Chapter 10
Impact of COVID-19 on the Global Sporting Industry and Related Tourism

Abstract Infectious diseases present an omnipresent threat to the health and safety of the global community. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic that began in China in 2019 swept around the world imposing unprecedented impacts on all the sectors of the world economy. The multibillion-dollar sports tourism industry was hit hard. This chapter unravels the impacts of COVID-19 on sporting events and, by default, sporting tourism. Such information is key for the industry to develop resilience against future pandemics and other natural disasters. Document and critical discourse analysis was used in gathering and analysing data. The findings show that most sporting events were either cancelled or postponed during the peak of the pandemic because of COVID-19 containment measures across the world, such as travel bans and port closures. Many sports governing bodies were also bankrupted and left in financial distress. Individual athletes lost income as their salaries were reduced or completely cut. Sponsors, betting firms, broadcasters and others in the sports value chain also incurred huge losses during this period. Among the key events affected were the 2020 Olympics, football leagues, golf, cricket, marathons, rugby and tennis. As such, there was a need for bailout packages and seeking alternatives for the sports industry to recover from the shock. This chapter recommends post-COVID-19 reviews of the sports industry and putting in place alternative future intervention measures for similar pandemics and other disasters.

Keywords COVID-19 · Sports tourism · Coronavirus · Football · Olympics · Comrades Marathon

10.1 Introduction and Background

With a basic reproduction rate of 2.2 (every 1 person infects 2.2. others), of relevance to the COVID-19 outbreak was its timing and the potential for super-spreader events. COVID-19 originated in Wuhan, which is a city of 11 million people, and...
coincided with the world’s largest mass population movement, namely, the Chinese Spring Festival (Ebrahim and Memish 2020). Chinese nationals come from all over the world to attend this festival – hence the heightened risk of global spread. Mass gatherings have been observed to be fertile grounds for the super-spreading of infectious diseases (News24 2020a). Participation in sports training, sports competitions and spectating have been noted to be possible mass transmission pathways of infectious diseases. The transmission is facilitated by the overcrowded conditions and sharing sporting equipment and practice surfaces (Raymond et al. 2004).

The sports industry has been one of the fastest growing industries in the world. In North America, for example, the industry reached the US$67.3 billion value mark in 2016, with the figures projected to reach US$78.5 billion by 2021 (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2017). This means that sports tourism is fast becoming an important driver of economic development. Within the sports industry, spectators, players, sponsors, broadcasters, betting networks and the host community derive important economic value from sporting events (Choa et al. 2019). Sports tourism can be defined as “sport-based travel away from the home environment for a limited time, where the sport is characterised by unique rule sets, competition related to physical prowess and play” (Hinch and Higham 2011: 21–22). Sport tourism events are conceptualised as a hybrid between participation in sport by the tourist as a recreational or high-performance athlete and recreational spectator activities. Sports tourism is therefore the use of sport as a touristic endeavour (Hinch and Ito 2018). In Britain, for example, as of 2015 nearly 800,000 overseas visitors each year travel to watch football and visit famous football grounds (Macgowan 2015). Despite their importance to the local economy, sports events and tourism are very sensitive to both natural and human-induced disasters, and especially health-related pandemics, given the overcrowded conditions that dominate the industry’s activities.

The world was put on hold by the emerging 2019 coronavirus pandemic, which surpassed the combined toll of the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) outbreaks in terms of deaths (WHO 2020). With the public health burden of COVID-19, ever-increasing, urgent and unprecedented decisions to contain the outbreak had to be made the world over (Poon and Peiris 2020; Dube et al. 2020). Sporting events and sport tourism are known to boost local and national economies, because they bring diversified revenue channels to the host communities. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, sporting events and the chain of activities that support these events were seriously impacted. There was an almost global shutdown on sporting events and the related sports tourism.

This chapter investigates the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on sporting events and, by default, sports-related tourism. The purpose is to document experiences with a view to learning and building the resilience of the sporting industry against future shocks.
10.2 Literature Survey

The potential damage posed by the start and spread of emergent infectious diseases has been illustrated recently by the H1N1 (2009), SARS, MERS, Ebola and Zika outbreaks. There is considerable evidence showing that such epidemics are likely to become more frequent and more fatal, unless drastic action is taken to mitigate their spread on a global scale (Massaro et al. 2018). In 2020 the world witnessed the emergence of a new, viral, zoonotic pathogen (SARS-CoV2) causing an outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Rodriguez-Morales et al. 2020). This led the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. COVID-19 originated in Wuhan, Hubei province, China, in 2019. The epidemic then extended to all provinces of the country and then to neighbouring countries, such as Vietnam, Russia, Nepal and other closely connected countries such as Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea and Japan. Within 2 months, COVID-19 had affected every continent of the world (Nishiura et al. 2020), with the epicentre shifting from China to Europe (especially Italy and Spain) and then to the USA (WHO 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic, as expected, disrupted the health status and economies of almost all the countries across the globe. Zumla et al. (2015) observed that in the past there was wishful anticipation by the political and scientific communities that coronaviruses like MERS-CoV and SARS-CoV would disappear with time. However, this has not happened and cases of especially MERS have continued to be reported from the Middle East throughout the years, since its discovery in 2012 (WHO 2015). This is because there is a large reservoir of these coronaviruses in animals such as bats, camels and pangolins, in addition to there being no specific treatment or vaccine. With the interconnected global village we live in, the potential risk of a global spread of an infectious disease like COVID-19 is ever-present (Rodriguez-Morales et al. 2020).

