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COVID-19 and the Integrity of Football

Jake Wojtowicz

Rochester, NY

JakeWojtow@gmail.com

Abstract: Sporting competitions have been beset by change due to COVID-19. Some commentators and sportspeople worried that this affected the integrity of these competitions. Focussing on European football, I suggest that one way of understanding integrity is in terms of fairness. I argue that many changes introduced a form of luck that is already common and widespread and that many changes were also justified. Thus, they did not affect the integrity of these competitions in this way. I then suggest that there is another integrity issue lurking: that the changes affected the character of these competitions, rendering them unrecognizable. I briefly explore this issue.

Integrity, Fairness, Recognizability, European Football, Justification

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# Introduction

Sporting competitions have been beset by change due to COVID-19. Some of these changes were initiated at the start of a season; for instance, Major League Baseball’s 2020 season only started after the pandemic first took hold, so the league had the chance to alter the competition structure before a pitch was tossed. Others, like many European football (soccer) competitions in 2019-20, had to adapt to the pandemic in the middle of their seasons.

These competitions could have just shut down, voiding the season. That would have been unfair on the teams who had, say, built commanding leads at the top of the table. It would have written off the sporting endeavors of much of a season. They could (and some did) also have just awarded championships based on points-per-game or current standings.[[1]](#endnote-1) Yet the preferred course of action for many competitions was to complete the season on the pitch. This meant that changes had to be made to resume and finish the season. Some players and commentators worried that efforts to resume the season could scupper the competition’s integrity.

Paul Wilson (2020), writing in *The Guardian* in May 2020, suggested that some players might opt out of playing in the resumed 2019-20 season for fear of contracting or transmitting COVID-19. The obvious concern here, echoed by Watford midfielder Tom Cleverley, is that teams could be shorn of players [(Eurosport 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?utEa8i); but Wilson also worried that even if these players played, they might be guarded and hesitant on the pitch. Add to this the fact that games would be behind closed doors, and Wilson feared that:

Whatever the aim of restarting the season in sterile conditions behind closed doors, in these circumstances it cannot be maintaining sporting integrity...Without even going into the possibilities of what sort of teams might be fielded by clubs with no further interest in the season, or with a preference for ending the season without playing any more games, the final league table would merit the biggest asterisk in history.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Or see the following, from Watford striker Troy Deeney [(Grez, Lewis, and Kolosk 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?MjfRDw):

I believe that when it comes to the integrity of this season anyway, it's already gone...I feel sorry for Liverpool because no matter how it plays out, they deserve to win the league. They deserve to get the trophy...But no matter how it plays out, even if we play all the games, it's still going to be the year spoiled by the pandemic. It's not going to be that year that Liverpool won the league being the best team and, you know, it's 30 years they haven't won for...So I do feel sorry for Liverpool and their players and [Liverpool captain] Jordan [Henderson], but in terms of integrity, there's no way you could say that this is a viable competition...It's like running a marathon, 20 odd miles, stopping for two months and then sprinting the last bit and going: “Ah, that was a good time that.”

On the other side of the issue, Arsenal [(2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?VSmgMJ) put out a club statement that said:[[3]](#endnote-3)

As a club, we are in full support of the objective for all remaining domestic league and cup matches from the 2019/20 season to be played, in order to maintain the integrity of each competition.

So, some worried that restarting these competitions would strip those competitions of integrity, others worried that without restarting the competitions would lose their integrity. What should we make of these worries? Do these competitions need an asterisk? I will argue that one way of understanding these worries is as worries about *fairness*: the changes that were made to resume competitions were unfair, so the competitions lost their integrity. In the next section, I will say more about why fairness and integrity are connected. I will then argue that many competitions *maintained* their integrity on this front. This is because, although teams experienced some factors that may have been *bad luck*, these factors—despite being forced on the competition by an extraordinary event—were not of a kind or degree of *sporting* weirdness so far outside the luck of ordinary competition. The factors introduced by COVID-19 did not introduce any novel *form* of luck or unfairness.

