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Grix, Jonathan , Brannagan, Paul Michael, Grimes, Holly and Neville, Ross (2021) The impact of Covid-19 on sport. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 13 (1). pp. 1-12. ISSN 1940-6940

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2020.1851285>

**Publisher:** Informa UK Limited

**Version:** Accepted Version

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# The Impact of Covid-19 on Sport

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on society, leading to a rapid closure of businesses, places of work, worship, social engagement, schools and universities. Sport is often seen – along with the arts – as a trivial pursuit, categorised under ‘hobbies’ or things to do once the serious business is over. However, this critical commentary argues that sport and sports events play a crucial social role even under normal circumstances. To this end we analyse the impact of Covid-19 on three areas of sport: first, the nature of elite sport played ‘without spectators’ is discussed and what this means for the necessary ‘feelgood’ factor associated with watching and following it; second, we look at Covid’s impact on the provision of sport for those in less well-off areas, drawing on a case study of Oldham during the pandemic. Finally, we analyse the severe economic and social impact of the pandemic on grassroots sports, including the relationship between mass and elite sport. This commentary seeks to stimulate wider interest on how Covid-19 has changed sport at elite and grassroots level and how the pandemic has led to differential outcomes for people from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Based on the above, the commentary assesses the likely long-term consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic on sport.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 and sport; ‘feelgood’ factor; sport provision; grassroots sport

## **Introduction**

There is little doubt that we are living through unprecedented times and the vast majority of our everyday lives have been altered by the first global pandemic since the Spanish flu (1918-1920). The spread of the Covid-19 virus has led to an unprecedented closure of businesses, places of work, worship and social engagement, schools and universities. The rapid transmission of the virus, which has led thus far to the loss of over a million humans lives throughout the world, has meant that sport and sporting events have been cancelled, postponed or altered so that competitions can take place but without spectators (see also: Malcolm and Velija 2020; Parnell *et al.* 2020). When set alongside job losses, sickness and death, sport rightly appears trivial in comparison, a luxury or trivial pursuit, often – as with the arts – categorised under ‘hobbies’ or things to do once the serious business is over. While this is undoubtedly true, we argue that watching and participating in sport offers one of the most powerful cultural forces needed for many people to get through the difficult times of lock-down and limited social interaction brought about by the pandemic.

In this paper, we offer a short commentary piece on Covid-19’s impact on the policy and politics of global sport, but with a specific focus on the UK. In doing so, we identify and discuss three areas where the impact has had severe consequences on how sport is consumed, accessed and governed. We first analyse what it means for elite sport to be played ‘without spectators’ and without the concomitant ‘feelgood’ factor associated with watching and following it. Second, we look at Covid’s impact on the provision of, and access to, sport for those in less well-off areas, drawing on a case study of Oldham during the pandemic. Finally, we analyse the severe economic and social impact of the pandemic on grassroots sports, including the relationship between mass and elite sport. Before doing so, however, the next section first discusses the impact Covid-19 has had on wider society.

## **The Covid-19 Global Pandemic in Brief**

‘Covid-19’ is an infectious disease caused by the pathogen known as ‘severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)’ (World Health Organization, 12 October, 2020). Typical symptoms of the disease include a high fever, dry cough, fatigue and a loss of smell and taste; however, crucially, recent studies estimate that up to 80% of those who contract Covid-19 are potentially asymptomatic, and thus experience few - if any - symptoms at all (see: Heneghan *et al.* 2020). The disease is easily transmitted between people who come into close contact with an

infected individual, mainly through the spread of infectious respiratory droplets or aerosols in the air (World Health Organization, 20 October, 2020). It is widely believed that the first human cases of the disease emerged in late-December 2019 in the city of Wuhan, located in the Hubei Province of the People's Republic of China (see: Burki 2020; Wang *et al.* 2020). By the start of March 2020, over 100,000 cases of the disease had been reported across 90 countries worldwide, at which time the World Health Organization labelled Covid-19 a 'global pandemic' (Kantis *et al.* 2020). As the year 2020 progressed, Covid-19 continued to spread, and by the end of October, over 44.8 million cases had been reported across 214 countries, with 1.1 million confirmed worldwide deaths from the disease (World Health Organization, 30 October, 2020).

