



## Postponed Olympic Dreams: High-Performance Athletes' Experience in Coping with Postponed Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games

### Authors' contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation

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### Abstract

The study aims to understand how high-performance athletes preparing for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games coped with challenges caused by the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) decision to postpone the Olympics as well as the COVID-19 pandemic by analysing varying experiences across different social contexts. It also investigates the organizational support in place to assist them during this unprecedented period, from sports governing bodies such as NOC's and NGB's. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with sixteen high performance athletes from Poland, Portugal, and South Korea, who had either qualified for Tokyo 2020 or were due to complete their qualification events. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the data collected from these interviews, providing insights into the athletes' experiences and coping strategies as well as organizational support they have received. Athletes reported utilizing internal resources such as goal setting, showing high resilience. They also relied on external resources, including organizational and social support. Support from sport governing bodies varied by country. Regardless, athletes highlighted the need for organizational, informational, psychological and financial support to address challenges and prepare for the postponed Olympics. The findings suggest sport governing bodies should maintain ongoing and up-to-date communication with athletes and conduct regular wellbeing checks to address potential concerns. By examining the immediate and practical impacts of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics postponement and the COVID-19 pandemic on high-performance athletes, this study offers empirical evidence on their perceived needs. These findings highlight the need for structured support initiatives from sport governing bodies and organizations as well as the proactive development of targeted support strategies for future sports mega events. Such measures will facilitate that athletes are better prepared and adequately supported during times of crisis.

**Keywords:** athletes' coping skills; Olympic Games; organizational support; psychological support; social support

### Introduction

The postponed Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games and the COVID-19 have together resulted in many changes to the preparations of both individual athletes and teams, with National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and National Olym-

pic Committees (NOCs) adapting to new realities. Many authors have addressed the problems facing professional sport in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, including: the health impact of the disease during mega sport events (Gallego et al., 2020; Vaishya, 2020), the potential economic impact of the virus on the sports industry

(Drewes et al., 2020; Horky, 2021; Vaishya, 2020) and comparison of the contemporary situation in the context of the postponed Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games with the impact of pandemics on sporting events historically (Constandt & Willem, 2020). However, there remains a lack of research on the experiences of athletes who had prepared for qualifiers or had already qualified for Tokyo 2020. Specifically, limited attention has been given to the key challenges and demands high-performance athletes faced across different societal contexts, considering the varying measures implemented by each country during the pandemic. In addition, there has been a lack of focus on the coping skills and strategies they employed to navigate these challenges in the middle of the pandemic, as well as their perceived needs for effectively managing such unexpected and demanding circumstances. Outlining the challenges faced by athletes after the postponement of the Tokyo Olympic Games is therefore the primary focus of this study. Only upon understanding athletes perceived challenges at this time, can we then turn to the auxiliary focus the study – to determine what NOC's and NGB's can do to effectively support athletes in dealing these challenges in the future.

In the context of the postponed 2020 Summer Olympics, Stambulova et al. (2022) propose three different scenarios in response to challenges faced by Athletes- 'rejection', 'acceptance', 'fighting' – for Olympic/Paralympic athletes based on Stambulova's (2011) mobilization model of counselling athletes in crisis transitions. Moving forward, career transition should be understood as turning phases in athletes' career development associated with a set of specific demands that athletes have to cope with in order to continue successfully in sport and/or other spheres of their lives (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). In the case of the first scenario, rejection, "it is a good time for me to retire now" (p.96). Athletes who had planned to retire after Tokyo 2020 may not wish to cope with challenges and uncertainties caused by the postponement and instead retire from sport. In the case of the second scenario, acceptance, "I can take a pause and strategically prepare for the next Olympic/Paralympic Games" (p.97). Athletes, in particular those in early/mid-career, may consider preparing for the next Olympics/Paralympics as they still have time to pursue career excellence and may lack present resources to cope with the challenges caused by the current postponement. In the case of the last scenario, fighting, "C-19 won't stop me preparing for Tokyo 2020" (p.97). Some athletes may be categorized as this, implying they are sufficiently experienced and have enough support to cope with the challenges and barriers related to Tokyo 2020 (see Stambulova et al., 2022 for further details of each scenario). While these scenarios provide useful perspectives on athletes' responses to the postponement of the Olympics, they do not provide

detailed accounts of the lived experiences of athletes. Addressing this gap requires empirical evidence obtained through in-depth qualitative approaches. In this context, Stambulova et al. (2022) encourage further research on this topic, highlighting the importance of providing evidence on how athletes have coped with the postponement of the Olympics and the broader impact of COVID-19. Such research is vital for expanding our understanding of athletes' career development and transitions, which the present study intends to address.

Some studies have attempted to address lived experiences more directly. The impact of COVID-19 on athletes, in particular elite sportswomen was measured (Bowes et al. 2022) to contribute to our better understanding of the phenomenon. While Bowes et al.'s (2022) study provided significant insights into the impact of the enforced lockdown on elite female athletes such as financial insecurity, training practices, engagement with coaches, its findings have certain limitations. Specifically, the participant pool, comprising 94% British athletes, and the reliance on a qualitative survey limit the study's ability to capture the in-depth experiences and insights of high-performance athletes from different countries, who may have access to varying support provisions and resources given the sport systems in each country. In their examination of the experiences of Austrian Olympic athletes and coaches, Oblinger-Peters and Krenn (2020) found that their participants experienced an immediate emotional response to the postponement of the Olympics, characterized by feelings of confusion, disappointment, and/or relief. They also identified various coping strategies employed by the participants, including distancing themselves from sports, cognitive reframing, seeking acceptance, and engaging in planning behavior. While these findings provide valuable insights into the participants' initial reactions and associated challenges as well as coping strategies they adopted, the study was constrained by its design, much in the same way as Bowes et al.'s (2022). Due to the reliance on short written statements collected via online survey platform and the exclusive focus on participants from a single nation, the findings offer only a limited exploration of athletes' experiences and their perceived needs. On the other hand, Zamora-Solé et al. (2022) conducted interviews with 25 athletes to explore the experiences of high-performance athletes in the context of the disrupted Olympic cycle caused by the simultaneous unexpected transitions of the pandemic and the postponement of the Olympic Games, a focus that closely aligns with the present study. Similar to the work of Oblinger-Peters and Krenn (2020), their study identifies facilitating factors that contributed to athletes' coping and management of transitional challenges and demands. While their findings provide significant insights into athletes' retrospective and prospective perspectives

