



## Dual career (DC) experiences of Korean elite judokas before and at university

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### ABSTRACT

The present study aims to explore the experiences of Korean elite judokas in managing dual career (DC) during: (a) pre-university years, (b) at the university, and (c) in preparation for the transition to the post-university life. We adopted an intrinsic case study design to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Korean elite judokas at a university. We aimed to explore a particular case in depth, focusing on the experiences of the individuals involved. Purposive sampling was applied to 12 DC athletes (seven male; five female) who are elite judokas and were in year 4 of university study at the time of the data collection. They studied at the same South Korean university and competed at an international level. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and thematic analysis was applied. The analysis identified four main themes: (a) DC path of prioritising sport and maintaining education, (b) Increasing sport demands and their impact on athletes' DCs, (c) Specific career development barriers of Korean judokas, (d) Coping resources and strategies and support in need. The study discusses the unique challenges and barriers as well as coping strategies of Korean judoka based on the Athletic Career Transition model, highlighting the importance of sociocultural context in their experiences.

Judo emphasises individual development and community building. While often considered an individual sport, judokas train and practice together, promoting camaraderie and mutual support (Lee, 2002). Judo also places a strong emphasis on mental and emotional balance, resilience, and humility, encouraging athletes to focus on their own progress and approach training with a spirit of self-improvement (Kim, Park, Lee, & Kang, 2015). This mindset is important for creating a positive and supportive training environment (Kim & Park, 2021) and upholding the ethical principles of judo, such as respect, honesty, integrity, and compassion (Yard, Knox, Smith, & Comstock, 2007). The International Judo Federation has established a truly global presence, with 200 affiliated countries. Since judo became an Olympic sport, South Korea (hereafter Korea) has attained notable success, securing a total of 49 medals – comprising 11 gold, 18 silver, and 20 bronze (<https://www.ijf.org/country/kor>). The training regimen for Korean national-level judokas is unique, involving centralised training at a specific location.

In Korea, the well-established practice of centralised training and living for elite athletes extends beyond national-level judokas and judo. While this fosters motivation and competition, it also has a darker aspect, with significant issues of abuse and bullying. The case of Choi Suk-hyeon illustrates the tragic consequences of physical and verbal

abuse in sport; despite seeking help from various public institutions and sport organisations, her requests were ignored, and she took her own life (BBC, 2020). In response, a forum was held to find ways to eradicate abuse and violence in elite sport (Kang, 2020), with a focus on addressing the role of coaches in perpetuating such behaviour. Recently, there has been a growing recognition of the abuse perpetrated by coaches, though such issues have historically been overlooked or intentionally concealed (Park, Lim, & Bretherton, 2012). This observation is consistent with David's assertion that "the human rights of young athletes are still a taboo subject for many sports organisations" (David, 2005, p. 5). The critical role of coaches in the success of elite athletes and the essentiality of a positive coach-athlete relationship as a predictor of a flourishing sporting career has been well established in the literature (Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001; Poczwadowski, Barott, & Henschen, 2002). However, the occurrence of tragic incidents in sport involving coaches and athletes has brought attention to the safety and well-being of elite athletes.

Understanding Korea's elite sport development and culture requires acknowledging its education system. Elementary school students are Grades 1–6 and students' average ages range from 7 to 12. Junior high school students are Grades 7–9 and their average ages range from 13 to

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15. High school students are Grades 10–12, and their average ages range from 16 to 18 (Kim & Kim, 2014). Despite Korea's notable success in international academic rankings, the factors behind its students' high-test scores remain obscure. The well-known reputation of *Asians and hard work* has been the main source of explanation for their high levels of productivity, not only in learning, but also in economic development and technology (Paik, 2001). The 1997 Korean financial crisis intensified middle-class insecurity, particularly in education, where prestigious degrees are seen as critical for social mobility and stability (Kim, 2013; Koo, 2007). This has led to not only high enrolment rates across all educational levels but also a substantial expansion of the private education sector. In 2008, 83.8 % of South Korea's high school graduates pursued higher education, one of the highest rates globally (Park, 2001). By 2021, 69 % of those aged 25–34 had tertiary qualifications, exceeding the 47 % OECD average (OECD, 2022). Thus, it is evident that education is a key cultural aspiration and class indicator in Korea, fostering a competitive society where class is earned through economic and educational achievements, not inheritance (Kim, 2013).

Korean society's enthusiasm for education is matched by the intensity of its elite sport programmes, where athletes, including judokas, engage in extensive training during their secondary school years, often in specialised, boot-camp-like centres (Park, Lim, & Bretherton, 2012). In Korea, student-athletes often prioritise sport over academics, leading to missed classes and potential educational issues in a society that values educational achievement. The government's focus on international sport success over academic progression contributes to these challenges, leaving athletes with limited time for study (Park, Lim, & Bretherton, 2012). The 1972 Athletic Specialist System (ASS) in Korea awarded scholarships to student-athletes for top-tier schools and universities, often irrespective of academic performance (Park, Lim, & Bretherton, 2012). This system prioritised sport over academics and challenged the notion that Korean society places the highest value on higher education (Shin & Nam, 2004). Significant parental investment in children's sport careers further supports this trend (Hong & Yu, 2007).

