CHAPTER XX

'THE COUNTRY IS UNDER THREAT, BUT THE GAME GOES ON':

EXAMINATIONS OF SPORTS WORKERS' WELFARE IN SPACES OF

GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICT

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Introduction

Conflict, violence and persecution disrupts millions of lives around the world (United Nations, 2015), and in many of these turbulent situations the 'everyday' or daily working life carries on. Focusing on areas of employment that include journalists, contractors, aid workers, medical personnel, military personnel, etc., scholarship has drawn attention to the physical, psychological, and emotional impacts of conflict on workers and their individual and collective coping responses (Roberts & Browne, 2011). These impacts can be extended to other employment sectors, including sports work. Furthermore, experiences of professional sports workers (e.g. coaches and players)

within conflict zones can be located within the broader examinations of sport labour and related migration studies. Firstly, research has identified the roles sport plays in peoples' lives in post-/conflict spaces (Massey, Whitley & Darnell, 2016; Sugden, 2006; Wilson, Van Luijk & Boit, 2015). It is not unusual for sport to be played or consumed in war zones as sport can provide a clarity, certainty, safety/security, order or sense of 'normalcy' in situations where these are largely absent (Martin, 2009). Additional scholarship has connected the impact of expanding (international) movements on sport and sports workers' migrations to broader geopolitical changes (Magee & Sugden, 2002; Maguire & Stead, 1996; Roderick, 2012). Notwithstanding this work, limited knowledge exists on the unique contextual conditions of the host nation that influence the career experiences of players.

In addition to contributing to existing work on sport in post-/conflict spaces, and sport migrant labour, this chapter provides new knowledge on how geopolitical fragilities manifest in the daily realities of some professional sports workers. Extending research highlighting migrant worker precarity and the need for organisational assistance and intervention, we evidence experiences of players getting on with their work and adapting to a fluid and potentially volatile context. While this book showcases the necessity of enhanced organisational welfare provision, this chapter articulates an alternate perspective of welfare in which sports workers' priorities may not reflect what we expect in the sport sector (e.g. career decisions, migration, future planning, network formation etc.). In continuing our research in this domain (see Purdy, Kohe & Paulauskas, 2017, 2018), the chapter raises pertinent questions on the conceptualisation, extent, and ideological and logical limitations of welfare provision within professional sport. Such questions also point to the need to reconsider what is possible/made possible when conflict erodes, removes, or renders irrelevant some of the established structures and systems of sport that protect sports workers.

Drawing on professional men's basketball in the Ukraine as a space to explore connections between geopolitical conflict and athlete welfare, the chapter focuses on the 2013-2014 season in which friction over land rights between Russia and the Ukraine escalated and protests spiralled into armed conflict. The chapter begins with a description of sports work in professional basketball. We then present data, in the form of vignettes, generated from interviews with basketball sports workers who were employed in clubs in the Ukraine during the 2013-2014 season. We subsequently analyse these experiences in light of welfare issues. The chapter finishes with a brief conclusion.

Context and approach

Professional sport has been criticised for its short-term, transitory labour and the expendability and replaceability of workers (Ingham, Blissmer & Davidson, 1999; Roderick, 2012), which prioritise the 'business of winning' over the welfare and well-being of individuals (Meisterjahn & Wrisberg, 2013). Other scholars have argued that the performative and highly contested culture of professional sport can compromise athlete welfare (Roderick, 2012). For athletes, the possibility of injury, declining performance, transfer to and from lower leagues, limited career longevity, and worker surplus further contribute to a precarious and insecure working context (Roderick 2006a, 2006b, 2012). It is unsurprising then that the ability to obtain and maintain contracts is highly significant (Agergaard & Ungruhe, 2016), with players increasingly migrating within and across borders in search of (lucrative) career opportunities.

In planning their careers, players might have some understanding of how their new employment conditions may differ to those to which they are accustomed (i.e. practice sessions, travel, food, culture, weather). Migrating players, in particular, may have a limited understanding

of the language, culture, and/or geography of the region in which they accept employment, which makes them an additionally vulnerable (Kelly, 2012). Furthermore, literature has recognised that beyond managing the stressors that are generally associated with sports work, migrant sport work is also compounded by responsibilities toward families and/or significant others (Carter, 2007; Faulkner, Molnar & Kohe, 2019). However, alongside the accepted unknowns of elite sport performance, contextual unknowns (e.g. political stability, environmental factors, and commercial/economic precarities) remain. And, there is only so much due diligence and research that players, agents, or organisations can do to mitigate effects and affects. In the processes of sport labour migration, and the individual experiences within the Ukraine detailed below, there exist considerable uncertainties for which contingencies cannot be made.

