

Article

Golf Club Management Challenges towards Sustainability: Opportunities and Innovations during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Perspective

Ricardo Macías, José Bonal ^{*}, Jairo León-Quismondo, Iyán Iván-Baragaño, Javier del Arco, Pablo Burillo and Álvaro Fernández-Luna

Faculty of Sport Sciences, Universidad Europea de Madrid, 28670 Madrid, Spain; ricardo.macias@universidadeuropea.es (R.M.); jairo.leon@universidadeuropea.es (J.L.-Q.); iyan.ivan@universidadeuropea.es (I.I.-B.); javier.arco@universidadeuropea.es (J.d.A.); pablo.burillo@universidadeuropea.es (P.B.); alvaro.fernandez2@universidadeuropea.es (Á.F.-L.)

^{*} Correspondence: jose.bonal@universidadeuropea.es

Abstract: Golf is among the top five sports practiced in Spain because sport tourism is one of their main lines of income. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all golf clubs had to shut down and thus enter a situation of economic uncertainty. The main objective of this study was to assess the sport management challenges that general managers of golf clubs have had to face before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they dealt with these issues. In this qualitative case study, management challenges and strategies were explored by subjecting five golf club managers with at least 5 years of experience to semi-structured interviews. Managers described that they went from a pre-pandemic situation of economic growth to having to deal with different challenges such as a lack of tourism, increased costs, and a need to install new safety and maintenance protocols. All participants highlighted the importance of constant communication with and transparency among stakeholders (clubs, government bodies, federations) during and after the lockdown period. Management during the pandemic expedited the digitization of golf clubs, and this was considered one of the main upsides of this period. Exploring the strategies used could help managers of this and other sports facilities to design sustainable management protocols to deal with possible future health or economic crises.

Keywords: COVID-19; golf management; communication management; golf tourism; sustainable management



Citation: Macías, R.; Bonal, J.; León-Quismondo, J.; Iván-Baragaño, I.; del Arco, J.; Burillo, P.; Fernández-Luna, Á. Golf Club Management Challenges towards Sustainability: Opportunities and Innovations during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Perspective. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 13657. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151813657>

Academic Editors: Kostas Alexandris, Olga Polyakova and Adele Doran

Received: 25 July 2023

Revised: 5 September 2023

Accepted: 11 September 2023

Published: 13 September 2023



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic in Spain, during which strict home arrest was enforced by governing bodies from 14 March to 2 May of 2020, led to a substantial decline in the intensity and quality of sports practice, which was accompanied by a rise in physical inactivity [1]. During this period of lockdown and the following months of easing of movement restrictions, sports clubs had to shut down and, consequently, enter a situation of economic and management uncertainty.

In Spain, more than three million people participate in some federated sport, and golf is among the top five sports practiced in terms of federated numbers [2]. The structure of sports clubs in Spain is unique. While 77% of all Spanish clubs are small (100 or fewer members), in Europe, our country ranks second in rising numbers of club members, only behind Poland [3]. In turn, Spain is the European country with the greater growing number of young clubs, that is, clubs founded in the year 2000 [4]. Moreover, 19% of people older than 15 years practice some type of sport or physical activity through a sports club or association [4]. This means that clubs account for much of the sports or physical activity that takes place in this country.

According to the Economic Impact Study of Golf in Madrid, the community of Madrid's golf industry generates 235 million euros [5]. Due to the COVID-19 situation, this would generate a situation of new challenges for the different golf courses to face in terms of sustainable management. From an environmental sustainability point of view, during the early phases of the lockdown, golf clubs needed to maintain their golf holes and facilities without knowing when they would reopen their golf courses to the public. In not having players on the golf course, which generate a deterioration in the surface to be maintained, the opportunity arose to carry out a more sustainable type of maintenance based on the nature of recovery from the green areas of the golf course. In turn, the golf clubs faced a situation in which, due to the uncertainty regarding the date of return to activity, they had to start carrying out more sustainable management of their facilities. This includes dispensing with certain jobs to reduce the club's salary burden, digitization of areas that were previously managed manually, or the requirement of a greater versatility of functions for the employees and managers of the golf clubs.

Similarly, golf in Spain attracts 1.2 million tourists annually and has a total production of EUR 12,769 million (including direct, indirect, and induced). The direct impact on the economy is around EUR 5418 million per year (EUR 777 million from golf course billing and EUR 4640 million from golf tourist spending) [6]. This means that an important part of the Spanish economy related to tourism would be affected by the situation generated by COVID-19. Likewise, the return to activity would mean a new challenge in terms of financial viability and sustainable management due to the difficulty in recovering this type of economy linked to golf tourism in the short term.

