

From Social Distancing to Social Inclusion – The Emotions and Friendships of Women’s Cricket during the Pandemic

By Peter Evans*

In the summer of 2020, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB), the sport’s national governing body in the United Kingdom, was set to introduce a new competition known as “The Hundred¹,” featuring eight teams in major UK cities with gender aligned competitions (Lieu 2019). The new competition was designed to be a commercial powerhouse, driving growth into new markets and providing a platform for women’s cricket, strategically positioned alongside the men’s game, to showcase the product to a national TV audience. This paper looks at the topography of the women’s game leading up to the outbreak of the pandemic to provide context for the directives and regulations that the ECB made in March 2020. The main purpose of the study is to explore the impact that these decisions have had on a small sample of female managers and athletes associated with the new teams in The Hundred. One of the products of the lockdown was that, although female cricketers, coaches and administrators were frustrated by the lockdown restrictions and the lost opportunities, the community took the opportunity to enhance social bonds, reflect upon their work practices and reset their priorities. The emergence of social bonding themes permeated the interviews that were conducted, these themes are contextualized by social capital theory and are thus a key outcome of this research.

Keywords: social-inclusion, female, gender, cricket, pandemic, lockdown, social-capital, anxiety, bonding

Women’s Cricket in England

Women’s domestic cricket in England has a rich heritage and the Women’s Cricket Association (WCA) held responsibility for running women’s cricket in England from its inception in 1926 (Heyhoe-Flint and Rheinberg 1976). The England Women’s international team was established in 1934 and the inaugural Women’s Cricket World Cup took place in England in 1973. The inaugural English Women’s County Championship took place in 1997, administered by the WCA (and assimilated into the ECB the following year). In recent times however, the development of T20 cricket (the shortened format of cricket, completed in approximately three hours) has transformed male and female cricket globally.

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¹Hundred is a professional cricket league in the United Kingdom and is the only cricket league in the world that played in 100-ball cricket format. It is organised by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) and played during July and August each year. The Hundred comprises eight city-based teams, with seven based in England and one in Wales. A men’s squad and women’s squad are formed for each team, with the competitions running alongside each other. A match lasts approximately two-and-a-half-hours and targets a new, younger audience in a dynamic, interactive atmosphere.

The T20 Indian Premier League (IPL) has become a commercial powerhouse, underpinned by broadcasting rights (Wigmore and Wilde 2019). Australia created the “Big Bash,” a comparable league in 2011. However, both these leagues were exclusively for male cricketers. The pivotal change for women’s cricket did not arrive until 2015, with the introduction of the Australian Women’s Big Bash League (BBL). The culture of “two teams, one club” franchises (whereby both the male and female teams are branded identically but play separately) was instituted and, crucially, media coverage and TV ratings were robust for both male and female teams (Australian Associated Press 2016). There was no English equivalent at that time, therefore the Australians appear to have gained a commercial and competitive advantage over their rivals.

The ECB responded to the Australian initiative in 2016 with the launch of the semi-professional Kia Super League (KSL) in England. The women’s teams had their own separate KSL identity (separate from the established male teams with different branding) and thus lacked the marketing penetration that the more integrated approach was generating in Australia. The KSL lasted four seasons and was to be superseded by The Hundred in 2020 as part of the ECB’s ambitions to emulate Australia. Accordingly, the new competition structure and marketing was more aligned to the BBL’s unified approach of two teams identifying as one club.

The Hundred was to be ground-breaking. For the first time in the history of English cricket, both men’s and women’s teams would share a common format, common branding and divide the prize money equally. Although women’s salaries remained less than men’s, this format represented a sea-change moment and was well received by the female cricket community. Heather Knight, the incumbent England Women’s Cricket Captain, said, “This is a great announcement for women’s sport. Women’s professional cricket is on an exciting journey and whilst there is still a way to go to realize gender parity, this move from The Hundred is a significant step in the right direction.” (Wisden 2020, pp. 22-24).

