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# "Maybe I'm just not good enough?": British swimmers' experiences of attempting to qualify for the Olympic Games

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The purpose of this study was to explore the transitional experiences of British swimmers as they attempted to qualify for the Olympic Games and gain a place in the British Swimming World Class Performance Programme. An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was adopted (Smith JA. Psychol Health 1996;11:261–271). Six swimmers (aged 20–25 years), one of each of their parents, and four coaches completed interviews leading up to and following Olympic trials over an eight-month period. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed following the guidelines set out by Smith and Osborne (Smith JA, Osborn M. Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods. London: Sage; 2003:51–80). Results indicated that athletes' transition experiences were characterized by a range of demands, which were categorized into five higher-order themes (a) Questioning "Am I good enough?"; (b) Managing and fulfilling expectations; (c) Operating within an environment that is working against them; (d) Lacking support and understanding of self and demands; and (e) Maintaining balance versus being an international swimmer. Overall, the results indicate that this attempted transition is complex, challenging, and unique and largely influenced by self-confidence. Addressing the individual factors impacting on athletes' self-confidence appears critical to enhancing swimmers' transitional experiences at the highest level.

**KEYWORDS**
career transitions, confidence, international sport, social support, swimming

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, considerable research attention has focused upon the transition out of sport and its potential negative and traumatic consequences.[1,2] However, athletes do not only experience transitions when they retire or terminate their career. Rather, athletes can experience transitions throughout their sporting development, which occur concurrently with non-sport transitions.[3] Such within-career transitions are detailed in the holistic athletic career model (HAC), which describes five levels in which transitions can occur: athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational, and financial.[3] At the athletic level, one transition experienced is the progression from the developmental to mastery stage. The mastery stage is the highest level of athletic proficiency and is characterized by an intensive investment of time and energy in developing sport-specific skills. For example, individuals need to give their all every day, search for small improvements, refine small details, and repeatedly deliver optimal performance under pressure.[4]

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To conceptualize this transition and the interaction of factors that may influence the process, a number of theoretical models of transition have been proposed.[5,6] These models all identify a number of demands, resources, barriers, and coping mechanisms that interact throughout career transitions to influence the outcome that the transitioning individual experiences. For instance, in Stambulova's model, there is a prediction that transitions come with a set of specific demands or challenges, such as higher physical fitness in elite sport, which need to be overcome to transition in an athletic career successfully.[6] Such demands can create a conflict between what the athlete is and what they want to be. How effective athletes are at coping with the demands depends upon the dynamic balance between transition resources and barriers they encounter. Similarly, Drew et al.[5] propose that athletes are met with numerous transition variables (ie, demands or challenges), which may have an influence on athletes' transition into senior sport. This model also proposes that these variables are acting within a youth development and organizational culture, which can be facilitative or debilitative toward the transition to the mastery phrase.

Empirical evidence on the transition to the mastery phrase is supportive of the aforementioned theoretical models. Recognizing such challenges and demands, a growing body of literature has examined athletes' entry into the mastery stage identifying that this transition is physically and emotionally demanding, with particular challenges arising in relation to expectations, physical and cognitive demands, and managing a dual career.[7,8] For example, challenges associated with stronger competition, a non-linear path to progression, issues concerning readiness for elite competition, and low self-confidence are all apparent during this transition.[7–9] Moreover, it has been identified that athletes will often use various resources to cope with this transition, including personal characteristics, coping strategies, and social support.[5,10] Evidence shows that if athletes have a plethora of support available, they are more likely to be satisfied with their sport participation and cope effectively with the transition to the mastery phase.[5] Barriers, however, may offset the resources available, which may make the process more difficult. For instance, financial pressures, a lack of support from education bodies (eg, teachers and school staff), a lack of physical and psychological preparation, and a lack of informational support (eg, lack of technical and tactical knowledge) may result in increased stress and a less successful transition for athletes.[5,10,11] Many athletes have outlined that they do not believe they were given appropriate support to successfully make the transition to the mastery phase of their sport career.[5,7,11] Taken together, the literature published on the transition to mastery phase provides an overall understanding of the process and potential factors which influence the transition. However, a number of gaps in the literature exist. Firstly, transition research has generally adopted one-shot interviews, which do not permit an examination of the individual's changing experiences and life course patterns.[5,12] Given that transitions are a process, which occur over an extended period of time, adopting a longitudinal approach is necessary to fully understand the process and to enable identification and meaning of temporal change throughout the transition experience.

Secondly, studies of transitions have often been retrospective in nature, where emotional state and subsequent events post-transition may influence how athletes perceive their transition experience.[13] To understand athletes' experiences of transition without the outcome of the transition being known, a prospective approach is required. Using a prospective approach, in which the outcome of a transition is unknown, also provides a unique opportunity to understand experiences of athletes who successfully or unsuccessfully transition. This is particularly useful because retrospectively identifying athletes who experienced unsuccessful transitions may be difficult, particularly if the transition resulted in them ultimately leaving the sport. Moreover, if athletes who have experienced an unsuccessful transition have subsequently experienced a successful transition, it is likely to influence how they perceive or make sense of their earlier experience (ie, in hindsight they may see it as a positive contribution to their current situation whereas at the time they may not).

Thirdly, given the potential beneficial and/or detrimental impact that accesses to support and an athletes' social support network offers,[5,10,11] gaining an insight into their perceptions of athletes' transitional experiences and particularly their roles within this is important. However, to-date, this has been given limited consideration.[5] Although the athletes' experience is paramount, gaining insights from their wider support network (eg, parents and coaches) provides an opportunity to further extend understanding by highlighting complimentary, contradictory, or absent accounts between these individuals. Such insights may be particularly valuable in individual sports, in which contact time between the athlete and coach is often high.

Finally, to expand understanding of mastery phase transitions, there has been a call to diversify the range of samples used, including a variety of cultures, religions, genders, and other backgrounds, to determine whether this has an impact on athletes' experiences of the transition to the mastery phase.[6] Such knowledge is important to ensure that context-specific considerations can be accounted for when tailoring support to best help athletes navigate this transition[12] This diversification includes the sports that are studied, which have to date generally been team sports such as rugby and football,[5,7,11,12] as well as the country in which these athletes are competing.

