‘What is to be done?’: Critical reflections on global sport governance in a post-coronavirus world.

Abstract

The title of this paper is inspired by the rhetorical question posed by Vladimir Illich Lenin (1902). In a pamphlet with the same title, he anticipated the 1917 Russian revolution and gave critical consideration to rebuilding a more democratic and just society from the detritus remaining after centuries of corrupt and tyrannical Tsarist rule. Lenin viewed this as a considerable challenge and opportunity for root and branch reformation of key social institutions that had held sway hitherto. Echoing this call to arms for a radical and critically reflective reformative action plan. People will soon be considering and demanding to know, from society’s ruling elites, what lessons have been learned across the commanding heights of the institutional infrastructure as we have known it. In this short paper based on life-long experience of participation in, and critical commentary on, sport using both evidence-based argument and some ‘blue sky’ thinking. We shine our spotlight on sport, one of the social institutions that have featured most prominently during the coronavirus hiatus. We consider the role of community or grass-roots sport and the significant gap sport has left in our locked-down lives. We then scrutinise top-level national and international sport and finally make important recommendations for the future organisation and governance of sport in a post-coronavirus world.

Keywords: global sport, governance, corruption, coronavirus

1. Introduction

Whether it be taking a run around the block or in a local park during the time permitted for outdoor exercise during the coronavirus lock-down, or our bewilderment triggered by the decimation of national and international sport and accompanying analysis. We have been reminded by its absence how important sport is to the fabric of our everyday lives, whether it be for supporting our physical and mental health, or simply giving us something to identify with and linking us to a wider community or commonwealth; either face-to-face interaction or in on-line abstraction. Except for the weather, when we encounter friends, neighbours or even strangers sport can often be the common denominator for starting a conversation between and among us. As such sport provides much of the cement that binds us, together. Reminding us, to borrow the title of one of a former colleague's book, that 'sport matters' (Dunning,1999).

The remainder of this paper is subdivided into three sections: firstly we consider the role of community or grass-roots sport; secondly, we scrutinise top-level national and international sport; Finally, in the conclusion, we draw our arguments together to make important recommendations for the future organisation and governance of sport in a post-coronavirus world.

2. Community sociability and sport

Twenty years ago, Putnam (2000) wrote 'bowling alone' exposing the decline in community sporting practice in North America, whilst highlighting the role of sport in building social capital between and among individuals and groups. Since then there has been much research highlighting sports unique efficacy in bringing families, friends, communities, strangers and even enemies together (see Groeneveld & Houlihan, 2010). Sport is now operationalised as a cure for myriad social, physical and mental ailments afflicting individuals and communities the world over with much support of its effectiveness (Conrad & White, 2015). Yet the

coronavirus crisis, and various global lockdowns, has brought many things that we take for granted into sharp relief, sport being one of them. Now that the opportunities to train, play and compete in sport, with each other, has been stripped away from so many, we can re-examine its importance in our lives and communities from a unique position of enforced non-participation.

The past two decades have seen interest in and research into the field Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) continue to expand (Sugden and Tomlinson 2019), exploiting sports malleable nature to help address a diverse set of social development and conflict resolution goals the world over. For example, both authors stood on a football pitch in Jerusalem in 2010 and witnessed 120 Arab and Jewish children play together under a banner of peace and coexistence. In 2016 (Author) travelled to Fiji and learnt how rugby union training and matches had become intertwined with the story of the nation, a key cultural artefact and pivotal activity for community life consolidating and reinforcing local and national identity. This has long been the function of boxing clubs in back-street gyms in cities around the world such as Belfast and Havana (Sugden, 1996), a comparative dynamic can likewise be witnessed in other combat sport's venues.

In an urban Mixed Martial Arts gym in England's North West for example, (Author) has undergone 2.5 years of training, socialising, fighting and competing with and alongside other gym members. He found that, far from bowling alone, this diverse group of athletes were fighting together, form improved mental health and community wellbeing (Sugden forthcoming). Yet in the aftermath of the gym's closure due to COVID-19 the outpouring of grief communicated via social media and the gym WhatsApp group uses a veil of humour to obscure issues of deeper concern. This is a scenario that is doubtless repeated across the locked-down world. Many are now faced with the nigh-impossible task of replacing the

physical and mental goods reaped from regular sporting engagement, as a participant or fan, with isolated, socially distanced sport and/or physical activity.

