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## THE PANDEMIC CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT ON SPORT

**Abstract.** The article describes the changes in the functioning of media-dependent professional and competitive sport caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It addresses the strong dependence of sport on electronic media; the consequences of a break in the production of sports broadcasts for the media, sports organisations and athletes; and pandemic remedial strategies. A discussion of the role of sport in contemporary consumer culture and its importance in the development and reduction of the impact of the pandemic is also presented.

**Keywords:** sport, media, COVID-19, consumption, sports fans.

## KRYZYS PANDEMICZNY I JEGO WPŁYW NA SPORT

**Abstrakt.** W artykule dokonano opisu wywołanych pandemią COVID-19 zmian w funkcjonowaniu sportu wyczynowego i profesjonalnego prezentowanego w mediach. Wskazane zostało silne uzależnienie sportu od mediów elektronicznych, jego skutki w sytuacji przerwy w produkcji sportowych widowisk dla samych mediów, organizacji sportowych i sportowców oraz pandemiczne strategie zaradcze. Przedstawiona została także dyskusja nad rolą sportu we współczesnej kulturze konsumpcyjnej i jego znaczenie dla rozwoju i ograniczania skutków pandemii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sport, media, COVID-19, konsumpcja, kibice.

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The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the scale of the decades-long progressive dependence of sport, in its professional and media versions, on mass media. The establishment, in the early 1990s, of a collaboration between the English men's football Premier League, with Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB television corporation and the transformation of the European Cup into the Champions League was a very important stage in the medialisation of sport in Europe. It helped to accelerate the creation of the sports-media industry as we know it today (Borges 2019: 276) and its development into the hyper-commodified version of the relationship between global sport and consumer culture indicated by Giulianotti and Numerato (2018). According to King (2002: 109–112), the integration of sport into the logic of the free market in this way had, in addition to its economic effects, also a great symbolic significance and accelerated the development of a new culture of football consumption. As manifestations of the medialisation of sport, Mosz (2011: 166) considered

the widespread presence of sports content in the mass media, the influence of the media on the structure and course of sporting events, the dependence of sports funding on its media appeal, the celebrity status given to idols of contemporary sport, the use of sports symbolism for non-sports marketing purposes, and the formation of a media audience for sporting events.

The rising number of televised broadcasts of sports competitions, the increasing number of broadcast hours, and the numerous rebroadcasts and representations of competitions, have enlarged the size of the sports audience. In terms of territorial coverage and audience numbers, this was particularly true for mega sporting events such as the Olympic Games or the World Cup. With each successive Olympic Games (comparing successive summer and winter games separately), the number of viewers of the final Olympic competition managed by the IOC has risen, and in the last decade or so there has been an additional increase in the diversity of viewing methods, communication channels and types of device. The Beijing Games in 2008 were already watched on television and the Internet. The London Games (2012) saw the widespread use of small mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. By the time of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, attention was already being drawn to the increased consumption of Olympic sporting competitions via social media (IOC 2016). Thus, according to the IOC, the 2016 Games were the most watched (the most consumed) Games in the history of these competitions, taking into account both television consumption (more than 113,000 hours of TV coverage on 584 TV channels) and registered use of online platforms and social media. According to data presented by the IOC, broadcasts of the Rio de Janeiro Games were watched by half of the world's population, and online viewing of Olympic competitions doubled that of the 2012 London Games (over 243,000 hours of online broadcasts and a 198.6% increase in this value compared to the London Games; IOC 2016: 4). For the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, the corresponding increase in the number of hours of

coverage of Olympic competitions compared to the 2014 Sochi Games, for TV and Internet coverage combined, was 38% (IOC 2018).<sup>1</sup>

Despite the examples identified above of the increasing scale of sports consumption via the Internet and social media, for this cultural field, it is still television that is the main source of sports content and largely the monopoly medium for the direct audiovisual transmission of sporting competition. Goldman and Hedlund (2020: 373) note that sport represents one of the last 'bastions' of satellite television, which continues to dominate the live broadcast of sporting events (live broadcast with new content), even if the same content is streamed simultaneously or presented with a delay also on the Internet and social media. The increase in the importance of social media and the number of viewers of sporting events who use these platforms, as can be seen, for example, in the case of viewing reports for the Olympic Games, is a permanent phenomenon, but has not yet resulted in the marginalisation of television and televised sports broadcasting.