In addition, Spain in general, and golf in particular, have a wide connection with the world of sporting events [7]. At a high level, Spain is a regular venue for at least two DP World Tour golf events, as well as three other Challenge Tour events, including the Tour Grand Final. In the same way, numerous federative events are carried out, both national and regional, of different levels and categories. These types of events, imply a considerable impact on the environment, since athletes, coaches, referees, and spectators make the trip to the competition using planes, trains, buses, or cars [8]. This implies that, during the lockdown period, and the consequent cancellation of this type of event, there would be greater sustainability and, in turn, the challenge for these events to give a greater response to the climate crisis would be reinforced [9].

At the same time, the vast majority of golf clubs organize their own local events, either for their members, for visiting players, or a combination of both types of clients. These small-scale events, from an environmental sustainability perspective, have a lower impact than large-scale events, since they generally do not require a high need to generate travel for their participants. In addition, they meet the challenge that sports and sporting events must guarantee long-term social participation and economic benefits for a local community [10]. Concerning these types of small-scale events, the challenges generated by COVID-19 related to the execution of a safe sports practice led golf clubs to implement actions such as the digital scorecard, used for registration of the results of the players in golf competitions, which answered challenges of both environmental sustainability and the sustainable management of golf clubs.

At the global level, the health safety measures adopted in 2020 had a severe impact on the financial situation of clubs and sports federations, as most employees lost their jobs or, at best, experienced cuts in their working hours and pay [11]. In the particular case of Spain, all sports events and activities in sports clubs and centers were suspended during the lockdown period. This meant that the mean annual employment level in sports fell from almost 220,000 jobs in 2019 to 200,000 in 2020, and this was accompanied by the shutdown of many sports clubs, gymnasiums, and associated firms, a situation from which we had not yet recovered in 2023 [2]. In the case of golf within the Madrid Community, this situation was responsible for the loss of revenues amounting to EUR 80 million and 970 direct employments in the more than 30 golf courses and practice installations existing at that time [5].

From this health and economic uncertainty generated by COVID-19, a need arose for coordination between government authorities and sports institutions to plan the return to normal sports activity. To assess their capacity to respond to a changing situation such as this, we must listen to the managers of sports facilities [12]. Indeed, when facing a situation of crisis, both governing bodies and clubs need to tackle challenges such as health care, financial aspects, the culture of sports clubs, and even their competence [13].

The return to sports activities in Spain took place under the Spanish government's restriction-easing plan. After the lockdown period, a return to normality was scheduled as a four-stage process. In the international sports setting, different national plans were created by policy-makers to gradually resume sports activities as restriction measures were lifted, such as in the case of Australia and its Toolkit launched by the Australian Institute of Sports [14].

In Spain, the Spanish Sports Council (Consejo Superior de Deportes, CSD) permitted outdoor walking and sport in stage 1 of lockdown easing. This meant that golf courses could be reopened on 11 May 2020, provided the conditions indicated in Order SND/399/2020 [15] were met. In parallel and before this Order was published, the different organizations within the golf sector, such as the Royal Spanish Federation of Golf; the Autonomic Federations of Golf; the Spanish Association of Golf Courses; the Spanish Association of Greenkeepers; the Spanish Association of Golf Managers; and the Association of Golf Professionals, presented before the CSD a "Protocol for Resuming the Sport of Golf" [16].

During the progressive return to activity in golf, the established protocols set the basis for safe golf practice, but, to accomplish this, it had to be added that golf clubs needed to offer a safe space, especially since the golf client is of a higher average age than other sports activities and needed to feel safe since, in turn, they represent a population at higher risk from the possible effects of COVID-19.

This document described the different guidelines at the levels of practical, management, and maintenance for a safe return to the sport of golf. This report complemented the basic protocol for the return to training and the recommencing of professional and federated competitions issued by the CSD [17]. However, it was not until 2022 that health measures for sports installations and events became recommendations rather than legal requirements. The main objective of the present study was to assess the strategies, difficulties, and sport management issues that general managers of golf clubs in Spain have had to face based on their self-reported experience.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design and Participants

As an outdoor activity, the return to golf after the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 was relatively simple, yet the complexity of running a golf club means it is essential that managers provide in-depth knowledge about how efficiently they implemented their strategies. To explore these strategies during the pandemic, we designed a qualitative case study based on interviews, which is particularly useful to assess a contemporary phenomenon in detail and within its real-life context [18]. Assuming that external reality can be examined and analyzed but never fully understood due to the unavoidable loss of components, we have adopted a realistic and critical ontological stance for this work [19]. In addition, a modified objectivist epistemology was used, which established that communication with the study subjects was essential for comprehending the causal mechanisms [20]. The rules for qualitative research criteria established by Tracy [21] were also followed in this study.

