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## A 'conditioned emergence' approach to managing systemic change in sport: insights from Golf Australia

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### ABSTRACT

**Research question:** Managing systemic change within sport governing bodies is a complex challenge. This paper uses the lens of complexity theory to shed new light on the process and investigates the following question: How can the 'conditioned emergence' model inform the management of systemic change within sport governing bodies?

**Research method:** Qualitative research was conducted with Golf Australia, which in 2018 moved from a federated to a unitary 'one-management' structure. A total of 21 semi-interviews were conducted with key stakeholders involved in the change.

**Findings:** The study reveals that Golf Australia's leaders faced considerable difficulty managing the change. Complexity theory is found to be a potent explanatory lens, highlighting how the organisation's 'deep structure' and order-generating rules acted as a powerful constraining force. Additionally, findings show that adopting a more intentional quasi-emergent change strategy, encapsulated by the three-step 'conditioned emergence' model – comprising 'conditioning', moving to far-from-equilibrium conditions', and 'managing feedback processes' – could have helped overcome this constraining force and facilitate a smoother transition.



**Implications:** This research extends the sport organisational change literature by introducing a new theoretical perspective for understanding change dynamics in sport governing bodies. It highlights the conceptual value of viewing these organisations as complex systems constrained by deep structures and rules. Furthermore, it demonstrates the utility of a quasi-emergent change approach, namely the conditioned emergence model, for effectively managing systemic change within such intricate and complex environments.

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## Introduction

Amidst an industry renowned for relentless transformation, understanding how to manage change successfully has been of longstanding interest to sport management researchers (Parent et al., 2021). To this end, a wide range of studies has been conducted on the forms, extent, drivers, and barriers of organisational change within sport, and particularly in national sport governing bodies (NGBs) (Hoye et al., 2020). From a theoretical standpoint, various perspectives have been employed including organisation theory (Ferkins et al., 2005), resource-dependency theory (Mrkonjic, 2023) and the contextualist approach (Thibault & Babiak, 2005). However, it is institutional theory that has emerged as the dominant lens for analysing change in sport (Robertson et al., 2021).

While institutional theory and others have provided significant insight into organisational change in sport, our assertion is that other perspectives can further illuminate the intricacies of change dynamics in the contemporary sport environment. A form of change gaining increasing attention in sport is the shift from federated to unitary governance and management structures, especially in Australia but also globally (McLeod et al., 2021a; O'Boyle & Shilbury, 2016a). This systemic change presents unique challenges due to the range of interconnected stakeholders involved, the complexities of structural change in a highly regulated environment, and the social dynamics at play in federated structures (O'Boyle & Shilbury, 2016b). The central argument of this paper is that an alternative approach underpinned by complexity theory, the conditioned emergence model (MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999), can serve as a valuable new way to understand and address the complexities of such a change.

The research question guiding this paper is: How can the 'conditioned emergence' model inform the management of systemic change within sport governing bodies? The Conditioned Emergence Model (CEM) comprises three steps: conditioning, moving to far-from-equilibrium conditions, and managing feedback processes. The model is distinctive for its 'quasi-emergent' approach. This means it allows for so-called 'self-organisation' (i.e. the spontaneous formation of patterns or structures within a system) at operational levels, while still enabling leaders to manage at the level of 'deep structure' (i.e. the underlying principles and rules that guide organisational behaviour) to maintain control over the broad archetype of the change (MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999, 2001). We propose that the quasi-emergent nature of conditioned emergence is highly relevant for sport management, as it offers a nuanced and practical way to navigate change in the complex, dynamic systems that sport governing bodies represent. Moreover, the model's emphasis on managing at the level of deep structure is particularly relevant to sport, given the ingrained beliefs and values that pervade the sector, as well as its often-rigid regulatory environment (Nagel et al., 2015). These features make the CEM a potentially significant new addition to the body of research on organisational change in sport.

To address the research question, we conduct qualitative research with Golf Australia (GA). In 2018, the network of Australian golf governing bodies underwent a systemic change in which five (of seven) state associations transitioned from a federated to a unitary management structure. That only five of GA's seven state associations participated in the change indicates that universal buy-in was not secured. The mixed support for the initiative makes it an intriguing case to examine, as valuable insights

can be gained into effective change management processes from both failure and success in organisations (Tondem, 2005).

## Organisational change in sport

Research on organisational change in sport started to gain momentum in the 1980s-90s. The body of literature in this area is now extensive. To maintain brevity, this section will review some key papers relevant to the present study. Kikulis et al.'s (1992) seminal work identified three main organisational archetypes (Kitchen Table, Boardroom, and Executive Office) underpinning change dynamics in NGBs. Recent research has revisited this work and proposed four contemporary archetypes that reflect different values, complexity, revenue sources, board composition, and governance (Parent et al., 2021). The concept of design archetypes has underpinned our increased understanding of change patterns in NGBs, with the idea of 'tracks' used to explain and analyse movement between archetypes (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988).