The rapid expansion of modern transportation and the improved mobility of people and goods has led to the fast spread of emerging communicable diseases. Local transportation is key in sustaining epidemics at the national level, while international air travel may facilitate cross-border and continental spread (Biscayart et al. 2020). On a global scale, passenger air travel is known to play a critical role in the spread of infectious disease (WHO 2020), and this is a common mode of transportation in the sports industry and sports tourism. In the city of Wuhan, where COVID-19 began, the local airport, Tianhe International, is a hub for major Chinese airlines. Although it is mostly a domestic airport, code-sharing with several European and North American airlines allows airlines to fly, with a single stop, to the major capitals and main cities around the world in a few hours. In 2018 alone, about 24.5 million passengers arrived and departed at this airport (Wuhan Airport 2020). An estimated five million people left Wuhan weeks before the travel ban and lockdown took effect on 23 January 2020 (Chen et al. 2020), and one would assume these included sports personalities and sports tourists. This fact alone accounts for a
realistic possibility of the global dispersal of the causative agent from the source (Biscayart et al. 2020).

Due to air transit, the SARS outbreak that initially emerged in Guangdong, China, in November 2002, quickly spread to 25 countries as far away as Canada by the end of March 2003 (Hui-Ju et al. 2015). Another example is the biggest Ebola outbreak, which occurred in West Africa in 2014, when the virus quickly spread and resulted in enormous infections in countries such as Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria. The virus also spread to the USA through infected patients who travelled from West Africa (Von Drehle 2014). COVID-19 was declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020, when it had affected countries on all continents (WHO 2020). The reported case numbers (over 800,000 at the time of writing) were most likely underestimates, given the shortages or unavailability of test kits in many developing countries, the 2.2 basic reproduction value (R\textsubscript{0}) of the virus and evidence of viral shedding from asymptomatic infected people (Ebrahim and Memish 2020). In addition to other strategies of reducing the spread of COVID-19, efforts to reduce crowds and mass events have reached unprecedented levels across the world (Ahmeda and Memish 2020; Dube et al. 2020).

Previous outbreaks of coronaviruses such as SARS-CoV had a negative impact on sporting activities at all levels, from the recreational to professional levels. This is because there is always concern about the possibility of infection among athletes and audiences in competitive sports. Most sporting activities involve close contact and usually bring together large crowds from different backgrounds and, sometimes, from different countries. This creates situations that may enhance the risk of a contagious disease spreading locally and even globally (Nishiura et al. 2020). Not surprisingly, after the SARS outbreak, many international events (including both contact and non-contact sports) which were originally scheduled for the first half of 2003 were either cancelled or postponed, thus impacting the sports tourism industry.

Sports tourism occurs when individuals or groups of people travel with sport as the prime motivation for the journey, despite other variations in the activities of the participants. Sports events may stimulate local economic development, for example, in 2010, the New York City Marathon boosted the city’s economy by US$340 million (Choa et al. 2019). In 2013, the sports industry in the USA produced 456,000 jobs with an average salary of US$ 39,000. These jobs included athletes, referees, coaches and agents (Depta 2015). In the European Union (EU), the sports industry accounts for 2.12% of the gross domestic product (GDP), amounting to €279.7 billion annually. The industry also employs 2.72% of the total EU workforce, which translates to about 5.7 million people (EU 2018).

Over the last number of decades, many countries and cities have been bidding to host mega sporting events such as the Olympics and the World Cups (rugby, football, cricket, etc.). This is done with the expectation that hosting such events will bring a cocktail of potential benefits to the host countries and cities (Wan and Song 2019) – especially lavishly spending sports tourists. Other sports competitions also
bring travellers from all over the world, because there are cricket, athletics and rugby participants and enthusiasts across the world. The chosen host cities are popularly visited throughout the event, even by non-sports personalities who may just be accompanying participants and friends. Occasionally, post-event tourism is positively impacted by the staging of such events, with Barcelona, which hosted the 1992 Olympics, being a good example. Kim et al. (2020) highlighted three main benefits of hosting mega sporting events as infrastructure development, image promotion and economic growth. For example, Beijing’s economic growth by 0.8% from 2005 to 2008 was in part attributable to its hosting the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics (Wan and Song 2019). Hosting sporting events can therefore significantly influence social and economic aspects of the host country, as well as the physical environment. Regrettably, this industry is also very sensitive to disasters of any magnitude.

Not just single-event competitions but also multi-event games were affected by the SARS outbreak. For example, Raymond et al. (2004) pointed out that athletes from Hong Kong and other SARS-affected countries were originally banned from attending the 2003 Special Olympics World Summer Games in Ireland because of contingency measures taken to tackle the SARS problem. It was particularly rare for governments, rather than sports bodies, to limit participation in a sporting event, as happened during the period of the SARS outbreak. Due to the SARS outbreak, the fourth FIFA Women’s World Cup was postponed and later moved from China to the USA. The world track-cycling championships, which were scheduled for July in 2002 in Shenzhen, China, were also cancelled because of SARS. This put into jeopardy the economic benefits associated with hosting these events and imposed losses on the organisers and their sponsors.

