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Sports as a context in strategy and innovation research: promises, challenges, and broader implications

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, sports have increasingly been used as a context for research in various fields of management and organisational studies, offering granular insights into performance determinants and organisational dynamics. Despite its promise, using sports data presents challenges, including concerns over generalisability to non-sport contexts, ethical issues related to personal data usage, risks of reinforcing bias, and usefulness in fields such as innovation. This article critically examines these controversies, emphasising the need to balance generalisability, precision, and realism in research design. Building on discussions from the DRUID 2024 Conference, we propose guidelines for leveraging sports contexts to develop theories, inform teaching, and address societal and policy impacts. By treating sports data as a deliberate research choice, we aim to clarify when and how it can meaningfully contribute to advancing knowledge in strategy and innovation.

KEYWORDS

Sports as a context; sports data; research methods; strategy; innovation

JEL CLASSIFICATION

M10; C80; Z20

1. Introduction

The abundant availability of granular sports data has frequently been argued to offer valuable insights for business and management (Fonti, Ross, and Aversa 2023), assuming that the dynamics observed within sports can be effectively translated to broader business contexts. Given the significance of this topic, the DRUID conference on 15 June 2024, hosted a stimulating debate around the statement: 'Research to inform strategy and innovation decisions has significantly overstated the value of sports as a context.' The debate featured Professors Conti (IE University), Grimpe (Copenhagen Business School), Operti (ESSEC), and Ross (Imperial College London).[1] Against the background of substantially increased scholarly use of sports data in recent decades, Conti and Grimpe argued that the value of sports as a research context has indeed been overstated, while Operti and Ross countered, highlighting the advantages sports data can offer for theory development and empirical testing.

First, sports provide clean structured environments with well-defined rules and incentives, producing data that are often unavailable in traditional business contexts (Palacios-Huerta 2023). Second, they often involve natural or quasi-experimental conditions – such as exogenous rule changes and performance shocks – that allow for stronger causal inference than is typically possible in more complex organisational settings (Aversa and Guillotin 2018). These advantages have made sports a valuable domain for developing and testing theories in strategy and innovation. For instance, research using sports data has contributed to the advancement of the resource-based view (e.g. Berman, Down, and Hill 2002; Kim and Makadok 2023), explored the dynamics of status and reputation (e.g. Castellucci and Ertug 2010), and revealed patterns in rivalry and competitive behaviour (e.g. Kilduff, Elfenbein, and Staw 2010; Ross and Sharapov 2015). In innovation studies, sports data have provided insights into technological responses to regulatory changes (Aversa and Guillotin 2018), R&D team composition (Hoisl, Gruber, and Conti 2017), and user innovation (von Hippel and Kaulartz 2021). Furthermore, sports settings have been instrumental in studying industry

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[1]The video of the DRUID 24 debate on the use of sports data can be accessed here: https://druid.dk/druid-debates/.

emergence, user entrepreneurship (Aversa, Furnari, and Jenkins 2022), and technology trajectories (Jenkins and Floyd 2001).

However, despite these contributions, critics have raised important concerns about the limitations of sports as a research context. A key critique is that insights drawn from sports data may not easily translate to broader business contexts (Katz 2001; see; Palacios-Huerta 2023, for an overview). Critics argue that the controlled environments typical of sports do not capture the full complexity of business operations, potentially leading to oversimplifications (Vermeulen 2016). As a result, the relevance and applicability of insights derived from sports settings to non-sport contexts are often questioned.

This article synthesises the arguments presented during the debate, offering a balanced perspective on the value of sports as a research context, particularly in the fields of strategy and innovation. While the proportion of strategy and innovation papers utilising sports data remains relatively small – around 1%, compared to 10% for papers using patent data – sports contexts have proven to offer unique strengths in theory development and empirical validation. The core message of this review is that researchers and educators can derive value from sports data to inform strategy and innovation. However, maximising this potential is contingent on the types of research questions scholars pursue, and provided that sports data are complemented with evidence from other complementary settings within the same study or across papers within a research program (Aime et al. 2010; Lampronti, Operti, and Sgourev 2024). Moreover, researchers must be cautious about generalising insights from sports to business contexts without carefully considering the contextual differences.

2. Has research to inform strategy and innovation decisions significantly overstated the value of sports as a context? Arguments and counterarguments

In this section, we summarise the key arguments raised by Conti and Grimpe regarding the statement, 'Research to inform strategy and innovation decisions has significantly overstated the value of sports as a context' as well as the counterarguments provided by Operti and Ross. In general, the critique focused on the generalisability and relevance of results obtained from analysing sports data for strategy and innovation. In contrast, the counterarguments highlighted that sports environments share more similarities with the strategic process of creating and commercialising innovations than typically expected.