on the lockdown and the postponement of the Olympics, the implications are mainly centered on psychological aspects and the practice of psychology professionals. As a result, the study lacks broader organizational-level insights and implications. In addition, along the lines of the other two studies discussed, this study examined athletes from a single country, which limits a more comprehensive understanding of diverse sporting contexts. This is why our approach that looks at multiple countries including Korea, Portugal and Poland, holds more value.

Samuel et al. (2020) noted that the dynamic nature of the pandemic, as a change event, created unique and complex experiences for each athlete, shaped by multiple factors. Thus, extensive research is needed to evaluate these influences and athletes' responses. In their invited commentary on the COVID-19 and Olympic/Paralympic athletes' developmental challenges and possibilities during a global crisis-transition, Stambulova et al. (2022) highlighted that athletes' lives and careers of high-performance athletes have been significantly impacted by the global pandemic, with the sport and Olympic/Paralympic movements being substantially affected. This emphasizes the inevitable career transition challenges and demands faced by high-performance athletes due to these unprecedented circumstances, requiring effective coping strategies and management approaches to address them. Gupta and McCarthy (2021) examined the challenges faced by athletes due to COVID-19 and found that the pandemic imposed a break on athletes similar to forced retirement, which significantly affected their athletic career. This brings to light the need to understand how high-performance athletes navigate transitional challenges and demands, as these can have a significant impact on both their athletic and post-athletic careers. Broadening perspective on these challenges is key for establishing targeted and effective support strategies, which is important to identify and understand to better support them. In this respect, considering athlete identity is critical for gaining deeper insights into the challenges and demands faced by high-performance athletes and understanding the nature of their athletic careers. High-performance athletes, whether amateur or professional, often prioritize their athletic identities. Despite having families, partners, or support resources, their focus on athletic identity can lead to identity foreclosure. This narrow identity is especially problematic during a pandemic, as it exacerbates social isolation (Schinke et al., 2020). In this context, Schinke et al. (2020) claimed that COVID-19 presents both identity-related challenges and opportunities for personal growth. This interruption caused by the pandemic provides goal-oriented athletes an opportunity to focus on personal development, strengthen relationships, and explore interests beyond their athletic careers. Thus, it is important to consider whether high-performance athletes,

impacted not only by the pandemic but also by its associated significant challenges such as the postponement of the Olympic Games, which may lead to substantial transitions, perceive these changes as opportunities or threats. Identifying these factors is critical for delivering timely and effective support to athletes.

Given the diverse challenges that can result in unexpected transitions for athletes, it is unsurprising that access to appropriate resources has been crucial in effectively managing these challenges and transitions while preparing for the postponed Olympic Games. Existing career transition models (Henriksen et al., 2010; Lavalée et al., 2014; Wylleman, 2019) suggest that athletes' coping processes and strategies are inherently centered on transitions, and the various requirements for achieving successful transitions should be carefully evaluated within the context of available resources (Stambulova et al., 2009). Factors which may enhance the quality of athletes' transitions are both internal (e.g., athletes' coping skills/strategies) and external (e.g., social/organizational support). Among these, social support from significant others, such as parents, coaches, friends, teammates, is regarded as the most important factor for athletes both at the end and the onset of their athletic careers (Stambulova et al., 2009). In terms of external resources, athletes require support from sport organizations and governing bodies when competing at the elite level, while this requirement diminishes as athletes retire (Hong & Minikin, 2023; Park et al., 2013). Thus, it is essential to examine both social and organizational support within the context of high-performance athletes' experiences in coping with the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. Such an investigation will present key insights to inform sport governing bodies and organizations, such as NGB's and NOC's, in developing relevant support initiatives, as empirical evidence in this specific and unique context remains limited.

NGBs and NOCs have important roles to play in providing organizational support at both preparation and competition stages of the Games. Research on organizational support in high performance settings, however, is limited (Hong & Coffee, 2018; Hong & Minikin, 2023). Hong and Coffee (2018) identified the organizational support available for athletes, as provided via support services/programs within nineteen different countries, including: psychological support, career planning, academic advice, and CV preparation. Reflecting athlete demand, most programs offered career counselling in the form of psychological support. The importance of psychological support from sport governing bodies and sport organizations may be especially pertinent in the context of the COVID-19. However, it remains unknown whether high-performance athletes effectively utilize such support in the context of the pandemic and the postponement of the Olympics. Further investigation is needed to

examine the extent to which these support systems and programs are utilized.

Nevertheless, it is argued that sport organizations and governing bodies are still ultimately responsible for providing assistance for athletes in balancing their athletic and non-athletic careers, and for supporting the development of holistic identities and life skills, which may positively influence their transitions (Park et al., 2013; Surujlal, 2016). NGBs and NOCs are also responsible for the overall running of sports in their countries, which makes them one of the key stakeholders responsible for supporting athletes' performance and wellbeing. However, it is not only competition preparation but also selection processes and other organizational aspects, which, if misconducted, can impact athletes' performance negatively. Athletes can also experience both competitive and organizational stressors, which need to be managed by utilizing coping skills and strategies (Leprince et al., 2018; Nuetzel, 2023). Support is vital to athletes coping with competitive stressors (Brown et al., 2018; Katagami & Tsuchiya, 2016) and may be provided by family, friends, coaches, teammates or governing body support staff (Cosh & Tully, 2015). Organizational stressors, such as organizational politics, selection criteria for participation and planning can also negatively affect performance and so assistance in mitigating these are needed too (Arnold et al., 2017).