The men’s player draft for The Hundred, in which teams take it in turns to select players from a talent pool of athletes, took place in October 2019, shown live by Sky Sports and BBC Sport. It was the first athlete draft of any sport in the United Kingdom. By contrast, the women’s competition had an open market mechanism with teams negotiating directly with the players. The difference in approach to player selection reflects the different levels of professional maturity between the men’s and women’s game (see Table 1); women’s pay ranged from £3,600 to £15,000 and men from £30,000 to £125,000 (Sealey 2019). The pay gulf emphasizes just how intrinsic the introduction of a shared prize money pot was, coupled with high hopes that it would lead to a major boost in exposure for women’s cricket. With extensive live coverage on terrestrial TV, there was an opportunity to close the gap in revenues from sponsorship and media rights.

Table 1. *The Gender Pay Gulf*

Salary Bracket	Male Player Pay	Female Player Pay
1	£125,000	£15,000
2	£100,000	£12,000
3	£75,000	£9,000
4	£60,000	£7,200
5	£50,000	£6,000
6	£40,000	£4,800
7	£30,000	£3,600

Note: Male and Female players were given an equal share of the winner's prize share, with each player receiving the same portion of the £150,000 pot.

In addition to launch of The Hundred competition, the ECB announced its “Transforming Women’s and Girls’ Cricket Action Plan”, a key component within the organization’s game wide “Inspiring Generations” strategy for 2020-2024 (ECB 2019). Through the action plan, the ECB committed an initial £20 million investment to develop the women’s game across 2019 and 2020, with an ambition for this figure to increase to £50 million over five years. This funding aimed to facilitate a pool of full-time professional contracts for female players, with the central aim of trying to make cricket a more gender-balanced sport - there are approximately 400 professional male cricketers in England and Wales, compared to a target of sixty-five females professionals in October 2020 (The Cricketer 2020).

The Pandemic Strikes

On March 12, 2020, due to rising concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Cricket Board announced that its men’s one-day internationals against New Zealand would be played behind closed doors. There was an immediate ripple effect as the following day Glamorgan County Cricket Club called off its men’s team Spanish tour to La Manga (Glamorgan Cricket 2020) and Essex cancelled its game with the Marylebone Cricket Club in Sri Lanka (Gibson 2020). The start of the Cricket County Championship (April 12th) was now clearly at risk. Accordingly, the ECB, on March 21, 2020 postponed all professional and recreational cricket until at least May 21, 2020 (Sky Sports 2020). The general mood across the country was that the pandemic was perhaps transitory and that compliance to the Government’s lockdown, imposed March 23, 2020, would normalize life relatively quickly. It slowly became evident that society would need to embrace a new norm, with sporting events played behind closed doors.

Following the suspension of recreational and first-class cricket, the ECB subsequently provided an interim funding package of £61 million to help cricket withstand the financial impact of the pandemic (Hoult 2020). Tom Harrison, the CEO of the ECB, said, “We anticipate that with no cricket this year a worst-case scenario could be as bad as £380 million. That would be the loss of 800 days of cricket across all of our professional clubs and the ECB. That is the worst-case scenario for us this year.” (Sky News 2020). Harrison also suggested the ECB would have to “reset future plans” across the whole game in order to ensure its long-term survival; principally, the ECB would have to prioritize their more lucrative events to ensure

the survival of the domestic game survival (ESPNcricinfo 2020). The Hundred, unproven in commercial terms, immediately appeared the most vulnerable and the ECB decided to postpone it until 2021, canceling the contracts of the recently signed players and impacting a combined 240 male and female cricketers (Shemilt 2020).

Sacrificed for the Greater Good? Worrying Times...

Clare Connor, the ECB's managing director of women's cricket, offered a judicious view of where the women's game was positioned, "We have to be completely realistic. If the international women's schedule cannot be fulfilled in full but a large amount of the men's programme can this summer, which is going to reduce that £380 million hole, we have to be realistic about that." (Ames 2020). Connor was also mindful that the England Women's national team may have to forsake playing international games, which are not cost effective, for the greater good. Subsequently, the ECB prioritised the creation of a "bio-secure" environment for the men's England vs West Indies test match on July 8th (Shropshire Star 2020).