Given the aforementioned gaps in the literature, the purpose of the current study was to explore the transitional experiences of swimmers as they attempted to qualify for the

Olympic Games and gain a place in the British World Class Performance Programme. Specifically, the study sought to address four research questions: (a) What are swimmers' experiences as they attempt to qualify for the Olympic Games and into the World Class Performance Programme? (b) What are the demands swimmers' encounter during this attempted transition? (c) What resources and barriers are swimmers exposed to during this attempted transition? and (d) What are parents and coaches' perspectives of swimmers' experience of this attempted transition and their influence during this process? To answer these questions, we adopted a longitudinal prospective approach to provide insight into the process of attempting to qualify for the Olympic Games, providing real-time experiences of this transition. Swimming was chosen because it is one sport which has received little attention in the transition literature, with no research to-date conducted within the United Kingdom. Moreover, swimming provides an interesting context to examine this transition experience, in contrast to other sports, because it is a sport in which senior national/international level athletes will typically train for a similar number of hours, at the same intensity, as individuals already competing at an Olympic level but often without access to the same funding or support.[10,14]

## 2 | METHOD

### 2.1 | Methodology and philosophical underpinnings

Multiperspectival interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), conducted over an eight-month period, was employed in this study as an in-depth qualitative approach to understand the experience of attempting to transition onto the world stage, through qualification for the Olympic Games.[15] IPA seeks to explore in detail how participants make sense of their social and personal world and the meanings particular experiences, events, and states hold for them, which aligned with the purpose of the current study.[16] Multiperspectival IPA maintains a commitment to idiography in data collection and analysis but extends this by combining two or more focal perspectives, allowing consideration of the intersubjective, microsocial, and relational dimensions of a given phenomenon.[17] One potential advantage of this design is its capacity for greater impact. The triangulation and convergence of multiple viewpoints can be more plausible than an analysis taken from a single population.[17] The adoption of a longitudinal approach was deemed important to facilitate consideration of the temporal aspect of attempted transitions and focus upon the course and events that occurred, in addition to the interpretations and meaning allocated to the experience.

In line with the idiographic, interpretive perspective of IPA, the current study was grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which purports that the core of understanding is learning about what people make of the world around them.[18] Drawing on an interpretivist perspective, this study was approached with an understanding that reality is subjective and can be influenced by the context of the situation, perceptions, interactions, and experiences.[18]

### 2.2 | Context and participants

Swimming is one of the most popular sports within the United Kingdom, with a recent survey by Sport England indicating that approximately 30% of individuals aged 16 years and older participating in 2018/2019 (https://activelives.sport england.org). At the elite end, 55 swimmers were part of the British Swimming World Class Performance Programme for 2018/2019, comprising 14 Podium athletes (ie, athletes expected to achieve a medal at an upcoming major international competition), 16 Podium Potential athletes (ie, athletes anticipated to achieve a medal at a future major international competition) and 25 swimmers for the Para-Swimming academy squad (https://www.britishswimming.org/about-us/ annual-reports/). This study focused specifically upon understanding the transitional experiences of a group of swimmers currently outside the World Class Performance Programme but who were trying to achieve selection to represent Great Britain at the Olympic Games (which would likely place them within the World Class Performance Programme). The swimmers trained at a high-performance swimming center in an elite squad alongside senior and top-end junior swimmers who were regularly competing on a national (ie, British Championships) and/or the world stage (ie, World Championships and Olympic Games). All senior swimmers within this elite training squad were targeting Olympic Games qualification. Linked to the performance center was sport scientists including a physiologist, psychologist, and strength and conditioning coach. However, access to this resource, particularly psychology, was limited, and as such priority given to those swimmers in the World Class Performance Programme or those who were currently representing the country at an international level (ie, Commonwealth Games).

Specifically, in line with the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, participants were selected using purposive sampling[19] to ensure they could draw upon rich informative experiences about their attempted transition. The inclusion criteria were that swimmers were (a) national level athletes, defined as a swimmer who was regularly competing at the British Championships but had not represented Great Britain at a senior age (19 years and over) and was not accessing national governing body funding[1]; (b) were either targeting or had

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[1]Podium or podium-potential level funding: https://www.britishswimming. org/performance/swimming/world-class-pathway/

gained necessary times for the national qualifying competition for the Olympic Games; (c) stated that their goal for the season was to qualify for the Olympic Games, represent Great Britain on an international stage, and received governing body funding; and (d) had a parent and coach who were also willing to participate in the study.

Overall, the sample comprised six swimmers (four male and two female), aged 20–25 years ($M$ = 21.7 years) who had been participating for between 8 and 19 years ($M$ = 13.7 years) in the sport. At the time of the first interview, all swimmers were ranked in the top 15 open age-group in the UK for their favored event, with half of the participants within the top eight. All participants regularly competed at the British Nationals and had previously achieved open age-group national finalist or medalist positions. Four out of the six swimmers had also qualified and competed at the selection trials for a previous Olympic Games, five of the swimmers had represented Great Britain as a junior or their home country (ie, England or Wales) as a junior or senior in international competition. One had also represented Great Britain in Open Water swimming as a senior.

The coach who was working with the swimmer participants at the time of the attempted transition were those included in the study. Overall, four coaches, all male, were recruited (two coaches were each working with two of the swimmers). The coaches had extensive experience (17–37 years coaching) and had all coached athletes to a national/international level. The coaches all indicated that Olympic Games qualification was the target for the year for the swimmer participants.

The parent who was most involved in their child's swimming was recruited because it was deemed that they would have the greatest insights into their child's experience. Most involved was defined as the parent who was perceived to be most present and actively involved in their child's swimming life, through for instance, providing tangible and emotional support. The appropriate parent was first identified by the swimmer, who was asked to indicate who was most involved in their swimming. This parent was subsequently contacted and asked to confirm if they were the parent most involved in their child's swimming life; following confirmation they were asked if they would be willing to participate in the study. All parents who were contacted agreed, resulting in a sample of four mothers and two fathers. The parents had been involved in their respective child's swimming career for 14–20 years.

## 2.3 | Procedure

Following ethical approval, the lead researcher contacted personal swimming associates who met the inclusion criteria for the study. Six potential swimmers were identified,

all of whom accepted the invitation. Swimmers were subsequently asked if they were happy for contact to be made with their parent and/or coach to participate in the study.

### 2.3.1 | Data collection

Interviews with swimmers were conducted in October (the start of the swim season), January, April (pre-Olympic trials), and May (post-Olympic trials), while parent and coach interviews occurred in October and May. The interviews lasted between 20 and 159 minutes ($M$ = 68, SD = 31.95) and were conducted either in person (26 interviews) or over the phone (12 interviews). Prior to data collection, two pilot interviews were conducted with retired swimmers to examine the suitability of the interview questions.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed for all participants based on the guidelines proposed by Rubin and Rubin[20] and previous transition literature and theoretical frameworks.[7,10] For swimmers, each interview began with introductory questions which focused on how they were performing (during training and competition) and how they felt about their swimming experiences at that present time. Next the interview focused on the key topic area of research; examining swimmers' overall experience during their attempted transition. Main questions were then asked to highlight specific experiences at this time point in the transition. Finally, participants were asked to summarize their current experiences.

