

Fighting for Olympic Dreams and Life Beyond: Olympian Judokas on Striving for Glory and Tackling Post-Athletic Challenges

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8 pre-retirement planning⁵.

9 Abstract

10 **Objectives:** This study explores the experiences of Olympian judokas, examining both their pursuit
11 of excellence to compete at the Olympics and their subsequent transition out of judo. The aim is to
12 offer empirical evidence regarding the challenges they face in realizing their Olympic dreams, and to
13 shed light on the transitional challenges, available resources, and needs they face as they move
14 towards post-athletic lives.

15 **Methods:** We conducted semi-structured interviews with eight Olympian judokas: five males and
16 three females, all of whom have retired from competitive judo. These participants are from Portugal
17 (n = 1), South Korea (n = 2), and the U.K. (n = 5). We employed thematic analysis, which led to the
18 identification of five main themes: (a) From Dreams to Olympic Reality, (b) Facing the Void: Loss
19 of Goals and Identity, (c) The Crucial Role of Social Support, (d) Dual Aspects of Pre-Retirement
20 Planning, and (e) The Double Edge of Organizational Support.

21 **Findings:** The findings highlight the significant challenges faced by Olympian judokas, including
22 goal and identity loss post-retirement, and the need for comprehensive and accessible organizational
23 support, particularly psychological assistance, to assist in their transition to post-athletic life

24 **Implications:** The findings not only enhance our understanding of judokas' experiences during
25 transition but also offer insights that could guide the development of tailored support programs. It is
26 critical for sport governing bodies and practitioners to apply these insights in creating comprehensive
27 and easily accessible support systems, which will ensure a smoother transition to post-athletic life for
28 high-performance athletes.

29 1 Introduction

30 Achieving and perhaps even standing out at the Olympic Games is perceived by a number of high-
31 performance athletes as the peak of their sports careers. This has led scholars to emphasize the role of
32 psychological readiness and assistance in achieving Olympic success (Wylleman et al., 2009;
33 Wylleman and Rosier, 2016). High performance athletes consistently push their physiological
34 boundaries and challenge their physical capacity to realize their Olympic aspirations. During their

35 prime, their accomplishments are recognized and celebrated as they establish what appear to be
36 unattainable physical standards (Silver, 2021). However, the rigorous requirements of top-tier sports
37 can sometimes hinder athletes from exploring diverse interests early in life (Barker-Ruchti et al.,
38 2019; Lavalley, 2005; Stambulova et al., 2007). As a result, many of these athletes often face
39 significant challenges in their post-athletic life, such as finding a new job, seeking social support
40 from trusted individuals, and experiencing social isolation (Lavalley, 2006; Martin et al., 2014; Park
41 et al., 2013; Warriner and Lavalley, 2008). Researchers reported that involuntary retirement can be
42 significantly related to transitional issues (Martin et al., 2014; Stambulova et al., 2021; Wylleman and
43 Lavalley, 2004). More importantly, such transitional issues can be associated with mental health
44 problems such as eating disorders, substance abuse, and tragically, even instances of suicide (Jones et
45 al., 2005; Malcolm and Scott, 2012; Mannes et al., 2019).

46 The journey of high-performance athletes after they step away from their sport has gained increasing
47 attention from both researchers and the broader public. Initial studies on athletes ending their
48 competitive careers can be traced back to the late 1960s, with Mihovilovic's pioneering efforts
49 (1968). Through the 1980s, there was an increase of studies examining aspects like athletes' career
50 progressions and the eventual shift towards retirement (Stambulova et al., 2009). In a more recent
51 review by Stambulova et al. (2021), it was noted that early studies, spanning the 1960s to the 1980s,
52 often tackled athletes' retirements from a non-sport specific framework. The 1990s, however, marked
53 a transition to a more holistic approach athletes' entire careers and within career transitions (e.g.,
54 junior to senior transition) using sport-specific frameworks. In contemporary times, this lens has
55 expanded further, considering athletes within the broader background of their cultural and social
56 ecosystems. While life shifts are known stress triggers requiring adaptation (Brissette et al., 2002),
57 the act of leaving a sport is especially transformative and could influence an athlete's psychological
58 well-being (Lavalley, 2005; Park et al., 2013). Notably, top-tier athletes are prone to a spectrum of
59 mental health challenges (Rice et al., 2016), which could appear as anxiety, depression (Gouttebauge
60 et al., 2016; Schuring et al., 2017), or, in severe cases, even lead to suicides (Hong 2018). Using
61 well-regarded theoretical background (Stambulova et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2005), Park et al. (2013)
62 highlighted 15 critical determinants influencing the quality of an athlete's shift away from their sport.
63 Their exhaustive list ranged from aspects like an athlete's self-identity to financial stability (see Park
64 et al., 2013 for further detail). Even with such comprehensive insights, there is still room to explore
65 further. Specifically, Park et al. (2013) emphasized the importance of pre-retirement planning for
66 ensuring a smooth and successful transition. However, the strategies elite athletes adopt for such
67 preparations, or the reasons some may overlook this step, remain under-researched and require
68 additional investigation.

69 In a similar vein, Stambulova et al. (2009) highlighted several crucial elements of the athletic
70 transition process. They pinpointed a variety of factors leading to the end of sports careers and noted
71 the individual differences in reactions to such terminations. Particularly significant was an athlete's
72 sense of having a choice in their transitioning out of sport and how it impacted their adaptation to
73 post-athletic life. They also emphasized the importance of athletes beginning preparations for life
74 after their sports career early on. In addition, the resources accessible to these athletes and the fact
75 that about 15-20% of elite athletes seek psychological help after retiring were highlighted. As a
76 result, these researchers stressed the value of early retirement planning, the autonomy in making the
77 decision to retire, developing various personal identities, having access to support networks, and the
78 development of proactive coping strategies as key to aiding athletes' adaptation to life after sport.
79 Since the key to an athlete's successful transition lies in their ability to adapt, and our study
80 investigates these challenges and needs, aiming to improve support for high performance athletes
81 during this significant phase.