2.1. Arguments

2.1.1. Limited relevance of sports data for strategy and innovation research

Data derived from sports contexts offer limited utility compared to other datasets, such as patent data. Indeed, only a small percentage of strategy and innovation studies rely on sports data. Surveys of researchers using sports data, conducted at a 2020 and 2024 conference on sports data and management theory, explored the potential of applying sports data across Academy of Management divisions (Figure 1). While most participants consistently named the Strategy and Organisation and Management Theory divisions as salient areas for research using sports data, the Entrepreneurship and Technology and Innovation Management divisions have so far played a more peripheral role. Among many others, areas for sports data application include status and reputation (e.g. Kim and King 2014), competition and rivalry (e.g. Kilduff, Elfenbein, and Staw 2010), risk-taking (e.g. Bothner, Kim, and Smith 2012), or motivation (e.g. Day, Gordon, and Fink 2012), as well as issues related to diversity and inclusion (e.g. Pope, Price, and Wolfers 2018), as evidenced by growing interest among members of the Gender and Diversity in Organisations division, but few topics in entrepreneurship and innovation research.

While this might suggest that sports data have not been overused in strategy and innovation research, their limited adoption is likely not coincidental. Other data sources, like patents, often provide richer insights into the innovation process. These insights include the inputs required for innovation and the spillover effects that innovations generate. For example, Scotchmer (1991) and Galasso and Schankerman (2015) have shown how innovations build upon existing knowledge and how patent systems might hinder this cumulative innovation process when inappropriately used. Similarly, seminal studies by Jaffe, Trajtenberg, and Fogarty (2000), Henderson, Jaffe, and Trajtenberg (2005), and Thompson and Fox-Kean

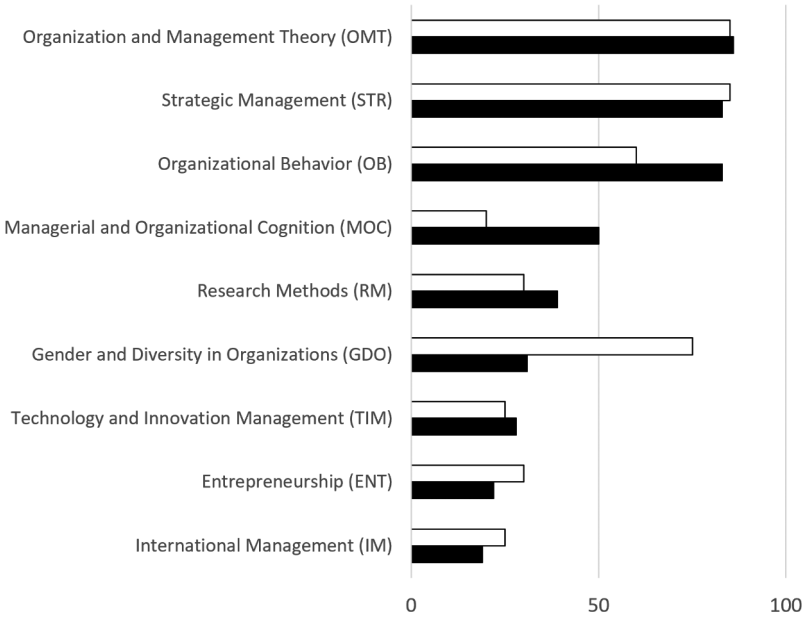

Figure 1. Potential areas for research using sports data across AOM divisions (survey responses at a conference on using sports data to advance management theory; in %; 2020 – black; 2024 – white).

(2005) highlight how R&D spillover effects spread geographically, offering broader insights than sports data typically afford.

2.1.2. Sports contexts as sources of innovation

One key source of innovation in sports comes from lead users – athletes and sports enthusiasts. For example, snow sports enthusiasts played a crucial role in the development of new equipment such as monoskis and snowboards, innovations that were eventually commercialised and helped create new industries. While lead users play a significant role in driving innovations in the sports industry (Von Hippel, 1986), they represent just one of the many drivers of innovation. Several other major sources of innovation – often more influential at a societal or industrial scale – are less observable in sports settings, making them more suitable for study in other domains. For instance, innovations often arise as a result of government incentives. Governments frequently steer innovative efforts to achieve certain objectives. The U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) is a case in point as it fostered the embryonic field of computer science by establishing academic 'centers of excellence' (Mowery 2009; Mowery and Langlois 1996).

