

Foreword



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The business environment of global sports is constantly changing, which is a challenge for the Central and Eastern European region. Recently, the pandemic has disrupted the basic structures and processes of sports, accelerating previous trends in sports economy. Global sports business has responded to the challenge with a great deal of innovations. Changing practices allow for better performance, not only during the pandemic, but also in the long term. New skills, networks, fundraising opportunities, communication channels are still unfolding and appearing. Efforts to ensure sustainability in sports have gained unprecedented importance, while digitalization and sports have become inseparable.

The aim of this thematic issue is to present a diverse selection of articles on the topics of business and social innovations in international sports, embracing the different innovative research topics in the field of sports business. The papers in this collection focus specifically on the relationship between sport, business and innovation.

FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

The year 2020 saw the world turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides the health and economic consequences, countless human activities were suspended or cancelled as the virus spread across the globe. Latin America in general, and the region's sporting activities in particular were not exempt, both heavily impacted by the contagious illness. In their paper, Durán et al. show how the regular season matches of Liga Pro (Ecuador's professional football league) were rescheduled due to the disruption caused by the pandemic. As many others, this league had to reschedule its games in a much shorter period of time than originally planned. To address this problem, the authors developed two mathematical models that enabled the season to be completed in the best possible fashion within the available time, winning the approval of all stakeholders including league officials, the players, the team coaches, the TV-broadcaster and the fans.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a shock for many organizations and their employees. This is particularly true for professional sport clubs that have suffered from strict lockdowns. In many countries, sports competitions were suspended, and when they finally resumed, volumes of stadium audience were severely restricted. The stop of financial flows from fans, sponsors, and media jeopardised the financial fundamentals of many sports clubs and made their employees face new challenges and hardships, potentially impacting their careers. This career shock may have obvious negative short-term consequences (in terms of job insecurity, reduced salary, the emotional impact of social distancing, and increased general anxiety). It may also have some positive effects in short-term (new competencies or increased entrepreneurship) that may generate valuable career opportunities and outcomes for the employees and their organizations. The aim of Nessel's study is to explore these effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the career capital of sports clubs managers and personnel.

András, Tátrai and Juhász's paper focuses on the sports-related public spending in the member states of the European Union (EU). Based on data from the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), certain countries grant state aid to sports, leading to spending calls for public procurement. To that end, using the public procurement database of the European Union (TED), the paper builds a sport-related public procurement database and analyses it. The articles aims to explore the characteristics of investments in sports and to find interconnections which may help understand the forms through which procurement are state support are implemented in the EU.

The purpose of Kozma and Teker's paper is to explore whether and how ongoing innovations in the club-level operations of the English Premier League (PL) clubs may substantiate a prospective change in their business model and lead to a solution of the financial sustainability issue in professional football. Their paper is of an exploratory nature in an effort to identify the ongoing business innovations and what changes can be foreseen in future years. The empirical analysis was based on three types of data collected about innovations in PL's clubs: information systematically collected from club webpages and their Facebook pages, as well as from the top three sport business journals that feature relevant content.

The aim of Herr's study is to present the culture related to the career of athletes, as well as the people and situations influencing personal decisions and career, through her own experience as a Hungarian professional handball player. The methodology used in her research is autoethnography, which gives her the opportunity to use her inherent "database" to present the culture of the wonderful sport that has meant everything to her, including resignation, success, the ups and downs, valuable experiences and values for almost 30 years (20 years of this on a professional level).

Despite programs facilitating the organization of international sport events announced by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), six cities withdrew from competing for hosting the Olympics, including Budapest in 2017. In the same year, Hungary organised a number of major international and national sports events, such as the 2017 Water Sports World Championship and the European Youth Olympic Festival (EYOF), with 10 different sports, on a world class level and successfully exploited their tourism-related potential. In the past Olympic period, over 100 international sports events have been organised in Hungary. One of the most important success criterion of such international sports events is social support. The question arises how social support can be achieved, and how the residents of the organizing city form an opinion about the impacts of an international sports event. Mate's study answers these questions by analysing the case of the EYOF, organized in the Hungarian city of Győr.

Before the Coronavirus pandemic, the fitness industry was a growing sector globally, in terms of both the number of members and clubs. Even prior to the pandemic, there were online workouts and technological innovations, but there was also a proliferation of multi-club memberships and gyms in shopping malls. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, revenues plummeted and many gyms went out of business. Consumers bought equipment for home use and switched to different types of online or outdoor workouts. Rada and Szabó's paper asks how the pandemic affected the consumer behaviour of former gym-members.

The Esport industry is an emerging and constantly changing and developing, growing sector. The pandemic has had a significant impact on Esport and its markets, and keeps affecting the whole ecosystem. The focus of Kovács and Szabó's paper, besides Esports, is Simracing. Due to the limitations of physical events, motorsports had to convert their races to the digital



world. The article aims to collect the positive and negative changes in the Esport and Simracing world caused by the pandemic, and examine the difficulties and challenges that the industry is currently facing. The research methodology is based on in-depth interviews with a wide range of industry professionals from different backgrounds, in order to compare theory with real life practice. The results show that Esports and Simracing still need to be improved to become more economically sustainable. Despite the difficulties, Esports will be a major player in the digital world. It is a question whether a hybrid structure could work in the future, and whether it could be strengthened by grassroots or other initiatives.

I would like to thank the authors of this thematic issue for their insightful contributions, as well as the editors of Society and Economy in Central and Eastern Europe for providing an outlet for this collection. On behalf of all authors, we look forward to receiving feedback from, and engaging in fruitful discussions with the readers of this issue.

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