The global spread of Covid-19 has been just as much a political problem as it has been a health one, with leaders from across the world forced to introduce and implement a number of strict national policies in their bid to control the disease. In the majority of countries, such policies have come in the form of various national lockdowns. In the UK, for example - a country that has to-date recorded a total of 1.05 million Covid-19 cases and 46,853 deaths (Gov.UK, 2 November, 2020) - two lockdowns have been introduced, one from 23 March to 1 June, and another from 5 November to early-December, 2020. For UK citizens - as for citizens of most high infection countries - such lockdown measures have included the closure of indoor public spaces, such as restaurants, bars, gyms, leisure centres and 'non-essential shops', the cancelling of events, such as weddings and festivals, and the national order that people should only leave their homes for 'limited reasons', such as for 'essential food shopping, exercise once per day, medical need and travelling for work when absolutely necessary' (*The Independent*, 23 September, 2020). While lockdowns are effective at lowering both Covid-19 cases and deaths, they are not long-term solutions, with cases soon rising once restrictive measures are lifted. However, and despite their significant impact on national and global economies, lockdowns are nonetheless necessary to controlling the spread of the virus until such a time that a Covid-19 vaccine becomes widely available, which, at the time of writing, looks unlikely to be any time before Spring 2021 (see: *The Guardian*, 19 October, 2020).

### **Covid-19 and Sport**

The unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic, and the lockdowns associated with attempting to arrest its spread, has impacted greatly on both elite and grassroots sport. Elite sport teams and organisations have suffered an immediate financial impact with losses due to a lack of live spectators. The Rugby Football Union (RFU), for example, have suggested that with no spectators

attending the recent Nations Cup or the Six Nations, they would lose close to £60 million (*BBC*, 22 September, 2020). As we discuss below, it is not only elite sport that has been impacted. Grassroots sport and leisure clubs and organisations, including gyms, swimming pools, golf courses and so on, have also been hit financially (*The Guardian*, 31 October, 2020). Equally, gate and ticket receipts constitute a large part of the revenue football teams receive and the prolonged pandemic has led to many in the English football pyramid, one the most lucrative in the world, struggling financially (*The Week*, 22 September, 2020).

It is clear now how the impact of the pandemic on sport and wider society can vary according to a state's political leadership and ideology and their 'exit' plan out of it. Many of the world's political leaders who appeared invulnerable prior to the outbreak of the pandemic have had their weaknesses laid bare. President Trump's style has been a model of how not to lead in a crisis; Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil consistently flouted social distancing rules and Vladimir Putin has looked out of sorts since the onset of the crisis. It is not incidental that these three are bound by playing down the virus and the countries they govern recorded among the highest rates of Covid globally (*BMJ*, 21 May 2020). In the UK, Boris Johnson's government strategy to combat Covid-19 has been an unmitigated disaster, leading to one of the highest death rates due to Covid-19 globally. If England's initial March lockdown was understood by many as too slow, its first exit strategy was seen as too fast, with a rushed return to work – and sport – designed to help a stagnating economy (*Guardian*, 19<sup>th</sup> May, 2020). Among the sports first allowed, following England's exit strategy, were golf and tennis – alongside household nannies – sports usually associated with the 'upper' socio-economic classes. We return to the theme of 'class' below when discussing the differential access to sports provision during the pandemic.

We now turn to our 3 themes within sport policy and politics to seek a deeper understanding of Covid-19's impact.

