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# Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and sport entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial  
potential of  
COVID-19

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has affected all sectors of the global economy but some have been affected more than others. The sport sector has been especially influenced by the COVID-19 crisis in a way that has never been seen before. This has meant an urgent need for most sport enterprises to think about new business models in order to cope with the change. The purpose of this article is to discuss in more detail how the sport sector can utilise entrepreneurship as a way of combatting uncertainty whilst promoting the recognition of new opportunities.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A review of the existing literature on COVID-19 in terms of crisis management, entrepreneurship and sport is undertaken. This helps to understand the linkage between sport and entrepreneurship and how this can be used in times of the COVID-19 crisis.

**Findings** – All sport businesses, athletes, managers, fans and consumers need to utilise entrepreneurial thinking in order to act creatively. This will help combat the unease and uncertainty, associated with the COVID-19 crisis and create more entrepreneurial ecosystems to develop.

**Originality/value** – This article is the first to explicitly state the need for sport businesses to harness the entrepreneurial potential of the COVID-19 crisis thereby contributing to new practices that will help the sport sector survive this uncertain time period and flourish in the future.

**Keywords** Coronavirus, COVID-19, Crisis management, Entrepreneurship, Sport entrepreneurship

**Paper type** Viewpoint

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## Introduction

Whilst the sport industry represents one of the most entrepreneurial economic sectors of the global economy, coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has had a significant effect on its ability to stay competitive (Parnell *et al.*, 2020). Entrepreneurship has often been highlighted as an important and novel force for the sport industries competitiveness and socio-economic position in society (Jones *et al.*, 2017). Despite the assumption that the sport industry has an entrepreneurial spirit the COVID-19 crisis resulted in surprise and unease about what to do (Alon *et al.*, 2020; Kraus *et al.*, 2020; Liguori and Winkler, 2020). Scholars have recognised sport entrepreneurship as contributing to the well-being of society and communities but until now, there has been limited attention to exploring the linkage with crisis management. Due to the ongoing and recent impact of COVID-19 on sport there is much still to know about these topics. Previously the topics of sport entrepreneurship and crisis management have rarely intersected and very little has been analysed when it comes to the topic of coronavirus. Thus, this article poses the research question: What happens when the sport entrepreneurship and crisis management perspectives combine in order to understand the effects of COVID-19?

This article aims to fill a gap in the literature by analysing the intersection of sport entrepreneurship and crisis management. To perform this intersectional analysis both strands of research are integrated as a way of understanding the COVID-19 crisis. Thereby this article highlights the complexity of sport entrepreneurship by providing a framework for incorporating a way to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. This enables a path to understand the diverse ways sport entrepreneurship is being used as a way to handle COVID-19. More particularly, the breadth of sport entrepreneurship is exposed as a way to understand different realities. Thereby representing a first step in gaining insights into how COVID-19 has affected the sport industry. This article therefore contributes to the research framing of sport and COVID-19 in terms of explaining entrepreneurial processes. This will help at a



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practical level to understand the outcomes of COVID-19 in terms of enabling sport entrepreneurship.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, the emergence of COVID-19 and its impact on the sport industry is contextualised. This means taking a contemporary approach to how sport organisations, athletes and policy makers are dealing with the crisis. Following a review of sport entrepreneurship and crisis management, the main intersections are stated. Finally, the conclusion states the theoretical and practical implications from the study by highlighting the effects on the small and medium sized enterprise sector.

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### *Crisis management and entrepreneurship*

