



Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

'Post-Olympic Blues' –The Diminution of Celebrity in Olympic Athletes

Journal Item

How to cite:

Howells, Karen and Lucassen, Mathijs (2018). 'Post-Olympic Blues' –The Diminution of Celebrity in Olympic Athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 37 pp. 67–78.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]

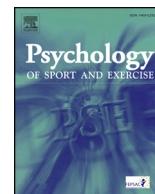
Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.04.008>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk



'Post-Olympic blues' –The diminution of celebrity in Olympic athletes

Karen Howells^{*,1}, Mathijs Lucassen¹

The Open University, United Kingdom



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Depression
Depressive symptoms
Elite
Mental health
Olympic games

ABSTRACT

Objectives: To explore the concept of the 'post-Olympic blues' through examining the antecedents of the negative affect experienced following Olympic participation and to articulate whether the post-Olympic blues is a 'normal' short-term phenomenon or whether it is more serious and enduring.

Design and method: Four female British athletes who competed in the 2016 Rio Olympic Games were interviewed and asked to draw timelines about their Olympic experiences on one or two occasions. The interviews and timelines were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Results: The athletes' experiences of the Olympic and post-Olympic period were characterized by highs around the Olympic Games and lows following their return to the United Kingdom. There were distinct temporal periods that were pertinent in the consideration of the 'post-Olympic blues'; *The Olympic Experience*, *The Homecoming*, and *Moving Forwards*. A fourth theme *Celebrity* involved integral and dynamic development over time. *Celebrity* comprised the development and the subsequent destruction of the athletes as celebrities.

Conclusion: This study has articulated what post-Olympic blues means to those who have experienced it, identified the negative impact that the athletes' celebrityization had on their mental wellbeing, and suggested that the negative emotions and subsequent behaviors were interpreted to be a normal response to returning home following Olympic participation. It is hoped that this research will engage coaching teams to formulate what support should be offered for athletes prior to and after the Olympic Games to limit the wellbeing impact that the post-Olympic blues has on athletes.

As athletes left the Rio Olympic village in 2016 and returned home, academics, journalists, and sports reporters were warning of the risk of the 'post-Olympic blues' for athletes (e.g., Florio & Shapiro, 2016; Howells, 2016; Pendleton, 2016). A perusal of online media revealed that the flurry of writing activity on this topic corresponds with the quadrennial cycle of the Olympic Games, and the articles published detail stories of athletes feeling lost, confused, and without purpose. Noting the same occurrence following the London Olympic Games in 2012, Uphill and Dray (2013) commented that: "Media reports of the 'Olympic Blues' among athletes have been considerable yet our scientific understanding of athletes' post-competitive emotional reactions has been largely neglected" (p. 660). Since that rather pejorative reflection on the academic reaction to what the media appear to have identified using anecdotal reports, there has been a relatively muted response from the academic community and few have focused on the post-Olympic period as a critical time in respect of the wellbeing of the athletes.

There are a few exceptions, whereby sport psychologists have

focused on interventions during specific Olympic quadrennial cycles. Reporting on the psychological preparation of the 2004 South African Olympic team, Gahwiler (2016) described a 5-stage model that was delivered by a team of sport psychologists. A novel characteristic of the program was the provision, for the first time, of a budget to support the post-Olympic intervention stage (which comprised stage five). This stage reflected the recognition of a need, "to support the re-integration of positive and negative Olympic experiences into the athletes' future lives and competitions" (p. 69). In evaluating the model, Gahwiler identified an uncertainty and lack of goal-focus in the athletes after competing in the Olympic Games that he posited was central to the (anecdotally) recognized phenomenon of 'post-Olympic depression'. Moreover, reflecting on their consulting experiences after the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, Gordin and Henschen (2012) articulated the "post-Olympic transition" (p. 96) as a time that was characterized by potentially detrimental organizational stressors (e.g., funding decisions made by National Governing Bodies [NGBs]) and the loss of a long-term goal for athletes. The authors warned of athletes'

* Corresponding author. Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, MK7 6AA, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 07526486466.

E-mail address: karen.howells@open.ac.uk (K. Howells).

¹ Karen Howells and Mathijs Lucassen, Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, The Open University, United Kingdom.

confusion, depressive symptoms, anger, resentment, abandonment, or emptiness and suggested that the formulation of new goals may assist in dealing with the problem (Gordin & Henschen, 2012).

More recently, prior to the London 2012 Olympic Games, the Irish Institute of Sport (IIS) implemented a post-Olympic career transition program to increase athletes' coping resources to successfully negotiate the post-Olympic period. Their program comprised three tiers of support that were initiated in the year before the Games. The latter two tiers focused specifically on the normalization and management of the post-Olympic experience (McArdle, Moore, & Lyons, 2014). The authors recommended that athletes should have two contacts with psychological services to support this challenging career transition. They stressed the importance of psychoeducation involving anticipatory coping which involves an individual preparing to deal with a future critical event (cf. Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The program was well received by athletes who benefited from anticipatory and proactive coping and considered that the opportunity to disclose to an independent sport psychologist was cathartic. A similar intervention study (Samuel, Tenenbaum, & Bar-Mecher, 2016) conceptualized the Olympic Games as a career transition with six distinct phases (the sixth being the post-Olympic experience). They found that the motivation of Israeli athletes who competed in the London 2012 Games to continue in their sport after the Olympic Games was related to their satisfaction in their coping after their Olympic Games experience, and the provision of professional support. However, importantly, the authors reported that the athletes experienced a decrease in motivation after the Games alluding to a period of the 'blues'. This program highlights the importance of a focus on coping strategies and professional psychological support. Finally, Schinke, Stambulova, Trepanier, and Oghene (2015) reported on the first step of a project developing support for the Canadian Boxing Team in the 2013–2016 Olympic cycle which conceptualized the Olympic experience as comprising six career meta-transitions. During the final meta-transition (i.e., the "post-Games") the program endeavoured: (a) to develop ideas of how to further improve the National Team Program; and (b) to ensure that the boxers were supported in the instigation of new goals in sport/life. The authors acknowledged that "sadness" (p. 85) may occur as the boxers negotiate their future pathways, but suggested that it was paradoxically accompanied with excitement for the future.

Despite this relatively subdued academic response, Olympic athletes such as the 10K Swimming Bronze medalist in Beijing 2008, Cassie Patten, have been vocal in articulating their experiences, revealing to Sky Sports (2012) that "In the year after the Games, I felt lost. I got really depressed, I was really unhappy. I would come swimming and just sit on poolside and just cry". It has been suggested that these athletes may be susceptible to significant depressive symptoms as they struggle to adapt to 'regular life' following their return from the Olympic Games; this is particularly the case for those who have a strong athletic identity (see, Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). These athletes are inclined to have a myopic focus on their sport performance and find it difficult to balance other aspects of their non-sports lives (Howells & Fletcher, 2015). Somewhat counter-intuitively, failure to win a gold medal is not a sufficient explanation for the negative affect that may be experienced after the Olympic Games have ended, as Olympic swimming champions, Allison Schmitt (USA) and Michael Phelps (USA) have also been open about experiencing depressive symptoms within months of returning from Olympic success (Frank, 2016). Victoria Pendleton, a British cyclist who won a gold medal in the 2012 London Olympic Games, stated in a media article: "It's almost easier to come second because you have something to aim for when you finish. When you win, you suddenly feel lost" (Pendleton, 2016). Murray-Williams a judoka (judo player) in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and his former coach Rhadi Ferguson labelled the depressive symptoms that Olympic athletes can reasonably expect to experience as constituting a condition they coined Post-Olympic Stress Disorder (POSD; Ferguson & Murray, 2014). However, exploration of POSD as a

disorder has not been pursued by either a clinical or an academic audience, therefore it is necessary to examine the wider literature on depressive disorders, depressive symptoms, and the blues to inform our understanding of the post-Olympic experience.