Another consistent theme throughout sport organisational change research has been the use of institutional theory. As Robertson et al.'s (2021) review article demonstrates, institutional theory has proven a highly influential lens for an extensive range of sport organisational change studies, and specifically how isomorphic pressures, institutional logics and institutional work explain the drivers and barriers of change and, in particular, the journey toward professionalisation. However, the theory's primary focus on the role of external forces arguably comes at the expense of understanding internal organisational dynamics (Nite & Edwards, 2021). Specifically, institutional theory tends to emphasise stability and conformity through external influences, which can make it less adept at capturing the more dynamic and complex internal factors that influence change within sport organisations' internal systems. Therefore, while institutional theory offers valuable insights, its emphasis on external factors may not fully encapsulate the intricacies of change processes within sport organisations.

Whilst dominant, institutional theory has not been the only theory used (see Table 1). Pettigrew's contextualist approach has also been adopted to understand change, including in the Bulgarian (Girginov & Sandanski, 2008) and Canadian contexts (Thibault & Babiak, 2005). This perspective focuses on the interplay between the content, context, and process of change to provide a comprehensive view of organisational transformation. However, like institutional theory, this approach also falls short of capturing the systemic aspects and internal complexity of sport governing bodies.

As indicated in Table 1, resource-dependency theory is another perspective that has contributed to the understandings of organisational change in sport (Vos et al., 2011). Resources are proposed to be assets acquired from the external environment (e.g. government funding), meaning the theory emphasises the external dynamics and drivers of organisational change (Mrkonjic, 2023). Parallel to this, stakeholder theory offers a perspective on the influence of external entities on change processes and has been used to explain the process of radical change (Thompson & Parent, 2021). Finally, organisation theory has been drawn on to frame research questions focused on change in sport, particularly in the context of professionalisation (Ferkins et al., 2005). Organisation theory is a meta-theory and thus does not provide a specific model on the internal machinations of change within sport governing bodies (Parent & O'Brien, 2018). While these perspectives

**Table 1.** Theories of organisational change in sport.

Theory	Premise	Perspective on Organisational Change
Conditioned Emergence (Complexity Theory)	Organisations are complex adaptive systems with dynamic, nonlinear interactions among network actors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unpredictability is a feature of organisational change.</li> <li>• Some measure of control over change is attainable through deep structure management using a quasi-emergent approach.</li> <li>• Emphasises managing internal dynamics of organisational change.</li> </ul>
Organisation Theory	An umbrella meta-theory for understanding organisational structure, processes, and design.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change is an essential part of organisational life.</li> <li>• A wide range of internal and external focused perspectives can elucidate change processes.</li> </ul>
Institutional Theory	Organisations conform to societal norms and institutional pressures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change is driven by the need to maintain legitimacy and align with institutional expectations.</li> <li>• The external environment is the key driver of organisational change.</li> </ul>
Contextualist Approach	Change is influenced by the historical and situational context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Context (both internal and external) is crucial in shaping the nature, speed, and direction of organisational change processes.</li> </ul>
Resource-dependency Theory	Organisations must access external resources to survive and thrive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leaders must focus on external strategic resource management and alliance-building in efforts to execute successful organisational change.</li> </ul>
Stakeholder Theory	Organisations must satisfy external stakeholders to survive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• External stakeholders play a key role in driving change and play a central role in determining the success of a change.</li> </ul>

all have their strengths, we propose that complexity theory can provide an enhanced understanding of the nuanced internal dynamics of change processes in NGBs.

## Complexity theory

Whilst originating in the natural sciences, complexity theory was embraced by social scientists in the 1990s. These scholars proposed that it could serve as an effective perspective for understanding organisational change (Rosenhead et al., 2019). In its broadest sense, complexity theory explains how systems (either natural or human) grow, adapt, and evolve (Dick et al., 2017).

Before establishing the central tenets of complexity theory, it is crucial to define ‘complexity’ and its key characteristics. In organisational contexts, ‘complexity’ refers to the intricate nature of systems, which in this case are the organisations themselves. These systems are comprised of a collection of interacting objects – be they employees, volunteers, or business units. A key aspect of complexity is ‘emergence’, a phenomenon where

the collective behaviour of the system's parts gives rise to outcomes that are not easily predictable (Rosenhead et al., 2019). Complexity in organisations manifests in various ways, including 'non-linearity', where small changes can lead to disproportionately large impacts; 'adaptability', meaning the system's ability to modify itself in response to environmental changes; and 'unpredictability', where despite certain regularities, the exact future state of the system cannot be precisely determined (Dolan et al., 2003; Turner & Baker, 2019). In sum, complexity within organisations refers to the emergent, adaptive, and often unpredictable behaviours and outcomes generated by a collection of interacting objects (Rosenhead et al., 2019).

Building on this foundational understanding of complexity, MacIntosh and MacLean (2001) asserted that complexity theory is best described as being organised around a few core concepts:

A primary concern is with the emergence of order in so-called *complex adaptive systems* ... Such order manifests itself through emergent *self-organisation* which occurs as a limited number of *simple order-generating rules* operate across a *densely interconnected network* of interacting elements to selectively amplify certain random events via *positive feedback*. This propels the system away from its current state toward a new, ordered state. (p. 1346)

The concept of complex adaptive systems is central to complexity theory. According to the 'dissipative structure' school of complexity theory, these systems experience episodic change, in which they transition between periods of instability and stability (MacIntosh & MacLean, 2001). Order emerges in these systems via the process of self-organisation. As the above quotation indicates, self-organisation is influenced by two forces. First, *order-generating rules*, which can be understood as fundamental points of reference that bring order to systems (McCarthy, 2003). In human systems such as sport governing bodies, order-generating rules can be understood as conceptions of 'how things are done here' (MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999), with an example being that power should be centralised to achieve optimal performance, or that the organisation should not take significant risks. When a system is in disequilibrium perhaps due to a perceived impending crisis, order-generating rules act as a constraining force on how the system adapts and evolves (MacIntosh & Romme, 2004).