Although England's female-centrally contracted players, whereby the ECB pay the players selected for England and control their playing schedule, could not play international cricket, they did at least have secure contracts. However, for many female cricketers the inaugural Hundred tournament was their only source of income in 2020. Southern Brave Head Coach Charlotte Edwards was concerned that, "A lot of people are out of work as well. A lot of players were hoping to have contracts for the Hundred, which were quite lucrative for some of them, and everyone's going to miss out which is so unfortunate and at such an important time for women's cricket." (BBC Women's Cricket 2020). Furthermore, she stressed that missing out on playing and performing was unfortunate at a "decisive moment" for women's cricket – this moment was seen as a step change in the journey towards parity for women's cricket through enhanced media coverage, shared marketing and branding, the introduction of a pool of professional players and shared prize pots.

What was apparent from the observations of both Connor and Edwards was that while there were concerns and anxieties over the loss of The Hundred and potentially Women's international cricket in 2020, they also recognized the need for cricket to simply survive. Edwards added, "I understand that the sport needs the money to survive and it is the men's game that makes this happen - we have to accept that we would like equality now but not at the risk of the future of the sport." This shows that senior figures in the game took a pragmatic approach to the position of the women's game in relationship to that of the men's – if the revenue generated by the men's game was lost it would inevitably impact negatively on the ECB's ability to fund and develop the female game.

Impact on Stakeholders

Methodology

Interviews of approximately forty-five minutes duration were undertaken with four key stakeholders in The Hundred: Beth Barrett-Wild (Head of The Hundred –

Women's Competition), Charlotte Edwards (Former England Captain, Director of Women's Cricket Hampshire, Head Coach of Southern Brave), Marie Kelly (England Development Squad & Warwickshire Women's captain and signed by Birmingham Phoenix) and Issy Wong (Warwickshire Women, England squad and Birmingham Phoenix). Barrett-Wild and Edwards were chosen because of their wealth of experience and senior positions held within the cricket industry; Kelly and Wong were approached to provide a viewpoint from a young, emerging athletes' perspective. These four individuals have credibility in the sport and provide a good representation of the various stakeholders, however, whilst the women provided extensive insight during their respective interviews, time constraints, unconscious bias and the small interview pool are potential limitations (Jones 2015). Interviews were "non-standardized" (unstructured) with a list of topics provided in advance, which the respondent could talk about freely, with the interviewer joining in discussions (Fielding and Thomas 2008). The focus was on the postponement of The Hundred competition and the interviews flowed as a "natural" conversation and the interviewer modified the questions to suit the participants' specific experiences.

In addition to the primary interviews, secondary source interview material has been used from cricket magazines and internet articles and interpreted in the context of the postponement of The Hundred. The author did not have the opportunity to interview Heather Knight and therefore had to rely on the secondary source interview which had different questions and the answers were edited for another purpose. The website resources of the National Governing Body (ECB), the Government Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and government agencies (Sport England) were also explored.

Beth Barrett-Wild – Head of the Hundred – Women's Competition

Beth Barrett-Wild was the ICC Strategic Planning Manager at the 2017 Women's World Cup and later held the post of Head of The Hundred – Women's Competition at the ECB. Barrett-Wild worked with a range of internal and external stakeholders, with oversight of all elements surrounding the creation and launch of the Women's Competition for The Hundred, alongside providing wider strategic support to other areas of the women's game at the ECB. Barrett-Wild gave an in-depth candid interview and provided substantial insight into how the decision to postpone The Hundred had been "very challenging personally and professionally."

Prior to the pandemic, there was a real sense that the women's game was, "coming of age and generated momentum and traction." The Women's game had evolved sufficiently, as now four of the twelve members of the ECB Executive are female and an integral part of the strategic planning of the whole sport.

Recognising that the postponement of The Hundred until 2021 was necessary, Barrett-Wild nevertheless found it "heart-breaking on many levels." Although the money was not lifechanging for the women it was important and significant in what it represented. Barrett-Wild said, "It was recognition of what the players are – elite athletes in their sport." She also recognized that the loss of a much wider audience for the women's game, through media exposure, was arguably a greater loss, "The opportunity to create role models and win a share of the mainstream media market was one of the main objectives that has eluded us."

