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Article

'I'm not a warrior, I'm a basketball player': A narrative on professional sport in troubled times

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Abstract
Encouraged by work calling for different approaches to examining sport industry issues, a narrative inquiry was adopted to interrogate the relationships between individual experiences and agency, management practices, and a particular sport organisation setting through the most recent turns of the Russia–Ukraine war. Commencing on 24 February 2022, this moment and ensuing consequences for professional Ukrainian basketball players reveal insights into personal sports work experiences within a dynamic, disruptive, and unpredictable setting. The narrative amalgamates data from interviews with two Ukrainian professional basketball players whose lives and careers were disrupted by the war. The narrative includes a chronology of critical moments, reactions, key decisions, and dilemmas and highlights ways the crisis was/is managed and the consequences upon individuals' lives, well-being, and career decisions. The work contributes to the sociological analysis of crisis management in sport by articulating how individuals might respond to sport systems during times of unprecedented flux.

Keywords
narrative inquiry, Ukraine, basketball, sports work, war

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National sport systems are buoyed by varied structures, processes, and components that contribute to their effective day-to-day operations and help ensure longer-term continuity (Geeraert and van Eekeren, 2022; Macris and Sam, 2014). These features offer degrees of stability and maintenance that ensure operational capacities and the system's ability to support constituents. Moreover, the continuity of practices over time also may afford protections and capacities for organisations to navigate change, adversity, and/or crises and develop contingencies for survival and thrivability (Smith and Green, 2020). Whereas sport organisations may differ in structures, practices, resources, and aims (e.g. participation, development, and performance), the system is predicated on assumptions of continuity. For the individual sports workers within (Kohe and Purdy, 2024), stability is routinely evidenced in the normalised athlete–(agent)–coach–organisational relationship, hierarchical management, contractual obligations, and day-to-day rhythms of work (e.g. training, practice, performance, and travel). Although the system provides a certain amount of 'homeostasis' or continuity, there is a noted dynamism to professional sport that forms part of daily and longer-term work realities (Purdy et al., 2023; Roderick, 2006). For example, athletes have a limited duration of professional careers, demonstrate adaptability to career trajectory change, and perturbations into their existing relationships (e.g. coach turnover) (Adams and Darby, 2020; Culvin, 2023; Purdy et al., 2018).

The permanence and stability of sport systems (and their fallibility) are thrown into sharp relief when confronted by events and circumstances that force organisations and their constituents to reconsider management practices, organisational norms, and routine working practices (Opatska et al., 2022; Vyas, 2022). In recent times, such notable moments have included the 2008 economic crisis that revealed professional clubs' insolvency and delayed or partial salary payments; COVID-19 whose effects reiterated existing regional disparities and inequalities; and geopolitical conflicts that influenced sport operations and manifested in identity and organisational politics (e.g. mobility) (Brentin and Tregoures, 2016; Markovits et al., 2014). As noted in the literature, in times of uncertainty, athletes have demonstrated capacities to react to crises by changing contracts, moving teams or further abroad for work, and/or making larger career decisions (e.g. exiting the game) (Purdy et al., 2023).

Although scholars have recognised that theoretically crisis management processes may form part of a sport organisation's repertoire (Preuß et al., 2022), and organisations may embed degrees of protection within their systems (i.e. financial reserves, insurance, and contractual clauses), some situations may produce such rapid and unforeseen change for which sports organisations and individuals cannot plan. Such sport organisation nuanced responses, which may parallel those experienced in other sectors, raise questions about individuals' experiences of established systems, assumptions about day-to-day work, policies and structures, disjuncture, and ruptures between theories, practices, and in situ realities. Investigations of experiences within sport organisations further reveal the importance of considering contextual parameters that constrain what is possible, and the agency and morality convergences for individuals that precipitate alternate opportunities and possibilities.

The purpose of this paper is to offer (and author) a contribution in the form of narrative inquiry that conceptualises and exemplifies sport organisation holistically as an amalgam of individual and collective experiences contoured by the geopolitical landscape and change and crisis management structures and systems. In particular, we focus on the

professional and personal lives of Ukrainian male basketball players during the Ukraine–Russia war (c.2022-). Here, we consider the experiences of sport workers within a specific sport system that has/is being impacted by the country's substantial and 'immediate' geopolitical, economic, and socio-cultural crises. The nature of this disruption cuts across all aspects of Ukrainian sport; however, it has notable consequences on professional sports' organisational cultures and (change and crisis) management, worker's welfare and well-being, and sector, organisation, and individual career sustainability (see also Kuvaldina et al., 2024; Purdy et al., 2023). The discussions here, therefore, may be of value beyond the Ukrainian setting to evaluations of sports workers' actions during other turbulent geopolitical contexts and conflict zones. Specifically, by compiling an evocative narrative of individuals living through and negotiating Ukraine's geopolitical effects, the paper makes distinct contributions to framing the humanitarian nature of crises, reconsidering the (re)prioritisation and limits of sport within these settings, and reconceptualising 'sustainable' sport and organisational systems. Moreover, beyond adding nuance to how professional sport systems are (and may be) structured and operate through crises, where 'flex' against the status quo may be possible, the research encourages continued critique of the sports worker–organisation relationship.

