“The Paradox of the Virtual Pro-Am: Professional Sports During the Pandemic”

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On March 11th of this year, it was announced that professional basketball player Rudy Gobert had tested positive for the coronavirus.[1] The following day, the National Basketball Association suspended the remainder of its season indefinitely. The National Hockey League did the same on March 14th. Major League Baseball cancelled spring training on March 12th, and has continued to push back Opening Day since then. NASCAR paused its season on March 16th, and did not begin holding races again until May 17th, with no fans in attendance. The other three major sports listed above have yet to resume their seasons, as of June 21st, 2020.

This abrupt stoppage of professional sporting events is unprecedented in America. Even during the Second World War, professional sports continued uninterrupted despite the absence of many of the best players. Major League Baseball and the National Hockey League held seasons throughout the duration of the war, and It has been argued that the National Basketball Association, and the modern form of basketball itself, took shape in 1946 in large part due to WW2.[2] (NASCAR was founded in 1948, and prior to this there had been no unified set of rules to define the sport as such.[3]) Labor disputes, the First World War, and the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11th, 2001, caused individual leagues to lose part or all of a season. Otherwise, the five major American sports leagues have essentially been in continuous operation since their individual beginnings.

Like many Americans, professional athletes have been unable to work during the pandemic. But this does not mean that they have been unable to play. In fact, many of these athletes have engaged in a strange new form of amateurism that may reshape major sports leagues in the years to come. They participated in eSport tournaments, organized by their

employers, in which they played video games that simulated their chosen sports -- and that often simulated the players themselves.

Within a month of suspending play due to the pandemic, each of the aforementioned leagues launched an official eSports tournament that featured professional athletes as amateur gamers. These tournaments were largely successful: they broke records for eSport viewership on major sports networks, and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for pandemic relief efforts.[4] They also suggested two directions that similar tournaments might take in the future, each revolving around a different relationship between the athlete and their simulated sport.

The first kind of tournament is exemplified by the "eNASCAR iRacing Pro Invitational Series", which began March 22nd and ended May 9th.[5] Professional stock car drivers raced one another on realistic 3D race tracks designed to reproduce official NASCAR speedways in video game form. They used actual steering wheels, pedals, and gearshifts patterned after those found in stock cars to control simulated vehicles on simulated tracks; they viewed those tracks in the first person, from the same vantage they would in a real race car. In sum, the NASCAR drivers competed in an eSport that was designed to directly replicate their professional practice. We might provisionally call this a *One-to-One Virtual Pro-Am*, in which professional athletes play themselves in a situation bijectively analogous to their sport.

The second kind of tournament was played by MLB, NBA, and NHL athletes, using the corresponding sport simulations *MLB: The Show*, *NBA 2K20*, and *NHL 20*.[6] These games are not one-to-one recreations of the professional athlete experience. Instead, they enable users to play as an entire team, sometimes even an entire sports organization. The player controls the batter, the pitcher, the one dribbling a basketball or handling a puck; they also control the other players, the coaches, and even the management and staff. These simulations do not usually revolve around a first-person perspective, but provide a flexible view of the field of play that alternates between third-person, overhead views, menus, and spreadsheets. We might call this

a *One-to-Many Virtual Pro-Am*, wherein professional athletes play themselves, others, and aspects of the system itself in a simulated sport.

There are many ways these two types of virtual pro-ams might reshape the major American sports. They will no doubt suggest manifold vectors for scholarly analysis. This short introductory essay gestures at one aspect, one element in particular: the athlete as a contradictory hybrid of professional and amateur. In the conventional pro-am, professionals and amateurs play together in an event. In the new virtual pro-am, the professional plays as an amateur. They are professionals at the sport being simulated, but amateurs at the simulated sport. They are depicted as professionals in the simulation, but viewed as amateurs when they play that simulation. More to the point, *they are amateurs when they control their professional selves*.

This playful paradox suggests a set of strange questions. How do we regard the professional athlete, when they play a corresponding eSport as an amateur? They certainly cannot compete with professional eSport players who, in turn, could not compete with the professional athlete at the originating "real" sport. In pro-am tournaments like the ones mentioned above, why might the player be considered a professional or an amateur? Is it a matter of skill, of celebrity, of salary or profitability? And what if the terms "professional" and "amateur" are no longer clearly distinct? Are we then witnessing the creation of a new kind of pro-am event, where the categories no longer apply and the term 'pro-am' becomes ironic, meaningless, or outmoded? These questions are provocations that, hopefully, will stimulate research in a safer future. For now, we can only guess at the effect virtual pro-ams might have on professional sports after the pandemic.

[1] https://www.nba.com/article/2020/03/11/coronavirus-pandemic-causes-nba-suspend-season

[2] Stark, Douglas. *Wartime Basketball: The Emergence of a National Sport during World War II*. Nebraska UP (2016).

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stock_car_racing#Early_years

[4] The NBA tournament was the most-watched eSport event in ESPN history (see https://www.latimes.com/sports/clippers/story/2020-04-10/nba-2k-players-tournament-could-be-more-than-one-time-event). The NASCAR tournament set, and then broke, the eSport record for the Fox Network (https://www.sportingnews.com/us/nascar/news/nascar-iracing-fox-enascar-pro-invitational-series-schedule/p9sn3cpp6b9e13szmnkuqkigh). The MLB tournament reportedly received over 32 million views across all platforms (https://www.adweek.com/digital/mlb-the-show-players-league-tallies-28m-views-of-livestreams-and-related-content/).

[5] https://www.enascar.com/iracing-pro-invitational-series/

[6] These tournaments were called, respectively: *MLB: The Show* Players League; NBA 2K Players Tournament; and NHL Gaming Player Challenge.