COVID-19 is a novel coronavirus that first originated in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019 (Toresdahl and Asif, 2020). It has rapidly spread to other parts of the world due to its highly contagious nature. The virus is similar to two other viruses: the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2002 and the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) in 2012 (World Health Organisation, 2020). All these viruses are part of the coronavirus family and their vector was a specific type of animal most probably a bat in the case of COVID-19. Each of these viruses had an initial narrow geographic origin in China or the Middle East that made its spread scientifically easier to (Eggers, 2020). All these viruses are a zoonotic form as they spread from animals to humans. COVID-19 is thought to have originated in the wet market that sold live animals in Wuhan, China (Pantano *et al.*, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked fears of an economic crisis and recession caused by a high level of uncertainty (Nicola *et al.*, 2020). All aspects of society have been affected by COVID-19 with new social behaviours such as social distancing and self-isolation being implemented. This is in distinct contrast to the internationalisation policy of the past that promoted global travel within the sport industry. COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020 (Cortez and Johnston, 2020). Initially COVID-19 was centred on China but then spread to other parts of Asia including South Korea and Japan. Other countries including Italy and Iran then sustained a high level of cases. The majority of Europe was then affected with the United States following. More recently, countries including the United Kingdom and Brazil have been heavily affected (Sharma *et al.*, 2020).

COVID-19 was declared a public health emergency of international concern. Due to the ease of transmission, coronavirus is a global epidemic that has significantly changed society and most notably the sport sector. There are two main strategies to handle coronavirus: mitigation or suppression (Kraus *et al.*, 2020). Mitigation involves slowing down the spread of the disease by building up herd immunity in the population (Kraus *et al.*, 2020). This strategy was used by the United Kingdom and Sweden. Suppression involves placing restrictions on the population to decrease its reproduction level (Perrow, 1984). This means implementing social distancing policies in order to decrease human contact. Despite which strategy is adopted there also needs to be non-pharmaceutical interventions to combat the progression of the disease (Liu *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, the general strategy of most governments has been to implement strict measures in order to flatten the infection curve and prevent the spread of the virus. Due to the risk to the healthcare system and high cost of caring for patients, multiple concurrent strategies have been used (Kuckertz *et al.*, 2020). This means governments introduced contact and mobility restrictions designed to control the spread of the virus. Some countries notably New Zealand implemented quickly strict restrictions and has recently recorded no active virus cases.

There are severe economic consequences of a health pandemic due to the simultaneous uncertainty on demand and supply chains (Kirk and Rifkin, 2020). This makes it hard to plan for the future and to take economic action (Ansell and Boin, 2019). Demand decreases in times of a pandemic for certain products and services usually of a non-essential nature (Weick and

[Sutcliffe, 2011](#)). This includes entertainment and travel that employ a large number of people. As a result, there is a rise in unemployment that affects other sectors of society especially the sport industry. This means there is a reduction in spending capacity causing a spiral affect ([He and Harris, 2020](#)). Supply either increases or decreases depending on the nature of products provided. Products of a non-perishable form may increase due to their ability to be used for long periods of time. Sport businesses that have had to shut down or not offer their products will have lower demand levels. In addition, the disruption to supply chains puts pressure on sport businesses to alter their existing production systems. Some sport businesses can do this in a timely manner whilst others take time to adjust or cannot alter existing systems. As a result, governments have had to step in and offer financial help in the form of supplementary payments or tax offsets ([Doern, 2016](#)). These stimulus packages can help sport businesses deal with uncertainty.

A crisis results in some form of surprise that is unpredicted ([Runyan, 2006](#)). This means there is a low likelihood of a crisis occurring but when it does it results in significant consequences. Crises can occur in a periodic or continual manner that makes them difficult to predict ([Williams \*et al.\*, 2017](#)). The low probability of a crisis occurring means that it is difficult to plan and implement strategies to deal with the change ([Hills, 1998](#)). A crisis can take a variety of forms including environmental in the case of natural disasters of economic involving financial change. Health crisis have economic, social and environmental affects making them complex to manage. This means businesses need to adapt and learn in order to survive in times of crisis ([Veil, 2011](#)). Crisis are normally associated with negative effects in terms of the changes required but can also result in positive affect in terms of innovation ([Faulkner, 2001](#)). This creates opportunities for sport businesses who successfully manage a crisis. Sport businesses that are slow or unwilling to react to a crisis are likely to have lower levels of performance. This means the emotions associated with a crisis in terms of feeling uncertainty need to be managed in a more positive way ([Shrivastava, 1993](#)). To do this an open working approach to engaging with stakeholders is advocated. This means perceiving the crisis in a positive way by being more flexible with change.