Review of literature

To contextualise the situation of professional basketball in Ukraine, we commence with an examination of crisis management, followed by a consideration of sustainability critiques, and how these shape sport organisational settings, forces, and decision-making and, subsequently, are experienced by the individuals within the system. At the outset, we acknowledge foremost that forms of predicament, change, uncertainty, precarity, emergencies, and turbulence form part of standard business environments. Accordingly, organisations develop appropriate strategies and operational practices that enable survivability and continuity. Although conceptualisations and the significance of crisis may vary depending on context and organisation, crisis management has been long recognised as fundamental to business and workers' experiences therein (Engemann, 2018). Engemann (2018) has noted that within crisis management, there are tendencies to focus on the organisation's protection and preservation. Part of this entails concerns for operations, image, reputation, and identity, and ensuring any deleterious effects on stakeholder relationships may be mitigated. Crisis moments also necessitate an array of practical organisational actions (e.g. quick decision-making to preserve resources, sustaining immediate operations, altering practice, implementing specific communication strategies, or managing emotional/humanitarian responses). Yet, there remain conceptual, semantic, and practical differences regarding the conflation of emergencies and disasters (with terms often used interchangeably).

    We are drawn to Zamoum and Gorpe's (2018) conceptualisation that underscores the severity and unpredictability of crises and the necessity of substantive critical decision-making by individuals therein. As outlined below, Zamoum and Gorpe (2018) identify crisis as having distinct characteristics:

- Events that are rare, significant, high impact, ambiguous, urgent, and involve high stakes (Simola, 2014) (e.g. the rapid intensification, development, dynamism, and

    unpredictability of conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and resonating international geopolitical significance).

- Involves a period of discontinuity, a situation where the core values of the organisation/system are under threat, and this requires critical decision-making (Kayes et al., 2013) (e.g. the Basketball Federation of Ukraine and professional clubs attempting to continue the league and sovereignty and independence of the nation's teams).
- Have a destabilising effect on the organisation and its stakeholders (e.g. as seen in the cessation of games, the transformation of existing league structures, and the move of teams and individuals abroad).
- Expected escalation of one or more issues, errors, or procedures during the crisis period (Kayes et al., 2013) (e.g. as witnessed in the destruction of Ukrainian sport infrastructure, restriction on (males) freedom of movement, and conscription).

This framing of crises is distinguishable from other forms of 'crisis' (either singular or inter-related) often explored within sport settings (for example, injury, pathway transitions, deselection, lack of funding/resources, athlete protest, corruption, forms of abuse, concussion, or other health-related issues). Moreover, utilising this approach better connects the macro- and meso-level aspects of crisis to micro-level individual processes and structures. Furthermore, Zamoum and Gorpe's (2018) characterisation helps address some variability of the term, and its derivatives, used within sport settings.

    Sport scholarship, to note, has identified broad uses of crisis to explain sector experiences and illuminate both the precarity sports workers face and the agency they possess in navigating their career trajectories (Dimoula et al., 2013; Purdy et al., 2018, 2023; Richardson and McKenna, 2020). Variations in use notwithstanding, conceptually, crisis management is a useful way to interpret the dynamics of sport sector responses. In the context of this paper, the crisis shock and ongoing situation prompted more enduring shifts in the ways professional Ukrainian basketballers go about their work. While war/geopolitical conflict may be conceptualised as its own crisis (and that raises additional unpredictability and uncertainties), there are echoes of universal crisis management features. For instance, the geopolitical situation in Ukraine has necessitated workers and organisations becoming more attentive to future preparedness activities and readiness exercises (also known as contingency development; Lartey, 2020) aimed at better enabling anticipation of future eventualities. Crisis debates have had value here in underscoring the sport sector's need to afford more priority to such issues as part of effective employee–employer relations, good governance, and organisational sustainability (Cherrington and Black, 2022; Mastromartino et al., 2020; Pederson et al., 2020; Shipway et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2010).

    Recent scholarship has focused heavily on the COVID-19 pandemic as a focal point for crisis response in sport (Chelladurai and Kim, 2022; Mastromartino et al., 2020; Miles and Shipway, 2020; Pederson et al., 2020). However, there remains wider interest in the varied nature of crises, the resultant effects on the sector, and how separate crisis forces overlap and resonate for individuals within particular contextual settings (Chelladurai and Kim, 2022; Mastromartino et al., 2020; Mori et al., 2023). Crisis complexities have been evidenced specifically in relation to Eastern Europe geopolitics, where scholars have

identified how such events have historically and culturally shaped organisations' operations, and continue to contour current practices, resources, and future-proofing plans (Korneyev et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2022; Opatska et al., 2022). This literature notwithstanding, there remains a strong emphasis on macro- and meso-level organisational practices, and gaps in discussion around wider implications across the day-to-day realities as experienced among the workforce.

