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Keeping Distance? Adaptation Strategies to the Covid-19 Pandemic Among Sport Event Organizers in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Sport has often had an important role in times of crisis, but the Covid-19 pandemic is another matter. Sport was heavily affected world-wide on all levels. In Sweden, gathering people for endurance events conflicted with the Covid-19 restrictions. Some events were cancelled, but many tried to adapt. What adaptation strategies to Covid-19 have Swedish event organizers used? What role have digital tools played in their adaptation? What economic impacts did these events experience? We argue that the challenges posed by Covid-19 have accelerated the digitization of endurance events and highlighted the tensions between commercial and non-commercial actors in sports due to the differences in financial structure and eligibility for economic support. We thereby contribute to the growing research on how sport events in general have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and specifically in the context of Sweden's somewhat exceptional response to the pandemic.

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1. Introduction

Sport has often had an important role in times of crisis, providing a sense of escape and comfort (Wilson & Millington 2020, p. 5). The Covid-19 pandemic is another matter. Sport has been heavily affected world-wide on all levels. In particular, gathering people for sport events such as football matches or endurance competitions were deemed a high-risk endeavor in terms of spreading Covid-19 (Parnell et al. 2020). Though usually not as crowded as elite football matches, organizers of endurance events such as the Gothenburg Half Marathon or Vasaloppet in Sweden faced an unprecedented situation. Even though Sweden in comparison with many other countries took a less restrictive approach to the pandemic and did not enter any lockdown, gathering more than 50 people, even outdoors along courses ranging many kilometers, quickly became a problem (Norberg et al. 2021). Some events were cancelled altogether, but many tried to adapt in different ways. What adaptation

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strategies and responses to Covid-19 have Swedish event organizers used? What roles have digital tools played in their adaptation? What economic impacts did these events experience?

In this article, we study the adaptation strategies and responses to Covid-19 from endurance event organizers in relation to the Swedish context with recommendations rather than a full-scale lockdown, and with a strong umbrella organization for sports – the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC). Our aim is to shed new light on how organizers have reacted to the pandemic and its related restrictions, and to discuss how these adaptation strategies will affect the post-pandemic management of such events in relation to sportification and digitization. We will focus on the use of digital tools, specifically GPS-tracking devices and connected apps to track, time and share performance. We aim to contribute to the growing research (e.g. Davis 2020; Grix et al. 2021; Krieger et al. 2021; Parnell et al. 2020) on how sport events have been adapted during the Covid-19 pandemic, by adding new data on the specific case of endurance events in Sweden.

We build on semi-structured interviews with event organizers, communication from their websites and social media channels, as well as data from an online survey and interviews conducted at Malmö University during spring 2020 about the impact of Covid-19 on sports.

We have chosen ten different events to study, ranging from small-scale events with a few hundred participants, to major events that normally draw tens of thousands of participants. We have also tried to cover the full scope of organizers, from non-commercial actors (sport clubs, federations) to commercial actors (corporations, entrepreneurs). The events are Gothenburg Half Marathon, Vasaloppet, Sätilla Trail, Skogsmaran, Bocksten Trailrun, The Toughest, Kretsloppet, Borås Triathlon, Rya Åsar Trail Run and Idre Fjällmaraton. We present them in more detail in relation to our analysis of their strategies during the pandemic.

Building on the empirical data above, we argue that Covid-19 has posed a difficult challenge to many endurance event organizers, and that their responses have accelerated an already ongoing digitization of endurance events. Digital tools such as Strava¹ have become more important for both organizers and participants. In addition, it has highlighted the tensions between commercial and non-commercial actors in Swedish sports due to the differences in financial structure and eligibility for economic support during the pandemic.

The article begins with some context on the Swedish response to Covid-19, as well as a short background on how sports in Sweden are organized. Then we will turn to the events and present their responses to the restrictions. Finally, the different adaptation strategies are analyzed and discussed to see how these temporary changes and the increasingly digitized endurance event sector may affect the post-pandemic management of endurance events, in Sweden and elsewhere.

2. The Swedish Sports Model and Covid-19

To understand how sport practices in Sweden have changed during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is meaningful to provide a brief overview of how and where sport is usually practiced. Firstly, the choice of sport activities in Sweden is generous

and offered by non-profit organizations like SSC (Swedish Sports Confederation, founded in 1903) and a large number of commercialized businesses such as gyms. SSC has 3,1 million (total population 10 million) members and is further subdivided into 72 specialized sport federations that conduct organized club activities. Their philosophy is based on egalitarian values and support from members. Additionally, Olympic sport disciplines are largely represented by SOC (Swedish Olympic Committee), which, in turn, has 41 specialized federations. According to statistics, and unlike larger fitness chains in Sweden such as SATS and Worldclass, SSC and other sport clubs do not make significant profits. They rely on voluntary work, sponsorships, and donations (Andersson et al. 2020; Norberg, 2018).