Researchers have argued that preparation for the Olympics is more effective when athletes are prepared physically, technically, tactically as well as psychologically (Diehl et al., 2019; Park & Lavallee, 2015). As such, some researchers suggest that psychological preparation is especially important for sport mega events, such as World Championships and the Olympic Games (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Wylleman, 2024), and there is some extant research on the psychological preparation offered to Olympic competitors (e.g., Schinke et al., 2015). Therefore, social support plays just as crucial a role as NOC'S and NGB's (Brown et al., 2018; Katagami & Tsuchiya, 2016), in terms of being associated positively with important results in sport and athletes' ability to adapt to new challenges (Stambulova et al., 2021). Both tangible support (e.g., funds, allowances) and informational support (e.g., communication letters, newsletters) may also be provided by sport governing bodies and organizations. In this respect, a more detailed understanding is needed of how such preparation takes place during the disruption of the Olympics and the role that psychological, social, informational, tangible support play in athletes' experiences and readiness for the Games.

The Holistic Athletes Career (HAC) Model (Wylleman, 2019) is useful in informing the present study in terms of providing a lens through which to interpret and/or understand the levels/phases of an athletic career and the key stakeholders who may support athletes in

different career stages. From the holistic developmental perspective, such career transition barriers may cause changes in athletes' career development at the following levels: i) Athletic development (e.g., closed sport facilities, cancelled competitions, uncertain schedules. ii) The psychological level (e.g., compromised athletic identity). iii) The Psychosocial (social isolation, worries about significant others). iv) The academic-vocational level (possibility of focusing more on education or work despite these areas being affected by COVID-19 and requiring readjusted effort). v) The financial level (e.g., reduction in funding). vi) Lastly, at the legal level (e.g. restrictions in international travelling, uncertainty about doping control procedures) developments" (Stambulova et al., 2022, p.3). In this model, NOCs and NGBs are closely related to the 'financial level' at the mature stage of athletes' careers (e.g., competing at the Olympics in the case of elite athletes), meaning the kinds of intervention where NOC's and NGB's can be most effective in assisting in unexpected transitions are financial. While coaches, partners, support staff members and family members are closely associated with the 'psychosocial level' throughout the developmental stages (i.e., initiation, development, mastery, discontinuation) of athletes' careers. Therefore, this model is fruitful for ascertaining the levels at which different actors can support Athletes Career development more effectively.

Athletes' coping strategies have already been investigated in competitive settings generally (Nuetzel, 2023). However, coping strategies employed in response to the unprecedented challenges posed by the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic games have not been extensively researched, particularly during the period of the postponement and the ongoing pandemic. Examining these strategies in real time can provide detailed insights into the lived experiences of high-performance athletes preparing to compete at the Olympics. Thus, a lack of appropriate social, organizational and psychological support to counter such stressors is likely to have significant negative consequences.

The study, therefore, aims to understand how high-performance athletes preparing for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games coped with challenges caused by the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) decision to postpone the Olympics as well as the COVID-19 pandemic and the overall experiences of athletes in different social contexts in doing so.

## Methods

This study employed an interpretive approach to explore and understand the experiences of athletes during an unforeseen transition and insights into their coping skills and strategies and how they managed this unexpected

change. Studies employing an interpretative approach seek to enhance our comprehension of a phenomenon, thereby providing insights that can guide responses to similar situations in the future (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). Our research followed the interpretivist paradigm to understand how individuals interpret their experiences related to specific events (Mallett & Tinning, 2014). We employed a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology, which recognize that social reality is shaped by each individual's perspectives, motivations, emotional responses, and values (Sparkes, 1992). Thus, the approach was considered suitable for investigating how high-performance athletes understood and responded to the unforeseen changes brought about by COVID-19. To capture detailed personal experiences, we utilized semi-structured interviews, a methodology focused on understanding personal experiences (McArdle et al., 2012).

### Participants

Sixteen high-performance athletes, seven males and nine females, from Poland ( $n = 6$ ), Portugal ( $n = 5$ ) and South Korea ( $n = 5$ ), all of whom had prepared for the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games, participated in the research. Convenience sampling was applied to recruit the

high-profile athletes during the specific period of time. Convenience sampling involves selecting individuals from the target populations based on practical factors. These factors may include how easily they can be accessed, their availability at a specific time, or their willingness to participate (Dörnyei, 2007). This sampling focuses on participants who are readily available to researchers (Saumure & Given, 2008). Given the authors' strong network with athletes in the three countries, along with the athletes' willingness to support the study and their availability during the study period, convenience sampling was deemed the most suitable method. The participants were aged between 21 and 36 years ( $M = 26.50$ ,  $SD = 4.12$ ) and are high-profile athletes in their respective countries, so their sports, nationalities and genders are not disclosed in order to ensure their confidentiality. Participants' sports include Athletics ( $n = 4$ ), Boxing ( $n = 1$ ), Cycling ( $n = 2$ ), Fencing ( $n = 1$ ), Gymnastics ( $n = 1$ ), Judo ( $n = 1$ ), Rowing ( $n = 1$ ), Sailing ( $n = 1$ ), Swimming ( $n = 3$ ) and Taekwondo ( $n = 1$ ). Their competitive athletic careers spanned in duration between 8 and 24 years ( $M = 13$ ,  $SD = 4.92$ ). An overview of participants' information is provided in Table 1, with certain details omitted to ensure their confidentiality.