The second force driving system change is *positive feedback* (or feedback processes). When in disequilibrium, systems become more responsive and 'open' to the non-linear interactions between network actors and, subsequently, this can have a significant impact on how the system changes (this phenomenon is referred to as a system behaving as a 'dissipative structure') (MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999). Because these interactions (feedback processes) are unpredictable, it means the outcome of the system change cannot be foreseen. At the same time, the feedback processes are guided and constrained by broader order-generating rules (Cairney, 2012). Interestingly, and as we elaborate in the next section, complexity theorists have noted that, unlike in the natural world, humans can gain greater control over how system change unfolds by consciously managing at the level of 'deep structure' to reframe order-generating rules, and actively 'hack' or use feedback processes to amplify and garner support for their new rules (MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999, 2001). This allows organisational leaders to better shape the direction of system change in their own vision.

We propose that complexity theory offers a potentially fruitful lens for understanding the intricacies of change within sport governing bodies, particularly due to its focus on dynamic, interconnected systems and how they evolve. Sport governing bodies inherently resemble complex adaptive systems. They are dynamic entities, constantly adapting to shifts in policy, public opinion, and financial pressures (Parent et al., 2021). Complexity theory provides a perspective that helps us to understand these emergent, often non-linear changes, making it adept at capturing the dynamism and unpredictability of this environment. Moreover, these organisations are not isolated but exist as part of a web of interconnected stakeholders, ranging from regional bodies, athletes and coaches to sponsors and fans (Ferkins et al., 2018). Complexity theory again presents a potentially potent lens for understanding such densely interconnected systems, offering insights into how changes in one part of the network can ripple through the entire organisation. Furthermore, the theory's focus on 'deep structure' allows for a nuanced understanding of the underlying norms, rules, and cultures that guide behaviour (and constrain change) within these organisations. This is particularly relevant to the sport context, where traditions and long-standing cultures are known to play a significant role in shaping (and constraining) organisational structures and dynamics (Amis et al., 2004; Nagel et al., 2015; Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2012). The following section introduces the specific complexity theory model that underpins this research.

### **The conditioned emergence model**

The CEM (MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999) is rooted in complexity theory and consists of three managerially actionable steps that, if followed, are theorised, and have been shown, to facilitate successful organisational transformation: (1) conditioning, (2) moving-to-far-from-equilibrium-conditions, (3) managing the feedback process. While presented sequentially below, these steps are acknowledged to be fluid and overlapping in nature (MacIntosh et al., 2023).

MacIntosh and MacLean (1999) assert that the first step, conditioning, requires change leaders to identify the 'order-generating rules' that underpin its 'deep structure' and attempt to modify those rules to align with their own, new vision for the organisation. Essentially, the order-generating rules underpinning the deep structure represent the organisation's implicit beliefs about its nature and operational methods (or as we noted earlier, the notion of 'how things are done here'). This conditioning process can take various forms but generally involves extensive engagement with organisational actors to articulate and persuade them of the new rules' benefits. The conditioning task is difficult because it requires challenging longstanding and deeply ingrained beliefs.

The second step requires that, following the conditioning work, the organisation must move to far-from equilibrium conditions so that the new rules can be given an opportunity to take hold. This typically takes the form of a restructuring exercise. During this period, the new order based on the new rules developed in stage one will seek to impose itself. While the organisation resides in such unfamiliar territory it typically becomes more open, and this is where self-organisation processes should be allowed to unfold within the bounded limits of the defined new rules. That is, sub-units should be empowered to dictate and contribute to detailed forms of the new structure, which is important for successful transformation in complex systems. According to

the model, this requires change leaders to cede control over detailed aspects of the change and therefore accept a degree of unpredictability in the final outcome (MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999).

The final step, managing the feedback process, requires that as the new organisation begins to emerge from the change process, feedback mechanisms must be used to encourage and reinforce the new rules and deep structure. Traces of the old rules will inevitably remain and there will be pressure to revert to old rules. The key managerial task is to resist this pressure while looking for and amplifying small signals consistent with the rules agreed upon in stage 1. The organisation may be somewhat unstable at this point as the old and new forms compete (MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999).