### *Sport without Spectators*

One of society's most popular pastimes – apart from Netflix, soaps, social media and actually playing sport – is watching or following sport, sports teams, stars and events. While it is widely acknowledged that participation in sport and physical activity makes people feel good and is good for their health (*NHS* 2020), less is known about the feelings aroused through watching sport, especially live sport. There is much talk of a 'feelgood' factor generated by the communal consumption of sport, but little in the way of explanation of what this actually is. The Covid-19

global pandemic serves to remind us of the crucial role spectators at sports events play in the co-production of a match, event, race or game. Consider the role of spectators in top-level tennis, high-profile boxing matches and weekly football games. Research shows that fans influence player's performances, referees' decisions and match outcomes (Wann 2019). Olympians speak of the roar of the crowd when they first enter the Olympic arena, a sound and feeling they recall decades after their sporting days are over (Authors 2021). Of more importance for our discussion is what the fans take from the co-creation of such events, given that the 'feelgood' factor fans elicit from sport actually serves a crucial purpose in society. The work of Emile Durkheim is especially insightful for understanding this. The process is encapsulated in Durkheim's term '*collective effervescence*', that is, the 'rush of energy' stimulated by assembled social groups (1995 [1912]).

<sup>1</sup> For Durkheim such a feeling derives from people coming together in large groups:

The very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation.....(Durkheim 1995, pp. 217-218).

Astonishingly, Durkheim's early recognition of the vitalising force that bringing people together in *close physical proximity* can generate chimes with very recent work that offers evidence of the pharmacological mechanisms at work in individual's brains during mass gatherings. Charles et. al. (2020) have shown recently the role of mu-opioids in the social bonding experience during religious rituals, which are comparable to sporting spectacles. It is this 'feelgood' factor that acts as an essential part of community bonding - local and national – and it is not dissimilar to the processes at work during public outpouring of emotion around 'royal weddings, civic parades [and] remembrance gatherings' (Giulianotti 2015, 6).

One overriding theme of the above is on *social* and *collective gatherings*. Covid-19 has put a stop to this and thus robbed sport temporarily of the very mechanisms by which the 'feelgood' factor is generated. Many sports fans experience 'collective effervescence' through regular live sporting consumption, in particular, at weekly football matches around which their lives are constructed: weekend (and occasionally mid-week) sports matches involve the build up to the game in the week prior to the game, pre-meetings on match day with other fans, often in a social setting (pub or bar), the match itself where the collective experience is undertaken and then the post-event analysis which may take several days, before the cycle begins again. It will also be at such events that the 'feelgood' factor is at its highest for the home fans, sharing, chanting, booing and whistling. Such synchronised action 'ramps up endorphin activation, producing a sense of uplift and social

engagement' akin to Durkheim's *effervescence* and Turner's *communitas* (Dunbar 2012, 54). It is this 'collective effervescence' of the sporting event that is understood as working as a communal remedy, refreshing and re-setting individuals psychologically, allowing them to face their everyday lives. The loss of this societal corrective and the synchronised roars of the crowd and other fan vocalisation is not adequately replaced by piping in 'clapping' and 'cheering' of crowds through speakers. This is accompanied by hundreds of cardboard cut-outs of fans filling the stadium in an attempt to create the very atmosphere that no longer exists when one side of the symbiotic experience of sport is not present. The impact of a packed, raucous crowd goes beyond the stadium itself: roaring fans are essential for the experience of millions of people who watch from outside the stadium, the state and country. *The New York Times* (20 July, 2020) sums up the broader role of spectators at live events and their value for the wider watching public thus:

For those watching on television, spectators are necessary surrogates. They provide jersey-wearing pageantry, face-painted tribalism and adrenaline for the players. Their responses of jubilation and anguish verify our passionate responses. Their voices become our soundtrack, collectively rising in anticipation, thunderously exhaling in joy or disapproval. And they reinforce the belief that we can directly influence the outcome of a game with our loyalty and howling presence.

