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Conceptualising the notion of the 'sport worker' and 'sport/s work': a commentary

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ABSTRACT

Sport research has interrogated ways diverse employment landscapes, distinct working conditions, state and organisational recognition of labour and work, contour working lives and workspaces. These explorations notwithstanding, contestation and ambiguities exist over how sport-related labour is termed and framed, and the consequences that follow for sector constituents. These debates form the catalyst for this position paper on the conceptualisation of 'sport/s work' to articulate intersections of sport, law and employment. In aid of understanding contemporary uses of the terms, we recourse to illustrating historical, cultural, and linguistic origins and appropriations, and recent reignition within sport research. From this foundation, and offering a definition, we posit possibilities for debate - that might provide more nuanced and robust conceptualisations of the 'sport', 'work', 'sport/s work' trinity. In so doing we underscore the ontological significance of critical engagement with language and concepts, more generally, in pursuit of more critical sport dialogue.

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Introduction

For the last decade or so, our research on professional sport in Europe has focused on issues related to labour, employment, and organisations' relationships with a range of individuals and stakeholders (e.g. coach, athlete, administrator, manager, performance director) (Kohe and Purdy 2016, 2018; Purdy, Kohe, and Paulauskas 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021; Purdy & Kohe, in review; Kohe, Purdy, and Litou 2022). In this undertaking we have frequently been drawn to closer consideration of the language, terms, phrasing, and ideas we employ to appropriately describe the various phenomena we are trying to articulate. Our frustrations have led us to other scholars (e.g. Carter 2006; McDowell 2022; Vamplew 1988) who have underscored the issue of conceptual clarity of and in sport, and in relation to work and labour. Their respective work identifies that language issues not only have semantic and analytical consequences for research, but stem from ontological, epistemic, and historically informed understandings that shape the work we do, and how it might be interpreted. Scholarship

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has emphasised that within the evolution of sport, practical and conceptual connections between sport, work, labour, and corollary terms such as employment and professionalisation, form part of an accepted language for how we understand, analyse, interpret, and write about sport and its consequences (Hill 2002, 2012; Holt 1990; Jones 1992). Moreover, these works have been foundational in identifying the transition of sport, through modernisation, and from amateurism to professionalisation, which has entailed various forms of codification, rationalisation, bureaucratisation, formalisation, and organisation. These procedures have, invariably, given rise to contemporary structures and processes, rules and regulations, and clearer role definitions and descriptions within the sector (e.g. coach, trainer, manager, chairperson, athlete, player, sport analyst).

Further historical, sociological and anthropological contributions have consolidated that sport *is* labour, that *bodies* labour, and that labour has consequences for the maintenance, sustainability and ‘success’ of sport systems (capitalist or otherwise) and the identities and experiences of individuals therein (Hargreaves 1985; McDonald and Rodriguez 2014; Skoog 2021; Vertinsky and Hargreaves 2006; Waquant 2004; Woodward 2009). A noted thread of this of continued critique has been recognition across the sector that there are entrenched power imbalances and body politics at play in these processes that sustain equities and normalise organisational practice, and in this case, organisation-athlete relationships and axioms (e.g. that the athlete is a component within a system, and at the professional level provides ‘performance’ that serves ‘benefits’ to the organisation). Moreover, where in some cases such contribution is/can be monetised, this has not translated into a wider acceptance that sport professionalism is, necessarily (and legally), equivalent to professional work (Avner, Hall, and Potrac 2023; Coupland 2015; Roderick, Smith, and Potrac 2017; Roderick 2006a, 2006b, 2012; Roderick, Waddington, and Parker 2000). This tension, as explored in this piece, is at the heart of current sector debate.

