

FROM THE EDITORS:
**EXPLORING NEW PLAYING FIELDS: SPORTS SETTINGS AND
MANAGEMENT THEORIZING**

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ABSTRACT

This Special Research Forum (SRF) explores the evolving landscape of modern organizations through the unique empirical lens of sports. In a rapidly changing world marked by digital transformation, social activism, and technological innovation, management scholars face challenges in capturing complex organizational dynamics. Sports, as a microcosm of society, offer a compelling research setting—featuring rich, high-stakes data on leadership, team dynamics, strategy, ethics, and innovation. The articles selected for this SRF showcase the potential of sports-based research to generate broader organizational insights. They explore critical themes such as the role of social capital in talent management, the impact of illicit behavior on competitive performance, the influence of biometric data on professional relationships, and business travel on decision-making. The forum highlights how sports settings can extend management theory beyond industry-specific findings, offering novel perspectives on human interaction, technology integration, and organizational governance. While this SRF attracted diverse submissions, it also revealed underexplored areas such as fan behavior, globalization, and sustainability. This piece encourages future research to leverage the wealth of sports data to address these gaps and further develop management theories applicable across industries. Like athletes pushing boundaries, we invite scholars to harness sports as a field for discovery.

Keywords: Sport, Management Research, Exploratory Research, Methods.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL RESEARCH FORUM

This Special Research Forum (SRF) is aimed at exploring the multifaceted and fast-evolving landscape of modern organizational phenomena through the unique empirical lens of sports.

Today’s organizations operate in a world marked by unprecedented societal, technological, and cultural changes that impact their structures, behaviors, and interactions. Issues like the digitization of society, the pervasive influence of social media, heightened focus on diversity and inclusion, data-driven performance assessments, supply chain interruptions, employee health measures, and environmental accountability are redefining both public and private spheres. These shifts compel management scholars to delve deeper into understanding and explaining new organizational terrain. However, capturing the full complexity of these phenomena is often challenging due to the difficulty of obtaining comprehensive and timely data that reflect the granularity of these transformations.

Previous reviews illustrating the depth and breadth of management scholarship using sports data suggest that sports may offer an exceptional opportunity to explore this complexity (Aversa & Hallila, 2021; Day et al. 2012; Fonti, Ross, & Aversa, 2023; Wolfe et al. 2005). As a microcosm of societal dynamics, sports reflect and often lead in various social, political, and technological trends. Examples abound, ranging from athlete advocacy in social justice

movements like #BlackLivesMatter, to digital innovations revolutionizing athlete training, performance monitoring, and fan engagement. Furthermore, the rapid professionalization and commercialization of sports have generated an immense repository of detailed data across multiple levels of analysis. These data include GPS-based tracking, social media activity, biometrics, and fan interaction metrics, all of which can become valuable input for artificial intelligence (AI), as well as creating unique empirical opportunities to study many of the issues facing modern organizations. The sports context — when not misused or overstretched beyond its possibilities — serves as a fertile ground for management scholars seeking to illuminate broader organizational challenges.

In this special research forum we welcomed submissions that employed sports as an analytical context to explore a wide spectrum of organizational phenomena. We encouraged contributions that spanned methodologies, levels of analysis, and theoretical perspectives. We encouraged authors to either examine how broader organizational trends manifest in sports, or use sports-based insights to inform theories applicable across organizational contexts. In all cases, the aim was to use sports data for exploratory research that extends our understanding of emergent organizational phenomena, and provides actionable implications for navigating today's complex organizational environment.

Here are our own empirical explorations based on the keywords from the submissions. Authors clearly engaged with phenomena around leadership, team dynamics, diversity, performance, motivation, strategy, and competitive dynamics. Authors also responded to the call's focus on ethics, strategy, and innovation and technology. However, some of the more unique aspects of the call, such as fan behavior, the societal role of sports, and globalization did not resonate as strongly. A partial list of the theoretical perspectives authors invoked includes

organizational change, upper echelons, agency theory, stakeholder strategy, behavioral decision-making, paradoxes and dialectics, social capital, dynamic capabilities, and social identity.