Thankfully, across civic society, technology has come to the (partial) rescue. Through our ability to watch and perform through live internet streaming services, scheduled at-home workouts have become a vital hub of both digital and physical sociality across the globe. This trend has added structure to the increasingly blurred days in lockdown and is a vital source in drawing some of the physical and cognitive benefits associated with 'normal' sporting practice. However, given the choice between an at-home workout or an in-person class, most participants would likely choose the latter. And for participants normally engaged in more carnal and/or team-based sports their choices remain limited to doing what they can, where they can, as limited public sporting space becomes reduced and 'live' becomes 'replay'.

In our (pre-coronavirus) everyday lives sport often exists in the space between work and home life. Aside from participation, engagement with sports media and fandom can be an important oasis. It's not just the event that we covet, sport also contributes to our identity, sense of belonging, pride and, ultimately, hope (Malik 2020). This is, in part, why fans across the globe continue to pay exorbitant fees to access live sport, through the prism of commercial media or in person. A ransom paid willingly to largely unaccountable (inter)national sporting oligarchs (Millward 2011). Yet as global, national and community sport has, largely, ground to a halt and a significant gap revealed, it is worth scrutinising sports place in the popular imagination. Along with the role and effectiveness of those that control our access to and engagement with sport.

On a governmental level, in the UK over a decade of socio-economic austerity policies have revealed that community sport facilities and provision is often the first on the chopping block (Widdop et al., 2019). While in North America budding participants are hit twice by the spiralling cost of community sport endeavours and the lack of accessible

facilities in key areas of deprivation (Gould 2019). During the coronavirus crisis, limited sporting spaces have become even more so, with deprived communities disproportionally affected by less optionality if choosing to socially distance outside (Duncan, McIntyre and Cutler 2020). There are similar scenarios worldwide, not least in locales unlucky enough to have hosted the various sport mega-events when, at the bequest of unbridled international governing bodies, national legislatures readily divert public funds towards single-use facilities and infrastructure to host the elite(s) events (see Gaffney 2010).

At this point, it is worth reflecting on the significance of sport in our everyday lives and how this is un-matched by effective governance and decision making. Beyond the sphere of national governance, globalisation and the advancements in travel and broadcast technology have meant that national and global sport authorities have seen their power and influence grow in parallel with their bank accounts. With such power comes great responsibility yet, as we will argue, not accountability.

3. The end of the oligarchs

When it comes to top-level national and international sport, even before the coronavirus reached its peak, among the sports' cognoscenti there seemed to be an emerging consensus that the existing model for sport governance, and management and was no longer fit for purpose if it ever had been? Rather than pick apart every segment and strata of world sports' industrial complex it is our intention here, painting with a broad brush, to concentrate on the big picture. Focusing instead on the global institutions that are supposed to lead world sport and through a trickle-down system of delegation regulate the national sporting organisations and leagues that fall within their respective authority spheres. In other words sports' global governing bodies such as the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and ancillary sport-related organisations, like the Wold Anti Doping Authority (WADA) and the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS).

However it would be remiss of us not to start by taking a look at one of the most extreme examples of sporting inequality and injustice that has been highly profiled and exposed during the coronavirus hiatus: that is, the funding and ownership template that has been in place in association football for the English Premier League (EPL). During the past decade or more, a relatively small number of elite football clubs are gorged with cash while most clubs below them in the English football pyramid totter on the brink of ruin and bankruptcy. To cut a very long story short; two main drivers come together to ensure that the EPL elite reside and remain in a financial Olympus that is beyond the reach of more commonplace and community-orientated clubs.

The first driver is the torrential revenue streams derived from television and other media-related contracts. The second source of the EFL's unbalanced income distribution is derived from the Leagues' top clubs being bought as vanity projects by a selection of individual offshore billionaires or cartels thereof. Football's European governing body UEFA has sought to eliminate this model of subsidized ownership by introducing financial fair play (FFP) legislation whereby clubs' accounts must demonstrate that they are living within their means. That is, they are not spending more on player transfers, salaries and the like than they are earning through income from gate receipts, television monies and legitimate sponsorship deals such as shirt branding, stadium naming and the like. Unfortunately across Europe a string of clubs have looked for and found loop-holes in FFP enabling mega-rich owners to continue to bank-roll selected clubs and, by so doing, violate the competitive integrity of their respective leagues and competitions keeping the oligarchs in command (see Sass 2016). Without listing the chief culprits, it is fair to say that the main source of the wealth which they choose to spend on football comes from revenue generated by the petrolium-chemical/gas industries. Thus, we see Gulf -state Arab sheiks and princes vying with Russian Oligarchs and consortia of American multi-billionaires to possess the biggest clubs on the

planet. They can then, with noses well and truly thumbed towards UEFA and it's FFP rules, field the world's most expensive and best players.