Similarly, high school teachers and coaches are motivated to promote their schools' reputation through sport, intensifying the emphasis on sport over education (Park, Lim, & Bretherton, 2012). The establishment of the ASS is also a significant event, but it is not the only one. The 1966 investment in national sport infrastructure culminated in the Tae Neung (now Jin Cheon) Athletics Village, a national training centre. This centre significantly contributed to the enhancement of elite athlete training, professional coaching, and the institution of welfare programmes including a lifelong pension system (renamed Performance Enhancing Research Pension), which provides pension for medal winners in international sporting competitions (Park, Lim, & Bretherton, 2012). Sang-Mu, the Armed Forces Athletic Corps, was established two years after the establishment of the Ministry of Sport in 1984 and played a crucial role in the development of elite sport. It allowed athletes from 25 sport disciplines to undertake full-time training during their mandatory two-year military service. The 1973 policy exempting Olympic and Asian Games medallists from military service has been also critical in shaping the professional trajectories of Korea's male elite athletes (Park, Lim, & Bretherton, 2012).

The focus on athletes' dual career (DC) and within-transitions has gained prominence, becoming a key subject for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, especially in Europe (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Guidotti, Cortis, and Capranica (2015) reviewed DC research in English from Europe (2007–2014), coinciding with the introduction of the DC concept in the White Paper on Sport (European Commission, 2007). Later, Stambulova and Wylleman (2019) critically analysed 42 European DC studies published in English between 2015 and 2018, integrating DC research into the athlete career sport psychology dialogue and European discourse. The researchers identified three major periods in athletes' DC path: (a) the transition to upper secondary education around age 15–16, (b) moving from school to university with continued DC, and (c) post-graduation decisions

between sport continuation or retirement and a post-sport career (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Global research on athlete career development, including DC pathways, has predominantly focused on European, North American, and Australian contexts (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009). There has been an emerging demand for research within varied sociocultural contexts to comprehend the environmental factors affecting athlete transitions (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Stambulova et al., 2009). While some work has been done in Asia and Africa (Park et al., 2013), studies on DC athletes are still limited. Park, Tod, and Lavallee (2012) studied Korean elite tennis players' retirement choices, not specifically DC experiences. Thus, this study appears to be the first focusing on Korean elite athletes' DC within career transitions.

DC athletes face significant challenges and stressors in sport and education, particularly during transitions (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). In this context, this study applies the Athletic Career Transition model (Stambulova, 2003) to explore the challenges Korean judokas face, their coping strategies, and their transition needs. The model explains the transition process through interactions among various components. It defines transitions process as managing demands or challenges with appropriate coping strategies, considering personal and environmental resources and barriers. Outcomes and pathways depend on coping effectiveness. The model predicts two primary transition outcomes: a successful transition and a crisis-transition. A successful transition is the outcome of effective coping, with a good balance between transition demands on the one side and the athlete's coping resources and strategies on the other (the most favourable pathway). A crisis-transition is the outcome of ineffective coping, which can be caused by any of the following: lack of resources, excessive barriers, and ineffective coping strategies. A crisis-transition may lead to either a *delayed* success through effective intervention (a favourable pathway) or an unsuccessful outcome marked by dropout, overtraining, or substance abuse due to unmet demands (an unfavourable pathway). The model details interventions for crisis prevention, coping, and mitigating negative consequences. It is considered beneficial for examining Korean judokas' DC experiences and documenting their within-transition experiences and requirements for success (Stambulova, 2003).

Building on the identified gaps in the literature and guided by the Athletic Career Transition model (Stambulova, 2003), the present study aims to explore the experiences of Korean elite judokas in managing DC during: (a) pre-university years, (b) at the university, and (c) in preparation for the transition to the post-university life. The research questions are as follows: (a) how do Korean elite judokas manage DC? (b) what challenges and barriers do they experience? (c) what coping strategies do they use to navigate challenges and barriers? and (d) what support do they require in preparation for life after graduation? *Pre-university years* refers to the period when athletes trained intensively at secondary schools with specialised centres and boot-camp-style accommodations (e.g., athlete-only dormitories), where their elite status allowed them to focus on sport over education. *At the university* refers to their time at university, with a similar environment to secondary schools and admissions influenced by the ASS (e.g., sports-based scholarships). Lastly, *in preparation for the transition to the post-university life* involves judokas planning for life after graduation and their future careers. These three periods in athletes' DC path have been under-researched and warrant further investigation. In addition, this study offers a case study on the topic of DC in a Korean context, which is a research area that has received relatively little attention in the field of sport psychology.

## 1. Methodology

### 1.1. Design

In this study, we employed an intrinsic case study design to examine the experiences of Korean judokas in managing DC (Stake, 2005). This method allowed us to thoroughly investigate a specific case, focusing on

the personal experiences of the individuals involved. In line with the purpose and research questions of this research, our research utilises a qualitative approach, drawing on the Athletic Career Transition model (Stambulova, 2003) to shape both the development of our interview guide and the interpretation of our findings. This study adopts a realist ontology, acknowledging the tangible aspects of athletes' experiences with DC, which can be observed and analysed. It also embraces a post-positivist epistemology, recognising that while our findings are based on empirical evidence, they are provisional and open to further investigation and refinement (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Ronkainen, Kavoura, & Ryba, 2016). This methodology maintains a balance between structured inquiry and adaptability in understanding the experiences of Korean judokas in managing their DC.

