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Professional sports work in times of geopolitical crises: experiences in men's basketball in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Professional sport is distinct employment shaped by organisational and managerial relations, stakeholder involvements, performance imperatives, contextual forces and precarities. Such employment has raised questions regarding work, employment sustainability and careers. The purpose of this article was to examine experiences of sports workers in men's professional basketball during the geopolitical conflict in Ukraine and highlight ways working conditions are negotiated in adverse contexts.

Research methods: A case study approach that utilised semi-structured interviews was applied to enquire about the daily events, activities and related emotion as recalled by sports workers in men's professional basketball in Ukraine during the geopolitical conflict.

Findings: The examination reveals issues related to institutional/organisational, community and individual sustainability of the sport sector when faced with geopolitical crises. While turbulent events may unsettle sports workers, these sports workers demonstrated an ability to respond to the situation, mitigate adverse consequences, and sustain their careers.

Practical implications: This work is of value those in sport organisations seeking to understand employees' experiences and actions during periods of uncertainty, and how individual career continuity relates to organisational sustainability.

Implications: Our approach advances understandings about sustainable organisational support and resources, and contingency planning in relation to navigating unforeseen events that arise in sports workers' careers.

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Introduction

Examinations of the professional sport industry have highlighted concerns regarding the increased responsibility (i.e. "duties of care") organisations are expected to have toward sports workers (Grey-Thompson, 2017). Scholars have questioned the sustainability of the professional sport industry, a context in which issues of precarity, vulnerability, replaceability, exploitation and uncertainty are pronounced (Dimoula et al., 2013). While sustainability concerns are independently and collectively complex, a consistent theme of public and academic debate has been to consider ways that sport organisations might provide "good" working conditions and alleviate "poor" working practices (Grey-Thompson, 2017; Syndex, 2013). Most recently, the consequences of the Covid19

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pandemic have made issues of sustainability more obvious, and caused the global sport industry to reconsider its practices and futures (Lachance, 2020; Parnell et al., 2020). Part of this redevelopment has focused on the need for organisations to acknowledge duties of care and/or wider ethical responsibilities to their workforce (Kohe & Purdy, 2021; Barry et al., 2016).

In pursuit of better working conditions, discussions of care and organisational responsibility have largely focused on developing, measuring, monitoring and evaluating workers' welfare within the contexts of organisational culture (Barker-Ruchti, 2019; Lang, 2020). These discussions contribute to broader concerns regarding continuity and security of organisations' capacities and abilities to provide a standard of conditions for workers and precipitate the need to advance critique of sports work. One way of considering the potential influence of drastic contextual forces on sport organisations and their workers is to interrogate the implications of the business and employees' careers therein. While sustainability has been recognised as an important aspect of "good" business practice (Stoughton & Ludema, 2012), in the midst of economic, political and management paradigm shifts toward greater transparency, accountability, social and ethical responsibility (Auweele et al., 2015), organisations have demonstrated closer attention to sustainability as an organisational imperative (Stoughton & Ludema, 2012).

A consistent theme within the literature remains the configuration of organisational responsibility and the problematic nature of organisation-worker relations. Previous scholarship has examined aspects of the precarious and unsustainable nature of contemporary sports work (e.g. migration, injury, short-term contracts, career transitions, precarity and management turnover) (Agergaard & Ungruhe, 2016; Purdy et al., 2018; Richardson & McKenna, 2020; Roderick & Schumacker, 2017). This work has contributed to recognition of professional sport as a distinct employment sector and highlighted the complex issues and tensions that workers (predominantly athletes, and to a lesser extent, coaches) have in different roles and contexts as they navigate their careers. In regards to the effects of a fragile organisational systems, evident commonalities in Europe also exist with respect to maintaining careers, employment conditions, organisational treatment of workers, career development narratives, the perceived and actual limits of agency, and positioning of workers as vulnerable entities within a system. As well as illuminating a distinct group of workers' lives, this scholarship has also demonstrated recent structural efforts undertaken by the sport industry to ensure workers' longer-term employment security and connections between their career longevity and welfare. Organisations such as EU Athletes, Syndex, World Players Association, European Observatoire of Sport and Employment are echoing academic critique about the need for improved organisational accountability and transparency with regards to employment security, rights and worker welfare. These organisations have demonstrated there remain considerable inconsistencies, inequalities and differences with respect to the development, resourcing and support for improving workers' welfare across the European spectrum.