82 High performance will all eventually face retirement, though the timing and circumstances of their
83 career termination can be unpredictable. Retirement is not just a career change but brings about
84 challenges related to self-identity and coping (Stambulova et al., 2009; Stambulova et la., 2021).
85 Many high-performance athletes, though, find themselves unprepared for transitioning out of sport,
86 lacking resources for a smooth career shift, leaving them vulnerable to a distressing transition (Hong
87 & Coffee, 2018). In our endeavor to understand the journey of retired Olympic judokas, we have
88 employed the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014; see in
89 Figure 1) as the foundational framework of our research.

90 [Figure 1 near here]

91 The Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition was initially developed based on research
92 on athletes' transitions by Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) has been modified by Lavallee et al., (2014).
93 This model offers insights into different aspect, emphasizing how sports psychologists and other
94 experts might best support athletes during these transformative phases. The model outlines four
95 primary triggers for ending an athletic career: aging, deselection, injuries, and personal choice.
96 However, while these reasons provide a baseline, it is important to recognize and understand
97 additional factors that could influence an athlete's decision to retire. For instance, Hong et al. (2021)
98 investigated support systems and interventions available globally for athletes facing career transitions
99 due to anti-doping policy violation. Their findings demonstrated that doping sanctions could
100 significantly affect athletes' retirement. This model also points to five key elements influencing an
101 athlete's adjustment to a new career phase. Past studies indicate that high performance athletes,
102 during this shift, might struggle with identity crises. This is attributed to the restricted chances they
103 get to develop diverse identities during their sporting commitments (Lally, 2007; Park et al., 2013).

104 As highlighted earlier, for athletes managing career transitions, it is critical to identify resources such
105 as coping mechanisms, social support network, and pre-retirement planning. When the pressures of
106 such transitions surpass these resources, athletes can struggle with challenges spanning from work-
107 related and financial issues to family disputes and mental health complications (Stambulova et al.,
108 2009; Stambulova et al., 2021). In these instances, they may benefit from interventions targeting
109 cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and organizational aspects (Lavallee et al., 2014). Previous studies
110 highlight the significant role played by sport governing body in implementing support
111 schemes/programs as a form of organizational interventions (Hong and Coffee, 2018; Surujlal, 2016).
112 Some research, including findings from Hong and Coffee (2018) and Torregrosa et al. (2020),
113 demonstrates the presence of career support systems tailored for athletes. Specifically, Hong and
114 Coffee identified these programs in 19 countries, indicating the proactive steps taken by sport
115 governing bodies and organizations to support athletes during these critical shifts. However, there is a
116 noticeable gap in research when it comes to understanding how athletes engage with these
117 organizational supports during their transitions. Thus, the present study aims to explore the
118 experiences of Olympian judokas striving to compete at the Olympics. By examining their transition
119 out of judo, this research intends to provide empirical evidence about what it takes to achieve their
120 Olympic dreams, the challenges they face during transitions, the resources available to them, and
121 their needs after their athletic careers.

122 **2 Materials and Methods**

123 **2.1 Design**

124 This research employed a case study design to understand the journey of Olympian judokas, from
125 their dedication to competing at the Olympics to their subsequent transition out of the sport. The

126 method allowed for a close examination of this unique scenario, emphasizing the personal stories of
127 the involved individuals. Since the aim was to identify the perspectives of these participants
128 concerning their journey (Smith and Eatough, 2019), the research is positioned in an interpretivist
129 paradigm (Mallett and Tinning, 2014), which is guided by a relativist ontology along with a
130 subjectivist epistemology. This empowers the researchers to identify how individuals interpret their
131 own experiences (Mallett and Tinning, 2014 Smith and Eatough, 2019). Phenomenological research
132 in the interpretive realm strives to explain, understand, and shed light on specific phenomena (Tuohy
133 et al., 2013), essentially identifying the core of the actual lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). As
134 Merriam and Greiner (2019) state, this research method offers an avenue to examine internal
135 experiences that often remain unexplored in our daily lives.

136 To explore the personal stories of the participants, we used semi-structured interviews, ensuring a
137 comprehensive capture of their narratives (McArdle et al., 2012). Recognizing that all participants
138 had a mutual experience and situation, attention was paid to the significance each individual assigned
139 to their journey (Creswell, 2007). Given that all participants were engaged in the collective
140 experience of Olympic competition and its subsequent transition, this approach was deemed most
141 suitable for our investigation.

142 **2.2 Participants**

143 We recruited eight participants in our study, five of whom were males and three were females, all
144 retired from competitive judo. During the data collection phase, the participants' ages ranged
145 between 32 to 41 years, with a mean age of 35.50 ($SD = 3.20$); years after retirement are between 1
146 and 13 years ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 4.05$). Detailed participant information is presented in Table 1.

147 [Table 1 near here]

148 **2.3 Data Collection**

149 Following institutional ethical approval, both author's contacts were used to recruit a purposive
150 sample (Noy, 2008). Taking into account the availability and preferences of participants during the
151 data collection, five face-to-face interviews were conducted while three others were facilitated
152 through video calls, using platforms such as WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams. Prior to the interviews,
153 participants were provided with the semi-structured interview questions. This proactive measure gave
154 them sufficient time to peruse the questions and determine their comfort levels in responding to them,
155 ensuring we remained ethically sensitive. To document the interviews, we used both a voice recorder
156 and the recording feature on Microsoft Teams. Due to the semi-structured format of the interviews,
157 participants enjoyed the latitude to discuss significant moments not explicitly covered by the
158 predetermined questions, further enhancing the depth and quality of our findings (McArdle et al.,
159 2012).