In the course of our lives, depressive symptoms are common, as fluctuations in mood are part of the human condition. Depression refers to a range of mental health issues characterized by: the absence of a positive affect (e.g., a loss of interest and enjoyment in everyday experiences); persistent low mood; and a range of cognitive, emotional and behavioral symptoms (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), 2009). Neither the origins nor the development of depressive disorders are definitively known. However, they are believed to be multi-factorial, and to be determined through a combination of genetic predisposition, psychological vulnerabilities, and life stressors (Malhi et al., 2015). Certain clinical signs and symptoms of depression when grouped together form syndromes or conditions, such as Major Depressive Disorder (MDD; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The term 'the blues', with reference to Olympic performance, is reminiscent of the post-natal academic nomenclature of the 1970s and 1980s when researchers (e.g., Edwards, 1973) began to distinguish between baby or postpartum blues and post-partum depression. In order to clarify what the 'baby blues' comprised, O'Hara and Wisner (2014) proposed using the 'Handley Blues' criteria to identify the presence of the blues if individuals experienced four or more commonly occurring features (e.g. crying and irritability) in the first week to 10 days postpartum. This is largely consistent with Kettunen, Koistinen, and Hintikka (2014) who identified the 'baby blues' as a transient mood disturbance which is manifested in certain behaviors such as tearfulness, as well as interpersonal hypersensitivity (i.e., heightened sensitivity to criticism and rejection), insomnia, and sometimes elation. It is also consistent with Buttner, O'Hara, and Watson's (2012) identification of the postpartum blues as a relatively commonplace (experienced by circa 40–80% of post-partum women), mild, and transient mood disturbance that may manifest itself in the days after childbirth. Postpartum depression or a postpartum major depressive episode (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), on the contrary is a diagnosable disorder, which is often defined as an episode of an MDD that occurs in the four weeks following delivery (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; O'Hara & McCabe, 2013).

A further domain where the use of the term 'blues' has become a normative characterization to explain negative mood is in reference to the deleterious emotions experienced by some brides following their marriage ceremonies. Gordin and Henschen (2012) likened the post-Olympic experience to 'wedding blues' as in both instances a goal has been pursued at the expense of many other activities, relationships, and endeavors and having reached the culmination of that goal, "an emptiness vacuum" (p. 96) remains. Specifically addressing this phenomenon, Carroll (2012) referred to a wedding as a 'redemptive illusion' which occurs when the bride, in a state of fantasy, identifies with the concept of celebrity, yet soon realizes that her life is neither transformed nor redeemed, and she experiences negative emotions that are termed the 'blues'. This concept of celebrity was alluded to in a qualitative investigation by Jackson, Dover, and Mayocchi (1998) of the experiences of Australian Olympians who won a gold medal between 1984 and 1992. The authors noted that the athletes were treated as "heroes" (p. 133) on their return home, but they struggled to cope with the high expectations placed upon them in both the sporting and public arenas and complained of feeling like "public property" (p. 128).

Across a variety of domains there has been a surge of interest in not just depression, but mental health in sport more generally. From an academic perspective, there have been peer-reviewed journals promoting special editions dedicated to the subject (e.g., *Frontiers in Psychology*; MacIntyre et al., 2016) and researchers have explored various aspects of mental health in sport (e.g., Newman, Howells, & Fletcher, 2016). However, despite ongoing research related to depressive symptoms and the elite environment, it can be challenging for

athletes to discuss their mental health concerns, due to the dominant narrative in elite sport that reiterates an expectation of ‘mental toughness’ in athletes; this has in turn exasperated the societal stigma of mental ill-health in athletes along with the public perception that exercise is curative of depression (e.g., Morgan, Parker, Alvarez-Jimenez, & Jorm, 2013). However, the evidence is clear that within the elite sport environment there are a number of risk factors for significant depressive symptoms that include being elite (e.g., Hughes & Leavey, 2012), identity foreclosure (e.g., Hughes & Leavey, 2012), the pressure to deliver peak performance (e.g., Weigand, Cohen, & Merenstein, 2013), sport specific demands (e.g., Nixdorf, Frank, & Beckmann, 2015) and retirement from elite sport (e.g., Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). Specific aspects of elite sport have also been associated with depressive symptoms, such as the identification of the especially high standards that Olympic athletes set themselves, where anything less than a gold medal is failure (Newman et al., 2016). At a policy-making level, the independent Duty of Care in Sport Report (Grey-Thompson, 2017) that explored various aspects of athletes’ wellbeing including their mental health stated that: “Mental health and wellbeing is a major concern in British performance sport and should be treated accordingly” (p. 23). The report recommended that NGBs engage with the “mental health agenda” (p. 22), and proposed that mental health training is provided for coaches, and mental health awareness training is made available for athletes.

Given the correspondences with post-partum blues, wedding blues, and the higher prevalence of depression in female athletes than in male athletes (Gulliver, Griffiths, Mackinnon, Batterham, & Stanimirovic, 2015; Hammond, Gialloretto, Kubas, & Davis, 2013), in the current study we give voice to four female Olympians who competed at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games to explore the concept of the ‘post-Olympic blues’ by exploring the antecedents of the negative affect experienced following Olympic participation, documenting the athletes’ individual accounts, and interpreting them from a psychological perspective. Additionally, the research endeavored to explore whether the post-Olympic blues is a ‘normal’ short-term phenomenon or whether it is more enduring, and hence likely to require formal interventions.

1. Method

1.1. Design

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was deemed to be particularly useful for this work because IPA, with its roots in phenomenology (viz. Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and hermeneutics (viz. Heidegger, 1962) has an ideographic focus, which involves the exploration of the meaning(s) constructed about an individual’s personal experiences. This is realized through interpretation by both the participant as the “experiential expert” (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 196) and the researcher. This dual interpretative process involves a double hermeneutic, where “the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 26). The focus of IPA is on the interpretations that participants have of their experiences and on their cognitive and affective reactions or accounts of what has happened to them (cf. Smith, 2011). Consequently, the present study focused not only on what happened, but also on how experiences impacted on the individual, and how perceptions of the impact of the experiences varied over time.

Individuals’ meaning-making activities are central to IPA and are informed by aspects of Heidegger’s (1962) phenomenology (cf. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013). Through engaging with IPA we acknowledge that the interpretation of events is both temporal and in relation to other aspects of our participants’ lives. Accordingly, the study employed two semi-structured interviews with three participants and (due to training and competition commitments) one semi-structured interview with one athlete. The use of two interviews and timelining allowed for an exploration of how perceptions of the post-Olympic period change

(if at all) over a year and how they are impacted upon by other (more recent) experiences. Through utilizing two integrated qualitative methods, different perceptions of the athletes’ experiences over time were accessible, this nuanced understanding may not have been elicited through the use of interviews alone (cf. Williams, 2017). Cognizant of the lack of understanding of this topic area, we endeavored as much as possible to “be consciously naïve and open: and to be receptive to change and ambiguity” (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 206). Accordingly, although semi-structured interviews were utilized for data collection, at times the interviewer (first author) was led by the athletes through their experiences without feeling a need to be prescriptive about the order and form of the questions. At other times she guided the participant to engage in a more “deliberate controlled reflection” (Smith et al., 2013, p. 189) encouraging them to recall and interpret their experiences in more depth to allow an in-depth exploration of the post-Olympic experience (cf. Smith, 2017).

1.2. Participants and researchers

Recruitment and inclusion criteria. Following institutional ethical approval, a criterion-based, purposive sampling strategy was used to identify a demographically homogenous sample (Robinson, 2014) of four participants who expressed an interest in talking about their experiences of the “post-Olympic blues” and the events that they perceived were contributory factors. The inclusion criteria comprised British female athletes who had competed at the Olympic Games in 2016 in an individual sport, and who had made the decision to continue competing at an elite level after the Olympic Games. In the first instance NGBs were approached with a request for access to potential participants; one participant was recruited via this strategy. Two further athletes were recruited through personal contacts, and one athlete following an appeal for participants on Twitter.

The athletes. A brief synopsis of the participants is provided below; the names are pseudonyms and personal details are non-specific to ensure anonymity. All four athletes were white British and ranged in age from 24 to 37 years old at the time of their Olympic participation ($Mean = 26.5$, $SD = 5.8$).

‘Emily’ is a non-funded endurance athlete who was competing in her first Olympic Games. The year prior to the Rio Olympic Games was uncertain for Emily as she was negatively affected by organizational stressors surrounding her Olympic (pre-) selection. Having qualified for her Olympic event, she was accompanied to Rio by her husband and her mother. She did not achieve her outcome goals which involved being above a particular placing; she attributed this failure to not “being brave enough”. Following her return to the United Kingdom (UK) her husband took her on a surprise vacation. Emily was distressed at times during the initial interview, crying on multiple occasions, but reflected in her second interview that the initial interview was a cathartic experience that facilitated a return to a state of normality.