Notwithstanding geopolitical efforts and structures to forge greater regional unities (e.g. EU, Schengen zone, Euro currency, common markets, etc.), social, economic, cultural, political and ideological differences are ingrained and maintained. Such variances invariably influence employment standards, conditions and practices and individuals' working lives. Moreover, while there may be some unity and accord in employment and labour in the region (particularly within the EU collective), there are differences in interpretations and application of employment standards, monitoring and evaluation, and accountability. In addition, regional conditions remain dynamic and can be punctuated and perturbated by an array of forces. For

example, the financial crisis of the past decade (and its aftermath), and "fear" and uncertainties around Brexit, has had an impact upon organisations' abilities to sustain stable conditions for some workers in professional sports in various European contexts (Douglas, 2019; Perry & Steenson, 2019). In some cases, these forces may be borne out over long periods and/or have wide ranging e/affects across the region, others are more specific to particular countries or sub-regions that may be as significant, in the immediate and real sense, to workers (e.g. radical government shifts, political protests, drastic shifts in environmental conditions, infrastructure failings, and in the most extreme cases, war). Indeed, such contextual dynamics contour employment settings and workers' daily lives. Yet, in the European professional sport sector, the understanding we have of how particular sports workers respond and navigate geopolitical complexities warrants further explanation. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to examine experiences of some sports workers in men's professional basketball during the geopolitical conflict in Ukraine. In fulfilling this purpose, the article encourages greater rigor in the contextualisation of sport organisation analysis and furthering interrogation of employment relations therein. Such approaches, we contend, should begin by focusing on the organisational context and practices and how these working conditions are experienced. In this paper, our interest is on the 2013–2014 basketball season, during which time civil unrest in Ukraine arose over the government to halt the signing of the Association Agreement with European Union and the related acquiescence to Russian State pressure (Biersack & O'Leary, 2014). The events brought further international attention to Russia-Ukraine relations, and led to global diplomatic interest and surveillance. In addition, the conflict created and exacerbated regional uncertainties within and across countries in Eastern Europe, the displacement of people from affected communities, and the loss of thousands of lives (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019).

In addition to geopolitical conflict, the regional context has been of particular interest due to the transnational sport organisational arrangements, development and application of European Union laws and regulations, relative fluidities of some workers' mobility within, and economic inequalities experienced within and across nations (Douglas, 2019; Engh & Agergaard, 2015). For those wanting to work in these contexts, this article draws attention to the rhythms of working conditions within professional sports and negotiations to enable continuity in the face of adverse contexts and contingencies, e.g. conflict, economic crises. Whether sports workers can be prepared for this or taught how to manage it is yet unknown. There has, to note, been little recognition from sports organisations regarding the emotional cost of such work and the wider consequences on their "employees". As such, fresh lines of inquiry are needed that take academic articulations of sports work into new empirical terrain and challenge existing perceptions of professional sport, how it should be organised, and, fundamentally, what "good" working conditions are. We recognise that it is possible to conceptualise drastic shifts in geopolitical forces as crisis management. Work here has predominantly adopted a reactionary perspective, focusing on public relations, communication and organisational reputation (Brown-Devlin, 2018; DiSanza, Hartman, Legge, & Gershberg, 2018; Shipway, 2018; Shipway et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2010). There has also been recognition that notions of crisis are complex, intersectional, and overlap with other terms (e.g. sustainability, resilience, strategic planning). This article adopts a sustainability perspective as it examines structural and individual continuities and discontinuities. While sustainability theory has been used to look at issues in sport organisational and management continuities from grassroots to professional (Lindsey, 2008; Totora, 2017), it is relevant in making

sense of the complexities of sports work in and through times of conflict and organisational desires to preserve the status quo and competitive business advantages. With its emphasis on the effects of external forces, maintenance of structural conditions and individual choices, sustainability is a useful concept to work with in configuring how sport workers operate and persist in contexts of adversity.

Sustainability and sport: A literature overview

Among academics, the term sustainability has been defined in numerous ways. At its most broad, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) defines it as "development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (1987, p. 43). Other definitions provide more clarity with the understanding that sustainability is a condition or set of conditions whereby human and natural systems can continue indefinitely in a state of mutual wellbeing, health, security, and survival (Jones et al., 2010; McMichael et al., 2003). In organisations, sustainability has many guises and is translated in varied ways, for example, as environmental sensitivity, cultural transformation, effective resource management, financial/economic parsimony, and "future proofing" (Stoughton & Ludema, 2012). Principles of sustainability have focused on several characteristics. These include: (1) assessing organisational resources and capacities in the present and projecting organisation growth into the future; (2) meeting and embodying economic, environmental, social and governance in both theory and practice (Brown, 2005); (3) effective resource management that has the capacity to withstand turbulence and change; and, (4) carefully balancing current organisation requirements with generating a legacy effect to ensure future iterations of the organisation will continue to operate effectively (WCED, 1987). Amid the wide theoretical scope of sustainability discourse, work has emphasised the importance of radical practical and ideological culture and behavioural change that drastically shifts organisations from their current practices (e.g. Le Roux & Prestorius, 2016). In general, there is a need to consider the effects of complex contextual forces on business operations and organisational resources to ensure survivability.