For the parent and coach participants, each interview began with introductory questions which focused on their involvement in the swimmer's career. Next the interview focused on the key topic area of research; the athlete's overall experience of their attempted transition. Main questions were then asked to highlight the coaches and parents' perspectives of the athlete's transition experience during that time. Lastly, parents and coaches were asked to review their role within the athlete's swimming career and to detail the support they provided during the transitional period. Each interview was transcribed and analyzed before the next interview with that participant to ensure new questions for exploration could be developed based on previous information. Additionally, each swimmer interview was conducted and analyzed prior to their associated parent and coach interview, ensuring the questions to parents and coaches were tailored around the experiences the swimmer had shared.

### 2.3.2 | Data analysis

Data analysis followed the guidelines proposed by Smith and Osborne.[16] First, audio files from each interview were transcribed and reread numerous times. Annotations of aspects

considered meaningful and of interest were then made, producing a comprehensive and detailed set of notes in the left-hand margin of the transcript.[21] Notes focused on the context, content (what was being said), and language (symbols, repetitions, pauses). During this stage, the lead researcher also took time to "bracket" her presumptions to facilitate focus on the data (see next section for further details). Next, emerging theme titles were noted in the right-hand margin of the transcript. The initial notes were then transformed into concise phrases that encapsulated the essential quality of what was found in the text, but at a higher level of abstraction and psychological terminology.[16]

Themes were then connected together to create superordinate themes. For example, the cluster themes, "lack of progression," and "feeling unprepared" were grouped together under the superordinate theme title of *Questioning "Am I good enough?"* This process was repeated for each transcript and participant separately to enable the identification of themes unique to each individual before these themes were compared across participants and examined to identify convergence and divergence between data. During this process, the analyzed parent and coach data were explicitly compared to, and considered against, the associated swimmer's data. That is, once the specific themes from the parents and coaches had been identified they were cross-referenced and compared to the associated themes within the swimmers' interviews to allow for the identification of any missing information, contradictions, and confirmations. Once all interviews were analyzed for each time point, summary tables were produced for each individual indicating the themes which were prevalent, before a comparison table was produced and a final narrative account produced.

## 2.4 | Methodological rigor

In line with IPA, Yardley's[22] four core principles were adopted as the criteria to ensure high-quality research was produced (a) sensitivity to context; (b) commitment and rigor; (c) transparency and coherence; and (d) impact and performance. Sensitivity to context considers the role of the researcher and how their own beliefs and assumptions may influence the study. The lead researcher of this study was, like the participants, attempting to make the national to international level transition, personally experiencing the same phenomenon being investigated. While this facilitated understanding of the participants, it was important to recognize where their experiences differed, so prior to and throughout the study (in line with initial IPA suggestions[16]) the lead author attempted to bracket her presumptions and judgements. Specifically, prior to starting the study the lead author engaged in extensive reflection both alone and with the broader research team regarding her previous transition experiences,

current experience, and what she anticipated finding in the study. Throughout the study, she then continued to maintain a reflexive journal in which she recorded both what she was experiencing and feeling and also reflected upon the nature and origin of her developing interpretations. The second author acted as a critical friend throughout the study, engaging in weekly meetings with the lead author; constantly questioning and asking her to explain and show how she had reached interpretations. At times, this resulted in very lengthy conversations where it became apparent that the lead researchers own frustrations or challenges were overriding the data. Consequently, the lead researcher re-examined the transcripts in light of her interpretations. It should be acknowledged, however, that in line with an interpretive perspective, the lead researcher's (and the broader research teams) experiences have influenced the data interpretation and are present within the results presented.

Commitment and rigor refer to the researcher's competence, immersion in the relevant data, and amount of time invested into the topic area.[23] To address these criteria, the researcher was embedded in the study for an eight-month period, consistently engaging in discussions with other members of the research team to facilitate ongoing examination of the data interpretation. Transparency and coherence relate primarily to the presentation of findings and how clearly the stages of research have been described in the write up. Here, an audit trail documenting the analytical decisions made when constructing the raw data units into the final superordinate themes was maintained. Finally, impact and performance refer to the usefulness and impact (ie, utility) of the research findings. Through the longitudinal prospective approach adopted and participants involved, we believe this study offers new insight into the demands swimmers face when attempting to transition from a national to international level, with the findings already informing practice in a national swimming organization.

## 3 | RESULTS

During the study period, only two of the six participants (Lisa and Joe) reached the Olympic Games trials, and neither was selected to compete at the Olympic Games. Therefore, none of the participants successfully achieved the transition of qualifying for the Olympic Games, although one swimmer (Lisa) was subsequently selected for the World Class Performance Programme. One swimmer (Dave) retired from the sport during the study and a further two participants (Joe and Carl) retired after failing to reach the Olympic Games. Below, the main factors that appeared to influence their attempted transition are detailed. In doing so, the overall theme is first introduced followed by an explanation of how the factors changed across the period of the study. Although displayed separately,

these factors should not be viewed independently; indeed, there was substantial crossover in terms of how these themes manifested, adapted, and influenced each other throughout the transition. Thus, throughout the results, we have sought to demonstrate such crossover, while still allowing the reader a clear understanding of the main influencing factors.

Before exploring each of these themes, given the lack of success in progressing to international level, it is important to understand the swimmers' general perception of their attempted transition process. Overall, it was apparent that the attempted transition was a negative, challenging process for all the swimmers. They struggled with the amount of change and instability in their careers during this period, as well as additional stressors such as injuries and managing a dual career, all of which they found difficult to overcome. For example, when asked in her final interview to reflect on the swimming cycle, Beth highlighted that the challenges experienced were exponentially more difficult than previous swimming seasons, "I feel like this year has been massive. Well, I've wanted to quit, wasn't very well, [health condition] was bad, hated university, wasn't doing very well in swimming, coach moved away [laughs]. What else didn't go very well? I broke up with my boyfriend." (I4[2]).

The challenges increased as time progressed and, eventually, the swimmers did not feel they were able to cope with the constant changes in the environment, personnel, and expectations. As Tom summarized, "I suppose if you were trying to sum it up it [the transition experience] would be trying to establish yourself between different environments that you're not used to." (I4). The swimmers' inability to cope with these changes consequently led to them questioning their abilities and future status in competitive swimming, perhaps, highlighting that although the swimmers had targeted Olympic Games qualification and been supported in this goal by their coaches, it may have been an unrealistic goal. This was encapsulated in the first theme, which became an overarching theme.

