COVID-19 and the sports sector

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic disrupted every aspect of the sporting value chain. The sports industry as a whole provides millions of jobs and has an estimated value of US$756 billion annually. The global cancellation of sporting events affected athletes, teams, leagues, and media that broadcast games. The three main sources of income for professional sports leagues – broadcasting (sales of media rights), commercial (sponsorship and advertising partnerships) and match day revenue (ticketing and hospitality) – all decreased significantly.

The sector has been characterized by what is known as the “sporting exception”: unlike other sectors in the world of work, some parts of sport are governed by the rules of sporting federations, which are often viewed as operating independently from labour law and other national laws. Although players are increasingly seeking to resolve issues through recourse to labour, administrative or civil law, and there is a growing international consensus on the application of international standards to athletes, the industry has been slow to adapt to this approach and still invokes the “specificity of sport”.

The sector is also marked by its use of a variety of contract types, primarily fixed-term contracts. Some athletes are independent contractors (in mixed martial arts (MMA) and other individual sports, for example). At times there is a complete absence of a contract. The working conditions of athletes vary across regions and disciplines, between team and individual sports, and within a wide spectrum. Moreover, many athletes have dual careers, combining their sporting career with higher education, vocational education or employment, in some cases involving complex employment relationships within sport. Athletes’ terms and conditions may be governed by various bodies, including clubs and national or international sports bodies, sometimes with overlapping mandates.

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The impact of COVID-19

Business and employment
Measures aimed at limiting the spread of the pandemic had a drastic effect on athletes and businesses at all levels of elite sports, depriving federations, leagues, teams and individuals of income and exacerbating pre-existing issues. Major sporting events around the world, such as the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics and Paralympics, were postponed. International, national and regional leagues were suspended, from the National Football League (NFL) in the United States of America to the UEFA Champions League and the FIBA Africa Basketball League, to name a few. While most sporting events and competitions have now resumed, pandemic-related cancellations and postponements are still affected competitions in Asia at the end of 2022.

The cancellation or postponement of competitions resulted in tremendous losses of revenue to federations, clubs and leagues from the sale of tickets, concessions and merchandise, as well as from sponsorships and broadcasting. Consequently, it also profoundly affected the financial security of most athletes, disrupting their income from funding, sponsorship and salaries. Some were furloughed; many found themselves with reduced salaries or unemployed, often in countries lacking adequate social protection. Sponsorship contracts were also reduced, cancelled or postponed. For athletes without annual contracts, the postponement of events such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games represented a loss of potential income related to medal and participation bonuses. To find new sources of income, athletes were obliged to take on jobs outside their profession (for example as street vendors) or to retrain professionally.

The pandemic also exacerbated the problems athletes face with late payment, while some had their contracts unlawfully terminated. In turn, this also contributed to corruption. A marked increase in match fixing was noted in 2021, particularly following the resumption of most competitions. Football, tennis and basketball were the sports most affected, owing to the large number of matches. Players and clubs in difficult financial situations were more susceptible to these attempts.

Some leagues were able to benefit from the early relaxing of public health measures. While the United States and Europe were still in complete lockdown, sports in China and the Republic of Korea had resumed in empty stadiums. The demand for live content from spectators in the West brought increased viewership to Chinese baseball from the United States and to Korean football from Europe. Within some competitions, the resumption of matches following lockdown saw a temporary levelling of the playing field, with major upsets in football and tennis.

Overall, however, measures implemented to limit the spread of COVID-19 aggravated pre-existing inequalities. Wealthy leagues that depend on broadcasting revenue benefited from the resumption of matches, first without spectators and later at reduced capacity. In the English Premier League, for example, the majority of revenue (59 per cent) is generated through broadcasting deals. Lower-tier clubs, which tend to be more reliant on ticket revenue, did not benefit similarly from the early loosening of restrictions.

The pandemic also widened the existing gap between men's and women's sports, particularly with regard to visibility and funding. For example, in 2020 numerous women's events in rugby, football, and cycling were cancelled, while the men's equivalents took place. The gendered impact of the pandemic varied across sports. In football, cricket and rugby – in which women's teams receive less funding – athletes lacked access to equipment during lockdown by comparison with their male peers.

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counterparts. An exception to this was the sport of netball,\textsuperscript{11} which is traditionally played by women.