Barrett-Wild's role required her to manage operational issues with a vast and complex array of internal and external stakeholders, with varying degrees of influence and engagement, from upper tier sponsors and elite players to stadium operators and the media. Barrett-Wild said, "The need for clear, concise information was a priority" and "managing expectations on the delay" (of The Hundred and the potential for a resumption) became increasingly exigent. The principal hurdle to overcome was to let players know of the impending postponement in advance of it getting into the public domain through media outlets and, ultimately, the termination of contracts. She described the process as a "mentally tough, clinical exercise" that she found very difficult as it had to be done by email in a very tight timeframe. Barrett-Wild was asked how stressful it was to have such a responsibility to players, in the short and medium term, and she said, "the lack of certainty is one of the biggest problems that people in the sports industry face, I like plans in place and I feel more anxious as a result."

Barrett-Wild had lingering concerns of whether a vaccine would be found, or if the ECB would be "forced to make redundancies or cut budgets," adding, "At times you can feel overwhelmed." The prospect of facing potential player hostility or depression made her "feel sad" and she wanted to be able to "provide emotional support while executing my duties."

Barrett-Wild expressed great passion for her role and the vision for women's cricket and felt the prolonged lockdown had given her the time to, "improve myself, personally and professionally." For example, she was exploring coaching methods, improving team support, planning and developing the new regional structure, and was doing so with a renewed sense of purpose derived from her view that, "we are all in this thing together, not just in cricket or the UK but the whole World." On reflection, she stated that there was an opportunity for the women's game to "reset itself" and "solidify its position by preparing effectively for 2021" with The Hundred as a "powerful vehicle for change."

The need to communicate effectively during the pandemic lockdown was an issue that Barrett-Wild felt strongly about, appreciating that the ECB could "help alleviate the potential psychological impact on players by utilising web conferencing more effectively." This had been achieved by hosting three hundred various stakeholders on a zoom conference; the trial was a success and it was intended to be the "first of many going forward" through and beyond the lockdown. Barrett-Wild said, "people are more active in asking questions in this scenario", and while there were technology issues to overcome most people were becoming "increasingly proficient at using this facility."

As head of the Women's Hundred, Barrett-Wild had a critical role to perform in managing the impacts on ECB personal during the lockdown. This was accomplished by identifying the need for clear communication, managing hopes and expectations and developing greater connectivity across the organisation. These professional responsibilities were complemented by personal growth through reflection and resetting.

Heather Knight OBE – The England Captain

Heather Knight captained England to a world championship at the Women's Cricket World Cup in 2017. As a prolific batter she represented Berkshire at county level, the Hobart Hurricanes in the Australian Women's Big Bash and was signed by the London Spirit in The Hundred.

Walker (2020) interviewed Heather Knight for Wisden Cricket Monthly and she acknowledged that the loss of The Hundred had been "quite hard mentally", triggered by the lack of a goal to work towards and the realization that the nomadic existence of a touring, travelling cricketer had come to an abrupt end. Endeavouring to make good use of the lockdown and "avoid the impending doom of being stuck inside," Knight responded to the NHS Volunteer Army campaign to people who were unable to collect their medication or transport themselves to hospital (Grafton-Green and Speare-Cole 2020).

In symmetry with the theme identified by Barrett-Wild's comments regarding having a voice at Board level within the ECB, Knight said, "[I] remember when the women's game was at best an afterthought. If this crisis had struck a few years ago it could have been catastrophic. At least now there is a little space at the table." However, Knight was also pragmatic in acceding to the commercial power of the men's game, "The financial clout always takes precedence, but it's great that we're being involved in conversations and I know the ECB are really keen to make it a gender-neutral sport." Knight expressed concerns for the young cricketers who would be able to compete in The Hundred in 2020, "It was their chance to stake a claim in the England team for the ICC Women's Cricket World Cup in February and March next year" and thus they would be "deprived of that chance, which could cause some negativity."