### 1.2. The case

A case study is a methodological approach used to capture the in-depth nuances of a specific scenario or group (Yin, 2009). As outlined by Hodge and Sharp (2016), the research phenomenon of interest in a case study is typically confined by being: (a) specific to a defined group or entity, (b) associated with a particular location or place, and (c) limited to a defined timeframe. In the context of our study, we focused on the experiences of Korean elite judokas attending a university known for specialising in elite sport. While our study was designed before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection was conducted during the pandemic, which had implications on their transitional challenges for preparing for their post-university life.

The lead author had trained as a judoka for five years in Korea when she was in primary school and joined elite judo training until she quit and decided to focus on academic commitments from secondary school. She won medals at regional competitions during the time. Her PhD project centred on sport career transitions, including DC pathways, and she has undertaken several related research projects at a U.K. university where a number of DC athletes attend. The co-author is a former Korean elite judoka at the international level and has been a DC athlete throughout his education until he completed his Masters' degree. He completed his PhD focusing on coaching in judo after he retired from competitive judo. Based on their background, they both have comprehensive knowledge and understanding of both judo and DC.

### 1.3. Participants

We recruited 12 participants for our study, consisting of seven males and five females who were all in their fourth year of university. These participants were elite judokas who had competed internationally and were all attending the same university in South Korea. Their university is a sport-friendly university (Morris et al., 2021) that is recognised for its strong commitment to sport, offering a supportive environment where top-tier elite athletes are welcome and provided with customised educational support to help them achieve success both in the classroom and on the playing field. At the time of data collection, the participants' ages ranged from 21 to 22 years old, with a mean age of 21.92 ( $SD = 0.28$ ). They had been participating in judo for a range of six to 14 years, with a mean of 9.08 years ( $SD = 2.02$ ). For all participants, their elite career path began in either primary (ages seven – 12) or junior high school (ages 13–15). Additional participant information is provided in Table 1.

### 1.4. Data collection

After obtaining institutional ethical approval, the second author's contacts were used to recruit a purposive sample. Snowball sampling was then employed with the help of the participants (Noy, 2008). Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the lead author via on-line video calls using Microsoft Teams. Although the interviews were semi-structured, they were also flexible, allowing participants to share

**Table 1**  
Participant information.

Codes	Gender	Age	Sporting Career length	Dual Careers since	Sport high school* attendance	Plans after university
DCA 1	Female	22	10	Primary school	No	Professional team (confirmed)
DCA 2	Female	21	6	Junior high school*	No	Professional team (confirmed) & national team
DCA 3	Female	22	10	Primary school	Yes	Professional team (not confirmed)
DCA 4	Female	22	9	Primary school	Yes	Professional team (confirmed)
DCA 5	Female	22	7	Junior high school	No	Professional team (not confirmed) & national team
DCA 6	Male	22	9	Primary school	Yes	Professional team (not confirmed) or Military services
DCA 7	Male	22	9	Primary school	Yes	Professional team (not confirmed) or Military services
DCA 8	Male	22	8	Junior high school	No	Professional team (not confirmed) or Military services
DCA 9	Male	22	11	Primary school	No	Professional team (confirmed)
DCA 10	Male	22	14	Primary school	No	Professional team (not confirmed) or Military services
DCA 11	Male	22	9	Primary school	No	Professional team (not confirmed) or Military services
DCA 12	Male	22	7	Junior high school	No	Professional team (not confirmed)

experiences that they deemed meaningful but were not covered by the interview guide (McArdle, McGale, & Gaffney, 2012). To ensure consistency across interviews, an interview guide was developed based on the Athletic Career Transition model (Stambulova, 2003) and the research questions: (a) sport background (i.e., at what point in your life did you start your career in elite judo and what motivated you to pursue a career in elite judo?), (b) DC experiences during pre-university years (i.e., how did you manage DC? what challenges and barriers did you face managing DC, and how did you cope with them?) (c) DC experiences at a university (i.e., how did you manage DC? what challenges and barriers did you face managing DC, and how did you cope with them?), and (d) preparation for the transition to the post-university life (i.e., as you prepare for graduation, how have you prepared for your future career pathway? what challenges and barriers have you identified when making decisions? what support do you require for better preparation for life after graduation?).

Prior to participating in the study, participants received an information sheet detailing its aims, methods, and risks and benefits. Upon agreeing, they signed a consent form. Interviews were scheduled after

receiving the forms. This procedure ensured participants were well-informed and affirmed our adherence to ethical research standards, such as informed consent and participant autonomy. The interviews lasted between 43 and 77 min ( $M = 59.17$ ,  $SD = 9.26$ ), and data collection took place from November to December 2021, with the participants scheduled to graduate from university in February 2022. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and were audio and video-recorded, with a voice recorder used as a backup. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, participants' names were replaced with codes (e.g., DCA [Dual Career Athletes] 1, 2, 3, etc.; see Table 1).