## 3.1 | Questioning "Am I Good Enough?"

The swimmers' transition experience appeared to be underpinned by a constant concern regarding their ability to perform at a higher level. Ultimately, whether they were "good enough" to make it at the Olympic Games. For instance, despite winning her event at the Olympic trials event, when reflecting on her thoughts on the morning of the race

[2] For ease, athlete interviews have been labeled I1, I2, I3, and I4 to correspond with the timing of each interview (ie, I1 refers to the first interview, I2 refers to the second interview…). Parent and coach interviews have been labeled I1 and I2 to again indicate whether comments were shared in their first or second interviews. Each swimmer has been given a pseudonym.

Lisa shared, "I said to my mum in the morning and I said to [coaches name], 'Let's try and make the final!' I wasn't even sure that I was going to make the final [laughs]… It was a strong field! (I4)."

Throughout all interviews, this self-doubt was ever present, both from the swimmers and their support network. As an example, echoing comments from all other participants, Tom described serious doubts about his ability to reach a higher level in swimming:

> I think mentally this is to do with swimming, self-confidence. I've taken a knock this season. I always sort of had a resolute belief that I could swim fast but this last three months, it was always there deep down but it became harder to find it. That brings out a lot of self-doubt, which is difficult to deal with
>
> (I2).

Echoing Tom's comments, his father shared a conversation they had months earlier:

> I said to Tom, "I think the Olympic trials next year you can swim faster there and do a personal best time again." He said, "I don't know." I said, "I'm absolutely sure that you can" and he said, "well it's not you that has to do it, it's not in your head," he said it's sort of that mental block
>
> (I1).

Particular factors appeared to trigger swimmers' self-doubts, such as injury and illness, reflection on progression compared to others, and underperforming at competitions. For example, Joe mentioned during his third interview just prior to the Olympic trials that an injury he received had impacted his self-confidence: "Yes, being injured is obviously going to lower your confidence massively. You're not going to believe in yourself as much" (I3). Similarly, when reflecting on their progress and aims for the season, swimmers often compared themselves to their competitors, which lead to them questioning their capabilities. Dave explained:

> You look across the country and see that someone has taken 7 seconds off their best time, then you think, 'how on earth have they done that?' 'Why are they doing that?' 'Why haven't I done that?' 'Why are they going faster than me?' And then you doubt your ability to beat them
>
> (I1).

Overall, whether due to injury, perceived lack of progression, or concerns regarding others outperforming them, these swimmers consistently discussed self-doubts regarding whether

they were really capable of making the transition to an international level.

### 3.1.1 | Experience over time

The majority of swimmers showed a lack of belief in their abilities throughout the eight-months. However, this lack of belief appeared to heighten as time progressed and Olympic trials approached, attributable to the increased training and psychological demands they experienced. As these demands intensified, the swimmers increasingly discussed the potential of failing to achieve the required standards to reach the Olympic Games and consequently started to consider retiring from the sport. For instance, in his first interview, Dave expressed that it was his childhood dream to win an Olympic Games gold medal and that he was fully committed to do so, "I've dreamt of that medal my whole life… I don't know why it motivates you so much after swimming for 10–15 years… I don't know why it sticks in your head" (I1). Yet, as the interviews progressed it was also apparent that the swimmers were experiencing conflicting thoughts and subconsciously dismissing any idea about a future career in professional sport. For instance, reflecting on whether she was on track to qualify for the Olympic trials, Beth explained:

> I would like to say so, yes. I do want a summer though. I do want to get away… I feel like I need a break. I think I will probably stay on until Commonwealths [Games] and then give it a good bash and call it quits
>
> (I2).

As the Olympic trials approached participants increasingly identified possible reasons why they might not succeed, with the impact of injury and age on the quality of training being frequently discussed. For instance, swimmers started to explain that they were not able to manage the same training sets they had in previous years, Beth explained:

> I think as you get older you are either less able to do more distance stuff, or less able to do sprint stuff. I found that I can't do as much distance stuff as I'm older… because I just can't do it, physically or mentally
>
> (I2).

Stimulated by such thinking, as the Olympic trials approached then passed, participants' confidence pertaining to their swimming careers continued to diminish and they increasingly focused on retirement. They started to express resolute time frames that they were working towards, as Joe shared, "Swimming is my number one priority, but when I finish swimming, then something else will be my priority… If I quit swimming within the next year or two, I can get a good job

to concentrate on" (I3). By his fourth interview, when he had failed to qualify for the Olympic Games, his focus had entirely shifted to the short term as he questioned whether he would ever be good enough to achieve his goal of representing Great Britain:

> Interviewer: What are your future career plans in swimming?
>
> Joe: I'm going to play it short term. I'm hoping this cycle [next four months] will be a bit better than the last one, but if it's not what I want it to be, I will probably pack it in… I have got in my head that okay, maybe it's time to call it a day
>
> (I4).

Joe's mum similarly suggested that Joe was not as committed or motivated for swimming as he used to be due to this lack of progression and success.

## 3.2 | Managing and fulfilling expectations

Another challenge discussed throughout the eight-month transitional period was swimmers' concerns regarding their ability to manage and fulfill their own and significant others' expectations. Joe shared, "Living up to your own expectations is a massive challenge and other people's expectations is a challenge (I1)." In terms of their own expectations (ie, the expectations they had for themselves), participants indicated that these were mostly related to their performance in training and competition, and also their university commitments. For instance, reflecting on the overall transitional experience, Tom explained that his inability to meet his own expectations resulted in him feeling guilty about wasting his coach's time:

> Day-to-day there is almost no consistency in training. You go from feeling really positive about things to the next day thinking you are going to need to quit. You are wasting your coach's time and it is probably not helping from that view point. I'm probably putting too much pressure on myself and overthinking it
>
> (I4).

Meanwhile, Beth expected to perform well at university, despite her swimming commitments. Therefore, Beth struggled to come to terms with potentially not achieving the university grade that she had anticipated. Beth's mother shared similar thoughts in her interview, as she said:

> Interviewer: Can you think of any challenges outside of swimming that Beth has encountered?

Beth's mother: Oh, I think probably just university isn't it. Putting yourself under that stress and strain because she wants to do really well. She really really really wants to do well at university and I think she's set the bar quite high

(I4).

The swimmers also described issues associated with managing their own expectations to perform for others. That is, participants explained that they placed expectations on themselves to achieve for significant others even though they had not required or discussed it. Lisa described, "I want to do well for myself, but I want to prove that I can swim fast for [coach name]. I want to make him proud and that's when I feel the pressure" (I1). Similarly, Carl explained that he used to reminisce about qualifying for an Olympic Games and the positive impact it would have had upon other individuals:

Interviewer: How do you feel about your decisions at the Olympic trials?