The chapter comprises vignettes built from data generated from interviews with four professional basketball players (American, Ukrainian, and European) and a head coach (European) who were employed in clubs in the Ukraine during 2013/2014. Data have been organised in light of the participants' roles and nationalities to, in part, highlight differing ways the Ukrainian, European, and American players made sense of the situation. It must be recognised that these are partial accounts of experience from players that draw on fallible historical memories and may potentially evoke a certain temporal and spatial nostalgia. However, these are moments that players lived through; meanings were crafted by players from these experiences which still resonate in players' contemporary lives. As researchers, we are mindful as to the extent to which we can be certain 'this is how it (conflict) was at the time'. Yet, there is learning that can be accrued from these accounts, particularly in revealing how conflict is interpreted at the individual level. We believe the data are worth sharing as they tell us

something about what it means to be a sports worker in various times and in different cultures and/or contexts.

Vignettes

Head coach

I had a long playing career so I have a lot of experience as a player and I am experienced enough as a head coach. Because of this, I think it's difficult to surprise me. There are no situations in sport that I haven't faced, but in the 2013/2014 season, I was wrong!

Nobody could imagine what would happen. We just did our job as usual, practices, travelling, and then, in February, something started, but no one was sure how long it would last. We had just flown back to the Ukraine from an away game. In Kiev there had been clashes between protesters and the police and about 100 people had been killed. Because of the situation, the Basketball Federation stopped the league for five days. The whole team, players, coaches, and management left the region. At this time, some of the foreign players moved their families out of the Ukraine to their home countries. When we returned, no one knew if the situation would calm down or blow up, so we took it day by day. We told the players to be smart when they were out and to avoid aggressive situations.

I was well connected with the embassies, but they were saying different things.
Some said, "Get out," others said, "Stay, but be careful" and there were others
who said, "It's a normal situation." So who do you listen to? If it was bad, they
would all tell us to leave. Also, the media was showing the situation in different
ways so, as a team, we discussed what to do. It was important for us to decide
as a team as if some left, the team would not be as strong; we would not be as
good and we wouldn't achieve what we had set out to do that season. It was
helpful that I had a couple of experienced players who were able to talk to some
of the foreign players who were stressed about the situation. They reassured
them that it was manageable and that if the level of threat increased, they would
have time to get out.

Interpretation

For the coach, decisions regarding about the team's welfare were made in light of the changing contextual conditions and daily situation. In the first instance, the coach utilised networks and communication channels to acquire knowledge about levels of safety (although some of these conflicted). In doing so, the coach's social capital and professional capacity were a valuable resource. However, as the players were over the age of 18 and, considering the welfare of the collective, the coach deferred decision-making to the team. In this example, welfare goes from being an individualistic concept in which the coach mediates the context on a personal, subjective, and relative level to a collective enterprise in which solidarity and consensus (and possibly hegemony and masculinity) matter (Anderson & McGuire, 2010; Steinfeldt *et al*., 2011). While the coach and players were capable of voicing their opinions, personal responses were largely tied

to maintaining and ensuring unity of 'the team' (specifically, the ideas of fraternal expectations that come with team cohesion), which had prioritised performance goals (reinforced further in the player vignettes).

By deferring to the collective, the coach absolved himself of some of his responsibility and may have felt less stress or pressure to make executive decisions on behalf of the team. While this may have been beneficial for the coach's individual welfare (by taking away feelings of guilt should anything go awry), the coach has also, inadvertently or otherwise, placed a potentially larger burden of responsibility on players (and their welfare). Although some of this burden is mitigated by fraternal decision-making, for some players such an approach may have necessarily exacerbated their existing concerns about the situation. At this juncture, the practice of welfare and duties of care do not exist at the organisational or federation level. Rather, these reside in the personal interactions and specific coach-player relations that are emotionally and situationally driven and manifested *in situ*.

Players

European

Nobody could have predicted it. No one. The GM [General Manager] said we should keep playing because things would settle down. In the previous season, there had been protests, but these were peaceful. I think even Ukrainian people were surprised that things turned violent. Nobody expected anything different until people were killed. When that happened, it was a critical few days. We were playing outside of the Ukraine and I saw it on television – the main street where the people died was one kilometre from the gym and my home, it was very close.