What changes to competition do I have in mind? Well, different competitions underwent different changes to different degrees, some were changes to the competition rules and structures and others were just unavoidable side-effects of COVID-19, but I have in mind the following (some of which Wilson and Deeney alluded to): the calendar shifted; there was a long stretch without any play; games were played later in the year; because games were played later in the year, some games had to be played later in the day to avoid the heat; some competitions allowed for drinks breaks due to the heat and due to concerns about player welfare; when play resumed, the calendar was condensed; because of the condensed calendar, extra substitutions were allowed; some players missed games (either through infection, an imposed quarantine, or indirect factors like needing to avoid exposure due to an at-risk relative); some players may have been guarded or reticent, and thus uncommitted to training or games; entire teams missed games; there were, in many places, no fans in the stadium; some competitions, such as the Champions League, underwent structural changes.

My approach is somewhat conservative: I will be arguing that these changes were not that interesting and did not affect the integrity of these competitions (I will focus on the 2019/20 season, but some of what I said applies to subsequent seasons). Yet I think it is worthwhile to defuse some of the criticisms leveled at these competitions. Once we have dealt with the notion of integrity as fairness, I will explore another criticism that is perhaps more novel, that the integrity problem is not one of fairness but of recognizability: the competitions, whether or not they were fair, are unrecognizable.[[4]](#endnote-4)

# Integrity

“Integrity” is often used broadly, and we need to get a handle on what integrity is to evaluate whether these football competitions lost it. I will argue that a recent understanding of sporting integrity illuminates the claim that these competitions might face issues, at least in one respect.

Alfred Archer [(2016)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?vc7MDe) has provided a persuasive exploration of sporting integrity. Archer explores three main cases: Lance Armstrong doping, Olympic doubles badminton pairs at the 2012 London Olympics not trying to win their games to ensure easier progress, and Rangers being allowed to re-enter the Scottish league structure at a higher level than other new clubs [(Archer 2016, 120–21)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?AS2WfV). Archer argues that the notion of sporting integrity should be understood as a virtue possessed *by the sport* and that an action that threatens sporting integrity somehow damages the sport itself [(Archer 2016, 122)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?B2pDvz).

In Archer’s Suitsian analysis of the virtue of a sport: “A sport has integrity to the extent that the constraints that the competitors face in the means they can use to achieve a given end are coherent” [(Archer 2016, 126; see Suits 1978)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?EZ2B0c). Actions that take away from the integrity of a sport somehow avoid or weaken these constraints, which defeats the point of the sport, and this can also render these achievements worthless or uninteresting: “A sport where one team faces far greater constraints than their opponents is of little interest. The reason why is that such a competition would both be unfair and would fail to determine winners on the basis of sporting ability” [(Archer 2016, 127)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?RuMtGm). Those who damage the integrity of the sport do so because they face, through their actions or the actions of others, looser constraints to the end of their sport, which defeats the purpose of playing that sport, and renders their achievements worthless.[[5]](#endnote-5)

# Fairness

Archer’s analysis helps us to understand one of the problems people might have in mind when they say that the changes to competitions affect competition integrity: the changes to competitions were *unfair*, they advantaged certain teams and meant that the constraints they had to overcome were weaker than the constraints on other teams, rendering victory worthless or uninteresting (or at least significantly diminished). Surely that is the worry that gave the normative force to, say, the worry that players missed games: some teams would be more badly affected than others. So, too, with the worry that allowing more substitutes and playing a condensed schedule benefited wealthier sides. If this means that some teams faced more stringent constraints and others face looser constraints, we might worry that this rendered the competition uninteresting, failing to determine winners based on sporting prowess and instead basing it too heavily on, say, squad size, prestige, and wealth.

This gives us the first aspect of the integrity issue when it comes to COVID-19’s effect on competition integrity:

**The Fairness Aspect.**   
The changes introduced to resume sporting competitions in the face of COVID-19 were unfair and thus they affected the integrity of these competitions. An unfair competition fails to subject all competitors to the same constraints that make that sport worthwhile and interesting.

But I think it is hard to sustain the claim that the factors introduced by COVID-19 were unfair and affected the integrity of competitions. Let’s posit that these factors did disadvantage some teams. My argument is that these factors might have been unfair in the sense that they introduced *particular* obstacles that teams otherwise (but for COVID-19) would not have faced, and this may have benefitted some teams rather than others, but this is no threat to the integrity of these competitions because the *type* of obstacle introduced is very familiar. If any team did suffer because of these changes, they suffered from the sort of luck we ordinarily see throughout sports. Teams faced looser or more stringent constraints in just the way that they always have done.

