



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

## Introduction

As the world begins to recover from COVID-19, it is safe to say that the virus infected also sport. Not only did the pandemic cause a significant disruption to the sporting calendar, but it created a worldwide turmoil to the entire sports ecosystem, including the health, well-being, and economic situation of players, as well as the work and finances of their player associations.

In order to investigate and bring attention to how the pandemic impacted players and player associations in the long term, EU Athletes carried out a research during Spring 2022. Said research is complementary to a research conducted in the early days of the pandemic, titled “Preliminary Research on the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Players and their Player Associations”. In that research, it was shown among other things that athletes’ demand for services had increased for 93% of respondents, and 76% of the player associations had received no specific government support. Furthermore, most respondents thought that the pandemic would cause lower salaries (90%), and 45% of the player associations had cases of athletes’ contracts being unlawfully terminated or modified by their employers. Based on the preliminary research, EU Athletes issued a number of recommendations found [here](#).

In the ensuing report from the preliminary research published in June 2020, EU Athletes also stressed that while an initial severe impact of COVID-19 on professional sport had been identified, the long-term impact was yet to be seen. Two years later, the long-term impact on players and their player associations has become increasingly evident. Having gathered information and views from its members on the matter, EU Athletes highlights in the following report the main findings on the long-term impact and outlines a number of challenges caused by the pandemic that are yet to be addressed.

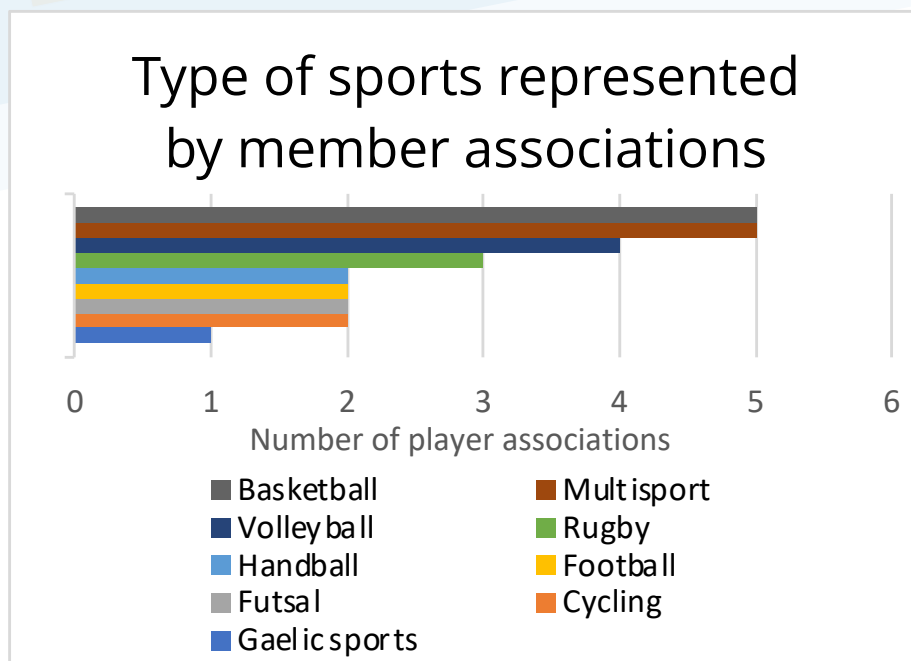
## Methodology

The research is based on a questionnaire which was distributed electronically to all 32 members of EU Athletes in April 2022. The aim of the questionnaire was to understand the long-term impact of COVID-19 on players and their player associations in Europe.

The term '*player association*' refers to independent athlete representative associations, sports trade unions and associations.

The terms '*players*' and '*athletes*' are used interchangeably to designate professional and elite level sports participants.

There was an 84% response rate to the questionnaire, with 27 player associations (1) (2) covering more than 15 countries and wide range of professional sports having responded.



<sup>[1]</sup> Associazione Italiana Pallavolisti (AIP) did not exist before the pandemic in 2019, as evident in some of its replies to the questionnaire.