I immediately called my wife who was in the Ukraine and asked her about the situation. She said she had heard the shooting all night and was keeping the family in the house. After this, the Ukrainian Basketball Federation stopped the league for five days. And, like many of my teammates, we got out of the country. During that time, I moved my family back to my home country and returned to finish the season.

I was not comfortable having my family there but, in the city where I was, as much as it could, daily life was carrying on. I thought things would calm down, so I assumed it would be okay to stay. I grew up in the Soviet Union so I understood a bit of what was happening but some players, particularly the American players, wanted to leave. The GM told me if one or two players left, everyone would follow. If this happened, our ambitions for the team would be ruined. And we had big ambitions beyond the Ukrainian basketball league. I talked to the players, we discussed the situation as a team and made the decision to stay. But we were in a city that was not the centre of the conflict so if the situation became really dangerous, we had time to get out.

Every time I spoke to my mother, she would ask, "what are you doing? Come back, it's war. Forget the money, come home." But you've got to be there and see the situation, it's different when you see it on TV. I knew the situation because I lived there, it was normal life. I'd go to practice, I'd go to the shop, I'd speak with people, and it was different to what they were showing on TV. In the east,

it was more dangerous than where I was because the border was very close. I remember we had a game in Donetsk. We had to take a bus for about 100 kilometres and during the journey we came across several checkpoints with soldiers. It was quite unsettling. We stayed in Mariupol for four days, played two games and returned home. A few days later it was reported that there had been shootings and people had set fire to the city. The city went into lockdown. We had just missed it!

In terms of basketball, as the season progressed, you could see some changes. As the conflict escalated, some teams started to save money. Normally we played in gyms with seating for 2,000-3,000 spectators, but they started to put us in small gyms. For example, we have a practice gym and a game gym – the game gym is for 8,000 spectators and the practice gym could seat 100. The GM immediately started to save money and said, "oh, this game is with a bullshit team, so we'll play in this small gym." And the Federation was not taking control to challenge this. On other teams, some players left or the teams dissolved because they lost their sponsors.

American

My agent found me an opportunity in the Ukraine. It was with a good team and it was good chance for me to improve my basketball, perform well, and hopefully progress. At that time, I didn't hear of war brewing in that region. With basketball I've been able to move to different countries and before I decide to go

to a country, I always try to do some research and see if it's safe, you know, what the city is like and stuff. It turns out the city was one of my favourites. I loved it there.

We didn't hear things right away, us Americans. We were kind of oblivious to it. We don't watch local TV because we wouldn't really understand it – so we heard about the conflict that was brewing from our teammates, like they started to talk about the situation. At the start there was a bit of talk and the next thing you know the situation had escalated. The coaches and the team staff would talk to us about it a little bit, but they didn't really know what was going on. They tried to tell us what they knew, just the basic stuff. They warned us to be careful, but life went on. Even during this conflict, life went on, people lived their lives – normal everyday life, you know, games were still being played. But you could see changes. In my city there were steel factories, which were a main source of income for all the people in the area. We used to have huge crowds at our games, but when the conflict started to get a lot more intense, the workers were not able to work because of the conflict, so they had no money and couldn't afford to go to the games. The steel factories were also our sponsors, so our salaries started to get delayed. As it got more intense, my teammates and I started talking like, "things don't look too good, we might have to leave". Once we got that idea, we started to take it more seriously.

I can't remember what it was, but I had signed my name up to some database. When Americans travel abroad, they can submit their information and they'll send you alerts and stuff if there is anything, if things are brewing. During that time, I received this message: "the Department of State warns US citizens to defer all travel to Crimea and the Eastern Regions of Donetsk and Luhansk and recommends those US citizens currently living in or visiting these regions to depart". At the same time, the club were telling us, "I think things are heating up, it's probably best you guys get out of here". We ended up going and leaving the Ukrainian players, which is also kind of crazy because the Americans had to get out, but the Ukrainians, it was their country, they were staying! My agent found me another team quite quickly and I was the first one to leave. I think my teammates who hadn't found a team yet stayed for a few more weeks, played a few games and then left. Shortly after, the club shut down. It literally ceased to exist! Some of my teammates were picked up by other clubs because they would accept any contract that came their way, but others were left out of jobs. No one was offering them a contract. They've been sportsmen for their working lives, what were they going to do?

