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Editorial, Managing Sport and Leisure, Special Issue

Managing sport and leisure in the era of Covid-19

Argyro Elisavet Manoli, Christos Anagnostopoulos, Aila Ahonen, Nicola Bolton, Ali Bowes, Chris Brown, Terri Byers, David Cockayne, Ian Cooper, James Du, Andrea Geurin, Emily Jane Hayday, John W. Hayton, Claire Jenkin, James Andrew Kenyon, Niamh Kitching, Seth Kirby, Paul Kitchin, Geoffery Z. Kohe, Themistocles Kokolakakis, Ho Keat Leng, Jan Andre Lee Ludvigsen, Eric W. MacIntosh, Hazel Maxwell, Anthony May, Katie Misener, Jimmy O’Gorman, Daniel Parnell, Keith D. Parry, Qi Peng, Daniel Plumley, Martin J. Power, Girish Ramchandani, Mike Rayner, Nicolas Scelles, Tracy Taylor, Tom Webb & Mathieu Winand

In December 2019 the world was first informed of a new virus, called SARS-CoV-2 (hereafter Covid-19) spreading fast originally in China and quickly in the rest of the world, resulting in the hospitalisation and death of millions of people worldwide (World Health Organisation, 2020). The quick and almost unstoppable spread of the virus called for Governments to enact various levels of measures. Whilst these measures were taken to different degrees and time-points, they generally included the introduction of social distancing and lockdown procedures in numerous countries around the globe. As part of these procedures, work and social gatherings were brought to an abrupt halt, disrupting the operations and norms in numerous industries, including the wider sport and leisure industry. From the postponement of mega-sport events, to the stopping of sport leagues, and the closure of leisure centres, the sport and leisure industry adhered to the various Covid-19 measures taken by local and national governments, following the guidance of experts such as the World Health Organisation (World Health Organisation, 2020). As the spread of the virus and our ability to respond to it progressed, these measures changed since they were initially put in place in the spring of 2020, with some forms of more lax measures in place until the autumn of 2021 when this editorial is being written.

After almost two years of living through the global Covid-19 pandemic, it is worthwhile and timely to reflect upon the measures, responses and experiences, and the effects that they’ve all had to the sport and leisure industry, which in turn provide us with numerous new avenues to explore. In this special issue a number of relevant commentaries are presented, elaborating on these, while pushing for more research on Covid-19 and its impact on managing sport and leisure.

While the detailed impact of the global pandemic is still unknown, the way sporting organisations, policy makers and sporting individuals have and are still responding may eventually reveal opportunities to rethink sporting systems and embrace change and digital transformation. Many commentators at the time suggested that there is a growing sense that the global sports hiatus could be an opportunity to do things differently when sport returns. This different way can now be explored in commercial, elite, non-commercial, amateur, men, women, youth and disability sport organisations, athletes and fans, physical activity providers and participants, and the wider field of sport governance, management and higher education as it is discussed below.

With sport and leisure gradually resuming, there is ample space to explore how Covid-19 has changed the industry, by examining not only the financial, but also the non-financial impact on sport organisations' sporting achievements and social outcomes. Sport organisations, particularly local and amateur organisations, may have been dramatically impacted by the lockdown measures in their incapacity to train, support and gather their members. This in turn could have resulted in a loss of sporting and social capital during the crisis that might be difficult to counterweigh now that operations are beginning to resume, as Doherty et al. (2020) discuss.

One significant negative consequence to result from the Covid-19 pandemic is the potential for a generation of young people that may be subsequently "lost to the sport they once played" as various "intrapersonal, interpersonal and environmental challenges present immediate risks to youth sport once the threat of Covid-19 recedes" (Drummond et al., 2020, p. 4). Though many of these same challenges are relevant for sport in higher education contexts too, there may well be a generation of students and graduates who are not just "lost to sport" in terms of participation or opportunities to compete, but also in terms of volunteering (whether that be coaching, managing, administering, or supporting sport). As volunteering opportunities within sport at higher education have become restricted, so too have the associated opportunities to develop the key skills that potential future employers expect graduates to be able to demonstrate once they enter the workplace. These graduates, therefore, are likely to be impacted not just by decreasing employment options available to them when they do graduate (Griffiths et al., 2017), but also by the lack of opportunities to engage in activities that could have potentially made them more employable (Powell & Francis-Devine, 2021).

