



# !!! sport in times of **CRISIS**

## the three crises

Our world is currently wrestling with three distinct, yet interconnected, crises. The first is a political crisis. This exists both internationally with the war in Ukraine but also nationally with the rise of populism and polarisation in domestic politics. This unstable political environment is helping fuel a second crisis - the cost of living crisis, which is affecting almost all European countries. The short-term distractions of these crises means we are deprioritising the third and most threatening problem - the climate crisis.



## the connection to sport

You might question what sport has to do with such serious topics as these, but we will go on to show you how sport is not just intertwined with all of these crises but is influencing them for better and worse.

## the cliché that sport is a force for good

There is a clichéd assumption that sport is a force for good. We believe this because we have been primed to do so, firstly, through the stories of Ancient Greeks and the glory of athleticism, then through the Muscular Christianity of Victorian England which gave us our modern sports today. As a result, when Nelson Mandela famously said "sport has the power to change the world" we presumed only for the better.

The truth is, sport is not some magical force that sits above our society. It is a cultural force that reflects it. It can be a source of good and evil. The question is who controls it and how.



## part 1

## sport and the political **CRISIS**

### the political crisis

The geopolitical stability of the world has degraded dramatically. Tanks roll once again through Europe. Tensions between the west and China are rising. At home, the relatively centralised government ideologies of the 2000s have been replaced by a rise in radical leadership.

## sport and politics don't mix

There are many who argue that sport and politics shouldn't mix. Political leaders like Sunak and Macron, conservatives like Lee Anderson MP or Laura Ingraham, rightsholders like the IOC and FIFA and even some athletes like Andrey Rublev have all made this case.

## the danger of depoliticising sport

People who make this argument almost always benefit personally from the two being separate. In truth, sport and politics are intertwined. They are impossible to separate as long as we play national anthems and fly jets over stadiums, or indeed we continue to support teams that represent our local identity.

Arguing for sport and politics to be separated is not just impossible but dangerous. It opens sport up to an abuse of power and sportswashing. It makes it easier for a country to host a Winter Olympics days before annexing another country's territory. It allows countries with questionable human rights to host major tournaments. It whitewashes the subjugation of minority peoples and groups. It enhances the status quo and makes it harder to challenge political regimes.

## the power of sport to fight back

Fortunately in recent years we've also seen the rise of the athlete activist. Athletes that use their platform to make a political point have become more prevalent and powerful than ever. We've seen what the likes of Colin Kaepernick, LeBron James, Breanna Stewart, Serena Williams, Marcus Rashford, Naomi Osaka and Lewis Hamilton can achieve.

## the role of brands in politicising sport

Brands, whether wittingly or not, are partially responsible for this rise in politically charged athletes. In the past athletes who brought politics into sport lost out on lucrative deals - as Michael Jordan once joked 'Republicans buy sneakers too'. With the rise of social purpose in marketing, athletes now find themselves in a novel position where they can actually earn more money by making a sociopolitical stand.

## part 2

## sport and the cost of living **CRISIS**



### the cost of living crisis

The destabilised political landscape has made the cost of living crisis more painful. This crisis is affecting people in different ways: firstly, there is the financial squeeze as inflation and interest rates begin to hurt. Secondly, there is a sense of losing control - costs are rising regardless of what consumers do. Thirdly, there is a growing sense of inequality as some businesses and individuals profit. Finally, we are also seeing a breakdown in customer experience across travel, hospitality, health and utilities.

## sport and socioeconomics

Sport's connection to this crisis is less obvious than that of politics, but it is fundamental. To understand it we need to go back to the origins of modern sport. Sport was created and owned by the upper classes until the later 19th Century. At this time sport spread to a rapidly growing and urbanising working class with the blessing of those ruling classes. The motivations behind this were two-fold: firstly, factory owners wanted a fit and healthy workforce; secondly, the ruling elite used sport as a distraction to limit unionism and civil unrest.

## feudalism in modern sport

That's relevant today because modern sport is still run in a similarly feudal way. Billionaire owners now control clubs that were the property of communities. They can hire and fire as they like, they can move the stadium, even change the team colours and fans have no protection in this. It was only when something as controversial as the European Super League was introduced that fan protest was actually listened to.

