Crime and Misconduct in Sport

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The global pandemic of 2020 brought about the suspension of almost all sporting activity. From grassroots sport through to elite competitions, the sporting world effectively ended. At the time of writing (early May 2020), there are tentative plans to restart some elite competitions, with the German Bundesliga and the Australian National Rugby League both announcing that competitions will recommence shortly. In both cases, the plan is to play games for a television audience only, in near-empty stadiums. In the months and years to come, it is likely that Sport in Society will see considerable debate as to the logistical problems in restarting sporting competition during and after a pandemic. For example, as spectators will not be able to attend matches and so there will be no game-day revenues. The purpose of competing is almost entirely to fulfill contractual obligations to television companies and sponsors, not because of any consideration for fans. It is also likely that the journal will see considerable debate as to the social and ethical problems of recommencing sporting competitions. For example, whilst players will need to be tested for COVID-19 on a regular basis, tests for first responders (medical staff, police, etc.) are currently in short supply.

Such problems beg questions as to the role of sport in modern society: Is it even appropriate to be planning sporting events while many are sick and dying? It is illustrative that while the organising committee of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic games prevaricated on whether or not the games would go ahead as scheduled (they eventually rescheduled the games to 2021), media reports were quick to argue that athletes would be so committed to competing that the threat of COVID-19 would scarcely be a deterrent. Astute readers will not be surprised to learn that the main evidence for this claim was the *Goldman dilemma*, a thoroughly debunked myth (Moston, Hutchinson, and Engelberg 2017) that suggests that athletes would willingly sacrifice their own lives in pursuit of sporting glory.

The use of such worn out tropes highlights a clear willingness in some sections of the media to believe the worst about modern athletes.

The cessation and (we must assume) eventual recommencement of sport following the pandemic will inevitably prompt a major reassessment of the role of sport in modern society. Until recently, the assumption that sport serves an important positive social function and that it is a powerful cultural force, has largely gone unchallenged. Many years ago, the manager of Liverpool Football Club, Bill Shankly, was reported to have said: “Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I don't like that attitude. I can assure them it is much more serious than that.” During the pandemic, the current manager of Liverpool FC, Jürgen Klopp, updated the sentiment when he said that “football always seems the most important of the least important things. Today, football and football matches really aren’t important at all” (Klopp 2020).

The cessation of sporting activity has clearly served to highlight some of the inequities in modern sport. For example, during the pandemic many elite players have continued to be paid even though they are not competing. This has prompted government ministers (most notably in the United Kingdom), and members of the media (again, most notably in the United Kingdom), to question whether athletes should receive such high wages whilst non-playing staff have been made redundant, or placed on enforced furloughs (leave without pay). In some countries, such as Australia, elite athletes have been asked (sometimes forced) to take pay cuts to subsidise the wages of non-playing staff. There has also been an implicit expectation that elite players should also sacrifice their wages to support local health services. Curiously, such arguments are only rarely made for other highly paid groups.

The media focus on payments to elite athletes undoubtedly reflects many of the underlying problems in society (most obviously, racism), but it also highlights the expectation that elite athletes are role models, and that organised sport is expected to be a

positive influence on society. This then, ostensibly, justifies the recommencement of elite sport long before other parts of society (e.g., grassroots sport) have yet to even consider the resumption of activity.

Such a position is surprising as there is evidence that sport exerts a negative influence on society. For example, in a summary of the research, Liston et al. (2017) found that sporting environments are places where violence against women can occur both directly and indirectly, through the entrenching of violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours. Similarly, another review paper (Engelberg and Moston 2016b) showed that sexual harassment in sport was so pervasive that even students studying sport science and sport journalism were more likely to be sexually harassed than students in other disciplines. Furthermore, women in sport appear to be more accepting of such behaviours than women in other contexts, such as the workplace or academia. Incredibly, sexual harassment might even be perceived as a normal part of sport (Australian Sports Commission 2001).

Despite such problems, sport has become one of the primary social engineering tools used to build communities and to prevent social problems (see Richards and May 2018). However, the evidence base for such initiatives is surprisingly scant. In a compendium of programs, Our Watch (2017) identified 28 current sports-based programs and initiatives aimed at preventing violence against women. The evidence base for these programs and initiatives was limited. Only four of the programs were classified as *good practice* (the program has been evaluated and the results published in a refereed source); another four were classified as *promising practice* (program has been evaluated and results published in a non-refereed source); and the remaining 20 had not been evaluated.

Almost 30 years ago, Robins (1990) argued that advocates of sport programs aimed at reducing or preventing youth crime were often “propelled by a sort of aggressive optimism” (p.26) and that the allocation of public money into sport-based interventions was

premised on research that lacked both validity and rigour. Little appears to have changed in the intervening period. More recently, Armstrong and Hodges-Ramon (2015) repeated those same accusations, suggesting that policy in the area appears to be based on isolated 'successes' (but not isolated 'failures') and nostalgic evidence, rather than rigorous evidence.