The pattern of events described above reveals some important insight regarding the process of successful change management from a complexity theory perspective. Burnes (2005) argued that a key tenet of complexity theory is that successful organisational change requires power to be democratised to the sub-unit level. This is due to the inherent complexity and dynamism of systems that transition between stability and instability. To prosper, innovate and achieve optimal outcomes in such environments, top-down approaches that limit self-organisation are thought to be suboptimal. The CEM is described as 'quasi-emergent' because it incorporates this perspective on the need for emergent self-organisation (at operational levels) but maintains that leaders can retain some control of the process by managing at the level of 'deep structure' to condition and amplify their own order-generating rules. Thus, the idea of conditioned emergence is that by 'working with the rules governing the deep structure ... it is possible to determine the characteristics of the new archetype without necessarily prescribing its exact form' (MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999, p. 306). Accepting that sport governing bodies operate as complex adaptive systems, this quasi-emergent approach presents a nuanced and potentially impactful framework for understanding and managing the intricacies of systemic change in sport.

The application of the CEM in organisational contexts has not been without critique. Houchin and MacLean (2005) caution against the uncritical conceptualisation of organisations as complex adaptive systems. They point out that organisations often have hierarchical structures and policies that inherently mitigate self-organisation and limit the impact of feedback loops, features that are essential for complexity in natural systems. Additionally, organisations typically strive for stability, contrasting with the disequilibrium that often leads to new forms of order in natural systems. However, it has also been argued that the pursuit of stability in volatile environments is itself an adaptive response. In this light, hierarchical structures and policies may be seen as adaptive mechanisms evolved to manage complexity (Houchin & MacLean, 2005). Thus, while organisations may differ from natural systems, the CEM still can offer valuable insights for understanding organisational complexity, adaptability and change.

## Method

To address the research question, a qualitative research approach, via semi-structured interviews, was adopted. This approach is appropriate for the current study, given the aim is to generate in-depth insights into social behaviours and processes (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

### **Sample and data collection**

Data for this study were collected between 2019 and 2020 (between 2 and 3 years into the change to the one-management model) through a total of 21 online semi-structured interviews, each of which was audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The interviewees were directors from two state-level bodies and the national body (seven interviews from each organisation). From a sampling perspective, efforts were made to source interviews from all seven relevant organisations, but consent was only received from three. Given that it was the directors who were intimately involved in the transition, these individuals were purposefully selected for interview to capture a well-informed and diverse range of perspectives on the change process. Interviews ranged from 45 min to 1.5 h and were guided by an interview schedule developed through a review of relevant literature. The questions were open-ended, focusing on topics such as change management strategies, successes, challenges, and lessons learned. Example questions included: How was buy-in sought for the proposed change? How successful were those efforts to get buy-in? How was communication managed through the change process?

### **Data analysis**

The data analysis procedure aligned with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage approach to thematic analysis: (a) familiarisation with the data through reading and rereading the transcripts; (b) initial coding; (c) searching for themes; (d) reviewing themes to create a thematic map of the analysis; (e) defining and naming themes; and (f) producing the report. Given the *a priori* selection of a theoretical framework, this study aligns with the 'theory-driven' approach to thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The three stages of the CEM represented the main *a priori* themes, with the research team grouping common phrases, opinions, and quotations that reflected these stages in GA's change management process. The analysis was conducted manually within Microsoft Word documents without coding software. An inductive analysis was performed at the sub-theme level, such as identifying 'constitutional challenge' as a key theme related to 'conditioning'. While the lead researcher led the data analysis, the entire team reviewed data and interpretations, ensuring data richness and nuances were captured. To maintain confidentiality, quotations are coded N1-N7 for representatives of the national body, SB1-1 to SB1-7 for representatives of the first state body, and SB2-1 to SB2-7 for the representatives of the second.

### **Findings**

This section details our findings on GA's change process, assessing its alignment with the CEM, and illustrating how complexity theory and the CEM can effectively guide systemic change in NGBs. Our analysis is structured around the model's three stages. Prior to analysing these stages, we first offer additional context on GA, including an outline of the nature and extent of its systemic change.

#### **Golf Australia and systemic change**

GA is the national governing body for the sport of golf in Australia. GA in partnership with its seven state member associations oversees programs aimed at encouraging

children and adults to participate in golf as well as providing a pathway for elite players to the top amateur ranks and in some cases on to professional golf. Approximately 1.6 million people participate in alternate forms of golf including mini-golf, hitting golf balls on a driving range, and simulator golf (GA, 2021). In 2020, 409,709 participants were members of golf clubs playing more than 11.7 million competition rounds across the country (GA, 2021), making golf one of the highest participant sports in Australia.

The structure of GA underwent a significant transformation in 2018, modifying its federated model to a centralised ‘one-management’ model. In other words, the seven state-based member associations retained a constitutional presence, but five of the member associations agreed to transfer their employees from state-based employee contracts to GA, hence the term ‘one-management’ to describe the change. Ideally, all seven member associations would have elected to adopt this approach but at the time of writing only five of the seven state member associations have embraced this new model. The rationale for the change was to foster a unified strategy for the sport and a more coherent governance and management structure to support that strategy. These changes sought to eradicate unnecessary duplication of activities and harness the commercial power of one aligned sport together with its vast participant base. Similar concerns with federated sport systems have been reported in a diverse range of countries (Fahlén & Stenling, 2019; McLeod et al., 2021b; Skille et al., 2023). Table 2 illustrates the key characteristics of GA before and after the change and the proposed benefits.