Knight's interview revealed the dual nature of a team player and that of a team captain, with the different responsibilities and concerns this engenders. Knight expressed empathy for young players, denied the platform to showcase their skills, but understood and accepted the potential vulnerability of the emerging female game. Knight was particularly keen to stress that, having a voice on the ECB was vital for negotiating the role and future of women's cricket during the crisis.

Charlotte "Lottie" Edwards CBE – Director of Women's Cricket Hampshire

Lottie Edwards, having retired from international cricket in 2016, enjoyed an outstanding twenty-year international career, including world titles in one-day and T20 formats and the prestigious 2008 ICC Women's Cricketer of the Year award. In 2018 she was named Hampshire's new director of women's cricket and in 2019 as Head Coach of Southern Brave in The Hundred. Edwards was furloughed by Hampshire County Cricket Club in March 2020. The UK Government initiated the scheme in March 2020 to mitigate the effects of COVID-19, allowing employees to receive 80 percent of their monthly salary up to £2,500 from the Government Treasury.

In the immediate aftermath of the cancelation of The Hundred, Edwards voiced frustration at the loss of exposure for the women's game and identified with her

players who would find it: “difficult to work towards a goal without the certainty that a training regime provides;” and like Heather Knight, felt a sense of “restlessness” triggered by the innate “wanderlust of a cricketer.”

Edwards was able to project ahead with high hopes, saying, “the ECB’s commitment to women’s cricket was robust” and was pleased with the “positive lead taken by the ECB’s Tom Harrison,” although she worried that “cuts might be required to grassroots clubs or facilities.” Edwards said she had, “reached a level of acceptance” of the pandemic that was motivating her positively to make changes in her personal and professional life, the lockdown had inspired Edwards to “develop her coaching knowledge” (with greater levels of preparation) and “I’m trying to communicate more effectively by using technology for remote tactical workshops and virtual fitness sessions.” These had proved popular with players and reduced the need to travel (freeing athletes of time constraints and relieving the burden of travel costs at a time of a loss in incomes). There was a real sense of enlightenment; she was “planning for a new future – looking at life in a different way,” not just in terms of coach-athlete relations but with a broader kindred spirit towards people in her community. Edwards added, “One of the biggest positives, on a personal level, has been connecting with neighbours. I now have ten new friends.” This suggests that the virus was perhaps responsible for people valuing relationships more and thus co-creating social inclusivity.

Marie Kelly - Warwickshire County Cricket Captain

Marie Kelly captained the Warwickshire Bears and was signed by the Birmingham Phoenix in The Hundred. Kelly also represented Loughborough Lightning in The Kia Super League 2017 and is the Women’s & Girl’s Cricket Development Manager for Complete Cricket, a professional cricket coaching company in the West Midlands. She was furloughed in March 2020.

Kelly saw The Hundred as “a pivotal point – a game changer” (based on the parity of branding and equal prize money and the increase in exposure for women’s cricket) but accepted the rescheduling decision was “in the best interests of the wider game.” It was, however, the reaction to the postponement on social media that caused her the most distress, “The negative comments on social media hurt – many girls felt devastated. People not in favour of The Hundred wanted it to be cancelled without any feelings for us and our careers.” The Hundred had received some negative coverage from the male dominated media (Morsehead 2019), which argued that the pre-eminence of Test Match and County Cricket may be diminished (without regard for the need to generate new revenue streams and provide female cricket with a viable commercial competition and a broadcasting launchpad).

Kelly was benefiting from taking some time away from work, which allowed her to experience a “positive mental break” and to be able to “reset” herself. The virtual group training sessions with Warwickshire had been “fun and rewarding” and coupled with creating training drills at home, in the garden with a bowling machine, provided much needed “structure to my daily routine.”

Warwickshire CCC’s provision of a sports psychologist and Sunday training via Zoom were regarded as constructive moves by the county. However, this did not

stop moments of feeling depressed. Kelly, when at a low ebb, would question the “point of things” with the ongoing “uncertainty of the future of cricket and society in general.” The fear that the postponement at some time may become a “permanent cancellation” resonated with her.

