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Redesigning the Games? The 2020 Olympic Games, Playbooks and new sports event risk management tools

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ABSTRACT

Rationale/Purpose: More than a year into the pandemic, scholars and practitioners have highlighted several of the organizational implications of coronavirus-disease 2019 (COVID-19) on worldwide cultural festivals and sporting events. Following COVID-19, numerous major sporting events, including the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics, were postponed in February and March 2020. As the new dates of many rescheduled sporting events approach in time, the article discusses pressing questions related to sporting event risk, safety and security.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The paper is conceptual and employs insights and frames from the risk management literature for its examination of sporting events staged in the mid- and late 2020 and early 2021.

Findings: We analyse risk management strategies and safety practices at recent sporting events that have been staged throughout the pandemic. Our argument is that the rescheduled sporting events – exemplified by the 2020 Olympics – have been subject to organizational, social and spatial redesign processes.

Practical Implications: The paper can provide emerging lessons and considerations for sporting event stakeholders in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Contributions: The paper adds to our understanding of emerging risk management strategies and safety practices that event stakeholders have adopted in the context of COVID-19. This is supplemented by an emerging and multidisciplinary research agenda.

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Introduction

On 24 March 2020, the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics and Paralympics were postponed by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in light of the rapidly unfolding COVID-19 pandemic.¹ The decision, which saw the event pushed back for one year (to 23 July-8 August 2021, and to 24 August-5 September for the

Paralympics), meant that the Olympics followed the path of several other sports mega-events that were either postponed or cancelled in the face of the global health crisis (Parnell et al., 2020). Whilst every Olympic edition, and sport mega-events more generally, are surrounded by risk and uncertainty (Boyle & Haggerty, 2012), the upcoming 2020 Olympics,

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¹Important to note, the postponed Olympics retained its 2020-name.

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fundamentally, initiate a series of critical questions in the current time.

Firstly, it remains uncertain whether the pandemic will be under control by July 2021. In February 2021, Tokyo and nine other areas in Japan were in a coronavirus state of emergency (*The Independent*, 2021a), and per 3 March 2021, 433,504 COVID-19 cases and 7933 deaths had been recorded in Japan.² Further, it has been reported that 80 percent of Tokyo's residents feel the Games should not be staged in 2021 (*The Independent*, 2021b). There was also opposition amongst the host country's residents against the idea of allowing international spectators to attend (*Reuters*, 2021). Then, on 20 March 2021, the organizing committee confirmed that international spectators would not be able to attend the rescheduled Olympics. In spite of this, as Shimizu et al. (2021, p. 1) write, "there has been a lack of transparency about the benefits and risk, and international mass gathering events such as Tokyo 2020 are still neither safe nor secure". Secondly, and despite the absence of overseas spectators, it still remains unclear *if* crowds of spectators will be present in the mega-event spaces by July 2021. As McCurry (2021) writes, "[i]deas being floated by the IOC and organizers range from allowing full stadiums, cutting venue capacities by half and banning spectators". Yet, reports suggest Japan may limit spectators to 50% of the stadium capacity, with Masa Takaya, a spokesman for the Tokyo Olympic organizing committee, saying a decision will be made in April (White, 2021). Quite similar questions may also be asked in relation to other rescheduled sporting events. And more broadly, the pandemic can represent a turning point with regards to sport mega-events organization and especially safety and security management (Lee Ludvigsen & Hayton, 2020).

In a way, this was demonstrated by the series of Playbooks published by the IOC, the

International Paralympic Committee (IPC) and the Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee (Tokyo 2021) in February 2021. The Playbook documents contain guidelines and a "game plan" for how Olympic athletes and stakeholders can play their part in the "safe and successful" (IOC, 2021a) Olympic delivery. Moreover, the G7 leaders expressed their support for Japan's commitment to stage the Games "in a safe and secure manner [...] as a symbol of global unity in overcoming COVID-19" (G7, 2021). Both inside and outside of the sports world, pressing questions related to sports mega-events' risk, safety and security figure prominently (Ranney, 2021).

