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Sport management and COVID-19: trends and legacies

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One of the enduring questions gripping scholars is the nature of sport's ubiquity. What makes sport so compelling for so many despite the many tensions surrounding its expression? To make the conundrum more complicated, we have witnessed a seemingly inexhaustible growth in sport's reach and scope, including as a source of recreational pastime, organised participation, fanatical devotion, and media spectacle. At the same time, sport's immense entertainment, recreation, and media fringes have exploded, spanning from competitive eating to esports. Sport undoubtedly occupies a non-trivial place in the economic, social, and cultural fabric of almost every part of the globe (Smith et al., 2021), as billions discovered when the COVID blackout struck.

In the midst of the pandemic, participants and followers endured unmatched restrictions, the absence of sport's myriad of forms a sobering but insightful window into the significance of a taken-for-granted lynchpin in daily life. For participants, the physical impacts disappeared along with a suite of pro-social benefits. Fans mourned the temporary death of vicarious identities and lamented the banality of an endless off-season. Players did calisthenics on the couch, leagues wrestled with risk and reward, teams raced to replace live sport with digital drama, sponsors sank into obscurity, broadcasters re-packaged, and the media recorded it all going by. Simultaneously, digital fitness exploded, esports triumphed, online gaming won the lottery, and the 2020 summer Olympics and European Football Championships made it to the starting line in 2021 (Evans et al., 2020). As the two ESMQ special editions on COVID-19 have revealed, unflappable sport scholars responded by posing some poignant questions and by collecting never before available data.

In volume one of ESMQ's COVID-19 special edition, we noted some recurring themes that sport and its managers faced during the pandemic. A first related to the tensions around risk for sport enterprises, which were entrusted with safeguarding the health and safety of their athletes and fans, but at the expense of the brand value and resulting cashflow that had been accumulated over decades. While sports and their constituent teams scrambled to maintain some form of engagement with their audiences – often through digital channels – fans expected greater social responsibility from their favoured brands. Whether for manufacturers, leagues, clubs or players, ethics and social

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responsibility emerged as a critical second theme. Of course, the content vacuum left in the suspension of competitive sport needed to be filled. Unsurprisingly, a third theme around digital engagement appeared prominently, including a surge in gaming, virtual sport modes, esports, and social media. Finally, we observed a peri-pandemic upswing in research centred on women's sport, partly motivated by concerns that its impressive recent intensification would be crushed by the deletion of live competition, and partly by suspicions that the conditions would reset the media to its traditional rut of reporting men's sport.

In broader terms, our first volume provided a salutary reminder of sport's fierce socio-cultural momentum, which yields a unique capacity to provide entertainment, meaning, belonging, and sociability. However, the research also brought into stark relief the prodigious resources allocated to sport's commercial imperatives, which revolve around attracting fans, selling merchandise, servicing sponsors, securing broadcast rights, stoking social media, and building brands. In other words, the pandemic exposed the sport management challenge of our times: preventing sport's cultural and community values being subordinated to business and commercial values in digitised, instant, fluid markets where sport has become the prototypical standard bearer for consumer capitalism and its insatiable constituents. As the first volume exposed, sport is expected to be a cultural stalwart, social adhesive, consumer product, media channel, commercial juggernaut, and digital revolution all at once. Here we see volume 2 of the COVID-19 special edition expand upon the themes of the first.

COVID-19 has focused the spotlight on the role of sport enterprises as social agents, especially around athlete health and safety, and corporate responsibility. Pursuing the latter in the first article, Boehmer and Harrison question whether an instance of corporate social irresponsibility during COVID-19 has led to a brand penalty for the offending party. Their study investigates a high-profile incident in Germany where the world's second largest sporting goods manufacturer, Adidas announced its intention to withhold rent payments for all of its German stores, taking advantage of a national government pandemic package that precluded landlords from evicting renters unable to meet payments during the shutdown. Faced with a public and political backlash, the company justified its actions, apologised, and eventually capitulated and paid its rent. While Adidas' strategy was perhaps unsurprising from a profit-maximisation viewpoint, Boehmer and Harrison's corporate social responsibility lens provides a particularly interesting test, hypothesising that the public would react unfavourably and that their sentiments towards the brand would slump in the period following the scandal. Armed with national survey data on brand sentiment, reputation, purchase intent, and behaviour combined with stock price valuations, Boehmer and Harrison determine that Adidas did suffer a significant sentiment and reputation nosedive for a few months. However, the more revealing conclusion was that purchase intentions, consumer behaviour, and stock prices held firm, suggesting that the company remained a preferred brand. Speculating on the results, Boehmer and Harrison suggest that the pandemic heightened the immediate impact but softened the longer-term effects; the former due to more concentrated public attention during the early part of the crisis, and the latter explained by the pandemic's distracting and constant change. We might also wonder first, to what extent social irresponsibility can be attenuated by bigger news, second, the degree to which offending brands are only fleetingly admonished by consumers with little intention of

