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A losing battle? Women's sport pre- and post-COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Research question: In 2019, women's sport was reported as being on the rise. Increased participation rates, media coverage, investment and support were evident. Following the spread of COVID-19 across the globe, which halted most forms of competitive sport, there were repeated concerns about the future of women's sport. This research aims to document elite sportswomen's perceptions of the state of women's sport pre-COVID-19 and the possible impact moving forwards.

Research methods: Ninety five responses from an online, anonymous, qualitative questionnaire completed by elite sportswomen mainly based, in the UK, on the impact of COVID-19 on women's sport were collected. Data were subject to a thematic analysis, to determine key concerns, and the frequency data of responses were quantitatively recorded.

Results and findings: Most sportswomen felt that women's sport was on an upward trajectory, but many juxtaposed that against inequality compared to men's sport in terms of media coverage and finance. There were concerns that the subordinate position women's sport, with less resources and support, will have severe implications post-COVID-19. However, there were considerations that a pause in sport would allow for personal development, increased participation upon sports return and space for a reconfiguration of sport.

Implications: Those involved in sport are encouraged to think more critically about progress narratives in women's sport. We caution that these hide perpetual, structural and symbolic inequalities and propose that they are positioned more coherently within wider gender equity agenda. This is a process that will require widespread cultural change.

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Women's sport; professional sport; COVID-19; financial precariousness; gender inequality

Introduction

In 2019, women's sport was gaining unprecedented attention, with increased discourses and action on women's participation and leadership, equal pay, safeguarding policies and media coverage (UN Women, 2020). Heading into 2020, the future looked bright for elite women's sport. On the 21st of February, the ICC Women's T20 World Cup launched in Australia, alongside an aggressive marketing campaign – a strategy known to increase

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attendances in women's sport (Meier et al., 2015) – to entice fans to the Melbourne Cricket Ground called '#FilltheMCG'. The tournament final held on the 8th March – also International Women's Day – attracted over 86,000 spectators, the biggest attendance for a live women's sports event this millennium. Following record numbers of spectators at, and viewers of, the 2019 Women's Football World Cup in France (FIFA, 2019), it seemed that interest in women's sport was on the crest of a wave. However, global sport was about to experience one of its biggest challenges yet in the form of COVID-19. Just three days after the aforementioned final, the World Health Organisation declared a pandemic, prompting a shutdown of the majority of all competitive sport. The sports industry was hit hard, but there were concerns raised that the impact would exaggerate inequalities (Evans et al., 2020), and thus would be more strongly felt in women's sport (Clarkson et al., 2020; Pape & McLachlan, 2020). In response to these concerns, this research aimed to document elite sportswomen's perceptions of the state of women's sport pre-COVID-19 and the possible impact of COVID-19 on women's sport.

The state of play for elite women's sport

In March 2020, *The Lancet* published a commentary highlighting the potential gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which men's and women's experiences differ (Wenham et al., 2020), and since then research in a range of fields has supported this notion: women saw a greater reduction in work hours and employment (Collins et al., 2021) and increased home labour responsibilities (Farré et al., 2020) and care responsibilities (Power, 2020). It was expected by academics studying sport that the pandemic would have a similar gendered impact in sports contexts, with women worse affected (Evans et al., 2020). Clarkson et al. (2020), writing about elite women's football in England, raised concerns regarding both organisational and economic repercussions, and consequences for players regarding contracts, migration and investment, and well-being. They outlined the complex history of women's involvement in football to illuminate 'very real threats to the progress of elite women's football', rooted in historical gender inequality (Clarkson et al., 2020, p. 2). Pape and McLachlan (2020) theorised how and why the impacts of the pandemic could be more significant for women in sport, using a framework of interdependence for sport. Here, they noted the persistence of gendered precarity and inequality in sport and the prospect of their exacerbation. Both papers proposed strategies for the long-term survival of women's sport, which centred on gender-equitable solutions, such as equal opportunities for the safe resumption of play (Pape & McLachlan, 2020), more equitable funding allocation and improvements in media coverage (Pape & McLachlan, 2020; Clarkson et al., 2020).

In understanding the concern for women's sport, it is important to provide some brief context. The vulnerability of women's sport during COVID-19 makes more sense alongside a discussion of both historical and contemporary issues pertaining to women's sport. Feminist commentators on the history of sport have highlighted two concurrent ideologies around sport that have contributed to the marginalisation and discrimination of women: the masculinist origins of sport and restrictive gender norms for women (Messner, 1988). Despite sport being organised and controlled - in very simple terms - by men for men, with Theberge (1981, p. 342) identifying sport as a 'fundamentally sexist institution that is male dominated and masculine in orientation', women have still

taken part in sport throughout history. That being said, the history of women in sport in the Western world is one that was constrained by gender norms and medical myths (Gregg & Taylor, 2019), which suggested that women were unsuitable for participation in sport (Hargreaves, 1994). Indeed, 'women's movement into sport (as athletes and spectators) has challenged the naturalisation of gender difference and inequality, which has been a basic aspect of the institution of sport' (Messner & Sabo, 1990, p. 9). In the twenty-first century, we have witnessed a gender transformation in sports, with millions of girls moving into previously male-dominated sports (Cooky & Messner, 2018). This has largely been attributed to shifts in Western cultural expectations for girls and women, which, in sport, equated to a growing acceptance of girls' athleticism, and an increasing professionalisation of elite-level women's sport (Bowes & Culvin, *in press*).

