

CANADA

Canadian sports look for a coronavirus bailout

The league that often feeds the NFL says it may not survive without government help.



McMahon Stadium in Calgary, Alberta. The Canadian Football League has asked the Canadian government for financial help of up to C\$150 million. | Derek Leung/Getty Images

By **ANDY BLATCHFORD**

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OTTAWA — American sports fans are fretting about when pro sports will come back as they know them, but in Canada the worry is whether some popular sports leagues will return at all.

The economic damage from Covid-19 is ravaging the sports business on both sides of the border, but the pain promises to be more for prominent, gate-dependent leagues based north of the frontier — like the Canadian Football League.

The league has asked the Canadian government for financial help of up to C\$150 million and, since the start of the pandemic lockdowns, it has moved swiftly to establish a lobbying presence in Ottawa.

In the U.S., sports leagues aren't asking for bailouts even as some teams look for relief without fan or television revenue. Madison Square Garden, home to hockey's New York Rangers and basketball's New York Knicks, has [pushed for money](#) from a federal aid package. And the Indiana Pacers have hired two lobbying firms to work on coronavirus-related issues, without specifying precisely what issues.

But the Canadian Football League, where National Football League greats Warren Moon and Doug Flutie first became stars, may be a canary in the coal mine for second-tier sports leagues driven by ticket sales.

“We want the support we need to get through this crisis, and not a dime more,” CFL Commissioner Randy Ambrosie told Canadian Parliament lawmakers in testimony recently about the 62-year-old league. “We support the decisions governments have made, but their effect on our business is devastating.

“We just don't want it to be fatal.”

The CFL, where American football players sometimes go to start, finish or rehabilitate their careers, had been scheduled to start its preseason this Sunday before postponing. On Tuesday, the [CFL issued a statement](#) saying it hopes to

kick off its season in September as long as governments ease restrictions on public gatherings by then, though it acknowledged cancellation is still possible.

Unlike the biggest North American sports leagues, the CFL's nine teams rely heavily on turnstile-generated revenues and far less on broadcast deals. The National Football League and the National Basketball Association, for instance, may be able to get by for a while with empty venues — but the CFL cannot afford to play games without fans in the seats. In the U.S., the fledgling XFL professional football league filed for bankruptcy protection in April.

In a span of a month, the Canadian lobbying registry shows CFL representatives met with 10 different senior officials from the offices of Innovation Minister Navdeep Bains and Heritage Minister Steven Guilbeault. CFL lobbyists have also pressed their case with Infrastructure Minister Catherine McKenna, Northern Affairs Minister Dan Vandal and, just last week, Justice Minister David Lametti.

But so far, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government has yet to provide direct support to the league. Ambrosie has also sought help from the provinces. At least one government, Ontario, [has already taken a pass](#).

Theo Meyer contributed to this report.

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