**Table 1.** Participant Information

Code Names	Nationalities	Sport	Gender	Career Length
Athlete 1	Korea	Cycling	Male	22
Athlete 2	Korea	Fencing	Male	24
Athlete 3	Korea	Judo	Female	6
Athlete 4	Korea	Gymnastics	Male	19
Athlete 5	Korea	Boxing	Female	8
Athlete 6	Portugal	Swimming	Female	9
Athlete 7	Portugal	Taekwondo	Male	15
Athlete 8	Portugal	Athletics	Female	13
Athlete 9	Portugal	Swimming	Female	13
Athlete 10	Portugal	Sailing	Female	8
Athlete 11	Poland	Athletics	Female	13
Athlete 12	Poland	Athletics	Female	10
Athlete 13	Poland	Athletics	Male	15
Athlete 14	Poland	Cycling	Female	10
Athlete 15	Poland	Rowing	Male	10
Athlete 16	Poland	Swimming	Male	13

### Procedure

Following institutional ethical approval, purposive sampling was applied by utilizing the authors' networks. The countries chosen for the study reflect the fact that

the authors are from Poland and South Korea, respectively, and have access to strong networks for recruiting high-performance athletes. Subsequently, snowball sampling was applied to recruit at least five athletes per

country (Alase, 2017). Ten interviews with Portuguese and South Korean athletes were conducted online by the first author, using apps such as WhatsApp and Kakao-Talk (the most used conversational app in Korea). This was not only due to the lead author, who conducted the interviews from a different location in the UK, but also due to the stringent restrictions in both countries. These restrictions limited the athletes' access to their usual training centers and significantly reduced opportunities for both indoor and outdoor activities including face-to-face interviews. Six interviews with Polish athletes were conducted face-to-face by a Polish researcher following government guidelines. Poland's restrictions were similarly stringent. However, athletes with access to the national training center were granted limited entry with official authorization from the authorities. While Semi-structured interviews were used with flexibility, allowing participants to direct the interviews in a way that was meaningful to them, such as introducing topics not included in the interview guide (Brown et al., 2018). The interview guide covered: (a) sport background (e.g. could you tell me about your sport and athletic career as a high-performance athlete?), (b) initial responses to the pandemic and the Tokyo 2020 postponement (e.g. how did feel/what did you think when you learned about the pandemic and the Tokyo 2020 postponement?), (c) barriers and challenges faced (e.g. what were the barriers and challenges that you faced due to the pandemic and postponed Olympics?), (d) internal coping resources (e.g. how have you coped with these barriers and challenges?), (e) external coping resources (e.g. organizational support from sport governing bodies and social support; what support have you received from your NOCs /NGBs /clubs /other relevant sport organizations or coaches / families /friends /significant others?), and (f) additional support needed to prepare for Tokyo 2020 (e.g. what support do you need to better prepare for the upcoming Tokyo Olympic Games next year?).

Participants were informed about the study's purposes, and each signed a consent form before interviewing. Data collection started in June 2020 and was completed in August 2020. Interviews lasted between 25 and 90 minutes, and the total interview time was 603 minutes ( $M = 37.69$ ,  $SD = 15.27$ ). Polish and South Korean athletes were interviewed in their own languages, and Portuguese athletes were interviewed in English. To reduce language barriers, the authors recruited Portuguese athletes who were fluent in English. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and participants were given code names to ensure confidentiality. The interview transcripts for Polish

and South Korean athletes were translated to English by the authors. Back-translation, which is the most common and highly recommended procedure for the translation process, was applied to achieve semantic equivalence (Chen & Boore, 2010). No major differences were identified between the first and final English transcripts, indicating that the integrity of the accounts were ensured during translation.

### Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied with an inductive approach, which allows the authors to create meaningful themes throughout the interview data (Braun et al., 2016). Thus, we followed the six steps that Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and participants were given code names to ensure confidentiality. Both authors read each transcript several times to better understand and to be more familiar with participants' accounts. Subsequently, notes and comments were made as coding process. Thereafter, notes and comments were used to create initial themes. These themes were then categorized into 'higher order' themes based on shared meanings. Cross-examination of codes and themes followed, and final themes were agreed upon by the authors.

Throughout the analysis process, the authors, both with qualitative research backgrounds, held regular meetings to discuss each step in the data collection, data analysis, and results analysis, to ensure credibility and transparency of the analysis (Morris et al., 2017). To ensure commitment and rigor throughout the research design and implementation stages, the authors ensured that the selected sample was consistent with the aims of the research, conducted pilot interviews, and developed detailed and thorough procedures of data collection and analysis. An audit trail was also developed by documenting the analytical procedures, thus enhancing transparency and coherence (Brown et al., 2018). In addition, the authors asked senior colleagues who possess extensive backgrounds in qualitative research to review the data analysis process, examine themes and provide feedback as 'critical friends' (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Smith & Caddick, 2012).

## Results

Four higher-order themes, as well as lower-order themes for each higher-order theme, were identified and are discussed in this section. The identified themes are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Themes identified from the interviews

Higher order themes	Lower order themes	Themes
Threat or Opportunity	Fear and Anxiety	Feel scared and nervous by the pandemic Feel anxious over uncertainty caused by both pandemic and postponed Tokyo 2020
	Another Opportunity	Feel relieved to have more time to prepare Have some extra time to recover injury
Issues and Struggles	Training Issues	Limited/lack of access to usual training facilities Reduced training schedule/programs
	Motivational Issues	Decreasing motivation by limited/lack of training opportunities Decreasing motivation by cancellation of qualifiers
	Financial Struggles	Limited/lack of financial support/resources Funding cut
Roles of organizational support in coping with uncertainty	Tangible support from sport governing bodies	Keep receiving fund from sport governing bodies Access to infrastructures Good communication
	Informative support from sport governing bodies	Lack of communication Checking in
	Emotional support from sport governing bodies Psychological support from sport psychologists/practitioners organized by sport governing bodies	Additional support needed; in particular, psychological support
Roles of social support in coping with uncertainty	Social support from family Social support from coaches	Talk to family members to take comfort Family members help them to keep motivated Gain updated information from coaches
	Social support from significant others (e.g., partners, teammates, friends)	Coaches closely check in their athletes to ensure their health and wellbeing Understanding and support from partners, teammates, and friends