Whilst not wanting to simplify the discussion, increasing cultural acceptance of athleticism in women can be evidenced by the patterns of visibility for female athletes, with both increasing and improved media coverage appearing to be integral to the continued growth and development in professionalising women's sport. However, research has perpetually demonstrated a mismatch in the quantity and quality of coverage of men's and women's sports (Fink, 2015). Bruce (2008, p. 57) notes that the sports media 'can simultaneously challenge and reinforce dominant assumptions that sport is primarily a male domain'. She identifies persistent 'rules' of media coverage that reinforce this notion: the symbolic annihilation of women's sport through perpetual low rates of reporting, and then when women are covered, they are often sexualised and/or feminised, or journalists display ambivalence – for example, juxtaposing representations of strength or skill against traditional femininity or weakness (Bruce, 2016). More recent literature presents *some* evidence of positive change, with Biscomb and Griggs (2013) documenting a shift towards a greater awareness of, and coverage of, women athletes in traditional sports media. Subsequently, Bruce (2016) outlined current 'rules' that challenge dominant assumptions about women in sport: they are now more likely to be portrayed as serious athletes, with more action photographs, and presented as successful national citizens – although this can result in an 'us and them' framing that subjects athletes from other nations to problematic coverage. Bruce then outlined two 'new rules': first, through the use of online media, enabling female athletes to use their own voices, on their own terms, and secondly, through the discourse of 'pretty and powerful' over 'pretty *or* powerful' (Bruce, 2016).

So, although there may be some evidence of positive changes, in a context where traditional media outlets have been criticised for ignoring or trivialising women athletes, online media – and specifically social media – is a potential tool for women athletes to redress this lack of coverage (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Online media provides sports-women and their sports organisations, fans and commentators with a space to share, debate and discuss women's sport (Bruce & Hardin, 2014; LaVoi & Calhoun, 2014). Allison (2018, p. 215), writing specifically about women's football, describes the role that social media can play not only as a potential marketing instrument but also as a 'free way of circumventing mainstream media outlets to communicate with and expand the fan base'. However, Mogaji et al. (2020) caution that there are risks associated with using social media, and sportswomen must be mindful of online 'trolls', with Kavanagh et al. (2019) highlighting that increased connection comes with the potential for misuse and abuse, especially for sportswomen. Despite this, low-cost, freely accessible coverage through online spaces can be significant for women's sport, as increased

visibility of women's sport is seen to have a significant impact on funding and sponsorship opportunities within sport (Caple et al., 2011).

Elite-level women's sport is often characterised by desires to embrace, or an inability to avoid, commercial imperatives (Forster, 2006), with the sport-media relationship central to promote commercial interest (Mansfield & Killick, 2012). This is seen as essential to the financial sustainability of women's sport and the move towards professionalisation, with Lough and Geurin (2019) proclaiming - albeit pre-COVID-19 - that women's sport was in a position to break new ground both socially and economically. However, the slower commercialisation of women's sport, connected to the stuttered history of women in sport and their relative invisibility within the sports media, has meant that women's experiences in elite sport are notably different from men's experiences. Pavlidis (2020) and Taylor et al. (2020) have highlighted how the cultures of sport create women who are grateful for any advance, and thus they often do not challenge gender inequality. In most sports, women's experiences as paid athletes are characterised by short contracts, low wages, little or no maternity pay and inadequate terms and conditions (Clarkson et al., 2020). Although there has been increasing investment from commercial partners and governing bodies, it remains that women's sport appears much more fragile than men's sport prior to COVID-19.

COVID-19 and the global shutdown of sport

As Garcia-Garcia et al. (2020) and Parnell et al. (2020) note, organised mass sports activities and elite sports competitions were among the first casualties when governments around the world started to decide how to control the pandemic. When the 2020 Tokyo Olympics was officially postponed to 2021 on the 24th of March (Tokyo2020, 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic arguably reached its peak in terms of its impact on sport, reaching the largest and most significant elite sporting event (Parnell et al., 2020). The following months saw extensive consultation and planning by leagues and governing bodies across the globe on appropriate ways to resume sport safely.