### Conditioning

According to the CEM, the first step to successful organisational transformation is identifying the order-generating rules that underpin the organisation’s deep structure, and subsequently seeking to modify them (MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999). For GA, the key order-generating rule was evidently that ‘state golf associations govern and manage themselves’. As highlighted by one interviewee, this idea of decentralised control constituted an implicit and long-standing order-generating rule: ‘To look after yourselves has always been the way ... and to not do anything in collaboration with any other States’ (SB1-1). This ‘rule’ has characterised how the GA network has operated since its inception, is enshrined in its constitution, and stakeholders of the golf system are,

**Table 2.** Characteristics and proposed benefits of the change.

Factors	Pre-change (Federated)	Post-change (Unitary)
Power Structure	Decentralised power with state associations having direct authority over golf operations in their areas.	Centralised power structure where the national body holds management authority.
Rules & Regulations	Each state association had its own set of rules and governance structures.	Unified rules and governance structures implemented by the national body.
Decision-making	Slower due to the need for consensus among state associations.	Faster due to centralised authority.
Financial Efficiency	Higher operational costs due to duplication of resources across states.	Reduced operational costs due to streamlined processes.
Strategic Alignment	Diverse strategies and plans between the state bodies.	Aligned strategies under the national body.
Compliance and Risk Management	Varied compliance standards and risk management practices.	Standardised compliance and risk management protocols.

naturally, highly adapted to it. This high level of adaptation was a common theme in the data, as this quotation illustrates: ‘Their argument is that there’s nothing One Golf [the new model] could do better than what they do anyway’ (N5). The rule appears to represent a core part of the deep structure of GA, and the data firmly showed that its ingrained nature makes it very difficult to change: ‘They’ve been running the show for many, many years ... change was always going to be difficult, because essentially what you’re doing is asking them to give up power and control to the national body’ (SB2-6).

Based on this understanding of the existing deep structure and rules, GA’s change leaders, namely the GA CEO and board, had to intervene in this deep structure and ‘condition’ support for a new rule concerning centralised management. Conditioning was attempted over a period of years (2015–2018) and involved change leaders conducting several formal in-person meetings with board members and delegates of the state bodies (i.e. the key decision-makers): ‘We went to many meetings in Melbourne where discussions were held’ (SB1-5). Conditioning work was also conducted informally between change leaders and board members of the State bodies: ‘There are conversations that are being held with people who have insights and inroads into the various state bodies. Obviously, I guess, the best way to describe it is lobbying’ (N2). These meetings were a core stage of the change process, offering a platform to present the case for the various components and advantages of the unitary model detailed in [Table 2](#), including improved financial efficiency and strategic planning.

Interviewees offered mixed views on how change leaders had gone about activities related to conditioning work. Some had positive perceptions, for example:

We also didn’t understand initially the benefits that could come from it [the change]. So I’m glad it took as long as it did because it gave us plenty of time to process it and we weren’t being pushed. I think Golf Australia handled it pretty well in the way they led us along the path and gave us plenty of time to evaluate the pros and cons. (SB1-6)

In contrast, many other interviewees had negative perceptions, for example: ‘It would have been easier if they [GA] had been better prepared with precisely how they thought this thing was going to work in practice and had been able to present therefore a better project management plan’ (SB1-5).

The mixed success in conditioning work meant that the new order-generating rule – namely that GA should operate in a centralised model – was not widely embraced. As noted earlier, at the time of writing, two state associations had not signed up for the change. Further, data showed that the states that did sign the service agreement were not wholly convinced of the new rule. The hesitancy among the participating state associations was evident in their preference for a service agreement approach over constitutional change. As one interviewee noted, ‘The turning point was probably about three years ago when we abandoned the initial idea, which was to amend the Constitution ... instead, we would simply have a Service Agreement’ (N3). This service agreement, designed for a fixed period, offered these state bodies a sort of ‘exit strategy’, as it was not as binding as constitutional change. The necessity for a service agreement arguably highlights the challenges of implementing systemic changes in sport governing bodies, which are inherently political and excessively regulated organisations in terms of constitutional rules. Another interviewee emphasised, ‘If you could avoid

Constitutional change, the Board could probably do it, and that's why GA shifted to a Service Agreement' (SB2-7). Intriguingly, this shows that the deep structure in these organisations does not merely manifest through implicit beliefs or 'how things are done here', but also in a constitutional form. Constitutions appear to be particularly difficult to amend in a federated structure, as well as the implicit beliefs that underpin them. As one interviewee explained when discussing the challenges of constitutional change: "Then they go back to their state and say, "don't be stupid, I've got an empire here and we're not going to touch that"" (N1).

Despite these challenges, as the quotations above show, there appeared to be a missed opportunity for GA with regards to conditioning – a key theme was that if change leaders' efforts to communicate the benefits of the new structure had been more thorough, the ultimate outcomes could have been different. That is, more state associations may have signed up for the service agreement, and the state associations that did sign up for the change would have had fewer doubts about maintaining the course. In support of the CEM, the data provides an implicit but strong indication that a more conscientious focus on conditioning would have helped GA's change leaders reframe the organisation's order-generating rule and deep structure: 'The meeting in Melbourne was run by a facilitator and we were a little, he wasn't from any of the golf bodies. We were a little concerned that some of our worries were being dismissed' (SB1-4).