### Threat or Opportunity?

All athletes expressed concerns, fear and anxiety as a result of COVID-19 and Tokyo 2020 being postponed. They saw COVID-19 as a global issue, affecting the world beyond the Olympics. Although government guidelines and measures differed in the three countries, athletes' responses to the exceptional circumstances were similar. Most stated that they were very anxious before the decision on postponing the Olympics Games, as this was their primary goal towards which they had worked for many years. Athlete 7 said, "before the decision everything was really stressful because we didn't know if we were going to have qualification, if we are going to have the games". The unexpected decision concerned some and even shocked others: "I was concerned but never really thought it would be like that" (Athlete 8). Subsequently, athletes experienced fear: and anxiety:

I was very frustrated at first by the decision on the Tokyo 2020 being postponed but became more scared

by the COVID-19 as I got more information about it such as the after effect. The more I know about it, the more I became anxious (Athlete 5).

Their use of language such as 'fear', 'frustration', 'anxiety' and 'nervousness' suggested that athletes considered the combination of circumstances caused by the pandemic and the postponed Olympics as a threat to both athletic careers, as well as to daily living. Some athletes, however, considered the postponement as an opportunity, although they also experienced frustration and stress. Athlete 9 remarked, "I try to stay positive to be better and do what I can to improve. [I focus on] doing different things, more physical work, and working as hard as I did before COVID-19. Now, I really feel good and think I'm better than before".

Athletes accepted the decision on Tokyo 2020's postponement as they considered it was in the best interests of all. Although postponement meant an extra year to focus on training, athletes tried to stay positive. For in-

stance, Athlete 6 stated “it’s a chance to do something better. We have to look from perspective to see positive things”. Those athletes who considered the postponement as positive, repeatedly mentioned that it enabled them to better prepare for the Olympics. Accordingly, the words ‘positive’ and ‘opportunity’ were often mentioned, and they tended to focus on the given opportunities. There were no clear differences between the countries, in terms of whether they considered the changed circumstance as a threat or an opportunity. However, it should be noted that individual differences, such as personalities and their positions (e.g., qualified for the Games or not), appeared to have an influence upon athletes’ perspectives.

### Issues and Struggles

The greatest challenges were associated with training, as athletes were unable to train as scheduled in their familiar environments. Issues included training in remote locations, no access to training camps, training at home, no fixed training schedules, no infrastructure, and limited access to support staff members, such as physiotherapists. In the case of the South Korean athletes, all were residents in the national training center and were released when the decision on Tokyo 2020 was announced. Some of them struggled with no structured training. Athlete 2 mentioned, “no plans were set up at the beginning, so I went back to my professional team and followed their plan, not the national team’s plan”. Many athletes noted that they struggled with reduced training plans because they could not access their training facilities or camps as normal and were constrained by government guidelines (e.g., social distancing).

While some athletes had access to training facilities, others did not or had limited access. An example of those who enjoyed access, Athlete 9, commented “I can swim every time when I and my coach have permission to go to the swimming pool. I bless it because I think it’s really important for me to have contact with the water”. Athlete 4, however, said, “I have to book a local facility when it is available, but it is not the same as the national training center”. Some athletes had to train at home. Athlete 7 stated, “we were trying to train at home, trying to maintain the program, the intensity and everything was really hard, and it was being a lot of stress”. Athlete 8, who could not join her team in another country due to lockdown, also struggled to train. She felt this was unfair as some teammates had access to proper training facilities.

As evidenced above, athletes highlighted the importance of ‘training plans’ and ‘(training) facilities’, thus, indicating that they were the key factors of enhancing athletes’ performance. In turn, it also indicates that the inability to develop concrete training plans and access to training facilities negatively impacts athletes’ performance and preparation. More importantly, athletes may be more

disappointed and frustrated with their limited training environment when they learn about others who have better (full) training environments. In this case, athletes’ performance and preparation may be adversely affected by such disappointment and frustration.

Motivational issues were raised by most athletes. Limited training opportunities and international/national competitions being cancelled impacted negatively on the motivation to keep training: “All the competitions have been cancelled so I have been mentally affected, lost motivation. I have felt exhausted” (Athlete 5). Athlete 4 also noted, “The most difficult thing is lost goal and motivation. I lost my motivation to engage in rehab and training”. Participants discussed how they coped with such motivational issues. The most popular coping skill was to set short-term goals to stay focused and motivated: “I focus on my goal for today” (Athlete 3). Athlete 4, who won a gold medal at a previous Olympic Games, suggested that “it is important to make progress step by step. You should achieve smaller goals to achieve your final goal like the Olympics. It is a matter of keeping pace”. ‘Motivation’ was one of the most commonly and frequently mentioned words across participants. Motivation was also closely connected to the athletes’ accounts of ‘goal(s)’. As realization of their critical goal of competing at Tokyo 2020 was delayed or became uncertain, the motivation to train and enhance their performance noticeably diminished.