Now I will argue that the bad (or good) luck these teams suffered (or enjoy) was desperately *ordinary*; it was the unfairness and bad luck we expect to see in sports and something we tolerate and do not think undermines competition integrity. I will also introduce a second line of argument: even if we think some factor is unfair, there is a further response against charges that this unfairness undermines the integrity of competitions: the changes were *justified*, which undercuts the complaint that they affected the integrity of these competitions.

First, let’s address the explicit concern raised by Paul Wilson and Tom Cleverley. Some players missed games or were reticent about playing because of COVID, but this is not at all novel. Players are regularly injured or banned and miss games because of this—this is a risk associated with playing football, and nobody could plausibly suggest that this undermines the integrity of competitions. What is the difference between Mohamed Salah missing, as he did, a few games due to COVID-19 and his missing a few games due to getting the flu or pulling a muscle? Really, there is no important difference. If a player missed the whole season, again, that’s little different to the bad luck of a bad injury: teams regularly lose key players, and although this might be unfortunate and we might wonder what might have been, nobody seriously thinks this affects the integrity of a competition. Players also face immense personal struggles, from dealing with family illness and becoming a primary caregiver [(Storey 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?5k5Tex), to suffering from stalking and death threats [(Malyon 2017)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?aEyVx7). Further, in response to Wilson’s explicit worry, there have always been teams (safe from relegation and stuck in mid-table) who have lost interest in a competition towards its end. Were COVID-19 not an issue, there still would have been players who missed games, or who played at well-below their usual standards; COVID-19 introduced a particular issue, but the type of problem is familiar.[[6]](#endnote-6) These worries, I submit, are worries only when isolated from the ordinary reality of football, where similar issues arise all the time.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Something slightly less ordinary is the fact that entire teams were under the threat of quarantine: not just missing one or two players, but the entire side (or large numbers of players) being unable to play. It does seem unfair if a team cannot play due to an enforced quarantine, and we might expect competitions to accommodate for this. Some competitions have done better than others. Several UEFA competitions have already seen teams, in the 2020/21 season, awarded 3-0 losses for being unable to fulfill their schedule due to COVID-19 [(UEFA 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?V9aj0M). At first, this seems unfair. And although it was overturned on appeal, Napoli were docked a point on top of being handed a loss, after they failed to travel to Juventus, because they were barred from traveling by their local health authority [(Galardini 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?6aCFYO).

But perhaps these cases were not so unfair. Napoli apparently breached the protocol agreed upon by the league. And in at least one instance, UEFA postponed the game and rearranged it for later in the week, only for further COVID-19 test results to necessitate a full-team quarantine [(UEFA 2020b)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?ElYYbw). What’s more, UEFA set out clear rules, and allowed for a variety of options to get around potential problems such as nationwide travel restrictions (some knockout ties were played in neutral venues to get around various travel restrictions); the rules were clear that if a match could not be played, the quarantined team must forfeit [(UEFA 2020e)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?l7m4Tb). So, the rules were clear, and there were also efforts to mitigate the unfair burden of COVID. It is also important to consider why these seemingly harsh rules might be in place: were these matches at the end of the season (say, the final), it might have been feasible to rearrange them further, but with an already-congested calendar, and with the fact that the competition has many other stages that needed to get underway, there may have been no alternative but to somehow arrange a result, and a reasonable option given this is to award the win to the team who could have played, rather than to the team who were (unfortunately) in quarantine.

So, we might think that this is very unfortunate, and out of the ordinary, for the teams that had to forfeit matches, it is nonetheless justified: the rules were clear, and UEFA at least attempted reasonable alterations to try to reach a sporting result. More broadly, it might be that certain changes were unfair yet justified when compared with the weight of the sheer logistical nightmare that, say, constantly rearranging matches would bring to a season already beset by logistical constraints. Even if unjustified unfairness undermines the integrity of a competition, it does not seem that justified unfairness would have such an undermining effect: sports are filled with inequality and bad luck that we tolerate anyway, so introducing a little more—in pursuit of a worthwhile goal—might be acceptable.[[8]](#endnote-8) We had to accept *some* changes to restart the season, and whichever set of changes we made would have negatively affected some teams more than others, but if we think playing the competition to completion is worthwhile, that justifies some teams suffering some additional obstacles (so long as this is one of the least burdensome set of changes necessary to resume the competition).[[9]](#endnote-9)

My claim is that justified unfairness does not undermine the integrity of a competition. Thus, we might grant that awarding a 3-0 loss was in some sense unfair, and the fact that these teams had to forfeit was extraordinary, but the forfeit was nonetheless justified (evidenced by the fact UEFA tried to postpone matches where possible) and thus does not affect the integrity of the competition.