<sup>[2]</sup> France (5 player associations), Spain (4), international (2), England (2), Italy (2), Ireland (2), Norway (1), Czech Republic (1), Greece (1), Poland (1), Slovenia (1), The Netherlands (1), Belgium (1), Iceland (1), Denmark (1), and Lithuania (1).

## Survey results

### 1) Impact on player associations

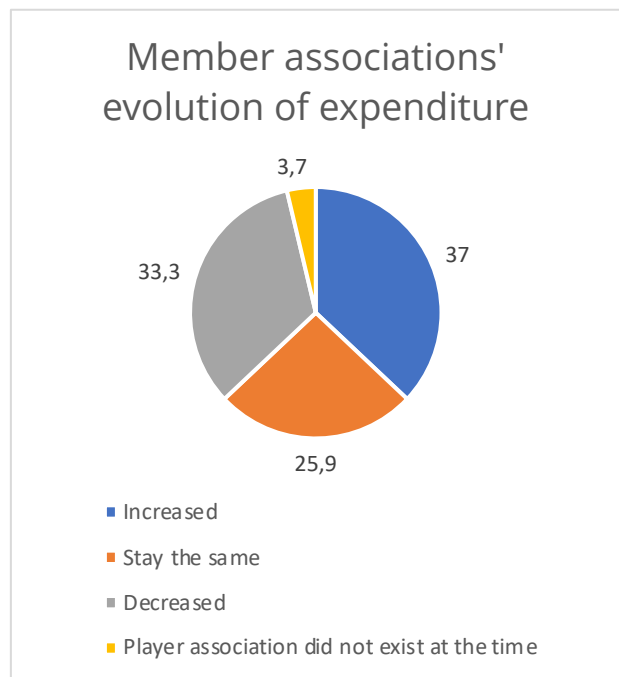
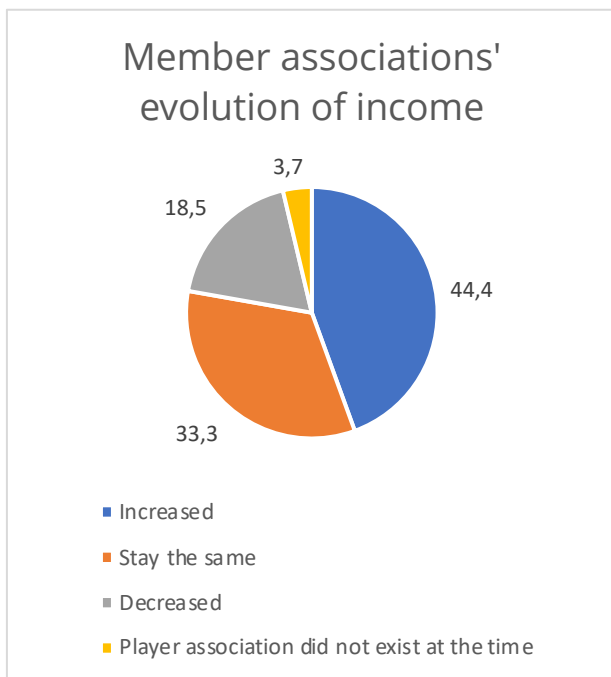
#### a. Financial situation

The pandemic has affected in many different ways the finances of our member association both positively or negatively.

- 19% reported an increase in their yearly income.
- 33% reported a decrease in their yearly income.
- 37% reported an increase in their expenditure.
- 33% reported a decrease in their expenditure.

1/3 of the player associations are expecting a financial deficit in 2022. 4% of them are expecting a large one.

We also noted that a large number of members believe that the pandemic will have a long-term negative effect on their financial situation. This situation appears worrying and raises concerns on the capacity of player associations to support their members and their day to day operation.