switching, and third, the natural life cycles of critical news in a digital era. It seems possible that the most striking implication of this research proves to be evidence that sporting brands enjoy a loyalty and resilience in their customers that most other brands could only dream about.

As we have seen throughout the two COVID-19 special editions, the tragedy of the pandemic has also contrived unusual sporting circumstances worthy of investigation. In the second article, for example, Helsen, Derom, Corthouts, De Bosscher, Willem, and Scheerder aim to find out how contestants in participatory sport events (PSE) modified their sport behaviours in response to the shutdown-induced cancellations. Taking a further step, they examine the factors determining whether these PSE consumers would get involved in virtual events. Employing a sample of nearly 3000 event and non-event participants from Belgium, the survey results show that most respondents maintained their activity frequency during the cancellation period, albeit with lower intensity. It turns out that a hiatus in organised PSEs does not mean that regular participants will cancel their activity; they continued at much the same rate but with reduced competitiveness. With the scaffolding of a social ecology framework, Helsen et al.'s data further reveal that event participants gained a small amount of interest in virtual sport events, although previous experience in virtual events was a strong predictor, suggesting that the replacement of conventional PSEs for virtual ones was linked to interpersonal environments, and pre-pandemic behaviours like technology usage. The resounding outcome points to the importance of prior virtual experience and PSE activity levels, and the surprising inconsequentiality of socio-demographic characteristics.

One of the issues emerging in the first volume of this special edition concerned the effect of the pandemic on the trend towards greater consumer interest and media coverage of women's sport. Taking a further step in this direction in article three, Symons, Breitbarth, Zubcevic-Basic, Wilson, Sherry, and Karg assess the Australian mainstream media's coverage of women in sport during the pandemic's interruption to live sport. The content analysis study tracks coverage from 20 media outlets and reported on the number of articles covering women in sport. A modest reduction in the coverage of women in sport was recorded from the outset of the COVID-19 live sport suspension, a level that continued throughout. Accordingly, Symons et al. conclude that during the interruption of live sport, media outlets reverted to their traditionally embedded practices disregarding women in sport stories. They subsequently speculate that men's sport does not necessarily dominate non-pandemic media cycles as an exclusive consequence of its live sport volume. Rather, it must also be supported by an underpinning media predisposition. As Symons et al. note, the COVID-19 deferral of live sport reveals a deeper structural bias towards the coverage of men in sport, perhaps founded on assumptions about commercial value and deployed through long-standing news conventions and social norms.

With commercial value a preeminent assumption the fourth article by Stavros, Smith, and Lopez-Gonzalez contemplates the digital and technology-driven transformation of the sport viewing experience as a response to COVID-19, with the aim of specifying its content and consumptive experience legacy. The authors argue that mediasport content has been accelerated and amplified by the pandemic, and can be conceptualised through four distinctive dimensions, namely the enlargement, enhancement,

connectedness, and ultimate engagement of the viewing experience. Stavros et al. further claim that while the visualisation of sport content has witnessed a material enlargement driven by the evolution of the mediation, it has been accompanied by a cognitive enhancement to make sense of that visual content. The digital progress, in turn, has facilitated the shared, multi-platform vision of sport that ultimately has multiplied the monetisation opportunities for fans sufficiently engaged in the viewing. The authors employ their four-category typology to propose an irreversible upshift in the mediasport dynamic in response to COVID-19, characterised by a foreshortened engagement between media, sport, and consumer. Sport viewing has transformed permanently.