COVID-19 has created havoc on society due to its economic and social consequences with severe affects felt in the sport industry. Many communities have faced lock down periods that have meant increased isolation and lower levels of economic production. Due to the closure of sport activities the effects have been harmful as normal sport events have not occurred. The major players in the sport supply chain (e.g. teams, sponsors, hotels, airlines and transport operators) have suffered unfathomable damages. In addition, related industries that depend either directly or indirectly on sport have suspended or closed their operations. Early indications mean that many of these businesses have closed or will likely never reopen again. Therefore, it is predicated that the alterations will result in an enduring shift in the sport industry. This could radically transform sport activity patterns.

There is some suggestion that the memories of a crisis fade and there is a return to the status quo. In the past other crisis including the SARS epidemic resulted in a dramatic fall then big rebound in activity and did not specifically the sport industry. This meant that there were some businesses that used the crisis to solidify their losses and plan for new opportunities. If a particular sport sector is impacted by a crisis then powerful stakeholders can collaborate to go after strategic opportunities. This means sport entities that have been devastated by the crisis can use the opportunity to implement new actions. Obviously, the ability of sport entities to shift their business activities will depend on their resources.

The unprecedented circumstances that have affected the sport industry as a result of the COVID-19 crisis signify an opportunity for entrepreneurship. This means that there are at least two major outcomes of the crisis. The first is based on extrapolating the behaviour of firms based on previous crises in that the sport industry will gradually return to normal. This

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depends on the impact the crisis has on certain parts of the sport industry and the level of government help. An alternative outcome is that the industry radically changes based on societal needs. Due to the virus not having a cure there may be a need to continual to use social distancing and hygiene practices. In order to better understand the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the sport industry it is useful to take a sport entrepreneurship approach.

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### *Sport entrepreneurship*

Entrepreneurship can be a powerful change agent for sport due to the way it opens up opportunities. The sport sectors entrepreneurial system can result in knowledge spillovers that were previously not considered. This makes entrepreneurship an important competitive driver in the overall success of a sports system (Jones *et al.*, 2018). Sport and entrepreneurship share similar characteristics due to the need for innovation to drive change. This makes sport a catalyst for entrepreneurship as it necessitates new thinking to increase performance.

Sport-based entrepreneurship is a distinct form of entrepreneurship as it enables a way to view sport activity from a creativity and futuristic perspective (Ratten and Ferreira, 2017). Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, it is useful to utilise sport entrepreneurship because of its deep connection with change. Entrepreneurship can be broadly defined as any form of business activity that involves innovation, risk taking and proactiveness (Jones *et al.*, 2019). In the context of sport, entrepreneurship is considered necessary for its ongoing competitiveness. Thus, sport entrepreneurship is regarded favourably as it enables the exploitation of market opportunities in a sport arena. This means gaps in the market can be addressed by futuristic and creative thinking. To generate value in sport some form of entrepreneurship is required (Ratten and Babiak, 2010). This enables economic development to take place that incorporates a sport element. Although not all development has to have a financial objective with social forms which being important in sport.

Sport-based entrepreneurship was initially proposed by Ratten (2011) as a new theory to explain the linkage between entrepreneurship and sport management. In this theory it is suggested that the sport industry due to its high level of profit, non-profit and hybrid enterprises constitutes a different type of entrepreneurship. This means that the sport context incorporates a distinct context that is unlike any other and requires a new theory. In addition, the sport industry has a high level of emotional attachment and engagement that differs to other contexts. This results in new types and forms of entrepreneurship that develop based on the sport ecosystem. In order to fully understand entrepreneurship in a sport context there needs to be some consideration about the role stakeholders play in the evolution of the industry. This involves thinking about the nature of sport and level of government help in promoting social responsibility and philanthropy (Ratten and Babiak, 2010). Moreover, the mixture of profit and non-profit objectives that are tied to social conditions and community objectives make the sport industry have a unique type of entrepreneurship (Ratten and Ferreira, 2017).

