



Covid-19 Impact Study 2021

Summary Report

Introduction

Since early 2020, Covid-19 has affected all our daily lives. The global pandemic stopped people from enjoying their hobbies, meeting friends and family, travelling, or even working as normal. The speed at which the virus spread, and the loss of life was enormous. Face masks, lockdowns and PCR tests have become part of regular life since that time. There has been an unimaginable impact on us all.

Most sport was cancelled or postponed starting in March 2020. Major sporting events, including the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and football's EURO 2020, were postponed, resulting in hundreds of millions of euros being added to the event budgets. The return to sport was complicated. Covid-19 protocols had to be written. Local and national regulations had to be implemented, travel restrictions, quarantine, vaccine certificates, spectator restrictions, plus a myriad of other obstacles had to be navigated.

The impact caused by the pandemic on Floorball activities has been substantial. There is not a single IFF Member Association who has not been touched by the effects of the pandemic. This report by the International Floorball Federation aims to identify the areas of the sport that have been hardest hit. By having a better understanding of the impact, the IFF, Member Associations, Clubs, and greater Floorball community can focus their resources on the areas where it will be needed most.

Survey Method

The Covid-19 Impact Study survey and its results were designed and analysed using Webropol, an online survey software tool. The survey was sent out to all 74 IFF Member Associations, of which 32 (42%) returned a completed survey. The study was conducted during April and May 2021, meaning that the answers relate to the MA experiences of the second half of the 2019-20 season and the whole 2020-21 season. The survey consisted of a total of 107 questions in nine different categories:

1. Competition
2. Participation
3. Referees
4. Organisation
5. Media
6. Marketing
7. Transfers
8. Finance
9. National Teams & IFF Events

In addition to the MA survey responses, the IFF Administration itself completed an analysis of how Covid-19 effected its operations during the same period. Similar categories and questions to those used in the survey were addressed by the IFF.

This report includes the summary section from each survey category, as well as the impact on the IFF for each category. The full report includes the detailed responses for every survey question, presented in graph form with an analysis of the results. As well, all responses to text-based questions are included in the full report.

A copy of the full report can be downloaded from the IFF website:

<https://floorball.sport/materials/downloads/>

1. COMPETITION

Competitions were clearly the activity that was most significantly impacted by Covid-19. The lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, the regulations that stopped indoor activities, the closing of schools and halls, as well as the limits on the number of people who could participate in an activity, all had a very negative impact on Floorball worldwide. There was not a single country where Floorball competitions were not stopped for some period of time.

In many countries where Floorball is a larger and more well-known sport, the top leagues were able to restart much sooner than in other countries, but still the junior leagues and lower adult divisions all suffered extensive breaks. Even the top leagues that restarted often had to pause due to regulations being introduced again, struggled with how to manage the competition when covid positive cases caused games to be cancelled, or had to play with empty arenas.

On a positive note, the Floorball community showed they were easily adaptable to adopting new rules, new formats of play, and Covid-adapted playing environments.

IMPACT ON IFF COMPETITIONS

From 3rd February 2020 - 25th August 2021 no IFF events were held and just 17 international matches played by National Associations. As a comparison, in the previous same period (Feb 2018 – Aug 2019) there were 20 IFF events and 177 international matches organised by National Associations.

At the end of January 2020, just before Covid-19 really hit, the Men's WFC 2020 European qualifications were played but the AOFC event scheduled for early March was the first IFF event to be cancelled. Over the next 18 months, all IFF events were cancelled or postponed, some being postponed several times. It was an unprecedented situation that we faced and the uncertainty about how the pandemic would develop, the different advice and approaches between countries, and the lack of any previous protocols to follow made the situation incredibly difficult for all stakeholders – the IFF, the local organising committees and, of course, the participating National Associations.

Like the National Associations, the IFF had to adapt. Covid-19 protocols for events were developed; Go/No-go dates for events were introduced; even whole new competitions were launched with the World Virtual Floorball Freestyle Cup in 2020. Trying to predict future Floorball activities in a world that looked completely different, not just as a whole but in each of our Member Associations, was very complex.

2. PARTICIPATION

With the lack of Floorball competitions, there was a subsequent impact on the level of participation, with National Associations finding it difficult to maintain licensed player numbers when they had no competitions to offer. This loss of players will be felt for many years to come and could significantly impact the Associations ability to operate at pre-Covid levels, especially as many rely on player licence fees to make up a large proportion of their operating income.

The adult (21-40yrs) age group was identified as the category that was projected to lose the greatest number of participants in coming years. Although juniors were severely restricted in their activities, the younger age groups were generally the focus of government actions when lifting restrictions. For associations it will be important to engage again with the youth and secure the participation of juniors to ensure future growth, as well as also working to attract back these senior players who contribute to the depth of an association.