External events like wars, diseases, and economic recessions have also historically driven transformative innovations. Conti and Roche (2021) and Nanda and Rhodes-Kropf (2013) have shown that economic downturns push individuals to create new ventures out of necessity and some of these ventures might lead to new innovations. Similarly, the COVID-19 Pandemic has accelerated mRNA vaccine research, with government agencies like the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the US playing a pivotal role in spurring progress in this field (Sampat and Shadlen 2021). Competitive dynamics are an additional important source of innovation. Firms constantly innovate to gain or protect their competitive advantage. For example, Apple's decision to design custom A-series processors for its devices optimised performance and power efficiency while integrating seamlessly with its ecosystem, creating a significant competitive edge. In that sense, while there is innovation in sports, it seems that most significant innovations originated from other sources.

2.1.3. Elite focus

Sports represent a niche setting that often caters to specific groups, such as elite athletes, rather than the broader population. Innovations outside sports, such as Excel worksheets, customer relationship management systems (CRMs), Zoom, and Slack have delivered transformative productivity gains for the average

user – gains largely absent in sports-driven innovation. Not only do innovations in sports often aim to enhance the performance of elite athletes, with limited applicability to the average person, but in some cases, these innovations can even be harmful to the typical user. For example, while Gatorade is designed to support high-performance athletes, its widespread consumption can lead to negative health effects, such as an increased risk of obesity, for the average sports enthusiast.

Relatedly, sports contexts have been consistently marked by gender imbalance and limited inclusiveness, particularly in media representation, governance, and resource allocation (e.g. Fink 2015). Strategy and innovation research drawing on sports data tends to focus on male-dominated domains, reducing the generalisability and inclusivity of the generated research insights.

2.1.4. The role of rules, regulation and regulatory shifts

Sports are governed by strict rules that limit the scope for innovation. For example, tennis regulations prescribe the size and tension of racket strings, restricting the potential for radical technological advancements. In many cases, rule-breaking innovations are sanctioned, deterring athletes from pursuing groundbreaking changes. By contrast, industries such as artificial intelligence (AI) push the boundaries of innovation, compelling policymakers to rethink regulatory frameworks. The European Commission's efforts to govern AI exemplify how breakthrough innovations reshape regulatory environments to ensure safe and reliable development. This dynamic stands in stark contrast to the relatively static regulatory frameworks in sports.

Another important consideration is that sports data are often praised for their ability to enable causal analysis, largely due to frequent quasi-exogenous regulatory changes that can be leveraged in ad hoc econometric models (Fonti, Ross, and Aversa 2023). However, these regulatory changes are frequently irrelevant outside the context of sports. For instance, modifications to doping regulations in tennis have little relevance for broader inquiries in strategy and innovation.

2.1.5. Appropriability regimes

Many sports exhibit a weak appropriability regime, where innovations by athletes can be easily observed and copied by competitors. For instance, a novel product or strategy can be quickly adopted by other athletes, eroding the innovator's competitive edge. This may discourage long-term investment in innovation or the introduction of radical new innovations.

Outside of sports, the ability of firms to capture the returns from their innovations varies widely. In sectors like pharmaceuticals, for instance, drugs – especially biologic-based products – are difficult to reverse-engineer and replicate, making it harder for generic producers to copy them (Branstetter, Chatterjee, and Higgins 2022).

2.1.6. Competitive dynamics

Sports are often characterised as environments where 'the winners take it all.' Success in sports typically depends on individual or team performance, with limited spillover benefits to competitors. This dynamic contrasts sharply with innovation ecosystems in high-tech sectors, where the value of an innovation is frequently intertwined with complementary innovations. Firms in these sectors benefit not only from their own breakthroughs but also from those introduced by others, as the innovation process is often cumulative. For example, Green and Scotchmer (1995) and Galasso and Schankerman (2015) document how innovation value is amplified through synergies with prior related advancements. Relatedly, Olsen, Sofka, and Grimpe (2016) and Grimpe and Sofka (2016) highlight the importance of collaboration for innovation, suggesting that partnerships but also larger consortia are fundamental drivers of innovation.

This interplay is particularly evident in open contexts, such as open-source platforms like GitHub. Here, innovations build on the contributions of others, creating a shared foundation for further technological progress (Conti, Peukert, and Roche forthcoming). The open-source model exemplifies how collective efforts can drive significant advancements, a dynamic largely absent in the competitive, winner-takes-all nature of sports.

Platform ecosystems, which are increasingly dominant business models in high-tech industries, further highlight the collaborative dynamics of innovation. In these ecosystems, developers of new products benefit from network effects, where the value of a product or service increases as more users or complementary

products join the platform. As a result, developers at least partially gain from innovations introduced by competitors and from the demand generated by these innovations (Conti and Santaló 2023; Jacobides, Cennamo, and Gawer 2018).

In conclusion, arguments for the overstated value of sports as a research context in strategy and innovation highlighted in particular the niche applicability of sports. In contrast, broader contexts such as high-tech industries, open-source ecosystems, and government-driven innovation initiatives might yield deeper and more generalisable insights.

