

The Most Thought-Provoking Sports Research Findings Of 2020And What They Mean For The Future Of Sport

2020 has been a year unlike any other. And with all of the challenges it has brought, so too has it brought interesting fields of study in sports research. It's been a year marked by the impact of COVID-19, athlete activism and transformational technology in sport.

From mental health to sustaining sport as we know it, this year has given us sport research findings to think about which really change the game. Here are some of the most intriguing research themes of the year, which we'll see a lot more of in 2021 and beyond.

Human rights in sport

While it's easy to think of athletes as superhumans, the reality is that they can be vulnerable to many human rights violations. A recent [Global Athletes Survey](#) of 491 athletes from 48 countries illuminated that sporting organizations need to invest in supporting athletes' rights, with the top concerns of athletes being verbal abuse, racial vilification, unfair team selection and the fear of retribution. Meanwhile, an [independent enquiry](#) found that perpetrators of sexual abuse of minors have often used sport as a cover, exploiting children's vulnerabilities. The groundbreaking [USA Gymnastics v Nasser](#) and Penn State cases revealed the extent of this issue in sport, the structural and power barriers to reporting incidents, and the urgent prioritization of governance needed in sport. With Caster Semenya losing her appeal based upon discrimination with the Court of Arbitration of Sport against the restriction of testosterone levels in female runners, inclusion of "Disorders of Sex Development Athletes" (DSD) is dependent on a complex balance among sporting fairness, inclusion and safety.

Athlete activism

In a year that could be defined by its activism, so too could its athletes. Civil rights activist and NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick began protesting against social injustice by kneeling, rather than standing, for the American national anthem ahead of football games, and in 2020 his protests against police brutality and racial injustice received renewed attention amid the killing of George Floyd in the US. This year, many high-

profile sports people joined the silent protest, with players from the NFL, soccer and the AFL taking a knee. Research into the public perception of the effects of athlete activism this year, using Kaepernick as a case study, found that people with more positive attitudes toward the protesting athlete, also had more positive attitudes toward the idea that was being endorsed by the athlete. Another study on Athlete activism and consumer behaviour found that consumers held negative response towards politically activist athletes, when the stance was incompatible with the personal political beliefs of those viewing the messaging, but that this backlash did not extend to the athlete's team. Megan Rapinoe and the US women's World Cup-winning soccer team epitomised possibilities for female athletes to use their unique sports platform in advocating for gender equality and equal pay by suing the national soccer federation and Para athlete activism was also observed to be a powerful tool for social change and inclusion.

Mental health and wellbeing in sport

This year, the International Society of Sport Psychology conducted a Think Tank to assess the current status and future outlook for the mental health and wellbeing of athletes. The Think Tank, made up of a wealth of experts including clinical sport psychologists, professors and professional sport organisations, proposed that mental health is a core component in the pursuit of athletic excellence, and therefore that the demands of training should be balanced with mental health support. The panel also recommended from their findings that mental health in a sport context should be better defined and more comprehensive assessment strategies be developed- that mental wellbeing is more than the absence of ill mental health, and a major resource for the whole athletic career.

The business of sport during COVID

The Covid-19 affected the sports economy across the world like nothing ever has - and the unexpected event cancellations, crowd -free venues and lost revenue raised big questions about the business model which sport relies on and the sustainability of it going forward. One study found that sports administrators have been able to make their businesses sustainable by reducing costs and increasing their use of digital communication and technology to combat this, and other studies suggest more optimal and resilient sport ownership structures and building of resilience through embedding entrepreneurial culture. Alternative revenue streams have been established through diversification into esports, licensing of analytics technology establishment of venture capital funds and over the top streaming. The re-thinking of the sports experience to integrate both virtual and offline engagement and crowd-sourcing of fan social media has also been a key research focus. However, the vulnerability of sport revealed this

year suggests a need for long-term analysis to confirm the 'new normal' sport business model embodying innovation, resilience and sustainability.

Sponsorship in sport

Authenticity of sponsorship matters. A study published in 2020 examined the public's perception of authenticity of sport sponsor-event partnerships and found that significant differences were found between healthy, unhealthy and corporate social responsibility sponsorships. It showed that sponsorship associations do affect consumer feelings toward the sport event as a whole. Scrutiny from policy makers in relation to harmful product sponsorship of sports continues to apply, and prevalence of these sponsorships was revealed in the burgeoning online gaming sector of esports in research published this year. Sponsorship evaluation has extended to positive stock market impacts at pre-announcement, and A new book release is a valuable tool, including enhanced internal branding impacts upon employee morale and productivity in a revised model on how sponsorship works.

Sports analytics predictive models

Recent trends for Data Science, Data Mining Algorithms, Machine Learning and Data Mining have made way for these techniques to be applied to in-depth sport analytics. A study in November 2020 looked at the applications of these in the NBA, and found that basketball analytics can be used for team composition, athlete career improvement and assessing how this could be materialized for future predictions - and therefore, that these metrics are a strong tool for decision makers for team and player forecasting and to make better choices for team composition in the future.

Sports Law: Inadvertent Doping and Strict Liability

The back end of 2020 has seen a lot of action in sports law, with Australian swimmer, Brenton Rickard returning a positive test eight years after allegedly inadvertently ingesting a banned substance through an over the counter drug during the London Olympics in 2012. The case provides much substantiation for ongoing commentary concerning the controversial World Anti-Doping Code rule, permitting re-testing of athlete samples up to 10 years after their collection. The case raises questions concerning the capacity for an athlete to bring relevant evidence so long after the original sampling; the increased sensitivity of detection compared to relatively unsophisticated pharmaceutical package labelling 8 years ago; the fairness of a strict liability doctrine in circumstances of inadvertent ingestion; and proportionality of the sanction, including significant reputational damage and medal stripping of team members, in addition to the athlete. The setting aside of the doping conviction against Chinese swimmer, Sun Yang, by the Swiss Federal Supreme Court this week

showcased the importance of procedural fairness and justice in doping disputes, with the athlete successfully appealing on grounds of bias. The case is extraordinary for many reasons, and elevates the need for more research into the complexity of anti-doping, and rights of athletes, also reflected in research published this year.

Sport Diplomacy

In a globalised, rapidly evolving political and economic landscape, the soft power of sport is being increasingly leveraged by government and business as a high profile and cost-effective asset to build national reputation, brand and image. While much of sport diplomacy research has focused upon sporting mega-events, professional sport and high profile athletes, the field has more recently focused upon the contribution of grassroots sports to public diplomacy.