In general, the pandemic disproportionately affected persons with disabilities. Elite athletes were no exception to this. Athletes with disabilities, already disadvantaged in terms of funding and access to facilities, were further affected by cuts to funding for para sport programmes.\textsuperscript{12} The pandemic stalled progress on issues they face such as marginalization and discrimination.\textsuperscript{13}

**Occupational safety and health**

The cancellation of events to protect athletes' health had unintended negative effects on their physical and mental well-being. The confinement period limited athletes' ability to maintain their training practices under the supervision of coaches and scientific experts. For many, limited access to specialist facilities, equipment and support – especially for sportswomen\textsuperscript{14} and athletes with disabilities\textsuperscript{15} – resulted in deconditioning or detraining. At the resumption of competition following lockdown, there was pressure to make up for lost time in competition calendars, leading to more intensive training and playing schedules, which in turn led to a significant increase in injuries in comparison to previous seasons in several sports.\textsuperscript{16}

The absence of competition was experienced by many athletes as the loss of a core component of their self-identity. Compounded by the loss of their vocation and income, this led to increased psychological distress,\textsuperscript{17} with athletes reporting feelings of loss, shock and sadness.\textsuperscript{18} Individual sports athletes reported higher levels of psychological distress than team sports athletes.\textsuperscript{19} For example, a survey of 200 National Basketball Association (NBA) players found levels of mental and physical well-being were maintained.\textsuperscript{20} During lockdown, many athletes were obliged to isolate in foreign countries away from their families and friends, putting them at risk of developing mental health issues or of existing conditions being aggravated.\textsuperscript{21} The limited access to equipment and training support had a greater impact on some sportswomen's mental and physical well-being.\textsuperscript{22} For child athletes, lockdown measures limited their access to physical and emotional support staff and, in the case of those living in sports academies, to their entourage (family and friends). Student athletes were also at an increased risk of developing mental health problems,\textsuperscript{23} especially young female athletes pursuing a dual career (education and sport).\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{12} Play by the Rules, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Sport for Athletes with Disability”.

\textsuperscript{13} Ivana Katsarova, Creating Opportunities in Sport for People with Disabilities (European Parliamentary Research Service, February 2021).

\textsuperscript{14} Georgie Bruinvels et al., “COVID-19: Considerations for the Female Athlete”, Frontiers in Sports and Active Living 3, article 606799 (February 2021).


\textsuperscript{17} Neil Dagnall et al., “The Potential Benefits of Non-Skills Training (Mental Toughness) for Elite Athletes: Coping with the Negative Psychological Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic”, Frontiers in Sports and Active Living 3, article 581431 (September 2021).

\textsuperscript{18} Lindsay Woodford and Lauren Bussey, “Exploring the Perceived Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic Social Distancing Measures on Athlete Wellbeing: A Qualitative Study Utilising Photo-Elicitation”, Frontiers in Psychology 12, article 624023 (July 2021).


\textsuperscript{21} FIFPRO, “COVID-19: Implications for Professional Women’s Football”.

\textsuperscript{22} Bowes, Lomax and Piasecki, “The Impact of the COVID-19 Lockdown.”


\textsuperscript{24} Juan Pons et al., “Where Did All the Sport Go? Negative Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Life-Spheres and Mental Health of Spanish Young Athletes”, Frontiers in Psychology 11, article 611872 (December 2020).
With the loosening of restrictions, there was a need to balance athletes’ return to competition with the risk of infection.\(^{25}\) Mask, quarantine, testing, bubble, ventilation and vaccination measures were put in place to this effect. The World Players Association developed a guide to returning to work and play, and a number of sports were able to conclude successful seasons with limited infections, thanks to measures such as single hotel rooms for athletes, daily testing and rigorous contact tracing.\(^{26}\) Sport body policies, funding, access to vaccines, and the desire to be vaccinated limited access to events for certain athletes. Para athletes with underlying medical conditions that put them at increased risk also required particular considerations.\(^{27}\) The impact was also gendered, depending on the region and sport. For instance, when mask mandates were lifted – and despite requests from team owners to charter aircraft – women’s basketball and soccer leagues in the United States banned teams from travelling on charter flights. The obligation for these sportswomen to travel using commercial airlines, unlike the men’s teams, put them at greater risk of contracting COVID-19.\(^{28}\)