160 To ensure consistency across interviews, we developed an interview guide based on our research
161 questions and insights from existing literature (e.g., Hong and Fraser, 2021, Lavalley et al., 2014;
162 Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2009; Torregrosa et al., 2015). The guide addressed the sport
163 background, prompting questions such as "When did you start your elite judo career?" and "What
164 motivated your interest in elite judo?". It also explored experiences related to preparing for and
165 competing in the Olympics, with inquiries such as "How would you describe your overall preparation
166 for the Olympics?", "What challenges did you encounter?", "How did you overcome these
167 challenges?", and "Can you share your overall experience of competing at the Olympics?". Lastly, it
168 touched upon experiences concerning the transition from competitive judo, asking participants "How

169 was your experience transitioning out of competitive judo?”, “What challenges emerged?”, “How did
170 you cope with these challenges?”, and “What type of support do you believe would be helpful?”.

171 Before participating in the study, each participant received an information sheet that detailed the
172 purpose of study, methodology, potential risks, and benefits. After reviewing this information, they
173 were asked to sign a consent form, confirming their agreement to participate. Once we received the
174 signed consent form, we scheduled individual interviews for them. Providing participants with the
175 information sheet and obtaining their consent was crucial to ensure they were fully informed about
176 the study and their rights. This approach highlighted our dedication to upholding ethical research
177 principles, such as informed consent and respecting participant autonomy. We posit that these steps
178 ensured the credibility and integrity of our study. Interview durations ranged from 61 to 143 minutes,
179 with an average time of 89.63 minutes ($SD = 29.94$). Each interview was transcribed verbatim. For
180 confidentiality, we replaced participants’ names with codes such as Olympian 1, Olympian 2, and so
181 on (see Table 1).

182 **2.4 Data Analysis and Rigor**

183 In this study, the authors employed the thematic analysis approach outlined in six steps by Braun and
184 Clarke (2006) to identify critical patterns in the collected data. The method, consistent with the
185 guidelines proposed by Braun et al. (2016), aided in highlighting key themes and patterns. To better
186 understand the data, the authors thoroughly went through the transcripts and revisited the recorded
187 interviews multiple times. They made notes on their preliminary observations concerning
188 participants’ Olympic experiences and their transitioning out of sport. To ensure the results were both
189 valid and consistent, the authors convened for three separate discussions, during which they
190 examined the preliminary codes and overarching themes that had been identified. These
191 conversations, held either over video or phone, were instrumental in refining the themes, ensuring
192 there was a mutual agreement on what had been identified. For clarity and transparency, each
193 identified theme was given a specific label and description. This thorough data analysis method was
194 chosen by the researchers to provide a reliable narrative of the participants’ experience, reinforcing
195 confidence in the results. Additionally, they reviewed and implemented Braun and Clarke’s (2006)
196 15-point checklist to ensure the quality of their thematic analysis across all six phases.

197 In qualitative research, it is critical to ensure our work meets rigor and trustworthiness stands. To
198 achieve this in our study, we took several steps. Firstly, our team regularly met to review our data
199 analysis process and the themes we identified. These discussions made sure our analysis matched
200 what we aimed to investigate. Then, following advice from Brown et al. (2018), we kept a detailed
201 record of the steps we took in our analysis, explaining the methods we used and why we chose them.
202 This aligns with Finfgeld-Connett’s (2014) suggestions. Finally, to make sure our findings were
203 sound and trustworthy, we each reviewed the analysis independently. We shared feedback with each
204 other, similar to the ‘critical friends’ idea from Marshall and Rossman (2006). Through these steps,
205 we made sure our results were trustworthy and met the standards expected in qualitative research.

206 **3 Results**

207 Five themes were identified from the thematic analysis (for further details, see Table 2).

208 [Table 2 near here]

209 **3.1 From Dreams to Olympic Reality**

210 All participants recalled dreaming of the Olympics from a young age, especially as they began to take
211 judo more seriously. Each one spoke of their deep enjoyment and love for judo. This passion gave
212 them a powerful motivation to compete at the Olympics, which they viewed as the pinnacle of their
213 judo career. In essence, the aspiration to participate in the Olympics became their primary motivation
214 and driving force. Olympian 8 mentioned, “I remember watching the Olympic Games in Athens in
215 1996. Not Athens, sorry, Atlanta. The Olympic Games have something special because you don’t
216 go to the Olympic Games because you are rich or you are poor, pretty or not; you’re there because
217 you are great at something. So, to be great at something, you have to put in significant effort. I
218 realized this when I was 14 years old and decided I wanted to be one of the best in the world at judo.
219 To achieve that, I knew I had to train harder than everyone else.” Similarly, other participants
220 nurtured dreams of becoming top judokas in the world and competing at the Olympics. To realize
221 these dreams, they dedicated themselves to rigorous training and consistent competitions to advance
222 their judo careers. Despite facing a number of challenges and obstacles, they persevered in their
223 pursuit of excellence to be among the best. Olympian 1 highlighted, “Every athlete faces moments of
224 anxiety. I believe that this anxiety is due to a lack of confidence in one’s training. Factors like failing
225 in one’s personal routine and management can contribute to this anxiety. Since there are things I
226 cannot change, and I’ve trained hard with what I have, I must accept that there are things out of my
227 control and focus on what I can do now.”