The importance of crowds, gatherings and spectators cannot be overstated and this is likely to become evident at any sporting event or sports mega-event held during the pandemic. Take, for example, the London Marathon: in 2019 some 43, 000 took to the streets of London to tackle the 42 km run; in 2020 just a handful of elite athletes competed around a sealed off loop with no spectators, resulting in the 'most surreal London Marathon in its 40 year history' (*The Guardian*, 4 October, 2020). The Tokyo 2020 Olympics, now moved to July 2021, may also suffer from a lack of supporters, especially from overseas. If, as appears likely, Covid-19 is still disrupting the gathering of thousands of sport spectators, international travel and people's willingness to do both, then the Olympics look set to be the first without an accompanying 'feelgood' factor for the host and those watching around the globe. The cumulative viewing figures for the 2016 Rio Olympics was 3.6 billion, getting on for half of the world's population. Without spectators – or with greatly reduced spectators due to social distancing or fear of travelling – it is unlikely that the 'collective effervescence' described above will be present. This, in turn, is likely to influence the overall impact of the event for Japan, who, like previous hosts, seek inbound tourists (and the income they bring), a change in their image abroad (to a more 'outward' and less 'inward' looking society) and an economic upswing due to the event. While Bond et. al. (2020) are correct in their assessment of

the economic impact of the missing fans in football stadia, it is the *psychological* aspect of sport ‘without spectators’ that leads to the loss of a necessary ‘feelgood’ factor for sports fans.

### *The Differential impact of Covid-19*

Covid-19 has undoubtedly had a profound impact on the lives of all members of society, as we look to adapt to what has been frequently termed the ‘new normal’. In popular discourse, the disease is spoken of as a ‘great leveller’ (Ali *et al.*, 2020, 415), whereby no one is immune to its profound physical, social and economic consequences. There is mounting evidence, however, to suggest that the pandemic has impacted disproportionately upon certain marginalised groups, namely BAME and lower socio-economic groups, bringing to light, and exacerbating, pre-existing socio-economic inequalities. In an increasingly divisive global political landscape, where right-wing populism appears to be the recipe of choice for swathes of working-class voters (cf. the ‘Red Wall’ in the UK and Donald Trump’s over 70 million voters in the recent US election), the pandemic has exposed a number of long-standing cracks in states’ governance, political culture and wealth distribution. Take the US, for example, where a lack of universal healthcare (often decried as ‘socialism’) has left millions of the most vulnerable open to physical illness and economic hardship. Early research on the pandemic in the UK has suggested that a decade of stringent austerity measures (see: Blyth, 2013) implemented prior to Covid-19 have left the nation’s most socio-economically deprived communities vulnerable to extreme hardship, only likely to be worsened by the current deteriorating economic conditions.

In terms of the provision of, and access to, sport and physical activity, evidence has shown that the ‘working-class’ are less likely to participate in both (Widdop *et al.*, 2018) than their ‘middle-class’ counterparts. The Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, anecdotally at least, appeared to lead to an upswing in people becoming physically active. A number of newspapers discussed the best exercise regimes, the best places to walk or cycle and latest trends in a variety of sports from yoga, fell running and the exponential growth in ‘virtual’ exercise (*The Telegraph*, 7 September, 2020; *Guardian*, 26<sup>th</sup> June, 2020). Almost all of the articles advocating exercise during the pandemic relate to people who work from home. The majority of people working remotely from home ‘...were [people in] well-paid, white-collar occupations in big cities...’ (*BBC*, 23 September, 2020). However, people in low-income jobs are among those most likely to be unable to work from home, which also makes them increasingly susceptible to contracting the virus. Further, recent figures released from Sport England collated during the ‘lockdown period’ between April and May



(2020) suggest that people from the lower socio-economic groups and some BAME groups continued to take part in less physical activity during the pandemic, in addition to those without access to a private outdoor space. Compounding these pre-existing trends, cuts to central government grants received by local authorities amounting to 38% in real-terms between 2009/10 and 2018/19 (Institute for Government, 2020) have left some councils with little alternative but to outsource their sport and leisure provision to private contractors, often at the expense of those lower socio-economic groups most reliant on council provision for affordable leisure opportunities (Ramchandani *et al.*, 2018). Alongside stagnating wages, changing welfare provision, an increase in the prevalence of insecure work and a rise in food bank use, the financial accessibility of sport and leisure for lower socio-economic groups arguably continues to decrease as these groups become increasingly isolated and excluded from society (Collins and Haudenhuyse, 2015).