2.2. Counterarguments

2.2.1. Sports contexts are relevant but underutilized in strategy and innovation research

A central concern behind the motion is whether sports have received disproportionate attention in strategy and innovation studies. However, the empirical evidence does not support this view. Over the past 44 years, only 176 articles have used sports to address strategy and innovation questions contexts across leading management journals. The proportion remains marginal—1.99% in the Academy of Management Journal and just 0.69% in the Strategic Management Journal – indicating that sports-based research occupies a relatively small niche. Moreover, sports-based studies have typically been explicit about their boundary conditions. Disciplines such as economics, psychology, and organisational behaviour have long used sports data to examine market dynamics, leadership, and team performance (Fonti, Ross, and Aversa 2023). To dismiss this body of work as excessively risky, overlooking its methodological contributions and empirical rigour, therefore seems inappropriate.

Another common critique of sports research is that its insights are exaggerated when applied to management practice and teaching. However, the evidence suggests otherwise. Data from case repositories and practitioner journals indicate limited use of sports as a focal context. For example, only 2.56% of cases in the European Case Clearing House (ECCH) repository involve sports-related topics. Similarly, Harvard Business Review, California Management Review, and MIT Sloan Management Review publish very few sports-based articles (ranging from 0.26% to 0.70%). These figures suggest that sports insights are not disproportionately pushed onto decision-makers.

2.2.2. Relevance to innovation research

Sports data are indeed appropriate for examining specific strategy questions in areas like competitive dynamics (e.g. Andrevski et al. 2021; Hallila, Frankort, and Aversa 2024; Ross and Sharapov 2015) and strategic human capital (e.g. Grohsjean, Dokko, and Yang 2025), rather than large-scale innovation initiatives or crisis responses. However, this does not preclude their relevance to broader innovation research. There is growing evidence of innovations, start-ups, or industries born out of sports contexts (Aversa, Furnari, and Jenkins 2022).

The relevance of sports as an innovation ground extends to contexts such as energy-efficient technologies and adaptive equipment for athletes with disabilities that later reach mainstream markets. Successful inventions in high-performance sports may 'trickle down' into lower-tier leagues, other sports, or non-sport domains (e.g. Cleveland-Peck 2024; Motortrend 2024; Reuters 2013). Sports can sometimes intersect with broader innovation processes: governments and corporations have occasionally used sports initiatives to support innovation in areas like materials science, sustainability, and public health.

2.2.3. Sports provide broad-based and inclusive Opportunities for research

Sports data often emphasise elite athletes and the top of the performance distribution. This focus may appear narrow, but it reflects a broader pattern found in several domains where performance is heavily skewed. Outliers can offer theoretical insights that are difficult to observe in more typical cases. As Powell (2003), p. 83, notes, 'The simple fact is that nothing unusual is happening in the performance of most industries. The action is in the extreme cases, and that is where strategy theories add their value.' Similarly, Bliese et al. (2024) argue that studying outliers can help surface mechanisms that might otherwise remain hidden.

At the same time, sports contexts can help capture broader trends. Some settings offer longitudinal data across youth, amateur, and professional levels (Palacios-Huerta 2023), including demographic, behavioural,

and performance-related variables that allow for studying team composition, mobility, and career progression over time. The structured and recurring nature of sports seasons enables the analysis of time-varying behaviours like learning and adaptation (Ross and Sharapov 2015). While the public availability of many datasets enhances transparency and replicability, the emphasis on measurable performance outcomes may still constrain the range of research questions that can be explored (Palacios-Huerta 2023).

Concerns about elitism in sports sometimes extend to issues of inclusivity, given the historical underrepresentation of minorities and the male dominance in many domains. While this critique is not without merit, sports have also served as platforms for inclusion and social progress. Serena Williams' advocacy for gender equity in tennis, leading to equal prize money at major tournaments, is one prominent example. Broader initiatives, such as the rise of women's soccer leagues, can support research on equity and diversity.

2.2.4. Rules, regulations, and regulatory shifts

While sports are governed by strict formal rules, these structures do not always constrain innovation. Moreover, when regulatory shifts occur, they create exogenous shocks that offer researchers quasi-experimental conditions for analysing decision-making and strategic behaviour. For example, Gasparetto, Loktionov, and Hochman (2023) use the introduction of VAR technology in soccer to study changes in referees' biases for home teams.

The link between regulation and innovation is not necessarily negative. In certain settings – such as green technologies – regulatory pressure can drive innovation (Wang, Cho, and Scheller-Wolf 2021). Sociological work similarly shows that rule-bending and reinterpretation can foster innovation (Merton, 1938). In sports, design rules define constraints but also stimulate creativity, prompting engineers and athletes to seek novel solutions. A striking example is Emirates Team New Zealand's invention of foiling in the America's Cup, developed after analysing design rules for potential loopholes. This innovation reshaped yacht racing and spurred broader technological change (ETNZ 2019). Under specific conditions, sports offer a setting to examine how institutional constraints can fuel innovation.

