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The COVID-19 pandemic and Olympic/Paralympic athletes' developmental challenges and possibilities in times of a global crisis-transition

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ABSTRACT



Our aim in this invited commentary is to stimulate discussion among sport psychology researchers and practitioners regarding the unique developmental challenges and possibilities that Olympic and Paralympic athletes are undergoing during their final – extended year of the Tokyo 2020 quadrenium. We begin the commentary with COVID-19 pandemic (C-19) context setting, proceed with discussing transitional and holistic perspectives on athletes' Olympic/Paralympic journey, outline three potential pathway scenarios and “C-19 as a possibility-provider” coping (meta-) scenario for Olympic/Paralympic athletes, and finalise our commentary with a summary of messages intended to invite further discussion and collaboration.

KEYWORDS

Career pathways; Crisis; Olympic/Paralympic aspirants; Tokyo 2020

The *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* (IJSEP) co-editors have featured three parallel editorials focused on Olympians/Paralympians (Schinke, Papaioannou, Henriksen, et al., 2020), professional athletes (Schinke, Papaioannou, Maher, et al., 2020), and physical activity participants (Papaioannou et al., 2020) in relation to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (C-19).¹ The first of these editorials (Schinke, Papaioannou, Henriksen et al., 2020) was conceived during March-April of 2020, and targeted Olympians/Paralympians' challenges and short-term strategies, a recurring topic in the IJSEP (e.g., Terry & Si, 2015 and Schinke & Papaioannou, 2020). The mental health of Olympic/Paralympic athletes has also been the launching point of a multi-societal think tank series, led by the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP; Henriksen et al., 2020).

To continue discussing how C-19 influences Olympic/Paralympic athletes' current career situations and developments, this invited commentary is comprised of four co-authors with experience as career transition scholars and practitioners. We, the co-authors, seek to stimulate discussion among sport psychology researchers and

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practitioners² (SPPs) regarding the unique developmental challenges and possibilities that Olympic and Paralympic athletes and people in other roles (e.g., coaches, SPPs) are undergoing during their final – extended year of the Tokyo 2020³ quadrennium. Although we acknowledge that people in other roles (e.g., coaches) also aspire to attend and participate in the Olympics/Paralympics, our focus in this commentary is on athletes. We begin the commentary with C-19 context setting, proceed with discussing transitional and holistic perspectives on athletes' Olympic/Paralympic journey and potential pathway and coping scenarios, and finalise our commentary with a summary of messages intended to invite further discussion and collaboration.

Context setting: how C-19 might affect athletes' career developments

C-19 spread dramatically during the months of 2020; the whole world has entered an abrupt transition from daily life as we knew it to one where people are masked, social distanced, in (semi) quarantine, cautious, and weary. Efforts have been made locally, nationally, internationally to cope with C-19 using scientific, common-sense, and trial-and-error type strategies. Despite societal efforts, there remain insufficient resources to cope with C-19, and the aforementioned transition has become a global crisis embracing health care systems, economies, politics, and social movements. Sports and the Olympic/Paralympic movement are also affected influencing the athletes' lives and athletic careers.

From a developmental perspective, C-19 can be seen as a *career/transition barrier* that interferes with sport participants' striving for career excellence. *Career excellence* is a new term introduced in the recent update of the ISSP Position Stand on Athletes' Career Development and Transitions (Stambulova et al., 2020), and it is defined as “an athlete's ability to sustain a healthy, successful, and long-lasting career in sport and life” and seen not as “a destination to reach, but more a journey to, or process of, striving for it, in which athletes might need support” (p. 14). Within the definition above, *healthy* means athletes' high resourcefulness and adaptability by coping with career demands and barriers while adding to the individual's resources. *Successful* refers to athletes' striving to achieve meaningful athletic and non-athletic goals while maintaining health and wellbeing. *Long-lasting* implies sustainability and longevity in their careers. Hence, striving for athletic success (e.g., as measured by sporting performance) is part of (life) career excellence.