Aspects of this gap have been addressed in research that has drawn attention to the necessity for sport organisations, and their members, to better recognise and develop strategies that respond to and attempt to ameliorate varied crisis effects (Cherrington and Black, 2022). Here, sport provides a mechanism to smooth tensions, offer rhythm maintenance, continuity, and familiarity for individuals, groups, organisations, and communities, and may serve to anchor identity formation and social cohesion (Abulhawa, 2017; Thorpe, 2015). This scholarship affords a means to understand connections between sport, crises, and human agency, and the roles sport plays in society within the *in situ* crisis, and later rejuvenation, recovery, and reimagining. This line of inquiry recognises that responses often necessitate a focus on alleviating immediate concerns (personal security, safety of families, mobilities) and that there are effects upon an individual's socio-psychological state and general welfare (e.g. stress, uncertainty, resilience, precarity, and emotional labour).

Irrespective of a focus on organisational aspects of change, sustainability, and crisis management, sport scholarship has noted the innate human nature of 'the system' (Connor, 2009; Roderick, 2006). Beyond this, scholars have highlighted personal welfare as a core component of professional career experiences and, by extension, a factor that requires consideration in the cultures, practices, and relationships organisations develop with workers (Culvin, 2023; Henry, 2016; Lang, 2021). A further theme of this work has been the tensions between practical organisational management of welfare and ethical obligations (e.g. 'duty of care') vis-a-vis welfare provision. In times of crises, this relationship is illuminated further and may have more substantive consequences due to organisational and personal resources being stretched, conditions creating unexpected and/or non-negotiable barriers, and established norms breaking down (e.g. league structures, travel, and training regimes).

Herein lies our interest within this paper, which acknowledges the humanisation of crisis management discussions and situates the individual at the centre of organisation frameworks. Focusing on narrative inquiry, and with crisis management discourse as a backdrop, this paper highlights one way to investigate the interdisciplinarity and intersectional nature of individual and organisational experiences within sport. The scope and extent of our interest were the deeply personal ways the crisis was experienced and what precipitated individual actions, decision-making, and coping mechanisms. Below, we provide a brief context that sets the scene for the subsequent content.

Context

Tensions between Ukraine and Russia are part of long-standing dynamic regional geopolitics that have played out over the 20th and early 21st centuries comprising domestic, regional, and global wars, land reappropriations, political shifts, and volatility

(Khmelko and Pereguda, 2014; Shekhovtsov and Umland, 2014). In 2013, the situation escalated when then-Ukranian President, Viktor Yanukovych, avoided signing the Association Agreement with the EU (Biersack and O'Leary, 2014). This act prompted pro-EU supporters within Ukraine to protest in Kyiv and across the country. The protest movement, which became known as Euromaidan, generated a strong government reaction and culminated in an unprecedented series of violent encounters. The volatile situation prompted Russian intervention and led to the Russian occupation of Ukraine's Crimea territory in 2014 (Onuch, 2014). The regional disputes and questions over Ukraine's sovereignty did not abate, with significant casualties reported, and continued mass displacement and emigration. Early in 2022, the tension again escalated further. It is at this point our narrative begins.

Methodology

The dynamic landscape of professional sport has lent itself to academics adopting a variety of methodological approaches. Here, sport research has utilised a range of qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, and relatedly, various iterations of thematic analysis, and alternate approaches (e.g. arts-based, participatory/democratic, Indigenous methodologies). Within the sociologies of sport, work of this nature has been well-evidenced and valued. Furthermore, there are also calls by scholars for innovative thinking and different approaches to data generation and data representation. For example, Hoeber and Shaw (2017) and Stride et al. (2017) encourage scholars to push methodological boundaries and utilise a greater array of contemporary approaches that afford greater attentiveness to ontological positionality and reflexivity. In synergy with these calls, long-standing work within this journal has emphasised the value of narrative in articulating sociological complexities in and through sport and, in particular, illustrating the interplay between individual agency, organisation action/inactions, and wider cultural milieu. In the context of individuals' negotiations of crisis and trauma in sport, for example, we are mindful of the work of Barker-Ruchti and Varea (2024) who, employing Arthur Frank's socio-narratological conceptualisation of individual's negotiating significant life events, utilise narrative to draw frame experiences of survivorship in sport in relation to sexual abuse within Women's Artistic Gymnastics. In terms of our paper, the work offers a means of understanding the role of the authored voice in providing pro/evocative insights in deeply meaningful and life-altering crisis events that resonate across professional and personal spaces.

