

Individual Career Transitions of German Olympians During the COVID-19 Pandemic

An Application of the Scheme of Change for Sport Psychology Practice

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic can affect individual career transitions in athletes preparing for the Olympic Games (OG). This study reconstructs German Olympians' career transitions while preparing for the postponed OG in Tokyo, applying the Scheme of Change for Sport Psychology Practice (SCSPP). Eleven (age: $M \pm SD = 26.81 \pm 2.92$; three females) athletes provide insights into their career transitions according to the SCSPP framework. The athletes report changes (e.g., training, professional status, missing competitions) related to emotional tensions (e.g., relief vs. disappointment) and the effects on their decision-making processes (i.e., initial coping, acceptance, adaptation). The Olympians develop identities, commonly experience relief, and describe their optimism toward Tokyo 2021. No interviewee wants to quit because of COVID-19. While preparing for Tokyo 2021, the Olympians use emotion- (e.g., vacation) and problem-oriented coping (e.g., new routines). Based on our results, we discuss recommendations for sport psychology practice.

Keywords: coping, crisis, Olympics, Tokyo 2020

Individuelle Karriereverläufe deutscher Olympionik_innen während der COVID-19 Pandemie: Eine Anwendung der Scheme of Change for Sport Psychology Practice

Zusammenfassung: Die COVID-19-Pandemie ist eine Krise, die individuelle Karriereübergänge bei Athlet_innen, die sich auf die Olympischen Spiele (OS) vorbereiten, beeinträchtigen kann. Ziel dieser Studie ist es, die Karriereübergänge deutscher Olympionik_innen bei der Vorbereitung auf die verschobenen OS in Tokio anhand des „Scheme of Change for Sport Psychology Practice“ (SCSPP) zu rekonstruieren. Elf (Alter: $M \pm SD = 26,81 \pm 2,92$; drei waren weiblich) Athlet_innen geben Einblicke in ihre Karriereübergangsrepräsentationen gemäß dem SCSPP-Rahmen. Sportler_innen berichten von Veränderungen (z. B. Training, beruflicher Status, fehlende Wettkämpfe), die mit emotionalen Spannungen (z. B. Erleichterung vs. Enttäuschung) und Auswirkungen auf ihre Entscheidungsprozesse (z. B. anfängliche Bewältigung, Akzeptanz, Anpassung) zusammenhängen. Olympionik_innen entwickeln Identitäten, erleben häufig Erleichterung und schildern Optimismus gegenüber Tokio 2021. Kein_e Befragte_r möchte aufgrund COVID-19 aufhören. Bei der Vorbereitung auf Tokio 2021 verwenden Olympionik_innen emotionale (z. B. Urlaub) und problemorientierte Bewältigungsstrategien (z. B. neue Routinen). Empfehlungen für die sportpsychologische Praxis werden diskutiert.

Schlüsselwörter: Coping, Krise, Olympiade, Tokio 2020

For athletes participating in the Olympic Games (OGs), the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding postponement of the OGs may be considered an unexpected and stressful life event, and one that could induce a crisis of uncertainty (Leisterer, Lautenbach et al., 2021). This uncertainty, in turn, might lead athletes to question their careers, for example, in terms of whether they still want to “go for another Olympic/Paralympic run?” or whether their life should “be about more than

sports?” (see position paper by Henriksen et al., 2020). Sport psychology practitioners have been called upon to help athletes mobilize resources that might support them in coping with uncertainty and maintaining mental health (Henriksen et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2020). The study aimed to better understand how athletes perceive changes to their careers and how these changes affect their emotional state and influence career-related decision-making via interviews. In doing so, we aimed to learn

about individual career transitions perceived by athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic and how sport psychology practitioners might support athletes in times of crisis.

The Scheme of Change for Sport Psychology Practice During COVID-19

The scheme of change for sport psychology practice (SCSPP; Samuel et al., 2020) is a theoretical approach to understanding the career transitions of athletes confronted with the decision of (a) staying an athlete, (b) returning to an athletic career, or (c) quitting an athletic career because of significant changes. The SCSPP was adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to describe the impact on athletes' career development during the pandemic (Samuel et al., 2020).

The SCSPP dynamically describes interactions between changes to the careers/lives and inner processes of athletes, namely, emotional reactions and states as well as coping and decision-making. Unexpected, surprising, and uninitiated changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent postponement of the Olympic Games (OG), triggered a set of emotional reactions and states that immanently influenced the decision-making processes of athletes.

Events that lead to changes in individual athletic careers (e.g., changes in squad status, injuries, family planning) may influence their emotional perceptions and decision-making (Samuel et al., 2020); the COVID-19 pandemic, however, caused a cascade of changes to all athletes' lives. Depending on the duration of such changes, these are classified as *initial* (e.g., abrupt cancelation of a competition), *periodical* (e.g., closed training facilities for several weeks), and *enduring* (e.g., the pandemic outlasting changes).

Samuel et al. (2020) distinguish these three durations of change according to their temporal characteristics in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, this accounts for other aspects such as environmental changes (e.g., restrictions) or active coping mechanisms (e.g., adapting one's training routine). *Initial changes* are new changes that occur accompanied by unknown situations, which may relate to an athlete's career status and are caused by or related to COVID-19 restrictions and/or policies in general. These changes are not intentional and do not originate with the athlete. *Periodical changes* are changes or adaptations of the environment and training that persist over a longer time, such as changes necessary to protect the athlete's competitive sports career under environmental conditions beyond their control or sphere of influence, such as closed training facilities. *Enduring changes* are long-term adaptations of the athlete's living en-

vironment, training, and competition routine following a domestic quarantine/lockdown or shutdown and associated restrictions because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The athletes' behaviors originating during a periodical change may persist, for example, when performing training sessions outdoors, even though training facilities may have reopened again during a change in the SCSPP framework, when athletes continue a behavior resulting from periodical changes, for example, even though training facilities have reopened. In contrast to periodical changes, the athletes are in control of enduring changes.