Issy Wong - Warwickshire County Cricket Player

Issy Wong was selected to be part of the England Cricket Academy (ECA) squad for 2019-20. At just 18, having recently completed her ‘A’ levels at Shrewsbury Boarding School, she became the youngest player in the Kia Super League in 2019, playing for Southern Vipers.

Once again, the theme of adjusting how training was conducted and disseminated through web platforms was a constructive influence on Wong. Initially, immediately after the lockdown, Wong expressed the feeling of operating in what she called a “bubble of emotional denial.” She was located in a rural boarding school which felt “disconnected from cities” where the virus outbreaks were at their highest and “dislocated from my family members back home.” However, as the enormity of the pandemic dawned, she overcame the “disappointment of not gaining the experience of mixing with seasoned professional international cricketers,” that The Hundred would have provided, by focusing on her training routine. The ECA had provided her with a strength and conditioning programme and Wong said that she wanted to “support and encourage my fellow team members” which reflected a creed of altruism ubiquitous in this cricket community.

Returning to live at her family-home, Wong strove to “replicate the routine that school provided me with” and felt she had been given the “gift of time” that had allowed her the “opportunity to perform a more active role in the community.” For example, she helped, “My mum putting on twice-weekly street Pilates class my street (it’s a cul-de-sac), which was brilliant.” This was further evidence of the forming of socially aware practices that help build civil bonds and bridge divides.

Emergent Themes

The interviews generated a number of nascent theses to explore, such as frustration, the need to attain equitable media exposure, communication processes, resetting of life perspectives and professional goals, the role and re-birth of community, and an “esprit de corps,” feeling a pride and mutual loyalty shared by the members of a group of women across the sport. Emergent themes are identified and catalogued below (Table 2).

Table 2. Emergent Themes

Theme	Sub-Theme	Athlete	Comment
Emotion	Denial	Issy Wong	"...bubble of emotional denial."
	Fear & Anxiety	Beth Barrett-Wild Issy Wong	"...the lack of certainty is one of the biggest problems that people in the sports industry face, I like plans in place, and I feel more anxious as a result." "The fear...of a permanent cancellation"
	Disappointment	Issy Wong Beth Barrett-Wild	"...disappointment of not gaining the experience of mixing with seasoned professional international cricketers." "heart-breaking on many levels."
	Frustration	Lottie Edwards	"difficult to work towards a goal without the certainty that a training regime provides;"
Beneficial Outcomes	Time/Reset	Marie Kelly Issy Wong	"...positive mental break" "gift of time" & "a positive, mental break"
	Technological Dexterity	Lottie Edwards	"...using technology for remote tactical workshops"
	Bonding	Marie Kelly Lottie Edwards Issy Wong	"...fun and rewarding" "...connecting with neighbours. I have ten new friends" "my mum putting on twice-weekly street Pilates classes"
	Self-improvement	Beth Barrett-Wild Charlotte Lottie	"...improve myself, personally and professionally." "...develop my coaching knowledge"
Management	Communication	Lottie Edwards Beth Barrett-Wild	"I'm trying to communicate more effectively by using technology for remote tactical workshops" "The need for clear, concise information..." & ..."Providing emotional support while executing my duties"
	Managing Expectations	Beth Barrett-Wild	"Managing expectations on the delay" "Mentally tough, clinical exercise"

Frustration, particularly in the early stages of the lockdown, was commonplace across the sample. It is an emotion which occurs in situations where a person is blocked from reaching a desired outcome and, typically, the more important the goal, the greater the frustration and resultant anger or loss of confidence (Berger 2005). Accepting the limitations of the sample size, in all of the above cases, the response of the athletes, coaches, and managers indicate a plethora of frustrations. Respondents discussed the frustrations of a postponed tournament, loss of media exposure, and removal of a revenue stream. However, such uncertainties were often offset by the

improved sense of social inclusion, belonging to a community threatened collectively by the pandemic. The interviews exhibited an enhancement of social bonding and an *esprit de corps*; the very act of social distancing became a *raison d'être* for resetting goals, reflecting on life and the desire to build and cherish relationships.

