

In view of the President Rhamaphosa's decision to progressively end South Africa's lockdown in a systematic and strategic manner, it is appropriate to consider the re-introduction of football in South Africa. The economic cost of our country's lockdown has been very significant and the impact on football, especially the professional and semi-professional leagues, has been huge. With the progressive opening of South Africa's economy, it is important to consider how South Africa's professional football leagues could be restarted amidst of the COVID19 pandemic.

The key principles in the management the COVID19 crisis has been:

1. Increased testing for Sars-cov2 (corona virus)
2. Social distancing
3. Effective handwashing and usage of a face mask
4. Isolation and quarantine in confirmed COVID19 cases and contacts
5. Identification and voluntary isolation of high-risk individuals

These principles should be at the forefront when considering how professional football could be safely restarted in South Africa in order to prevent transmission and spread of COVID19. It is imperative that these principles are strictly adhered to if our professional leagues will be restarted in coming weeks and months. I will provide a few suggestions how these principles could be applied.

1. COVID 19 testing

It will be imperative that a comprehensive COVID19 testing system is established. This is particularly important to identify asymptomatic carriers of SARS-COV2. Testing protocols could include the following:

- **All persons that will be present at the stadium on matchday to be tested.** In view of the turnaround time for results, this may need to be done the day before to prevent unnecessary delays on matchday. Those tested will need to be isolated to prevent contracting the virus afterwards
- **Weekly testing of teams in-between training sessions.** This is important to identify players that needs to be isolated, to prevent transmission to the rest of the team and to prevent the last-minute withdrawal of players before a match. This record may also be required for interprovincial travel of teams.

2. Social distancing

Social distancing is a very important measure in the fight against COVID19. The virus is spread from person to person and the risk of transmission is massively reduced if principles of social distancing are observed. In this regard, the following measures should be considered:

- **Playing behind closed doors** – There should be no spectators at the stadiums where the games would be played. Only the essential staff required for games to be played and televised should be present at the stadium
- Demarcated areas at the stadium to limit close contact of persons present on matchday
- No team line-up and handshakes prior to the match
- No handshakes or hugs after the match

3. Effective handwashing and usage of a face mask

Areas for handwashing to be established at the stadium that promotes frequent handwashing. All non-playing staff should wear a cloth facemask. Additionally, the stadium would need to be cleaned and sanitized. Regular cleaning of all match balls before, during and after the match should be performed

4. Isolation and quarantine in confirmed COVID19 cases and contacts

All individuals that tests positive for COVID19 should be isolated for a period of 14 days. This includes players, coaches and members of the media. After the 14 day isolation period, a follow-up test should be conducted to ensure that individuals are not asymptomatic carriers before they are able to participate again.

5. Identification and voluntary isolation of high risk individuals

Individuals that are at high risk for developing severe COVID19 should undergo voluntary isolation. This category includes:

- Individuals that are 70 years and older
- Individuals that have an underlying medical disorders that renders them to be immunocompromised

In order to ensure that these guidelines are adhered to, it is important that dedicated medical teams are established to conduct screening and testing for COVID 19.

In view of the logistical challenges and financial costs listed above, it is not feasible for these measures to be conducted all football leagues across South Africa. It is only feasible to conduct these in the PSL and NFD during the COVID19 pandemic. The biggest limitation is the availability and turnaround time for COVID19 tests.

Team training prior to first match

Laliga has produced a protocol for a return to action prior the first league match. This system could be utilized in South Africa if weekly COVID19 testing is performed in all teams. There are 4 phases in this approach. First there will be training alone or in pairs; then training in small groups; then training as a squad; before finally playing fixtures again, providing there have not been any outbreaks that clubs have been unable to control in the previous three phases.