‘Sian’ is a funded swimmer, who was competing in her second Olympic Games (having previously competed at the London Olympic Games in 2012). Although Sian did not achieve her main outcome and performance goals, in one of her events she achieved a lifetime personal best. On her return to the UK she visited her immediate family whilst suffering from a mild illness and then vacationed with her long-term partner. Shortly after her return she was told that she had lost her funding and that there were to be significant changes in the structure of her coaching team in the upcoming season. Sian was interviewed on one occasion only.

‘Ailsa’ is a funded field athlete who was competing in her second Olympic Games (having previously competed at the London Olympic Games in 2012). Following the London Olympic Games she set what she considered a realistic outcome goal of winning a Gold medal. However, her preparation for the Games was beleaguered by injury that at the time potentially jeopardized her Olympic qualification. As a consequence of her injury and subsequent rehabilitation, her outcome and

performance goals were re-evaluated in the months before arriving in Rio. Accordingly, having qualified for the final in her event she was satisfied that she had achieved her goals. She was accompanied in Rio by her husband. On her return home her husband returned to work and she vacationed with another family member.

'Hattie' is a track athlete who is partially funded and was competing in her first Olympic Games. She was accompanied in Rio by her husband, but not by her coach who had not been selected as a team coach. On the day of her race she awoke with a temperature and a cough and felt that this had some impact on her performance. Ultimately, she did not feel that she achieved her goals. On her return home she went on a short city break with her husband. He then returned to work and shortly afterwards she returned to her part-time job and training.

The researchers. Understanding the motivations and backgrounds of the researchers is a fundamental facet of IPA to contextually locate their interpretations. This collaboration brought together two researchers with contrasting backgrounds and different research interests, yet whose beliefs and values are broadly aligned. The first author is a practicing applied sport psychologist who works with athletes at all levels predominantly from individual sports. Her research interests are in adversarial growth in elite and competitive athletes, and the impact of competitive sport on mental health particularly in elite sport. She has primarily engaged in qualitative research involving both IPA and narrative analysis. The second author has worked as a registered occupational therapist in state-funded mental health services in the UK and New Zealand, predominantly in the child and adolescent mental health field. His research in mental health has been psychologically orientated with an emphasis on mood disorders, and has involved both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. There is coherence in the researchers' respective epistemological stances, in that both describe themselves as constructivist who are interested in making sense of peoples' own constructions of their experiences; this is despite tending towards a preference for different research methodologies. The researchers' respective contributions were predominantly in their areas of strengths, with the first author contributing her subject knowledge of elite sport and qualitative research, and the second author contributing his expertise in depression and human occupation/activity.

1.3. Procedure

Data Collection. Following institutional ethical approval at the authors' academic institution, a retired male swimmer who had competed in the London 2012 Olympic Games (and who was known to the first author), provided feedback on the interview questions. The questions were then subsequently refined. Despite an intention to interview athletes as soon as possible following their return from Rio, delays in recruitment, athletes' vacations, training schedules, and camps, meant that three athletes were interviewed 8 weeks after their return to the UK and then 36 weeks after their initial interviews. Due to training and competition commitments one athlete was interviewed only on one occasion 18 weeks following her return. It is important that the reader is aware that the participants' reflections are on past events and their accounts represent the meanings that these experiences held at the point of interview (cf. Papatomas & Lavallee, 2010).

The initial interview commenced with participants being asked to draw a timeline of their experiences from their arrival in Brazil to the present day. Timelining is a form of graphic elicitation which records, extends, and deepens understanding of participants' past experiences (cf. Howells & Fletcher, 2016; Sheridan, Chamberlain, & Dupuis, 2011). In this study timelines provided a useful structure for the interviews and complemented discussions to encourage participants' recall and interpretation of events. The interviews comprised four sections: the Olympic experience (e.g., "Can you tell me about your Olympic Games experience in Rio?"), the post-Olympic experience (e.g., "What was it like returning home after the Olympic Games?"), future plans (e.g., "Generally speaking, how do you feel about the future?"), and the

interview process (e.g., "Can I contact you in about 9 months to a year for a follow up interview, to see how things have changed at least a year after Rio?"). However, to maintain the integrity of the participants' accounts and to allow them to focus on areas pertinent to them, the structure was used as a guide rather than a prescriptive formula. The second interview and associated timeline followed a similar format to the initial interview, but included questions on member reflections (cf. Smith & McGannon, 2017), that is, the participant's interpretations of the initial interview, involving for example, a collaborative exploration of similarities (and differences) in interpretations of the timelines, and additional participant-specific questions that emerged from an analysis of the information provided at the initial interview (e.g., In your last interview you displayed despondency about never feeling anything like what you experienced at the Olympic Games, have you've got any thoughts on that now?). The second timeline was useful as a comparative tool so the participants could visually reflect on variations across their timelines and the intensity of their emotional highs and lows. The interviews lasted from 44.30 min to 65.14 min ($M = 56.42$, $SD = 7.87$), were recorded using an audio device, and manually transcribed.

Data analysis. IPA is idiographic in nature; analysis commences with a detailed examination of each case, which, in this study involved one or two interviews (i.e. an initial interview and a follow-up interview for three out of the four participants), one or two timelines (i.e. one timeline per interview), and correspondence in the form of emails between the participant(s) and the first author. In the first instance, the initial interview transcript and the associated timeline were reviewed thoroughly and repeatedly by the first author. Initial coding was carried out noting down anything of interest, interpretations and making summaries of ideas. This initial coding was utilized to inform the development of individualized interviews for each participant's second interview. This procedure was then repeated for each of the initial interview transcripts. After the follow-up interview, the transcript of the second interview and the associated timeline was then subject to iterative and repetitive reading and initial coding. The individual participant's interviews were then combined and considered as a single case and, where applicable, additional coding was added to the original transcripts. From this stage recurrent themes were identified, with key words acting as codes. This procedure was then repeated for the remaining participants. The next stage involved the first author attempting to identify repeated patterns and thematic connections, both within and across transcripts. Throughout the data analysis the authors were cognizant of the need to identify differences as well as similarities (both within and between the athletes' accounts) and to be appreciative of: intersubjectivity; the sometimes shared and overlapping, relational engagement with our social world (cf. Heidegger, 1962).

1.4. Methodological rigor and quality

The founder of IPA when reviewing a large corpus of IPA illness studies, argued that generic quality assessments lack the specificity required to assess the quality of an IPA study (Smith, 2011). Indeed, recently Smith and McGannon (2017) have argued against adopting an approach that judges any qualitative study in "preordained and set ways" (p. 16). Nevertheless, to encourage a reflective and dynamic appraisal of the quality of this research, the present study was designed and was iteratively appraised through engagement with Smith's (2011) principles of what constitutes good (and acceptable and unacceptable) IPA research. In light of criticisms surrounding the use of member checking to enhance the trustworthiness of a study (viz. Thomas, 2017), this study utilized 'member reflections' (cf. Smith & McGannon, 2017) to encourage participant engagement, deep reflection, and as a means to understand the participant-constructed realities. This was realized through the follow-up interview which, in addition to exploring the main research question also involved both the researcher and the participant reflecting back on both the original interview and their