Absence of a consensus and/or consistency in the language has also been evident in peer-reviews of our work where clarification has been sought with regards to our (currently) preferred use of the term ‘sport worker’. Reviewers have understood how the issues and context relate to the word and its use, yet there is apparent discomfort with the unfamiliar nature of the term. Some reviews have been more vociferous in suggesting we drop the term in favour of hyper-specific role descriptors, for example, ‘professional athlete’, ‘coach’, ‘general manager’, and ‘administrator’. While alternatives are often offered, we feel these do not adequately encapsulate the concept; which we feel comprise generalisms shared with other sectors (e.g. particular organisational structures and hierarchies, role specifications, legal parameters), and specificities that have borne out of sport’s evolution and contextual settings (e.g. amateur and professional histories and ethos, priori ethics, nationally/regionally specific applications as to what counts/does not count as ‘work’). These suggestions have encouraged us to consider parallels to other acceptable general terms to describe employees in other sectors (e.g. health workers, education workers, key workers, civil servants). In adopting our approach, we are informed by, and build upon, historical and contemporary ‘sport/s work’ to explore what a sport space may ‘be’ as a domain of labour, and whether the term encapsulates nuances of labour and employment contexts. This paper is not, however, an historical examination of sports work, which, given conceptual ambiguities, tensions, varied uses, and contextual differences we see as a futile exercise. Rather, we commence from a point that there has been a noted emphasis on ‘work’ in sport scholarship. Yet, there

is a need to evolve the concept(s) further and better consider their inter-relationship and dependency within the context of sport.

In this undertaking, we have been guided by literature in management, organisational sociology, and employment relations, to understand and conceptualise the nature of work, employment and career trajectories (as ideas and processes) (Barry, Skinner, and Engelberg 2016; Eteläpelto et al. 2013; Faulconbridge and Muzio 2012; Guo, Giulianotti, and Tak 2023; Holton, Barry, and Chaney 2016; Morgan and Pulignano 2020; Richardson and McKenna 2020). In parallel, sport scholars (particularly in sociology and management) have similarly sought to articulate and/or substantiate these ideas and have resurrected the term *sport/s work/ers* to identify varying roles, characteristics, and experiences within the sport industry (Platts and Smith 2018; Roderick and Gibbons 2015). However, 'sport/s work' has been used *ad hoc* in a variety of contexts over time (including both as noun and adjective, and in sport specific and wider settings). Where it is present in sport research, it is frequently used with limited definition, and without theoretical rationalisation and development beyond specific roles. Consequently, there is room for further theoretical development given the diverse and complex nature of the contemporary sport industry. We believe, the notion has relevance given prevailing debates over the limited social, legal and political recognition workers in the sector (in particular, but not exclusively, professional athletes) get in performing labour for sport organisations (Connor 2009; Huml, Taylor, and Dixon 2021; Weight et al. 2021). Yet, whether athletes may yet be considered formally as employees remains under debate within the sector (EU Athletes 2023; Johannsen 2022, 2023; Lloyd 2023). However, relatedly, and to draw attention to how contemporary labour in the sport sector might be framed, in the quest for clearer academic foundations, interconnected philosophical, semantic and practical discussion of 'sport/s work' is warranted.

Subsequently, we acknowledge ways labour undertaken within the sport sector has been historically conceptualised in relation to specific roles (e.g. athlete, coach, etc.). These framings have recognised distinctions and ambiguities between the amateur and professional ethos, organisational structures, and processes (e.g. contracts, legal resources, and organisational control), and individuals' agency therein. In tandem, scholarship has also noted how such labour is a feature of, and conditioned by, complex contextual forces that have created an insatiable capitalist sport system that seeks to maximise and extract labour from its constituents (Andrews and Silk 2018; Cervin and Nicolas 2019; Lee 2010). Despite considerable focus on work, labour, and sporting bodies (and bodies in sport), the language around, and scholarly uses of, the concept remains vague, inconsistent, and often obscure. Subsequently, this paper argues for a more considered use of the term and puts forth that the term 'sport/s work' should be afforded greater acknowledgement that may make scholars more comfortable and critical in/of its use. We begin by situating 'sport/s work' discourse within the sport employment landscape.