To understand this sports model, it is important to see it as part of the larger society building that has characterized the Nordic countries after World War II where welfare policy, good housing standards for all residents, good social security system, equality and focus on public health have been important parts of the Nordic social-democratic social development. Aspects like openness, democracy and solidarity are important foundations of the Nordic sport model. When it comes to sports, health and physical activity among the countries' inhabitants, the Nordic countries are at the top of the world. In Sweden, 70% of the population claim to be physically active every week, while 78% of the population in Bulgaria and 75% in Malta claim that they never play sports or engage in physical activity (Norberg, 2018).

The question then becomes whether this way of organizing sports, with strong national sport federations that have state funds and economical support from the municipalities to be distributed as wisely as possible to achieve both good public health for all age groups, sports enjoyment for all and world champions, is the best for today's societal challenges?

The implicit contract between the state and the sports movement where the state expects social benefits and a healthy population is under pressure. The main reason for this is the decline of activity levels in child and youth sports, a trend that was apparent even before Covid-19 (Norberg, 2018). The semi-private and commercial actors we take a closer look at in this article are therefore becoming increasingly important for physical activity and public health in the Nordic countries. Will these various organizations operating outside the traditional sports model survive Covid-19 and what will be their biggest challenges?

From the thousands of small-scale races and events organized by individual entrepreneurs, small businesses or local sport clubs, to major events such as the Gothenburg Half Marathon or Vasaloppet, endurance events are an integral part of Swedish sports and an important motivation for training for many exercisers (Andersson et al. 2021, p. 31; Armbrrecht et al. 2021). With Covid-19, organizers of these events are facing challenges because of the restrictions on social gatherings. The restrictions are still active during the spring of 2021, and there is a general dissuasion from the Public Health Agency of Sweden towards arranging sport events and competitions. The only exceptions are events aimed at elite athletes and at children born in 2005 or later (Public Health Agency of Sweden 2021).

3. Theory and Method

The aim of this article is two-fold. First, we will analyze the adaptation strategies of endurance event organizers (public, private and non-commercial) in Sweden with focus on their use of digital tools. Second, we investigate how the Public Health Agency of Sweden's Covid-19 strategy, and the Swedish organization of sports, has shaped the adaptation strategies of the endurance events in question. Are there differences between commercial/private organizers and associations/non-profit organizations? How have they handled participant fees etc.? Together, this will give an insight into the adaptation strategies to Covid-19-imposed restrictions among commercial and non-commercial endurance event organizers in Sweden.

Our sources consist of information from the websites and social media pages of the organizers and events that we study. There, they have published continuous updates about their event aimed at actual and potential participants. In addition, we have conducted semi-structured interviews with endurance event organizers, both private actors and representatives for sport associations and clubs.

Finally, we use data from an ongoing research project conducted at Malmö University during 2020. The project 'Voices from closed stadiums' is a mixed-methods approach consisting of both quantitative and qualitative tools; an online survey and semi-structured interviews. The references to the survey are linked to the report written by Andersson et al. (2021), where the project group have analyzed and summarized the survey results. In this survey, 1141 respondents answered questions relating to their physical activity during the pandemic. About 56 percent identified as women, 43 percent as men, and 1 percent as other. The study included participants from 23 different sports, ranging from elite athletes to exercisers training a few hours per week and covering ages from 16 to 80. The data is limited in the sense that it was not a randomized selection of, but rather an open call for respondents (Andersson et al. 2021, pp. 8 and 9). While this survey covered a broad spectrum of issues relating to physical activity and training, we will for the purpose of this article focus on aspects relevant to endurance events.

Additionally, 90 semi-structured interviews have been conducted over Zoom or telephone and transcribed verbatim. These interviewees were recruited following the survey, in which respondents could share their contact information. A total of 192 respondents were willing to be interviewed, and out of these the project group selected 90 with an ambition to cover a broad spectrum in terms of age, sports, and physical activity levels.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted by three members of the research group. All interviews were transcribed and then the interviews were discussed and analyzed in the research group. Based on this discussion, we then selected interviews that were relevant to this study on endurance events. A total of nine interviews, from the total number of 90 interviews, are included in this study and we have chosen to name these in numerical order. Interview 1, interview 2, etcetera.

In addition to these anonymized nine semi-structured interviews, we have conducted interviews with key people in the endurance event field to get both a broader and a more in-depth picture of the research questions. These key people have chosen to appear with their real names in this study.