C-19 is unique as a career development barrier and has specific features:

- C-19 is an *unanticipated barrier*, and therefore neither sport participants nor their support providers could be prepared with proper resources and strategies keeping in mind the globality of the current pandemic compared to the 2002–2004 Bird Flu or the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreaks, both having affected populations in only some parts of the world;
- C-19 is a *shared barrier*, thus, all sport participants regardless of their level and country, are affected by it although some local conditions and specific challenges might differ depending on medical, sociocultural and sporting contexts;
- Globally, there is a lack of experience in dealing with C-19, and there is *uncertainty* about when the virus' spread will be inhibited or stopped, and how C-19 will develop further;

- C-19 has *external* (e.g., quarantine restrictions, ceasing events, social isolation, economic difficulties) and *internal parts* (e.g., personal reactions, including frustration, fears, depression, helplessness or high determination and motivation to cope with). The external part of C-19 (i.e., related local, national and international regulations) is not under sport participants' or support providers' (e.g., coach or medical doctor) control. Awareness, acceptance, and adjustment are needed, and many SPPs are seeking to suggest ways in which athletes can cope with C-19 challenges (e.g., social isolation, re-scheduling career plans). The internal part of C-19 career barrier (e.g., motivation, goal setting, developing competencies) is more controllable, which is where SPPs can help;
- C-19 brings *a possibility of serious illness* that, even if a person survives, requires extensive yet unknown recovery. Should an athlete be infected, she/he enters a new transition with COVID-19¹ as a demand to cope with, and its consequences for elite sport involvement can be difficult to foresee. To decrease a risk of COVID-19 spread, athletes, coaches, and other stakeholders need to take social responsibility to care for themselves and for others (especially in team sports and centralised training environments);
- C-19 has *a double nature* as does any developmental barrier; it is hard, unpleasant and challenging, but if sport participants cope successfully they will become increasingly resourceful and ready to meet new challenges in their sport and non-sport life.

From the *holistic developmental perspective* (Wylleman, 2019a; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), C-19 appears to be a powerful career development barrier producing changes in sport participants' *athletic* development (e.g., closed sport facilities, cancelled competitions, uncertain schedules), as well as *psychological* (e.g., compromised athletic identity), *psychosocial* (social isolation, worries about significant others), *academic-vocational* (possibility to focus more on education or work but these areas are also affected by C-19 and require adjustment energy and efforts), *financial* (e.g., reduction in funding), and *legal* (e.g., restrictions in international travelling, uncertainty about doping control procedures) developments. Some sport participants have appeared resourceful enough to cope or were/are able to quickly develop resources (e.g., creatively reorganised their lifestyles and training), but some have experienced crisis (with a lack of resources and ineffective coping strategies) and need(ed) professional support. What adds to athletes' difficulties to cope is that coaches, support staff, and sport organisations (from local clubs to national and international sport governing bodies) are also challenged by C-19 and have to reorganise their work (e.g., on-line coaching, tournaments with participants performing parallel in different parts of the world).

C-19 creates an especially difficult situation for Olympians/Paralympians keeping in mind postponement of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games and lingering uncertainty about whether the Games will be held in 2021. Within this commentary we focus on current challenges and possibilities of Olympic/Paralympic aspirants, meaning athletes who have qualified or are still underway in their qualification/selection for participation in Tokyo 2020.

Transitional and holistic perspective on Olympic/Paralympic Games journey

Within the athlete career (sport psychology) literature Olympic/Paralympic Games are considered as a *career change event* (Samuel et al., 2016) and as a *multi-phase transition process*

(Stambulova et al., 2012; Wylleman et al., 2012) with several *meta-transitions* (i.e., transitions within a bigger transition) between the phases (Schinke et al., 2015). In the recent multi-societal consensus statement (Henriksen et al., 2020) on the Olympic/Paralympic quadrennium and athletes' mental health, the authors outlined a "normative" Olympic/Paralympic cycle with related opportunities and challenges, changes in sport environment, and relevant changes in coordinating efforts of the support providers across the *Pre-Games phase* (with early and late preparation sub-phases), the *During-Games phase*, and the *Post-Games phase*. Recommendations to various stakeholders on how to support a healthy quadrennium are suggested based on the authors' experiences working with athletes. When the consensus statement was written C-19 was not foreseeable. Now the "normative" Olympic/Paralympic cycle is disrupted by C-19, and adjustments should be made keeping the athletes' well-being and mental health in mind. With C-19 as a powerful transition barrier, a combination of *whole person* (Wylleman, 2019; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), *whole career* (Stambulova et al., 2020; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014), and *whole environment* (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017) perspectives can be a key in supporting Olympic and Paralympic athletes. The *whole person* perspective is used to frame an Olympic/Paralympic aspirant as a person who is doing sport, seeking to take part at the Olympic/Paralympic Games, and has various non-sport pursuits. The *whole career* perspective means helping the athletes to bridge their past experiences, current issues, and anticipated future. The *whole environment* perspective implies to go beyond the athletes' interactions with their micro-environment's significant others (e.g., coaches, teammates, experts, family) to also embrace influences of the macro-environment's stakeholders (e.g., media, national and international sport and non-sport governing bodies).