The landscape of 'sport/s work'

The contemporary sport sector is contoured by an array of interrelated and complex issues that are challenging the structures, conditions, processes, and interpretations of employment. The concerns here are diverse and differ across international and organisation landscapes. In North America, for example, discord has been registered with regards to the exploitation of collegiate athletes' labour (Tatos and Singer 2022; Stocz et al. 2019). Across Europe, and in countries such

as New Zealand and Australia, there is ongoing discontent with current international federation and national governing body practices that have precipitated and exacerbated developments of collective athlete action, advocacy, and unionisation (EU Athletes 2023; Johannsen 2022, 2023; Lloyd 2023). In Eastern Europe and some nations in the Global South, there have been similar concerns related to infrastructure, policy, resourcing, and sustainability of professional sport employment (Purdy, Kohe, and Paulauskas 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021; Lakisa, Sugden, and McDonald 2021; Marques and Júnior 2021). Whereas local and national responses have differed, the forces have generated tensions between what constitutes work in the sector, what roles are recognised, and how and what organisations provide for ‘workers’. In some regions, these issues have culminated in various forms of collective action across the sector with specific groups seeking better mechanisms of representation within the organisations (e.g. IOC Athletes Commission, NGB Athletes commissions) and/or develop advocacy through independent/external entities (e.g. FIFPRO, EU Athletes, and the New Zealand-based Athletes’ Cooperative).

Notwithstanding foci and aims of these groups, their existence is anchored to shared concerns vis-a-vis representation and participation of all members within organisational governance and decision-making; clarifying and seeking assurances regarding legal rights, responsibilities, and protections; and improving, moral and ethical duties of care, welfare, and wellbeing. Actions have included the pursuit of more equitable practices across sports, countries, or organisations (e.g. pertaining to pay and benefits, tournament training, access to facilities, equipment and clothing, maternity/paternity rights). In addition, athletes and other members of organisations have taken legal recourse individually or *via* class action to improve organisational change and accountability (Evans, 2021; McLaughlin, 2020). Further effort has been directed to establishing some sector roles (e.g. ‘the coach’) as a professional that has greater recognition within the fulfilment of State policy agendas (particularly those related to sport sector development, health and wellbeing) (Ives et al. 2021), and developing universal professional standards, qualifications, job descriptions and criteria across the sector (for example, the work of European Observatoire of Sport and Employment (EOSE)) to improve labour conditions, career development and worker’s wellbeing (European Observatoire of Sport and Employment 2023; Lyon 2004).

The plight towards political and organisation recognition, and improved ‘employee’ rights, has been compounded further by wide-ranging demands for state-led and independent reviews of global and national sport organisations to improve governance, integrity, transparency and accountability, and ethics (Grey-Thompson 2017; Sport NZ 2021). Whereas outcomes and consequences of such reviews remain debated (Dawbin, Sam, and Stenling 2021; García 2006), there is momentum within the reviews, and investigations continue to provide actionable insights, for urgent, systemic, and wholesale changes to the sector at large to ensure safe, secure, space in which all individual’s rights, protections and livelihoods are prioritised. Given the significance of these debates to individual’s lives and livelihoods it is of value to recourse to interrogate the origins of sport as ‘work’, and ‘sport/s work’ as labour, and the associated ideas, practices and assumptions that have evolved and become entrenched in sport, culture, and employment logics over time.

‘Sport’, law, and ‘employment’

Legal aspects of labour, employment, and industrial relations within, and beyond Europe, have continued to interrogate what work constitutes within particular contexts, and the

effects that tensions have on organisation-collective/individual employee relations (Henry 2016). Discussions have extended to labour practices and employment within the sport industry (Cattaneo and Parrish 2020; O'Leary 2017). While emphasis has varied, pertinent sport work considerations has been the attention afforded to issues of definitions of 'employment' and 'employee', associated rights and protections, contracts and clauses, exploitation and maltreatment, unionisation and collective bargaining, parties' moral obligations and ethical duties of care. In relation to the sport industry, legal critiques have identified a plethora of concerns that include: organisational recognition of athletes' legal status; migration/mobility/'free'-movement of persons; commercial and organisational controls over employees; career protection and organisational duties of care, and, legal action vis-a-vis dispute resolution (Anderson, Parrish, and Garcia 2020). Others, such as O'Leary (2017), have similarly noted the necessity of greater legal scrutiny of wage and salary conditions, nationality quotas and illegibility, and individual's intellectual property rights.