### 1.5. Data analysis and rigor

We employed a thematic analysis following a structured and systematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019), familiarising ourselves with the data through repeated review and initial coding to identify and develop themes. These themes were guided by discrete aspects (i.e., challenges and demands, coping resources, and support) from the Athletic Career Transition model (Stambulova, 2003) and research questions. With an emphasis on coding reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2019), both authors were actively engaged in coding process to ensure consistency aiming for reliable and accurate coding. To achieved this, the authors had four separate meetings via video or phone calls to discuss the identified and developed themes. These discussions facilitated the finalisation of themes and consensus on their identification. For each theme and sub-theme, the authors ensured that findings from three specific periods were comprehensively captured. We also reviewed every phase of the data analysis, from initial coding to theme development, during collaborative meetings to ensure accurate coding aligned with our research questions and theoretical model (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Both authors independently analysed the data and then cross-reviewed each other's work, serving as critical friends to ensure analytical rigor and consistency (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

## 2. Results

To address our research questions, four themes were identified: (a) DC path of prioritising sport and maintaining education, (b) Increasing sport demands and their impact on athletes' DCs, (c) Specific career development barriers of Korean judokas, (d) Coping resources and strategies and support in need.

### 2.1. DC path of prioritising sport and maintaining education

All participants clearly prioritise sport across the three periods. This is unsurprising given the intense nature of elite sport in Korea where sporting success is exclusively emphasised for those on an elite sport pathway. Sport-friendly schools and universities also provide academic flexibility to support their sporting achievement. Since the participants gained admission to universities based solely on their performance records (e.g., medals at major competitions both nationally and internationally), they could naturally decide to prioritise sport. Due to their drive for sporting success, they sometimes over trained, leading to injuries: "I once had to have an operation due to an injury from excessively training, trying to outdo a friend who was my rival" (DCA7). Beyond the given training demands, some judokas (DCAs 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, and 9) emphasised that upon progressing to university, they also undertook personal training outside of their regular team sessions. This additional training was motivated by their desire to significantly advance in their sport.

After training was all finished, I would rest for a bit and then go out again for personal training. I felt that this was the only way to improve bit by bit. I felt that both my body and my technique became

stronger, so even though it was hard, I think I always tried to make sure I did my personal training (DCA1).

However, it led to them spending more time training, often at the expense of other aspects of life, such as studying. While prioritising sport, the participants tended to *maintain* education across the three periods instead of actively advancing in their studies, as they did in sport. As noted earlier, in the Korean context, since they were able to transition from secondary schools to universities, by simply meeting the minimum attendance requirements. As a result, they felt no need to study as hard as their peers who were not elite athletes. Some judokas (DCAs 1, 4, 6, and 11) mentioned that they initially balanced judo training and studies during the early stages of their elite athletic careers in junior high school, primarily due to parental advice. However, they found it challenging to maintain this balance due to increasing training demands.

While I was training as an elite athlete during junior high school, I also had to study hard. My dad always emphasised that I had to study hard to be successful. But as the training demands increased, I found it hard to keep up with my studies (DCA 11).

DCA11's narratives highlight the culture of *hard work* emphasised by parents for success, with education being seen as a cultural aspiration for success. Due to the academic flexibility and special arrangements for university admissions they enjoyed in high school, they did not feel the need to put extra effort into achieving high grades on assignments and exams. As they transitioned from secondary school to university, they found the university environment similar in this regard. As a result, they continued to prioritise sport while maintaining education.

However, during the period of preparing for life after university, many judokas (DCAs 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, and 12) started putting more effort into their studies to develop a backup plan. They had acquired teaching qualifications as a backup plan during their time at university, which enables them to work as physical education teachers at secondary schools. Despite not being entirely enthusiastic about attending lectures and achieving high grades, they completed the course to obtain required qualifications. This course is usually open to elite athletes with national and international medals.

### 2.2. Increasing sport demands and their impact on athletes' DCs

The participants in the study consistently identified training demands as a significant challenge during their secondary school and university years. Once identified as talented sportspersons, managing the increased training demands became challenging as they progressed in their careers and transitioned to the next level of education. All participants discussed their struggles with these heightened training demands during their secondary school years. One participant, DCA1, expressed, "I wanted to run away because of the extreme training demands ... I just couldn't keep up." Similarly, DCA9 noted, "I thought of running away, but had to keep training as I didn't want to disappoint my parents and brother who is a good athlete." At secondary schools, the participants trained and competed with their school judo teams. Many of these schools provided training accommodation for elite athletes, which can be referred to specialised centres with boot-camp-style accommodations. They only attended certain classes (e.g., 9 a.m. to lunchtime or early afternoon) and trained in the afternoon and evening while other normal students attend all classes until late evening in Korea. Due to heavy training demands (morning, afternoon, and evening sessions), participants, unlike their non-athlete peers, often missed classes, slept during them, and struggled to concentrate on studies in secondary school. The training demands also increased significantly at the university level. As they transitioned from adolescents to young adults and from junior to senior levels, they started training with senior judokas who possessed greater experience and superior skills. This intensified training environment and its demands posed challenges for the

participants during their transition to university. However, a notable difference was the increased autonomy and responsibility they had over their training.