Events involving change induce emotional states and reactions that shape an athlete's individual perception toward change, which are more or less relevant for the athlete (Samuel et al., 2020). Such events may trigger initial emotional reactions (e.g., happiness), which may, in turn, be maintained as a periodical (e.g., a good feeling) or enduring (e.g., being self-confident) emotional state. These emotional perceptions are interrelated with athletes' decision-making processes, when cognitively appraised and contextualized in a career transition process (Samuel et al., 2020). This means that athletes might decide to employ a first strategy (e.g., social engagement) to cope with an initial change. The decisions made by athletes are ultimately deliberate and represent enduring changes. However, until these changes become enduring, the processes are less deliberate and based on tendencies of acceptance of or adaptation to the current situation. This acceptance or adaptation is part of the periodical change. That is, periodical changes need decisions for or against acceptance and some form of adaptation, whereas enduring change leads to career decisions.

Current Findings on Olympic and Elite Athletes' Dealing With the Pandemic

Recent quantitative studies of Olympic athletes' training routines, mental health, and coping strategies showed that mental health and training routines were impacted by COVID-19, but that athletes employ various coping strategies. Further, while recent studies reveal that many athletes strongly agree with the postponement of the OG, they frequently have a negative perception of confinement as it relates to their workout routines and schedules (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2020). In addition, most athletes trust that such confinement will not affect their performance options at the OG 2021. Regarding mental health, research showed that the risk of mental-health problems is associated with financial concerns, whereas daily routines and perceived ability to cope with the pandemic are associated with increased positive mental health (Pensgaard et al., 2021). Along a similar vein, a higher self-per-

ception of distress tolerance is associated with lower levels of a variety of dysfunctional responses (e.g., anxiety) in top-level athletes (González-Hernández et al., 2021).

In detail, interview-based studies of Olympic athletes show they may struggle with their feelings and coping styles during the pandemic. In a qualitative study, British athletes ($N = 8$) stated that they perceived the COVID-19 lockdown as a threat to their athletic goals and thus, adapted to the restrictions so they could focus on their athletic lifestyle (Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021). In this context, the athletes described challenges that led to loss (i.e., of motivation, of athletic identity, or of physical fitness) or negatively affected mental health (i.e., depression). According to this study, the athletes coped by accepting the situation or by developing routines. Additionally, some athletes reevaluated the critical pause as an additional year to prepare (e.g., time for sufficient recovery after an injury, more time to get fit) or to rest and recover (Balk & de Jonge, 2021; Balk et al., 2021), while others used the time to contemplate their privileges as top athletes. Similar results were found in an interview study with 21 Austrian Olympians (Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020): At the postponement of the OG, the athletes reported three emotional reactions – confusion, disappointment, and relief – which were related to athletic, mental, and professional challenges. The athletes reported several coping strategies: distancing themselves from the sporting world, cognitive reappraisal (i.e., an additional year as an opportunity to recover or prepare), finding acceptance, and planning behaviors (Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020).

The Present Study

Thus, the perceptions, challenges, and coping strategies of athletes have been investigated during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding European top-level athletes. However, little is known about their perspectives on their career transitions during COVID-19, with a focus on change, emotional perception, and decision-making embedded in the SCSP theoretical framework. Furthermore, we focus on transition pathways in the athletic career during the pandemic based on insights gained from German national athletes to contribute to the European perspective. Based on this approach, we hope to elucidate various career transition pathways among Olympic athletes during the pandemic and thereby derive useful measures for sport psychology practice.

Method: Qualitative Interview Study

Philosophical Perspective

Following the example of Poucher et al. (2020), our research question is postpositivist, whereby every athlete has individual insights to offer based on their respective dependencies. Individuals, in our case athletes, possess their own perspectives or truths regarding a phenomenon, here the COVID-19 pandemic, and the initial change event. Accordingly, we follow a holistic approach to acquiring and assessing individual insights. We interviewed Olympians regarding their experiences – past, present, and future – of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sampling

Eleven athletes (three females; age: $M = 26.81 \pm 2.92$) were interviewed. The participants were German-speaking Olympic athletes recruited via personal contacts. These athletes competed in combat sports ($n = 7$), water sports ($n = 1$), and individual sports ($n = 3$). Six athletes had qualified for the Tokyo OG at the time of the interviews. The remaining five athletes were in the process of waiting to compete to become qualified. Four athletes had previously participated in the OG and two athletes in the youth OG. On average, the athletes had taken up their sport at the age of 7.5 years ($SD = 3.3$). Three athletes to end their careers after the OG, but only two of them had officially announced this at the time of the interview. One athlete was expecting a child. One athlete was married, eight were in a relationship, and two were single. Most of the interviewees ($n = 9$) were members of professional sport support groups (*Sportfördergruppen*), and two were students at a university.

