



CONCOURS D'ADMISSION 2022

FILIERE UNIVERSITAIRE INTERNATIONALE
FORMATION FRANCOPHONE
FUI-FF_ Session 1_Automne

Épreuve n°4

ANGLAIS

Dimanche 19 septembre 2021 de 13h30 à 15h30

Durée : 2 heures

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Enough already! Sport needs to slow down and rein in its endless lust for growth

Whatever the game, let's forget 'conquering' new markets or devising yet more new formats

Adapted from The Guardian, By Emma John, Sun 29 Aug 2021

There were murmurs of disquiet in the England dressing room at Headingley last week and this time they weren't about the top-order batting. They followed the news that a handful of cricket administrators were in line to share a £2.1m bonus, despite Covid cuts that had cost 62 jobs and reduced players' salaries at every level of the game.

5 In response, Ian Watmore, chair of the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB), pointed out that such incentives were “widely adopted across many sectors, including sports federations”. That executives at an emphatically not-for-profit organisation have no embarrassment about sharing a couple of million on top of their very generous salaries merits little more than a shrug and a *c'est la vie*. Bonuses are how you recruit and reward in business and banking, the two
10 worlds from which sport now derives almost all its managerial talent.

What those payments are rewarding *is*, however, worth considering. If you want to know what drives sports governance these days, cricket can offer two distinct examples from the past month alone. First is The Hundred, a new tournament that the majority of fans didn't want and which muscled into an already strained schedule. The second was the news that the sport would
15 be bidding for inclusion at the 2028 Olympics. Both ventures spring from a common belief: that the sport must expand its reach and its revenues, both domestically and abroad.

The Hundred was sold hard to sceptics as the only way that cricket could save itself from increasing irrelevance by appealing to audiences it was failing to engage – despite plenty of evidence to the contrary. The Olympics, meanwhile, have been presented as a “no-brainer” for
20 the sport, a way to spread the game beyond the limits of its erstwhile colonial territories and grab a foothold in the lucrative US market.

Cricket's leadership is only trying to keep pace with the pack. Tennis and golf – two sports with their own legacies and silverware – fought their way back into the Games in a bid to break out of their “niche”, not content with being two of the wealthiest sports on the planet. The NFL
25 tried to expand into the UK, despite being the world's most profitable professional sports league. This is what every individual sport's message is now – that it needs more people to play, to watch and to spend.

What's never questioned is the founding doctrine of expansion. Growth is how society – or at least the corporate world – measures success and so the idea that each sport must take aggressive
30 measures to increase its fanbase, to endlessly improve market share, to make converts of countries that until now have preferred basketball or kabaddi, has become so indoctrinated into its philosophy that governing bodies have turned empire builders.

The mid-2000s realisation that there was more money to be made than cricket administrators had ever previously imagined was what first turned the sport's head. Ever since Rupert
35 Murdoch's Sky, then financial fraudster Allen Stanford flashed their cash in its direction, those running cricket have indulged the narrative that the game's future is on the line, that it's take the money or die. Rarely has there been any indication that this is the case. Some elements of

the sport are more lucrative than others, some parts have to be subsidised to survive. The notion that cricket itself is so unloved that it's on the brink of extinction and only a constant cash-grab can save fans from a cricket-free universe is patent nonsense.

Still, the game must always be growing, must constantly be expanding, must establish itself wherever there's more money

It's an easier line to sell, however, than the truth, which is that cricket, like every other sport, like most businesses and governments and societies, is so wedded to a hypercapitalistic ideology that it has completely lost perspective on what it is and what it's for. Cricket isn't fixated with maximising its revenue streams in order to stave off oblivion, but because that's the only model that those who run it know and it's what earns executives their bonuses.

Why does sport still cling to the myth of infinite growth that flies in the face of everything we've learned about sustainability? There was a hopefulness in the early weeks of the pandemic that a global shutdown would force us all to think differently. That individuals and communities alike would take a good hard look at the way we were living, reassess our objectives, take some responsibility, and emerge into a new and chastened world that thought before it acted.

Not sport. Football came straight out of the gate with the much reviled idea of a European Super League funded by an investment bank. And not cricket, either. The rush to recoup Covid losses has been as good an excuse as any to ignore criticism that there are too many games and cram even more into the calendar. When player fatigue became an issue, the response was not to programme less cricket but to enlarge squads and implement rotation policies. This hasn't worked, by the way. England have lost their biggest all-round star, Ben Stokes, at the peak of the summer season and for the foreseeable future.

But still the game must always be growing, must constantly be expanding its reach, must establish itself wherever there's more money and more growth to be had. Thus the Olympics and the long-sought gateway into the land of the free. Some administrators will give you humbug that all this global expansionism is born of a missionary zeal for the game, as if countries such as America and China don't know what they're missing.

It doesn't help that in the UK sports such as cricket and rugby have found themselves so crushed beneath the football juggernaut that they're battling a constant inferiority complex. And in rugby's case, the intervention of private capital, such as that of the equity firms now invested across the game, from England's Premiership to the New Zealand team, can only accelerate the process, as return on investment becomes a higher priority than those who play the game.

But it would be nice if, just once, the people who run these sports could take a step back from their commercial backgrounds and see our favourite sport as the rest of us see it – something to be enjoyed by whoever likes it at the time, something that doesn't need to be loved by everyone or to be “mainstream” in every nation. A game that was invented for leisure, pleasure and recreation, not a product to be sold and marketed incessantly, to bolster a bottom line and justify its executives' bonuses.

Emma John is a sportswriter and the author of *Following On: A Memoir of Teenage Obsession and Terrible Cricket*.
(1146 words)

1. READING COMPREHENSION

Answer the following questions *in your own words*.

- Any passage including 3 or more words in sequence taken from the source, or paraphrase without citation will be penalized.
- 50 words minimum / question.

1. Explain the following sentence: *The Olympics, meanwhile, have been presented as a “no-brainer” for the sport... (1.19-20)*

2. Why are rugby and cricket particularly threatened by the quest for growth?

3. How is the decision to award a bonus to the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) justified?

4. Why can the “lust for growth” be detrimental to sport, and especially to cricket?

2. ESSAY

Discuss the statement below (450 words, +/- 10%; use a / every 50 words). Please indicate the number of words at the end of your essay.

But it would be nice if, just once, the people who run these sports could take a step back from their commercial backgrounds and see our favourite sport as the rest of us see it. [A] game that was invented for leisure, pleasure and recreation, not a product to be sold and marketed incessantly, to bolster a bottom line and justify its executives' bonuses. (1.70-75)