Carl: I used to think of Olympic trials being broadcasted and me finishing second or first. I used to think of the commentator saying, 'yes he's secured his place!' I used to think of all my school friends, family and coach watching and they would be like, 'Yes Carl!' My family would be so happy and now every single person I used to think about I have let them down. I know you shouldn't think like that, but that is how I feel

(I4).

Finally, participants reported challenges associated with managing and fulfilling explicit expectations of significant others, often related to aspects outside of swimming. In particular, the swimmers discussed issues associated with fulfilling their parent's expectations with regards to attending university. For instance, when asked why he attended university which he had indicated disliking, Joe shared, "My parents. I don't want to do university, they push me into it, I've got to do it. University is stressful and parents wanting you to do it is stressful" (I1).

However, when talking to his mother, she explained that she did not think she pressured Joe to attend university but rather encouraged him to reduce the pressure associated with swimming:

I do try and get him to get that balance. I know in his head his swimming is everything but I do try to say what you will be able to achieve if you have got your qualifications. I keep saying it is really important to get that balance as well

(I1).

### 3.2.1 | Experience over time

The swimmers reported concerns associated with managing and fulfilling expectations throughout the eight-month transitional period. However, it appeared that intensified expectations were encountered as the Olympic trial event became closer. For example, in her third interview, 2 weeks out from the Olympic trials, Lisa shared that she felt her coaches were exerting large amounts of pressure on her leading into the trials:

It's mentally exhausting. It's pressure in a way because there is so much unknown after, I don't know what other swimming meets there are, it's overwhelming. The coaches are making this meet so big, so so big, they almost make the meet bigger than the meet you're trying to qualify for, for that meet

(I3).

In general, the swimmers indicated that they were trying to minimize the focus on Olympic trials and the coaches and parents perceived that they were also doing this—focusing instead on swimmers' education, rehabilitation from injuries, or the process of development. However, the swimmers were consistent in indicating that they felt increasing pressure from others as well as placing more pressure on themselves, as Beth shared just prior to the trials:

It was motivation probably and because of the anxiety of not knowing how well… well thinking I was going to swim badly and be like "aw well" … it was just that lead up, that anticipation of waiting to swim and see the outcome

(I3).

## 3.3 | Operating within an environment that is working against them

Another area that influenced swimmers' experience was the structure and functioning of the organization in which they were operating. Participants appeared frustrated that they were attempting to transition in the face of demands relating to tangible support available in the environment, costs, selection criteria, and structural changes within the swimming club. Particularly, swimmers reported difficulties associated with their access to various support systems within the club/organization, specifically psychologists. These swimmers did not have access to an extensive sport science team, consequently, they felt they were at a disadvantage compared with other competitors who were attempting the same transition. For instance, when discussing her access

to a sport psychologist, Beth explained, "No, I'm not that good am I? So if you're not good enough you don't get the support [laughs]. Unless you are very messed up in the head and they are like 'Beth, you really need it'" (I2). The lack of psychological support that Beth received reinforced her thoughts concerning "not feeling good enough" about her abilities to transition onto the world stage. The coaching staff also expressed the necessity for sport psychology support for national level swimmers and explained the challenges these swimmers encountered when acquiring this type of support:

> I still don't believe world governing bodies put enough emphasis on the psychological support. You can only get psychological support if you're on funding but if you are not on funding and couldn't make a major game, that could have a direct impact on making or even excelling in those games. So, it is a bit of an unfair scenario (I1).

Beyond psychological support, swimmers also felt disadvantaged due to a lack of financial support. These swimmers perceived there was a lack of investment in them because the organizing body was targeting those swimmers already receiving funding or younger swimmers who might reach the subsequent Olympic Games. Not only did swimmers perceive this to be unfair that swimmers who train the same number of hours at the same intensity as the swimmers who are on top level of funding, do not get recognized, but it also meant they had to take on other jobs, reducing their focus on swimming and ultimately increasing their self-doubts:

> I think [governing body] dish out £30,000 to people that are on sponsorship deals, they have private funders, they live at home. Then there are people that are trying to do exactly what they are doing if not better, and they are having to find part time jobs, are going to university, struggle with money, and it seems if you aren't already there you aren't allowed to get there (I1).

The participants also expressed difficulties associated with selection policies for major competitions. Specifically, in Lisa's first interview she explained that she thought [governing body] excluded her from the selection of major competitions, and that the same individuals were consistently selected for major competitions:

> Honestly, I am always probably the one below the cut off. I am probably always the one that just falls out of the net. So whichever way they

cast their scope of who they are going to pick, I am probably just the one that falls out (I1).

Lisa felt that because she was always the one in the position below being selected, she would never gain the necessary experience to break into international swimming. Both Lisa's coach and mother shared the same thought, indicating that [governing body's] selection policies restricted Lisa's ability to transition in swimming. Lisa's mother shared her thoughts following the trials event:

> It's quite interesting though because some of my colleagues at work don't understand swimming and they said "yay she did really well!" and I will say "she's not going to the games" and they said "well why?! What's going on?!" You know that's [governing body], it's the way they do it… it doesn't matter what time everybody gets, they will just select who they want! (I4)

### 3.3.1 | Experience over time

Demands relating to the organizational environment were apparent throughout all participants' accounts during the eight-month study period. For instance, as demonstrated above in Lisa's first interview, [governing body]'s selection policies were always perceived as a barrier for her to overcome to progress to an international level in swimming but this was reinforced after the Olympic trials, as she explained, "You just want one person on a panel to say 'let's take a chance on this person'…based on FINA times I would have gone (to the Olympic Games)… qualifications are so tough" (I4). However, well Lisa performed, she was frustrated because she perceived her goal of transitioning to a world stage was always going to be out of her control and in the fate of other individuals' hands.

Challenges associated with a lack of financial support also appeared to be a reoccurring issue throughout the study. A lack of financial income was a constant strain for the swimmers, who felt that having access to funding would benefit their athletic development. Joe explained how he would feel if he did receive funding, "You wouldn't have to worry about getting an income, or getting a job, because that's what funding is about, you're not supposed to worry… they [governing body] help you deal with all of that, so you can concentrate on your performance" (I1). The swimmers' lack of funding was an underpinning barrier which influenced whether or not they experienced additional challenges during their attempted transition (ie, having to apply for a job and income), and consequently impacted on their confidence. As time progressed, demands associated with a lack of funding seemed to intensify, attributable to the issues experienced within the

swimmers' training environment. As Joe explained, when discussing issues with his training options:

> I might go and train with [swimming club] for a bit… I'm going to move clubs because [Coach's name] training isn't right for me… I've been talking to [swimmer's name] about it and how much it costs getting there… it's a lot of money and I really want to do it as well. I would love to move clubs but it's the money, it's the money again
>
> (I4).