Evans et al. (2020) note that the pressures faced by the sports industry during this time are imbalanced, given the uneven nature of sport, where inequalities in sport, such as along gendered lines, will be laid bare. Pape and McLachlan (2020, p. 393) note that women's sport might end up 'taking one for the team' as governing bodies look to save men's professional sports leagues. Likewise, Clarkson et al. (2020) noted specifically that the situation for women's football is potentially much more precarious, and the impact much more significant, than for men's football. Evans et al. (2020) further contend that implicit gender-based inequalities in sport during the COVID-19 pandemic merit further investigation. Thus, this paper - as part of a project on elite women's sport during COVID-19 (Bowes et al., 2020) - considers the perceptions of elite sportswomen on the state of their sport pre-COVID-19 and the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on their sport.

Methodology

It has been noted that sportswomen are often expected to feel grateful for their access to elite sport; they should emphasise positivity, understand that their engagements are

important to the future of their sport and the growth of their game, and subsequently they fear punishment for speaking critically or negatively (Pavlidis, 2020). It was from this position that the research methodology was designed. The two lead researchers created an anonymous, online, predominantly qualitative questionnaire to collect data. Whilst there are limitations to this approach – as Rowley (2014) explains, researchers cannot be sure that the questions have been fully understood, and not all questions will be answered (due to boredom, time, unwillingness to respond or elaborate, or simply not having an opinion) – the methodology was carefully considered. It was expected that elite sportswomen would feel cautious in discussing their opinions on COVID-19 and the impact of women's sport, and some would feel uncomfortable disclosing negative experiences or expressing concerns. It was felt that an anonymous questionnaire would provide participants with a safe space to document their experiences, without fear of identification.

The online questionnaire was created using Qualtrics [Qualtrics 2005; 37, 892 ed. Provo, Utah, USA]. As part of the questionnaire, all participants accessed the participant information sheet and then provided informed consent prior to the questionnaire commencing. To participate, women had to be aged a minimum of 18 years and taking part in elite sport, defined as at least competing in a national-level competition. The questionnaire contained 29 questions, organised into three sections, although participants did not need to answer all questions. First, closed questions were asked on attributes of the participants (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016), including age, occupation, sport, level of competition, years of competition at that level and significant achievements. Featuring open questions on attitudes of the participants (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016), the second section centred on the immediate impact of enforced lockdowns on the women as athletes, from both financial and training perspectives (Bowes et al., 2020). The final section contained questions that allowed participants to express their views on women's sport pre- and post-COVID-19, including a comparison to men's sport. Open-ended questions included:

- Prior to COVID-19, what were your perceptions of your sport in comparison to men's sport?
- Do you feel well supported in your sport by the media?
- Do you think your sport will be affected in the long term by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Do you feel the impact of COVID-19 on women's sports will be different from men's sports?

For every question, participants were encouraged to explain their answers. The data related to this section are reported here.

Following ethical approval (Nottingham Trent University 19/20-120V2), participant recruitment and data collection took place over a three-week period from 27 May 2020 to 17 June 2020. Given the specific target population, a variety of sampling strategies were used: purposive, convenience and snowball (Rowley, 2014). The lead researcher advertised the study via the social networking site Twitter, the initial tweet receiving over 300 link clicks to the questionnaire. In total, 219 people

started the questionnaire, with 95 chosen for data analysis. Given Rowley's (2014) contention that a limitation of questionnaires is that not all participants would want to answer all questions, we set an inclusion criterion for data analysis of a 50% response rate.

For data analysis, the researchers adopted a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In qualitative questionnaire responses, the important data often lie in the detailed explanations (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016), and as Rowley (2014) notes, the most common approach to interpreting these data is to work through each question, coding responses and identifying key themes. This was undertaken with a feminist framework in mind that, like Pape and McLachlan (2020), foregrounded women's experiences in sport as rooted in gender inequality where, especially in professional sport, they operate in a system that privileges men.

The qualitative data analysis involved two stages. Initially, researchers coded the data set by question. The initial coding process allowed for the addition of frequency analysis, where codes were manually counted in response to specific questions to enable a quantitative reading of the data. The lead author then thematically analysed the codes, combining individual codes into larger themes where relevant, considering the data set as a whole, instead of the quantitative per question approach. This allowed trends across the whole cohort to be considered, as well as in specific populations such as per sport or competitive level where necessary.

Participants

The participants selected for analysis were aged between 18 and 34, with 94% of participants residing in the United Kingdom. There were responses from a variety of different sports: rugby (21%), netball (18%), football (15%), hockey (9%), cricket (8%), swimming (6%), equestrian (3%), golf (3%), as well as archery, athletics (including paratriathlon), basketball, BMX, canoe slalom, cycling, fencing, lacrosse, Olympic weightlifting, squash, table tennis and ultimate frisbee. All but one participant competed at the national or international level, including world champions, commonwealth champions and international medallists in a range of sports. Only 16% identified being an athlete as their sole occupation, with 57% of the sample receiving some form of financial reimbursement for their involvement (Bowes et al., 2020).