Although sport entrepreneurship is not a new phenomenon, as evidenced by the technological innovations used by athletes and fans, it was not until recently that scholars started to research the topic. The concept initially focused on commercial and technological forms of entrepreneurship evident in sport that enabled the growth of the global sport industry. Technology in particular, the Internet and mobile commerce have generated additional growth for the sport industry. In addition, social entrepreneurship has also become popular in sport due to the impact sport has on society. For this reason, there has been more focus on how sport creates social value through entrepreneurship.

Sport entrepreneurship is a highly contextual topic and can be described in many different ways. The main goal of any type of sport entrepreneurship is to incorporate business ideas in sport in order to incorporate more value. Any definition of sport entrepreneurship needs to

include value creation in its description. This means broadly speaking, sport entrepreneurship is concerned with the goal of performing some form of value creation. This can occur in a financial or social manner depending on its context.

There are three main schools of thought in the sport entrepreneurship literature. The first is the general innovation school that views sport entrepreneurship in terms of innovative change. This means the individual is the main instigator for the sport entrepreneurship. The individual can be an entrepreneur, athlete, fan, sport manager or any other kind of stakeholder. Therefore, sport entrepreneurship is used to solve problems by using innovation. Irrespective of whether the type of sport entrepreneurship is commercial, social or a combination of both it involves innovation. The second school of thought is the enterprise view that suggests sport organisations as the main instigator of change. Due to the power some sport clubs and federations have in society taking an organisational or entity point of view helps to understand sport entrepreneurship. Often in order for sport entrepreneurship to be successful it requires the support of many different kinds of sport entities. The third school focuses on how sport enterprises emerge in the economy based on societal change. Due to the high number of technological innovations being adapted and generated by sport enterprises there has been a proliferation of entrepreneurship in the sport industry. Thus, technological innovation is the most important facet of sport entrepreneurship and can lead to performance improvements.

Sport entrepreneurship is a process that needs an individual or entities commitment by expressing a sense of passion (Ratten and Jones, 2020). The relevant success of a sport enterprise such as fulfilling its original goal will depend on the way it transforms the market. This means there needs to be some kind of value creation or impact in order to achieve its goals. What is clear is that the mission or goals of the sport entrepreneur are critical to the successful implementation of the idea into the marketplace (Ferreira *et al.*, 2020). Critically evaluating how sport entrepreneurship is used in times of crisis may challenge our conventional wisdom. This may lead to greater insights into the transformational potential of sport entrepreneurship in times of crisis.

The field of sport entrepreneurship has grown tremendously in recent years and is associated with a greater awareness of the entrepreneurial nature of sport (Rexhepi *et al.*, 2018). Whilst there is no question that entrepreneurial studies of sport are important there also needs to be an exploration of how sport entities respond to crisis. McSweeney (2020) focused on how there has been an increase in interest on social entrepreneurship in sport due to the way it incorporates social change, sustainability and innovation. In addition, in a review of the literature on sport and social entrepreneurship, Bjarsholm (2017) highlighted how there are still many gaps and a lack of understanding about the way sport can incorporate an entrepreneurial perspective that builds on social and non-profit objectives. Thus, in order to advance the literature and practical significance of sport management Misener and Misener (2017) suggested blurring sector boundaries in order to derive new thinking. This makes sport entrepreneurship a useful way to explore how sport businesses are coping with the COVID-19 crisis.

### *Effects on the sport industry*

All sport leagues including professional and amateur were cancelled in March 2020 due to COVID-19. This unprecedented stoppage of sport events had a huge effect on sponsorship and broadcasting fees. In addition, for sport fans and athletes the stoppage resulted in a significant disruption to their daily lives. Some sport leagues were more affected than others with college basketball in the United States not being able to play their March Madness series. In addition, due to restrictions on social gatherings some sport leagues have been able to recommence their seasons but without fans. This has meant as a global pandemic, COVID-19

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has halted many sport activities. There has been a ripple effect from COVID-19 restrictions on many other aspects of society. In response to the pandemic, health policy makers initiated a program of flattening the curve. To do this country and state borders were closed with travel restrictions put in place. In some countries including Australia, a mandatory two week quarantine period for all travellers from overseas was introduced. As a result of these restrictions a dramatic decrease in sport tourism resulted with hotels and restaurants significantly affected. In addition, unnecessary travel has been imposed meaning individuals need to stay close to their place of residence.