Leadership style was identified as a central factor that could have enhanced the conditioning work of GA's change leaders: 'If you haven't got good leadership, you get nothing' (N5). Ferkins et al. (2018) offered a definition of collective leadership within federated sport governance, noting that it 'encapsulates how a board comes together to generate leadership and to progress key strategic initiatives within and across a network of affiliated bodies, such as in a federated model' (p. 222). This data strongly indicate that this style is beneficial for instigating systemic change: 'I think that if we're really going to build the bridges and probably win over the other remaining states, then that leader needs to be extremely collaborative with all the various stakeholders' (SB2-6). This quotation was illustrative of a common theme in the interviews and highlights the importance of a collaborative leadership approach, especially in the complex, federated landscape of sport governance.

### ***Moving to far-from-equilibrium conditions***

The second stage of the model requires organisations to move to 'far-from-equilibrium conditions' so that its new order-generating rule(s) can be given a chance to take hold. This stage is associated with the 'bifurcation zone' (Burnes, 2005), in which there is a major departure from the existing organisational archetype. This stage typically manifests as a major restructuring exercise, and this is what occurred at GA with the move to the one management structure in 2018 via the service agreement. As Table 2 illustrates, this involved changes in the power structure, rules and regulations, decision-making, financial operations, strategic process, and compliance.

Despite stakeholders acknowledging the potential benefits that could come from the change, it is at this stage when maximum organisational discomfort is typically felt as current equilibria are destroyed (MacIntosh & MacLean, 2001). This was evident

within GA: ‘You know people on the ground, you know people that work there, you bump into them, and they roll their eyes, and they feel they’re still lost’ (SB2-1). Another director commented on the financial discomfort associated with the initial stages of the change in 2018: ‘We’re about to announce a fairly big loss for Golf Australia. A lot of that is because of the costs of integrating all the state associations. So I think you would have to say so far, not so good’ (N6).

MacIntosh and MacLean (2001) assert while organisations reside in this unfamiliar territory, they typically become more open and non-linear, meaning that small signals or interactions can impact significantly how systems and procedures evolve. According to the conditioned emergence approach, at this stage self-organisation processes should be allowed to unfold within the bounded limits of the new rules. That is, detailed forms of the structure should be allowed to emerge based on the non-linear interactions of organisational actors at different levels. This requires some democratisation of power to sub-units over the change process. This aligns with the ‘quasi-emergent’ nature of the CEM.

The data revealed perceptions that once the restructuring had occurred, GA was too ‘top-down’ in their approach and did not sufficiently engage or empower the state associations in optimising the change (i.e. self-organisation was curbed): ‘People need to be, I think, led along a path in a way that gets their involvement and allows for their input ... otherwise things just don’t happen’ (SB1-7). ‘It’s got to come right through the whole Golf Australia administration to be involved’ (S3). There appeared to be a perception among many interviewees that this lack of involvement in helping to influence the details of the new structure was damaging to GA. These comments exemplify this perception: ‘it’s a long way from being at a point where you could call it successful integrated One Golf’ (SB2-2).

In contrast, one example of where self-organisation appeared to be enabled was within strategic planning processes. Several participants expressed that they felt that the state associations were effectively involved in this process, for example:

They’re really good sessions because ... it’s important to provide the detail that you’re talking about on the strategy ... you meet the people and form relationships ... so if there’s an issue you can give them a call or whatever and say, ‘These are the problems’. So I think that process is a really good process. It might be expensive, but it works. (SB1-4)

The above quote indicates that the strategic planning discussions were one forum in which the states were engaged to help co-direct detailed aspects of the new structure. That said, this was not a universally held view: ‘We were definitely given the opportunity to review strategic plans ... but I think it [our input] was probably not taken on board. Or seen as “that’s too many details”’ (SB2-3). Overall, despite promising reports regarding the strategy sessions, the general sense then was that states were not sufficiently engaged in forming detailed aspects of the new organisation.

This approach taken by GA’s change leaders does not emulate the guidance of the quasi-emergent CEM, in which self-organisation should be facilitated within the bounds of the new rules. This lack of input was widely seen to have a detrimental impact on how the change was implemented, and this corresponds with Burnes (2005) proposition that complex adaptive systems will only prosper if there is a democratisation of power in organisational life.

### ***Managing the feedback process***

The final stage of the conditioned emergence is focused on reinforcing the new rules after the restructure has been formalised (MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999). Within the quasi-emergent conditioned emergence approach, this stage reflects the need for leaders to enforce the bounded limit of their new order-generating rule. The interviews generated rich insight into what unfolded when GA's new structure was initially adopted. It is at this stage when, if the CEM is being explicitly emulated, leaders need to devote significant attention to ensuring feedback mechanisms are being fully leveraged in support of the change. Generally, the data revealed negative perceptions about communication when the new structure was initially adopted: 'There was not enough listening done. There was more, like here we are now we've got a pattern of what we're doing, as opposed to reciprocal and mutual understanding along the way' (SB2-2). 'So to us, that's frustrating, because we feel we should not have to be pushing for updates and things' (SB2-3).