Some athletes discussed their financial struggles. Although all participants received financial support from their NOCs and NGBs, the level of support varied depending upon the funding system in each country and athletes’ current performance level/ranking. In the case of South Korea, athletes were unpaid once released from the national training center. Thus, some athletes who were still student-athletes, or were not members of professional teams, struggled financially. Eventually, athletes were paid as a result of training individually and submitting daily training reports to the Korean Sport and Olympic Committee (KSOC). Athlete 7 also raised some funding issues, “When you are on Olympic level you get scholarship also some funds for the traveling, but this lasts only for 2 years. If you don’t get another result within 2 years, it will be over”. Athlete 8 highlighted financial issues related to sponsorship, “if there is no Olympic Games why sponsors are gonna invest on you”. While the Polish athletes did not directly discuss their financial struggles, some of them noted that companies and local governments which previously provided financial support were struggling, and this was expected to result in funding cuts. Athlete 14 commented, “some companies are struggling, and we are not sure how the situation will look like. I’m also supported by my local government, and I think there may be some cuts too”.



When discussing financial struggles, athletes became noticeably disturbed or upset as such struggles could negatively affect their athletic careers, including their specific preparation for Tokyo 2020, their long-term athletic prospects and daily lives. While many South Korean and Portuguese athletes were supported financially by their NOCs/NGBs, the support varied and South Korean athletes, in particular, experienced temporary funding cuts, causing them concern and anxiety. Although Polish athletes did not mention financial struggles, some of their accounts mentioned difficulties experienced by athletes' sponsors, specifically local governments, and companies, thus, indicating uncertainty about the sustainability of their financial support.

### **Role of Organizational Support in Coping with Uncertainty**

Athletes identified different types of support which they had either received or needed from their sport governing bodies or NOCs. Athletes' perspectives on communication with NOCs differed by country. All Portuguese athletes stated that communications with their NOC were very positive, and they appreciated the NOC's efforts to keep them updated and provide up-to-date information: "It is really good. We received emails, messages via WhatsApp, we know everything" (Athlete 7).

On the other hand, athletes from South Korea experienced a lack of communication with their NOC and federations. They found that the information received was not up to date, so they had often already searched for updated news on COVID-19 and Olympic Games by themselves or had been informed by fans, friends or family members. However, they all closely communicated with their coaches and teammates via a mobile chat group in order to keep each other updated. Athlete 2 noted, "I found that the update from the sport organizations or sport governing bodies was a bit behind. So, we are checking with the updates through our coaches and teammates". In Poland, communication with NGB's differed depending upon relationships inside those organizations: "I have first-hand information from the federation, but it is not really my concern" (Athlete 14). Athlete 13 noted, "I'm not in touch with the federation, my coach is, and everything works very smoothly". Some athletes mentioned that communication was poor generally, so nothing had changed as a result of the pandemic.

Support which athletes received from NOCs and NGBs since the start of the pandemic varied by country. South Korean athletes did not mention any support from NOCs and NGBs, while other participants identified some. However, as already discussed, South Korean athletes were all paid a form of monthly salary from their NOC, as all were members of national teams. Portuguese athletes were satisfied with their NOC's support and their com-

munications with them. They commented that they also received good support from their federation. Athlete 9 also mentioned federation support, "We have support from federation. They try to help us in many ways. They give the salary needed for training". Athlete 10, however, was frustrated by a lack of federation support, "Olympic committee give the resources federation doesn't use it properly. They [federation] don't communicate properly. It's not working". Some Polish athletes highlighted support from their federation in the form of infrastructure access: "The federation organized a camp with access to necessary infrastructure some time before it was widely accessible, it helped us a lot" (Athlete 16); Others mentioned support when on training camps abroad, "The federation organized our trips, and everything went smooth" (Athlete 14).

It was evident that the degree and type of support from sport organizations varied by country. While Portuguese athletes were very satisfied with the informational and emotional support given by, and communications with, their NOC, Korean and Polish athletes indicated poor, or indeed, no informational/emotional support and communications. This does not serve to show that athlete support is determined on a country-by country basis, it only shows that organizational support from sport organisations varies on a global scale, in type of support and extent of support. It is worth noting Korean and Polish athletes did highlight tangible support provided by their sport organizations. Such emotional support enabled the athletes to cope with the challenges and enhanced their emotional wellbeing, which eventually helped them to improve their performance and stay motivated to prepare for the upcoming events. On the other hand, the tangible support that Korean and Polish athletes received allowed them to focus on improving their performance, however, they still required more emotional support to feel cared for and supported in their emotional wellbeing.

When they were asked what additional support they would require when preparing for Tokyo 2020, most athletes first mentioned that they would like 'to go back to normal', using their national training center and facilities, and training as before the pandemic: "I don't need additional support. I just want to train with my teammates in our training camp" (Athlete 7). However, they also appreciated that they would have to respect the government and general health and safety regulations. Athletes also identified support needed to cope with the challenges, which NOCs and NGBs might be able to address. Psychological support was particularly highlighted. Athlete 1 commented:

Psychological support is important for mental training, especially when preparing for a major event like the Olympics. I've got a counselling session before and that helped me a lot, it helped me go back to my

routine quickly. So, ongoing psychological support would be appreciated.

The athletes' accounts evidenced that psychological support arranged by the NOCs and NGBs was lacking, irregular, or inconsistent while the athletes themselves considered it as critical in order to cope with challenges and unanticipated changes. In addition, athletes who highlighted poor communication from NOCs and NGBs complained how they were 'left in the dark' by these bodies, some of which did not know how to manage the situation. It was important to receive any up-to-date information. Some athletes suggested that the most important way of providing support for Tokyo 2020 would be improved communication with NOC's or NGB's: "I can repeat. Communication is crucial. We need to know what is happening, to have this comfort. To be aware of the situation." (Athlete 15). Some athletes who were not fully funded by NOC's and NGB's, highlighted a need for further financial support for training or qualification events.

The athletes' accounts across the countries highlighted the importance of psychological, informational, and financial support, whether or not such support had already been provided. There were no clear differences between countries in terms of the support they required to better prepare for Tokyo 2020.