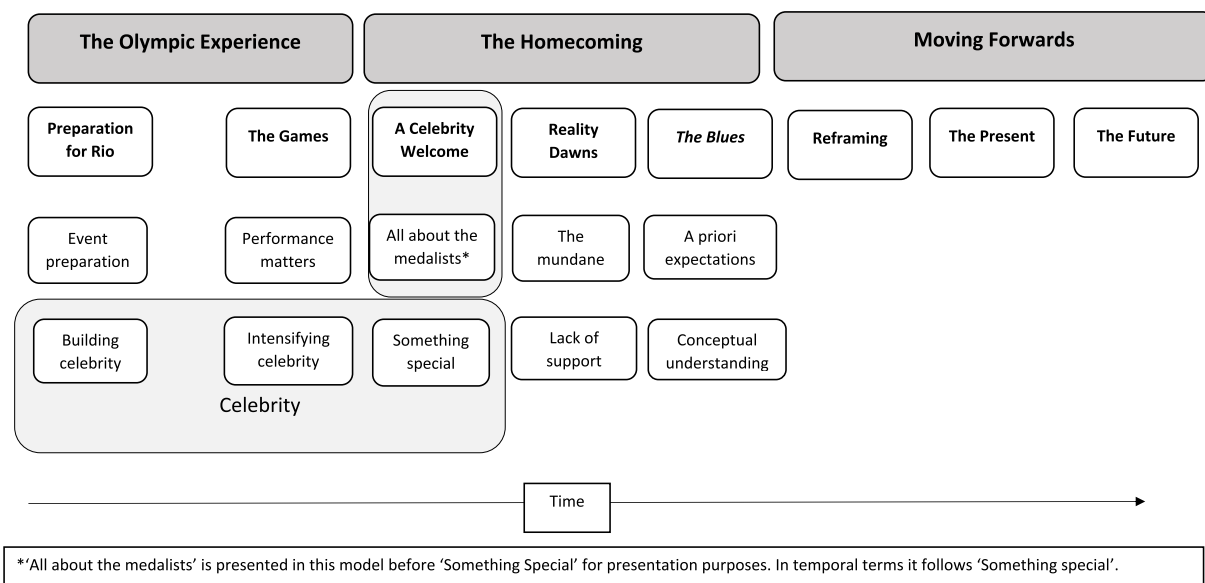


Fig. 2. A visual representation of the themes.

all”. Participation in this heterogeneous system required the participants to engage in unfamiliar (albeit often exciting) practices that cemented their Olympian identity. For example, Emily talked about the “high” that she experienced following her qualification and how she was expected to engage with the media, an engagement that began her transformation into a celebrity. This engagement, which was not within the control of the athletes, was so intense that the athletes were not able to engage in any reflection on their situation:

I'd had two weeks of intense, we want to interview you, BBC Radio are ringing up or the newspapers, they're all wanting interviews, and it was just like people throwing things at you. I didn't have time to breathe or reflect or get down about anything.

The Games. There was dissociation between the narratives of the athletes' athletic performance in their respective events and the narrative of being a celebrity Olympian in the Olympic Village. Accordingly, there were two distinct sub-themes evident in *The Games*, namely, *Performance matters* and *Intensifying celebrity*.

Performance matters. None of the athletes lost sight of their purpose, and that was that their role was to represent their country in their respective events. This placed pressure on the athletes and perhaps unsurprisingly, the athletes experienced pre-event competitive anxiety and self-doubt competing in the biggest competition of their lives. As Ailsa explained:

My warm up was awful... a bit panicky. It's the biggest competition of the year, I needed to qualify for the final, and I'm not giving my best performance. . . . [I] calmed myself down and just was like 'you've got nothing to lose, just go out there and give it your best'.

Although the participants interpreted that the UK public were anticipating GB medals, the athletes were primarily performance and process goal focused. Nevertheless, for three athletes there was some incongruity about whether they achieved their goals. As Hattie explained:

I would have liked to have been in that final, but if you'd said to me this time last year “you'll make the Olympics but you won't make the final, you'll be disappointed”. I'd be like, “no, no, no I wouldn't”. But I think... you always want that tiny little bit more.

Ailsa explained that despite setting a realistic outcome goal, when she achieved it she was disappointed suggesting that her interpretations of her performance were situated in the context of her earlier

expectation of becoming an Olympic champion which, at another point in time, may have been realistic:

In London... my coach said... you should be Olympic champion in four years. . . . But after having surgery a string of problems happened for me. . . . So we went to Rio wanting to make the final and then see what happened. . . . I came so close to winning a medal... but we were disappointed with that, but to finish [in the position achieved] was good.

Intensifying celebrity. The celebrity identity that had been molded in the build up to their arrival in Brazil was augmented following their arrival in the Olympic Village. Although the athletes were focused on their upcoming performances, they were in awe of the way that they were treated as members of the Olympic community and interpreted that “it made you feel special walking around in GB kit knowing that you're there at the pinnacle of your sport. . . . You're spoiled for three weeks” (Ailsa). The culture at the village was one of extravagance, involving seemingly infinite resources and services. Sian described it paraphrasing a well-known idiom: “it's like a little part of your brain that's like a ten-year-old child that just wants to run around like you're in a sweet shop”. This was elaborated on by Hattie who described:

The dinner hall was massive... you could have a curry for breakfast if you wanted it, there was food available all the time. . . . We got a free phone... and we got some nice little cards that said: ‘Once an Olympian, Always an Olympian’.

2.2. The Homecoming

Initially, and irrespective of their individual experiences in Rio, the participants reached a point following their competitions and their subsequent sight-seeing opportunities that they were ready to return home, as Sian stated, “I just wanted to go home and be with my loved ones”. This expressed need to go home may represent a perceived vulnerability that represents the first overt sign of ‘the blues’ and some disconnection with their transient identities as celebrities in a village where they were devoid of autonomy. Sian explained:

You're in the village and you're in high security... we did go out, but it wasn't that easy to do. The village was based in the middle of nowhere. . . . And for me it sounds really sad, but I was counting down to go home and spend time with my family.

Their return to the UK was marked by the pomp and circumstance of a British Airways aircraft painted gold, a media frenzy, and homecoming parades. Initially, they mostly reveled in the attention that they received although this was tempered by an awareness that “it’s all about the medalists” (Ailsa). However, the attention waned, the athletes returned to their ‘mundane normality’, and they experienced feelings of being “lost” that we interpreted as being characteristic of the ‘post-Olympic blues’. Accordingly, there are three separate sub-themes; *A Celebrity Welcome*, *Reality Dawns*, *The Blues*.

A Celebrity Welcome. There was conflict within the athletes’ accounts that recognized the perception that they were special due to their participation at the Olympic Games but this was tempered by the perception that they had *failed* to win medals.

Something special. The narrative of being something special that had begun during the preparation for the Games and had been reinforced in the Olympic Village continued as arrangements were made to bring the athletes home. Hattie described the experience:

We got on the plane and it was all exciting. That’s another high... and that was something you’ll never forget... we had champagne and sung the national anthem. . . . [and had] a special menu that said, a thing from the captain saying how proud everyone was and the food had been specially selected. . . . And then walking off the plane through the airport with everyone cheering and stuff was really nice.

About the medalists. Whilst echoing Hattie’s excitement about the homecoming, the other athletes acknowledged that there was a hierarchy of attention, with more interest being given to the medalists. Sian explained that “I think it would have been more cool for the medalists because they all went in first class”. Ailsa interpreted that despite the effort that had been made to create an exciting and visually appealing spectacle the focus on the medalists may have “reflect[ed] how low I felt after”. She explained:

The medalists really get preferential treatment, but it’s so black and white. When we arrived... all the medalists get off and have photos, and then all of a sudden it was like right everyone else can just disembark the flight. It just made me feel a bit rubbish.

This resonates with Emily’s account. Describing her return home during her second interview she was able to cognitively appraise the impact that a conversation with a member of the public had on her at the time. However, she was also able to reflect on and reframe the erroneous assumptions of the general public:

The lady across from me was: “So you’ve been to the Olympic Games”, because I was wearing the kit, and as soon as she said “Did you win a medal?” and I said “no”, it was the end of conversation. It was like she didn’t know what to say to me then. . . . It was like have I failed? And when I look back on it now, it’s a massive achievement. There were only three people in my event that were going to win a medal.

Reality Dawns. As the initial excitement of returning home subsided, the athletes were faced with the recognition that life had not changed appreciably, the routine tasks of living remained, and that their transient status as celebrities had not afforded them any special treatment at home. Accordingly, they had to cope with *The mundane* and *Lack of support*.

The mundane. The mundane represented an acknowledgement by the athletes that they were still required to engage in normal everyday behaviors which they found “boring” (Ailsa) or uninspiring following the excitement of the preceding months. Hattie explained:

Coming to work... is boring... [I] can’t be bothered to cook as much. You know, I’ve got to go shopping, I’ve got to spend money. I think it’s just like that. I just didn’t have quite that get up and go.

The need to engage with these routine tasks went beyond disinterest

and created levels of frustration, as Emily explained:

There were days where I could have thrown the dishes everywhere and broken them. I didn’t want to do normal things. I don’t know what I wanted to do but I just didn’t want to do the washing up. I didn’t want to be washing clothes or cleaning or going to Tesco, it would drive me crazy.