Indeed, interviewees consistently shared a perception that GA's change leaders did not adequately manage feedback processes, with one director stating: 'We hardly ever saw the federal colleagues ... We had trouble getting information out of them and we still have trouble getting information out of them' (SB2-1). The potential consequence of such perceptions of the feedback process is that, while a new structure was adopted, the order-generating rule underpinning it (i.e. that the centralised structure will be beneficial) was not embraced, which could eventually lead to a reversion of structures in the (potentially near) future. Indeed, there was evidence of this occurring: 'I don't see the community getting the benefits' (SB2-1).

In support of complexity theory and the conditioned emergence approach, the data showed that a failure to get on top of feedback processes in GA's case was detrimental to the change process as it allowed room for negative rumours to emerge concerning the new order-generating rules:

We have to get out there and get a lot more information out there and let people know what's really happening because rumours, especially negative rumours, get a life of their own and unless you quell them, they'll get worse. (SB1-6)

As noted, in the conditioned emergence approach, not only do change leaders need to quell concerns through feedback and engagement, but they also need to amplify the benefits of the new rules. There again appeared to be some opportunities to do this. Some directors highlighted the immediate benefits of the model: 'The biggest ticket item was certainly the sponsor numbers, the investment that sponsors were prepared to make in the organisation, or in the sport'. (N4)

However, despite these positive outcomes emerging from the change, some felt they were not communicated effectively to the network:

I don't think we are as good as we should be at conveying the message of what has been done well and the good results. And I think that's also a resourcing issue, so I don't think our communication, well I know our communication to the states has not been as frequent or as thorough as it should have been and probably as they had expected. (N7)

The data presented so far in this section shows a common perception that inadequate feedback management hindered GA's change process, primarily because it meant new rules were not sufficiently amplified or old rules dampened. This meant that the

characteristics of the change (Table 2), including centralising decision-making, were not fully embraced. Through highlighting those perceived deficiencies, this research provides support for the tenets of the CEM and has drawn attention to how systemic change in NGBs could potentially be managed better in the future. Accepting that NGB system change is constrained by existing powerful order-generating rules, this research supports the idea that leaders must think consciously about the benefits of their own, new rules and work diligently to amplify them across the organisation, during in-person meetings and elsewhere. The perceptions of state-level actors suggest that this was not done effectively in GA's case.

A key theme regarding why change leaders were unable to manage feedback processes successfully was a *lack of resources*: 'Golf Australia didn't have the resources, they didn't realise how big a project it was going to be, and this one guy who was driving it all just couldn't cope with all that' (SB1-3). 'I don't think, to be honest with you, Golf Australia put enough resources into it' (N5). This data indicates that a lack of human and financial resources impacted the extent to which GA's leaders could engage in feedback processes when the new structure was in its initial stages – they simply did not have enough people or funding to do so. Fortunately for GA, there was a suggestion from an interviewee that resourcing issues may soon be resolved to a certain extent with a specific person employed (additional human resource) to act as a liaison between the national board and the states. This development reflects GA behaving as a dissipative structure where detailed forms of the new archetype emerge based on iterative network feedback (MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999).

## Discussion

This study explored the research question: How can the conditioned emergence model inform the management of systemic change in sport governing bodies? The findings suggest that the CEM offers a nuanced, practical, and effective framework for understanding and managing change in sport governing bodies. GA's change leaders had difficulty managing the transition, and our data shows that a more deliberate application of the model's three steps – conditioning, transitioning to far-from-equilibrium conditions, and managing feedback – would have facilitated a smoother change process. Our core contribution lies in showing how the conditioned emergence approach, grounded in complexity theory, enriches both the understanding and management of systemic change in sport governing bodies.

A central tenet of the conditioned emergence approach is that, although organisations behave in a dynamic, emergent, and non-linear manner, change is constrained by order-generating rules that form a deep structure (MacIntosh et al., 2023; MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999). These rules act as a powerful constraining force regarding how organisations, as complex adaptive systems, evolve (MacIntosh & Romme, 2004). This proposition was supported by our data, which showed that the notion of favouring decentralised control took the form of an order-generating rule and this made it hard to change. By framing GA's barriers to change in terms of deep structure and rules, the conditioned emergence approach, underpinned by complexity theory, offers a nuanced analytical framework that enriches our understanding of internal change dynamics within sport governing bodies. This study goes beyond existing theories (see

Table 1) which often focus on external forces that constrain change, by illuminating the very fabric of the organisation's internal system that makes change so challenging.

Previous research suggests that deep structure reflects barely articulated views about how things are done in an organisation (MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999). While this form of deep structure was relevant in GA's case, another notable feature appeared to be the constitutional rules that enshrined decentralised control. In this sense, the deep structure emerged as a multi-faceted phenomenon, encompassing both implicit beliefs and constitutional rules. This dual form of deep structure seems to be contextually influenced. Sport governing bodies are invariably highly regulated, political entities with elaborate constitutional rules and bylaws (Parent et al., 2018, 2021). This distinguishes them from corporate organisations, which, although guided by organisational rules and corporate laws, are generally far less regulated and face fewer constitutional barriers to change (MacIntosh & MacLean, 2001). Our findings in the sport context thus build upon the conceptualisation of deep structure offered in previous research (Drazin & Sandelands, 1992; Macintosh & Romme, 2004), revealing that it can take on various forms – including a constitutional form – which presents additional challenges to change, especially in sport.