Most interviews were conducted via phone or Zoom, due to the Covid-19 restrictions. This type of virtual/distance interviews is a methodology chosen out of necessity, but we also believe that virtual interviews could have certain benefits. Though it raises some concerns in terms of anonymity and integrity, recording interviews in Zoom does provide a source material that open up for analysis of body language, facial expressions and other visual features which an audio recording does not. We have not developed any such analysis in this article, and additional research on the use of virtual interviews would be needed to better understand the differences between audio-recorded interviews *in situ* and virtually recorded interviews.

This article mainly analyzes the adaptation strategies and responses of event organizers in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. We use the sportification model (building on Guttman 1978), sportification is a model for how sports develop towards quantification, regimentation, organization, specialization and several other criteria. In relation to endurance events and those who organize them, the levels of organization and quantification are especially interesting to look at. Are organizers with a high degree of sportification, such as national and regional associations, more or less equipped to handle the impact of Covid-19 on their events? Is there a difference between those more traditional sport organizations and hybrid organizations with commercial actors involved?

All of the events studied in our article usually present detailed results for each participant. This quantification has been accelerated through the use of digital tools over the last decade and therefore is closely linked to digitization. To what extent this digitization of results and performance analysis in endurance events has set a standard that could now help bridge the divide between physical and digital endurance events, is worth more attention.

Those who participate in the endurance events we discuss could be categorized as “highly involved event participants” (Getz & Andersson 2010) because they invest a lot of time and resources in their sports. Stebbins (1992) concept of *serious leisure* can also be used to explain the devotion to endurance practitioners and the social identity they develop together with others with the same developed interest in pursuing their leisure activities (Armbrecht et al. 2021). Vasaloppet has very many participants who participate year after year and who plan the training after this particular race, which makes the race an important part of their everyday life.

The (sport) media landscape has changed rapidly and the impact of digitization and social media in everyday lives are under constantly discussion both inside and outside academia. One of the early theories about digitization and the media came in Joshua Meyrowitz’s (1985) book *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior* where the author showed how the media changes people’s living conditions by influencing our way of living our cultural and social lives:

By changing the boundaries of social situations, electronic media do not simply give us quicker or more thorough access to events and behaviours. They give us, instead, new events and new behaviours (Meyrowitz, 1985, cited in Forslid et al 2017).

A total of 35 years have passed since then and Covid-19 gives Meyrowitz’s claim new content since private, NGOs and public actors use digitization and digital media

to deal with and overcome the challenges that the pandemic has brought to the various organizations.

Since studies show a connection between event participation and quality of life, where increased event frequency contributes positively to the quality-of-life (Armbrecht et al. 2021; Andersson et al. 2021), is it important to try explaining and understanding the long-term consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on future events.

4. Covid-19 and Swedish Sports Sector

The Scandinavian countries are among the most invested in sports and training. In Sweden, more than two thirds of the population exercise on a regular basis (European Commission 2018). The organization of Swedish sports is traditionally managed through the umbrella organization, the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC). Federations for individual sports (e.g. skiing, football, orienteering, athletics) are members in SSC, and while federations also act individually in many issues it is the SSC that has a mandate to distribute governmental funding for sports. When the government allocated extra funding (in total about 1.5 billion Swedish crowns) as a response to economic losses due to the Covid-19 restrictions, it was the SSC who got to distribute the money. This meant that it was the SSCs non-profit member organizations and clubs who got support, while commercial actors and endurance event organizers had to do without.

Apart from the popular sports movement, there are also an increasingly diverse sector of commercial sport and training, including gyms, PTs, outdoor facilities and not least endurance events (Norberg 2020). Some of these events, such as Vasaloppet and the Gothenburg Half Marathon, are hybrid organizations that are highly commercialized while still being owned or run by non-profit clubs and organizations under the Swedish Sports Confederation umbrella.

For the management of sport and training, Covid-19 has been a new and difficult challenge. Building on expertise from its Public Health Agency, Sweden has chosen a different approach than many other countries. Restrictions and social distancing protocols has nonetheless limited the maneuver space of sport event organizers severely. In early March 2020, the Swedish government followed the recommendations of the Public Health Agency and set a limit to public gatherings. First the upper limit was 500 people, but by the end of the month it had been lowered to 50 people and stayed on that level until 29 September 2020 when the limit was once again raised to 500. This easement was only temporary, as the situation worsened in October. Soon, the limit was lowered to eight people which effectively made any type of traditional endurance event hard to arrange (Public Health Agency of Sweden 2020b). These restrictions are still in place in the spring of 2021.

In the recommendations of the Public Health Agency, it is emphasized that sport and physical activity is important for public health. Most of the information at their website around sport events is aimed at indoor events, and outdoor training and competition is mentioned as a preferable option if in compliance with the restrictions. However, and this is the part that have made things complicated for event organizers, all events must “comply with the legislation in the Public Order Act chapter 2, section 1–3 §§ regarding public gatherings which are limited to 50 people”

(Public Health Agency of Sweden 2020a). The use of this legislation meant that it was the local police departments that granted permits to arrange a certain event. The law in question has been interpreted as prohibiting the presence of more than 50 people in the 'event area', meaning that a 42k marathon course through the forest must adhere to the same restrictions as a 400m race. With these restrictions, it became more or less impossible to organize endurance events in the usual manner. The Public Health Agency issued a risk assessment tool for organizers and clearly stated their expectations: "Sports clubs should do a risk assessment before arranging an activity and take precautionary actions" (Public Health Agency of Sweden 2020a). The tool included measures for the reduction of participants (especially international visitors), access to alcohol, toilets etcetera, as well as moving events outdoors.

Covid-19 has caused a financial disaster for Swedish sports associations, due to the fact that 90 percent of the income the associations have lost can be linked to events that could not be carried out. This is caused by non-registration fees, ticket revenues, sponsorship funds and sales (Armbrecht et al. 2021). In addition to the drastic economic consequences for Swedish sports due to the pandemic, Armbrecht et al. highlighted the social challenges that follow in the footsteps of Covid-19, -social effects divided into five major areas: (i) loss of membership, (ii) reduction in activity, (iii) physical and mental illness, (iv) integration, and (v) joy/solidarity (Armbrecht et al. 2021, p. 20). The last three social factors mentioned here are perhaps the most difficult to measure but which have the most serious consequences in the event of a prolonged pandemic. Many have the competition and the implementation of a special race as the main motivation for training. The lack of competitions therefore means that inactivity and social distancing can increase significantly in the future if the pandemic persists.

5. Coping Strategies among Swedish Endurance Events – Cancelling or Adapting?

Swedish endurance events have been deeply affected by the Covid-19 restrictions. We have looked at ten different endurance events, of different size, organized by either private companies or entrepreneurs, non-profit sport organizations or individual clubs and associations, or hybrid organizations.² Ten events were studied, and we categorize them as follows:

Large-scale Events (>10 000 participants): Gothenburg Half Marathon, Vasaloppet

Medium-scale Events (2 000–6 000 participants): Kretsloppet, The Toughest, Idre Fjällmaraton

Small-scale Events: Sätilla Trail, Skogsmaran, Bocksten Trailrun, Borås Triathlon, Rya Åsar Trail Run

We will now analyze how they have adapted to the recommendations of the Public Health Agency of Sweden, both the individual events as well as some general tendencies. Our selection of events to study was based on an ambition to cover a broad spectrum of events, ranging from small-scale, local races to major events that under normal circumstances attract tens of thousands of participants, many of whom

are international visitors. In this section, we will discuss their responses on an aggregate level while also giving individual examples. We divide them into two main categories – those who cancelled, and those who adapted. In the second group, some went for a digital event. Those will be analyzed in a separate section.

6. Cancelling

The first type of response was to simply call off the event. This was done by five of the ten events we looked at. But within this group, there were still important differences in how they communicated about their decision to cancel the event, how they handled the issue of participant fees that had already been paid and how they framed their decision. For example, the Idre fjällmaraton which takes place in an alpine resort in the mountains in Dalarna County moved all participants to next year. They offered no refund or compensation. Under the heading ‘We have really tried’, the organizers explained that even though they were prepared to start the race in groups of 40 runners each 20 minutes. Still, the local police department did not grant permission for the event which include four courses (12k, 28k, 45k and 84k) in sparsely populated terrain (Idre fjällmaraton 2020). Similar responses were communicated by Bocksten Trailrun (a race with several distances in a forested part of southwestern Sweden) that offered no refund at all and simply kept all fees. The 10k city race Kretsloppet in Borås also cancelled their event but offered full refund or a place in the next year’s race. Though not fully representative, the lack of negative reactions in the social media pages of these events suggests that participants in general understood of the measures taken.

The obstacle course race (OCR) The Toughest did not offer any refund either. They are the Nordic region’s leading OCR. With experience of over 80 award-winning races in six countries they are among the biggest OCR-organizers and they offer three different classes in OCR; family, athletes and ‘for all’. A racing court has a cost of 1.2 million Swedish crowns (SEK) to complete a good race, this is because they build new courses every time and they have 10–15 men running for a week. The company’s turnover is 25 million SEK (Ögren 2020). They cancelled their event and eventually offered a ‘compensation package’, including a digital substitute race (The Toughest 2020a).

Since the company did not refund the fees or give free access for the next occasion, they had a lot of disappointed customers and they explained who to blame and why they could not give the money back:

We are very sorry the Swedish government still hasn’t understood the business model that all companies working with events are using – simply put: the Swedish government wants the individuals to pay for this/.../We understand that this is far from an ideal situation, and we understand that some of you will be very frustrated with us and/or the government. Maybe a few of you will threaten us with lawsuits. Please understand that if this would go to court and you would be entitled to have your money back, that would force us into bankruptcy and thereby not resulting in the desired outcome. (The Toughest 2020b).

When we interviewed one of the founders of The Toughest, Per Ögren, he said that there is structural injustice in the way the Swedish government distribute the support under Covid-19:

We have dissatisfied customers, we cannot give any money back or promise them a free place next year, it is an unfair competitive situation in Sweden - we are a commercial company and we do not receive support from the state - that is how it is in Sweden - lifestyle sports comes last on the list - it is the association sport life that rules in Sweden - we cannot satisfy our customers due to lack of support. It is very frustrating. (Ögren 2020)

The Toughest team share their frustration over the political (sport) system and the way the politicians handle the pandemic:

The only thing that mattered was the number 50. For us, 50 people in a small store is a crowd. 50 people spread over several kilometers is not. Sick and elderly people indoors are a risk. Healthy relatively young people outdoors in small groups with lots of space are not. But as it is now the stores and restaurants are crowded. People cough and sneeze in public with no further regulation. But healthy people can't go running in an organized event, even if in small groups. But it doesn't matter what we think. It is what it is and hence we cannot host any normal events in 2020. (The Toughest 2020b)

Some organizers really took the fight in public. Borås Triathlon is like The Toughest organized by a commercial actor, former world-class triathlete and double Ultraman World Championship winner Jonas Colting. It is a two-day event with around 1000 participants in total. This year they first postponed the event. The decision was communicated in April and a new date, 19 September, was announced (Borås Triathlon 2020a). In mid-August, when many other races had been cancelled and it had become clear that Covid-19-related restrictions would still be in place in September, Borås Triathlon announced an adapted version of the event. Following the recommendations of the Public Health Agency of Sweden, no more than 50 people would be allowed in any given part of the arena at the same time. Starting groups of 50 or less, dissuading any potential spectators, swift exit from the arena after finishing and no collective prize ceremony were among the measures taken (Borås Triathlon 2020a, 2020b). However, this was not enough. The local police department did not give permission for these events to take place, as they interpreted the recommendations of the Public Health Agency to limit the number of people to 50 at any given time in the whole event-area. In the case of Borås Triathlon, that meant a restriction of 50 people along a half-Iron Man course stretching hundreds of kilometers through forests, small roads and open water. Jonas Colting, organizer of the event, declared his frustration at the decision not to grant permission for the event: "It is incredibly provoking that we shall have to fight for our right to allow more than 50 people to swim in a lake, bike on a road and run in the forest" (Svt.se 2020b). Colting even said that he would defy the decision of the local police department and go ahead with the event anyway, in a form of civil disobedience not usually practiced by endurance event organizers. Borås Triathlon was eventually cancelled, but Colting had by then made his point publicly known beyond any doubt.

The cancellation of endurance events has, in line with what Colting argued, been problematic for many of those who normally participate in such events. In the light of our survey, we have seen decreasing training motivation for endurance athletes and exercisers that do not have any events or competitions to prepare for (Andersson et al. 2021, pp. 31 and 32).

7. Adapting

A second kind of response was to adapt the physical event, but still try to arrange it on the original place and day. Three events went for this strategy, though in different ways. Skogsmaran normally has simultaneous races (11k, 21k, and 42k) along a 42k hiking trail through the forests outside of Gothenburg. They decided to cancel all distances except 42k, to which they allowed 50 participants. Those who had already signed up for one of the other races were offered a refund, a place in the next year's race or to donate their fee to the organizers for the benefit of future events and management of the course trail. A similar approach was taken by Rya Åsar Trail Run. They chose to go ahead with the race on the original day, but with starting groups of 45 runners spread out from 8 AM to 6.30 PM. Each starting group was to finish the 11,6k race and leave the area before the next group could start (Rya Åsar Trail Run 2020). Sätåla Trail was the third event in this category, and they organized a training event with two groups of 50 participants who could run the 21k course, one group in the morning and the other in the afternoon. This training event was eventually cancelled due to the sharpened restrictions in Sweden in November 2020.

A common denominator for these trailrun events is that they take place in the forest, have less than 2 000 participants and are organized by either a small sports club (Skogsmaran by a local ski club, Sätåla Trail by a local orienteering club) or a small commercial actor. Their relatively small scale and the landscape in which they take place worked to their advantage in adapting to the Covid-19 restrictions when they could accommodate 50 participants. However, when the limit for social gatherings was lowered to eight people and a general dissuasion for participation in sport events was issued (Public Health Agency of Sweden 2020b), even this kind of event became impossible to arrange.

Another form of adaptation was to re-organize the physical event to fit the Covid-19 restrictions meaning that the participants could run the race distance but at various times. One of the interviewees said about the Lidingö race:

Yes, it's nice, the Lidingö race, they would change instead of canceling, and offer that you could book a race time but still run on the right track. And then submit a result. And I think it is, it's a fun concept. (I1)

Another example connected to orienteering, who has a lot in common with trail runs, shows that of some of those interviewed valued the Covid-19 strategy:

The orienteering week was canceled, but now they had instead released maps, and so, you had to run yourself and measure the distance with a GPS watch and log in there so you could see how you have run./.../So, I think it was a really fun concept, that it does not have to be tied to just one day, but that you can compete and train a little spread out. (I2).

Orienteering seems to have been successful in some of its Covid-19 strategies where they mainly have opened up and provided several opportunities to practice the sport:

With the pandemic, it has now sort of popped up a lot of variations where maps and courses have been available weekly. You have shared online so you have been able to print out a map and such, went on the road and ran. (I2)

8. A Digital Future?

In addition to the strategies above, some organizers cancelled the physical event but instead offered a digital event. In the face of Covid-19 restrictions, endurance events have turned to digital platforms in new and innovative ways. While many smaller organizers have been fast in cancelling, adapting or digitizing their races, we also see how larger organization have transformed their events into digital ones. We see this digitization strategy as the most interesting in terms of future implications, as it may prove to be a breakthrough for the organization of digital and/or hybrid endurance events. We already see how virtual training and competition have become an important alternative to traditional events during the pandemic, even for professional athletes (Westmattmann et al. 2021). Fast adaptations of similar kind have been pointed out in the case of professional dart with seemingly positive results (Davis 2020), and e-sports have continued to grow during the last year (Ke & Wagner 2020; Kim, Nauright & Chokechai 2020). In the following, some of these digital events and the tools they used are discussed.

The Gothenburg Half Marathon, which is among the world's biggest half marathons, is organized by the regional athletics association, in cooperation with several big sponsors. They have an organization with employed staff, hundreds of volunteers and an existing digital infrastructure. Gothenburg Half Marathon went for a digitized race using Strava as a tool for participants to register their results. The reactions were somewhat mixed, and one of our interviewees did participate in the digital event but was disappointed with it: "I did Göteborgsvarvet digitally. Yes, what to say about it? No, it was really boring compared to the real thing" (I6).

The digitized Gothenburg Half Marathon was perhaps not a full replacement for the physical event, but it was at least an attempt to provide an opportunity to run. That said, it was not nearly enough in economic terms. On the contrary, the organizers are facing an economic crisis and have flagged for termination of employments to avoid bankruptcy (Svt.se 2020a). Here we can see how the size of the organization was helpful in the sense that they had the resources to arrange a good, digital alternative, but also problematic as the incomes from the digital event could not sustain such a large organization.

Vasaloppet, the world's largest cross-country ski race, also organizes a 'Summer week' with running and mountain bike competitions along the same track as the legendary ski race. This August, they cancelled the physical events for the whole week and instead launched a digital event called 'Hemmavasan'. Also using Strava, participants could choose between several races which could be conducted anywhere as long as the race was registered with GPS and uploaded through Strava.

These rather ambitious transformations of physical events into digital alternatives seem to have been an option only for large-scale organizations like Gothenburg Half Marathon or Vasaloppet. They had the resources and staff to quickly adapt, and even though they still lost many participants they could at least offer something instead of simply cancelling their events. In the case of the Gothenburg Half Marathon, the digital race was a sort of consolation for those who had already signed up and would not get any refund on their participant fee. In Vasaloppet, which has its main event in early March and thus could go ahead with the main ski event just before the Covid-19 restrictions were in place, the digitized summer

week in a similar way was a replacement for the planned physical events. While it did in some way replicate the physical performance, the social aspects of a large-scale event that gather thousands of people was another matter. Large-scale endurance events across the world have faced similar challenges, and the psychological impact of reduced spectator and/or participant numbers has been identified as a major threat (Grix et al. 2021).