Socio-economic inequalities in sports participation can be typified through the case of Oldham (Authors, forthcoming), a metropolitan borough situated in the north-west of England, with the town centre located 7 miles northeast of Manchester city centre. An in-depth case study examined the impact of Covid-19 on sports provision for lower socio-economic groups, situated against the wider socio-political backdrop of austerity, policies which have been suggested to disproportionately impact 'urban and poorer parts of England than in more affluent rural and suburban districts', and as being 'larger in London and northern regions of England than in southern regions.' (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2012, 124). The findings of this case study suggest: for those deprived groups less likely to participate in recommended levels of exercise prior to the pandemic, the economic downturn is translating into further negative financial implications and is likely to force them into relative poverty due to job losses and further cuts to public spending. With the dramatic rise in food bank use in Oldham during the pandemic and forecasted mass unemployment upon the eventual cessation of the furlough scheme, it appears unlikely that sport and physical activity will be at the forefront of the agenda for many below the poverty line. Targeted third sector sports provision presented a lifeline for many prior to Covid-19, compensating for stretched local government resources following a decade of austerity and providing for those most in need. Concerns were widespread, however, that these third sector organisations may also struggle to recover from the pandemic and continue to provide for society's most vulnerable at a time where demand for their services is arguably greater than ever. In addition to a prolonged era of austerity measures, it is also thought that local authority leisure services could become increasingly expensive as local authorities attempt to recoup a shortfall in central government funding due to the pandemic, with the threat of further austerity measures set to be implemented in the coming months and years. This subsequently may only further prevent lower

socio-economic groups from accessing sport and leisure provision, with local authority provision most typically relied upon by these groups (King, 2009).

The multi-faceted public health implications of the pandemic were also brought to light by the case study and chime with a recent report (Institute of Health Equity, 2020) marking 10 years since the landmark 2010 Marmot Review. The report highlighted growing health inequalities and reduced life expectancy among the UK's most socially deprived groups, suggesting a lack of safe and accessible opportunities for sport and physical activity during Covid-19 and beyond. In the context of this report, we are presented with a double-edged sword, whereby those most likely to suffer more severe physical symptoms from the virus should they contract it, are also those most reliant on prescribed exercise for the early prevention of other serious health conditions. If these individuals lack the assurance to access sport and physical activity at the present time due to their increased mortality risk from the disease, these socio-economic health inequalities appear only likely to be exacerbated, arguably until such time that a vaccine is available.

Looking ahead to what is likely to be a prolonged period of economic recovery, it is likely that countries badly hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the UK, will need to enter a period of renewed austerity in order to repay the vast sums of government borrowing used to sustain the economy (up to 7 August, this stood at £210 billion; see: *BBC*, 22 October, 2020). This, in turn, is likely to hit those lower socio-economic groups hardest. Covid-19 has arguably exposed some of modern Britain's vast inequalities, revealing just how vulnerable to poverty many members of an ostensibly classless society are, in addition to showcasing a fragmented public sector emaciated by a decade of ideological contraction (*The Guardian*, 31 May, 2020). We may therefore question whether in deprived areas, such as Oldham, the disease is indeed a 'great leveller', or a magnifying glass exposing and exacerbating deep-rooted poverty and inequality. Part of the political discourse in the UK consists of government promises to 'level up' the nation, decentralising the spread of wealth from London (*BBC*, 7 September 2020), with the aim of reducing regional inequality. However, these inequalities only seem likely to persist in the pandemic's economic fallout, particularly in the context of tensions between local government leaders in the north and central government leaders around alleged geographically disparate handling of the pandemic (*The Independent*, 18 October, 2020). While we may hope for policy-makers to prioritise sport and physical activity, given its undisputed positive social and physical outcomes, mounting national debt is likely to mean further cuts rather than investment in much needed sport provision, at the expense of those most reliant on community provision for their access to participation opportunities, and the significant social return on investment that often flows from it.