### **Role of Social Support in Coping with Uncertainty**

Athletes identified social support as significant in managing challenges at this time. Many athletes particularly appreciated support from coaches: "My coaches check on me and my teammates very often, on an almost daily basis. I think this is very important to keep motivated" (Athletes 4). The athletes who highlighted the importance of support from coaches indicated satisfaction and confidence in dealing with the current challenging circumstances. They tended to emphasize their close relationships with coaches and highlighted the positive impact this had on how they coped with the situation.

Athletes highlighted support from families and 'significant others' to be as crucial as support from coaches: "Family support is essential" (Athlete 1). Others mentioned support from partners and friends: "My girlfriend supports me a lot as well as my family. I have lots of friends, so it is easier" (Athlete 7). When discussing social support from families, partners and friends, the athletes tended to express their thoughts and feelings with gratitude. It was apparent from their accounts that social support from those stakeholders played a critical role in coping with changes and challenges and affected both their coping process and their motivation to prepare for the upcoming Olympics. As many restrictions were imposed by governments, athletes tended to maintain close ties with their social support providers to stay connected

and reduce feelings of isolation. There were no clear differences between countries in terms of social support received and how athletes perceived such support. Rather, athletes across countries held similar perceptions as to how valuable and helpful social support was for them.

## **Discussion**

By interviewing high-performance athletes from three different countries in the middle of the phenomenon of the COVID-19 and postponement of the Olympic Games, the present study captured the athletes' lived experience and how they coped with challenges caused by the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) decision to postpone the Olympics as well as the COVID-19. The findings highlight their unique experiences resulting from the COVID-19, describing the consequent challenges and barriers, and the 'coping' resources available to them. While some athletes considered the postponement of Tokyo 2020 as an opportunity, other athletes experienced fear, frustration, stress, and anxiety as a result of the COVID-19 and the postponement, which in many cases impacted their athletic careers, causing struggles and transitional difficulties (Stambulova et al., 2022). From the holistic developmental perspective (Wylleman, 2019), the participants have experienced changes and challenges at different levels. In particular, at the athletic level (e.g., no training plans, limited/no access to training facilities), the psychological level (e.g., motivational issues, lost/missing goals), the psychosocial level (e.g., limited opportunities to meet in person due to restrictions) and the financial level (e.g., funding cuts, possibility of losing sponsors). Most athletes, however, coped with the given circumstances by exhibiting adaptivity and concentrating on moving forward positively. In this context, it can be interpreted that the experiences of a significant number of the athletes in the present study are in line with the third scenario – fighting: "C-19 won't stop me to prepare for Tokyo 2020" (Stambulova et al., 2022, p.97). These athletes proactively confronted the challenges and demands and remained committed to their goals, demonstrating resilience and patience in their preparation for the Olympics. This highlights the critical importance of their coping skills and strategies as key internal resources.

The authors found that high performance athletes have experienced struggles and challenges which require to be addressed at both individual and organizational levels. A major issue is that athletes are unable to train 'as normal' and this is likely to continue as a result of social distancing measures or lockdowns worldwide. Such training issues, as well as the cancellation of future sporting events (e.g., qualification events), are negatively associated with athletes' motivation. Researchers have emphasized

that athletes' coping processes/strategies are crucial to managing unexpected changes and transitions, and that such transitional demands including motivational issue and available resources should be matched with identified challenges and barriers (Lavalle et al., 2014; Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2009; Stambulova et al., 2021).

Our findings suggest that setting short-term goals may help overcome such motivational challenges. Goal setting is a well-known motivational technique to enhance productivity and performance in achievement domains such as sport (Cosma et al., 2020). The goal setting strategies applied by athletes in this study helped them to overcome motivational issues that were considered to be major challenges and have motivated them to maintain their preparations for Tokyo 2020. This evidence should be considered as critical when sport organizations and sport psychologists/practitioners develop support schemes to enhance athletes' psychological and behavioral coping skills and strategies.

The findings indicate that both internal resources (e.g., coping skills/strategies) and external factors (e.g., social/organizational support) can significantly influence athletes' coping processes (Brown et al., 2018; Stambulova et al., 2021). It was found that athletes require organizational support from sport organizations/ governing bodies when competing at the elite level (Hong & Coffee, 2018). In this context, Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009) highlighted the responsibility of sport governing bodies to ensure athletes' mental health and wellbeing, noting that the organizational setting can significantly affect individual wellbeing and performance. They also claimed that athletes' success in preparing for and competing major events such as the Olympic Games is associated with their ability to build and foster connections with key stakeholders and support systems (Wagstaff, 2019). The findings also demonstrate that communications with NOCs and NGBs, and their level of available support for athletes varied. Moreover, our findings suggest that receiving social, financial, and emotional support were all crucial for athletes in coping with the challenges and barriers caused by the COVID-19 and the postponed Olympics. This may be critical evidence to consider when sporting organizations and practitioners develop support schemes/services to help their athletes cope with similar circumstances in the future.

The findings highlight that athletes require different types of support from NOCs and NGBs, including financial, psychological, social and informational support. This reflects the expanded Holistic Athlete Career (HAC) Model (Wylleman, 2019). Many athletes highlighted the importance of receiving psychological support from professionals, such as sport psychologists, mental skills coaches and other counsellors. The athletes indicated that they needed to learn how to deal with their stress/emotions, such as anxiety and frustration, in order to stay

motivated and focused on their training/performance. To address the importance of psychological support for high-performance athletes in unexpected transitions, such as those caused by the COVID-19, the role of sport governing bodies to support such sport can be highlighted within the HAC model. Researchers have previously emphasized the importance of athletes being psychologically prepared during both the Olympic cycle and the Olympic Games (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Birrer et al., 2012; Wylleman, 2024). It is important to note that while previous research identified support programs, including psychological support (Hong & Coffee, 2018; Hong & Minikin, 2023), the findings in this study indicate that such support remains insufficient, highlighting the continued demand from athletes. Thus, it is hoped that our evidence can encourage NOCs and NGBs to expand their available psychological support to better support their high-performance athletes' performance and transitional needs.