With the high degree of mediatisation of sport and its great presence in consumer culture, the global pandemic situation caused huge problems for broadcasters of sports competitions and, in a domino effect, for all organisationally and economically related actors. This was particularly true for the specialised sports TV channels, whose broadcasting schedules were largely filled with live broadcasts of sporting competitions involving multiple sports played in various locations around the world, and who had to cope with the period of roughly six months (March to August) of 2020 when the majority of sporting events were cancelled (Two Circles 2020). These cancelled sporting events were not seen by tens or hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide, and several million in Poland itself.

The pause in the possibility of hosting sports competitions brought a sharp halt to the business machine of producing and selling sports products. This resulted in a temporary freeze in the operations of a global sports industry valued at more than US\$500 billion in 2019 (BRC 2019) and forced many sports institutions and sports-related companies to change their existing ways of operating and even – more from the perspective of fans and social scientists of sport – to raise ontological questions about the meaning of contemporary professional sport. With the temporary loss of the ability to produce and sell a media sports product (Hull, Romney 2020) and the generation of revenue by sports cartels (going back to the notion used by Jankowski et al. 1997: 129), it became apparent that contemporary professional sport in media sports is a spectacle on display. This is pointed out, among others, by Sowa and Wolański (2017) in their – at least intended – unmasking book on the 'real' commercial essence of contemporary professional and competitive sport, which uses the myth of amateur and Olympic sport from the early period of the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/winter-olympics-ratings-smallest-ever-1235097103/> (accessed: 31.03.2022), see also: <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/why-tv-audiences-are-tuning-out-tokyo-olympic-games-2021-07-30/> (accessed: 31.03.2022).

development of the modern Olympic Games only pragmatically. As the authors note, “the way it is organised and functions is not at all defined by the logic of sporting competition. It is actually determined by the principles of capitalist accumulation, led by two key elements for the owners of capital: investment and return, i.e. profit” (Sowa, Wolański 2017: 9).

The persuasive messages of advertising accompany spectacles (viewed in both electronic and live media) and all other sports content (journalism, information, popularisation, etc.), and this is justified on the grounds that it is very difficult to find a more effective medium for reaching large audiences than sport. Examples of very effective exploitation of the advertising potential of sporting events (e.g. the American finals of the professional American football league NFL Super Bowl and other major sporting events) are cited by Sahaj (2018), and others, who also point to less successful attempts to introduce themes of social responsibility or the promotion of physical activity and healthy lifestyles in advertisements accompanying broadcasts of sporting competitions.

Giulianotti and Numerato (2018: 231–232), analysing the interaction between consumer culture and sport, concluded that global sport is currently in the third phase of its relationship with consumer culture. The first phase of this relation is, according to the cited authors, who use fashionable naming formulas, launch phase 1.0, which manifested itself from the late 19th century to the 1940s. Phase 2.0 (1940s to 1980s) was the expansion of consumer culture worldwide and the penetration of sport into popular and mass culture, accelerated by the development of mass media. During this period, the very concept of sport also began to be extended to active lifestyles (e.g. with the emergence of the fitness industry, alternative sports), and through the growth of global companies such as Adidas, Reebok and Nike (Giulianotti, Numerato 2018: 231) the world of sport was commercialised and commodified. All this laid the foundations for the relationship between global sport and consumer culture in the hyper-commodified version 3.0, which experienced strong turbulence as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic. It is worth noting that the indicated second phase of the relationship of global sport and consumer culture largely bypassed the socialist states of the time, where, despite the appearance of some self-governing sports organisations, sport was subject to full legal and financial state control. The third version (phase) of the relationship between global sport and consumer culture is characterised, according to Giulianotti and Numerato (2018), by the greater intensification of the processes already taking place and the greater complexity of the sports market. This stage saw the establishment of global sports production chains with suppliers, intermediaries and consumers of sports products and services; the creation of clubs, leagues, federations as business brands; and the strengthening of transnational sports corporations. According to the cited authors, these phenomena particularly affect countries in the global North, but are also penetrating Asia, Latin and South America and Africa. The latter phenomenon may be related to the adoption of the sporting free-market formula

as a mode of operation, but also to the ‘softpower’ attractiveness of sport for new states seeking recognition and prestige (Lenartowicz 2018).