*Closing Doors, Opening Windows?: the politics of grassroots and elite sport during the pandemic*

A final area we identify where the pandemic has had a significant impact is on grassroots and elite sport – or, more precisely, the politics *between* grassroots and elite sport, and the politics *within* ‘elite’ sport. We deal with each in turn.

There has long been tension *between* ‘grassroots’ or ‘community’ sport and ‘elite’ sport. For example, national governments the world over have come to sacrifice funding of grassroots sports in favour of increasing support for elite sport, usually in the search for medal success and prestige on the global stage (see: Authors 2015); note too, how when elite sports fail to deliver, funding is then drastically decreased or withdrawn by funding bodies, which, in many cases, leads to a negative impact on those seeking progression from grassroots – take UK Sport’s 2014 decision to withdraw its funding for basketball after it was decided that the sport ‘had little chance’ of securing Olympic glory for Team GB, a decision which was labelled as having an ‘extraordinary impact’ on community basketball across the UK (see: *BBC*, 17 July, 2014).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, this favouring of elite sport over grassroots has been showcased most notably during the UK’s second lockdown, which started on 4<sup>th</sup> November, 2020. Key has been the UK government’s desire to allow elite sport to continue, albeit behind closed doors, whilst halting altogether grassroots and community sport. On 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2020, it was announced that elite/professional sports leagues in England, such as the English Premier League, the English Football League, the National Leagues and the Women’s Super League and Championship, would be permitted to continue, while non-elite sports would be forced to shut. The government’s decision to close grassroots sports and leisure provisions during this second lockdown, while allowing elite sports to continue has resulted in a backlash from various sports leaders and local communities. While clubs in the English Premier League (EPL) continue competition, and continue to benefit from television revenues, it has been reported that grassroots football clubs in England have lost in the region of 48% of their income since the pandemic began (*The Guardian*, 28 September, 2020). Highlighting the financial devastation already endured by grassroots sport, Lisa Wainwright, Chief Executive of Sport and Recreation Alliance, argued that:

These restrictions will critically affect the 150,000 plus local sports clubs in every community across England and will place them in a perilous scenario not knowing if they will ever open their doors again... [this could be the] final nail in the coffin for grassroots clubs which have struggled to survive the initial lockdown (in *BBC*, 31 October, 2020).

The need for grassroots sport to be put under such financial pressures in England has been questioned by many, first, in terms of the lack of evidence surrounding the actual dangers of Covid-19 transmission, with England's Chief Scientific Advisor, Sir Patrick Vallance, admitting he is 'not aware' of any reported cases of Covid-19 spread from outdoor community play (*BBC*, 4 November, 2020); and second, the fact that school sport in England has been allowed to continue, despite youth grassroots sport being halted. To some, these two points have been enough to lead calls for grassroots to be made exempt from the UK's national lockdown - in Manchester, for example, over 100,000 people signed a petition for grassroots football to continue during the lockdown period, arguing that, just like elite sport, grassroots sports clubs already had clear processes in place to prevent Covid-19 spread, and highlighted too the increased mental and physical health benefits of grassroots sports within local communities (*Manchester Evening News*, 3 November, 2020)