## the exploitation of the fan

The modern business of sport, and football in particular, exploits hard-working fans financially too. In the last twenty years Premier League clubs have increased transfer spending from 265m to 2.7bn. Fans pay for this. This season 14 of 20

Premier League clubs raised season ticket prices. A Premier League fan in the UK has to spend more than £65 a month across three different TV subscriptions to be able to see all the televised games.

## sport as a driver of inequality

Sport doesn't just drive inequality amongst fans but through participation as well. What sport you play has always been a determinant of socioeconomic status. Those divisions are as deep as ever in modern Britain. A male cricketer playing for England is currently more likely to be privately educated than a peer in the House of Lords.

How much sport you play is similarly unequal. As economic hardship increases the gap between those that can access sport regularly and those that can't continues to grow. Sport creates a society of haves and have nots. If we believe sport provides children with greater opportunity and life expectancy, we have to take that seriously as a right for all in our society. At the moment, sport has the power to deepen regional and socioeconomic divides and can worsen the inequality we see in the cost of living crisis.



### part 3

## sport and the climate crisis



### the climate crisis

Both the political and cost of living crises are affecting the climate crisis. Conservative politicians are now using the economic situation as an excuse to renege on climate commitments. This is a myopic stance to take because if global temperatures rise by just 2°C by 2050 cost estimates are expected to be more than \$20 trillion.

### sport as a victim of climate change

We know the importance of the fight against climate change and sport is once again intertwined with it. Firstly, because sport is a victim of climate change. Sporting events are being cancelled or disrupted at both a professional and grassroots

level. By 2080, only one of the past Winter Olympics venues could reliably host another.

### sport as a contributor to climate change

Sport isn't just a victim of climate change however, it is a contributor. It is estimated that sporting events alone create 30m tonnes of CO2 a year, that's about the same as Denmark. This doesn't include travel around the events, just the events themselves.

### sport as a stage of protest

Sport has also become a stage to protest against lack of action on climate. Like the suffragette, civil rights and anti-apartheid movements before them, climate protestors have chosen sport as a stage to make their point. Many of these protests are actively targeting the behaviour of sponsors, not just the event itself, so brands need to be very careful.

### sport as part of the solution

Sport also has the potential to be part of the solution. Sport is a platform that can still generate a huge collective audience watching the same thing at the same time. This means it has the ability to get our attention. It also has the ability to inspire us and remind us of what humanity can achieve. These things come together perfectly in an event like the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris - a games billed as a showcase of what a greener, better world could look like. Sport can continue to be a problem for the climate, or it can become the biggest advocate for change.

### sport to the rescue

It would be a mistake to think that these themes are just theoretical. Sport has the power to be a practical force as well. In AD 447 the city of Constantinople played off the fandom of chariot racing teams to compete in rebuilding its city defences. In modern times we've seen sport being used to actively reduce knife-crime and domestic abuse, raise cancer awareness, increase organ donation and reduce homelessness. Sport can motivate people to act when little else works.



## ten key takeouts for marketers:

Here are ten key things marketers should think about when it comes to managing sport in times of crisis.

1. Sport is not automatically a force for good despite what we're often told. It can divide, control, abuse and exploit.
2. Sport is inherently connected to politics, the question is not whether sport should be political, but who controls the politics in sport. If you as a brand are not in charge of your political message in sport, someone else is.
3. If your brand has a strong sociopolitical point of view, how can sport actively be used to amplify that? Who could you partner with who shares those same beliefs or values?
4. Sport has always been connected with socioeconomics. The sports we play and what that says about us were largely defined over 150 years ago. Sport can exacerbate economic equality, is your brand taking this seriously?
5. How can you ensure hard-working fans aren't exploited by the commercial side of modern sport? How can you improve the experience for fans and not worsen it?
6. How can your brand use sport to alleviate or reduce inequality, not increase it? A lot of focus has been placed on reducing gender or racial inequality through sport, far less focus has been placed on reducing socioeconomic inequality through sport.
7. If your brand is entering the world of sport, you should be confident that your green credentials are sincere and sound. If not you are at heightened risk of being targeted by protestors.
8. Stand for something not next to something. Be clear as to why you are using sport. If you are merely badging a property, you are at risk of your brand being hijacked by someone else's story.
9. Can sport be a platform for your brand to help combat climate change? How can you capture people's attention in a way that inspires hope, not shocks them into fear?
10. Sport doesn't have to be just a branding exercise that slowly changes opinion over time. Sport can be used strategically in the short-term to directly change behaviour.