On March 24, 2020 the International Olympic Committee postponed the event to 2021. This was due to the virus spreading mainly through person-to-person contact via respiratory droplets that occur from sneezing, coughing or touching a surface containing the virus. To decrease the spread of the virus proper hand hygiene has been advocated. In addition, regular cleaning and disinfection of surfaces is needed. For the sport industry, social distancing has meant a change in the way games are played. Social distancing refers to keeping a physical space between others and avoiding mass gatherings. This has resulted in sports being played without spectators and a reduction in physical contact. For athletes that thrive on competition and physical activity the restrictions from COVID-19 have had mental health effects. These psychological effects meant a removal of social support systems that are particularly evident in team sports. This created anxiety, sadness and stress for athletes. In addition, due to restrictions placed on gyms and fitness centres, athletes have had to find other ways to train. This has been a traumatic time with many athletes and individuals feeling frustrated at the lack of appropriate training venues. Whilst maintaining social interactions with teammates is encouraged, it does not have the same effect as physical contact.

The Euro 2020 football tournament was postponed with other events including the Formula One Grand Prix in Melbourne, Australia following. This has resulted in a significant financial burden for sport clubs that rely on an event as a source of income. The gravity of these reductions in income is still yet to be fully understood. Social distancing has been used as the main way to contain the spread of the disease. The sport food sector has been impacted with consumers panic buying and stockpiling. This has placed a strain on the supply chain for food products and services. As a result, there has been an increase in demand for long life food products and online food delivery. In addition, the concentrated time in lockdown has affected the ability of individuals to play sport. This has meant that online sport games have increased both in a competitive and leisure form.

Within a very short period of time the sport sector dramatically changed. COVID-19 triggered a need to stop sport activities because of public health concerns. This caused severe limitations to sport activities both in a public and private form. Just about every type of sport has been affected by COVID-19 in one way or another. Therefore, the COVID-19 crisis represents a challenge for the sport sector that needs to apply entrepreneurial strategies in order to adjust. Entrepreneurship enables new ways of thinking and acting to emerge that helps to deal with the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 crisis. All types of entities in the sport industry have to adapt their business models to changing environmental conditions. As a result, the COVID-19 crisis is bringing about unintended and in a way unknown forms of social change. A stronger sense of solidarity has emerged in sport leagues as a result of the crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a global health crisis that has resulted in significant economic and social upheaval. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a progressive implementation of working from home in order to limit social contact. In sport ventures intensive cleaning and sanitation has been required. Despite the academic and managerial relevance of entrepreneurship to sport, no previous academic studies have incorporated a crisis management approach. The existing sport entrepreneurship literature has tended to be broad without taking into consideration a crisis or risk management

viewpoint. Due to the speed of which the COVID-19 crisis has impacted the sport industry, a crisis management approach embedded in entrepreneurial thinking is required. This is due to the current COVID-19 crisis creating a unique context that has not been investigated in sport entrepreneurship research.

The initial virus outbreak was quickly spread due to the ease of international travel. The global impact of COVID-19 is predicated to be similar to the 1918–1919 Spanish Flu for which no vaccine or treatment existed. Whilst the COVID-19 crisis has caused much stress and anxiety it has also presented a time for pause and thinking about future paths sports can take. This means there has been time taken to consider possibilities and ponder the way forward. The concept of a crisis refers to making a decision on some form of action that is required. This means the sport industry can be reinvented to be more sustainable and resilient.

The shutdown of many sport activities and restrictions on playing sport has virtually eliminated the sport economy in communities. In the past there was a fear of oversport or too much sport so the shutdown has resulted in the complete opposite. This means sport stadiums are empty, fitness centres closed and sport events of all sizes cancelled. Undoubtedly, the social and economic effects of this change are large and will continue to be felt for some time.