Based on this enriched understanding of sport governing bodies as complex systems, constrained by deep structure and rules, this study further advances the sport management literature by highlighting how leaders can actively manage systemic change in this intricate environment. Specifically, this study illustrates the utility of a quasi-emergent approach, which has typically not been analysed in previous sport organisational change research (Hoye et al., 2020). This conditioned emergence framework uniquely balances top-down managerial control with bottom-up emergent self-organisation. It fosters adaptability and responsiveness at operational levels while still enabling leaders to guide the overarching archetype of change, thereby facilitating successful organisational transformation within complex systems (MacIntosh & MacLean, 1999).

Our findings strongly suggest that GA could have improved its change strategy by adopting this quasi-emergent approach in the form of conditioned emergence. Previous research indicates that complex systems thrive when they evolve in an emergent manner and when influence is devolved to sub-units (Burnes, 2005; Rosenhead et al., 2019). Our findings corroborate this perspective in the sport context, revealing that a key issue for GA was the inadequate inclusion of state-level stakeholders, which hindered progress and fostered resentment. Clearly, there is a need for a degree of emergence and self-organisation within sport governing bodies for successful change. However, this can be complemented by leaders engaging with the deep structure and rules to maintain control over the broad archetype of change. The proposition of this paper around quasi-emergent, conditioned emergence, extends insights from institutional theory and other perspectives (see Table 1), which, although useful, do not offer as detailed a perspective on the foundational characteristics of sport governing bodies as complex systems and, importantly, how to think about managing change within them. The quasi-emergent approach advocated here has direct relevance for systemic changes in Australian sport's federated structures and broader implications for sport bodies in other sectors, including Europe (Fahlén & Stenling, 2019; Nagel et al., 2015; Skille et al., 2023).

Another key finding of this study is the importance of adopting a collective leadership style during systemic change, particularly in the context of federated structures that are often adversarial by nature (O'Boyle & Shilbury, 2016b). Our results indicate that board-to-board collaboration is crucial to successfully condition new order-generating rules in this context. This aligns with Ferkins et al.'s (2018) description of collective leadership and supports existing studies that advocate for this style in federated models (Shilbury et al., 2020). This insight specifically advances knowledge of the first phase of the CEM. Given the inherent challenges of overcoming deep structures and rules, our findings suggest that conditioning work should be complemented by a collective leadership style, which emphasises board-to-board interaction, trust-building, mutual respect and inclusion (Ferkins et al., 2018). This insight complements existing research on the need for collaboration in change management in sport (Kikulis, 2000; Skinner et al., 1999; Thibault & Babiak, 2005). Furthermore, our study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the CEM itself, highlighting that certain contexts necessitate tailored approaches to conditioning work, such as through certain leadership styles. On the topic of resources, our findings resonate with both past sport organisational change research and Ashby's Law, which posits that adequate types and amounts of resources are necessary for effectively managing complex systems. In essence, the more complex the system, the greater and more varied the resources required for its control (Hoye et al., 2020; Parent et al., 2018).

From a practical perspective, this study offers value by detailing a prescriptive approach that goes beyond theoretical discussion. The three steps of the CEM – conditioning, moving to far-from-equilibrium conditions, and managing feedback processes – serve as a pragmatic roadmap for change. These steps are particularly beneficial for practitioners in sport governing bodies who grapple with the complexities of systemic change but lack a structured approach to navigate it. Other dominant perspectives including institutional theory (Nite & Edwards, 2021) and the contextualist approach (Thibault & Babiak, 2005) offer rich explanatory frameworks for understanding change, although arguably are limited in their prescriptiveness. The CEM provides actionable insights grounded in complexity theory. This makes it a valuable tool for both scholars and practitioners, offering theoretical depth along with practical, step-by-step guidance for managing systemic change in sport organisations.

## Conclusion

This study explored how the conditioned emergence approach can inform the management of systemic change in sport governing bodies, specifically focusing on GA. In doing so, this paper enriches the sport management literature by presenting a nuanced perspective of sport governing bodies as complex systems constrained by deep structures and rules. It illuminates the challenges of designing and managing systemic change within these intricate environments and introduces the quasi-emergent approach as a viable solution. This approach, grounded in complexity theory, offers a balanced framework for change management.

This study was not without limitations. Sample bias is a concern, as the perspectives of the interviewed stakeholders may not be fully representative of all constituents of the golf network. Further, the extent to which these findings can be generalised to

other sports and their governing bodies remains an area of uncertainty. This requires a cautious application when considering their relevance beyond the immediate context of this study. Additionally, the study's temporal scope captures only a snapshot in time, limiting the ability to assess the long-term impacts of the change or evolving dynamics. Looking ahead, some avenues for future research emerge. First, analysing the model in other sport contexts will assist in adding rigour to its proposed relevance, and an action research approach would be a productive way of directly observing the model in practice. Second, a longitudinal study could offer insights into the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of the CEM in managing systemic change. Finally, there may be an opportunity to combine complexity theory and the CEM with other theoretical perspectives for a more holistic approach to analysing organisational change in sport.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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