Emily used a wedding metaphor to articulate her experiences of how it felt transitioning from being something special to being ordinary again:

It’s a bit like when you get married. . . . You build up to this day and you plan it and... it was an absolutely great day, but then you come back home. You go to Tesco [grocery store] shopping and nothing’s changed. Everything’s the same but you almost built it up as if you expect something to be different and it’s not.

Lack of support. The athletes talked at length about the lack of support that they perceived from the public and their significant others. Three of the athletes were surprised about how quickly interest in them waned, Ailsa explained: “Once the novelty had worn off I was kind of just sat there at home like well this is a bit weird, I expected it to last for longer”. Hattie was disappointed by the public perception of her performance in Rio and how she perceived that the public did not understand. She recollected an example:

People think I did really rubbish and I did Tesco’s Click and Collect [grocery store home delivery] and the guy had seen me running... he knew I got to the Olympics and he was like ‘why didn’t you run like you ran in America when you qualified?’

However, we interpreted that of more concern to the athletes involved their relationships with their significant others whose perspective the athletes struggled to understand. All of the athletes expressed their gratitude to their families for the support in the build up to the Games, but they also expressed surprise and irritability that this perceived support did not have sufficient longevity. We interpreted that this intersubjectivity, the divergence of perceptions about what was the appropriate level of support following the athletes’ return, was in part explained by the incongruence in the categorization of the Rio experience with parents and significant others perceiving taking part in the Olympic Games as the accomplishment of a long-term goal and the athletes perceiving that they had not fully realized their goals. Emily interpreted her mother’s response to her sustained low mood: “I think all she said to me was I don’t understand why you’re upset. You’ve achieved what you want to do for 25 years. What’s there to be upset about? I don’t understand”. Hattie described a similar response from her mother, but in her second interview acknowledged that her mother’s motivations were about helping her deal with her negativity: “My mum’s... She’s a bit like ‘hang on a minute, now look stop thinking about yourself all the time, how you feel and things. . . . Keep things in perspective here, you’ve been to the Olympics, you’ve had a great year, be grateful for what you’ve achieved and experiences you’ve had’. So that’s kind of how she’s helped me try and deal with it”.

One athlete explained that the post-Rio experience had a negative impact on her relationship which was suffering at the point of the initial interview, however, a period of reflection between the two interviews had allowed her to reframe the experience and empathize more with her husband. During the initial interview Emily explained:

I am really down and he’s like ‘what’s your problem?’ But then I notice he’s down. . . . We can’t help each other. . . . I just thought I don’t want to be here with you right now. I don’t want to be around you. You’re not helping my situation. We argued a lot.

In the later interview she recognized that she had harbored irrational thoughts towards her husband and acknowledged that her husband was attempting to help her:

I don't think it was that he didn't understand how I felt about things, but he was trying to say okay, right, you feel lost. You haven't got a goal. Let's put a goal in place. I just didn't feel ready for that.

We interpreted that the perceived lack of social support could be part explained by the incongruence between how two of the athletes and their significant others perceived the Rio experience and the return to the UK. This was manifested in what could be considered interpersonal hypersensitivity whereby the athletes felt abandoned. Ailsa explained that her husband had interpreted his time in Rio as a holiday and that the return to the UK represented a return to work and routine. She contrasted that with her own experience which involved the return to the UK as representing a period to relax and spend time with her loved ones:

I got frustrated sometimes because when I texted him asking 'When are you getting home from work, can we go for coffee? He'd be like 'oh I just want to chill'. And I'm like "but I've done that all day, I want to go out and go for coffee and spend time with you!"

The Blues. All of the athletes experienced low mood that was articulated as feeling "lost". They had not consciously conceptualized this as a condition or a concept but had attributed their negative state(s) to some aspect of their Olympic experience. Interestingly notwithstanding the previous comment, three of the athletes had been warned that they would experience the blues, and all were during the interview able to reflect on their own experiences to theorize about the phenomenon. Accordingly, the blues comprises *a priori expectations*, and *conceptual understanding*.

A priori expectations. The athletes' exposure to the phenomena suggested an internalization of a narrative that identifies low mood as a normal response to the Olympic experience, yet none had identified it as a specific phenomenon nor had they been provided with any specific skills or strategies to manage the experience. Three athletes had been warned that they may experience some low mood but it had not been conceptualized as 'post-Olympic blues' nor had they anticipated that they would experience it. Hattie explained her reaction when she was warned by her physiotherapist about the prospect of negative affect following her return: "I was like 'No I won't be. I'll have been to the Olympics and I've had this amazing time and I'm ready to get onto the next thing'. He was like 'Hmm we'll see'". Emily explained why she had not taken the prospect seriously: "I never really talked about what came after [the Olympic Games], because I couldn't see past Rio".

Conceptual understanding. The athletes were articulate about what they thought that the blues comprised and all made causal attributions about their own experiences. Ailsa explained it in terms of coming down from a high which we interpreted was compounded by the athletes' experiences of celebrity:

You're spoiled for three weeks, and you're experiencing these massive highs and competing in front of massive stadiums, and everyone's talking about it. . . . And then you get home and it's just you're not used to just being back in reality.

Coming down from the 'natural high' articulated by Ailsa may explain the negative affect that the athletes experienced. However, we interpreted that the nature of the Olympic Games created a 'unique buzz' that the athletes perceived could never be replicated. Emily explained "when you come off the Olympics, what is there to do now? That is my problem. I've spent 25 years dreaming of becoming an Olympian and it's like I don't know what will give me that fire again". Ailsa referred to a void that had been left: "It feels like nothing's going to fill, it kind of feels in the moment like nothing's going to ever, you're never going to feel like that again".

Sian had an alternative narrative and that was that her depressed mood was less about the experience in Rio but more concerned with the organizational stressors that negatively impacted on her autonomy:

Big restructures, funding is cut or funding increases [is] to be expected... after an Olympics. So for me it wasn't the fact that I'd come back from an Olympics that made me feel down ... but the instability. . . . I felt like decisions were being made on my behalf. And I didn't like that at all. I like to be in control.

With the benefit of reflection over two interviews, Emily questioned the terminology of 'blues' suggesting that this did not capture the severity of what she experienced. In her first interview she ruminated over her current state of mind:

I think I [am] depressed, a little depressed. Blues is almost like a bit sad, something you can get over in a week. This is not. This is not a week. This is... over two months since I competed. That's a long time to still be thinking some days, why do I feel like this?

In her second interview she reflected back on how she was feeling and although her sentiment remained the same, her articulation of her experience represented a move from a descriptive account of her emotions to a more interpretative focus on her psychological state where she sought to seek meaning in her experience.

I think that it must have been depression. . . . I wouldn't have expected to be feeling like that for so long, feeling so helpless ... there were some days where I just thought what's the purpose of me being here? Don't get me wrong, I was never going to do anything. But I just sat and I was like what is the purpose of my life? ... And is that depression? I feel like almost it is... because we're not talking days. We're not talking weeks, we're talking a couple of months.

She went on to discuss the therapeutic benefit of engaging in the research:

It really, really helped to talk to you. And it wasn't like you were counselling me. I think it was just you were prompting me to think about things in a different way. And I think that's what you need. It's not necessarily that you want someone to tell you it's going to be all right, because you have to deal with it in your own way, but what you want is someone just to listen and maybe ask the right questions that you can start putting things back together for yourself.

2.3. Moving Forwards

Moving forwards was present in the second interviews of the three athletes and in the sole interview of the fourth. We interpreted this as being due to the fact that the initial interview was temporally too close to the Olympic Games for the athletes to process their experiences and reflect on future plans. Moving forwards represented both a state of mind and a tangible assessment of where the athletes currently are and what the future may bring. It is represented by acceptance of their performances and a focus on the positives which is articulated in *Reframing*. The athletes discussed their current situations which are represented by *The Present* and their plans for the future both in respect of their personal and sporting lives, this is articulated by the theme *The Future*.