This study employs a narrative inquiry methodology that encompasses the generating, analysing, and re-presenting stories of life experiences (Clandinin, 2013). The explicit focus is on the experiences of Ukrainian sports workers in professional basketball who have lived/are living through war and its resultant effects on their careers and personal lives. Grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, we privilege narrative inquiry for its value in bringing together a variety of methods for studying, analysing, and understanding human experiences (Clandinin, 2013; Papathomas, 2016). As various scholars have noted (e.g. Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007; Mertova and Webster, 2019; Neisser and Fivush, 1994), narrative inquiry is a subjective research approach emphasising individual perspective(s) via exploration of personal stories, autobiographies, and

other forms of expression (Clandinin, 2007). The aims of which are to utilise narrative authoring (both the process of authorship and end product) as a means to gain insights into individual meaning-making within participants' lives and/or in relation to specific experiences. Narrative inquiry offers accounts that are sensitive to the intersections with, and influence of, temporal–spatial, socio-cultural, geopolitical, economic, etc., forces that enact upon individuals' lives (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007). Previously, Purdy et al. (2023), for example, have identified how Ukraine's historical and socio-cultural relationships and position, and individual understanding of the contemporary geopolitics and immediacy of the conflict within the region shaped distinct crisis responses. Appreciated in this research, it is this ability for the narrative construction to tap into, and express, contextual nuances that are advantageous for unfolding the complexities of characters, relationships, and settings (Mertova and Webster, 2019). Consequently, narrative inquiry is one methodology that transcends some of the limitations of conventional forms of quantitative and qualitative data generation and (re)presentation (Hoeber and Shaw, 2017).

To differentiate narrative inquiry from other qualitative approaches, three areas need to be simultaneously explored: temporality, sociability, and place (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006; Stride et al., 2017). Firstly, the narrative needs to be constituted within a temporal boundary (e.g. the build-up to the war and its commencement). Secondly, sociability is concerned with personal (feelings, hopes, desires, and reactions) and social conditions (the context occupied by the individual and other people who contribute to the structure of that setting) (e.g. Ukrainian male professional basketball players' experiences of the changing landscape). Thirdly, is the place or the physical boundaries of place or places where the event(s) occur that offer 'checkpoints' for the reader (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006) (e.g. Spain, Czechia, and Latvia). Furthermore, the work can be justified in terms of the personal, that is, why this narrative inquiry matters to the teller as to us as individuals; the practical, in terms of what difference this research might offer to individual practice within a particular organisation setting; and the theoretical, in terms of what difference this research might make to conceptual understandings or to making situations more socially just (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). With the unit of analysis being the individual sport workers' lives in a distinct sport setting undergoing crisis, a narrative inquiry framework provides a useful way to articulate the lived experience of structures, systems, and processes.

Participants

Following ethical approval from the lead authors' institution,[1] a gatekeeper contacted Ukrainian professional basketball players who were playing in Europe and were willing to undertake an interview in English, a very specific and small-bounded cohort. Three players were recruited, but one withdrew due to a lack of language confidence. Two players, an average age of 30 years old, agreed to participate in virtual interviews that focused on the notable contextual events that had shaped their career in the past 4 years (e.g. COVID-19 and war). The players had long-standing professional careers in the sport, playing for teams inside and outside of Ukrainian leagues, and had been members of the national team.

The number of available participants was restricted to the small number of Ukrainian players who were outside of the country when the war started; those who chose to participate (even under the assurances of anonymity) did so by accepting a certain degree of risk and political and/or social backlash should their identities and specific individual experiences be revealed. Thus, the authorship of the narrative we have adopted, assimilating participants' data, is an additional, and important, ethical and safety precaution. To re-emphasise, this was an emotional and sensitive situation with due care taken to ensure an appropriate ethical approach. This included (1) the ability for participants to skip uncomfortable questions; (2) the ability to halt and/or discontinue the interview at any time; (3) signposting and emphasis on utilising relevant support services (e.g. trauma counselling, mental health advice/support, or wider pastoral care); and (4) participants were given copies of the transcripts and were invited to remove information that they later felt uncomfortable disclosing (but, in this particular case, no changes were made). In addition, counselling support was available for the lead researcher through their institution.

Data collection

Interviews were used as a means of generating 'texts' and interpretations of an individual's social world and life experiences (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). Akin to Mertova and Webster (2019), interviews and wider reading and interrogation of the events informed how we constructed and detailed time, place, and plot structures.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom and were in English. Both were 90 min in duration, recorded and transcribed. The interviews were largely unstructured; however, prompts were used to encourage the participant(s) to elaborate, provide detail or examples, and explore memories and understandings of their experiences (Chase, 2011; Clandinin and Murphy, 2007). For participants, it was convenient to communicate their experience, through stories, which enabled them to tell what they wanted to tell in the way they wanted the experiences illustrated. As an example, following a prompt such as 'where were you when the war started?', participants spoke for 9–11 min uninterrupted, which made it clear that these were visceral and natural responses that were embodied, resonated profoundly in who they understood their realities, and were being enacted in the very moment.