One focus of sustainability scholarship has been to examine the ways in which the concept can be applied to institutional settings and operations. For example, how sustainability can/may be incorporated (or not) within the existing ethos and management of organisations, and utilised in day-to-day operations (Bosselmann, 2016; Choudhury, 2018). Notwithstanding difficulties defining sustainability, work has highlighted some ways sustainability can be applied within varied employment settings and operationalised at the institutional, organisational and community levels. In sport, scholars have shown interest in several sustainability foci, including environment and infrastructure, organisational management, long-term planning and future proofing (e.g. with respect to sport mega events (Loland, 2006)), and employment practices (e.g. HR processes, financial protection) (Taylor et al., 2015). Further work has examined sustainability within the context of sport development and sport-for-development (Lindsey, 2008).

Synthesising a cross-section of sustainability concepts from literature on health programmes, Iain Lindsey (2008) has offered a means of understanding the concept within sport. Focused on the sport-for-development sector, Lindsey's conceptualisations are useful in articulating the multi-dimensional nature of sustainability and the ways it may be manifest within and across the sport sector. Lindsey (2008), for example, goes beyond the traditional pillars of sustainability (e.g. environmental, financial and social) to four forms of sustainability that may be addressed by sports

development programmes: institutional, organisational, community and individual. Institutional sustainability comprises "longer-term changes in policy, practice, economic and environmental conditions in the wider context of the sports development programme" (Lindsey, 2008, p. 284). In professional basketball, for example, this may exhibit as redeveloped policies and strategies that ensure continuous access to a consistent pool of high calibre players. The extent of these developments and investments are contingent upon both the clubs' and the federation's financial resources, and the wider setting in which the sport is organised and managed. Organisational sustainability includes the scaling-up and maintenance of programmes by delivery bodies, and also considering capacities and viabilities for delivery (Lamberton, 2005; Swerissen & Crisp, 2004). In the context of this article, such sustainability may be seen in the roll-out of talent identification pathways and performance programmes across a national/regional network. Community sustainability, by contrast, and to draw similarly on the work of Shediac-Rizkallah and Bone (1998), may exist at the "local" level where there are efforts to sustain enduring relationships and practices among community members. For instance, specific professional basketball clubs paying attention to continued and consistent player welfare initiatives. Lastly, individual sustainability entails longer-term adaptations to personal behaviours, attitudes and actions via the interaction/relationships with the community, organisation and institution. For sports workers in professional basketball, such sustainability may be enacted through adjusting to contextual changes, scanning horizons for opportunities, procuring pathways for longer term transitions and work/lifestyle security (Barker-Ruchti, 2019). To note, these classifications are not fixed and there are overlaps in how sustainability may be demonstrated. Nonetheless, the framework offers ways to "work with" some of the characteristics of sustainability across macro to micro levels. In this article, for organisational purposes, they are presented as distinct yet interrelated concepts to interrogate both professional basketball systems and structures within Ukraine during the geopolitical turmoil, and some resultant consequences that occurred among sports workers as they navigated continuities in the sport.

Theoretically, this article emphasises the relationship between system maintenance and adaptation, developing resilience alongside futureproofing for eventualities, resourcefulness and resource awareness, and operational effectiveness (Bosselmann, 2016; Le Roux & Prestorius, 2016). These terms independently are as conceptually complex as sustainability and have their contestations and intellectual genealogy. Nonetheless, they are part of the lexicon and vernacular of sustainability debates. Accordingly, this theoretical framework of sustainability is relevant to interrogations of sport organisational change, environmental disruptions, and organisational and employee relations and experiences. These sustainability considerations frame this discussion of sport organisational approaches during contextual uncertainty.

An appreciation for sustainability is of value for understanding how sport organisations maintain financial sustainability in order to maintain participation and performativity (e.g. keep the organisation afloat, attempt to maintain a presence and reputation in the sport through competition, maintain sports workers' long-term careers/employment) (Skinner & Stewart, 2017). Such forces may lead sport organisations to maximise efficiency in order to meet these ends and also ensure that the legal compliance standards are effectively met. The better resourced, savvy and capable organisations may work on future proofing the business (e.g. ensuring sufficient financial reserves, robust sponsorship agreements) to enable survival and also mitigate potential effects of unforeseen circumstances and/or turbulent times. In the pursuit of these ends,

attention on other dimensions of sustainability (social and environmental) may not be prioritised in the same way. In addition, there is growing recognition that, however defined, applications of sustainability in sport have human costs and have impacts that may transcend individuals' work and organisational relations (Lindsey, 2008; Skinner & Stewart, 2017). As explored in this article, contextual forces and the performance-based characteristics of the sector coalesced to have practical consequences on the sustainability of clubs, the competition and sports workers' careers.