Reframing. Although there were periods of incongruence in the athletes' accounts of their goal achievements, there was evidence of reframing the performance experiences to protect the sporting self. Emily was adamant during her initial interview that she had not achieved her goals, but in a more reflective account, in her second interview she positively reframed her experience: "So I didn't have the perfect race, but I actually still finished [in the top 1/5]. I was still at the Olympic Games. And I think that's how I've got to look at it now". She elaborated on how her initial perceptions were overly negative: "I think looking back, actually, I've been very hard on myself for a long time and I have actually achieved quite a lot". Despite identifying unpleasant experiences about how she was treated by certain members of the public, in her second interview she had a more positive narrative

about how she is treated as an Olympian although she attributed this to a change in how people treated her:

A guy in a shop... was like “Oh, my god, how amazing. I've never met an Olympian before!”. . . . I think you get a lot more of that now ... but going back nine months ago it was all about the medals. “Oh, you didn't get a medal. Oh, sorry to hear that”. But it's definitely all changed. I think the way people react to me has changed as well.

However, Alisa went further, reframing not only her performance but the exposure afforded to individuals who win medals at the Olympic Games. We interpreted that this reframing was protective, focusing her attention not on the past but on her re-evaluated performance goals (i.e., a medal at the World Championships) for the future:

I think the frustration looking back was lots of people won medals, therefore unless you won a medal it didn't matter; whereas now I think athletics is one of the main sports there's a lot of emphasis on the World Champs and Commonwealth Games. So... if I was to win a medal these [at] this World Champs, I'd get way more exposure than if I was to win a medal at the Olympics because there's so many other athletes at that time that will win it.

The Present. Although the athletes had not all had positive experiences between the two interviews, with both Ailsa and Hattie experiencing on-going injuries, their cognitions, emotional states, and behaviors were focused on the present rather than being connected to their Olympic experiences. Hattie articulated her current problems with a leg injury as being distinct from any negative affect related to the Olympic Games: “The Olympics was forgotten. . . . [My coach and I] clashed a bit for a few months, training was horrible. . . . We had this big discussion about it and made quite a lot of progress”. Similarly, Ailsa focused on the highs of a record and the lows of a serious injury which she reflected surpassed those associated with the Olympic Games, which in her initial interview had been the most extreme that she had experienced: “I don't think I've ever experienced such a high and then ten days later experienced such a low. . . . I think it's the lowest I've maybe ever been in my life, just because it's so horrible”. We considered that her interpretation of the intensity of her experiences were impacted upon by the recency of the events and through collaborative meaning making in the second interview encouraged her exploration of her interpretations:

Karen: Do you think that over time events that were traumatic, because they were very fresh in your memory, are no longer traumatic?

Ailsa: I said to my coach the other day, ‘I've never felt this bad, I feel awful, I feel like this is the worst thing that's happened’, and he was ‘you have to remember that, three years ago you had surgery which meant you couldn't do your sport for a whole six months’. . . . If that was now then it would feel much worse. But because this is happening to me right now, this is the worst thing.

The Future. Possibly in part due to managing their post-Olympic blues experience (whereby a lack of goal-focus is thought to be particularly unhelpful), two of the athletes (Ailsa and Hattie) were adamant that they wanted to compete at the next Olympic Games. Ailsa explained that “I want to be an Olympic champion in Tokyo. And on the way to that I want to win as many medals as I can at major champs”. Hattie expressed a desire to improve on her past performance adding: “I really want to try and get to the next [Olympic Games] Tokyo”. The other athletes (Sian and Emily) had no intention to retire but were unsure whether they would compete in the next Olympic Games.

3. Discussion

This study gave voice to four female Olympians who competed at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games to explore the notion of the ‘post-Olympic

blues’ providing a linear account of the athletes' experiences before, during, and after the Olympic Games. In collaborative meaning making with the participants, we explored the antecedents to the negative affect that the participants reported experiencing following Olympic participation. Through integrating several interviews and timelines into one study (cf. Williams, 2017) and by adopting IPA which informed an acknowledgement that our interpretation of experiences is both temporal and exists in relation to other aspects of our lives, we accessed the shifting interpretations of the athletes' perceptions of their experiences and development of the post-Olympic blues. We also explored whether the post-Olympic blues is a ‘normal’ short-term phenomenon or whether it is more enduring, and hence likely to require formal interventions.

The athletes were vague about the specific antecedents to the depressive symptoms that they experienced after their return home, although one athlete attributed her low mood to organizational stressors which is consistent with experiences of Australian Olympic gold medalists (Jackson et al., 1998). We interpreted that it was the overall experience that elevated the athletes to a celebrity status, rather than any specific performance issues that contributed to the negative experience of the post-Olympic period. However, there was some incoherence in the narratives of the athletes; where they were simultaneously resentful of the attention given to the medalists but acknowledged that (enhanced) success would have had little impact on their post-Olympic blues. The notion of the celebrity Olympian was a pervasive narrative, whereby the athletes' identification with celebrity began with their commodification (i.e., the kitting process and the media interviews). This continued during the Games, and then culminated with the athletes' being treated like celebrities on their return from Rio. However, this celebrity Olympian identity depersonalized and eclipsed the individual characteristics and achievements of the athletes. This ‘Olympian’ identity epitomized in the presentation of “Once an Olympian, Always an Olympian” cards distributed in the village and the perception of celebrity was internalized by the athletes and was reinforced by interactions with members of the public. The identity of being a celebrity Olympian was consistent with, and complemented, the strong athletic identity that is evident in many elite athletes and has been linked with a vulnerability to a depressive reaction to a relevant negative life event (Brewer, 1993; Doherty, Hannigan, & Campbell, 2016). When the excitement of the Olympic Games had subsided, interest in the athletes waned, from both significant others and members of the public, accordingly the athletes experienced a loss of identity (as well as the corresponding status) and experienced feelings of loss and associated negative emotions. Their short-lived identification with celebrity is comparable to bridal identification with celebrities and the expectation of veridical change following the wedding festivities (cf. Cassie Patten reveals post-Olympic struggles as her medal was shut away, 2012). In both cases reality is almost immediately omnipresent following the event and results in a reluctant acceptance that little has changed and that the mundane that was previously present remains.

Social support in the elite sport performance literature has been shown to be fundamental in dealing with adversity in relation to adversarial growth (e.g., Howells, Sarkar, & Fletcher, 2017) and specifically perceived social support in respect of resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). This present study also highlighted importance of perception in the provision of social support. The internalization of ‘being special’ impacted on the expectation of social support which was incongruent with the perception of social support that the athletes considered that they received from their significant others. All of the athletes reported that they had strong, stable relationships and had been supported by their wider families in their sporting careers. However, having experienced considerable tangible support prior to, and during the Olympic Games, they were surprised and disappointed in that they perceived that the support was limited in extent and duration following the Olympic Games and were annoyed that the focus of others turned quickly from the athletes' sporting careers to other members of the

family, work commitments, or conversations about starting a family. This acknowledgement of frustration towards others reflects the participants' inability to share and fully understand their significant others' experiences and is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) assertion that our understanding is shaped by our own embodied position in the world and we cannot truly understand the social world from another's perspective.

The reports from the participants in this study about the stories that they had heard from fellow athletes, recollections and visual representation through timelining of their own experiences, and multiple media reports collectively suggest that the negative emotions and subsequent behaviors were interpreted to be a normal response to returning home following Olympic participation. The post-Olympic period was difficult for the participants and was characterized by periods of depressed mood and a general loss of interest in life, which are both common depressive symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The athletes reported negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, irritability), and behavioral responses (e.g., crying; interpersonal hypersensitivity) that are consistent with the notion of the 'blues' as conceptualized by the post-partum (cf. Kettunen et al., 2014; O'Hara & Wisner, 2014) and wedding (cf. CassiePatten reveals post-Olympic struggles as her medal was shut away, 2012) literature. However, the prevalence and extent of these symptoms differed between the four athletes and over time. Three athletes acknowledged in their initial interview that the post-Olympic period comprised the worst experience that they had encountered in their sporting careers. They articulated the negative emotions that they had during this time were incomparable with any prior experience. However, one of these athletes derogated that initial account in her second interview referring to a worse experience that had subsequently followed. This temporal incongruence is consistent with a changed sense of lived time and involves a changing narrative of the embodied self over time (cf. Coventry, Dickens, & Todd, 2014). All of the athletes reported that the symptoms lasted for several weeks but two of the athletes reported a more enduring period of negativity that lasted for several months. One explicitly stated that she did not think that she had experienced the 'blues', as what she had encountered was more intense and longer lasting than the 'blues' nomenclature suggests. Instead she thought that she was depressed. Whilst we cannot interpret whether this athlete would have been diagnosed with an MDD if formally assessed, the reported intensity and durability of the athletes' depressive symptoms during the post-Olympic period illustrates the gravity of the athletes' experiences.