In keeping with scholars (Chase, 2011; Dowling, 2012), we recognise participants had agendas for sharing their stories. As political tools, stories can mobilise audiences to challenge unacceptable social practices and/or persuade individuals to support a specific point of view (Dowling, 2012). Opting to stay out of Ukraine and not serve as soldiers, their role was to draw the world's attention to the war, so participating in this project was one way in which they could do so.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were read numerous times with the lead author focusing on content relating to the Russian–Ukraine war. From this, attention was placed on critical moments, reactions to events, key decisions, or dilemmas. Approaches to storytelling may not, we appreciate, follow patterns that are coherent, logical, and chronological. For example, jumping around

times, places, and events. Yet, to author a narrative from a player's perspective in which the emotion, attention, and emphasis were as best reflected as they could be via a researcher inter-mediary, these data were organised chronologically, with the lead researcher inevitably shaping what was included and excluded (Riessman, 1993). Therefore, the resultant narrative was an amalgamation of direct quotes from the transcripts with the authors interjecting with connecting words and phrases to improve readability. In this narrative, we opted to present the data as one voice as it was the most meaningful way to demonstrate the shared and complementary experi-ence of crises. In keeping with Munslow (2010), who emphasises the empirical and conceptual value of authoring a 'story space' that entails the researchers' careful crafting of participant data and ideas, we created our narrative. The rationale was to centre the power of voice through a unified and unifiable narrative, rather than a two-player dialogue. The value in doing so, as scho-lars such as Booth (2012) have noted, was to illuminate theoretically and contextually rich, nuanced, and well-informed explanations.

The focus of the narrative was not on whether the discussion was an accurate reflection of the events, but the meaning(s) participants attached to these events (Hammersley, 2008). In narrative inquiry, the storyteller aims to create an evocative, engaging, and explanatory way to link disconnected data (Dowling et al., 2015). Thus, construction of the narrative was important because it (re)presented a version of an experience/s that was presented in a particular way (which includes choice of voice and tone, language and style, editing, refinements, clarification, and possible explicit and implicit omissions by the participants). To help readers navigate the narrative, we have broken it into three parts: part one which includes the build-up and 'commencement' of the war, part two involves initial actions and 'creation' of the league, and part three, 'continuation' of the war and its enduring effects.

A narrative on professional sport in troubled times: players' recollections of and through the crisis

Part 1: Commencement

Murmurs about war started at the beginning of January; no one took it seriously; we thought it was some kind of political propaganda. But then the discussions increased and the foreign players on the team started to get worried because their families, who were watching TV in the USA, told them that war would be starting. And then at the beginning of February, every day it was more news and the feeling that maybe something will happen. When the Russian army moved to the borders of Ukraine, the American players said they should leave. However, our president, who had done a great job with the team said, 'We don't really believe that war will start, but we need to continue to play in the Champions League so, if you are panicking and thinking of leaving, we can have a training camp in another country and wait to see what will happen in Ukraine'. So, we left the country on the 14th of February and went to Czechia. The coach chose this location because he had worked there and had connections, so it was easy to organise everything quickly. On the 13th of February after morning practice our president called us to a meeting. He said 'Guys, we have a plane tomorrow to Czechia, to Prague for a two-week training camp. If you want to take someone with

you, just give, give our GM the names of those who go with you'. So, I flew with my wife and child, and yeah, we went there and I have not gone back to Ukraine.

Looking back, it's crazy how quickly we did this, but the timing worked. We were practicing for a week and then four or five players on the team also played for the national team so we had to go to the World Cup qualifiers. So, on the 20th of February, we left Czechia for the Ukrainian national team training camp in Malaga for games scheduled on the 24th and the 27th.

And on the 24th of February, do you know what happened? The war started.

I remember when I went to sleep, it was like midnight and my brother texted me 'They closed the airport'. I was scared because in a normal situation, nobody closes an airport. But, they cancelled all the flights at 10:00 or 11:00 pm and he was asking, should I leave?

When I go to sleep, I always put my phone on silent. It was like 4:00 in the morning when I awakened, not because of the ringing, but because the phone was lighting up with notifications. Messages kept arriving. And when I woke up, I could hear noises in the corridor of the hotel. People had started knocking on doors. Like, did you see what's going on? And I couldn't believe it, the war had really started. I immediately called my family to find out if everybody was safe. I was worried because a lot of the messages I was receiving said most of the city had been bombed.

We immediately got everyone to go to the hotel reception. My wife was at a nearby hotel, but when she heard the news, she came to my hotel. She said she was feeling so uncomfortable at that time because when she got there, she could see huge guys, two metres tall, with their phones, crying because they were trying to get their kids and wives out.