Methodology and methods

The context

Historically, relations between Ukraine, Russia and wider Europe are difficult to unravel. Over the course of the late nineteenth century through to the early twenty-first century, for example, there have been underlying and enduring antecedents shaping European geopolitics (e.g. domestic, regional and global wars, land reappropriations, and political shifts) (Clark, 2012). The consequences of which have led to a recurring narrative of geopolitical (re)arrangements and conflict on the continent in which Ukraine and Russia remain entangled. More recently, a confluence of factors (including military interventionism, territorial disputes and land right issues, natural resource control and distribution, economic relations, and corruption, media bias, and Western involvement, among other concerns) have exacerbated the situation and led to the Ukrainian government's more discernible turn toward Russia (Khmelko & Pereguda, 2014; Shekhovtsov & Umland, 2014). The geopolitical shift was most notable when it appeared that President Yanukovych was giving into Russian pressure by not signing the Association Agreement with the EU that had been negotiated over several years (Biersack & O'Leary, 2014). Consequently, supporters who were looking for closer relations with the EU began to protest in Kyiv and these escalated into a larger social and political upheaval known as *Euromaidan*. The government's reaction against the protesters culminated in an unprecedented series of violent encounters in Kyiv and cities in the west of Ukraine (Onuch, 2014). In constructing this section, we acknowledge two intertwining subjectivities. In the first instance, prevailing research perspectives have tended toward Westernised accounts of these events in which there is substantial degree of consensus over Ukraine and Russia's respective geopolitical position, acts and responses. Secondly, we accept that our stance commences as researchers from Western backgrounds, but that our interpretations have been significantly informed by long term professional and personal engagements within the region.

Case study approach

Informed by the interpretivist paradigm, this article explores how some sports workers in men's professional basketball in Ukraine operated in relation to geopolitical events that contoured the 2013/2014 playing season. Towards this end, a qualitative case study approach (Merriam, 1998) was used to enquire about the daily events, activities and related emotions, as recalled by the sports workers. Here, the richness of the case study was enhanced by the researchers' sustained engagement and knowledge of the research context that has come from a decade of field work in the regional area, sporting context and with sports workers in this professional setting. Familiarity with the landscape has, invariably, enabled us to understand and interpret both the context and individual experiences therein in more nuanced ways. The participants' reflections are, we appreciate, influenced by the passage of time (interviews took place up to three year after the 2013/14 season), there is a subjectivity, narrative framing and censoring to the interpretations

that are acknowledged (Hughes et al., 2019; Smith, 2010). Participants were interviewed in the English language, which for some, was their second or third language. Irrespective of this, it is acknowledged that participants, and the researchers, have been limited by words and a particular lexicon that are used to describe sporting and daily experience (Hughes et al., 2019). Within an interpretivist approach, this acknowledgement is of value because it places emphasis on the individual nature of experience, how experiences are recalled collectively, and how alternate realities are juxtaposed.

Similar to Merriam (1998), in this article a case study methodology serves to describe and analyse a bounded phenomenon which was particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. The approach is, firstly, particularistic in that it is bound by specific temporal and spatial parameter of a sport system operating in a particular context; in this case, the focus was the 2013/2014 men's professional basketball season in Ukraine. The analysis is descriptive in that it is enriched first by the varied nature of participants interviewed, the nuances in experiences, the breadth and depth to which content reflected issues in the sport sector, and the connections drawn between the localised sport setting and wider geopolitical context. A heuristic criteria is attended to by endeavouring to contribute to a growing body of work on sports workers' welfare in elite settings; providing fresh examination of sports workers contemporary experience of geopolitical turmoil; and, offering conceptual links to theoretical debates.

Participants and procedures

Following ethical approval from the lead author's institution, a gatekeeper was utilised to find participants from a variety of nations who had been employed in clubs in the top Ukraine basketball league during 2013/2014 and could provide a variety of perspectives on the topic. Participants needed to be comfortable undertaking an interview in the English language. Following consent, data were generated via semi-structured interviews with five professional basketball players (one American, three Ukrainian and one European), a head coach (European) and a General Manager (European). All participants were male, over the age of 30 and had a minimum of ten years of experience in professional basketball in various leagues in Europe. Such involvement in professional basketball shaped their understanding of the events in Ukraine and informed their negotiation strategies.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature with content largely organised around the sports workers' experiences of the 2013/2014 season but maintained the flexibility to explore relevant ideas which unfolded as the conversation progressed. Interviews averaged 90 min in duration and were recorded via a Dictaphone. Five of the seven interviews were conducted in person, however, geographical location required that two interviews were conducted over FaceTime. Transcripts of the interviews were returned to participants who were invited to edit the documents, however no amendments were requested. We recognise that these methods provide only a small snapshot of individual reflections of a particular geopolitical juncture. Accordingly, while participants' experiences at the time were contemporaneous with the global criticism of Russia during the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, Russia's wider political activities were not a feature of the questions we asked of participants in this project. Furthermore, given data were collected post-event we are mindful of nostalgia and selective framing of experiences (Hughes et al., 2019). It is important to highlight the restrictive context in which the data were generated; in particular, it is difficult to recruit participants in top-level professional sport who see value in devoting leisure time to an academic project. Those who did participate

had connections to academia and/or strong connections to the gatekeeper.