Ukrainian

For the first half of the season, everything was good. Life and basketball; everything was normal. The league was at a good level. After the New Year, everything started to happen, but on the court I just thought about basketball. I didn't think about the situation in the city, in my country. I focused on my job, I

liked my job, I needed to play, and I wanted to win each game. The first changes we noticed were that the club began to get slow with salary payments. Because of the conflict, our sponsor's business shut down, so after February they stopped paying us. We had a meeting with the GM who told us we could stay or go. The American players left, but everyone else stayed until the end of the season. I think there were players who might have wanted to leave, but no team picked them up. Others, the young players – aged 24, 25, 26 – stayed because they were afraid to leave the country. I think they didn't know English or they were worried their playing conditions [minutes] would not be the same. They were stuck. Because people were leaving the team, we had to take players from the second team, who weren't the same quality. So the quality of basketball started to drop. There was no support from the Federation and the club had very little money, if any. We didn't even have sports medicine. If you twisted your ankle, you were told to, "go buy medicine, go to a doctor, pay your own money". At this time, nobody could think about sport. The season ended in April and on the second of May I was at a football game and after half time maybe 2,000 fans left the stadium went into the city centre. People started fighting and more than 40 people died. From that time, it was a war situation – on the main roads there were tanks and soldiers with machine guns. Around the city, small bombs would go off; it was very dangerous and everyone was afraid. I called my agent and told him to get me out. I got a contract with another club outside of the Ukraine and everything there was good. I was playing well and they knew the situation at home so they offered me a five-year contract with citizenship, a passport, and everything.

Interpretation

The player cases above demonstrate distinct responses to an instance of geopolitical turmoil. Responses varied according to their contextual conditions, which differed across the players. For the European player, there was an initial period of intense and volatile activity that 'settled down' over the season. The American player was located in a region that was suffering sustained socio-economic decline due to the overarching conditions of the conflict which, ultimately, led to the dissolution of the team. The Ukrainian player, in contrast, was in a situation in which conditions were escalating and there was increasingly volatile military activity and localised civil disorder. Notwithstanding conditions, each players' abilities to manage their situations were shaped by cultural background, professional experience, and personal resilience. This led to constantly (re)assessing the situation and their priorities in light of evolving daily circumstances (which, in some cases, contrasted those being portrayed in the media). Athletes' respective readings of their situations were reliant upon on the embassy, peers, coaches, agents, and collective decisions made by the fraternity.

Mindful of the geopolitical conditions, each player also exhibited a professional desire to continue to work and fulfil their contract. In doing so, they demonstrated an adjustment to the context they found themselves in and were endeavouring to maintain a sense of 'normality' despite declining playing conditions. That is, as a consequence of reduced commercial support, General Managers of teams tried to conserve money by organising games in cheaper, poorer-standard facilities, accepting the release of players from contracts due to delayed payments or lack of payments, and reducing medical support. While coaches and players were endeavouring to go

about their business as usual, due and fair criticism arose regarding the roles and obligations of the Federation in the crisis.

According to the players, the Federation's response was two-fold. First, following the clashes between protesters and the police in Kyiv, the Federation paused the league for five days. Second, the league was shortened by a few weeks, which enabled some players to bring their career movement decisions forward. Given the circumstances, such a response may be considered logical and appears to have been executed in the interests of player welfare and sustaining the league as best as possible. In the immediate sense, the geopolitical situation impinged on the league's requirements for operation (for example, minimum requirements regarding the standard of player care, competition venue size, frequency and nature of competition structure). As a result, players felt aggrieved that the necessary quality assurance and safeguards were not in place and not being monitored. Consequently, the league standard dropped, teams disappeared, and fan patronage diminished. For these players, who had built professional careers of a certain calibre, these were welfare issues that they felt the organisation should have had a stronger responsibility for. Here, there was a disconnect in what the organisation could provide, and subsequently what players felt needed to be provided.

Amid these concerns regarding welfare provision, it is of value to recognise that players' vulnerabilities manifest in their articulations and appreciations of organisational welfare provision. For example, the stresses and concerns are potentially exacerbated for some players by not having the language skills to access information about their situation and a lack of familiarity with the context/contextual history. In contrast to the European and Ukrainian players who were fluent in Ukrainian and Russian languages, the American player's reading and assessment of the situation was undertaken through intermediaries. Arguably, this put him in an additionally vulnerable

situation. For the Ukrainian players, ultimately only some players had the capacity to secure contracts outside of the country. As such, with the economic consequences of the conflict, teams collapsed, and players were left unemployed.