The research participants were Golf General Managers/Directors working in top managerial positions at different golf clubs in the Madrid Community before, during, and after the pandemic period of 2020–2021. As a purposeful sampling method, the criterion sampling was used to gather in-depth information [22] from 5 managers with a minimum of five years of work experience in the golf sector. Most managers ran clubs under a mixed membership model including club members (most customers) and occasional (paying)

customers. The golf clubs had a total membership of 220 to 21,000 members. Besides the use of the golf courses, the services offered were practice greens, cafeterias/restaurants, or other sports facilities (tennis, paddle tennis, swimming, etc.). All the clubs hosted golf tournaments and competitions of various levels. Finally, we should underscore that one of the managers interviewed ran operations at a real-estate-linked golf course, while the others managed purely sporting clubs. The different types of golf clubs selected for the sample could be identified as a limitation; however, the selection of the clubs has been made paying attention to covering the wide spectrum of the variety of golf clubs in the Madrid region. In this way, the selected clubs covered the different aspects related to golf clubs such as the number of members, type of client, quality of the course, complementary facilities, or strategic positioning.

2.2. Qualitative Methods

The five managers were subjected to semi-structured interviews to obtain exclusive, inside knowledge and understanding of how their management tasks had been adapted to the situation of the pandemic and the consequences of their actions after that period. The interview was designed ad hoc. The instrument was then tested for construct validity in pilot tests completed by two of the participants. Response triangulation was performed independently by two investigators. Finally, reliability tests were independently run by two investigators by interviewing one participant to subsequently check the agreement between the results obtained. After the design process, 20 open questions were generated and classified into 3 blocks (management before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic). The Declaration of Helsinki was adequately addressed, and the study was approved by the Scientific Commission of Universidad Europea de Madrid (Registry number CIPI/21/073). The interviews were conducted 'face to face' with each manager at the different golf courses and lasted 35 min to 1 h. The interviews were conducted, recorded, and subsequently transcribed by the investigator trained during the pilot tests.

2.3. Data Analysis

After transcription of the interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted based on Braun and Clarke's six-step coding procedure [23] as follows; (1) become familiar with the data, (2) generate the initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review the themes, (5) define and name the themes, and (6) produce the report. First, we independently coded the dataset using Atlas.ti v22.0 after detailed readings of notes several times and becoming familiar with the data. After a discussion between the researchers about establishing a consistent perspective of what they were analyzing, the initial categories and codes were generated, reviewed, and confirmed. The next step included organizing codes into structured themes, which emerged from describing the situation. Although the researchers initially applied a deductive coding approach, new themes were generated. Finally, 28 themes were identified, refined, and discussed by the research team to check the relevance and consistency of the classification procedure. In addition, these 28 themes were classified into 3 blocks called "management pre-pandemic", "management during lockdown and restrictions", and "management post-pandemic". Each block is described below:

- Management pre-pandemic: items regarding management before March 2020.
- Management during lockdown and restrictions: items regarding management during the period of lockdown and restrictions from March 2020 to March 2022.
- Management post-pandemic: items regarding management after lifting all restrictions from March 2022 until the present (December 2022).

Finally, for the results section, the five managers that participated in the study were named using the next pseudonyms: Carlos, Pedro, Roberto, Juan, and Alberto.

3. Results

3.1. Management Pre-Pandemic

When asked about managing their golf clubs or courses before the COVID-19 outbreak, the managers claimed that the situation and future perspectives were fairly optimistic, both in terms of earnings and organized events. In many cases, they were embarking on new strategic measures targeted at promoting increases in membership numbers, players, events, sponsors, and revenues.

“We had almost doubled our members from 2016 to 2020”. (Carlos #1)

“At the competition level we had hosted a professional championship, we had been growing in the sports setting, organizing competitions of ever higher level, and in the more social setting, we indeed had great tournaments. . . 2020 was a year in which we still had many scheduled sponsorships, and, in the club, there was an air of optimism”. (Pedro #2)

The problems detected before the pandemic were the same for all clubs with a “mixed” clientele (members and occasional customers) and were mostly related to friction between the two user types. Generally speaking, members with a monthly subscription considered they were entitled to certain privileges or benefits over “pay and play” customers.

“As a major problem was the issue regarding the relationship between customers and members (. . .) although it has been explained a thousand times that occasional customers are needed to complete earnings as with 500 members paying their subscription it is not enough to maintain a club of these characteristics. This issue of friction between members and other customers is difficult to resolve”. (Roberto #3)

3.2. Management during Lockdown and Restrictions

Given the complexity of the pandemic’s context, this section has been divided into the subsections of financial management, maintenance of installations, communication with interested parties, and design of safety protocols.

3.2.1. Financial Management

Most of the managers agreed that the financial situation was much affected during the periods of lockdown, and restrictions caused services such as cafeterias, other sports facilities, or competitions to be shut down or canceled. In parallel, costs increased because of the need to buy healthcare products (hand gel dispensers, masks, etc.) and to continue with greenkeeping activities during the lockdown. Finally, as in many other firms, non-essential workers were furloughed such that some clubs had to apply for credit. On the upside, most members maintained their subscriptions during lockdown, thus helping with the clubs’ financial situation.