Whereas such work, and individual cases, have achieved some success in challenging the sport industry and aligning it with other forms of employment, there remain discrepancies at regional, state and organisation levels with respect to formalising sport labour as work and protecting those plying their trade within system (beyond administrators, coaches, and professional services staff). In the UK, for example, the context in which we work, national governing bodies of sport have jurisdiction to define the boundaries of those who 'work' within the organisation (e.g. athletes are not considered to be employees, however coaches are). In parallel, the UK government recognises the contribution of sport migration to the nation's work and labour by affording incoming athletes the category of 'international sportsperson visa' whilst others in the sector are recognised as 'skilled workers' (Gov.uk, 2023). Similarly, across Europe, Pijetlovic (2015) notes, 'labour law does not apply to athletes in the same way it applies to workers in other industries' (cited in Cattaneo and Parrish 2020, 26). Complications arise at the regional (in this case, European) level with regards to the lack of acceptable definitions of sport. And, moreover, developing conceptualisations of the sector that account for the interrelation between physical, cultural, economic, and organisational aspects. Here, while regional sport organisations and entities such as EOSE have undertaken efforts to consolidate some of the legal parameters and potential universality of sector wide definitions and job descriptions, currently there remains more that divides than unites, and there appears reluctance at national sport federation level to be too progressive with conceptual innovation, political stance or legal reform.

At present, the trajectory of modern sport development and the cumulative efforts of sport governing bodies have established a set of regulations, practices and principles (in essence, an autonomous legal order, *lex sportiva*) that dictate entrance and participation in the sector. *Lex sportiva* essentially constitutes a conceptual, legal, and regulatory space that demarcates the breadth and depth of jurisdiction sport organisations may have over those within the sector (Foster 2012; Foster et al. 2012; Duval 2013). Notwithstanding that criminal aspects remain the jurisdiction of domestic or international non-sport agencies, the existence of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) (the independent international agency responsible for mediating sport industry disputes) also further consolidates sports' distinct sector identity and the extents to which *lex sportiva* work/do not work in practice. Additionally, research continues to note there remain assumptions that sport has exceptional qualities such that it should be afforded a degree of exemption from ordinary law (Anderson, Parrish, and Garcia 2020; Cattaneo and Parrish 2020). Concerns here have debated the

extent to which sport labour can be positioned within work and employment regulations and governance. Nonetheless, this scholarship has also identified, yet unresolved, conceptual, and practical disjuncture in defining sport and work in ways that advance and extend protections for *all* those within its jurisdiction. To move understandings forward, there is value in considering historical uses and perspectives in other sporting domains.

Linguistic and semantic origins

Our process to understand the origins and use of the terms relied upon the following databases: SPORT Discus, Google Scholar, University Search Engines (employing technologies such as Unpaywall, CORE, EZProxy/Open Athens), specific academic sport journals, and the Oxford English Dictionary official search engine. The initial search terms were: (a) 'sports work' and b) 'sport work'. All documents were reviewed, including non-English language papers (with English abstracts) and material where the abstract indicated use of the phrases, but the remainder of the material was either not available in English, or inaccessible due to institutional permissions and website restriction. We acknowledge the inherent limitations of our search engine choices and strategies that have contributed to the research and accept that there may have been alternative search processes that could have been employed, and that further material may exist. Nonetheless, our approach has been of value in establishing an initial point of investigation in understanding the term and some of the issues that may derive from its deployment in organisation and academic contexts. Accordingly, we position this paper as a conceptual and pragmatic exploration using available source material to elicit a critical conversation about how sport/s work is understood.

Whereas the terms 'sport work', 'sports work', 'sports worker' have become used more frequently in recent decades, the uniting of the terms have much longer origins. Archival root-source analysis from the Oxford English Dictionary (which trawls an array of English-language records), and further searches of historical and scholarly databases (e.g. SPORT Discus, Google Scholar, Google Ngram Viewer, University Search Engines (employing technologies such as Unpaywall, CORE, EZProxy/Open Athens), and specific academic sport journals, reveal distinct, yet varied, coupling of the words (which we recognise do not accurately 'capture' the essence of the term we are investigating here) from the late 1800s and early 1900s. For example,

Athletic sports work under a great disadvantage,... (Terry 1895, 486).

...the two sports work as harmoniously (Carleton 1867, 85).