Interview Guideline and Procedure

We focused on asking for associations of individual relevant structures (i.e., perceived changes, emotions, decisions) in the past, present, and future regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, we relied on the five-step career counseling technique of Stambulova (2010) and adapted this technique to an interview guideline to elicit a flow of words in our interviewees. Table 1 presents interview questions according to Stambulova's five-step career counseling technique. It should be noted that, while key issues related to decision-making are not explicitly stated, we argue that questions bridging the past, present, and future

Table 1. Interview guideline based on the five-step career counseling technique (Stambulova, 2010)

Guideline questions	Five-step career counseling
Please tell me about your life as an athlete, your athletic status, and your life before COVID-19? What would you say: Where are you now in your athletic career?	Make a framework: Draw a life or timeline beginning at your birth and mark your current age. Use this timeline to visualize crucial events of your past, present, and future regarding the following questions.
What do you think has been important in the past that supported you to achieve your current athletic career? How did you perceive the postponement of the Olympics 2020?	Structure your past: What have been the most important events in your life until now and when did these happen? Mark these time points on the lifeline.
Please tell me about a typical day now, during the COVID-19 pandemic: What is important for you to do now?	Structure your present: What are the most important parts of your life right now? How would you prioritize these parts of your life now?
Imagine the optimal year from now until the Tokyo OG in 2021: How does such a year look for you? What are your expectations for the 2021 OG in Tokyo?	Structure your future: Think about, and describe the most important events you wish for/expect in the future?
According to your experiences: What exactly do you think might help you to get through the pandemic, to reach your goal(s)?	Bridge your past, present, and future: What were the most difficult moments in your life until now, how did you cope, and what have you learned? What were the most successful moments in your life until now? What do you want to achieve in priority areas of your life, for you right now? Make an action plan. Can you do anything today to prepare for the next years/events/challenges? Do you still think that you have the right priorities right now?

Note. The five-step career counseling is abbreviated for our purposes here; for further information, please see Stambulova, (2010).

(see five-step career counseling) stimulate athletes to discuss their decision-making processes.

The interviews were introduced by smalltalk questions. Ad-hoc questions (e.g., Could you explain this to me? How did you feel then?) were asked to animate athletes to extend their answers. Interviews concluded with the question of whether the athletes wanted to add something in particular. Based on the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2001), the authors declare that they had and have no doubt about the ethical appropriateness of this interview study. Regarding the declaration's principles, the authors were aware of issues with the risks. In detail, Olympians represent a vulnerable sampling because of their exclusivity, the research protocol, data privacy and confidentiality, informed consent, and the publication of this qualitative data. These issues were addressed with the corresponding preventions: respecting a strict data-privacy policy (i.e., coded data medium and limited access of department members to original and nonanonymous data), informing participants about study objectives and interview topics, warranting full anonymity (regarding name, sport, location), using the data highly confidentially, following research standards throughout the entire study process, providing the interviewees with several opportunities to decline or retract their participation, and following a deductive approach and analysis of the interview data based on the theoretical presumptions focusing on empirical data to avoid political demands when disseminating this work.

Franziska Lautenbach conducted interviews from 16–22 April 2020 with an average duration of 102 minutes ($SD = 38$ min). Before being interviewed, the athletes were informed about the study aim and data protection procedures, and that the interviews would be recorded. All interviewees (electronically) signed an informed consent form and were provided with the interview transcripts afterward. Audiotapes were transcribed ad verbatim, and names mentioned during interviews were anonymized.

Data Analyses: Coding and Interpretation

Before the data analyses, the authors reflected on their personal approach to data interpretation: Both authors have an educational background in sport science and physical education as well as doctorates in sport psychology. Based on this background, and according to sport psychological theory, this supports the authors' interpretation of the interviewees' statements. Additionally, Franziska Lautenbach has a certificate as a sport-psychological expert (German Society for Sport Psychology e.V., expert database of the Federal Ministry for Sport Science) and experience working in the applied field of sports psychology. Accordingly, Franziska Lautenbach conducted the interviews with the athletes to create a natural conversational setting between athlete and sport psychology counselor. Further, while the authors are active in competitive sports, they have never performed (internationally) at a top level. In this way, they could understand the

athletes' feelings without identifying with their Olympian roles and thus could maintain an analytical distance. In a first step, based on the SCSPP, the data were analyzed according to the rules of Mayring's content analysis (2020). Then derived a coding guideline from the SCSPP with three main categories and three to four subcategories (see Table 2) to analyze data following a deductive approach. According to Mayring (2020), the coding guideline should be tested with three interviews for interrater reliability between two raters before analyzing the entire set of data. Cohen's kappa showed an interrater reliability of $\kappa = .74$.

In a second step, after descriptively identifying interview parts according to the SCSPP, aggregated the interview codes to more general phenomena in the form of a condensed interpretation via several discussions between raters based on the coded data.

Data Rigor and Quality

In qualitative research, methodological integrity is essential to guarantee rigorous and high-quality data. The methods employed in the present study address dependability (i.e., the reproducibility of the study), credibility (i.e., the reliability of the methods and data interpretation), confirmability (i.e., the presentation of authors' perspectives to clarify perspectives toward objective data interpretation), and transferability (i.e., the generalization of findings to a larger entity) according to Maher et al. (2018). First, dependability is supported by a detailed description of our methodology. Second, substantial interrater reliability supports the credibility of our approach to interpretation. Third, as the authors and analysts of the presented data, we presented our predispositions when reporting our data analyses to strengthen confirmability and to reflect on how our individual predispositions – that is, similarities and differences in our interpretation processes – influence data analyses. Whenever differences in our viewpoints occurred, we deliberated until we reached a common perspective or an understanding and acceptance of the other's position. Fourth, embedding and contrasting our findings in the context of current research (especially Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020; Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021) reveals the strengths and limitations of our data regarding transferability (please see the Discussion section for further explanation). In sum, by ensuring that these four approaches to data rigor are accounted for, we think our data analyses process can be regarded as reflective (Rose & Webb, 1998).