“We had positive EBITDA, and the government’s furlough scheme also helped because staff wages are the highest fixed cost of any golf course, and this was alleviated although EBITDA went down, and earnings were considerably compromised. We had to ask for funding through bank loans and make use of the tools implemented by the government for this type of problem, but this issue was resolved reasonably well”. (Roberto #3)

All the managers agreed that, as soon as the lockdown was over, there was a surge in the use of their golf facilities, and, in some cases, membership numbers also went up.

“In the year 2020, more balls were issued in the practice field, more green fees were obtained, more carts were hired, more everything was hired than in all of 2019 and there was no need to close for two months; what I mean is that as soon as the club reopened, business surged, this is a reality and something that unfortunately did not occur in other sectors”. (Juan #4)

“Then when the period of home arrest was over, people could come again. We can even confirm an increase in memberships of close to 14%”. (Lucas #5)

There was consensus among the managers that the increase in golf-playing witnessed was the result of the benefit that golf is an outdoor rather than an indoor sport. This determines an ambiance of more confidence and health safety advantages that other sports cannot offer.

“As golf is played outdoors, there is no sharing of equipment, distances can be kept, there is no need for indoor installations, that is, someone could pull up in their car, play 18 holes, and drive back home without having touched anything other than their own equipment and been more than 2 m away from the other person playing. This meant that courses could open fairly quickly and that the assistance level was high from the beginning”. (Roberto #3)

3.2.2. Maintenance of Facilities

Maintenance work during the lockdown period was perceived positively by all the managers interviewed. This is because it served to carry out in-depth maintenance tasks without the impacts and deterioration produced by daily golf practice by users. Additionally, this meant that, after the lockdown, golf courses could open in optimum conditions. In effect, some of the interviewees mentioned that any income received was mainly spent on maintenance work.

“So that you can imagine the situation, everything has its good side. If I am honest, at first we had time to carry out some maintenance work on the green (what we call cultural tasks), actions that with the players, with the course open are very difficult. . . In this sense, it was great. We had time to aerate and check greens. . . to do lots of things which are more difficult when the course is open. And, in second place, the closing of golf courses was beneficial. It is not the same when a golf club where 130,000 people play per year than when suddenly nobody steps on the green. The lawn was in great condition when the players returned. From this perspective, it was good”. (Juan #4)

“Because during the time when you could not play, all we did was maintenance (. . .) We did maintenance work using reduced human resources because with the earnings received during this period, we could not do everything”. (Lucas #5)

3.2.3. Communication with Interested Parties

Probably, the issue most appreciated and mentioned on a greater number of occasions by the managers was communication among the different interested parties during the period of lockdown and restrictions. As these interested parties, they identified the State Government (through the Spanish Sports Council), National and Regional Golf Federations, the Association of Golf Courses of the Madrid Community, and the Association of Golf Course Managers and Greenkeepers. The managers highlighted fluid communication among these groups through online meetings. Shared protocols were established that were new to all parties. They also stressed existing coordination among the different golf clubs. Likewise, some managers also mentioned this established communication as a source of pride and reported feeling privileged to have been part of it, a situation not seen in other sectors.

“Luckily a protocol was created along with the different associations, federation, and government, such that we all acted in parallel. We even checked on one another by saying: “Hey, don’t take the covers off the holes”. We even said things like: “Hey, someone in Andalusia is doing this, will someone call them please”. (Carlos #1)

“The main difference in the world of golf is that we were extremely lucky as all institutions -clubs, federations, managerial associations, and greenkeeper associations—worked really hard together to draw up protocols that were definitely a reference at the national level of how things had to be done to make things as safe as possible”. (Pedro #2)

The routes of communication described were online channels such as videoconferences, web pages, or messaging apps. In addition, some managers highlighted their use of

WhatsApp groups to maintain communication with managers of businesses other than other golf clubs. When asked about the contents of messages, points described as important were maintaining constant communication, transparency, and transmitting confidence to staff, occasional customers, and members.

“During the strict lockdown, communication was on the one hand with your workers about how the situation was and the gradual changes in the club, but also with the club members about what we proposed: “Dear Member, you are at home but we are here taking care of the club, keeping it alive so that when you can come back you will find it how you left it”. It is also true that there was almost daily news from the club, challenges, games, pictures . . . that is, it was constant communication”. (Pedro #2)

“It is essential to keep everyone informed about what is being done and what is not being done, both starting from the staff and the customers, suppliers, contract firms, etc., as they demand this. . . if they are well-informed everything works better (. . .) I feel that also transparency, I think that describing things as they are helps and benefits the organization”. (Roberto #3)

Regarding communication of members/other customers with the club, the managers considered this had been fairly positive, and members accepted the explanations transmitted by the club. However, there were some complaints about recovering subscription fees, but these were practically null. Moreover, there was much grumbling about the inevitable lack of social activity in the club given the restriction measures imposed, and many people asked that these restrictions be eased.