228 While some participants won medals, others did not. Although they recognized that simply
229 competing at the Olympics was an honor, they could not help but look back with a sense of regret.
230 Olympian 3 shared his experience “Between Beijing and London, I had best point in my career. But
231 best time in my career came in the middle of the two Olympic Games. So, maybe for 18 months to
232 two years in this period, I almost didn’t lose a match internationally and I was number one on the
233 world ranking list. But it was not the right time to be an Olympic Champion.” It was worth noting
234 that, when he was young, he left university to focus solely on judo, which was a significant decision:
235 “I went to university when I was, I think 17... no... 18 and also started training like almost full-time
236 judo and I was doing both, but I was loving doing judo and I didn’t enjoy my university course. I
237 think my personality was if something is going wrong, I stick my head in the sand. So, I started doing
238 more of judo, more, more, more, more, more and going to university less and less and less and less.
239 [...] So, I left university without doing exams in second year. at the time, I think really, I tried to
240 cope with this on my own but not very well.”

241 Olympian 1 still felt frustration, “When I lost, it felt like I had been in a car accident. It was
242 unexpected. Just as you wouldn’t anticipate getting suddenly hit by a car. When I lost, I initially
243 didn’t want to do judo anymore. I gave it my all, and in a way, I felt hurt.” Among the participants
244 who won a medal, Olympian 5 shared her feeling when she won a medal “I knew winning a medal
245 wouldn’t be easy, but it happens to me. It was amazing. All my hard work paid off. [...] I considered
246 going for another Olympics, but I knew it would be very challenging.” They knew what it took to
247 prepare for another cycle of the Olympics, and they had already invested everything they had into the
248 event. In light of this, all participants chose to retire after the Olympics. Even though they
249 accomplished their goals by competing in the Olympics, departing from a passion they had devoted
250 their lives to was challenging. Olympian 8’s statements describe this sentiment effectively: “I
251 remember, after my last fight when the competition ended, I was overwhelmed with emotion and
252 tears. It wasn’t because I had lost; it was the realization that a journey spanning 12 years had come to
253 an end. For over a decade, I had worked towards this, and in that moment, it felt like a door was
254 closing.” The participants recognized and appreciated their achievements but also understood their
255 limitations regarding continuing their athletic careers for the next Olympics. As a result, they chose
256 to retire from competitive judo.

257 **3.2 Facing the Void: Loss of Goals and Identity**

258 Two notable shared experiences among the participants were the loss of goals and identity. Given
259 that their primary objective was to compete at the Olympics, with all other goals directed towards a
260 successful athletic career, they inevitably faced the issue of goal loss: “The first emotion I felt was a
261 lack of purpose. Without a goal, there was a sense of depression. What I remember thinking back
262 then was, just as I used to focus solely on training every single day, there was no longer a need to
263 maintain that focus” (Olympian 1). Olympic 8 also noted, “It was a strange feeling because like I told
264 you, I finished a cycle in my life. But at that moment I had no objective in the future. I knew that I
265 wanted to finish university, but the university that I was studying at I didn’t enjoy that much.”

266 Loss of identity emerged as another central issue among the participants. Olympian 5 mentioned that
267 she still struggled with identity issues, even though she retired five years prior to the data collection:
268 “You know, I’m happy with what I’ve achieved. I have a family now... and I keep myself busy,
269 always learning. But even so, that athletic identity of mine remains a huge part of me.” While some
270 of them have established professions and others are exploring career options, they struggle to find
271 interests beyond judo. Even when choosing a profession, they question whether it truly aligns with
272 their desires: “So, the young athletes were familiar with me being like a coach, like a coach type
273 responsibility. So, this was quite an easy transition. I think the more difficult transition was - I think
274 partly because I left my education and then I didn’t go back to my education, I felt probably a little
275 trapped when I was first a coach because I love judo, I liked coaching, but I wasn’t 100 per cent sure
276 that coaching was what I wanted to do. [...] But I felt like maybe this is the only way I can make
277 money because I have no qualification in anything else. My - all of my experience is in this. So, if I
278 don’t want to do this, how am I going to make money? How am I going to get a job? So, I think for
279 probably almost two years, I didn’t really speak to anyone about this apart from my wife.” Olympian
280 4, who recently transitioned to a coaching role, echoed this sentiment.

281 Among the coping strategies that participants employed to address the issues of goal and identity
282 loss, two stood out: setting a new goal and seeking support. While the topic of seeking support will
283 be explored in depth in the subsequent sub-section, participants emphasized the significance of goal
284 setting and maintaining focus on their new objectives. Both Olympian 6 and 7 stressed the
285 importance of concentrating on one small goal at a time, similar to how they approached judo by
286 focusing on one fight at a time. This sentiment, shared by others, highlighted the importance of
287 leveraging their well-developed skills in goal setting and motivation—skills transferable to areas
288 beyond judo.

289 **3.3 The Crucial Role of Social Support**

290 The participants emphasized the importance of social support throughout both their athletic careers
291 and their transition periods. When they began their judo journeys and faced critical decisions in their
292 careers, parental support was crucial in enabling them to pursue their passion for judo. While parents
293 initially had concerns about a career in athletics and preferred their children to pursue academic paths
294 like their peers, they eventually offered their support. This encouragement was so important for the
295 participants in pursuing their dreams: “They didn’t stop me, but they were not very, very happy. They
296 had no background as sportsmen, so they didn’t have this sport culture. So, for them the important
297 thing was to study and to have a peaceful life in the future. Sports can be trouble here” (Olympian
298 8). Olympian 2 also shared such experience, “Yes, my dad would say that I had a lot of athletic
299 talent, so I should pursue it. My mum, reluctantly and with tears, would send me off. She’d be
300 heartbroken and often tell me, even as she was crying, ‘It’s not too late; you should study.’”.