For the majority of athletes that did contract the virus, symptoms were usually mild and hospitalization rare.\(^{29}\) Nevertheless, many struggled to return to their previous level of fitness for several weeks after infection, with some developing “long COVID”.\(^{30}\) The latter group experienced persistent symptoms such as shortness of breath, brain fog and confusion, among many others, that prevented them from returning to play for long periods of time and in some cases led players to retire.\(^{31}\)

**Social dialogue**

In Europe, the pandemic initially spurred players to make greater demands on athletes’ associations, particularly for legal advice (for example regarding unlawful termination or modification of contract), financial support and advice, dual career and transition support, and mental health support.\(^{32}\) In some cases, unions together with sport bodies were able to negotiate and establish protection mechanisms which reduced exposure to infection, providing for higher protection than for athletes not represented by workers’ organizations.\(^{33}\)

**Social Protection**

The absence of recognized employment contracts for many athletes, especially women, made them ineligible for government financial support measures.\(^{34}\) For example, a recent report found that only 18 per cent of women were considered professionals according to FIFA regulations, with the majority of remaining players relying on other sources of income.\(^{35}\) Many athletes had short-term contracts, while in some cases there was no written contract at all. The lack of health insurance and medical coverage, as well as of basic worker protection and rights, left athletes vulnerable. Moreover, at several competitions players were expected to sign liability waivers in case they contracted COVID-19. The precarious financial position in which many athletes were left led many to seek other sources of revenue, to pursue dual careers or even to abandon their athletic careers entirely.

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\(^{31}\) Alex Kirshner, “I’m Going Backward: How Athletes are Dealing With the Uncertainty of Long Covid”, Global Sport Matters, 9 February 2022.


Future of the sports sector

The lack of preparation for the first wave of COVID-19 prompted countries to plan for future pandemics and other widespread states of emergency that might drastically limit the possibility of participating in sports. Public health authorities, player associations, leagues and sport governing bodies collaborated to negotiate and implement “return to play” (RTP) protocols. Changes to scheduling and competition rules (format, length, number of teams, number of players allowed on team rosters, and so on), along with other policies aimed at protecting the health of athletes and the public, may serve as a foundation on which to develop effective and responsive measures in the event of future pandemics.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also pushed sports leagues to shift away from their traditional reliance on broadcasters and towards more diverse means of engaging spectators and generating income. These include streaming services, interactive content (such as fan commentary and statistical analysis), gambling, and virtual technologies such as immersive technologies and e-sports. Pandemic insurance is likely to become simultaneously increasingly popular and difficult to obtain, given the massive financial risks to insurers. All-risk event cancellation policies are also likely to be in higher demand.

Athletes’ ability to organize and to defend their rights as employees will continue to advance. Despite an enduring gender gap and setbacks resulting from the pandemic, the popularity of women’s sport is likely to continue to grow, and with it media coverage, funding, sponsorship, prize money and salaries (albeit in a non-linear manner and varying from one sport to another).

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37 World Players Association, “Best Practice Measures to Protect Public and Athlete Health at the Tokyo Olympics”.
38 Sunil Gulati and Andrew Zimbalist, “COVID-19 was a Game Changer, What Now for the Future of Sport?”, I by IMD, 5 March 2021.
40 Hall.
Responses by constituents and partners

International sectoral responses and resources

At the start of the pandemic, it was proposed that mega-sporting events continue as planned, given the financial investments at stake. The Tokyo 2020 Olympics were postponed only after several athletes spoke out and action was taken by athlete associations and national Olympic committees. Following the initial hesitation by some to cancel or postpone competitions, international sports federations have generally followed the regulations and guidelines of national authorities or international organizations such as the WHO.

To assist their members, sports federations provided financial support through actions such as: waiving annual membership fees for national federations; making advanced payments and increasing players’ compensation; and providing interest-free loans and relief funds. Other measures implemented included publishing guidelines for returning to sport, to complement those of governments and public health authorities; changing the format of competitions to minimize travel and contact among athletes; and providing online courses.

The European Council adopted an instrument for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency, through which they granted loans of up to €100 billion to support Member States in extending short-time work schemes and other similar measures to businesses and workers.