There are also other necessities during pandemic outbreaks. The organisers of sporting events, in times of disease outbreaks, need to be equipped with sufficient and correct knowledge to effectively address any infection from the perspective of prevention, early recognition and timely control of spread. Appropriate hygiene and etiquette measures have to be taken during sports training and during the actual matches (So et al. 2003). This is because participation in sports training and competition may act as a pathway for possible transmission of a disease (Nishiura et al. 2020). Sharing sporting equipment and practice surfaces can be another potential means of transmission. SARS-infected bodily fluids and respiratory secretions can contaminate sporting equipment and practice surfaces. Close personal contact during training and competition in contact sports like football, basketball and netball can further transmit the contagion from person to person (Raymond et al. 2004).

Raymond et al. (2004) considered crowded changing rooms with dense steam from showers as possible causes of infection due to aerosolised viral particles that can be transmitted from any viral carrier to the entire team. There is also a high probability of viral transmission because steam enhances the floating time of the virus-carrying droplets. Frequent travel to sports destinations may further increase the probability of viral transmission in sports settings. Presence in a relatively
crowded aircraft or bus with poor ventilation can be risky if an infected person is travelling with the team. Rothe et al. (2020) and Tian et al. (2020) in their study of coronaviruses highlighted that the chances of infection on an aircraft when infected persons travel during the asymptomatic phase of illness were there, but very low. Therefore, it was advisable to take precautions to prevent possible transmission during flights.

Since there are no specific drugs or vaccines available for COVID-19, the risks associated with infection remain very high. Health systems are overburdened everywhere. Hence targeted and non-coercive community interventions put in place to deal with COVID-19 had an impact on sporting activities and sports tourism. These measures included the cancellation of ad hoc events and the suspension of events with super-spreader potential such as sports crowds. Respiratory infections have been noted to be the most commonly transmitted at such events (WHO 2020). Even when the $R_0$ is low, the crowd density during mass gatherings predisposes to high rates of transmission (Ebrahim et al. 2020). Other community-based measures taken to control the spread of COVID-19 that had implications for sports were the use of social distancing measures to reduce direct and close contact between people in the community and travel restrictions to affected areas, including reduced flights and public transport and route restrictions (Ahmeda and Memish 2020). Voluntary home quarantines when a team member gets into contact with an infected person(s) were also instituted, as this has been noted to reduce stress on the emergency healthcare system. Although family clusters of infections may occur, the numbers of affected people are usually far lower than in institutional settings (Ebrahim et al. 2020). These measures, when followed religiously, may help delay the exponential spread of an outbreak until drugs and vaccines become available, but they also destroy the sports tourism industry.

To control the COVID-19 outbreak in Japan, Sugishita et al. (2020) observed that sports and entertainment events were cancelled on government advisory for 2 weeks from 26 February to 11 March 2020. This was designated in Japan as a voluntary event cancellation. At the same time, it was advised that small business and private meetings be cancelled voluntarily. Epidemiological models showed that these measures were able to reduce COVID-19 infections by up to 35%. The peak number of cases was reduced by about a third compared to what it would have been without the adoption of these measures.

Most of the literature describes how previous coronavirus outbreaks occurred, the areas and places that were impacted and the interventions that were undertaken to try and contain the outbreaks. There is very limited literature that takes an in-depth look into how exactly sporting events at different levels were impacted and what measures could be taken to be resilient to future shocks caused by the virus, hence the need to explore how the industry was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The next section presents the methodological underpinnings for this work.
10.3 Materials and Methods

This chapter analyses case studies of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on sporting events – from the global to continental and national levels. Documented in the study are the impacts of COVID-19 on the staging of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, cricket, golf, tennis, football, the Comrades Marathon and rugby championships. Critical document analysis of the games provided the main source of data. Critical document analysis is a mostly qualitative data collection method in which documented information is interpreted by the researcher to produce meaning around the study objectives. The content analysis gives rise to emerging themes, much like the themes that emerge from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. Selected locations and countries with severely impacted major sporting events are shown in Fig. 10.1.

The documents used in the study were mainly public records and reports from local and international organisations, personal documents such as first-person accounts and experiences, incident reports, electronic media and newspapers. Critical document analysis is fast becoming a popular method of research and has been used in several similar studies, for example, the one by Nhamo and Mjimba (2020).

10.4 Findings and Discussions

It can be argued that the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic “decimated” the sporting industry, with all forms of sports, at all levels, impacted negatively. Most sporting events and fixtures were either suspended or cancelled altogether,
on a scale that was unprecedented in the modern history of sports. The impacts were felt from the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, through the cricketing world, the major professional football leagues and basketball, to rugby championships, marathons and other related events. The details will be presented in the following subsections.

10.4.1 Controversies and Ultimate Postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics

The Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games was undoubtedly the largest mass sports event of 2020 that was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 204 countries and regions take part in the Olympic Games, with 164 countries participating in the Paralympics (Nakamura et al. 2018). The host city, Tokyo, was expecting to receive about 20 million visitors that were to be attended to by over 70,000 volunteers from the games and 8000 from the city. Some 11,090 Olympic athletes and 4400 Paralympic athletes were going to participate, with 14 million food dishes expected to be delivered to participants (Ingle 2020). These conditions alone, before factoring in the COVID-19 pandemic, presented a major challenge for the organisers (Nishiura et al. 2020). As the pandemic continued to spread the world over and all sporting events were being cancelled as a containment measure, the inevitable occurred on 24 March 2020: the hard, but rational decision to postpone the Tokyo 2020 Olympics was made, after a discussion between the International Olympic Committee (IOC) president and the Japanese Prime Minister. This was after “strong viewpoints” had been raised by several National Olympic Committees that postponement was the only course of action to take, for the health and wellbeing of athletes. Other countries like Canada and Australia had even indicated that they would boycott the games if they were to be staged in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic (Canadian Olympic Committee 2020). They argued that nothing was more important than the health and safety of athletes and the world community.