301 As they advanced in their careers, they also received support from coaches, partners, and peers. This
302 support was critical for the continuation of their pursuit of dreams. For instance, “I’ve got massive
303 support from my coaches when I felt down, checking on me, keeping in touch, it was massive help
304 (Olympian 7)”. Both Olympians 3 and 5 highlighted the significant support they received from their
305 partners during their athletic careers as well as during their adaptation to life post-retirement.: “I
306 think to catch these people I had to focus 100 per cent on judo. But certainly, in the last part of my
307 career, I did like many different things. So, I think one of the most important things was when I met
308 my wife” (Olympian 3). Olympian 6 noted, “I need to spend some quality time with my friends to
309 relieve my stress and such. If I have a good weekend with my family and friends, who always
310 support me, I find that my training the following week goes better”. However, Olympians 1 and 4
311 experienced a lack of support from their coaches, which adversely affected their performance,
312 particularly during the Olympics and in the preparation leading up to it. For instance, Olympian 1
313 noted, “We were together for 4 years and were on the national team together. But I knew he wasn’t
314 interested in me. Why? Because he never once came to me personally to teach a technique, and never
315 once paid attention to me during training. I always trained alone, and he only coached me during
316 competitions, even though I made it to the team on my own. Realizing I had trusted someone like this
317 for 4 years to reach my final goal was extremely disappointing”.

318 While participants actively sought social support both during and after their athletic careers,
319 they recognized that ultimately, they had to confront all challenges on their own. They believed this
320 was because even family, coaches, partners, and friends might not fully understand the unique
321 challenges of their careers and transitions. In addition, they felt confident in their own strength to
322 manage these changes and demands.

323 **3.4 Dual Aspects of Pre-Retirement Planning**

324 While participants recognized the importance of pre-retirement planning during their active athletic
325 careers, most did not manage to do so. They emphasized the challenges of creating pre-retirement
326 plans, as athletes need to remain focused on their immediate goals and performance. Some
327 participants pointed out that the absence of a clear point of contact for support made it difficult to
328 even consider initiating pre-retirement planning. For instance, Olympian 2 mentioned, “I was an
329 athlete too, but athletes mostly focus on their sports and don’t make decisions about their future
330 careers. They think they’ll give it a try, and if it doesn’t work out, then they’ll consider what’s next.
331 But by the time they realize it, it’s late. They’re already in their 30s. If they’d realized it in their mid-
332 twenties, they could have done something else while still earning a salary. When they leave the sport
333 and try to find a new path, they’re older, which makes it hard to start something new. Plus, they don’t
334 even know where to begin or whom to ask. There might be people who’ve benefited from seeking
335 guidance, but I haven’t seen any. There probably is some assistance if you call the association, but
336 you have to take the initiative and knock on doors to get that help. Athletes don’t know where to
337 start. They haven’t been educated on this. Only a few who are fortunate enough to know about such
338 opportunities might knock on those doors”.

339 While none of the participants managed to establish pre-retirement planning during their athletic
340 careers, some of the British judokas mentioned that they learned how to pursue their second career
341 from their agencies. For instance, Olympian 3 discussed, “I worked with [the name of the agency]
342 and then for all of the rest of my career I worked with them. So, although I was not doing like formal
343 education, I was doing a lot of work with those guys on developing my ability to talk in front of like
344 an audience...and also to deliver workshops to businesses around how to help businesses through the
345 lessons from sport. they have like a tag line, like they talk about double career track, so they always
346 talk about athletic career and okay ‘What else? What's your second career path?’ They are always

347 trying to speak to athletes about ‘okay it’s important that this goes well but if this goes well and
348 you’re doing nothing with this, the rest of your life could be very difficult. So, let’s make this like
349 double career track’”. Some British judokas, including Olympians 5 and 6, mentioned receiving
350 support from their sport governing bodies to cope with transitional demands and explore career
351 options. However, they believed there should be more consistent support for transitional demands
352 and pre-retirement planning. In contrast, Olympians 1 and 2 (from Korea) and Olympian 8 (from
353 Portugal) expressed frustration over the lack of organizational support, feeling that their sport
354 governing bodies neglected them once their careers ended. For instance, Olympian 8 highlighted that
355 “If I end up having to live under a bridge afterward, they’ll just say it’s not their problem, that they’ve
356 done their part in helping me. But I believe otherwise; it is their problem. I think there needs to be a
357 system, rule, law – something – where governments, federations, and Olympic committees take
358 responsibility for these individuals.”

359 The narratives from the participants in this section strongly suggest a need for further organizational
360 support. This would help athletes keep a balance between pursuing excellence and preparing for life
361 after sport, as well as assist them in adapting to post-athletic lives.

362 **3.5 The Double Edge of Organizational Support**

363 While the participants recognize the value of organizational support in fostering their athletic dreams
364 during their careers, they also felt that such support, when influenced by the politics and agendas of
365 sports governing bodies, could dampen their aspirations. Although organizational support can
366 manifest in various ways - from financial and informational assistance to psychological and
367 emotional support - the participants predominantly spoke of financial aid during their athletic career
368 and psychological support for their life post-athletics. Regardless their nationalities, they benefited
369 from financial support from their respective sport governing bodies, especially during periods when
370 they were aspiring athletes, at the peak of their performance, and notably when preparing for the
371 Olympics, which they greatly valued. However, the British judokas encountered challenges with
372 funding cuts due to decisions made by the sport governing body. They were asked to relocate to a
373 central training center, leaving behind their regional facilities where they had trained extensively. All
374 the participants in this study chose not to move, believing that staying with their familiar facilities
375 and coaching staff was critical for optimizing their training and results. This preference was
376 overlooked, leading them to lose out on funding, which adversely impacted their training and
377 performance. One participant even pointed out that these politics and agendas were instrumental in
378 their decision to retire. Olympian 4 bitterly discussed, “Politics is always in the background. It’s like
379 being on the edge of funding battles. [...] They just changed the funding criteria one day, and the
380 funding was cut down just like that. They just move the goalposts at their convenience [...] It’s like
381 gambling. Performance sport is a gamble...”.