National-level responses: governments and federations

Governments sought to limit the spread of COVID-19 by imposing measures including suspending competitions, closing sports facilities, and restricting physical activity to the home or to specific outdoor public spaces for a limited duration, provided that social distancing measures were respected. Depending on the sport involved and the national context, restrictions were gradually eased following lockdown periods with a progressive return to activities: competitions first in empty stadiums, then with a limited number of spectators, and finally full resumption of competition. As an example, during the United Kingdom’s second lockdown (November 2020), elite sport was allowed to continue behind closed doors. Following the lockdown, a limited number of spectators were permitted in stadiums. Other government measures included the required wearing of masks, COVID-19 testing and mandatory vaccinations.

Several governments also offered financial support by providing one-time payments or low-interest loans; waiving or postponing tax, rent and social security obligations; and facilitating claims for partial unemployment benefits, among other things. Many also facilitated the obtention of unemployment compensation for workers usually ineligible for benefits (for example independent contractors). Some governments facilitated online training and education programmes for athletes, club directors and federations on themes such as gender equality, adapted sports, applications of science and

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44 International Boxing Association; International Fencing Federation.
45 International Gymnastics Federation.
46 International Handball Federation.
47 International Olympic Committee (US$150 million package); FIFA COVID-19 Relief Plan (US$150 million distributed among 211 national football governing bodies); International Paralympic Committee (€1.8 million grant funding available to member organizations in 2021).
48 International Basketball Federation (FIBA): phased approach to restart.
49 FIBA and IBU.
50 Katsarova, “How Coronavirus...”.
51 Grix et al.
52 Laura Scott and Mandeep Sanghera, “Fans at Sporting Events: Maximum of 4,000 to be Allowed in England”, BBC Sport, 23 November 2020.
technology to sport, and institutional strengthening. For example, at the outbreak of the pandemic, Sport Singapore, the country’s sport agency, offered courses covering topics such as digital marketing, service excellence and sports science.

National sports federations also provided financial and other forms of support to their members. The Uganda Handball Federation, for example, launched a COVID-19 food relief campaign to support former and current players, coaches and administrators severely impacted by lockdown.

Players’ organizations

In some cases, players’ organizations participated in COVID-related decision-making on issues such as RTP and health and safety measures, in collaboration with leagues, federations and governments. They negotiated with leagues to support their members. For instance, in Major League Baseball, the players’ union negotiated with the league to determine how to adjust players’ compensation. However, many organizations reported inadequate consultation, and the majority did not receive financial support from governments.

During the pandemic there was also collaboration among players’ agents, epidemiologists, lawyers, and medical and public health experts, leading to the development of RTP guidelines. Measures agreed through collective bargaining set the industry standard for best practice, as identified by leading public health experts, including the creation of COVID-19 advisory committees that include player associations, governing bodies and experts; full and comprehensive insurance for training and competition periods; daily testing for athletes; tailored treatment and rehabilitation programmes in the event of infection; and the development of easy-to-understand materials to promote player safety. Some of the practices developed were used to inform wider public health policy. For example, revisions to the definition of a “close contact” used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States were informed by data shared by the NFL and NFL Players Association.

Some players’ organizations participated in significant social activism and community support initiatives to support communities affected by COVID-19. In soccer, for example, players’ associations organized to help communities at risk by providing food, shelter and healthcare equipment and by supporting smaller clubs and leagues.

Leagues and clubs

After the cancellation and postponement of competitions and the imposition of lockdowns, media consumption increased considerably. Sports broadcasters and leagues took advantage of this as an opportunity to provide their viewers with more and different types of content. Some leagues also offered more flexible payment options. Others removed their paywall completely. Broadcasters and leagues showed classic games, archived content, documentaries, e-sports and niche competitions. The NFL, for example, made every game since 2009 available for streaming on its direct-to-consumer channel.

Broadcasters and leagues also collaborated to find mutually beneficial solutions in the absence of matches, such as paying broadcasters compensation, giving them additional rights and prolonging agreements. Agreements were put in place to allow the payment of fees in instalments or at reduced rates.

In the absence of competition, some leagues made revenue-sharing arrangements, whereby richer clubs provided financial support to lower-tier clubs at risk of

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54 Fernando Cáceres Andrés, Sport in the Time of Pandemic: An Ibero-American Perspective (UNESCO Office Montevideo and Regional Bureau for Science in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2020).
59 Sparrow et al.
62 Hall.
63 Katsarova, “How Coronavirus...”.