At the time of writing this article there is still much uncertainty about when and if the crisis will finish or sport activities will have to evolve based on the new normal. Given the unprecedented situation one can only ponder as to whether we shall see major shifts in the sport industry. Certainly, it seems things will not revert back to how they were before the crisis as social habits and customs have changed. This means that the sport industry has an unprecedented opportunity to be more entrepreneurial than it has been in the past. Due to the significant reduction in sport activities individuals have had to resort to other leisure activities. For many, this has been supplemented by online training or fitness events. Meanwhile, due to the slowdown of sport activities, there is a need for a rethink about how sport is consumed. This opens up the possibility for individuals to engage in sport in a whole new way, especially given social distancing requirements. As a result of individuals being locked up in their homes and restricted to certain areas a surge in sport entrepreneurship is to be expected. There has been an increased interest in natural or outdoor activities that maintain social distancing practices. This means that old style sports such as walking and running particularly if done alone have increased. This is contrast to the previous trend in group and team events that required close contact. Thus, the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on sport entrepreneurship are immediate. Despite the gravity of the situation there will be palpable benefits for the sport industry.

#### *Implications for the small and medium sized enterprise sector*

More now than ever before sport practitioners need to embrace entrepreneurship as a way to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. This will enable them to recover faster by building new strategies that deal with changing environmental conditions. To do this, sport managers need to solicit suggestions about how to act in an entrepreneurial manner whilst taking on new challenges. This may require larger investments in infrastructure and capital. Thus, it is advisable that sport stakeholders design solutions that have a value-added component. This can incorporate strategies that explicitly have an entrepreneurial orientation. To do this, some new thinking is required by sport organisations as to how they can capitalise on the use of technological innovations particularly in the form of augmented reality. As the COVID-19 crisis is ongoing and there is no end in sight, sport organisations need to develop new strategies in order to compete in the new environment. This means engaging fans through different kind of initiatives that build on their entrepreneurial passion. More research is needed on how sport practitioners are being entrepreneurial in the current economic climate



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characterised by much uncertainty. This research would help to derive additional ways of looking at the crisis from an innovative perspective in terms of possibilities and extending the use of technologies to a sport forum.

When designing an entrepreneurial solution or ways to alleviate problems caused by the COVID-19 crisis evaluative benchmarks should be set for specific time periods. This will enable a better understanding of how the sport entrepreneurship is impacting society at the present and future time periods. The stakeholders should also be aware of the benefits of the sport entrepreneurship and how it can be applied. This means the aspirations for the sport entrepreneurship and specific groups it will target. As psychological factors such as the need for achievement, independence and goal setting impact sport entrepreneurship they should be examined in more detail. Therefore, designing sport entrepreneurship for COVID-19 hinges on the ability to activate an entrepreneurial passion in individuals. This is different to the response mechanisms used in previous crises such as Ebola and Zika, which were largely concentrated in one geographic region. COVID-19 is a worldwide crisis and has affected all aspects of the sport industry. Thus, adopting a worldwide strategy might be required in order to foster the resurgence of sport organisations.

Leveraging entrepreneurship for sport purposes will require individuals to persevere and find ways to solve COVID-19 problems. This can have flow on effects and enable more forms of sport entrepreneurship. In addition to psychological factors there are also social factors impacting sport entrepreneurship. This involves the emotional and lifestyle impacts that individuals associate with sport. Sport stakeholders need to remember that entrepreneurship is needed in times of crisis. This means that successful sport entrepreneurship will require the input of stakeholders and the alignment of collective interests. Resources necessary for sport entrepreneurship can be tangible in the form of buildings and equipment or intangible such as social networks and knowledge.

## Conclusions

This article contributes to the crisis management of sport organisations during the COVID-19 crisis by proposing an entrepreneurial model for long term survivability. Thereby showing how sport organisations can cope with the COVID-19 situation by incorporating more entrepreneurship. As discussed the theory of sport-based entrepreneurship can be used as a way to understand how the sport industry adapts due to the COVID-19 crisis. Whilst it is a difficult time for many sport entities and individuals an entrepreneurial approach can make a big difference to those who wither compared to those who flourish. As a consequence, sport entrepreneurship provides a unique way to bridge theory and practice in order to foster a more collaborative approach to dealing with the ongoing crisis from COVID-19.

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