Results

Description of Significant Changes, Athletes' Emotions, and Athletes' Decision-Making Processes

To maintain the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are used instead of participants names.

Significant Changes

Pre-COVID-19 career status: "Qualifying, well, that went down the drain." (Lara)

Before COVID-19, the athletes described the status of their careers as generally stable in terms of professional and financial status, qualification for the OG, and physical health and fitness. However, some were at a critical point in their career before COVID-19. For example, some athletes had not yet qualified (i.e., Lara, Emi, Jürgen, Chris, Moni); other athletes were experiencing a phase of injury or illness (i.e., Paul, Jochen, Hagen, Boris); and others yet had lost their jobs because of the time-consuming process of qualifying (Emi): "Until December I had a part-time job. Then they kicked me out and told me 'Sorry, you are qualifying yourself for the Olympics and you are always out and about which is not sustainable for us,' so I still had to get points to qualify." Thus, critical situations pre-existed for these athletes before the COVID-19 outbreak.

Initial Changes: "Everything was gone at once." (Paul)

Initial changes because of the COVID-19 pandemic can be considered newly occurring changes and unknown situations that may relate to an athlete's career affected coaching and training, interaction processes, information flow, season planning, and access to sports facilities. These changes are characterized as unforeseen disruptions in the daily-life routines. For example, some athletes reported a sudden interruption or change in training routines, and some found the obligatory break difficult, since they were neither ill nor injured, as John's quote illustrates: "Getting a forced break without actually being injured ... [to train] all alone now is, for a longer period of time ... well, a bit strange ... something that you need to deal with."

On the other hand, in the beginning, some athletes appreciated the break, such as Emi: "Hey cool, you are given some time and you can get away from all of it." Especially for the injured athletes, the postponement was even considered a blessing in disguise, as shown by Boris' quote: "Others see it as an obligatory break, but I can turn this around for me and regard it as a break that I need to take to get better." In a similar vein, some athletes per-

Table 2. Coding guideline based on the SCSSP

Category	Subcategory	Definition	Coding rules
Changes	Pre-COVID-19 career status	Description of athletic career status before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in February 2020.	Code as stable, if successful qualification, season or Olympic preparation, etc. is described / ... unstable, if transitioning, unclear qualification status, etc., is described / ... critical, if injuries, rehabilitation, crisis, etc., is described in February 2020.
	Initial changes	Newly occurring changes and new, unknown situations that may relate to the athlete's career status and which have been impacted by COVID-19.	Code as positive/negative initial change, if a new situation in sports because of the pandemic is described with a positive/negative valence.
	Periodical changes	Persistent change or adaptation of one's living environment and training habits, necessary for a competitive sports career under environmental conditions that are not under the athlete's control or sphere of influence.	Code as functional/dysfunctional periodical change, if routine change regarding the pandemic is described as helpful/harmful regarding motivation or athlete identity.
	Enduring changes	Long-term adaptation of the athlete's living environment, training habits, and competition schedule following a domestic quarantine/lockdown or shutdown, together with further COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions.	Code as functional/dysfunctional enduring change, if a change-related routine is integrated into the athlete's daily life after pandemic restrictions are lifted; routines must be described as helpful/harmful.
Emotions	Initial emotional reactions	Immediate emotional response to initial and novel impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on one's living environment. These effects are described individually with an emotion that is an essential component of the individual's experience.	Code as positive/negative initial emotion, if individual representation or behavior is described regarding the pandemic and relates to a positive/negative valence (e.g., happiness, anger).
	Periodical emotional states	Emotional states related to changes (e.g., restrictions because of COVID-19) that impact decision-making related to medium-term adaptations of daily routines (e.g., social contacts with training colleagues, sleep-wake rhythm, etc.) and training (e.g., focus, periodization, etc.).	Code as positive/negative periodical emotional state, if individual positive/negative representations are described as fundamental for emotions perceived during longer-lasting changes in the pandemic (e.g., feeling in control of something, feeling stressed).
	Enduring emotional states	Emotional experiences that (likely) accompany permanent changes in living environment, training habits, and competition schedule because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which consolidate or question decision-making.	Code as a positive/negative enduring emotional state, if individual positive/negative representations are described as resulting positive/negative emotional states according to changes because of the pandemic (e.g., feeling self-confident, lacking self-confidence).
Decision-making	Initial strategies	Initial strategic decision to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.	Code as an individual's initial strategy, if it is individual coping .../ ... as a social initial strategy, if it involves social company .../ ... as a professional strategy, if professional counseling is described as a way of dealing with initial changes.
	Behavior during pandemic restrictions	Conscious decision to adapt one's living environment and training habits to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic; this involves the use of situation-specific coping strategies.	Code as a positive decision, if acceptance of the situation and/or functional adaptation / ..., if defiance and/or dysfunction or no adaptation of everyday life regarding the pandemic is described.
	Career decision	Future-oriented decision-making related to one's athletic career with implications for subjective representations and changes in one's living environment, training habits, and competition. The decision may mean either (a) (continuing) to pursue one's competitive athletic career, (b) returning to athletic activity, or (c) ending one's career immediately.	(a) Code as a continuing career development, if a future career development is explicitly described. / (b) Code as a return to athletic activity, if a return to athletic activity is explicitly described as a comeback after a pause in the athletic career. / (c) Code as ending one's career, if the ending is explicitly described.