Let’s focus again specifically on entire teams having to miss a match and consider a different approach some competitions have taken. The Premier League postponed some games, rearranging them (sometimes at short notice) for later on in the season [(](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?uXtH15)Premier League [2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?uXtH15), as did Ligue 1 [(AFP (Paris) 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?f2DlvY). League competitions tend to have more matches and thus have more slots in which to rearrange forfeited games, and the logistics are easier when there is no international travel involved, so it is easier to rearrange games so enforced forfeits are less easily justified. That’s why Rostov’s 10-1 loss to Sochi damages the integrity of the Russian Premier League [(France 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?SDlURt). Rostov had to play with youth players because their first team was in quarantine and Sochi refused to postpone. This unreasonably burdened Rostov, and it affects the other teams in the league who must play a much stronger Rostov, while Sochi have an inflated goal difference. Surely it would have been less burdensome overall to postpone than to make Rostov play a team of near-children and lose 10-1. So, it did not seem to be justified, and one might worry that it undermined the integrity of the Russian Premier League.

Still, the approach taken in England and France seems reasonable, and it might give us hope that the changes made in reaction to COVID-19 might even make competitions *fairer* in future: if we are more comfortable with late-notice rearrangements, we will be more willing to make them in future to ensure fairness. Teams have been hit with problems that have prevented the entire team from playing before. In 2006, Tottenham Hotspur lost to West Ham, and missed out on a Champions League place; Spurs crumbling under pressure won’t come as a surprise to many fans, but in this case they had an excuse: many of their players were sick, having eaten the now-infamous dodgy lasagna [(Short 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?QrGoyb). It isn’t just illness that can affect a game. In 2010, Barcelona faced Inter Milan in the semi-finals of the Champions League. The tie was won partly through Jose Mourinho’s tactical acumen and motivational skills, but it was also affected by the fact that Eyjafjallajökull exploded, stopping air travel for two days and forcing Barcelona into a 16-hour bus ride to Milan (Wilson 2018, 143–46).

We might hope that competitions would be able to find a way past this sort of unfairness in the future: although it is sheer bad luck that means teams are understrength, it might be preferable if competitions could try to accommodate this by rearranging matches or coming to some other sort of arrangement. Is it *unfair* that Barcelona had to play a game despite the interruption of Eyjafjallajökull? Perhaps not. But we might think it would have been better had they not had to face such an extra-sporting obstacle and had they been able to rearrange the match. Perhaps in Spurs’s case, nothing could have been done since there were competing considerations of fairness—it was the final game of the season, and these games are played simultaneously so that no one side has an advantage knowing what result it needs—but surely there will be other cases, when we are past COVID, where an entire team is ruled out, and we may be more willing to accommodate this.

So, I have argued that the fact that some players would miss games due to COVID-19 is unremarkable because players miss games anyway, and I have suggested that the way that many (though not all) competitions dealt with entire teams being out was either fair, or justifiably unfair, so these competitions maintained their integrity. What about the other changes made in response to COVID? Take, for instance, the fact there was a break and games were played later in the calendar year. For one, this break meant that there was a long stretch without games, so some teams had players recover from injury and other teams suffered new injuries, but this just underlines how ordinary this is: players get injured, players recover more quickly or slowly than expected, such is sporting life. The break also meant that some games were played later in the year. Some players are better in some conditions, other players are better in other conditions, and the fact some players will thus do better in hotter weather is normatively no different to the fact that some are better at slogging through a particularly wet March. Some managers complained about the drinks breaks, introduced to help players cope with the heat, arguing that they were unnecessary [(Sharpe 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?MpTU0X). Yet drinks breaks for extreme heat have been a regular part of football for years [(BBC Sport 2014)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?Jiz1Fg). And it misunderstands the purpose of drinks breaks to suggest that they were only there because the weather was hot: they were also there because the calendar was condensed and drinks breaks are a useful way to promote hydration and prevent injuries [(Gray 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?dJ7V1I).[[10]](#endnote-10)