In the fifth article, Su, Du, Biscaia, and Inoue remind us that sport's transformative effects might just have made a decisive difference to many fans' psychological well-being during the COVID-19 turbulence. Using attachment theory, the research team looked for a connection between Chinese fans' involvement with sport properties and their psychological health post pandemic. Involvement did indeed bolster psychological well-being for fans, their connections to favoured sport brands ameliorating experiences of emptiness, as well as promoting a sense of togetherness. Sport can strengthen fans' perceptions of safety and security during troubled times, involvement proving an effective precursor to more robust psychological well-being. By implication, sport organisations might assume greater responsibility for their fans' welfare, perhaps even working towards establishing more expansive opportunities for community and peer-to-peer support. Indeed, as Su et al. reveal, highly involved fans were more appreciative of sport brands' attempts to cultivate fan collective identity in response to the crisis and received favourable psychological outcomes with this sense of shared responsibility.

With some relief we might point to the final article in this volume by Behrens and Uhrich, which provides a timely reinforcement that on-site fans maintain a pivotal role in sport marketing after all. Their innovative study examines how the use of fan imagery in stadia affects media consumers' responses, in this case to unfamiliar sport leagues. An online experiment using German sport fans tested the impact of imagery with both high and low levels of social atmospherics. What was particularly novel, however, was the use of imagery depicting a sport with which the subjects had declared no prior familiarity – the Australian Football League. Behrens and Uhrich report that their German subjects were influenced by the character of the AFL fan imagery where still portrayals of high social atmospherics – packed crowds – led to greater attraction. This cognitive response transformed into emotional desirability when the imagery incorporated vivid multisensory (video) stimuli of passionate crowds responding to game scenes. Marketing content employing in-stadia fans can materially influence potential new consumers watching via other media channels. The lesson would seem especially salient in the context of empty stadium 'ghost' matches during the pandemic. Poor stadia atmospherics undermine media audience perceptions of the broadcast and of the participants involved, potentially incurring more far-reaching brand damage. The marketing implications associated with transmitted fan imagery have never been more critical in a post-pandemic sporting context where remote viewing will only gain in significance.

Research directions post-pandemic

What lessons might we infer from the data and analyses in the curated research presented in the two volumes of the COVID-19 special edition? Whether COVID-19's jolt has shifted sport's axis permanently, accelerated its inexorable path, or just bottlenecked the industry for a few years, will not be clear for some time yet. However, the contents of the two special edition volumes should give us pause to consider some fruitful research directions irrespective of the answer.

As a first observation, research published in the two volumes of the ESMQ special edition as well as elsewhere, indicate that the pandemic unveiled hitherto under-utilised digital opportunities for sport organisations, precisely because they were forced to compensate for the absence of their core products (Ströbel et al., 2021). Responding to severe and lightening public health restrictions, sport organisations dramatically scaled back their operations, suspended competitions, abandoned strategic plans, reset objectives and priorities, and managed cash flow as a priority in the revenue constrained conditions (e.g. Karg et al., 2021). At the same time, sport organisations rapidly upscaled their digital footprints, dived deep into social media platforms, and collaborated more widely with newfound energy driven by an imperative to maintain relevance and presence.

Commitment to digital channels varied in the response to the pandemic. Voluntary clubs providing organised sport increased their use of digital tools, but mainly for communication (Ehnold et al., 2021). At the other end of the spectrum, Horbel et al. (2021) found that the digitisation of stadia experiences via smartphones was instrumental to the co-creation of value for fans when they returned to live action. For the professional sector, digital compensation came swiftly because it had to, ranging from hasty supplementary content to comprehensive esports or virtual alternatives. Research has confirmed that virtually mediated sports competitions, which resemble conventional sport participation in terms of realism but can be undertaken remotely and in limitless virtual environments, were well received by sport participants during the pandemic (Westmattmann et al., 2021). It may not be all fun and games for esports though. Likely to be a significant part of sport's future, esports seems destined to confront the same challenges that mainstream sport continually encounters. For example, playing esports recreationally does not affect consumers' propensity to watch esports broadcasts, suggesting that like its traditional sport counterpart (Jang et al., 2021), esports participation is not the same as esports fandom. Some traditional sport fans remain resistant to accepting esports as a sport at all (Tjønndal, 2021).

Second, paradoxically, it is also now clear that the boundaries defining what sport is are less clear, especially as the combination of the pandemic and the platform economy has encouraged technology firms to integrate content, at the same time as sport properties have moved into technology. For example, the English Premier League club the Wolverhampton Wanderers, recently partnered with Warner Music UK's Alternative Distribution Alliance to launch a record label. The ambition aims to combine the reach of football with the youth appeal of music, intensifying both in the pursuit of new revenues and markets through the entrepreneurial venture. It joins a series of Wolves projects outside football including esports and fashion businesses. As sport properties engage in new levels of entrepreneurialism, future research would be well directed at better understanding these aggressive market dynamics.