Analysis

The analysis was guided by a desire to understand and interpret various levels of the sport structure affected by the geopolitical conflict, and the resultant implications for sustainability. Lindsey's (2008) work was useful to provide contextual language in the process of deductively analysing the data. Although Lindsey (2008) focuses on another sport industry area, his broad categories of institutional, organisational, community and individual not only reflect a common intellectual language but were useful in framing the interviews with the sports workers. Participants did not conceptualise their narratives using these discrete concepts, however, from the language used (seen in the discussion below) it is evident that this framework helps to articulate the different levels of influence within individuals' experiences and actions. Therefore, the following discussion is organised into three themes: institutional and organisational, community, and individual. As mentioned previously, it is recognised these three themes overlap. Yet, for organisational purposes they are discussed separately. Following the presentation of themes is a discussion of sports work and sustainability.

Results and discussion

Analysis of these data generated from basketball sports workers within Ukraine have illuminated both normalities of sector employment in professional sport in Europe and consequences of catalytic events such as geopolitical conflict. While each participant's experiences of their working conditions were distinct and personal, the data highlight workers' responses, management and negotiation of the situation in ways not unique to professional sports in Europe (see Syndex, 2013). However, in light of the broader issues of sustainability within the sport sector (particularly with regards to institutional continuity, employment security and welfare obligations), there are significant themes that emerge from this context and individuals' experiences. The subsequent sections of the article demonstrate ways the manifestation of contextual forces influenced the continuity and viability of a regional and national sport framework, and specifically sports workers' capacities to ply their trade effectively. Ultimately, participants demonstrated varying reactions and adjustments to the contextual scene to advance their causes and interests. Beyond the lack of an organisational "blueprint" for risk mitigation and sustainment, of significance is that the experiences unsettle understanding about organisational capacities and responsibilities regarding employment continuity, and what collective responses and individual agency can be foreseen and planned for.

Institutional and organisational sustainability

In relation to conceptualisations of institutional and organisational sustainability (Lindsey, 2008), the geopolitical turbulence made it difficult for the basketball league to operate. Institutional capacities for sustainability were thwarted, initially, by changes in the organisational structures. During the early stages of the conflict there had been some intervention from the federation. Initially, following the clashes between protesters and the police in Kiev, the federation paused the league until the situation and working conditions were deemed to be "safe". The European player recalled: "The Ukraine basketball league stopped for five days. And during this time, I [brought] my family to [home country]." However, as the season progressed in light of the geopolitical influences, and deterioration of state leadership, the structures supporting the continuity of the sport dissolved, and working conditions deteriorated (although

sports workers' contracts were expected to be fulfilled). This was demonstrated when the federation ceased to enforce the rules of the league (e.g. competition venue size, frequency and nature of competition structure). A player recalled:

> [Before the conflict] the league was at a good level. We would get 3000 spectators a week. [According to the rules to] play in this league, the gym needs to be big [enough for] 3,000 or 2,000 [spectators] at least. But [when the conflict escalated] the federation stopped enforcing the rules so some teams [tried] to save money … [For example] our GM [would say] "oh … this game is against a bullshit team so we will play in the small gym" … These gyms are not for games, they are for practice with room for 100 spectators … It's okay for practice but not for [games] … There was no control [from the Basketball Federation].

The vigour of the league prior to the conflict gave the impression of sustainable organisational and competition structures that had buoyancy and momentum. For example, one club was playing in the EuroCup (the second-tier cross-border European professional basketball club competition) and had aspirations to qualify for Euroleague. Also, Ukraine had been selected to host the European men's basketball championships, Eurobasket, in 2015. Here, as Lindsey (2008) has discussed more broadly in relation to other sport contexts, the coalescence of economic, social and political forces inhibited both the federation and the clubs to the extent that they no-longer had the capacities to fulfil objectives to support and care for workers.

Among participants, the perception existed that the conflict had a direct impact upon resources, and the consistency/clarity of messages being delivered to the clubs with respect to continuing operations. Although players had to adhere to their contracts, this was not the case for the federation who was not maintaining the minimum standards for the league. As highlighted in the previous quote, players felt aggrieved and fan patronage diminished. For players who had built professional careers of a certain calibre, these were issues they felt the organisation should have had a stronger responsibility toward to maintain contractual expectations and working conditions of professional sport. It appears that the organisation's reaction was focused on preserving their immediate business concerns as opposed to the long-term sustainability of the league and ensuring some level of quality working environment. A player stated, "when [no one is in] control … [it became] anarchy."