Findings and results

There were some key themes identified across the data set in relation to the state of women's sport before COVID-19 and their concerns around the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on women's elite sport. The following themes will be discussed in more detail using the verbatim qualitative responses from the participants, using quantitative frequency data to support:

- (1) Challenging the 'boom' narrative of women's sport
- (2) Financial precariousness
- (3) Issues of media coverage
- (4) Contemplating the positives?

Challenging the 'boom' narrative of women's sport

When the participants were questioned on the state of women's sport pre-COVID-19, compared to men's sport, they noted feeling undervalued within the world of sport, although aware of the progress that had been made. In total, 42% indicated in some way that they felt women's sport was on the up prior to the COVID-19 pandemic: 'The women's game was growing massively in crowd support, funding and opportunities to make a career out of it' (Cricket, International).

The remaining 58% of participants described their subordinate positioning in sport, in multiple ways but mainly across media coverage and funding, and absent of any progress narrative. It was felt that the growth of women's sport was one that was often juxtaposed against systematic inequalities within sport. In total, 80% of participants – including some of those who felt the profile of women's sport was improving – noted that a comparison with men's sport marked out, or made visible, some form of inherent inequalities, and that the growth of women's sport was hindered by inequalities between men's and women's sport. The participants felt that it was clear they were part of a positive trajectory for women's sport, but one that was still significantly behind their male counterparts for multiple reasons. One international basketballer stated: 'It was on the up for women but it's still not comparable to men's in terms of salary, crowds, sponsorship, coverage'.

Similarly, an international netballer highlighted the disparity as a 'losing battle':

I think its recognition and popularity was growing which felt really good, but also I felt a bit like a losing battle. It felt like we were always trying to be at the same level as other male sports, which seemed a million years away and was tough when it felt like we were training and putting as much effort in.

Clearly, the women were aware of the impression of growth but were able to retain a critical focus on where women's sport sits within wider sport hierarchies, with only 10% of the participants commenting that there was gender equality in sport prior to the pandemic.

In considering the impact of the pandemic in relation to men's sport, the concern for 78% of the participants was that there would be a bigger and more problematic impact on women's sport. For some, this disparity between men's and women's sport was immediately evident in the return to play priorities and protocols. In rugby, one international player described the differences in access to training and support: 'Yes, the men continue as normal, train at home, had equipment shipped out to them, train in their own gyms, have constant communication between team, coaches and support staff women have nothing'. Similarly, in football, the access men have to training and competition was also noted: 'Men have gone back to training and will be getting paid again whereas the women's league has been cancelled so the earliest we will play a competitive game again could be late August' (Football, National).

Whilst one participant felt 'everything' was a negative impact (Netball, National), for the rest of participants, the concerns around the immediate negative impact of COVID-19 on women's sport specifically was recorded as either financial (51%), a reduction in interest (23%), a decrease in standards (19%), loss of teams (4%), and one participant feeling pushed to the side. When considering the implication on women's sport in the long term, even more women were concerned about the financial implications (66%), as well as noting issues around the effects of a lack of competition (12%), and that

feeling that women's sport was being ignored (4%). Clearly, the strongest fear around the continued growth of elite women's sport was in terms of finance, which will now be discussed in more detail.

Financial precariousness

Some of the biggest concerns from sportswomen around the future of their sports centred on financial remuneration and funding. In terms of the finances involved in women's sport, there was a strong sense of inequality across the participants pre-COVID-19. This was manifest in terms of the lack of contracted salaries and full-time professional status, with only 57% of the participants receiving some form of payment for their involvement in elite-level sport. For example, these two participants, international competitors in cycling and netball, highlight the insecurity of sport as work for women, describing how many have part-time jobs:

In Pro cycling women minimum wage only came in in 2020 and only for the top 8 teams. All other female cyclists have to have a job alongside riding. (Cycling, World Medallist)

Many female athletes within netball have to fit training in around another job in order to make ends meet. (Netball, International)

When the participants were questioned on the financial opportunities for women compared to men in sport, many described the large disparities in their sports and 91% felt that pay was unequal between the sexes.

These disparities were often explained across player contracts and match fees, sponsorship and prize funds. Many of the athletes were very forthcoming about sharing their experiences of the gender pay gap. In terms of contracted financial remuneration in cricket, the large disparities were clearly evident. As two players explain:

The new franchise competition that was due to take place was joint with the men where everything was the same with the men, except pay. They were getting far far more. (Cricket, International)

In one of the competitions, 1 male salary is more than the overall women's budget. (Cricket, International)

Likewise, in rugby, players noted the disparities between male and female players with regard to match fees and contracts. For example:

There is greater disparity for male and female rugby players. You compare a £1000 match fee for a women playing for England in comparison to a male counterpart receiving £20,000. (Rugby, National)

Playing rugby at premiership level as a man I would be making £1000s however that is not the case as a woman. We still have to pay for kit packages/subs at the start of the season. Sponsorship is hard to come by, especially if moving to a new city to play, I don't have the local links and contacts to gain sponsorship. (Rugby, International)

Like this particular rugby international, many other participants raised the issue around attracting sponsorship. For example, an international squash player stated that male athletes were able to attract higher sponsorship deals and greater levels of promotion by sponsors: 'The main racket sponsors still provide significantly better contracts

to males of equivalent rankings. They promote the males more than say the men sell more rackets which is a circle that needs breaking’.