Each phase of the Olympic/Paralympic cycle brings specific demands that necessitate coping processes. Within Stambulova's athletic career transition model (2003, 2017), the author explained the transition process through the interplay between: the transition demands (i.e., what athletes want/ought to achieve going through the transition), resources and barriers (i.e., internal and external factors facilitating or debilitating coping), and coping strategies (i.e., what athletes do to proceed through the transition). Transitional persons appraise demands and barriers (typically as challenges) in relation to their resourcefulness and select coping strategies accordingly, based on using their strong points and compensating for the weaker points. The implementation of coping strategies leads to the primary transition outcomes: a *successful* or *crisis-transition*. A successful transition is an outcome of effective coping, with a good match between the transition demands and one's resources (*the most favourable transition pathway*). A crisis-transition is the outcome of ineffective coping (by low resources, and ineffective coping strategies) and creates a need for professional intervention. Based on studying various types of crises during the athletic career, a set of relevant symptoms were identified, including a *decrease in self-esteem, lasting emotional discomfort, increased sensitivity to mistakes and failures, increased number of internal barriers* such as low self-efficacy, and *disorientation in decision making and behaviour* (Stambulova, 2003). The symptoms above are usually subclinical (i.e., do not yet meet criteria for clinical diagnosis, but manifest it in latent characteristics) and signal that an athlete needs interventional support (from an educational SPP or a clinical psychologist). Further, the crisis might have two secondary outcomes: *an unsuccessful transition* (*the unfavourable transition pathway*) associated with premature athletic dropout, or

negative consequences such as seriously compromised mental health (with clinical treatment needed), or a *delayed successful transition* facilitated by effective intervention, meaning *the favourable transition pathway*. Therefore, a crisis is a critical moment in the transition process, where helping athletes to avoid the unfavourable pathway can turn the process toward a better outcome and personal growth (see Cosh et al., 2020; Schinke et al., 2018; Stambulova, 2017). We now refer to potential pathway scenarios in relation to the current circumstance of C-19.

Potential scenarios for Olympic/Paralympic athletes

At the time of writing this Commentary, there is only one year left before the postponed Olympic Games Tokyo 2020. Olympic/Paralympic candidates should be in the final (late and intense preparation) phase of their quadrennium. Uncertainty with the Tokyo 2020 continues, and SPPs should be *proactive* in helping athletes to navigate their career paths. When things are uncertain, we might try to structure the uncertainty by suggesting potential scenarios athletes might consider and adopt.

Drawing upon Stambulova's (2011) mobilisation model of counselling athletes in crisis-transitions, a crisis is metaphorically defined as "being at a cross-road" with a minimum of three alternatives: "rejection", "acceptance", and "fighting". *Rejection* implies attempts at getting away from the traumatic situation, perhaps by dropping out of the activity; *acceptance* implies staying in the situation but modifying one's personal reaction to it and re-focusing; and *fighting* implies trying to radically change the situation to the better (see more in Stambulova, 2011). Applying these alternatives to the C-19 affected situation, we identify *three pathway scenarios* that Olympians/Paralympians might consider. These scenarios are general, and each might imply many individual and context-specific variations /hybrids and ways of coping.

Scenario one: "It is a good time for me to retire now"

Scenario one is a "rejection"- type scenario that might be suitable for many, especially, the late career athletes, who were on the Olympic/Paralympic podium before and now for different reasons (e.g., health problems, decreased motivation, non-athletic life pressures and possibilities), do not want to face all the uncertainties associated with Tokyo 2020. SPPs might anticipate that the first reaction of athletes to this scenario might be denial, and time will be needed to make a retirement decision and consider the challenges and possibilities it brings (e.g., Park et al., 2012). This process will go easier for those who planned retirement after Tokyo 2020, and thus already have clear ideas/plans of what to do in their post-athletic career (e.g., Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2020; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014). Challenges associated with scenario one might include but are not limited to: shifting a career path to non-athletic life (e.g., education, vocational occupation, family); social re-positioning (within micro- and macro-environment); dealing with the self-identity change (making non-athletic identities more salient); reorganising lifestyle (e.g., maintaining physical shape through exercising), all complemented by dealing with various uncertainties that C-19 brought to education and the job market. By coping with these challenges, athletes open a new page in their striving for (life) career excellence using resources they developed in sport.