The temporary loss of the ability to cooperate with electronic media and of the access to audience-consumers in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic undermined the overall sense of existence of professional sport in its current form. It also prompted ontological questions about the meaning of contemporary professional sport. Questions that, in the normal, very rapid course of sporting events, almost no one asks – apart from humanists studying this cultural phenomenon. The hypothetical situation of a prolonged lack of opportunities to organise professional sports competitions and the associated lack of income from media broadcasts could have resulted in the rapid decommercialisation of sport and its reduction from the level of a very lucrative economic and professional activity to that of an amateur or semi-amateur pastime of enthusiasts. This could have meant a return to the convention of sport for athletes rather than sport for spectators and a version of the relationship between global sport and consumer culture in the format described by Giulianotti and Numerato (2018) most resembling 2.0, if not 1.1.

Referring to Goffman’s (1981) theatrical metaphor of social life, it can be noted that the effects of the pandemic in the case of sport concerned both the sphere of the backstage (processes invisible to most media audiences of sport) and the very organisation of the stage and the spectacular content presented on it, as well as the relationship between performers and spectators. In the case of professional and competitive sport, we can analyse the effects of the pandemic in several dimensions. Probably among the most relevant are the effects of the pandemic inside sport (planning and implementation of the training process and sport competitions) and the effects on the social and economic environment of sport (including, inter alia, the sports media broadcasting sport competitions and spectators of sport competitions).

In a system of such strong contemporary linkages between sport and consumer culture, as Giulianotti and Numerato (2018) point out, the lack of opportunities for the sale and presentation of sports products during the pandemic period had the greatest impact on major commercial players dependent on a broad stream of media revenues and profits from the sale of branded sports products. This applies to sports such as football in Europe, or American football, baseball, ice hockey and basketball in North America. Horky (2020: 203) highlighted the fact that in the German ‘sports monoculture’ of football, this problem affected the sport and its two top leagues to the greatest extent. From the data discussed by Horky (2020), it appears that in the two top German men’s football leagues, media revenue accounted for more than 60% of the league’s total revenue. This shows the scale of the dependence of these leagues on the media, without which they could not function in their current form. It also illustrates the importance of the media consumers of sport, which is generally greater (at least in the financial dimension under discussion) than the fans of those directly attending matches in football auditoriums. Matchday revenue was just under 13% of total league revenue for the Bundesliga and 17% for Bundesliga 2. Add to

this the fact that Germany's top football league, the DFL, averaged 42,000 spectators per match, the second highest figure in the world after the North American NHL (67,000 spectators) and the English Premier League (38,000 spectators). Despite these fan numbers – impressive from a Polish perspective at least – the higher the level of the league games, the less significant was the income from tickets purchased by spectators attending the stadiums (Horky 2020: 2–3). In the case of the other top German sports leagues discussed by Horky (2020), the share of revenue collected from the media was much lower, reaching a maximum of 14.4% in ice hockey. By contrast, in handball, which is quite popular in Germany, it reached only 3%. In the case of the leagues in question, the share of income from ticket sales was higher than in the case of both football leagues, but the main source of income was from sponsors linked to the media and their social impact. The share of income from sponsors reached as high as 78% in the volleyball league.

Many sports organisations had to cancel their regular sports events from March 2020 onwards (the WHO announced the coronavirus pandemic on March 11th), at the same time this deprived the media of sports spectacle products and forced the entire sports community to change their plans (changes 'within' sport). The sports marketing agency Two Circles (2020) estimated on the basis of the calendar of major sports events worldwide (with an expected direct audience of no less than 5,000 people) that around 53% of the sports events of this type scheduled for 2020 were not organised. In absolute numbers, this means that nearly 26,500 events were not organised on schedule. Particularly unfavourable for sports event organisers, the media and fans worldwide was the period of several months between March and August 2020. After this, some of the postponed sports events were organised under the new pandemic regime. This resulted, for instance, in the number of major sporting events organised in September exceeding the number of such events originally planned for that period.