A small number of participants compete in sports for prize money, and they similarly highlighted gendered differences, noting the disparities in prize funds, again alongside issues with sponsorship. In compound archery, an international competitor stated: ‘In many of our tournaments the cash prizes for women are often lower (supposedly due to participation numbers). Also, with certain companies there are more male sponsored athletes than female despite being at the same level’.

Clearly, this participant felt that the value placed on women’s sport is lower than men’s sport. It was a similar case for one professional golfer: ‘Males compete for greater prize funds. They have more exposure in the media, predominately television and can therefore achieve higher sponsor contracts’. It is evident here that the sports-women felt all avenues for financial gain (wages, sponsorship prize funds) contained a gendered dimension that inhibited their earning potential.

As noted previously, the majority of the sportswomen had multiple concerns over the long-term impact of COVID-19 on the finances of women’s sport. Whilst there was an acceptance that the global pause on sport would impact the whole of the sports industry, there was a sense that this would be felt more sharply for women’s sport, given that they are so far behind men’s sport. Many of these concerns centred on the expected effect on sponsorship, funding or revenue from fans. One national-level netballer referred to requests for charitable donations from fans: ‘Our salary cap has already been reduced and teams are asking for charity from fans. And we were on a rise in terms of media coverage so this may see us lose our momentum’.

The sense of a loss of momentum was evident in this international-level rugby player’s concerns about the future of sponsorship in her sport:

The premiership has just lost their title sponsor and are yet to find another one so the timing of Covid-19 is not good for women’s rugby. Funding cuts as a result could be very detrimental. The women’s 6N also does not have a title sponsor and so they may struggle to find one in the current climate.

There was also the suspicion that men’s sport would be the priority in a financial sense, either through earlier returns to play or in future funding decisions, given the increased cultural significance of elite-level men’s sport:

Even though I think there is genuine support and desire to grow the Women’s game, in reality the majority of income comes from the men’s game so financially to Women’s game may take a hit to its growth in the near future. The men’s game will be a financial priority. (Cricket, National)

The financially precarious existence of the sportswomen – as seen with the sample of sportswomen in this research – was an obvious and extensively articulated concern for many, from a personal position and in considering the health of their sports in both the immediacy and longer term.

Issues of media coverage

As we have seen above, some of the participants noted the media focus on men’s sport contributed to the disparities in pay deals, funding and sponsorship opportunities.

Only 32% feel well supported as sportswomen by the media, although there was a sense that women's sport was receiving increased media coverage before the pandemic hit:

This is another thing that has grown dramatically over the past 3 years and I definitely think that there has been massive improvements and I would say that I do feel the sport is supported in the media. However, I wouldn't say that it's supported by big companies in terms of all the time, it only seems to be massively on the media when there is a huge tournament and these are only every couple of years. More support for the league would be good, but I do think we're getting there. (Netball, International)

Despite this sense of improvement, many still noted problems. Regarding space for journalists to publish work, one national-level footballer stated: 'Those journalists working for women's football work very hard to get heard. Lack of space given online and in papers to women sport'. Another national-level footballer described problems around coverage in 'off-peak' time: 'There is a lot more coverage now, but it's still often at very off-peak times and sort of as a token gesture'. This 'tokenistic' sentiment was felt in rugby too, with one international player stating: 'I think women's rugby can still be more present in the media, more tv coverage whether that's highlights on at a reasonable time not 11 pm on a Sunday evening during 6 nations'.

When discussing media coverage, some of the sportswomen noted the importance of success in enabling them to increase their levels of media representation, highlighting that for women's sport to be seen as worthy of coverage, they had to succeed. One hockey international described the recent success of the Irish team in the 2018 World Cup as a springboard for more media coverage: 'The recent World Cup silver medal the Irish women's hockey team won definitely had a positive impact on the media coverage of women's hockey'. Similarly, the success of England's netballers in the 2018 Commonwealth Games was described as a pivotal moment: 'When we won cwg [Commonwealth Gold] we had great coverage, we need results though for it to be publicised. It's definitely improving but still a long way to go' (Netball, International). Despite the sense that women were being covered more frequently in the media than previously seen, it was clear that specific sports dominate, and there was work still to do. Sportswomen competing in 'minority sports', such as swimming, table tennis and squash, reported that their sport as a whole was rarely featured in the mainstream press.