Overall, it appeared that the swimmers perceived they were embedded within an environment which did not equip them with the appropriate resources to transition to an international level and instead, were constantly battling against the working organization. This, in turn, was a distraction from their swimming as well as a barrier to them being able to reach the next level in swimming. As such, these organizational challenges were directly attributed to swimmers' self-doubts.

## 3.4 | Lacking support and understanding of self and demands

The swimmers perceived a lack of support from those around them to help them reach an international level. Specifically, they questioned the extent to which their social support network understood them or what they were trying to achieve and manage. For example, when discussing support from their coach, swimmers explained that coaches did not appreciate the challenge of managing university and training. As one swimmer shared:

> I think a coach needs to step in, but on a more democratic level, they need to discuss it [missing training for university] with the swimmers and not say, if you don't turn up tomorrow you're getting kicked out. Say we need a chat about how much you're training, a mature approach, treat us like the adults we are
>
> (I2).

The swimmers' views contrasted with those of the coaches, with the coaches explaining that they felt they treated the swimmers appropriately, providing them with independence and authority:

> With senior swimmers, they're allowed to have some input and some conversation about the programme. Whether we use that input or not is a different story, we might not. You can't dictate

and tell seniors what to do, certainly not all the time. Sometimes you have to, but certainly not all the time

> (Coach, I1).

Such contrasts in views illustrate that although coaches may be perceiving that they are providing support to the swimmers, it is not being received or seen as responsive to their needs.

At times, the swimmers also suggested that their coaches failed to provide sufficient attention, especially in comparison with other swimmers in the environment. For example, when Joe was asked if he needed any additional support to achieve in swimming, he responded:

> It's quite hard to… see someone have so much priority when they [coaches] don't believe in you as much as them, so that's quite hard. Coaches favour the swimmers which are already on the potential funding (schemes) and already on funding
>
> (I1).

This perceived lack of attention from the coaches made the swimmers feel they were less interested in their development, focusing attention instead on those performing at a higher level. Consequently, because they were not the "most important" swimmer, there was a belief they might not have access to the support necessary to make the transition to an elite level. Such thoughts appeared to reinforce swimmers' concerns regarding whether they were good enough to make the transition.

Participants also reported challenges associated with a lack of understanding from their parents leading up to the Olympic trials. For example, Lisa thought her mother did not understand how her comments, such as the following, could become a source of pressure:

> Interviewer: Are your parents supportive of your swimming career?
>
> Lisa: Well my mum said to me that she wants to retire if I make the Olympics. So I was like 'ah okay mum, forget about all of my childhood dreams, I will make the Olympics just so you can retire'. She's like 'yes please! Thank you!' She's adding pressure actually [laughs]. I've got in my mind, do it for her so she can retire
>
> (I2).

Although seemingly said in jest, Lisa took her mother's comments on board and felt additional pressure to perform. Lisa's mother was unaware that she might have a negative impact on her daughter, explaining: "She [Lisa] doesn't actually tell me [if we pressure her], I don't know [long pause]. I don't know and I

don't try and burden her [laughs], I could never do that to her" (I1). Again, such contrasting experiences between parents and their support network further illustrate why the swimmers may have felt misunderstood.

Participants also felt their parents did not understand the process of becoming an international swimmer or what it entails to achieve at the highest level. For example, Joe explained that he would not speak to his parents about his concerns within swimming because he thought they were unable to fully understand what he was going through: "I don't think they understand the athlete and swimming world really, so that's why I don't really talk to them about it [my challenges]" (I2). Interestingly, Joe's mother said in her interview that she thought it would have been beneficial to be provided with support from the coaching staff to help educate her about the challenges national level swimmers encounter.

### 3.4.1 | Experience over time

The swimmers described a lack of understanding and support as an ongoing issue throughout the eight-month study period. However, it appeared the athletes desire for support was particularly enhanced after the (unsuccessful) Olympic trial event and they felt those around them were ill-equipped to provide the necessary support. For instance, Lisa had picked up an injury at the event and felt it was not being appropriately managed:

> That is what's frustrating me at the moment because it's not the biggest injury I've had but I can't seem to get my support staff around me to help me just move on. I feel like I'm stuck and I don't need to be stuck, I can just move forward and get things rolling but I can't because nobody is willing to help me
>
> (I4).

Lisa perceived a lack of control in getting support staff to actively engage with one another and help her overcome the injury. The lack of urgency and support from staff consequently made Lisa feel alone and helpless in dealing with her injury after the Olympic trials.

The participants also voiced concerns about their parents' behaviors and felt that they were a burden on their future decisions about whether or not to continue with competitive swimming after the Olympic trial event. As Carl shared, "I've got my mum nagging me about swimming. So I've still got stress from all this from my mum… I'm not very good at saying 'Mum I'm stopping swimming, or mum, I'm going to carry on swimming'" (I4). Carl found it difficult to be open and honest with his mum because he perceived that she did not understand or support the reasons as to why he wanted to retire (ie, because of his poor performances at Olympic trials)

and was, therefore, anxious about her reaction to the overall situation.

## 3.5 | Maintaining balance vs being an elite swimmer

The final theme was related to the tension swimmers felt attempting to maintain balance in their lives while also aiming to be an international swimmer. Participants held a perception of what an elite swimmer was and should be doing, and were constantly trying to exceed this. However, they were conflicted as they realized there was more to life than swimming. Maintaining a high level within swimming sometimes felt "all-consuming" because they dedicated the majority of their life to excelling in sport. As Tom shared:

> I would probably say I'm quite bad with getting a work/life balance. It's hard because in swimming and sport your work is so dominant, it takes up so much of your time… I am trying to think of the last time I actually socialized
>
> (I1).

However, even though they thought they dedicated their lives to swimming, they voiced concerns about living up to their coach's perceptions of commitment to the athletic role. Swimmers thought their coaches wanted them to be this image of an ideal international swimmer who solely dedicated their lives to competitive swimming. Joe said:

> The coaches have this image of this perfect performance athlete, and no one here fits this perfect performance athlete. They want someone who lives and breathes swimming, that's all they think about every day… but no one has got that, no one, the best swimmers in the world don't do that
>
> (I2).

Such tension between the "ideal" and "actual" led to participants questioning their commitment, preparation, and whether they really should be doing "more" to succeed. But all the swimmers were in a dual career (working or studying) and thought their coaches were not accepting of academic/vocational commitments as they did not align with the "ideal" swimmer. For example, Joe explained his experiences:

> Joe: They [coaches] don't like you having a job, they don't really like you going to university.
>
> Interviewer: Why do the coaches not like you going to university/having work?

Joe: Getting tired for training, getting stressed about things which aren't related to swimming… they just think that you're not a 100% athlete if you're not committing all of your time, the fact is, you can't because you can't afford to. It's impossible

(I1).