2.2.5. Appropriability regimes

Sports may not be ideal for studying traditional innovation appropriability mechanisms like patents, but they provide a potential setting for examining other isolating mechanisms, such as secrecy (de Werra 2010) or design isolating mechanisms (Proboat 2024; Sharapov and MacAulay 2022), open innovation, knowledge diffusion, and community-driven strategy. Formula 1 teams, for example, develop technologies in private and withhold details until regulations require disclosure – mirroring trade secrecy and IP strategies in high-tech industries. Events like the Palio di Siena involve hidden alliances and covert tactics that keep competition under control (Sgourev and Operti 2019) and improve performance in competition (Lampronti, Operti, and Sgourev 2024). In baseball, public access to Statcast data has enabled teams, analysts, and third parties to build advanced models that inform performance and recruitment decisions. GPS and race data allow teams to study pacing, positioning, and rival strategies. For example, SailGP uses the Oracle Cloud Infrastructure (OCI) to collect and share more than 300,000 data points per second in real-time from its F50 racing catamarans with all competing teams. Beyond enhancing safety by identifying anomalies and preventing damage, the data sharing enables teams to compare performance, provide real-time insights for decisions during races, and input for learning and training simulations between races (SailGP, 2023). Similarly, the 37th America's Cup introduced a joint reconnaissance program to replace costly spying practices. Recon units gathered and shared data, imagery, and videos of new boat designs, promoting transparency and enabling both teams and fans to engage in technical discussions (Sail-World 2022). These initiatives illustrate how shared data in sports can enhance strategic decision-making and foster learning and community engagement.

2.2.6. Competitive dynamics

While sports are often portrayed as purely 'winner-takes-all' arenas where competition prevails, this view oversimplifies the strategic and structural dynamics at play. Research shows that performance distributions in business and sports are strikingly similar (Powell 2003), both following heavy-tailed, power-law patterns where a few actors achieve sustained success due to superior capabilities, decision-making, and resource deployment. This challenges the idea that sports are categorically different from business. There is also

growing research on the effect of losing competitions, and how it affects strategic decisions (Durand, Piezunka, and Reineke 2025; Moliterno and Wiersema 2007), shifting the discourse away from an exclusive focus on winning and informing strategy research on lower-tier competition in non-sport domains (Jeon, Bundy, and Shen 2025).

Contrary to widespread beliefs, cooperative behaviour is fundamental to many sporting contexts. Within-team collaboration is obvious, but even across teams, examples of co-opetition – collaboration among competitors – are common. Professional cycling teams coordinate temporarily to share pacing responsibilities, while Formula 1 teams engage in joint lobbying efforts and technical partnerships, much like firms in strategic alliances (Kakkar et al. 2020; Clough and Piezunka 2020). And sailing teams sell design packages to their competitors (Sailing World 2023) and collaborate with other teams from other sports disciplines to find sources of performance enhancement (Stuff 2024).

Taken together, the counterarguments suggest that sports may provide a 'living laboratory' for strategy and innovation research due to their rich data, competitive dynamics, and strategic decision-making processes. Beyond their methodological advantages, sports contexts also present parallels to corporate environments.

3. Finding a common ground

The preceding discussion highlights disagreements over the value and limitations of sports as a research context in strategy and innovation, reflecting broader divergences in methodological preferences and disciplinary traditions. As a result, establishing a common position among scholars from opposite sides of the aisle is challenging, and discussions risk becoming polarised. Rather than amplifying disagreements over specific critiques, we suggest redirecting the debate towards identifying shared principles that can help guide researchers' methodological choices. Specifically, we propose viewing the use of sports data not as a categorical stance but as a context-dependent research design choice – shaped by the nature of the research question, disciplinary expectations, and empirical constraints.

To support this approach, we outline two balancing principles: the need for knowledge accumulation and the importance of thoughtful contextualisation and boundary setting. These principles acknowledge that no single method can simultaneously optimise realism (observing natural behaviour), precision (controlled measures and manipulations), and generalisability (applicability across settings). As McGrath (1982) observed, trade-offs are inevitable in research design. Sports data – which combine some of the control and structure found in experimental settings with aspects of real-world complexity (Palacios-Huerta 2023) – may bring value when researchers lack access to other longitudinal, behavioural, or performance-related data. However, their applicability is not universal. The use of sports contexts should be guided by a clear understanding of their strengths and limitations, not merely by convenience or data availability.