Given the issues raised with traditional media coverage, participants were asked about the significance of social media to their sport. The sportswomen were overwhelmingly aware of the role social media can play in promoting women's achievements, 80% considering it valuable for their sport. This was for a multitude of reasons. For some sports that fall out of the mainstream, such as BMX, cycling and show jumping, online spaces have a high importance:

Very important, it's the only way it can be shown. (BMX, World Medallist)

Women cycling often isn't televised so get all news through social media. (Cycling, World Medallist)

Social media does a lot to spread the word on new achieving riders especially the younger ones who have potential to be great. (Show Jumping, National)

For these athletes, social media was invaluable in providing information to existing fans. Other sportswomen from more mainstream sports noted the importance of using social media to connect with fans, or inspire the next generation:

Very significant. It's cheap and quick so that's how much of our content is shared and where we engage fans in the season, camps, knowledge of the game and general player profiles. (Netball, National)

Massively, it is a free way to promote the sport and looking at the target market for young girls to play sport is massive on social media. (Rugby, International)

The accessibility of social media, especially in terms of providing 'free' visibility for sportswomen, was recognised. In this vein, it can also be a personal project for the sports-women, enabling them to build a brand, promote themselves and control the way they are represented:

Yes it enables me to create my own narrative. (Olympic Weightlifting, National)

It's a good way for individuals to build a personal brand and promote the sport to a large audience. (Netball, International)

However, some athletes reported the burdensome nature of engaging with social media. Despite this, they were able to appreciate the importance of it:

Very important. Social media is a lot of peoples sole form of getting news. Players have to do a lot of personal promotion of games on social media though. (Rugby, International)

It is very significant for me, I don't enjoy promoting myself through social media, but it is in the terms of my sponsorship agreement. It has been a huge help in saving me money, even if I don't earn income from it! (Swimming, Age-Group European Medallist)

In considering the long-term impact of COVID-19 on women's sport, some of the participants noted a potential impact on the relationship with the media. For one, the lack of media coverage in the 'no sport' lockdown period was significant, with a sense that they may just fall further behind:

A lot are missing the promotion and recognition they get each year when the leagues start. Missing this is missing a full year in matches, income, media etc. And with female sport already behind on all of these bases it's only going to push it further back. (Netball, International)

For some, there was also a feeling that it was a missed opportunity to showcase women's sport, with men's sport side-lined too. With no men's sport to compete with, this would be an ideal time to publicise women's sport:

No not enough coverage and content. COVID also a good opportunity to increase that when no live sport to report. (Cricket, International)

Media missed a chance to promote women's football while men's was off. (Football, National)

Overall, the athletes felt that there had been positive changes within the sports media, but plenty of work to be done, which meant many relied on social media channels for coverage and promotion, bringing both benefits and challenges. Following the global pause on sport, some questioned whether an opportunity was missed in levelling out the media coverage of sport?

Contemplating the positives?

When asked to identify any positives from the pandemic, 22% believed that there was nothing positive that could come from the COVID-19 crisis for women's sport and that it had actually further highlighted inequalities. However, most participants were able to articulate some potential positives of the COVID-19 crisis. Some noted that it could lead to an increased focus on other aspects of sport, or increased participation (44%), and some highlighted the potential for improved support for women's sport (27%), and an increased use of online applications to support sportswomen (3%). Interestingly, one participant noted that it could demonstrate that 'there are larger things in life' (Cricket, National) as a long-term benefit, with another noting the opportunity for a clean slate.

For some, the comments on potential positives also centred on the notions of a 'restart and/or restructure':

A clean slate and opportunity to showcase different viewing to the usual football, rugby and cricket. (Squash, World Medallist)

Restructuring the leagues and using the time to plan and prepare and make positive changes for when we are back at training and playing. (Rugby, National)

In relation to the above, others felt that the enforced break from sport could possibly encourage a wider base of fans, and similarly provide an opportunity for restructuring, describing the COVID-19 inspired Rose Ladies Series as a positive:

Hopefully for the better. It will take a long time for sport sponsorships to get back to the levels they were at. But with potentially greater exposure in the UK with a new series in the UK recently introduced, this can lead to attracting more fans to the womens game and encouraging more juniors to take up the game. If this series is a success it could lead to more events in the UK in the future. (Golf, Professional Tournament Winner)

Some athletes felt that the time away from the pressures of elite sport would have a positive effect on their personal growth and development. One international swimmer referred to learning about psychology: 'I think a lot of people have had time to learn about themselves (mind or body) and look into aspects such as rehab or sports psychology that they might not have done previously'. For one international netballer, the pandemic provided an opportunity to perhaps plan for a family: 'It's allowing for many female athletes to take the time with their family and consider starting families, which is a huge milestone and hurdle that many female athletes have to consider and plan more than the average woman'. The sense of development was also evident for some in a physical sense, in terms of rest, recovery and performance: 'Given us the chance to train and have adequate recovery rather than having to fit training sessions in go to work and then to rugby' (Rugby, National).