Opinions about intra-national organisational capacities in the domestic league were also compounded by concerns about some clubs' transnational abilities to operate at the continental (European regional) level. Some clubs, to note, participated in the EuroCup. However, the perceived risks of the conflict created anxieties for the non-Ukrainian clubs' insurance companies which prevented workers from receiving the necessary coverage to travel to Ukraine. A participant highlighted, "[because of the conflict] no one wanted to play in Ukraine." Thus, in the upper echelons of the leagues (e.g, EuroCup), there were concerns about workers' welfare that were illustrated by upholding insurance protection and limiting travel options. A player explained:

> It was a decision of the foreign teams because of players' insurance. It was, you know, the insurance companies looking at the Ukraine, this conflict … it doesn't matter that there is no conflict in Kiev. [They think] in the Ukraine there is conflict and they don't want to insure players from foreign teams (i.e. teams outside Ukraine) for games … We still had to play in the Euro Cup and we had three games left. And the organisers said you cannot play home games in [Ukraine] … . So, we played a playoff game away against a French team … and a 'home' game in [another European city] against [another team].

As discussed in this quote, while teams were unable to travel into Ukraine, sports workers

in Ukrainian-based clubs drew upon their professional networks to negotiate the use of arenas in other countries so they could host the required fixtures at a reasonable price. Thus, the Ukrainian clubs were able to creatively address the issue with insurance that fulfilled the requirements to maintain their participation in the league and, by proxy, the continuity of sports work. Here, it worth noting that other European clubs recognised the difficulties Ukrainian colleagues were facing and provided assistance in the form of ad hoc goodwill gestures such as reduced prices for arena rental, marketing, logistics and hospitality.

The geopolitical situation also had a direct impact upon the long-term sustainability of the sport with the cancellation of the hosting of Eurobasket (the European Basketball Championship); of which Ukraine had been selected as the host nation for the 2015 tournament. The decision not to hold the event in Ukraine compromised the viability of the organisation and the league by directly impacting plans to invest in new facilities which were part of the strategic vision to grow the sport. The General Manager commented:

> The Ukrainian government decided to cancel the event. As a result [we] calculated that basketball will lose six new arenas because, you know, when the Euro championship was in Lithuania they built six new areas … In Ukraine there are no new arenas. There is an arena built in 1960 … with eight thousand spectators, but it's old …. [Because of the Euro championships] they [started building] two arenas … but now … the buildings stay at the level they have started ….

Such improvements to facilities would have invariably contributed to the overall quality of the league by attracting new talent and financial investment. The coach explained, "now basketball for Ukraine is maybe [the level it was] 15–20 years ago."

To summarise, consistent with articulations of organisational sustainability in and beyond sport, and wider research on employees coping with "traumatic" experiences (Cummings et al., 2019; Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Holton et al., 2016; Khamisa et al., 2015; Moldavanova & Goerdal, 2018; Purdy et al., 2018), there were expectations that clubs, at the very least, managed the situation to ensure some semblance of "normal" working conditions (e.g. competition regulations on stadia; travel insurance). In the absence of clear organisational direction and communication during the crisis, the maintenance of the playing environment became a responsibility of the workers rather than the basketball federation. Thus, the maintenance of the league was contingent upon interplay between individual sports clubs, stakeholders who facilitated the competition, and sports workers. Although workers appeared to accept constraints that would/did inhibit organisational responses, this did not mean workers allowed for an "anything goes" mentality. Furthermore, the cancellation of hosting Eurobasket in 2015 in Ukraine (specifically, the withdrawal of infrastructure investment) had substantive consequences on the sustainability of the Ukrainian league in the hierarchy of men's professional basketball leagues in Europe.

Community sustainability

Within professional sport, the notion of community (and the nomenclature associated with "the team") is a central construct and a key part of sports' business models and working environments. Moreover, the preservation of community is often fundamental to its members and works to maintain identity distinction and protect against external threats and influences (Cohen, 2013). Conceptually, community can be configured as a site of social relations bound by mutuality, solidarity and emotional bonds, interconnectivity, shared values, behaviours, rules and ideological affiliations (Cohen, 2013; Morgan & Pulignano, 2020; Purdue et al., 2000). Community sustainability can be further understood as developing

enduring relationships and practices within groups that aid their continuity (Lindsey, 2008; Shediac-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998).