In certain cases sports work to the detriment of those who participate in them... (OEA 1896, 80).

A more specific coupling can be found in other archival sources. The term is used in US State documents during World War II that acknowledge gratitude for collaborative efforts among the country's service. For example, 'the Soil Conservation, National Park and Forest Services for their cooperation in the winter sports work' (SoC 1941, 148). And in the following:

As a title of annual honours within sport organisations, e.g. Recognition by the International Motor Yacht Union to some members for their substantive annual commitments to 'sport work' (e.g. IMYU 1931).

American Photographic Publishing Company (Fraprie 1933, 644) 'And if the camera is to be used in the ordinary way for sport work...'

Beyond the somewhat anodyne uses noted above, the term emerges in the US State intelligence and foreign affairs documents in the 1930s within the context of critical surveillance of socialist and communist ideologies of the Soviet Union and satellite organisations to explain organised state physical training and labour. Communications from the Youth Workers' Communist League (YWCL), for instance, championed the utility of sport as means of socially and politically organising members in harmony with the organisation's ideology. The documents were subsequently picked up by US Congress Special Committee hearings investigating the extent and proliferation of communist activities within the country (US Congress 1930a; US Congress 1930b). As the hearing document (i.e. US Congress 1930a) highlights from the YWCL communications:

In order to win the millions of young workers from the influence of the bourgeois sports organizations, we must radically turn the entire league membership to the importance of sports work, and the necessity of building up the Labour Sports Union as a mass working class sport organization. The general underestimation of sports work is part of the failure to understand the new course of the Young Communist International toward new methods of work. At least 10 per cent of the league membership, especially the young American proletarian members, must be actively engaged in sports work (p.821).

Immediate tasks of the league – (1) To educate the membership in an understanding of our line in sports work. The emphasis should be: sports work is real mass work for the league... (p.1153).

Such uses of the term are helpful in understanding the importance of physical culture as a means of particular ideological reinforcement and have remained a key part of historical analyses of communist sport across the twentieth century. While not conceptualised further in terms of employment and the sport profession, it sustains relevance of linking sport/physical training to the general notion of work/labour. While the term 'sports work' may have remained part of the present-day vernacular of former communist and socialist nations, English-language uses of the term fade from use. We see, nonetheless, a resurgence of the term in 2015 in academia among a select cohort of predominantly, Western scholars examining the sport industry, coaching, individuals' experience, and organisational relationships.

In academic scholarship, semantic investigations to trace historical uses and contemporary developments of the term, and related words, becomes a more complex and fraught task. A basic cursory search of keywords related to work and employment across 10 popular academic journals in the sociology, history, management, educational and coaching aspects of sport studies reveal an initial wealth of potential uses and inclusions as starting point (see Figure 1).

This exercise has illustrated the challenges of linguistic and conceptual critique. Foremost, that there is a breadth of scholarship across disparate fields where these terms are being used, but that this is a lengthy and complicated, and largely futile, undertaking if the outcome is to draw any sense of consensus, consistency and/or clearer understanding as to what does/does not constitute features of sports work. For example, the words 'work' and 'termination' were problematic search terms due to the broad search engine algorithms that include irrelevant inclusions, associations and uses. A more refined

	Sport in Society	Internatio nal Review for the Sociology of Sport	Sociology of Sport Journal	Sport Managemen t Journal	European Sport Managem ent Quarterly	Journal of Sport Managem ent	Internat ional Journal of the History of Sport	Sport in History	Sport, Education and Society	Sports Coaching Review
Careers	1997	1511	2346	210	588	2346	2766	754	1120	241
Labour	1007	818	166	135	266	166	1742	499	415	72
Employment	1412	1037	1121	174	596	1121	1665	435	789	173
Contracts	614	325	1008	167	246	1008	684	189	162	42
Sacking	545	284	83	13	81	83	840	223	214	53
Termination	176	115	309	23	71	309	265	43	34	17
Work	2199	1838	8375	618	727	8375	3073	927	1302	265

Figure 1. Number of raw/unfiltered hits within a selection of relevant sport journals.