IMPACT OF REDUCED PARTICIPATION ON IFF

The reduced number of participants in each of our Member Associations will be clearly reflected in the overall participation statistics for our sport when the next Member audit is carried out. Floorball will not be alone in this situation, as the majority of sports will feel the same impact, but it will be how quickly that we can rebuild those participation numbers that will prove significant, especially in comparison to the recovery of other sports.

To ensure the quality of future IFF competitions it will be important that our Member Associations can rebuild their participation levels as quickly as possible, allowing for depth of players for selection at national representative level.

3. REFEREES

Unlike players who can practice technical skills on their own, maintaining the skill levels of a referee is very difficult without any matches to officiate. We can expect to see the development of referees impacted by the break in competitions and it will be important to be aware of the need to fill the 'gap' in both experience of referees and the number of referees in the future.

Many National Associations took the opportunity to provide education for new referees, mostly online, which was an activity that many of them had not done before, either because of the lack of resources or the idea that only face-to-face education was acceptable. As well as the actual online education, many created new educational materials and developed new communication methods. These positive actions will help to ensure that the level of refereeing is maintained once competition levels return to 'normal'. A return to referee exchange programmes will be important for helping to maintain skill levels and development.

IMPACT ON IFF REFEREES

During the break in international tournaments, most of the referee education responsibility fell to the National Associations since no international events were organised. The break in events allowed for other projects such as the Physical Play project to be given more attention. All IFF referee educations were carried out online and the IFF Referee Committee was able to manage the international referee and observer nomination procedure for 2021/2022 as planned.

The IFF didn't lose any international referees or observers because of the lack of games due to the pandemic and all the selected referees and observers continued their international careers as planned. The IFF, like the national associations, also created some new materials and had online educations and online rule tests. All the selected international referees and observers had to take the updated online rule test before their final approval as international referees and observers.

4. ORGANISATION

The different organisational structures of the Member Associations were affected in a variety of ways during the pandemic. Those with employed staff were able to work on alternative projects while several smaller associations, run just by volunteer staff took the opportunity to restructure and reorganise their operations. Although income may have been less, for most associations their costs were also reduced during the pandemic, so the financial impact was perhaps not as harsh as it may have been initially expected.

In most countries, office operations moved online with people working from home for at least a short amount of time, and in some cases, for very extended periods. The use of 'new' online tools for meetings and education exploded and proved very useful. Not only were more people able to be reached, but operating costs were reduced.

Understandably, in many countries, clubs requested some kind of financial assistance from the Association, mostly in the form of reduced fees for the coming season or partial/full refunds of fees already paid for competitions that were not able to be held.

IMPACT ON IFF ORGANISATION

Without events there was a clear financial impact for IFF, but with significantly reduced costs and savings, especially in regard to travel, combined with the support from the International Olympic Committee & the Finnish Ministry of Education, the IFF was able to carry on operations as normal for almost the entire period. The IFF staff were furloughed for a period of one month each at the end of 2020, but full-time staff numbers were not reduced and the temporary employment of interns for special projects (such as this survey) was still possible.

The IFF office in Helsinki, Finland, where the majority of IFF staff are located, followed the government guidelines for working from home. This has meant that the staff worked away from the office starting from March 2020. The government work-from-home recommendation ended in Finland on 15th October 2021 and most staff are now working a combination of days in the office and from home.

Apart from the stoppage of events, the main impact for the IFF operations was that almost all development activities were stopped in 2020, but during the latter part of the survey period some virtual development educations were organised. The fact that no physical meetings were able to be



organised first caused a small standstill in the operations, but within a few weeks the different tools for virtual meetings were quickly adopted. Microsoft Teams has been the main tool for regular staff meetings and internal communications, as well as the main method for conducting committee & Central Board meetings. New technologies were introduced for General Assembly 2020, including online voting via Mentimeter, but with the reduced income the development of other tools, such as the renewal of the IFF Statistics Software and IFF website were not able to proceed as planned.

The postponement and cancellation of Events lead to an increased need for consultation and negotiations with the organisers, not only in regard to agreements, but also how and when to publish news of decisions taken. IFF was forced to renegotiate all TV agreements for the WFC 2020. The IFF CB had four additional meetings per year compared to normal, mainly due to the pandemic and extra decisions that needed to be taken. There was close contact with the Member Associations as the political implications of the Covid-19 related decisions had to be discussed in detail.

5. MEDIA

At the beginning of the pandemic, when all Floorball activities were stopped, Associations worked hard to maintain the engagement of their fans. Over an extended period though this became increasingly difficult as the amount of new content was significantly reduced. The most significant impact was on website visitor numbers, while social media channel engagement remained steadier. Many adopted the use of new channels, such as Tik Tok, and successfully used social media to run 'at-home' campaigns and promotions.