Building on the second research direction, third, we would propose that the COVID-19 crisis installed a new cadre of sport business models. COVID-19 stimulated leagues and clubs to forge partnerships with technology firms to monetise data, produce consumable analytics for fans, and offer bespoke interactive experiences blending on-demand streaming, social media, and point-and-click game statistics. For example, the US National Basketball Association's collaboration with Microsoft Azure offers all of the above along with mobile apps incorporating social clips, intelligent graphics, and match predictors. Sky Sports has headed in the direction of motion-capture augmented reality, digital avatars, and gamification for their coverage of the new *The Hundred* abridged cricket competition in England. Meanwhile, the Tokyo Olympic Games featured augmented and virtual reality, 360-degree replays, AI-driven analytics, and a proliferation of social media platform activity too numerous to list. However, one noteworthy recent development emerged from athlete resource support organisation, Opendorse in partnership with Twitter, offering student athletes a platform to monetise video content, thereby giving US college athletes compensation for their NILs – name, image, and likeness. Rounding the commercial circle, Opendorse also leverages its endorsement marketplace, bringing sponsors and their resources into the model.

Fourth, propelled by the new currency of the digital economy – data – the marketplace has become a fragmented, cluttered, global sport-media-entertainment ecosystem. The digital wave transformed into a data tsunami as the COVID shutdown impelled both content and distribution ends of sport's value chain to make haste in making money. Meanwhile, fans curated content, co-creating for their own value, in the process demonstrating how to make a second and third screen even more valuable than the first. As a corollary of the immense fan-driven activity, a new surge in community-driven monetisation exploded, initially built on platforms such as Twitch and Reddit, but fragmenting and replicating from there. Although remaining digital communities, the platforms have become thoroughly monetised on the basis of a new angle on the old content. Traditional sport sells core content; that is, the game, the opportunity to watch it, the clubs and players and their images, and its associations – basically tickets, rights, sponsorships, and merchandise. In contrast, digital communities focus on non-core content, where the value add is the profit. They take a non-linear approach to sport content, and focus on stories, co-creation, fan ownership, influencing, and engagement. The content is also no longer controlled or distributed by sport properties, but rather relies on the bottom-up activities of fans who create their own. An outcome of this immense bottom-up activity has been a paroxysm in sport-related start-ups based on the novel development, distribution, or combination of digital content. At a time when traditional sport was on the ropes, start-ups took advantage of the vacuum and attracted stagnant venture capital. For example, the online gaming fantasy company Dream11 recently formed a venture division called Dream Capital, armed with US \$250 million and an ambition to become a sport technology conglomerate. Dream Capital has consequently invested heavily in start-ups associated with sports, gaming, and fitness technology.

Fifth, as Drewes et al. (2021) acknowledged, sports like professional football (soccer) leagues and their constituent clubs have received a sharp reminder of the critical interdependencies between stakeholders, beginning with fans and spectators, media and broadcasting, venues and stadia, and a suite of upstream and downstream value-adders like

sporting goods manufacturers and sponsors, respectively. Can normally robust sport leagues such as professional football rebuild to be COVID-proof, or indeed recompose business activities in order to bolster their resilience against other unknown and unpredictable future crises?

In mid-August 2021, Barcelona FC President Joan Laporta revealed that the Spanish super-heavyweight football club is 1.35bn euros in debt, its wage bill currently accounting for 103% of its total revenues. The club has a negative net worth of 451 m euros and cannot operate without enormous bank loans. At the least, future-proof sport will need to reconsider its financial structures starting with its equity base, revenue-sharing policies, licencing arrangements, incentive payments, capital investment and over-investment, and even future funds held in escrow. For example, Hammerschmidt et al. (2021) noted football's financial vulnerabilities during the crisis and advocated a combination of risk management – like securing a major sponsor from a non-cyclical industry, and bolstering liquidity – in addition to greater entrepreneurial diversification. For Ratten et al. (2021), the study of sport's entrepreneurial ecosystems during the crisis suggested that value co-creation through networked relationships was advantageous to attenuating financial fragility. Meanwhile, much of sport cannot expect to receive taxpayer support, but will nevertheless be held to high standards of social responsibility. Sport events and facilities will need to prioritise the health and safety of participants and spectators, which could mean the wholesale review of venue polices, processes, and systems (DiFiori et al., 2021).