At the same time, when the national lockdowns began around the world, exercise was marked as one of the few reasons permitted for leaving the house, demonstrating the importance of physical

activity for public policy, and further highlighted by the wider interest shown on social media (Hayes, 2020). Many felt this could be an exciting opportunity for the industry to strengthen its position after the Covid-19 pandemic is over. However, the lack of support for prioritising important sport for social change initiatives for early re-opening, and the ongoing lack of support for physical activity facilities, such as leisure centres, could suggest that this was a false dawn. With organised physical activity resuming, the influence that the pandemic might have had on sport participation rates and added requirements to the providers is worth further considering as Amagasa et al. (2020) and Hammami et al. (2020) argue.

In line with this, anecdotal evidence during the pandemic suggested that societal inequalities were exacerbated (Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2020), with this being reflected in community sport (Sport England, 2020). Many of those with outdoor space and safe neighbourhoods have embraced individual exercise, but those without these opportunities were not, further stressing any potential societal (and individual impacts) of the lack of universal structured and inclusive opportunities in safe environments, as Fitzgerald et al. (2020) also suggest.

The community sport sector has faced major layoffs and declining infrastructure investments during the pandemic, with public policy often offering little to no support to a sector that has sometimes suffered the repercussions of years of austerity, especially in some parts of the world. This in turn offers itself as a potential fertile ground for the exploration of the use of strategic management and planning in order to build capacity and ensure sustainability in their future operations (Hammond, 2020), while potentially using new technologies and virtual environments to create a sense of community and social capital among participants, employees and volunteers (Martins et al., 2021).

At the same time, uncovering the coping strategies adopted by various sporting organisations in order to survive the crisis, despite the disruption of their operations, would also allow for valuable insight to be gained on how to mitigate potential losses for organisations, along with lessons to be learned on crisis management, strategies and monitoring (Clarkson et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2020). Exploring these concepts in the wider realm of the sport ecosystem, would also allow for sport management practice to learn from its experiences, re-think their current norms and potentially prepare better for such disruptions in the future, as Manoli (2020), Parnell et al. (2020), Sharman (2020) and Wilson et al. (2020) suggest. Or even, as Byers et al. (2021) advocate, re-think sport governance and management altogether.

Moreover, the initial ban of live audiences when sport re-started, the gradual re-introduction of live audiences in sport events and the hosting of postponed events such as the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games and the Wimbledon Championship that took place in the summer of 2021 presented such an almost unprecedented disruption in organised sport norms. This disruption raised questions on the role of live audiences in stadia and consequently their return there, as Bond et al. (2020), Brown (2020) and Penfold and Kitchin (2020) discuss. It also brought the issue of public perceptions and security of events back in the forefront, as Ludvigsen and Hayton (2020) and Sato et al. (2020) argue.

An important aspect to consider is how people have adapted throughout the pandemic. For example, how fans have altered their behaviour in this new era of no sport or of only televised sport. Apart from the consumption of already popular sport, it is interesting to explore whether new sports, such as eSports, have been “discovered” by sport fans who were deprived of live “traditional” sport, and whether this will manifest in permanently altering their habits or indeed altering the practices of the sport organisations involved as Ke and Wagner (2020) discuss.

Interestingly, how athletes might have engaged in other forms of sport, at home, or virtually during the pandemic is also a topic worth reflecting upon. With famous athletes in motor sport, cycling and tennis among others, who having taken part in virtual competitions, a large market penetration for those fans not yet familiar with e-sports has been encouraged (Rojas-Valverde et al., 2021). This in turn may shed light on the impact such a move might have on spectators, sponsors and broadcasters, potentially opening the door to a future transformation of the sport and leisure industry.

Along these lines and while keeping the athletes in mind, their role within the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent measures taken globally to control it, as well as the impacts such measures might have had on them, are examined by Leng and Phua (2020), Souter et al. (2021) and Mohr et al. (2020) who shed light on the often neglected human side of sportspeople, as do Castagna et al. (2020) while focusing on football officials.

With articles within these special issues drawing our attention to numerous potential implications of the global pandemic, the need for further research is stressed once again. As the impact of this pandemic is likely to influence sport and leisure in the long term, longitudinal research is needed to understand and learn how to shape the industry moving forwards. These commentaries offer our

reflexions so far and a starting point for research to follow on the wider and ever developing sport and leisure ecosystem in the era of Covid-19.

Disclosure statement

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