64 Fernado Cáceres Andrés, Sport in the Time of Pandemic: An Ibero-American Perspective (UNESCO Office Montevideo and Regional Bureau for Science in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2020).
69 Sparrow et al.
72 Hall.
73 Katsarova, “How Coronavirus...”.
bankruptcy. For example, in Germany the four clubs participating in the UEFA Champions League agreed to provide €20 million to the other clubs in the Bundesliga.\textsuperscript{64}

When play resumed in empty stadiums, clubs found inventive ways to generate income – from selling “virtual tickets” to past matches, to making it possible for fans to pay to add their names to the club museum and stadium bleachers\textsuperscript{65} or even to have their faces appear on mannequins in the stadium,\textsuperscript{66} while some fans ordered cardboard cutouts of themselves to fill the empty seats.\textsuperscript{67} In Formula One there was a shift to e-sports, with virtual races with professional drivers organized during lockdown.\textsuperscript{68}

Periods of confinement saw coaching and training staff employ technology, for example social media platforms, to provide home training programmes to facilitate athletes’ return to practice and competition. Many athletes were able to connect virtually with their team staff, management and technical staff, as well as with psychologists, physiotherapists, doctors and sport nutritionists for online training sessions.\textsuperscript{69} In Ghana, for example, athletes from the women’s national football team uploaded videos of themselves training as their WhatsApp status so that coaching staff could monitor their performance and provide feedback.\textsuperscript{70}

After lockdown measures were loosened, leagues and teams with the financial resources to do so (for example the NBA) created “training bubbles” in which teams and management were isolated from the rest of the population.\textsuperscript{71}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{64} Drewes, Daumann and Follert.
\textsuperscript{65} For a study of the situation in Brazil, see Marcos Ulhoa Dani, “Contratos de trabalho desportivos e a pandemia da COVID-19: Análise pelo prisma das medidas provisórias 927 e 936 e outras fontes”, Revista do Tribunal Regional do Trabalho da 10\textsuperscript{a} Região 24, No. 1 (2020).
\textsuperscript{68} Alan Baldwin, “Virtual World Races to Fill Sporting Void Left by Coronavirus”, World Economic Forum, 22 March 2020.
\textsuperscript{70} Ghana Football Association, “COVID-19 Effect: How our Women’s National Teams are Coping”.
\textsuperscript{71} Hall.
\end{footnotes}
ILO tools and responses

In 2020, the ILO Global Dialogue Forum on Decent Work in the World of Sport\(^ {72}\) adopted points of consensus and made several recommendations to governments and the social partners, including on the need to promote effective social dialogue; adopt, implement and enforce laws and regulations that ensure fundamental principles and rights at work; and create an enabling environment to promote decent work in the world of sport by ensuring equal opportunities and conditions regardless of gender, protecting athletes from violence, racism, abuse and discrimination, developing lifelong learning programmes, ensuring occupational safety and health, ensuring access to social protection coverage for athletes, and safeguarding the rights of children and young people to participate in sport in suitable conditions.

Importantly, the Global Dialogue Forum also recognized that “[a]ll workers, including athletes, regardless of the type of employment relationship, require, as a minimum, to be protected by the fundamental principles and rights at work”.\(^ {73}\) In this respect, athletes should enjoy the rights set out in the original ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work adopted in 1998:\(^ {74}\) freedom of association and collective bargaining and protection from discrimination, child labour and forced labour. In June 2022, the International Labour Conference decided to amend the Declaration to include “a safe and healthy working environment” in the ILO’s framework of fundamental principles and rights at work.\(^ {75}\) These principles and rights apply to all ILO Member States; for athletes, the framework offers a labour-based path to addressing challenges in working conditions in sports, in particular occupational health issues such as COVID-19 infection.

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\(^ {72}\) ILO, “Global Dialogue Forum on Decent Work in the World of Sport”.

\(^ {73}\) ILO, Points of consensus adopted by the Global Dialogue Forum on Decent Work in the World of Sport, GDFWS/2020/7, 22 January 2020, point 4.

\(^ {74}\) ILO, “ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work”.

\(^ {75}\) ILO, Resolution on the inclusion of a safe and healthy working environment in the ILO’s framework of fundamental principles and rights at work, International Labour Conference, 110th Session, 2022.
Further information

The ILO web page “COVID-19 and the World of Work: Sectoral Impact, Responses and Recommendations” provides links to key resources, including:

- ILO sectoral tools and instruments
- Joint statements and calls for action to fight COVID-19
- ILO partnerships to fight COVID-19 sector by sector