The decision to postpone the games due to the COVID-19 pandemic, rational as it seemed, was prolonged. Scott et al. (2020) referred to the delayed decision to postpone the Tokyo 2020 Olympics as emanating from what they called a “game of chicken” between the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Tokyo 2020 organisers. This was due to the commercial and legal ramifications that could follow such a decision. In such situations, who it is that effectively postponed the games would be crucial for litigation purposes, because that could open them to potential allegations of breach of contract. However, given the impossibility of hosting the games during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the IOC had the contractual right to cancel the games on safety grounds and was protected from any claims for damages by the host city in such an event. On the other hand, as highlighted by Scott et al. (2020), the host city contract did not refer to postponements, and hence the IOC rather preferred Japan to make the ultimate decision. Boycotts by certain key
members of the IOC such as Canada and Australia gave the impetus to the IOC and local organisers to postpone the games on the basis of incomplete games. This meant that it was no longer possible to proceed with the planned schedule, and it also provided some protection from possible legal and insurance claims from the multiple commercial entities that had contracts tied to the event, such as broadcasters and sponsors.

The postponement of the Olympic Games due to the COVID-19 pandemic is considered unprecedented and unquantifiable. This is because it was the first time this had occurred in the 124-year modern history of the event and also because of the complexity of seeking a solution to issues that the IOC and Organisers had no control over (Dang and Hals 2020). Furthermore, regardless of how understandable the basis of the postponement was, there were some in Japan who felt that the decision amounted to an embarrassment for the hosts (Scott et al. 2020). This is due to the fact that no other Olympics had ever been rescheduled before, but only cancelled during World War I and II periods (Ingle 2020). The Olympic organisers also highlighted that postponing the Games, which had a budget of US$12.6 billion, came with its own set of challenges. In fact, addressing the unique situation required close coordination with all partners, such as the Japanese government, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, broadcasters, Tokyo 2020 marketing partners, suppliers and contractors. Numerous practicalities arose, such as that the hotel and other bookings that had been made previously would not necessarily be available during the rescheduled Games. However, despite the severe financial toll on the sponsors and sports tourists, the major corporate sponsors of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics stood by the IOC after the Games were postponed. Still, the corporate sponsors were not likely to get the expected return on billions of dollars committed to their agreements (Dang and Hal 2020). There were further questions on whether the Athletes’ Village and other key venues would still be available given pre-agreed deals with private occupants and the need to find other tenants. Another key question was if Japan could really afford the costs of keeping these venues empty for another year, without them being viewed as white elephants or ivory towers.

Another issue that the IOC had to worry about was the prospect of having to bail out some of the international sports federations that depend on financial handouts and had not been having games due to the effects of COVID-19. Some of these federations had insurance to mitigate the negative impacts of the COVID-19 shock, but most faced a worrying future in the aftermath of COVID-19. During the delay in postponing the Olympic Games, several athletes expressed grave concerns about the need to prepare for the Games as normal, during the COVID-19 pandemic. They argued that this was putting them and their families at risk of contracting the virus and therefore pushed for a postponement. They also noted that for them to fittingly prepare for the Games, their health and safety needed to be considered first (Scott et al. 2020). By the time the Games were postponed, only about 57% of the athletes set to take part in the Tokyo Olympics
had qualified. The rest still had to attend qualifying tournaments that were supposed to have taken place around the world, but had been cancelled because of the pandemic (Reddy 2020; Murakami and Grohmann 2020). Those that had qualified still faced the challenge of adequate preparation, since most gyms, stadiums and swimming pools were shut down across the world, as most countries went under lockdown to try and contain the COVID-19 pandemic (Murakami and Grohmann 2020).

Upon the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, no specific dates were mentioned, except that the Games had been rescheduled to no later than the summer of 2021. There was no clear consensus on new dates for the Games, mainly because each sport discipline has its own calendar to consider and because of the continued uncertainty about when the pandemic may be under control. For example, a year’s delay of the Games would clash with the World Athletics Championships, already scheduled to run from 6 to 15 August 2021 in Oregon. Moving them to October would make them clash with the European football season and major US sports events – hence the need for an all-stakeholder approach in determining the new dates (Murakami and Grohmann 2020). The Games were then later rescheduled from 23 July 2021 to 8 August 2021 and would maintain the name “Tokyo 2020”, despite taking place in 2021.