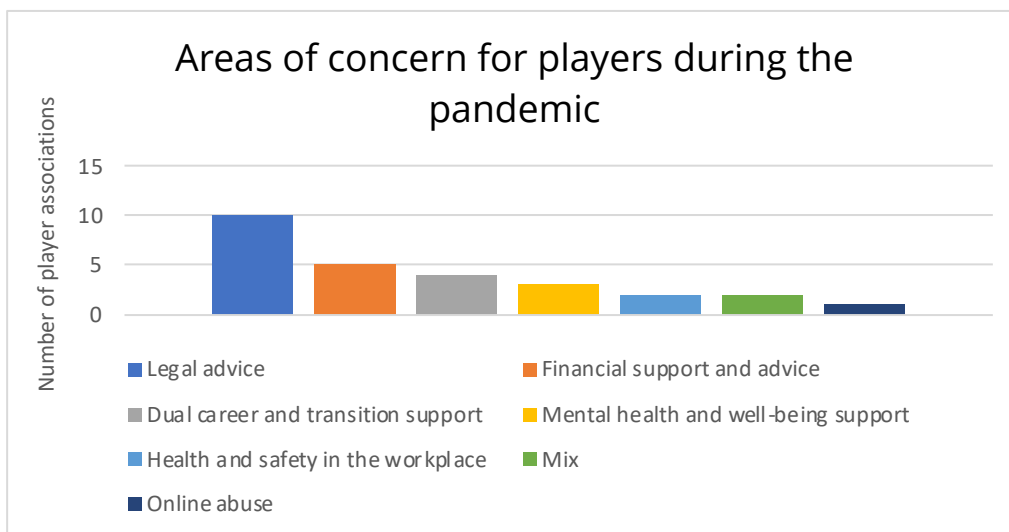
#### b. Membership and members' demand

The pandemic had unexpected consequences on our members. For 22% of them their membership increased over the period, while for 22% of them their membership decreased. 14 of the 27 player associations who replied in the survey said that their membership "has stayed the same compared to before the pandemic".

## Huge increase in player services demands.

74% of the player associations reported that the demand for services from players increased during the COVID-19 period. Players' requests and questions were of all types. Certain areas of expertise of player associations were particularly used (see graph below). For these areas they had to allocate more resources and more staff time. One player association which had noticed an increase in demands around mental health gave the following example:

*"Before the pandemic we already had an agreement in place with a psychologist center. Because of the increased demands we received from players for mental health services we felt the urge to restructure this agreement to allocate more psychologist hours to our members each week for 18 months. We expect that there will be a need to continue providing support at this increased level in the future."*



### ***c. Involvement in decision-making***

In regards to decision-making and negotiations related to COVID-19, 52% of the player associations reported that they have been involved to some extent with their league, federation or governmental entities. 22% of them reported large involvement.

On the contrary 22% of them reported insufficient involvement with their stakeholders. This lack of proper consultation raises a lot of questions since most of the decisions that were being taken affected players directly whenever they concerned health and safety protocol, scheduling of the season etc...

When asked to elaborate on their involvement (or lack of involvement), the respondents gave the following examples:

*"Pay cuts were imposed on players initially without consultation but some consultation did then take place with some clubs regarding pay cuts. We were fully consulted on other areas of Covid-related matters e.g. return to playing/training, etc."*

*"We have been involved. However we haven't had the influence the players would've liked over certain issues"*

#### ***d. Changes in the way of working***

The player associations were asked in what way (positive or negative) their work had changed since 2019. While the respondents' views may differ, most of them are united in saying that it generated substantial changes to their structure and/or operation.

Furthermore, a number of them reported that they have experienced an intensified and diversified workload. Their work was intensified due to the increased demand for services from players, and diversified due to new kind of requests.

The most significant change in the player associations' operation was arguably the transition to more digital work, which resulted in positive outcomes but also new challenges. On the one hand, this led to better infrastructure for players' meetings and emphasized that online courses are better adaptable to players' schedules than physical ones. On the other hand, some reported that the online meetings with players resulted in exchanges appearing more "superficial" while the issues discussed were of extremely high importance.