Once top league competitions were able to resume the restrictions on spectators meant that the broadcast of Floorball matches became even more important as this was the only possible way to reach an audience. Many associations already had broadcast or streaming agreements in place and most of these were able to broaden their reach. Many used archive footage and created highlight packages to ensure continual content on their channels.

IMPACT ON IFF MEDIA

As the pandemic took over and cancelled or postponed IFF Events, it also reduced floorball content. Website user numbers decreased and so did the impressions and engagements on IFF social media channels. The usual increase on these numbers during World Floorball Championships and other events was not realised due to the pandemic.

To keep followers engaged, the IFF shared followers' videos on how to keep practising floorball at home. To utilise new virtual concepts, IFF launched the first ever World Virtual Freestyle Floorball Cup (WVFFC) which was aimed to activate floorball players around the world. Since events were not creating any new content, different types of throwback posts were published on social media utilising photos and video footage from past IFF Events.

6. MARKETING

The marketing activities of the IFF National Associations already varied greatly before the pandemic, so the effects have also been different. Fortunately, most members who already had agreements have found that their sponsors and partners have been understanding of the situation, however, they do foresee an impact for future negotiations, both with current and potential partners. Their lower participant numbers and reduced website/social media users could reduce their negotiating strength and make them less attractive as a partner.

IMPACT ON IFF MARKETING

The market was very challenging for the IFF due to the pandemic. With the absence of events and uncertain outlook about restarting floorball, in addition to instability on the market in general, resulted in a reluctance to engage into negotiations. Despite the difficult market situation, the IFF was still able to open some new leads and progress the discussion with sports apparel providers. The positive outcomes of new partners for some federations as well as for WFC 2022 in Switzerland shows that companies see the situation improving in the near future.

Prior to the pandemic, the partnership with Protocol Sports Marketing had not produced many results so the slow situation on the market left time to re-negotiate the existing agreement. In addition, a new sales agency was contracted during the period - Red Carpet Brand Alliances. This agreement covers the Nordic countries, with sales starting in November 2021.

Floorball manufacturers have been hard hit by the pandemic, not just by reduced sales, but also by difficulties in sourcing product materials. Until participation levels significantly increase, finding a balance between demand, production, and supply will be difficult.

During the pandemic the IFF invested time to create a product catalogue with the assistance of the Swedish Floorball Federation. The IFF sponsors have been very understanding of the overall situation. With the restart of events the IFF have tried to, where possible, fulfil special requests from sponsors that in some way help to compensate for the missed events, despite it being a force majeure situation.

7. TRANSFERS

Most international transfers are made between the larger Floorball countries so, not surprisingly, it was these countries who felt the greatest impact of the pandemic in this area. With competitions stopped and lockdowns introduced many players, especially those who are based in foreign countries for the sole purpose of playing Floorball, chose to return to their home country.

Smaller member countries that have many foreign players who are temporarily located there due to other (non-Floorball related) employment, also experienced a loss of players as many companies shut down projects during the pandemic. Most believe that transfers will still be impacted in the short-term due to continuing uncertainty caused by the pandemic and travel restrictions.

IMPACT ON IFF TRANSFERS

Due to Covid-19 the IFF introduced a temporary transfer rule which allowed foreign players, whose series in their leagues were temporarily stopped, to return to their original country. Players were also able to move and temporarily play in another country for the same reason. The Covid-19 temporary regulations were valid from 1st November 2020 until 30th of June 2021.

The pandemic forced a lot of National Leagues to suspend their competitions and therefore players were looking for a opportunities to play in leagues that were still running. IFF noticed an increase in transfers between November 2020 and January 2021, during which 73 players temporarily moved to play in another league. Due to the lack of International Tournaments during the summer, there were no Temporary Play Transfers or Student Transfers. In total, international transfers were made to 20 different countries during the 2020/2021 transfer period (1st July 2020 – 15th January 2021), with the top four destinations being Finland (127), Sweden (126), Czech Republic (98) and Switzerland (93).

8. FINANCE

The level of government support that members received had a significant impact on their financial situation during the pandemic. Some were lucky enough to receive high levels of aid, while most received very little, or even nothing. The financial impact is also somewhat double-edged. The bigger federations may have had more significant losses but due to their larger member base their recovery may be swifter, while the smaller federations, with smaller losses but much less potential for income, may take a much longer time to recover. Development and national teams were the areas highlighted as most likely to suffer in the future due to a reduction in available finances.