Scenario two: “I can take a pause and strategically prepare for the next Olympic/ Paralympic Games”

Scenario two is an “acceptance”- type scenario that might be the most suitable for early/ mid-career athletes, who still have time ahead in their athletic pursuits (i.e., 2024 Olympic/ Paralympic Games), but currently do not feel resourceful enough to cope with the Tokyo preparation demands complicated by C-19. SPPs might anticipate that the decision to postpone the Olympic/Paralympic dream will be difficult for aspirants, especially if various stakeholders rely on their participation. Challenges in this scenario might include but are not limited to: changing athletic preparation plans and negotiating these changes with relevant stakeholders; dealing with a compromised athletic identity; planning how to use the Olympic/Paralympic “pause” for developing resources (e.g., competencies, social and professional connections) to be better prepared for the next Olympics/Paralympics and other life challenges. The advantages of scenario two relate to no-rush strategic preparation for the next Games, allowing more space for a non-athletic part of a dual career (e.g., studies), and possibilities to learn from other’s experiences, including aspects of scenario three.

Scenario three: “C-19 won’t stop me to prepare for Tokyo 2020”

Scenario three is a “fighting”- type scenario, possibly suitable for experienced and highly resourceful athletes in their mid or late careers. A majority of Olympic and Paralympic athletes might want to adopt this scenario, but for some it will be too risky considering potential negative consequences for mental health and career progression (if not coped with). Therefore, SPPs might discuss with athletes the degree of risk, and to assist the clients in making a conscious and responsible decision. Challenges in this scenario include but are not limited to: monitoring the situation with Tokyo 2020 and making relevant adjustments in plans and training/recovery routines; adapting to unusual training conditions, competitions’ atmosphere, short-term schedules; creatively developing solutions to deal with social isolation and getting access to professional and social support. Following scenario three brings the athletes, regardless of whether they undergo Tokyo 2020 Games, a potential opportunity to represent their countries, and possibilities for self-testing, strengthening a role model position for athletes and fans, and becoming more resourceful in their striving for career excellence.

When communicating these potential pathway scenarios to the athletes, SPPs have to be neutral and patient in order to give their clients an opportunity to make their own decisions based not only on their wishes but also appraisals of their circumstances (e.g., external pressures, obligations). There also can be hybrid-scenarios with shifts from one scenario to another. Currently it is possible to expect that many Olympic/Paralympic athletes initially will prefer scenario three but then might have to shift to either scenario two (e.g., being injured or in a broader sense not being resourceful enough to “fight”) or scenario one (e.g., because of pressing circumstances or tempting possibilities in non-athletic life). Another potential hybrid is proceeding from scenario two either to scenario three (e.g., if the athlete’s situation radically changes to the better) or scenario one (e.g., if the non-athletic life brings new tempting possibilities). These potential pathways scenarios can be complemented by a coping (meta-) scenario we term “C-19 as an opportunity-provider”. It is a meta-scenario because

it permeates all the pathways scenarios by means of athletes' and support providers' focus on C-19 developmental possibilities rather than limitations. In career development there are no purely negative or positive experiences. We mean that what is perceived as a barrier in a short-term might turn into added resourcefulness in the long-term.

Take home messages

To conclude, we provide several statements/recommendations for our readers to consider and adjust in regard to their clients, conditions, and contexts. We also hope that our messages will stimulate relevant discussions and various stakeholders' collaboration in our field.

