



**Preliminary Research on the impact of the COVID-19  
Pandemic on Players and their Player Associations**

European Elite Athletes Association

June 2020

## Introduction

The Covid-19 Pandemic has had a severe impact upon Europe. It has caused personal tragedies and economic devastation. Sport has not been immune from its impact. Most professional sport has shut down for months. We are now seeing a gradual return-to-play behind closed doors for high-profile professional sports which is welcome. However, for many professional leagues the return to play is not yet financially viable.

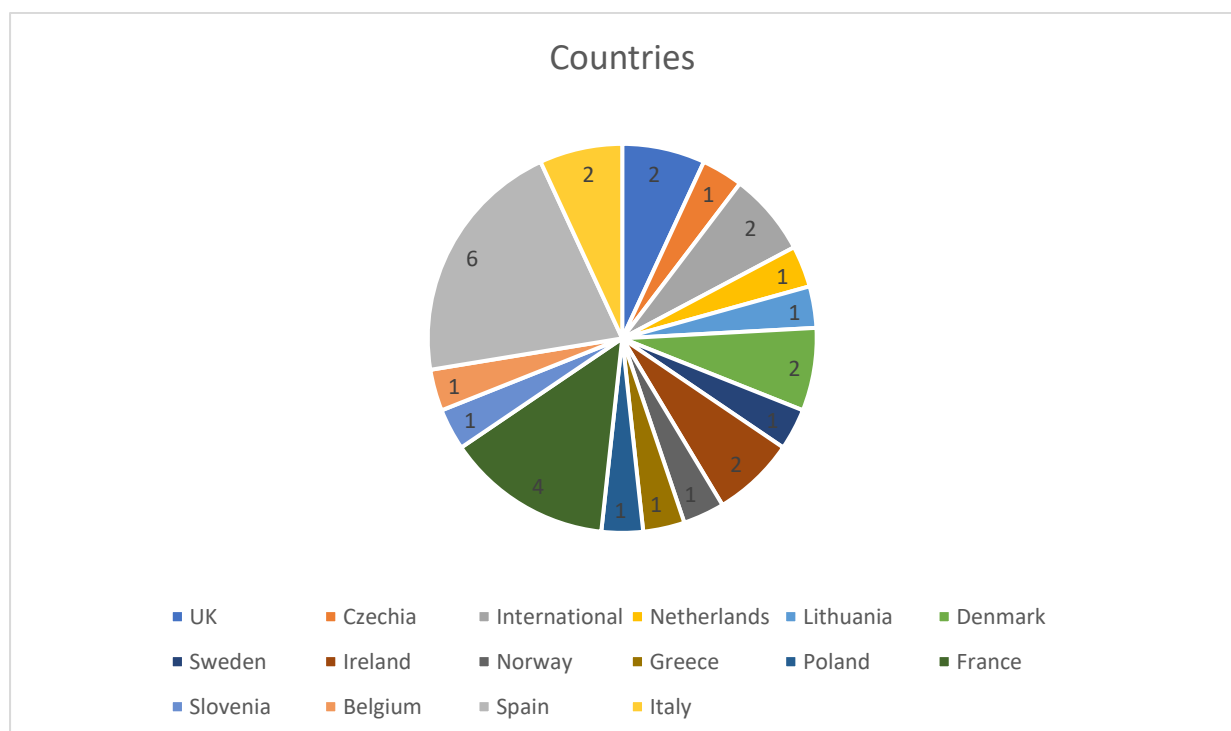
It is still early days as we try to work out the impact of the pandemic on elite sportsmen and women. The following report highlights the preliminary findings of our research. There is scope for greater research on the issues raised within this report as the longer-term impact of the pandemic becomes more evident.