This leads on to a related problem. The calendar was condensed, but in itself that isn’t a problem of fairness: the problem of fairness arises because some teams were less well-equipped to deal with this. Here, we turn from the capriciousness of injuries and almost-random unfortunate incidents to a sort of unfairness that is biased in favor of particular teams: the rich ones. Poorer teams are more badly affected by injury and fatigue because they have fewer high-quality players to replace their starters when needed. Drinks breaks may help alleviate injuries and fatigue, and so might the introduction of five, rather than three, substitutes [(Gray 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?bdnZ5R). But the substitute rule just exacerbates the inequalities between teams: it may help to save the well-stocked teams from injury, but weaker teams do not have the squad depth to make these changes and thus they are put at a further disadvantage: they are less able to benefit by making changes during a match and are more likely to suffer from conditioning problems throughout the competition.

One reply here might be that although some teams were disadvantaged by this, it cannot be *unfair* because all sides are held to the same standard and so this change is impartial. Daniel Dombrowski (2020) has offered a compelling case against this “fair to both [in our case “all”] sides” view. To take his example: just because a refereeing decision is impartial, that does not make it fair; for instance, if a referee is lenient to both sides, this might be unfair on the more skillful team which could hold the other side scoreless without fouling whereas the weaker team can only hold the other team scoreless by committing these unpenalized fouls (Dombrowski 2020, 452). Dombrowski is concerned with refereeing decisions and the ways that the more skillful, stronger, side can be disadvantaged. But in our case, it is often the weaker sides who are disadvantaged. They have less depth, fewer players of skill on the bench, and although this is in some sense a lack of sporting skill, it is often caused by other factors: a lack of prestige, not to mention a lack of funds, means they cannot attract better players to fill the squad.[[11]](#endnote-11) So, even though the substitute change was impartial, we might still say that it was unfair.

Still, my form of reply stands: firstly, the unfairness was justified, secondly, squad depth is an issue aside from COVID-19. Let’s address these points in order. Firstly, to have anything like ordinary seasons in the coming years, the 2019-20 season had to be somewhat condensed, and if it could not be condensed, competitions would have to bear the cost either of canceling it or revamping future competitions significantly—these are major costs, so it seems that cramping the season might have been preferable. The condensed schedule was justified. And we can see why there was a need to allow five substitutes. As IFAB, the board that governs football’s laws, put it, the change to the number of substitutions was made because: “matches may be played in a condensed period in different weather conditions, both of which could have impacts on player welfare” [(IFAB 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?YU5I0b). So, although it may be unfair on some teams to make this change, it was justified in the interests of player welfare and in serving the overarching goal of minimizing disruption whilst completing the competition, and this change will continue to be justified to some extent as competitions still deal with the fallout of COVID-19.

Secondly, although some of the weaker teams played more matches in a shorter space of time than they normally would have, squad depth has always been an issue for such teams: they are simply not as able as better-funded teams to react to injuries or players losing form. The changes made in response to COVID-19 did not *create* issues with squad depth, but these changes did at least make clear that there are unfairnesses concerning squad depth. This could mean one of two things. On one hand, we, in European football, might be comfortable with squad disparities and not think they undermine the integrity of competitions. On the other, we might be deeply uncomfortable with squad disparities and either put up with it as necessary (or too hard to fix) or think it does indeed render competitions unfair and undermines their integrity. But if the latter is the case, then it isn’t the *changes made in response to COVID-19* that undermined the integrity of these competitions, they had lacked integrity for a while and COVID-19 just threw that in the sharpest relief.

My argument has been that the changes created in response to COVID-19 may have introduced forms of luck or unfairness, but many of these are similar to the sort of luck and unfairness we anyway tolerate in sporting competitions—so we have no reason to believe that these *changes* undermined the integrity of these competitions.[[12]](#endnote-12) I am not here an apologist for disparities in top-level football: my position is compatible with the thought that some disparities that already existed mean that these competitions lacked integrity in the first place. But if we do not believe this, we have little reason to worry about the changes made in response to COVID: things may have been bad, but COVID-19 itself did not majorly impact *the integrity* of European Football, at least not because of issues of fairness. Alongside this, I have argued that even if extra unfairness was introduced, this was *justified*, and so did not undermine the integrity of these competitions.