Building upon the recent academic attention given to the 2020 Olympics (Boykoff, 2020; Boykoff & Gaffney, 2020; Constandt & Willem, 2021; Hutchins & Andrejevic, 2021; Rookwood & Adeosun, 2021; Shimizu et al., 2021), this paper provides an analysis of recent sports events and competition that have been staged throughout the pandemic in mid- and late 2020 and early 2021, ahead of the 2020 Olympics and several other international sporting events. The article aims to identify and discuss risk management strategies and industry practices in an epoch of "covid-secure" sporting events, which can impact the planning and eventual delivery of the Olympics and other sport mega-events. Sporting events, we argue, have undergone redesigns which this article maps the contours of.

The article begins with a discussion of risk management and risk strategies at contemporary sports events. Then, we examine a number of recent sporting events or competitions hosted throughout the pandemic, between June 2020 and the present-day. We then discuss the mentioned Playbooks and the Olympic test events, as two specific pre-event risk management strategies. The paper will conclude by highlighting some implications and considerations for future research.

²See: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

Risk management and risk strategies

For Chang and Singh (1990), sports events are surrounded by a complex set of risks that present major concerns for event organizers and stakeholders. Accordingly, risk management processes must begin “long before the event actually takes place” (p. 52), whilst the selected risk management strategies can represent “the key to a successful event” (Leopkey & Parent, 2009b, p. 154). Crucially, the centrality of risk management at international sporting events has increased in line with broader trends, including sports’ growing popularity and increased media coverage, insurance costs and terrorist threats (Brynildsen & Parent, 2021). While different definitions exist, we define risk management here as a “proactive process that involves assessing all possible risk to the event and its stakeholders by strategically anticipating, preventing, minimizing, and planning responses to mitigate those identified risks” (Leopkey & Parent, 2009a, p. 205).

Over the last decades, and after 9/11 in particular, the body of research exploring safety and security risks at sport mega-events has extended considerably (Boyle & Haggerty, 2012; Cleland, 2019; Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010; Lee Ludvigsen, 2020; Toohey & Taylor, 2008). Especially as precautionary principles, increasingly, have guided sporting event risk managers (see Toohey & Taylor, 2008). While safety and security have featured centrally in the extant literature as important aspects of any sport event’s risk management, Jennings (2012) and Leopkey and Parent (2009b) also draw attention to the importance of a broad approach to any unforeseen sporting event risk categories (these could relate to e.g. financing, human resources, sports or positive/negative media stories). To mitigate these risk categories, risk management requires the adaptation of specific strategies or tactics.

By drawing from the pre-existing literature and their own empirical findings from two Canadian sporting events (the 2006 Figure

Skating Championship and the 2007 FIFA U-20 World Cup), Leopkey and Parent (2009b) provide a strategic framework with seven risk strategy categories. From an event host stakeholder perspective, these are relevant when dealing with the various risk management categories. Essentially, the distinctive categories that are identified are: (1) *reduction*, (2) *avoidance*, (3) *reallocation*, (4) *diffusion*, (5) *prevention*, (6) *legal* and (7) *relationships* (p. 162). Within this framework, reduction – composing a broad category – is accordingly the most commonly deployed strategy.

Reduction refers to diminishing or lessening risks and involves planning, clear organizational goals, staffing, controlling, communication and test events (p. 162). Indeed, Brynildsen and Parent’s (2021) recent study of Winter Olympic test events demonstrates the ability of test events as reduction tactics which can give stakeholders “hands-on” experience. Moreover, the remaining six categories can be succinctly summarized as follows: “avoidance (staying away from risk), re-allocation (transferring of risk to other parties), diffusion (separation or dispersion of risk), prevention (elimination of risk), legal (insurance against risk), and relationships (cooperation and balancing risk)” (Leopkey & Parent, 2009b, p. 166). Apart from the mentioned reduction strategies, the most frequently utilized strategies were relationships, legal and avoidance, it is found (ibid.).

This framework of risk strategies has been applied to other mega-events. From the perspective of a participating team, Hanstad (2012) explores how Norway’s national team identified risk management issues and handled risk strategies prior and throughout the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada. Hanstad, in particular, documents the relevance of reduction, avoidance, diffusion and relationships as risk strategy categories. Yet, this concurrently demonstrates the flexibility of the relevant framework, as it may be applied to the perspectives of both event

hosts and participating teams, both of which must adapt respective strategies.