When I entered the university, I felt intimidated because there were many older judokas who performed better than I did. With the increase in training volume and intensity, it was challenging to keep up. I frequently questioned whether I should continue or not [...] However, as I adapted, I realised that the good thing is that I'm not just doing what the coach tells me to do. I can take on more training on my own, and the biggest difference compared to when I was in high school is that I have to take more responsibility for my training level (DCA7).

Similar to their experiences in secondary school, they found attending classes and focusing on their studies challenging due to fatigue from intense training. As DCA6 explained, "I tried to study at the beginning of the new semester but often fell asleep as I was too tired to focus on class." Their daily lives were heavily committed to training, and other aspects of life, such as studying, socialising with classmates, and spending time with family, were often neglected. As they approached university completion and prepared for post-graduation life, they adapted to the intense training demands, developing the skills and competencies to manage them. Thus, the training demands were no longer seen as challenging.

### 2.3. Specific career development barriers of Korean judokas

#### 2.3.1. Bullying by senior judokas

Regrettably, all participants in the study reported experiencing some form of bullying by senior judokas during their pre-university years. This can be attributed to Korea's hierarchical culture based on age and position, which is further emphasised when transitioning to the next level of the education system and training as *junior* judokas alongside new senior judokas. The bullying that participants experienced included both verbal (e.g., constant insulting) and physical abuse (e.g., being beaten up, corporal punishment). The severity of the bullying varied across participants, with DCA10 describing his situation as a "living hell" and DCA7 struggling to cope with both increased training demands and bullies. For instance, DCA10 ran away from a training camp and school due to an inability to cope with the rigorous demands of training and persistent bullying from senior judokas and his coach, resulting in feelings of hopelessness. When DCA7 reported the issue to his coaches and parents, he was bullied even more and eventually stopped reporting it. Other participants shared similar concerns, with DCA4 noting, "I was so afraid that if they figured out that I reported this to our coaches or my parents, they would bully me more." Participants acknowledged increased societal awareness and measures against bullying, yet still found it very difficult, sometimes more so than heavy training demands. However, they reported no bullying experiences with senior judokas at university.

#### 2.3.2. Coaches' controlling style and bullying

Many participants (DCAs 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 12) mentioned experiencing bullying by coaches associated with the controlling coaching style during their pre-university years. Athletes tend to be expected to obey whatever the coach instructs due to the Korea's hierarchical culture. In that process, even if the coach treats the athletes unfairly, there are situations where such behaviour is inevitably accepted and ignored. This is due to the fear that opposing or challenging the coach could negatively impact the athlete's future prospects. The hierarchical relationship between judokas and coaches significantly contributed to the judokas feeling powerless against the repetitive verbal and physical abuse. The controlling coaching styles of some coaches also made participants feel anxious and intimidated, as DCA12 explained, "my coach has a very controlling coaching style and was always very strict about everything. I always felt intimidated and uncomfortable ... but I had to

just follow what he asked us to do." The bullying experienced by participants (DCAs 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 12) was frequent, and came from peers, senior judokas, or coaches, intensifying their coping difficulties.

Participants noted that controlling coaching styles were a particular issue at the secondary school level. They did not report any issues related to coaches' controlling style and bullying during their time at the university. In particular, all male athletes in the study appreciated the autonomy and supportive coaching styles of their university coaches, which contrasted with their experiences at secondary school level. It is noteworthy that these athletes attended different secondary schools, suggesting that negative experiences with bullying and controlling coaching styles are not unique to particular secondary schools. It is also worth noting that while male judokas appreciated autonomy and supportive style of coaching at the university, female judokas did not discuss the style of their coaches or relationship with them too much. Instead, female judokas emphasised their experiences with secondary school coaches, highlighting a controlling coaching style. They indicated a lack of support from these coaches, which posed a significant career development barrier. While male judokas mentioned that they communicated with their coaches when they had difficulties at the university, only DCA3 (female) mentioned that she received support from her coach when she was injured in year 4 at the university: "After moving up to the fourth year and getting injured again, it was tough. But I feel like the coach made a lot of efforts to boost my self-esteem." The gender-based coaching dynamics and expectations for male and female judokas could influence their experiences and perceptions. The females' emphasis on secondary school coaching styles may indicate long-term impacts from their earlier formative experiences, possibly influencing their interactions and trust levels with future coaches.

#### 2.3.3. Uncertainty caused by COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the athletic and academic progress of participants in their third university year, a crucial time for securing a post-graduation national or professional team spot. This interruption adversely affected their pre-transition period and career development. Korea's strict pandemic protocols intensified these challenges, with closures of training facilities and severe limitations on contact sport like judo. As a result, participants had to train independently without university resources, increasing their responsibility for their own training and performance. Academically, the shift to online learning during the pandemic brought new challenges. The unfamiliar setting further reduced their study motivation, with concerns about athletic careers adding to their anxiety. Uncertainty about competition resumption and the pandemic's timeline was stressful, and cancellations of key events wore down their drive and disrupted goals. While some judokas endeavoured to maintain fitness, others saw decreased motivation affect their training and subsequent performance upon competition return. These obstacles increased concerns about progressing to higher levels such as national or professional teams. DCA11 expressed the impact of COVID-19 on their athletic career, saying, "I lost motivation and even lost my interest in judo for a while as we didn't have any competitions to work towards. [...] I knew I wasn't ready enough for competitions but felt so much pressure to win a medal before graduation." DCA11 also shared their disappointment with their performance in a competition, saying, "I finished 2nd place in one competition but was very disappointed with my poor performance. I was supposed to finish 1st to be recruited by a professional team for sure."