“The priority was absolute safety. Indeed, the cafeteria firm was the one that suffered most, because the elderly player, who would have a coffee after a round, will now go straight home, and that is the end of coffee sales. This functioning was indeed something different (. . .). It was not so much because of complying with the norms, the truth is the player has not complained about this but rather players grumbled and asked if the norms could be modified: “Hey when are you going to stop this? When are you going to remove the hole covers?” (Carlos #1)

“During the deepest part of home confinement, we had to seek support from the members who continued to pay the club their subscription with practically no exception or complaints. There were two or three people who did not agree and dropped out, but this was minimal”. (Lucas #5)

3.2.4. Design of Safety Protocols

When asked about how the sports installation was managed from an economic standpoint during the period of shutdown and reopening with restriction measures, the managers mentioned they had more uncertainty and had to work with different economic scenarios during the lockdown. This was, nevertheless, followed by a sharp increase in the number of members and occasional customers.

“During the lockdown, the challenge was to maintain the club, see how this would affect it, how it could affect revenues, and make case scenarios considering the possibility of complaints or the rights the members would have because of those closed months and then, also, all the situation of the workers: job losses, unemployment, new workers. . .” (Roberto #3)

For the hygiene and health safety protocols implemented, we mentioned earlier the important role of coordination among the different groups of interest in the world of golf at the managerial level. Based on guidelines published in the Boletín Oficial del Estado (State Official Bulletin) and regional hygiene and health safety norms, the Real Federación Española de Golf (Spanish Royal Federation of Golf) established a basic consensus protocol. This protocol included different directives in the sections about sports practice, sports management, and installation and equipment maintenance to guarantee a safe return to golf playing. Among these measures were issues such as how to minimize the use of

common spaces, including the reception area or changing rooms, removing rakes from bunkers, social distancing in practice zones, or disinfection of equipment.

“Federations, managerial associations, greenkeeper associations. . . worked really hard together, creating protocols that were of sure reference at the national level of how things had to be done so that these would be as safe as possible. The most important aspect of management was without a doubt to transmit all these protocols to all users, that they should comprehend them, and fulfill them for the safety of everyone, which was the main goal. Then of course all these protocols kept changing practically from day to day, week to week, and some things could be done earlier than others”. (Pedro #2)

Although restrictions in the period of risk mitigating measures were well received by most customers, the managers identified the shutdown or limited opening of other services offered by golf clubs, such as the cafeteria/restaurant or competitions, as causing the most controversy. The cafeteria/restaurant had to meet the conditions set by the Healthcare Administration, and sports competitions could not be resumed in an initial stage of return to activity. For the managers, this meant a managerial challenge in terms of fulfillment of protocols such that the social atmosphere worsened despite the enthusiastic return of the users.

“The social situation suffered most negative impacts. The members wanted their cafeteria, as before the time of COVID. All events for which people could get together were the most restricted”. (Juan #4)

According to most of the managers interviewed, the most important aspect of management, which continued on after the pandemic, was, without a doubt, the digitization of tee time bookings. Before the pandemic, many of the clubs took bookings manually or using basic software. However, given the social distancing measures limiting numbers on the green at any given time, clubs were somewhat obliged to implement a control system through online bookings. All interviewees expressed their satisfaction with this new system, and while some managers were reticent because of the senior profile of their customers, all have adapted well to this way of taking reservations.

“With the pandemic, we had to take a 2.0 step of digitization in the club. And this step 2.0 is a great benefit. In effect, many members appreciated this despite all challenges and restrictions. We had not taken this step before because the main barrier is that the members are old, very old, and we would argue: “They are happy with how the system works” (. . .) But what we did in this period was: “Well now I have no option but to really implement the software so that members can book online, and have a protocol for bookings”. (Carlos #1)

“The first thing we tried was to set up an online booking system—something I would like to highlight is that if something good has come out of COVID (. . .) it is online booking for players. Online booking is here to stay. The truth is that all clubs were thinking about it, in installing it, and we found we were obliged”. (Juan #4)

3.3. Management Post-Pandemic

When asked about their current situation, golf club managers mostly replied that their clubs found themselves in a similar or better situation than in 2019 (pre-pandemic), both in economic and organizational terms. Similarly, all managers agreed that it was essential that they had recovered the social aspect of the club (including tournaments and competitions) without restrictions and that they were promoting the well-being of their customers and the possibility of attracting foreign players.

“Yes, from a corporate viewpoint, corporate events and tournaments are coming back. (. . .) The activity of social tournaments is carried out as normal in most cases (. . .) and we are practically at the level we were in 2019 in terms of level of activity”. (Roberto #3)

This notwithstanding, some managers were cautious about future economic perspectives, owing to existing problems such as increasing costs, including those of raw materials, and a possible future financial crisis.