Importantly, however, Leopkey and Parent (2009b) highlight that new event locations, and their unique political and economic environments may impact the adopted risk strategies. The importance of a sports event's particular context, ultimately, connects with Giulianotti and Klauser (2010) who argue that existing risk theories can be applied to explore:

[H]ow specific security risks and “risk groups” are identified by relevant stakeholders at different SMEs [sport mega-events]; how security institutions (both public and private) implement specific risk-management techniques within particular contexts; and how risk legacies remain in post-SME contexts (p. 57)

Evidently, the particular contexts of a sports event are likely to impact their overarching risk management processes. Indeed, it has been suggested that the pandemic represents a “live test” which pushes organizations to readjust their approaches to and plans for risk and readiness (Parent & Reutsch, 2021). In this sense, the 2020 Olympics and the event's scale constitutes a setting in which the mentioned strategies related to risk management, including reduction, relationship and avoidance strategies, must be developed on-the-job, through the recirculation of recent lessons and practices and in relation to the transmission and case rate realities. Moreover, this current situation provides a unique context and we thereby set out to discuss how the current health catastrophe of COVID-19 has impacted the strategies and tools of risk and security management at sporting events. To do this, we explore some of the sports events staged throughout the pandemic in mid- and late 2020 and early 2021. The pandemic remains on-going, and its impacts on the world (and the sports world) have been unprecedented (Parnell et al., 2020). As such, there is still a need to understand the emerging strategies that may be used by organizers

and stakeholders in order to mitigate COVID-19 related risks and threats at present-day sports events. This remains particularly important as numerous rescheduled sport mega-events approach in time, including but not limited to the 2020 Olympics, UEFA Euro 2020, *Copa America* and the 2021 Wimbledon Championships. Ultimately, the discussed frames and insights from the reviewed literature can therefore be revisited and evaluated in this exceptional time and sporting event environments.

Looking back

Sports events are normally visited by mass crowds that gather inside confined crowded spaces. Faced with the risk of an infectious disease like COVID-19, sports events can thus, at a basic level, have super-spreader potential, and become sites where diseases might spread among a broad variety of people (Dickman, 2013). Strategies to reduce the risks, in light of COVID-19 catastrophe, were implemented. These included cancelling events with super-spreader potential, enforcing social distancing, reducing travel, quarantine, and clear communication from governments (as identified by Ebrahim et al., 2020), all of which were intended to delay the spread of the outbreak until a vaccine became available. During this period, we have witnessed sports events return from a temporary suspension from May 2020 and onwards behind “closed doors” or with limited crowds inside the venues (Perić et al., 2021; Rookwood & Adeosun, 2021). Given the need to reduce the risk of mass gatherings, notably through crowd density, it is no surprise activities began behind closed doors without spectators (Ebrahim & Memish, 2020).

Notwithstanding, the resumption of sporting events *with* or *without* crowds has not proved entirely straight-forward. A series of new risk strategies have been adopted by event organizers and sporting bodies, in order to provide

safety for the relevant events' athletes, spectators and stakeholders. Here, one noticeable risk reduction strategy can be seen in the cases of the 2019/20 National Basketball League (NBA) and UEFA Champions League (UCL). The NBA and the UCL both resumed in late-July and August 2020 – and were completed – inside sealed-off “bubbles”.

For instance, the NBA “bubble”, an isolation zone inside the Disney World in Orlando – hosted 22 teams that were provided with accommodation, training facilities, security and testing (*Reuters*, 2020). This again suggests that specific strategies related to accreditation, facility management and controlling (Leopkey & Parent, 2009b) were adopted. The NBA games, meanwhile, were staged at the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex inside the “bubble”. Whereas the cost of resuming the NBA season inside the “bubble” came to an estimated \$150 million, the resumption still saved the league from losing out on larger TV revenues (Hindman et al., 2021). Reportedly, athletes, staff and media were regularly tested for COVID-19 and, in the case of a positive result, individuals would be placed in 14-day isolation inside the Orlando campus (*The Guardian*, 2020). Similar to the Olympic Playbooks, athletes were also provided a document with guidelines for their stay in the NBA “bubble” (ESPN, 2020). Some evidence suggests that the “bubble”, with its rigorous testing programme, was effective in preventing virus spread. For example, the NBA could report of three consecutive weeks without positive tests (Forbes, 2020). The NBA staged 172 games successfully inside the Disney campus. Reflecting on the organization and logistics of the bubble, Kelly Flatow (NBA Executive Vice President of Global Events) highlighted the importance of collaborative efforts and the continual revision of health and safety protocols in the face of a new challenge. Flatow stated that:

