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As our sports venues become hospitals, there's little to cheer but much to admire

SEATTLE — The makeshift hospital features an image of Russell Wilson on an outside wall. There's all-pro linebacker Bobby Wagner, too, along with a few other prominent Seattle Seahawks. In normal times, these are indicators that you are on the grounds of CenturyLink Field, the noisy home of the city's NFL, MLS and XFL franchises. In these times, however, they welcome the sick.

If an empty stadium isn't enough to epitomize this jarring new sports reality, then here's more to wrench your gut: the enormous facilities housing our favorite fields of play are transforming into emergency medical centers.

It is practical, yet poignant. During this lockdown, we have spent every day lamenting the cancellations and postponements of games, wondering when they will return and pondering how the big-time leagues will find a way to entertain us. We yo-yo between embracing old memories and dreaming about new thrills. But the more we anticipate the end of this crippling pandemic, the more we realize the novel coronavirus has only begun to disrupt life.

When will baseball return? Well, it's hard to be speculate with accuracy when a large grass lot at the spring training complex of the Washington Nationals and Houston Astros is now a drive-through testing site for West Palm Beach residents. This thing couldn't possibly interrupt football season, right? A lot can change — a lot had better change — in five months. But who can be sure when the FedEx Field parking lot just opened for testing this week?

I use the word "sobering" quite a bit. When rereading and nitpicking my columns after publication, it comes up way too much in describing a tough loss or recognizing that a hyped team isn't as good as perceived. But you want to know what's really sobering? Obsessing daily about the return of the NBA, only to receive a distressing reminder about the complexity of life right now.

Early Saturday morning, my dad needed an ambulance to rush him to a Louisville hospital. He required two emergency surgeries. He was able to be released after five days, thankfully, but because crowded hospitals must be especially cautious while treating covid-19 patients and others, my mom couldn't be with him during the ordeal. She could drop off his cellphone and other items, but she couldn't visit. The nurses called to keep her informed when my dad couldn't, but those were five long days of uncertainty and worry. And while we all have heard about the many ways this virus is stressing medical staff and facilities, it doesn't hit home until a loved one loses consciousness and must be carted away, and all you can do is make a curbside delivery.

Before the fun can restart, the suffering must peak. That's the harsh reality right now. There's no use predicting the return of sports in this nation until every state, or at least the overwhelming majority, can minimize the spread of the coronavirus. And there are 50 different timelines. I've abandoned my early expectation for sports to synchronize with my levels of boredom and impatience and come back quickly. After the scare with my dad, I'm grateful for what we

consider to be simple things, and I'm more appreciative than ever of the dedicated doctors, nurses and other hospital employees who are risking their lives to save lives.

So it was quite meaningful to go by the CenturyLink Field Events Center, a building next to the stadium that has been turned into a military field hospital that can treat 148 patients. Officials are using the facility for non-coronavirus patients. More than 300 members of the 627th Hospital Center from Colorado's Fort Carson were deployed to Seattle to run the temporary hospital.

"We are fighting alongside each other in this battle against an unseen enemy," Brig. Gen. Doug Cherry said during a news conference.

This isn't some week-long pop-up store like you see during major sports and entertainment events, either. This is an acknowledgment of a lengthy battle. Many sports facilities already are being used, and in the weeks to come, many more will be converted nationwide.

Cynics will offer snide remarks about wealthy sports owners finally offering more of a civic return on their publicly funded palaces. Beleaguered fans will joke about it taking a pandemic to see full stadium parking lots again. Others actually will need to visit these places for more serious reasons, and when those stories touch us, there will be gratitude for the forward thinking in planning for medical refuge.

"We are at the start of a marathon," Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan (D) said. "This is not a sprint. It is going to take time for us to get through this."

How much time? It doesn't matter. The pandemic officially has cost us a year of the NCAA tournament and Wimbledon. It has delayed the Olympics for a year and suspended just about everything enjoyable for an indefinite period. There is probably more bad sports news to come. But these so-called losses are nothing when compared to the number of reported coronavirus cases, which is about to surpass 1 million worldwide.

It takes 20 minutes to drive from my house to CenturyLink Field. The route, through streets so empty now that it feels like 4 a.m. at all times, inspires either depression or reflection about better times. Then, in mid-thought, comes the stadium district, south of downtown, where the city usually lets loose.

On Wednesday, a soldier stood outside in his uniform. Thirty feet away, two smokers talked. A man rode by on his bicycle. Other than that, there was silence.

There was no rush to get into the temporary hospital, no panicked wife outside wondering about the health of her husband. Just silence at the stadium. In this strange new normal, that made it a good day.