Some clubs in Ukraine reacted to the evolving geopolitical conditions by uniting around a collective cause to sustain the team and its day-to-day practices. For example, initially, some managers tried to keep the community together. The European player recalled:

> The general manager asked us not to leave because Americans, especially Americans, wanted to leave, and he said to the [Eastern Europeans], you know the mentality and when it becomes very dangerous, we will say leave. But now, okay, I think in a couple of days it will be normal. Because if, for example, if you [Eastern Europeans] leave, some players they will follow immediately. Okay. When everybody stays, it's normal. But if somebody leaves, others start to look, 'Hey, he left. I need to go.'

In this situation, the general manager's priority was to maintain the team and thus its ability to play, win and earn money. This sort of approach coheres with Shediac-Rizkallah and Bone (1998) regarding the sense of solidarity (real or perceived) and consensus required in order to achieve sustainability imperatives. Here, the ingrained cultural hierarchies of the sport (and inherent trust/rapport players in their teams) contributed to the players not questioning the general manager's strategies.

Throughout the season, community sustainability was influenced by variances in individuals' actions. For example, language difficulties for some players made them vulnerable and reliant on others for communication (see Purdy et al., 2021). The American player noted:

> We don't hear things right away, us Americans. We're kind of oblivious to it, we don't watch tv, the local tv, we wouldn't really understand it much anyways – the conflict that's brewing so we heard from our teammates … You start to hear a little bit at first and then more and more you start to learn more and more and then the next thing you know, me and the other foreigners are all talking, saying it's getting pretty bad … And then our teammates start to tell us a little bit more about the disputes and stuff.

In the first instance, players formed an understanding of the situation from their immediate connection to other players within the club with whom they had national commonalities, shared language and friendship. As the above quote attests, and notwithstanding the veracity of information being shared, these "micro-communities" were a valued resource that fed into players' perceptions about their immediate futures and subsequent decision-making. In summary, community sustainability was advantageous for some teams as it enabled the creation of amiable conditions (e.g. team unity, high performance objectives, a clear plan toward league win) that made the continuation of work possible (and desirable). Sustainability was also aided by a sense of solidarity within the team and between the club and players. Moreover, ensuring a strength of numbers would be beneficial to the team maintaining performance and participation in the league, and lead to the (successful) completion of the season and a stronger position in the league rankings.

Individual sustainability

At the individual level, sustainability is conceptualised as longer-term behavioural adaptations to, and interactions with, organisation and community. In previous work, scholars have framed sports workers' individual adaptations in terms of resilience, precarity and negotiation (Roderick & Schumacker, 2017). Critique has, variously, positioned the strength of individual agency as the mechanism for successful navigation of contextual changes. Additionally, a general emphasis has been on the individual's development of professional and personal skill sets to cope with adverse working conditions (e.g. McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006). The experiences of basketball

sports workers in Ukraine reflect individual's capacities to sustain careers within a broader structural framework; in this case, between the sport community and organisation/institution.

The sports workers interviewed drew attention to contractual clauses that acknowledged the longer-term sustainability of the players' working conditions. There were situations in which some players were able to recourse to their contracts to navigate contextual and organisational change. For example, contractual clauses such as *force majeure* offered a layer of legal security by allowing for the contracting parties to suspend or terminate the contract when they were prevented from performing by events outside of their control (e.g. in the event of war, natural disaster). A player explained, "In your contract you have *force majeure* and … immediately your contract is cut, and you will not get your money … ". Contractual conditions provided some security, however, as a declaration of war had not been initiated at that point, *force majeure* could not be invoked.

While the conflict created a catalyst for workers to make career and working decisions, sports workers' behaviours within Ukraine were not unusual from other players in Europe. For example, decisions related to career transition, contract exit, migration, long-term financial planning, retirement, may have already been occurring. Yet, for some players the instance brought about a step-change in the way that some of these moments and decision-making processes were managed. For example, a Ukrainian player commented:

> Before this war, everything was good. I knew what I was doing. Before the war I got a very good salary and I bought a lot of apartments to rent out … I wanted to finish playing at age 35 and I was not going to go into a regular job. In my country this is $200 a month, you know? I cannot work for $200 … . So, I invested all my money in a few apartments … And after this war started, my plans had to change because the price of my apartments has dropped, and I can't sell them. I need money for my future, so I now need to move out of this country.

Akin to other sectors, these basketball workers in Ukraine also had professional development aspirations. This included desires to play more games, get more game time (and thus improve statistics and recognition), and compete in stronger leagues. This natural career progression and the need to protect investments, however, was thwarted by the contextual conditions. Some stronger players, like the one quoted above, were able to secure contracts outside of Ukraine and left mid-season. Other players remained in post until the end of the season and sought employment in other European clubs. While the exit of these players had an impact on the quality of the league, it also created opportunities for those who stayed. For example, a Ukrainian player recalled, "When the American players left the team, maybe I had five, six or seven additional playing minutes". In contrast, some teams dissolved, leaving players unemployed and the impact of this varying in light of the player's situation. The General Manager stated:

> The players who have had good contracts with big money, they have the possibility to live without a job for one year, it's not a problem … The problem is for the Ukrainian players, young players, with small salaries … they have to find a job in Ukraine … What can they do when they can't get a contract with a team? They [don't] have the possibility to work in the factory because [they] are sportsmen.