While many of the criminological issues facing sport have been extensively studied in other contexts, their occurrence in the context of sport presents some unique and complex challenges. For example, the Australian Crime Commission (2013) alleged that some coaches and support staff were actively facilitating the introduction of organised crime into sporting markets. This is undoubtedly not a new problem. In many discussions about crime and sport it is inherently assumed that sport exerts the power to corrupt. In essence, otherwise law-abiding people become indoctrinated into patterns of behaviour that develop into increasingly serious criminal actions. Researchers have compared the criminal attitudes and behaviours of athletes and non-athletes across a variety of different offence types (Nichols and Crow 2004, Nichols 2007) . However, the results of such studies have been equivocal, with some suggesting that athletes are more likely to commit criminal behaviour (Chandler, Johnson, and Carroll 1999, Kudlac 2010), others suggesting exactly the opposite (Ward 1999), and yet others have suggested that the relationship varies with offence type (Caruso 2011, Veliz and Shakib 2012).

Efforts to tackle problems in sport have often been undermined by the sporting industry, which has largely attempted to conceal the practice and extent of crime and misconduct. For example, actions such as on-field violence which would be deemed as criminal in other contexts, quite incredibly, might be are seen as a *normal* part of elite sport (Pedersen et al. 2009). Misconduct may even be used in media campaigns to promote public interest in sporting contests (e.g., rugby league is frequently promoted with images of on-field violence).

To date, there have been several analyses of the criminal histories of players. For example, studies in the USA (Benedict 2004, 1997) and Australia (Wilson, Stavros, and Westberg 2008) reveal that many sporting teams feature a disproportionately high number of players with criminal convictions (Crosset, Benedict, and McDonald 1995). Despite the widespread media coverage given to criminal and non-criminal misconduct by athletes, public reactions to such incidents are somewhat muted. In part, this may be explained by 'tribal' allegiances where misconduct by one's own team is condoned, but similar behaviour by a rival team member is condemned (Cialdini et al. 1976, Dietz-Uhler and Murrell 1999). A related possibility is that inconsistent or distorted media reporting of sporting controversies might influence opinion. For example, the reporting (or non-reporting) of offences may be linked to the media's sponsorship of a sport.

Confronted with the public relations problems posed by athlete misconduct, many governments and, to a lesser extent, sporting organisations, have advocated that non-criminal offences (e.g., doping, on-field violence) be treated as criminal matters, with offences investigated by police officers (Moston and Engelberg 2016). The sporting industry is increasingly coming to be seen as one that has failed to adequately deal with its own problems, and that external agencies such as the police, are now required to intervene.

There are currently multiple threats to the integrity of sport and the extent to which the sporting community recognises and responds to these threats is only superficially understood. The failure to deter doping (Moston and Engelberg 2016), let alone more serious forms of misconduct, suggests that current strategies to deter and detect crime and misconduct suffer from a severe credibility problem. Consequently, such problems are likely to intensify in both number and severity in the coming years.

The current Special Issue called for papers to identify the type and scale of crime and misconduct in sport, and to offer possible solutions to those problems. As such,

this Special Issue fits within what has become known as “dark side research” (Parnitzke Smith and Freyd 2014). That is, research on phenomena which many might wish it did not exist. Sporting authorities often avoid conducting dark side research because it generates an unwanted dilemma: if a problem is found, some action to deal with it may be required. Conversely, a failure to conduct research ensures that the unwanted dilemma never arises. The lack of research on the prevalence of sexual harassment in sport is illustrative: the last study of this issue in Australia was conducted over twenty years ago (Australian Sports Commission 2001). There has been little to no interest in conducting any new research despite national data suggesting the problem is highly prevalent in general society.

The current Special Issue

The purpose of the current Special Issue is to bring together new research that exposes the dark side of sport, revealing causes, prevalence, consequences, and solutions for such conduct. We have a longstanding interest in such issues, having spent most of the last ten years studying doping in sport (e.g., Engelberg and Moston 2016a, Engelberg, Moston, and Skinner 2012, Moston, Engelberg, and Skinner 2015). Please note here that, depending on which country you live in, doping may be a crime, or a form of misconduct. It is hoped that the Special Issue will provide a focal point for new crime and misconduct in sport research that helps to move the field beyond non-rigorous evidence sources. It also contributes to the growing body of (mainly anecdotal) evidence that prompts the question: is sport the cure, or is it the cause?