Finally, both qualitative and quantitative designs were well-represented with authors reporting the results of studies that included ethnographies, video-based analyses, interviews, panel and archival data analysis, quasi-natural experiments, and computational modeling. In total, we were pleased to see such a range of submissions that took up the challenge we set out for the SRF!

Publishing in *Academy of Management Discoveries* is a tough sport, even for trained scholars. And while we had no specific limitations on the number of articles to accept, we had a high bar for manuscripts that moved through the review process. Out of the 41 submissions we received, we desk-rejected 20 papers, sent out 21 for review, and ultimately accepted the six that appear in this volume. We also received a commentary on one of the articles, which we also include here along with the original authors' response. For researchers who aim to advance management theory with sports data and generate important insights into modern organizational phenomena, the six articles in the SRF serve as excellent exemplars. However, we believe it can be equally insightful to understand the reasons for rejecting the papers that did not make it through the review process. So, before we preview the articles that are included in this SRF — that is, the submissions that aligned well with the express purposes of the SRF — we pause to consider what kind of manuscripts we received that were not well-positioned for the SRF, as well as the kind of manuscripts that we hoped to receive...but didn't.

Submissions That Didn't Make the Team

Our goal was to attract and highlight contributions that leveraged sport settings to push the boundaries of theory development within management studies and uncover new insights into

contemporary organizational phenomena. Overall, while there is no such thing as a “flawless study” the submissions we selected for this SRF balanced theoretical ambition with empirical rigor, ensuring both the fit with the journal’s empirical discovery-oriented aims and the resonance with broader organizational questions beyond sports. Many of the rejected submissions presented strong empirical analyses of *sports management* but lacked sufficient ambition in developing management theory on contemporary organizational phenomena. While these papers provided valuable insights to that field, they fell short of the broader theoretical contributions we sought for this issue; namely to go beyond context-specific studies of the sports industry and instead leverage sports settings to illuminate underexplored organizational theories and phenomena applicable across diverse organizational contexts.

Additionally, several submissions exhibited a disconnect between data and claims. In these cases, the papers either failed to articulate fully how their empirical findings advanced understanding of their particular phenomenon or neglected to substantiate their empirical discoveries with adequate empirical evidence. This disconnect hindered the ability of these papers to contribute meaningfully to management scholarship, as the link between the sports data and the organizational phenomenon was either tenuous or missing altogether.

Another issue that disqualified a number of manuscripts was a misalignment with the journal’s guidelines. Consistent with AMD’s mission, we called for exploratory papers that used sports contexts to shed light on organizational phenomena where theoretical understanding remains underdeveloped. Unfortunately, some well-written and interesting submissions focused on testing established theories rather than exploring novel insights, making them a poor fit for this journal which values discovery-oriented, data-driven research. These papers, more focused

on deductive confirmation rather than abductive inquiry, did not align with the issue’s objective to capture emergent trends and innovations in modern organizations with sports data.

Lastly, we rejected several submissions where the potential for an important contribution was limited by suboptimal sports data. In some cases, the datasets were insufficiently granular or lacked relevance to the phenomenon under study, making it difficult for these papers to generate meaningful insights into modern organizational dynamics. Particularly when using sports settings — where complete, population-level dataset are often available to those with enough stamina to search and collect — there is the expectation that authors utilize the most comprehensive dataset to explore the focal phenomenon. Moreover, robust and contextually appropriate data are particularly essential for exploratory research.

Topics In Rain Delay

While our special issue attracted a diverse set of submissions, several critical topics that we highlighted in our call for papers remained largely unexplored. These areas hold immense potential for advancing management theory by leveraging the innovative data now available in sports contexts. Below, we outline a research agenda that integrates big data, sports settings, and modern organizational phenomena and illustrate each topic with actual cases to emphasize the practical and theoretical value of these unexplored avenues. Table 1 summarizes this agenda.