“Currently we are again seeing positive perspectives. 2021 was a good year without recovering all losses, that is, we have not made up everything lost during COVID. But it was still a good year economically, and the forecast for 2022 was optimistic, although I think that we are not going to be so optimistic as activity has slowed down a little”. (Roberto #3)

“We are struggling because increases in the cost of raw materials and energy have a very negative impact on us. I had ordered a ball machine and from one minute to the next they told me: “This has gone up by 20%, and if you don’t buy it within a week. . .” (Lucas #5)

Most managers experienced concern in this period, hoping that something similar would not happen again. In contrast, they also highlight the benefits of establishing better coordination among organizations, implementing necessary processes such as digitization and improving communication channels. Except for one club with full membership, golf clubs are now looking to expand through new sales strategies designed to capture new members and other customers.

“We found ourselves in a situation in which no club nor manager had prepared for because we can understand situations of economic, social problems, etc., but a pandemic of this type. . . this has not been studied at business schools. And I think that the capacity of managers and the importance of associations for situations as difficult as what we have lived through have also been brought to light. This I think is one of the main lessons: that unity makes for strength”. (Pedro #2)

“The issue of digitization and also of establishing new norms of functioning, as, for example, the requirement for bookings whether online or not, the flow of people, information, the communication channels opened with members. . . I feel the general functioning of the club has improved”. (Roberto #3)

The results obtained in each block examined are summarized in Figure 1.

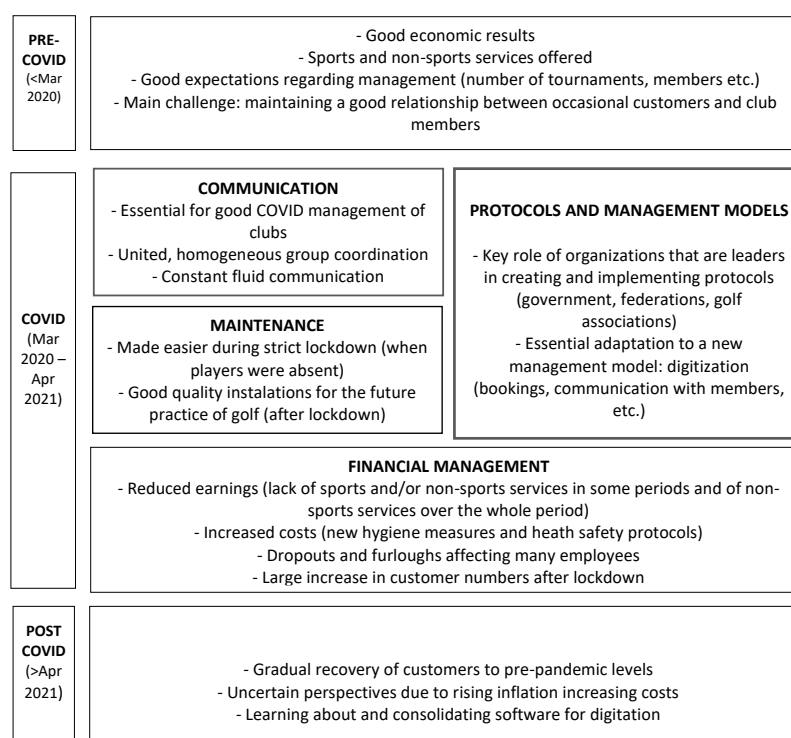


Figure 1. Summary of results: Management of golf courses pre, during, and after COVID-19.

4. Discussion

The COVID pandemic had a myriad of consequences across all sectors of society, and golf course managers, as others, faced previously unknown challenges. Due to wide differences in the characteristics of golf clubs, such as size, user number, or additional services provided, this study uses an inductive qualitative approach to describe these challenges and how they were dealt with. This research method has been traditionally used for more in-depth explanations of different scenarios than those obtained through quantitative research. In the area of sports, similar qualitative research has been performed. For example, in professional soccer, this approach has been used for the safe design of artificial turf fields [24]. Also, best practices [25] and causes of customer dropouts [26] in fitness centers have been explored through qualitative approaches.

4.1. Situation Pre-Pandemic

Our findings reveal that, before the COVID-19 outbreak, the situation for recreational golf clubs was optimistic in terms of growing membership and occasional customer numbers, earnings, and number of sponsors. This positive situation has also been identified by other authors. For example, in 2008, in the US golf was practiced by 25 million people, and, in leisure time, golf courses were constructed, and golfer numbers have been growing since this time [27]. More recent reports reveal that 51% of all golf courses in the world are found in North and Central America, 23% in Europe (Spain has 497 golf courses and ranks 12th worldwide according to this number), 17% in Asia, 5% in Oceania, 2% in South America, and 2% in Africa [28]. Some authors claim that the reincorporation of golf in the 2016 Olympic Games boosted its popularity [29]. The subsequent rise in club subscriptions has meant more revenues from memberships. This observation is consistent with prior research in Europe, in which memberships and green fees were identified as accounting for almost 70% of total golf club revenues [30]. The source of the remaining proportion was additional services, such as earnings from food and beverages [30].

