

# British Journal of Sports Medicine

## **Athletes as community; athletes in community: COVID-19, sporting mega-events, and athlete health protection.**

Journal:	<i>British Journal of Sports Medicine</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Article Type:	Editorial
Date Submitted by the Author:	n/a
Complete List of Authors:	Mann, Robert; University of Exeter, Children's Health and Exercise Research Centre, Department of Sport and Health Sciences Clift, Bryan; University of Bath, Centre for Qualitative Research Boykoff, Jules; Pacific University, Politics and Government Bekker, Sheree; University of Bath, Department for Health
Keywords:	Public health, Surveillance, Sporting organisation, Performance, Olympics

SCHOLARONE™  
Manuscripts



I, the Submitting Author has the right to grant and does grant on behalf of all authors of the Work (as defined in the below author licence), an exclusive licence and/or a non-exclusive licence for contributions from authors who are: i) UK Crown employees; ii) where BMJ has agreed a CC-BY licence shall apply, and/or iii) in accordance with the terms applicable for US Federal Government officers or employees acting as part of their official duties; on a worldwide, perpetual, irrevocable, royalty-free basis to BMJ Publishing Group Ltd ("BMJ") its licensees and where the relevant Journal is co-owned by BMJ to the co-owners of the Journal, to publish the Work in this journal and any other BMJ products and to exploit all rights, as set out in our [licence](#).

The Submitting Author accepts and understands that any supply made under these terms is made by BMJ to the Submitting Author unless you are acting as an employee on behalf of your employer or a postgraduate student of an affiliated institution which is paying any applicable article publishing charge ("APC") for Open Access articles. Where the Submitting Author wishes to make the Work available on an Open Access basis (and intends to pay the relevant APC), the terms of reuse of such Open Access shall be governed by a Creative Commons licence – details of these licences and which [Creative Commons](#) licence will apply to this Work are set out in our licence referred to above.

Other than as permitted in any relevant BMJ Author's Self Archiving Policies, I confirm this Work has not been accepted for publication elsewhere, is not being considered for publication elsewhere and does not duplicate material already published. I confirm all authors consent to publication of this Work and authorise the granting of this licence.

**Title Page****Title of the article:**

Athletes as community; athletes in community: COVID-19, sporting mega-events, and athlete health protection

**Corresponding author:**

Robert H. Mann.

Address: Children's Health and Exercise Research Centre, Sport and Health Sciences, College of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Exeter, St Luke's Campus, Exeter, UK, EX1 2LU.

Contact Details: rm537@exeter.ac.uk (07828162065)

**Co-author list:**

Bryan C. Clift. Centre for Qualitative Research, University of Bath, Bath, UK.

Jules Boykoff. Department of Politics and Government, Pacific University, Oregon, USA.

Sheree Bekker. Department for Health, University of Bath, Bath, UK.

**Competing interests:**

There are no competing interests for any author.

**Contributorship:**

RM, SB, and BC were responsible for the initial concept. RM wrote the first draft of the manuscript, with SB and BC making initial revisions. All other revisions by RM were circulated and commented on by SB, BC, and JB. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

**Acknowledgements:**

N/A

**Funding:**

There is no funding to report for this submission.

## **Athletes *as* community; athletes *in* community: COVID-19, sporting mega-events, and athlete health protection**

*“This is far bigger than our dreams right now. Now more than ever is a time to think bigger than yourself. Protect yourself, your families and your communities”.*

Melissa Bishop-Nriagu (Canadian 800 m record holder).

The current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic presents an extraordinary public health challenge. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines a pandemic as the global spread of a new disease for which there is little or no pre-existing immunity in the human population. Worldwide, we have seen ambitious public health measures implemented by governments, non-governmental organisations, and individuals alike. Yet, there is still more to be done to ‘flatten the curve’ and mitigate the impact of this pandemic.

Sporting ‘mega-events’ are international, out of the ordinary, and generally large in composition.<sup>1</sup> These include the Olympic Games, which provide mass-spectacle for the public<sup>2</sup> while producing significant health and socioeconomic impacts for host nation(s),<sup>3</sup> including an increased risk for transmission of infectious diseases.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, pandemics like COVID-19 bring added urgency to examine the impacts of hosting sporting mega-events.

As sporting mega-events have been cancelled and postponed in response to COVID-19, the rhetoric emerging from international sporting organisations, such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), has emphasised the importance of protecting athlete health. While this messaging around the decision to postpone Tokyo 2020 aligns with the Olympic Charter, and complements the IOC’s investment in athlete health protection,<sup>5</sup> it is necessary to interrogate what the unintended impacts are for athletes and others in relation to the cancellation, postponement, or continuation of staging sporting mega-events in the moment, and aftermath, of a communicable pandemic. The current COVID-19 crisis

1  
2  
3 spotlights the need to create and codify a rigorous system of checks and balances that ensures greater  
4  
5 accountability on the part of mega-event organisers, while ensuring that the athletes' voice is heard.  
6  
7

## 8 **1. TENSIONS: ATHLETE AS COMMODITY VS ATHLETE AS COMMUNITY**

9  
10  
11 In observing early decision-making processes during the current pandemic that proposed that mega-  
12  
13 sporting events *continue as planned*, a tension emerged between maintaining 'athlete as commodity'  
14  
15 within a lucrative commercial industry, while recognising and promoting 'athlete as community' in a  
16  
17 world that requires social cooperation to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. In the case of the Tokyo  
18  
19 2020 Olympics, an upsurge in athletes speaking out, such as Melissa Bishop-Nriagu, and action taken  
20  
21 by athlete associations and National Olympic Committees, instigated by Canada, clearly prompted the  
22  
23 IOC's decision to postpone.<sup>6</sup>  
24  
25