Note. Definitions according to Samuel et al. (2020).

ceived the extra time as an opportunity for additional training and further improvement.

Periodical Changes "That was a big challenge." (Paul)

Periodical changes persist temporarily and are not newly arising adaptations to the COVID-19 restrictions. Such changes can lead to challenges in maintaining or refocusing a reactive

behavior in the face of persisting lockdown restrictions. Such reactive behavior may be exhibited in new routines, social distancing from teammates, or changes to workout goals.

"First of all, to get your regular everyday life back on track ... That was a big challenge," said Paul, speaking for several athletes who experienced difficulties re-establishing a routine and daily structure. For some athletes, this led to a de-

crease in motivation mainly because of poor conditions and lack of structure. In contrast, others appreciated these changes and (a) tried new things, such as Moni who “often went on long bike rides”; (b) found ways of adapting to training conditions, such as Lara who found support from teammates that allowed her to practice “in this private room with mats”; (c) appreciated their independence, such as Kevin: “I simply have more fun when I can drink my coffee in the afternoon and I can say: ‘Wow, now I’m going for another two hours of road cycling or I’m going on the ergometer for another hour and I can determine the program myself’”; (d) realized like Paul that they actually “do sports to do sports,” whereas before they “did sports to get better”; or (e) that “practicing outside ... is actually really, really awesome” as a combat sports interviewee acknowledged.

Enduring Changes: “I would still work on these [techniques], definitely” (Lara)

Enduring changes are environmental adaptations (e.g., having a 5- instead of 4-year Olympic term) following a period of restricted training, such as during a lockdown or quarantine. Such adaptations may include exploiting the additional year of preparation year to master particular techniques, as Lara did. Others, like John, wondered about competition delays and the possibility of testing one’s standing: “When will the first sporting event take place again, when will normality return ... physically achieving a performance curve, choosing specific tournaments to test where I stand at the moment.” Thus, the Olympians perceived difficulties in seeing the additional preparation year as advantageous because of the continued delay in returning to a regular season of qualification/competitions. And finally, others appreciated the opportunity to return to being an athlete again, upon lifting of restrictions and felt confident about the future, such as Moni: “Okay, you can make the qualifiers, even if you were out for 2 weeks. And so, I think: ‘Okay, you can make next year’s qualifiers even if you haven’t been in the water for 3 weeks, 4 weeks, because you quickly get back into the daily routine, into your rhythm.’” When pandemic restrictions are eased, the athletes need to find ways to return to participating in international competitions. During COVID-19 restrictions, the athletes missed the feeling of meeting and competing with other athletes around the globe, as Emi’s interview quotation shows: “I’ll ... be glad when things continue, when I see my people from the sporting world again, when I’m traveling internationally again.”

Athletes’ Emotions: “...It is gonna be a long way.” (Hans)

According to the SCSPP, initial changes are linked to specific emotional reactions (Samuel et al., 2020). On the one hand, the athletes felt relief after the postponement was officially announced since “only then you can really start

to make plans” (Chris). Some athletes also felt an abrupt decrease in pressure to perform. The athletes reported further positive emotions, such as happiness about “the upcoming year” (Hagen). They also felt relaxed, happy, calm, satisfied, or at ease. On the other hand, they also report several negative emotions, such as displeasure, dissatisfaction, restlessness, anger, feeling of being treated unjustly, sadness, or disappointment because of the postponement: “In your head you are on your way, you are so close to the finish line to be part of the Olympics and now this goal is so far away again and in the first moment, that was really frustrating.” (Emi)

The athletes also described periodical changes in their emotional states that were positive, such as having a good feeling, feeling at ease, feeling hope or calmness, or negative, such as mistrust, regret, boredom. Additionally, the athletes described the time of the pandemic as highly challenging, uncertain, and reported feelings of pessimism and doubt. Lara stated that she was still in a state of shock: “Well I am still a little bit ... like a sleepwalker ... Also, that I am in some sort of hole.” Yet, she still felt optimistic: “It’s okay. It could be worse. ... I have no doubt.”

Concerning enduring emotional states, the athletes appear to be optimistic, reporting feeling “hunky-dory” (Hagen), brave, proud, and that they appreciate the feeling of tiredness after physically challenging workouts. However, they also reported that it was highly challenging to remain optimistic, as evidenced by feelings of uncertainty described in every interview. The athletes further said that they felt lonely and “stir-crazy” (Lara, John) when at home all the time. However, Lara revealed optimistic self-confidence when contemplating her return to an efficient routine: “I have known myself for a while ... it is a question of when ... a point is reached. That happens naturally and boom ... I get up ... plan my training and so on.”

Athletes’ Decision-Making Processes: “For me, it’s clear: I want to achieve the goal. I want to go to the Olympics.” (Paul)

The athletes’ first reaction was to devise strategies to cope with initial changes. Here, the interviewees described either (a) individual strategies, such as a positive inner monolog, as Lara clarified: “[After the postponement] I, of course, tried to convince myself ... that there are also positive sides to it,” to stay focused for making further decisions; (b) social strategies, such as staying in touch with others or interacting with coaches and teammates to remain up to date; or (c) professional strategies, such as meeting a sport psychologist, to cope with these change-related events.