DCA3 used the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to focus on recovering from injury, but as competitions were postponed, she became anxious about the future. She said,

I was positive at the beginning while other players were so disappointed with the postponement of all competitions at that time. I really wanted to recover from my injury to better perform, but I got injured again ... that's when I experienced a slump as I wasn't sure about my athletic career without any recent medals.

Initially, the DCA3 had a positive outlook despite the postponement of competitions, in contrast to other judokas who were disappointed. However, her optimism was short-lived as she suffered another injury while attempting to recover from the first. This challenge diminished her confidence and fostered uncertainty about her athletic career, particularly with a lack of recent medal-winning performances.

#### 2.3.4. Mandatory military services

In relation to the limited progress in their athletic performance, male judokas (DCAs 6 to 12) faced an additional barrier that heightened their anxiety and stress: mandatory military service. This specific career development barrier becomes increasingly evident during the preparation period for the transition to post-university life. If these male participants did not sign a contract with a professional team immediately after graduation, they were required to complete their military service. Even DCA9, who had already signed a contract at the time of data collection, was still obligated to complete military service at some point in his twenties or early thirties. Those who had not signed a contract by the time of data collection hoped to join Sang-Mu, the Armed Forces Athletic Corps, where they could continue training as judokas and potentially advance their careers. However, joining Sang-Mu is competitive, and they would need a recognised performance record to be considered.

I'm currently waiting for confirmation regarding a contract with the professional team. If it doesn't work out, I'll have to go to the military. I want to apply for Sang-Mu, but the competition is so intense that I'm not sure if that will be possible (DCA6).

As a result, they viewed the pandemic's effects, especially the disrupted competitions, as more severe given the repercussions for their post-graduation career paths.

### 2.4. Coping resources and strategies and support in need

#### 2.4.1. Reliance on individual resilience

The notable internal coping source that the participants relied on across the three periods was their own resilience in managing their DC and transitional challenges. In this respect, the most common coping mechanism used by the participants to manage transitional demands and difficulties was to *just get on with it*. This suggests a reliance on their innate resilience. While many judokas (DCAs 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11 and 12) acknowledged the supportive role of parents and peers, they predominantly leaned on their resilience during transitional challenges. As emphasised in the previous section, the participants demonstrated a strong sense of independence and a determined mindset towards coping with their transitions. Thus, they believed that they had the capacity to recover from difficulties they had. Instead of immediately seeking support when faced with difficulties, their focus was on tackling challenges and continuously improving as athletes to achieve their athletic goals. As DCA7 noted, "I realised that I had to persevere on my own. There was no one who could help me, so I just pushed through it." As a reactive strength, resilience played a critical role in addressing challenges and difficulties, which further strengthened their motivation and drive to achieve their goals.

Such judokas' motivation and commitment to pursuing their goals (e.g., sporting success) are characterised by proactive energy and a focus on achieving established outcomes. It should be noted that they emphasised a desire to manage their difficulties independently, focusing on their goals and maintaining motivation because they wanted to take responsibility for their decisions to become elite athletes. For instance, DCA8 stated, "I had to persevere as I was highly motivated. I aimed to improve and ultimately become the best." DCA5 also shared the view, "No matter how hard it gets, I believe I have to take responsibility for the path I chose. Once I've made a choice, I think it's important to focus on that choice." This determined mindset, present in all participants, helped them better manage the challenges they faced.

#### 2.4.2. Seeking social support

While the participants tended to rely on their own resilience instead of seeking support, their social support systems proved beneficial throughout the three periods. However, they were more inclined to seek support during the *pre-university years* and the *preparation for the transition to the post-university life*, especially regarding issues caused by COVID-19. A half of the participants (DCAs 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, and 12) acknowledged the significance of turning to their parents and family members for support. Despite recognising this, they often hesitated to do so, primarily due to feelings of guilt. They were concerned that sharing their struggles might burden their families or exacerbate their worries. As DCA2 explained,

At first, I confided in my parents about my struggles and problems, but I started to feel guilty for constantly making them worried about me. Therefore, I stopped sharing my negative experiences with them and chose to persevere through the difficulties alone. It was a challenging decision, but I didn't want to burden my family with my struggles.

In relation to peer support, DCAs 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 12 noted that they have developed a good relationship with their peers within their judo teams, which was significant social support sources as they shared their daily lives by living in the same dormitory and training together.

I attended university classes and trained with the same teammates. As we spent so much time together, we could share the difficulties we faced both in studying and training. We were able to help each other, which was comforting. With their support, I believe I was able to overcome tough times (DCA4).

The participants' experiences highlight the diverse role of social support in their lives. The participants often hesitated to approach family with their challenges, out of concern for adding to their worries. However, the bond with teammates provided a valuable source of support, emphasising the importance of peer connections within the athletic environment.