Normally on the day of a game, we have a morning shoot-around. Given the situation, we let the coach know that we would not practice. But we weren't talking about whether we should play or not. We were in Spain, everything was scheduled, and it was a chance to tell the world what had happened. When our national team went to the gym for the game, we were totally out of focus because our minds were in Ukraine, but we understood that we should play and give what we could to send the message that we should fight. We played terrible basketball. Of course, we lost. After the game, we called our GM to find out what we were going to do next and were told that the Spanish Federation had offered to help. They paid for us to stay in the hotel for a few more days to give us time to decide what we should do.

In Ukraine, in the first 2 or 3 days from the start of the war, you could not leave the country because everyone else was trying to get out. There was no gas, no nothing. Most of the people leaving were mothers with their children, including my sister and her children. And at that time, it took almost 3 days for them to travel 700-800 kilometres to the border. They said the buses were driving slowly because of the traffic, and they had to sleep where they could – they even spent the night in a school. It was a bad, bad situation. I left Spain to move to the border to meet them and as soon as I saw them and knew they were safe, I felt I could breathe normally. Yet Russia continued to bomb everything everywhere and we didn't understand what was going on.

Part 2: Creation

When I left Spain to meet my family, my team was still situated in Czechia, preparing for the Champions League, so this is where we went.

The first two weeks in Czechia, everyone was shocked. No one was thinking about basketball. We tried to work, but it was almost impossible to focus. So, we just tried to play basketball to continue a normal life, but as soon as practice finished, the nightmare continued.

My team had six Ukrainians and a Czech head coach, two Lithuanian assistants, some Americans, and another Czech. For sure they cared about Ukrainian players, but our problems were not their problems, and this distance was important for us. If it was a team of 12 Ukrainians, it would have been so hard. But if you have like five or six Ukrainian guys in the team and all others are from different countries, the balance helped.

Early in March, the club's management decided it's not a good time to continue when our country is in such a bad situation. They said the money for the team should be used to support our army, our soldiers, and our people and were sorry. From that moment our club disappeared. And I can fully understand – why would you keep the club if you don't know that Ukraine will exist next month? And that was it. The coach helped players find contracts because he had a big name and a lot of connections. Also, because we had a great season in the Champions League, most of the players were picked up by other teams and continued to play out the season. Other clubs also helped – they gave contracts to injured players so they would have a place to go and provided accommodation for player's families and relatives who had left Ukraine.

At the end of May, my father went to my club apartment in Ukraine to return a few things for me. I called the GM to tell him, and he said 'don't rush signing anywhere because maybe the team can come back'. Nobody could understand how we could come back and, for sure, we couldn't play in Ukraine because the league had been cancelled.

It turns out that the president and sponsor came together and said, 'let's do something special' Like, 'let's surprise everyone. Let's put Ukrainian basketball on the map. We can continue to talk about war, but we can also keep doing what we can'. And the sponsor had the resources for that. First, they called the management of the Latvian-Estonian basketball league. Previously, they had supported the Ukrainian national team in their preparation for Eurobasket, so the team management asked the league if our team could join. The league had plans to enter the bigger European competitions – it's supposed to be Champions League or Europa Cup – and they were happy to have us. And from that moment, they started to set up the club.

The Latvian-Estonian league is connected across the two countries so it wouldn't be strange to have Latvia and Estonia plus Ukraine. For sure the situation is still unbelievable that it was possible for us to continue the team and to keep playing. Everyone is hugely thankful to them for accepting us. But different to other countries, for them, it's not that painful to involve us. For example, if we're playing in a league that is only in one country, let's say Latvia, to invite a Ukrainian team to be part of the league for the season, there's a risk of having a Ukrainian club as champion of Latvia. It sounds stupid, but it's different if it's a connected league. So, we have found a nice place.

All our families are with us, with the players, everybody is here. We fit in the league, but we also fit in the country, so that makes everything a bit easier. There are a lot of Ukrainian kids in the kindergartens, and some of the teachers are also Ukrainians so it helps us try to continue a normal life. It's not just my life, you know, it is the life of my family.

We were a Ukrainian team living in Latvia. When we played our first game in Europe, people, like the opposing teams were saying 'what the hell? How is a Ukrainian club here and how do you have such a good team?' And playing in the EuroCup, we see Ukrainian people because Ukrainians are now all over the world. And it's good when you see them supporting you, but you understand that they are not tourists. They're just escaping and running from war. So, it's in your head from two sides, like 'Ohh Ukrainians. Did they leave? Because maybe this happened to them or their families?'

Next season we will continue to play with the Latvian-Estonian Basketball League, but who knows what will happen next. One thing is that in the Latvian-Estonian league, our Ukrainian roster is like the domestic roster and our team, so we could have foreigners. This applied to this year, and for the next year, it is likely. Also, a Latvian or Estonian player can be added to the Ukrainian roster and count as a domestic player. This rule helps otherwise the cap on foreign players is painful because it limits clubs in other leagues taking on Ukrainian players. But, if other leagues around Europe would consider Ukrainians as domestic players, it could help Ukrainian players who are not in their country to get contracts. It wouldn't be too much or overload other teams or the league because we don't have too many Ukrainian players at a high level. Still, this support would really help.