382 Apart from financial support issues, psychological support from the sport governing body is crucial,
383 especially during an athlete’s retirement phase. Of the participants, only Olympian 5 received such
384 psychological assistance, which she found invaluable both during her athletic career and immediately
385 post-retirement. However, she emphasized the need for this support to be more consistent and easily
386 accessible, especially when athletes struggle with psychological challenges such as identity loss upon
387 retirement. While some athletes, such as a few British judokas, can obtain support from other sources
388 such as agencies, as discussed by Olympian 8 in a previous section, the participants’ narratives
389 suggest that sport governing bodies should actively address this concern.

390 **4 Discussion**

391 This study explores the experiences of Olympian judokas, both in their pursuit of excellence to
392 compete at the Olympics and in their transition out of judo. It aims to provide empirical evidence
393 about what it takes to realize their Olympic dreams, as well as the challenges they face in transition,
394 available resources, and the needs they encounter in their post-athletic lives. The findings offer
395 significant contributions to both academic literature and practical applications. From a literary
396 perspective, this study provides empirical evidence of Olympians' journeys to excellence and the
397 challenges and obstacles they overcame to fulfill their Olympic aspirations. While the findings align
398 with prior studies on the loss of athletic identity, they also bring to the forefront the issue of goal loss,
399 which is inevitable once their ultimate objectives—such as competing or winning a medal at the
400 Olympics—are achieved. This research further corroborates previous studies on the critical roles of
401 social and organizational support. However, it also sheds light on the less-discussed negative
402 perspectives athletes hold regarding organizational support. Similarly, while participants highlighted
403 the importance of pre-retirement planning in hindsight, they also emphasized that high-performance
404 athletes often find it challenging to establish such plans during their active years (Barker-Ruchti et
405 al., 2019; Lavalley, 2005; Stambulova et al., 2007) unless they receive adequate support. These
406 insights resonate with the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavalley et al.,
407 2014), which will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections. Practically, these findings suggest
408 essential elements that sport governing bodies should consider when developing new support
409 strategies or enhancing current support services, ensuring they cater effectively to both retiring and
410 post-retirement high performance athletes.

411 All participants shared their journeys toward the Olympics, detailing the challenges, demands, and
412 coping strategies they employed to achieve their goals. Beyond their passion for judo, the Olympics
413 served as a key motivator, pushing them to persist in their endeavors. The Olympic Games
414 symbolized the pinnacle of their athletic careers. In this respect, they invested heavily in physical
415 preparations, such as rigorous training and injury management, as well as psychological preparations,
416 in line with findings from Wylleman et al. (2009) and Wylleman and Rosier (2016). While all
417 participants achieved their dream of competing in the Olympics, they recognized the inevitability of
418 their careers ending post-Olympics. They were acutely aware of their limits and believed they had
419 reached their peak. In this context, their retirements could be viewed as voluntary. Research suggests
420 that voluntary retirement can facilitate a smoother transition into post-athletic life (Lavalley et al.,
421 2014; Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2009). However, this study's findings indicate that a
422 voluntary retirement does not necessarily mitigate the challenges of this transition. The loss of goals
423 and identity emerged as pressing issues, with some participants still struggling with them. Consistent
424 with earlier research (Lally, 2007; Park et al., 2013; Sinclair and Orlick, 1994), identity loss was a
425 primary concern. While the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavalley et al.,
426 2014) cites identity concerns as factors affecting career transition, this study suggests the inclusion of
427 goal loss as an equally impactful factor. To address these challenges, participants employed goal
428 setting and sought support. Establishing and focusing on new objectives enabled them to find
429 direction in their post-athletic lives, often in alignment with new professional pursuits. However, it is
430 crucial to note that while some secured professions, others were still exploring career avenues, all
431 struggled with identifying interests outside of judo. At times, they questioned their choices, tying
432 back to the broader issue of inadequate pre-retirement planning. Their intense commitment to their
433 sport left little room to explore external interests. Although they acknowledged the importance of
434 pre-retirement planning, they conceded that it might be challenging to achieve without adequate
435 support. To developed tailored support programs that consider the specific context of Olympic
436 judokas transitioning out of sport, it is crucial to acknowledge the impact of sports on human
437 personality and the variations in personality traits across different combat sports disciplines;

438 customizing support services to the specific personality traits associated with each trained sport is
439 critical for developing effective support mechanisms as Piepiora and Witkowski (2020) suggested.