I want to end this section with three practical considerations concerning the broader impact of COVID-19. Firstly, one might object that the changes made in response to COVID-19 had a much more major effect than I have suggested. One might think that players were more affected than I have supposed, that the congested schedule was devastating rather than just a bit more taxing than usual, or that the lack of fans in the stadium was deeply unfair on teams who, say, had already traveled to Anfield and played in front of that crowd.[[13]](#endnote-13) There may be a reasonable argument to be had here, but such an argument needs to be made against my point that there is a way of seeing these changes as not all that different from the ordinary constraints faced when engaging in football competitions.

Secondly, my argument concerning unfairness can be bolstered by one further consideration: COVID-19 devastated many aspects of our ordinary lives, and to resume anything like normality we had to make some changes. To insulate sports from this is unrealistic, and we should operate with a principle of tolerance for changes that might, in other times, have seemed troubling.

Thirdly, COVID-19 has wrought economic hardship across the world, and it has made it almost impossible for football clubs to make the profits they were previously making. We might have little sympathy for the clubs with mountains of money, backed by American sports barons or states trying to sportswash their image. But even near the top level, many clubs are in difficult times. Failing to, say, end the season and get the TV money, or failing to hand out competition prizes, would have been another huge blow. The pragmatic considerations that justified certain changes to restart competitions are not all *sporting* considerations.

# Recognizability

I now want to consider a different form of challenge to integrity. “Integrity,” when employed in the context of sports, often focuses on doping, match-fixing, or tournament manipulation (including betting) [(IOC 2021; FIFA 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?lebtkE). These are inherently moral issues, and a central issue here is fairness. Archer’s examples fall into these categories, and his analysis is a powerful analysis of why the actions in these cases threatened sporting integrity. Armstrong’s doping meant that he did not face the constraints expected in cycling; Rangers being allowed to enter the league structure at a higher level than others meant they did not face the regulative constraints other teams face.

Yet I do not think that a focus on *sporting integrity* via fairness—although it is important to discuss and certainly motivates some concerns—fully captures the issues we are interested in. Archer explores several different conceptions of integrity, and one view he explores (but sets aside) concerns understanding integrity “in terms of possessing a character that is founded on identity-conferring commitments,” and perhaps the most famous exponent of this view of integrity is, as Archer [(2016, 119)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?4b7Boj) recognizes, Bernard Williams. To adapt what I think is the thrust of Williams’s argument: there are some projects or principles that a person could not plausibly have, and there are other principles that person must have if they are to continue to *be* that person. Pep Guardiola is committed to a possession-based, pressing game of football, and if he adopted a deep defense and encouraged his defenders to just hoof it to the big man, he would no longer be the Pep that fans respect and love.[[14]](#endnote-14) Likewise for clubs: if Barcelona disavowed Catalan nationalism and adopted negative football tactics, we might think they are, in some sense, no longer Barcelona.

I think this understanding of integrity allows us to understand another facet of integrity when it comes to footballing competitions.[[15]](#endnote-15) Rather than asking whether these competitions have remained *fair*, we might ask whether they have remained *themselves*. The problem becomes, then, whether a result in a competition is a result that we can recognize as a result *in that competition*. Must there be some asterisk next to Bayern Munich in the Men’s, and Lyon in the Women’s, Champions League that says they won *something* (fairly, and perhaps that competition was valuable), but it wasn’t *really* the Champions League.

**The Recognisability Argument.**  
The changes introduced to resume sporting competitions in the face of COVID-19 affected the *character* of these competitions and thus they affected the integrity of these competitions. A competition that undergoes such changes fails to remain the competition it purports to be.

Something might not undermine the integrity of the *sport*, yet still undermine the integrity of the competition if that competition becomes *unrecognizable*; we might think that the constraints set *by the competition* are compatible with the constraints of a good competition in that sport—so, it isn’t an integrity issue in Archer’s sense—yet we might also think that the competition has lost particular features *of that competition*. We might think that the 2019-20 Champions League was a kosher football competition, but we might also think that it was not *the Champions League*. We might think that there is some value to the competition, but that this value differs from (if not in level, in form) the regular Champions League. Bayern and Lyon would still be champions, but they would be champions of something different. They would be champions of a competition that has sporting integrity, but the Champions League has certain features, and they did not win a competition with those features.