Participants also highlighted the importance of social support in dealing with uncertainty and Olympic ambitions. This is consistent with existing literature which emphasizes the importance of social support for athletes in order to cope with competitive stressors (Brown et al., 2018; Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2021). In this respect, it is important for athletes to be aware of available social resources and make best use of these (Poucher et al., 2018). Social support from coaches is believed to affect athletes' satisfaction with their sporting experience (Ferreira et al., 2024). Many participants stressed that good communication with coaches and their social support network were crucial to managing ongoing challenges and uncertainty. It was also highlighted by researchers that social support providers are not limited to family, friends, partners, coaches and teammates but may also include support staff members, for example; medical and mental health professionals (e.g. Katagami & Tsuchiya, 2017). In this regard, it should be noted that the Portuguese athletes appreciated the communication with their overarching organization, the NOC, in addition to communication from their coaches and local organizations. The athletes indicated that they felt cared for and supported by their NOC, which positively impacted their coping process, and such good practice should be shared with and considered by other national sport governing bodies/organizations.

Our findings contribute to current literature by providing high-profile athletes' perspectives on the unexpected transition caused by the COVID-19 and postponement of the Olympic Games and in doing so, enhances the existing theoretical framework (HAC Model; Wylleman, 2019) by emphasizing the importance of organizational support from NOC's and NGB's, and highlighting their extended role in providing psychological, social and informational support, in addition to financial support. In this respect, a well-established organizational culture and associated

practices may need to be considered to provide extensive and holistic support. This is because organizational culture significantly influences Olympic performance outcomes as well as contributes to athlete stress, talent development and effective organizational functioning (Arnold et al., 2013; Henriksen, 2015; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). The findings also contribute to an expanding area of knowledge regarding the importance of athletes' goal-setting skills and resilience in managing unexpected events and investigating transitions at a global level. In addition, similarities and differences between countries have been highlighted. Overall, it was found that there were no clear differences between countries in each theme, except whether athletes perceived informational support as sufficient (Portuguese athletes), or as poor (Korean and Polish athletes). Tangible support, however, was only highlighted by Korean and Polish athletes. Otherwise, athletes' perspectives and experiences varied, and depended on individual differences, such as their personalities, personal circumstances (e.g., access to facilities/funding, qualifications) and level of support received, rather than country of residence.

### **Practical Implications**

In addition to its theoretical implications and contributions, the present study provides significant practical implications. The athletes demonstrated their coping skills and strategies to manage and overcome the transitional challenges caused by the pandemic and the postponed Olympics, which were entirely unexpected. Their experiences strongly highlight the importance of possessing not only internal resources but also external support including organizational support from sport governing bodies. While internal coping strategies, such as goal setting, were emphasized, athletes perceived organizational support, such as informational, social, and financial aspects, as a critical need. More importantly, the athletes highlighted the need for professional psychological support, which should be organized and facilitated by sport governing bodies and organizations. In this context, sport governing bodies and organizations can play a significant role by developing a comprehensive support system that fosters athletes' internal resources, such as goal setting, social network development, resilience, while simultaneously providing effective external resources including psychological, informational, social, and financial support. This dual approach aims to prepare athletes not only for performance but also for the transitional demands they may face throughout their athletic careers. While we acknowledge the limited resources available to sport governing bodies and organizations for the development of such a system, it is critical to identify and prioritize key areas within their specific organizational and athletes' contexts, addressing them strategically and progressively.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

While the study provides in-depth insights into the topic, it also has certain limitations. Athletes who were first time Olympians and those wishing to retire after Tokyo 2020 were not distinguished. Although the authors interviewed each category, some participant athletes had competed at multiple Olympic games but did not plan to retire after Tokyo 2020. Data based on this factor, therefore, was not analyzed. Future research might usefully explore differences between those groups, in terms of their levels of resilience and coping skill and strategies. While high-performance athletes' experiences across three countries were investigated, the current study applied a multiple perspective rather than a comparative case study. Future research might use case studies to investigate different national support systems and sport cultures. This may be significant in explaining why the responses to and expectations of NOCs and NGBs vary by country. Lastly, it was observed that individual personalities and positions (e.g., qualified for the Games or not) may have an impact on their perspectives. While measuring their personalities and the relationship between their personalities/positions and perspectives was beyond the scope of the present study. Thus, future research can consider this and possibly measure the relationship.

### **Conclusion**

Aiming to understand how high-performance athletes coped with the challenges posed by the recent pandemic outbreak and the postponement of the Olympic Games, the present study provides a clear identification of the challenges and demands faced by high-performance athletes from three different countries. It also demonstrated how they navigated these challenges and highlighted their perceived needs during this unprecedented and demanding situation. Based on the findings, both theoretical and practical implications are presented, providing in-depth insights to enhance our understanding of athletes' experiences in such extraordinary circumstances. Furthermore, this study provides empirical evidence for sport governing bodies and organizations to effectively address athletes' needs.

The Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics was finally held in 2021 and the authors have since witnessed several participants winning medals, and others transitioning out of high-performance sport before or after the re-scheduled Olympic Games. As some of the participants in this study perceived, the authors also found the postponement of the Olympics and the circumstances caused by the pandemic to present an opportunity to conduct the present study and enhance our knowledge on this topic. It is hoped that the findings of this study can be used to aid the future development of support schemes for high-performance athletes.

### Ethics approval and informed consent

The study was approved by the Ethics Board of the University of Stirling General University Ethics Panel (GUEP) 0538.

### Competing interests

No interest to disclose.

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