In direct contrast to the swimmers' views, the coaching staff thought that they were understanding and supportive of the athletes' external commitments and encouraged a "healthy" balance between their commitments to training and university, as one coach said:

It's important that they carry on doing it and I would never say to somebody you're out of the group because you missed training based on that. We try to balance a programme where if you're going through a hard time at university and you've got things to get done then we try to balance the programme so you're missing minimal amounts. I think that's the only way we can be supportive. Try to be a bit more understanding if they're knackered in the morning because they've been up all night

(I1).

The coaches believed that their actions and behaviors were supportive of the swimmers' development and, therefore, assumed that they did not need to address the way in which they provided support to their athletes. Consequently, the swimmers' perceived this lack of acknowledgement and support from the coaches' as a barrier and debilitating contributor to their athletic success.

### 3.5.1 | Experience over time

Overall, the swimmers perceived they lacked balance between swimming and other life domains. Although this issue of balance was present through all four interviews, there was a shift in the focus over time. In the first and second interviews, the swimmers seemed to fully commit to the athletic role, were highly motivated to transition to an international level and thus, indicated that their sporting careers were the primary focus. For instance, asked about her focus on swimming, Lisa shared, "Yes, it has to be [main focus], doesn't it? I think at this point what I am trying to do is qualify for the Olympic Games, it has to be (I1)." In contrast, in their third and fourth interviews, Carl and Tom mentioned they were exploring opportunities outside of sport which allowed a more "even" balance in the athletes' lives. The swimmers realized that their performances in swimming were not the only things they wanted to focus on. As Carl shared:

I'm at the point where I'm not thinking like a swimmer, I'm at the point where I'm thinking, right let's start making a lot of money and let's start going on holidays that I'm actually paying for. Let's start being more considerate to other people, in terms of relationships. That's what I'm thinking about, rather than swimming up and down a pool and that being my only concern

(I3).

Carl explained his priorities had changed over the eight-month transitional period as a result of evaluating his level of life satisfaction. After asking Carl why his priorities had changed, he shared: "It's to do with happiness. Work and making money makes me happy, being with someone I like makes me happy, swimming does not make me happy, university does not make me happy (I3)." It appeared the enjoyment for competitive swimming decreased as time progressed, with the swimmers beginning to consider other opportunities.

The swimmers' lack of enjoyment and negative outlook toward their athletic careers also seemed to develop from their perceptions about what swimming offered and meant to them in their daily lives. As Beth shared:

You realise that you can't really afford it, you realise that it's not going to get you anywhere. In terms of a job you cannot just do swimming. It won't support you at all really. It's just like, at the end of the day, it's a massive hobby that takes up an awful lot of your time. It's just a hobby really

(I3).

Through this realization process, it was drawn to Beth's attention that her swimming career would not fulfill her future aspirations in life. Consequently, she expressed that she wanted to take some time out of her swimming schedule to focus on other commitments, which would allow her to maintain a more balanced lifestyle.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the transitional experiences of British swimmers as they attempted to qualify for the Olympic Games and gain a place in the Swimming World Class Performance Programme. This transition would move the swimmers onto the world stage and provide them with access to funding, something they were currently without. However, the findings suggest that attempting this transition was extremely challenging for these swimmers, with them encountering numerous demands and perceiving limited access to resources. As this study used a prospective design, it was not possible to know if the participants would

successfully complete their desired transition and unfortunately, none of the participants did. Consequently, although the study does not provide insights into the experience of successfully reaching the Olympic games, it provides extremely insightful and pertinent detail pertaining to the experiences leading up to, and following, an unsuccessful transition—something which has received little attention in the literature. It may have been that for some of the participants the transition was unrealistic and reaching the Olympics was not a feasible possibility or it may have been that they were unlucky, nevertheless, for each participant they viewed this as a failure as they had committed to attempting this transition. Consequently, a number of the athletes in the current study dropped out from the sport, highlighting the real problems that can arise if athletes are unsuccessful in achieving desired transitions when competing at a high level in senior sport. As such, consideration of the challenges and demands these swimmers report is important to help guide future research and practice to both better understand unsuccessful transitions and also to better support athletes throughout transition experiences and particularly following those which are unsuccessful.

Within this study, there was one aspect of the experience that was particularly pervasive and consistent; the ever-present self-doubt and low self-confidence regarding whether the swimmers could make it to the Olympic games and onto the World Class Performance Programme. These doubts were articulated from the first to the last interviews, and all other challenges discussed appeared to exacerbate these concerns or were stimulated by these doubts, including their increasing realization that they were perhaps going to fail to achieve their transition goal. As such, it was apparent that the athletes found themselves in a downward spiral of doubts, whereby they started with concerns about their ability to successfully transition and then over the eight-month period, these doubts were continually reinforced by perceived (at times insurmountable) demands and a lack of support and ability to manage these demands. The role of self-confidence has previously been identified as an important influence on athletic performance and as a factor that can impact an individual's ability to cope with a transition.[23,24] Although previous research has identified that athletes may experience reduced self-confidence after their transition into or out of elite sport, our study indicates the substantial impact self-confidence can have on the ability to successfully navigate a transition. Moreover, it illustrated the sheer number of factors that may impact upon an athletes' confidence, many of which may not be recognized by, or even exacerbated, by those around them. Consequently, ensuring athletes are well supported, prepared for challenges, and confident ahead of any attempted transitions appears particularly important.[7,25]

Reductions in the swimmers' self-confidence were particularly evident when certain events, namely when they were ill, injured, or following unsuccessful performances (non-normative transitions), caused them to reflect on their age and level progression in the sport in comparison with others. A lack of progression in development (ie, plateau in performance) has been identified as a common setback experienced by athletes in high performance sport, having a significant consequence on their future sport participation.[26] Interestingly, when reflecting on progression, the swimmers were particularly aware of their age and the potential that they were "running out of time." The aging process is a key driver of athletes' mental and physical development, and impacts upon how athletes develop their sport confidence.[24,27] Although the literature in the physiology discipline has examined age in relation to peak performance, there is a lack of understanding regarding the psychological effect of age on elite performance, specifically during career transitions in sport.[28] Further research examining the psychological effects of chronological age in elite sport, in particular, during athletic career transitions, may therefore be useful to enable practitioners to better support athletes harboring such concerns.