The most important part of pulling everything together was the collaboration [...] With every event and program we do around the world, it is a cross-functional effort, but in this case, it was hyper-sensitive collaboration in terms of making sure we looked at it from every angle. We had so many logistical challenges that we had never faced before from a health and safety perspective (quoted in *USA Today*, 2020)

Yet, rigorous testing regimes and collaboration represent no panacea nor guarantee for “covid-secure” sports events and their athletes, visitors, staff or stakeholders. In December 2020, several English Premier League games were postponed following coronavirus outbreaks in different clubs (BBC Sport, 2020). Further, whilst the 2021 World’s Men Handball Championship in Egypt (in four host cities) was completed behind closed doors, Cape Verde’s team were forced to withdraw following a virus outbreak in their squad (BBC Sport, 2021a). Weeks later, for the 2021 Australian Open at Melbourne Park (8-21 February), more than 500 athletes, staff and officials had to self-isolate following a positive case in one of the tournament’s quarantine hotels. Subsequently, this led to the postponement of a tournament warm-up match (Sky Sports, 2021a). For the Australian Open, athletes were also required to comply with a 14-day quarantine policy upon arrival in Australia (ibid.). These early indications demonstrate how outbreaks have disrupted athletes and the event organization, although the mentioned events or competitions have been completed.³

In the current unpredictable climate, questions also exist around the prospects of a presence of spectators at events like the Olympics and UEFA Euro 2020. Previous research into the safety and security perceptions of mega-event attendees, mostly in relation to potential terrorist threats, show that some potential visitors may be deterred from attending due to safety concerns (Taylor & Toohy, 2006). Event

³With the exception of the 2020/21 Premier League (still on-going at the time of writing).

visitors' safety concerns are important when making the decision on whether to attend or not, and concerns can impact visitors' overall event experiences (Toohey & Taylor, 2008). Simultaneously, sports event attendance may be used to display a "resilience to fear and anxiety" (ibid., p. 464). Presently, little is known about how sports event visitors' responses to the new threat of COVID-19. However, interestingly, Perić et al. (2021) find in a survey that sporting event consumers in Croatia, Iran and Slovenia expressed a desire to attend sporting events when movement restrictions are lifted gradually. These findings also underline the centrality of safety-related protective measures at future events.

Indeed, some sporting events and competitions have returned with crowds. This includes the English Premier League (with up to 4000 attendees), the FIFA Club World Cup in Qatar (30 percent of the stadium capacities), and the US Super Bowl LV (with 25,000 attendees in a 65,000-capacity stadium). The Super Bowl "is the most-watched single-game sporting event in the US" (Schimmel, 2011, p. 3278), and for Super Bowl LV on 7 February 2021, the safety protocols included face coverings, physical distancing, temperature checks and PPE for staff (*The Guardian*, 2021a). Meanwhile, 7500 tickets were assigned to vaccinated health-care workers (NFL, 2021). As National Football League (NFL) spokesperson, Brian McCarthy, commended in relation to these safety procedures:

We took a critical look at all of our functions to ensure a safe and responsible gameday experience for fans [...] And that begins with the parking lots where fans may get there four or five hours prior to [the game] [...] We spent a lot of time with local, county, state, and federal officials, medical experts, and public health experts to go over our plans, and they provided feedback (quoted in *The Guardian*, 2021a).

As comes to fore in the above statement, the safety planning ahead of Super Bowl LV thus

involved a series of pro-active processes and assessments (see Leopkey & Parent, 2009a). Spatially, it would encompass places outside the stadium where fans would interact and move in the build-up to the main event. Furthermore, the pre-planning, as apparent, involved consultative processes (see Swart & Maralack, 2020) of information and knowledge sharing between a diverse set of stakeholders which, seemingly, formed a pre-game relationships strategy involving cooperation, negotiation and meeting stakeholder needs (Leopkey & Parent, 2009a).