The data in this article coheres with work that has identified the extent to which workers possess and enact agency, have the ability to work independently of the organisation and community, and can read and respond to situations in ways that will be advantageous to sustainability of the careers (Eteläpelto et al., 2015). Beyond this, the experiences evidence realities and difficulties sports workers face as they

navigate their career identity and professional identity work in uncertain/precarious times (Henry, 2013; Purdy et al., 2018). In men's professional basketball in Ukraine, some workers were acutely aware of their limited skillsets and the consequences for transitioning into other sectors and industries.

Augmenting current conceptualisations and discussions of sustainability, individuals' capacities to enact agency and sustain their short- and long-term careers did not occur in isolation from the organisational setting of the sport and community context of the club. Responses to the situation, for instance, illustrated that workers sought to create sustainable working conditions in light of their ability to move/not move, immediate and long-term financial circumstances, social and professional relations, and personal career needs and desires.

Conclusion

The nuances of the *Euromaidan* situation have been debated in a variety of ways (Biersack & O'Leary, 2014; Onuch, 2014). Yet, scope remains to understand how the events played out in the sport sector. In revealing some of the experiences of professional basketball players in Ukraine at the time, this paper offers one of the first explorations of this important geopolitical moment and its effects on individual lives, team communities and the overarching sport structures. What became evident in examining players' experiences was not only the immediate and/or short-term consequences on their daily lives and playing routines, but the ramifications for the longer-term sustainability of careers, the viability of the team, and the overall continuity and quality of the league. Conceptually, thus far discussions of sustainability have emphasised organisational and structural contexts and processes, and articulated ways the continuity of business practices in the short and longer term may be maintained. This article reaffirms the importance of considering organisation preparedness and strategy, however, it draws needed attention to the individual and human components (e.g. workers) that comprise the system. Moreover, whereas Lindsey's (2008) framework provided a conceptual starting point for recognising the role of the individual within structures, this work has added empirical data that locates individuals within sustainability processes across levels of the sport setting and underscores how career experiences are navigated accordingly. Echoing current debates in the field, this work points to the increased emphasis on sustainability within organisational practices in and beyond sport, the place of sustainability in times of change and geopolitical conflict, and continued participation of all stakeholders in dialogue about sports work.

This analysis has also been of value in examining *connections* across the various levels of sustainability within the sport sector. Sports workers' experiences here illustrated how contextual uncertainties and organisational competencies affect employees' job satisfaction and career pathways and led employees to develop protectionist strategies (e.g. intelligence gathering, mobilising of networks, remaining or relocating) to ensure their short-term survival and longer-term professional sustainability (Cummings et al., 2019 Johnston et al., 2016). In relation to men's professional basketball in Ukraine, while the organisation had some mechanisms of worker support, in the onset of geopolitical conflict the permanence of the institution and structures was significantly compromised. While workers in other sports and settings may have been able to rely more heavily on the organisation for support to sustain their careers, workers in this research did not always have this option. In the absence of adequate leadership and finances, the federation were curtailed in what they could do and offer workers. As such, the ability and responsibility for sustaining career and working conditions within this particular league fell to individual players/groups of

players. Ultimately, this article foregrounds the need to appreciate how sports workers are moving/operating *within* these conditions, and what makes their work sustainable.

In contemporary professional sport, workers have certain expectations (both contractually and morally) with regards to how organisations operate and the level of care and security their employment provides (Nurmi, 2010). Essentially, there was a high degree of faith in the stability and operational effectiveness of the system, and that these certainties and guarantees would kick in as and when needed to protect workers' collective and individual "best" interests. Sports workers did not perceive a complete system failure in Ukraine (e.g. leagues and some clubs prevailed, competition was maintained). Rather, there was a perception that the sustainability of the system was being challenged by the conflict, and that irrespective of long-term political outcomes, there were immediate individual and organisational consequences that needed to be mitigated and/or resolved. The issues were also influenced by workers not knowing when the conflict was going to end and/if things could be "normal" again. However, in a time-sensitive, performative-based industry, they could not wait around to find out. Decisions here echo findings in other sport employment studies whereby the performativity of the club and player are the predominant conditions underpinning career continuity (Roderick & Schumacker, 2017; Solow & von Allmen, 2016). Geopolitical conflict appeared to be *another* event/force contouring the landscape of sport employment conditions. Even where such a risk to sustainability may be foreseen, it is not until organisations and individuals are faced with experiences in situ that the complexities can become known, understood, appreciated and acted upon.

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