An additional area of concern that was listed was losing contact with players and stakeholders, particularly permanent contact with players. The respondents stressed that it was difficult and sometimes almost impossible to organize in person visits to the different clubs during the season and thereby maintain in-person interaction with the players. One association noted that:

*"[...] not having access to clubs due to Covid for long periods has had a negative effect on relationships with members (visibility is key!) and it will be challenging to rebuild confidence".*

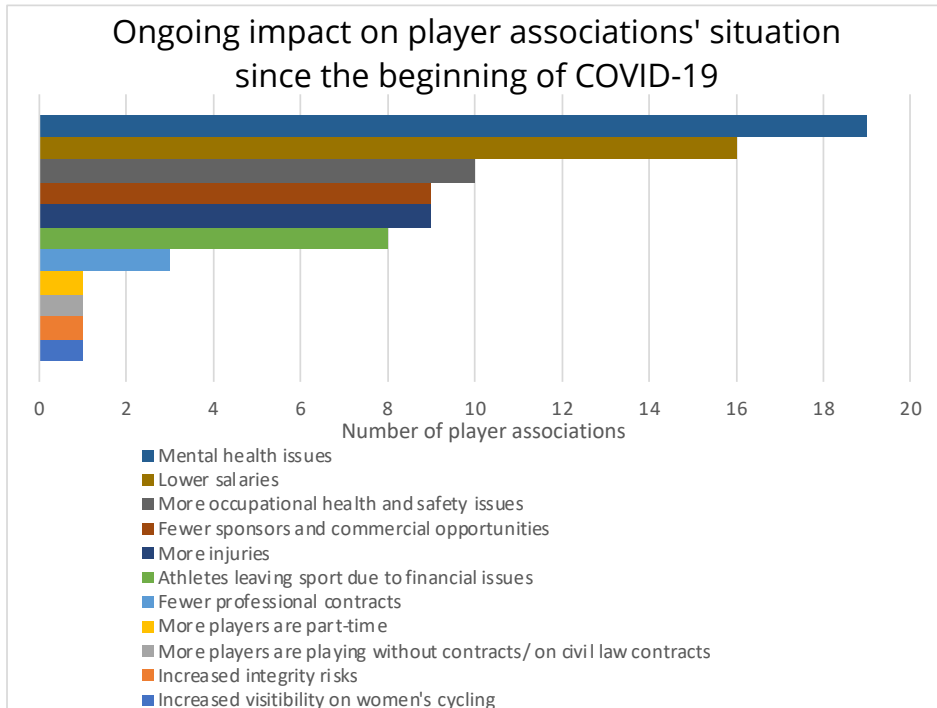
### **2) Government support**

The importance of the player association movement to sports and the welfare of elite players must not be understated. In order for player associations to function and flourish, government support is crucial. This is particularly important in times of crisis. Notwithstanding, 78% of the player associations reported that they have not been able to benefit from any specific financial support from their respective governments during the pandemic. Only 4% reported that they have received significant support.

Those few player associations (22%) who have received specific financial support from the government were asked to describe specifically what kind of support they had benefited from. However, the examples that were given turned out to be normal measures for employees rather than specific financial resources dedicated to the sport sector.

### **3) Impact on players' situation**

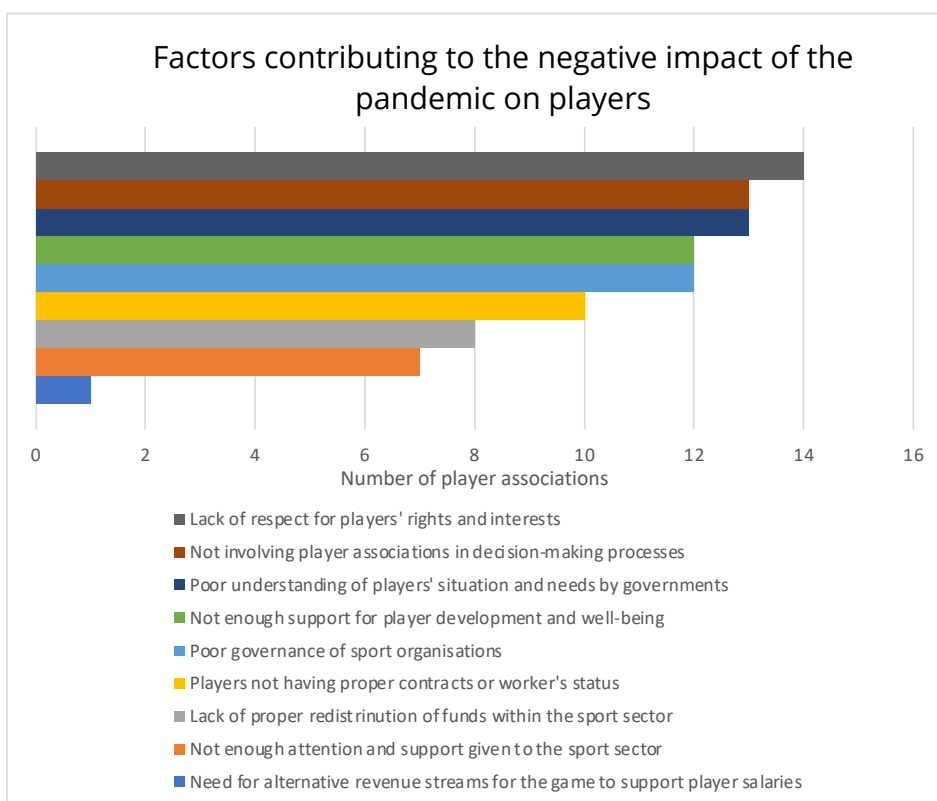
When the player associations were asked in the preliminary research what they believed the long-term impact of the pandemic would be, almost half of them replied that they thought mental health would become a future problem for their respective members. Considering that already this percentage (48%) may be regarded as high, it is alarming that now 70% of the player associations have reported a negative impact on their members' mental health in the 2022 research.