I think that might be what Troy Deeney was getting at in his criticism of resuming the season. He worried that Liverpool’s victory would be spoiled, it would be like winning a marathon race with a break in the middle. Although this might involve concerns about fairness, Deeney seems to be getting at something else. We know that if you run a marathon and take a two-month break, you’ve not really competed in a marathon race. The problem, I submit, is not that the competition is somehow *unfair*, nor is it that it stops being a football competition in the way that a 20-mile run with a 6-miler several months later stops being a marathon race, rather it is that it loses its particular *character*. We might wonder whether the calendar shift, the extra substitutions—not least the empty stadiums devoid of fans—meant that, fairness aside, the competitions that resumed *were not the competitions that we know and love*.

So, what does it mean for a sporting competition to have integrity so that it remains recognizable? The competition integrity that we are interested in is not based on aesthetic or social principles like in the integrity of clubs. We might bemoan a defensive, boring, negative team winning a competition, but still they have won *that* competition. There are some broad features, of course, that make a competition the competition that it is. For instance, the Premier League is a mostly English affair. It might, conceivably, expand to allow for a few foreign teams (perhaps the Glasgow clubs), but were it to go much further than that, it would cease to be the Premier League, it would be some new competition. It also has promotion and relegation, and were it to move to a franchise model, it would be a separate competition from its predecessor.

To further illustrate my point about the character of a competition, and to explore an alternative option, we can look at what happened in Argentina, where top-level football had an enforced 7-month-long break, and the 2020 Copa de la Superliga was canceled. Instead of resuming the competition, or just leaving it empty, it was replaced by the Copa de la Liga Profesional.[[16]](#endnote-16) This replacement competition, later renamed the Copa Diego Armando Maradona, had an entirely different format and was clearly *not* the Superliga. It was a new tournament, meant to replace the Superliga. Maybe we should view the 2019/20 Champions League as like this: Bayern and Lyon won the premier European competition, but the tournament was different enough from how it was originally meant to be that it is more akin to a totally new tournament.

What about other league competitions? There had been only one round of the Superliga, whereas the Premier League was way over halfway through by the time it was canceled: annulling it and replacing it with a new competition would have been deeply unfair on, say, Liverpool. My point is not that the Premier League *should* have taken the same option and created a new competition instead; rather, it is to offer the worry that the Premier League, post-resumption, failed to maintain its character. We might worry, as Deeney did, that Liverpool did not indeed win the *Premier League*, they won something else.

# Conclusion

Even if these competitions were not unfair, even if—like everything else in life—sports had to change to continue, these changes might have affected the character of these competitions. The worry is that they thus ceased to be *those* competitions. It strikes me that Liverpool did win the Premier League. Yet I do not know whether or not the 2019/20 (and perhaps the 2020/21) Champions League maintained its integrity in this sense. Must we stick an asterisk next to the winners in the record books, noting that they actually won some other replacement competition?

Some features pull me towards saying it did maintain its recognizability. Over the years, this competition has evolved, yet the Champions League seems to be the same as the competition it started as: the European Cup. Previously, only league champions were allowed in, but this was broadened; and there have been different structures in the competition. For instance, it has been a straight knockout, currently has one group stage before the knockouts, and for a time had a second group stage; but in my view, and the view of many, these changes may have *altered* the competition, they did not change it into a new one. Manchester United have won this competition three times: in 1968 (as the European Cup) and in 1999 and 2008 (as the Champions League).[[17]](#endnote-17) So, the competition structure has changed plenty over time and maybe that means the structural changes in 2019/20 are also compatible with the competition maintaining its recognizability. Further, the 2019/20 competition still was the premier continental club competition, and perhaps that is what is so central to its recognizability, and what ties it to the European Cup.

Other factors pull me in the other direction: this change of format was short-term, and we might wonder whether changing, mid-season, from the contemporary format to the one-off format is a different kettle of fish to planned format changes that have previously shaped the competition. Perhaps home-and-away matches are central to this competition; and there were no fans in the stadium, which is an important factor in the home-and-away nature of the competition. Perhaps Bayern and Lyon won, and this achievement was valuable, but they did not win the Champions League, they won a replacement competition.

In short, I do not know how to settle this. Our judgments will depend largely upon what we take to be central to a competition: must the Premier League finish in May? Must the Champions League have home-and-away matches? Must there be fans in the stadium? Did the victors exhibit the balance of skills that we think is necessary for success in that competition?[[18]](#endnote-18) Our answers may vary, and some might lead to the idea that competitions maintained their character, others to the idea that they shifted and were different competitions. But I think it is our reaction to what makes a competition *that* competition, not to questions of fairness, that will settle whether or not these competitions maintained their integrity.