An interesting, yet obvious, consequence of the cancellation of sporting events was the decrease in the number of medals won annually by athletes in 2020 compared to previous years. In the case of Polish athletes and events of the European and World Championships rank (in Olympic and Paralympic disciplines):

at the international competitions for people with disabilities held in 2020, the number of medals won by Poles was also significantly lower than in previous years. The representatives boasted 20 world championship medals and three European championship medals. This was 80.2% and 95.2% less than in 2019, respectively. The average number of medals won between 2015 and 2019 at the world championships for people with disabilities was 96, while at the European championships it was 102 (GUS 2021: 71).

On a global scale, the impact of the pandemic on professional and competitive sport also revealed the scale of the precarisation of the sports workforce, as highlighted by Evans and co-authors (2020), among others. Athletes who did not compete and win medals lost the formal basis for maintaining or gaining

scholarship support, which for most of them (especially in less commercialised and media-oriented disciplines) is the de facto basic salary. In Poland, but probably also elsewhere, this could apply to governmental, union and club scholarships, but also, for example, to universities. In their scholarship regulations the latter did not take into account reasons beyond the athletes' control for not achieving high sporting results and, for example, did not extend scholarships based on confirmed results from years prior to the pandemic. This problem, of course, also affected the performance bonuses of athletes and coaches, but also the salaries of numerous organisers of sports competitions. After a period of relaxed restrictions on sports spectators, many countries reintroduced spectator constraints in sports stadiums in December 2021 (Euronews 2022). In Germany, a total ban on spectators at major sporting events (mainly football matches) was introduced from 28 December 2021. The same ban was introduced in the Netherlands. In Portugal, Sweden, Italy and the UK, only vaccinated persons (with certificates) could attend sporting events during this period. The specific arrangements varied from country to country, but they always restricted the normal functioning of professional sport and the sports and recreational activities of citizens.

The list of cancelled, temporarily suspended or rescheduled events is extensive, but the most spectacular was the cancellation of the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games and their unprecedented postponement to 2021. This was a severe setback both for the organisers of this mega sporting event in Japan themselves and for the International Olympic Committee. This organisation, after adopting a more commercialised direction in the 1980s, had, and nowadays has, even more difficulty finding organisers for the increasingly elaborate and expensive Olympic Games. A case in point is the 1984 Summer Olympics, for which Los Angeles was the only candidate, and which received very significant concessions from the IOC. In spite of the strong commercialisation of these Games, which were described with the pejorative term 'Hamburger Games' for this reason (Toohey, Veal 2007: 279), they were probably the only modern Olympic Games that made a profit for the organiser. Due to less interest in hosting the Olympic Games among the democratic states which have traditionally organised such events up to now (generally, states from the global North; Giulianiotti, Numerato 2018: 232), which openly debated the actual costs and legacy of such sports events, the IOC became more willing to choose offers from states with less active and open societies, which seek international recognition and prestige. The combination of sport with political and economic activity as part of a soft power strategy (Grix, Lee 2013) resulted, among other things, in the hosting of the Summer and Winter Olympic Games being awarded to Russia (2014), China (2008, 2022), and Brazil (2016). In line with this rationale, many other major sporting events were also awarded to countries with no significant tradition in the area, with a history of human rights violation (like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates), but eager to provide sport federations with organisational and financial support in order to gain global

recognition. This was also related to the expansion since the late 1990s of consumer culture and the attractiveness of the sports market in these countries, which was manifested in the growth of strong national sports leagues, the recruitment of sports stars, and the development of infrastructure for sports-associated consumption (Brannagan, Giulianotti 2015).