Ultimately, the decision to use sports contexts in strategy and innovation research comes down to evaluating trade-offs. Just as researchers carefully weigh the benefits and limitations of laboratory experiments (Levitt and List 2007), or patent data to trace innovation patterns (Grimpe and Sofka 2016; Savage et al. 2020), researchers must consider whether such contexts meaningfully contribute to knowledge accumulation or offer distinctive advantages for specific questions. Overstated claims or weak contextualisation have likely fuelled scepticism about sports-based research. A more transparent and disciplined evaluation of when and how sports data can be usefully deployed is essential to integrate sports-based studies within a broader research agenda in strategy and innovation.

3.1. Knowledge accumulation: when can sports contexts contribute to theory building, testing, or discovery?

Many researchers acknowledge the growing availability of high-quality sports data but admit they 'simply don't like sports data.' While such preferences are understandable, advancing knowledge accumulation in management research requires moving beyond personal inclinations and towards clearer evaluative standards. The use of sports data should be driven by methodological considerations, not by personal preferences or the convenience of data availability. For researchers, this means assessing whether sports

data offer genuine analytic leverage for the theory under investigation. For reviewers and readers, it means evaluating the fit between data, method, and theoretical contribution.

Too often, articles rely on sports data as a one-off empirical setting for theory extension or testing, without establishing links to other contexts or building cumulative insight. Yet, the focus must transition from isolated studies to fostering knowledge accumulation *across* studies and contexts within the field. This integration, which fosters paradigm validation or falsification, can be achieved in three ways. First, researchers can combine sports and other organisational contexts in one study (e.g. Lampronti, Operti, and Sgourev 2024; Ong and Reynolds 2024), examine how sports activity shapes decision-making in other industries (e.g. Biggerstaff, Campbell, and Goldie 2024), or engage in replications of existing sport studies (e.g. Ertug and Maoret 2020; Teeselink, van den Assem, and van Dolder 2023). Second, scholars may use sport analogies and metaphors as conceptual lenses to connect work on shared phenomena. For example, the sailing metaphor in economics (Cabral 2002; Dixit and Nalebuff 1991) and in strategy (Ross and Sharapov 2015; Sharapov and Ross 2023) has helped explore how leaders adapt by imitating competitors – a topic explored through formal modelling, empirical studies, and computational simulations. Third, researchers can pursue knowledge trajectories by combining several contexts and methods across papers. For example, research programs on competition and imitation have leveraged sports data to develop theory, test it in non-sports contexts, and integrate insights in broader reviews (e.g. Posen et al. 2023; Ross et al. 2019).

Beyond theory testing and extension, sports can also contribute to theory discovery. Simon (1999) highlighted the discipline's long-standing emphasis on verification at the expense of discovery and used chess to uncover mechanisms of bounded rationality. Building on this tradition, recent work has explored how chess and artificial intelligence inform research on strategic decision-making and learning (Gaessler and Piezunka 2023). Reflecting this growing interest, Academy of Management Discoveries has issued a call encouraging the use of sports contexts to identify novel patterns and theoretical puzzles (Moliterno et al. 2021). However, discovery-oriented work requires particular care in how findings are communicated and interpreted. Careful reporting is essential to clarify how future research can build on initial exploratory findings. As King (2023), p. 206, argues, the reporting style – whether 'hourglass,' 'vase,' or 'funnel' – shapes how findings are received and built upon. While the 'hourglass' format remains dominant in empirical sports research, alternative formats may better suit exploratory studies that require replication or extension in different contexts. Without such reflection, even promising discoveries may appear anecdotal or over-claimed, limiting their contribution to theory development and idea generation.

3.2. Contextualizing: what is specific about the setting, and how should results be interpreted and generalized?

Contextualisation is essential to ensure that insights derived from sports settings are interpreted with appropriate caution and clarity. Researchers in strategy and innovation must avoid projecting assumptions and generalisations from one context onto another, particularly when translating findings from sports to business. As Bamberger (2008) warns, insufficient attention to context risks overgeneralisation and limits theoretical refinement. Pillai, Goldfarb, and Kirsch (2024) further emphasise that most research is retrospective, meaning scholars analyse decisions using information not available to actors at the time. This creates a gap between how decisions were made by actors and how they are later interpreted by researchers, making contextual awareness all the more important.

To address this, researchers should assess contextual variables that shape decision-making. These include: (a) expectations of others' behaviour, (b) access to information and technologies, (c) institutional norms, (d) industry structure, and (e) cultural narratives (Bamberger 2008; Pillai, Goldfarb, and Kirsch 2024). Along these dimensions, some sports may resemble domains like investment banking or academia, where performance is individually measured and reputational rivalry is salient. For example, Sgourev and Operti's (2019) study of jockey mobility in the Palio di Siena reveals patterns relevant to mobile talent markets, where individuals seek visibility and flexible affiliation (Operti, Sgourev, and Lampronti 2021). However, these findings are less applicable to firm-specific performance environments (Akinsanmi Oyedeji and Coff 2024) or settings governed by strong informal norms of loyalty (Godart and Mears 2022).