Meanwhile, the mentioned Australian Open was visited by 17,922 spectators on the tournament's first day (BBC Sport, 2021b). However, due to an enforced five-day lockdown in host city Melbourne, following a smaller outbreak, spectators were prevented from attending the tournament for the period between 13 and 17 February (Sky Sports, 2021b) as the competition continued behind closed doors. Spectators then returned, at reduced numbers, for the Australian Open's final four days (ibid.). This development subsequently marked an important shift: ultimately, the tennis tournament was approached as a workplace – rather than an entertainment event/venue, which allowed the event's sporting side to continue in the absence of fans. As the premier of Victoria, Daniel Andrews, stated:

Large and small professional sport events, they will function essentially as a workplace ... But they will not function as an entertainment event, because there will be no crowds. And the workforce will be the minimum that is needed in order for that to be Covid-safe and safe in lots of other contexts (quoted in *The Guardian*, 2021b).

Essentially, the case of the Australian Open demonstrates the organizational disruptions and challenges that may emerge *throughout* an event's duration in the pandemic context. Further, it also shows how processes of learning occur when planning for, organizing and staging "covid-secure" sporting events.

Important insight into this is provided by the Tournament Director and Tennis Australia CEO, Craig Tiley, who commented in light of the five-day lockdown that: “We have been on a massive learning curve; this is not the same model for everyone or tempered for everyone, but this one has worked and I think it can be applied in many cases” (quoted in Sky Sports, 2021c). Tiley also stated that:

One thing I have learned is that it’s extremely difficult to pull off an event of this nature with these number of international players coming from around the world, all the hot-spots in the world, particularly as we still are at the height of this pandemic [...] As far as the IOC goes, we’ve shared information with the Australian Olympic Committee and with a few people in the IOC and I’m sure we would be happy to share more. (quoted in Sky Sports, 2021c)

From the above reflections, we observe that the event organizers’ lessons and experiences from staging the Australian Open were shared through networks of information. Such lessons may be recirculated and inform forthcoming events, although the nature and profile of each event differ and may complicate this (“this not the same model for everyone”). Whilst the formation of globalized networks of expertise has become common practice ahead of contemporary sport mega-events (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2011), the uniqueness of the Covid-crisis requires that stakeholders search for new sets of recommended and good practices that derive from a relatively limited set of staged events

throughout mid- to late 2020 and early 2020. At sporting events where crowds have returned in limited numbers (see selected examples in Table 1), safety and security measures have involved, for example, socially distanced seating, face masks, one-way entrances and exits, temperate checks, some clubs (i.e. Everton FC) required spectators to provide a negative COVID-19 test result prior to attending (Kirkbride, 2020) and technologies that assist issues related to over-crowding or social distancing, and temperature checks. Indeed, for Hutchins and Andrejvcic (2021), new technologies are also likely to impact the 2020 Olympics as public health measures may blend with security-related and consumption technologies. As they argue:

The challenge posed by the circulation of people under pandemic conditions is not just to facilitate and accelerate movement, but to simultaneously minimize the forms of social contact that enable viral spread. The emerging goal is transactional “touchlessness,” combined with automated monitoring of personal contacts (ibid., p. 375)

New strategies and systems – and naturally, these systems’ *aims* and *rationales* (e.g. distancing, “touchlessness”, track/trace) – serve to demonstrate how sporting event risk management, for now, has come to revolve primarily around limiting, mapping and monitoring physical and social contact between individuals and crowds. Despite this, however, other risk categories will still exist. The new strategies are also demonstrated by this discussion overall,

Table 1. Selected sports events staged between January–March 2021.

Sports Event or Competition	Date(s)	Place	Sport(s)	Attendance
English Premier League 2020/21	12 September 2020–23 May 2021	UK	Football	Closed doors, and periods with 2000–4000 spectators.
2021 World Men’s Handball Championship	13–31 January 2021	Egypt	Handball	Closed doors
2020 FIFA Club World Cup	4–11 February 2021	Qatar	Football	30 percent of the stadium capacities
Super Bowl LV	7 February 2021	USA	American Football	25,000 (in a 65,000 stadium)
Australian Open	8–21 February 2021	Australia	Tennis	Originally 25,000 per day. However, reduced throughout the tournament
Nordic World Ski Championships 2021	24 February–7 March 2021	Germany	Nordic skiing	Closed doors

as it is observable how a range of new practices, strategies and issues emerge in the response to COVID-19. Importantly, some of these strategies are likely to be adapted or appear in some form in the 2020 Olympics. However, it also remains crucial to highlight that the size and scale of the Olympics naturally complicate the prospects of “policy-transfer” (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000) of existing knowledge-based templates or policies that commonly inform or assist the Olympic planning and delivery (Coaffee, 2013).