Insert Table 1 here

The abundance of new data sources in sports opens up exciting research possibilities. GPS and spatial tracking data, for instance, enable researchers to explore teamwork, coordination, and decision-making in real-time, high-stakes settings. The English Premier

League (EPL) uses using spatial tracking technology to monitor player positions, speeds, and distances covered during matches. Similar data is also collected in other sports contexts, such as National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA) and National Hockey League (NHL), as well as several college leagues. Such data can offer deep insights into individual and team performance and the complex interplay across these levels of analysis, as well as adaptation under pressure, and coordination in dynamic settings. Future studies might examine these aspects in organizational teams facing rapid changes or high-risk situations, translating findings from the sports field to workplaces where adaptability and real-time coordination are essential.

Similarly, analyzing fan interactions on social media provides a parallel to consumer and employee engagement in organizational contexts. For example, the Los Angeles Lakers leverage social media to gauge fan sentiment and engagement, reacting to game outcomes and player performances (Carp, 2021; Rohrbach, 2019). Likewise, Formula 1 teams, such as Mercedes-AMG Petronas and Red Bull Racing, strategically use social media analytics to track fan engagement, measure sentiment during race weekends, and respond to controversies, driver performance, and team decisions (Minardi, 2021; mvpindex 2022;). Intense rivalry in F1 racing (Piezunka et al. 2018), for instance between Lewis Hamilton and Max Verstappen,, generates massive online discussions (Scott, 2021), which teams monitor closely to adjust their media strategies, sponsor activations, and fan engagement tactics (Hookit.com, 2019). Studies that explore fan reactions to wins, losses, controversies, and trade decisions could offer insights into customer loyalty, brand perception, and crisis management. Such analyses are relevant for organizations outside sports, where real-time customer feedback increasingly influences brand decisions and strategic pivots. By studying these social interactions in sports, researchers could

derive broader implications about how organizations build loyalty, handle reputation management, and communicate effectively with stakeholders.

In sports, human-human interactions provide unique opportunities to study inter-generational conflict, the multilevel emergence of human capital resources, and the dynamics of the sharing economy. Sports teams often feature multi-generational rosters that illuminate the challenges and benefits of inter-generational collaboration. Research on how multi-generational sports teams, for example, align diverse experiences and perspectives could provide useful insights for organizations facing similar challenges. Such studies could examine generational conflicts, mentorship practices, and knowledge-sharing within the team, yielding actionable findings for companies striving to improve cohesion and productivity in multi-generational workforces.

Additionally, exploring how individual talent evolves into collective human capital resource within a sports team could enrich theories on human capital resource emergence in organizations. The Red Bull Junior Team created a development program for high-performing human capital that trains young talented drivers from go-karting to Formula 1, by embedding them into the Red Bull organizational culture, teamwork, and technology. By analyzing such team dynamics, researchers could build theories on talent integration, role adaptation, and collective growth, as well as better understand the task and social environments that are critical for such valuable human capital resources to emerge. This research might extend to organizations that rely heavily on collaborative skill-building and shared goals, offering guidance on how to harness individual talents for team and organization success.

In terms of the sharing economy, sports contexts also provide natural settings to study resource-sharing and collaboration. For instance, Major League Soccer (MLS) teams and soccer

teams in Premier League (England), Serie A (Italy), and Bundesliga (Germany) frequently loan players to minor league teams or overseas clubs. Such arrangements allow teams to share resources, develop talent, and extend players' career opportunities. Studying this model could offer new insights into organizational dynamics within the sharing economy, where companies increasingly rely on collaboration, shared resources, and flexible arrangements. This avenue could explore how organizations can effectively share human resources and capabilities to increase adaptability and broaden talent development pathways.

The advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, encompassing automation, digitalization, artificial intelligence, and gig work, is transforming the nature of work and employment. Human-organization interactions in sports provide an ideal lens to study these changes, especially through the adoption of automation in training and analysis. For example, the use of automated performance tracking tools like Catapult, which monitors athletes' physical metrics, has become common across various sports leagues. Automation in these settings could inform studies on how organizations integrate new technologies, redistribute human tasks, and address employee responses to automation. Additional research could yield important insights for industries grappling with automation, particularly regarding job security, role transformation, and productivity in tech-enabled workplaces. We also raise these questions: does the presence of advanced analytics and the reshaping of sports parallel the ways automation and AI are reshaping organizations?; does access to high quality data and sophisticated analyses result in mimetic tendencies among sport teams, potentially reducing the interestingness of sport?; and could the same be happening in organizations, with efficiency of advanced technological tools stripping away the uncertainty, challenge, and interfirm variability of organizing? We clearly are not there

yet, but we might inform the evolution process of the latter – organizations – by taking a dedicated look at the former – sports.

Sports settings are increasingly defined by human-technology interactions due to the rise of digitalization, virtualization, and technology-enabled consumer interfaces. The rapid growth of e-sports, for example, has created virtual competition spaces that mirror physical sports in terms of audience engagement and commercialization. The global reach and digital nature of e-sports, as seen in the League of Legends World Championship, provide a rich environment for examining how digitalization and virtualization impact fan engagement, brand development, and employee (or athlete) identity. By studying these interactions, researchers can develop new theories on digital transformation, user experience design, and the evolution of professional identities in virtual contexts, which are applicable to organizations transitioning into digital spaces.

Additionally, sports teams increasingly employ technology-enabled consumer interfaces to enhance fan experiences, both in-stadium and remotely. The NFL's Dallas Cowboys, for example, offer fans a mobile app that includes features like real-time stats, replays, and fan interaction opportunities, blending physical attendance with digital engagement. Similar arrangements are offered by Formula 1, which provides its race viewers with live telemetry, simulations, and the possibility to switch the point of view across different cars. This interface exemplifies how organizations can use technology to enhance customer experiences, create loyalty, and gather real-time feedback. Research could explore the effectiveness of such tools in building consumer-brand relationships, addressing customer needs, and creating integrated online-offline experiences. Insights from these studies could be useful to a wide range of organizations seeking to enhance customer engagement and loyalty through technology.

Organization-society interactions in sports offer a valuable lens for examining how organizations respond to societal expectations around global supply chains, environmental sustainability, and industry innovation. For example, global supply chains are increasingly central to sports, especially in sourcing equipment and apparel. Nike, a key player in the sports industry, faces challenges in balancing efficiency with ethical sourcing and environmental sustainability. The disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted vulnerabilities in global supply chains, creating an opportunity to study resilience, adaptability, and ethical considerations. Research using sports supply chains could provide lessons for other industries facing similar disruptions, focusing on strategies for maintaining continuity, enhancing transparency, and balancing economic efficiency with ethical commitments.

Environmental sustainability is another significant issue, and sports organizations are beginning to address their environmental impact. The Tokyo 2020 Olympics, for instance, prioritized sustainability, using recycled materials for medals and reducing waste throughout the event. However, global warming and snow reduction is making alpine skiing increasingly reliant on artificial snow, and the International Olympics Committee predicted that by 2040 only 10 countries will be able to host the Winter Olympics. Studying how sports organizations embrace environmental goals can inform theories on organizational adaptation, stakeholder engagement, and corporate social responsibility. Such research can guide other industries in understanding the long-term impacts of sustainability commitments on brand reputation, consumer trust, and operational practices.

Finally, the emergence of new industries and product categories within sports, and sports technology, reflects how organizations adapt to changing market demands and technological advancements. The NBA's involvement in e-sports through its NBA 2K League exemplifies the

sports industry's response to new consumer interests and technological possibilities. This shift provides a framework for studying how traditional organizations innovate, engage with new consumer segments, and integrate emerging technologies. These studies could offer valuable insights into innovation management, market expansion, and strategic adaptability, helping organizations outside sports navigate disruptive changes in their industries.

Papers in the Starting Line-Up

The articles selected for the SRF excel in phenomenon articulation and empirical rigor, offering fresh insights that extend beyond traditional sports management. Each skillfully integrates data with plausible theoretical insights, using the unique context of sports to address broader organizational questions in areas like technology integration, deviance, and team dynamics. Additionally, these papers leverage rich, granular data from sports settings to explore poorly understood phenomena, embodying the exploratory and impactful research we aimed to showcase. In the remainder of the editorial, we briefly summarize this exemplary research.

