

# Can players refuse to return to football and are they at increased risk of injury?

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Premier League clubs will have to manage the increased risk of players being injured and allay their possible fears over contracting coronavirus if training can resume next week.

Medical and performance teams will plan programmes based on the season potentially resuming on June 12, which is a tight timeframe. Players would initially train in small groups but before doing so they will have to agree to their club's policy covering measures related to the virus. Some players have expressed concern about contracting the virus because of underlying health conditions affecting them or their family, prompting the possibility they could refuse to return.

Here John Shea, a sports lawyer from Lewis Silkin, explains the legal position while David Clancy, a high performance and sports medicine physiotherapist and director of Hauora Life in Ireland, explains what players might face when they return and why they could be at a higher risk of injury.

*John Shea, a sports lawyer from Lewis Silkin*

**Can players say they don't want to return due to fear of infection?** Players are contractually required to train and play matches and refusing could be a disciplinary offence. But like any employer clubs have a legal duty of care to provide a safe place to work for employees. If a player has a reasonable fear about their health and safety it could entitle them to refuse to return.

### **What is likely to constitute a reasonable fear?**

It will differ between clubs and players. It will largely depend on what measures have been put in place by clubs to protect players' health and safety, such as, following government guidance on social distancing and washing of hands as well as implementing further measures such as Covid-19 testing, providing PPE, staggering arrival and training times, ensuring no mixing and providing hygiene training. Players will have responsibilities and be obliged to follow the club policy. It will be important for clubs to effectively communicate to their players about the protective measures they have put in place to reassure them that their health and safety is protected.

### **What about players with underlying health issues?**

Personal circumstances need to be considered. Some players will be categorised as higher risk due to their health or that of someone they are living with. That might provide them with a more justifiable reason to refuse to return. Clubs will need to be guided by the medical advice in these situations and may even order players not to return, even if they are happy to do so.

### **When else might a player say no?**

It is possible that players who are out of contract on June 30 or believe they will move this summer could refuse to return because they will say that they do not want to risk contracting the virus and jeopardising a transfer. Or a player might say that the club's measures are not sufficiently stringent to protect their health and safety, for example, if social distancing is not possible because of the size of the club's training ground. As far as I am aware, most Premier League training grounds are large enough to implement social distancing, but this could perhaps be an issue in the lower leagues in which case clubs should consider alternative training venues such as their stadium.

*David Clancy, high performance and sports medicine physiotherapist who has worked as an external physiotherapist for Premier League players*

### **Players have been monitored extensively, so why would they be at risk of injury?**

Players were competing at a high intensity when matches were suspended and the break will have been longer than between normal seasons. Despite working at home they have probably not been able to do their usual exercise routines, meaning a fall in levels of fitness and strength. That combined with a short period of time to train, recover and complete the season means that players will be more susceptible to muscle strains, ligament damage and preventable injuries. There could be more hamstring injuries, for example, because players might not have been doing the same chronic workloads or been able to sprint over a physical space at home.



Real Madrid's midfielder Luka Modric arrives at club's training ground today

EPA/CHEMA MOYA

### **Can you give a broad timetable of the next month?**

In the first week players will undergo a risk assessment for potential respiratory and cardiac complications and have fitness and strength tested. Players will do exercises on grass, such as a box drill which combines running, shuffling and backpedalling to help maximise movement in different directions. In the second week they will try to work in larger groups. In the third week they will do harder physical work and step up ball work, while socially distancing. In the final week physical contact will begin, based on a protocol yet to be given to clubs by the Premier League. It is hard to schedule training with certainty as the season could still be pushed back.

### **What types of tests will be conducted?**

It will be fitness, muscle endurance and strength. Performance staff will check the muscles around the hip, knee and ankle. The data will be compared to levels before and during the season. Players will walk, run slowly, jump, hop, stride, change direction and sprint to determine if they are ready. They will do a bleep test where they run back and forth between two points 20m apart, a yo-yo test (a regular endurance assessment) and a VO2 max which assesses lung capacity. They might have a lactate threshold test as studies indicate the higher the blood lactate concentration, the higher the muscular fatigue. This involves a player running on a treadmill over increased speeds and/or incremental gradients up to around 22km an hour (equivalent to doing 100m in about 16 seconds), for a few minutes while the lactate acid in their blood is monitored. In another

test players will wear a mask while exercising to record the maximum volume of oxygen that they can use, which is a good indicator of the efficiency of the cardiovascular system. Other tests cover reaction times and counter-movement jumps.

**What are the exercises?** Players will be asked to contract muscles over a range of movement to help evaluate the strength of the hamstring, groin and ankle. They need to be able to go through the gears, decelerate, brake and change direction. If the player falls short, they might rupture a hamstring when pushed harder. A hamstring can be tested using an isokinetic machine which changes its resistance to keep the speed of an exercise consistent. Also players will shuffle and zigzag around cones over various distances, lift their legs high to cause a big stretch, or sprint to ensure no discomfort. Groin strength can be assessed by asking players to squeeze a ball between their ankles or knees for a period and measure the pressure generated. A tape measure can be used to measure muscle size to examine for potential loss since football stopped.