

# Where “normal” might be the “new normal”

## Sport in Gibraltar

BY IAN FELICE<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

On Tuesday 30 March 2021, the Victoria Stadium was the setting for the Group G World Cup Qualifying Round football game between hosts Gibraltar and The Netherlands. 181 places separated these countries in the FIFA rankings. The Netherlands are an established powerhouse, frequently among the favourites to take the top prize at major football tournaments. Gibraltar are minnows, having joined FIFA in 2016, and only after a 20-year CAS battle. Winning Group 2 of League D of the 2020-2021 UEFA Nations League, over Liechtenstein and San Marino, remains its most significant international footballing milestone.

Gibraltar’s Victoria Stadium is a feast for every sense. It has a capacity of around 2,000 people and sits right beside the territory’s airport runway. The runway itself cuts through the main access road into Gibraltar from its frontier with Spain. When the runway is to be used, barriers drop down at each end and traffic stops, like a railroad crossing. When a plane lands or takes-off, the barriers are raised and cars can continue their journey. There are no stands at the runway-end of the Victoria Stadium, so the most entertainment bored Dutch goalkeeper Tim Krul probably had that cold, miserable, windy evening was a frontline view of a British military plane landing in Gibraltar with a precious cargo of Pfizer vaccines.

The match itself was an entirely one-sided affair. The Netherlands had 73% of the possession, yet hit the Gibraltar defensive wall time and time again until finally breaking through in the 42nd minute. A further six goals followed in the second half. Memphis Depay scored twice. The Dutch had 35 total attempts at goal. Gibraltar? None! Portuguese referee João Pinheiro mercifully called for full-time, and the 0-7 final score will go down in the record books as just another ho-hum qualifier.

So why am I writing about this football match six-odd weeks later? Why did the world’s media excitedly descend into Victoria Stadium for this David v. Goliath formality? The answer is that this otherwise forgettable sporting

contest served almost as a public health experiment, and might have helped shine a light on how future events may need to be organised and hosted as the world, hopefully, emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Gibraltar

Firstly, in case you have never heard of Gibraltar, known popularly as the Rock, some context.

It is a British overseas territory located at the southern tip of Spain. It is small. 6 square miles or so. It is home to 30,000 people, although an extra 10,000 or so trek back and forth over the runway road every day to work in the territory. Contrary to some *vox populi*, it is not an island. It has a land frontier with Spain, as well as the airport, a vibrant port and a cruise terminal. Over 7 million people visited Gibraltar every year in the life before COVID. If Gibraltar was a sovereign nation, it would be a top 5 country in terms of its GDP per capita.

Like everywhere else, Gibraltar has been hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. It fared wonderfully in the first wave, recording no loss of life in its population. Regrettably, the second wave brought with it a more virulent strain, and, unfortunately, 94 lives were lost to COVID-19 between the end of 2020 and the start of 2021.

However, Gibraltar has since become one of the feel-good stories of the success of vaccination against the COVID-19 virus. Virtually all of its adult population has been inoculated with a double-dose of the Pfizer vaccine delivered by military planes of the type witnessed by Tim Krul. Lockdowns and other restrictions have been relaxed since the middle of March. Bars, restaurants, cafeterias, workplaces and schools operate largely as they did pre-pandemic. Mask-wearing is not compulsory, except in retail areas. It is on the UK “green list” of permitted travel destinations. At the time of writing, there has not been a single COVID-19 case in its resident population for over a month.

### “Rumble on the rock”

Amidst this backdrop, Gibraltar ventured one step further.

What if, it asked, we could start organising events again? What if, gasp, we could safely allow crowds to attend these events? Public health officials undoubtedly had more than a few sleepless nights in the days leading

<sup>1</sup> Hassans International Law Firm Limited, Gibraltar.

up to the event, but heavyweight boxing provided the first opportunity. The long-awaited re-match between Dillian Whyte and Alexander Povetkin took place in Gibraltar in March 2021 in controlled conditions.

Billed as the “Rumble on the Rock”, the COVID-19 situation in Gibraltar was stable enough that both fighters and their camps were able to travel to and stay in Gibraltar for the build-up to the fight, and a crowd of 500 was allowed access to the event.

It was not lost on many that the venue for the fight, the Europa Point Sports Complex, had been the site of the (unused) Gibraltar government’s emergency Nightingale Hospital during the height of the pandemic.

### International football

With the boxing experiment under its belt, Gibraltar went one further and allowed international football to return to the Rock amidst great expectations and cautious optimism.

If the event was successfully organised, it could pave the way for other large(r) gatherings to take place. And so it was that the Gibraltar v. The Netherlands match meant much more than just another qualifier. At its most mundane, it meant people could gather in crowds again. At its highest, it represented hope that the pandemic was over and that life could return to a new normality that very much resembled the “old normal”.