From an athlete’s perspective, the postponement of the Olympic Games has also brought with it scores of unknowns. This is so, for one, because the older athletes who were at the tail-end of their careers may not be able to compete in 2021. Having waited for 4 years to compete in their final Olympics, it is uncertain whether they would be willing to finance another year of training and also put themselves through the gruelling training, given their advanced age and the fact that some had already announced their retirement soon after the 2020 Olympics. For sports with an age limit at the Olympics, such as football, which is played by the under-23 age group, will the players who are over 23 years in 2021, but were eligible to play in 2020, be allowed to compete? On the other end of the spectrum, will athletes who were underage to compete in 2020 be allowed to take part in the 2021 Games, given the fact that the Games will still retain the name Tokyo 2020? Another question is if the qualifying tournaments of the postponed Tokyo 2020 Olympics will continue to be held in 2020, or will they now be held within a few months of the rescheduled Games? Of critical importance is, what will happen to those who had already qualified for the Games – will they keep their spots, or will they have to qualify again, considering that there are always young and new competitors who may emerge during the year? Many would surely advocate to have a clean slate and start the qualification process all over. Shelnin (2020) argues that for finely tuned Olympic athletes, a year’s postponement changes everything against the backdrop of so many variables and the uncertainty surrounding the build-up to the Games and the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, by April 2020 certain experts, like Kentaro Iwata, a professor of infectious diseases at Kobe university, expressed doubts that the Games could even be held in 2021, because a year-long delay might not be sufficient (News24 2020b).
The lessons from the postponement show that there is a need to press the refresh button on the structure of the Games. The costs of hosting the Olympics are becoming unbearable. There is a lot of pressure on the host cities and organisers, who end up making too many promises to the local communities. There is a need to rationalise and scale down the Games to manageable levels. The Games need to be sustainable in both the socio-economic and environmental dimensions, with the athletes’ representative bodies having more say in how the Games are run, in order to guarantee their health, safety and interests. Who knows, COVID-19 could have brought an opportunity to downsize this event too.

10.4.2 Disruption in Football Events

Football, like most sports, was also greatly affected by COVID-19. Inasmuch as all leagues were affected, the smallest and less-sponsored ones took a bigger knock than the bigger and well-sponsored ones. In English football, the lockdown on sports due to the COVID-19 pandemic made teams outside the lucrative Premier League face unprecedented periods of financial uncertainty. Stone (2020) pointed out that for all football in England below the three divisions that make up the National League, the leagues were made to stop in March 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, before the scheduled end of the season – with all the results being expunged. This meant that there was no promotion or relegation in these leagues. The same conditions applied to the women’s game below the Women’s Super League and Championship level. The football body made this decision in the light of the financial impact on football clubs and the uncertainty brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. There were also concerns for the safety and welfare of clubs, players, staff, officials, volunteers and supporters during this unprecedented period. The decision meant that the planned restructuring of the non-league football system at the lower levels, which was planned for 2020, had to be suspended until the 2021/2022 season. Even though some of the teams in these leagues had already won enough points to gain promotion to the next level of the game even before the start of the COVID-19-disrupted season, these were still cancelled. In addition to the big let-down for these clubs, the decision had a huge financial impact on them, since they had invested heavily in that success, and the loss of promotion also affected some of their revenue assumptions for the coming season. However, with a quarter of the fixtures left to play when football was cancelled, the association saw it as being unfair to award promotion or relegate teams when there were so many matches left to play.

During the suspension, the Football League agreed on a £50 million relief package for teams – mostly those in the Championship League, League One and League Two. The money was based on an early payment of bonuses, television rights and interest-free loans to assist financially stricken clubs. Without match-day revenue, some (even rich) clubs had already started making the tough decision of laying off
some of their staff and asking their players to accept wage cuts of as high as 70%. This was because the rescue package was only enough to support the clubs for 4 weeks and far from a complete answer to the financial problems that they were facing because of the pandemic. Some clubs started implementing wage deferral arrangements, which involved putting caps on salaries until the situation has normalised. As Stone (2020) observed, the extension of the football season into the time period it was supposed to be over had financial implications for clubs that were changing kit manufacturers and sponsors. The deals, together with the massive marketing that comes with them, were seriously impacted by the delays in completing the season, and millions in potential revenue were lost. At the time of writing, all football was still suspended, and the prospects of abandoning the leagues in the hardest-hit countries were very high. With hundreds of millions of dollars at risk due to the pandemic, there was consensus on the need to devise ways to reach the finishing line. Taking the English Premier League (EPL), for example, not finishing the season would have an impact on broadcasting to the amount of about £760 million. The appetite to finish major football leagues even in the middle of a global pandemic led some players to feel as if they were being used and forced to play in dangerous conditions. The players argued that it was only after some players got sick that serious action was taken to stop football during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other interested community members argued that football was existing in a “moral vacuum” and did not deserve any support, especially from the tax payer’s money. This, they argued, was justified because the clubs make enough money which they do not use wisely, causing them to suffer financially within the first month of a global pandemic.

At the time, there was still some uncertainty surrounding the spread of the coronavirus, and some of the football matches that were played in Europe when the COVID-19 pandemic was starting to run amok have turned out to be super-spreading events. Doyle (2020) observes that the European match between Atalanta from Italy and Valencia from Spain is now viewed as “partita zero” or game zero and a “biological bomb” that exploded in Italy. In the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, the winning team’s (Atalanta) 40,000 strong fans who had travelled from Bergamo set up wild celebrations, hugging and shaking hands with one another. Although there were several major triggers and catalysts for the diffusion of the virus in Italy, it is widely believed that during the euphoric celebrations that night, the fans unintentionally played a part in the spread of COVID-19, which devastated that part of Italy during the pandemic. Since it was a key match, most key informants noted that any fan of the playing teams would not miss the match if they had tickets, even if they felt a slight fever. In the aftermath, 35% of Valencia’s staff and players tested positive for COVID-19. The area around Bergamo, where Atalanta football club comes from, went into lockdown just 4 days after the game, as the number of confirmed cases of the COVID-19 virus rose rapidly. The game now goes down in memory as the night of joy which created a tragedy (Doyle 2020).