Sixth, while it was noted in volume 1 that there was a radical surge in fitness equipment and Peloton-style products, what has emerged over the course of the pandemic was that these alternatives were not enough to offset the absence of all facilities and venues. Consequently, the closure of sports clubs, fitness centres, and community sports grounds during the pandemic led to a reduction in leisure time sport and exercise. One study revealed that 31% of Germans decreased their active leisure, 26% maintained, and 6% increased (Mutz & Gerke, 2021). As Helsen et al. also determined, many who remain active do so at a lower exercise intensity. Forthcoming studies will ascertain whether the bounce back will reach former activity levels, or whether the pause has left a lasting legacy where populations have learned sedentariness. It would seem plausible to hypothesise that the significant mental health impact of the pandemic and its consequences for physical health – particularly for the young (e.g. McGuine et al., 2021) – will not be as elastic as activity levels. Also unclear is the extent to which participants will flow back to organised, recreational, or community sport. Much more research will need to be undertaken to confidently diagnose the grassroots impact of the pandemic on sport and physical activity.

Seventh, and finally, the trajectory of women's sport remains precarious following the COVID-19 intercession, having rolled back some of the impressive and hard-fought inroads it has achieved over the past decade. In the absence of live broadcasts, the sporting media returned to the comfortable habit of men's sport to generate content. Yet, some market activity suggests that the demand for women's sport will encourage a revival, including ratings for the Tokyo Olympics, which showcased an almost equal gender balance of competitors with 49% female representation. Moreover, the US National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) and the Women's National Basketball League (WNBA) were the only professional sport leagues in North America to boost their TV

ratings during 2020. The NWSL in particular enjoyed a distinct boost as a consequence of its 2020 broadcasting arrangements where every game was available to fans anywhere via television (mainly in the US) or through streaming. With the new availability came a 475% increase in viewership, and a 15% increase in social media engagement including a 350% increase in male fan engagement.

Closing thoughts

In mid-2021, with the United States deep in the Delta variant crisis, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg gave formal voice to the worst kept secret in the company. The company's vision, he announced, would revolve around the immensely ambitious project of constructing the 'metaverse'. Facebook customers would not merely log into the company's products, but would live, work, and leisure inside them. So ambitious is the project that to deliver on the vision Facebook has to play a pivotal role in building an entirely new generation of the internet. Appropriately, the term 'metaverse' was invented by science fiction author Neil Stephenson, appearing in his 1992 novel *Snow Crash*. In the book, the metaverse was a massive shared online space where the physical, augmented, and virtual all came together to form a new reality.

Perhaps mis-understood as just the addition of virtual reality, the metaverse is more accurately seen as a next generation of the mobile internet, most likely in a series of iterations prodigiously transformative, just like the jump from fixed line modems to global, mobile smart device access. One pivotal part of the iteration will indeed involve virtual reality in that the metaverse will create an embodied place for all of its users. Our virtual presence inside the internet means that we could permanently live within the system, along with everyone else. According to the definition by the former head of strategy for Amazon Studios, Ball (2021), 'The Metaverse is an expansive network of persistent, real-time rendered 3D worlds and simulations that support continuity of identity, objects, history, payments, and entitlements, and can be experienced synchronously by an effectively unlimited number of users, each with an individual sense of presence'. While VR will likely be a mechanism to access the Metaverse, it will encompass entertainment, virtual worlds, social networking, information, media, data, games, commerce, as well as anything that can be configured as an interconnected (user) experience or simulation from education to art. The full conception of the Metaverse will be an entirely new world duplicating reality in cyberspace. It's the red pill choice, except that it will be the choice to move from reality *to* the Matrix, and it's being developed right now by a number of technology giants.

While the metaverse vision might have been inexorable, it has unquestionably been mobilised in concrete as a response to the pandemic, which has brought the tech giants vast surfeits of cash, and a glimpse of how global mobile connectivity can engage idle hands. For us it reveals how the combination might intersect, where the consequences for sport and its viewing would seem metamorphic, and at the very least, worthy of another special edition or two.

We note that the COVID-19 special edition volumes have published research collected from developed world regions, and that little is known about how much of the developing world's sport has fared. Surely, additional research is desperately needed. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, it remains clear that the COVID-19 pandemic

is far from over, and that the fallout will demand ongoing research scrutiny for many years to come.

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