Theoretically, this research has identified differences between the blues (which appear to be a transient 'natural reaction' to the Olympic experience) and a depressive disorder, such as MDD, which is more concerning and develops in some athletes after their participation in the Olympics. However, certain points related to the value of psychopathology and in labelling more generally in this area remain unclear. In particular, given that there is a growing consensus that psychiatric diagnoses "are akin to social constructs" (Malhi et al., 2015, p. 8), this raises a question about the usefulness of diagnoses and labels (such as the 'post-Olympic blues') for athletes experiencing problems after the Olympics. This point is perhaps particularly salient for elite athletes, who are used to embracing mental toughness, whereby any signs of 'mental weakness' are viewed with negativity. Therefore, these athletes may feel reluctant to identify as experiencing the post-Olympic blues (and may be especially reluctant to be diagnosed with MDD), for fear that this will negatively impact on them (e.g. in terms of their future sporting career). Conversely, without labels like the post-Olympic blues, athletes can be devoid of a framework which can assist them to make sense of the challenges they experience after the Olympics.

3.1. Limitations, Future Research, and Applied Implications

Adopting a longitudinal design was an important consideration in the planning of the research to access the athletes' shifting perceptions

of their lived experience of the post-Olympic period. Such a design requires a certain degree of commitment and an ongoing availability by the participants. Due to training and competition commitments, one of the athletes was only interviewed once 18 weeks after her return home. Her narrative, perhaps tempered by the passage of time and by not having the opportunity to reflect on her earlier account, was often incongruent with the accounts of the other participants and we cannot be certain whether the differences in her story are related to her Olympic experiences or her fundamentally different experience of the research process. A limitation of this research may be the inclusion of her incomplete data. However, removal of her data was inconsistent with our constructivist epistemology; her constructions of her experiences are as relevant to understanding the shifting perceptions of the post-Olympic experience as are the constructions of the other participants.

Our understanding of the post-Olympic blues is in its infancy and this study has highlighted scope for further research specifically, in terms of the elite sample and the lack of intervention studies that focus on the post-Olympic blues as a discrete issue. The study comprised a sample that was restricted to athletes who did not win a medal (and who had lower than expected performance outcomes) and thus based on the findings from Hammond et al. (2013) it is expected that they would experience depressive symptoms. Nevertheless, research (cf. Jackson et al., 1998) and anecdotal media reports have indicated that medaling at an Olympic Games is not a protective factor against negative outcomes following the Olympic Games or the development of depressive symptoms. Previous research by Hammond et al. (2013) has demonstrated a link between under-performance and depression in world class swimmers, whereby performance failure was significantly associated with depression in the top tier athletes (defined as the top 25% of performers who were competing to represent Canada internationally). Considering this incoherence, it would be useful to explore the prevalence of the post-Olympic blues in a sample of athletes who did win a medal. We did not explicitly explore the specific preparation for the Olympic Games, yet the athletes conveyed that the build up to Rio was exciting and all encompassing. However, irrespective of their prior Olympic experience only one athlete engaged with a sport psychologist to ensure that she was not daunted by her Rio Olympic participation in the same way that she was for London. It is possible that this preparation may explain why in this athlete's retrospective account of the post-Olympic experience she does not consider that her low mood was attributable to her Olympic participation (rather she interpreted that it was organizational stressors that were of consequence). However, none of the athletes were specifically prepared for the post-Olympic period, despite their accounts indicating that knowledge of low mood following the Olympic Games was common amongst coaches, physiotherapists, and other athletes. To date, there has been little evidence of any substantial programs other than that implemented in Ireland to assist athletes to normalize and manage the post-Olympic experience (cf. McArdle et al., 2014) and none that have addressed the post-Olympic blues as a discrete issue, which is likely to require specific interventions.

The reflective nature of this research informed by phenomenology (viz. Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1962) gave the participants opportunity to reflect on the strategies that they perceived would have mediated their negative responses to returning home. Their suggestions articulated in this research under the themes of *Event Preparation*, *Moving Forwards* and *The Future* provide the basis for applied implications for practitioners working with Olympic athletes. The sample size in this study was consistent with other IPA studies but issues around generalizability are important, particularly in the context of deriving implications for applied practice. The application of statistical-probabilistic generalizability, that is a confidence that these findings can be applied to all other athletes, is a misnomer in qualitative research such as IPA that uses small samples, and is incongruent with the epistemological and ontological assumptions of this research (cf. Smith, 2018). Nevertheless, we contend that this research has naturalistic

generalizability (Stake, 1978, 1995), that is given the depth of the accounts presented, the findings will resonate with Olympic athletes' experiences of their return from participation in the Olympic Games and as such are useful in informing applied practice. Accordingly, it is important that all Olympic athletes are given the opportunity to engage with sport psychology provision to prepare for their response to the post-Olympic period, are afforded the opportunity, following their return home, to engage in reflection and reframing of their experiences, and are encouraged to re-evaluate and focus on goals for the future. Given that we cannot realistically predict who is going to perform or under-perform and in light of findings from studies (e.g., Jackson et al., 1998) that discounted medaling being a protective factor, all athletes should be given support and psychoeducation about the post-Olympic blues prior to competition and provided with anticipatory and proactive coping strategies (i.e., reflection and reframing) to facilitate successful negotiation of this particularly challenging transitional period. Furthermore, irrespective of medal success following the Olympic Games, cognizant of a duty of care, all athletes should be provided with the opportunity to engage with psychological support following their return to manage the feelings of loss, their negative emotions, and the identity challenges that are characteristic of the post-Olympic blues. Athletes interviewed in this study, regardless of their funding status, were not provided with tangible support after the Games despite varying levels of psychological (and other) support prior to the event. One of the athletes in this study interpreted this as being a consequence of the inevitable personnel change following an Olympic Games where for a period the main focus shifts from the athlete to job security for support staff.

In conclusion, in giving voice to these female Olympians this study has articulated what the phenomena means to those who have experienced 'post-Olympic blues and explored the impact that the athletes' celebrityization may have had on their mental wellbeing. It is hoped that this research will engage NGBs and coaching teams to work with the recommendations of the Duty of Care in Sport report (Grey-Thompson, 2017) in formulating what support should be offered for athletes prior to and after the Olympic Games to limit the wellbeing (and potentially performance) impact that the post-Olympic blues has on athletes.