The 2020 European Football Championship (known as Euro 2020) was one of the high-profile victims of the COVID-19 outbreak. Euro 2020, which coincided with the 60th anniversary of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA),
was supposed to be played for the first time across 12 European countries, instead of the traditional one country hosting or two countries co-hosting. The move was meant to celebrate the 60-year milestone of UEFA and was also necessitated by challenges in finding committed hosts with 12 satisfactory football stadia, following the expansion of the tournament from 16 to 24 teams, after the Euro 2016 hosted by France (Ludvigsen 2019). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in most of these host countries in early 2020 raised concerns regarding its potential impact on players, staff and visitors to the tournament. As the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on football grew, a number of domestic and UEFA competition matches were first played in empty stadia, and eventually all matches of Europe’s major leagues were suspended. Ultimately, Euro 2020 was postponed to 2021. The rationale behind the shift was to allow for pressure to be reduced on the public services in the affected countries while also providing space in the calendar for domestic European leagues that had been suspended to complete their seasons, once the pandemic is under control.

In South African football, it was business unusual after a national state of disaster was declared on 15 March 2019 because of COVID-19, and all mass gatherings, including sports, were suspended. While the Premier Soccer League (PSL) players were still being paid by the clubs during the football shutdown period, the match officials were left to bear the brunt of the pandemic from a salary point of view. This was because they are not permanently employed by the South African Football Association and are remunerated as and when they work or according to the number of matches at which they officiate (Makhaya 2020). At a more localised level, fitness trainers in South Africa also highlighted that the lack of sports and the restrictions on movement during the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on their way of life. As Magasela (2020) observed, fitness gymnasiums had to be shut down to mitigate against the spread of the virus: business suffered seriously because people were first scared to go to gyms and as restrictions tightened, the people were banned from going to fitness clubs. Job losses were inevitable as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted.

Sports people with sponsors also acknowledged that due to the universal shutdown of businesses during the pandemic, sponsors were facing their own challenges in getting value for their money from them, which could only happen if they were working.

Ultimately, the postponement and/or cancellation of all of these sporting events had an effect on sports tourism and the associated benefits for the cities and countries hosting them.

10.4.3 COVID-19 and Cricket Events

Cricket is another sport that was hit hard by the COVID-19 outbreak globally. The cricket-playing nations are shown in Fig. 10.2. Of special note was the postponement of the high-profile Indian Premier League (IPL). The decision to suspend the
Multibillion-dollar IPL was taken as a precaution to stop the spread of COVID-19 as India’s 1.3 billion people were placed under lockdown for 21 days to try and contain the killer virus. The IPL cricket tournament draws the world’s top players from all the major cricket-playing nations. The postponement came as India also cancelled its two remaining one-day cricket internationals against South Africa because of the pandemic (Chakraborty 2020). In fact, the touring South Africa team had to return home without playing.

COVID-19 also led to the halving of the winner’s prize of the 2020 IPL and put a dent in its US$6.8 billion brand value. The postponement or eventual cancelling of the tournament meant further losses for the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), which gets around US$532 million annually from broadcasters and its central pool of sponsors. The Chinese smartphone maker Vivo, which sponsored the tournament to the value of 219 million rupees, stood to suffer a big loss if the postponed tournament were eventually cancelled. The BCCI and IPL franchises also pay 20% of a player’s annual fee to his home board, which stands to lose that income if the postponed tournament were eventually cancelled.

Cricket Australia is also at risk of losing close to US$174 million if the coronavirus outbreak derails their high-profile home test series against India in October 2020 (Chakraborty 2020). The English and Welsh Cricket Board in turn announced that they would be reducing the salaries of their national team players but also offered a rescue package for the cricket clubs that were in financial distress because of the COVID-19 outbreak. They observed that players also needed to bear the financial consequences of the meltdown caused by the coronavirus.
10.4.4 Impacts on Rugby Championships

As with the other sports, the cancellation of rugby fixtures deprived teams of much-needed ticket sales and broadcasting money. Some of the rugby tournaments that were affected by the coronavirus outbreak were the Six Nations, the World Rugby Sevens Series, the Olympics, the European Cups, the Guinness Pro14, Super Rugby and The Rugby Championship. Among the most impacted rugby competitions were the Super Rugby and Rugby Championship tournaments (Fig. 10.3). These involve teams from Argentina, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Africa. In New Zealand, each of the five Super Rugby teams had to be given a grant of US$149,000 by New Zealand Rugby to assist them to survive for up to 3 months after their funds had dried up under the COVID-19 lockdown (Mulvenney 2020). The lockdown on sporting activities had left the teams with players to pay, but no revenue streams. The decision to fund these teams was mainly aimed at stopping them from collapsing and also to protect the core capabilities of the clubs, so that they would be ready to continue where they left off once the COVID-19 pandemic was under control. Players in these teams also played their part by taking salary cuts (Mulvenney 2020).