Japan, which hosted the 1964 Olympic Games – a milestone in many aspects, such as the fact it was globally televised – provides a good example for the IOC of a country that, despite many reservations, was ready to host an event of this scale again. Preuss (2006: 2) points out that this type of solution may reduce the risk of losses (re-use of previously renovated infrastructure), but other authors (Schardt 2006), indicate that this is not necessarily true when a significant amount of time has passed since the previously held Games. The organisation of the next similar sporting event may, in such a case, involve the demolition of venues that do not meet modern sporting and safety standards, and thus entail the reconstruction or the construction of completely different infrastructure. In addition to Tokyo, however, London (1908, 1948 and 2012) and Paris (1900, 1924, 2024), Los Angeles (1932, 1984 and 2028) and Beijing (2008, 2022), which had already been granted the Games in the 1920s, have also agreed to host them again. However, the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that, in addition to the problems previously encountered by the organisers of the Games during and (perhaps especially) after their organisation, new global phenomena have emerged that make hosting these events an even higher-risk endeavour and may result in a further exodus of those willing to organise them, or accelerate a general change in their formula, including a trend towards the decentralisation of mega-sporting events.<sup>2</sup> There are already tried and tested practices in this area, e.g. in football and the final tournaments of the European and world championships (e.g. the Belgian-Dutch Euro 2000 and the Polish-Ukrainian Euro 2012 organised by UEFA, and the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea by FIFA). Perhaps the most spectacular example, in recent years, of this decentralisation of the sporting spectacle and reduction of organisational risk is the UEFA Euro 2020 tournament, in which the tournament's final matches were originally scheduled to take place in Amsterdam, Baku, Bucharest, Budapest, Copenhagen, Glasgow, London and Saint Petersburg, as well as Bilbao, Dublin, Munich and Rome (12 cities in 11 countries<sup>3</sup>). After the event was postponed, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, to 2021, the tournament was limited to 11 host cities in 10 countries in April 2021 (Dublin was withdrawn from hosting the tournament and two cities hosting matches were located in the UK). This action was also intended to increase interest in the event across Europe, and to increase its consumption potential while empowering local communities. By dispersing the direct spectators of football matches between 12 cities (while limiting their numbers in the stadiums)

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<sup>2</sup> More information: Lenartowicz, Mosz (2018: 271–274).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.uefa.com/uefaeuro-2020/event-guide/> (accessed: 13.04.2022).

and not creating large concentrations of people in fewer locations, UEFA, without probably expecting it at the planning stage of the event, also reduced the pandemic risks to some extent.

However, while sports events organised regularly every year or every few years could be cancelled and postponed, a bigger problem concerned ‘serial’ – that is, almost non-stop – broadcast sports leagues at local, national or international levels. Professional clubs, federations and media were faced with the problem of periodically stopping their main activities altogether or quickly looking for alternatives to keep the system of producing and selling sports shows running. The complex decision-making processes concerning the postponement of tennis tournaments due to the pandemic are recounted chronologically by, among others, King (2020). In the case of this highly commercialised, media-driven and global sport, the number of parties involved and business stakeholders is so large that every single decision regarding key events had many expected and unexpected effects and – especially in the spring of 2020, during the initial period of the pandemic – generated more dissatisfaction than expressions of support and acceptance. According to King (2020: 346–347), much negativity was caused by the French Tennis Federation’s postponement of the French Open on 17 March 2020 from the originally planned date of 24.05–7.06.2020 to 10.09.–4.10.2020. This concerned both the decision, which was too quick and radical according to some, and the avalanche of other changes caused by it. Large tournaments attracting the best players to a particular area of the world are accompanied by smaller tournaments benefiting from the concentration of attention and the numerous presence of good players in a particular location (Europe, the United States, Australia, etc.). For them (in the case of the French Open 2020, such a sizable accompanying tournament was the WTA Strasbourg 2020), this also meant having to postpone dates, renegotiate contracts, etc., or trying to organise the tournament on the original date at the risk of star absences and less media interest. The decisions of the major organisers thus toppled the first domino, triggering further changes, both in tennis and probably in many other sports. Over time, as the severity of the impact of the pandemic made sports organisations realise the need to change and scale back their activities, there were fewer negative assessments and emotions. For example, they were not made or expressed with regard to the next Grand Slam tournament on the courts of Wimbledon. In this case, the Lawn Tennis Association decided to cancel all major tennis tournaments on grass in the UK (King 2020: 347). The need to manage a sports organisation efficiently in a pandemic crisis, to develop different action plans depending on the current pandemic situation and national regulations, as well as the decisions of international sports organisations, became part of the daily management in all sports associations.