We observed that golf managers are conscious of the mixed profiles of their customers. While conflicts between members and occasional customers have not been reported in the literature, in a recent study, four profiles of golfers were defined: competitive regulars, competitive leisure and business, socially mature, and social family [31]. Definitely, there was a situation in which general theories about the business cycle [32] and evolutionary strategies for business evolution [33] did not seem to be threatened.

4.2. Situation during the Pandemic

One of the main concerns of interviewees during the pandemic was the high cost of protection equipment, such as sanitizing hand gels, face masks, or gloves. This has been a common complaint in the sports industry, affecting sports centers, venues, and arenas [34], and also in non-sport industries [35]. On the upside, as the interviewees mentioned, most club members decided not to drop out. Other authors have also mentioned that they were able to rely on their members' loyalty during the first COVID-19 lockdown [36]. This indicates that the different factors and theories on the aspects that affect customer retention in sports services [37,38] were well established in the interviewed golf clubs.

The managers interviewed also explained that, as an outdoor sport, they were able to safely reinstate their activity earlier than other sports services. This lower transmission risk has been described for sports other than golf, such as outdoor soccer, for which the risk of COVID-19 infection was described as low when preventive measures were in place [39]. Our findings are also in line with a report of no transmission of COVID-19 between professional golfers during the Ladies European Tour [29]. In effect, golf has been described as a manageable activity throughout the COVID-19 pandemic [40]. Other sports identified by some authors as more likely to carry a risk of infection spread are ice hockey [41], squash [42], or fitness activities [43], mainly because of the closed spaces generally required or the exchange of contaminated equipment.

The golf club managers also mentioned that, during the lockdown period, they were able to conduct a lot of maintenance work. This remark was consistent among those interviewed, as golf courses are unusual sports facilities in that they need to be kept alive. Hence, managers gave importance to maintenance tasks concerning the possible reopening of greens. Also, some clubs took advantage of the lockdown period to undertake those tasks that are more difficult to pursue when customers are using the facilities. Golf clubs have been described as having fixed maintenance costs [36], so operating a course can be considered something constant [30]. Billion [44] illustrates that, typically, maintenance of a golf course usually amounts to around 50% of total costs, including maintenance of indoor facilities.

Our results highlight the importance given by golf club managers to the possibility of uninterrupted communication with the different golf stakeholders. This helped build best practice protocols and was also observed by Huth and Billion [36]. These authors mentioned that all stakeholders tried to steer golf towards a better future by underscoring the benefits of golf as a nature experience and health-promoting activity.

When asked about the protocols generated, the main concern was the digitization of processes. Digital platforms have witnessed an exponential increase after the lockdown period. Digital transformation is a worldwide trend, not only for managers [45] but also demanded by users of sports facilities. Clear evidence of this reality is the rise in digital trends between the pre- and post-pandemic era. According to a worldwide survey, online trends were not a priority in 2020, yet they reached the first position in 2021 [46].

4.3. Situation Post-Pandemic

With regard to the post-pandemic perspective, our results reveal the conservative nature of managers' forecasts. While they are optimistic, the uncertain current economic situation resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak and the Ukraine–Russia conflict does not allow for accurate predictions. Some authors' ideas complement our results, in that they feel that more attention should be paid to golfers' health and well-being in the future [36]. Further, as an outdoor activity, we might expect an increased level of participation in golf, as other outdoor recreational activities have already undergone [47]. Considering the characteristics of golf and possible future scenarios, overall, the future is optimistic for golf centers and their stakeholders.

The end of lockdown brought with it a large increase in user numbers, although earnings have not yet returned to those before 2020. Similarly, management during the pandemic expedited the process of digitization of golf clubs, and this was considered one of the main upsides of this period. In the post-COVID era, managers are cautious about future perspectives while they try to recover user numbers and maintain elements now considered essential, such as management communication channels and software. This is in line with the different strategies proposed and carried out in order to recover business in the post-COVID era [48,49].

5. Conclusions and Implications

The main objective of this study was to describe the situation faced by golf club managers before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain. Golf course managers stated that they have moved from a situation of optimism and economic growth, pre-pandemic, to having to deal with challenges that have never been experienced before. Managing conflicts between regular and occasional customers was left aside, as sports and non-sports activities abruptly came to a standstill. Protocols, manuals, restriction measures, and guidelines of every type emerged during this period. Sports management during the COVID-19 pandemic was such that managers had to make decisions that nobody was prepared for. One of the keys of management during the COVID period was the constant communication and transparency among stakeholders, even between clubs in direct competition. This coordination, when it came to designing and implementing protocols, was a great help for the safe return to sports activity, especially as golf is among

the sports for which health measures imposed by the authorities can be more easily put into practice. Managers of golf clubs reduced their staff to a minimum, as revenues barely covered costs. Maintenance operations on greens and essential installations were prioritized to guarantee a return to golf in perfect conditions of play and health. All of it was implemented by a massive modernization process through the digitalization of the entities' procedures, and well received by users due to their "player experience focus" nature.

