of his coronavirus-stricken region.

"I have seen very bad images, we must hold on," he told Sky Italia, who

will also broadcast the virtual race.

'And he's back from the dead here'

Formula One chiefs have also galvanised some of their drivers to grab their gaming controllers, racing a Virtual Bahrain Grand Prix which was abbreviated because of technical difficulties.

Boxing legend Muhammad Ali, who died in 2016, was even back in action, beating Sonny Liston again on Friday in a virtual bout with 35,000 YouTube viewers.



Ferrari and McLaren went head-to-head on a virtual racetrack

Ali will now meet the long retired Mike Tyson after he beat up George Foreman on Saturday.

Racing-mad Britain comes to a standstill each year for the Grand National and with the courses all closed, broadcaster ITV will show a virtual race on April 4.

The real race can be a dangerous lottery with horses and riders potentially suffering serious injuries in the many falls, but it makes millions for the bookies, who this time will run online betting for the field of 40 runners.

"We use the latest CGI technology and algorithms and were ready to go ahead as a forerunner to the big race," said executive producer Rob McLoughlin.

As with the boxing, there will also be a race of champions pitting the late Red Rum, who won the National three times in the 1970s, against defending champion Tiger Roll.

Baseball staged a four-player video-game tournament called "MLB The Show" on Friday. It also suffered some [technical problems](#) before it was won by Amir Garrett, a Cincinnati Reds pitcher, who played at home wearing his team uniform.

"A win's a win," said Garrett but he also said: "You've got to realise it's a [video game](#)."

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