The International Judo Federation (IJF), initially suspended The World Judo Tour in March 2020 and did not return until August 2020. Yet, it had to call time on the tour season, where 400 competitors from 61 countries convened on Hungary, less than a month after it returned. IJF President Marius Vizer said it was a “hard decision to take” but stressed the safety of athletes was the top priority as the world continues to grapple with the coronavirus pandemic (Berkeley, 2020, p. 1). Ultimately, the Olympics represent a multi-sports events which is staged across various venues, stadiums and sport centres. The nature of the deployed arenas also differs between being outdoors (i.e. golf, sailing) and indoors (i.e. basketball, handball). It also involves both individual and team sports, and draws its thousands of competing athletes, staff and stakeholders from a global pool: potentially, 206 nations will gather for the 2020 Olympics (Parnell et al., 2020). As Ranney (2021) writes, from a public health perspective, the Olympics represent “a perfect storm for infections like SARS-CoV-2 to spread, due to the density of people attending, the close quarters of athletes and the fact that people are coming from all corners of the globe”. The complications, related to finding or applying “one-size-fits-all” solutions, are also impacted by the national transmission rates, guidelines and travelling restrictions which call for time relevant and country- and event-specific approaches to sporting event risk management and organization.

The Playbook and Olympic test events

The Playbooks are part of a series, which aim to provide a framework of basic principles that each key stakeholder group will follow before they travel to Japan, when entering Japan, during their time at the Games and when leaving the Games (IOC, 2020). The first of the series was aimed at International Federations and Technical Officials who must prepare for in the region of 11,000 athletes. This was followed by Playbooks for athletes, media and broadcasters. The Playbooks provide direction and set parameters that will enable stakeholders to plan their operations and they will be continually updated.

Sport governing bodies will typically release policy documents and official communiqués through their official channels to articulate their requirements for host countries and provide the public with updates. Previously, Manuel Castells’ “relational power”, has been used as to analyse the shift in responsibility between key actors involved in the World Cup 2022. In this article, Millward (2017) illustrates how those involved in allowing migrant construction workers’ death, injury and illness frame the situation as both “regrettable” but also beyond its responsibility. For Leopkey and Parent (2009b), the re-allocation strategy involves the transfer of risk or the responsibility of risk to somebody else. This raises questions regarding what a “safe and successful” delivery looks like and for whom. In this respect, the transfer of responsibility to stakeholders away from the IOC appears to be the strategy (ibid.).

Moreover, as Brynildsen and Parent (2021) write, test events have – despite being subject to limited research – traditionally held important roles in the pre-planning of events, as risk management tools. Indeed, the IOC introduced requirements related to test events in 1982 (ibid.). According to Tokyo 2020 (n.d.), the test events are designated rehearsals that can “confirm and improve the competition and Games operation capabilities in order to ensure

their successful operation during the Olympic and Paralympic Games". As according to the test event calendar, the first test events of the 2020 Olympics began already in September 2018.

Notwithstanding, it is currently clear that the impacts of COVID-19 have significantly impacted the test events' meanings and objectives. As recently found, test events' objectives regularly relate to showing readiness and the testing of operationalization and the workforce (Brynildsen & Parent, 2021). From February to May 2021, ahead of the 2020 Olympics, a number of test events were therefore scheduled for 18 athletic disciplines in different venues including the Ariake Gymnastics Centre and Tokyo Stadium (Tokyo, 2020). As IOC (2020) stated following the announcement of a revised test event calendar in November 2020: "In response to the COVID-19 situation, Tokyo 2020 will implement infection control measures and plan to conduct comprehensive tests of various aspects of venue management, including taking care of spectators at selected test events". Thus, whereas test events, in themselves, are not new-found strategies adopted by organizing committees and/or event organizers, the pandemic has clearly generated a novel context for test events to be useful and telling risk management tools within, and for the testing of COVID-19 related countermeasures.