1. One key contemporary task for SPPs is helping athletes to strive for career excellence despite C-19, which disrupted the current Olympic/Paralympic quadrennium. SPPs should help the Olympic/Paralympic athletes to be *proactive* by monitoring the situation with the Tokyo-Games, making relevant adjustments and optimising their reactions (e.g., helping them to appraise coping with C-19 career development barrier as resilience and creativity training; e.g., Williams, 2010) and by discussing potential career pathway and coping scenarios, if needed.
2. Supporting Olympic/Paralympic athletes necessitates performance enhancing strategies and developmental approaches. A candid and comprehensive exploration into potential career pathway and coping scenarios might be useful to navigate counselling processes keeping in mind *whole person*, *whole career* and *whole environment* perspectives (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Stambulova et al., 2020; Wylleman, 2019; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The aforementioned approaches can reinforce and augment Olympic/Paralympic athletes' mental wellbeing.
3. Each athlete's identity is multidimensional with athletic identity (often) being dominant but also co-existing and intersecting with other identity dimensions. Among the three potential pathway scenarios communicated above, scenario one (i.e., athletic retirement) requires SPPs' focus on centralising the client's non-athletic identities (e.g., student, employee, parent, activist), while working with scenario two (i.e., strategic preparation for the 2024 Olympics/Paralympics) and especially with scenario three (i.e., preparing for Tokyo 2020), athletic identity should be centralised because it is an important internal resource in athletes' striving for their Olympic/Paralympic dream (but also a part of risk taking in the case of involuntary career termination).
4. Olympic/Paralympic athletes' conditions under C-19 are partly similar and partly different depending on the environmental, medical, sociocultural and sporting contexts they reside in. Shared circumstances include quadrennium uncertainty, whereas responses to uncertainty will differ by nation (e.g., depending on the previous pandemic experiences) and within each nation (e.g., by social class), and by sport subculture (e.g., individual and team sports). Therefore, SPPs are recommended to adhere to the principles of *context-driven practice* through cultural reflexivity as opposed to adopting culture-and-context-blind approaches (e.g., Stambulova & Schinke, 2017). Hence, SPPs should seek to strengthen their skills as cultural insiders to better reflect upon challenges posed by personal background and role as a practitioner in relation to the client's unique non-normative processes within the quadrennium (see more in Schinke & Stambulova, 2017).

5. Potential resources for the SPPs interested in implementing the developmental perspective include theoretical and applied frameworks and strategies. Although not developed for C-19, some theoretical frameworks can accommodate the client's situation from different perspectives, while applied frameworks and strategies might add to the SPP's professional tools. Among the *theoretical frameworks*, we recommend consideration of the following: the holistic athletic career model (Wylleman, 2019), the athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003), the athletic talent development environment model (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017), the scheme of change for sport psychology practice (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011), and the integrated career change and transition framework (Samuel et al., 2020; Stambulova & Samuel, 2020). Useful *applied frameworks and strategies* include, but are not limited to: mindfulness-acceptance-commitment therapy (e.g., Moore, 2012), "values compass" approach (Henriksen, 2019), existential psychology approaches (e.g., Nesti & Ronkainen, 2020), creating positive narrative resources about successful coping with C-19 barrier (e.g., Carless & Douglass, 2008), life skills development approaches (e.g., Lavalley, 2005), the "sport census" tool (Lavalley et al., 2020), the mobilisation model of counselling athletes in crisis-transitions (Stambulova, 2011), and the five-step career planning strategy (Stambulova, 2010).
6. Intra- and interdisciplinary collaboration between experts in Olympic/Paralympic support teams (e.g., SPPs, mental health experts, nutritionists, medical staff) is a key condition for coordinated efforts in helping athletes to deal with C-19 (Henriksen et al., 2020; Wylleman, 2019b). The integration of each aspirant's support network will facilitate consistent messages across supporters, all providing healthy reinforcement in the performer's career journey and striving for career excellence. We invite the readers to continue discussions on C-19 challenges and possibilities and work together to support sport stakeholders in times of a global crisis-transition.

Notes

1. Following the definitions of the World Health Organization (2020) we distinguish between COVID-19 as a disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and COVID-19 pandemic as a global crisis-transition caused by the virus spreading worldwide. In this commentary C-19 means COVID-19 pandemic and COVID-19 means disease.
2. There are many terms used worldwide to designate practitioners working with athletes on various psychological issues (e.g., mental performance consultants, mental coaches, sport psychology consultants, sport psychologists, etc.). Acknowledging this diversity, in this commentary we will refer to all these experts as sport psychology practitioners (SPPs).
3. Tokyo 2020 is still an official name of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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