4. Global sport governance?

Which brings us back to the vexed question of governance. Who is to set and enforce these rules? It is difficult for UEFA to question clubs within its confederation on matters related to tyranny and corruption when UEFA itself has been shown to be both corrupt and prone to ethically questionable leadership (Forster, 2016). Such characteristics are sadly shared with its parent ruling body FIFA (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2018). Unfortunately, Association football is not alone when it comes to being plagued by autocracy and corruption in sports governance. Some have argued that when it comes to dictatorship and corruption in sport the IOC could teach FIFA a thing or two (Boykoff, 2013).

Like many other sports governing bodies, FIFA and the IOC have two key commonalities which will need to be eliminated before an alternative and more just and equitable system for international sports governance can be put in place. Firstly the nepotistic and parasitical system through which organizations' leaders and senior officials are elected and re-elected to office by existing organization members and officeholders will need to be reformed in favour of one that is not based on such cronyism and corruptible systems of favouritism, reciprocity and other forms of nepotistic patronage. Secondly, any reformed system for the selection/election of governing body leadership will have to be externally endorsed and validated. This body would need to be extra-organisationally rooted, democratically independent with accountable institutional arrangements including process-transparency and role accountability. Finally, sport governing bodies must be made to prioritise and reinvigorate their germinal purposes for existence: that is to organize and stage sporting competitions. If by so doing they can generate income, that may be a beneficial outcome for reinvestment, but this is not the main *raison d'etre* for their existence.

For reasons that have been well explored elsewhere. For too long FIFA has prioritised the commercial opportunities that can be leveraged out of having the stewardship of international football competitions. Unfortunately, as has been shown, the more money that flows in through FIFA's entrepreneurial activities the more opportunities for corruption multiply (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2018). In a similar vein, as Boykoff (2013) has charted, over the past few decades the hosting of The Olympic Games, whether they be in summer or winter, have been harnessed to a neo-liberal global money-spinning project. Boykoff refers to this as 'celebration capitalism' whereby Olympic sporting mega-events are used as platforms for fulfilling the business-oriented goals of the international corporate sector. Regardless of the impact of this on the health and sustainability of these multi-event sporting competitions themselves.

This brings us to our final question. What arrangements can be put in place to ensure that the international sport governance is reset in a way that the impediments outlined herein are eradicated once and for all and replaced by a system that functions efficiently and is universally respected?

Conclusion: What needs to be done?

So what arrangements can be put in place to ensure that the governance of international sport is reset in a way that the impediments outlined herein are eradicated once and for all and replaced by a system that functions efficiently and is universally respected? While acknowledging that there is no 'telos' or touchstone for universally agreed moral truths. The closest approximation can perhaps be found in the articles of The United Nations (UN) charter agreed in San Francisco in 1945. The UN was established in the deep shadow of World War II unsurprisingly, therefore, its founding principles are heavily influenced by the need to establish and maintain peaceful relations among nations of the international community. This imperative was underpinned by proclamations concerning democracy,

human rights, equality and social justice. Operating under the UN's umbrella and adhering to its key principles are several sub-departments including the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). An overarching objective of UNESCO is to address 'emerging social and ethical challenges' (UNESCO, 2020). It is, therefore, well within the parameters of this organisation that we are suggesting that a new body, 'The United Nations Council for Sports Governance' (UNCSG) be formed.

The international sport system is an anarchic society where capital is king. Political theorist Francis Fukuyama (2016) argues that the effectiveness and order of a society can be tested against the strengths of state, the rule of law and its democratic accountability. Global sport fails on all three elements. However, fully formed, the UNCSG could super-ordinately coordinate and oversee the governance and regulation of international sport as it continues to be articulated through the organs of existing sport governing bodies and their sub-divisions. But now under the watchful eyes of a democratically accountable U.N. personnel. More thought, analysis and debate are needed, urgently, as we seek to build equitable and transparent global sport governance under the watchful eye of the UNSCG. This is what needs to be done!

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