Furthermore, in reference to the discussed risk management strategies (see Leopkey & Parent, 2009b), this paper has tentatively identified strategies related to reduction (e.g. reduced crowds, test events, "bubbles", testing, face masks), re-allocation (Playbooks, "game plans") and relationships (collaboration, expert feedback, information-sharing) from the emerging practice. To be sure, we acknowledge that future empirical work should build upon this and extend this further to encompass the diverse risk management strategies, and also reflect the wider literature on crisis and sports management. Yet, in a way, this shows the relevance and applicability of the framework to the new and unique context.

Concluding comments and considerations for future research

It is expected that 23 July 2021 will mark the opening of the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. However, with less than three months to go, uncertainties perpetuate regarding a potential cancellation or another postponement. For example, the mentioned suspension of overseas fans was, throughout April 2021, followed by announced plans to test athletes on a daily basis, a new state of emergency in Tokyo (until 11 May 2021), and reports of the organizers preparing for an event without spectators (Sky Sports, 2021c). Meanwhile, "Cancelling Olympics" has been trending on Twitter (Zirin & Boykoff, 2021).

Notwithstanding, the Olympics are merely one of several major sporting events that have been rescheduled for the summer of 2021. To conclude this article, we argue that this Olympic version – similar to sporting events more broadly – raises several critical questions. As exemplified here by the 2020 Olympics, rescheduled sporting events have undergone significant organizational, social and spatial redesign processes in the face of the pandemic. This redesign is, in part, encapsulated by the published Playbooks as well as the new risk management strategies and models that event organizers have had to consider, devise and implement. As the discussed sports events staged throughout mid- and late 2020 and in early 2021 reveal; risk, safety and health concerns are likely to loom large at future sport mega-events. However, as IOC (2021a, p. 10) also acknowledge: "despite all care taken, risks and impacts may not be fully eliminated, and therefore you agree to attend the Olympic and Paralympic Games at your own risk". In this sense, it should be reiterated that safety related questions persist, and as Shimizu et al. (2021, p. 1) call for, "[p]lans to hold the Olympic and Paralympic games this summer must be reconsidered as a matter of urgency" and adhere to principles of public health.

Recent sports competition and events have demonstrated a need for new risk management strategies to ensure social distancing and testing to control transmission; flexible and reactive approaches to emerging scenarios; and the fostering of new relationships. Moreover, strategies such as the Olympic Playbooks and test events are two specific pre-event risk management strategies. With our discussion of recent sporting events, linked with a conceptual discussion of risk management, this paper contributes towards an understanding of the emerging strategies and tools utilized by sporting event organizers and stakeholder groups in the mitigation of COVID-19 risks. Yet, it remains clear that despite the new health, safety and sanitation measures, widespread compliance and phased reintroductions of spectators, *completely* “covid-secure” sporting events cannot be guaranteed until this is achieved in the wider society. As such, it may be prudent to consider whether it is rightful to speak of “covid-mitigated” rather than “covid-safe” (see Urch & George, 2020) sporting events.

Finally, whereas researchers have started to examine the diverse impacts of COVID-19 on sports (see, for example, Constandt & Willem, 2021; Hindman et al., 2021; Parnell et al., 2020; Perić et al., 2021), the medium and long-term impacts will now start to take effect. Therefore, we suggest that the operational advantages of test events warrant further research as a sporting event risk management tool (Brynildsen & Parent, 2021). Researchers could therefore investigate the formal and informal modes (i.e. conventions, workshops, policy documents) through which experiences generated from test events – before rescheduled sports events – were shared and disseminated through networks of expertise and consultation. We also encourage researchers to explore how “game plans” (i.e. the Playbooks) provided to athletes, staff, media and other stakeholders are continually revised, as new and updated versions become available in line with rapid developments that

have characterized 2020 and 2021. We also believe there is an opportunity for future research that involves the investigation of stakeholders’ perspectives of risks related to some of the mentioned, or other forthcoming sporting events. Stakeholders, then, could include organizing committees, sports federations, the media, sponsors and fan networks. Importantly, such perspectives can add to the existing knowledge (see Hanstad, 2012; Leopkey & Parent, 2009a, 2009b).

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