We kick-off the SRF with “When More is Less: The Role of Social Capital in Managing Talent in Teams,” by Loignon, Fonti, Bagherzadeh, Gurca, and Shresta. This study challenges the assumption that “more is better” when recruiting star talent. Using data from elite European football teams, it uncovers a paradox: teams with many star players often perform worse than those with fewer, demonstrating a “more may be less” effect. The key factor is social capital, measured through passing networks. Dense, decentralized networks amplify the benefits of star talent, while sparse, centralized configurations hinder efficiency. Within-match analyses reveal the difficulty of building optimal social capital, as human capital significantly shapes team dynamics, which tend to resist change. These findings offer valuable insights into managing star-

filled teams, emphasizing the complex interplay between individual talent, collaboration, and team performance. Organizations can learn from this study how to harness star employees' potential while maintaining team cohesion and effectiveness.

Interestingly, three papers in the SRF addressed issues of illicit behavior. While it may be somewhat surprising to see that this topic captured so much attention, its prominence in the SRF highlights the power of using sport data to model phenomena that would be almost impossible to capture in traditional organizational settings. The first paper in this vein, “Did Cheating Help the Houston Astros Win? Organizational Misconduct, Illicit Competitive Intelligence, and Organizational Performance,” by Downs, Mahoney, and Somaya investigates whether illicit “sign-stealing” by Major League Baseball’s Houston Astros enhanced the team’s batting performance. Contrary to expectations — and the prevailing popular narrative around this widely publicized scandal — the authors find no significant improvement in performance due to the sign-stealing scheme, even under conditions where cheating might have been most advantageous. Leveraging abductive reasoning, the authors propose three compelling explanations for this surprising finding: conflicts between organizational and professional identities, information leakage to rivals, and disruption of routines. The study demonstrates how exploratory research can generate novel insights into this hard to measure organizational phenomena, thereby reshaping assumptions about unethical behavior’s effectiveness.

The paper “A (Bounded) Preference for Rule Breakers” by Wakeman, Yang, and Moore, explores how and when rule breakers are rewarded. Analyzing NHL penalty data, the authors found that players committing penalties often received *increased* playing time, except in the case of extreme rule breakers or in critical moments like playoffs. The effect was stronger for teams on losing streaks, where visible effort (such as committing penalties) appeared more valued. A

follow-up experiment supported these findings, showing that non-severe rule breakers are perceived as more committed to team success. The study highlights how organizations may benefit from tolerating moderate rule-breaking, while also recognizing its boundaries. By leveraging sports data, the authors provide nuanced insights into the dynamics of rewarding deviant behaviors and their implications for organizational success.

The final paper on this theme, “When Does Rule-Breaking Hurt Performance? Evidence from Judo, Soccer, and Organizational Settings” Ong and Reynolds examine how rule-breaking affects performance among rivals of differing rank. Analyzing data from judo, soccer, and experiments, the authors reveal that higher-ranked rivals suffer greater performance losses from rule-breaking due to poor risk assessment rather than stricter penalties or scrutiny. Two key insights emerge: First, “clean living pays,” as elite teams, often tempted by status and complacency, should prioritize rule adherence to maintain long-term success. Second, the findings challenge the idea of “doing well by doing good,” showing that provoking higher-ranked rivals can lead to retaliatory rule-breaking, ultimately harming their performance. The study provides a nuanced understanding of how rank influences the costs, dynamics, and risks of deviance in competitive environments.

In “On the Right Track? Studying the Use of Biometric Data to Manage People in Organizations,” Downie, Pachidi, Huysman, and Hafermalz investigate how biometric data is used to manage and control individuals in organizations, focusing on an elite sports setting (Judo, Tennis, and Basketball national teams at the Olympics). Through an ethnography, this paper examines how biometric data — temporal, intimate, and decontextualized — requires managers and athletes to negotiate shared rhythms, visibility, and contextual understanding. Coaches and athletes collaboratively manage bodily performance data, highlighting a novel form of "shared

control" where both parties influence the use and interpretation of biometric data. The study provides a framework for understanding this dynamic and discusses its implications for theories on organizational control and people analytics in high-performance environments.