440 The findings highlight the critical roles of both social and organizational support in athletes'
441 transition out of their sport. When confronted with significant challenges and barriers, participants
442 sought social support both during and post their athletic careers, aligning with observations from
443 previous studies such as Brown et al. (2018). Notably, the primary sources of this support shifted as
444 participants progressed in their careers. In the early stages, parental support was significant, but as
445 athletes matured and advanced, they increasingly turned to partners, coaches, and peers for support.
446 This shift is elaborated upon in Wylleman (2019), in the context of the Holistic Athletic Career
447 model. While many participants valued the support they received from their coaches, two judokas
448 (Olympians 1 and 4) recounted negative experiences stemming from a lack of such support. This
449 deficiency notably impacted their performance, especially during the Olympics and the preparatory
450 phase leading up to it. Given the well-documented influence of the coach-athlete relationship on
451 performance, as noted by Jowett (2017), the lack of a strong bond with a coach (as in the case of
452 Olympian 1) and frequent changes in coaching staff without involving the athlete in discussions (as
453 experienced by Olympian 4) are matters sport governing bodies should consider when strategizing
454 and framing support mechanisms for the Olympics. In this respect, the role of coaches extends
455 beyond enhancing athletic performance to influencing the overall well-being of the athletes.
456 Witkowski et al., (2016) found that that combat sport athletes, such as Polish combat sport athletes
457 including judokas, perceived their coaches as playing a critical role in their educational process, and
458 thus, many coaches prefer to focus on educational values rather than solely on sports achievement.
459 Fostering educational values, as preferred by most combat sports coaches, indicates that proficient
460 coaches can play a progressively crucial role in enhancing all dimensions of health (e.g., somatic,
461 mental, and social) of athletes and their abilities to cope with life challenges (Witkowski et al., 2016).
462 More importantly, while participants actively sought out social support to navigate their challenges, it
463 is crucial to acknowledge their inherent resilience and accountability. These athletes have highly
464 developed psychological skills throughout their training and competitive judo experiences (Sarkar,
465 2017).

466 Regarding organizational support, only two British judokas (Olympians 5 and 6) mentioned receiving
467 any from their sport governing body to cope with transitional demands and explore career options.
468 However, it is important to highlight that such support tends to be sporadic and even temporary.
469 Those who did experience such support emphasized the need for more consistent and regular
470 assistance for transitional demands and pre-retirement planning. In this context, inconsistent support
471 can be categorized as organizational stressors, which have been identified as common and
472 challenging issues for high-performance athletes (Arnold, Wagstaff, et al., 2017). The persistence of
473 unaddressed organizational stressors can lead to various adverse outcomes, including burnout, injury,
474 negative emotions and affect, and significant impacts on health and well-being (e.g., Arnold,
475 Fletcher, et al., 2016; Cross et al., 2015; Tabei et al., 2012). These consequences can, over time,
476 profoundly affect athletes' transition out of sport, necessitating increased attention and intervention
477 from sport governing bodies and related authorities. As mentioned earlier, participants pointed out
478 that the establishment of pre-retirement planning necessitated support, particularly from sports
479 governing bodies. In addition, several participants (Olympians 1, 2, and 8) expressed frustration over
480 the lack of organizational support. This feedback should be integrated into the Conceptual Model of
481 Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavalley et al., 2014), particularly under 'Factors Related to
482 Adaptation to Career Transition' (e.g., the absence of organizational support). Other participants also
483 highlighted that the lack of a clear point of contact for support made it challenging to consider
484 establishing pre-retirement plans, which should be also integrated into the model.

485 While none of them had put pre-retirement planning into action during their athletic careers, it was
486 notable that some British judokas did benefit significantly from their agencies in terms of developing
487 a career plan. These observations highlight the pressing need for organizational support that maintain
488 a balance between pursuing excellence and facilitating preparation for post-athletic lives,
489 emphasizing pre-retirement planning. While earlier studies have documented the existence of
490 structured support programs worldwide, which include pre-retirement planning provisions (e.g.,
491 Hong and Coffee, 2018; Torregrosa et al., 2020), there is still a compelling case for more rigorous
492 implementation. Such insights should also be incorporated into the Conceptual Model of Adaptation
493 to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014), especially under ‘Available Resources for Adaptation to
494 Career Transition’ (e.g., well-structured organizational support). In addition, it is crucial to
495 emphasize that athletes must be aware of the importance of establishing pre-retirement planning to
496 sufficiently prepare for their post-sport lives and ensure long-term well-being and quality of life. It is
497 also important to widely publicize successful examples of pre-retirement planning to help athletes
498 understand its significance. Mentorship can be an effective approach in this context. Park and
499 Lavallee (2015) proposed that practitioners could offer mentorship support from individuals who
500 have successfully navigated athletic career transitions and adjusted to life after sports, which is a
501 crucial consideration in the provision of support.

502 From the perspective of organizational support, participants acknowledged the significance of such
503 support in fueling their athletic aspirations throughout their careers. Nevertheless, they also felt that
504 when this support is removed by the politics and agendas of sports governing bodies, it can have a
505 discouraging effect on their ambitions. Every participant received financial support from their
506 respective sport governing bodies during their peak performance times, especially as they prepared
507 for the Olympics. This financial assistance was instrumental in advancing their careers. Yet, it is
508 noteworthy to mention that the British judokas confronted substantial funding cuts due to the sport
509 governing body’s decision to shift training to a central training center. All of them declined this
510 transition, leading to shared negative experiences. Importantly, one participant emphasized that such
511 politics and agendas played a pivotal role in their decision to retire. This emphasized the potential
512 adverse impacts of unfavorable politics and agendas, which can profoundly affect an athlete’s
513 performance and might even prompt early career termination. These insights should be incorporated
514 into the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014), specifically
515 under ‘Causes of Career Termination’ (e.g., shifts in politics and agendas). As previously noted,
516 changes in politics and agendas within sport governing bodies that negatively impact athletes’ careers
517 and performances can also be categorized as organizational stressors, particularly concerning
518 logistical and environmental issues (Arnold, Wagstaff, et al., 2017). To mitigate such organizational
519 stressors, it is critical for sport governing bodies to establish clear communication channels, involve
520 athletes in decision-making processes, and implement well-structured support systems that address
521 the unique needs and challenges faced by athletes.