Decreased salary is another noteworthy issue. A large number of player associations expected in 2020 to see players' salaries decrease. Two years later, we can confirm that 58% have seen decreased salaries during the last two years. This percentage is extremely high and really alarming. Less professionalised sports are particularly vulnerable in this regard, and with limited visibility on their future.

The research also shows that the pandemic has resulted in fewer sponsors and commercial opportunities, more occupational health and safety issues, and more injuries.

In regard to the factors contributing to the negative impact of the pandemic on players, slightly more than half the player associations (52%) reported that a lack of respect for players rights and interests is a strong factor. Other factors of concern are not having involved player associations in the decision-making process (48%) and the poor governance of sport organisations (48%).



The player associations also gave their views on the biggest issue regarding the negative impact on players. The following examples were raised:

- Loss of jobs and salaries;
- Lack of social interaction and relationships caused by periods of imposed isolation;
- Uncertainty of contracts;
- Insufficient involvement of player associations in the decision-making process.

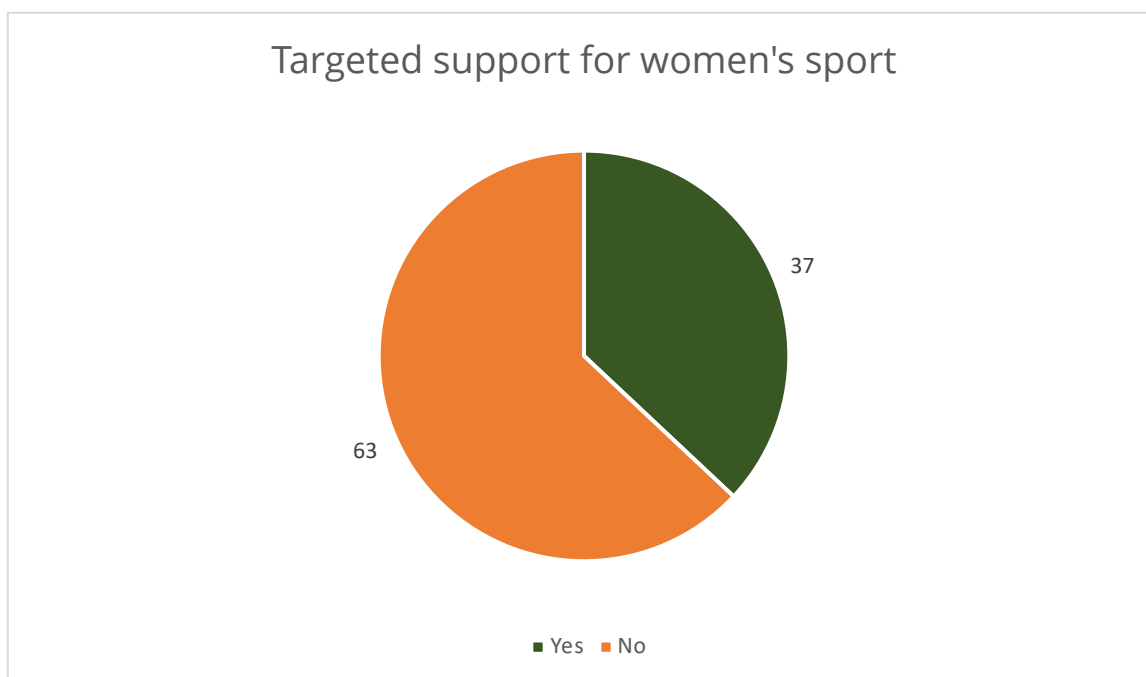
As regards positive impact, the research revealed that some players have increased and improved their relationships with player associations, started focusing more on dual careers, and become more aware of the importance of having proper employment contracts in place written and signed.