approach would tackle issues with regards to term specificity, uses and contextualisation. While this would be a starting point for peers to undertake a subsequent meta-analysis or systematic review, as outlined earlier our intentions here differ. Nonetheless, from the historical investigations and the semantic explorations patterns and aspects to work in sport settings that create a trajectory toward a definition. For instance, there exist distinctions between terms specifically associated with formalised sector participation (e.g. paid and contracted employment/labour/work) and informal, holistic and/or ambiguous aspects (e.g. emotional labour, identity/gender work, working ‘in sport’). Further, while primarily discussions focus on the most visible aspects of sector performance (e.g. athlete, coach, manager, organisation), there are peripheral and/or additional roles that comprise work in this space (e.g. administration, media, human relations/personnel, marketing). Thus, there may be a need to consider distinctions between ‘pitch/pitch-side’ and ‘non-pitch side’ activities and roles. Additionally, there is cross-over in some areas of language, conceptualisation, and explanation of some terms (such fluidity and ambiguities in sport language have been recognised too in other research, see Hughes, Kohe, and Purdy 2019). For example, there exists varied uses of similar terms to describe phenomenon (e.g. voluntary/unpaid-work/work-in-kind, parental/caregiver work, or hiring/firing/sacking).

Helpful terminological advances have been provided by Roderick, Smith, and Potrac (2017 and Roderick, Smith, and Potrac 2017) in broadening the concept and definition; specifically, in affording it a broad, and relatively general, scope incorporating the whole sector and those working within it. As Roderick, Smith, and Potrac (2017, 100) notes: sports workers are ‘sport industry employees who are associated with the production of sport at all levels of performance’. We acknowledge here that, too, the notion of sport as ‘industry’ has been identified as similarly problematic (Gammelsæter 2021), and further compound ideas of sport as ‘work’, and sport being a unique employment space. This contention notwithstanding, adding to this, Roderick, Smith, and Potrac (2017, 99), have set forth that: sports workers include:

employees of the sports industry, and people for whom a key element of the job is the production, or support for the production, of 'sport' at all levels of performance. Sports workers may also be people who 'work' for sports organizations voluntarily and receive (however ill-defined) a psychic rather than economic remuneration.

This current definition is of value as starting point for both solidifying sport in its many forms and guises, as a distinct site of work and labour and employment as comprising recognisable tangible elements (e.g. roles, job specificities, managerial relations, and responsibilities) and intangible components. As Roderick, Smith, and Potrac (2017) contend, the term comprises meaningful psychological, socio-cultural, and ideological components that add nuance to formal roles, experiences, interaction, and organisational environments. Thus, Roderick, Smith, and Potrac (2017, 99) highlight:

As with all other forms of work, people employed in the sports industry work not only to make a living but also to acquire self-respect, to fulfil a desire, and achieve self-actualization.

Of note, and as wider research in sport has begun to explore (e.g. Purdy, Kohe, and Paulauskas 2021), their definition also acknowledges that the term may include varied positions and roles across different sector spaces (e.g. professional, higher education, volunteer, leisure, and hospitality).

As part of wider work to establish and extend the legitimacy of sport coaching and position it as an important domain in the sport sector, scholarly conversations have started focusing on the different aspects of sport-employment labour and highlighted how issues within coaching (e.g. emotional labour, ethics) share characteristics with work in other sectors (Gale et al. 2019; Ives et al. 2021). Formal sport roles are, for example, easy to understand, conceptualise, monetise, and monitor. Such arguments are helpful to a point, but have muddied the waters in expanding our understanding of the sector. If the mission here is to advance an agenda that improves the credibility and legitimacy of sport, sport employment, and professional roles therein, then the current semantic and conceptual usages of the term should be explicit and applied with more consideration. Critique is needed about the use of the term generically (e.g. to include emotional labour, mental health, personal development) and the specificity of the term (e.g. community sport/s worker, volunteer sport/s worker). Building on this, it is worth understanding what workers matter and which work matters?