IMPACT ON IFF FINANCES

The financials for IFF were already quite strained, mainly being a liquidity problem, but were moving in a positive direction when Covid-19 hit. Relatively early it was realised the need to cut about a third of the annual budget so as not to jeopardise the existence of IFF. All travelling was stopped and only the most essential investments on development were carried out. In the end of 2020, the IFF employees were all furloughed for four weeks.

The IFF received Covid-19 financial support of USD 75,000 from the IOC, divided in two halves, the first part in 2020 and the second part early 2021, as well as support from the Finnish Ministry of Education of EUR 50,000. These support payments, together with the cost-cutting measures, helped IFF to stay on the positive side. To avoid a further liquidity crisis, the IFF negotiated with the associations registered to IFF events that had to be cancelled, as well as those associations that could not participate in IFF events due to restrictions, that their paid fees should stay with IFF and be used for later events. In addition, IFF secured the possibility of a EUR 100,000 loan from the Finnish Floorball Federation, but as the Covid restrictions have eased and events were confirmed to be played this option has not yet been needed to be used.

9. NATIONAL TEAMS & IFF EVENTS

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IMPACT ON IFF EVENTS

The direct impact of the pandemic of IFF events during the survey period is summarised in the earlier section on competitions, however the impacts on the national teams will have a flow-on effect for future IFF events. There is expected to be some financial strain on many Member Associations and the participation of national teams in international events is an area where many may look to for cutting expenses.

The holding of events is imperative to the success of the IFF. We rely on income from these for the running of the organisation as well as the implementation of development plans. The IFF relies on National Associations to host events and for teams to register and participate. Any significant drop in either of these areas will need to be looked out for.

In the short-term, National Associations may find it more difficult to secure government support for hosting tournaments, thereby limiting the number organisers available to host IFF events. The increased need for Covid-19 protocols and the added expense both for the organiser and participating teams may also have an impact on participation in events. The risk associated with hosting or attending an event is also higher while the Covid-19 virus remains active.

Conclusion

This Covid-19 Impact Study provides a picture of the huge impact that the pandemic has had on Floorball worldwide. The lack of competitions had the biggest effect, especially on participation levels and the finances of clubs, national associations, and the IFF, however the study shows the great resilience of our Member Associations to adapt and change. While we may not have been able to offer traditional competitions during the worst periods of the pandemic, we found new ways to bring Floorball to our members. Online education, online team training, online meetings, and virtual competitions were areas where new opportunities appeared.

We developed new ways of working during the pandemic, many of which will likely stay with us in the future. The time away from organising competitions offered some members the chance to re-organise and focus on areas of the organisation that had been overlooked. For most of the competitions there were large periods where spectators were not allowed in the venue, so clubs and associations offered more games than ever via online platforms.

There is no doubt that in the coming years we will all still feel the effects of 2020/2021. The Covid-19 pandemic is not yet over, and we must still find ways to rebuild. A focus on attracting back players, spectators, and sponsors will be vital. The IFF & National Associations must be sure to focus not just on recovering the youth development but also ensure that the recreational and lower-level adult players are brought back to the sport. Returning participation numbers to pre-Covid levels is important not just for the statistics but also directly impacts the financial position of clubs and associations.

The success of online activities must be built upon. The benefits of online education – lower costs and higher participation possibilities – must continue. In sport, there is often no substitute for face-to-face training, but we must try and offer a variety of education methods at all levels to cater for as many people as possible.

The online presence of Floorball has grown significantly in past years and during the pandemic we were able to maintain a significant proportion of followers across all media channels. Future events must capitalise on new technologies and platforms to keep our followers engaged and attract new ones. The pandemic has shown the importance of the online connection to our supporters. Even without competitions we clearly have a strong product to offer not just to consumers but also for our partners.

Since the survey was concluded in mid-2021, the IFF have successfully staged two Under 19 World Championships and have two adult WFCs just around the corner. The league competitions in almost all European countries have begun for season 2021/22 and international matches are being held regularly between Member Associations. There are still major sporting events being postponed or cancelled, so the pandemic is not yet over, but Floorball has developed strong Covid-19 protocols that can be implemented for all events, and we now have the knowledge of how to plan within Covid-19 adapted event environments. We are hopeful that we do not find ourselves again in the situation of having to postpone or cancel events, and we are confident that the Member Associations will slowly recover memberships levels.

The IFF hopes that with the review of this report new initiatives and projects will be implemented to help rebuild Floorball throughout the world. Life has not returned to 'normal', and perhaps may never fully return to how things were before, so we must adapt to the new climate and endeavour to find different and improved ways to engage our players, fans, sponsors, and media to make Floorball even stronger than before.

Thank you to all of the National Associations who took the time to complete the survey, and thank you to Mattias Kauk from Northumbria University who provided the results analysis as part of his Sport Management studies and internship with IFF.



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