Finally, some felt that a potential benefit of the lockdown could encourage increased grassroots participation. One rugby international stated: 'People are itching to get more active and socialise, there is no better way than playing sport – hopefully there is an increase in female participation in sport'.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to document the lived realities for elite sportswomen during COVID-19, considering the state of women's sport before COVID-19 and understanding their concerns for the future. Following popular discourses of progress and advancement in women's sport, leading to a 'crescendo' in 2019 in the UK (BBC, 2019), we were interested in understanding the current state of play for women involved in elite sport in 2020. We felt it was important that there was a space provided for sportswomen to comment on their experiences, as the voice of women athletes is largely absent from the literature on elite or professional sport (Taylor et al., 2020).

As we have seen in this paper, women at the pinnacle of their sports felt that prior to COVID-19, the momentum was shifting in favour of women's sport in terms of opportunities, funding and media coverage, whilst also cautioning it was still not on a par with men's sport – a 'it's never been better but there's a long way to go' feeling. This, however, is not a new sentiment, and feminist academics have argued similar points of contention over the years. Recently, whilst writing about dominant narratives regarding women's sport between 2015 and 2017 in Australian sports media, McLachlan (2019) questioned the reality of so-called 'moments of progress'. She explains that 'despite facing continued inequality and discrimination in sport, there is the presence of celebratory discourse (of progress, boom times and historic moments, years and eras) regarding women's involvement in, and rights to play sport over the last 130 years' (McLachlan, 2019, p. 9). She further highlights that the 'repetitive (or continuous) discourse of progress potentially constrains the possibilities for gender equality (in sport)' (McLachlan, 2019, p. 20), by concealing the perpetual inequalities that exist. Even though much has been achieved for women in sport, the fight for equal – or at least equitable – pay and conditions for women is still ongoing (Taylor et al., 2020). It would appear that the sportswomen here, in juxtapositioning their own narratives of progress in women's sport against their continual struggle for real recognition and support, inadvertently and inexplicitly also question the boom narrative. They were acutely aware of their subordinate positioning within elite sporting cultures.

With this in mind, the impact of COVID-19 on women's sport was expected to be more significant than in men's sport. That was expressed when the sportswomen were considering the future of their sports, as well as when documenting their experiences of living through lockdown (Bowes et al., 2020). One significant concern centred around the financial stability of elite women's sport. It is widely accepted that many elite sportswomen operate in precarious financial conditions (Culvin, 2019; Clarkson et al., 2020; Pavlidis, 2020), and those not competing full time in sport have a balancing act of considerations, including sport, work, family and/or education (Taylor et al., 2020). Bowes et al. (2020) highlight that the immediate impact of the pandemic on elite sportswomen was often felt in financial terms, with no match fees, cancelled contracts and sponsorships, and team players being furloughed by their employers. This, however, is problematic only for those women who receive financial reimbursement through sport. In the discourse around the future of women's sport more broadly, financial troubles appeared to be one of the biggest long-term worries, a concern that impacts all women involved in elite competitive sport, irrespective of their employment status. Sportswomen have acknowledged that there are limited funding opportunities for

them, compared to sportsmen, and believe that they are treated as second-class citizens (Mogaji et al., 2020), or framed as dependent upon men's sport (Pape & McLachlan, 2020), and this notion was evident in the participant's responses here. The impact of economic inequalities for sportswomen - and women's sport - exaggerated during COVID-19, is constitutive of wider societal issues surrounding the gender pay gap, with many noting that gender inequalities increased in both paid and unpaid work during the pandemic (Collins et al., 2021; Farré et al., 2020; Power, 2020).

The participants aligned worries over the financial future of their sports with concerns over the quality and quantity of media coverage, a persistent problem in women's sport (Fink, 2015). Many felt that coverage for women's sport in the media was dependent upon success, and thus it becomes a personal problem, almost forgiving of the institutional and sociocultural challenges that sportswomen face to be represented. Given this narrative, at a time when no sport was on (and thus, no women's success stories), sportswomen were reported as largely absent in sports media coverage during the COVID-19 lockdown (Breitbart et al., 2020; Bowes, 2020). It was felt by some participants that this was a missed opportunity to address the gender inequality in media coverage. However, as men's sport was able to restart much earlier than women's sport, again the gender imbalance in sports coverage was obvious. In the UK, former professional footballer turned broadcaster Alex Scott emphasised: 'It's not acceptable. Women's sport in general has gained positive momentum and visibility for us [which] does matter. But now we're going to go a whole summer of just watching men's sport again' (BBC, 2020). And so social media becomes an important platform for sportswomen, with Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) noting its use as a tool for female athletes to increase visibility. Here, the sportswomen demonstrated their acute awareness of the necessity to use and engage with fans on social media, and for those in minority sports, it was felt as one of the only avenues to publicise their achievements. However, as Scheffer and Schultz (2013) claim, social media has given rise to the 'accessible athlete', but with that comes concerns of misuse and abuse (Parry et al., 2015), and queries over whether it actually contests the status quo of gender narratives in the sports media (LaVoi & Calhoun, 2014).