I cannot go home, because according to the constitution, I should go into the army. So, if I went back to Ukraine, they would give me the papers to join the army. And me? I'm not a warrior, I'm a basketball player. And I can give more as a professional basketball player to support our army than I could by fighting. By playing for the national team and wearing the Ukrainian flag, I'm showing the world that Ukrainians are still fighting, and they have the right to live a normal life without any occupation, without war. So, I cannot cross the border.

Part 3: Continuation

The game still goes on in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Basketball Federation stopped the league at the start of the war, but they resumed it in the 2022/23 season. I have huge respect for the players in this league. They started in October or November [2022], with eight teams and only a regular season. It was made up of a lot of guys who played in the first league and couldn't officially leave the country. It is unbelievable that they are playing! They have league rules that if you are playing and it's like in the middle of the third quarter and there is an air alert, you should go to the bomb shelter and if the air alert is more than two hours, the game is postponed or cancelled. If it's one hour and 55 minutes, you're sitting in a bomb shelter and the air alert is off, you finish the game. So, there were a lot of games like that. But salaries? It was just enough money to exist. You could put food on the table, that's it. There were no big contracts. Some clubs even had Americans this year! It was American players who needed to play somewhere for like, you know, €1000 or something.

Also, no fans are allowed. Instead, the games are covered by video broadcast. It's a bit strange because people were allowed to go to the cinema, but in the cinema, they have bomb shelters so if there is an air alert, everyone goes there. The gyms that we have in Ukraine are old or small because the war is destroying most of the buildings, and there's no room to put a bomb shelter.

For the players outside of Ukraine, it is strange. We left everything in our country so it's a little bit different and difficult to be away for such a long time. The Latvian Federation has given us a lot of support and said that they will continue to do this. So, for basketball, I think we have everything we need right now. But thinking about the future, for sure we will need help, but first, we need to stop the war.

Discussion

The geopolitical conflict in Ukraine bears its own hallmarks and the situation remains in flux. Accordingly, the learnings and understanding we draw from the context and participants' experiences are evolving. Nonetheless, our engagement with those in this space has opened questions about how professional sport is undertaken and what new possibilities can/might manifest when conditions and forces change. Specifically, and rehearsing wider work on athletes' embodied praxis and cultural learning in sport (Allen-Collinson, 2009, 2017; Barker-Ruchti, 2019), the narrative draws needed attention upon, in parts illustrates alternatives to, established ways of being and working in a sport. In analysing crisis response and advancing sociological and organisational framings of crisis (Shipway et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2010), it is possible to appreciate the personal costs that an immediate and drastic suspension of the normal realities of sport had and the resultant implications for the professional management of the sport (e.g. continuity of the league and club). Furthermore, in synthesising the micro/individual with meso- and macro-level approaches and frameworks, what is evident is how nuanced the experience was in terms of interactions and communications, changing priorities and expectations, and individuals' responses to organisational actions within an intensifying crisis (Zamoum and Gorpe, 2018). The narrative thus adds to appreciation of how established, definitive, and responsive individuals may be to sport systems during change and also how change can be personally managed effectively and efficiently.

In synergy with research highlighting professional athletes' abilities to find ways to work 'successfully' (Carless and Douglas, 2016; Purdy et al., 2018; Richardson and McKenna, 2020), players in this narrative utilised varied forms of capital to exercise their career survival and strategically adapt to the intensification of the circumstances, dynamic organisational changes, and unpredictable geopolitical landscape (Zamoum and Gorpe, 2018). Pronounced in this situation was the extent to which players' use of capital led to contrasting personal and professional circumstances and trajectories. For example, lower-ranking players eventually joined or remained in leagues in Ukraine for low salaries and disrupted playing conditions. The players, however, were already out of the country so they were able to employ their resources to advance their professional careers by having mobility to access leagues outside of Ukraine. Furthermore, across the enduring destabilisation of structures and norms (Zamoum and Gorpe, 2018), their focus was to reunite with members of their families who could and/or wanted to leave Ukraine during the initial months of the war. There is, thus, an evident interplay between the individual necessity and desire to ensure one's own sustainability first and foremost (as expressed in the substantial references to family security and safety), versus the logic of, and loyalties to, the team/organisation. However, such tensions are only part of a complex picture of professional players' lives. There are clear

connections players make between their court time/training/playing matches/scores and outcomes and all the 'other' components of their jobs (e.g. GM relationships and communication, contracts, accommodation, food, security, travel/transport, and league continuity) and wider lives (Culvin, 2023; Weight et al., 2021).