The National Basketball Association (NBA), the major US men’s basketball league, also introduced unusual solutions for unusual pandemic times. In order to sustain the production of basketball sporting spectacles when there were constraints

on training opportunities, the organisation of games with spectators and transport restrictions (mainly by air), the league authorities decided to subordinate themselves even further to the requirements of television broadcasts and indirect consumers of the sport. It was decided to create a kind of film studio, placing participating teams (limited to 16 teams) and playing all matches in one place, isolated from the outside world. This was intended to prevent the spread of the coronavirus among players, coaches and support staff. One team could delegate up to 37 staff (players, coaches and other personnel) and the total number of basketball players in the 'NBA bubble' was around 350 (Vaudreuil et al. 2021: 2). Such artificial conditions and a kind of physical and social protective 'bubble' were created at the Disney theme park in Orlando, Florida (Walt Disney World Resort and ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex sports facilities). The safety rules in this NBA bubble were described in a 100-page document that was given to the players.<sup>4</sup> Due to the isolation of players and support teams, teams were also advised to use mental health professionals at all times. NBA teams arrived at the ESPN Sports Centre on 7 July and league play resumed from 30 July 2020.<sup>5</sup> In many other sports, competition resumed during 2020 using prepared health safety protocols and allowing a limited number of spectators at sport venues.<sup>6</sup>

For sports organisations involved in mass media sports, for whom a very high proportion of revenue is derived from media cooperation, the main and largely effective fallback solution for times of pandemic restrictions on standard sporting activity was to re-establish competition even without spectators at sports venues. This meant, of course, financial losses (no profits from ticket sales and fan consumption at the sports venue), but these were relatively small compared to the losses that would be incurred, for example, by the – difficult to imagine in a pandemic, of course – situation of organising competitions with full audiences but without the possibility of media coverage. For entities in less popular sports and at lower levels of sports competition, the loss of income from spectators watching the competition at sports venues was a much bigger problem. In Poland, however, sports clubs usually also have sponsorship support and often receive public funding from local government units. This is, of course, dependent on the legal form of the club, the level of sporting competition, the sporting discipline, and other variables. The situation in Poland is also related to the fact that the vast majority of sports

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.espn.com/nba/story/\\_/id/29321006/in-documents-nba-details-coronavirus-testing-process-orlando-campus-life](https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/29321006/in-documents-nba-details-coronavirus-testing-process-orlando-campus-life) (accessed: 10.05.2022).

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting here the different functioning of the top professional sports leagues in the USA, where, in contrast to the European tradition, the club composition of the leagues does not change as a result of the results obtained by the teams and is not open to the entry of, for example, less wealthy clubs from the lower leagues that have gained access to the higher leagues through their good playing performance or the drop out of teams with the worst sporting results. The set of teams in the NBA, for example, is fixed every season.

<sup>6</sup> For more information: Pedersen et al. 2021.

facilities (“especially large facilities such as stadiums, sports halls, swimming pools, ski jumps, cycling tracks, etc.”) are owned by local government (Pawlak, Smoleń 2015: 162), and “the vast majority of professional sports clubs do not own sports facilities” (Pawlak, Smoleń 2015: 163). Besides, as Kuźbik (2011: 225–226) notes, in the case of Polish sports clubs, income from sports activities accounts for about 30% of the budget. The rest comes from other economic activities of the clubs (e.g. advertising, transport, hotel services).