In South Africa, the teams in the Super Rugby league implemented a remote training programme to keep players active even during the lockdown periods. This included players doing daily wellness and temperature reports to make sure that they were not infected. The plan of the clubs was to be match-fit within 3 weeks of the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, huge challenges come with practising as an individual indoors, when players had been used to working, training and travelling together as a team. In South Africa, rugby and football were the greatest losers sportswise, during the COVID-19 outbreak. In 2018, South Africa Rugby earned R714 million in broadcast rights, sponsorships of R388 million and R100 million in gate revenue (Ray 2020). All this revenue, and potentially more, stood to

![Super Rugby and The Rugby Championship nations](image)
be lost because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Technically, the rugby board was in breach of its contracts with broadcasters for not supplying content during the lockdown and also for not giving its sponsors value for money. Whereas South African rugby teams were financially precariously sound during the first 21 days of the COVID-19 lockdown, cost-cutting measures would be a necessary reality further down the line if the pandemic continued unabated.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Rugby Australia was forced to lay off staff in a bid to survive the shock of the huge losses they had incurred when lucrative games were cancelled. Three-quarters of staff lost their jobs, and even the CEO of Rugby Australia had to take a 50% salary cut. This came in the wake of a loss of up to $74 million in potential revenue when their test matches against Ireland and Fiji were cancelled due to COVID-19. Extreme measures therefore had to be taken to ensure cost reduction for the sport to remain financially viable, so that when the global crisis ended, the board would be able to rebuild the sport (AFP 2020).

### 10.4.5 Implications for Major Golf Tournaments

There are four major golf championships with several events. These include The Masters Tournament, the PGA Championship, the US Open and The British Open. The countries that host these championships and tournaments are shown in Fig. 10.4. Based on the locations of the host countries, the golf scene presents tourists (both players and fans) with opportunities to travel around the world. On 12 March 2020, the PGA Tour made a statement concerning The Players Championships and COVID-19 (PGA Tour 2020a). In the statement, they
indicated that they were aware of the challenges emerging from the spreading pandemic, with the situation rapidly changing. However, the decision was made to continue with The Players Championships, although it would be reviewed constantly. Fans who no longer wished to attend were free to request refunds through laid-down procedures. The tournament went ahead for day 2, but with no fans. Eventually, the tournament was cancelled (PGA Tour 2020b). In the same statement announcing the cancellation there was further bad news, as all upcoming PGA Tour events were cancelled.

On 13 March 2020, an announcement was made that The Masters was postponed (The Associated Press 2020). The Masters was due to take place from 9 to 12 April 2020 at the Augusta National Golf Club. This cancellation also impacted the Augusta National Women’s Amateur and the Drive, Chip and Putt National Finals. However, no new dates were announced for The Masters, with the decision coming only 12 hours after the PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan announced the cancellation of four PGA-related tournaments. These cancellations included three rounds of The Players Championship discussed earlier. It emerged that The Masters had historically finished in April each year since 1935, with the only exception being cancellations from 1943 to 1945 because of World War II. The picture of the total number of events that were eventually cancelled or postponed per major tour is presented in Fig. 10.5.

![Fig. 10.5](image)

**Fig. 10.5** Total number of events cancelled or postponed per major tour. (Source: Authors, data from PGA Tours (2020c))
On 17 March 2020, more bad news came in. The PGA Championship scheduled for 11 to 17 May 2020 at TPC Harding Park in San Francisco was also cancelled (PGA Tour 2020c). In the statement, the PGA Tour commissioner indicated that the health of the players remained the number one priority. Other major events cancelled included the RBC Heritage (13–19 April 2020), Zurich Classic of New Orleans (20–26 April 2020), Wells Fargo Championship (27 April-3 May 2020) and the AT&T Byron Nelson (4–10 May 2020).

A number of players took to social media to react to the cancellations and postponements. On 16 March Tiger Woods wrote, “There are a lot more important things in life than a golf tournament right now. We need to be safe, smart and do what is best for ourselves, our loved ones and our community” (PGA Tour 2020d). On 20 March 2020 Webb Simpson wrote, “So proud of the @WMPhoenixOpen. The Thunderbirds are donating $1 million to charities in need in the Phoenix area … What the Thunderbirds do each year is incredible, and I’m glad to be a part of it”. Lastly, Ian Poulter wrote, “Hi guys I know it’s difficult but if we all listen and distance ourselves and not gather in groups we can stop the spread. I’m seeing so many videos of selfish, disrespectful people who think this is a joke. If you don’t listen this will spiral out of control even more” (ibid.).

10.4.6 Impacts on Major Tennis Events in 2020

There were five major tennis championships scheduled for 2020, and some were affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, with negative impacts on tourist movements. The main tournaments included Wimbledon, the US Open, Australian Open, French Open and Summer Games Tennis Tournament that was to take place in Japan. The host countries are shown in Fig. 10.6. The Main Board of the All England Club

![Fig. 10.6 Countries hosting major tennis events. (Source: Authors)](image-url)
(AELTC) and the Committee of Management of The Championships announced the cancellation of Wimbledon’s 134th Championships on 1 April 2020. The tournament was shifted to 28 June to 11 July 2021 (AELTC 2020). The main reason was to ensure that the multitudes of tourists that usually grace the occasion do not get infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus which causes COVID-19. This was also to comply with the UK government directives for combating COVID-19.