Second, the athletes made decisions regarding adaptation or resignation according to the impacts they experienced because of COVID-19 restrictions, and these decisions were based on a prior acceptance of, or defiance toward, the situation. For example, Moni showed acceptance: “And I’m like, yeah, I’m really relaxed about it. I can’t change the situation, I try to make the best of it, it’s as simple as that.” Emi, on the other hand, tended toward resignation: “... I thought you [i.e., federation, sponsors, coaches] can all kiss my ass. I worked my balls off for nothing.” Then, over a longer period of time, several athletes adapted to periodical or enduring changes (e.g., closed training facilities, missing daily structure, missing team colleagues, season planning) by developing new routines, sometimes together with their coaches.

When the athletes were asked to describe the decisions related to their future career, they reflected on their career until Tokyo 2021, stating they had not intended to end their athletic career before Tokyo 2021: “I thought that this would be the last highlight of my sports career, and after that maybe I’d let everything wind down a bit. I don’t really want to just stop like this, without another sporting event like this and then just say ‘Okay, then ..., that’s it for now, I’ll just retire now.’ That somehow felt like the worst option” (Hans). Overall, the interviewees did not mention a decision to quit their careers because of the 1-year postponement of OG. Yet, some athletes described the natural end of their athletic career, together with new life goals such as jobs, parenthood, or continued education without mentioning a relation to the postponement of the OG.

The athletes showed self-confidence in their decision to cope with COVID-19 restrictions through optimism toward successful Olympic preparation, although because of the lockdown restrictions fitness and conditioning workouts were nearly the only training routines possible. Moni pointed out that she knows that she will come back, once competitions are possible again: “I know that even if I’m not in training for 2 or 3 weeks, I can still get back to my performance level quickly. I’ve shown that more often in recent years. And I think that simply gave me assurance ... I already knew these situations because of illnesses and injuries, that I was often out for weeks and quickly got back into this whole rhythm and flow, so to speak.”

Condensed Interpretation

To explore the processes of more general phenomena in the SCSP model, we condensed the data, reducing it to several experiences consistently shared by different athletes concerning our analyses of changes, emotions, and decisions. This act of condensing revealed four relevant

phenomena: postponing the OG, development of roles and identities, emotional tensions, and coping strategies.

Postponing the OG: “Now we finally know it officially.” (Chris)

“Okay, it was not a surprise that this would happen,” Chris said, and others repeated, when asked about the postponement of the OG. The athletes became aware early on of the consequences for international, competition-related travel: “... before that, we were in Warsaw. There we saw the Italian [athletes] and they were very alarmed about the virus and about the danger of contagion” (Hans). Paul described a situation during an on-going tournament where each athlete’s temperature was taken, and no one was allowed into the facilities. The athletes also experienced ongoing (qualifying) competitions being canceled. Similarly, the athletes mentioned that the closing of training facilities made them realize that something serious was occurring. “And everyone just had a feeling or was quite sure,” Chris said. Thus, they were not surprised when the postponement was officially announced but rather felt relieved or frustrated.

Development of Roles and Identities: “I might find something new.” (Boris)

The COVID-19 pandemic witnessed changes in the roles and identities of the athletes. Some felt that there was no comprehension of and understanding of their role as athletes. For example, Lara stated clearly that “... this [lack of understanding from friends and family] is really dire for me.” Moni also noted that both in her private and public life she hoped that “people would have more comprehension for athletes.” For example, Emi became aware that some people were just interested in her as an athlete and not as a person. Regarding her public life she stated: “I see so, so many things everywhere such as the commercials I did, I don’t know how many thousands of shootings, I went to the Olympics ball and I talked about so many things, and I shared so much of myself – to just stand there in the end and be totally ignored ... people don’t really care at all what is going on with you.”

Others, for example, Jochen and Boris, became aware of their privileges as athletes “... for turning our hobby into a job” (Boris) and for being financially secure during the pandemic “especially considering how other people have experienced existential crises ... Well, I mean, I am making a living from [my sport]. It’s a marginal sport. That is absolutely insane. I became even more aware of it, this gratitude and this privilege, which I am usually aware of, but what this really means and how far-reaching this is ... I thought about it a lot and how special this is.” (Jochen)

Finally, some athletes broadened their athletic identity and explored new roles during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Boris, for example, stated that he found time “...to try new things. Well, I am trying now to develop new fields of interest for which I usually would not have time. I might find something new.” Others discovered new possibilities. Hagen, for example, explored his coaching abilities and started providing training tools for kids on social media. Jochen found resources to support others and to become more involved in family issues: “... I continued to mediate between the parties and listened to the positions of all involved and tried to mediate and settle their dispute or find a solution.” And finally, John looked forward to being involved in his new role as a father, during his child’s first year: “... due to the postponement, my child ... well ... I will see it growing up from the beginning.”

