

Guest editorial: sport and well-being

Prompted by the rising globalization and commercialization of sport, there has been a growing research agenda focussing on well-being in sport, encompassing the physical and mental health of athletes, community health issues associated with sport and the role of sport as a vehicle for positive social change. Sport and recreation have become matters of increasing policy concern around the world, with growing empirical recognition of the wide-ranging positive developmental, social and health impacts of sport. Research attention directed towards sport and well-being traverses multiple fields including science, psychology, economics, law, marketing, management and sociology. This special issue presents a variety of perspectives addressing the critical notion of well-being in sport, examining key stakeholders in the sport ecosystem including athletes, consumers, sports employees and communities more broadly.

The extensive positive impact of sport in relation to community resilience and development, mental, physical and social empowerment as well as economic outcomes is explored in this special issue focussed on sport and well-being. Potential adverse effects on well-being are also addressed, including the ongoing debate on the viability and integrity of amateurism in lucrative collegiate sport and the financial health and acumen of student athletes.

In the first article, “Sport: A Driver of Sustainable Development, Promoter of Human Rights, and Vehicle for Health and Wellbeing for all”, Masdeu Yelamos, Carty and Clardy canvass the wide-ranging impact that sport has upon long-term economic development and societal well-being by presenting United Nations endorsed mechanisms. The paper reports the status of sport policy and the strong association among human rights, health, well-being and sport across the UN system through a detailed review of the state of the field, providing a call to action for multilateral agencies, health and sport authorities to promote global agendas to improve public health.

Local sport teams, particularly in smaller communities, play a critical role, not only as a source of recreation but also in facilitating social and community well-being. “Rural Community Wellbeing through Minor League Sport”, by Kim, Magnusen, Weaver and Kim, investigates how residents in a small town perceive the social responsibility initiatives of a minor league hockey team and the associated positive psychological benefits. Specifically, the authors examine how a minor league hockey team’s socially responsible initiatives are perceived by local residents and impact well-being in terms of community pride, subjective well-being, feelings of attachment and gratitude. The implications support the use of local teams as an asset that can be leveraged beyond monetization, to influence economic development and social welfare.

The next paper continues with the theme of social responsibility initiatives and local sport – also in the context of hockey. Riggin, Danylchuk, Gill and Petrella’s paper, “Social Impact of a Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative”, examines the impact of an initiative, “Hockey Fans in Training”, aimed at improving the health and well-being of sport fans, particularly middle-aged overweight men, and the community more generally. The findings highlight the intermediate impact of the programme in terms of physical well-being as well as the long-term benefits that extend beyond the physical to social and emotional well-being.

The following paper focusses on the well-being of a key, but often overlooked, sport stakeholder: sport employees. This conceptual paper by Oja, Kim, Perrewé and Anagnostopoulos, “Conceptualizing A-HERO for Sport Employees’ Wellbeing”, proposes an expanded employee psychological capital construct, which includes authenticity in addition



to hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism, labelled “A-HERO”. The authors subsequently suggest a theoretical model to improve the well-being of sport employees, providing a fruitful avenue for future research relevant to a wide range of sport organizations.

“Investigating the Financial Overconfidence of Student Athletes”, by McCoy, White and Love, shifts the focus on well-being from community to the individual athlete, by examining the financial well-being of student athletes. Financial well-being is a key predictor of overall well-being in life, including physical and mental health, academic performance and job satisfaction. With more research and practice in sport centred on athlete welfare and career transition following a career in elite sport, this study provides an important contribution as it tackles a dimension of well-being that has been previously overlooked. The findings indicate that student athletes appear to be over-confident in financial self-efficacy and knowledge compared to non-athlete students. This suggests that financial well-being should be a focal educational and support mechanism for student athletes transitioning to graduation, and potentially elite athletes more generally.

Collegiate athletics are also the focus of the paper by Custis, Hoben and Larsen, “Big money, corruption, and black markets: a closer look at the legal and economic effects of amateurism in division I NCAA college athletics”. This paper responds to the topical debate on the legality and ethics of amateurism in US collegiate sport, under the current NCAA model. The authors argue for a restructuring of the NCAA to reflect the reality of modern commercialization and profits in collegiate sport, pointing to regulatory injustice in compensation through a historical review of labour law and antitrust cases. It also suggests the potential for a black market effect based upon this compensation gap straining the free market, and is a timely discussion given recent admission scandals illustrating these impacts.

The diversity of research in sport concerned with well-being is highlighted through this special issue. The powerful platform of sport as a mechanism for social change through athlete and community transformation, beyond commercialization is supported by interdisciplinary research and ongoing attention directed towards well-being as a key performance indicator in sport. Collectively, the papers in this special issue provide insight beyond the physical and social benefits of sport, to inclusion and connectedness to support marginalized communities and individuals. As stated by the United Nations, “Sport has a unique power to attract, mobilize and inspire. By its nature, sport is about participation. It is about inclusion and citizenship. It stands for human values such as respect for its opponent, acceptance of binding rules, teamwork and fairness [...]” Sport continues to be recognized through research, as an efficient and high-impact tool of development, social cohesion and individual and community well-being.

Kate Westberg

*School of Economics,
Finance and Marketing, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology,
Melbourne, Australia, and*

Sarah Jane Kelly

Business School, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia