

## **Sports in FHocus: A Weird Year**

It was the year of Jonny Bairstow's Stumpgate. It was the year of financial turbulence, catalysed by Mohammed Bin Salman's deep pockets. It was the year of needlessly fast races, from only one racer. It was the year of host heartbreak. It was the year of financial injection - and turbulence - catalysed by Mohammed Bin Salman's deep pockets. It was the year of Spanish football ecstasy, before its rapid evaporation.

In sport, there is always a winner. And there is always a loser. The FH Sports team have picked their favourites from 2023.

### **Winners**

#### **Women's football**

This week we saw Mary Earps awarded the BBC's Sports Personality of the Year. Two years ago, Mary Earps wasn't a household name. She probably wasn't even a name unless you were a dedicated women's football fan. To win such a prime-time, consumer-facing, cross-sport award sums it up. Women's Football is winning in the UK and hopefully it will continue to for a very long time.

It's not just in the UK though. Matildamania remains very real in Australia, with Sam Kerr cementing her role as an (inter)national treasure. The USWNT has just released a global Netflix documentary following a very public and successful battle for equal pay. In Spain, La Roja returned home and world winners to see public demand drive needed change within Spanish football. EA SPORTS also added women's players to their Ultimate Team offering. The tide is well and truly turning for women's football and if the past few years are anything to go by, bring on 2024.

#### **Australia**

This is going to be a painful one to write... but you have to admit that the Aussies have had an all time year when it comes to sport. Other than the Rugby Union of course (see you later, Eddie). However, across multiple sporting stages, both domestic and global, Australia has been showing us how it's done.

They've hosted quite possibly the best Women's World Cup in history and their competing team, the Matildas, led by the tour de force that is Sam Kerr, inspired a whole nation as interest and participation in women's football is now at an all time high. Their cricket teams came in clutch as they retained the Ashes away in the UK (still hurts), won the ODI Cricket World Cup against India in the final... in India, won the World Test Championship and that's just the men... the women's team also retained the Ashes here in England and won the T20 Cricket World Cup, again beating the host's (this time

South Africa) in the final. They won the Netball World Cup beating England again in the final.

The only thing I can take comfort in is that they announced they weren't quite up to hosting the Commonwealth Games in 2026. But who's the real loser there...?

### **The underdog**

In sports, everyone loves an underdog. In the Cricket World Cup, Afghanistan shocked England, Pakistan and Sri Lanka - showcasing their rapid rise. In the Rugby World Cup, Fiji beat Australia, Portugal beat Fiji and floundering England were tear jerkingly close to defeating the to-be champions. Colombia beat Germany in the Women's Football World Cup, Wyndham Clark emerged from obscurity to win the U.S. Open and Marketa Vondrousova became the first unseeded female to win Wimbledon. Even this season in football, at the lofty top of the table some unexpected teams are taking the reins much to the chagrin of their high-spending rivals. Look at Bayer Leverkusen, Aston Villa and even minnows Girona beating the big guns like Real and Barcelona. It's all rather magical. This is why we love sport.

Moving forward, it looks like more upsets may be on the cards. Across all sports, major tournaments are encouraging more shock-leaning results. In rugby, minor nations have been given the opportunity to compete against the giants. In football, the World Cup and Champions League formats have been expanded. In cricket, teams like Uganda and Canada have a chance to create an upset at the World Cup next year. For brands and PRs, this only offers wider opportunities for stories and sponsorships. We say, to the underdog - long may they reign.

### **American Sport**

A sea of green and gold Green Bay Packers fans lining Oxford Street. A flood of blue and orange-adorned Chicago Cubs lovers in Soho. A mass of white and aquamarine Miami Dolphins devotees lining Frankfurt's main drag.

[Fin Taylor's](#) beautifully cringeworthy interview may have left NFL Network ashamed of their lack of research, but there is no denying the American invasion continues. Taylor may admittedly have a point. British American Football lovers may seem in short supply, but thanks to the NFL's incisive marketing over the last decade, there are now almost 15 million fans of the NFL. That's one in five of us. Major League Baseball's games at London Stadium sold out rapidly, the NBA's grasp on the younger generations has strengthened and even Pickleball courts are popping up across the country.

Even in the States, sport is bigger and brighter than ever. The thrilling Superbowl added an obscene \$726 million to Arizona's GDP. College athletes - fenceposted from making

money from business deals for so long - are now able to earn compensation for their name, image, and likeness. The greatest football player of all time joined Inter Miami.

American sports may not have erupted in the same way McDonalds or Hollywood did globally, but their patient wait is paying off. What can we offer them in return? Darts, frankly, is the only option. Just imagine.

## **Losers**

### **F1**

The Las Vegas Grand Prix was the most highly anticipated race on the Formula One calendar and it wasn't hard to see why. Not dissimilar to the F1 roadshow, Vegas oozes glitz and glamour with high stakes lingering in the air, so it was expected to be the best race of the year.

And financially it was – the whole event achieved a record-breaking economic impact of \$1.7billion and put Vegas one-step closer to a 10-year contract with F1. However, the success of any sports depends on fan engagement and whilst the race itself was thrilling and entertaining, the rest of the weekend appeared to be one big mess. Issues ranged from outrageous ticket prices and a track not fit-for-purpose, to fans forced to leave after only 8-minutes of running time and the questionable 'added bonus' of the Netflix Cup, all of which caused fan outrage and cries of it being a "shambles" by the media.

Whilst Vegas appeared to be the ideal city for F1 to place its bets on a good ROI, it fell short at hitting the fan engagement jackpot.

### **Host countries (Paris, bedbugs)**

An unexpected loser and topic of sporting conversation this year was the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. Why you ask? Well, there just happened to be a mass infestation of six-legged beasts which wreaked havoc and continue to have a hold of the famous city of love. Yes, bedbugs.

Reports of bedbugs plaguing public transport, theatres, cafés, homes, and hotels across Paris spread like wildfire globally, with headlines reading "No one is safe". That nice baguette you've just bought? Well that's now a bug-gette. Travellers were especially put off from visiting, for fear of taking the critters back home with them.

There were real fears and still are that this could put people off visiting for the upcoming games and it's safe to say, this was not quite the publicity that France would have wanted ahead of the prestigious games. It remains to be seen how this will impact the Paris 2024 Olympics and the French economy, but only time will tell.

## **Golf**

Despite some incredible performances on the course and one of the most memorable Ryder and Solheim Cups in recent memory. The world of golf couldn't help but continue to get in its own way when it came to the professional game.

A persistent battle of tug and war between players and PGA vs. LIV persisted as more high profile players continued to trade blows and make a move to the LIV side. The obvious issue the world is having with the sport currently is that money appears to be doing all the talking and there's not a care for the fans, but a counter to that is that this rustling up of the golf world is for the better. It has ruffled the PGA's feathers and the status quo and provided players and the sport the opportunity to grow from how the sport is played, supports its players and is consumed by fans both in-person and virtually and also provided a host of opportunities for new brands and sponsors looking to enter the space.

All we can say is, that soul of the sport which has continued to be tested this year and will most likely continue to do so next year. It's fortunate that beyond the professional game, the sport is now more popular than ever thanks to a dramatic cultural shift that's seeing the sport beginning to appeal to the masses. Golf can only pray that this merger between the PGA and LIV will eventually see the sport come out the other side of this for the better from both a player welfare and fan standpoint and they can all live happily ever after...

## **Saudi Arabia**

Quite the hullabaloo followed Saudi Arabia's venture into global sport. Did they attract some of the world's biggest names to their football league? Yes. Did they win a World Cup, set to take place in 2034? Yes. Did LIV golf shake up golf as much as it had hoped, then attract the world's number 1 player? Yes. But did they win any fans in the process? Well, not really.

In reality, Saudi Arabia has spent £4.9bn in sports deals since early 2021. But the cake is still thoroughly unbaked. Not only did Mohammed bin Salman claim he will 'continue doing sport washing,' but he raised his 2030 tourism target to 150 million visitors. How many visitors went in 2022? Less than 6 million.

The Neymars and Ronaldos of this world haven't exactly done wonders for match attendance either. In fact, on average, 8,470 fans have attended a Saudi Pro League match this season, with some games accumulating less than 1,000 fans. That's less than the average League One attendance.

Look, it's clear. The Saudi vision is long term, but in the process of their tinkering, they haven't exactly won many allies amongst us sports fans. Aside from the money-thirsty

associations desperate for a dime, of course. What will the future bring? That might just be for the Crown Prince to decide, not us mere mortals.

## **Referees**

It's been another tough year for referees - and VAR technology hasn't helped their cause. There's always got to be a 'bad guy' in any sporting story, and it's always easy for fans to blame the refs and umpires. However, there's been some shocking inconsistencies this year. From new rules and differing priorities shown during the Rugby World Cup in France, to VAR slowing down play and then referees ruling against obvious penalties and fouls in professional football (*literally, what is the point of VAR?*).

However, it shouldn't be undervalued. Being an umpire or a referee is a skill that requires top-level fitness, quick decision-making, and psychological stamina. It's a skill that is underfunded with limited pathways. As a slight positive, it makes it even more amazing that we've started to see referee ceilings broken with the likes of Rebecca Welch and Sam Allison coming through. So here's hoping we'll see more diverse talent in the near future and fingers crossed that will drive a wider talent pool for the future. After all, when there's sport, there's always a ref.