References

- American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Brewer, B. W. (1993). Self-identity and specific vulnerability to depressed mood. *Journal of Personality, 61*(3), 343–364. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-6494.ep9402021311>.
- Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L., & Linder, D. E. (1993). Athletic identity: Hercules' muscles or Achilles heel? *International Journal of Sport Psychology, 24*(2), 237–254.
- Buttner, M., O'Hara, M. W., & Watson, D. (2012). The structure of women's mood in the early postpartum. *Assessment, 19*, 247–256. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1073191111429388>.
- Carroll, J. (2012). Beauty contra God: Has aesthetics replaced religion in modernity? *Journal of Sociology, 48*(2), 206–223. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1440783311409083>.
- Cassie Patten reveals post-Olympic struggles as her medal was shut away (2012). *Sky sports*. Retrieved from <http://www.skysports.com/olympics/news/15234/8190601/cassie-patten-reveals-post-olympic-struggles-as-her-medal-was-shut-away>.
- Covenry, P. A., Dickens, C., & Todd, C. (2014). How does mental-physical morbidity express itself in lived time and space? A phenomenological analysis of encounters with depression and chronic physical illness. *Social Science & Medicine, 118*, 108–118. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.07.068>.
- Doherty, S., Hannigan, B., & Campbell, M. J. (2016). The experience of depression during the careers of elite male athletes. *Frontiers in Psychology, 7*, 1069. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01069>.
- Eatough, V., & Smith, J. A. (2017). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In C. Willig, & W. S. Rogers (Eds.). *The sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology*. London, UK: SAGE.
- Edwards, M. (1973). The crises of the fourth trimester. *Birth, 1*(1), 19–22. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1523-536X.1973.tb00657.x>.
- Ferguson, R., & Murray, T. (2014). *The Olympian's success paradox: When the games are over, managing post-Olympic stress syndrome in Olympic athletes [Kindle version]*. (Retrieved from Amazon.com).
- Fletcher, D., & Sarkar, M. (2012). A grounded theory of psychological resilience in Olympic champions. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 13*(5), 669–678. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2012.04.007>.
- Florio, J., & Shapiro, O. (2016). The dark side of going for gold. *The Atlantic*. Available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/08/post-olympic-depression/496244/>.
- Folkman, S., & Moskowitz, J. T. (2004). Coping: Pitfalls and promise. *Annual Review of Psychology, 55*, 745–774. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.141456>.
- Frank, G. (2016). *Olympic medalist Allison Schmitt opens up about struggle with depression*. Today. Available at: <http://www.today.com/health/olympic-medalist-allison-schmitt-opens-about-struggle-depression-t101693>.
- Gahwiler, A. (2016). Psychological preparation of the 2004 South African Olympic team. *South African Journal of Sports Medicine, 19*(3), 68–73. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2078-516X/2007/v19i3a642>.
- Gordin, R. D., & Henschen, K. P. (2012). Reflections on the psychological preparation of the USA ski and snowboard team for the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action, 3*(2), 88–97. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21520704.2012.683091>.
- Grey-Thompson, T. (2017). *Duty of care in sport. Independent report to government*<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/duty-of-care-in-sport-review>.
- Gulliver, A., Griffiths, K. M., Mackinnon, A., Batterham, P. J., & Stanimirovic, R. (2015). The mental health of Australian elite athletes. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport, 18*(3), 255–261. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jsams.2014.04.006>.
- Hammond, T., Gialloretto, C., Kubas, H., & Davis, H. (2013). The prevalence of failure-based depression among elite athletes. *Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine, 23*(4), 273–277. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1097/JSM.0b013e318287b870>.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. (J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson trans.). New York, NY: Harper.
- Howells, K. (2016). 'Super-human' athletes are at risk from the 'post-Olympic blues' – here's why. *The Conversation*. Available from: <https://theconversation.com/super-human-athletes-are-at-risk-from-the-post-olympic-blues-heres-why-64266>.
- Howells, K., & Fletcher, D. (2015). Sink or swim: Adversity- and growth-related experiences in Olympic swimming champions. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 16*, 37–48. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.08.004>.
- Howells, K., & Fletcher, D. (2016). Adversarial growth in Olympic swimmers: Constructive reality or illusory self-deception? *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 38*, 173–186. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/jsep.2015-0159>.
- Howells, K., Sarkar, M., & Fletcher, D. (2017). Can athletes benefit from difficulty? A systematic review of growth following adversity in competitive sport. In M. R. Wilson, V. Walsh, & B. Parkin (Vol. Eds.), *Sport and the Brain: The science of preparing, enduring and winning, Part B, progress in brain research: Vol. 234*, (pp. 117–159). UK: Academic Press.
- Hughes, L., & Leavey, G. (2012). Setting the bar: Athletes and vulnerability to mental illness. *The British Journal of Psychiatry, 200*(2), 95–96. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.111.095976>.
- Jackson, S. A., Dover, J., & Mayocchi, L. (1998). Life after winning gold: I. Experiences of Australian Olympic gold medalists. *The Sport Psychologist, 12*(2), 119–136.
- Kettunen, P., Koistinen, E., & Hintikka, J. (2014). Is postpartum depression a homogenous disorder: Time of onset, severity, symptoms and hopelessness in relation to the course of depression? *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth, 14*(1), 402–411. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/s12884-014-0402-2>.
- Lavallee, D., & Robinson, H. (2007). In pursuit of an identity: A qualitative exploration of retirement from women's artistic gymnastics. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 8*, 119–141. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2006.05.003>.
- MacIntyre, T., Van Raalte, J., Brewer, B., Jones, M., O'Shea, D., & McCarthy, P. J. (2016). Mental health challenges in elite sport: Balancing risk with reward [special issue]. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <http://journal.frontiersin.org/researchtopic/4208>.
- Malhi, G. S., Bassett, D., Boyce, P., Bryant, R., Fitzgerald, P. B., & Fritz, K. (2015). Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists clinical practice guidelines for mood disorders. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 49*, 1087–1206. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0004867415617657>.
- McArdle, S., Moore, P., & Lyons, D. (2014). Olympic athletes' experiences of a post games career transition program. *The Sport Psychologist, 28*(3), 269–278. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2013-0046>.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception*. (C. Smith trans.). London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Morgan, A. J., Parker, A. G., Alvarez-Jimenez, M., & Jorm, A. F. (2013). Exercise and mental health: An exercise and sports science Australia commissioned review. *Journal of Exercise Physiology Online, 16*(4), 64–73.
- National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) (2009). *Depression: The treatment and management of depression in adults (update)*. <http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG90/NICE>. London.
- Newman, H. J., Howells, K. L., & Fletcher, D. (2016). The dark side of top level sport: An autobiographic study of depressive experiences in elite sport performers. *Frontiers in Psychology, 7*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00868> Article 868.
- Nixdorf, I., Frank, R., & Beckmann, J. (2015). An explorative study on major stressors and its connection to depression and chronic stress among German elite athletes. *Advances in Physical Education, 5*, 255–262. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ape.2015.54030>.
- O'Hara, M. W., & McCabe, J. E. (2013). Postpartum depression: Current status and future directions. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 9*, 379–407. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-050212-185612>.
- O'Hara, M. W., & Wisner, K. L. (2014). Perinatal mental illness: Definition, description and aetiology. *Best Practice & Research Clinical Obstetrics & Gynaecology, 28*(1), 3–12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bpobgyn.2013.09.002>.
- Papathomas, A., & Lavallee, D. (2010). Athlete experiences of disordered eating in sport. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise, 2*(3), 354–370. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19398441.2010.517042>.

- Pendleton, V. (2016). Winning gold is hard enough, but coping with the post-Olympics blues will be the greatest challenge for Team GB's stars. *The Telegraph*. Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/olympics/2016/08/19/winning-gold-is-hard-enough-but-coping-with-the-post-olympics-bl/>.
- Robinson, O. C. (2014). Sampling in interview-based qualitative research: A theoretical and practical guide. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 11*, 25–41. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.801543>.
- Samuel, R. D., Tenenbaum, G., & Bar-Meher, H. G. (2016). The Olympic Games as a career change-event: Israeli athletes' and coaches' perceptions of London 2012. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 24*, 38–47. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2016.01.003>.
- Schinke, R. J., Stambulova, N. B., Trepanier, D., & Oghene, O. (2015). Psychological support for the Canadian Olympic boxing team in meta-transitions through the national team program. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 13*(1), 74–89. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2014.959982>.
- Sheridan, J., Chamberlain, K., & Dupuis, A. (2011). Timelining: Visualizing experience. *944 Qualitative Research, 11*(5), 552–569. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1468794111413235>.
- Smith, J. A. (2017). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Getting at lived experience. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 12*(3), 303–304. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262622>.
- Smith, B. (2018). Generalizability in qualitative research: Misunderstandings, opportunities and recommendations for the sport and exercise sciences. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 10*, 137–149. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2017.1393221>.
- Smith, J. A. (2011). Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Health Psychology Review, 5*(1), 9–27. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2010.510659>.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2013). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Smith, B., & McGannon, K. R. (2017). Developing rigor in qualitative research: Problems and opportunities within sport and exercise psychology. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 1*–21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2017.1317357>.
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2015). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to methods* (pp. 53–80). (3rd ed.). London, UK: SAGE.
- Stake, R. E. (1978). The case study method in social inquiry. *Educational Researcher, 7*, 5–8.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. London: Sage.
- Thomas, D. R. (2017). Feedback from research participants: Are member checks useful in qualitative research? *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 14*, 23–41. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2016.1219435>.
- Uphill, M. A., & Dray, K. (2013). The thrill of defeat and the agony of victory: Towards an understanding and transformation of athletes' emotional experience. *Reflective Practice, 14*(5), 660–671. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2013.835720>.
- Weigand, S., Cohen, J., & Merenstein, D. (2013). Susceptibility and depression in current and retired student athletes. *Sport Health: A Multidisciplinary Approach, 5*(3), 263–266. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1941738113480464>.
- Williams, T. L. (2017). Exploring narratives of physical activity and disability over time: A novel integrated qualitative methods approach. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2017.09.004>.