Emotional Tensions: “You need to feel joy or sadness now.” (Hagen)

Most of the athletes appeared to experience uncertainty, fluctuations, or swings in their emotional states and decision-making regarding the postponement of the OG, which for our purposes we define as emotional tension. For example, during Lara’s interview, she described feeling depressed because of abrupt changes in training, competition, and traveling schedules – while simultaneously accepting the situation and feeling optimistic about the future. Boris, John, and Chris were frustrated about privileges enjoyed by only *certain* athletes (e.g., open sporting facilities, soccer). While some felt that certain athletes were the subject of favoritism within the federation, they were not particularly disturbed by this. Hans, for example, was happy that he could take time to recover from a knee injury but felt rather sad because other things in his life had been put on hold: “But other than that, it is actually not so good for me because I was planning the end of my career ...When the OG ended, I wanted to seek new opportunities, challenges, and job perspectives. And, well, this has all been postponed.” Also, Jochen felt that, even though he could take care of his injury, his plans for the future, to end his career and “start a family,” were now “frozen.” In a similar vein, Paul, who was coming back from an injury, felt especially pessimistic about the future “It could be that I will have a shitty next year, then I will not go. I thought about it a couple of times. That worries me ... I think ‘What if it doesn’t work?’ Then, I have postponed my Masters for a year and won’t go to the Olympics, won’t fulfill my dream. Yet, this year I would have gone. That would be a bitter pill to swallow.” And finally, whereas Moni shared her relief at the situation: “Well, I must say that I was startled by how relaxed I handled the postponement of the OG,” Hagen could not decide how he felt about the postponement: “Is this good or bad now? ...You need to feel joy or sadness now.”

Coping Strategies: How Athletes Deal with the Pandemic in Sports and Training: “It goes on and on ... and on and on” (Boris)

The athletes reported different coping strategies for handling changes in training and competition schedules because of the lockdown and the postponement of the OG. “Can’t do anything about it.” (Kevin) “Tomorrow the sun will come up again and the world will keep spinning and, no matter what happens, you need to make the best of it.” (Hagen) These quotes demonstrate that the athletes coped with the situation by accepting it. Further strategies revealed in Hagen’s quote, included trying new things, such as cooking, painting, learning a language, being more active online, or giving press interviews. Most athletes were successful in restructuring their routines – and yet: “It was strange in the beginning, but we found a groove since we really were only at home all the time” (John).

Several athletes employed problem-oriented coping strategies, such as cognitive restructuring or reappraisal in terms of seeing the postponement of the OG as an opportunity (see Initial Changes). The athletes also refocused on new and adapted training content including new goals such as improving their technique or becoming and staying healthy. Finally, readjustment goals seem to be the most important “trick,” as Kevin would put it: “Yes, ... tricks are different, but at the end somehow it is all about clear goals.” Others thought about seeking a sport psychology practitioner – as Emi did – which has helped: “For example, my sport psychologist and I have worked on ... things where you focus on the mental aspect of the sport.”

The athletes also used humor as part of their emotion-oriented coping strategy, such as Jochen, who was injured: “I joked around a little bit. Well, that everyone is doing the same as me, lying around at home, sitting on the sofa ...” Others simply took a break, for example, Emi: “Well, sometimes I had two or three glasses of wine. So, it’s a little bit like being on vacation for me.” Some did sports to relax, such as Kevin: “When I get on my bike ... it takes my mind off of things ... and I can relax a little bit.” Some athletes had high self-efficacy and drew strength from their previous experiences with training breaks, for example, because of previous injuries. Through their previous experience and successful coping with earlier crises, the athletes were equipped with feelings of self-certainty. Finally, Boris, for example, used imagery techniques to stay motivated: “The feeling when you hear the national anthem, when you get a gold medal put around your neck. Well, such feelings. Also when you get home and you see your parents again after a long time and they are super proud of you ... and the clothes of the national team, and the clothing itself and so on ... this is the feeling that I am trying to focus on, and this motivates me immensely, so

that I say: ‘Wow, this is where I want to go again’ ... for that I give everything.”

Discussion

By using the SCSPP as a theoretical framework (Samuel et al., 2020), we aimed to understand the changes experienced by Olympic athletes because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the postponement of the OG. Specifically, we examined the athletes’ emotional states and decision-making processes to better inform sport psychological practices.

Decision-Making

No athletes in this sample decided to quit or to not participate in the OG 2021 because of the pandemic. This is in line with previous research (Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020; Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021). However, not all proposed options in the SCSPP theoretical framework were exhausted within our sample; our data reflect only 11 athletes, so that further quantitative data is needed to examine all proposed options of the SCSPP. Nevertheless, it seems that the postponement – which brought about profound sacrifices for some athletes (e.g., job or study opportunities, starting a family) – did not lead to ending their athletic careers. Rather, the athletes decided to accept the situation and adapt their training, routines, and daily structure.

Time for Reflection

Several position papers have asserted that the COVID-19 pandemic represents a chance to reflect and ask such questions, such as “Should my life be more about than sports?” (Henriksen et al., 2020). The athletes in our interviews reported having more time because of the lockdown and the postponement of the OG. The available time was used by most to reflect on notions of privilege (e.g., earning money with their sport, traveling) athletic identity, relationships to others (e.g., getting closer vs. criticism from people outside of the world of sports), and a future beyond sports – similar to findings among British athletes (Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021). Some athletes in our sample focused narrowly on their athletic identity, whereas others expanded their self-concept by becoming a coach, mediator, good friend and listener, or a father. Because social isolation has been claimed to foster a narrow athletic identity and increase anxiety and other mental health concerns (see Henriksen et al., 2020), it seems plausible to encourage athletes to use the time of such a *critical pause* to explore, expand, and enrich their athletic identity (Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021). Additional quanti-

tative research shows that a highly developed athletic identity seems to be related to dysfunctional adaptations – cognitive (e.g., rumination) or emotional (e.g., depression) (Costa et al., 2020) – whereas a poorly developed athletic identity seems to be associated with a lack of motivation during the pandemic (Lautenbach, Leisterer et al., 2021). Although our data are not quantitative, we wish to highlight the important influence of athletic identity on athletes’ adaptation to the COVID-19 crisis: During restrictive periods (e.g., during times of closed training facilities), athletes should reflect on broadening their athletic identity and intensifying this identity in different domains, such as working as a coach, instead of concentrating on athletic performance, to possibly avoid negative cognitive and emotional, and motivational psychological consequences.