The Wimbledon cancellation also covered the entirety of the ATP/WTA European grass-court swing. This included the ATP events in ‘s-Hertogenbosch, Stuttgart, London-Queen’s, Halle, Mallorca, Eastbourne as well as WTA events in ‘s-Hertogenbosch, Nottingham, Birmingham, Berlin, Eastbourne and Bad Homburg (Tennis.com 2020). The US Open was not affected at the time of the announcement. However, events were to be continuously monitored. At the time of completing this chapter, the USA was the new global COVID-19 epicentre, both in terms of infections and deaths. As in the case of the PGA Tour, the last time Wimbledon was not played was in 1945, during World War II. Serena Williams reacted with shock (Tignor 2020). Wimbledon is the oldest tennis tournament globally and attracts huge numbers of tourists and visitors over its duration of 13 days. For example, the following visitor figures were reported: for 2017 (473,372), 2018 (473,169) and 2019 (500,397) (Lange 2020). This is why it made sense for the organisers to cancel the tournament due to COVID-19 – many were going to be in real danger of contracting the disease.

10.4.7 Other Major Sporting Events Impacted by COVID-19

In South Africa, the Comrades Marathon was one of the most prominent victims of the COVID-19 pandemic. The marathon is the largest and oldest ultramarathon in the world and is held annually between the cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg. The event attracts participants from all over the world and has been growing in popularity over the years. Figure 10.7 shows the number of capped participants in the marathon from the years 2011 to 2020. In 2020, when it was cancelled, it was expected to attract 27,500 participants, compared to the 19,591 it attracted in 2011 (Comrades 2020).

Some of the other key sporting events that were postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic were the Dubai World Cup and several USA events. The Dubai World Cup race, which is held at the Meydan Racecourse, is one of the world’s richest horse races, with a total prize money of US$35 m, including US$12 m in the feature race (ESPN 2020). In the USA, major professional sports leagues such as Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, Major League Soccer and the National Hockey League suspended the playing of games as the virus spread rapidly across the country. Major marathons such as the Boston, London, Paris, Great Wall and Barcelona marathons were either cancelled or postponed over COVID-19 concerns. One of the first major events to see a shift in schedule was the 2020 Tokyo Marathon, at the beginning of March 2020. The
marathon was only held for the elite and non-elite runners given entry to the 2021 race. As the pandemic became widespread and the uncertainty of its containment grew, sports organisers proactively started to reschedule or cancel events set to take place in the first half of the year 2020 (ESPN 2020).

As Reuters (2020) observed, the anti-doping system was facing challenges with most countries going into lockdown and closing their borders to contain the spread of COVID-19. The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), in giving guidance on taking samples from athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasised that the collection officials must be healthy, have no symptoms related to the virus and must be provided with protective medical equipment. Where movement was restricted, WADA advised to concentrate on targeted athletes from high-risk sports and disciplines. However, another challenge was that most accredited laboratories had suspended their normal operations due to the pandemic.

Owing to the suspension of professional sporting activities worldwide, the US$450 billion global betting industry also suffered a big setback. As soon as there was a global shutdown on sporting – especially horse racing – most of the prominent betting companies issued profit warnings and most started having financial hardships (Smith 2020). In East Africa, gambling sales went down by as much as 99% following the devastation of global sports in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The suspension of the world’s leading football leagues left many gamblers in East Africa with very little to bet on. In addition, all gambling shops were closed in an attempt to control the pandemic, and only as few as 30% of the gamblers could gamble online. As a result, this industry, with an annual turnover of US$42 million
in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, was almost decimated during the pandemic (Karoney and Edwards 2020).

Such was the unbearable negative impact of COVID-19 across several global sporting disciplines and the supporting sports tourism industry.

10.5 Conclusions

The study revealed that sports events and sports tourism were negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as measures to control its spread took preference over sports all over the world. From the banning of air travel and closure of airports to lockdowns in many countries, the odds were against sporting events and their stakeholders. The fact that sport comes secondary to the wellbeing of communities is unquestionable. However, we cannot ignore the millions of dollars that have been lost by major sport governing bodies, individual teams and athletes and their dependants due to the pandemic. The sports industry was both decimated and bankrupted. Most sporting events around the world, ranging from individual events to regular league matches and mega sports events lined up for the first half of 2020, were cancelled and/or postponed. The most salient victim was the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The cancellation of sporting activities led to losses for the individual teams, broadcasters and sponsors, leaving most of them in financial distress. From an athlete’s perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the loss of income, as most sporting clubs significantly cut salaries, with some reducing salaries by as much as 70%. The athletes also faced a major battle to remain fit during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, given the fact that they had no access to training grounds and centres. The most vulnerable members of the sporting industry were confronted with job losses and an indefinite suspension of income. As a sensitive tourist industry, COVID-19 also impacted heavily on the sports tourism sector, leading to a loss of income in the entire value chain, including hotels, restaurants and food production. Undoubtedly, plans needed to be put in place to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on sportsmen, administrators and other stakeholders. It is clear from what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic that athletes need to speak with one voice to protect themselves against the commercial interests of their employers. The employers seemed to have been out of touch with the gravity of the pandemic during its initial phases. They continued with sporting events even when it was no longer safe to do so, in some cases facilitating the spread of the disease and also risking the health and wellbeing of the athletes and spectators. Only after several athletes had contracted the disease was action taken. With the industry having hit rock bottom, an urgent rescue package needs to be designed and delivered by governments and interested stakeholders to help it survive the post-pandemic period. In future, it will be imperative for the industry to put in place a fund to help them survive disaster periods as that imposed on it by the COVID-19 pandemic.
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