There have even been examples of new, digital events popping up during the Covid-19 restrictions. One such is SkiErg-loppet, a digital race over 5000 m using the Concept SkiErg double-poling ergometer. Swiftly organized by a small business run by entrepreneur and elite skier Erik Wickström, this event drew 400 participants who reported their own results through a web formula. “It was cost-efficient, and we used our existing social media platforms to advertise the event. I think that this type of event with low economic risk is here to stay” (Wickström 2020). This is an example of how an organizer with a low degree of traditional sportification (e.g. organization, professionalization and regimentation) could act fast and use digital platforms to create a profitable event perfectly compliant with the Covid-19 restrictions.

Others chose to deepen an existing cooperation around digitization. Vasaloppet released a new app together with est/mika:timing, who were already responsible for measuring the results in the physical races of Vasaloppet and who is one of the major actors in this line of business involved in over 400 events each year and timing the performance of hundreds of thousands of participants in endurance events (est.se 2020). The Stockholm Marathon used a similar app, also designed by est/mika:timing. For Vasaloppet, their digital edition got a lot of attention in social media even though it was not a big economic success. Erik Wickström, who besides organizing his own events also worked with Vasaloppet for many years, argues that cancelling altogether would have been a risky strategy: “Cancelling would probably have been cheaper in the short perspective but it would have had negative consequences for the coming years. The digital part of Vasaloppet is probably here to stay” (Wickström 2020).

The pandemic has created new ways of thinking about training and not least how to share your own experiences:

So I started googling a lot about how to conduct training outdoors and we also opened a Facebook page to be able to share what we do and to get inspiration from what others do and thus exchange experiences. (I3)

The use of social media to convey training and tips on physical activity seems to have increased significantly during the pandemic, something that is reflected in the interview material:

I have my little videos where I explain publicly how we do if there are special wishes, fears, question marks and that they then get in touch before they come to the training. I have explained on social media how we work here. (I4)

But many of the interviewees also testify that they do not think the digital solutions are satisfactory and that they really miss the physical competitions:

On the one hand, I ran a marathon in April, and I would have run 90km in South Africa on the 15th of June, but it became virtual, so then I ran 30 laps on a 3 km track, and it was not fun. But now I have tested it and now I will run the Boston marathon virtually in September, but I have a hard time coping, - for me - it does not work - I break down mentally, I think it's boring. So, for me it's hard. (15)

The virtual races are a bit fun, but it does not like a real race. Technically, we have certainly gotten better/.../But no, I'm not that positive. (17)

Reflections from those who have completed digital races show varying experiences where some experience the flexibility positive as shown in previous quotes while others have negative experiences:

But it was not exciting enough for me to do it again - so that it is very, very very, far from a real race, I must say. (18)

Many athletes lack the social encounter and the social meaning that the physical race offers:

The races are a very social event - and these virtual races, well then you lose the social completely. (19)

To summarize, we argue that Covid-19 has posed a difficult challenge to many endurance event organizers, and that their responses have accelerated an already ongoing digitization of endurance events. In addition, it has highlighted the tensions between commercial and non-commercial actors in sports due to the differences in financial structure and eligibility for economic support during the pandemic. While all event organizers are experiencing economic downturn, the support from the Swedish state has favored non-commercial actors.

9. Public Health and Sports – a Commercial or Non-Profit Endeavor?

There is no doubt that Covid-19 has challenged the traditional Swedish sports movement and entrepreneurs respectively. However, while many of the clubs under the Swedish Sport Confederation umbrella have received support from the Swedish state, commercial actors have been left without any similar support system. What will this mean for the future organization of endurance events? The incalculable Covid-19 is already a challenge to the Scandinavian sports model and will continue to be so in the coming future.

Races and events such as The Toughest or Borås Triathlon, arranged by entrepreneurs rather than by non-commercial actors from the sports movement, have expressed frustration over how the Covid-19-related restrictions affect their economy. The support from the Swedish state to sports is distributed by the Swedish Sports Confederation and is primarily aimed at its member clubs and organizations. Commercial organizers of events and races have not received any such support. This actualizes a much-discussed issue in Swedish sports: how to handle new types of actors who enter into the changing landscape of sports as the traditional, non-commercial sport clubs lose members?

The organization and management of endurance events have become an issue of political importance, and one of few areas where critique of the Public Health Agency of Sweden has been voiced. In early August, a debate article was published in *Dagens Nyheter*, one of Sweden's leading newspapers. In the article, commercial and non-commercial actors and representatives from several major endurance events and sport associations argued against the restrictions that had made it more or less impossible to arrange endurance events with more than 50 participants (Dagens Nyheter 2020). This was just one of many similar public displays of frustration from the sport event sector towards the Public Health Agency's recommendations, and how local police departments interpreted the guidelines. The concluding comment from the team behind The Toughest reflects the frustration and abandonment many private and semi-private organizers experience in Sweden and Scandinavia as a result of Covid-19:

If we don't survive this pandemic, there won't be any events, not now nor later. We believe that you, just as us, would prefer to have Toughest's events back in 2021 and forward. (The Toughest 2020a)

The events in this study and their responses to Covid-19 suggest that there will indeed be endurance events also after the pandemic is over. However, not all of them will be the same. Much like academia has been forced to quickly develop strategies and competence for online teaching in the face of Covid-19, so too are sport events facing a challenge that already seem to have accelerated the digitization of such events. There is a market for digital endurance events, both as an alternative to traditional events and as part of hybrid solutions that include both physical and digital elements (Armbrecht et al. 2021, 31).

Digital tools have become a more important aspect of endurance events during the Covid-19 pandemic, and this will continue to affect the management of such events also in a post-pandemic world. Economic effects have been most severe for large, commercialized events, and these have also been the ones who invested most time and effort in digital alternatives (Armbrecht et al. 2021).

Many participants are familiar with the digital tools in question, and from the events we have studied it is more about how tools like GPS monitoring devices, pulse watches and digital platforms for sharing results are used, than about introducing new and hitherto untested technology. While the major endurance events before Covid-19 was organized by large organizations with employees and a high degree of sportification, it remains to be seen whether a new sport event landscape will favor other types of more digitized events, and other types of organizers. In general, indoor virtual training options such as SkiErg, smartbikes, trainers and the related software such as Zwift has been identified as a tool to counter the negative effects of Covid-19-related restrictions (Westmattmann et al. 2021, 11). The SkiErg race mentioned above is one of many examples of how event organizers can use this increasing familiarity with digital tools among exercisers to develop new types of competitions and events.

While our conclusions are based on data from Swedish endurance events, we see tendencies of increasing use of digital tools in relation to endurance sport and physical leisure activities (e.g. Loudin 2021; Venter et al. 2020; Westmattmann et al. 2021). Indeed, this is also evident in other sports such as professional dart

(Davis 2020). Our findings can be interpreted as an indication of how small-scale events have been easier to adapt to fully digitized events, without losing the 'feel-good' factor associated with large-scale gatherings of spectators and participants (Grix et al. 2021, 4). This could be an indication of how the already blurry line between training and competition among endurance sports exercisers is about to dissolve altogether. As both training and races under the Covid-19 restrictions has largely been conducted alone and in your local geographical setting (Andersson et al. 2021), networking through digital tools become fundamental for the meaning-making of our training and leisure. Participants become prosumers, part of prosumption networks (Bond et al. 2020) that both consume and produce value for endurance events and digital platforms. In such a reality, a small-scale event like the SkiErg-loppet can offer something similar to a digitized large-scale event such as Gothenburg Half Marathon. This could open for a richer variety of races and events, and potentially for more participants. However, the consumer dimensions of endurance training and events have been problematized as a potential added stress (Egan-Wyer 2019). In this regard, fast digitization of events could make leisure even more serious (Stebbins 1992) and further blur the line between play and work as sportification becomes more accentuated (Pargman & Svensson 2020). What happens when events go digital, and sharing results potentially becomes an even more central aspect of endurance races? Perhaps the fast developments in e-sports, which have continued during Covid-19 (Ke & Wagner 2020), can be a useful tool to navigate the accelerating digitization of training and events? Digitization has been suggested as an additional aspect of sportification (Pargman & Svensson 2020), and from what we have seen so far, the social distancing protocols may serve to accelerate this development.

More research on how different strategies to reduce the spread of Covid-19 has affected endurance events of different scale and in different geographical contexts is needed to draw more general conclusions. In the light of the critical research on athletes and exercisers as prosumers (Bond et al. 2020), the socio-economic dimensions of a potential post-pandemic transition to digitized endurance events that require expensive equipment (smart bikes/trainers, ski ergometers etc.) and subscriptions to digital platforms and software require more attention. Public health may suffer from the fact that events are not carried out, because many have the event itself and the competition as a motivator to move around (Andersson et al. 2021, p. 35; Armbrecht et al. 2021). Given the importance of endurance events for training and physical activity, the organization of endurance events during and after the Covid-19 pandemic deserve continued attention from sport managers, event organizers and researchers.

Notes

1. Strava is a digital platform for tracking, uploading, analyzing and sharing physical performance. It is compatible with many GPS devices and is one of the most popular training apps with more than 50 million users world-wide. Strava (2021).
2. These ten events are Gothenburg Half Marathon, Vasaloppet, Sätilla Trail, Skogsmaran, Bocksten Trailrun, The Toughest, Kretsloppet, Borås Triathlon, Rya Åsar Trail Run, and Idre Fjällmaraton.

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