Discussion

Sport labour migrations across Europe are well established, and players/coaches at the professional level may be well versed and comfortable with moving across regions (and encountering all sorts of difficulties). Many of the labour-related issues presented above are consistent with scholarship focusing on the working conditions of professional athletes in Europe (Syndex, 2013). These include concerns regarding late-/non-payment of salaries, lack of medical support, and poor facilities. Beyond this, in the Ukraine there were a specific and unforeseen series of geopolitical events that precipitated a sense of trepidation among players working in the domestic basketball league. Being confronted with an active/emerging geopolitical conflict (particularly one as severe and extreme as that witnessed in the Ukraine) is, for most players, an uncommon occurrence. Notwithstanding national orientation, players recognised the dynamic and unpredictable nature of the context they found themselves in, gathered information where possible, and responded as they felt appropriate. While the players recognised the deteriorating standards of the game and the league, and that the organisation could have better managed infrastructure issues, there was a general acceptance that there were limitations that impacted upon organisational capacities to deliver on wider welfare and care issues given the significance of the circumstances.

Irrespective of the presence of conflict, there are employment laws within the European Union that frame sports work. These include, for example, directives on employees' rights, general working conditions, mobility, pay, equality of opportunity, and health and safety (European

Commission, 2016). In addition, contractual clauses such as *force majeure* offer a layer of legal security by allowing for the contracting parties to suspend or terminate the contract when they are prevented from performing by events outside of their control (e.g. in the event of war, natural disaster). Whilst contractual conditions can provide some reassurance, for these sports workers, these were not applied as the situation was not deemed to be as severe.

The sport workers' vignettes provided above evidence some junctures in which normalised expectations regarding organisational responsibilities and athlete welfare were disrupted easily by contextual precarities. In the case of Ukrainian professional basketball, welfare needs transcended, from the players' perspectives, the organisation's responsibilities. What mattered was the players' abilities to meet their immediate needs and priorities. Not unlike in other sports and other contexts, in addition to their teammates, coaches and club management, players are networked with peers, agents, and coaches. Such a community serves as a useful mechanism for the sharing of experiences, which may aid other sports workers in similar situations. These networks are useful in times of geopolitical turmoil as they afford sports workers opportunities to fill gaps in welfare provision that may not be provided by organisations. Moreover, as evidenced in the vignettes above, such networks have additional utility in providing communication channels and information deficiencies in times of crises. The US consulate, for example, provided an authoritative, clear, and direct form of communication that, for the American player, was highly valued.

The coach and players were aware of the potential severity of the situation and associated risks. Yet, there was a strong sense of team fraternity, sport ethic, and employment duty (bound to notions of ensuring financial security) that led to them to stay and continue to do their job. Key differences between players reveal variances in embodying conflict experiences. Several

Ukrainian players, for example, were domestically constrained due to political sanctions, personal choice to stay near family, and/or lack of performative capital. Non-Ukrainian players, in comparison, were capable of greater mobility and evidenced a sense of security in being able to exit as and when the time called for. Without the situation being deemed to be a *force majeure*, they accepted that they would be leaving without being paid. Thus, they continued to fulfil their contracts with the clubs. To some extent, the players' reactions could be the result of concerns regarding the potential time lag between contracts. According to a General Manager working in a basketball club in the area, it could take at least a month to source and secure a contract with another club. Players' hesitations to relocate could also be due to uncertainties over securing a satisfactory contract, or a contract at all, due to the surplus of sports workers in Europe.

Conclusion

It is not the intention that the content of this chapter is taken to represent the experiences of all players in the Ukraine as a small number of sports workers were interviewed. Beyond the Ukraine, we recognise that the type and severity of geopolitical conflict varies from context to context. Nonetheless, the chapter has highlighted interesting messages relating to the welfare of sports workers. There are lessons here for considering possibilities for industry change. The current push across Europe and the EU, in particular for improved organisational governance and actions vis-a-vis welfare and duties of care, has pressured national sport federations to work harder towards these ends. In the case of the Ukrainian Basketball Federation (and reflecting other conflict and post-conflict spaces in the region), geopolitical turbulence has meant that there remain substantive inequities in organisational resources and capacities across the country that inhibit welfare work beyond some of the key fundamentals (e.g. hours of employment, mobility, pay and contract

negotiation). In the immediate term, as a result of transnational conflict, players left, league standards dropped, teams disappeared, and financial support and fan patronage diminished. Yet, amid the country's ongoing attempts to stabilise, the basketball league is rebuilding. However, the pace, extent and effectiveness of this reconstruction still requires substantive investment, support and encouragement.

Note

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