In "Just Calling Balls and Strikes: The Impact of Business Travel on Cognitive Performance" Terry, McGee, Gevrek, and Collings use data on Major League Baseball umpires to explore how frequent business travel impacts cognitive performance. Contrary to common beliefs about the universal effect of jet lag, the study found no significant cognitive decline associated with crossing up to three time zones compared to same-time-zone travel. However, age emerged as a critical factor: older umpires excelled in high-stakes games but experienced cognitive declines with prolonged stays, while younger umpires showed initial struggles but improved over time, particularly after westward travel. These findings provide new insights into the effects business travel on professionals in high-stakes, travel-intensive roles, revealing that the interplay between age, travel patterns, and task demands significantly shapes cognitive outcomes.

Finally, and in the spirit of scholarly discussion that is central to AMD's mission, this article is followed by a commentary by Barling and Turner and a response from the Terry and colleagues. This discussion, which is introduced by an editorial note from Moliterno and Rockmann, closes the SRF with an interesting "case study" on the power of exploratory research to generate new theoretical insights, and the potential of sports to provide a rich context to understand contemporary organizations.

CONCLUSION

We hope this Special Research Forum serves as a springboard for future research that leverages sports as a powerful context to explore and deepen understanding of modern

organizational phenomena. Like a well-coordinated play that opens up new paths to the goal, these studies show the potential of global sports-based insights to illuminate issues relevant across industries and organizational contexts. We anticipate that this forum will inspire scholars to tackle big questions with fresh perspectives and innovative data. Just as athletes push boundaries to achieve peak performance, we encourage researchers to boldly advance management theory, using sports as a dynamic field for discovery. With these efforts, we aim to see lasting exploratory contributions and discoveries that influence both academic understanding and practical management strategies that enhance managers' playbooks.

TABLE 1
Type of Sports Data and Opportunities for Theoretical Development

Type of data / empirical setting	Opportunities for theoretical development	Sport example(s)
GPS and spatial tracking data in sports	Insights into teamwork, coordination, and decision-making in dynamic, high-stakes environments	English Premier League (EPL) spatial tracking technology
Data on social media interactions of fans	Understanding consumer and employee engagement, brand perception, and crisis management	NBA's Los Angeles Lakers and F1 teams' use of social media on their drivers' rivalry to adjust their engagement with media, sponsor and fans.
Data on inter-generational collaboration in sports teams	Examining mentorship, knowledge-sharing, and generational conflicts in organizations	Motorsport drivers and soccer player often coach their children into similar sport careers
Data on human capital development in sports	Building theories on talent integration, role adaptation, and collective growth	Red Bull Junior Team's talent development pipeline
Data on resource-sharing in sports teams	Exploring collaboration and resource-sharing models in the sharing economy	MLS and European football leagues' player loan systems

Data on automation in training and performance tracking	Investigating organizational responses to automation, job security, and productivity shifts	Catapult automated performance tracking in various leagues
Data on digitalization and virtualization in sports	Developing theories on digital transformation, user experience design, and professional identity evolution	League of Legends World Championship in e-sports
Data on technology-enabled consumer interfaces in sports	Enhancing consumer engagement, loyalty, and real-time customer feedback strategies	Dallas Cowboys' and Formula 1's digital engagement platforms
Global supply chains in sports	Studying resilience, adaptability, and ethical considerations in supply chains	Nike's global supply chain challenges and COVID-19 disruptions
Data on environmental sustainability in sports	Understanding corporate sustainability, stakeholder engagement, and long-term brand reputation	Tokyo 2020 Olympics' sustainability initiatives and Winter Olympics challenges
Data on emerging industries and product categories in sports	Analyzing strategic adaptability, market expansion, and innovation management in traditional industries	NBA 2K League as NBA's response to e-sports growth

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