Implications

Looking at the COVID crisis as a learning opportunity, it is interesting to extract some practical implications that future golf managers and, potentially, even managers from other sport sectors could use to establish a sustainable style of management in their business.

In first place, in the case of golf, it is clear that the central element of such sustainable management would be the "full transparent collaboration among the stakeholders" (i.e., Clubs, Federation, Associations, members, etc.) which facilitates:

- (a) A higher bargaining power with suppliers (trying to, for example, minimize the high impact of inflation over some costs)
- (b) A fairer competence among clubs, especially in the face of the great threat that price-based competition could be, on a specific segment such as golf, traditionally focused on quality and the top socioeconomic level clients.
- (c) Better partnerships and collaborations between clubs. Particularly those clubs with a mixed business model (i.e., pay to play and membership model) can take advantage of the establishment of such agreements to provide to their members "other playing options" when they are unable to offer playing time at their facility due to club massification. During the conducted interviews at the current research, it was mentioned how a few clubs in Spain have this type of agreement, with positive client feedback.
- (d) Potential organization of new events. Sharing resources and efforts among stakeholders would open the potential for new event opportunities that were not in place due to economic or personal limitations.

Secondly, there are two crucial elements that our results have determined to be in the equation of sustainable management. On one hand, there is the need for "Digitalization" of procedures and clubs in general, to increase efficiency and productivity, as well as to reduce costs. On the other hand, there is the need to "Empower Player Experience", which, in this case, was mostly based on creating a "safe playing environment" due to COVID-19. However, it could be interesting to understand what elements enrich the player experience once the global health crisis has passed. Figure 2 visually expresses the recap of the present research and its practical implications.

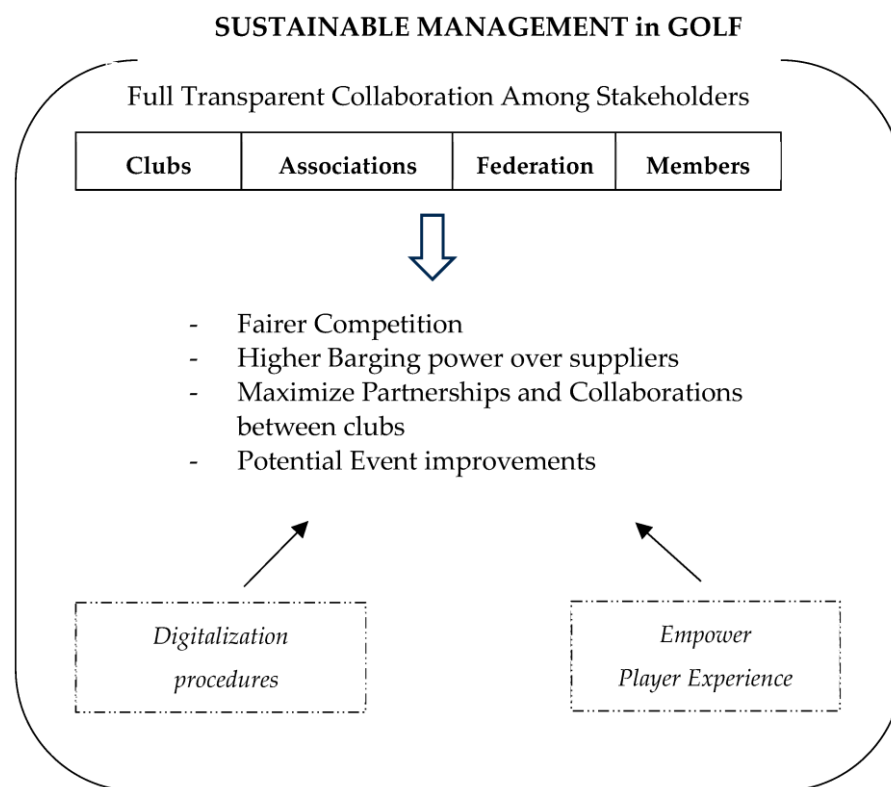


Figure 2. Key implications for establishing sustainable management method in golf.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Á.F.-L., J.B. and P.B.; methodology, Á.F.-L., J.L.-Q. and I.I.-B.; software, J.L.-Q. and I.I.-B.; validation, J.d.A., P.B. and J.L.-Q.; formal analysis, R.M.; investigation, R.M. and J.d.A.; resources, J.B.; data curation, J.B. and I.I.-B.; writing—original draft preparation, R.M.; writing—review and editing, J.B. and J.L.-Q.; visualization, Á.F.-L.; supervision, P.B.; project administration, Á.F.-L.; funding acquisition, Á.F.-L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received internal funding from Universidad Europea’s research projects 2021. CODE: 2021/UEM27.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of Universidad Europea de Madrid (Registry number CIPI/21/073).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality reasons.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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