Despite the very real anxieties regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the future of women's sport, primarily in terms of financial implications and media invisibility, the sportswomen were able to articulate some potential positives to their plight. The potential for a reconfiguration of sport was noted, a proposition that Rowe (2020) emphasised as central in reimagining a post-COVID-19 sports world. The pause in sport could allow for the perpetual inequalities often faced by women in sport to be dissected, discussed and challenged. By shifting narratives about women's sport, it could engender cultural change within sport. It was felt that there could then be an increased opportunity to engage those at a grassroots or community level and attract new fans. Additionally, on a personal note, the participants noted the benefit of a break from competitive action, enabling both personal and physical development.

Whilst this research has provided empirical evidence to support concerns that sport-based gender inequalities during COVID-19 needed further investigation (Evans et al., 2020), by documenting elite sportswomen's perceptions of women's sport pre-COVID-19 and their concerns for the future, it does not come without limitations. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected nation states in a variety of ways, and these athletes' experiences of, and concerns about the impact of, the pandemic will be influenced

by and situated within their own geographical location – which is predominantly the United Kingdom and Ireland. We have previously highlighted both the benefits and issues of the methodology, and we would suggest that more detailed qualitative research and more scoping quantitative research are necessary.

Implications and concluding thoughts

On the 19th of June, some of the UK's most prominent sportswomen were involved in a letter to Prime Minister Boris Johnson titled Equality Check, shining a light on the lockdown gender gap. As reported by Morgan (2020), the letter included the following statements:

Sir – We are concerned that the long-term impact on women is being overlooked in the Government's response to the coronavirus crisis ... Sportswomen, too, face an uncertain future. The last women's team sport fixture in this country was on March 14. Yet all the focus has been on male-dominated sports. The coronavirus lockdown is turning back the clock on women's lives in Britain. We call on the Government to take action to halt this reversal.

The concern for the future of women's sport, embedded within wider discussions on the impact of the pandemic on women, was clear. Early research has already indicated that the response to the pandemic has had a disproportionately negative impact on women across all sectors and age groups, with some concerned that the legacies of inequalities will persist long term (Blundell et al., 2020). The letter to Johnson evidences the concern in the UK that women's sport was going to be negatively impacted too, a view that was being felt globally too (Breitbart et al., 2020; Pape & McLachlan, 2020; UN Women, 2020).

The fear that women's sport would be sacrificed for men's sport, and the reality that men's competition was a priority when sport was safe to return, was a concern theorised by Pape and McLachlan (2020). They articulate that a 'dependence' narrative serves to inhibit women's place in sport and hides 'the extent to which men in sport depend upon a whole range of (gendered) structures that have been established over time' (Pape & McLachlan, 2020, p. 392). The prioritisation of men's sport further reinforces the subordinate positioning that women's sport has in elite sport cultures. This notion was articulated and felt by the athletes themselves. Thus, sportswomen are both structurally and symbolically precarious (Cooky, 2017; Pape & McLachlan, 2020) in the world of elite sport.

As research into professional women's sport continues to highlight both competing discourses of growth but constraint, or progress but inequality, there are further issues to consider. Gender is not the only bastion of inequality within sport, with intersectional approaches essential to not miss the 'interlocking oppressions' (Crosby, 2016), and alongside further considerations of women's experiences based on race and social class, a detailed consideration of elite athletes competing in disability sport is paramount. Fitzgerald et al. (2020) note that disability sport continues to be viewed through a lens of inferiority. As one participant here noted:

I think more than the male and female for us it's the difference between para and our able bodied counterparts. I think in para sport there is not a huge difference between men and

women. However there are a lot less sponsorship opportunities for para athletes. (Triathlon, International)

As such, further intersections, such as disability, as well as race, ethnicity, sexuality, social class and national identity, warrant further investigation (Pape & McLachlan, 2020), as the impact of COVID-19 continues to be felt across sport.

The popular narrative heading into 2020 was that women's sport was on the rise – more media coverage, increasing professionalisation, improving financial and working conditions – but this research raises questions over those assumptions. Consequently, we encourage those involved in sport to think more critically about progress narratives in women's sport, cautioning that they hide perpetual, structural and symbolic inequalities, and propose that they are positioned more coherently within wider gender equity agendas. Exposing these 'boom' narratives to critiques and moving beyond face value in terms of women's sport progress are essential in the strive towards gender equality (McLachlan, 2019). As one international netballer stated: 'I believe the value attached to a female athlete is lower than that of a male equivalent'. With this in the minds of the athletes, progress narratives are empty until there are genuine attempts at parity – a process which will require wide-reaching cultural changes from the major stakeholders involved in elite sport, including governing bodies, media organisations and commercial partners. The global pause, however, has provided space for a potential reimagining of sport (Rowe, 2020), with sportswomen clearly not content with living on the margins anymore.

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