We take the formal conditions, roles, and practices in and of the sport sector as a foundation for our definition of sports work that follows. To preface, and as illustrated in this paper, our thinking and phrasing are informed by several propositions and assumptions. First, that synergies between sport and work (as broadly conceptualised as *a/the* labouring body) have been historically entrenched by, and through, practices and assumptions of the modernisation of the sector and its constituents. Second, ideological constructs and debates over amateurism and professionalism have served to solidify tensions for how sport and sporting bodies are understood, defined, and controlled (e.g. by organisational processes and socio-cultural mores). As part of this, what counts/does not count as 'work'; a by-product of which is continued organisational/institutional discomfort in fully accepting the legal rights of performing bodies as working bodies. Third, akin to other areas of work, the sport sector comprises highly specialised roles, job descriptions, career pathways, contextual requirements and

contractual conditions that set it apart as a distinct employment space. Fourth, the conditions (including the temporal and spatial rhythms of competition/league/event cycles, funding and marketing forces, and ebb and flow of careers through the system) all give cause for serious recognition of sports work/sports worker as acceptable vernacular. As per the above, we propose the following definition.

Sports work: a definition

Noun

1. Comprises Institutionally-recognised formal activity that takes place within the sport, recreation and leisure sector and contributes to organised operations, systems, and processes essential to the temporo-spatial function of sport. *They enjoyed being sports workers for the municipal sports event authority*; *Sport workers protested against sportswashing in Saudi Arabia*.
2. Specific job descriptions, roles and tasks carried out in relation to pitch and pitch-adjacent contexts. *They were recruited for an unpaid sports work internship by the Local Organising Committee for the Olympic Games*.

Verb

1. To be engaged in Institutionally-recognised formal activity towards the temporo-spatial practices of the sport, recreation, and leisure sector; do sports work. *Unpaid sports working for the university took up the majority of their time as undergraduate students*; *Sports working outside of his contracted terms led to his instant dismissal from the national team*.

Beyond this definition, by extending the term beyond the purely physically performative pitch-side/pitch-adjacent roles (and encompassing the wider work occurring within the sector), the term offers a means to frame sector work that contributes to debate about what labour is and who matters within the space, and what the consequence of work (formally prescribed or otherwise are). Here, the intention is not to lessen the experiences of professional workers within the sector, or those engaging in sport in informal ways (e.g. additional to already recognised volunteer work, and into unrecognised volunteering and involvement of parents/caregivers) but acknowledge that work (and its affiliated terms/concepts) extends beyond. Further conceptual building might, we acknowledge, extend to consider the informal economies and labour that abound across the sport sector (Adams and Deane 2009; Aquino et al. 2022; Halldorsson, Thorlindsson, and Katovich 2014; Jeanes et al. 2019; Neal et al. 2023).

Conclusion

This brief consideration of ideas and terms above has been a useful heuristic practice for us to think more carefully about what constitutes sport, work, sport(s) work and affiliated concepts. We have also been prompted by reviewers' comments, such as the following:

One way of doing so is to better define a phrase in the manuscript: ‘sports work’. That isn’t a common phrase in English and thus has no meaning. What is sports work? Is that what professional athletes do? Is it what those who work in the sport industry do?

Such questions have not only encouraged us to be more considered in our treatment of the term in our work, but also to interrogate on broader theoretical and epistemological levels what ideals, practices and processes constitute sport and work. Subsequently, this has also contributed to our critique of the terms’ uses, the underlying assumptions that may lurk behind its deployment, and ways this may/may not contribute to rendering sport a distinct and/or unique workspace. We respect that there may be colleagues for whom sport/s work is an anathema or at odds with the ways in which they conceptualise sport and practices therein. However, as we have raised in previous work (Hughes, Kohe, and Purdy 2019), we are limited by the words and language we have, and there is a need to open a new vernacular. In this quest, peer reviewer comments have reminded us of the limits and futility of language in adequately and appropriately being able to capture the essence of our expression. Whereas the focus of this piece has been sport/s work, we see the issues of language and semantics extending to other concepts that we frequently draw upon as scholars (e.g. identity, emotion, injury, pain). All which are imbued with historical, political, socio-cultural, and philosophical weight. In essence, words matter, but mattering about words matters more! In the absence of an appropriately agreeable alternative (if such exists), we have confidence that the definition of sport/s work (as a general term for employment and labour within the sport sector) we propose is a meaningful foundation upon which to unpack the multifarious experiences that occur therein.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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