## 26 **2. COMPLEX SOCIAL SYSTEMS: RECOGNISING ATHLETES AS COMMUNITY**

27  
28  
29 The cancellation or postponement of sporting mega-events comprise a clear effort to safeguard athlete  
30  
31 health. Given the current situation, any other course of action would be contrary to public health  
32  
33 measures. Yet, the disproportionate focus on the health protection of *individual* athletes has sidelined a  
34  
35 larger and more pressing conversation: that of athletes as being situated in wider communities. In sports  
36  
37 injury prevention it has become common to reference biopsychosocial models and complex systems in  
38  
39 athlete health protection work, yet the underpinning frame of reference still seems to be on individuals,  
40  
41 rather than communities. Given the current moment – a worldwide pandemic – it has never been more  
42  
43 important to recognise, hold space for, and negotiate the complex social systems of which athletes are  
44  
45 a part. This lens is particularly important to consider.  
46  
47

48  
49 Public health centres on the recognition that *individual* athletes are situated *in* – and are integral parts  
50  
51 *of* – wider communities that include other athletes, their multidisciplinary support teams, families, and  
52  
53 local/national/international societies. Flattening the curve of a pandemic depends on recognising that a  
54  
55 single athlete can be a vector for this communicable disease (and preventing that), but also that their  
56  
57 role within their own complex social systems matters. Prevention here is bigger than *individual* athletes  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 alone. Recognising, holding space for, and negotiating athletes *as* community – as human beings who  
4 are part of this world rather than simply being commodities – has never been more important.  
5  
6

### 7 8 **3. RETURNING TO SPORT: ENSURING EQUITY** 9

10 By its very nature, elite sport is not equitable. Every athlete has a career trajectory that requires  
11 navigating several barriers to and facilitators of performance, with only one athlete (or team) standing  
12 on top of the Olympic podium at the end of each quadrennial cycle. However, in the aftermath of a  
13 communicable pandemic, these inequalities will become more apparent and dependent upon different  
14 public health responses – representative of an international postcode lottery.<sup>7</sup> Given that elite athletes  
15 will periodise their training programmes towards sporting mega-events, which thus requires access to  
16 specialist facilities and multidisciplinary support teams, how can these different approaches be taken  
17 into consideration for postponed events? Simply moving the timeline may not be enough. Indeed, a  
18 recent editorial advocated that ‘maximal caution’ should be taken in resuming sporting activity.<sup>8</sup> These  
19 considerations matter, and returning to sport will thus be about more than the resumption of training  
20 schedules and a revamped sports calendar.  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33

### 34 **REFLECTION: ATHLETE-CENTRED APPROACHES** 35

36  
37 Sporting mega-events can provide hope and unity. Amid an extraordinary public health challenge,  
38 optimism and solidarity matter more than ever. We don’t know what a return to sport will look like after  
39 this pandemic; however, we do already know that the community matters more than ever. Athletes are  
40 demonstrating that ‘social distancing’ is a misnomer: in their insistence to *physically* distance, and  
41 encourage others to do so, they show remarkable social interconnection. Taking this physically isolating  
42 moment to reflect on athletes as *whole human beings*, situated in communities that they care about,  
43 enables us to adopt more of an athlete-centred approach to athlete health protection when we return to  
44 sporting mega-events in the future. The fierce urgency of this task has never been clearer.  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

## References

1. Viehoff, V., and Poynter, G. *Mega-event Cities: Urban Legacies of Global Sports Events*. London: Routledge 2015.
2. Tomlinson, A., and Young, C. *National identity and global sports events: Culture, politics and spectacle in the Olympics and Football World Cup*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 2006.
3. McCartney, G., Thomas, S., Thomson, H., et al. The health and socioeconomic impacts of major multi-sport events: systematic review (1978-2008). *BMJ* 2010;340:c2369. doi: 10.1136/bmj.c2369
4. McCloskey, B., Endericks, T., Catchpole, M., et al. London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games: public health surveillance and epidemiology. *Lancet* 2014;383(9934):2083-89. doi: 10.1016/s0140-6736(13)62342-9 [published Online First: 2014/05/27]
5. Engebretsen, L., Bahr, R., Cook, J.L., et al. The IOC Centres of Excellence bring prevention to Sports Medicine. *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 2014;48(17):1270-75. doi: 10.1136/bjsports-2014-093992
6. Zirin, D., Boykoff, J.. The Olympics Teeter on the Brink. *The Nation* 2020. Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/2020-olympics-coronavirus-cancel/>.
7. Anderson, R.M., Heesterbeek, H., Klinkenberg, D., et al. How will country-based mitigation measures influence the course of the COVID-19 epidemic? *The Lancet* 2020;395(10228):931-34. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30567-5
8. Corsini, A., Bisciotti, G.N., Eirale, C., et al. Football cannot restart soon during the COVID-19 emergency! A critical perspective from the Italian experience and a call for action. *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 2020:bjsports-2020-102306. doi: 10.1136/bjsports-2020-102306