#### 2.4.3. Professional support in need

While all participants planned to pursue a career in professional sport after graduation, half of them (DCAs 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8) emphasised the importance of mentoring and career counselling services. They believe these professional support services would help them explore alternative career options during their university years, thereby better preparing them for life post-graduation. DCA5 expressed the desire to become a police officer but lacked guidance on how to prepare for such a career outside of sport. She considered herself fortunate to join the national team but also acknowledged uncertainty about her future career beyond sport:

I am lucky to join the national team soon, but I still don't know what to do afterwards. I have thought about becoming a police officer as I am not very interested in teaching. It would be great if I had a mentor who is a former athlete in a different profession, such as a police officer, or access to professional career counselling services to learn how to prepare for it.

As previously noted, many participants (DCAs 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, and 12) secured teaching qualifications during their university years, positioning them to take on roles as physical education teachers in secondary schools. Despite having these backup plans, participants still stressed the importance of mentoring or career counselling services to explore interests outside of sport and to better prepare for their post-university life. In addition, for the male athletes obligated to complete military service unless they secured a professional team contract, mentoring could provide valuable guidance in career planning, especially considering the added challenges posed by the mandatory military service.

### 3. Discussion

This paper presents a case study design focused on exploring the experiences of Korean elite judokas in managing DC during: (a) pre-university years, (b) at the university, and (c) in preparation for the transition to the post-university life. This case study aims to generate insights into a unique and unexplored Korean DC context, seeking to bridge significant gaps in the existing literature. First, the post-university transition phase for DC athletes, while crucial, lacks focused research (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Second, examining diverse sociocultural groups is critical to understand environmental impacts on athletes' transitions (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Stambulova et al., 2009). Lastly, the career development and transitions of Korean elite, especially DC athletes, are under-researched. The findings align with the Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003), emphasising resources and strategies that facilitate successful transitions.

The specific findings related to Korean judokas enhance our understanding of the transitions faced by DC athletes in diverse cultural contexts. This goes beyond the existing European-centric studies (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019) and highlights the importance of considering the unique socio-cultural factors influencing athletes' career development and transitions. This study clearly identified that Korean judokas prioritise sport while *just* maintaining their education throughout the three periods. Research has shown that DC athletes have limited time to balance both sport and education, often requiring prioritisation of one over the other or a rebalancing of commitments to meet athletic and academic goals (Stambulova et al., 2009). Korean judokas did not struggle with balancing athletics and academics, often prioritising sport from the start, with minimal school attendance and viewing class as a break from training. Their goal was the elite pathway, offering university access for athletes with basic attendance. Thus, they tended not to devote much time to academic studies while training and competing. This unique cultural phenomenon in Korea can be attributed to the history of elite sport development in the country, which created privileges for elite athletes, such as the ASS, military service exemption, and pensions, to foster elite sports (Kim, 2004; Park, Lim, & Bretherton, 2012). The university's sport-friendly environment, assisting athletes in balancing academics with training and competition, could account for participants' smooth management of DC. This allows them to aim for athletic success while maintaining education without major problems such as failing or delayed graduation (Morris et al., 2021). However, consideration of the long-term effects of restricted educational progress during secondary and university years on post-athletic life is required (Park et al., 2013).

Transitioning to higher competition levels was challenging for participants due to intensified training demands, consistent with prior research on DC athletes' transition stressors (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). These increased training demands reflect findings from earlier studies (e.g., Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, & Selänne, 2015; Stambulova et al., 2009). Importantly, participants consistently mentioned feeling too tired to concentrate in class and facing challenges in their academic pursuits due to exhaustion from rigorous training. This implies that their daily schedules were predominantly centred around training, often at the expense of other crucial aspects of life, such as academic commitments, social interactions, and quality time with family. The findings also demonstrated that the Korean judokas faced specific career development barriers throughout the three periods. The participants experienced bullying from senior judokas and coaches, further intensified by the rigorous training demands, causing significant challenges during their secondary school education. Such behaviour reflects the harmful cultures observed in elite sport. In these environments, athletes can be viewed primarily as assets, power imbalances arise, and abusive actions are frequently minimised or deemed standard (McCadden & Cusimano, 2018). Participants reported increased bullying awareness in Korean elite sports, yet many, including recent

high school graduates, still encountered such behaviour. Newman, Warburton, and Russell (2021) outlined four bullying themes in professional football: Repetition, Power, Abuse and Intimidation, and Emotional Effect, covering incident frequency, masculine dynamics, financial status, and abuse impacts. The findings of the current study align with these themes, especially in relation to the repetitive nature of bullying incidents reported, their feelings of powerlessness due to hierarchical relationships between judokas and coaches or between junior and senior judokas, and the verbal and physical abuse they faced.