Further, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed entrenched politics *within* elite sport. In England, this has played out most notably in the context of professional football, and the debate concerning how the 'super-elite' professional clubs – that is, those clubs in England's top professional league, the EPL – should financially support those in the 'lower' elite leagues of the English Football League (EFL), comprising the Championship (tier two), League One (tier three) and League Two (tier four). Elite football in England was stopped from March to June, after which England's elite leagues have been played behind closed doors, meaning football fans have been banned from attending live games. This has brought about significant financial worries for those clubs lower down England's elite/professional football league system, with clubs in the EFL far less reliant on television income, and far more dependent on match day revenues. The severity of the situation for EFL clubs brought about by the pandemic was encapsulated by Preston North End FC advisor, Peter Ridsdale, who remarked 'my guess is there are at least half a dozen (clubs) that when it gets to Christmas and there's no solution, a number of them may well fold or go into administration' (*BBC*, 15 October, 2020). The EFL have asked the EPL for a bailout in the region of £250 million.

Important to note is that, 9 months into the Covid-19 pandemic, England's elite football clubs are yet to reach a financial support package agreement, despite continued losses, particularly amongst EFL clubs. Even more notable is the reason for this, which can arguably be put down – at least in part – to the way a handful of the richest clubs at the pinnacle of English elite football have come to see, and attempted to use, the pandemic as a 'window of opportunity' – that is, a timeframe in which conditions are considered ripe for one's favourable outcome to be positioned as a worthy solution to a major systematic problem (see: Kingdon 1984). When a window of opportunity does

open, that is when ‘policy entrepreneurs’ make their move for significant change, and that’s exactly what happened when, on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2020, ‘Project Big Picture’ was tabled by the richest clubs – or so-called ‘big-six’<sup>1</sup> – of the EPL. Led by Liverpool FC and Manchester United FC, Project Big Picture set out to reduce the amount of clubs in the Premier League from 20 to 18, scrap the EFL Cup and Community Shield, and to centralise power and decision-making rights to the EPL big-six. This would have been the most sweeping change to the English elite football system since the formation of the Premier League in 1992, and would have seen the EFL receive 25% of all future television revenue, as well as the required £250 million bailout package. On the 15<sup>th</sup> October, EPL clubs voted to reject Project Big Picture, and instead tabled a £50 million rescue package for League One and League Two clubs only, with some EPL clubs uneasy about providing wealthier Championship clubs with financial support, which would ultimately be used to reinforce their push for promotion to the EPL, to the detriment of some existing EPL clubs (see: *The Guardian*, 13 October, 2020). On 16<sup>th</sup> October, the EPL’s offer was rejected by the EFL, with the latter arguing that any settlement ‘must meet the requirements of all 72 clubs’ (*BBC*, 16 October, 2020). Leaders from elite football in England are now due to meet government ministers in early-November 2020 in order to try to reach some form of agreement.

So, in sum, during the pandemic, we have witnessed the top six richest football clubs in England make a power grab for, well, even more power, and we have seen the EPL as a whole refuse – at least to date – to hand over the £250 million required by the EFL, in fear of financially reinforcing rivals in the Championship. This has been compounded by the fact that, during the pandemic, EPL clubs spent a total of £1.26 billion on transfers, and arguably made the most of the situation in English elite football, with £260 million spent on bringing EFL players to the EPL (see: *The Athletic*, 21 October, 2020). The outcome thus far has led some – such as ex-England defender Gary Neville, and ex-Football Association Chairman David Bernstein – to call for some form of new, independent regulation to govern professional football in England, as it has become clear that ‘football has shown itself incapable of self-reform’ (*BBC*, 15 October, 2020). As the pandemic progresses, time will tell if England’s richest clubs do indeed really want to support those lower down the leagues. Up to this point, however, the pandemic has perhaps shown that English elite football does indeed represent what one journalist has called a state of ‘deadly dychonomics’ – that is, in contrast to an ecosystem where all are supported for the ‘greater good’, one finds a system based on power and self-interest, where the stronger seek out new ways to take advantage of the

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<sup>1</sup> Includes: Liverpool FC, Manchester City FC, Manchester United FC, Chelsea FC, Arsenal FC and Tottenham Hotspur FC

weak (see: Liew 2020). It is perhaps another reminder that football (and sport) is, in many ways, merely a reflection of the wider society in which it finds itself.