Social Capital and an Esprit de Corps

Social Capital highlights the multifaceted and often subtle, intangible values associated with human social relationships and the groups formed. Social groups share a sense of identity, understanding, norms, values, trust, cooperation, and reciprocity. Social capital is a structural, relational and cognitive measure of the value of these resources and there are two clear distinctive variations: bonding capital is exclusive and reinforces identity and homogenous groups, whereas bridging capital is inclusive and outward looking, embracing people across diverse social or cultural divides (Putnam 2000). The notion of sport as a conduit for social capital provides a strategic tool for Government to use to implement social policy agendas (Jarvie 2006, Coalter 2007, Hoye and Hoye 2008, Nicholson and Hoye 2008).

In the U.K., the Government Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is the main policy agency for sport across the country and funding source for Sport England. Social development in sport is a key aspiration of the DCMS, advocating that sport is one of the best ways of breaking down barriers in our society and must be used to its full potential (Nicholson and Hoye 2008). The social policy outcomes advocated by the DCMS, rationalized through the ethos of sport for development, are laudable (positioning stronger communities as a curative for anti-social behaviour), they often neglect the social interactions constructed internally within the sport (Sport England 2004). Putnam (2000, p. 23) credited Xavier de Souza Briggs with the concept that bonding social capital was “good for getting by,” but bridging social capital is for “getting ahead.” As many people will relate to, one of the effects of the pandemic was the need to simply “get by” in extraordinary circumstances and thus it can be argued that the act of bonding within the women’s cricket milieu was not only triggered by the lockdown but became the unconscious currency for overcoming frustration, loneliness, sadness and anxiety. During this extended period of isolation from one’s teammates, the cohesiveness of the unit was tested. Barrett-Wild felt the obligation to “connect efficiently and with transparency,” Lottie Edwards to provide “continuity” through on-line training, Kelly and Wong to encourage “togetherness” as they trained. Thus, there was evidence that the characteristic of vertical segmentation (hierarchies within an organization) was been bridged through the exposure of administrators, coaches, and players to greater and more varied levels of communication, which in turn created trust.

Conclusion

The women in this study all recognized, at different levels, that the postponement of The Hundred was frustrating but necessary and how they collectively accepted that reality aroused a kindred spirit – an *esprit de corps* and a desire to help and exchange kindness. The pandemic transcended their normal experiences and their

conventional circumstances - how could a senior policy executive understand the physical pains athletes endure, or conversely how could an athlete relate to the pressure a manager agonizes over in canceling contracts? The differential of status within an organization can undermine social capital, but Halpern (2005) argued that having the same experience facilitates mutual respect; the interviewees took refuge in the solidarity generated by the global reach of the pandemic – emotions such as frustration were shared due to the commonality of cause.

The onset of the virus came at a critical time for the development of the women's game in the U.K. The consensus that, although it was an unwelcome obstacle toward a more gender balanced future, it was not as ruinous as it could have been had it occurred earlier in the sport's lifecycle. There were indications that the ECB had, with the commitment to their 2019 Inspiring Generations strategy, cultivated the transformational ethos of a purpose-led business. The core of any purpose-led organisation is to recognize why it exists (Bulgarella 2018). In the case of the ECB, its purpose as a national governing body is to fulfil a need in society: to grow and improve the game through participation and connecting communities (ECB Careers 2020). The ECB's simultaneous approach to The Hundred reflected this; it was revenue driven but had a purpose beyond profit (a commitment to provide the resources for change not just within the female game but across the demographics of the cricket community).

The pandemic caused a paradoxical impact: frustration at a lost opportunity, yet providing time to reset, reflect, and review. This study identifies a pre-existent, systemic environment strategically positioned to take advantage of this pause and draw on the newly acquired social bonding developed in lockdown. There is an absence of tangible measures to assess the outcomes of connecting sport and social capital (Nicholson and Hoyer 2008). However, this study identifies a willingness to embrace the positives of the new communities developed during the COVID-19 pandemic and operationalize them which, as a blueprint for the evolution of women's cricket, could be truly transformational.

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