As seen with other forms of crises (Corrales-Estrada et al., 2021; Micouleau and Robert, 2024), beyond the individual, the situation precipitated collaborative responses across teams and leagues to ensure some degree of coordinated organisational continuity. Processes in this case were borne out of coaches, team owners, general managers, and Ukrainian, Spanish, Estonian, and Latvian federations working in synergy via their personal and professional connections (Lefebvre et al., 2021; Purdy et al., 2023). These interpersonal relationships afforded a rapid, informal, and fluid 'work-around' that made the continuity of the sport viable (Pedersen et al., 2020) and contributed to players' abilities to persevere in making career decisions as the situation escalated. Ultimately, the crisis produced a system shock that catalysed new opportunities for some players that may not have been foreseen, entertained previously, or would have necessarily transpired at such a rapid pace had the circumstances not forced a rethink and creativity about ways of working in the sector and ways the sector might work (Barrett and Shipway, 2024; Shipway et al., 2020; Zamoum and Gorpe, 2018).

The relationships between individuals and sector practices within the narrative draw out a sport-related humanitarian counterpoint to the war that sits in juxtaposition to geopolitical superstructures and actions in and beyond sport (e.g. NATO, UN, EU operations, Red Cross, and International Federation, FIBA Europe, and IOC) specifically regarding the limited investigations of professional athletes' experiences of the conflict in Ukraine (Purdy et al., 2023). Most prevalent, we feel, are the revelations offered in terms of the effects and effects of dynamic contexts and sport system change and the consequences this has wrought to the professional basketball's constituents over time. There are echoes, we appreciate, with extant sport mobility literature that has identified the abilities of sports workers to rapidly adjust to changing work settings and cultural contexts (Ungruhe and Agergaard, 2021; Ryba et al., 2018). While mobility is an established characteristic of professional sport, the crisis added further gravitas and seriousness to the decision-making and created conditions, and had consequences on what movement was and was not possible (Zamoum and Gorpe, 2018).

Whereas previously, the national basketball federation had standard structures and ways of working, the situation necessitated different types of management responses not necessarily bound by policy, procedures, and organisational/governance norms (e.g. following rules around league arrangements, competitions, and contracts). While players described how they, their peers, the organisation/club, and others in the system worked through the situation to find suitable outcomes and opportunities, their experiences illustrated responses to events as organic, ad hoc, and a unique arrangement borne out of the specific temporal, spatial, and geopolitical constraints. Reflecting the characterisation of crises as composing multi-dimensional and intertwining aspects (Zamoum and Gorpe, 2018), articulating some of these personal connections and social consequences provides means to understand and examine professional sport experiences through an individual lens, and value that organisational processes have personal consequences and dimensions.

The continued situation in Ukraine crystallises a need for a certain amount of flex in how individuals manoeuvre in sport and within the sport system itself. Given the experiences of individuals within this situation, our analysis also draws attention to extending critiques of the boundaries of sport sector responsibilities. Accordingly, future work on sustainability in sport might benefit from articulating pragmatic, structural, and process analysis of what is being managed with consideration of who is being managed, and the consequences this may have for organisational ways of doing.

Conclusion

We were compelled to write this paper following encouragement from fellow scholars (Hoeber and Shaw, 2017; Stride et al., 2017) who advocated for continued acknowledgement and exploration of research methodologies and presentation. Chohering with colleagues, for us, narrative inquiry afforded an effective and valuable approach to interrogate how societal issues are embedded within the sociological inquiries of sport organisations, governance, and development of sport (Knoppers, 2015), specifically Ukrainian male basketball players' professional career sustainability during times of war. With this focus, narrative inquiry provided an innovative and purposeful representation in that it allowed varied aspects, or different angles, of the phenomenon to be viewed (Harris, 2014). The research process has raised epistemological and methodological questions for our understanding of sport, work, and individuals' lives. For example, what is possible in professional sport in times of crises; how new precedents might be set; and what possibilities might exist outside of 'the system', or as part of a new/altered system?

Importantly, this narrative adds value to understanding professional sport by illustrating that there is considerably more to sports work beyond the performative. Moreover, in appreciating workers' experiences of crises, it is beneficial to understand how these aspects of sports work are positioned against the wider organisational and professional sport settings in which they reside. Such stories, we respect, might be told for the purposes of justification, persuasion, memory work and/or emancipation (Dowling, 2012), or advocacy, with narratives highlighting the complexities and contradictions of real life (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001). We acknowledge participants' and our own place and politics in the telling. We proffer no claim that our interpretation is the only possibility for making sense of the narrative. Furthermore, we acknowledge experiences of crises are individualised. In this case, we accept the inherent limitations of only being able to connect with two professional players who were playing outside of Ukraine. Whereas further participation may have intensified and coloured the nature of the narrative differently, it would not have altered the certainty that war happened and is happening, and that it continues to produce significant effects and affects of those individuals, organisations, and systems within the situation. Moreover, we are steadfast in our conviction that the narrative of a few voices is not of any less significance than that of the echo of a larger chorus.

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