In order to get there, however, strict conditions had to be observed at the Gibraltar v. The Netherlands match. Only double-vaccinated over-18s were allowed access into the event. All tickets were validated only after a negative test result a few hours before the game. Everyone who attended was required to be tested again, 10 days after referee Pinheiro’s final whistle.

Remarkably, not a single positive COVID-19 test was recorded following either the Whyte v. Povetkin fight, or the Gibraltar v. The Netherlands match. Public health officials could sleep again, safe in the knowledge that not a single person had been infected at either of the large-gathering events, and that the experience of hosting and organising these events would be a blueprint for others to follow.

### The “new normal”

The positive results of the “new normal” experience instilled a sense of confidence in the Gibraltar authorities. After the pros, the plan transitioned to a safe resumption of amateur and youth sport in the territory. A staged approach was implemented and restrictions on sports training and competition, as well as general leisure, were gradually lifted. Grass-root sports resumed and kids returned in their droves, enforced stay-at-home orders clearly having done little to dispel their passion and enthusiasm. Gyms re-opened, and the battle to shed those lockdown kilos in time for the summer months began in earnest.

At the time of writing, football, basketball and hockey (arguably the three most popular sports on the Rock) are

immersed in their league and cup competitions. Rugby and cricket have enjoyed the return of their venue, which otherwise would have housed the government’s Nightingale Hospital. Racket sports are in full swing (no pun intended). Bicycle sales soared during Gibraltar’s two lockdown periods, and never have so many people dug out those old sports shoes to go for a gentle jog or a brisk walk.

Let us make no mistake about it, though. It has been harsh. Like much of the rest of the world, Gibraltar was caught by surprise by the COVID-19 pandemic. It went into its first lockdown in March 2020. In the days leading to this, restrictions had already been implemented on the use of sporting facilities (all largely government owned), with a big impact on all competitions.

Football, the only sport in Gibraltar where sums of money are in play, was hard hit. The GFA, Gibraltar’s national federation, declared the 2019-2020 season null and void, much to the chagrin of the then league leaders. Uncertainty reigned during the Champions and Europa League campaigns of its representatives over the summer, when COVID-19 protocols were ever evolving and outrightly flouted by a visiting team from Kosovo. Better COVID-19 statistics in September and October 2020 allowed a return to play, but the second wave, at the start of the winter, put everything back on hold. Was this the new normal?

Even during some of the periods of restriction, however, there were positives to take. The Gibraltar basketball federation, GABBA, keen to keep their kids engaged, came up with the idea of a “skills challenge”. Timed, individual obstacle circuits, designed to test players’ fundamental basketball skills, were the focus of this competition. One player at a time dribbled through the circuits, trying to beat a clock whilst they took shots from designated spots on the court. The other participants sat in social distanced, mask-wearing settings just outside the court, awaiting their turn. FIBA, the sport’s world governing body, liked the idea and incorporated it into a global, on-line event, where countries participated against each other virtually, from different corners of the world.

### Conclusion

There is nothing quite like the real thing, though, and now that we are back into the full swing of things, Gibraltar is working hard to ensure the efforts of the last year do not go to waste.

With every day that goes by without a new case, confidence soars but caution remains. The very successful vaccination campaign is nearing its end with very cogent evidence to show that the vaccines work. As countries strive to roll out their own campaigns with ever greater zeal, they can look to the Gibraltar experiment to take comfort that these efforts will be rewarded.

As successful as Gibraltar has been to date, though, the feeling is clear – until all of us are out of this pandemic, none of us are!

When the world changed in March 2020, sports was but another casualty. With most of us confined to our homes for months, the distractions of supporting our teams, cheering on our players, living the dreams and feeling the pains were not there. The pandemic paralysed sports much as it did everything else, and, precisely at the time when we needed that escape the most, re-runs on TV and spectator-less competition on TV were the best we could get. For all these reasons, a one-sided football match in a tiny corner of Europe, played in blustery conditions beside a military airport meant much more than anyone could ever imagine. This was much more than just about Gibraltar v. The Netherlands. This was about the hope of getting back to what we had. The hope that our “new normal” could look very much like “normal” always did.



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JUNE 2021

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## COORDINATOR

Erica Pasalbessy (MSc)  
Nolot  
P.O. Box 206  
5270 AE Sint-Michielsgestel  
The Netherlands  
Tel.: +31 (0)625279308  
E-mail: erica@nolot.nl

For further information on the journal  
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ISSN nr.: 2211-0895  
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Preferred citation: *Sports, Law and  
Taxation (formerly GSLTR) 2021/1*, at page  
number(s)

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