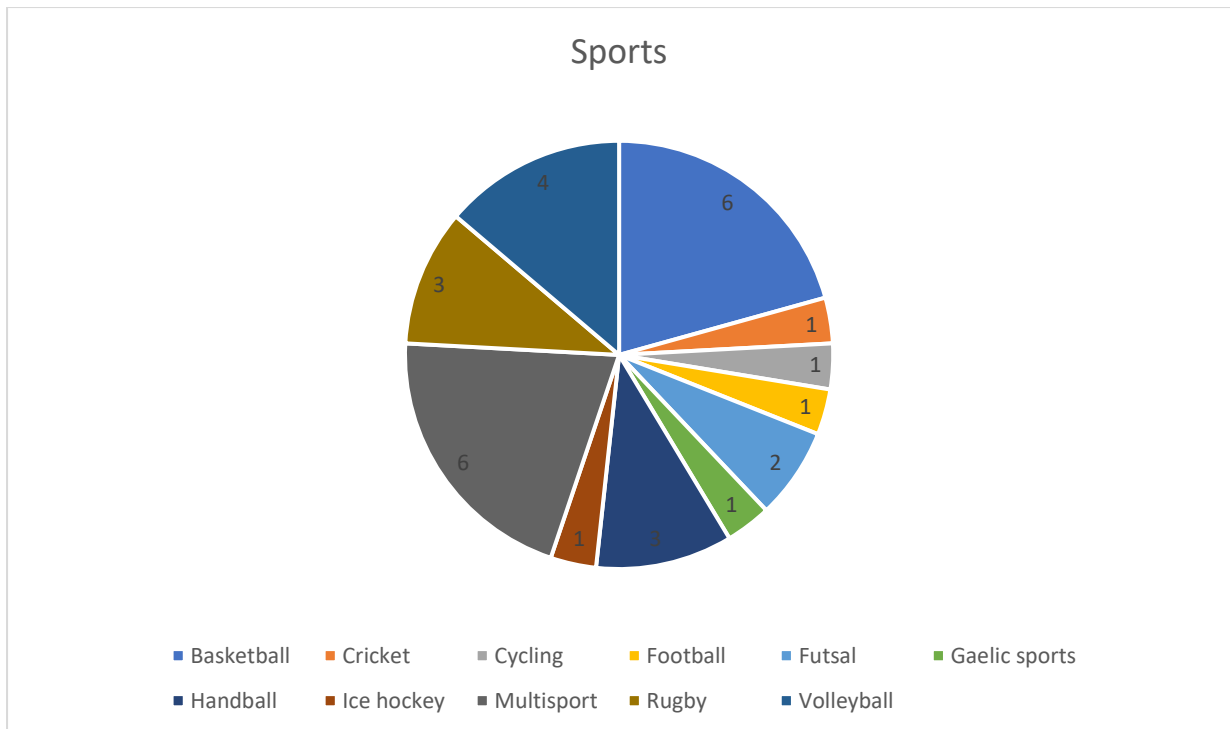
## Methodology

The research is based upon a questionnaire distributed electronically to all 35 EU Athletes members in May 2020. The aim was to understand the impact of the pandemic upon the players and their player associations in Europe.

The term 'player association' in this research refers to independent athlete representative associations, sports trade unions and associations. The terms 'players' and 'athletes' are used interchangeable to designate professional and elite level sports participants.

There was an 83% response rate to the questionnaire, with 29 player associations covering more than 15 countries and wide range of professional sports responding (see graphs below).





## Survey Results

### 1) Impact on Player Associations

On the positive side, the pandemic is driving players to unionise, come together and join their player associations. It demonstrates the importance of player associations to support athletes, especially in the time of crisis.

Membership has increased for 55% of the player associations and stayed same for the rest.

Athletes' demand for services from their player associations has increased for 93% of respondents.

The most pressing demands from players are for "Financial support and advice" and "Legal advice".

It is disappointing that 45% of associations have had cases of athletes' contracts being unlawfully terminated or modified by the employers. This is simply unacceptable. The pandemic is not a justification for unlawfully imposing changes to players contracts.

During the early days of the pandemic covered by the questionnaire, the player associations reported that their income and expenditure seems to be relatively stable in comparison to the same period last year.

However, 55% of player associations are expecting a financial deficit this year and for a worrying 17% of player association this will be a large deficit.

It is unclear what the level of reserves are amongst the European player associations but given that it is a young sector it seems likely that many of the newer associations will have limited financial reserves.

## **2) Government support**

Given the importance of the player association movement to their sports and the welfare of elite players, it is worrying that 76% of player associations said they had received no government support during the current crisis.

The lack of government support for the professional player association movement is something that needs to be addressed at both a national and European level.

When it comes to government support for players it is a mixed picture, with some athletes receiving government support and some not. The main reason for players not getting support is due to issues around a lack of contracts, wrong types of contracts and employment status.

The lack of recognised employment contracts for sportsmen, and especially sportswomen, will have resulted in additional hardship for athletes because it will exclude them from national income support measures.

## **3) Women's sport**

Women's elite sport has made significant progress over the last decade. Given its dependence upon gate receipts as opposed to television rights, women's sport looks to be disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

45% of player associations think that the impact of the pandemic will be worse for women's elite sport compared to men's sport, 52% think it will be the same and only 3% think it will be better.

There is a real fear that women's professional sport will be significantly set back by the pandemic and that many of the gains of the last few years made by women's sport could be lost without targeted intervention and support.

## **4) Long-term impact**

The player associations were asked what they considered the long-term impact of the pandemic was likely to be on their sports and their athletes.

- 90% of associations were expecting to see players' salaries decrease.
- 55% thought that there were likely to be fewer professional contracts offered to elite athletes.
- Mental health issues for their member players were identified as a future problem by 48% of responders.

Earlier [research](#) by the Professional Players Federation in the UK has identified that financial difficulties can be a major cause of mental health issues in retired players. There is little doubt that the toxic combination of job losses, reduced income and the pandemic will mean there is an urgent need for increased support for players and those transitioning out of the game.

## **Conclusions**

This research was undertaken quickly in order to get feedback from EU Athletes members about the impact of the pandemic on professional sport in Europe. The results paint a worrying picture and should form the basis for further research looking at the issues identified in greater detail.

Player associations are becoming more important for professional and elite athletes. More than half of player associations reported an increase in membership during the pandemic. A large majority (93%) of associations reported an increase in demand for their services.

It is worrying to note that 55% of player associations are running a deficit this year with 17% facing a large deficit. This is compounded by the fact that 76% of player associations received no government support to help with pandemic.

Too many professional players were also unable to access government funds. There were a number of reasons why athletes were not supported, with the lack of contract or the type of contract and the employment status being a significant factor.

Almost half of associations have had cases of athletes' contracts being unlawfully terminated or modified by the employers.

Looking to future, the player associations are worried that there will be fewer professional contracts in sport and reduced salaries for those still working as athletes.

Mental health concerns were identified by 48% of associations as a likely outcome for players from the pandemic. These will be made worse by the loss of jobs and income, resulting in even more demand for player association support.

## **Recommendations**

From the initial research, EU Athletes and its members call upon the sports movement, national governments and the European Union to:

- 1) Acknowledge the importance of the player association movement to elite sport and the welfare of professional athletes.
- 2) Look at ways of providing direct support for player associations to help protect elite athletes from exploitation.
- 3) Elite-level women's sport will likely need targeted support if its recent gains in terms of its public profile and professionalism are not to be lost.
- 4) Improved support for all professional athletes is needed. This should include:
  - a. Expanded funding to enable greater access to career transition programmes.
  - b. Dedicated mental health support for athletes.
  - c. Proper employment status for all professional athletes and protection of athletes' labour rights.
  - d. Professional athletes being eligible for government income support programmes.