### **The Covid-19 Legacy on Sport: Looking Ahead**

If every crisis is an opportunity in disguise, the Covid-19 pandemic has a number of lessons for governments to learn. There is little doubt that this crisis has been instrumental in revealing both poor governance, policy failure and a number of pre-existing fault lines, in particular, in the manner in which the upheaval has disproportionately hit the less well-off. Looking ahead to a post-pandemic future (with a possible vaccine looking slightly more likely as we write this: see *The Financial Times*, 9 September 2020), three discernible Covid-19 ‘legacies’ stand out.

First, it is clear that governments need to re-think their investment decisions in sport. We discussed the tension between elite and grassroots sport using football as an example. Other sports in the UK share a similar tension. The target-driven culture of elite sport funding skews developmental pathways of sports, that is, sports successful at elite level attract ever more government funding; whereas, popular sports like basketball in England receive but a fraction of more ‘niche’ sports, such as sailing (£75, 000 for 2018-2021 as opposed to £25.7 million for 2017-2020; see: UK Sport, 2020). While 1.2 million people played basketball in 2019 (Basketball England, 2019), only a tenth of that number took part in sailing; if we consider the ‘socio-economic barriers’ to participating in sailing (see: World Sailing Trust, 2020), the question arises if the taxpayers’ money is being equitably spent. Given the likely cuts to local authorities to pay for the Covid-19 crisis, the Government needs to consider carefully the impact this will have on the provision of sport and physical activity for those who cannot afford private gym membership and personal trainers.

The second legacy of the Covid-19 crisis for sport is likely to follow the growth of remote working and the use of online platforms to conduct business (*Financial Times*, 23 August 2020). The exponential growth in online fitness tutorials (for example, Joe Wicks’ YouTube channel) and eSports during the pandemic is likely to make a mark on sport and physical activity production and consumption in the future. Once again there is an economic aspect to the access to these new developments. Working from home (WFH), as we have discussed, usually involves those in the knowledge economy and those with higher levels of qualifications; it also pre-supposes a secure and fast internet connection, which is not the case for many in the UK. While many people debate whether to invest in an office at home or to take up a virtual Pilates class to replace their previous

exercise regimes, the Government ought to consider investing in fair and easy access to municipal sport and recreation for those less fortunate in society. In doing so, they should also work closely with the technology and fitness organizations and personnel who pioneer these (in trend) ways of remaining active.

Third, eSports have seen a significant rate of growth during the pandemic and some sports, such as Formula 1 and soccer, enjoyed a boost as professionals from these sports turned to the virtual world (see: *Forbes*, 2020). While the governance of eSports remains chaotic (see: Peng *et. al.*, 2020), it is probably a matter of time before the International Olympic Committee (IOC) or Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) will have to bow to pressure to accept some form of 'e'-Olympic Games or 'e'-World Cup, especially as the eSports industry is growing rapidly in terms of finance and fans (*ibid.*). Consider too, how, on reflecting on the various postponed international football and Olympic events in 2020, how future e-based versions of the real thing might keep audiences engaged should humanity have to deal with future pandemics – as things stand, the decision to completely postpone such events has been taken as there are no real alternatives, apart from allowing these events to continue behind closed doors, which, for their hosts, in many ways defeats the purpose of staging these events in the first place. In filling this void, official IOC and/or FIFA-led eSports competitions might act as a welcome alternative for both governing bodies and audiences, if and when these events need to be postponed once more.

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<sup>1</sup> Durkheim's original work looked, in particular, at 'rites' and 'rituals' in religion. The same type of feeling is associated with sport and devoted fans.