522 Psychological support from sport governing bodies is considered particularly significant during the
523 retirement phase. Only one participant (Olympian 5) had received such psychological support, and
524 she emphasized the need for more accessible and consistent support, especially when athletes
525 confront challenges such identity loss during retirement. The lack of such support is considered
526 detrimental to a smooth transition. For instance, the tragic suicide of former world judo champion
527 Craig Fallen in 2019, following his retirement (Keay, 2019), highlights the urgent need for structured
528 and customized support for athletes transitioning out of their sports careers. Many cases of athletes
529 struggling with post-retirement challenges, such as loss of identity and motivation, financial
530 difficulties, job insecurity, and loss of life goals, have been extensively documented (e.g., BBC,
531 2018), all of which strongly point to a lack of pre-retirement planning during their athletic careers as

532 highlighted previously. In this context both this study and prior research (e.g., Hong and Coffee,
533 2018; Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2009; Stambulova et al., 2021; Torregrossa et al. 2015)
534 confirm that psychological support is critical for high-performance athletes, both during their careers
535 and as they transition out of their sport. As highlighted by the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to
536 Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014), psychological support is a cornerstone of effective
537 organizational interventions and should be central to support services and programs.

538 **4.1 Practical Application**

539 The insights gained from the present study provide a foundation for developing a path for athletes'
540 retirement and facilitating their quality lives post-athletics. Firstly, a proactive approach to retirement
541 planning is critical. Sport governing bodies should initiate engaging athletes in pre-retirement
542 planning at an early stage in their careers, focusing on holistic development that includes not only
543 athletic but also personal and professional development. Secondly, fostering strong relationships with
544 coaches, peers, and support staff is also crucial as they play a significant role in the athlete's journey
545 and can provide valuable support during the transition phase. Thirdly, the provision of consistent and
546 structured psychological support is key to addressing challenges such as identity loss and goal loss.
547 Mentorship programs involving retired athletes who have successfully navigated the transition can
548 provide valuable insights and support. In addition, promoting successful examples of pre-retirement
549 planning and post-athletic career development can serve as a motivation and guide for athletes.
550 Lastly, sport governing bodies should establish clear communication channels, involve athletes in
551 decision-making processes, and address organizational stressors that can negatively impact the
552 transition. Providing guidance on financial management, career development, and setting life goals
553 post-retirement are also significant components of the support program. Thus, a holistic, structured,
554 and proactive approach to retirement planning that addresses the unique needs and challenges faced
555 by athletes is essential to facilitate a smoother transition into post-athletic life and ensure their long-
556 term well-being and quality of life.

557 **4.2 Limitations of the Study and Future research Direction**

558 While this study offers meaningful contributions, it also has limitations. It was not initially designed
559 to explore differences in experiences based on cultural backgrounds. However, data analysis did
560 uncover some such differences to a degree. A deeper exploration of these cultural nuances was
561 beyond the study's scope, but future research could examine the experiences of Olympians, factoring
562 in their cultural backgrounds and their countries' sports systems, both of which can significantly
563 influence their careers. Although judo is one of the representative Olympic sports, there is a dearth of
564 research on judokas' experiences. Thus, examining their experiences was valuable. Still, future
565 research could expand to include athletes from other sports, especially team sports, to offer a more
566 comprehensive perspective on the pursuit of Olympic excellence and the subsequent transition out of
567 sport. In this respect, studying sports less prominent in public discourse or newly introduced to the
568 Olympics might also provide fresh insights.

569 **5 Conclusions**

570 The present study explored the challenges faced by retired Olympian judokas including issues of
571 identity and goal loss, mental health challenges, and a lack of adequate support from sport governing
572 bodies during their transition. It also highlighted the adverse effects of insufficient pre-retirement
573 planning. Despite these challenges, the resilience of athletes in adapting to post-athletic life was
574 evident. The findings emphasize the need for a proactive, structured, and holistic approach to
575 athletes' retirement planning, involving financial guidance, psychological support, mentorship, and

576 decision-making involvement from an early stage in their careers. Although the study provides
577 valuable insights into judokas' experiences, it also indicates the necessity for broader research
578 covering a diverse range of sports and cultural backgrounds. In conclusion, this study emphasizes the
579 importance of a holistic strategy in preparing for retirement to ease the shift into life after sports,
580 thereby ensuring sustained mental and physical health and overall life satisfaction for retired athletes.

581 **6 Conflict of Interest**

582 The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial
583 relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

584 **7 Author Contributions**

585 **Hee Jung Hong:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data Curation,
586 Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization, Project administration.

587 **Seung Han Hong:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data Curation,
588 Writing - Review & Editing.

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597 **10 Data Availability Statement**

598 The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding
599 author. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise
600 the privacy of research participants.

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732 Table 1. Participant Information

Participants	Gender	Age	Nationality	Years after retirement
Olympian 1	Male	Early 30s	Korea	5
Olympian 2	Male	Early 40s	Korea	13
Olympian 3	Male	Early 40s	UK	7
Olympian 4	Male	Mid 30s	UK	1
Olympian 5	Female	Early 30s	UK	5
Olympian 6	Female	Early 30s	UK	1
Olympian 7	Female	Mid 30s	UK	1
Olympian 8	Male	Late 30s	Portugal	9

733 *Note: We have employed broader terms concerning the participants' age as an additional measure to
734 secure their identities.

735 Table 2. Themes identified by Thematic Analysis

Theme	Sub-themes
From Dreams to Olympic Reality	Strong Drive and Motivation Persevering with Pursuit of Excellence
Facing the Void: Loss of Goals and Identity	Loss of Goals Loss of Identity
The Crucial Role of Social Support	Support from Parents Support from Coaches Support from Partners and Peers
Dual Aspects of Pre-Retirement Planning	Athletic Commitments versus Future Preparations The Consequences of Deferred Planning
The Double Edge of Organizational Support	Organizational Support: Encouraging Athletic Aspirations Organizational Support

Organizational Support Subject to Politics and Agendas:
Discouraging Athletic Aspirations

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