The pandemic situation was commented on continuously in the electronic media and press also in the context of sport, and has been analysed by sports researchers, including sociologists, with obvious delays. Giulianotti and Collison (2020) conducted a content analysis of articles published during the first period of the pandemic (early 2020) in the most popular press titles and electronic media in the UK, selected by type (electronic versions of magazines and their websites and the BBC news portal were analysed), in terms of assessing journalists’ perceptions of sport, athletes, sports clubs and organisations, and amateur sport and physical recreation. This interesting article highlights both the descriptive and normative nature of publications on sport. Describing the situation, as in other countries, the media reported on the effects the pandemic was having on the course of sports competitions; its extraordinary impact on sport and the restrictions on sports competition as a result of decisions made by state authorities or sports federations. The evaluative nature of some publications seems to be of greater interest, since they identified sports spectatorship as the source of pandemic problems and a manifestation of the greed and lack of solidarity on the part of league and club competition authorities, due to their reluctance to cancel lucrative sporting events and their pressure to resume sports competitions quickly in order to limit financial losses. This included the different treatment of sanitary recommendations up to March 2020 by various organisers of sporting events in the UK, including the hosting of the clubs’ Champions League football match between FC Liverpool and Atletico Madrid in England (attended by 52,000 fans, including 3,000 Spanish fans) and the hosting of the Cheltenham four-day horse race on 10–13.03.2020 with around 150,000 fans. Although this is not mentioned in the article, outside the UK this may also concern the organisation, also widely reported in Poland, of football matches between Spanish and Italian club teams in the Champions League (clubs Atalanta and Valencia) in February 2020 just before the SARS-CoV-2 virus surged in Italy in early 2020.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the material analysed by Giulianotti and Collison (2020) also pointed to the opposite phenomena of sports organisations’ sense of responsibility for their employees (players, training staff, support teams, etc.) who are deprived of earning opportunities, e.g. through the organisation of psychological support (the case of The Women’s Netball Players’ Association) and, for example, gestures of solidarity by athletes working voluntarily in hospitals.

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<sup>7</sup> Vide: Bengel 2020.

Examples of such attitudes and behaviour of organisations and athletes in the pandemic were also given by King (2020: 348), among others, who addressed the behaviour of tennis stars during this period, including, Novak Djokovic's presentation of unusual theories regarding the possibility of combating coronavirus through meditative methods and questioning the need for vaccination. As he is an internationally famous sport star, the theses put forward by Djokovic met with significant response from the public. Another tennis player Roger Federer, who understood the pandemic atmosphere more, reinforced his positive media image with a donation of over 1 million US dollars to fight coronavirus in his native Switzerland (King 2020: 348). Such actions were also taken by other athletes aware of their privileged financial position and social responsibility, including the Polish footballer Jakub Błaszczykowski (who donated PLN 400,000 to the Human Gesture Foundation to fight the coronavirus) and Robert Lewandowski (a donation of one million Euros, surpassing Roger Federer's financial gesture) and Arkadiusz Milik, whose restaurant in his hometown of Katowice prepared meals for hospitals (Mazurkiewicz 2021: 199). Similar activities were also undertaken by some fan organisations (especially those focused on football) abroad and in Poland, to the best of their ability (Mazurkiewicz 2021).

In this article, I have referred to professional and competitive sport and the relationship of sport and the mass media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the memory of the pandemic restrictions is fading with the passage of time, it may still be worthwhile to return in sociological research to this unique and interesting period in the development of modern sport. If we take a wider view of sport in our reflections – including all its amateur manifestations and recreational physical activity, the social inequalities and unequal treatment of athletes, sports disciplines or forms of physical recreation, and their participants – the period of the pandemic can be subjected to additional analysis. It is pointed out, for example, that emerging demands, particularly in the UK, for players to agree to salary reductions and expectations of transferring reduced resources to public health care, applied only to football players (Evans et al. 2020) who were famous for earning obscenely high salaries (although not differentiated by league level). In the United States and Canada, there were claims that state or federal restrictions related to sport and physical recreation were conditioned not only by the actual pandemic threat, but also by the socio-economic status of the participants, resulting in less restrictions on upper-class sporting practices (tennis, golf, fitness club activities, spas and wellness). Interesting areas of analysis may also include the psychological, health and social effects of interruptions on athletes' training and competition appearances, the impact of the pandemic on relationships between athletes and between players and coaching staff, as well as on the processes of preparing and implementing training plans. This may be of particular interest in the analysis of professional athletes working in foreign clubs and in sport migration studies. In the case of amateur sport, physical recreation and physical education, it may also be useful

to analyse the persistence of the increased awareness, during the pandemic, of the importance and need for physical movement for the proper functioning of humans in modern technical civilisation, and to investigate the long-term effects of the pandemic on health and fitness.

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