Applying sport-based findings without considering such contextual variation risks drawing conclusions that are either misleading or overstated.

Contextualisation also helps avoid simplistic narratives that liken business leadership to coaching or athletic success. These accounts, often found in popular business literature, tend to strip strategy of complexity and reduce research to metaphorical comparison. A more grounded approach treats context as a core part of research design, requiring scholars to make explicit how findings relate to broader theory and how claims are bounded. As King (2023) notes, clear, transparent reporting helps audiences understand how context shapes results and when generalisation is appropriate. This is particularly important for sports-based research, where novelty can draw attention, but researchers need to engage with contextual features.

4. Conclusion: rethinking the use of sport contexts in strategy and innovation

Following the principles outlined above, researchers can pursue more rigorous and context-sensitive work using sports data, leading to a more responsible application of sport-derived insights in teaching, industry, and society. In line with Wickert et al. (2021), we reflect below on potential avenues for impact in *educational, practical, and policy and societal domains*.

Sports represent a major global industry – valued at over $50 billion – and a key contributor to education and local economies, with college athletics alone accounting for $18.9 billion annually (Statista 2021). Institutional interest is growing: in 2024, JPMorgan established a 'dedicated sports investment banking team' (Reuters 2024), while tech development is helping unlock growth potential in emerging markets such as India (Deloitte/Google 2024). Business schools increasingly respond by creating specialised curricula. Yet this visibility carries risks. The stardom of athletes and managers in sports organisations risk creating generalisations in the classroom from single-sport figures ($N = 1$), especially when these share the obvious (e.g. Magic Johnson's lessons on success in manufacturing; Ballantyne 2022) or are bad examples or poor role-model choices (e.g. as athletes that later faced criminal investigations, such as Franz Beckenbauer in football).

Still, sports can support experiential and case-based learning when integrated with care. Athlete guest speakers can boost student engagement, but risk diluting analytical focus unless integrated into the curriculum with clearly defined learning goals. Educators should anchor discussions to ensure the guest speakers' insights are effectively linked to theory, taught frameworks, and learning objectives. They should also align sports examples with session objectives, avoiding selections based on personal interests or convenience. Similarly, competition strategies can draw on diverse sports while emphasising collaboration, promoting inclusivity, and avoiding overreliance on male-dominated or region-specific sports – a concern raised during the DRUID debate.

Specific examples highlight the potential of sports as contexts for fostering experiential teaching. Pairing (former) athletes with non-sports students in specialised programs or courses, such as Harvard's crossover initiative, can provide a more balanced perspective and strengthen connections between universities and local professional communities. An approach highlighted during the Q&A part of the DRUID debate entails leveraging sports contexts to bring students closer to real decision-making. For example, one of the debaters has used the sports context to bring strategy research insights into practice based on a student-led initiative (Ravi 2023). This initiative was built on research into 'simple rules' and decision heuristics for strategic decision-making under uncertainty (e.g. Reb, Luan, and Gigerenzer 2024; Vuori et al. 2024). Linking these ideas to prior work on imitation strategies in competitive environments using sailing data (e.g. Ross and Sharapov 2015), students on sailing boats applied a toolbox of alternative decision rules to navigate competitive scenarios. A pre-workshop introduced theoretical frameworks, their business applications, and context-specific videos to familiarise students with the challenges. On the water and during post-discussions, students explored the fit between decision rules and environmental conditions, offering a deeper understanding of simple rules and strategy in uncertain environments.

Regarding the *practical* impact of research insights, many businesses and executives face time constraints and are drawn to quick lessons on career success. This demand helps explain the prevalence of book covers, articles, and practitioner-oriented outlets that promise 'how to be successful.' Insights from sports contexts are *particularly* prone to oversimplification due to the celebrity status of athletes or the hype of certain sports narratives. This creates a market for entertaining yet shallow stories with limited practical value. As

a recent critique during the Paris Olympics 2024 in the Economist (2024) observed: While the comparison between sports and business can trigger some interesting questions, the reason why people listen to podcasts and go to speaker events by sports stars is that ' . . . [t]hey want a simple formula for success. And they want to hear what it is like to run faster, jump higher and vault better than anyone else.'