There are six papers in this Special Issue, a relatively small number which may reflect the general reluctance to conduct problem-based research in sport (there simply aren’t that many researchers in the field). However, the quality of the papers is high and the contributions significant. The methodologies fall into two broad categories: archival data and qualitative data (including case studies, interviews and focus groups). Conducting research on

crime and misconduct is not inherently any harder than in other areas, with the single proviso that sporting authorities will probably not support or endorse such research (we told you it was hard!). However, this problem can be overcome through the methodologies employed here.

Before addressing the main arguments of each paper, we would like to highlight the 18 authors whose work is featured here. Seven authors were from the United Kingdom, four from France, three from Australia, two from the United States of America and one each from Canada and Ireland.

The first paper is "Measuring the violence and incivility of players in professional sport and the disciplinary bodies' management: statistical analysis of French professional football' by Willem Ruppé, Olivier Sirost, Christophe Durand and Nadine Dermit. This paper, based on 10 years of archival data (comprising 6027 observations), examines incidents of violent and otherwise inappropriate behaviour by French professional football players and the penalties applied for those behaviours. We would like to highlight the efforts that went into developing a framework for analysing the data in this study. As researchers, we appreciate the complexities of such a task and duly acknowledge those efforts. As to the findings, the objective data shows little change in violent and uncivil behaviours, but this jars with media reports suggesting there are increasing numbers of scandals. Perceptions of crime and misconduct can differ from objective truth. This is an ongoing issue that pervades most research in this field.

The second paper is 'The emergence and perpetuation of a destructive culture in an elite sport in the United Kingdom' by Niels Feddersen, Robert Morris, Martin Littlewood and David Richardson. Once again, we acknowledge the efforts of the research team as they conducted an impressive multi-method (16 month) longitudinal study involving athletes, coaches and other key stakeholders. The antagonism between the various groups,

including examples of deception and manipulation, revealed here is remarkable. That such behaviours can be rationalised and destigmatised helps to explain how destructive cultures in sport can be created and then maintained.

The third paper is 'When women athletes transgress: an exploratory study of image repair and social media response' by Rachel Allison, Ann Pegoraro, Evan Frederick and Ashleigh-Jane Thompson. Featuring two case studies (Abby Wambach and Maria Sharapova) the paper shows some of image repair strategies that famous athletes employ after transgressions are detected. We have previously conducted studies on similar themes (Moston and Engelberg 2019) and particularly enjoyed seeing the use of Benoit's image repair theory (e.g., Benoit 1997) and a strong demonstration of how it can be applied to sporting transgressions. The identification of the specific image repair strategies employed by the athletes is important, so too the demonstration of how audiences (e.g., Facebook users) readily accepted and built upon those strategies.

The fourth paper is *'Life at the edge: exploring male athlete criminality'* by Lucy Sheppard-Marks, Richard Shipway and Lorraine Brown. In this paper ten (male) athletes who had committed criminal offences (prior to or during their athletic careers) were interviewed. Once again, as researchers who have conducted interviews with those who have transgressed (Engelberg, Moston, and Skinner 2015), we know that participant recruitment in such situations is extremely difficult, so we were suitably impressed with the methodology. The findings, expressed in part through a model of (male) athlete criminality will help guide future research studies, including studies of female athlete criminality.

The fifth paper is 'Regulating unsanctioned violence in Australian sport: time for Vamplew 2.0?' by Annette Greenhow & Matthew Raj. Springboarding from a notorious Australian case on on-field violence, the authors then review attempts to measure attitudes towards sport related violence (i.e., 'Vamplew 1.0'), before detailing Australian criminal

legislation and exploring how this might link to sporting violence. The quality of the legal analysis here is excellent and those materials will undoubtedly be of considerable value to non-legal scholars. Throughout this paper the logic and the writing are of the highest caliber. We applaud and support the resulting call for a Vamplew 2.0

The final paper is 'The impact of sports participation on crime in England between 2012 and 2015' by Stephen Brosnan. After reading the first five papers, readers might be wondering whether do we really want sport to resume post COVID-19? If so, reading Brosnan's paper might be a useful counterpoint to the preceding five papers. Drawing on four years of archival data from England, Brosnan shows that participation in sport was associated with lower rates of crime (particularly violent crime). The paper also shows that other factors, most notably socioeconomic conditions, should be factored into any attempts to link sport to crime.

While most readers will read the papers in this Special Issue in isolation, we believe that as a combined body of work they highlight many of the problems of conducting research on this contentious topic, but also the possible rewards that can come from such studies. So, in conclusion, once more we would like to thank each of these authors for their hard work in drafting and revising the papers. It was a pleasure to work with you all and we offer our sincere thanks.

We would also like to thank the reviewers. Your timely (most cases!) and insightful (most cases!) commentaries helped to enhance the quality of the work presented here. The authors made clear to us that they while sometimes they found the feedback to be challenging, in each case manuscripts were greatly improved by the reviews.

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