Coping Strategies and Emotional Stability

Coping strategies are very important for athletes attempting to deal with the current COVID-19 crisis. Comparing our findings with recent findings (Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020; Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021), acceptance of the current situation is a fundamental first step among effective coping strategies. Acceptance strategies are associated with finding creative solutions when dealing with challenges during COVID-19, as recent findings suggest (Szczypińska et al., 2021). This is supported by the athletes we interviewed, who reported creatively finding new training facilities or training outdoors.

Interestingly, some athletes experienced swings in emotional states. Emotional fluctuation was also reported among elite soccer players and has been associated with resilience (Madsen et al., 2021). In other words, resilience is considered a protective factor for mental health and emotional stability (Madsen et al., 2021) and should be considered in future intervention strategies with athletes (see also Henriksen et al., 2020).

Additionally, developing one’s athletic identity by trying new activities (e.g., coaching others, doing other physical activities than usual) or exploring other identities seems to be a widely used coping strategy (Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020; Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021).

Our interview findings show that problem-oriented coping strategies, such as planning skills and developing daily routines, were common effective coping skills among athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., González-Hernández et al., 2021). Especially daily routines were found to be strongly related to mental health and well-being (González-Hernández et al., 2021).

Staying optimistic, grateful, and reappraising challenges are additional emotion-oriented coping skills reported by our interviewees, in line with recent findings (e.g., Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020). None of the athletes in our

study stated that they doubted that they could perform well during the OG 2021, which agrees with the research of Spanish Olympians (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2020). No athlete quit their athletic career because of the current COVID-19 crisis.

Contributions and Implications for Sport Psychology Practice

According to the aim of our study to focus on German athletic career transition pathways during COVID-19, we can summarize study findings first with the fact that none of our interviewees considered ending their athletic career because of the pandemic or the postponed OG. Rather, the circumstances of the pandemic (i.e., restrictions) and the additional time available to prepare for the OG affected their daily lives. The athletes developed their roles and broadened their athletic identity, while reflecting on being an athlete. Thus, it seems not to be the prolonged preparation time for the OG per se that influences athletic career transitions, but rather self-reflection on individual roles and identities that are not a part of the sporting world that present a career challenge.

Accordingly, sport psychology practitioners need to be aware of several possibilities to help athletes to deal with such a career transition. On the one hand, social aspects can be focused on creating a supportive environment for athletes. According to our findings, sport psychology practitioners should focus on the need for federations to better interact with athletes, on a better understanding of the role of coaches and an athlete's entourage, on fostering support of athletes in being athletes, and on promoting the role of athletes' in sport-related political debates to develop the social aspects of their athletic identity. On the other hand, fostering coping strategies can be decisive in how athletes handle uncertainty during the COVID-19 crisis. Here, self-responsibility in athletes seems to be key, and athletes need routines. In addition to previously mentioned coping strategies, such as acceptance, exploring new and meaningful activities, or developing routines (e.g., Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020; Stambulova, 2011; Szczypińska et al., 2021; Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021), we would recommend the following strategies to support athletes in (nonnormative, cross-cultural) crises:

- *Learn acceptance:* apply mindfulness approaches, such as mindfulness-acceptance, commitment, or mindfulness meditation (Noetel et al., 2019).
- *Exploit sources of self-efficacy:* elaborate on successful coping with significant change events in the past. The more similar these change events are to current crises, the better for developing self-efficacy.

- *Create reliable social networks:* identify parameters of the athlete's social network, including coaches, federations, kinesiotherapists, financial stakeholders, etc., and develop plans for incorporating these networks into the athlete's lifestyle.
- *Refocus training while staying focused on goals:* determine what the athlete wants to achieve and adapt ways of successfully reaching goals in the face of prevailing restrictions (e.g., closed training facilities) by identifying appropriate alternatives (e.g., creating a home gym).

Limitations

There are several study limitations. First, all interviews were conducted during the first COVID-19 lockdown in Germany, shortly after the announcement of the OG postponement. Thus, the study results represent a snapshot of that phase of the pandemic but not further insights for subsequent phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, no athletes were sampled who decided to retire following the announcement of the OG's postponement. Second, all interviews were conducted in German and translated into English. Thus, it cannot be excluded that the original meaning of German quotes has been unintentionally altered in translation. Third, the sampling of this study focuses on combat, water, and individual sports and sport professionals but not on team sports. Investigations of other types of sportswomen and sportsmen would broaden our knowledge about athletes' career transitions during this challenging time. Fourth, we should be aware that top-level athletes are well acquainted with media interviews, and this experience might interfere with interview-based research studies – as athletes may favor expressing use-appropriate words rather than speaking frankly.

Future Research

Future research should focus on developing sport psychology measures and practices that support athletes in coping with uncertainty, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Empirical approaches are needed to support sport psychology practices and should be investigated in the future. For similar interview studies, we would recommend including ethical considerations – based on the present study – to focus on a totally independent sample, entirely transparent interviewee information, a consent of voluntary participation, a strict data privacy policy, and a backup in the event of a psychological crisis that might arise during the interview. Future research in this area

should focus on the role of athletic identity, salutogenesis as a potential approach to deal with uncertainty (see, e.g., Leisterer, Lautenbach et al., 2021), resilience (see Madsen et al., 2021), and optimism.

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