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Today, it is quite clear that sport has become a commercial product. Some even state that professionalized sport is “one of the most financially successful industries for the past 50 years, penetrating every sphere of social life and becoming one of the most popular cultural practices. Professional sport has been transformed into a huge, commodified industry that more and more dominates everyday life” (Sage, 2000, p. 266). It is, however, not only the organized competitive sport that has been commercialized, but this applies to sport in general. More commercial businesses have emerged within the sport sector. These businesses offer their customers various sports-related products/services/experiences such as sports tour packages to sporting event, training at commercial gyms, and e-sports. In total, reports from the European Commission (2018) and Eurostat (2023) show that sport (in a broad sense) accounts for more than 2.1% of the EU’s total GDP and that the proportion of employees in sports-related occupations has increased in relation to other occupational categories (e.g., in 2022 the employment in sport represented 1.4% of the total employment in Sweden).

Some consequences of the commercialization and professionalization of sport are thus that more sports-related businesses have emerged, and it has become increasingly important for sport organizations to constantly develop to both improve their competitive advantages (both sportingly and financially), and deliver desired products, services, and experiences to their
passionate, engaged and active customers/consumers. This development has meant that researchers now are considering sport to be something “that is inherently entrepreneurial” (Ciletti, 2012, p. 1). Consequently, this has resulted in that the academic interest of entrepreneurship in sport has increased rapidly during the last decade (see González-Serrano et al., 2020).

One influential and pivotal researcher who has made important contributions to the field of sport entrepreneurship is Vanessa Ratten. I have now been given the honor of reviewing two books by Ratten published in 2020, one she wrote herself and one she edited. The first book, which this review will also focus on, is called *Sport Startups: New Advances in Entrepreneurship*, whereas the second, which will be reviewed a little further on, is called *Sport Entrepreneurship: An Economic, Social and Sustainability Perspective*.

There are some mentions of sport organizations, such as Super Bowl, but whether these can be defined as sport startups is questionable, especially since Super Bowl in my opinion is not a temporary organization.

Why I choose to start this “series of reviews” with the book focusing on sport startups is because a startup can be defined as a “temporary organization in search of repeatable, scalable and profitable business model” (p. 107), which means that the “intent of startups is to trial new products or services to see if they are accepted in the marketplace thereby paving the way to a more long-term business venture” (p. 107). Inspired by a Schumpeterian perspective on entrepreneurship (see e.g., Schumpeter, 1934, 1942), one could as such argue that this trial and assessment of whether the innovation is feasible and scalable is the first step of entrepreneurship, that is, before developing the organization and its innovation into a more stable organization (business venture) with growth ambitions. This makes it relatively reasonable to start reviewing the book that focuses on this first step.

The book *Sport Startups: New Advances in Entrepreneurship* consists of 8 chapters covering different themes, e.g., what are sport startups, how are entrepreneurial opportunities created through sport ecosystems and the impact of digital transformation on sport. Its primary target audience is, as stated in the book’s back cover blurb, scholars of innovation, entrepreneurship, sport management, and business studies, and it is based on this objective I have read the book.

First of all, by focusing on sport startups, Ratten contributes to a small but growing field of research within sport management. Besides this, it is my professional opinion that the subject in question is attracting more and more attention from society at large. Therefore, it was with great interest and anticipation that I started reading the book.

In my opinion, the book has several strengths. First, I really enjoyed reading both the first and last chapter in which Ratten briefly and concisely presents concepts of importance to the book – such as defining the concepts of sport startups and stakeholder relationships – as
well as the contributions the book provides and its implications. She also highlights the lack of research in this field. It is, however, worth noting that she doesn’t just state that there is “a dearth of material on sport startups in the entrepreneurship and sport management journals” (p. 10), but she also suggests five possible areas of research; for example, research on ways entrepreneurs utilize networking to create value in sport startups) (pp. 10–11; see also pp. 111–115).

Second, and speaking of networking, in the third chapter Ratten mentions how entrepreneurial opportunities can arise through co-opetition networks, which simply means that sport organizations in a sport ecosystem cooperate and compete at the same time. The idea of co-opetition in sport is that sport organizations can derive value from their competitors. This means, which may be surprising, that despite the great emphasis on competing and winning in sport, potential entrepreneurs (and sport organizations in general) shouldn’t be afraid of sharing and discussing their ideas with competitors. In fact, research suggest that co-opetition can be a very effective strategy to drive innovation and improve organizational performance (see e.g., Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Wemmer et al., 2016).
Third, in the last chapter Ratten describes five types of innovations that are relevant to sport startups: 1) Product (e.g., clothing and equipment); 2) Process (e.g., information and communication technology such as online payment systems that can increase the availability of sport services; 3) Managerial (e.g., new ways of coaching or styles of play); 4) Marketing (e.g., new ways of communication such as using social media to enabling direct communication with fans); and 5) Institutional (e.g., changing legal frameworks or embracing new organizational forms/structures that enhance business activities) (pp. 109–110). By describing these types, Ratten clearly defines and exemplifies what innovations in sport can be, and thus also what a sport startup can focus on. This may seem obvious, but then you must remember that the concepts of innovation and entrepreneurship are two very common buzzwords in society, and they are therefore frequently bland, which can explain that they are often considered as synonyms.

The final strength that needs to be highlighted is the description of the digital transformation in sport and the discussion of its consequences (see Ch. 7). No one can have missed the importance of the internet and social media (including AI and big data) for sport organizations, both on and off the field. Ratten argues that this development is particularly important for sport startups as it has lowered the costs of doing business and provided a way for entrepreneurs to enter their marketplaces. Furthermore, as the idea behind sport startups is to trial new products/services to see if they are accepted, entrepreneurs can use social media to see whether their products (and thus their businesses) have a future. However, it is important to point out that she is not entirely positive about the development. She highlights that technology such as the use of big data raises important ethical challenges about data privacy, private integrity, and data security.

Having presented some of the strengths, we now come to the somewhat sadder part. In particular, the book has two major shortcomings which lower its value and unfortunately prevent it from achieving my high expectations.

First and foremost, I find the book disordered, fragmentized and as such not always readable. This due to an experienced lack of coherence. One example of this is that the definition of a startup differs slightly between the first and final chapter, and my question is why. Why didn’t the author include the definition on page 107 in the first chapter? The same applies to the concept of innovation which is described now and then throughout the book (see e.g., Ch. 5, 6 and 8). Another illustrative example of this is the concept of organizational innovation which is mentioned on page 62 (Ch. 5) but is first defined on page 72 (Ch. 6). Yet another example is that the book is filled with concepts and definitions, which would be fine if they had been linked. Instead, they sometimes feel pushed in without always being part of a context. I think this is somewhat remarkable as the book’s primary target group is scholars.

My second concern is the lack of concrete examples of sport startups. There are some mentions of sport organizations, such as Super Bowl, but whether these can be defined as sport startups is questionable, especially since Super Bowl in my opinion is not a temporary
organization. Using concrete and illustrative examples of sport startups would have enhanced my, and probably many others, understanding of what a sport startup can be and look like. One can, however, consider this as a call to other scholars to find examples of these and study them in more detail, for example through case study-designs.

To summarize, I would argue that Ratten has published more academically significant works than this. However, and despite its shortcomings, I find the book worth reading, largely because it is about a highly relevant and valuable subject, and its many references to what future research can, and perhaps, should focus on.

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References