Yet, as scholars, there is room for more thoughtful translations of insights from sports contexts into management practice. Research using sports data should be clearly positioned in relation to established management practices and frameworks and highlight whether (and how) it brings a unique contribution. Additionally, since practitioners are unlikely to engage directly with academic papers, especially those in a sports context, scholars must increase efforts to disseminate findings in more accessible formats that favour comparison across contexts. This could include becoming part of review articles, which are more widely read and curated around a broader topic, as well as translating research insights into business cases, a university blog, and a practitioner journal. Importantly, these outputs should offer practical guidance on implementing specific ideas in non-sport contexts (e.g. metrics, processes, and stakeholders involved), emphasising why and when a specific insight does work and when it doesn't, depending on contextual factors. Being explicit about boundary conditions helps business practitioners avoid the generic, and often misleading, conclusions in 'airport books.'

Finally, sports may play an important societal role, supporting public health, shaping values, fostering inter-generational connections, engaging volunteers, and serving as a platform for innovations that often diffuse from beachhead segments in sports into broader markets. Sports-based research in strategy and innovation can enhance *policy and societal impact* by studying sports contexts relevant to pressing global challenges, such as those outlined in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, competitions like SailGP or local historical races, which combine heterogeneous resource pools, team dynamics, and include women in leadership roles, help address challenges like Gender Equality (Goal 5) and Reduced Inequality (Goal 10). Similarly, research on innovations in adaptive sports technology, as showcased in the Paralympics, can shed light on accessibility for individuals with disabilities. eSports and adaptive sports can further illustrate how technology and inclusivity in sports can inform policy and business practices in non-sports sectors. Other emerging topics of interest for strategy and innovation studies include the strategic use of technological advancements in sports, the impact of digitalisation on competitive strategies, and the integration of artificial intelligence in game strategies. In that sense, it seems that the thoughtful application of sports data may hold the potential for contributions to the innovation literature,

Table 1. Checklist for authors, evaluators and readers of research based on sport contexts.

1. Research Fit and Knowledge Accumulation
- Does the sports setting illuminate a theoretical mechanism that would be hard to observe elsewhere?
- Has the author justified trade-offs in realism (e.g. observing natural behaviour), precision (e.g. controlled measures), and generalisability (e.g. applicability across settings), as discussed in McGrath (1982)?
- Does the work connect to prior studies – through replication, cross-context comparison, or synthesis – rather than remaining a one-off illustration? Does the combination of studies and papers move forward a specific line of research?
- Are effect sizes and boundary conditions reported so that others can cumulate or falsify the findings?

2. Research Contextualization
- Are contextual factors – expectations of others, information access, institutional rules, industry structure, and cultural narratives – explicitly described?
- Does the author explain where the sports setting resembles and diverges from target business domains (e.g. industry, academia)?
- Are claims about external validity realistic? Does the paper avoid simplistic sport-to-business metaphors or translations?
- Is the reporting style (hourglass, vase, funnel) suited to the study's confirmatory vs. exploratory goals (King 2023)?

3. Educational use
- Are sports cases or guest speakers tied to clear learning objectives, frameworks, and assessment criteria?
- Does the material draw on diverse sports to avoid gender, regional, or cultural bias?
- Are students prompted to critique the limits of sports analogies before generalising to other settings?
- If experiential activities are used (e.g. sport simulations), are pre-briefs and de-briefs anchored in theory, not just storytelling?

4. Managerial & Practitioner Relevance
- Are the findings suitable for dissemination in practitioner-oriented outlets (cases, blogs, industry magazines), not just academic journals?
- When translating findings into actionable guidance (metrics, processes, contingencies) are contextual differences properly taken into account?
- Are the limits of transferability spelled out to help managers avoid 'one-size-fits-all' takeaways?
- Are celebrity anecdotes tempered with data so lessons are evidence-based rather than inspirational sound bites?

5. Societal & Policy impact
- Does the paper *plausibly* link its findings to policy goals (e.g. SDGs) without overstating reach?
- Is there evidence – or at least a clear rationale – that the practice could diffuse beyond sports?
- Are possible downsides (exclusion, privacy, unintended misuse) acknowledged alongside potential benefits?
- Have the authors identified realistic channels through which these insights might reach policymakers or community stakeholders?

which has so far seen relatively few applications of sports data, compared with the broader strategy literature. At the same time, the pitfalls of sports data seem to be particularly pronounced in an innovation context.

In summary, while sports data offer opportunities for research in strategy and innovation, important challenges remain. Concerns about external validity, generalisability, and domain relevance continue to shape how research using sport contexts is perceived. These challenges translate into significant hurdles for scholars, including resistance from journal editors, difficulties securing institutional support, and scepticism regarding the legitimacy of sports-based studies within the broader academic community. In the spirit of providing actionable guidance to both authors and evaluators of research using sports as a context, we provide a practical checklist (Table 1) with questions intended to encourage a cautious use of sports data in strategy and innovation to overcome existing obstacles and realise its potential.

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