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1. Alex Wolf-Root and I argue that, with few exceptions, competitions cannot award placings to teams unless they play through to completion [(Wojtowicz and Wolf-Root 2021)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?ka1wOK). This raises issues of integrity if the competitions award placings without finishing, and it suggests that *if competitions indeed must award placings, they should try to finish* *to maintain integrity*. I shall not address this here. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. At least, that was Wilson’s worry: he admitted (writing in May 2020) there could be a restart that maintains fairness and integrity and the prospects for the Premier League doing this would depend upon how well the Bundesliga resumption went. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Chris McMullan pointed out we might not want to take this at face value: they are also motivated by (perhaps important and respectable) financial worries. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. There are many other issues concerning fairness and integrity that I will not touch on. For instance, it seems that there are issues of fairness concerning changing rules after a competition has begun (thanks to Aveek Bhattacharya for stressing this point). And what difference does the fact that in some competitions clubs voted on changes and in others the changes were enforced from above? [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. As with Archer’s examples, there are several ways people can affect the integrity of a sport. We will focus more specifically on the integrity of a particular competition. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Even if COVID-19 *increased* the risk of players missing games (not just due to COVID-19 itself, but due to injuries brought on by conditioning worries), this risk is surely not radically more extreme than a normal season. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Molly Hudson (2020) raises a related issue: many player contracts expired before the end of extended seasons; this especially affected women’s competitions because many domestic leagues finished early, and contracts could not be renewed (due to financial reasons). Teams in the Women’s Champions League were allowed to register new players, which perhaps alleviated this. See, though, my below point on recognizability. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Alex Wolf-Root points out that if 75% of games are justifiably cancelled, we would doubt the integrity of the season, so justification does not defeat the charge that something undermines integrity. I agree, but I think that in such cases we might say that the problem is the season ended early, or we might say something, as I do below, about recognizability. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Alex Wolf-Root suggested to me it may have been fairer to just give no result for this match. Perhaps, but it is also possible that there are downsides to declaring a neutral result, especially when we need to find a way to settle the tie. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Chris McMullan pointed out to me that it isn’t clear that this is effective, and there has been some debate about efficacy in the Premier League. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This argument won out to some extent in the Premier League. Although in the resumed 2019-20 season five substitutes were allowed, this was revoked in 2020-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For another point, that we can address with a similar approach: In the Champions League, Bayern Munich had a significantly longer break between the end of their league competition and the resumption of the Champions League than some other teams. But we can question whether that rest was beneficial or not: football is abound with conversations concerning whether this or that team benefitted from, say, already having won the league and being able to rest their players, or whether sustained competition would have been preferable. This is a problem other teams (such as Paris St Germain, even Bayern some years) suffer in ordinary seasons. It was also justified to push the Champions League to the end of the season: it could not reasonably compete with condensed league schedules (especially when international travel was problematic) and, if we believe resumption to be superior to cancellation, the end of the season seemed a reasonable time to play the competition. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Thanks to Chris McMullan for putting it like this. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See [Williams (1973a, 97–100)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?I6rgkI). Williams’s thoughts about integrity are, like much of his work, elusive. I think that his work on character and principles sheds much light: [(Williams 1973b; 1981)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?NfKAqB). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Archer doesn’t think the Williamsian approach is a good way of understanding *the concept of integrity* in sports (Archer 2016, 123-5), because he thinks that when we claim something lacks sporting integrity, we are saying that such an action undermines the very integrity of the sport. I don’t disagree, but I suspect that “integrity” has many uses, and Archer’s is a core meaning in sports. Still, there are other issues that his analysis might not cover. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Likewise, English domestic cricket replaced the usual County Championship with the Bob Willis Trophy. Thanks to Aveek Bhattacharya and Chris McMullan for pointing me to this. Both also point out that some competitions have longer histories and what we do during this pandemic might affect future iterations of competitions. One thing that makes it easier for the Argentinian case is that the Superliga was itself a very new competition. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. This isn’t *entirely* uncontroversial, and as Aveek Bhattacharya pointed out to me, in some contexts the European Cup and Champions League are seen as separate (like the Premier League and English Division 1 are sometimes treated as separate competitions, such as for some records). None of this should undermine my point. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Thanks to Alex Wolf-Root for this important suggestion. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)