#### 4) *Women's sport*

Over the last decade, stakeholders have made significant progress supporting women's elite sport to grow by allocating specific resources. We are encouraging these efforts not to be stopped as they are particularly important in a period of crisis.

It is deeply problematic to see that 63% of the player associations responded that *"no specific targeted support for women's sport was in place during the pandemic"*.

For the player associations who reported that they have received targeted support for women's sport their answers included mainly government funding and loans.





## Conclusions and recommendations

While the days are yet too early to present the ultimate impact of the pandemic on sport for players and their player associations, important conclusions can be drawn from the information gathered by EU Athletes from its members at this stage.

The COVID-19 pandemic drove more players to unionise. Players recognised the central role that player associations have in a period of crisis. The player associations were the main contact point for players to collect information about for example: the scheduling of the season, the ongoing negotiation both at the league and federation level, temporary changes in the working laws and their impact on working contracts or basic questions on dual career support. Altogether, player associations were instrumental in supporting athletes during the pandemic as their demand for services increased dramatically.

On the other and, when analysing the 2022 survey results in light of the recommendations issued by EU Athletes back in 2020, we see that some areas are still in need of additional efforts.

### 1. Acknowledging the importance of the player associations in the decision-making process.

Players have a fundamental right to meaningful representation. It is very problematic that the players' representatives were, in certain situations during the pandemic, not entitled to a proper seat at the table when decisions were taken - decisions that most of the time affected players directly. Good governance principles, through social dialogue, is the only way to properly involve players.

### 2. Providing targeted support for elite women's sport.

Many sports and/or countries were left without targeted support for women's sport during the pandemic. This is alarming and confirms the fears that our members predicted in 2020. Measures should urgently be imposed to ensure that the gains of the last few years in women's sport remains effective in the long-term.

### 3. Enabling greater access to dual career programmes.

It is clear now that the pandemic has pushed athletes to think way beyond sport. The demand from players on questions related to dual career programs available or transition after sport were even more central in the work of player associations during the last two years. We are encouraging stakeholders to tackle that issue as part of collective bargaining or allocate sufficient resources to support existing programs developed by player associations.

### 4. Addressing mental health support for athletes.

Two years of pandemic has dramatically increased the athletes' mental health problems, as witnessed by player associations. In 2022, mental health of athletes must be recognised as a priority to be addressed at the EU level. An EU Expert group including representative of player associations should be established to give recommendations to member states on how to tackle this issue. Combined efforts should also be rapidly taken by all stakeholders at the national level to endorse existing programs and support the creation of new ones, with the help of certified experts and player unions.

## 5. Reinforcing the rights of athletes as workers

With no proper working status in place for athletes in certain EU countries and certain sports, they were faced with an unprecedentedly worrying situation. For example, in the absence of proper employment contracts, athletes were deprived of government income support programmes which led to imposed salary cuts or termination of contracts. It is crucial that athletes are recognized as workers to ensure that their fundamental rights are guaranteed and that they can remain fully employed.

Two years after our first survey we clearly see that certain subjects have not sufficiently been addressed at both European and national level and therefore, the consequences are enormous for male and female athletes all around Europe.

All stakeholders need to assume their responsibility and act in a combined effort to offer viable solutions and a more sustainable working environment for athletes.

EU Athletes and its member associations will continue to evaluate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in the coming months and issue ensuing recommendations on actions that need to be taken.