There is no risk-free return... final call will be with players’

The quarantine hotels, the extra hygiene measures, all those precautions intended to put professional footballers inside a coronavirus-proof cocoon?

They’re all great. Up to a point. But anyone involved in the risk versus reward debate surrounding football’s return should be aware that Covid-19 isn’t contained quite so easily.

As England’s Premier League advances towards a resumption of competition, putting ever more pressure on the SPL to follow suit, getting the right sort of expert advice will be crucial in deciding what happens next.

Simon Clarke, Associate Professor in Cellular Microbiology at the University of Reading, can speak with no little authority on the subject. And he has a desire to introduce one or two indisputable scientific facts to the conversation.

As he patiently explained to Sportsmail, there is no such thing as a risk-free sporting environment. Not while the pandemic is still with us.

Certainly not until widespread vaccination becomes something more than a promising theory and a couple of interesting clinical trials.

Clarke believes that, ultimately, it will be professional footballers themselves who will have to make the final call on whether to take a chance on catching — and possibly spreading — the virus.

The fact that he’s in no doubt their unanimous response will be to return to action says everything about the commitment of elite athletes.

Yes, he says, they’ll take a gamble in order to play. As long as they’re fully aware of the odds then, as a man of science, he has no problem with that.

Up to speed with most of the solutions being put forward by a variety of footballing authorities around the world, Clarke pointed out: ‘People need to understand the risk they put themselves under when they choose to participate.

It’s impossible to put them in a bubble. All you can do is reduce the risk. My opinion is that most professional sports people will take that risk.’

‘If you think of the risks faced by boxers, racing drivers and jockeys, that speaks to the motivation of elite competitors.

‘Arguably, footballers would be putting themselves at risk. But it would be an informed decision.’

‘Whether it’s training or actual games of football is irrelevant, the rules are still the same.

‘You are still exposing people to other people — and they could be carrying the virus.

‘So it’s important to stress that it’s impossible to eliminate risk.

‘There will always be risk. The only way to avoid all risk is to not do any sport. And you can understand why that’s not going to be an option in the long term.’

‘The Bundesliga plan, yet to be approved by German politicians at provincial and national level, drew attention for the idea of buying test kits in the hundreds of thousands.

‘Clarke certainly feels that kind of capacity, political non-starter until the UK is testing in far greater numbers, is going to be crucial in getting football back in any form.

‘The key, really, is to test people regularly,’ he said. ‘Regardless of whether they are playing, test everyone.’

‘But that means testing someone before the match, then a few days later, a few days later and a few days later again.

‘You test your team, you need the opposition to be carrying out the same testing regime.

‘Because, as footballers, they are constantly coming into contact with team-mates and opponents.’

‘Even if there is a negative test on a player before a game, then he tests positive after the match, you have to be aware that he could have infected other people.

‘Sports people cough and they spit on the pitch. That’s an extra way to bring up the virus.

‘If you don’t have symptoms and are testing negative, nothing else can be done.

‘It’s really not feasible for players to wear face masks. It would be impossible in rugby, because it’s just another thing to grab in a scrum.

‘In football, you have to ask if it would restrict their breathing, I think it would, so players wouldn’t be happy with that.

‘Any sport that puts a heavy cardiovascular load on the athlete isn’t going to want anything that restricts breathing.’

‘Every model being discussed involves keeping fans locked out. At the moment, just feeling secure enough to have 22 players on the pitch for 90 minutes is the only aim.

‘At various stages, leagues have talked about World Cup-style camps, where entire teams are sequestered to play out the remainder of the current season. And then the start of the next
campaign, too?

'The hotel option is a possibility,' admitted Clarke. 'But, even then, they are still being exposed to other people. There will be somebody driving the coach, somebody might be involved in preparing their kit.

'No matter how well you clean, people in the hotel are touching doors and railings. It's not feasible to eliminate that threat.

'Then you go to games and are exposed to the opposition, the ref and other officials.

'So, yeah, putting them in a hotel under quarantine for months on end is an option. But it only reduces the risk. It doesn't eliminate it entirely.'

Clarke let out a grim laugh when reminded of football's first baby-steps response to the creeping menace of coronavirus, including a slightly farcical ban on pre-match handshakes — just days before the entire sport was shut down.

'Players were involved in a sport where there is close contact, breathing heavily and — not to put too fine a point on it — spitting all over the pitch,' he told Sportmail.

'Then I noticed that, after one of the games, players who had been banned from shaking hands before kick-off were embracing each other.

'The winners put their hands out and the losers, not wanting to be poor losers, felt compelled to react.

'Honestly, I would have done the same thing. It's ingrained in our culture, how you behave after a game.'

'Among a populace desperately seeking light at the end of the lockdown tunnel, much has been made of the R for Reproduction number (the expected number of cases directly generated by one case) dropping below the magic figure of one.

'Stay below that and the virus burns itself out, right?

'Clarke cau t ioned: 'We're all focusing on this R number.

'When it gets low enough, the restrictions can start to be eased.

'But you'll still have the virus in the population.

'And, if you allow people to mix too closely, the R figure will start to go up again.'

'If that happens, no quarantine measures known to man will save football from the inevitable backlash.

'There are risks all round, then, on the road to an extremely enticing reward — some form of football in whatever passes for normal.'
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There have been suggestions that footballers might wear face masks when they return to action. Players at Gremio in Brazil wore them before a game with Sao Luis in March, but that was in protest at being forced to play amid the coronavirus pandemic — and they took them off before the match started. The Brazilian Football Federation subsequently suspended all nationwide competitions.