The participants' career development and progression were also hindered by coaches' controlling style and bullying. Coaches' controlling style is characterised by authoritarian and coercive communication, insensitivity to athletes' thoughts and emotions, and the use of inappropriate persuasion techniques such as guilt induction, manipulation, or threats (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2010). This style is associated with coaches' antisocial behaviour, as suggested by previous research (Hodge & Gucciardi, 2015). Although such a controlling style may be perceived as situationally appropriate, it negatively affects the quality of the coach-athlete relationship, as well as the athletes' motivation, engagement, and performance (e.g., Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Van den Berghe et al., 2013), as confirmed by the current study. The findings indicate gender differences in judokas' perceptions of coaching, implying early experiences, particularly for females in secondary school, may affect later trust and coach interactions. Thus, it is critical for sport authorities and schools to tackle these issues for athletes' career health and well-being. Positive coach-athlete relations and proper coach training can lessen these concerns, assisting athletes in handling DC-related stressors.

The study findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic became a significant barrier to career development for Korean judokas, disrupting their post-graduation preparation. Cancelled or delayed competitions deprived them of career advancement opportunities, missing chances to demonstrate their skills and secure professional team positions. While all participants completed a teaching qualification course, providing them with the option to serve as physical education teachers, most admitted to being easily distracted and failing to attend virtual lectures or complete assignments. The findings also highlight the profound impact of COVID-19 pandemic on athletes' career paths and mental well-being. Even with backup plans in place, such as teaching qualifications, there can be reduced enthusiasm to pursue these alternatives during challenging times. Thus, sport governing bodies and educational institutions should consider offering immediate and holistic support to athletes facing uncontrollable disruptions like these. In addition, mandatory military service presents a unique challenge in Korea, impacting the career advancement of male judokas. Effective pre-graduation strategies, guided by advice from experienced coaches, judokas with similar backgrounds, and educational institutions, can help reduce the associated stress and anxiety.

Throughout the three periods, participants consistently relied on their own resilience as a primary means of navigating their DC and transitional demands. Resilience played a crucial role in the coping process, reinforcing participants' motivation to pursue their sport goals. Definitions of resilience typically focus on two primary components: (a) facing challenging situations or adversity and (b) the ability to adapt positively (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). In this context, participants demonstrated this adaptability, particularly when facing transitions and DC-related challenges during the three key periods. Their adaptability not only reflects their resilience but also highlights the skills and strategies they have developed over time to effectively manage the complexities of being DC athletes. While participants significantly highlighted reliance on individual resilience for their coping resources and strategies, they also acknowledged the value of social support from parents and peers. However, they often avoided seeking support to not burden loved ones. While their natural resilience instilled independence, overreliance on it may be unsustainable. In this context, the importance

of a cohesive and inclusive social support network, along with individual efforts, was emphasised to better assist dual career athletes (Tessitore et al., 2021). For their overall well-being, both athletic and non-athletic, additional resources may be required. Stambulova et al. (2009) noted that aligning transition demands with resources helps overcome obstacles. Other research also indicates athletes need internal resources such as coping strategies and external support from organisations for successful transitions (Hong, Henning, & Dimeo, 2020; Stambulova et al., 2009).

Concerning external coping resources, participants highlighted the need for professional services including mentoring and career counselling for post-university transition preparation. While they rarely sought social network advice on career paths, they valued mentoring from high-achieving athletes and guidance from career counsellors for practical information on future opportunities. Mentoring has significantly contributed to notable athletes' development and success (Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2007). Studies show mentored high-performance athletes often report greater satisfaction, confidence, and a desire to mentor others (Hoffmann, Loughead, & Bloom, 2017). However, sport mentoring research remains limited compared to other fields (Lefebvre, Bloom, & Loughead, 2020). Eby et al. (2007) divided mentoring research into youth, academic, and career categories, which are all potentially beneficial for DC athletes, warranting more exploration.

Another unique finding in the Korean context is the career path athletes take post-graduation. As Table 1 indicates, all participants pursued a career in professional teams, regardless of whether it was their desired option or not. Joining a professional team offers financial stability and opens up diverse career prospects, such as entrepreneurship, further education, or specialised job training. This transition is supported by Korean initiatives from the government, local authorities, and leading companies to foster elite sport, allowing athletes to earn a living full-time (Park, Lim, & Bretherton, 2012). However, it may restrict athletes from considering varied career options later. Athletes should thus develop long-term career plans, and educational institutions with sport governing bodies should encourage these strategies, not only emphasise professional team contracts.

### 3.1. Limitations and future study direction

While our study provides valuable insight into the experiences of DC athletes in Korean elite judo through a case study approach, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The cross-sectional study design limits the ability to identify the long-term impact of transitions and preparation for life after sport. Future longitudinal studies are needed to track athletes' progress. There is a clear need for research on the mentoring of DC athletes. This could enhance their career development and transitions and inform sport psychologists and practitioners on how to better support them. The findings, particularly those of bullying, provide empirical evidence and support for the development of a structured support system in Korea. Lastly, future studies may consider a collective case study approach, where several cases are studied concurrently or consecutively to investigate a phenomenon (Hodge & Sharp, 2016). This could include a series of case studies of different sport or countries.

### Author statement

\*Hee Jung (first name) Hong (surname) – I have no middle name: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Roles/Writing - original draft; Writing - review & editing.

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### Declaration of competing interest

The study was not funded, and we do not have any conflict of interest: Dr Hee Jung Hong on behalf of Dr Seung Han Hong.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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