Given that athletes source confidence from their coaches' encouragement/belief and support from family and friends (ie, through positive compliments, feedback, and reinforcement), it is perhaps notable that the swimmers in this study often felt misunderstood, lacking in support, or under pressure to perform.[29] Although it is difficult to know which manifested first (ie, the lack of belief or the lack of support), these findings reiterate the importance of athletes' support network, recognizing that transitions are an extensive process and that access to appropriate support, encouragement, and guidance far beyond (both prior to and following) a key event is critical.[30,31] Social support derived from key interpersonal relationships (ie, coaches, parents, and peers) has been identified as an important resource for athletes during athletic career transitions.[7,10] However, in the current study, a misunderstanding was reported between the athletes' and their support network (eg, coaches, parents, support staff, and university lecturers) regarding the amount and quality of support being provided. This finding aligns with previous literature that has indicated performers preparing for athletic retirement felt the significant others around them did not understand their career transition process.[32] Such incongruous perceptions of the exchanged support behaviors between athlete and support staff reiterate the importance of regular, open communication between all individuals rather than simply assuming that support has been received.

The swimmers also felt they lacked tangible support (eg, funding and psychological support) to successfully transition, associated with the specific organization and environment in which they were functioning. Numerous studies have reported financial pressures as a challenge encountered by

athletes during career transitions in sport and considering that athletes gain confidence from having a "competitive advantage" over their opponents,[29] it is important to recognize the psychological impact of restricting individuals (eg, national level athletes) from receiving this support when compared with other individuals during career transitions.[29,33] Additionally, research has indicated that athletes encounter various psychological difficulties during career transitions in sport, including gaining autonomy, performing under new levels of pressure and establishing personal motivation.[8,11,24] These psychological demands can cause sport-related strain and have been linked to an increase risk in mental health disorders.[11] Given the number of non-normative transitions (eg, injuries) experienced by the athletes in the current study and their potential negative responses (ie, depression, anxiety, and anger), their expressed openness and urgency about their need to be provided with psychological support during these challenging times is concerning, and reinforces the need for organizations to consider what support is available for national level athletes throughout their career.[34] Clearly, as was possible through this study of one sport, within one particular country, critically evaluating the potential impact that organizational culture and environment have on athletes as they attempt to transition is pertinent.

The swimmers were working toward achieving professional status, thus spending a period of their life almost exclusively focusing on competition and training. However, as time progressed, most of them were hesitant to commit their whole lives to high level swimming. Previous research has recognized that athletes who possess "sound" athletic identities and show a great commitment to achieving their personal goals and excelling in sport have had successful transitions in sport.[26,35] Contrary, athletes who showed signs of alternate goals, including the lure of a secure future and good career prospects, unsuccessfully transitioned to a senior level in sport.[35] These ideas were evident in the current study, where the swimmers were increasingly interested in pursuing vocational opportunities and interpersonal relationships than committing everything to swimming. However, given the swimmers' lack of belief in their ability to succeed in this transition, this reduction in commitment and effort may be an attempt to "protect themselves" from failure and exposure to negative feedback in socially evaluative environments (eg, competitive sport).[36] These behaviors are reflective of the "self- handicapping" theory which has been conceptualized as a maladaptive coping strategy (eg, involving disengagement and passivity) and will likely have a negative effect on long-term development and athletic performance.[37,38] Thus, the swimmers may find themselves in a perpetual cycle of limiting their commitment to reduce the impact of failure, which may result in reductions in training and subsequent progress, further exacerbating low self-confidence and increasing chances of an unsuccessful transition.

Through the process of attempting to reach the Olympic games, the swimmers had to navigate a range of other normative and non-normative transitions at an athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational, and financial level. These findings support the HAC model,[3] as well as highlighting the frequency with which athletic and non-athletic transitions coincide with one another and seemingly influence athletes' opportunities for success in sport (and beyond). For example, injury and illness influenced the athletes' feelings toward their (lack of) physical and psychological readiness and thus impacted on their confidence to successfully transition and reach the Olympic games. The athletes also perceived that their support network (ie, coaches and sport organization) did not provide them with sufficient social support during their injuries/illness and described demands associated with their inability to undertake academic activities. These findings are replicated in other career transition literature, which has reported changes within athletic (higher standards of training,[24] psychological (establishing personal motivation[39]), and financial (lack of financial security[12]) domains to all influence athletes' fluidity during the transition experience. Moreover, they point to the importance of ensuring that all athletes are supported through all transitions to ensure that one does not negatively impact upon another.

# 5 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There are several limitations to this study that should be taken into consideration when interpreting these findings. First, our study was only conducted with participants from a single sporting organization from the UK. Competitive swimming is a unique sport due to its demanding nature (ie, intensive physical training from a young age), high risk of medical-related issues, and emphasis on aesthetics/body image. Conclusions are therefore limited to this particular group of athletes because of the differences in sport systems, societal norms, educational systems, and cultural traditions which can all impact career development.[2] Future research is encouraged to explore these factors across cultural societies to highlight differences and similarities between such demographics.

In our study, the environment itself appears to have influenced the success and subsequent progression for participants, however, the extent to which this was examined was limited. Consequently, adopting a more holistic approach to the study of transition, whereby the focus is removed from an individual athlete to the environment the athlete belongs to may be beneficial. By adopting a holistic ecological approach, future research will therefore be able to glean a more in-depth view of the specific organizational factors which influence successful/unsuccessful national to international level transitions in sport.

As highlighted, none of the athletes in our study successfully transitioned onto the world stage, through qualification for the Olympics and into the World Class Performance Programme. However, one swimmer did subsequently make this transition after the completion of the study. Based upon the participants' initial performance rankings, they were capable of competing at the national trials and the swimmers' goals signaled that they wanted to achieve qualification for the Olympic games. However, this may have been a lofty goal. Consequently, through this study we were unable to gain an understanding of a successful transition. Nevertheless, the insights gained regarding unsuccessful experiences are valuable, and future research should continue to adopt such prospective approaches in the hope of gaining further insights into both successful and unsuccessful transitions at this level.

## 6 | PERSPECTIVES

During the eight-month research period, the athletes not only reported transitions (ie, normative and non-normative) in relation to an athletic context, but also transitions at a psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational, and financial level. These transitions coincided with one another to influence the athletes' success in sport and other domains of life. An athletes' support network should therefore be encouraged to co-operate with one another, to promote well-rounded development of an individual. For example, athletes, coaches, parents, university staff, performance lifestyle advisors, and sporting organizations should endeavor to meet on a regular basis to monitor and evaluate athletes' development across each of these domains. It is also important to recognize that the attempted transition to elite level swimming was populated with non-normative transitions. Given the specific difficulties associated with non-normative transitions (eg, involuntary in nature), it would seem particularly pertinent for coaches, parents, and support staff to help prepare aspiring athletes to anticipate and subsequently cope with potential significant but unpredictable transitions and events. Therefore, it is essential that athletes are educated about the potential unpredictable change events during their careers and the impact that they can have on their development if not managed effectively.

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